ABSTRACT

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

by

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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.