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QUILTING FAITH: AFRICAN AMERICAN QUILTS AS SOURCE MATERIAL FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION

by

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ABSTRACT

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Scholars of African American religion have done well to note the poignant role of cultural productions in the making, doing, and theorizing of religion and life options. Lacking in this discourse is critical attention to the religious significance of African American quilts, the quilters who make them, and the quilt-making process as source material for the study of African American religion. This dissertation adopts and thinks with the work of Anthony B. Pinn’s definition of African American religion as the quest for complex subjectivity, “a desire or feeling for life meaning.” To characterize the religiously significant experiences of quilt-makers, I will use Pinn’s definition of religious experience as “a human response to a crisis of identity that constitutes the dilemma of ultimacy and meaning—a type of transforming experience that speaks to a deeper reality, guided perhaps by a form of esoteric knowledge.” Pinn’s definition of black religion as the quest for complex subjectivity, and his definition of religious experience create a framework that enables African American quilts to be viewed as a cultural practice of meaning-making. Through a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on religious studies, sociology and art criticism/art history, the dissertation asserts that some African American quilters use scraps of mundane materials to craft visual testimonies that link black religion to everyday life. Research from the analyses allows
scholars to gain deeper insight into the role of African American quilts in the expression of religiosity, and consider the cultural production of quilts as legitimate and viable source material for the study of African American religious life. *Quilting Faith: African American Quilts as Source Material for the Study of African American Religion* reveals that the cultural production of African American quilts are just as important to understanding African American religion and religious experience as music, drama, dance, poetry, slave narratives and the like.
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Introduction

My interest in African American quilting stems from my interest in the connection between religion and art within the African American experience. I am drawn to the artistic expression inherent in African American quilts for they keep alive daily memories, stories, creativity, and beliefs of African Americans through “scraps” of mundane materials that quilter’s find in their everyday lives. The materiality of the quilts visually communicates the day-to-day feelings and experiences that tell us how African Americans “got this far by faith.” The visual testimonies within African American quilts inform us about what images, texts, symbols, memories, experiences, and/or beliefs that gave their life meaning, and brought a transformation of consciousness, a sense of inner peace, belonging, and/or a particular focus on what ultimately matters in the struggle for a fuller life.

This dissertation will use Anthony Pinn’s definition of Black religion as the “quest for complex subjectivity--A desire or feeling for more life meaning.”¹ This central concern for subjectivity, according to Anthony Pinn, is “the creative struggle in history for increased agency, for a fullness of life.”² As such, the quest for complex subjectivity is concerned with one answering what could be understood as ultimate questions about oneself—the who, what, when, where, and why of our existence. Second, Pinn’s definition of the nature of Black religion allows this dissertation to investigate and

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identify visual testimonies within African American quilts that inform our understanding of this ‘yearning and pushing for a fuller life’\(^3\) within the everyday lives of African Americans, in general, and African American women, in particular. In this light, the art of African American quilting reveals that there is something more to be seen in African American quilts than what is immediately visible to the eye. To wit, the “something more” is the hidden realities, visions of life, beliefs, experiences, and meanings contained in the visual testimonies of the quilts, which if we could read and interpret them it could enhance our understanding of the links between everyday realities and Black religion.

**Central Argument for Engaging African American Quilts**

African American quilts, and the quilters who create them, are just as important to our understanding of African American religion as slave narratives, music, religious drama, film, poetry, and literature. According to Carolyn Mazloomi, “these quilts, like any art, serve as primary transmitters of the cultural, political, social, and spiritual values by which the artists live.”\(^4\) African American quilts are distinguished from heralded black cultural productions such as music, song, novels, and poetry; dance, etc. because they tell stories using a needle, thread and “scraps” of everyday materials. The fact that quilts are made with scraps of materials, not words, song, or music, suggests that they express black experiences, history, and religious beliefs differently.

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According to Bill Arnett, “every great quilt whether it be a patchwork, appliqué, or strip quilt is a potential Rosetta Stone... Every combination of colors, every juxtaposition or intersection of line and form, every pattern, traditional or idiosyncratic, contain data that can be imparted in some form or another to anyone.”

In this light, African American quilts are crucial for expanding our understanding of material objects and their creativity in generating knowledge-cultural, social, religious, political, and personal in the everyday lives of people of African descent living in the United States. Yet, rarely is scholarly attention given to why African American quilters are prompted, inspired, and/or compelled to collect these ‘scraps’ from what they commonly do in their everyday life. They fail to consider what motivates them to create visual narratives about their identities, beliefs, ideas, dreams, memories, and experiences. Little is known about the everyday circumstances or conditions in which contemporary quilters quilt. Scholars have overlooked how quilting contributes to their feelings about themselves, how quilters define themselves religiously, and/or how quilting/quilts influences and shapes one’s sense of belonging and/or relationships with others. Hence, if we could find them and read them, in the words of John Vlach, pioneer folk studies scholar, “then we can effectively travel back to specific times and places and recapture worlds that were either lost or obscured by willful forgetfulness.”

In this light, the study of African American quilts will complement the research on black cultural productions.

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There are three aspects of African American quilting I am interested in focusing on: (1) the materiality of the quilts, (2) the art of quilting, and (3) the visual testimonies quilts tell. First, I want to know why the materiality is important and significant to quilting as a form of religious expression. Second, I want to show how quilting offers an outlet for experiences of the religious—“a time for introspection and reflection, a means of developing hidden talents, a way to gain emotional stability and independence,”7 in a fragmented and hostile world. Lastly, I am fascinated with the stories of the quilts. I am interested in how the stories within quilts constitute and sustain the meaningful realities of everyday life that are linked to the quest for complex subjectivity. I am concerned with which stories about daily experiences are presented, structured, and made into coherent and decipherable forms of visual testimonies that in telling allows African Americans to rework and re-imagine the past, reflect on life choices, and entertain who they are and could become.

Such an observation suggests that scholars of African American religious studies should investigate African American quilt narratives for what they say about African American religious life in the United States. To this end, I argue that some African American quilts craft a visual language out of mundane materials that communicate narratives of lived experiences that are significant for understanding Black religion.

Material Culture as Source Material

When scholars of African American religion focus on the study of heralded cultural productions they neglect the whole realm of human activity concerned with crafts—the traditional aspects of how “things” are made and used. The study of material culture suggests that scholars can study human experience through objects such as African American quilts. According to a pioneer scholar of material culture, Thomas Schlereth, the methodology that underlies the study of material culture is that “objects made or modified by humans, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, reflect the belief patterns of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension, the belief patterns of the larger society of which they are apart.”

The objective of material culture is to get at hidden beliefs or what lies beneath the surface. This is significant because it suggests that material culture can make visible the aspects of the world we can’t see directly. As such, underlying cultural assumptions and beliefs about these signs and symbols can be repressed or taken for granted, and not visible in what a society says and makes popular or artistic. As artifacts, African American quilts are fabricated objects that continue to exist over time as historical evidence that can be re-experienced as material for study. Jules David Prown argues that cultural analyst should want to get at hidden beliefs or submerged beliefs of individuals and groups of individuals of societies. According to Prown, and I would agree, a culture’s most fundamental beliefs maybe hidden, “they may be beliefs of which the culture itself is not

8 Schelereth, T material culture studies in America Lanham, MD, AltaMira Press, 1982, p. 3.
aware, and some of them so hard to face that they are repressed.”  

In other words, artifacts in addition to their intended functions may reveal deeper cultural truths that can only be observed directly through representations of the hidden mind and beliefs that are expressed in objects. Exploring a wide range of artifacts, including not only the written record, but also the countless objects left behind by African Americans for over three centuries, can add to our understanding of the African American experience in a unique way, which in turn will help us gain a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of black religion and experiences of the religious.

**Literature Review**

Much of what we see regarding studies of African American quilts falls under descriptions of slave made quilts and their significance to the study of folk arts and crafts, art history, and African American cultural studies. Scholars such as pioneering historian of African American art, Robert Farris Thompson, in the book entitled, *Flash of the Spirit*, plays a vital role in examining the role of the various aspects of art/cultural artifacts in African American religious studies. Thompson examines how African influences of art and philosophies shaped and defined the Black Atlantic visual tradition. His research sets a precedent for revealing the visual and philosophic streams of creativity, imagination and special drive of the Yoruba, Kongo Dahomean, Mande, and Ejagham that run parallel to the massive musical and dance modalities that connect black people in the Americas to “Mother Africa.” He posits how five African civilizations have

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informed and are reflected in the aesthetic, social, and metaphysical traditions (music, sculpture, textiles, architecture, and religion) have shaped the specific cultures of their descendants in the New World. He discusses the textile compositions of quilts, visual lore, and creativity to reveal elements of African influence, and stresses that enslaved Africans in the Americas already had knowledge-at-hand to create quilts, and that quilting transforms their material existence through acts of vision and memory. Lastly, Thompson sheds light on the Afro-American women and men societies and the myths, secrets, knowledge and imagery of these societies that resonant with indigenous African form of script. His work is important because it allows us to discuss the possibilities these elements being present in African American quilts, and allows us to draw parallels between African American quilting guilds and the secret societies of Yoruba, Mande, Kongo, and Ejagham. Although Thompson provides an in-depth account of the aesthetic continuities between Yoruba art of West Africa and Yoruba-looking art in the Americas, his analysis glosses over how African American quilters have taken this knowledge and craft and made it their own during modern times. I am primarily interested in the way quilts illustrate the myths, images, beliefs, symbols, and themes as visual testimonies within contemporary African American quilts. Other scholars such as Cuesta Benberry, Kyra Hicks John Vlach Carolyn Mazloomi, Roland Freeman and others have commented on aspects of this idea. Although what Thompson says about African retentions does not refer directly to my topic, his explanation of slave made quilts in terms of links to the religious memories of “mother Africa” helps focus my point that contemporary African American quilts illuminate links between Black religion (quest for complex subjectivity) and the daily lives of African Americans.
In the 1980s, folklorists were fascinated by the life histories of African American quilters and emphasized the specificity of the art of quilting and slave made quilts and history. African American ‘folk life’ scholar, John Vlach, in his book, entitled, *By the Work of Their Hands*, posits that African American quilting is rooted in a spirit of self-sufficiency, and that quilts have meaning, and that the quilting bees (guilds) provided relief from the slave’s daily routine. His work reveals that the crucial source that gives African American material culture its special classification is its African heritage, and that this heritage is not an isolated cultural element but a validation of an alternative history. He asserts: (1) that if were to truly understand African American material culture, we must understand the intellectual premises of the creation of material culture, (2) that quilts symbolized links to family, security, and home, and that the quilting bees were a form of celebration that provided relief from the slave’s daily routine, (3) that material culture is a tangible expression of human desire that inspires people, (4) that enslaved Africans made themselves into a new people, and that it has been sensitively recorded in the material culture they created, and lastly, he suggests that “traditions of custom, belief, song, dance, narrative and craft were passed to succeeding generations.” Ultimately, his work is significant to my research on the art of quilting and African American quilts because he reveals how African American quilters, particularly in Texas, made quilts that simultaneously embody the experiences of the quilters, forge bonds of communal identity, willful forgetfulness, creative urges and heartfelt feelings that can be visually communicated and interpreted. I will expand upon his work to discuss the art of quilting

as religious experience. Vlach is crucial to my own work, for the aforementioned reasons; however, Vlach does not examine the religiosity of quilts which is an element of this dissertation. Therefore, I expand on his work by exploring the art of quilting contemporary African American quilts as religiously significant to our understanding of Black religion.

Recognized leader in Southern studies of African American history and folklore, William Ferris, in his book entitled, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, reveals that “scholars have not given African American material culture the attention it deserves.”

He states that scholarly studies are greatly needed in this area, in order to establish a balanced perspective to understanding African American culture. His work reveals that while there is a lot of work on the spirituals, blues, and sermons within African American culture little is known about black folk arts, crafts, and material culture. He posits that these artists can draw heavily on religion as a source for their vision. According to Ferris, “the church is a vital force in their lives, and they interpret both biblical texts and local religious history through art.”

He examines how this strain of art emerged from the rural South and migrated across the United States. He maintains that the life and work of folk artists must be considered to gain a deeper insight about the aesthetics and purpose of their work. He also examines the role of dreams and visions, solitude and creativity, memory, and religion. This research is important because it stresses the importance of

visual literacy, analysis of the collective works of a quilter, the creative impulse to quilt, and the significance of stories and memories embedded in quilts. In this light, his work influences and directs this writer to explore the life and work of the quilt artists and compare one artist’s vision to another in order to understand the full range of African American material culture as religious. Ferris’ research suggests the need for scholars to mine the “impulse”, of artists (quilter) through material culture in general, and quilting in particular. In other words, Ferris wants us to examine what makes quilters quilt. He stresses the importance of working with the artists’ words, because the words and symbols are essential components to their art, and “the more one articulates and share their thoughts, the more we see through their eyes.”¹³ In light of Ferris’ work, this dissertation will focus specifically on African American quilting and quilters by reflecting on the religious ideas embedded in the quilts and the way those ideas help to reveal the complex and variant ways that quilters make meaning out of life.

Building on Thompson’s work, Maude Southwell Wahlman, professor of Global Arts, and author of Signs and Symbols discovered that “many quilt-top designs were similar to designs found in African religious textiles, designs that can be decoded because contemporary Africans [African Americans] know what the symbolic designs mean.”¹⁴ Wahlman states that quilters can put forward continuities of meaning and esoteric knowledge, and reveals that identification of religious symbols in African American quilts is based on knowledge of African religious textiles and conversations with African

¹³ Ferris, W. “Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts,” Jackson, Miss: University of Mississippi, 1986, p. 3.
American women. For the purpose of this dissertation Wahlman’s work highlights both the religious meanings embedded within quilts and the significance that decoding these quilts plays in helping to understand the religious perceptions held by African Americans. Furthermore, Wahlman illustrates through the use of quilts how to examine the link between African cultural sensibilities and African American religious notions and conceptions. For example her research suggests that African American quilts can be described and classified as religious textiles that contemporary quilters can decode through ethnographic approaches as well as through previous collections that describe the meaning and religious notions within the field of art history, folklorist, and material culture. In addition, she posits that contemporary quilters revive and reformulate aspects of earlier cultural systems and religious beliefs that were highly valued and thought most important to retain. Her work supports my belief that ideas in objects can craft a visual language and provide meaning that may not be able to be communicated through words or verbal expression. For Wahlman reveals that contemporary quilters affirm the extraordinary tenacity of African technical, aesthetic, and religious ideas for over 100 years, and that quilts are an indispensable tool for coping with an indifferent and hostile reality. My project expands on Wahlman’s notion of the religious significance and value of quilts by including the statements from the quilters regarding their religious ideas that Wahlman decided to exclude from her research. In other words, where Wahlman only tells us that quilts have religious significance and meaning, my research will explore specifically what is religiously significant to the quilter and the meanings behind them by collecting the stories from the quilters regarding their quilts. Furthermore, my research will expose the great diversity of quilting.
Gladys-Marie Fry, scholar of Folklore and English, in the book entitled, *Stitched from the Soul*, helps establish that the style and content of slave made quilts create a visual language that articulates family histories, legends, and the emotional and psychological well-being of each quilter. According to Gladys-Marie Fry, “Denied the opportunity to read or write, slave women quilted their diaries, creating permanent but unwritten records of events large and small, of pain and loss, of triumph and tragedy in their lives.”

This research suggests that quilts made by people of African descent collect historical and personal data from ‘scraps’ of everyday life. The need for a social outlet and warmth helped establish quilting as an important part of African American plantation life. In addition, Gladys-Marie Fry’s research reveals that quilts contain clues that help both reveal and recover life cycles of individuals and communities such as marriages, death, events, etc. Her research suggests that we can use the scraps of a quilters remembered past to patch together stories that will help interpret the psychological, emotional, and spiritual meanings of quilt makers. According to Gladys-Marie Fry “Slave women channeled their despair into patterns of which they could be proud, in which they found fulfillment and a sense of self-worth.”

Thus, Gladys-Marie Fry’s research suggests that African American quilts have remained an untapped source of cultural study of memory patches—scraps of communal and personal history--that shed light on how the art of quilting provides an outlet for African American women/men to maintain emotional stability, and fulfillment in their lives, families, and communities.

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This study of African American quilters differs from that of Gladys-Marie Fry in that her focus is on the design aesthetic of enslaved quilters, and this dissertation will focus on a different time frame to explore specifically the design aesthetic of contemporary quilters. Whereas Gladys-Marie Fry introduces that slave made quilts were made for religious purposes, this dissertation will expand that research to trace the religious significance of quilt-making and quilts during the 1960s through the 1990s. The examination of the “time period” will provide data that will enhance our understanding of how African American quilts express the religious beliefs of their makers, and how the religious aspects of quilts have survived within African American communities. Continuing the work of Gladys-Marie Fry, this dissertation will allow contemporary quilters to speak in their own words about how they trace their communal history, and how the creative process of making quilts captures the feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and cultural commitments of these quilters. This is significant for this project because it reveals that African American quilters take an active role in their personal redemption by making quilts.

One of the most significant historical research projects regarding African American quilts was written by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard. In their book entitled, *Hidden in Plainview*, their work reveals the ingenuity of African American quilters to use quilt patterns and stitches as codes that could be read by enslaved Africans traveling on the Underground Railroad. Their research explores the techniques, the lore, and images of African American quilts that reveal more than just their functional nature. According to Tobin and Dobard, “the African American quilt is a communicator, conveying heritage, and was displayed as a means for slaves to flee the plantation and
journey to freedom.” These authors call our attention to the connections between quilts and the struggle for freedom, and that quilts are central to understanding the African American experience in the United States. To this end, their work allows us to understand the transmutations and creolization’s that occur as each generation encoded memories of African and African American social organization, religious values, and artistic skills in quilts. Their work is significant because it reveals that the quilts have a coded visual language utilizing the quilt pattern in conjunction with spirituals and topographical stitching which created memories, shared information, and communicated ideas of freedom in the minds of those escaping. This suggests that African American quilting groups can construct a “quilt code” that can transmit ancestral lineage, customs, beliefs, information, memories, and legends from generation to generation.

Tobin and Dobard’s work supports the foundation for this dissertation project. Yet, it differs in that this dissertation will be looking for the linkages, encoded memories, transmutations and coded visual language of contemporary quilters from 1960s through 1990s. Also, Tobin and Dobard seem to focus on one aspect of the encoding process—liberation. This project will expand the significance of African American quilting beyond the notion of liberation, to focus on the religious aspects of quilts, and the religious experience of quilt-making. Furthermore, like that of the work of Fry, this work will expand Tobin and Dobard’s work to include contemporary quilters and quilts. This dissertation will build on Tobin and Dobard’s work to expand our understanding of quilts

beyond slavery, and suggests that African American quilts contain narrative formations
that entail an expressive and representational collective consciousness of the African
American struggle for more life.

In her book entitled, The Art of History, Lisa Collins sheds light on the historical
entrenched practice of disregarding visual art and artists in the field of African American
studies. She extends cultural critic Michele Wallace’s notion of the “problem of the
visual in Afro-American culture” to include the work of black visual artists in the 20th
century African American thought. Her work suggests that visual art can explain or
confirm racialized myths and theories of life, and that producers of images are a part of
meaning-making. She confirms that African American women artists confront particular
processes, stories, and histories through their work and affirms that during slavery myths
gained strength when linked to visual representations. She supports her claims by using
examples of the photography of Saartjie Baartman and young black girls, the absence of
the black female nude in art, the use of games, dolls, film and literature to validate the
neglect of black visual production in African American studies and art history. Her
research reinforces the idea that “scholars in African American studies, with hefty
support and encouragement from others, have routinely devalued black visual production
either openly or through a process of benign neglect.”18 Although, she stresses the
importance of rigorous studies of the visual and material culture, she fails to investigate
the cultural production of African American quilts and quilters. She grossly overlooked

the vital stories and dialogues that these female visual artists are having with or about art, 
social, cultural, and intellectual histories in general, and in religion in particular. 
Furthermore her neglect of quilting maintains the “visual paradox” to include a problem 
with seeing quilts as visual art, and ignores the positive contribution that African 
American quilters. Unlike Collins, this dissertation will focus on the visual art of quilts 
and will explore the practices and beliefs of African American quilters from 1960s 
through the 1990s. Furthermore, whereas Collins focuses mostly on visual arts and 
narratives this dissertation will also focus on the entanglement of material culture and 
narrative. Using a blend of social and art history, this dissertation will examine African 
American quilts as cultural displays of stories through time and space that convey visions 
of black life that offer new insights on visual art and its histories. 

The work of sociologist Tim Dant, in his book entitled, *Materiality and Society*, 
reveals that it “is the lived materiality of our bodies interacting with the materiality of 
objects that generates social significance of a range of types.”

19 Dant explores how the 
realm of material culture has become interwoven with our ideas about what society is as 
well as reveals the taken-for-granted ways that people interact with things. He posits that 
the material stuff, the objects that we encounter in our everyday lives, have been 
manufactured by our particular cultural context. He calls this interaction with objects 
‘material interaction’. He suggests that what we do with objects is routine, habitual and 
hardly guided by thought. Tim Dant’s work is significant to this dissertation because his 
sociological approach to material culture reveals that direct interaction between 

individuals and objects is mediated, and focuses on the ways that subjectivity is enhanced in material forms, and extends the possible actions of the human body. He states that in studying distinct cultures, “the material life of a people is inseparable from the religion, rituals, or customs of their cultural existence and sometimes it has provided a particular focus for making sense of a particular culture.”

He uses the work of Tisseron, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty to reveal the various ways that people interact with things in modern life. Dant is concerned with understanding the relationships between humans and objects alongside the complexity and emotional relationships between humans which constitutes the social.

The work of this dissertation will explore the human interactions with African American quilts and the art of quilting, and how it becomes a part of one’s social world. Dant’s work allows me to describe how the interactions between people and quilts are not just practical but are the emotional core of our being that is connected to the culture as an expression of individuality, beliefs patterns, and society. The work of this project differs from Dant’s because his running example is the automobile, and this dissertation will focus on quilts. Furthermore, whereas Dant is talking about culture he is not specifically examining the role of religion to the meaning making of people’s everyday lives. This dissertation will specifically examine how African American quilts as objects of material culture have a religious significance to Black religion. Ultimately Dant shows the

complexity of human individuals and their social lives by examining “the ways in which individuals are situated within sub-groups or strata within the society”\textsuperscript{21}

Lastly, the book entitled \textit{Conjuring Culture} by Theophus Smith, examines the story-teller as “conjuror”. Theophus Smith provides a hermeneutical approach to track the transmission and transformation of Biblical images, metaphors, and symbols beyond the sacred site of the African American church into popular culture. Smith states that oral tradition is central to American life, and serves as an integral part of community building, integration, and sustenance through stories, sermons, and social conversations. In this light, Smith suggests that African Americans have maintained communal and generational bonds in the face of an isolationist and individualistic American ethos. He states that the ritual behaviors and linguistic modes of communication among African Americans entail the creative and innovative appropriation of biblical figures and themes which testify to the power and prophetic relevance of Judeo-Christian narratives and scriptures in African American life. In the section on “Theoretical Perspectives”, Smith invokes the work of philosopher Lucius Outlaw and cites Outlaw’s call for a “hermeneutic of black cultural productions.”\textsuperscript{22} Although Smith is not specifically talking about quilts, his work is important to my work on quits because he shows the innovative ways in which African Americans developed practices and practitioners that help to explain and provide cultural products that gave meaning to their lived experiences. Smith acknowledges that the conjuror is not the only metaphor to describe such transformations,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p. 12
\textsuperscript{22} Smith, T., “Conjuring Culture: Biblical formations of Black America”, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 4
and that his unconventional representation of conjure be extended to include other cultural performances that involve curative transformations of reality by means of mimetic operations and processes. In other words the quilter, like the conjure; can be used as a metaphor to describe one who is engaged in the practice of cultural mimetic operations and practices. According to Smith, conjure is a magical means of transforming reality. In this light, this dissertation will examine the way that contemporary quilters transform reality using a network of signs and “scraps” of materials, protect their visions, and make them reasonably persuasive to others. This dissertation reveals that it is important to recognize how African American quilters make use of materials and symbols for quilts as a conjure book, and suggests that quilters as conjure should be critically examined and included among the specialists Smith writes. This project will use hermeneutic methodologies to explore how African American quilters provide African Americans with ritual prescriptions for re-envisioning and transforming their history and culture. Building on Smith’s work, this research project will investigate the process by which African American quilters and/or quilts invoke extraordinary and esoteric knowledge to effect changes in the conditions of lived experiences of African Americans. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation reveals how contemporary day-to-day African American quilter’s use symbols and conjurations from the Bible that serve African Americans as instruments for the expression of suffering, healing, and hope that brings about a more liberated existence. This study will show that quilters are conjurors that use “scraps” of materials, quilt patterns and designs, and weaving to provide conjurational figures, symbols, and phrases from which new, better worlds can be imagined and brought into existence. To this end, this research will shed
light on a new paradigm for understanding the formulation and evolution of African American religion and culture.

The work of these pioneering scholars reveals that slave made quilts and quilters are a witness to African American cultural history, integrate the memory and collective consciousness of Black culture and identity, that urges a new look at African American quilts for their religious sensibilities. This research and descriptive data of African American quilts and the art of quilting reveals that the materiality of quilts are not separate entities but rather are connected and embedded within the webs of cultural knowledge, understandings, aesthetics, and elemental impulses of African American religious experiences that can deepen our understanding of the complexity of African American religious life. Their work reveals that there is limited critical discourse regarding contemporary African American quilters and their quilts. This dissertation aims to add to the continued study of the great legacy of African American quilt-making in order to think boldly about how African American quilts are interwoven with the practices of daily life and construct visual testimonies of places, people, experiences and events that illuminate their significance for our understanding of the quest for complex subjectivity.

Sample Location: African American Quilting in Houston

Ethnography is the primary methodology of this dissertation. This project will consist of informal interviews, participant observation, oral reports, and photographs of quilts made by African American quilters who currently reside in Houston, Texas, and began quilting between the 1960s and the 1990s. I selected Houston, Texas based on the work of pioneering folklorist John Vlach. In his book, By The Work of Their Hands, he
calls for scholarly research on folk crafts within specific communities in Texas before it’s too late. He argues little is known about Texas arts and crafts, and that it is important to study the Texas African American quilting tradition to survey the Folklife—“the total lifeway of a group of people including their verbal, material, and spiritual forms of expression.” Vlach also reports that Texas slave narratives reveal that craft activities such as quilting were a prominent practice during and after slavery in Texas.

I selected the 1960s-1990s because there is limited scholarly discourse on quilts made during this contemporary time period. Most research has focused on quilts made by enslaved blacks. By focusing on the contemporary period, I can add to existing knowledge regarding African American quilts in Texas. In addition, I can obtain data directly from the quilters themselves, in order to record the underlying resources of meaning in contemporary African American quilts and quilt-making process. To ensure a fair and positive research environment, I obtained IRB approval for this project. I encouraged quilters to feel free to express their experiences and religious beliefs with me. In this light, the ethnographic work had the following themes: (1) Research takes place in a natural setting in the field, an everyday context where scholars study people’s actions and accounts. (2) I gathered data mainly through participant observation and/or relatively informal conversation. In other words, my data collection was, for the most part, relatively unstructured. By unstructured, I mean that the research did not involve following a fixed and detailed research design, specified at the start. The categories that I

used for interpreting the data developed from what people said and did during the research process. (3) Lastly, I did interview quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle (Quilt Circle) and five quilters in the private setting of their homes. The research design employed a relatively open-ended approach, and my initial interests and questions were refined over the course of the research. Much of the same was true of the interviews.

From the interviews and participant observations, this dissertation identified five quilters. I examined their quilts, seeking to describe and interpret their significance to our understanding of the quest for complex subjectivity. I selected the Jubilee Quilt Circle as the site for the communal aspects of African American quilting tradition. I made contact with various quilters that were present, and I conducted interviews and participant observations. I used oral accounts to capture unsolicited information not included in my open-ended questions. The oral reports allowed me to use what people say at the Quilting Circle as evidence about their perspectives and the larger subcultures and cultures to which they belong. Thus, the accounts are treated as part of the world they describe. They add to the validity of the information provided, and are shaped by the contexts in which they occur. The interviews at the Quilt Circle take into consideration information participants provided to one another, as well all information unsolicited by the researcher. The quilters selected were interviewed both in private setting such as their homes, and in communal spaces such as a Jubilee Quilt Circle. There was no fixed sequence of questions; thus, the interviews were closer to a conversation. Field notes were taken and tape-recorded as needed. Photographs were also taken of the quilts and are considered artifacts—constructed objects made by the quilters. The photographs taken of the quilts reveal the materiality of the quilts, shapes, colors, symbols, images, content, and design.
The photographs assisted me with interpreting the autobiographical stories quilters told and the visual testimonies of the quilts. The photographs also allowed me to capture specific items, spaces, events that I found to be significant during my ethnographic research.

Theoretical Considerations

I apply Anthony Pinn’s concept of “relational centralism.” The theory of relational centralism “allows us to decipher patterns and layers of meaning and movement in order to help us put into perspective the past, present, and future possibilities for more fulfilled existence.”24 Pinn’s relational centralism allows one to observe and collect resources for evaluation and analysis of resources, operates within particular historical moments that illuminates the shared impulse that marks all life. First, as an approach to the study of black religion, relational centralism recognizes that African American quilts, the stories the quilters tell, and the process of making quilts all serve as resources, because they entail an encounter with a deeper something. Therefore, such a study reveals more than just a particular moment in history and social interaction, it also reveals, as Pinn notes, “realities hidden from immediate experience.”25 Second, the underlying something is the impulse and feeling for complex subjectivity that comes about from a crisis event or rupture of historical situations that require interpretation. Third, this impulse marks all forms of religious experience. Fourth, this approach


requires an assumption that the elemental impulse and how it operates helps us gain a better understanding of what it means to be human that isn’t restricted by race. Through the lens of relational centralism, this study reflects the ways in which quilters make sense of their realities, and the ways in which the quilt-making process and their stories are interactively constructed and visually express the quest for complexity in their daily lives.

To interpret the visual testimonies in the quilts that communicate links to Black religion and everyday life, I apply Pinn’s hermeneutic of ontological dimension to interpret “the social as experience and expression to promote clearer vision regarding the issues of meaning and purpose that plague humans.” This interpretation mines the religious significance of African American quilting that scholars have ignored. This hermeneutic allows for interpretations of the stories embedded in quilts that articulate individual and communal understandings of “being” within a quilter’s body of work. It also interprets stories within quilts that constitute life-changing experiences that spark new meanings of life. Pinn’s hermeneutic of style interprets the stories African American quilters tell, present and visualize about themselves or others, in new and liberated ways. These approaches explore how African American quilters articulate a style of being using “scraps” of materials that tell stories that counter the process of dehumanization. Pinn’s view suggests that we should explore the connections between cultural artifacts and Black life experiences to gain a deeper understanding of Black religion.

In this light, the dissertation examines what African American quilt stories are saying about African Americans’ experiences and their struggles for a fuller life. This

26 Ibid, p. 186.
project also interprets the creation of African American quilts at the Jubilee Quilt Circle. Conversation and its unpredictable turns is a central thread within the Quilt Circle where quilters share their relationships, experiences, and artworks. Furthermore, through re-visiting the quilts with others in the Jubilee Quilt Circle, quilters continually re-negotiate their understanding of the quilts, and learn techniques and skills.

To interpret the interactions and making of the art within the Jubilee Quilt Circle, I employ Gadamer’s hermeneutical aesthetics. The focus of hermeneutical aesthetics is on what shapes subjectivity and guides its expectations, and that art has something to tell us. This experience for quilters allows them to share and say something about the experience each quilter has with making quilts. Gadamer’s notion of contemporaneous art experience, play, festival and symbol allows this project to interpret the dialogical dimension of the art of quilting within the Quilt Circle. Gadamer’s notion of aesthetic experience allows the research to reveal that quilting is more than one voice. Through play, festival, and symbol, I interpret the shared interest the quilter’s communicating through their quilts. Both Pinn and Gadamer’s hermeneutic approaches identify the complexity, range of interpretations, and creative ways of being in life and history. Both scholars provide a theoretical framework for me to look for themes and essences and to provide a description of experience that does justice to the meanings identified by the participants—African American quilters. I acknowledge that these approaches do not exclude the possibility of developing some broad generalizing statements about the conditions and forms under which the quilter or quilts attempts to renegotiate or challenge existing conditions, galvanize new roles, express religious beliefs, and adopt African textile traditions. Nevertheless, these theoretical considerations allowed me to
analyze and interpret the visual testimonies of African American quilts to understand how particular kinds of stories function within specific cultural or situational contexts and to identify different genres of personal story and anecdote. In addition, these theoretical considerations permitted me to draw on socially shared formats, the meanings that underpin or infuse them, and the wider situations that quilters’ stories both respond to and shape that are significant for our understanding of Black religion.

Layout of Chapters

The chapters in this dissertation bear witness to, and offer support to my contention that as source material, African American quilts are significant for the study of black religion. This dissertation should be understood as a response to various scholars call to study African American material culture, in general, and African American quilts, in particular. Furthermore, this project recognizes African American quilters as subjects produce and reproduce cultural products that transmit visual testimonies that allow scholars to gain a better understanding of black religion and the experiences of the religious in black communities in the United States.

In chapter 1 entitled, Redirecting the Gaze: African American Quilts as Source Material, I suggest that the study of African American quilts has been overlooked by scholars of African American religious studies. As such, scholars of African American religion should pay critical attention to the study of African American quilts, the quilters who make them, and the quilt-making process as source material. African American quilts offer visual testimonies of black experiences, culture, and history that have been useful for individual and collective identity, religious consciousness, and faith formation.
Thus, the study of African American quilts complements the study of African American black cultural productions within African American religious studies.

In chapter 2, *African American Quilts: Developing the Framework for Visual Testimonies*, I describe and contextualize contemporary African American quilts as art, and quilters who make them as storytellers and artists that weave scraps of materials from their everyday life to create visual testimonies that can be interpreted. The primary goal of this chapter is to offer an interpretative framework to examine African American quilts as source material for the study of African American religion.

In Chapter 3, *African American Quilting: A Birth of a Tradition from Slavery to the 20th Century* provides a history of African American quilting that draws connections between African textiles, religious textiles and African American quilts. The chapter also explores the transformations and creolizations of how contemporary African American quilters craft a unique artwork. This chapter also examines the African American quilting tradition. This chapter pays close attention to the cultural development of African American quilts, and how the art of quilting crafts stories of meaning making.

In Chapter 4, *Weaving Ourselves: Memory, Creativity, Narrative, and Faith of Texas Quilters*, I will report my ethnographic research findings. This chapter reveals how contemporary African American quilters in Houston use needles and scraps of materials to leave careful records of their emotional, religious, and psychological well-being on each surviving quilt. African American quilting allows quilters to navigate through life with the aid of symbols and “scraps” of everyday and the aesthetic design of mundane materials. The observations presented in this chapter indicate the potential ability of African American quilts, quilters, and the process of quilt-making to serve as
tools of daily life that add to our knowledge of the nature and meaning of black religion in the daily lives of African Americans. African American quilts are cultural productions that reveal the complexities of human lives. In their present form, African American quilters visually record the quest for complexity of African Americans in their daily lives, which can be interpreted. African American quilt-making, quilts, and the quilters who make them are a rich source material for the study of African American religious studies.

A summation of the dissertation’s primary arguments and implications of this research for African American religious studies will be provided in the conclusion. An expansion of the subject matter, methodological implications, and subject consideration for future research in religion will be offered in the final section.
Redirecting the Gaze: African American Quilts as Source Material

Scholars of religion have studied cultural production to learn about blacks’ experiences, religious beliefs, cultural continuity, oppositional identities, and the formation of black religious institutions. The information gained provides a sociocultural context for understanding the complexities and varieties of religion and experiences of the religious within black communities in the United States. Yet, in spite of the intellectual exercise among these and others within various disciplines, the religious significance of the African American quilting tradition has gone largely unnoticed within African American religious studies. This is significant because while there are major studies within African American religious studies on black cultural productions such as spirituals, slave narratives, folktales, visual art, and the like, African American religious scholars have failed to pay critical attention to African American quilts in particular, and African American material culture in general as source material for the study of Black
religion. Failing to pay critical attention to African American quilting, scholars of religion have overlooked how quilters utilize scraps—small pieces of materials—from everyday life to communicate visual testimonies (statements made with images, signs, and symbols) that illuminate the links between Black religion and everyday life. In this light, this chapter argues that scholars have failed to explore the African American quilting tradition as a parallel artistic expression to music, dance, poetry and the like. As a result, scholars of African American religion have overlooked African American quilts that contain visual testimonies of black history, culture and experiences, and religious beliefs as source material for the study of African American religion. In order to recognize African American quilts as source material it is first necessary to situate the study of black cultural productions within the field of African American religious studies.

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Second, it is important to outline how the scholarly discourse of black cultural productions has contributed to scholars understanding of faith formation of African Americans in the United States. Lastly, this chapter points out that the study of African American quilts can expand the religious discourse on black cultural productions.

Black Cultural Productions: The Significance for the Study of African American Religious Studies

We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.

John Berger, Ways of Seeing

The first attempt to gather data about African American creative cultural productions occurred on May 30, 1867, when an article in the New York Nation announced an upcoming volume on Negro Spirituals. The publication sparked subsequent literature and many debates concerning the Negro spirituals’ origins, expansions, influences, and their significance in terms of the religious life of Negroes. In his Souls of Black Folks, published in 1903, W.E. B. DuBois classifies the Negro folk songs as “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.” Dubois reveals the creative spirit of hope and survival of the Negro Spirituals (Sorrow Songs) as source material for describing and analyzing African and African American religion, the

traditional African American Church, and the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of the “souls” of Black folks. This pioneering work of DuBois revealed that African Americans both enslaved and free, created unique and distinctive black cultural creations and religious worldviews that were more than aberrational attempts to mimic mainstream European-American culture and religion. His work placed the “the preacher, the music, and the frenzy”\(^{32}\) as key religious elements of black religious life in the United States. In subsequent decades, DuBois’ work was followed by numerous publications by scholars in varying disciplines such as historian Carter G. Woodson, scholars of religion Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, anthropologists Melville Herskovits, Zora Neale Hurston, and Arthur H. Fauset, just to name a few.\(^{33}\) These scholars examined the Negro Spirituals, and introduced the social significance of black cultural productions within African American culture. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, scholars stressed that cultural forms such as songs, music, dance, sermons, folk tales, art and humor are important source material for describing and understanding how people of African descent found in Christianity a theology and a new orientation to the world, which they adapted to their psychological, political, spiritual, cultural, philosophical and social needs during and after slavery. In this light, the study of the character and development of African American religion and religious experiences, history, and West African creative cultural forms slowly began to gain attention inside the Academy.

\(^{32}\) Ibid, p.211
However, despite the scholarship during this time, the close relationship between African American cultural production and the study of African American history and religion failed to receive critical attention in American scholarship until the 1960s and 1970s.

Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power and Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s,34 scholars were challenged to undertake a thick description of the reality of American culture and religious history from the point of view of black people themselves. Scholars accepted the challenge and began to advocate for the revision of the long-standing view, theory, and/or doctrine that substantiated the inferiority and unjust treatment of people from African descent living in the United States. This awakened an interest by scholars to revisit the idea of a distinctive African American culture and religion developed in the American past. Faced with limited material resources during and after slavery, scholars began to consider black cultural productions such as slave narratives, music, songs, folktales, literature, dance, sermons, humor and the like as source material for revisionist scholarship. As a result, scholars began to produce legitimate scholastic reinterpretations of the existing evidence, motivations, and existing knowledge of African American culture. During this productive period, a cadre of scholars did groundbreaking research that expanded the visibility and knowledge base of

the development and distinctive qualities of African American religious history in the United States.\textsuperscript{35} One of the leading figures in the revisionist study of African American religion, Gayraud Wilmore, posed a question that stimulated a renaissance in the scholarly study of African American religion in the United States: What does it mean to be Black and Christian? Given the focus of inquiry, the excavation of black cultural productions of enslaved Africans established the notion that “the Christianity which had been developing for more than four hundred years among the descendants of the first slaves brought to this world is a different version of the religion professed by the descendants of the slave masters.”\textsuperscript{36} Historical studies of slave autobiographies and descriptions of religious services reveal that enslaved Africans’ distinctive way of talking, believing and worshiping God can be found in what Wilmore notes as “the highly charged and emotionalism of the services, the mourners bench, the shouting, hand-clapping and holy dancing, and the picturesque imagery of the sermon and the spirituals.”\textsuperscript{37} Consequently, in the description, analysis, and interpretation of these creative modes of religious expression, along with the slave narratives and expanded


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid p. 10
research on folk stories such as tales of Jack, Brer Rabbit, or High, John, scholars were able to establish a broad understanding of African American religion, religious experience and its historical development within black communities in the United States. To this end, black cultural productions as source material has played an important role in the study of African American religion, and has helped establish African American religious studies as a legitimate discipline in American scholarship.

Yet, the African American quilting tradition was excluded from the charged public conversations and careful academic study regarding a distinctive African American culture and religion in the United States. In one sense this is not surprising; the precise meaning of the symbolic crafting of the quilts was difficult to observe, read, and interpret, thus, scholar’s attempts to gain a common agreement regarding the religious and cultural meanings of the quilts lacked a methodological framework. But in another sense, it is surprising, since there were within revisionist scholarship referents to African American quilts as a religious expression, and in the development of black religion. For example, Albert Raboteau, one of the premiere interpreters of African American religion, brings to light that quilts played a role in the early religious experiences of enslaved Africans within secret hush-arbor gatherings.\footnote{Secret hush-harbor meetings are the places where enslaved Africans freely mixed African rhythms, singing, beliefs with evangelical Christianity. Through signals, passwords, and messages not discernable to whites, enslaved African called enslaved Africans to these secret religious gatherings.} In his attempt to explicate the religious traditions within slave culture, Raboteau tells us about a preacher named Woods who remembered “preaching to other slaves and singing and praying while huddled behind
quilts and rags, which had been thoroughly wetted ‘to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air’ and then hung up ‘in the form of a little room,’ or tabernacle.”39

Raboteau’s mention of preacher Woods points to the notion that enslaved Africans creatively manipulated quilts within the secret hush harbor meetings, and that quilts are inevitably linked to the development of black preaching, singing, praying, and religious experiences within slave culture.

Sterling Stuckey, a leading thinker on Black Nationalism, mentions how quilts were crafted to preserve African religion and its expression within American slavery. In the text, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, Stuckey mentions African American quilts when he writes:

Missionaries failed to halt African religion in Georgia because it took forms they did not understand or even imagine…it also appeared in a form and a place which whites would least expect African religious expression of any kind—in the quilts of slave women. Fashioned from throwaway cloth, slave quilts were used to clothe mysteries, to enfold those baptized with reinforcing symbols of their faith.40

Both Raboteau and Stuckey point to the diverse ways in which enslaved Africans used quilts to envision, experience, and develop black religion within American slave culture. Yet, scholars of African American religion failed to pay critical attention to the brilliant snapshot of African American quilts within slave culture, and instead focused on the style and rhythmic expression of African American preaching, singing, and how the

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vibrant worship experiences defined black religion. To this end, African American quilts were overlooked as source material.

Additionally, scholars of African American religion also ignored the pioneering research done by revisionist scholars such as art historian Robert Farris Thompson and folklorist John Vlach. In *Flash of the Spirit* (1978) Thompson reveals how West African Mandes brought African textile traditions to Spanish and English colonies in the New World. He posits how African civilizations have informed and shaped the cultural production of music and textiles in the New World. He discusses the textile compositions of quilts, visual lore, and creativity to reveal elements of Mande influence, and stresses that enslaved Africans in the Americas already had knowledge-at-hand to create quilts, and that quilting transforms their material existence through acts of vision and memory.

In *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, Vlach posited a correlation between the creativity of African American quilting tradition and the basic strip patterns of African textiles, and the aesthetic preferences, visual lore, religious symbols and signs that establish African American quilts as a distinctive black cultural expression separate from European-American quilts.\(^{41}\) Despite Thompson and Vlach’s critical attention to the creative genius of enslaved Africans to preserve African art traditions within African American cultural productions, Womanist and Black Theologians failed to give attention to decorative arts and crafts of black women. In the next section, I outline the study of black cultural productions within the Womanist theology and ethics and Black Theology.

I turn to Womanist theology and ethics and contemporary Black theologians to contextualize the study of black cultural productions and its impact on the study of black religion within African American religious studies.

1.1. Source Material for Womanist Theology and Ethics

The significance of black cultural productions in the scholarly discourse of Womanist theology and ethics within African American religious studies is impossible to ignore. Womanist theologians and ethicists have utilized modes of creative cultural production as source material to argue for critical attention to the experiences and religious history of women in the Black Church and within African American religious studies. To express black women’s experience in their lifelong journey for self-realization and social empowerment, womanists appropriated the term “Womanism,” which was coined by the African American woman poet and novelist, Alice Walker.42

Womanist theology and ethics scholars developed Alice Walker’s concept of Womanism to rescue black women from invisibility within American scholarship, to encourage critical attention to black women as historical actors in the drama of black empowerment, and to carefully describe and interpret the tripartite oppression that black women have experienced and continue to experience in the United States. The groundbreaking research in womanist theology and ethics by scholars such as Katie Cannon, Jacqueline Grant, Emily Townes, Delores Williams and others within the study

of African American religious studies shed light on how black cultural productions such as narratives, novels, music, and the like provide theoretical insights into black women’s experiences, moral dilemmas, and socio-cultural perspectives of African American religious life.\(^{43}\) The creation of a womanist approach, using black cultural productions, allowed womanist scholars to accentuate both the blackness and the femaleness within theological, religious, and biblical studies, as well as articulate black women’s ethical claims and moral wisdom of surviving and thriving in the face of tripartite oppression in the United States. Through literary analysis, womanist scholars expressed the plight of black womanhood and articulated an answer to the question: “What does it means to be human in relation to God and the world when one is Black and female?”\(^{44}\) Womanist ethicists have used the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Gloria Naylor and others to look for evidence of black women’s creativity, to give voice to black women’s experiences from a subjective and communal position, and to explore the revelation of God and religious symbolism that allows black women to see their full humanity, mainly as a part of the black Christian heritage. In other words, these stories allow womanists to pay critical attention to black women’s religious experiences, articulate their spirituality and ideas of God, and express the creative genius of women. In *Mining the Motherlode*, Stacey Floyd-Thomas notes:

…womanist religious ethicists attend to black women’s writings as sacred texts because embedded within them is a strong tradition of charting the crux of black women’s spirituality—their persistent questioning of theodicy, their spiritual strivings, and their radically immanent concepts of the divine. From these sacred texts, womanist ethicists carve out a new canon, a veritable storehouse of life stories that illuminate the experiences of survival and liberation in the midst of evil and suffering.\(^45\)

In this light, the study of African American literary narratives within Womanist theology and ethics are tools that allow scholars of African American religious studies to embrace the particular dimensions of the culture of black women and to undertake the difficult task of providing an appropriate framework for analyzing, describing, and interpreting the religious thought, history, and lives of black women within African American communities. In this light, the study of black cultural productions allows womanist scholars to open up and explore the religious life of Black women in America. For example, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes in her book, *If It Wasn’t for the Women*, uses narratives and stories of black women as data for sociological interpretations of the roles and places of black women in their churches and communities within black religious experience. Gilkes reveals, through fieldwork and narratives of women’s enterprise and activities, how black women have strengthened, shaped, transformed, and sustained black churches and black communities. According to Gilkes, “if it wasn’t for the women, you wouldn’t have a church.”\(^46\) Gilkes shows that despite the many denominations that formed between 1895 and 1950, those that have survived have done so mainly through


\(^{46}\) Gilkes, Cheryl. *If It Wasn’t for the Women*: *Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001. p. 54
strong women’s departments, auxiliaries, missions, clubs, societies, ministries, and organizations within African American churches.\textsuperscript{47} She highlights the ability of black women to foster material and psychic survival through the conscious effort to integrate women across race and class, despite the growing divisions and suffering within black communities. For Gilkes, black women

\begin{quote}
...participate in the church and community organizations that focus directly and indirectly on the shared suffering of black women...This sense of shared humiliation and the determination to resist its consequences have undergirded the community experience of black women and helped to define the character of their relationships with one another.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

Gilkes highlights how the creative cultural process of black women empowered them to communicate a women’s liberation movement through their church and community work that went beyond the household and workforce. To this end, Gilkes’ sociological approach to the study of black cultural productions draws attention to the communal impact of black women within the black community, black church, and American society. Interestingly, Gilkes work reveals the important roles women’s departments and various organizations and clubs have played within Black churches; yet, her work has overlooked quilting guilds/bees that have existed in black churches and communities throughout the Church history she explores. She overlooks how quilting guilds/bees contributed to the collectivism of women in black churches and communities, and how they represented a club/organization that helped women overcome tripartite oppression in society. She ignores the fact that within Black Churches, regardless of denomination,

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid p. 32-36
there are quilters who have had a significant social role and an alternative worldview. She failed to pay critical attention to how quilters fostered racial pride, social cohesion, spiritual strivings, as well as the role quilters play in the cultural production of religious settings. I am of the opinion Gilkes could of overlooked African American quilts because her interest in women’s roles and community organization moved her to reveal aspects of black women’s experiences in the church and community that focused on “explaining and interpreting sacred spaces that emerged at specific crisis points in the African American experience.”49 As a result, many of the women may not have mentioned quilting in their oral histories of the church, or don’t quilt in the church. In this light, Gilkes’ research points to the need for further research to explain and interpret more fully the role of quilting among contemporary women within churches and black communities in the United States.

Another example of Womanist theological reflection that reveals the significance of black creative cultural productions as source material comes from Cheryl A. Kirk Duggan, in the book, Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals. Duggan asserts that music offers an arena for wrestling with good and evil, suffering and pain, and that the oral antebellum spirituals are slave narratives because they tell stories through song. Duggan investigates the Spirituals as a tool for doing narrative theology, specifically theodicy that shows the context, story, creative spirit, and divine revelation within the spirituals. For Duggan, the analysis of the Spirituals takes seriously the

African and African American experiences, and allows scholars to give voice to those who are silenced. Using the language of Womanist theory, Duggan reveals that Spirituals are worthy of study because they are tools for uncovering theodicy, exposing the lies of racism, sexism, and classism. As ritual, they “affect a collective exorcism toward societal healing in the past, present, and future.”

For Duggan, the oral, written, and musical dialogue in the Spirituals reflect a liberating biblical Womanist vision, which shows that African American communities experience life as an interrelated whole and know God as a personal, powerful, compassionate liberator committed to the survival and wholeness of all people. Her analysis of music from a theologically informed perspective illuminates black folks’ God-talk and religious belief systems within the secular and the sacred to reveal the creative spirit of hope and survival and humor that allows black folks (men and women) to foster faith and challenge and overcome the societal evils of slavery, racism, classism, and sexism. Duggan also discusses how stories, symbols, and rituals help give meaning and shape to the world. In addition, she explains how they have been used in a racist society to create an impressive network of cultural, social, economic, political, and educational patterns and policies to establish the black person as a “nigger.”

Duggan suggests that African Americans’ primary goals are to love themselves, appreciate their personal magnificence and communal Black heritage, and celebrate different cultures. Addressing the arrogance and transcending the pathos of racism, she notes that “African Americans have responded [to racism] using the Spirituals as

documents of power.” She considers the Spirituals to be stories that celebrate the remembrance that everyone has right to life and a story to tell. Within the Spirituals, one can “uncover stories of coded communication, of theodicy, from an actual oppressed American social and historical context.” To understand theodicy, Duggan suggests that one has to turn to written and oral texts or to words and songs. For Duggan, hearing the cultural voices of the Black community through these creative cultural productions allows African Americans to remake reality, know art as life, experience self-consciousness, seek justice and liberty, and view blackness as a gift that triumphs over evil and suffering. To this end, Duggan’s work suggests that black cultural productions such as music, song, stories, and rituals are worthy of study, historically contingent, and allow African Americans to wrestle with issues of evil and theodicy. Yet, Duggan’s provocative study ignores the creative possibilities and contributions of cultural productions made specifically by black women, and limits the focus of the expression of African Americans religious life and culture to the text and tune of African American cultural traditions. In this light, Duggan overlooks that running parallel to the massive musical and textual cultural traditions within black communities is a popular style of African American quilting that weaved a pattern of notes with scraps of materials to conceptualize and teach African Americans a polyrhythmic historiography of womanist thought that exposes oppression, places women’s realities in everyday life, and carries a message that is grounded in black women’s and other women of color’s methods of

52 Ibid, p.60.
reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. Her attention to just the text and musical expression of black cultural productions neglects the diverse ways African Americans record their voices, religious beliefs, realities, and ideas amidst the evils of slavery and racism. In this light, she fails to notice that quilts express rhythm and off-beat patterns that have been often compared to Jazz, and that multiple rhythms in African American quilting represent alternative articulations of African American musical styles such as the Spirituals. As a result, African American religious discourse on black cultural productions by womanist scholars, such as Duggan, suggests that scholars don’t integrate folk culture such as quilts into the existing body of knowledge of African American religious life and culture. To this end, womanist scholarship has failed to ask: Can African American women quilters create quilts that also communicate ideas of evil and theodicy, religious beliefs, and actual realities like the musical styles of the African Diaspora?

It is also important to note that Womanist scholars have used black cultural productions to recast the very terms and terrain of womanist scholarship. For example, Kelly Brown Douglas, in *Sexuality and the Black Church*, seeks to determine why the Black Church and scholars of African American religion are reluctant to discuss matters of sexuality. As a work of womanist theology, Douglas’ description and analysis of religious history, biblical hermeneutics, and the forging of black sexual and familial realities demonstrate the oppressive constructions of gender and sexuality in Black

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churches and communities. Douglas asserts that “stereotypes and false images
surrounding black female sexuality provide the foundation for sexual exploitation and
humiliation of Black men, as well as for fostering notions of white male and female
superiority.” Her examination of biblical narratives, myths, stereotypical visual images,
film, black music, humor and stories as source material demonstrates the white culture’s
heterosexist exclusion and violence and blacks’ sexual discourse and responses. Her
work calls for the rhetoric of black liberation, which stresses liberation for everyone in
black communities, to be taken seriously by scholars and the Black Church. As a
corrective, she suggests black churches should draw on biblical narratives and
scholarship on black culture to take seriously the physical and particularly the sexual
well-being of blacks struggle to be whole persons. For Douglas, not only does God’s
biblical message have meaning and significance for issues of sexuality, but “black culture
is replete with wit, music, literature, art, and folklore that mockingly relate White
culture’s conferral of unreasoning zeal and adroitness upon people when it comes to their
sexual temperament and conduct.” Her work reveals how interpretations of God’s
revelation in the Black church and creative cultural expressions in the community reunite
dichotomies such as the sacred and the secular and the body and soul in order to open up
conversations that can heal wounds and nurture healthier attitudes and behaviors

pertaining to sexually related issues and concerns within black churches, the Academy and communities in the United States.

Even though Kelly Brown Douglas pushes for an expansion of womanist scholarship, she fails to consider the creative possibilities of black women using African American quilts and quilting processes to express issues of sexuality and other oppressive concerns. She fails to explore whether black women were having conversations, creating cultural productions, and sharing stories within quilting guilds/bees in black churches, homes, and communities, and how these spaces allowed black women to break out of brutal cycles of oppression and obscure the power relations that strive to maintain certain principles, values, and taboos that silence black women’s experiences. Consequently, she overlooks the significance of how making decorative needlework and other decorative arts can become intertwined with ideas of femininity, sexuality, and other “unspoken” issues that are silenced within Black churches and communities. For instance, she and others failed to pay attention to contemporary quilts made by Faith Ringgold, and her use of quilts to tell the stories about black women’s experiences, religious beliefs, and her use of art quilts to bring attention to issues on race, class, and gender in a white hostile world. Also, Douglas mentions her concern over the lack of attention to the HIV/AIDS epidemic within the black communities, but she fails to consider how gay men and women have used quilting (The NAMES Project: AIDS Memorial Quilt)\textsuperscript{56} to help people understand the devastating impact of losing a family member, friend, and/or loved one to AIDS. Gay

\textsuperscript{56} The NAMES Project website: The AIDS Memorial Quilt http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt
men along with women have used the NAMES quilt to spark a nationwide mobilization of support for Lesbian and Gay Rights, and how the quilt has redefined the quilt-making tradition in response to the contemporary issue of the tragic loss of human life to HIV/AIDS. Lastly, Douglas does not consider how the African American quilting tradition within the Black Church illuminates black folks’ God-talk and religious belief systems within the secular and the sacred realms.

Overall, this very short summary of Womanist scholarship reveals the significance of the use of cultural productions in the study of Womanist theology and ethics. Within this framework Womanist scholars have privileged song, music, and narratives as premier cultural productions for the study of black women’s moral development and religious life in the Black church and community. As a result, Womanists have failed to explore why African American quilts have been constructed and pursued by African American women as a response to a call from God, community, and as a tool of daily life. They have not examined how the process of quilt-making creates solidarity within the Black churches and communities in the United States. That is, despite the use of quilts as a metaphor by African American novelists such as Alice Walker  

Womanists have failed to critically examine the art of African American quilting as a creative way to tell stories and contribute on a very basic level to the survival—bodily, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and culturally—of African Americans, in general, and African American women, in particular. These highly creative

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believers of diverse faith and practices are significant to understanding Black Religion. First, I think womanist scholars should pay critical attention to African American quilts, quilters, and quilt-making because it defines centuries of hand work done by women and passed down from generation to generation as an artistic mode of expression. Second, as a folk, decorative art and craft, women quilters cut, piece, sew, and quilt leftover, discarded, mundane scraps of materials that serve as visual testimonies of women’s history, experiences, and religious life, both past and present. For example, Harriet Powers Bible Quilts, which are located in the Smithsonian Institute and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, are “visual testimonies each carrying a message to those of her own era and of generations following that speaks to community support, personal strength, and religious belief.”38 Third, the failure to study the art of quilting creates an academic blind spot about the belief systems of African Americans that are documented and expressed through African American material culture. Due to this blind spot, scholars have failed to investigate how African American quilt narratives reduce Black religion to infinitely interchangeable “scraps” of everyday materials, symbols and practices that can be used as instruments or vehicles to convey meaning, as well as provide tangible material resources to chart African American women’s many challenges and triumphs to obtain a fuller life. In this light, scholars failure to study African American quilts, quilters, and quilt-making scholars miss learning about various art forms that are relevant to black women’s lives, how the scraps of leftover, discarded, mundane,

cheap materials speak to the women’s experiences of tripartite oppression, affirm a rich African heritage, and tell stories that help scholars gain a deeper understanding of African American belief systems and religious themes that link their present reality to their hope for the future. As a result, there are questions that go unanswered such as: How and why do African Americans use quilt-making and quilts as a coping strategy for survival, past and present? What factors shaped the development of quilts as a creative alternative to the songs, dance, drama, literature, music, and the like for African American women? What aspects of black religiosity are scholars missing by not paying attention to African American quilts, quilters, and the quilt-making process? What is African about African American quilts and quilt-making? How do quilts, quilters, and quilt-making create, reinforce, and/or maintain visual communication systems of religious and moral beliefs within the African American communities? These questions are just a few questions that go unanswered, that if answered, would strengthen our understanding of the cultural significance of the visual testimonies of African American quilts to African American religious life and everyday life. Failure to ask these questions and more, one can easily overlook that African American quilts, quilters, and quilt-making can serve as a framework for conceptualizing and teaching African American women’s history and experiences, and African American belief systems that links black religion to everyday life. To this end, I think that womanist scholars should pay critical attention to African American quilts and its history in order to understand the historical experience of the multifaceted lives of African-Americans, illuminate the links between black religion and everyday life, and focus on a social change perspective that is genuinely and creatively grounded in black women’s and other women of color’s cultural productions. It is
necessary to integrate decorative arts and crafts into the existing knowledge of black cultural productions to investigate the stories we may have missed that are told with scraps of cloth within individual and communal religious settings, black homes and communities in the United States. Next, I will explore the theological approach to black cultural productions within contemporary Black theology.

1.2. Source Material for Contemporary Black Theology

The sources that shape the perspectives within Black theology also rely on black cultural production as tools for theological reflection. For James Cone, black theology of Liberation, “must take serious the cultural expressions of the community it represents so that it will be able to speak relevantly to the black condition.”\(^{59}\) Influenced by theologians Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, Cone establishes the sources for the study of Black theology.\(^{60}\) He identifies the use of black creative expressions such as song and music, poetry, narratives, theatre and other art forms in the black community as data for describing how black people live and their modes of religious thought. Cone’s theological approach helped establish the study of black religion using black cultural productions. Although Back theologians have played a crucial role in normalizing the academic study of black religious culture, subsequent research by contemporary Black theologians has sparked an institutional and intellectual basis for studying and

interpreting a much wider range of black religious expressions within black religious life. Thus, for these scholars and others the use of only the heralded black cultural productions has persistently created issues that have burdened black constructive theology within contemporary times. Mainly, because as contemporary scholar of Christian ethics Victor Anderson argues, “black liberation theology remains alien to the regular life and practices of the black churches in particular and too much of black culture in general.”

Consequently, scholars such as James Evans, Dwight Hopkins, and Anthony B. Pinn reveal the need for Black theologians to construct a black theology addressing the concerns of diversity and complexity of the nature and meaning of African American religion and religious experience within contemporary black communities in the United States.

For example, in *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*, James Evans asks: Who are African Americans and where do we go from here? Evans asserts that Black theology reflects the passions, feelings, and expressions of African American Christianity, but suggests that it must also “be in touch with the guts of black religion” in order to coherently interpret the experiences of black people and the Gospel within a changing cultural matrix. He argues the relationship between the religious and the cultural share a close relationship in black experience, and that the creative play and imaginative activities of aesthetic worship such as singing, chanting,

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62 Evans, James H. "We have been believers." *An African-American Systematic Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress p. 2.
dancing, shouts of praise and hand clapping supports Tillich’s suggestion that “culture is the form of religion, and religion is the content of culture.” For Evans, the use of black cultural productions allows scholars to examine the subject of systematic theology from a uniquely African American perspective. Evans recognizes the problems that theologians face in analyzing and correlating black experience and divine revelation, and he suggests that theologians must respond to these problems through active engagement with black communities. According to Evans, the idea of having community is an innate religious sensibility that affirms that only in community is there survival, prosperity, and sacredness of life. Evans realizes that coming to terms with all the black cultural productions within the black community is difficult, as there are many different ways black cultural productions are used by African Americans to signify the historical solidarity of the believer with the community of faith, and thus with God. Thus, cultural influences must be considered in the teaching, preaching, and writing regarding biblical interpretation and/or Black theology.

Evans pinpoints that culture influences all religions, and all religions have a hermeneutic aspect to them. Consequently, Evans suggests that black theology must be told through narratives to be responsive to the contemporary experiences of African Americans. For Evans, these narratives can be found in black creative cultural productions such as spirituals, preaching, folk tales, music, and the like. He suggests

64 Ibid, p. 121.
65 Evans, James H. We have been believers: An African-American Systematic Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992 p. 124,
that these sources help theologians to tell a complete story that combines the actual story
that believers tell about God with the stories they tell about God’s participation in their
daily lives. Evans asserts that black theologians and Black churches recognize that faith
stories come from more than just the Bible. Though these stories create tensions, he
contends they do not create conflicts because the stories are not competing for the status
of the Bible. However, these folk stories combined with biblical narratives reveal the
truths about African Americans participation in concrete experiences and every day
realities. Therefore, black theologians could record and tell both stories and weave them
together, so that Black theology emerges “self-consciously out of the interstices of life
and thought, faith and praxis, and doctrine and culture.” Evans suggests that Black
theologians must continue to examine and interpret the phenomenon of black religion and
search for new connections between the faith and its practice, worship, and its theology.
He insists that whatever theologians say about God must address the faith and
experiences that make intercultural and intergenerational discourse possible.
Consequently, black theology must be told through narratives because they are essential
to the entire process of doing black theology, as these narratives have oiled the wheels of
the black liberation movement since its inception within black communities in the United
States. Evans work shows that black theologians can use black cultural expressions to
map African American religious creativity and its role in the freedom struggle of black
people. Evans use of black cultural productions outlines four things that a preacher or

66 Ibid, p. 31
67 Evans, James H. We have been believers: An African-American Systematic Theology. Minneapolis:
theologian must take into account, which are as follows: one, cultural influences are inevitable: two, biblical interpretations must be relevant to today: three, the biblical story is comprised of more than the individual words that make up the story: and four, the Bible’s authority must be interpreted within historical context of the black struggle for liberation. His four points encourage scholars to strive to locate black cultural productions that describe and interpret the multi-dimensional aspects of the black religious experience within the believing communities of Black Christians more accurately.

Evans answers the alienation problem, but in his hermeneutical turn he continues to focus on common slave narratives to propose that these sources can benefit our contemporary social context. He fails to explore the possibility of other black cultural productions such as visual art, decorative arts/crafts, and Hip Hop culture that communicate narratives that express the relevance of the Bible and Black theology within contemporary Black communities. However, his work is significant for this project because I agree that narratives are important, and that expressing theological reflections biblical interpretations through narratives can provide meaning and purpose for contemporary African American communities. In this respect, I suggest that the theologians expand their knowledge of the diverse ways stories are told and retold, by exploring all the creative mediums stories are recorded and communicated. Narratives of contemporary African American quilts should be considered as source material along with the slave narratives, to see “how we got this way by faith.” The study of African American quilts, as source material, will allow scholars to gain a deeper understanding of
the interdependence of cultural and religious practices in black religion and in the daily experiences of African Americans. In this case, one might ask: How so?

From the ethnographic research I have conducted with African American quilters in Houston, as well as through secondary sources within the social sciences African American quilts are a certain kind of visual production (quilts are made with scraps of cloth versus paint, music, dance, clay and the like) that also communicates a network of convictions, attitudes, perspectives, emotions, and forms of representation that has helped African Americans mediate their social environments to seek a more satisfying life outside religious dogma and institutions. In this case, African American quilts (as African American material culture) provide additional source material for studying how black religious life, culture, and worldview emerge from the everyday lives of African Americans in general, and African American women in particular. Furthermore, through the study of African Americans quilts scholars of religion can gain a better understanding of how all black cultural productions are interwoven within black religious life to serve a life-affirming function that preserves and promotes the religious and cultural sensibilities of the black community and each of its individual members. Thus, the study of African American quilts reveals a visual dimension to religious expression within contemporary black communities, and reveals how visual images, symbols, and signs can also communicate narratives of thinking, being and doing that can influence faith formation within black religious life and culture.

Dwight Hopkins’s *Shoes that fit our feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* explores the theological lessons of black cultural productions as a starting place for constructive Black theology, and for reflecting upon the common experience of
oppression by virtue of membership in particular social groups. He contends that belief
in the liberation of the poor is important for the study of contemporary black liberation
theology, and that there is a connection between the lived experiences of the African
American community and the core message of the Christian Bible. In other words, the
common experience of systematic oppression based on social group membership serves
as a starting point for theological reflection; with black cultural resources offer a
particular lens to understand group experience, scripture, history, tradition, in order to
construct theology. The driving question is what important sources of faith in the black
community nurture the construction of a contemporary black theology of liberation?

Hopkins proposes that a black theology of liberation today is:

…woven together from at least the following political and cultural strands found
in the fabric of black North American life: the African American church, black
women, African American cultural folklore, major black political representatives,
and an analysis and vision coming out of the African American legacy of struggle.
Furthermore, authentic accounts of the God of freedom, which black people have
worshipped and continue to worship in its sources.68

Thus, for Hopkins the construction of a black liberation theology must start from the
viewpoint that God’s poor will attain justice. Hopkin’s theological reflections on the
slave narratives, spirituals, autobiographies, and black folk culture explore the basic tales
of poor black folks to examine their contributions to theology, Christology or suitable
medium, and to human purpose. In this light, Hopkins’s constructive black theology of
liberation requires a deeper understanding of poor black women’s spirituality and its

68 Hopkins, Dwight N. Shoes that Fit our Feet : Sources for a Constructive Black Theology. Maryknoll,
N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993., p. 4
challenges, values, and traditions that act out their faith in God and black women’s faith experiences through practical activities in black communities that push black theology to an encounter with God’s holistic liberation. For example, for black theology, one of the locations of the poor is the gender-racial-poverty reality (sexism, racism, and classism) of African American women. Through the use of literary and biblical narratives, Hopkins shows that black women’s spirituality expresses ties to their own community and the broader community, including their ancestors, women-to-women relationships, black women’s love for their families and black men, as well as their connectedness to the powerful imagery of Africa. He also suggests that source material, created by black women, transmits stories of spiritual wisdom and encounter with the Holy that challenges black theology to open its eyes to see other forms of black women’s spirituality outside the recognized black church structures. According to Hopkins, “the originality of black women’s spiritual experience and story must be taken seriously precisely because a black theology of liberation receives and participates with an incarnational God who resides with the poor. And while attending to the fight against wicked spiritualties, “we also open ourselves up the multiple positive, creative, and spiritual laughter, tears, dance, and thinking of the women.” As a result, black creative sources, especially made by women, have allowed black theologians and religious thinkers to find spiritual realities that can harvest new theological language, metaphors, ideas, and categories that will foster a contemporary construction of black theology. Hopkins’s work indicates that the

stories of black women should be taken seriously. It is significant because it pushes scholars of African American religion to consider how the cultural productions of women offer contemporary black theologian’s religious insights that may help them frame black theology today. Yet, Hopkins fails to explore black cultural productions made by women that encourage theological reflection on women’s oppressed experience that informs and sparks action. He fails to critically analyze how women’s cultural productions such as African American quilts embrace black theologies to add an extra dimension to reflect theologically and spiritually on the outcomes and meanings of thoughtful action in the pursuit of liberation. He also fails to examine how the making of quilts by African American women requires the participation with others who share the same oppression, and how quilts serve as a vehicle for generating knowledge and social change within contemporary black communities in the United States. Thus, Hopkins fails to critically explore how African American quilts encourage theological reflection on common experiences of oppressed groups working for social change. And how quilts generate knowledge and narratives that may inspire the quest for a fuller life among individual members of oppressed groups within contemporary black communities.

In short, both Hopkins and Evans used the slave narratives, music, spirituals, folktales, and the like as resources for Black theology to tell how enslaved Africans and their descendants created a living tradition of African American religion and culture. The descriptions they offer are consistent with the general discourse of Black theology and religion generally described, thus, maintaining the same concepts and highlighting the same elements within current scholarship. From my perspective, the focus on heralded cultural productions fails to fully explore African American religious experience and
culture in all its complexity and diversity. In the twenty-first century, to limit Black theology and religion to the study of only the heralded resources limits the understanding of African American religion and culture, and prevents the theorizing of the full range of life options and cultural productions that shaped African American religious life in the United States today. To this end, maintaining this approach restricts the study of the range of ways in which human creativity and faith can be expressed, and does not allow for African American religion and experiences of the religious to be understood in a way that speaks to the African American desire for a full existence in everyday life within contemporary black communities in the United States.

Within the scholarly discourse on the contemporary construction of black theology, Anthony Pinn suggests that scholars should rethink and revaluate heralded cultural productions to gain a deeper understanding of the religious experiences and practices of African American, and scholars should accurately describe, analyze and interpret cultural productions excluded from the accepted record of black cultural productions.

In *Terror and Triumph*, Pinn pays attention to the historical manifestation of black religion. Focusing mainly on the Black Church and Islam, Pinn seeks to articulate a vision of black religion’s nature and meaning in terms of both its primary structure and its historical manifestations and to explore the variety of religious expressions and practices at the “heart and soul of black religious life.” He provides a description of the unique experience and history of black people in the United States. For Pinn, blacks’

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dehumanization as “object” occurred during their enslavement on the shores of Africa, their journey across the Middle Passage, and when blacks were sold on auction blocks. Beyond these “rituals of reference” that occurred during the era of transatlantic slavery, this dehumanization was reinforced well into the twentieth century through the lynching of black bodies.

In response to the trials and tribulations experienced by blacks, African Americans developed practices, doctrines, and institutional structures to cultivate a distinctive black religion to combat the processes of dehumanization and objectification, which earmarked what Pinn calls “liberative activism,” which developed through the agency of the Black Church, and a “theology of history” that enabled them to make sense of their suffering. In this light, Christianity and the Nation of Islam allowed African Americans, both enslaved and free, to confront the dehumanization process. Pinn asserts that it is in this struggle against dehumanization that the core of black religion developed as the “quest for complex subjectivity” or “a desire or feeling for more life meaning.” In this light, the quest for complex subjectivity is concerned with one answering what could be understood as ultimate questions about oneself—the who, what, when, where, and why of one’s existence. This central concern for subjectivity, according to Pinn, is “the creative struggle in history for increased agency, for a fullness of life.”

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Pinn turns to cultural artifacts such as clothing, quilts, wall collages, and visual art to suggest that scholars can gain new ways of examining and comprehending black religion. He suggests that sensitivity to this cultural production reveals that a creative thrust remained intact, despite the attempts by whites to dehumanize blacks and quench their religious yearning. He argues that the decorative arts allowed free and enslaved African Americans to rethink their social and cultural context and express a more liberating existence. Pinn argues that African American quilts serve as “tools of daily life [that] have been overlooked by most in black religious studies.” He suggests that faced with the terror of enslavement, enslaved Africans creatively gathered “scraps” of materials from their everyday life, and stitched a text of images and patterns into a tapestry that not only warmed the body, but stimulated the mind, and inspired the spirit. He argues that quilts are texts full of images and patterns that articulate a broad and freer perspective of life that is significant because it reveals that the push for more liberated form of individual and communal life can be found in the rather mundane materials of daily life. In this light, the creative process of quilting, as religious experience, is defined as “the recognition of and response to the elemental feeling for complex subjectivity and the accompanying transformation of consciousness that allows for the historically manifest battle against the terror of fixed identity.” Pinn’s assertion that religious scholars and theologians within African American religious studies have overlooked African American quilts, as a decorative art, is the point of departure for this dissertation.

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His definition of black religion as the quest for complex subjectivity, and his definition of religious experience create a framework that enables African American quilts to be viewed as a cultural practice of meaning-making. In this respect, this project will illustrate how African American quilts craft visual narratives that communicate the links between the quest for complex subjectivity and everyday life among contemporary quilting organization and its individual members. In this light, this dissertation should be understood as a response to Pinn’s call for the study African American quilts, in particular, and material culture, generally.

In the next chapter, I begin with the notion that African American quilts should be considered within the dominant study of African American religion, and I propose that African American quilts communicate visual testimonies about African American experiences and their struggles for a fuller life that can help scholars gain deeper understanding of what links black religion to everyday life within contemporary black communities. In fact, the next chapter is concerned with developing the framework to examine and interpret African American quilting process, quilts, and the quilters who make them.
In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how scholars of African American religion examined black cultural productions such as music, slave narratives, songs, folktales, and poetry as source material for the construction of African American religious thought and experiences of the religious. Within that demonstration I showed where scholars of African American religious studies failed to critically examine African American quilts as source material for the study of African American religion. Consequently, much of the discussion concerning African American quilts has been conducted by archeologists, folk scholars, anthropologists, feminists, historians of art, and those who study visual/material culture. Scholars within these disciplines have illustrated the complex and significant

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ways that African American quilts communicates identity, memory, experiences, and creativity. However, these scholars failed to pay critical attention to the religious significance of the quilts. Indeed, despite Emile Durkheim’s conviction that religious persuasions stabilized society, and gave people an orientation to life. Therefore, I argue that African American quilts are visual testimonies that link black religion (quest for complex subjectivity) to everyday life. This link is important to the development of a fuller understanding of concepts, ideas and meanings for scholars of African American religion. Due to the selective treatment of quilts, there is no blueprint in which to study the religious significance of African American quilts. Thus, the primary goal of this chapter is to offer an interpretative framework that examines the visual testimonies of African American quilts as source material for the study of African American religion.

My research design in this chapter is outlined in four parts. Part one outlines African American quilt tradition in Houston, Texas. I provide this outline to frame the context for my ethnographic research that I present in this chapter. Next, I outline my epistemological stance within social constructionism. I lay this out to reveal my personal

and subjective position that I bring to this project. Specifically this section helps to explicate my subjective views that influence how I will interpret the data to lay a clear foundation for my perspective on this research project. Part two identifies and justifies Anthony Pinn’s theory of relational centralism as the theoretical perspective for my chosen methodology. Relational centralism provides the theoretical perspective that requires that I look beyond the aesthetic quality of the quilts to deconstruct the attitudes and values of the African American quilt. Through this lens, I develop the concept of the 3 Q’s (the quilt, the quilter, and the quilting process) to provide the framework for interpreting what I observed. Part three discusses Anthony Pinn and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic approaches that are employed to interpret the data. I use Pinn’s hermeneutic of style and body, hermeneutic of the ontological dimension and hermeneutic of inner meaning to interpret the research collected from the five quilters selected while conducting fieldwork. I use Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of play, symbol, and festive to interpret the conversations and actions observed within the Jubilee Quit Circle. Part four describes the ethnographic/qualitative methodology to provide the conventions for data collection of the visual testimonies within African American quilts. In this sense, the subject matter--human beings engaged in meaningful behavior--guide the mode of inquiry and orientation of the investigation in order to understand the specific subject matter.
2.1. Situational and Contextual Elements of the Study of African American Quilts in Houston

Throughout Houston, Texas one finds quilts in homes, churches, businesses, museums/galleries, libraries, universities, and hospitals. These quilts can be found on beds in homes. They are given at baptisms in churches. They hang on walls in museums. They are exhibited in galleries and decorate businesses, libraries, hospitals, universities. They are even given as gifts and tokens of love. In fact, each year Houston hosts the world’s largest International Quilt Festival. The Quilt festival is a haven for over 60,000 quilt makers and seamstresses throughout the United States, and features over 2000 quilts and over 500 exhibitors, which makes it one of the world’s biggest quilt and textile shows.\textsuperscript{77} In addition to the Festival, Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts in 2002 debut the Gee Bends of Alabama Quilts in an art exhibition.\textsuperscript{78} This exhibition recast African American quilts as art. The recasting of African American quilts as artistic expressions not only elevated the value of African American quilts within the art world, but also it established the African American quilting tradition as an original creative enterprise within American art and culture. Houston’s rich African American quilting tradition can also be found within African American churches. For instance, Pastor Dr. D. Z. Cofield of Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church (church home of deceased Congresswoman Barbara Jordon located in 3rd ward) commissioned the creation of a quilt to chronicle the

\textsuperscript{77} Visit the following websites: \url{http://10times.com/quilt-festival-houston}, \url{http://traveltips.usatoday.com/fall-international-quilt-festival-houston-texas-106702.html}, and \url{http://www.quilts.com/home/about.php}

church’s founding by crafting pictures of its founding members and church history. Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church gives quilts to its members at baptismal, and hangs a quilt to tell the history of the church. These quilts were commissioned by Wheeler Avenue’s founding Pastor Rev. William Lawson, and quilt giving is a standing tradition at Wheeler. At Brentwood Baptist Church, Pastor Joe Ratcliff commissioned a quilt depicting the historical plight of African Americans from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. These are just a few examples of the quilts displayed in African American churches in Houston.

In addition to museums, churches, and festivals, one can also find quilts within the private lives of individuals and families in Houston. Some families own quilts from the 19th century till today. It is often common to speak of quilts in Houston, and for someone to tell you a story about a family member, friend, church member, and/or co-worker they know who quilts or keeps the quilts in the family. However, the study of these quilts and their significance is less abundant. This raises important methodological questions such as: how does one collect or generate the data pertaining to Houston quilts? And how does one analyze the data collected? Therefore, for this project, I chose to conduct a qualitative study of African American quilts. A qualitative research study provides a way to examine the individual and social significance quilts have on the lives of both individuals and communities. For the most part, the essence of qualitative research is twofold: (1) a commitment to some version of the naturalistic approach and interpretive understanding of human experience, and (2) an emphasis on qualities of
entities, processes, and meanings to gain new information or in-depth perspectives which quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret.\textsuperscript{79} In this light, qualitative research allows the researcher, as Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln notes, “stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of the inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning.”\textsuperscript{80} In other words, the province of qualitative research is the world of lived experience, where individual beliefs and action intersect with culture, and explored and discovered in great detail with the intent to discover new information and communicate the researchers ideas and findings.

Some scholars view qualitative research as an assault on experimental (positivist) sciences such as psychology, physics, economics, and view qualitative research as unscientific, exploratory, soft scholarship, and/or subjective with no way of verifying their truth claims. Scholars such as Silverman argue that those, who attempt to capture the point of view of the interacting subject, are reproducing naïve humanism “a Romantic impulse which elevates the experiential to the level of the authentic.”\textsuperscript{81} In other words, researchers who attempt a philosophical investigation of humanist ideas through qualitative methods provide unsubstantiated findings and/or are improbable attempts at best. There are other scholars that question the validity of qualitative sociological

research that turns an ethnography eye towards discourse and storytelling. This textual and performative turn, as David Snow and Calvin Morrill notes “will take us further from the field of social action and the real dramas of everyday life and thus signal the death knell of ethnography as an empirically grounded enterprise.” Of course, I disagree. I favor qualitative research for this project because: (1) the behaviors and interactions of research participants are directly observed, (2) participants are encouraged to tell their own stories, (3) the researcher can reflect on their day-to-day experiences to stress how social experience is created and given meaning, and (4) the researcher can utilize a variety of methods and practices such as participant observations, unstructured interviews, photographs, and the like, and (5) the researcher can provide theoretical illumination of the phenomenon under investigation. Ultimately, visual imagery is constructed through various practices, technologies, and knowledge. A critical approach to visual images is needed to decipher the style, ontological dimensions, and inner meanings of the visual testimonies, as well as the social practices of the quilt-making process to expose their religious significance as source material for the study of African American religion. A qualitative approach to the study of quilts allows for the investigation of African American quilts, the quilters who make them and the quilt-making process within the everyday social world. The gathered information from interviews is then analyzed in an interpretive matter to communicate the findings. As such, I gain the quilter’s point of view of the meanings, understandings, and

contingencies of the quilts to provide a thick description of their religious significance.

In addition, throughout history, the qualitative researcher has defined their work in terms of hopes and beliefs, “religious faiths, occupational and professional ideologies.”

Qualitative research has been judged on the standard of what it says about “something”, and how it conceptualizes our reality and the images of the world. The qualitative approach is a major tool in the research of racial and cultural diversity and confirming theories or beliefs within our everyday world. For example, scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier, Melville Herskovits, William Foote Whyte, Arthur Vidich, Stanford Lyman, and Victor Turner just to name a few have used qualitative research to establish ethnic studies and question assumptions of earlier history. These scholars used ethnographic methods to make a prodigious impact across a spectrum of disciplines such as sociology, history, religious and theological studies, to cultural and ethnic studies, which contributed greatly to the study of black cultural productions being fertile conceptual material that served to transfer individuals/groups from the profane to the sacred. In other words, the depth of their qualitative research allows the researcher to explore how people actually experience their culture and how those experiences are expressed in various forms to highlight their

84 Ibid, p. 18
relevance and interpret their meanings within diverse fields of study. As such, I suggest that qualitative research allows for the investigation of African American quilts and their link to black religion and everyday life. In this light, a qualitative approach bears mightily on the way I approach the observation and analysis of contemporary African American quilts in Houston, Texas.

Epistemology: Social Constructionist View of Qualitative Research

As a qualitative researcher, I speak from a multicultural, gendered worldview. In addition, I have multiple reasons for participating in the study. For example, one reason is I desire to gain a deeper understanding of African American quilts and their religious significance. Another reason is I believe that black religion functions as a way to transcend the terror and dread or what Pinn calls “rituals of reference” within everyday experiences in the natural environment. Rituals of reference, as Pinn argues is a “fixed identity as object, recognition of this status fosters a form of dread and terror, and religion manifested in black life is a response to or wrestling against this terror, understood in terms of liberation.”86 In other words, I accept Pinn’s notion that human existence of African Americans is characterized by terror and dread in our everyday lives that raises questions about the who, what, when, and why of our existence. And Black religious forms provide answers that humans need in order to accept, adjust, and/or make meaningful the dehumanization and violent suppression African Americans experience in life.

From my perspective, religion and the social world are constructed not created. As such, in a word, my logic or epistemology for this research is based on a social constructionism view. My constructionism view is consistent with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman’s text, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.*\(^{87}\) Berger and Luckman’s social constructionism stance posits that reality and knowledge is socially defined. And this reality and knowledge refers to the subjective experiences of everyday life, in which the individuals own thoughts and ideas (and others in their life) of the world are understood rather than comprehended as an objective reality. Berger and Luckman also maintain that semiotics and signification are the most important means of maintaining, adjusting, and recreating subjective experiences. For Berger and Luckman this includes body language, material artifacts, language, signs and the like. Berger and Luckman define signs as anything that has an “explicit intention to serve as an index of subjective meaning.”\(^{88}\) Through language individuals can transcend and actualize an entire world at any given moment, and can construct symbols from everyday experience, bring back and imagine symbol, as well as present them as real elements of everyday life. For Berger and Luckman, “symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and the common-sense apprehension of this reality.”\(^{89}\) Lastly, material artifacts and body language are viewed as “human expressivity” that manifests itself in products of human activity such as objects,

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\(^{89}\) Ibid, p. 54
art, dances, and gestures that are available and considered elements of a common world. As Berger and Luckman notes, “All these presences can be highly meaningful of course in the ongoing reality of life.” As such, individuals and groups of individuals interacting in a social system creates concepts, material artifacts, bodily movements, language, and mental representations of each other’s actions that are made available to themselves and others. Through human expressivity and reciprocal interactions, over time, meaning, knowledge, and beliefs of what reality is become embedded into the fabric of society. Through this lens, Berger and Luckman’s version of social constructionism provides insights and perspectives that are useful in my qualitative research of the cultural production of African American quilts.

Experience comes to us not just verbally or written but also through a broad array of images and expressions such as movies, murals, rites, material culture, carnivals, and so on. The expressions are encapsulations of the experience of others, or as Victor Turner notes, “the crystallized secretions of once living human experience.” For this project, I am interested in the visual imaginings within African American quilts. Within a social constructionist view, I can examine and construct meaning from objects, and interpret their significance as religious sources, rather than overlooking them as an independent ‘thing’ with no intrinsic meaning. Social constructionism allows the researcher to focus on objects intently to emphasize that society is actively and creatively constructed by objects that human beings produce and interact with their individual and

90 Ibid, p. 54
social worlds. This means objects can speak to us, and that we should try to interpret what they say about our practical life, and their active constitution and reconstitution of frames of meaning of culture, human experience, creative acts, and belief systems. Regarding objects, visual/material objects convey memories, faith, narratives, and creativity within everyday life to: (1) designate specific information, (2) contribute to collective and individual self-understanding and agency, (3) materialize something unnoticed or forgotten, (4) construct or reconstruct life experiences and visions of life in order to think about the world differently, and (5) gain a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of black religion and experiences of the religious. The study of visual/material objects, in many ways, allow me to choose methodologies and hermeneutical approaches that identify and understand these visual testimonies as sources of religious insight grounded within human experience within individual and social worlds. In the next section, I cover the theoretical perspective, methods, and methodology for the study of African American quilts.

### 2.2. Theoretical Perspective: Ways of Seeing

Visual testimonies are defined as visual statements, declarations, and/or affirmations that are expressed using scraps of mundane materials within African American quilts. African American quilts as art allows me to refer to the visual testimony of the quilt as having a configuration or composition that arouses or that is evocative in character. In order to discuss how African American quilts are visual testimonies, one must explore the quilt, quilter, and quilting process are taken together to gain an understanding of African American quilts as visual testimonies. To study the
African American quilt by itself, the researcher fails to understand the religious significance of the symbolic communication, multiple perceptions of culture, and how cultural productions might facilitate awareness of internal realities. Scholars are unable to gain the full purpose of the art, which novelist James Baldwin notes “is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.” This means that scholars will overlook African American quilts as source material for the study of African American religious studies if they ignore the stories quilters tell about the quilts, and the quilting making process. In other words, to study African American quilts, is to study the quilt, the quilter, and the quilt-making process within both personal and communal settings. As source material, the African American quilter is the storyteller/artist that creates a visual narrative. The quilt is both a visual narrative and art. The quilt-making process reveals how the visual narrative and artwork was made.

Drawing from the collected data, the investigation revealed relationships between the quilt, the quilter, and the quilting process must be studied as three parts of a whole. To examine and interpret just the visual imagining with quilts creates a false vision that eclipses the religious significance of African American quilts to the researcher. That is, not everyone reads visual images the same way, and in order to get an authentic interpretation of the visual testimonies, one must also relate the stories of the quilter, and how the quilt was constructed. No two quilts are the same, even if they have the same imagining or made using the same pattern or technique. Not to mention, people can look at the same images, yet, interpret them differently. The researcher must keep in mind

what Pierre Bourdieu points out that, “seeing” images is a social/cultural practice that is learnt differently by different people. Bourdieu shows that photographs (images) have an ambiguous and differing legitimacy within various social groups. The difference ethos of social groups determines the acceptance of certain images, and their attitudes, meanings, and aesthetic choices of the images. Hence, the quilter’s story is central to validating information about the quilt. In addition, having knowledge of the quilting process provides information about the multiple practices and techniques as social-cultural process, that should be appreciated and described to ground interactional sequences, social construction of images, visual knowledge, and ideological aspects of representation.

To gain an interpretation of the religious significance of the visual testimonies within quilts, the study of African American quilts requires sensitivity to what I will call the 3 Q’s (quilt, quilter, quilt-making process). Taken as a whole, as Pinn notes, “content and form, material history, and elemental impulses bleed into each other.” In terms of the 3Q’s, this means that the content and form of the quilt is related to the material history, and the elemental impulses that undergird the quilt-making process are woven together. The quilter provides the dimension of autobiographical understanding of the quilts and the quilt-making process. This means that the quilter’s stories relate the heterogeneous elements of their lives, and in turn one’s self, to the making of the quilt,


and aesthetic choices and material history that crafts the visual testimony. This requires a lens that will foster an interpretation that is credible for understanding quilts as source material. For such a theoretical approach, I turn to Anthony Pinn’s “relational centralism.”

For this project, relational centralism points to the idea that scholars must collect quilts, ponder them, and arrive at an understanding of the encoded knowledge about the quest for complex subjectivity. Inspired by Pinn’s relational centralism, the attention to both the particular and the shared impulse of all humans allows researchers to view the 3Q’s as a particular cultural production that marks the complex, messy, subjective, and relational within human processes of meaning-making. As an approach to the study of black religion, relational centralism operates on theoretical assumptions and questions that seek to clarify the nature and meaning of religion while recognizing the value of both the center and margins of religious life.

First, relational centralism allows us to understand that black cultural production expresses notions of self, community, religious institutions, doctrines, historical situated realities, and the world that reveal a deeper “yearning for something” within human history and social interaction that can be examined. Second, this “yearning for something” can be called the quest for complex subjectivity. Life is viewed as having meaning. A yearning for something (meaning) refers to the elemental impulses and feelings for the quest for a fuller life. The study of the 3Q’s reveals the hidden symbols and obscure signs points back to this yearning for complex subjectivity. This is

95 Ibid, p. 195-200
significant because it suggests that African American quilt visually articulate a link between black religion and everyday life. Third, this elemental feeling or impulse must be viewed as the “genius of all black religious practice.” Fourth, relational centralism posits that scholars can gain a better understanding of human beings through critical attention to the elemental impulse and how it operates in terms of the human experience. Lastly, relational centralism acknowledges that we are unable to fully capture the elemental impulse of black religion through historical realities, thus, scholars are unable to gain full comprehension the nature and meaning of black religion. These theoretical assumptions require that the researcher be aware and sensitive to the fact that, as Mircea Eliade notes, “the symbol reveals certain aspects of reality…which defy any other means of knowledge. Images, symbols, and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they…fulfill a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being.”

Using Pinn’s relational centralism as my theoretical approach also requires sensitivity to questions that inform the interpretive process. For example, can the present reality be reduced to a common denominator, or does the reality point to the genius of black religion? What is to be made of the various incarnations of the elemental nature of religion? Does the arrangement of black life and its priorities point to the “texture” of this elemental yearning? Do the diverse manifestations and the context of each manifestation say something about the nature of this elemental impulse? For Pinn, these questions,

97 Ibid, page 197
“appeal to the relational nature of this approach by seeking to put in better focus our understanding of what is religious about black religion through a framework of analogy.” For Pinn, the analogy is not based on value judgments or concerned with hierarchical rankings used to undertake the analogy. In this light, relational centralism allows scholars to think critically in terms of relations of human interaction and experiences that uncover dimensions of the nature and meaning of religion and the experiences of the religious within everyday life without bias. Relational centralism allows theory and art production to transform art into a visual text. The visual becomes a referent (sign) to the historical moment of its production, and art as representation becomes a tool to evaluate and assess the validity of the nature and meaning of black religion in everyday life. The 3Q’s allows scholars of religious studies to gain an understanding not only of what the quilts contain, but also of how quilters express a way of coming to know this elemental impulse that marks all human life, as well as how the quilt-making process reveals the role of complex subjectivity in selecting and arranging “scraps” of everyday life to report the internal realities of black religious life. As such, from the study of the 3Q’s, scholars can communicate the relational nature of the faith perspective and cultural orientation that permeates the creative work, in order to put in better focus our understanding of what is religious about black religion through the framework of a quilt analogy. Through the lens of relational centralism, African American quilts as source material are an alternative creative expression through which

the quest for complex subjectivity emanates from the ordinary. African American quilts are created based on need and materials available. Thus, the manifestation of the African American quilts is a situational affair. Within the situational context, empowerment is achieved by creating a visual narrative the expresses their thoughts about ideas about life and black religion. Through quilts, African American quilters express creativity and multiple points of view of life through the subject matter.

2.3. Hermeneutic Approaches: Interpreting African American Quilts, Quilter and Quiltmaking

The African American quilter uses ‘scraps of materials” to create visual testimonies that reveal how we inhabit and co-habit the world in which we live. According to Darlene Clark Hine, “imbedded in quilts through history are deep reflections on the everyday activities, values, beliefs of ordinary folk.”100 By knowing how to interpret these visual testimonies, we learn how articulate possibilities and meanings of life. Examination of the visual narrative of a quilt opens up questions and criticisms about knowledge claims being made about black bodies and the historical dynamics that shape black religious lives. As a semiotic register of things, a hermeneutic method is required that can interpret the quilts visual narrative. Using Pinn’s Hermeneutic of Style, the researcher can interpret the style of the quilt as a narrative of experience and subjectivity. The data collected in this research reveals that a quilter (body) moves through life, and imaginatively explores her/his everyday experiences

interpreting events and situations from her or his perspective. Based on desire, time, and life experiences, she (he) then creatively arranges the pieces into a creative artwork by using selected colors, images, signs, and symbols, memories and bits and pieces of scrap materials found along the way to craft a style that best expresses “certain codes that speak to the religious nature of black experience.”

In this light, it is through the artistic elements of African American quilts that quilters transform the external world in ways that creates a visual space within the tapestry. This visual narrative recasts their experiences, beliefs, and visions of life—real or imagined help them make-meaning out of life. African American quilters speak to us through visual materials in quilts, and the style of African American quilts call us to think about, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “every ideal of style dictates not only how we should say things but what sort of things we may say.”

Through a hermeneutic of style and body scholars can make sense of African American quilts as art, that create visual testimonies of morals, beliefs and communal dimensions of black life denied by the larger society. Through a hermeneutic of style, one interprets how quilters express a stronger sense of value and appreciation of black bodies within the context of both individual activities and communal existence. The data reveals that the quilter articulates his/her desires to highlight the black life experience through actual patterns and design of the quilt to create new visions of life as the quilter

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sees fit. For instance, one of the quilters from the Jubilee Quilt Guild that I named Hattie Johnson states, “I want to make a quilt for my niece with a ballerina on it. So far I can’t find a black ballerina. I want her to see herself a black ballerina. If I can’t find it, I might have to create my own ballerina.” As a result, the style of the quilt offers a little more than ornamentation. As Calvin Seerveld wrote “art itself is always a consecrated offering, a disconcertingly undogmatic yet terribly moving attempt to bring honor and glory and power to something.” A hermeneutic of style allows us to interpret the style of the quilt that points to how they struggle against a denial of black worth through the cultural production of African American quilts. That is to say, that African American quilts as product are designed to free the minds and spirits of African American people by creating through the style of the quilt a visual imaginative experience. Through the hermeneutic of style and body the imaginative space created within the quilt can be interpreted, and are of religious significance because as Pinn points out, “the actual patterns and techniques point to the style of this struggle for liberation and rehearse the collected stories that summarize this religious experience.” This means that scholars can gain a more robust understanding of the creative impulse to craft visual testimonies. The hermeneutic of style and body help us understand the connection between African American quilts and lived communities.

Hermeneutic of Ontological Dimension

103 Interview with author, June 19, 2014
Written stories or the vernacular arts are not the only ways to express matters of feeling that have something to do with our understanding of some person, place, situation, or religious experience. Not to mention, written and oral arts are hardly ever adequate for telling the whole story. Regarding the literary tradition as Tony Morrison notes, “over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, “let us drop a veil over those proceedings too terrible to relate.” In other words, the kinds of writing skills that one needs for a literary or vernacular rendition of a religious experience are often constrained by discursive communication that can hinder possible meanings and understandings of what is expressible or representational. Yet, when one adds the visual narrative (what one sees) to the written and the vernacular stories one can fill in the gaps or fragile memories of what was forgotten, missed, or neglected by written or oral narratives about human experience. In life, everyday seeing, remembering, believing, and living within specific environments raises two questions: what is made visible? What is rendered invisible? What we tend to look at depends on many factors that are enmeshed within power relations, economic struggles, mobility, and a willingness to see. A hermeneutic of ontological dimension allows scholars working with African American quilts to gain a deeper understanding of the impulse or feeling for complex subjectivity that we often ignore. The images and impressions of the quilt are a valuable tool for understanding meaningful experiences that express life meaning. As such, African American quilts are material records of personal and social experiences. For example,

one of the quilters in Jubilee Quilt Circle informed me that “I saved all of my sons old family reunion t-shirts. The t-shirts are arranged to tell a story of our family reunions so he will remember the fun times he had with family and the importance of being connected to family. With the quilt, he will never feel alone. He will remember he is a part of a family.”107 Indeed, the vision of the quilter is a cultural construction, which the quilter attempts to capture experiences, beliefs, and thoughts in all its complexity to create a felt experience. The material representation of the quilt is available for others to experience and to be touched by it.

The ontological dimension of African American quilting is important for several reasons. First, a hermeneutic of ontological dimension allows scholars of African American religious studies to interpret the visual testimonies in African American quilts to gain new meaning or reveal something that is hidden within a remembered past, faith perspectives, creative acts, and/or written and oral narratives. For example, the quilter I named Mattie Smith informs that she use to watch her grandmother (now deceased) make quilts as a child. Mattie stated, “My grandmother use to make utility quilts. She made quilts out of whatever she could and the quilts were used as covering. I think that is why I am a scrap quilter because I am still reaching back for my grandmother.”108 Second, this hermeneutic allow researchers to interpret visual testimonies that speak to elemental modes of being that are felt, to create nuanced views of black religious life. For example, one of the quilters in the Jubilee Quilt Circle informs me “what quilters feel, think, and

107 Interview with author, May 15, 2014.
believe about life, religion, and themselves can be seen in a quilt. A part of the quilter is in every quilt they make.” Thirdly, this hermeneutic allows African American quilts as a cultural production to contribute to the fundamental cannon of source materials for black theological reflections and religious reflections on black experience. Lastly, the hermeneutic of ontological dimension allows scholars to interpret the knowledge quilters have that calls us to take another look at that which is all too familiar within our daily lives. In this light, a hermeneutic of ontological dimension allows scholars to probe how African American quilters communicate certain underlying impulses and what they say about the conscious ways in which subjectivity is shaped and directed by a visual narrative motif--that enhances our understanding and viewing of public and private construction of self and experiences of the religious.

**Hermeneutic of Inner Meaning**

African American quilts tell us more than just social and cultural aspects of the quilter’s life and the world in which they live. As artists, quilters yearn for knowledge, search for personal meaning, desire the big picture in which they can believe and come to understand themselves. They have public issues, private troubles, and perceive relationships to make meaning out of life through stories. These stories orient values, express feeling, emotions, create vocabularies of motive, and give voice to an elemental impulse we all share. The African American quilters in this project often claimed that quilt-making has therapeutic ways to help women cope with stress and upheaval; that

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they are inspired to quilt from sources that were extrasensory, transcendent, and supernatural. This requires a hermeneutic that cuts through external realities to the core of experience. As such, I turn to Pinn’s hermeneutic of Inner Meaning. A hermeneutic of inner meaning as Pinn writes, “affords an opportunity to examine black religious reality for both its inner workings and its external structures, which in turn allows conversion accounts...to be examined for what they say about the inner urges that inform practices, as opposed to simply concentrating on the socioeconomic and political consequences of these inner urges.”110 As storytellers, the stories they tell about lived experiences, and their interactions with extrasensory, spiritual energy or experiences of the divine or supernatural seems to help them make quilts. The quilters in this project like to call this force God, and they believe God comes to them during the quilting process. For example, the quilter I interviewed privately that I named Donna Jackson tells me, “before I quilt I pray, and God gives me a vision to make the quilt.”111 Another quilter at the Jubilee Quilt Circle states, “When I have problems in life I quilt, and something comes over me and I know that everything is going to be alright.”112 This internal sense of God or something appearing to them can take place within dreams, visions, and/or mental conversations with God, spirit, or something that they believe inspires and/or guides their quilt-making. Thus, these dreams and supernatural visions, as William Ferris notes, “appears during sleep or semiconscious states, and its revelation haunts the artist until

111 Interview with author, August 21, 2014
112 Interview with author, May 15, 2014
released through art.” In other words, quilters reveal that during sleep or semiconscious states ideas about quilting are given to them, and they feel compelled to make the quilt they saw in the vision or dream. For example, a quilter at the Jubilee Quilt Circle stated, “I talk to my ancestors when I quilt.” Another quilter said, “Quilting helps me stay connected to my mother, it’s like she is there with me.” Through conversations, the quilters teach us that the source of these elemental impulses exists in another sphere of existence altogether, and communicates with them before they quilt or during, and even throughout the quilting process. This internal sense of source, allows actual and imaginary worlds to overlap, and in turn their creativity is enriched.

For the quilters in this project, when African American quilters make quilts they gain a deeper kind of conscious that makes them different than the being they are when they aren’t quilting. According to the quilters, it can creep up on them gradually or abruptly, it equips them with altered feelings, new consciousness or wisdom, and/or experiences of inner peace and unity. In these instances, the quilter gains insights they receive from God/spiritual/supernatural that allows them to select the style, the story to be told, design and/or pattern. When I was at the Jubilee Quilt Circle, a quilter informed me that “sometimes when I am having trouble finishing or creating a quilt, I ask God to help me and he shows me how to finish the quilt.” The quilter is compelled to craft the quilt under this new direction and guidance. This experience rids themselves of the

114 Interview with author, May 15, 2014
115 Interview with author, May 15, 2014
misery or uncertainty they feel, which converts to a feeling of energy, vigor, fullness, that
gives them the strength to meet situations of all kinds, and a disposition that makes them
feel, in the words of William James, that “when the fruit is ripe, a touch will make it
fall.”116 This means that these quilters already have a disposition that accounts for this
experience. So when the quilter experiences these accounts they must have already
believed in this type of experiences of the religious. So, when they would naturally
attribute the experience as being something spiritual or something beyond themselves.
Interestingly, no matter what issue, problem, or misery they were dealing with, their
belief in the infinite allows them to see things differently after the encounter. In the
spiritual realm, the quilters describe that it happens either sudden or gradual, and they are
able to unify their actions with Spirit, God, ancestor, supernatural, or energy, in order to
receive a meaning, direction, guidance, peace, joy, and relieve common wants that
restores the quest for fuller aspirations about life and the quilt-making process. This
experience of the religious resists a reduction of religion to an individual’s or group’s
religious activities, as well as the adaptive coping and the healing processes affirmed by
faith-based interventions they may already know. This experience reveals ‘something
more.’” As such, quilters in this project believe that when they quilt they connect to a
dynamic energy that changes their emotional excitement about life. This energy
speaks to a hot place in a quilter’s consciousness, and creates a group of ideas to which the quilter
devotes his/her self to the art she or he works to create. This is similar to what William

p. 201
James call “the habitual center of his [her] personal energy.”¹¹⁷ This means that the quilters set of ideas and religious aims are converted to the center of his/her personal energy that creates an excitement within individuals that create new ideas. James also suggests that the individual will be able to fully articulate the excitement that shifts the person’s mental system but may not account accurately for all the single forces at work. According to James,

Neither an outside observer nor the subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one’s center of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so…explanations then get so vague and general the one realizes all the more the intense individuality of the whole phenomenon…The collection of ideas alters by subtraction or by addition in the course of the experience, and…a new perception, a sudden emotional shock, or an occasion which lays bare the organic alteration, will make the whole fabric fall together…for the new ideas that reach the center in the rearrangement seem now to be locked there.”¹¹⁸

In other words, James suggests that creativity is an elemental impulse that stems from something they may not be able to fully describe. However, they can fully describe how the energy moved them to focus on their work of art, and eliminate all barriers to creating the quilt. As, such a hermeneutic of inner meaning will allow scholars to interpret stories quilters tell about this experience of the religious because scholars can explore the intent, motivations and beliefs that are held by the quilter during the quilt making process. James contends that once the quilter meets with a “mystical experience” it allows their personal energy to reach its religious center. In this light, the quilter knows that the emotional impulse that comes this way seldom leaves things the same. Hence, the quilter overcomes

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 219.
all barriers to make the quilt. The quilter is convinced that this experience is striking and memorable, and they see or learn something new or different. This ability to see or learn something new or different, centers their focus and allows them to create something “bigger” that they could not have done themselves.. As such, a hermeneutic of inner meaning when used to read African American quilts can be said to using Pinn, “promote attention to the hermeneutical value of modalities of reality that are not confronted to the formal structures we are comfortable with, those we can touch and handle.”119 This hermeneutic offer the interpretation needed to penetrate the depths of feeling marking religious life, that isn’t a move from history but an investigation of the essential nature of religion and experiences of the religious. In this light, these three hermeneutical approaches enables me to interpret the individual aspects of the elemental impulse of the African American quilter, the visual testimonies of the quilt, and the stories the quilters tell about making quilts and the quilts themselves, but does little to help me understand social aspects of the conversations and experiences within the Jubilee Quilting Bee. In this next section, I will explore Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics of aesthetics play, festive, and symbol for understanding the significance of quilting at the quilting bee or guild for African American quilters.

Hermeneutics of Aesthetics

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics of aesthetics concerns itself with the dialogues with work of art, and starts from the premise that art and its production is not the only, or even the most important aspect of art, what is important is our experience with art. Gadamer’s hermeneutic inquiry into aesthetic experience declares a hermeneutical approach to art that views art as speaking to us. In Gadamer’s approach, one enters into dialogue but does not control the discussion of the dialogue. In other words, dialogue is a social act that cannot be explained in term of one person’s activity. For example, this is illustrated at the Jubilee Quilt Circle when quilters discuss displayed quilts and ask questions about the art that was made. Gadamer suggests that the give-and-take of dialogue is driven by questions and answer, and for Gadamer one interprets through the exchange of questions and answers. This in turn creates more questions and provides more answers. Gadamer writes that an “encounter with a great work of art has always been… like a fruitful conversation, a question and answer or being asked and replying obligingly, a true dialogue whereby something has emerged and remains.”

This social act of dialogue is described by Gadamer as “play,” and in play the subject is not the players, but rather the play itself. Gadamer’s notion of play suggests that the dialogue avoids subjective aesthetic judgment. Instead, for Gadamer the aesthetic experience occurs in the exchange between the viewer, the work, and the being of art. Therefore, when the quilt is displayed at the quilting bee/guild, the play with art occurs in the presence of a spectator of quilters. The dialogue of the work of art and quilter manifests all the elements of play tied to the experience of art. For Gadamer, the play and

art work are both practices which require the spectator to play along with what they bring into being.\textsuperscript{121} For instance, a quilter displayed a quilt and one of the quilters asked, “Why did you make that white women quilt?” The quilter who made the quilt, asked, “Why do you say it’s a white woman’s quilt?” The other quilter replied “it is a white woman’s quilt because of the pattern, colors, and the overall feel of the quilt. It looks like a white woman’s quilt.” The quilter who made it stated, “Good, I want it to look like a white women’s quilt because I am entering an exhibition, and I don’t want them to think it’s a black woman’s quilt, because if they think that it probably won’t get selected.”\textsuperscript{122}

The quilts made are then displayed at the bee or guild and then discussed for a “show and tell”. The underlying motif is that aesthetic consciousness is drawn into play, and the participation of spectators demand immersion that is anticipated or controlled by something much larger than personal judgment. Gadamer’s game analogy challenges conventional approaches in several ways. First, the subjective cannot be the interpretive starting point. Re-living the conscious life of an artist does not uncover what informs their subjectivity, and grasping the player’s consciousness is not the goal of the game being played. Second, the tool or the equipment does not constitute the art or the game. In other words, art cannot be understood by tools and equipment alone. Third, there are rules or bonds that are required to comprehend the game or an artwork. In fact, what constitutes fair of foul play depends on the rules and bonds of the group, although the vitality of the art is not held to these rules or conventions. Gadamer’s approach allows for

\textsuperscript{121} Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1986 (RB), \textit{The Relevance of the Beautiful}, London: Cambridge University Press. P. 23
\textsuperscript{122} Interview with author, May 15, 2014
the interpretation of dialogue at the quilting bee/guild to be consider a game in which the artist’s present their quilt to the other quilters to displace subjectivity, to discuss more than just tools and equipment of quilt-making, and the dialogue about the quilt is driven by the subject matter which in turn reveals something new to the quilter or quilters, and the experience is transforming. In other words, at the Jubilee Quilt Circle quilting bee these discussions at play draws quilters, the quilter, the quilt, equipment and rules or bonds into one event that promotes an interactive view of the quilt that in turn makes it a communicative event. Hence, the process of making a quilt at the quilting bee involves more than one voice, and this lends to a dialogical dimension. Gadamer’s game analogy suggests that the act of the quilters enhances the being of the quilt by experiencing what is at play within it. This type of “show and tell” game creates a fuller realization of the subject-matters of the quilt(s), and the quilters as spectators bring something new forth such as how the quilt makes them feel, what it reminds them of, what is significant about the quilt for them, and so on (see figure 2.1).
For example, the quilters discussed how the colors made them feel, and what they thought about the quilt, and how the stars of the quilt reminded them of various Star quilt patterns such as the Native American Morning Star quilt, and the Lone Star quilt patterns. (figure 2.2. and 2.3).

123 Picture of a Quilt that was displayed at the Jubilee Quilt circle
The use of fabric and colors in these quilts are chosen to create eye movement. The use of the cool and warm colors can draw your eyes in different directions. This star

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124 Picture captured from the [http://spiritofthelakepeople.blogspot.com/2010/06/lakota-morning-star-true-white-buffalo.html](http://spiritofthelakepeople.blogspot.com/2010/06/lakota-morning-star-true-white-buffalo.html) For the Lakota People this pattern represents when the soul and the flesh unite, they become the rising sun or the Morning Star.

125 Picture captured from the [http://www.sewing-solutions.com/Lone-Star-Quilt-Patterns.html](http://www.sewing-solutions.com/Lone-Star-Quilt-Patterns.html) It was dubbed the Lone Star by quilters in Texas because it’s the Lone Star State.
pattern comes in various styles and is one of the oldest American quilt patterns, and in Texas this pattern has shown up on quilts that have been used to bury the dead. Also, a star quilt pattern has been used in the Underground Railroad quilts. In this light, the display of the quilt offers the quilters to reflect on the meaning of the quilt with others, and also to share the quilt to deliberatively have others think about the imagery of the quilts in various ways.

For Gadamer, the festival is an act of sharing that binds and brings together the community in more important ways that reveal the intimate experiences of life, creativity, various worldviews, and interests. According to Gadamer, “festive celebration, clearly distinguishes that here we are not primarily separated but rather gathered together.” This means that the festivity of the quilting bee/guild allows quilters to create quilts while in relationship with others. It is the cooperation necessitated to unite individuals as far as the day to day labor in the production of the quilt(s). Gadamer suggests that art binds us to a common historical and cultural heritage, and one senses that the art says something to someone. In this communal spirit, quilters overcome the everyday issues and challenges as a community, by coming together around a shared interest to bring forth a quilt. The festive encourages the quilter to suspend everyday issues of individuality, and

126 For more information about this pattern and its connections to burial use go to Texas Quilts: Texas Treasures Paducah, Kentucky: American Quilter’s Society, 1986. http://www.womenfolk.com/quilt_pattern_history/mornstar.htm


adopt an attitude that allows the quilters to realize that they belong to an extensive community of quilters. As such, the quilter realizes that they belong to something bigger than themselves. One of the quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle stated, “I quilt at the Circle because I enjoy quilting with other women and spending time with them. I feel like I am a part of sisterhood and that we are doing something meaningful.”

Gadamer’s concept of festive reveals the quilter’s appreciation of the art work awakenings the past and future meaning of oneself and life within community. For example, “This quilt was made during a workshop taken a few years ago. I realized that some people confine spirituality to a book or church and fail to recognize their natural surroundings. When we open ourselves to nature’s beauty, power, and intricacy, then spiritual lessons will come to us with little effort.” This festive experience becomes an important resource for capturing how quilters exchange visions of life while quilting that also impacts the ways they view themselves and the world they live in. During this festive event, it is amazing to see how they weave a part of this into the quilt.

A third aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics of aesthetics involves the speculative dimension of aesthetic experience which he calls “symbol.” For Gadamer, the symbol is associated with the remembrance, and that the incomplete-the fragmented pieces- and a promise of making whole “in turn alludes to beauty and the potentially whole and holy

129 Interview with author, June 19, 2014.
order of things.” This means that the symbol signifies hope for an abundance of meaning that can also express the unexpected and sometimes frightening images. For Gadamer, the material symbol presents its own meaning and represents a place where that meaning becomes present, and references to the symbol as fragmentary reveals an expectation of the possibility of wholeness. The quilt as symbol makes meaning out of the fragmentary scraps of material that offers the possibility of wholeness. At the Jubilee Quilt Circle, quilters realize the premise that every articulated meaning involves bringing forth more than what is actually communicated. This means that quilters through dialogue realize that the co-joined pieces of material sparks an act of recognition, and the symbol is associated with explicitly what we recognize implicitly.

Resonance and depth of meaning depends on the speculative capacity of the image to insinuate the unstated interconnection of meanings of a given symbol. As such, the speculative power of an image, symbol, or sign in the quilt has something in common with the sublime. It illuminates in visual image a myriad of unstated meanings that can be felt or sensed, but not fully understood or conceptualized. This means as Nicholas Davey suggests “the power of the symbol resides in its ability to reveal that unbeknown to ourselves we are in communion with something much larger than ourselves, that is, horizons of meaning which implicitly sustain reflection and which can when made

explicit bring us to think quite differently of ourselves.”

African American quilts provide ample ways in which quilters use symbols that help gain a sense of rootedness and connection that helps us feel supported in times of uncertainty. The quilts help us see what is going on with the quilter, which can help us understand the meaning of important life experiences that promote personal growth and spiritual transformation. When we learn how to interpret them we gain an understanding of the inner lives of the quilter, and it allows us to share with others the dynamic forces that asserts the reality of such an inner center. The quilter as creator, storyteller, and producer helps them stay connected to themselves in fundamental ways that gets their needs met, and maintains balance in their lives.

Hence, Gadamer’s hermeneutics of aesthetics allows scholars to interpret the dialogue between quilters as an act of play, festive, and symbol which in turn quilters learn that the symbols in their quilts constantly invoke what is not immediately given. This means that scholars can gain a more robust understanding of the meanings that give expression to the sublime, which will help them theorize about what can never be fully grasped or conceptualized. This visual narrative allows us to “see” what individuals may not be able to say. In the light, African American quilts can always mean more, as Gadamer notes, “An artwork is never exhausted. It never becomes empty…No work of art addresses us always in the same way. The result is we must answer it differently each

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time we encounter it. Other susceptibilities, other attentiveness, other openness in us permit that one, unique, single, and self-same unity of artistic assertion to generate an inexhaustible multiplicity of answers.\textsuperscript{134} This means that African American quilts and the quilters who make them, and the quilting process allows quilters to heal themselves, bless and nurture others, and envision new ways of being and thinking in their everyday lives. As such, the production of the quilt is a visual testimony of their quest for complex subjectivity within their everyday lives. Therefore, in keeping with his basis insight, Gadamer states, “Aesthetics must be swallowed up in hermeneutics.”\textsuperscript{135} What follows is my methodology for studying African American quilts in Houston, Texas.

\textbf{2.4 Research Methodology: Collecting the Material as Data}

In order to investigate African American quilts and their religious significance, I had to choose a methodological approach to collecting data about the 3Q’s. I chose an ethnographic approach of qualitative research as my methodology because I wanted to observe and participate in the daily activities of a few quilters. I wanted to learn how quilters make quilts, why they quilt, and if quilts illuminate a link between black religion and everyday life. In terms of data collection, ethnography usually involves the researcher, as Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson notes, “participating, overtly, and covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews.

collecting documents and artifacts—in fact gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.”

Ethnographic research allows the researcher to conduct fieldwork in the natural setting of the participants to observe the quilters actions and listen to their stories, rather than under conditions created by the researcher. Data collection for the most part is unstructured in two senses. First, data collection does not involve a fixed and detailed research design at the start of the research. Second, the categories used for interpreting what the research observes while conducting fieldwork is generated out of the process of analysis, not through the use of observation schedules or questionnaires. Third, the focus is on a few cases of a small group of people to facilitate an in-depth study. Lastly, the analysis of the data requires an interpretation of the meanings of the data collected, and how they can be implicated in local and wider contexts. For the most part, as Hammersley and Atkinson notes, “ethnography is not far removed from the means we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings, of other people’s actions, and perhaps even of what we do ourselves.”

In this light, as a novice researcher one must discover for him or her is required, and must use the knowledge they have at hand. For this project, I decided to conduct pre-fieldwork to clarify and develop research problems before the actual fieldwork began.

My pre-field work consisted of attending quilting exhibitions, museums, quilting guilds, interacting with quilters in church/community events, curating quilting

exhibitions, and working as a gallery manager for an art gallery. Through these experiences, I was able as a novice to watch, listen, ask questions, make blunders, and as Hammersley notes, “acquire a good sense of the social structure of the setting and begin to understand the culture(s) of participants.” The primary aim of the pre-fieldwork phase is to develop the research questions. I must admit that asking the right questions as R.K. Merton notes “finding the right questions to ask is more important, and sometimes more difficult, than answering it.” Another aim of the pre-fieldwork is to gain access to African American quilting in Houston, Texas. This was challenging for several reasons. First, I did not know how to quilt. I was denied access to guilds in Houston, Texas. This is due to the fact that the purpose of the guilds is to pass skills and techniques to quilters, and to produce quilts for charity and organizational purposes. The business of the guilds wasn’t conducive to people who cannot quilt. Also, this limited my access to quilters. As such, I had to rely on “gatekeepers”---people who control direct resources and access to participants--to help, which took unpredictable turns and led to more pre-fieldwork being done. Second, gaining access to quilters can be as Feldman notes, “a rude surprise to researchers who have not anticipated the difficulties that could be involved.” After a year and a half of pre-fieldwork, I finally decided to start telling the quilters I met that I wanted to learn how to quilt. I did this because I found that the quilters were more receptive to invite me to events and places that they quilt. In my

\[138\] Ibid, p. 79
\[140\] Feldman, M.S, Bell, J, and Berger, MT. Gaining access, A Practical and Theoretical Guide for Qualitative Researchers, Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira, 2003. vii. The book provides a general discussion of access problems, focusing on access to individuals than to institutions.
opinion, the quilters were more receptive because quilting is a craft/art, and the guild is an association of persons that pursue the same craft/art, and formed to protect mutual interests and maintain standards of the trade. The change in strategy was prompted by year and a half of denied access to the quilting guilds/bees that I experienced curating art exhibitions in Houston. I believe that it made a difference because quilters pursue mutual aid and community, in order to share certain habits and/or characteristics of the craft with new quilters. This way the guilds/bees can gain control of the production, standards, and marketing of African American Quiltmaking, protect their social and economic autonomy, and gain greater social complexity which they understood gave the guild/bees extraordinary power as an organization within the larger quilting industry in the United States. To this end, I gained access to the Jubilee Quilt Circle in Houston, Texas and the questions driving this dissertation were:

1. In what ways do the art of quilting and African American quilts foreground the connection between black religion and everyday life?

2. How do African American women/men perceive or contend that the art of quilting is a religious experience?

3. Do African American quilts provide a visual narrative that articulates the quilter’s personal and/or communal beliefs, ideals, and cultural commitments?

4. Can contemporary African American quilts and quilters shed new light on the meaning of quilts in the lives of African Americans?

At the Jubilee Quilt Circle, I gained access to African American quilters that lived in Houston who had started quilting between the 1960s-1990s in the United States. I
chose this time period for two reasons. First, not much is written about contemporary African American quilters in the United States, and Texas in particular. This is partly due to the fact that African American culture exhibits a blending of European and African ideas which makes the specific combination of cultural influences often difficult to estimate, and as folklorist John Vlach notes, “Black quilts provide a good example of his sort of confusion.”\(^\text{141}\) I also chose this time period because according to Quilts, Inc. (the organization that hosts the International Quilt Festival in Houston) 2010 Quilting in America survey the average age of the 16.38 million households in the United States has a quilter is 62 years old, well-educated (72% attended college) affluent (91, 602 household income), spend on average $2,442 per year on quilting, and have been quilting on average 16 years with 44% preferring traditional styles of quilting, and 50% preferring traditional and contemporary styles of quilting.\(^\text{142}\) In this light, I wanted to conduct fieldwork on women who could share their experiences growing up in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, had experiences with quilters who were quilting during the generation before them, and they began quilting during contemporary times in black communities in the United States. In this regard, I was able to gain a relative sample of 8-10 African American quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle.

The Jubilee Quilt Circle is classified as a quilting bee. A quilting bee is an informal gathering of people (both men and women) who come together to quilt. These


groups are often close-knit groups based on relationships, interests and resources, and outsiders are often informally screened to make sure that you won’t upset the group’s autonomy. This quilting bee was established over 20 years ago, and has currently 8-12 quilters who regularly meet every Thursday to quilt in Houston, Texas. The Jubilee Quilt Circle is located in the historical black community called Third Ward. Third Ward is one of six historic black communities in Houston, Texas. Third Ward in Houston is the city’s most culturally diverse neighborhood. Despite the everyday vagaries of race and economics, Houston’s Third Ward is home to Texas Southern University, University of Houston. In Third Ward, there are several historical Black churches such as Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church established in 1866, and Trinity United Methodist Church that was established in 1865, just to name a few.143

Fieldwork: Jubilee Quilt Circle: Social Setting of Quilt Making

Quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle consist of both men and women, and they come and go as they choose with no consequences. Taking what I learned from pre-fieldwork experiences, when I gained access to the Jubilee Quilt Circle, I also opted to learn how to quilt. I participated in quilting in order to be a participant-observer. As Hammersley and Atkinson notes, “the aim here is to minimize, as far as possible, the influence of the researcher on what is said, and thus to facilitate open expression of the

informant’s perspective on the world.”144 As such, I was able to merge into the surroundings and join in conversations because I was quilting. I allowed the quilters to talk at length in their own terms, as opposed to solicited questions. Interestingly, the stories that the quilters would tell while they were quilting ranged from top stories in the news, to religious beliefs, to the plight of black people, to the history of Houston, and the mythologies and stories of the African Diaspora. As I sat there cutting pieces of cloth, I realized that their concepts of culture and identity were complex, and they articulate Stuart Halls view that “identities are never completed, never finished, they are always, as subjectivity, in process.”145 In other words, the quilter’s identity is a process that occurs through linguistic representation that is always subjective, changing, and never completed. At the Quilt Circle, the regular members were close associates that came to the Jubilee Quilt Circle for social interaction in a creative space. They expressed that being in a community of quilters was the reason they attend the Jubilee Quilt Circle.

At the Quilt Circle, they quilted or learned new skills and techniques while discussing notions of culture, religious beliefs/practices and identity. In the setting, each quilter sat next to each other with just enough space for their things. There were ironings boards, jazz in the background, food bought or prepared, and they would quilt. I learned that the quilters liked to have music playing, and have food to keep the event festive. As one quilter stated, “there has always been food and music at the Quilt Circle. I like to

listen to music, eat, and socialize while I am at the Quilt Circle. It is part of the reason why I come here to quilt. It’s different than when I quilt at home.”

The iron boards and irons were there to iron materials they were going to sew together to make a quilt. For the first, six weeks of being there, they let me iron the materials they were preparing to sew. I also would help clean up and help them organize scraps of materials, carry things out to the car, and display their quilts. While quilting, they would share stories of the difficult and often painful decisions they have to make in their everyday lives. Their life stories reveal the wealth of experience, which impacts the quilting decisions they made for selecting images, colors, patterns, and designs. For example, they could come to report that they changed the colors, style, or stopped quilting on a project based on some circumstance, information, conversation, or mood that occurred in their lives or the lives of the person the quilt was being made for. One quilter stated, “I have had the hardest time quilting this piece. When I got home, I realized that I don’t like the colors of this quilt. I don’t like the colors she wants for this quilt. They don’t inspire me to quilt this piece. I wish I could get her to change these colors.”

Another quilter reported, “My sister is retiring this year, and I told her I would make her a quilt. I know that she likes earth tones so I am searching for the material to make the quilt. I also need to find images that represent her career. I am received the vision of how I am going to make this quilt.”

Every week the Jubilee Quilt Circle was a learning environment that allowed the quilters to discuss and share their quilts and personal stories of life that impacted their

146 Interview with author, May 1, 2014.
147 Interview with author, May 1, 2014.
quilting. These stories can be described as autobiography, life-history, self-narrative, and/or personal oral accounts of the quilters, and each story told was being re-membered while they quilted. For present purposes, I refer to James Olney’s definition of autobiography which he states may be understood as “a re-collective/narrative act in which the writer [quilter], from a certain point in his [her] life--the present--looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show that past history has led to this present state of being.” In this light, the stories told at the Quilt Circle, one can get a sense of how coherence and continuity is carried and maintained about quilting within the quilter’s family history. One can learn about quilting techniques and ideas that they are share. In addition, one can get a grasp of how people of different background and heritages manage their different social identities within their everyday lives. To this end, the dialogue reveals the inter-relationship between narrative, memory, creativity, and faith, and analyze why this dialogue and community interaction is desired while quilting in a public realm.

As a participant observer, I shared in the discussions while I learned to cut scraps of materials. While quilting they engaged me in conversation about what I do, where I am from, etc. I informed them about my academic background and personal information. I felt that this type of disclosure was necessary, and that I was being interviewed. In the discussion, I believe my conversation about being a PhD student in religious studies prompted them to disclose that they belonged to diverse Christian denominations such as

Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist etc., and one individual in attendance identified themselves as “non-religious”. In my opinion, I believe they felt more comfortable with sharing this information because I explained to them that I was interested in learning about diverse religious experiences within African American religious life in Houston. What I found interesting was that the diverse religious identities didn’t seem to be a problem. The Jubilee Quilt Circle releases people to express their lives personally and particularly, and this cultivation easily includes, at least to some degree differing connections to religion and religious identities. During our conversations, the quilters highly value each other’s personal take on things, and also think it’s legitimate if not gratifying to display their personal opinions, behaviors, quilting skills and projects in public. In other words, what Charles Taylor calls “expressive individualism”— in the presence of others, people free to do their own thing. For the quilters, this expressive individualism allows each quilter to act, and in the words of Taylor “others are there, as witnesses of what they are doing, and thus as co-determiners of the meaning of [their] action.” What is particularly interesting is the acceptance of differing religious and non-religious identities in the Quilt Circle. In the quilting bee, each person can affirm various beliefs, and create associations that, in my opinion, may rival the religious institutions most are affiliated with. In other words, the quilters are not simply acknowledging a religious identity or affiliation but describing, perhaps narrating, an on-going process that they may not be able to do within their institutional religious affiliation. Giving these factors, the Quilt Circle is a

community of quilters with an assumed agreement, diversity and acceptance felt by the individuals who constitute the group. Considering this is a small group, I found that while I was quilting, the disclosure was a way to see if the person fits in, and self-accounts are an act of truthfulness that helps to establish a rapport - a kinship-between the individual and members of the quilting bee. In addition, honesty is one if not a major ingredient in this sense of relation or rapport, and it seems possible to say that the autobiographies about whom one is may well achieve a high level of significance. This community of quilters allowed me to learn that their autobiographical self-disclosures and their religious beliefs, identities, and practices are tied to quilting, and that their life journey is a quest yet fulfilled. Although the interviews are not structured in the sense that all interviewees are not asked the same questions, the quilters shed light on how the group dynamics can provide insight about other religious activities that African Americans participate in outside the Black church that help them find purpose and make meaning out of everyday life. Researchers can learn how the quilter make sense of themselves and the world, what has been taken for granted, what is looked at or hoped for in their lives, and how these realities impact and/or influences their lives and artwork.

Looking closely at images that were used in making the quilts, one could classify the images into the certain groups which included but not limited to: (1) images of Africa, (2) images of black people that represent diverse faces and Afrocentric beauty, (3) images of nature such as trees, flowers, animals, and natural landscapes, (4) images of African symbols and shapes, colors, designs and (5) images of religious symbols, figures, and signs. The quilters took the visual representation of images very seriously, and considered the social significance in the articulation of meanings and effects on people
and in the world. Through participant-observation, I was able to pay close attention to the quilter’s reasons for using particular images in the production of quilts. My critical attention to the images was based on the auteur theory—the notion that maker of an image is the most important aspect in understanding a visual image. By focusing on the intentionality of the quilt-maker to use certain images in quilts, one could conclude that quilters select images to gain a certain feel or experience with the quilt. For the quilters, quilts in the words of John Dewey “does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one.” Regarding the feel of the quilt, quilters understood what Caroline van Eck and Edward Winters emphasize “there is a subjective feel that is eliminable in our seeing something.” In this light, the images used or created expressed a certain “feel”, that the quilter found impossible to convey fully in words. Overall, the images, in one way or another, in quilts have some kind of agency that exceeds the meanings brought to them by quilt-makers. That is, the images in quilts express ‘something’ which exceeds the meaning of the image itself. The quilter arranges the quilt images to present a frame for cultural thought, encode symbolic propositions about it, and express a “feeling” intended to change the viewer. In this light, contemporary African American quilt art, in the words of Susan Sontag, “today is a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility.”

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151 Dewey, J. *Art as Experience*, New York: Peregee Books, 1934 p. 84
the quilt-making process, visual imagery in African American quilts is constructed through various practices, technologies, and knowledge. Thus, in chapter 4 the analysis of visual quilt images will take the form of detailed case studies of the quilts and their images. Through participant observation I selected five quilters that I interviewed individually at their homes. I decided to switch locations because I realized that to mine the religious significance of African American quilts requires and individual and private spaces. In the social setting, the Jubilee Quilt Circle was not conducive to investigate the link between African American quilts and black religion in ways of living the everyday.

**Interviewing Individual Quilters**

I attended the Jubilee Quilt Circle for a year, and within that year I was able to go the homes of 5 quilters to observe their individual inner lives and to personally interview them outside the Jubilee Quilt Circle. The decision to select interviewees’ was based on Barney Glaser and Jerome Strauss call “theoretical sampling” that allowed me to choose those quilters whose personal accounts seems likely to cultivate and examine emerging analytic ideas. As such, the primary concern is that the selection of cases minimizes the differences between cases to highlight basic properties of a particular category, and to facilitate the emergence of relations among categories. The aim of the sampling process is develop a rich understanding of the dimensions of a concept and theory that are

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grounded in and/or emergent from real life events and circumstances. From the data collected at the Jubilee Quilt Circle. I decided through participant observation at the quilting bee, which quilters to interview, based on the personal accounts that they shared through questions and casual conversations about their life stories and the quilt-making process. Once I selected an adequate representation of the quilters, I conducted unstructured interviews of the quilters in the privacy of their homes. Here, accounts were treated as part of the analysis to aid in the assessment, not to deny or affirm validity. As ethnographer, I wanted to investigate the private setting of quilters to collect data about the perspectives, concerns, and learn more about the quilt making process in private settings. These accounts provide a deeper understanding of role quilting plays in their everyday lives in both private and social settings.

The unstructured interviewing, allowed for a flexible approach that enabled the discussion to flow in a way that seems natural. The open-ended questions allowed each interviewee to discuss with me: why they quilt, when they started quilting, family history, religious beliefs, their quilting process, the organization of their quilting space, everyday experiences that influences quilting, experiences of the religious while quilting, signs, symbols, material and images they collect, psychological reasons, cultural influences, quilts they created, the importance of quilting in making meaning out of life and so on. As such, the unstructured interview allowed me to record their autobiographical stories of their quilts, their lives, and the quilt-making process. One of the challenges I faced was trying to find what scholars such as Georges Gusdorf, Michael Gazzinga, Arnold
Ludwig, and D.P. Spence call the “narrative truth” which splits the truth into two parts—objective and subjective truth. I found that thinking of the quilters stories in this way hinders study of the quilter’s autobiographies, because their stories are considered lies or untruths about what really happened. I want to suggest that the study of 3 Q’s requires researchers to move beyond the subject-object split and move in the direction opposite of the view just considered. The study of the 3 Q’s requires that the narrative truth be considered a telling, rather than a reproduction of the past as it was, and more appropriately understood as a “creative redescription” of the past. This perspective of narrative truth allows the subjective truth (autobiography) to be defined as at true event, and allows for the truth to be found in art rather than history or science. This perspective offers that the person is in charge of their own autobiographical fictions, that they can shape as they wish, and the imaginary stories that get told “rings true” aesthetically and pragmatically. Thus, I want to suggest that we think beyond the subject-objective divide, and that the truth of visual testimonies can be found in the narrative dimension of the autobiography, and this narrative dimension allows for the comprehensive study of individual lives as an important vehicle for understanding the human condition, and opens the path toward a more integrated and adequate way for studying the human realm. It centers the autobiographical understanding of the interrelationship between memory

and historical accounts that allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of human personhood and how it is framed in terms of an individual identity that includes a unique story of coming-to-be. As such, autobiographies require living, which entails a living out of a mythical story that transcends the boundaries of the individual life, and is inseparable from telling one’s own personal story in the looking-back over one’s personal past. This perspective emphasizes visual testimonies as worthy in their own right, and worthy enough for others to learn about. What I wish to underscore here is that in contemporary times in the United States, the stories of one’s life have gradually become a more focal concern for how things happen and occur in the daily lives of human beings and the operative presumption being that individuals can tell their own” true” stories of how the present came to be by looking backward and situating the moment in a coherent, believable narrative form using various mediums of expressions such as clothing, pictures, cell phones, symbols, video, social media, quilts and the like. In this light, we live in a time when autobiographical narratives are inseparable from personal memories of everyday life, or life stories, that one communicates to others, and what emerges is a complete narrative revolution in of both self-understanding and self-representation. From this perspective, in the words of Georges Gusdorf,

The man [woman] who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future; he [she] has become more aware of the differences than the similarities given the constant change, given the uncertainty of events of men[women], he[she] believes it useful and valuable thing to fix his[her] own image so that he [she] can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world…Each man[woman] matters to the
world, each life and each death; the witnessing of each about himself enriches the common cultural heritage.  

In this regard, I argue that the narrative dimension of visual testimonies entails a remarkable series of dialectical relationships that can offer a more adequate framework for exploring and interpreting black religious life in contemporary African American communities, and its individual members. In this light, the visual testimonies that quilts tell narrow the gap between experience and words to give form and meaning to one’s life as an unfolding story that reveals more about the extant ways of remembering and telling than about the particularities of life as it is. From my perspective, the visual testimonies of African American quilts support not only the epistemological aim of increasing knowledge and understanding of the human realm, broadly conceived and imagined, but also takes artfully and imaginatively creates an artwork that speaks to the needs, interests, beliefs, wishes, and desires for a fuller life of the people in question. To this end, one has to interview the quilter to interpret the visual testimonies of the quilts and the quilting process to get nearer to the deep human stuff that shapes their understanding of Self, life, and their faith.

In the interview process, I was an active listener, and by listening to what was said could structure necessary clarification if needed or how the future course of the interview might be shaped. As much as possible, I tried to avoid leading questions, and tried to remain aware of what is and is not said by the quilters. Each interview was audio-

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taped. After the interviews, I was able to take pictures of the quilts for illustration purposes. Another challenge I had was that in the social setting some of the quilters were reluctant to discuss the quilts as religious. I overcame that challenge by changing the setting to their homes, and only selecting the quilters who seemed to be more free in their discussions of the religious significance of quilts and quilt-making. In chapter 4, I will provide more detailed accounts of the personal interviews and photographs.

Summary: Weaving all the Scraps Together

Over all, the ethnographic research at the Jubilee Quilt Circle revealed that African American quilters capture and express the yearning for a fuller life in the visual testimonies they create using scraps of materials from their everyday life. The African American quilt as art, in the words of Anthony Pinn, “has the ability to affect us by drawing into the open concealed realities, possibilities, and meanings, thereby teaching us about connections between historical developments and inner urges.”  

158 African American quilts have a religious dimension that can be interpreted to discover the elemental impulse for complex subjectivity and its links to everyday life. This means that the visual testimonies of quilts, whether indirectly or directly point to the quest for complexity, and the actual quilt points “to the answer he [she] consciously or unconsciously gives to the question of the meaning of life.”  

159 As such, African American quilts contain ideas and experiences of all kinds, abstract and concrete,

religious and secular through visual images and scraps of materials that are arranged to tell us something about the quest for complex subjectivity in our daily lives. The ethnographic research assumes that the visual testimonies communicate the elemental “feeling” of the quilter, and that feeling requires multiple hermeneutical approaches to interpret links to black religion, in relation to the autobiographical narrative of the quilter, and the sites of production.

The study of African American quilts when viewed through the theoretical perspective of relational centralism allows scholars to interpret the quilter, quit, and quilt-making process (3 Q’s) as visual narrative. Pinn’s and Gadamer’s hermeneutics allow quilts to speak to the remarkable range of quilt meanings, and the relation between memory, narration, art, and faith that can be translated. The ethnography reveals that on a day-to-day basis people are quilting African American quilts both in their private and social lives. We need to learn to treat them with more respect, rather than like stuff that has no meaning. In the quilting bees, diverse human beings from diverse backgrounds and experiences, come together to play in a festive environment to talk about skills, techniques, beliefs, experiences, and the purpose and meaning of life. In these communities of conversation, quilters have managed to create a setting that religious and non-religious individuals, regardless of color, can come together and play, and their human experiences are woven into the quilts. African American quilts as texts contain visual testimonies that tell stories of the human quest for meaning, as well as describe the way the world is, was, and what it ought or can be.
What follows in chapter 3, is the history of African American quilts from slavery to the present. Using Charles Long’s concept of “crawling back,” Chapter 3 will explore the historical legacy of the African American tradition to understand how these cultural productions became visual testimonies that link black religion to everyday life, and the contemporary African American quilting tradition developed as an art within black communities in the United States.

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Chapter 3

African American Quilting: A Birth of a Tradition from Slavery to the 20th Century

During the late 1960s and 1970s, examination of African American quilts and their histories opened a window for scholars to reexamine previous conceptions and misconceptions of the role, history, placement, and meaning of decorative arts as material culture and visual art. After many years of under-engagement, art historians, folklorists, slave archeologists, ethnologists, and quilt historians began to give the study of African American quilts credence within the study of American quilt-making, making quilts legible data within the field of study. According to quilt historian Cuesta Benberry, “there was need to dispel certain myths that had developed about African American quilts to examine some of the influences on these creations, to portray the continuous diversity that characterized black made quilts, and, when possible give voice to the quilt-makers
themselves.” As such, the study of quilts as a scholarly area of study created a new cadre of scholars who seemingly placed a priority on examining the ways that African American quilts are intrinsically connected to social, political, and economic conditions of African American lives.

Most exciting of all was the discovery of a historical connection and empirical synergy between African American quilting rituals and West African textile traditions and practices. Early investigations by art historians such as Robert Farris Thompson, Eli Leon, and Maude Southwell Wahlman identified the various similarities of African American quilting tradition to the West African traditions. The interconnection between African American quilting traditions and West African textile traditions established that African American quilts are shaped by a design aesthetic, emerging from embodiments and practices of oppression, that differentiate them from traditional Euro-American forms of quilt-making. For the most part many of these scholars concluded that African American quilting traditions offered unique ways of thinking about and interrogating African American visual and material culture. For instance, Maude Southwell Wahlman notes that, “Symbols are embedded in works of art; artifacts are history-encoded. We need to read African American art more carefully to discover fully the complexities of African American history.”

161 Benberry, C. The Threads of African American Quilters are Woven Into History, American Visions 8 no. 6 (December-January 1993): p. 18.
The “connections” to West African textiles established historical and contemporary African American quilts as profoundly different visually from the aesthetic of traditional American quilts. Continued research by scholars further suggests that African American quilts are more than folk art objects. For example, scholars have illustrated that throughout the quilting history deep reflections on the everyday activities, values, memories and beliefs of African Americans are imbedded in quilts. As such, this chapter provides context for and charts a historical genealogy of African American quilt-making to provide a space for the analyses of the birth of a particular African American quilt tradition. The genealogy of the African American quilting tradition provides the historical information to introduce my concept of “war on fear.” My concept of the “war on fear” positions the African American quilting tradition as a response to the challenges and struggles confronting people of African descent from slavery to present. Furthermore, it creates a lens to interpret what such historical movements say about various hermeneutical dimensions of African American quilting practices. Through this lens, I gain understanding of the non-linguistic expressions, non-material impulses, and the deepest conditions for symbolic communication within quilts. The non-linguistic expressions allow me to interpret what African American quilts have to say about lived

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experiences. This information sets the stage for the analysis of the quilts made by African American quilters in Houston, Texas in chapter 4.

A deeper analysis of quilts in the African American tradition enables a more crystalized understanding about the role of religiosity in black culture and life, and the value of it in everyday practices of survival. Largely genealogical in nature, this chapter situates the data of African American quilt-making tradition within historical context and contingency with a focus on the significance of quilts in varying historical moments from slavery to present, to what I refer to as the birth of a nation in order to recover an appreciation and cultural heritage of the African American quilting tradition. Along these lines, the conceptual framing of each section attempts to reveal how the burden of anxiety ridden provinciality created a struggle for self-identity which, in turn, birthed the cultural production of African American quilts in the United States. The quest for identity sparked the process of cultural syncretism which combined West African textile traditions and provincial American textile traditions which helped sustain a religious cosmology that was unspoken. Taken together, the sections that follow highlight the role and shape of quilting as it relates to the quest for complex subjectivity of people of African descent in the United States.

17th Century Fear of Blackness: The Origins of Constructing Terror

The first enslaved Africans arrive in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Yet, from 1619 to 1660, historians of slavery, including U.B. Phillips, James Ballagh, and others have argued that there is tangible evidence that colonial Virginians allowed Africans to be free, to own property, political rights, and to have substantial equality in Virginia. As Phillips notes, “In the county court records prior to 1661 the Negroes are called Negro
servants or merely Negroes—never, it appears, definitely slaves. Despite Spanish and Portuguese colonist’s enslavement of a quarter of a million Africans by 1619, British colonists in Virginia seem to have preferred as James Ballagh notes “to retain him [a Negro or Indian] only as a servant.”

The Ballagh-Phillips positions establish that by the 1660s the majority of Africans were either servants or free, and only a few remained de facto slaves. Yet, after 1660s British colonists as Winthrop Jordan notes, “considered them [people of African descent] visually, socially, and even biologically distinct people and in every way inferior to everyone else.”

The precise evolution of this change in perspective is uncertain. Yet, George M. Fredrickson offers a preliminary explanation in his essay entitled, Toward a Social Interpretation of the Development of American Racism. In the article, Fredrickson’s model suggests that the root of slavery in the 1690s stemmed from “fear” of the color black, and anxiety over the sudden influx of blacks in the late seventeenth century to the area. Fredrickson’s interpretation of the historical evidence situates racism in the anxiety and fear among European Americans. For Fredrickson, fear created the story of an evolution toward what he calls “societal racism”—the treatment of blacks as if they were inherently inferior.

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164 Phillips, Ulrich Bonnell. American negro slavery: a survey of the supply, employment and control of negro labor as determined by the plantation regime. D. Appleton, 1918. p. 75
165 Ballagh, James, Curtis. A History of Slavery in Virginia Baltimore, 1902 p. 29.
interpretation of the historiographical issue differs from other scholars before him such as Wesley Frank Craven, Eric Williams and Carl Degeler; it moves the discourse towards the origins of racism and slavery as fear -- a feeling of disquiet or apprehension that creates a state or condition marked by this feeling. This feeling of fear by whites created denigration denial of everything black-the color black, black bodies, black culture, religion etc. Fredrickson’s notion that fear is the catalyst for the enslavement and racial oppression of African Americans raises the question: What are the underlying workings that produce and promote this emotional response toward blackness? A preliminary explanation was given by anthropologist Phillip Mason that suggests that:

It is the peoples of Northern Europe who have shown the strongest color prejudices. This may be because they themselves are fairer than people from Southern Europe; it may also be because they have had the most reason to fear black. The long winter nights have surely left a mark on our language and thought; we speak of dark deeds and black moods, innocence and purity. The devil was black to people who had never seen a brown skin. And when a brown skin was seen for the first time, the first associations were with dirt and defecation and with all the metaphors associating darkness with evil and fear.

As such, Mason and Fredrickson help to explain the underlying impulse of racism in the United States as fear of blackness that creates an anxiety that results in psychologically satisfying ideas of white supremacy. This suggests that at the whites have an innate distain for anything black, due to their cultural and daily experiences in Europe of cold dark nights, dark woods and forests, and their own descriptions of eras such as the Dark

170 Mason, Phillip Common Sense About Race Little Hampton Book Services, 1961, p. 91
Ages, Black Plague, Medieval Times, Hellenistic period. During the eras, fear and anxiety caused them to ask fundamental questions of who, what, when, and why of their existence. Consequently, they decided whites were superior and constructed the fixed identity of all blacks as inferior, beastly, dangerous, and unchristian.\textsuperscript{171} In other words, European whites developed a special racial feeling toward anything that was black, and this feeling prompted hatred, contempt, pity, or fear, which they projected onto black bodies.

The rhetoric of the human differences between whites and blacks was almost always framed in religious terms. The notion of a biblical curse on black-skinned people divinely cosigned Europeans to superiority over people of African descent. They decided to maintain that social order of people of African descent through means of enslavement, violent suppression, and racial oppression. This decision was most likely influenced by their remembered past of the torture and punishment in Elizabethan times.\textsuperscript{172} During Elizabethan times, many executions and violent, cruel punishments were witnessed by many thousands of people in England, and Europe. For over 2000 years, torture was frequently used, and most Europeans seemed to treat these events as exciting and a normal everyday thing. Interestingly, Europeans had experienced under Queen Elizabeth more torture than in any other period of history, and this created a country living in fear.

\textsuperscript{171} Degler, Carl Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice, Comparative Studies in Society and History, 1959, p.11,  
of being the next victims. Again, this constant living in fear caused them to ask questions about the meaning of life, and they turned to Christian Scripture. For English colonists the Bible, best believed, explained the most probable cause for the spectacle of blackness in the world. The pervasiveness of the biblical explanation is uncertain, but as Jordan posits this notion was “probably sustained by a feeling that blackness could scarcely be anything but a curse and by the common need to confirm the facts of nature by specific reference to Scripture.”  

As such, during American colonization both whites and blacks experiences of fear created memories and testimonies of terror and dread that keep changing and adapting to new forms of anxiety and fear. To this end, fear and anxiety are at the root of Pinn’s rituals of reference and reinforced a fixed identity of African Americans as objects. These changes and adaptations have shaped the social order to create what I call the “war on fear.” My concept of the war on fear appropriates Pinn’s assertion that terror and dread sparked the development of practices, doctrines, institutional structures earmarked for historical liberation from white supremacy. As such, the religion that manifested in black life, according to Pinn is a “response to the wrestling against this terror, understood in terms of liberation.”

By appropriating Pinn’s concept regarding terror and dread, I am able define the war on fear as two opposing responses to the feeling of fear of the “Other.” This fear creates the anxiety of extinction by the other. In other words, this anxiety is sparked by

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the visual, social, and physical fear of the other. In the war on fear, there are European-Americans who experience fear of the visual appearance and physical presence of black bodies that causes anxiety real or imagined. Their collective response to fear and anxiety is the historical manifestation of racial oppression and dehumanization of black people. This historical manifestation is rooted in a particular form of American Christianity and ideas of white superiority. Consequently, African Americans collective response to the fear and anxiety of white terror is to create private and intimate spaces for more liberative interactions and intentions. These spaces signify in the words of Victor Anderson a “fuller range of life options and sensibilities—all expressions, actions, attitudes, and behaviors interwoven and artistically expressed.”

As a result of the war on fear, African Americans (and whites) produce some cultural artifacts such as art, music, dance, sermons, literature and the like to help shape their world and express multiple ways to make meaning out of life. In my opinion, the fear and anxiety gets played out in the social world, and every black and white woman, man, child in the United States is caught up in the complex situations of the war on fear. The war is constant and every changing, and firmly entrenched into the lives of both black and whites, and by extension the rest of society. Blacks are constantly living in fear every day a cop stops them, or a white person enters their church, and whites live in fear that blacks will retaliate and gain power, so they push for gun rights and support laws and organizations that will protect them from black people and their way of life. For this project, it is through the lens of the “war on

fear” that I situate the cultural production of African American quilting tradition. This extends Pinn’s notion of complex subjectivity to be sensitive to the cultural production of African American quilts as an individual attempt for a quest for a fuller life within the context of the social. Borrowing from Pinn’s notion of African American’s historically manifested response to the terror of dehumanization I view the individual cultural production of African American quilts as the push for transformation and improvement of life that stems from one’s own internal capacity and ingenuity. This push for transformation and improvement of life is linked to black religion. I also agree with Pinn that “black religion is more than just a move against white actions; because they entail an evolving tension between reaction and creativity, black religious forms are not simply dependent on and reflective of white life.” However, the war on fear between whites and blacks in America provides the lens through which I interpret what I call the birth of a tradition-- the African American quilting tradition in the United States. The birth of a tradition identifies African American quilts as a religious expression that black religion manifests. In the following sections, I shall put forth the birth of the African American quilting tradition by tracing some significant aspects of the African American past, and the gallantly persistent struggle of enslaved and freed African American quilters to create visual testimonies out of scraps of materials of everyday life.

3.1. The Birth and Birth of African American Quilting: Beyond a Folk Culture Conception

Making and trading numerous types of cloth was a vital element in African life and culture. As Venice Lamb notes, “it would be hard to overestimate the importance of the role that this craft has played on the domestic, social, commercial, and even religious,
aspects of people’s lives in West Africa.”

When Europeans arrived in Africa, they found that almost every town of any size in West Africa south of the Sahara had a cloth quarters in its market. From the Senegal River to the ports of Angola, Europeans learned and became familiar with West African textile traditions and the cultural production of narrow strip cloths. The narrow strip cloths were a portable art, in which strips were dyed, painted, and sewn together to make bigger fabrics that were used for clothing, blankets, mats, fishing nets, tents, saddles, etc. These narrow strip cloths were easy to transport and could be made into various textile products. This is significant because, according to Venice Lamb, “neither in Europe, nor in the Middle East, do we find such emphasis on narrow-strip weaving, or such dramatic fusion of such strips in the making of multi-strip cloths and textiles.”

Given this, it was only a matter of time before Europeans figured out the value of Mande weavers and cloth makers as laborers, and that they could use textiles to entice and capture West Africans into slavery.

In the text, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, Michael Gomez argues the trade between Europeans and Africans was not an equal exchange nor typified by good faith negotiations. Gomez asserts that an overwhelming majority of enslaved African accounts agree that slave traders used cloth, especially red cloth to attract and deceive West Coast Africans. These stories are now known as “the red cloth tales” and they depict white slave traders as the ultimate trickster. The stories reveal how West Africans were seduced

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by red cloths and other material things by European-Americans, enslaved and transported to North America. These red cloth tales are significant because these are personal accounts from the perspective of the enslaved Africans, including women, and show an indigenous ritual practice of storytelling in the lives of black people from the onset of slavery. A primary example of the “red cloth” capture stories was offered by South Carolinian Richard Jones in 1937. Jones tells the story of his grandmother Judith from Africa. According to Gomez, Jones reports,

> Some stranger’s wid pale faces come one day and drapped a small piece of red flannel down on de ground. All de black folks grabbed for it…En a larger piece was drapped a little further on, on until the river was reached…when de ship was reached, dey drapped large pieces on de plank and up into de ship till dey got as many blacks on board as dey wanted.\(^{179}\)

This narrative and others like it were passed along to warn future generations about the cost of material enticements, and the price of African peoples’ naïveté. By creating and retelling their life stories from their perspective, such teachings not only seek to provide a historical memory of what actually happened from their perspective, but also encouraged listeners to learn from their mistakes and be aware of the deceptive tactics of the European traders. This view of the traders as a trickster has remained in African and African American folklore for generations.\(^{180}\) For example, the trickster figure tales such as Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Uncle Remus, Anansi, and Ijapa have survived within the twentieth century African American literature and West African folk traditions. The


trickster can serve as a villain who engages in maleficent violence or a cultural hero within these folk and literary traditions. Such narratives and similar tales established a counter-hegemonic tactic that helped them confront their victimization. The lessons of these stories signified that enslaved Africans and their future descendants possessed the wisdom and skills to creatively resist and subvert the “ultimate trickster.”

In the text, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*, Renee Harrison identifies the role seduction and trickery played in the enslavement of African people, especially women. Furthermore, such accounts of seduction provide a snap-shot of African women and girl’s experiences and struggles over their abduction from the coastal areas of West Africa. Louisiana resident Della Fountain recollects her memory of “red cloth tales” from the perspective of her African-born grandmother.

According Harrison, quoting Gomez, Fountain reports that,

Traders come dere in a big boat and dey had all sorts of purty gew-gaws—red handkerchiefs, dress goods, beads, and trinkets in bright colors. Dey would pull up at de shore and entice de colored folks onto de boat to see purty things…and before the darkies realized it dey would be out from shore. Dat’s de way she was captured.

For both Gomez and Harrison, the seducing and tricking of African people was the “most important aspect of the trade to understand and the most consequential lesson to learn


about dealing with white folk.”183 According to Renee Harrison, quoting historian Anne C. Bailey184, such seduction-plot narratives, told through imagery and metaphor represent:

an independent mode of historical representation: a unique understanding and conception of history and the process of history making consistent with important aspects of West and Central African oral tradition and culture…Such narratives show that African peoples appropriated their own understanding of ‘history-making’ by creating and retelling their life stories from their perspective…This counter-hegemonic approach to history and history-making suggests that a collective African epistemology was operating among those victimized. This counter-hegemonic strategy validated African peoples’ experiences of slavery and offered wisdom to future generations of oppressed daughters and sons.185

The red cloth tales and other seduction-plot narratives such as sugar plum stories and trickster stories were used to help new arrivals make sense of their new life, and established a common history and lessons for survival.186 Given this, the stories forged a West African oral tradition embedded with wisdom that taught political, moral, and spiritual meanings. Most would agree with Henry Louis Gates, that “it is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet common cultural rituals.”187 These narratives were shared on the slave ships, and throughout the plantation regime to warn enslaved Africans about the consequences of blindness and enticements.

184 Anne C. Bailey is a social historian in the departments of History and Africana Studies at SUNY Binghamton, Her research has centered on the history of the Atlantic slave trade and its impact on Africa and its worldwide Diaspora.
185 Harrison, R., Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 2009 p. 16-17
Latent within these cautionary tales is subversion. As such, these cautionary tales allowed enslaved Africans to make sense of their existential and ontological absurdity, prevent the terror of certain thoughts and expectations, and stir up the ability to take action—seek freedom.

The “red cloth tales” offer hermeneutical sensibilities important for this research project. Pinn’s hermeneutic of ontological dimension allows scholars to probe the “red cloth tales” to grasp how one speaks to and about what lurks behind modes of black expression. The theoretical terrain of complex subjectivity allows me to keep in mind the links between black religion and everyday life through the stories African Americans tell, and to ask questions about the underlying or elemental impulse that motivates enslaved Africans and their descendants to seek greater consciousness and more meaning out of life through creative black cultural productions. Such a move allows scholars to mine how these stories of trickery and seduction offered a counter-hegemonic narrative as a means of monitoring human experience and ordering social structures and realities.

And this information was communicated through material objects that, in turn, helped enslaved Africans gain a richer self-consciousness, communicate the elemental meaning of religion, and promote a critical engagement with the world during the course of their life, both individually and communally. In short, with only their memories of the past and knowledge of West African traditions, the red cloth tales and seduction narratives helped enslaved Africans create various cultural productions such as music, visual art, and material objects that communicated African Americans experiences, thoughts and beliefs which gave rise to the historical manifestation of doctrines, practices, and institutional structures earmarked for human liberation from the war on fear.
Start of Something New: West African Weavers and Cloth Makers Arrive in North America

Almost from the day when they first arrived as slaves in America in 1619, African American women [and I would add men] have rebelled against their plight...They transformed the wilderness into spaces where creative imagination could flourish and subversive action began. ---Womanist Theologian Delores Williams 188

The moment the large slave ships arrived, slave merchants took great care to inform slave owners of the African region and the specialized skills enslaved Africans possessed. Most of the slave owners in North America preferred Mandes people from the Senegambian regions. 189 British slave owners were well aware that West Africans brought with them many highly developed skills such as “metal working, woodwork, leatherwork, pottery, and weaving.” 190 Slave owners assigned work roles based on skills the various West Africans already possessed. Consequently, most of the Mandes were assigned to house servant duties such as artisans, handi-workers, craftsmen, and seamstresses. Their familiarity with the skilled labor helped them adjust to their new environment. As James Thomas Mc Gowan notes, “they were prepared by their background because of the similarity of the tasks they had performed in Africa.” 191

Newly arrived West Africans were met by enslaved West Africans on the plantation. They formed solidarities and bonds by sharing tales, memories, creative ideas, religious beliefs and information about their homeland. Enslaved Africans also shared information about: how to grow and harvest African crops, how to cook what food was preferred, the shapes and materials that composed familiar household objects; “the perpetuation of sacred forms that were imbued with spiritual meaning and power; and traditions related to a built environment.”  

Over time, enslaved Africans realized that the African legacies from which they emerged, equipped them with wisdom, imagination, and craftsmanship to creatively transmit life-affirming worldviews, resistance, and create unity among the diverse ethnic groups. Along with the trickster narratives and seduction plots, enslaved Africans found ingenious ways to encode messages using mundane and thrown away objects. West African weavers and cloth makers, artisans, and craftsmen and women repurposed these material objects to promote and reinforce behaviors that “allowed beleaguered blacks to transcend fixed forms of identity and develop more complex modalities of lived meaning as both individuals and members of community.”

This is significant because it shows that enslaved Africans possessed the ability to use left over and mundane objects to do what Zora Neale Hurston describes as decorating the decorations—“in other words, it adds layer upon intricate layer of meaning and beauty to

objects of nature and artifacts of everyday use.” Their ability to “decorate the decorations” suggests that enslaved Africans were seeking to renegotiate their embodied existence using everyday objects. Despite the horrors of slavery and the enormous pressures of cultural indoctrination, this strategy allowed them to be in dialogue with the creative and subversive traditions and ideologies within their own African traditions.

By the end of the 17th century, enslaved African artists, weavers, and handiworkers crafted mundane objects that constituted a creative act of self-expression and resistance. Enslaved Africans found ingenious ways to use their creativity, skills, and bodies to fashion their own interpretation of the social order, reject the essence of slavery, and renegotiate their own rights and value as human beings. As such, the creative thrust to “decorate the decorations” allowed enslaved Africans and their descendants to develop African American quilts. In applying Pinn’s hermeneutics of style and body I am able to interpret these cultural artifacts as a way that African Americans seek to counter the process of dehumanization. Pinn’s hermeneutic of style and body, as an analytic, brings to the surface a certain style or rhythm of the quilts by which the process of struggle for new ontological and existential status unfolds through black bodies because of the strong connection between oppression and the manipulation of the body.”

As such the style and rhythm of African American quilts are shaped and molded by resources at hand, creativity memory and self-understanding. Thus, I am proposing that attention to African

American quilts and Pinn’s hermeneutics of style and body is vital for gaining a deeper understanding of the links between black religion and everyday life. To this end, I now turn to the creative struggle for increased agency among enslaved West Africans within plantation life, in order to, the emergence, growth, and developments of the African American quilting tradition.

3.2. Plantation Life: Slave Quarters, Resistance, and the Emergence of Quilting Bees

By the eighteenth century, plantations and farms in the South such as Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, North and South Carolina hummed with the sounds of African blacksmiths, masons, carpenters, weavers, artisans, shoemakers, seamstresses, and the miller. The wealthier plantations resembled industrial communities. Many enslaved Africans acquired a high level of skills and dominated most trades such as metal work, carpentry, tool making, and textiles. Enslaved African men were skilled carpenters, brick masons, iron makers, wood carvers, painters, and potters. Enslaved African women contributed to making fabric, clothes, sewing, quilting, and producing other crafts. As such, in the eighteenth century West African craftsmanship in the production of “farm tools and handicrafts won the praise of Europeans, and within the plantation regime they came to dominate particular trades.” Given this, West African Mandes and Mande-influenced ethnic groups, in the words of U.B. Phillips, “had by far the best opportunity

which any of their race had been given in America to learn the white man’s ways and to adjust the lines of their bondage into as pleasant places as might be.”

This means that enslaved Africans learned how to live in two distinct worlds—the one in which whites controlled and they had to survive daily, and one in which they carved out for themselves. As such, West Africans learned how to create coded language and images that supplied the plantation with Africanisms that were shared and adopted by the various African ethnic groups of the slave community to create beauty, autonomy, and resistance. This coded language allowed enslaved West Africans working as artisans, seamstresses, blacksmith, carpenters and domestic workers to create symbols, signs, images, and objects that expressed their African identity and cultural heritage.

Most scholars have failed to pay critical attention to the fact that “West African people have been adept at borrowing cultural elements from their conquerors and victims and fusing them with their own.” This means that scholars have overlooked the notion that West African domestic workers would know how to infuse African images and style within the European cultural productions, as well as make distinctive material objects for themselves. This creative ability allowed West Africans to also play a significant role in preserving African textile traditions that evolved into a distinctive African American quilting tradition. Through quilt-making, enslaved Africans crafted visual testimonies that expressed their quest for complex subjectivity using scraps of mundane materials.


from their everyday life. As such, quilt-making was a way for domestic workers to respond to the fear and anxiety of losing oneself, and as Pinn notes, “this undoubtedly represented a visual statement of a struggle for meaning beyond the restrictive categories offered by white America.”

This is significant because it shows that enslaved domestic workers, visual artisans, and craftsmen created visual images that allowed enslaved Africans to visualize a stronger sense of value and importance within the context of individual activities and communal existence. Living in close proximity to whites, enslaved house servants managed to convert adverse material conditions into a new world in which their spirit could break free.

Depending on their owners’ economic level, many African women and young girls were trained as apprentices. For example, according to Gladys-Marie Fry, “we have evidence that in some cities such as Charleston, South Carolina and Baltimore, Maryland in the 18th century, Euro-American women created special schools specifically to teach young African American girls to sew and learn decorative crafts like quilting and embroidery.” This is significant because this shows the development of an apprentice relationship between enslaved Africans, mainly women, and European-white women. For instance, enslaved African women made quilts for the slaveholding family using the

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materials, techniques, and designs fashionable at the time.\textsuperscript{202} This required the slave mistress to teach enslaved Africans European-American techniques and styles. Since the enslaved African seamstress was responsible for making the quilts for the plantation, they produced quilts for utilitarian and decorative purposes for both the slave masters household, and the personal use of enslaved Africans. Familiar with making textiles enslaved West African quilt-makers found innovative ways to disguise within the quilts “improvisational forms and elements from African cosmology and mythology.”\textsuperscript{203} In this light, Mande and Mande-influenced craftsmen and artisans maintained West African weaving and textile traditions as African people became acculturated to their new environment, and the principal form of labor in textile production in the United States.

By the mid eighteenth century, “slave quarters were becoming increasingly separated from the main house and specifically identified in the tax lists as “Negro quarters” or “Negro dwellings.”\textsuperscript{204} The slave quarters provided enslaved Africans separation from the consistent gaze of the slave owner and mistress. Although not well documented, it should be of no surprise that enslaved Mandes desired and were determined to possess objects and items in their semi-private quarters that their masters possessed. Materially, the Mandes house servants often did live better, partly because they received items from members of the white family and partly because they were in a

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\textsuperscript{204} Cheryl Hayes, “Cultural Space and Family Living Patterns in Domestic Architecture, Queen Anne’s County, Maryland, 1730-1776” (M.A. thesis, Georgetown University, 1974)
\end{flushright}
position to take what they wanted anyway.²⁰⁵ Hence, it was in the slave quarters that as Gladys Marie-Fry notes, “African traditions first met and intersected with Euro-American cultural forms.”²⁰⁶ This allowed enslaved Africans to create an interaction between past and present, and to react creatively and responsibly to the realities of their new situation.

In this light, enslaved Africans turned Euro-American cultural forms to fashion items of African design and religious meaning. These repurposed cultural forms helped to shape and give texture to African American religion and culture. Quilting allowed enslaved Africans to forge community by creating protected spaces where they could share ideas, acquire information, find and give each other essential support for survival and craft a religious way of life through material culture. For example, enslaved Africans realized that they could use quilts to hold their own religious gatherings – in this way quilting becomes not only product of life-meaning and making religion, but also, becomes context for such activity. According to Albert Raboteau, “one practice was to meet in secluded places—woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets (aptly called hush harbors).²⁰⁷ The use of quilts at the hush harbors helped forge African Christianity. The original significance of the quilts to keep warm was transformed for another purpose that enabled enslaved Africans to create private spaces where they could share and develop creative ways to preserve their religious beliefs and practices during American slavery. Thus, African American quilts were present when enslaved African encountered God and

the sacred. Their use and presence at secret, independent worship services in the backwoods and slave quarter is a phenomenon which E. Franklin Frazier called the “invisible institution” suggests the nature and meaning of black religion has links to the cultural production of African American quilts.

The application of Pinn’s hermeneutic of ontological dimension within the context of the quest for complex subjectivity allows for the interpretation of quilts as natural and historically bound objects that communicate certain underlying impulses of religion that allow us to discuss the ordering of social structures and communal realities. Pinn’s hermeneutic of ontological dimension allows the researcher to “probe cultural structures for what they say about their source” that involves a “return to the roots of human perception and reflection undertaken so that we might grasp anew and reexamine the fundamental bases of the human presence.”

As such, this hermeneutic allows a visual interpretation and an empirical domain into the testimonies, practices and acts of remembering/memory endemic to black life and the making of black religion more broadly. Pinn is spot on when he suggests that interpreting the ontological dimension embedded within cultural productions is an important step because it “explores consciousness and historical action in terms of an underlying genius, the prevalent feeling or impulse as genesis of the black liberation struggle broadly conceived.”

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209 Ibid., p. 187.
Applying his hermeneutic to the visual testimonies of African American quilts reveals how the quilter sees or understands his /her own world and experiences. The visual and symbolic value of African American quilts draws attention to the quilter’s individuality and their participation in contemporary communities in the United States. In this regard, African American quilts contain a visual record of the everyday life encounters, and articulate the feeling or impulse for the quest of complex subjectivity using whatever means available to the quilter at the time. The quilter’s creative genius to weave scraps of materials from their everyday life to express their views of life allow us to gain a better understanding of the culturally defined symbols, signs, and images that serve to implant a new sense of self that reinforces and celebrates the human quest for a fuller life.

The African American quilting tradition requires us to ask: how do quilts express an awareness of self, history, and community? How do the artistic elements or visual elements work together to get us to transfer emotions, perspectives and thoughts to the real world? How do quilts express inner meaning? The fact that African American quilts played a role in the “hush harbors” allows us to blend hermeneutical sensibilities with attention to visual art and material culture. Quilters rely on symmetrical designs and geometric patterns to create allegorical scenes which give visual testimonies that reflect back on religious beliefs and community life. Quilts also have been made for religious

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210 In the slave quarters, however, African Americans organized their own "invisible institution." Through signals, passwords, and messages not discernible to whites, they called believers to "hush harbors" where they freely mixed African rhythms, singing, and beliefs with evangelical Christianity. These meetings provided one of the few ways for enslaved African Americans to express and enact their hopes for a better future.
rituals and practices. For example, quilts were also made for burial rituals and practices such as wrapping dead bodies in quilts, and/or placing a “patchwork quilt” on the grave.\footnote{Blassingame, Joh. n W. \textit{The slave community: Plantation life in the antebellum South}. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. p.91.} This suggests that enslaved Africans made quilts to express the beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about the death of someone. The act of wrapping the person in a quilt was done by enslaved Africans and their descendants to make the bodies transcendent. As such, quilts transmitted beliefs materially what might not be able to be said orally, especially during slavery.

There were various beliefs and superstitions associated with quilt making. For instance, two common beliefs were that triangles in quilt designs signified prayer messages, and certain colors were believed to protect the maker.\footnote{Fry, Gladys-Marie. \textit{Stitched from the soul: Slave quilts from the antebellum south}. University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p. 65.} Regarding superstitions, for many quilters it was considered bad luck to begin quilting on Fridays, and to make a quilt with straight or unbroken lines.\footnote{Ibid. 65-67} To make straight or unbroken lines within quilts stems from a folk belief in evil spirits follow straight lines, and that “an imperfect quilt would distract the devil in the night.”\footnote{Ibid. 67} Within the Jubilee Quilt Circle, the contemporary quilters that I interacted with while conducting fieldwork validated that they heard of these superstitions, and that there are some quilters that still hold to these old fashioned quilt-making traditions within in contemporary society. They also shared other quilt processing techniques such as every quilt has a “drop of blood on it” from a
pricked finger, and the blood on the quilt represents the labor of love each quilter puts into making each quilt. This suggests that contemporary African American quilters recognize that their cultural and historical memory maybe fragile and fragmented regarding the deeper meanings of the quilts produced prior to WWII, but they are aware of a historical orientation, and can speak to shifts in mindset, practices, and aesthetic orientation of the art of quilting that can be traced over time and space.

Quilters also used folk stories, astrological phenomena, proverbs, African gods, biblical scriptures and images to express the beliefs of the individual and the community. The earliest religious imagery is seen in a 1775 Bible cloth from New Orleans, Louisiana, in which contained ideographic designs that were similar to Yoruba EgunEgun costumes and bags used by priests for the god Shango.¹²¹⁵ This means we have evidence that enslaved Africans also blended African religious symbols into their Bible cloth. This implies that other quilts blended African religious symbols and images with Christian religious symbols and text such as crosses, North Star, and biblical scriptures in slave made quilts. This is significant because these quilts were used at the hush harbors, as decoration for burial sites, for protection from evil, and combined both African religious Christian symbols to blend or disguise within the quilt forms and elements of African deities and mythologies. Quilts that enslaved Africans made give tangible form to their cultural and religious beliefs, practices, and search for meaning. This means that Pinn’s hermeneutic of inner meaning can be used to highlight the presence of “something” that

influences and informs quilting practices and rituals in black communities. A hermeneutic of inner meaning allows me to cut through historical modalities to the core of black experiences to examine what quilters say about the inner urges and feelings that inform their quilting practices. It also sheds light on their need to express these inner urges and feelings through quilting. This hermeneutic allows me to push deep into the quilt-making process and expose as best I can, the depths of the feeling and urges that mark religious life. This, by extension, affords an opportunity to examine the religious realities within the quilt making process as an elemental impulse for complex subjectivity that is expressed through the materiality of the quilts. Pinn’s hermeneutic will be used to interpret the visual testimonies of quilts to expose what they say about God and other divine beings, mystical experiences and visions, and a yearning for complex subjectivity that dominates one’s consciousness and energy after experiencing a crisis or horrific event. Through this mode of interpretation, African American quilts can be seen as visual testimonies that allow African Americans to rethink and reevaluate life experiences, transcend fixed forms of identity, and express a core impulse or feeling for complex subjectivity that informs all types of black religious life.

Quilt-making also helped enslaved Africans carve out an independent life on the plantation. This required a unified effort. After working all day, most enslaved Mande craftsmen and artisans would stay up all night making beds, tables, benches, and tools they needed. And since most enslaved Mandes women were domestic workers and seamstresses they would stay up making clothing, blankets, and other personal and household items they could use in their homes. In this light, at the end of the day, “the overwhelming majority of adult slave women returned from their work in the fields to
cook, wash, sew, knit, weave, or do other kinds of work, sometimes for the plantation household, more often for their own families.” Quilting, sewing, and weaving allowed them to “make due” with the meager supplies they received from the master, and also carve out other ways to “make ends meet.” In order to produce quilts on their own for their families, the quilting bees was created. This was the only activity that most slave owners and mistresses would allow enslaved Africans to come together privately, because if they were quilting and sewing they were still working. The quilting bee became a source of social contact that gave enslaved Africans an opportunity to exchange news, see loved ones, pass on African traditions, and plan strategies for resistance.

At the quilting bees, women and men came together to quilt in their slave quarters and socially at quilting parties held on the plantation. According to Gladys Marie Fry, quoting Anne L. McDonald, “men shared the responsibility for spinning, weaving, and knitting for the plantation household, and if they produced extra goods, could sell them outside.” In the slave quarters, this created family communal situations that developed a social construct where gender roles were blurred. Due to the plantation regime, everyone had to pitch in men, women, and children. On the one hand, men and boys did what European-Americans would signify as “women’s work” such as sew, quilt, crochet, knit, embroider, etc. On the other hand, women and girls did what was designated as “men’s work” such as hauling, plowing, chopping, and carpentry and other skilled labor as a means of survival. Together, families worked to have material objects in their homes

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and on their bodies (clothes) that allowed them to gain a sense of autonomy. Enslaved Africans learned of births, deaths, secret meetings, what was going on in the “Big House”, and the quilting gatherings in the slave quarters as Gladys Marie-Fry notes, “the group life in the quarters was the slave equivalent of group life in Africa.”

In practical terms, quilting and quilts made in the slave quarters played a very important role in crafting a distinctive African style, quests for freedom, and what Mary Douglas calls “thought styles”—common judgments made in everyday life. According to Douglas, thought styles are:

The idea is that in all their behavior persons are continuously engaged in trying to realize an ideal form of community life and trying to persuade one another to make it actual. Little that is done or said is neutral, every aspect of living and all choices are tested in the struggle to make a cultural ideal come true. On this approach each cultural type is in conflict with the others and there is no line to be drawn between symbolic behavior and the rest. Everything is symbolic and it is all heavily engaged.

In other words, the choices that enslaved and freed Africans made were influenced by the cultural productions of the Mandes weavers and seamstresses on the plantation. As Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang note, “Material objects are and have always been central to human communication.” In this light, the quilts distinct stitches, dying, colors, and construction were particular to Mandes weaving techniques, and the colors of the patterns along with the arrangement of the symbols and patterns embodied a system of meanings through which they expressed themselves and communicated with each other. The

meanings and messages communicated by the different objects created by the Mande weavers and seamstresses became embedded in the life stories and meaning making of the people who used them, displayed them, and shared them. The African style images, symbols, and/or signs such as Adinkra symbols, Nsibidi signs, stars and pinwheel images that they embedded within the textiles and objects created in the slave quarters, influenced everyday choices and judgments to act within their everyday lives that allowed them to shape religious beliefs and culture different from their oppressor. For Douglas, living in community means accepting standards by playing by the rules, negotiating new rules, and suffering consequences for disapproval. In this light, the background assumption is that every society imposes normative standards on its members, and every community discriminates in it references to define their interests, actions and behaviors, and thereby negotiate and validate the pursuit of those interests within society. To this end, the Mandes and their descendants helped shape and influence everyday “thought styles” that allowed enslaved and free Africans to choose to create a distinctive religion, culture, and quilting tradition during the 18th century despite the physical, psychological and socioeconomic consequences of American slavery. As a result, enslaved Africans not only quilted in their slave quarters, they also managed to negotiate a space within the plantation regime for quilting parties—the communal activity of quilt-making.

The quilting parties were a festive occasion. Enslaved Africans made the occasion memorable by playing music, dancing, and feasting at the quilting parties. The quilting parties allowed enslaved Africans to renew and establish relationships with other enslaved Africans, as well as white women, on and off the plantation. Enslaved Africans
had to balance two worlds—one white and one black at all times. Hence, there were also two types of quilting parties, as Fry notes, “elaborate affairs in which each phase of the events was orchestrated, and more impromptu scaled-down affairs that rotated nightly from cabin to cabin.”

The elaborate parties, often sponsored by slave master and mistress required the elder women to piece the quilt tops before the party, and organize the events including food and entertainment. Teams of four would work on one quilt, gifts were given for winners of quilt challenges, and quilters would produce as many quilts they could complete while laughing, eating, talking, and playing during the course of the night. It should be noted that quilting was not always about celebrations or social interaction. On certain occasions, quilting bees would gather to help those who experienced extreme hardship. The quilting bee would be planned and women and men would quilt and make clothes and other items for children without a mother or for someone who had lost a spouse, or for someone facing harsh circumstances beyond their control. Both clothing and blankets were essential to their work productivity, health and comfort. The quilting bee sparked charity, communal involvement and activism on the plantation that created a public moral ethic—an ethic with pragmatic value.

Quilting was a craft that played a role in self-preservation, building bonds and networks among both black and white women, and afforded both free and enslaved Africans financial income that allowed them to carve out a life for themselves. Hence, the quilting bees in

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the quarters and quilting parties allowed large numbers of enslaved Africans within the same plantation (and surrounding plantations) to share similar cultural retentions, trades, memories, stories, religious beliefs, aesthetic preferences, and ideas of freedom unknown to white slaveholders. The desire to have material objects in their homes and within the community allowed enslaved Africans to develop an internal economy for all things made that reminded them of Africa, and resonated with their new environment. Enslaved Africans would pick up items often discarded by whites, and would use them for their own purposes. As such, the quilting bees and textiles produced, in most instances, represented the creative efforts of an entire family. This practice laid the foundation for the development of an African American quilting tradition.

3.3. Only the Scraps Remain: 19th and 20th Century Records of African American Quilts

About 400,000 native born Africans were brought to the United States before 1807.223 By the nineteenth century, enslaved Africans managed to use their cultural knowledge and skills of West African textile and American cultural production traditions to gain privileges among white families, build homes and self-esteem, and create an African American quilting tradition. Quilts and quilt-making created every day “thought styles” that promoted solidarity and the push for the end of slavery. Yet, this era was marked with considerable change. For instance, in 1807, the British stopped importing enslaved Africans to America. As a result, the decline of enslaved native born Africans

sparked the demand for American enslaved Africans. In addition, enslaved and free Africans dominated the textile industry in America. Skilled African domestic workers, craftsmen/women, and artisans capitalized on their skill, creativity and the demand for labor. The ability to know a specialized trade and to create European-American and African American styles, African Americans began to work for hire, both enslaved and free. The changes in the economy and trade in the nineteenth century created Southern advertisements and sale listings that provide descriptions of the slave’s talents. For example, a typical advertisement read:

“To be hired immediately” A very complete Seamstress; a complete worker of muslin, sober, and no runaway; she is a young colored Woman in her eighteenth year; she is very fond of children, can make their clothes [sic] and dress them with taste.224

The changes in the American economy, politics, and the drastic reduction in native born Africans coming to America, enslaved African Americans were becoming more and more acculturated to European-American ways and practices. The lack of enslaved born Africans had an impact on the cultural retentions of Africanisms. As such, historically we witness the creative genius of enslaved African Americans to preserve and sustain a distinctive quilting tradition as their knowledge and memories of Africa slowly began to fade.

The most infamous example of the elaborate work and skill of enslaved Africans is the Harriet Powers Bible Quilts. Harriet Power’s is considered one of the most

important African American quilters, because we have actual quilts she made in the 19th century. Harriet Powers was born a slave in Athens, Georgia on October 29, 1837. She spent the early part of her life on the plantation where she would have learned how to sew from the mistress of the house and other enslaved Africans.225 Her style of quilts reflect the style of the Benin, West African textile tradition of applique’ cloths, which were used as costume, festival ornamentation, and wall hangings by the religious and secular elite within the Fon, Yoruba, and Edo kingdoms in West Africa. Although, only two of her quilts remain, scholars have recovered through the writings of the white patron, Jessie Smith, statements made Power’s about her quilts. For example, as Celeste-Marie Bernier notes, “Harriet Powers believed her purpose was to preach the gospel in patchwork, to show my Lord my humility…and to show where sin originated, out of the beginning of things.”226 Scholars also reveal that each panel in her remaining quilts tell a story of its own that can be viewed and studied like a painting. She assumes the role of storyteller using cloth that paint scenes of the Bible, folk life, and historical events. Here, Celeste-Marie Bernier informs us of a Powers’ Bible quilt:

The individual panels of Powers’ first quilt are multi-dimensional and open-ended. She leaps from one bible story to the next to encourage viewers to make connections across her discordant symbolism…Powers’ non-chronological’ sequencing of the biblical stories may even have been designed to challenge viewing practices. Her repetition across scenes of diminutive crosses, spherical stars, erect and prostrate grey and white bodies, panthers, deer, leopards, elephants, birds, and cockerels transgresses the boundaries of individual panels to blur relationships between the temptation of woman, the crucifixion of Christ, the

225 To learn more about Harriet Powers life go to http://georgiawomen.org/2010/10/powers-harriet/
tempting of Judas and the wrongdoing of Satan. Powers complicated her moral allegories by repeating motifs and symbols across these scenes to encourage audiences to search for their own spiritual message in her otherwise unresolved narratives.\textsuperscript{227}

The quilts made by Harriet Powers and contemporary quilters allow us mine the long tradition that developed throughout the nineteenth century.

Research shows that the quilts made by enslaved and free African American consists of three layers: the top portion, which can be plain, pieced, or appliqued; the middle layer (or filling); and the lining. Quilt stitches, or “tacking” bond these three layers together.\textsuperscript{228} Most scholars would agree with Roberta Horton that there are six major design characteristics that identify an African American quilt, and they included the following: (1) Vertical strip organization, (2) Bold contrast colors, (3) Large design elements, (4) Asymmetry, (5) Multiple patterning, and (6) Improvisation.\textsuperscript{229} Most of these overlap, because the large design elements are often arranged in asymmetric, multiple patterning, and with improvisation of bold contrast colors and vertical strip organization. This African American design aesthetic allows for diversity in designs, patterns, and style. Consequently, no two quilts are exactly alike. This design aesthetic seem reasonable considering the circumstances under which enslaved African Americans had to quilt on the plantation.

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\textsuperscript{227} Ibid, 39-40
\textsuperscript{228} Fry, Gladys-Marie. \textit{Stitched from the soul: Slave quilts from the antebellum south.} North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002 p. 43
One of the most creative aspects of African American slave quilts are the materials used to make the quilts. The ingenuity with which slaves used “throw away” or discarded goods is astonishing. Gladys-Marie Fry gives us a great description, when she writes:

For the top portion, slaves used material left over from their plantation clothing allowance and old cast off clothing, cut up and reused for quilt squares. Eighteenth and nineteenth sources referred to homespun, linsey or linsey-woolsy, jean, ticking, osnaburg, and kersey, among other fabrics. Slaves also found a way to use gunny, feed, flour, tobacco, and sugar sacks. Additionally, slaves purchased new cloth, such as calico, flannel, broadcloth, and gingham form extra income...For the middle layer, or filling, slaves used clothes that could no longer be mended, leftover threads from the loom, pieces of raw cotton, and bits and pieces of wool...From the bottom layer, or lining, slaves used “anything they could get” This lining ranged from homespun to any combination of the fabrics used for the top portion of the quilt.  

Due to the need for warm coverings and clothing, remembering the design flexibility of the “strips” within West African textiles gave them the skills and ingenuity to transform “scraps” into an innovative and creative quilting tradition. Enslaved and freed Africans took these discarded, found, made, and altered, “pieces” and then creatively decorated these mundane and left over materials into a decorative art.

Since the natural color of cotton and wool is a dull white. It was perfect for bleaching into a bright white, or soaked in a dye pot. Slave narratives frequently refer to the fact that slaves learned to use plant dyes expertly. John Vlach provides us with an ex-slave account of Ellen Polk age 83, who was born a slave in Gonzalez County, Texas.

and Fannie Yarbrough, who was also born a slave in Egypt, Kaufman County, Texas; she
was six at the time of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{232} Combining both their stories, Vlach informs us
that:

\begin{quote}
The women would go into the woods and take bark from the tree parsley from the
ground and mix them with copperas and put it all in a big iron pot and boil it.
They would strain the water off and dye the cloth. The color was brown. Once
slaves learned to produce dyes they could give their threads different colors,
which in turn could be used to enhance their weaving… Fannie Yarbrough
bragged…I learned all about spinning and weaving when I was little and by the
time I was ten I’d make pretty striped cloth.\textsuperscript{233}
\end{quote}

These ex-slave narratives suggest the production of the quilts represented both personal
creativity and meaning, and in the circumstances when the quilts were made by a group,
the patterns and colors choices were more likely to represent a communal meaning and
aesthetic.

Among enslaved Africans the color preference for red requires attention. There
are many theories for the universal use of red within African American quilts. Among
the many theories concerns over the use of red was because in Africa the color red is
easily seen. In Africa, bright, strong colors can be recognized from a distance and “this
was important if one needed to give a proper greeting to someone.”\textsuperscript{234} This indicates that
the color red communicates and that it signifies a proper greeting (a respectful way to

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\textsuperscript{232} Workers Progress Administration, Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume XVI, Texas Narratives, Part 3, 2011
speak to someone). Denied the right to speak freely of black pride and culture, enslaved Africans spoke with colors, and the color red expressed various thoughts, beliefs, and experiences without words. The various meanings of the color red, like language, lies in the particular contexts in which it was experienced and interpreted. For example, in the United States, the color red signifies (1) the Blood of Christ and sacrifice, (2) Holidays such as Christmas and Valentines, emotions such as passion and aggression, (3) Gives warnings such as hot, stop, danger, (4) represents love and courage, and (5) similarities in the color symbolism of various cultural groups and religious traditions within Africa. According to the *Encyclopedia of African Religion Volume I*, the color red among the Akan (Mandes ethnic group) represents “a complex language through which to read the beliefs of a people, which are unquestionably related to their ontology and cosmology.” This suggests that the color red in quilts has symbolic meanings that holds significance for African Americans, and helped shape common articles of faith, codes, and rituals which sprang from the social and material conditions of American life.

The large design patterns for the quilts were also another feature of the quilting process. On the plantation, the white mistress used copybooks to learn traditional patterns. Little is known about the influence of these copybooks and their patterns on African American quilts. Scholars have failed to determine the author of these copybooks. Therefore, it is hard to determine if the mistress or employer transmitted the designs or patterns to the enslaved Africans, and/or the enslaved or free Africans

transmitted them to the mistress or white patrons in the United States. I am of the opinion that both occurred. Gladys Marie Fry reveals that the term “copybook” appears in an ex-slave testimony which reads, “I learned to write in a copybook, and I’d write stories about Christ, and several different stories, I filled a great big copy book with practice." That as enslaved African women that learned to read write and/or draw they would have created copybooks that were shared among whites and blacks in the United States. Fry also records, some of the learned quilting patterns most frequently in the WPA narratives that identify pre- and post-Civil War patterns: (1) Breakfast Dish; (2) Saw tooth (silk); (3) Tulip Design (laid work); (4) Prickle Pear; (5) Little Boy’s Breeches; (6) Birds All Over the Elements; (7) Drunkard’s Path; and (8) Double Star, just to name a few. According to the Runaway Quilt Project: Digital Humanities Exploration of Quilting During Slavery, the Breakfast Dish design is from New England circa 1860-1880, the Saw tooth design was produced in Alabama in circa 1820-1840, Tulip Design made it to Indiana in 1860, Prickle Pear was appliqued by an ex-slave Gracie Mitchell interviewed by Bernice Bowden as a part of the WPA Narratives, Little Boy’s Breeches is similar to the Overall Sam design of the 1900s, Birds All Overs the Elements or Birds in the Air is associated with slave code myths and the design comes from a slave legend about a runaway slave that ran from patrollers. According to the Nebraska National Park

237 Ibid, 45-46 You can see the patterns on the website http://www.quiltindex.org/search_results.php?keywords=quilt+patterns&search=go
238 http://runawayquiltproject.org/methodology/geospatial-mapping/ To visit this website one can trace the geospatial mapping of the quilt designs in the United States
Service Quilt Discovery Experience webpage, Drunkard’s Path was a popular way for women to express their opinion about alcohol and its uses, and to raise money and consciousness for the abolition of slavery, and Double Star, aka Eight Pointed Star was the most common motif among homesteaders traveling west, and they considered stars as religious symbols of their faith in God. 239

The patterns might involve political statements, and reflect coded messages. For example, in the anti-slavery hotbed of the Northeast, a lot of quilt patterns reflected politics, such as Clay’s choice (see figure 1), Underground Railroad (see figure 2), Log Cabin (see figure 3), and Whig’s Defeat (see figure 4).

Figure 3.1 Clay’s Choice  Photo captured from Youtube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_L6TP6fy4w

239 http://www.nps.gov/home/planyourvisit/quilt-discovery-experience.htm To visit this website one can view pictures of the quilt blocks and their history.
Figure 3.2: Underground Railroad Quilt Squares
Photo captured from the Printable Underground Railroad Quilt Code Game
http://deceptivelyeducational.blogspot.com/2014/06/quilt-code-game.html

Figure 3.3: Log Cabin Block
Photo captured from the website
These quilt designs suggest that enslaved and freed African Americans developed a way to encode messages within some quilt patterns. Some quilt historians have suggested that enslaved Africans created an Underground Railroad Quilt Code, that was used African Americans who desired to be free. According to Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard the authentic Underground Railroad Quilt Code blocks are: (1) Monkey Wrench; (2) Bear’s Paw; (3) North Star; (4) Drunkard’s Path; (5) Wagon Wheel; (6) Nine Patch; (7) Basket; (8) Wagon Wheel; (9) Crossroads; and (10) Crossroads, and so on.²⁴⁰ (See figure 2 above) It should be noted that there are numerous debates that challenge the scholarly claims that the Underground Railroad Quilt patterns were distinctive to African American quilting. Less debatable, is the historical data indicating that the plantation mistress, wives of the overseers, and abolitionists quilted with enslaved African Americans, and

that there was “mutuality and sharing of the sewing skills, design concepts, and sense of color in textile production.” Thus, I am of the opinion that the common quilt designs within American quilting tradition were copied creative designs that enslaved and freed Africans created, and that these common quilt designs were shared by quilters, both white and black, to communicate with runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. Hence, the Mandes that served as house servants, craftsmen and skilled artisans/workers had the best opportunities to run for freedom, and often took it. Once freed, it is not unlikely that anti-slavery supporters in the North and South used quilts to devise a system of transmitting information to each other, many times in coded form. According to Tobin and Dobard, “sending and receiving such information would happen right in the open, in churches and other gatherings such as quilting bees and husking parties.”

This suggests that only the individuals that could interpret the Underground Railroad Quilt code and other codes would know how to use the quilts to direct runaway slaves to take particular actions. More research is needed on the role of black quilters in the Female Anti-slavery societies, Anti-slavery sewing circles, as well as how quilts helped to support the abolitionist revolution, which as Lynne Bassett notes, “eventually transformed into the women’s suffrage movement and the campaign for Civil Rights.”

Another characteristic of African American quilts was the improvisation designs that blended multiple patterning, asymmetrical designs within the tapestry of the quilts.

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Improvisation and multiple patterning’s form another aesthetic tradition shared by people who made African and African American textiles. The strips were sewn together, and the contrasting bright colors were staggered in relation to the other strips, yet as Roy Sieber notes, “the careful matching of the ends of cloth dispels the impression of an uncalculated overall design.”

In this light, the creative exchange of techniques, style, and creativity among African American seamstresses, weavers, craftsmen/women and artisans, both free and enslaved, became a significant part of American culture and yet, at the same time, remained a distinct culture apart from it. The distinctive aesthetics of African American quilts allow for interpretation of the quilts to determine their cultural and religious significance. In the story of African American quilting tradition in the 19th century, quilt-making was part of creative genius that transferred meaning from the social to the symbolic realm, and quilts became a primary site for articulating and clarifying their sense of the world. In this light, the mundane materials used to create quilts gave form and content to the thoughts, experiences, beliefs that enabled enslaved and freed African American to remember, reweave, and rearrange meaningful cultural fragments that enabled them to survive, understand and oppose the injustices forced upon them. This, by extension, launches us into the development of the African American quilting tradition in the 20th century that maintained a lifeline of vision for African Americans.

By the 20th century, there were many different responses to African Americans new found freedom in the United States. Within the war on fear, on one side these changes caused white sentiments about industrialization to lead to what art historian Lynda Jessup describes as “a longing for the types of physical or spiritual experience embodied in utopian futures and imagined past.” This sparked the Colonial Revival Movement, strongest from 1890s through the 1920s. During this time, material culture was used in this campaign to revive principles of the past before the Civil War, in order to create a psychologically soothing effect among those living in industrialized societies. The Colonial Revival era used quilts to regain admiration for America’s colonial and pioneer past. Advocates of this campaign believed that “home decoration in the style of an earlier era would grant the inhabitants the desirable character traits of that period and by decorating in a past style, social, political, and economic unrest could be mitigated, or at least more easily ignored.” Thousands of women were quilting during this period, creating a remarkable diversity in quilt styles and patterns that transformed quilting from a folk art to a commercial industry. Periodicals, magazines, the invention of the sewing machine, mail-orders and the manufacturing of textiles, dyes, and patterns were used to promote and advocate mainstream white Protestant Americans ideas of nationalism and patriotism. The world was changing rapidly due to industrialization, immigrations,

245 Hanson, M, and Crews, P., “American Quilts in the Modern Age, 1870-1940, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2009, p. 2
growth of urban cities, transportation, and racial and cultural conflicts. As a result, Colonial Revival leaders “sought refuge in the past and used both fact and myth to help socialize newcomers to principles they held dear…They believed that early historical figures and pioneer values needed to be esteemed by all who lived in the United States.”247 This predicament created two different responses regarding the use of art as a vehicle for racial progress.

African American responses to this cultural crisis have been thoroughly explored through literary and other artistic pursuits such as music, dance, sermons, poetry, spirituals etc. Yet, visual art and material culture were often overlooked by most scholars. An explanation for this has been offered by Art historian Lisa Collins and Cultural critic Michelle Wallace, in which they argue that at the center of African American thought there is a “problem of the visual in African American culture”, that has neglected and ignored the significance of visual and material cultural productions (paintings, sculptures, architecture, furniture, quilts) as a source material for the study of Black cultures.248 In this light, who can estimate what the devaluing of African American quilts has cost Black religion and visual art? Within academic circles, African American quilts were often overlooked or ignored due to one of the most persistent myth concerning African American heritage in the United States. It was strongly believed that slaves did not have a quilt-making tradition, thus, there was no need to study what did not exist. This myth is based on the argument that African American women (and men, in a few instances) were

too busy working in the fields all day to have time to quilt.\textsuperscript{249} This myth created its previous neglect, and it also set up the scholarly neglect of the religious significance of African Americans quilts. Such a move has made this project possible, and the reexamining of the historical context of African American quilts makes this stance no longer acceptable.

Searching the limited literature, one will find Roland L. Freeman’s \textit{Communion of The Spirit}. In his book, we find information about African Americans quilters and their preservers from 1940s-1996. As a photographer and a folklorist, Freeman provides eye-witness accounts and illustrations representing the first survey of African American quilt-making on a national level. The books more than 300 photographs are sequenced with text. Freeman suggests that “to understand these quilts one had to understand the vital roles they played in the community, as one among many arts and skills that provided vibrant cultural expression.”\textsuperscript{250} He argues “communion” is complex, and “it refers to the power of quilts to create a virtual web of connections---individual, generational, professional, physical, spiritual, cultural, and historical.”\textsuperscript{251} In this light, quilts are a configuration of mixed experiences and thinking that is inextricable linked with the stories and actions of the people that became part of the evolving social identity of African Americans.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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In the 1940s, while most American scholars were paying attention to African American visual arts, music, sermons, performing arts, gospels, film, and other cultural elements, Freeman’s grandmother in 1944 had a healing quilt. He states that when a baby was born in his family the baby was brought to his grandmother’s house to take a nap on the quilt. According to Freeman, in this way, the baby was supposed to get in touch with the elders and ancestors to receive their blessing and protection.²⁵² He gives a first-hand account. He writes:

My clearest memory of this was in March 1944, when my sister Marie Arbia, the first of my mother’s six children from her 1943 marriage to John Tyler Grace, was born. When Marie was placed on the healing quilt, she screamed as though she was in great pain and the longer they let her lie there, the louder she hollered. Finally, my great-grandmother Arbia picked Marie up and handed her to my mother. She then took the quilt off the bed, turned it over and sat in a chair with quilt in her lap. Wrapping Marie in the reverse side of the quilt, Arbia sat there humming and rocking her to sleep. When Marie finally fell asleep, the women turned the quilt back over and placed her on it, she continued to sleep. Arbia then said that Marie had hollered because the spirits had freighted her. My mother asked her what this meant, and Arbia said, “It means she going to travel a rocky road. There will be much confusion in her life, because she’ll have trouble trusting people.”²⁵³

Freeman does not show us a picture of the quilt, because his great-grandmother requested to be wrapped and buried in it when she was deceased.²⁵⁴ Yet, his eyewitness account reveals that we can find evidence about the art of traditional African American quilting, contemporary quilters, and their quilts. Freeman suggests that contemporary African

²⁵² Ibid, 8
²⁵⁴ Ibidp.58
American quilters create art work that reveals close relations between art and life, while basing their creative process in religious beliefs and lived experiences. “

Freeman asserts that African American quilts are a familiar part of black life, and its traditions are passed down from generation to generation. Freeman’s chronological account of quilting covers the period 1940s-1996. For instance, he tells us about a quilter in Houston, Texas. The quilter’s named Della R. Collins. Della R. Collins was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana in 1925, and remembers seeing her mother, aunts, and neighbors quilt. The type of quilts she makes is applique (to decorate by cutting pieces of material and applying them to another), and she also makes novelty quilts, theme quilts, and variations of traditional quilts. Raising a family as a single parent, she is actively involved in the Women of Color Quilters Network quilt guild. The Women of Color Quilters Network was born out of an awareness that “African American quilters suffer from the same stereotypes, stigmas, and barriers that can delineate and constrict almost every aspect of their American social experience. There is a tangible pressure to conform to the ‘other’ quilt world.” Collins conducts programs on quilts-slide and lecture sessions. She shares with Freeman how she came to quilt. Freeman shares her story when he writes:

As a child I always loved fabric, and when I made something I collected all the leftover pieces, and combined them to make one-of-a-kind clothing. And I collected the smaller pieces to someday make a quilt. I machine-pieced my first

257 Ibid p. 60
one from a found Workbasket Craft magazine in the early 1970s. I didn’t make any more quilts until I got tired of the likes of Eli Leon and Maude Wahlman saying what black-made quilts look like and why. Being a charter member of the International Quilt Association, I asked the organizer to let do an exhibit of black quilters, and my Houston friend told me I had to have a quilt in the exhibit, so in 1989 I made A Child’s Word, my first real quilt.  

By the end of 20th century, in the book, Black Threads, Kyra Hicks provides us with a vast list of quilting guilds that exist, but no critical investigation has been conducted of these contemporary quilt guilds and organizations. This information concerning African American quilt guilds and other communal organizations have yet to be mined fully. Yet, we know from scholars such as Carolyn Mazloomi that “contemporary African American quilters for the most part are isolated from one another and ignored by the wider public.” Mazloomi explains that contemporary African American quilters are overlooked because scholars discounted the diverse body of African American quilters. Instead, scholars have analyzed only a small sub-group of African American quilts to determine certain qualities that were inherent in the world of African American quilters. This created isolation for those quilters that did not conform to the scholars criteria, and these quilters were “relegated to an artistic limbo, where their quilts were regarded as neither authentic African American nor mainstream American fabrications.”

258 Freeman. P.199.
Mazloomi documents a broad range of quilts by African Americans. She documents the spirit of creativity that exists among contemporary African American quilts, and tells us about the continuities that contemporary quilters have with West African textile traditions. In the book, *Spirit of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts*, Mazloomi’s collection of data is about the reasons why they made their quilts. Their stories reveal the demoralization of African Americans and the hypocrisy of American democracy. Women from all walks of life acknowledge their lived experiences, worth, beauty, and the legacy of creativity passed on from their foremothers, in particular, and women (and men), in general. She reveals that the debate regarding what is the black aesthetic in the expansive era of the 1960s adds another level of complexity regarding whose definition of blackness is authentic. She suggests that the commentary on ‘art quilts’ frequently excludes African American quilting. Mazloomi argues that all quilts are art. She recognizes that considerable attention has been given to “the utilitarian nature of black women’s quilt-making, much less has been written about the artistry of their works and the ways in which their aesthetic needs are fulfilled through the process of quilting.”

For example, she tells us about Dorothy Holden from Charlottesville, Virginia, who made a quilt entitled Mr. and Mrs. Afro P Angel and Michael. Dorothy tells Mazloomi that:

> My quilts fall into five different categories: portrait, instructional, experimental, emotional, and inspirational. Mr. and Mrs. Afro P. Angel and Michael was purely inspirational. I don’t know exactly when the idea hit me, but I’d been reading

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about angels for a couple of years. And then I began a collection of black angels. Just asking clerks if they had any black angels was interesting. One day it dawned on me: “Hey, why not make my own angel? And why not make a family of angels? Lo and behold, all the imported African fabrics hopped off my shelves, and other fabric that I had picked up serendipitously, and fell into place. Why Mr. Angel has yellow trash-bad ties for hair, I do not know. Perhaps a true angel guided my selections. Mrs. Angel or Tough Love Angel has painted steel-wool hair with a heart-shaped face, mouth, eyes, and heart shaped embroidered eyebrow.  

Continuing the legacy of slave made quilts, contemporary African American artists have used “readymade” found-objects to tell the stories of Black life, and to express anti-racist social and historical commentary. These artists have created their own program of creative visual production from the debris of their own communities, and in the process brought African American visual art to new heights. Found-object art constructs its own system of values based on a freedom of creation that challenged the system of rules that governed the museums, galleries, art collectors and critics. Freeman and Mazloomi laid the foundation for the concept that the African American quilts are a trope for understanding African American women’s (and men) creativity, religious beliefs, and links to West African textile traditions in the United States. Their research sheds light on the sacred wisdom that has been passed down from generation to generations, and presents an array of stories, quilts, quilters, and interpretative possibilities that could never be exhausted.

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Summary

This “crawling back” through history to understand the art of quilting suggests that the quilt and quilt-making process allowed enslaved and freed Africans to record thoughts and experiences that evolved into a hybridized system of beliefs that were passed down from generation to generation within the homes and communities of African Americans. This genealogy of plantation life, quilting bees, and resistance reveal that the quilter, the quilting making process, and the quilt are interconnected and taken as a whole tells a story using scraps of materials from everyday life that express the religious beliefs and human experiences within the inner and outer spaces of the everyday lives of African Americans, especially women. In this light, the quilter’s creative ability use colors, stitching, symbols and patterns, and the quilting process allows scholars to gain a better understanding of the connections between visual expression and the religious imperative that guides the symbolism, mode of production, and formal character of the artwork.

What I am trying to establish is that the study of African American quilt-making process, quilts, and the quilters who make them allows us to trace the symbols, imagery, signs, and mundane materials that provide scholars of religious studies with tangible evidence of the blending of art and the quest for complex subjectivity that creates its own iconographic blend of communication that can be interpreted. That is, hermeneutics can be applied to gain a deeper understanding of how the quest for complex subjectivity is visible in contemporary African American quilts.

In the next chapter, through Pinn’s hermeneutics of inner meaning, ontological dimension, and style and body, as well as Gadamer’s hermeneutics of aesthetics, I will be able to interpret aspects of the quilting process that give voice and vision, structure and
substance to the quest for complex subjectivity in the contemporary everyday lives of people of African descent in the United States. Looked at this way, the visual testimonies tell stories about various ways African American quilt makers want to make meaning of their experiences visually, and by interpreting these quilts we learn what matters to them as they compose their lives out of the social narratives and cultural environments in which they live. My theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods suggest an effective approach to mining the religious significance of African American quilts is to investigate the cultural production of African American quilts among contemporary quilters that began quilting between the 1960s-1990s in the United States. Hence, in the next chapter, I will provide interviews of five (5) African American quilters in Houston to illuminate the importance of contemporary quilt narratives, quilters, and the quilt-making process as source material for the study of African American religion.
Weaving Ourselves: Memory Creativity Narrative and Faith of Texas Quilters

From slavery to present, quilting has been a familiar part of African American lives for a variety of reasons. These reasons range from livelihood, to decorative art and craft, to cultural artifact, to gift, to sacred object. Often many quilts intentionally communicate the cultural, political, social, and spiritual values by which African Americans come to make meaning out of life. In this chapter, I apply Anthony Pinn’s theory of relational centralism to investigate and interpret African American quilter’s stories, the quilt’s visual testimonies, and the process of quilt making for their religious significance. Relational centralism is a useful tool because it allows me to shift my attention of quilts from merely a visual aesthetic to a greater preoccupation with deconstructing and interpreting the quilter’s attitudes, assumptions, and values. This lens allows me to interrogate the complexity of African American quilts to better understand the relationship between the quilter, the quilt, and the quilt-making process. Therefore, in this chapter, I illustrate how the ethnographic research I conducted on African American
quilters in Houston illuminates the link between black religion (quest for complex subjectivity) and the everyday lives of African American quilters. My ethnographic approach includes participant observation at the Jubilee Quilt Guild, photographs of quilts, and unstructured interviews of five African American quilters. Ultimately, my research reveals the memories, narratives, creativity and faith testified by the quilter, expressed in the quilt, and are made possible by the quilt making process point to the nature and meaning of black religion and experiences of the religious. In other words, the cultural production of African American quilts exposes the diverse and complex ways that many African Americans come to make meaning out of life. Each quilter’s autobiographical account highlights a category--memory, stories, creativity, and faith to promote a clearer vision regarding the links between the study of black religion and everyday life.

4.1. Linking West Africa and Spanish Texas: The History of African American Quilting in Houston

The state of Texas, particularly Houston, offers fertile ground to explore the significance of quilts for the study of African American religion because of its deep quilting history and its rarely explored terrain. Indeed, the history of African American quilts in Texas can be linked to the enslavement of West Africans, and their textile traditions. As discussed in the previous chapter, the historical evidence of textile traditions links enslaved Africans to both Spanish and English colonies in the New World. Consequently, it is of little surprise to discover that the textile traditions in Texas are connected to West African Mande textile traditions. The cultural production of African American quilts in Texas can be traced to enslaved and free people of West
African ancestry in Spanish settlements along the Gulf coast. Since the sixteenth century, these enslaved and freed Africans maintained West African textile traditions, while living among Native Americans, who resided along the Rio Grande, Chihuahua, and within Mexico City. By the eighteenth century a notable number of Spanish settlements in Texas included a population of enslaved Africans who were freed. As sovereignty passed from Spain to Spanish Texas, there were a substantial number of people of African-Spanish-Native American ancestry.

By 1792, a number of freed blacks, runaway slaves, and some whites within British colonies were drawn to the area by the anti-slavery position of Mexico (Spanish Texas). The migration was spurred on by cheap land, and the opportunity to gain a better life. As a result, within the province of Spanish Texas free blacks formed 15 percent of the population.264 During this time, free black Mexicans represented little threat to white labor in Spanish Texas, or to the slave trade in British colonies. With no perceived threat, many white settlers in urban cities of Spanish Texas made little effort to restrict blacks from occupational opportunities, thus, free blacks owned land and could practice any trade or skill they desired. The Texas State Historical Association notes “by the late eighteenth century, black Mexicans lived in every part of the viceroyalty and occupied positions in every sector of the economy.”265

Since free black Mexicans had the opportunity to carve out a life for their own under the Spanish and Mexican governments, many of them adopted artisan trades.

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265 Texas State Historical Digital Archive http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pkb07
Weavers and crafters became one of the most valuable trades in the region. For example, in the text, *Black Texans*, Alwyn Baer notes that “Gil Antonio Ybarbo took a black weaver along to teach his trade to other settlers when Ybarbo established Bucareli on the Trinity River in 1776.” Baer makes clear that black weavers were a cultural resource to pioneering settlements in Spanish Texas. In addition, the influence of the West African Mandé tradition was retained among free Black Mexicans and the multiracial population in Spanish Texas. This is significant because it reveals that Mandé ethnic groups influenced textiles in Spanish Texas, and they were present before enslaved African Americans and white slaveholders from British colonies arrived in the nineteenth century. Thus, the West African textile traditions in Spanish Texas opened the door for the construction of an African American quilting tradition in Texas that existed before the British arrived in Virginia in 1619, and that there are cultural retentions between African American quilting traditions and West African Mandé ethnic groups in Texas.

In spite of the anti-slavery sentiment in Spanish Texas, Stephen F. Austin was granted permission to bring 300 settlers and their slaves from the United States to Spanish Texas in 1823. This agreement opened Spanish Texas to a flood of European-American immigrants from southern states. Many of these white colonists were determined to institute slavery in Spanish Texas. This created the underlying conflict that

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266 Barr, Alwyn. *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1996, p. 3. This is significant because Ybarbo was the leader of the “displaced persons” of the area who were given the choices of living in San Antonio or the Rio Grande. In 1779 the settlement of Bucareli was abandoned, and Ybarvo rebuilt the town of Nacogdoches. He died in 1809 and his descendants are still living in the area in the 1990s. Bexar Archives, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. Carolyn Reeves Ericson, *People of Nacogdoches in the Civil War* (Lufkin, Texas: Piney Woods Printing, 1980).
led to the Texas Revolution in 1836. The Texas Revolution ended Mexican rule, and Spanish Texas became the Republic of Texas. Free black Mexicans were not welcomed in the Republic of Texas. As a result of this, limitations were quickly put in place on free blacks and runaway enslaved Africans in Texas. For example, shortly after the Texas Revolution, white slave owners influenced the provisional government to adopt an ordinance making it unlawful “for any free negro or mulatto to come within the limits of Texas.”267 For this reason, many slave owners were afraid that free people of color would entice enslaved Africans to run away or rebel. Coincidentally, the laws in the urban areas were not enforced as strictly as in the rural areas of Texas. Hence, free black Mexicans and runaway Africans from Southern states in the United States had a greater chance to remain as free persons of color in Texas. Consequently, a small population of runaway Africans and free black Mexicans grew in number in the urban cities such as San Antonio, Austin, and Houston, Texas. Baer contends that there were “over a thousand residing in Houston and Galveston by 1860 with several hundred in Austin, San Antonio, and other large towns.”268

In urban areas, most whites felt as long as free black Mexicans or runaway Africans caused no trouble, they should be allowed to carve out an independent life for themselves. Freed and runaway blacks managed to maintain their free status by becoming assets to their community. For women, this meant rendering services such as

seamstresses, washerwomen, house servants, and wisely investing their money inboardinghouses or real estate in these urban areas.269 This is significant because withinthe urban areas of Houston, free black women managed to carve out some aspect ofcontrol over their lives in the midst of a growing enslaved population, and lived similarlives to some white slaveholders and non-slaveholders. In antebellum Houston, accordingto John Garrison Marks, the historical evidence as a whole shows that “by maintainingcontacts with the wider community, free blacks in Houston established positive reputations and became known locally as individuals rather than abstractly as free people of color.” 270 In fact, Marks argues that “free blacks in early Houston certainly did notmaintain desperate lives on the margins of society, subject to the capricious whims ofwhite patrons, nor could they ever afford to do so.” 271 While there was a growing freeblack populace, there was also a growing enslaved population developing, with themigration of British colonizers in the 19th century.

Pre-Civil War, from 1836 to 1860, the number of enslaved Africans increasedfrom 5,000 in 1836 to 11,323 in 1840, to 58,161 in 1850, to 182,566 enslaved Africansowned by 7,747 slaveholders in 1860. 272 Unlike the vast number of enslaved Africans inrural Texas that worked in the fields, most enslaved Africans in urban cities worked asdomestic servants, cloth makers, blacksmiths, artisans, carpenters, and the like. For

269 Winnegarten, Ruthe, Black Texas Women: 150 years of Trial and Triumph. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995, p. 2
enslaved African women, this meant cooking, laundry, sewing, weaving, and other domestic duties. The migration of these free blacks to the urban cities is what I would like to call the “first Great Migration in Texas.” The first Great Migration in Texas was the movement of thousands of free black Mexicans; runaway enslaved Africans, and freed Africans out of the rural areas of Texas to the urbans of Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin. Driven from their homes by the laws and large influx of enslaved Africans that came with British colonizers, many free black Mexicans and African Americans headed to urban areas, where they took advantage of the need for domestic services and skilled labor. During the Great Migration in Texas, freed people of color in Texas began to build a new black urban culture that allowed them to confront economic, political, and social challenges, and build a new place for themselves in public life that would impact the development of urban communities in Houston for decades to come.

In the text, *Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph*, Ruthe Winnegarten states that, “quilts made by slave women fused African ethnic traditions with American ones. The string quilt with its strip pattern linked to West African textile designs had the most cultural significance.” She suggests that the women who possessed traditional domestic skills such as seamstress, washerwomen, weavers, and cooks cultivated the quilting bee tradition among women. Winnegarten and historian Jacqueline Jones write that the threads of cotton and wool, “bound slave women together in both bondage and sisterhood. The textile crafts were a central feature of many female

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273 Winnegarten, Ruthe. *Black Texas women: 150 years of trial and triumph*. University of Texas Press, 2010., p. 21
slaves’ daily routine.”274 In Texas, there were rigid textile quotas that enslaved African women had to meet on the plantation daily that required they work day and night. Weaving, dying, sewing, and quilting fabrics required women of all ages to work together to produce textiles for the planation, and for themselves. In urban city ports and river ports, “black artisans, both enslaved and free took advantage of the hired out system, and cash wages.”275 To varying degrees, enslaved women were allowed to accumulate property and engage in commodity production.276 This afforded enslaved Africans that arrived with British colonizers, freed African Americans and free Black Mexicans textile producers the spaces and time to interact with each other, and share textile techniques and skills. This was often done at quilting parties on and off the plantation.

On the plantation, enslaved Black Texans, made the occasion memorable by playing music, dancing, feasting. The bees allowed for enslaved Africans to renew and establish relationships with other enslaved Africans, on and off the plantation. In their effort to sustain family and communal ties, quilting bees brought young and old women and men together, in an effort to sustain family and communal ties and preserve a vital group culture. As John Vlach notes, “No doubt, the quilts produced were also memorable, and in form they probably embodied patterns determined not just by one

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274 Jones, Jacqueline. Labor of love, labor of sorrow: Black women, work, and the family, from slavery to the present. Basic Books, 2009 p. 29
275 Ibid. p. 38
276 Ibid, p. 38
quilter or one plantation… and hence quilts may have been a central means of ethnic self-preservation even in the midst of slavery.”

Archaeologist Kenneth Brown excavated the historical Levi Jordan plantation in Brazoria, Texas, and found substantial evidence of the slave life from 1848-1892. Brown reports that there were activities that related to the internal activity of the plantation that included the quilter and the seamstresses, and the external economies that also included seamstresses. The internal activities he states, “helped to build and maintain the plantation as a community, and helped the group and its individual members to survive in personal, physical, and sometimes even spiritual ways.” He found that community wide function of the cabins on the plantation showed evidence of the manipulation of a variety of African and European-America symbols. In these cabins, Kenneth Brown and Doreen Cooper state that, “the symbolic meanings of the items would be clear within the context of the black community and generally learned orally, rather than being expressed openly on the objects.” In other words, the symbolic meanings of the objects that were in the homes and around the plantation of enslaved Africans were shared orally, and could only be explained by those who knew their meanings. This means that cultural meanings were communicated through objects that were “hidden in plain view.”

279 http://www.publicarchaeology.org/webarchaeology/html/cabins.htm
280 Brown, Kenneth, and Doreen Cooper Structural Continuity in an African American Slave and Tenant Community, Historical Archaeology 1990 24:7-19
This is not to suggest that enslaved and free blacks in Texas didn’t have unique challenges to face. Indeed, enslaved African Americans in Texas faced many hardships, dehumanization, and racial oppression. Their constant struggle for a better life required that both free and enslaved African Americans occupied two distinctive and complex worlds—one controlled by whites that they needed to negotiate and survive daily, and the one they fashioned for themselves. As such, their common experience allowed enslaved and free African Americans to share skills, talents, and religious beliefs, which they combined with creative imagination to develop distinctive African American art forms such as quilts, musical instruments, dances, folk tales, and spirituals. Consequently, within each area of labor, one could conclude that varying social and cultural relationships among free and enslaved African Americans took place within Texas urban areas that laid the foundation for the development of a distinctive African American culture in general, and an African American quilting tradition, in particular. By the end of slavery in Texas, on June 19, 1865, the African American quilting tradition was a confluence of black Atlantic folkways and textile traditions that formed as a result of the transatlantic slave trade by Spain and England, and further developed by free and enslaved networks (mostly women) before and after slavery in Houston, Texas.

4.2. Art, Charity, Activism: Women’s Networks and African American Quilting in Houston

Enslaved Africans in Texas were emancipated on June 19, 1865, two years later than other African Americans in the United States. During the early stages of Reconstruction, many single mothers, widows, and unmarried women were domestic workers who left rural areas in search of greater opportunities in the urban cities. This is
what I call the “Second Great Migration in Texas.” The second Great Migration in Texas involves thousands of enslaved African Africans that migrated to urban areas after Emancipation of Slavery in the United States. Of the large numbers that arrived in urban cities in Texas, the 1870 census for Texas listed 10,603 paid domestic workers, and 1,107 were listed as laundresses, most of whom were black.\(^{281}\) This is due in part to the large migration of single white men to Texas after the Civil War who needed domestic and laundry workers. Consequently, hundreds of all black communities known as “freedman’s towns” sprung up in Houston County, Fort Bend County and surrounding areas. Freedmen’s settlements were independent communities of African American landowners and land squatters that formed in the years after Emancipation. Freed African Americans strong desires for land, autonomy, and isolation from whites motivated formation of these independent black communities, and landownership rose from 1.8 percent in 1870 to 26\% in 1890 to an all-time high of 31\% percent soon after 1900.\(^{282}\) This is significant because it shows that in Houston African Americans were allowed to develop all black communities, which in turn, suggests that within these communities the African American quilting tradition was maintained and passed down from generation to generation.

These close-knit Houston communities functioned as a safe haven against bigotry, and made it possible to resist and placate racism. Women put tremendous effort in the life


of these communities by organizing churches, schools, private and public events that took on political endeavors as well. Women’s property ownership played an important role in developing a black middle class in Texas. According to Winnegarten, “female property owners became part of a small but elite stratum in black society, and emerging middle class which included artisans, shopkeepers, teachers and school principals, government officials, ministers, and their families.” Within the middle class, freed Black women developed networks that allowed them to educate themselves for greater opportunities, utilize their resources, funds, and skills to build new community institutions to support their spiritual and social lives. By the beginning of the twentieth century, “women dutifully entered into community life through church, club, and neighborhood activities.” As a result, women helped establish Houston as a center for hope, cultural development, and racial autonomy for people of African descent in Texas.

In *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston 1900-1941*, Bernadette Pruitt states “Houston’s population grew from nearly forty-five thousand in 1900 to almost six hundred thousand in 1950, while the African American community rose from fifteen thousand to one hundred and twenty-five thousand. Only Los Angeles experienced greater per capita growth in the twentieth century.” From 1910-1970, African Americans migrated to Houston, instead of the North or other regions because most liked the idea of living in the South. In fact, many

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African Americans who migrated from rural and small towns in Texas and throughout the South felt Houston represented what was good about Southern life—cuisine, community, arts, dialect, historical continuity, and racial autonomy.

Within the city, most of the African American women worked as skilled artisans, domestics, laundress, and cooks in hotels, stores, and the private homes of white families in Houston. Black women’s wage earnings in the service trades “helped to create permanent communities of agency, activism and idealism.” Black Texas women insisted on taking responsibility for social change, and their club movement represented the best educated, and the most prominent and capable women of color. For black women, the need for change was urgent and the commitment to organize even more compelling in the face of racism and critical needs of the black community. Black Texas women organized on the local, state, and national levels. By 1908, Black Texas women organized so many clubs that they established the Texas Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. This organization united the Women’s Home Progressive Circle, American Sewing Circle, Christian Home Talent Club, White Swan Social Club, Ladies Reading Circle, and the Art Club. These women’s clubs offered moral uplift, encouraged charity and mutual assistance, fostered education and the arts, and provided spaces for women to freely enjoy and share social and cultural life. More than white women, the need for black women to collaborate was urgent and their commitment to the neediest in their communities was more compelling in the face of pervasive racism. In

286 Ibid., p. 9
287 McArthur, Judith. Creating The New Woman. The Rice of Southern Women’s Progressive Culture p. 88
fact, by 1910, black women had “developed as many voluntary associations nationally as their white counterparts, if not more.”

Club leaders came from both the middle and upper classes, and club women undertook a vast array of voluntary projects, and began networking with national organizations to improve the home, moral, and social life in black communities in Texas. Black Houstonians benefited greatly from community building commitments, self-help tactics, and internal relations of its women residents, as well as the women’s clubs, churches, and fraternal/social organizations that came to the aid of blacks in need. In these women’s networks, Black women focused on agency, institution building, and aesthetic expression to improve black communal life in Houston. Furthermore, these women networks allowed black women to reflect on both a public pride of heritage, sisterhood, and deep spiritual belief systems through art, social activism, and charity. These pioneering women used various creative mediums to interpret various aspects of black life and illuminate its links to black religion, as well as counteract the dearth of black images in popular culture. According to Pruitt, blacks “relied on coded expressions of protest, such as the use of literature, political satire, music, dance, visual arts, as well as sports, in their efforts to break free from White supremacy and embrace Blackness.”

For the working class and elite, the Black arts in Houston served as a conduit of racial autonomy and consciousness, community building, and celebrate African American culture. In this light, creative endeavors among African

\[\text{288} \text{ Winnegarten, Ruthe.} \text{ Black Texas women: 150 years of trial and triumph. University of Texas Press, 2010.}, \text{ p. 189.} \]
\[\text{289} \text{ Pruitt, Bernadette.} \text{ The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941. Vol. 21. Texas A&M University Press, 2013.}, \text{ p. 187} \]
American women in the first five decades of the 20th century in Houston served as an impetus for promoting blackness, agency, and the artistic world they helped shape in the city. This history helps lay the foundation for the development of the African American quilting tradition in Houston from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, which reveals the moving away from black earlier racial identification as enslaved Africans toward, another one, a movement that culminates in Americans embracing social justice and equality for African Americans in Texas, and in the United States.

During the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Black arts Movement in the South was divided into three strands: the cultural power of the elite and historically black colleges and residential communities. In the text, Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, James Smethurst notes that “in some cities such as Houston, Memphis, New Orleans, and Miami the movement was rooted largely in residential communities.”290 Smethurst recognizes that historically black colleges such as Texas Southern University played a role in the Black Arts Movement in Houston, but the community oriented Black Arts circuit was far more important. Literature concerning the role of African American quilting in Houston during this time, to the best of my knowledge is not sufficient, because little is known about the community based movement among African American quilters. Yet, there were two community-based women’s organizations in Houston. In these organizations women came to sew and quilt. The oldest women’s club of the two is the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity club

that was founded in 1902. This club worked with a needy black underclass and their focus was gender inequality, poverty, educational activities, racial uplift, and in this organization art, charity, Christian principles, and activism are interwoven to create change in black communities. The women who joined this club “met twice a month in the homes of members, they shared ideas about every facet of the community (and beyond) and became involved—they shared sewing experiences and made garments for needy children.”

African American Christian women have attended the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity club for over 100 years, and the organization still exists today as the Married Ladies Social Art and Charity Club of America, Inc.

The second women’s club in Houston is located at the Blue Triangle, formerly the first Branch of the YWCA in Houston, was founded in 1918. From 1918 to the end of the Civil Rights era, the Blue Triangle provides a central meeting place for women and girls to learn textile production, art, and other domestic skills in Houston. Today, the Blue Triangle, is owned and operated by some of the black women who attended the facility as children in the 1930s, and it is now known as the Blue Triangle Community Center.

Within the facility, is a mural painted by the late Dr. John T. Biggers. The mural titled “The Negro Woman in American Life and Education” is a visual message said to be both “spiritual and provocative bringing the past, embracing the present, and providing hope

It is also the home of the Blue Triangle Quilt Guild (the same facility noted above). The Blue Triangle Quilt Guild is one of first African American quilt guilds in Houston. The Blue Triangle Quilt Guild mission is interesting because it links contemporary African American quilting to Christian African American quilters, and the goal of these quilters to preserve the art form: “to promote fellowship among Christian quilters; to preserve our African American quilting heritage and traditions; to foster an appreciation for fine design, creativity, and self-expression, and keep alive the art by teaching youth and exhibiting our quilts as a timeless art.”

The founder of the Blue Triangle Quilt Guild stated she came up with the idea to start the guild when,

I was at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, and Reverend Lawson was preaching about how God gives everyone gifts, and that we should use our gifts. I thought about the gift God gave me to quilt, and how I could use my gift to help others. So, I started making baptismal quilts for the church. Each child that baptized at the church receives a quilt. It grew from there. Now we make quilts to raise money, Texas Children’s Hospital, Veterans, the elderly, and others in need.

Each month quilters from the Blue Triangle Quilt Guild meet to quilt at the Blue Triangle Community Center to make quilts. Currently, the Blue Triangle Quilt Guild has over 30 members that come from all over the city of Houston, and surrounding rural areas such as Beaumont, Texas. Regarding the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity organization, if one were to visit this organization, one can still find women quilting, teaching others to quilt, as well as meet and network with other quilters in the Houston area.

http://www.the-blue-triangle.org/
http://www.bluetrianglequiltguild.com/purpose.html
Interview with author, October 21, 2010 at the Hearts, Hands, & Heritage: The Patchwork Soul of Women quilt exhibition that I curated at Rice University.
Overall, the historical development of the African American quilting tradition in Houston reveals that: (1) For over one hundred years before the British established colonies in the Northeast, there was a vibrant West African textile tradition in Spanish colonies, and these traditions were shared with Native Americans and Europeans in Spanish colonies in North America. (2) Free Black Mexicans and enslaved African Americans drew on the knowledge of West African textile traditions and European-American traditions to produce a distinctive African American quilting tradition during, after slavery in Texas, (3) women’s networks and organizations established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided a creative space for quilters to maintain the quilting tradition in Houston, (4) the struggle for artistic agency and the re-conceptualization of black identity during the Black Arts Movement in Houston was rooted in residential communities, and (5) the range of production, service, and quilting activities of contemporary African American quilters points to a relationship with black Christian women. Throughout the twentieth century, the Blue Triangle Quilt Guild and the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity organizations created and sustained a viable forum for women to preserve the African American quilting tradition both individually and collectively in Houston. These two organizations suggest that within women’s networks in black communities in Houston, there is a long-standing African American quilting tradition. The fact that these two organizations are still active speaks to the intentionality of African American women to preserve the craft in the new millennium. As such, what follows is the ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the Jubilee Quilt Circle. Members of the Jubilee Quilt Circle began quilting between the 1960s and 1990s, and they currently reside in Houston, Texas. The research was conducted to investigate
the quilter’s creative capacity to make quilts that contain visual testimonies that express the link between the quest for complex subjectivity and everyday life. In this section, the actual names of the quilters have been changed, and I have given them factious names in this dissertation.

4.3. Collecting the Materials: Ethnographic Research of the Jubilee Quilt Circle

From October to December of 2013, I made random visits to the Jubilee Quilt Circle (Quilt Circle), to observe, meet, and interact with the quilters at the Quilt Circle. Through preliminary discussions with Bernice Benson, founder of the Jubilee Quilt Circle, I learned three things about the Quilt Circle: (1) the founder of the Quilt Circle was once a member of the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity Club, (2) some of the members of the Quilt Circle were also members of the Blue Triangle Quilt Guild, and (3) why the Jubilee Quilt Circle was called a Circle and not a quilting bee/guild. Bernice Benson informed me that,

The Circle connotes a gathering, a focus, all looking in the same inward direction, graphically, and so you enter the circle at whatever point is comfortable to you, and you can move upward, around, through the circle and it becomes a sphere in a way that makes sense and is comfortable to you. It is a very organic process. You can be a novice, be very experienced and you can seek your own level, if you just want social time, advice, hone your skills, engage in social conversation, you can find all that and more in the circle.297

It is should be noted that before I began the ethnographic research I had the following assumptions: (1) only African American women attend the Jubilee Quilt Circle, (2) most of the quilters learned how to quilt from family members, (3) most of the quilters were

297 Interview with the author, November 6, 2014.
Christian, (4) the quilt images, symbols, and signs are intentionally arranged to give a visual testimony that can be interpreted, and (5) the quilts contained retentions of West African textile traditions. I based these assumptions on the information I received while curating quilting exhibitions at Rice, research, and the time I spent doing pre-fieldwork in Houston for over a year.

At the time I began my fieldwork, there were eight to ten quilters who attended the Quilt Circle every Thursday. Not all the members were women or African American. However, most of the quilters are college-educated, over 65, and are considered middle class (median household income $53,000–75,000) to upper middle-class (median income $116,000 to 177,000).298 These demographics are typical of most quilters in America. According to the 2014 Quilting in America survey conducted by Quilts, Inc., dedicated quilters are female, 64 years old, well-educated (79% attended college), affluent ($101,080 household income), and have been quilting for an average of 20.3 years.299 A dedicated quilter, Karey Bresenhan, president of Quilts, Inc. and Emeritus of the Quilts show states, “we know dedicated quilters don’t regard quilting as an optional hobby, but as part of their lives. They, like quilters throughout history, quilt during good times and bad. Their quilting is both a means of expressing themselves creatively, and also of expressing what is going on in their lives and how they are dealing with it.”300 The main question driving the ethnographic research was: Does the contemporary African

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298 Interviews with author in general conversation. I defined these classes based on facts from the Pew Research Center http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/02/04/americas-middle-holds-its-ground-after-the-great-recession/
American quilt, quilter, and quilt-making process articulate the connection between black religion and everyday life?

I conducted ethnographic research from January to October 2014 at the Jubilee Quilt Circle. African American quilters would gather from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. to quilt on Thursdays. When you walk into the Jubilee Quilt Circle room in the Artists Collective location, you will see an ancestor picture wall altar—a white wall with pictures of Bernice Benson’s family members and others. Then you will walk into the art gallery, with an exhibition of African American art. Then the next room would be the Jubilee Quilt Circle room. There are large white rectangular tables placed side by side, to create a larger table. The table put me in mind of sitting around a block square. Food was often prepared, and consisted of home cooked and store bought food such as salads, pastries, crackers, cheeses, juices, dips, and sandwiches. There you would see their quilting tools and fabrics (See figure 4.1 and 4.2), women sewing fabrics, (figure 4.3) and other things they needed to quilt such as iron and iron board, tape, stencils, designs, and the like. The group structure at the Quilt Circle consisted of a very informal organizational structure. By informal organizational structure, I mean there are no job titles, the interactions are based on camaraderie. And there is no organization chart or elections of officials or Board of Directors, and no financial obligations such as membership fees or dues is required.
As such, people were allowed to come and go at their leisure with no apparent consequences. For instance, on September 25, 2014, a member of the Quilt Circle I

Photograph of Scraps of Materials, May 15, 2014
Photograph of Scraps of Materials, May 15, 2014
Photograph of Sewing the quilt, August 7, 2014
Photograph of Iron and Ironing Board, August 14, 2014
hadn’t seen before came by. Her name was Pam, and she visited to show us the Veterans quilt she made (figure 4.5a and 4.5b). She stated, “I made this quilt to honor unsung women Veterans in the Army.”  

She was a Veteran herself, and she identified herself as a story quilter. My quilts she stated, “Tell stories about historical events, women, family history, and her religious faith.”

As a participant observer, I attempted to learn how to quilt. For the first two weeks I was at the Quilt Circle, I was able to walk around and observe and ask questions about their individual quilting projects. The third week I attended, one of the ladies stated, “If you are going to be here, you got to work. Come here and iron these pieces of cloth for me.”

For about a month, my job was to iron pieces of material, sweep and clean the work area,

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305 Interview with author, September 25, 2014
306 Interview with author, September 25, 2014
307 Photograph of Veterans Quilt made by Pam, September 25, 2014
308 Photograph of Veterans Quilt made by Pam, September 25, 2014
help them carry things out to the car, as well as they would ask me questions about being in school and about my life. In the fifth week, one of the quilters, stated, “You need to be thinking about what type of fabric you want to use to make your quilt.” I was informed by Bernice Benson to think about what type of quilt I wanted to make. I didn’t know what kind of quilt I wanted to make. So, I asked: how do you decide what type of quilt you want to make? There were various answers such as: they decide based on a pattern, design, picture, creative idea, drawing, television, book they read, family or patron request, feeling, old quilt, or as one quilter stated “just start collecting fabric you like, it will come to you.” So, I started to look at fabrics that I would see at the store, at the Quilt Circle, and at my friend’s houses. I still didn’t know what type of quilt I wanted to make, so I selected some fabric that I got from the quilters at the Blue Triangle Quilt Guild, and I brought them with me to the Quilt Circle.

Once I had my fabric, I was able to select my workspace within the group. There was no assigned seating, so I just came in and took a spot. Each quilter would answer my questions and show me proper techniques for measuring and cutting the fabrics. Once at the table, I found that quilters talk and quilt. I observed and participated in conversations that moved from the personal to the political, the local to the historical, and the cultural to the religious. These conversations gave us opportunities to express ties to Africa, familial memories and ancestors, special friends and loved religious and sacred connections, social and political concerns, cultural events and African American history. In the midst of all this activity, the quilters stitch, cut, and organize scraps of materials together to create quilts that were both functional and beautiful. I must admit that while I was learning how to quilt, all the activity going on was distracting. I found it difficult to quilt
in the social environment. Every Thursday, I couldn’t understand how they managed to quilt while all this was happening, and how they could produce anything with so much social activity. While we worked on our quilting projects, there was music playing, food being served, the noise of sewing machines, several conversations going on at once, people asking questions and showing us things, and various people coming and going throughout the day. When I asked the quilters how they manage to quilt with all the social activity, the consensus was that quilting this way stems from the slave quilting tradition that still continues today.

I never got past cutting the materials at the Jubilee Quilt Circle. I just didn’t have the patience to sit there and cut and sew the scraps of material. In addition, I just couldn’t think of a quilt I wanted or moved to make. Although I know how to sew by hand, and I wanted to make a quilt, I couldn’t stay focused on doing the work with so many people and activities going on. There is a science to making a geometric pattern of scraps of fabric, which in turn produces something tangible, useful, meaningful, and beautiful. I realized that to quilt takes skill and talent that I did not have. It was more than collecting fabric and cutting the material and sewing. You have to know how to piece together the scraps to make something beautiful. This experience made me gain a deeper understanding of the ingenuity, skill, talent, and vision of quilt making. Also, from my experience, there has to be ‘something’ in you to want to make a quilt. Whatever it was, I didn’t have it while doing fieldwork. Yet, it should also be noted that they still found a place for me. I wasn’t in isolation. They found some utility for my services. I was allowed to keep cutting scraps, ironing the materials, and helping them with little things.
they needed to work on their quilts. This allowed me to work closely with the quilters, and develop closer relationships.

Making Quilts: Visual Creativity and Memory

The basic elements of the quilt include the top, the interlining, the backing, and the edges.

I learned that the basic quilting process consists of the following (1) Find fabric to sew together, (2) find or create a pattern or design to make such as nine patch, applique, flower quilt, Grandmother’s Garden etc. (3) take measurements of the fabric to determine the size you desire them, and the number of many pieces you will need to make the quilt, (4) cut the binding fabric into scraps with a rotary cutter or fabric scissors, (5) sew the scraps of cloth together, (6) When you have sewn together the scraps of materials for a block, iron it. (7) start to piece the quilt (sew the strips) into the desired pattern and/or design, (8) start binding all the strips of cloth together either by hand or sewing machine, and (9) sew all the edges and corners of the quilt to create a complete border.

Throughout these basic steps the quilter can always embellish the quilt, improvise the design, colors, pattern, and materials, as well as add a label to the quilt. This is a basic rendition of making any quilt. What distinguishes an American quilt from an African American quilt is the aesthetics For instance, the American quilting tradition, practiced by both whites and blacks, places attention on precise measurement and exact pattern replication. For example, I have included a picture of a quilt that would be considered an American quilt, (see figure 4.6). The quilters informed me that this is an American quilt.  

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traditional Flower Applique Quilt design. I wanted to obtain clarity regarding how you can visually tell the difference between a European-American quilt and an African American quilt. So, I wanted to compare the American quilt to an American design that was done using an African American aesthetic. (see figure 4.7)

Figure 4.6 – American Flower Applique

Figure 4.7 – Afr. Am Flower Applique

The U.S. Flower quilt design has appeared since the 19th century, many of these flower designs were one of kind, and they gained popularity because the basic idea could be reproduced without a pattern. The African American flower quilt is also an original design that is fanciful and complex. Each quilt is beautiful. Although the flowal design is

310. An example of a contemporary American quilt pattern scroll down till you get a Very Special Red and Green Pot of Flowers Quilt Pattern. Learn more go http://www.americanquiltstudycroup.org/sem12events.asp

311. This is an example of an African American quilt pattern done by African American quilter Barbara Ann McCraw searching the internet. Learn more go to: http://www.quiltsart.com/gallery.asp The original design showing a larger than life Bluebonnet, the Texas State Flower. Her signature is a Black Butterfly.
similar to the tradional U.S. Flower design, there are distinctive aesthetic choices that show the variation in the flower applique’ design of the American design.

The classified African American quilt shares a keen likeness to the seven traits of the West African tradition which are: (1) vertical strip organization, (2) bold colors, (3) large design elements, (4) asymmetry, (5) multiple patterning, (6) improvisation, and (7) symbolic form. These elements were determined by 1970s scholars attempting to codify the art form, in order to distinguish them from European-American patchwork quilts. There were quilts that I observed at the Jubilee Quilt Circle that also share this African American aesthetic (4.8, 4.9, 4.10 and 4.11). It should be noted that many scholars have embraced this criteria for defining African American quilts, but since the late 1990s, other scholars such as quilt historians such as Cuesta Benberry and Carolyn Mazloomi suggest that this criteria is narrowly stereotypical, and they posit that there is a wide spectrum of quilts, techniques, and styles in African American communities. For example, there are quilts made in 3D, computer imagining, and art quilts-quilts that are made to be displayed on walls, and have no utilitarian purpose.

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Hicks, Kyra, 1.6 Million African American Quilters: Survey, Sites, and a Half-Dozen Art Quilt Blocks, New York: Black Threads Press, 2010.

Figure 4.8 – Afr. Am. Aesthic314

Figure 4.9 – Afr. Am. Aesthic315

Figure 4.10 – Afr. American Aesthetic316

Figure 4.11 – Afr. American Aesthetic317

314 A photograph of an African American aesthetic done by a member of the Jubilee Quilt Circle, August 15, 2014.
315 Ibid, August 15, 2014
The designs of the quilts were original, even though they were inspired by catalogues, magazines, and pieces of existing patterns. I viewed the style and body of the quilts as a part of a creative response to the challenges of preserving African American aesthetics in the United States. As a response system, the contemporary quilts made with variables of West African textile tradition supports Charles Long’s concept of “Africa as historical reality and religious image.” In the text, *Significations*, Long posits a systematic study of black religion—“a kind of initial ordering of the religious significance and expressions of the black communities in America”  

318 He suggests that African Americans have retained and maintained an African style that points to the “complexity of experience revolving around the relationship between their physical being and their origins.”  

319 Through this lens, one could interpret the African style quilts as the parallel and counterweight to European-American quilts. For Long, the African style promotes social cohesion within black communities. As such, the quilt emerges as an image that as Long notes “is always invested with historical and religious possibilities.”  

320 The quilts speak to a certain style of being that says something about the desire to see the world differently. A loyalty and allegiance to keep recreating concepts of African style and meaning that communicates the “real” art African American quilter’s champion. The quilt images, symbols, and signs are depicted to create and privilege their

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316 Ibid, October 3, 2014
317 Interview with Author, August 16, 2014
320 Ibid. 176.
own cultural references and visual aspects of historical and aesthetic possibilities that speaks to beauty and value in the mundane. When I asked why do they make African style quilts?

Quilter A replied, “I love being black. Making African American quilts is a part of my heritage.”

Quilter B replied: “It’s a part of our culture and it’s beautiful.”

Quilter C replied: “These are the type of quilts that my ancestors made. I don’t want to forget that.”

This means that African style quilts make a claim about creativity and cultural memory. The quilters’ use of creativity and history to make the quilts, allows us to understand the aesthetic quality as an important visual testimony of the concern for things that push the boundaries of what is considered an American quilt aesthetic. The struggle for visibility of what is considered beautiful to African American quilters is encoded in the cultural production of quilts.

Narrative Realities: Quilt Conversations

Within the four-hour time span at the Circle, a quilter would always display a quilt at the end of the day. Each week some quilter had completed a quilting project while attending the Quilt Circle, or they brought a quilt in to display that they had been working on. This was a ritual practice and interestingly, every week someone had something to display (figure 4.12a and 4.12b).

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321 Interview with author, February 20, 2015
322 Interview with author, February 20, 2015.
323 Interview with author, February 20, 2015.
The quilter would present their quilt and inform the group of the creative choices made and why the quilt was created. Those in attendance would provide feedback and share insight they gained from the quilt. Here I applied Gadamer’s hermeneutics of play, symbol, and festive, to the display of quilts at the Quilt Circle to engage the quilters in dialogue. Some of the questions being asked were: What do you see? How does the quilt make you feel? What do you think the quilt is trying to say? In displaying the quilt, we are to interact with it, and devote our time trying to figure out what it says, how it makes us feel, and what we think of when we see the quilt. The concept of display, distinguishes the quilt from other quilts and activities, and centers our attention to acknowledge the existence of both the object and quilter. The application of Gadamer’s concept of play allows me to interpret the display of the quilt as a way to force me to stop what I was doing and pay attention to it, and in turn, I made allowance for the quilt and quilter’s presence. Thus, during the display time, the other quilter’s and I had to take time to see

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324 A photograph of a picture of a quilt done by Hattie Johnson, January 11, 2014.
325 A photograph of a picture of a quilt done by Hattie Johnson, January 11, 2014.
what the quilt had to say and show us. This means that the quilt when displayed requires our attention and inquiry, and we are to engage the quilt to discuss what the quilt signifies to us when viewed. We are to interact with it, and devote our time trying to figure out what it says, how it makes us feel, and what we think of when we see the quilt. To play with the quilt in this way, suggests that the quilter wants to know not just what it says, but discuss the ways the quilt makes a certain intentional statement, and expresses particular ideals of the quilter. When the quilters and I stopped to pay attention to the golf quilt, the quilt-maker wanted to know does the content and form of the quilt truly speak to his love of golf. In other words, she wanted to know does “the quilt say he is a golfer.” To answer the question, the audience had to produce a response to the quilts statement and claim. In order to do so, we made associations between the elements in the work that were familiar and unfamiliar to us. For instance, when some of us looked at the quilt, we didn’t realize the symbols in the circles were from golf t-shirts. However, we were familiar with the symbols along the border of the quilt, because they represented images of golf that we knew. This quilt practice reveals that the quilters provide a forum for their stories, and for sharing the artistry captured in each quilt. This is done to ensure that the quilt serves as a transmitter of idea, visions, creativity, and/or cultural imagery that elicit an emotional response from the viewer.

In Gadamer’s concept of play, symbol and festival, the source of the truth of the quilt is the ontological dimension of the artwork, because it delivers a representation of “something” to us that broadens our understanding of our own subjectivity, and our world. In other words, the quilts displayed a myriad of things to us to view and engage that help us expand our perception of ourselves and the world in which we live. The
ritual of displaying quilts revealed that group conversations of quilt making is significant because they critique the quilt, and the quilters who make them. As private viewers of the quilt, we serve as critics and our purpose is to describe and instruct the quilter, and offer an evaluation of quality. The art is criticized by other quilters in the craft, and the story of a quilt has a beginning, middle, and end, thus, composition is intelligible, useful, and authoritative which extends narrative analysis into complex networks of accounts.

The production of the quilt and reception of the quilt in society requires that displayed quilt is critiqued for its aesthetic meaning in one’s life, idea of reference, and the acceptance or rejection of the concept of aesthetic perception and experience. In addition, they solicit the reader of the quilt to become sensitive to the myriad layers of social context that condition the visual testimony in the quilt. Furthermore, observing the construction, display, and reception of quilts reveals how the quilts create and structure meaning. The conversations about the quilt and quilt-making process by the quilter focuses on the everyday narrative activity that unfolds in situated interactions. As such, the quilt provides a narrative account through the arrangement of colors, images that directs us to the importance of social discourse, and suggests that the visual design of the quilt requires us to pay attention to how the quilt was assembled and communicate accounts that both inform and shape meanings, aesthetics, and perceptions of society.

A challenge that I quickly encountered as a researcher was my ability to link the artful expression in the quilts to the religious. Yet, in, On Art and Architecture, Tillich suggests “every cultural creation has a religious dimension insofar as it contributes to the answer
of the question of the meaning of our existence and existence universally.” In other words, Tillich suggests that the religious dimension of art is not always linked to the images, symbols and signs, but rather to the ability of the art itself to answer existential questions about individual lives and the meaning of existence more generally. Tillich’s analysis of art and architecture suggests that “ultimately no irreligious art is possible.” For Tillich, this means that even art that lacks an explicit religious subject matter can still be considered religious. Thus, Tillich allows one to understand that the generality of art as religious has two spheres that assign value to an artwork: the aesthetic and the religious.

The aesthetic value of the artwork is the natural beauty in the artistic creation. The religious value is that it is a form of art, whether it contains secular or spiritual subject matter or not. To this end, if the quilts express a sense of the meaning of human existence and questions about the meaning of life, then they have the ability to pose fundamental questions and sentiments about human existence and experience that scholars of religious studies are required to answer and explore. Both Tillich and Pinn suggest that art can have an underlying reality that holds in tension material existence and non-material impulses in ways that extend our sense of self and how we understand our existential concerns about life. As such, I explore the various ways quilts contribute to the existential questions and nonmaterial impulses that constitute the study of African American religion.

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327. Tillich, out of art and architecture p. 190.
Keeping the Faith: Links to the Religious

In *The African American Religious Experience in America*, Anthony Pinn contends that “the religious landscape of African American communities is thick, complex, and diverse.” Most African Americans are exposed to a variety of influences and borrow or appropriate these beliefs and practices in their daily lives. Although most African Americans may locate themselves in a particular Christian tradition, their religious lives are comprised of more than Black churches and doctrines of the Christian faith. As such, more research is required to investigate and understand the complexity and diversity of religious experiences of African Americans in particular and African American religion more broadly. It is my view, African American quilts as source material illuminates the complexity and multi-dimensional ways in which African Americans exist in the world and come to make meaning out of life. As such, this examination provides us a reflexive way to think about the world in which we live, and the artifacts we engage with as more than just objects. Quilts provide historical, cultural, and theistic points of reference. These points of reference help us to become aware of our subjectivity as not only arbitrary choices, but also as intentional responses to socio-economic, political, ecological, and informational influences on our everyday life. Art so conceived sheds light on need for deciphering and deconstructing the meanings implicit within the quilts. As a participant observer at the Jubilee Quilt Circle, I found that creativity, memory (remembering), and storytelling play a role in the development of the visual narratives

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that quilters make. However, this only explains a part of the quilts’ religious significance as source material for the study of African American religion. I also concluded from talking to the quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle that there was “something” more going on with the quilt-making process. This prompted to delve into questions of religious meaning and significance. The connection between spirituality and quilt-making among contemporary quilters has been discussed by quilt-historians such as Carolyn Mazloomi and Robert Freeman, just to name a few. Both Mazloomi and Freeman provide a catalog of statements and artwork that are a testament to the spiritual connection some African American quilters make between their quilts and the quilt-making process itself. \[329\] In a conversation that I had at the Jubilee Quilt Circle on August 7, 2014 with a group of quilters who were attending the guild at that time, I asked the quilters do you think there is a connection between quilt making and spirituality (embraces the concept of an ultimate and/or alleged immaterial reality), and they reported:

Quilter A: Yes, sometimes when I quilt, I hear God.

Quilter B: Yes, God gives me the vision to make the quilts I make.

Quilter C: Yes, I think quilting is spiritual.

Quilter D: When I quilt, I can hear my ancestors and they help me.

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Quilter E: Well, all I know is when I have problems or worries, I quilt and something lets me know that everything is going to be alright.

Quilter F: I just like to quilt, I haven’t thought about it.  

Their subjective responses suggest that quilters have diverse experiences with quilt making that form a complex unity and that in their relations to each other they simultaneously and mutually affect each other. Together their responses provided a space that allowed for exploration of the diversity and complexity of the quilters’ individual and communal perspectives of the religious significance of quilt-making. In my desire to examine both the social and the individual dimensions of quilters, I commenced to ask them about their religious faith. Although they all identified themselves as Christian, they represented various denominations of Christianity such as non-denominational, Catholic, Pentecostal, Epistle, and Baptist. Realizing that religion and spirituality are often understood as synonymous terms, I decided to rephrase the question do you think there is a connection between quilt making and religion? Surprisingly, many of them were reluctant to talk of the art of quilting and its connections to religion. For most of them the word religion was synonymous with the Black church and Biblical Scripture, and they didn’t feel comfortable saying that quilt-making was religious. In fact, one week I came to the Quilt Circle, and I was informed that a couple of quilters requested that we curtail the conversation about quilting as religious. I was never informed which quilters

330 Interview with author on August 7, 2014.
wanted to change the topic of the religious significance of quilting. I was just told that “some quilters have stated they felt uncomfortable with the topic.”

Yet, each week, the quilters would share stories about mystical and other worldly experiences they had quilting, and how quilting helped them cope with the crisis and dread in their everyday lives. For example, each week a quilter would share they had a dream or vision about a quilt, an other-worldly experience that pushed them to keep quilting, how quilting helped them with overcome a problem or crisis, and/or how something about the quilt connected them to a past family member or memory that influenced their quilt-making process. These testimonies suggested to me that quilting constituted a concern for sharing stories about spirituality and nurturance while quilting, and that quilting constituted telling stories that help us gain deeper insight into both spirituality and the meaning of Christianity. This also highlighted the limitation of the social, and spurred my desire to examine the individual quilters in more intimate settings.

As such, I had to respect the quilters who didn’t want to discuss religion and quilt-making. So, I began to ask questions concerning the significance of the “scraps” of materials used for the quilts. I asked the members of the Quilt Circle if there is something significant about the touch, feel, smell, and look of the “scraps” of cloth for quilters.

Quilter A: For me it’s the touch of the fabric. It calms me. Quilter B: I can’t describe it; there is something about the way the fabric feels and looks that draws me in. Quilter C: The fabric speaks to me and I am drawn to it.

August 21, 2014 general conversation no interview
I took note of the language that the quilters employed to talk about her relationship to the mundane fabrics that composed the quilt. One quilter stated that the colors of fabric are important because, “the colors of the fabric tell you a lot about what the quilter is feeling when they are quilting.” She went on to say that, “I can look at a quilt, and depending on the colors and arrangement, I can tell if they were happy, sad, etc. based on the color choices. The color tells you things.” Indeed, I was aware of the significance of colors and moods within color psychology in art, design and therapy. Yet, there has been no real scientific research on the subject, and the topic is greatly debated. As such, the colors can be seen as expression of feelings that help them express how they counter painful experiences and celebrate joys within their daily life. The colors are an attempt to express what they cannot say in words about their struggle for more life meaning. Each color represents an inner meaning for the quilter that is expressed visually. Through the visual expression of the colors in the quilt they express themselves in new ways, and the through the quilt we can get a “diary” of their personal feeling through time and space.

My experience with the quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle led me to believe that in order to determine the religious significance of African American quilts I had to pay attention to the quilt, the quilter, and their quilt making process. It is important to note that all quilts are not religious. There is some art that is made just for art’s sake—it serves no political, didactic, or other end. Furthermore it is important for this project for me to accept that all quilters do not experience deep felt religious experiences that are

332 Interview with author, May 15, 2014.
333 O’Connor, Zena, Colour Psychology and Colour Therapy, Color Forum, Volume 36, Number 3, June 2011.
crystalized in the artistic activity. In fact, from my fieldwork, some quilters do not want to talk about it in public, or have even given thought to the religious significance of a quilt. Therefore, I needed to have an opportunity to talk to the quilters who feel comfortable talking about the spirituality of quilts in a more private space. I resolved the limitations of the social setting of the quilt-making process, by asking for one-on-one opportunities with individual quilters in the Quilt Circle, in order to learn more about the quilter’s quest for complex subjectivity in their everyday experiences.

Selection of Quilters for Theoretical Sampling

To select the cases studies for my research I employed Glaser and Strauss theory for “theoretical sampling”. Theoretical sampling is, according to Glaser and Strauss “the process of selecting incidents, slices of life, time periods, or people on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs.”\(^\text{334}\) As such, the selection of cases is the primary concern in order to minimize the differences between cases and to highlight basic properties of a particular category. In addition, this will allow me to facilitate the emergence of relations among categories. The aim of the sampling process is develop a rich understanding of the dimensions of a concept and theory that are grounded in and/or emergent from real life events and circumstances. From the eight quilters that I could interview based on the data collected at the Jubilee Quilt Circle, I only selected five of them. I didn’t select one of the quilters because she didn’t want to be interviewed. Another quilter’s husband got sick and she stopped coming to the Quilting

Circle. The third quilter I could not interview due to scheduling conflicts. However, based on the data collected about African American quilts, each of the five quilters made quilts that they identified as African American quilts. Furthermore, each quilter identified themselves as an African American quilter who began quilting between 1960s -1990s. They all resided in Houston, Texas at the time of the study. Finally, each quilter was divided into a different category of quilter for sampling.

In recording their stories, I abandoned the notion of judging the work by the precision of detail and what can be measured as truth and falsity. As such, the stories about their lives are more than just a recapitulation of the structure of everyday attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Through the quilter’s autobiographical stories we learn how the quilter recasts experiences in visual language that gives their art a suggestive rather than literal shape. Bearing this in mind, we can learn how to read and interpret the visual imagery of the quilt. Their stories support the epistemological aim of increasing knowledge and understanding of the human realm and it illuminate the quest for a fuller life through the quilt, quilter, and quilt-making process.

Quilter#1 Caroline Williams is a traditional quilter. A traditional quilter knows how to quilt by hand, but also can use a sewing machine. They tend to make quilts that hearken back to the past while focusing on excellence construction and design. She creates quilts that are a part of a long established tradition such as a nine patch quilt or story quilt. Caroline is originally from Guyana, South America. She came to America via London, England. First she lived in New Orleans, Louisiana and then moved to Houston, Texas. She came to Houston because she was displaced by Hurricane Katrina. There are many South American women like Caroline that live currently live in Houston.
Quilter#2 Mattie Smith is a scrap quilter. A scrap quilter is a quilter that makes do with the materials at hand. They use every scrap of material available. They collect the scraps from various sources and locations and their quilts are constructed from the leftover mundane scraps of fabric and materials.

Quilter #3 Hattie Johnson is a visual artist that quilts and paints. She quilts more than she paints, because her preferred medium is fabrics.

Quilter#4 Bernice Benson is a textile artist. She embellishes or decorates textiles and her construction method is sewing and quilting of fabric. She uses quilted designs and/or patterns in her textile production.

Quilter#5 Donna Jackson is an art quilter. An art quilter makes contemporary artwork that expresses aesthetic concerns that are common to the whole range of visual arts: painting, printmaking, photography, graphic design, assemblage and etc. This aesthetic art helps retain a relationship to the folk art from which it descends through materials or techniques. The applique is the predecessor to the art quilt.

I selected the quilters based on their openness to discuss their religious beliefs and experiences of spiritual phenomena such as dreams, visions, and connections to their ancestors and/or supernatural while quilting. I also selected them because each conferred that quilting is most satisfying to them because it reconciles tensions, calm and dissipates fears, mitigates sorrow, brings harmony, clarifies solutions and/or provides solutions. I wanted to know more about these experiences. I identified four themes to explore: memory/remembering, creativity, storytelling, and faith. These themes are relational and overlap in very complex ways. I utilize the themes to help me interpret how African American quilting helped quilters articulate their quest for a fuller life through quilts. The
individual interviews are presented in narrative form. From the stories of quilters, we learn about things they picked up, categorized, created in the moment-moment interaction with and reaction to particular people, places, and things at particular times that helps them make meaning out of life. What follows are the stories these five quilters tell about five themes: stories, memories, creativity, activism, and faith. It should be noted that I have created fictitious names for each quilter.

4.4 Caroline Williams Narrative: A Traditional Quilter’s Quest for Complex Subjectivity

The story depends on every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being.

T.M. Trinh

On August 15, 2014, I visited Caroline Williams’ home to interview her. Immediately when you walk into Caroline’s home you see her quilting room (4.13 and 4.14). On her dining room table, she has all types of cloth (4.15) And you see quilts on the wall that have African motifs (figure 4.16).

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335 Trinh, T.M., Woman, Native, Other Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 119
She began quilting in the 1980s while living in New Orleans. When I asked Caroline how did she start quilting? And she began to tell me a story. She replied,
One day, I was watching television about quilting and I found the quilts such a beautiful art. Then a lady who came by saw it and said my mother does that and I said oh, that is so beautiful, I will have to see her do it one day.” The lady and I developed a relationship. Then one day I received a call from her while I was at work she asked me to pick her up. I went to go get her, she got in the car and passed out in the car. She died in my car. So when I took her to the hospital, I called her mother and said this is what happened. The mother later said that I have heard so much about you, and I am making a quilt for you right now.

In this light, Caroline’s ritual of reference is the death of the women in the car. The experience was tragic and filled her with a sense of terror and dread. Ultimately it had a significant impact on her thoughts about the meaning of life. The car wreck sparked Caroline to seek answers in response to the terror of death and dying. Caroline recalls in her contemplation about the wreck that the lady’s mother never gave her the quilt. However, she stated that, “the husband (father) heard the story of his daughter commissioning the quilt, and he wanted to make sure I got a quilt from them.” Caroline informed me that he gave her a quilt. When she saw the quilt she realized that she also wanted to make quilts. The notion that Caroline had an increase desire to be creative highlights the impact crisis has on the creative process. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 1, the mode of expression that quilts offered to that creativity speaks to certain aspects of black religious studies, particularly in the ways scholars of black women have explored the creative impulses of people who compose gospels, hymns, and literary writings as well as the way those creative expressions influence larger religious beliefs and ideas. The creative impulse that Caroline speaks about provides many of the same offerings.

Caroline informed me that she started quilting as a hobby. In the beginning she made quilts primarily for her family. Then she stated that she began to make one quilt that she
“was really serious about. It was named *God Coming Home.*” She told me that making
the quilt “took on a life of its own.” She remembered that when she began quilting this
quilt, she walked into a store and saw this fabric that she really liked. According to
Caroline, “when I walked in the store I fell in love with the fabric. The fabric just
grabbed me.” She went on to describe the fabric to me. She informed me that “it had
rectangles and squares and the colors of fabric made the fabric pop.”340 She stated, “I put
it against the wall and this big cross appeared on the fabric, and I thought how am I going
to quilt this...just then a butterfly flew across.” 341 The butterfly gave her the idea to
complete the quilt by quilting butterflies in the four corners of the nine-patch quilt. This
butterfly pattern would create the cross—symbolic meaning implies one coming home to
God.

I took note of the language that Caroline used in her description of the quilt, such as the
names she gave her quilts. For Caroline, the idea of home represented a desired space for
return. For instance, in the case of the death of the lady, death no longer is viewed as
finality, but rather a return to a place that is described as home. That space of return was
articulated through religious language that Caroline appropriated and resituated onto the
quilt. Home and God possessed particular meaning for Caroline. So significant is the idea
of home and God that her quilt attempts to translate not only an idea but a feeling. When
I asked her did she think that the way she came to make this quilt was part of God’s plan,
she immediately said, “Yes.” Indeed, she stated that she made several quilts with

340 Interview with author, August 15, 2014
341 Interview with author, August 15, 2014
“coming home” as a part of the name or theme in the quilt. In my question, I attempted to see how she understood God as agent as well as, clarify how her belief in God’s agency played in her quilting process. When asked why she used the “coming home” theme or language in her quilts, she informed me that she wanted people to get the feeling “they were coming home to God.” In this light, Caroline’s language hints to the role the individual has in relationship to the God, death and rebirth. In other words, she expresses a religious sentiment of displacement and redemption and the need to situate both the individual and the social back in a place wherein God dwells.

This idea that Caroline expresses in her quilt has religious impact. It attempts to answer what is the responsibility of the individual to the social? What constitutes the social? How does the individual engage with the social? These questions, prompted me to explore how the quilt translated the answers to these questions to others. I went on to ask Caroline if she shared the meaning of her quilts with the people to whom she gives the quilts. She replied “No”. For Caroline, the name of the quilt alone becomes a coded message. In other words, Caroline’s quilt articulates Caroline’s desires and hopes for those who receive the quilts in non-verbal ways. This is significant because it suggests that quilts offer and transfer inner meaning that is not verbally communicated, but visually communicated. It also transfers an idea that quilts construct a visual testimony of the individual to the social. Thus as a visual testimony, the quilt recounts Caroline’s religious belief and hopes for herself and for others. Her theme of Coming Home to God suggests that the quilt serves as a symbolic bridge between the daily world and other-

342 Interview with author, August 15, 2014.
worldly existence with God. For Caroline, the value of the quilt was seen to be in the transformative experience it offers. She states, “the quilt was a nine-patch quilt and the colors and images of the quilt were so beautiful, and with the butterflies coming toward the cross, it just grabs you.” This suggests to me that Caroline’s quilt speaks to affective responses that we associate with the art, that she feels creates a moment of focused intensity and heightened awareness.

The theme of “coming home” in Caroline’s quilts is common to Negro spirituals and gospels and biblical passages and ideas, particularly as they relate to resurrection narratives and beliefs of Jesus. Furthermore, it suggests that Caroline wants people to experience a feeling not just cognitive ways of knowing. For Caroline, the ability to translate a feeling to others that they are coming to a place of comfort, peace, and safety through the medium of quilts is a sacred aspect of the quilt. She creates a space in the quilt wherein the person can feel at home with God. For Caroline, God is not just a being, but God is translated as a space wherein people may dwell in comfort. In this sense the quilt takes on multi-functional roles of comfort. These multi-functional roles of the quilt involve a material comfort, a sensual comfort, a religious comfort, and a personal comfort. Based on the circumstances that led her to produce the quilt—the death of a woman—it is reasonable to assume that this experience shook up her “customary patterns of consciousness.”

This sparked her to place emphasis on the ephemeral, momentary, and unpredictable world that promises no permanency. Through quilt-making, Caroline encodes matters too serious to communicate directly, and through the use of colors, 

fabrics, and images, she expresses connections between the living and the dead, hope and despair, present and future. Caroline’s story about the quilt, the home can be understood as a metaphor for various religious meanings. Most certainly, it is Caroline’s visual testimony. Particularly that the home she returned to is not the same as the one she left. Instead, it is a new, enlarged sense of God’s kingdom. The style and body of the quilt suggests that religious consciousness is tied to a wrestling with the past and present, which is responded to through the construction of the quilt. To this end, quilting illustrates how Caroline finds ways to create a quilt that combines something of her personal history with tangible symbols that she ascribes religious meaning that she shares with those in her family and community. Not only do Caroline’s quilts offer ideas of home and God, but also they also offer ideas of belonging and citizenship. Caroline became a United States citizen in 2013. After becoming a legal citizen of the United States she made a quilt to celebrate this experience in her life. She calls the quilt *Patriotic Flag* (figure 4.17).
She informed me that she made two of these quilts. One she gave to the Jubilee Quilt Circle and the other one she made for herself. The latter is shown here in this project. She initially made the quilt because she didn’t like the flag she received at her swearing in ceremony. She told me, “I made my own Patriotic Flag. The quilt is a nine patch quilt.” Speaking about the quilt, she states, “I included a heart within a house, and added brown to the colors of red, white, and blue.” The interpretation of the color brown is included to symbolize her inclusion within the United States, and the heart signifies love and that she is now at home. This quilt illustrates a set of symbolic images that helps Caroline express her experiences in ways meaningful to her. As a visual testimony,

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344 A photograph of the Patriotic Flag Caroline made, August 15, 2014
345 Interview with author, August 15, 2014.
they speak to the individual hopes, success and beliefs that Caroline has in her life. For Caroline, this quilt symbolizes her hope in a more robust and fuller life as an American citizen. Although the images of the heart, squares, colors, and diamonds are not specifically religious symbols, the quilt still allows Caroline to find and express meaning. This is significant because it suggest that the religious is not limited to just God talk, but is also about the various patterns, beliefs, and behaviors that people employ to understand the dynamics in their life experiences. In her quilt, she includes symbols that allow her to construct meaningful testimonies every time she looks at the quilt. Every time she needs to be reminded about her life journey, she has a quilt that communicate her individual identity and agency within larger social and historical experiences, cultures, and identities.

As I examined the picture of the quilt after the interview, I realized that a cross with a shape of a heart in the middle of it is placed in the center of the quilt. I interpret the symbol of the cross in her quilt as a search for the sacred—the referent for religion. Placing the cross in the center of the quilts speaks to the central ideas that constitute Caroline’s beliefs. In addition, her quilt contains symbols used to explain her experience of migration and settlement that are visually expressed as crossing and dwelling in the quilt that she feels brings one home to God. The quilt is tangible evidence of her feelings and images that relate to freer experiences of life, and to communal sensibilities and relationships as an African American.

While with her, she also showed me other quilts that she produced. For instance, she showed me one of the first quilts she made in Houston named, *Path to Freedom* (figure 4.16). Like the aforementioned quilts, in this particular quilt she included crosses.
She stated, “Every way you look at it forms a cross.” She goes on to say that “the crosses represent that God has a hand in it.” She wanted the crosses to be the focal point of the quilt. When explaining the visual narrative of the *Path to Freedom* quilt, she states:

The story starts when the slaves are told by the tumbling block that a slave journey is going to start, and that you need to tell your family goodbye if you are going to go. Then you join the monkey wrench which turns the wagon wheel towards a bear’s paw trail to the crossroads. Once they got to the Crossroads they dug a log cabin on the Ground which means that are to take shelter in a log cabin. If you noticed that the colors of the squares tells you which house is safe to stay at until given instructions and clothes, Shoofly is the name for missionaries and they told them to dress up in cotton and satin bow ties. The bow ties are the clothes they will need to wear to look like natives and they tell you to go to the chapel, and exchange double wedding rings. For the wedding rings in the quilt I chose four because the four becomes a cross. The numbers of wedding rings tell you how many times the church bell will ring, and that will mean it is safe to go, and while they are going the image of the flying geese tells them which way to go because one of the geese is a different color. And then this is called drunkard path it tells you to get off the path, because there are slave hunters, and they tell you to meander your way until you see the star. The star is the destination.
Her inclusion of the crosses to this slave narrative illustrates the religious influence that slavery and freedom has on the quilter. She is intentional to add her religious sensibilities to her aesthetic choices. For the quilter, the designs and forms of decoration carry religious meaning. African American quilts, similar to written words, attempt to narrate context for the understanding of meaning through visual signs and symbols. These visual signs and symbols not only construct narratives that relate to the social, but also testimonies that reveal the understanding of the individual. Furthermore, her desire to identify with the African American experience of migration and settlement speaks to both the link between blacks in the Atlantic, but also, to the significance of the individual to the life of the social. In other words, through her quilt we can see how the social experiences of blacks in the Atlantic world is constructed and advanced through the

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voices of individuals. In this light, the quilt symbolizes her sensitivity to the plight of African Americans experience in particular, but also to the experience of African people across the Atlantic world. The quilt serves as a reminder of the continuities in her life. Caroline’s quilt is organized around historical narratives that she adopts. I interpret much of Caroline’s appropriation of larger historical narratives by applying Pinn’s hermeneutic of style and body. In this way I interpret the quilt as a creative expression of her “sensitivity to black life experience as it occurs through movement, display, and ornamentation that is the flow of struggle for more life.” In other words, Caroline’s quilt becomes concern with the larger historical narrative of African people in the United States and the way trans-Atlantic displacement impacted their lives. Her desire to connect with the African American experience signals her personal identity formation. For example, her movement from the Guyana to Louisiana to Texas to full-fledged citizenship becomes aligned in many ways with the Trans-Atlantic movement for black people in the United States. Although the Underground Railroad quilt patterns and symbols were used to help free enslaved African Americans, Caroline’s rendition of the quilt points to the notion that contemporary African American quilts infuse old symbols with new stories that can provide glimpses of contemporary African American lives and links to their quest for complex subjectivity within the terror and dread of creating a home in a new land. Her message is that you are always at home with God. What is also readily apparent is the significance of the quilter to the interpretation of the quilt. For instance, even when scholars have the name of quilts, understand the geometric patterns,

symbols and creative designs within them it is still difficult to interpret them without knowledge of the quilter. In the case of Caroline, if we did not know her personal narrative of migration and displacement then we would not be able to fully understand the visual narrative of the quilt, particularly her use of crosses. Although this may not be necessary for other black cultural productions, the interpretation of African American quilts requires the quilter’s narrative to decipher the symbolic meaning being expressed. The discussions with Caroline revealed other impulses that led to her creativity. For instance, she contends that while working on quilts she will sometimes have dreams or premonitions. During our time together she stated that, “two weeks ago when I was working on a quilt, I was lying in the bed sleeping when someone came to me in a dream.” According to Caroline, the person in her dream told her to look at different pieces of fabric because she needed to make a quilt for a baby girl. She stated that when she came out of her dream or premonition, she immediately stopped working on the quilt she was working on and began working on the quilt she was instructed to make (figure 4.19a and 4.19 b).
Although, this study doesn’t attempt to prove the credibility of Caroline’s story, it does show how dreaming has an impact on quilters’ beliefs and understandings. She went on to tell me that when her daughter arrived home that she informed her daughter that “someone is going to have a baby girl.” For Caroline, her premonition rang true when shortly after she started on the quilt her sister called and informed her that her that her niece was going to have a baby. Caroline told me that before her sister could tell her the news that she interrupted her and said, “I know don’t tell me she is having a little girl.”

In the text, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, William Ferris’ argues that artists state that they have dreams and visions in the process of creating. According to Ferris, these dreams and visions appear in their sleep and usually haunt them until they construct the art work. The art work serves as a release from the haunting experience. Although in this case, Caroline had not completed the quilt. Caroline’s decision to make this quilt

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348 A photograph of the image Caroline selected for the Baby Quilt she was instructed to make in her dream of premonition, August 15, 2014.
349 A second photograph taken of the image Caroline selected for the Baby Quilt she was instructed to make in her dream or premonition, August 15, 2014.
points to the extrasensory sources that informs her quilt making process. For Caroline, the vision and the quilt represent a relationship between something supernatural or extrasensory and the quilts she makes. The quilt becomes her material evidence of the extrasensory or supernatural which allowed her to envision the quilt.

Caroline’s experience during quilting is central to her belief that ‘something’ else is involved in her quilting process. Although this “something” could be explained within the context of empirical lived experience, for Caroline, this experience grounds her belief that something allows her to see and know things before they happen. As such, quilting serves as a medium that expresses the inner meanings that inform her quilting practices. The truth of these inner urges for Caroline is revealed through her individual experiences in her daily life. As such, one can interpret these extrasensory impulses as something that is vital to the sense of security of the individual, particularly in a world that is filled with uncertainty. Furthermore, Caroline’s visions allow her to hold to the idea of “other-worldly” as a religious experience within her everyday life. In other worlds, Caroline’s quilt is significant because it allows us to examine how quilters perceive and react to happenings of the present and future at the same time. Because the personal aspect of these religious experiences, these are stories that may never be talked about unless the quilter shares the story with the person the quilt is made for. Thus, the fullness of the sacred that informs aesthetic choices such as images, colors, patterns, designs in the quilt are overlooked, ignores, or forgotten. Therefore, in order to better understand Caroline’s inner urges and experiences that are expressed in her quilts, it is vital to understand the influences that lead to their production. In this light, an investigation of the influences that lead to the production of the quilts provide an
understanding of the quilts past the aesthetic which allows for the investigation of the religious experiences that inform Caroline’s everyday life. In other words, the discovery of Caroline’s notion of visions illustrates that for certain individual quilters, there is more to quilting than just sewing and collecting scraps of material. Her quilting practices are a testimony to larger inner meanings and beliefs that undergird modes of production, and the aesthetic choices.

Caroline’s autobiographical account is an embodiment of lived experiences that are shaped by social, cultural, and spiritual experiences within her daily life. Her quilting stories sheds light on the ways symbols articulate experiences and the ways these experiences can be utilized as source material for meaning making of births, migrations, displacement, and other experiences that trouble the heart, mind, and body. The quilt provides ample evidence of how quilter’s use mundane materials to heal themselves, bless and nurture others, and envision a new day that helps to bring balance and harmony in their everyday lives. Caroline’s quilt stories illuminate how quilts serve as viable outlets to express varying forms of agency via scraps of materials that give individuals the ability to see themselves in complex ways that are personal, communal, and dynamical. Thus, Caroline’s stories serve as testimonies of the use of quilts to express self-interpretations in varying ways, the experiences of the supernatural or extrasensory that impact quilter’s lives, and suggests some sort of transformative paradigm in quilt making.
4.5 Mattie Smith’s Memories: A Scrap Quilter’s Quest for Complex Subjectivity

On October 3, 2014, I interviewed Mattie Smith. Mattie Smith is a scrap quilter that likes to collect scraps of materials and piece them together into a nine patch quilt pattern—which can be made into tiny-mini quilts or bedcovering. As a child, she used to watch her grandmother quilt. Yet, she didn’t begin quilting until the 1990s. She remembered helping her grandmother make utility quilts—quilts made for covering objects. Mattie stated, “My grandmother used to make utility quilts. She made quilts out of whatever she could and the quilts were used as covering. I think that is why I am a scrap quilter because I am still reaching back for my grandmother.” For Mattie, quilting connects her to a remembered time with her grandmother. It provides her a way to “reach” back in time. I wanted to know if this was the sole reason that Mattie quilts, so I asked her: why does she quilt. She stated “there is something inside of me. Quilters call it the “quilt bug”. She goes on to say, “I just have a desire to make quilts. I like to piece them. It’s a passion, it hard to describe. It’s either there or it’s not.” I knew this to be true from my own experience with trying to quilt. For Mattie, her point of reference for quilting lies mostly in a feeling that is not fully expressible. However, she did say that quilting played an important role in her life, because she can see things in life through the pieces of materials she collects. She states “it colors my life so much I can see things differently.” This means that through the lens of quilting she able to imagine various ways of being and existing in the world.

Mattie identifies as a Pentecostal Church of God in Christ Christian. Her view of quilting it tied to her religious beliefs. For Mattie, nobody is perfect. We are all striving for perfection. In striving for perfection, Mattie states, “we don’t always reach it, but
something always pretty comes out of it. That has made me so much more tolerant of others and myself in so many areas.” I interpreted this to mean she adopts a moral stance that is influenced by her subjectivity and ideologies based on her interpretation of biblical teachings. This is the epistemology that she lives by. She strives for perfection in life and in making her quilts, yet, she never quite achieves it, and in the words of Mattie, “but something beautiful always comes out of it.”

As a scrap quilter, she collects scraps of fabric and then tries to figure out what to do with it. To collect her scraps of materials, she goes around to stores, people, and just about anywhere she can. In her quilting room, she created a colored system to organize her scraps (figure 4.20a, 4.20b) and she shared two quilts she made. (4.21. and 4.22).

Figure 4.20 – (a) Scraps of Materials

Figure 4.20 – (b) Scraps of materials

351 A photograph of the scraps of materials in Mattie’s quilting room, October 3, 2014
She searches to find patterns to copy or sketch, so that she can alter it. She selects the cloth based on how she feels about the material and the idea she has of the quilt she is going to make. After she selects the fabric she cuts, and sews her scraps to make the quilt tops, and allows the design to evolve into something new and original. She admits “I improvise. Nothing ever comes out exactly like the copied patterns.” The improvisation and strips of cloth that Mattie uses to create her quilts are not only aesthetic principles of African American quilts but also the technique allows Mattie to express her individuality. For Mattie, the quilt is an expression of who she is.

In reviewing the notes I made about Mattie and how she collects scraps for her quilts, I thought of what Levi-Strauss calls “bricoleur”. According to Levi-Strauss a bricoleur is

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352 A photograph of other scraps of material in Mattie’s quilting room, October 3, 2014.
353 A photograph of one of the quilts designed by Mattie, October 3, 2014.
354 A photograph of second quilt designed by Mattie, October 3, 2014.
a “Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person.” I apply Strauss’s definition of bricoleur and apply it to the quilter because both are professional do-it-yourself persons. Similar to the bricoleur, the quilter has “to make do with whatever is at hand.” Second, the quilter is like the bricoleur because the means are often determined by past experiences that are varied. Third, both bricoleur and the quilter complete projects through the technique of improvisation, utilizing existing materials to create new ad hoc structures as a response to the environment. Lastly, their daily environments are the stage and the materials are often pantomimed. In other words, quilters utilize their homes, work, social and private spaces to create dramatic images that produce testimonies and stories without words. As such, each scrap piece of material is woven together to compose a material history that expresses the complexity of the meaning making process and the contradictions of the lived world. When I say complexity, I mean to suggest that this material history involved diverse, often contradictory, innumerable actions, occurrences, conditions, engagements, etc., that constitute human experiences. The quilter is a complex subject and the quilts by extension constitute complex reminders of meaning making and daily experiences. Furthermore, the quit-making signals to the quilter’s life at a point in time and the conditions that inspired the quilter to create. For this reason, the scraps of materials depict Mattie’s lived experiences, and the scraps are sewn together to create a artistic expression of thinking, being, and doing and its complexities across time and space.

356 Ibid, p. 17
During our time together she informed that she was often called very degrading names because she was a dark skinned girl. However, producing quilts fosters a personal affirmation. She told me that when she quilts it is a confirmation that, she likes who she is. She told me that “people may not like the quilt. That is okay. But I like it.” She let me know that when she makes her scrap quilts, she is reminded of a scripture that says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthen me.” The production of her quilts that links biblical scripture was very informative to me because it affirmed her Christian identity. This testimony led me to ask more of her religious background. Mattie identifies herself as Pentecostal, Church of God in Christ. She also informed me that for her, Christianity does not lead her to judgment of others. This theological perspective links her thoughts about quilting to her God-talk. In fact her story and process of scrap quilt bring to the surface that her style of being and her religious beliefs “seeks, through cultural creativity, to counter the process of dehumanization.”

Most crisis events have profound impacts on one’s thoughts, actions, and beliefs. As mentioned earlier in this section, this crisis may spark questions of: who, what, when, and why of one’s existence. Mattie had a crisis event that lent to her practice of quilting. Her crisis event occurred when she was diagnosed with both breast and liver cancer. After she recovered from the illness her husband soon died. She stated, “I questioned God. Why did you do this to me? I was angry. And then I thought, even though I don’t understand it, God’s word is good, but I didn’t see any good in this at all…This is more than I can see.” For Mattie, the quest for answers to life extended not merely to the

conditions but also to God. As such, I interpret Mattie’s question as a prayer. Quilting will eventually become the answer to Mattie’s prayers for self-understanding of life events. It shows how she interweaves narratives, beliefs, and events that illuminate the bond between the quest for complex subjectivity and daily life.

While Mattie was seeking answers to her prayer, she became very close to one particular friend who was a quilter. Before her crisis event she explored the idea of quilting. However, her crisis and relationship with her friend inspired Mattie to become a quilter. Mattie believes that quilting brought her closer to making sense of her life. Mattie’s story reveals that the individual experiences of crisis and social interaction can have impact the impulse to create. Moreover, Mattie’s story reveals the role creativity can play in helping to address life questions. She chose to be an artist/quilter to make sense of the circumstances in her life. As such, quilting allowed her to draw from fragments of personal experience from various scraps of material to construct a coherent narrative that allows her to make sense of life.

As I learned about her life experiences and theological perspectives, I learned that although she gives quilts away, Mattie makes quilts mainly for her family to use. Mattie is the only person in her immediate family that quilts. Therefore, it is important to Mattie to make quilts for her family because the quilts become records of life experiences. Through quilt-making memories are preserved and passed down from generation to generation. For example, Mattie stated, “When my aunt died, my cousin gave me her quilts.” For this reason, the quilt represents familial ties. Her cousin gave her 44 unfinished quilt tops. The quilt, I’d Rather Quilt than Eat (Figure 4.24a and 4.24b), was one of her aunt’s unfinished quilts. Mattie completed the quilt. Mattie said her aunt used
an old adage all the time. The adage was, “I’d rather quilt than eat.” She told me that when her aunt was alive she never talked to her about quilting, and when she began quilting her aunt was blind. During that conversation Mattie said “I didn’t want to ask her about quilting. I didn’t want to remind her of what she could no longer do.”

Figure 4.24 (a) I’d Rather Quilt Than Eat Quilt

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359 A photograph of one of the 44 unfinished quilt tops that Mattie’s aunt made, October 3, 2014
The quilt shown above is an example of one of the 44 unfinished quilt tops that belonged to her aunt. When Mattie displayed the quilt, I noticed that Mattie’s aunt’s quilt is comprised of a myriad of scraps of fabric in a patchwork of alternating colors within crosses and squares. In this artwork, her aunt cut and sewn together numerous pieces of cloth that she arranged into images of a cross that is symbolic of her religious faith. The quality of the fabric is mundane, the texture and feel of the fabric imparts knowledge about the aunt’s material resources, and the aunt’s arrangement of these fabrics implies a sense of spiritual empowerment and creative achievement. When you look at the quilt, the background fabric communicates an experience such as birth of a baby, ruptures, situational changes, and the embedded cross signifies the importance of personal spiritual empowerment. From left to right, the quilt illustrates a positive affirmation of black

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360 A photograph of from a different angle of Mattie’s aunt’s unfinished quilt tops, October 3, 2014
women’s ability to transform scraps mundane fabrics into fabric artworks, and express her religious beliefs through the deliberate design of the cross in the quilt.

Her aunt’s 44 un-finished quilt tops allow Mattie to feel connected to her aunt. I took note that Mattie said that while quilting she also talks to her deceased grandmother and aunt. She informed me that she talks to her aunt often about how she should finish the quilts. Mattie stated “when I am quilting I talk to her, and I ask her questions about decisions I am making while I quilt, and that is my connection to her.” She claims that when she talks to her aunt she asks for direction in making the quilt. For instance she told me during our interview that she will say, “auntie what would you do right here? Wish you were here so could tell me why you did that? What were you thinking or doing when you did this?” For Mattie, her talks with her aunt reveal her desire to maintain her aunt’s legacy through quilting, and to invoke and express through quilting the spirit/knowledge of her aunt. She also informed me how her aunt’s Christian faith is embedded and expressed in the quilt. For example, she pointed out the recurring cross symbol in the quilts. For Mattie, her aunt was deliberate in her actions to express her Christian faith and belief in the quilts. This links her expression of her religious beliefs to quilt-making.

Mattie also informed me that she could tell certain things about her aunt’s life and well-being by having her aunt’s 44 un-quilted quilt tops. Mattie stated “you can see the progression of how she quilted, and you could see like in her polyester quilts, there is a series of quilts where the materials she used suggest she must have been going through a hard economic time.” For Mattie, her aunt’s quilts serve as a road map of her aunt’s life. She stated that is why she learned “how to date cloth”. For Mattie, learning to date materials allowed her to learn more about her aunt’s life through the quilts to learn about
things that were often forgotten about her aunt and her life. Memory is fragile, and the quilt can remind her and other family members’ mundane things that they may willfully forget.

Gladys Marie Fry contends that quilts leave careful records of an artist’s emotional well-being. According to Marie Fry, clues can be found in the stitching patterns, color preferences, stains, blood, and tears on the quilt. All of these clues help us trace life cycles, experiences, and knowledge along the way. As such I interpret her experiences as they occur through movement, display, and ornamentations of the quilts while being sensitive to memory. In this light, the quilt can be seen as a presentation of her aunt’s life. It is a family artifact that reveals her aunts struggles in life. The aesthetic quality is an important component for the struggle for a fuller life. For Mattie, the memory of her aunt lives in the quilt insofar as it is affective and spiritual. Thus the quilts hold memories that could potentially fall out of focus, become forgotten. Her quilt is a visual testimony of both “things and the perceptions of things as they relate to black struggle for a humanized existence.” In other words, through her aunt’s quilts Mattie is able to rethink, reshape memories of her aunt, in order to mark the traditions and values that connect one generation to another. This is important because it suggests that from generation to generation, quilts pass on implicit and explicit understandings that help to actualize the life a person both living and dead.

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The colors, materials, construction techniques, and even the name of the quilts provide important information about the quilter and their life experiences. This information embedded in the quilt allows family members to feel connected and share stories of loved ones that help them make meaning out of life through the experiences of the deceased family member. It is for this reason that Mattie plans to finish her aunt’s 44 un-quilted quilt tops and give them to family members. Mattie stated:

what I plan to do with my aunt’s quilt, is every time I finish one, I am going to number it, and date it according to my aunt’s life span, and then I will add the posthumous date of when I finished the quilt so they will know when I did it, and then I am going to give them to family members so that they will have one of her quilts and they will know I finished it. I am not putting my name on the quilt because I want to reflect her work.

For Mattie, her aunt’s quilts served as family heirlooms that would keep alive the memory of her and her aunt within the matrilineal line of the family. These quilts will serve as a form of record of family history that is shared through cloth instead of literature or song. These quilts are vehicles for remembering, and in this family unit, the memory works on two levels. First, the quilt’s imagery sparks remembering that transports them to a past time and place; second, these memory quilts are a testament to the beliefs, events, and experiences that speak to her family’s capacity for survival, endurance, resilience, renewal, and the quest for a fuller life.

From my interview with Mattie, I noted that she raises above her crisis events. She is able to do this through her faith which is expressed in the transformative act of quilting. Mattie creates a space for remembering her aunt’s life through quilting. It is within this space that Mattie invokes the memory of her aunt in order to spur her creativity for quilting. In other words, the space provides the atmosphere that allows
Mattie to create from memory. She weaves this memory intricately into the very fabric of her aunt’s unfinished quilt tops. In this light, Mattie embeds within the unfinished quilts information that helps her and others remember mundane things about her aunt’s life, which in turn, influences and shapes personal identity and communal consciousness of the matrilineal line of the family for generations. As a material artifact (heirloom), the quilts complement text stories of cultural memory, and autobiographical narratives of the lives of contemporary African Americans. Both Mattie’s quilt and her aunt’s quilts articulate constructionist acts of remembering that can add information about individual lives of black folks, that can expand our understanding of how African American women congealed contradictory claims of cultural identity within their own memories. In other words, the quilts contain scraps of information about the everyday lives of African Americans that sheds light on how African Americans developed a self–conscious that allowed Black women to be both African and American. Quilts are visual testimonies of the self-consciousness of women striving to nurture their double self into a complete and truer self that is shared in the homes of African American families in Houston, Texas through quilts.

After looking at her aunts quilts, I noticed that the colors her aunt used are recreated in different designs and symbols in her own quilts. (Figure 4.25 and 4.26).
Utilizing the same colors as her aunt in her quilts suggest an act of remembering and being remembered. These acts of remembrance connect the present to the past. Mattie’s quilt signifies symbolic movement of ideas, memories, and craft that venerates her aunt. More deeply, quilts represent symbols of death and resurrection through materiality that affirms the belief that life continues through memories that continues to give meaning, and vitality to the quest for complex subjectivity in the here and now. Her story reveals how quilters adopt and adapt aesthetic designs from the past to make something new. Her quilt allows us to examine the designs, colors, patterns, and images that help us deepen our awareness of the black experience in quilting. Mattie’s story should encourage scholars to reconsider quilts as a source to expand the scope of black cultural production to include contemporary women’s decorative arts and craft traditions. On the basis of this reflection it is possible for scholars to reconstruct family histories and kinship ties; it also makes it possible to understand how quilting allows women to learn from each other,

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363 A photograph taken of Mattie’s aunt’s quilt, October 3, 2014
364 A photograph taken of Mattie’s quilt, October 3, 2014.
which in turn teaches women how to respond constructively and creatively to the realities of life. This would allow scholars of African American religion to gain a better understanding of the complexities of life, creative problem solving, and creative ways of remembering that empower those left behind at all socioeconomic levels within black families and communities in the United States.

4.6 Hattie Johnson’s Creativity: An Artist as Quilter Quest for Complex Subjectivity

On October 2, 2014, I got a chance to interview Hattie Johnson at her residence. Her home was filled with warm colors and various pieces of art. As we sat in her living room, she began to tell me her story. Hattie Johnson began piecing quilts with her mother when she was a child. She has been quilting as an artist in the 1960s. When asked why does she quilt? She informed me that her mother had six sisters, and they all were seamstresses and quilters. She said that “quilting was a natural thing in my household.” She also informed me that “there was a stream in my family for art, and both the boys and girls learned.” This short story of Hattie’s family life and environment reminded me of what Harriet Goldstein notes, in Art in Everyday Life. Goldstein states that “when beauty is expressed in our surroundings, it becomes a part of our life and our personality.”

Hattie grew up learning all kinds of artistic skills. The women in Hattie’s family ranged from painters, to sculptors, to furniture makers. They also engaged in embroidery, knitting, crocheting, and the like. For Hattie, quilting was a necessity and it provided a solution to

her family’s needs. Hattie’s childhood experiences reinforce the idea that quilting has its roots in a matrilineal line of families, and that quilts serve as tools of daily life within the homes and communities of African Americans.

As I listened to Hattie, Hattie considers herself an artist who enjoys painting and quilting.

When asked why she likes to quilt, Hattie stated that,

For me it is release kind of thing, and a form of expression. When I am depressed about something or having anxiety, I tend to do things with my hands, which keeps me on an even keel. So sewing, it releases all tension, takes my mind off stressful kinds of things. I tried reading, but it doesn’t do it for me. I like working with my hands. Anything crafty wise, which I can use my hands. I can release all tensions and whatever I am worried about or concerned about, it puts me in another state of mind.

According to Hattie, she experiences an emotion, particularly in stressful moments; working with her hands creates a calming effect. The calming effects that comes along with quilting, for Hattie, allows her to overcome unwanted and unpleasant emotions, and release tensions through the production of the quilt.

Research by scholars such as Tessa Daily contends that art can be therapeutic. She suggests that art’s non-verbal communication is an effective tool in therapeutic reconciliation that helps a person resolve an issue. According to Daily, “art actively provides a concrete rather than verbal medium through which a person can achieve both
conscious and unconscious expression.” In light of Hattie’s account, quilting can be seen as having similar therapeutic properties. For this reason quilting is an important part of her life. It is one of the ways she relieves stress in her daily life. Hattie is able through quilting to nurture herself and hold things together, which in turn enhances her psychological and physical will to survive. Hattie puts forth the idea that the stylistic features of quilts allows quilters to express their sorrows and their joys, attitudes, and beliefs, and the possibility of reconciliation of what seemed paradoxical and incapable of resolution before they started to quilt. As such, she points scholars to the significance of the relations between women and objects of art that creates a transformation in themselves and their life.

It should be noted that quilting is only one of Hattie’s artistic forms of expression. She explained that she loved to paint. She has completed several paintings throughout the years. (Figure 4.27, 4.28, 4.29) She had several paintings around her home. It was apparent that she had a passion for painting in the past from the way she talked about painting.

366 Dalley, Tessa, ed. Art as therapy: An introduction to the use of art as a therapeutic technique. Routledge, 2008. p. 4
Figure 4.27 – A painting Hattie Made

Figure 4.28 – A painting Hattie Made

Figure 4.29 – Hattie’s painting

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367 A photograph of a painting Hattie made, October 2, 2014.
368 A photograph of a painting Hattie made, October 2, 2014.
These portraits show Hattie uses paint to reimagine places, people, and things that present Hattie with a sense of serenity and peace. Her depiction of landscapes, home, and family life is expressed in her painting. When asked does she still paint, she said, “Yes”, but now that her son is no longer home, she quilts more than she paints. She states, “quilting fills the void for me. It’s natural for me to do, I am comfortable with it. It’s like a natural high.” For Hattie, her son leaving the house was a crisis moment in her life. His leaving the home ushered in a sense of loss and transition. In her attempt to cope with her crisis she decided to quilt. This suggests that quilting does something that painting does not.

For Hattie, creating quilts allowed her to cope with the fact that her son was now an adult and out of the house. Thus, she worked through her feelings with her hands. The quilt expresses the emotions she felt and replaces them with ”a natural high” Through quilt making, Hattie is not only able to manage her emotions, but she is able to exercise her creative talents. She told me that as an artist, working with fabric and/or paint provides a way to express her deep emotions. As such, I would suggest that Hattie chooses to quilt, in order to provide for themselves psychological and emotional solace in the face of terror and dread in everyday life.

Hattie explains to me that her creativity is an extension of her being. She claims that she has always had a talent for producing artwork. She told me that “if I visually look at it, I can create it, I barely read the instructions. It’s visual for me.” Hattie credits her talent to God. She perceives of her artistic talent as a gift and not merely a skill. She told me in our time together that “God gives everyone a gift.” She went on to say that she believes that quilting is a gift, and “that you are supposed to share your gifts with others.” This idea God, gifts, talents, and community reveal Hattie’s worldview. This is
significant because it suggests that Hatti embeds this worldview into her quilts. Thus, in order to understand Hattie’s quilts it becomes vital to understand the ideas, beliefs and values that constitute her quilt as an extension of her being.

Each year Hattie makes quilts that she gives to nursing homes, Veterans, parents for baptismal, as well as charitable organizations. She believes that God lays it on her heart to make the quilts and give them away. Yet again, Hattie’s language of God as an agent reveals her religious grounding that creates a particular worldview. When Hattie makes these material objects that God laid on her heart to make, we are able to see how Hattie simultaneously work out a conception of human service and devotion to God. Making quilts provides Hattie with a particular interpretation of human existence that orients her life choices and image/concept of God. Her particular concept/image of God and her specific worldview allows her to construct different perspectives of cultural and religious traditions. For example, during a conversation about her theistic worldview, she shared that she doesn’t practice certain religious rituals such as tithing money in church. She stated that, “I believe that there are many ways to tithe to the church, and that God did not mean that we only give money for tithes.” In fact, she felt the act of making and giving away quilts is tithing. She admitted “that most wouldn’t consider that tithing, but God knows what I am doing.” She believes that God knows what she is doing because “God gives me the gift to take a vision and create it.” Hattie talks of her belief in God as a major component of her identity because it supports and gives meaning to her creativity and agency. I contend that Hattie’s belief that God gives everyone a gift reveals her worldview, but also how she makes meaning out of her creative talent, and her personal responsibility to give back to others. For Hattie, believing that God gave her the talent
affirms her understanding of herself as person, and notions of charity within community. Hattie’s concept of tithing also suggests a tension between her individual agency and her commitment to the church as a social structure. She admits that there are people in her church that are skeptical of her personal beliefs about tithing, but she seems to finds freedom in living according to her own views and beliefs of Christian practices and beliefs. This suggests that Hattie’s thinking, being, and doing puts her on a journey for more life meaning that is of her own making, and on her own terms.

Hattie conjoins her identity as an artist and a Christian. She doesn’t feel the need to preface one over the other. Thus her identity is constructed through ideas that she both appropriates from her Christian community as well as from beliefs that she holds from her identity as an artist. This is significant because it highlights her worldview is both a product of Christian belief and separate from it. Thus her faith can be expressed in the quilts in multi-dimensional ways. For Hattie, the creativity expressed in the quilts she gives away unites her identities into one. It situates a myriad of ideas, beliefs, and values from both the personal and social onto a material object. This material object as quilt becomes a nonverbal articulation of Hattie’s voice, agency, and moral values. Thus, her quilt-making demonstrates her agency as a person of faith, reveals Hattie as an artist that conceives God as the ultimate point of reference, and reveals a theological perspective that offers a different orientation of Christian life. On one hand, one could consider Hattie’s perspective about tithing antithetical to traditional notions of tithing. On the other hand, one could consider her perspective an attempt to conceive what else could be understood about tithing that is heavily influenced by her beliefs in God and creative
work. This is significant to our understanding of the relations between theology and art, which in turn allow people to interpret dogma and institutional structures subjectively.

As such, Hattie’s theistic view of tithing invites theologians to gain an understanding of how quilt-making and quilts as art point to what Gordon Kaufman calls an “imaginative constructive reality—the claim that theology is primarily a work of the imagination.”

According to Kaufman,

By looking at what the imagination does for human existence, creating a picture of the world, of the whole context within which human life is lived and within which human existence, therefore, must be understood—we are enabled to see that our God talk…belongs to a specific worldview, a specific orientation of human existence, created by the imagination in one particular historical stream of human culture to provide orientation in life for those living in that culture.

In this light, the study of African American quilt-making and quilts reveal to theologians how the imagination of quilters has produced other pictures of the world that offer different perspectives of religious and cultural traditions. In turn, theologians can gain a better understanding of African American quilts as a cognitive, creative, and ethnic enterprise that opens up discourse to how quilts express a complex layered human reality, and how theology emerges from quilting in the daily lives of quilters. In this light, Hattie as quilter pushes members of her church community to enter in dialogue concerning the meaning of life and the theology of the people.

As such, her narrative challenges the discourse on what it means to be black and Christian today for African Americans, in general, and women in particular. Her artwork and story raises questions: how does quilting portray her freedom and independence? How does her artwork as source express economic justice for everyday people? How as source does it articulate what it means to be black, woman, artist/quilter and Christian? How do the quilts portray women’s ethics and the moral dilemmas? These questions concerning quilts in the lives of quilters who are artist pose allow us to explore how particular identity as quilter, and the cultural production she creates express religious beliefs, levels of virtue, and self-worth to develop a renewed sense of humanity, and shapes one’s orientation to a quest for a fuller life.

As previously stated, Hattie’s family had a love and connection to art. She informed me that her Godmother was good friends with John Biggers the famous visual artist who lived in Houston. Her cousin studied with Biggers, but she admits that she didn’t take advantage of the opportunity. She stated, “I just remembered my high school teacher telling me I could never be an artist. So, I was not as confident, so I missed the opportunity.” For Hattie, these restraints and criticism impacted her life. The critique of her personhood and creativity by her high school teacher restricted her identity formation. She told me that she had to struggle to free herself from the restraints that she allowed to be placed on her identity as an artist. This highlights why she places great emphasis on her talents as both a gift from God and why it constitutes much of how she views and understands herself. In addition, it illuminates how quilting helps her

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371 Interview with author, October 2, 2014
overcome a fixed identity, and how quilting can be considered a religious experience—a type of transforming experience that speaks to a deeper understanding of self. Indeed, as a quilter Hattie is able to overcome a fixed identity within the context of a white racist world.

The way black women respond to real and imagined social barriers is significant to the study of black religion because it reveals the various ways women have responded to tripartite oppression in the United States. Hattie’s reveals how her social identity is formed by contrast and opposition. This contrast and opposition is crucial in understanding Hattie’s identity as an artist. Feminist scholars such as Linda Nolin, Anne S’Allevea, and Griselda Pollock, and others suggest that creative genius is a historical and culturally determined concept, and that defining and looking for artistic greatness often excludes women. Furthermore, Hattie’s life story illustrates the complexities and frustrations that certain black women encounter in a social spaces and the way those social spaces inform what it means to be black and female. For womanist ethicist, Hattie’s story and artwork help define and identify the various modes of oppression black women experience in the art world, in religious communities, and in society. Womanist ethicist can examine the artwork and stories of women artists as source material to gain a deeper understanding of the images, colors and scraps of materials are used to resolve their double consciousness—two warring ideals in one dark body through making art. African American quilts, quilters, and quilt-making as source allows womanist ethicist to

interpret how quilts express black women’s ultimate sacred and secular concerns that fosters black women liberation—that God is on the side of the oppressed. The 3Q’s will allow womanist ethicist and theologians to map particular voices of black women to translate the lived realities that inform faith development, make visible the moral agency of black women that confronts the more painful and unpleasant aspects of their lives, as well as the joy and accomplishments within their daily lives.

The more I talked to Hattie I began to realize that she wanted to tell me more about the plight of being and artist than her being a quilter. Hattie identifies being a quilter for broader and more intentional reasons. She believes identifying as a quilter that she raises the idea of quilting to the level of fine art, within her community. Hattie felt that quilts are just as beautiful, creative, and meaningful as paintings and other fine art. Hattie notes, “I think quilts can beautify a home, wall, or room, just like a painting.” For Hattie, just because quilts are not in the museum doesn’t mean they aren’t fine art. It is Hattie’s desire to replace the concept of art in the museum that is framed in the art world, with the concept of the quilts as fine art which is located in intimate spaces such as with family, homes churches, and community. In these everyday spaces quilts, Hattie showed me the quilts she has made for family and friends (figure 4.30a and 4.30b).
Hattie states that when she makes her quilts for someone, she wants it to express something about the person. Hattie is convinced that all of the quilts she has made for her family tell a story about them and their lives. She tells me that all her fifteen nieces and nephews have received quilts. These quilts represent their life experiences, religious beliefs, and things that are important to them in their lives. Therefore, being a quilter plays the important role of historian and record keeper in her family, and by extension, their friends and community. She stated, “I should have been an archeologist.” She finds the materials and items that represent their lived experiences, beliefs, feelings, and the like. She reported that “if you are into turtles, I am going to make sure the turtle motif is in the quilt.” She also stated that she “would add colors that would represent different moods in the quilts.” I asked her why it was so important to make these types of quilts

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373 A photograph of Hattie’s New Orleans Quilt, October 2, 2014
374 A photograph of Hattie’s New Orleans Quilt, October 2, 2014
for family, and she stated, “I believe I am giving a piece of me to others and that they will remember me. In time, I believe that when they get as old as me, they will say I got one of my aunt’s quilts.” For Hattie, the quilts are also an extension of herself, and the matrilineal line of her family, and within her community.

She also showed me another quilt that she made. (see figures 4.31a and 4.31b). As a quilter, Hattie likes applique. She stated, “I like it. It’s a sheer joy to do. I want it to look like a creative expression.”

Both the Red Work Quilt and the New Orleans quilts show that Hattie likes bold colors, contrast, symmetry, embellishments, and her quilts show movement that reveal different variations of the same symbol and or image that brings a balance to similarity and difference. The balance between similarity and difference of images supports and gives nuance to one another, and through each block she frames images in a way that speak to

375 Photograph taken of Hattie’s quilt front, October 2, 2014
376 Photograph taken of Hattie’s quilt back, October 2, 2014
interests and views of life that expresses both mental and social dimensions of Black women’s real-lived epistemologies related to multiple perspectives, cultures, and experiences. I interpret the content of Hattie’s quilts as a visual testimony that seeks to counter the myopic constructs of black women’s lives that confines the definition of identity, taste, ideas, memories, humor and visions of life.

Fabric is the medium that she prefers to use as an artist and she is often drawn to African fabrics. Hattie told me “If I see anything that has an African motif I am going to buy it. It’s hard for me to not buy it, I am drawn to it. It’s a part of my ancestry.” Thus for Hattie, the value of the quilt as a historical record of family, church and communities histories becomes a continued legacy of an African past. As I looked around her home I saw many African figurines, masks, cloth, and other items. Her quilting room had several large armoires full of fabric (figure 4.32a and 4.32b.)
The large number of fabrics shows that she has collected fabrics for quite some time. Since isn’t aware of how she will use each of these fabrics, but she collects them in advance to make sure she has whatever she needs when she is ready to create. In this light it is easy to see how African American quilts, and the quilters who make them have the ability to transform scraps of materials from everyday life into visual testimonies of creative knowledge and elemental impulses using a plethora of fabrics she has collected in her daily life. The quilts and the quilters who make them collect scraps of materials to create visual testimonies of memories that they can use to make quilts that affirm black worth and dignity, and illuminate the links between black religion and everyday life. Hattie’s story challenges scholars of African American religious scholars to wrestle with the contemporary experience of the black religious life of women artists and their wrestling with the struggle for freedom from constraints within the Black church and community. It allows scholars of religious studies to gain a better understanding of how quilters use their art to express that there is another interpretation to Scripture/ religious beliefs that orientate religious life. She also tells a narrative of another reality as an artist and quilter that refutes racial and sexual attempts to threaten her sense of well-being and human value. We learn from her quilts and story how she shapes her identity and her sense of values in spite of her social experiences of dehumanization, and how her artistic talent is her source of knowledge and divine inspiration. The quilting helps her survive.

377 A photograph taken of Hattie’s collected fabrics, October 2, 2014
378 A photograph taken of Hattie’s collected fabrics, October 2, 2014
her daily suffering, and the production of the quilt is affirmation of joy and creative freedom that make her life more meaningful. Thus, the study of African American quilts, quilters, and quilt-making is significant to the study of African American religion because it enables scholars to gain a fuller understanding of the human function of African American religious and theological language, which in turn makes it possible for scholars to reconceive the theological enterprise as explicitly and essentially imaginative construction. Thus, theological work, in the words of Gordon Kaufman, “can be carried on as a fully critical and self-constructive activity, in a way that has never before been possible.”

4.7 Bernice Benson Quilt Activist: A Textile Artist’s Quest for Complex Subjectivity

My interview with Bernice occurred on December 15, 2014. This interview took a different turn than the other interviews. I learned that for Bernice quilting is a vehicle for social activism. It was apparent that her story was not focused on her quilt-making. Instead, our conversation was about how the cultural production of quilts plays a vital role in the struggle for a fuller life in a hostile world. She began talking to me about her strong commitments to the black community and the preservation of the African American quilting tradition. Although, she doesn’t have many personal quilts, the Quilt Circle allows Bernice to create a social identity for herself. As such, Bernice’s identity is primarily related to her cultural commitments and increasing the accessibility of the art in underserved communities in Houston. This is important to the way the social community

of the Quilt Circle provides purpose for individuals within a social space. For Bernice, the quilts and the production of quilts are mediums for the facilitation of social change. Bernice’s desire to preserve the African American quilting tradition places her account in the social and the ontological. In other words, the African American quilting tradition provides Bernice a means of existing in the world. She creates a space for quilters and their art. In this way she ensures that African American quilts move from the margins of visibility to center stage in the black community and art world. It is personal mission to rescue them from invisibility or passing out of existence. The link between her identity as artist and social activist composes much of her personal narrative. During our discussion, I asked her if being a quilter makes her feel compelled to give back to her community. According to Bernice, quilters have a commitment to giving back. She claimed that “quilters are always giving.” When comparing quilter to fine artists Bernice said,

With the fine arts, there is not the same understanding of what it takes. There are artists that won’t share what medium they are using. They are inventing media and manifesting a creative idea for people to look at it, and they aren’t starting on the same fundamental ground as quilters. With quilters the process is shared. In the visual arts it is different. It is the same creative process. But with quilts, it is easier to share.

Thus, for Bernice, quilters construct a more altruistic environment. This altruistic environment characterizes the type of interaction in the Jubilee Quilt Circle. In spite of this, Bernice is concerned that quilters and their communities do not receive the visibility and recognition for their communal or artistic contributions for shaping political consciousness and social empowerment. As such, she believes that it is her responsibility of the Jubilee Quilt Circle to create programs, initiatives, and collaboration for the
creative class of African American quilters in Houston. For Bernice, creating this space for African American quilters and artists will give them visibility that allows them to preserve the quilting tradition, and continue to allow quilters to make a social impact on the world. For Bernice, being a quilter joins her and other quilters to something larger. For Bernice, the Quilt Circle counters the negative consequences in society that created by racial and political differences in many of the same ways as African American churches. For this reason, Bernice’s Jubilee Quilt Circle membership and participation is prompted by a quilter’s desire for self-fulfillment and meaning making that arises from service, reciprocity, and association. Thus, for Bernice, the participation of quilters in quilting bees/guilds, art groups, and exhibitions helps break down social barriers and tripartite oppression that black women experience in society. This is evident at the Quilt Circle. Members are from diverse racial, political, and religious backgrounds, and she hopes that this created space provides a sheltered arena for personal development and expression that promotes unity within diversity that enables individual or groups of quilters to eradicate the social and economic forces of white racism. She admits that she realized that it is difficult to gain mutual support in the art world between blacks and whites based on histories of discrimination and oppression. This prompted me to ask her what she believed cause this rift within between blacks and white artists in the art world. Bernice replied,

The difference is that in this country the objective is to ignore, abscond, or even usurp what we have brought from Africa. There may not be differences in patterns or skills, but there is a difference. People think that Africans were taught to quilt. I don’t believe that is the case. Creativity is a natural impulse. We were inspired to create. If something exists long enough like cloth, it is natural to embellish and improve it over time. Necessity is the mother of invention.
In other words, America’s worldview of Africa and its people constructed a social and economic environment that created enmity and competition between quilters of different races that promotes tensions within and between groups of artists/quilters. In this light, Bernice also informs me that she feels society doesn’t recognize the social impact of quilters and quilts within the struggle for liberation for three reasons: (1) quilters receive little attention in mainstream media, education, and religious institutions, (2) the racist tendency to create simplifying categories that blur sharp differences between European-American quilting and African American quilting, in order to economically control African American women’s labor and production, and (3) African American preachers and scholars have failed to see the myriad of ways that African American women have adopted the art of quilting in their search for hope and dignity in a society that has and continues to treat African Americans brutally. Her reasons are significant because she reveals that the African American community has overlooked the emancipatory potential of quilting, the use of quilting as a cohesive force among women, and failed to see quilters as an unconventional religious group of artists that feel compelled to communicate, challenge, and reinforce the existing social structures and social relations in the United States.

In exploring Bernice’s concept and purpose of African American quilting, I purpose that quilters have a voice that speaks not only to their spiritual quest and fulfillment but also their earthy trials and social yearnings. Bernice’s story about being a quilter who is committed to social activism makes we think about how many more women activist that are quilters, and how many more quilters have been activists throughout African American history that we know nothing about. Bernice’s story points
to a whole historical narrative we may have ignored about women quilters and the connection to quilting and social activism among women. Her story also spreads light on the fact that women can and have used quilts as a strategy or response to transcend their everyday experiences that, in the words of Anderson, “conditions the possibility of freedom, openness, and creativity. It conspires with the human will to adapt our circumstances and adjust us to the ways of the world for the sake of human flourishing.” In this light, Bernice reveals a creative potential of quilters and their quilts to communicate the position and condition of Black people in the United States that inspires people who are victims of oppression and degradation to mobilize and take action that leads to a more liberative existence for all people.

Bernice began quilting in the 1980s. Like the many of the other quilters, Bernice had a crisis event that led her to the quilting community. For Bernice, her crisis event occurred in the 1980s, when it was time to send her daughter off to the University of Texas (figure 4.33a, and 4.33b, and 433c). She stated,

The inspiration for my first quilt was to produce something by hand for my daughter as a sign of love for my daughter. It was the desire to make something beautiful for her. It needed to be traditional. It was important to me that these traditions were handed down. I received them, but they were not valued but my mother. It skipped her. I have them. It is important they are passed down and across. My daughter doesn’t sew, but it is important that certain traditions are available to her daughter. That is how culture is built. We are consciously choosing what we will hand off to the next generation, and articulate what is possible and important culturally.

Figure 4.33 – (a) College Quilt
A photograph of the first quilt made by Bernice, December 15, 2014.

Figure 4.33 – (b) College Quilt
A photograph of another angle of the first quilt made by Bernice, December 15, 2014.

Figure 4.33 – (c) Sketches of the College Quilt
A photograph of Bernice’s sketches of the College quilt, December 15, 2014.
Her desire to quilt was sparked by uncertainty, self-concern, and future orientation characterized as a journey or quest to preserve traditions for her granddaughter. Furthermore, she wanted to make sure quilts was a deep concern for the future. She wanted to ensure that her family would have artifacts that would narrate the significance of family, culture, and womanhood. All of these pointed to her hope for the future. Bernice’s language is informed by the way she understands her crisis event. For Bernice, her crises oriented her to look toward the future, and to create a cultural artifact that would direct the gaze of others toward the future. The quilt articulates the particularity of her own life that gives meaning and coherence to her daughter and her granddaughter’s lives. In this light, the quilt becomes a material object that is dedicated to someone, in order to define relationships of individuals, and share insights for future knowledge. Her appreciation of textiles at the time allowed her to meet the founder of the International Quilt Festival. The founder of the Quilt Festival encouraged her to enter her quilt into the competition in Houston—a competition that she ultimately won. As I looked at the quilt after our interview, I immediately noticed that this quilt looks like an American aesthetic quilt. I found it interesting that Bernice as activist, decided to make her daughter an American aesthetic quilt design, versus a African American aesthetic quilt design. I interpret her selection of the aesthetic design as a conscious desire to make sure her daughter had a quilt that would resemble an American aesthetic to ensure her daughter would have a sense of belonging at the University of Texas. Her daughter would be seen as having all the material comforts that other white students would have, and thus, her quilt would signify her daughter’s inclusion as an African American. This is tangible evidence of what Charles Long’s concept of “The Involuntary Presence of the Black
Community in America.” Long suggests that the involuntary presence of the Black community in America presented “a bizarre reality, not simply because their presence as slaves pointed to a radical change in status and culture, but equally because their presence as slaves pointed to a radical contradiction with the dominant culture itself.” This suggests that Bernice’s quilt was an attempt to help her daughter come to terms with the opaqueness of her condition and at the same time oppose it. Bernice’s quilt was her way of expressing the truth of the negativity she could experience at an predominately white institution, and at the same time, “transform and create an-other reality” one of inclusion and belonging. Thus, the quilt symbolizes a religious consciousness that is related to this imagery, and from such a consciousness Bernice hopes that the quilt can give her daughter the power to resist and maintain her humanity while at college. The quilt on her college bed would visually reinforce to her daughter a sense of belonging, and the quilt signifies a highly exceptional and extremely impressive image of her daughter at a predominantly white university. Thus, the quilt acts as a reminder to her daughter that she belongs, but also that she maintain her identity without completely acquiescing to the norms of the majority population. Her daughter’s quilt is illustrative of the inner dynamics of how quilts combine and interweave concepts of self, in relationship to communal realities that emerge.

Bernice is oriented toward future success for herself, her family, and the world in which she lives. She views life as a gift. She informed me that she self-identifies as a non-

385 Ibid, p. 177.
denominational Christian. Her religious sensibilities are expressed in her quilts as social justice. For Bernice, quilts are a testament to the power of spiritual expression that links life and beauty. According to Bernice,

Life should be meaningful, comfortable, beautiful, and a quilt embodies those characteristics, it is a manifestation of a belief system a value system no matter how long it takes to produce, how complicated or how simple.” Life is important it is not to be taken for granted which is why we don’t throw away quilts. We make it, we preserve it, we take care of it; we repair it, because we respect what it took to produce it. Quilts are art an imitation of life.

I found that Bernice didn’t really have much to say about the intersection of religion and quilting. However, she did tell me that “I can sense God when I am quilting.” Although she grew up a Christian, she admits that she “still discerning God’s voice from her own.” Bernice doesn’t feel compelled to use God language to talk about the impulse that inspires her to quilt. During our meeting she said that the impulse to create can be called “by whatever name one wishes to call it.” As I tried to mine more information about her quilting practices, she informed me that her inspiration is to create the structure and space for others to quilt. She is inspired to make sure quilters have a place to do the craft in her community. She stated that she hasn’t had time to quilt as much as she likes, “I have assumed the responsibility to create the infrastructure to preserve the craft. My creative impulse and inspiration has been applied to that, more than the creation of the quilt, or sitting and working on a quilt myself. I am driven by constraints and inspired to create possibilities for others to create. I am a product of the sixties.” In her search for beauty and a deeper experience of the sacred she grew to value spaces that lent towards liberation efforts. As such, her language of the spiritual is tied to her
work in the social. Her story doesn’t follow conventional scripts of the other quilters that end with settling comfortably into a familiar community-of-faith or institutional religious belief system. Her narrative highlights her appreciation for the open-ended, the unpredictable, and the creative.

When you visit Bernice’s quilting room, it takes up a large part of her two-story home. She has quilted textiles with African fabric. She is a historian of African American quilting in Houston. Thus, she has documents of awards and exhibitions, pictures of old quilts, quilting supplies and all other sorts of things. (Figure 4.34, 4.35, 4.36, 4.37, 4.38, 4.39).
Figure 4.34 – African Cloth

Figure 4.35 – Quilting Tools

Figure 4.36 – Quited Textile

Figure 4.37 – International Quilt Festival Award

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386 A photograph of Bernice’s African Cloth, December 15, 2014
387 A photograph of Bernice’s quilting Tools, December 15, 2014
388 A photograph of Bernice’s Quited Textile, December 15, 2014
389 A photograph of Bernice’s International Quilt Festival Award, December 15, 2014
She is grateful to African American predecessors for forging the path for her to do the work of social justice. She told me that she believes she has a responsibility to do her part in helping make a better world for others. This is why Bernice believes quilting is an autobiography that leaves a record/testimony of individual lives for future generations to interpret. She said, “I joined the quilt circle for social reasons and to learn new skills.”

For her, her textile skills were meant to be used for social justice projects that help give people’s lives meaning. This suggests that quilting offers a new consciousness of blacks by helping to promote a clearer vision regarding the issues of meaning and purpose of the impulse or feeling for complex subjectivity.

By the time we finished the interview, the examination of her life and art as an artist revealed the complex and creative ways through quilts Black women explore culture and

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388 A photograph of Bernice’s quilted textile, December 15, 2014
389 A photograph of Bernice’s International Festival Quilt Award, December 15, 2014
390 A photograph of Bernice’s Quilt Room, December 15, 2014
391 A photograph of a picture of a quilt made by Bernice, December 15, 2014
engage the community in Houston. It also revealed how her role as artist was transformed into social activism and agency that allowed for a greater appreciation of the traditional practices of quilting. She used quilting to devise a way to make community for quilters. By making community, I mean to suggest her ability to construct social, educational, familial organizations that ensures racial survival and progress of African Americans.

Through her narrative, memory, and creative expressions she transforms the fixed identity that society has placed on people, particularly black women. The quilting circle illustrates the various transitions in her identity construction from being a student to a textile artist to an artist to a teacher, and ultimately a quilter. In the end she identifies herself as a community activist. In this light, Bernice’s creative thrust to be an artist who quilts embodies the cultural habits, values and expressions of African American women artists in the past, such as Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and other women social justice activists that are artists. Her interview highlights the desire among cultural activists to translate black women’s work as both artistic and social justice expressions. As such, the work of Bernice and others within the quilting circle preserve an essential part of African American women’s art and cultural history. Even though Bernice no longer has much time to quilt, she provides a way to understand the quilter as not only creating quilts, but also how the quilter creates space for social justice and cultural awareness projects. In this way Bernice, creates a space for the emergence of new artists/quilters to construct their voice and create their vision of life. This signals to the creativity and agency of black women in their struggle for a liberated existence. Her story and her activism reveal the complexity of her self-identity and her quest for complex subjectivity through her daily life. Her story challenges our understanding of
agency through art to speak to the universal condition of humanity. By interpreting her artwork and activism as the freedom to embrace a moral sensibility on her own terms, we learn of her duties, obligations, values, and beliefs that extend our understanding of black womanhood. She combines religious reflection and practical understanding to gain a better understanding of how women are trying daily to eradicate oppressive social structures that circumscribe the agency of African American women. Her artwork lets her have hope, identity, and agency to envision and reconcile marginalized experiences of black women, and especially black artists. For Bernice, her faith becomes manifested in the everyday experience of women’s lives, and by interpreting their artwork and stories we learn things we often ignore about the cultural productions of women.

This is significant to the study of African American religion because quilters provide religious and social testimony of African American women. These stories should be read as an illustration of what Cheryl Sanders believes is the “most critical hermeneutical challenge facing Bible-believing Christians, namely, the struggle to be faithful to God’s call to freedom and justice in the midst of a society that offers attractive compromises with the evils of oppression.”\textsuperscript{392} Bernice’s story is an example of what Sanders calls “empowerment ethics.” According to Sanders, empowerment ethics means “the norms, principles, and ethos ascribed to individuals and groups engaged in the task of liberating others by empowering them to act.”\textsuperscript{393} The study of African American quilters broadens our understanding of the contributions of quilters and quilting organizations that


\textsuperscript{393} Ibid, p. 4.
exemplify and embody empowerment ethics. To be specific, it illuminates how the African American quilting tradition reflects a chronology of collective transformation that underscores Black churches’ obligation to address the ethical predicaments of oppressed people, and provides an empowerment ethics paradigm that fosters an integrated understanding of experience, insight, and struggle that: (1) affirms the humanity of the oppressed before God, (2) uses quilts as an effective vehicle of protest for social change, (3) creates African American quilting bees, guilds, and organizations that welcome and embrace an intragroup social ethics that demands justice within the larger society, (4) inspires oppressed people to join forces to develop strategies for personal progress and community development, (5) articulate a constructive vision of self-advancement that fosters church and community role models, and illustrates what is hoped for in the future, (6) recognizes a quilter’s self-directed transformation of the human psyche that allows them to function as socially responsible moral agents, and (7) affirms that empowered women, men, and communities should devote their gifts and resources to serving the needs of others, just like Christ. To this end, studying the 3Q’s allows scholars to gain deeper insight of the importance of the African American quilting tradition in the daily lives of African Americans and women., offers examples and illustrations of artwork made by individual quilters, groups of quilters, and/or quilting organizations that promote self-worth and self-affirmation, and/or how quilters use quilts and quilt-making to convey a spiritual imperative for all people to pursue justice, righteousness, and moral agency in the world. The failure to see the 3Q’s (quilter, quilt-making process, quilt) as a source material for the study of African American religion hinders womanist and Black theologians ability to fully understand the steps taken by
African American women and groups of women to move progressively from a state of tripartite oppression to one of moral agency within the framework of the Christian faith that is linked to the cultural production of African American quilts. In other words, by defining herself as a quilter Bernice relocates not only where we might find art, but also how we might understand the art that we find as social activism. The quilt becomes an expression of religious consciousness of a quest for subjectivity that finds its own self-interpretation through quilts, which expresses hope for the future and the power to resist the harshness of life. To this end, quilters as activist illuminate a religious consciousness of African Americans which offers a reservoir of visual testimonies that communicate who black people are, where they have been, and their hopes for the future, which is shared from generation to generation among African American women in their daily interactions with family and community. Quilters who are activist illuminate how material objects can be used to inspire women to take action. In my opinion, it is exciting to think about the new interpretations that would come about if careful attention was given to role of quilters in social justice movements, and how it is linked to the religious consciousness of African American quilters.

4.8 Donna Jackson’s Faith: An Art Quilter’s Quest for Complex Subjectivity

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1 King James Version

I conducted the interview with Donna Jackson on August 21, 2014. Donna begins her story with the death of a loved one. In 1997, Donna Jackson’s father died. His death impacted Donna’s life greatly. She served as his caregiver until his departure. As she watched her father’s health decline, Donna started asking existential questions regarding
the meaning of life. Similar to the previous quilters, this crisis in Donna’s life sparked the creative impulse to quilt. The search for greater meaning and purpose in life led her to reflect on her life and the world. She discovered as she reflected on her life that an inner desire to create began to flourish. This quest for creative expression eventually put her in contact with other people who were engaged in the art of quilting. Ultimately, they invited her to visit fabric stores, exhibitions, conferences, and travel to meet other quilters at their homes. Donna’s encounter with these quilts and quilters set her on the journey to experience more of what life has to offer, both individually and socially. In 1998, one of Donna’s quilting friends invited her to travel to a quilt exhibition hosted by an African American quilt guild in Dallas, Texas. When she arrived at the exhibition, she saw “a quilt with a visual image of a sun with sun rays.” According to Donna,

When I went to the exhibition, I walked in the door and up the steps and I saw this quilt with a dramatic sunburst and the rays around it. It caught my attention, and I was in awe of it…this was more than I ever contemplated what a quilt was.

Donna was in “awe” of the quilt, and this aesthetic experience sparked an impulse and/or emotion that inspires a willingness to accept different understandings of self, the other, experiences and material objects. As Van der Leeuw notes that once awe is established it “transcends into sediment forms of words, language, myths, rituals, and religious formula when reenacted becomes a testimony or witnessing that strives for a meaningful whole.” This awe allowed Donna to subscribe to alternative worlds of meaning-making and empathy that inspired an underlying conviction and rigorous commitment to

the quilting tradition. In other words, Donna’s encounter with the quilts generated a passion to make meaning out of life differently, and to articulate her quest for complex subjectivity by using scraps of materials.

Donna realized that the quilts were not like the traditional quilts that she had seen before. For her, these quilts more resembled works of art. She said that she told herself, “I could do this. I know that I could do this.” After the exhibition she met Roland Freeman, author of Communion of Spirits. She listened to the stories Freeman told about the quilters he had met and the quilts they made. After listening to Freeman, she felt inspired to quilt. She kept saying to herself that she was going to quilt. She kept repeating the affirmation “I can do this”. Once she convinced herself of this larger perception of self, as a quilter, she told herself, “I am going to start quilting when I get home”. Donna informed me that her friends were skeptical about her quilting passion. Donna told me that Freeman said that when she becomes a quilter that she was going to experience something within herself. She stated that Freeman told her it was going to be an absolutely wonderful thing. According to Donna, Freeman said, “What you are going to get from it, is an individual you didn’t know exists.” She accepted Freeman notion that quilting would be transformational. Donna claims to have told Freeman “I am going do it, and I know that I am going to do it.” She went on to say that, “I believe that I got into quilting because I knew that I could do it if I put myself into it wholehearted, speed

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ahead, nonstop.” She left Dallas inspired by her trip and determined to be a quilter and make quilts.

Upon her return to Houston, Donna bought a Brother’s sewing machine, cutting board; new tools needed to cut fabric, and collected materials for quilting. For Donna, it had been over 23 years since she sewed. She stated “because I said when I reached a certain age I wasn’t going to sew anymore, I was going to buy what I needed.” This idea of sewing hints to Donna’s belief that hand-made clothes transmitted social signals that said something about your socioeconomic status and race. As Desmond Morris notes, “It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals. Every costume tells a story, often a very subtle one, about its wearer.” 396 So after college, she no longer sewed her clothes. Donna chose the room where her father lived before he died. She cleared out her father’s belongings and transformed her father’s old room into her “new” quilting room. The cleaning out of the room in many ways represents the renewal that Donna felt, and highlights that quilting serves as a powerful tool that helped her face the loss and start to heal. This suggests by enlarging her repertoire of hands-on-skills that brings out her inherent creative potential, which in turn allows Donna to alleviate psychological and spiritual pain of the death of her father. This is significant because it shows that the art of quilting allows quilters to communicate with symbols, fabrics, and colors, which in turn creates a path that allows, as art therapist Jill Goodacre notes, “access the unconscious and gets behind defenses and survival strategies that allows people to

develop insight—its powerful because it allows people to reach their own insights based on their works.”

In this light, Donna points to how artistic expression enhances healing and growth that meets the physical, emotional, cultural and spiritual needs of a person. Thus, the study of the African American quilts as a daily tool of everyday life, suggests that learning a traditional craft can be an important step toward healing from a life crisis such as death.

Donna started out as a traditional quilter. Her first quilt was a Log cabin quilt pattern. She stated, “I chose to make this quilt because it was a pattern enslaved Africans used to make Underground Railroad quilts.” For Donna, choosing a pattern that was once used on the Underground Railroad inspired her start quilt-making. She remembered her grandmother making those types of quilts and she wanted to start out making quilts like her grandmother made. Thus, Donna’s initial quilt not only correlates to a collective and shared history of an African American past, but also to the individual relationship with her grandmother. However, she stated that she found making traditional quilts boring and that she “found no purpose in it.” Since quilting traditional quilts was not fulfilling she continued to explore quilt making. This experience led her to make applique’ quilts. She remembered that her Aunt Zeffy made these types of quilts. Again, Donna became bored with making applique quilts from patterns like her “Aunt Zeffy used to make.” She admitted that she didn’t like the set patterns of applique’ quilts. She wanted to be more creative with her quilts. Donna’s eventual shift to making art quilts was part of her search

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for a quilt-making process that allowed her to make quilts that expressed her elemental impulse to create material objects, which she was as an artist. Her quest ended when she found art quilts—a quilt that hangs on a wall or free standing sculptural piece.

Her interest in making art quilts stemmed from her academic training, as well as, the skills she had learned as a seamstress when she was 19 and 20 years old. She wanted to start off making something that was difficult to make. Donna said “just as I did with my sewing. I would take a vogue pattern and make it mine, and you could see that dress in the vogue magazine and I made that, then I got to where I didn’t need a vogue pattern I just would pick it up.” She went on to say that, “I knew that if I was going to sew again, it had to be something that was going to challenge me. It had to be something that would pull the best out of me and…quilting was it.” As such, a quest for life meaning, the remembrance and relationship of loved ones, and desire to push herself to produce challenging art quilts motivated Donna’s learning process. Her journey reveals her multidimensional modes of being a quilter. Her quest was linked to a desire and ability to create something that she could enjoy, and expressed her elemental impulse to create. This is significant to the study of African American religion because this experience suggests that we approach quilts with sensitivity to the subject matter of quilts that links the use of art as a medium of self-expression, and the power of creating beauty in the midst of the complexities of life.

In 1999, the first artistic pictorial quilt that Donna designed was called *Nubian* (see Figure 4.40).
Figure 4.40 – Donna’s Nubian Quilt

When this quilt was made, she had just begun to develop her skills of making faces and vivid illustrations of landscapes. Donna already knew how to draw and sketch from her former academic training. However, to learn how to make facial designs within quilts, she studied Charlotte War Anderson. Although she knew that making faces in quilts would be a challenge, she continued in the practice. For Donna, this quilt combined the

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398 A photograph of Donna’s Nubian Quilt in her home, August, 21, 2014
399 Charlotte War Anderson official website [http://www.charlottewarrandersen.com/](http://www.charlottewarrandersen.com/) To gain a sense of the style that Donna Jackson uses in her art quilts.
techniques she learned from her grandmother and Aunt Zeffy and from studying War’s quilting techniques. At the time of our meeting, she still owned this quilt. It hung in the foyer of her home in a gold frame. I realized that the location and the framing of the quilt spoke its artistic value to Donna. She is proud of the quilt. For Donna, the Nubian quilt is an attempt to reconstruct her history and her cultural identity as she sees it. Donna shared, “when I began this quilt, I prayed to my ancestors to give me the vision for this quilt. I had no knowledge of this place. For this one, a specific prayer was said asking that my ancestors give me the gift to create a piece representing my culture.” As such, her Nubian quilt serves as a link between the real and the imagined, past and present, and her quest for a fuller life.

The landscape of the quilt shows the detail of her visions and the visual images creates a vivid picture of Africa. Immediately I noticed that she included sun and the sun rays in the quilt. I interpreted her inclusion of the sun with its rays as deliberate remembrance of her transformation to quilting after her crisis event. For Donna to put in the quilt, shows that this visual image of the sun with rays showed she wanted to reproduce a transformative, life changing experience for others. Her use of physical bodies in the quilt informs us of her perception of these bodies within a vision of a liberative existence. Her decision to make the quilt with the guidance of an “otherworldly” guide instead of historical facts suggest that she wanted to make a quilt from intuitive knowledge. Her story reveals an intuitive decision making that shapes, colors, and influences the selection of images and design of the quilt. This is significant because it shows that quilters can become aware of intuitive knowing and decision making through making quilts. It is materializes the intuitive knowing and decisions that
characterizes the themes and forms in the quilt that shapes her perception of Africa and herself.

As I looked at the quilt hanging on her wall, I noticed the colors, applique’, and piecing together of materials create dimensions of the African landscape and Nubian faces that give the quilt visual qualities of a painting. From centuries of art history we learn that paintings have a narrative impulse within their compositions, and that viewers who are adept at reading narratives into images, reveal that some of human culture’s most beloved storytellers have been painters. As such, I found myself asking: What is being remembered? How did the quilter manifest this vision? What is she trying to tell us or get us to see? Regarding how she manifested this vision, she stated, “In my mind’s eye this is what I envisioned what Africa would have been like with the mountains, pyramids, animals, and mountains.” When you view the quilt, the quilt indicates a positive element of Nubian life that appeals to the imagination.

As interviewer, I recognize that Donna’s memory of her ancestors and Africa is not necessarily linear or historically accurate. The picture is very subjective. Therefore, the quilt isn’t constructed to denote history but rather Donna’s own subjectivity. She reimagines her identity and experiences within a cultural frame of her own imagination. For Donna this is significant because her visions of life-real and/or imagined provide meaning. Her Nubian quilt serves as a link between the real and the imagined that gives abundant allusions that allow black folks to overcome the sterility of a fixed identity. Her quilt reflects a creative possibility that points to the religious meaning of the land, even in
the absence of authentication. Her story about the quilt reveals a religious experience—"a type of transforming experience that speaks to a deeper reality, guided perhaps by a form of esoteric knowledge." Donna’s experiences in making the Nubian quilt represents a form of unconsciousness that contains archetypes, and primordial images and ideas that remain an important residue and stronghold among black people and culture. This is significant for the study of black religion because quilts as narratives allows scholars to gain a better understanding of a Jungian “collective unconsciousness” (the inherited part of the human psyche not developed by personal experience) among African American quilters. For Jung a goal of life for individuals is to grasp the uniqueness of themselves and others in the broadest terms. The larger conceptions of self is based on the idea that humans inherit a deeper collective wisdom, not developed by personal experience, which allows individuals to fulfill their unique promise, by using archetypes of protection, survival, and hope that can be administered to any ruptures in the minds of the faithful. The collective unconscious contain a well of images that people should succumb to, in fact it is what these images are for, as Jung notes,

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They are meant to attract, to convince, to fascinate, and to overpower. They are created out of the primal stuff of revelation and reflect the every-unique experience of divinity…Thanks to the labors of the human spirit over the centuries, these images have become embedded in a comprehensive system of thought that ascribes an order to the world, and are at the same time represented by a mightily, far-spread, and venerable institution called the Church. 404

This suggests that images in African American quilters, often unconsciously create, elementary or primordial thoughts that can be interpreted, to gain a deeper understanding of the images, symbols, colors, and designs within quilts that shape the relationships, beliefs, thoughts, and visions that matter most in our lives. To this end, it should be remembered that this deeper mind carries a vast store of objective wisdom and inner visions that when recognized and accessed allows scholars of African American religion to decipher life’s changes and larger meanings that quell the secret unrest of an oppressed people. Lastly, Donna’s prayers to her ancestors, creativity, and her life experiences are all interwoven to reconstruct her African heritage in a positive light. As such, Donna’s Nubian quilt is an example of the process of connecting memories (conscious and unconscious, real and imagined) to symbolic compositions within quilts that gives depth to all modalities of human consciousness. This is significant because it reveals an effort to gain a richer self-consciousness or a better understanding of self through a visual image. The idea that she would express the real and imagined with scraps of materials instead of paint, music, dance, and written text suggests, that quilts

404 Ibid, p. 8
should be included in religious discourse about black cultural productions. Including the quilt-making process, quilts, and the quilters in the discourse can enhance our knowledge of how material objects allow African Americans to rediscover their ethnic origins and generate new ideas of self that originated from some kind of transcendent belief system, in the broadest terms.

As we were walking up the stairs in her home, I noticed this quilt she named *Apostles of Freedom* (see figure 4.41)

![Figure 4.41 – Donna’s Apostles of Freedom Quilt](image)

This quilt has pictures of actual African Americans that played a significant role in the liberation of Black people. Along the border of the quilt, she sewed scraps of fabric to create the faces of Harriet Tubman, Fredrick Douglas, W.E.B Dubois, Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers, James Brown, Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X., and Thurgood Marshall. Between each portrait, are designs that resemble symbols and images used in
the Underground Railroad quilts during slavery. In the center of the quilt, she quilts a scene of the continent of Africa, she depicts the transportation of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic in ships, and then she depicts the black experience in the United States by cutting out real pictures that she transferred into cloth and sewed into a mural. At the back of the scene is a picture of the sun, symbol that represents the memory of her father and the spiritual guidance she receives while making the quilt. Thus, this quilt represents another example of the visions that Donna receives from what she calls her “mind’s eye.” When she received the vision for the quilt, she stated, “I am going to pray on this, I got to find the fabric that is going to express what with my mind is telling, and an anxiety comes over me until I find that fabric that will allow it be created. She strongly believe that this quilt concentrates on a faithful representation of historical decryptions of the African American experiences that forges the movement toward liberation that could be interpreted to mark African American religious development. Again, Donna reiterated that before every quilt she prays. She informed me,

Now my quilts start with a prayer, and that prayer is that you put it in my mind for me to see it, and then in my heart to fill it, and then in my hands to do it. Now that is my prayer every time before I start, and you better believe me it starts in my mind, and he puts it my heart, and then in my hands for me to create it because without that it would be junk. It wouldn’t be special, it wouldn’t be unique. I know that my pieces are unique because they are a gift from God, they really are.

She even went so far to say that she can step into other worlds through quilting, and that she believes there is a connection between spirituality and quilting. However, she informed me, “That is not in every quilter, they can make it out to be, they never
asked for that knowing and spiritual guidance to do something.” To gain a better understanding, I asked so: is it like God is directing your every move? She replied,

Every stitch you make. It becomes like, oh Lord, that doesn’t look right, well [something says to her] rip it up, rip it open, and take that stitching out. Now I stitched too much and torn the material, well [something says to her] get another piece, and find a way to applique in, so you are hearing this. I am not just saying this, something is going on that is hard to articulate. That is why I say yes, its spiritual, it’s just like when the holy spirit comes to when you ask God for something, and you ask Lord to let you see it, let you hear it, talk to me, and then the Holy Spirit comes to you, it’s the same thing. Something is guiding and telling you what to do. He [God] walks me through it.

In this quilt, Donna truly believes that God gave her the vision, the heart, and the hands to make *Apostles of Freedom*. God provided her with the talent to visually create a portrait of history that illuminates the quest for complex subjectivity.

Donna’s narrative illustrates the quest to push for more in life. She expresses this through creating art quilts. Her art is constructed through challenge, difficulty, and the ability to go beyond one’s comfort zone to create possibilities of life. Her comments point to her impulse to create, and her desire to integrate spirituality into her art. For Donna, it is important to emphasize meaningful moments of life in making quilts. She believes that the remembrance of these moments in history in the quilt help African American develop a richer self-consciousness that helps African Americans live fuller lives through a critical engagement with the world, and reexamine their human presence. This is significant because it suggests that gaining a better understanding of self is psychological event that puts the quilter and the viewer in contact with something greater than themselves. This allows for African Americans to gain a new sense of awareness and vision on life. Her story suggests that there is something within the art of quilting that gives rise to a consciousness that is squarely lodged in the belief that “I am Somebody.”
Through quilting, Donna is able to create, in Pinn’s words, a “holistic function of facilitating growth.” She combines lived realities, self-consciousness, visions of life, creativity, esoteric knowledge, and faith to expresses an external portrayal of something and the inner meaning of something which are woven together to give a picture of reality that facilitates beliefs in a fuller life for African Americans. As such her material reality can be considered a picture that actives a broader awareness of the connections between historical developments and inner urges, and speaks to the quilts visual testimony as the quest for complex subjectivity in the daily lives of African Americans.

This concludes my ethnographic research on quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle in Houston, Texas. African American quilters at the Jubilee Quilt Circle produce contemporary quilts from a spectrum of life experiences in order to “say” in the quilt what isn’t expressible in words and other forms of expression such as music, dance, sermon, and the like. Through the visual testimonies in their quilts, quilters weave stories that link black religion to everyday life. Through memories, creativity, narratives, activism and faith, the 3 Q’s reveal complex and subtle interactions in everyday life along with prayer and transcendent belief systems that allow quilters to create a picture that makes their quest for complex subjectivity noticeable. The creative ability to mix symbolism and imagery using scraps of materials from their everyday life suggests that the quilt and quilt-making process allow quilters to record thoughts and experiences that evolved into a personalized hybridized system of beliefs that were passed down from generation to generation within the contemporary homes and communities of African Americans.

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Americans in Texas, and beyond. The quilter’s ability to record the psychological well-being through the colors, stitching, symbols and patterns, and the quilting process allows scholars to gain a better understanding of African American history, thought, and experiences, as well as connections between visual expression and the religious imperative that guides the symbolism, mode of production, and formal character of the artwork. What I am trying to establish is that the study of African American quilt-making process, quilts, and the quilters who make them allows us to trace the symbols, imagery, signs, and material culture that influenced the development of African American religious beliefs and culture. The study of quilts, quilters, and quilt-making provides scholars of religious studies with tangible evidence of the blending of art and the quest for complex subjectivity that creates its own iconographic blend of communication which illuminates the links between black religion and everyday life. The quilter, the quilting making process, and the quilt are interconnected and taken as a whole tells a story using scraps of materials from everyday life that express the religious beliefs and human experiences within the inner and outer spaces of the everyday lives of African Americans, especially women. Thus, this chapter hopes to advance the idea that African American quilts are source material for the study of African American religious studies.

In the next chapter, the conclusion is provided to summarize my argument, point out what is unique about the project, research implications for the study of religion, theory and method, limitations and gaps in research, and implicate future research.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Quilting Faith: African American Quilts as Source Material for the Study of African American Religion has two main arguments. First, scholars of African American religious studies have overlooked the critical study of African American quilt-making process, quilts, and the quilters who create them as source material for the study of African American religion. Second, African American quilts use scraps of mundane materials to craft visual testimonies that illuminate the links between Pinn’s definition of black religion (the quest for complex subjectivity) and everyday life. The realization that scholars of African American religion have overlooked the critical study of African American quilts led to the chapters in the dissertation. The goal of this dissertation is to encourage scholars of African American religion to conduct further research on African American quilting, quilts, and quilters as source material for the study of African American religion.
In chapter 1 entitled, *Redirecting the Gaze: African American Quilts as Source Material*, I argue that scholars have failed to explore the African American quilting tradition as a parallel artistic expression to music, dance, poetry and the like. In this chapter, I outline the trajectory of the study of black cultural productions within African American religious studies. I point out that throughout the first half of the twentieth century, scholars stressed that cultural forms such as songs, music, dance, sermons, folk tales, art and humor are important source material for describing and understanding how people of African descent found in Christianity a black theology of liberation and a new orientation to the world, which they adapted to their psychological, political, spiritual, cultural, philosophical and social needs during and after slavery. Scholars who understood the religious significance of black cultural productions limited the examination to heralded cultural forms such as music, dance, song, literature, and poetry as proper source materials for the description of African American religion. I highlight Womanist and Black theologian’s theoretical underpinnings of heralded black cultural productions and their religious significance for the study of African American religion. I also reveal that an offshoot of only recognizing and examining the available resources is the lack of exploration of the existence of African American quilts in our stories of black religious life, and the depths of the nature and meaning of African American religion. As a consequence scholars have failed to recognize African American quilts as source material for the study of African American religion. I conclude the chapter by pointing out that it has become necessary to include attention to African American quilts (both as art and material object) to help us understand the visual ways in which quilts speak to the links between black religion and everyday life. I define black religion using Anthony
Pinn’s definition of Black religion as the “quest for complex subjectivity--A desire or feeling for more life meaning.” 406 This central concern for subjectivity, according to Anthony Pinn, is “the creative struggle in history for increased agency, for a fullness of life.” 407 Pinn’s definition of the nature and meaning of Black religion allows this dissertation to investigate and identify visual testimonies within African American quilts that inform our understanding of this ‘yearning and pushing for a fuller life’ 408 within the everyday lives of African Americans, and women in particular. The use of Pinn’s definition and the gaps in knowledge about this cultural material posed a challenge in developing the approach to the study of the visual testimonies within African American quilts for scholars of African American religion. To this end, in chapter two I provide multi-disciplinary methods and hermeneutic approaches that allow for greater comfort with the engagement of African American quilts as source material.

In chapter 2 entitled, African American Quilts: Developing the Framework for Visual Testimonies, I argue that African American quilts are visual testimonies that link black religion (quest for complex subjectivity) to everyday life. Thus, the primary goal of this chapter is to offer an interpretative framework that examines the visual testimonies of African American quilts as source material for the study of African American religion. I begin by outlining the African American quilt tradition in Houston, Texas as the site of

investigation. The choice of Houston as a site raised several methodological questions: how does one collect or generate the data pertaining to Houston quilts? And how does one analyze the data collected? To address these questions, I chose to conduct a qualitative study of Houston quilters. I favor qualitative research for this project because it allowed me to can utilize a variety of methods and practices such as participant observations, unstructured interviews, photographs, and the like, to collect the stories, directly observe behaviors, and interactions, reflect on the experiences, and illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. As a result of my thinking with a social constructionist view (knowledge is constructed, not created), I choose multiple ethnographic methods and hermeneutical approaches that identify and interpret these visual testimonies as sources of religious insight grounded within human experience within individual and social worlds. I combined Anthony Pinn and Hans-Georg Gadamer hermeneutic approaches to visual art and material culture. I also used Anthony Pinn’s theory of relational centralism as the theoretical perspective for my chosen methodology. Relational centralism provides the theoretical perspective that requires I explore the relational nature of the African American quilt, the African American quilter, and the quilt-making process. In other words, relational centralism requires the quilt, quilter, and quilting process must examined together to gain an understanding of the religious significance of the visual testimonies within African American quilts. Through this lens, I develop the concept of the 3Q’s (quilts, quilters, and the quilt-making) to provide the framework for collecting data and interpreting the visual testimonies of the past, present, and future possibilities for more fulfilled existence within African American quilts. In this sense, the study of African American quilts through the theoretical perspective of
relational centralism requires attention to the visual dimensions of African American quilts, the history of the material and life-stories of the quilter, as well as the quilt-making process that allows the quilters to express creativity and multiple points of view of life that has allowed African Americans to make meaning out of life. Through the lens, African American quilts as source material are an alternative creative expression through which the quest for complex subjectivity emanates from an ordinary quilt that simultaneously exists with heralded forms of black cultural productions. The methodology and interpretative framework reveals that the 3 Q’s can provide a more robust understanding of the visual testimonies in quilts, and gain a better understanding to why quilters use scraps of materials from everyday life, instead of other creative mediums such as literature, songs, dance, poetry, and the like, to express links between black religion and everyday life. With the theoretical and methodological approaches in place, I present in chapter 3 the historical contextualization and aesthetic considerations that shaped and developed a distinct African American quilting tradition in the United States.

In the chapter entitled, African American Quilting: A Birth of a Tradition from Slavery to the 20th Century., I argue that the examination of African American quilts and their histories opens a window for scholars to reexamine previous conceptions and misconceptions of the role, history, placement, and meaning-making of African American quilts. As such, this chapter charts a historical genealogy of African American quilt-making to provide a space for the analyses of the birth of a particular African American quilt tradition. The genealogy of the African American quilting tradition provides the historical information to introduce my concept of “war on fear.” The concept
of “war on fear” hermeneutically positions the African American quilting tradition as a response to the challenges and struggle’s confronting people of African descent from slavery to present. Furthermore, it creates a lens to interpret what such historical movements say about various interpretations of African American quilting practices. Through this lens, the non-linguistic expressions and the deepest cultural conditions for symbolic communication are explored from slavery to present. Along these lines, the conceptual framing of each section reveals the process of cultural syncretism which combined West African textile traditions and provincial American textile traditions that helped sustain African religious cosmology, ideas, beliefs, experiences, and quests for a fuller life in the United States. Taken together, this chapter illuminates that from slavery to present, quilts have value and worth within black communities in the United States, and many quilts intentionally communicate the cultural, political, social, spiritual values and beliefs that helps African Americans make meaning out of life.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, Weaving Ourselves: Memory Creativity Narrative and Faith of Texas Quilters, I illustrate how the ethnographic research I conducted on African American quilters in Houston reveals the cultural production of African American quilts and illuminates the link between black religion (quest for complex subjectivity) and the everyday lives of contemporary African American quilters. My ethnographic approach includes participant observation at the Jubilee Quilt Guild, photographs of quilts, and unstructured interviews of five African American quilters. The ethnographic research reveals that memories, narratives, creativity and faith as testified by the quilter, expressed in the quilt, and are made possible by the quilt making process. The five individual interviews provide a glimpse into the diverse and complex lives of
quilting and highlights the ways quilts express and make tangible the realm of the transcendental, spiritual, unconscious collective imagination and memories in their everyday lives. The interviewed quilters reveal that there is more to quilts than their aesthetic qualities. Each scrap of cloth represents a remembered past, that is arranged creativity to communicate a visual testimony that speaks to a larger, freer perspective of individual and communal life. As such, the substance of religion as historically manifested is discernible not only in heralded black cultural productions or other identified materials, but are also in the mundane materials of daily life contained in quilts. They also reveal that the stores that quilters tell about the quilt-making process reveals a creative ability and deeper religiosity is tapped into, and this allows the quilter to rethink, reshape, and present new perspectives of the cultural, religious and social context of their world without words. Through African American quilts we have unwritten records of the life experiences, beliefs, visions (real or imagined) and creative impulse that requires a sustained looking at and looking to within the study of African American religion. My findings suggest that there is a gap in knowledge about African American quilting, quilts, and quilt-makers, and that scholars need to develop sensitivity to the exploration of these material objects and decorative arts for signs that will allow them to gain a more robust understanding of, what is African American religion?

The challenge to this type of research is skills required to conduct ethnographic research such as: gaining access to quilters/quilting bees and/or guilds, interviewing, and the insider/outsider dilemma of ethnography. Throughout the dissertation, I identified the themes and ideas about the visual testimonies of quilts that link black religion to everyday life. I am aware that some of the writing has an abstract quality to it and that
some readers might find difficult to access. This is mainly due to my desire as the researcher to structure this dissertation in a way that raises questions and engender conversation that is vital to the discourse in the study of African American Religion rather than proffer final meanings about quilters’ beliefs and their quilts. The dissertation was designed to enable readers to see how aspects of African American quilts have religious significance for the study of African American religion. As such, the abstract areas of the project suggests that the ideas can be challenged, elaborated, and extended, and crafted into an argument that can be examined for the amount of weight an argument holds to generate conversations and serve as a catalyst for further research. More training is needed to make sure students can conduct qualitative research, and conduct it a timely manner. I posit that ethnographic methods are the best approach to enriching our understanding of how crisis, terror and dread spark creative expressions that are linked to the quest for complex subjectivity in the daily lives of African American, in particular, and all human beings, in general.

The two arguments of this dissertation bring into consideration corresponding implications for African American religious studies and those seeking meaning of African American religious phenomena. First, the study of the 3 Q’s expands the range of black cultural productions taken up in African American religious discourse. As mentioned in this dissertation, scholars of African American religion have failed to explore the religious significance of African American quilts. As such, this dissertation unveils a visual tradition that can no longer be ignored by scholars of African American religion. *Quilting Faith*, secondly, adds to the terrain of recognized methodologies and hermeneutical approaches in African American religious studies. The investigation of
African American quilts becomes a site of intersection for multiple disciplinary tools within art history, sociology, and religious studies. Accordingly, this intersectionality allows for a multi-method approach that combines various hermeneutic constructs and their application with a mixed methods design. This interpretative framework allows for the viewing of quilts as a whole and as a sum of individual parts that allows researchers to gain knowledge to build a more robust understanding of the religious significance of African American quilts. Finally, this dissertation opens up the investigation of quilts in terms of an underlying impulse (the quest for complex subjectivity) that is shaped by and within the context of historical realities and cultural creations of African American women, in particular, and African American, in general. The inclusion of African American quilts in the study of African American religion extends the examination of the black cultural productions to include the decorative art and crafts made by women within black communities in the United States. This is significant because it forces scholars of African American religion to dig deeply into the everyday lives of African American women to see how they seek to weave together all the various threads of the quest for complex subjectivity in a way that speaks to an all-encompassing sense of life meaning that involves a continuous yearning and pushing for a more life options for themselves and others. Currently, the frame of the discourse frequently imposes parameters of representation of black religious life and culture in general, and black women’s religious life and art in particular. The examination and interpretation of the quilts as source material spark critique that broadens what is being talked about within the tradition, and reveals the wider much more complex issue of faith as lived. Although I focused on African American women quilters, this project can be expanded to include all human
beings that produce quilts. The research can also be expanded to include the study of other material objects such as figurines, scrapbooks, beads, pottery, dolls, etc., as well as, visual art such as silhouettes and other found-object artworks. Lastly, more research can be done on the connection between West African textile traditions in Spanish Texas, and its links to traditional and contemporary art and textile traditions in Mexico, shared textiles patterns, designs, and images used by European-American quilters, and the impact of West African textile traditions in the development of the Western frontier and the textile industry in the United States.

It is my hope that this dissertation has garnered interest in further exploration of African American quilts, quilters who make them, and the process of quilting as source material for the study of African American religion.
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