

# Uncoverings

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## Quilt Talk: Verbal Performance among a Group of African-American Quilters

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*In order to offer an alternative to the material culture research model, this essay explores the social and oral context within which African-American women teach and perform quilting. The data were collected over a four-month period during which I was a participant/observer in a racially mixed sewing class sponsored by a neighborhood center in Tucson, Arizona, and predominantly attended and taught by African-American women. First classified according to type of performance and then considered holistically, the data corroborate the notion that from the verbal performances of any group—rather than from the group's material culture alone—emerge the values, beliefs, and notions of order that provide an impetus for the aesthetics informing the traditional material items that a group produces. A narrative account saturated with the dialogue of the African-American women, the essay is organized like a quilt itself: a few scraps of talk are grouped into four blocks, each one representing a particular speaker and a specific type of quilt-talk performance, and then quilted together with the folkloristic and sociolinguistic theory that reveals the patterns not only in these performances but also in their relationship to those in other African-American communities and other quilting environments. The conclusion: it is only by listening to the voices of African-American quilters speaking their subject that quilt researchers can come to understand the complex context of the traditions, beliefs, values, and aesthetics that comprise African-American quilts.*

### A Few Scraps

"I bring in the quilt to show Miss Jordan and she says 'Oh, I thought you were going to make a *handmade* quilt.' And I tell you I ripped out all those machine stitches. When Miss Jordan says 'by hand' she means by *hand*.'" . . . "Now, honey, maybe that's how you want to use a thimble, but you sure ain't sewing with it.'" . . . "You know even at the quilt shows where they have the experts, if you look, you'll find mistakes. That makes a quilt like life: it don't always work out just right.'" . . . "Taking apart all those blocks in a whole quilt—that's how I got my degree in ripping out. You got to go a long way if you want to catch up with me in that area.'" . . . "Didn't nobody teach me how to quilt: I'd sit up with a string and paper and teach myself how to do those patterns before I sewed them.'" . . . "Quilting is like cooking: everyone adds a little and takes some away to make it their own.'" . . . "If you want to keep quilting, you need to get used to our jokes because you know jokes tell something serious too . . . That's what our [quilting] class is good for, teaching communication."

The structure of the essay that follows is meant to emulate that of a quilt. I begin with a few snippets of quilt talk, piece those fragments together into four blocks, and finally quilt the blocks together into a patterned whole. Each block of the essay characterizes the talk of one of the principal African-American women of the classroom, though not all women of the class are represented herein. The metaphorical blocks are modeled on the literal four blocks of the quilt I made during the times I spoke with and listened to these women's quilt talk. Arranged in the Split Nine Patch pattern, each block is pieced from a similar striped background material contrasted with some other bright color, one color to a block.

The examples of quilt talk I present here occurred within the context of a sewing class given on Tuesday mornings at the Northwest Neighborhood Center in Tucson, Arizona. Though the class is ongoing and has been meeting for over five years, the data represented here was collected during the September through December session of 1991. Comprised of a mix of Anglo women and women of color, the class is for the most part an exclusively female environment,

with only occasional and brief visits by males; the size of the class varies widely with sometimes as many as ten women in attendance, sometimes as few as three. Because the teacher and a majority of the attendees are African-American, because these particular women are older and have been attending the class longer and more regularly than anyone else, and because the Center is located in a predominantly and historically black neighborhood, the sewing class feels as if it is “theirs” to me. Though I recognize that this setting is not exclusively African-American (after all, I am there and so are one, two, sometimes three other Anglo women and occasionally the same number of Hispanic women), I think it nonetheless represents to some extent the context and text of African-American “quilt talk.”

### *Four Blocks*

#### BLOCK ONE: *Lilac*, Vergiree Jordan

The story of this quilt’s blocks begins with the lilac one. Because this block is the one I finished first, the one that taught me how to complete the rest, I attribute it to Miss Jordan; she is, after all, the teacher, the one who showed me how to measure the pieces correctly so they’d match each other and produce even edges. But also the tone and construction, the feel of the lilac block seem to suit the “Miss Jordan” that I’ve constructed: its colors are subtle, soft, subdued, even elegant. Of all the blocks of my first quilt, this has the fewest number of mistakes. Likewise Miss Jordan herself is the most quiet, precise, perhaps even refined of the quilt talkers in the sewing group. Her talk is the most subdued and infrequent; it’s also rarely if ever performed for entertainment—though she certainly seems to enjoy being entertained by others—and never, that I have seen, used to assert power or control. Though she never claims expertise for herself, others often attribute it to her. A professional seamstress before her instruction days, Miss Jordan is talked up as *the* expert when it comes to sewing and for letting no shoddy work slip by her: “If Miss Jordan showing you how, you know you’re learning it right!”

The quilt talk type most indicative of Miss Jordan is the "teaching how to quilt" performance that primes students for getting it right. Unlike other teaching performances I have given or seen, Miss Jordan's particular version contains as much if not more showing than telling; that is, it demands more watching than listening from the learner, more action than talk from the teacher. Most often the interaction sounds like this: "this goes here this way like this," followed by a long period of silence during which Miss Jordan executes the task being taught while the learner watches. Demonstration, rather than explanation, is privileged. Other quilters' brief teaching performances verify that this particular characteristic of the teaching quilt talk performance holds true across performers. For instance, one quilter's lesson to me on how to tie a quilter's knot was a non-verbal demonstration; another's on using a thimble consisted of watching me work and saying at the appropriate moments, "Yes, honey, that's right; that's how I do" or "Oh, no, honey, I don't do like that." In more collective teaching sessions, the women often tell me, "don't you worry; you'll get the feel of it after a while; you won't even need to look, you'll just feel where the needle goes" whenever I say that I'm not sure how to do something that they have demonstrated.

Miss Jordan's individual style within this form of quilt talk teaching performance is very even, quiet, and softly spoken, one that I've heard the other women call "sweet" even as they are jokingly complaining about the way Miss Jordan demands perfection: "she'll tell you you have to rip that seam out but she'll say it so sweet you'll think ripping out is an honor." Because Miss Jordan certainly has the ability to talk sweet, perhaps the respect that she earns is a result of her type of quilt talk, a type of talk which is helpful and never boastful. And so, I attribute to her that block of my quilt that is the most precise, well-executed, sensible, and lilac-sweet in color and performance.

BLOCK TWO: *Hot Pink*, Lily Bacon

To Mrs. Bacon, I dedicate the "shocking pink" block. Just as the bold, hot pink block jumps out at me, so too does Mrs. Bacon's pres-

ence seem to fill the sewing classroom and command attention. Though she's attended infrequently during the months I've been collecting material from the sewing class, her impact has been far-reaching. When she walked in the room, everyone, including Miss Jordan, stopped what she was doing to minister to Mrs. Bacon: someone brought her a chair, another found her a vacant sewing machine, others cleared off table space so she would have room to work. The oldest of any of the women who have attended the class, Mrs. Bacon commands more respect than anyone else.

I perceived almost all of Mrs. Bacon's classroom talk to be a performance of some sort. Just in telling me her name, for instance, she recited a sort of poem: "I'm Lily Bacon, bacon and eggs, eggs and bacon, Lily Bacon. Now don't you forget it." A grand teller of her own tale, Mrs. Bacon gave me her stories of her girlhood, married life, and more recent times; a native of Texas, she became mother at age eleven to nine sisters and brothers when her own mother died. Married at fifteen to "a good husband . . . he raised them kids like they was his own," Mrs. Bacon and her husband adopted her brothers and sisters and eventually had another eleven children of their own.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Bacon's most prominent form of quilt talk was the quilter's autobiography, wherein the quilter tells the story of when and where she learned to quilt, who taught her, what her first quilts were like, and what current quilting projects she has underway. I learned that for Mrs. Bacon quilting, like cooking and rearing children, was a skill learned not from her mother but out of necessity of circumstance. "I'd sit up with a string and paper and teach myself how to do those patterns before I sewed them."

As you can imagine, it's virtually impossible for me in this article to do Mrs. Bacon's type of quilt talk real justice since *her* wordings are what make her story her own. Wanting to capture that essence, I asked her if she'd mind repeating and letting me tape some of the stories she'd told me about quilting. Her response was "there ain't nothing to tape. I done said it all. That's all there is." I feared that I would forget what she'd told me.

My fears were unfounded, however, as I discovered in the weeks after Mrs. Bacon's visits to the class. Because Mrs. Bacon and I were

sitting some distance away from the others while she was telling me her story, I thought our conversation had been private. Yet, time after time, the other women of the group would remind me of what Mrs. Bacon had said, applying her advice or humor to other situations that would crop up. For instance, the week following Mrs. Bacon's last visit, Mrs. Summers took the occasion to say to me, "Why are you standing up when you could be sitting down? You remind me of what my daddy used to say to me: when you're older, it'll still be sitting on the curb waiting for you. That's what Mrs. Bacon was trying to tell you last week. Remember what Mrs. Bacon told you about that?"

In actuality, it seems that *everyone* (at least every other African-American woman) was listening to our conversations, mentally recording them for further references and use. This aspect of audience participation in others' conversations is something that I realized only after the fact and which made clear another essential aspect of the group's "quilt talk." It appears that at least to these women, during quilting/sewing classtime, *any* conversation that *anyone* can hear—even if listeners have to strain to hear—seems to be open for report, response, and interpretation from the audience, which includes anyone in the room, not just the person being directly addressed.

Mrs. Bacon is also a performer of the teaching how to quilt version of quilt talk. Like Miss Jordan's, Mrs. Bacon's laissez-faire attitude toward teaching fosters the learner's individual techniques and styles. Her teaching technique was once (in my memory) directed at me: very casually glancing over at me struggling to stitch together pieces while I listened to her stories, Mrs. Bacon said to me "Now maybe that's how you want to use a thimble, but you ain't sewing with it." This comment was one that I could either ignore or capitalize on as an invitation for Mrs. Bacon to show me how to use the thimble properly. Similarly, Mrs. Summers' favorite story about Mrs. Bacon demonstrates the patience and confidence with which the latter instructs apprentices. Rather than asserting authority by telling the then-novice what she had to do, Mrs. Bacon's response to Mrs. Summers' complaints about not liking thimbles and deciding not to use one was (in Mrs. Summers' rendition): "Oh, don't worry,

honey, you will, you will.” Like Miss Jordan’s teacher talk, Mrs. Bacon’s too is often re-presented (either through reported speech performances or the sorts of comments mentioned above) to me by the other women. The women’s attention to her talk indicates how they value her as an experienced quilter. For instance, in introducing Mrs. Bacon, Mrs. Summers honored her with a very formal introduction: “Now here’s the one who taught me everything I know about quilting.”

BLOCK THREE: *Blue*, Marion Stevens Turner

Most noteworthy to me about this block is the stretchiness of its work-shirt blue material; it gave me fits at first because it kept stretching out of kilter and thus I couldn’t get the pieces to fit together smoothly. However, when I eventually connected this block to the others and quilted the entire construction, the gaps and tightness of the blue cloth worked themselves out for the most part. This experience with the literal cloth brings Marion to mind for me.<sup>1</sup>

For one thing, when I include Marion in this discussion, I’m stretching the definition of quilt talk because she is not a quilter herself. However, she is a regular and integral member of the sewing class and further has played a definite role in the story of my quilt, a part characterized for me by that “stretch-to-fit” aspect of the blue material. Marion’s most frequent type of talk in the sewing class deserves attention for what it illuminates about the context of African-American women in the racially mixed sewing class.

Marion’s quilt talk expertise is joking. By watching and listening to her, I developed some insight into how to interpret and present jokes in this crowd and thus how to become part of it. This step was an important one for me. One reason is that—up until the point when I first made a joke that she liked—Marion never spoke to me at all; about me, yes, but to me, no. Another reason is that, since this type of joking is very different from the type I’m used to, the shift was a difficult but necessary one: it taught me how to acquire some of the values essential not only to this group but to quilting as an enterprise.

The women’s favorite topic for jokes specifically related to sew-



ing and quilting is “ripping out” stitches. I had already heard some such jokes on these topics before I became aware of how Marion had cleverly incorporated me into one of those jokes. The context surrounding her joke began weeks earlier, namely on the first day I actually constructed the first block of my quilt. After cutting out the fabric from a template I had made and sewing (awkwardly) my first two pieces, I showed my product to Mrs. Summers, another woman in the class. Intending to make the same sort of self-deprecating, ironic joke to her that I might make to other friends of mine, I said, “Okay, I’ve practiced enough at this. Now I’m ready to be an expert.” Either Mrs. Summers thought me simply a bad joker or she took me literally; either way, she didn’t laugh. Rather, she seemed amazed that I would say such a thing. I heard her repeating my remark in whispers to Marion later that day and then laughing out loud about it as she repeated it more openly to Mrs. Bacon the next week. Soon after these two were laughing at my remark, Marion began a series of jokes about ripping out. The following is a typical opening for such a sequence: Marion (or someone else) says, “Ruth, you awfully quiet over there. You’re making me nervous. What you doing?” At this point, everyone looks up and laughs when they see that Ruth is ripping out a seam, and Ruth answers something like “Oh, I’m just doing what I’m good at.” More laughter.

During the particular joking exchange made at my expense, Marion added a new dimension: “Maybe I ought to get a Ph.D. in ripping out. Then I could be an expert in *that!*” Her emphasis on the last word “that,” the fact that she, like all the African-American women, knew that I was working on a Ph.D., the additional fact that they had apparently found foolish my earlier comments about wanting to be an expert—all these lead me to believe that Marion was having a laugh at my expense. Though I’m not precisely sure, I believe my response won me favor because I refused to take offense: “Well,” I said, “at least *that* degree would be a useful one.” As I understand the practice of signifying, a unique form of African-American linguistic play that relies on indirection and double entendre for its effect, that sort of response is the preferred one because it allows both parties to avoid direct confrontation and it honors the verbal ability of the signifier.<sup>2</sup>

My attempts to make quilt talk jokes helped me stabilize my own place in the group when one day I added a joke onto one of Marion's statements. In the context of sewing another in a series of clothes for her granddaughter and feeling frustrated about how long it took to finish one project, Marion grumbled, "I'd know I was productive if I came at 9:00 and left at noon [the time the class meets] with something done." I said, "Well, if it was me, I'd have to be coming at 9:00 on Tuesday and leaving at noon on Friday." Speaking to me directly for the first time, Marion said, "Yeah, you got that right. That's me too."

More complete audience acceptance of my performance of jokes came during another class meeting. Miss Jordan had been showing me how to finish the edges on my quilt: "You just pin along here like this, and sew along the pins here. But someday you won't need the pins; you'll just know where to sew." I ruefully said, "Humph, I'll be retirement age by then." Another woman laughed a little and said, "Yeah, you say to yourself I know I'll know it, but when?" I answered, "When I'm wearing wings and playing a harp." This joke earned not just laughter but also some vigorous verbal approval: "You got that right! Hey, she learns fast!"<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps another way to understand the serendipity of my efforts to stretch-to-fit Marion's ways and learn to talk more comfortably with her is to contrast my attempts to befriend her with those of the only other younger-than-forty white woman in the class, Kim. Admiring the couple of projects that Marion had been working on for weeks but happened to be finishing all in one class day, Kim said to Marion "Wow, you sew fast! You must be able to make something in only one day!" Marion—who had never to my knowledge spoken directly to Kim—answered this "compliment" with a huffy and emphatic "I don't sew *nothing* fast!"

In addition, I attribute my eventual acceptance into the group to my completion of a very important initiation rite—a finished quilt. My hunch is verified by a conversation I had with Marion and Mrs. Summer, a conversation that occurred after I had stayed up late several nights in a row sewing and thus had nearly completed my first quilt. I was quite surprised and delighted by the women's response to my work. Marion said, "Well, I'm real proud of you and the work

you did because you sure was a novice when you came in here. But you stuck with it." Mrs. Summers added, "Yes, you didn't get frustrated like some people I won't mention." I'm quite sure the latter remark is intended to signify Kim, who had started a quilt much earlier but had abandoned her work. "Well, I had good teachers," was my answer. "But you were intimidated when you first came, weren't you?" Marion asked me. "Weren't you intimidated?" You bet.

#### BLOCK FOUR: *Green*, Ethyl Summers

Quite simply, this block is my favorite. It boasts work with fewer mistakes and better fit than the pink or blue ones. Though its effect is not quite so bold as that of the shocking pink block, I like the high contrast of the colors of the green block, a contrast that is arresting but somehow soothing too, smooth but resonating. Mrs. Summers herself is vibrant; her contributions to the classroom, vital. An instructor and a joker, Mrs. Summers is also a teller of her own quilt tales and a skillful reader of others' quilt texts; thus, she has introduced me to many other types of quilt talk.

For instance, she's often told me (or anyone else who might ask) the story of her own quilt, the one she is currently working on and that—because it is on display while she works—others ask about. A doubly layered story, this quilt tale involves, on the one hand, the history of the quilt's actual construction. This performance could include items such as an explanation of why the quilter started this particular quilt when she did, intertextual references to other quilts that inform the one being told about, a description of the process by which the quilter acquired the materials (scraps, found objects, patterns, buttons, etc.) for this particular quilt, and so on. On the other hand, telling the story of one's own quilt can also involve telling the narrative that the quilt carries "within itself," a story that explains the referential meaning of the quilt. By "referential meaning" in this case I am indicating the representation that the quilter has of her quilt's meaning, a meaning that perhaps depends on the purpose that the quilter has in making the quilt as well as on her own

emotional landscape at the time of the quilt's construction. This meaning of the story of one's own quilt seems to be the least often told; in fact, sometimes the quilter may decide to keep it totally to herself.

Mrs. Summers' most frequently told quilt story is about the second of two quilts she's made for her twin grandsons. Whenever anyone stops to admire her work, which they often do—class members and visitors alike—Mrs. Summers freely explains that these twins are the only family members she's not yet quilted for, that she found in a pattern book the idea for the appliqued boy figures that make up several of the quilt's blocks, that she'd previously made for her granddaughter a quilt that was similar but that had bonnets on the figures. She even accounts for the small blood spots on the quilt as reminders of times when she was working too long and not using her thimble properly.

But only once did Mrs. Summers tell me the story of her quilt as it was depicted in the images it displayed; she only told it then because I asked her directly: "But what do these pictures [of animals painted in the material of several large blocks in the quilt] and stitching [of a barn shape around the animal pictures] mean? Who are these figures?" Her answer was a story about a time when her twin grandsons had been younger and had visited a farm. They had liked the freedom and change of this farm; they'd been happy there. She wanted them to be able to remember that time and not the city streets where they lived now. I thought she was making some connection between each of the six or seven differently clothed figures in some of the blocks and the animals or scenes the figures were juxtaposed against: she kept pointing to them during her brief telling. But I couldn't really follow that part of the story; its connections seemed known to Mrs. Summers alone. For every part I heard, my hunch is that there are four or five "meanings" left untold.

Mrs. Summers is also an expert reader of others' quilt texts. Always one to remind me that "quilting is like cooking: everyone adds and takes away to make it their own," Mrs. Summers uses the occasion of reading another quilter's text to infuse it with her own style and interpretations. Her reading of other women's quilts inverts the order of priority of information that she told about her own quilt:

her construction of the meaning of another's quilt involves little discussion of the handiwork or construction of the quilt itself; rather, it emphasizes the emotional landscape of the quilter at the time she pieced her work.

When telling me the story of Rosie Lee Tompkins' quilt *Checkerboard Variations*,<sup>4</sup> for example, Mrs. Summers began her reading on the left hand side of the quilt about midway from the top. Pointing to specific areas of the quilt as she narrated, she told me that the areas where Tompkins had used the tiniest squares showed that when she pieced them she'd had been feeling down and having hard times. "Things got better here near the middle," she said, "but then they got bad again here where the pieces are tight like she can't breathe. That's what we used to call 'lean times.' But then, here at the top [at which point Mrs. Summers made a vertical move up in her reading], that's when they got better and stayed that way." I found this reading remarkable, not only because of its wealth of assumptions about the quilter, but also because of its unique mix of horizontal and vertical reading of the text, a mix that seemed intended to follow some chronological arrangement of the quilter's emotional progress but whose spatial logic I could not otherwise follow. Why, for instance, couldn't the text of the quilter's emotional life have begun at the top of the page/quilt? That is, why didn't she read the quilt as a story about good times that subsequently went sour? Equally interesting to me is the connection Mrs. Summers made between the quilt and another art form: "This quilt, it's like a Negro spiritual." "You mean because sometimes you sing a verse long, like here," I asked her, pointing to a larger square in the quilt, "and sometimes short like here?" "Yes. And it's about feelings and about people, about how they're *feeling*."

In addition to her obvious dexterity at reading another's quilt, Mrs. Summers is quite skillful at telling quilt jokes. Unlike Marion's signifying jokes, Mrs. Summers's humorous narratives rely on reported speech, that is on her retelling of what someone else had said. These reported speech jokes, like signifying, can be at someone else's expense. But, unlike signifying, this version of Mrs. Summers' quilt talk provides another example of her ability to recenter another's

“text” for her own purposes. In this latter trait, her jokes (and her skills) are unlike any other woman’s in the class.

Here’s an example: Mrs. Allen, a local quilter known for her talent as well as her rather cranky disposition, was formerly a member of the sewing class. She had recently been collaborating with the rest of the group in making a friendship quilt which they were going to raffle off in order to buy a serger sewing machine for the class. Mrs. Summers tells a story about a day when Miss Jordan, who had been called out of the classroom for a while, asked the women to work on cutting out the squares for the quilt while she was gone. “Well, Mrs. Allen says [in Mrs. Summers’ story] ‘I don’t want to be sitting in no classroom cutting squares. I’m just gonna tear this material off. Miss Jordan will never know.’ So Miss Jordan comes back and takes one look and says ‘Oh, you tore it.’” This story sends all the women who hear it (Mrs. Allen not among them) into fits of laughter, presumably because it affirms Miss Jordan’s sharp eye for shoddy work and especially because it shows up Mrs. Allen.

Mrs. Summers’ repertoire of jokes reappropriating someone else’s speech probably has other ends as well. For instance, consider her joke that reports Miss Jordan’s appraisal of Mrs. Summer’s first quilt: On seeing the completed quilt hung in front of her, Miss Jordan reportedly said “‘Oh, [Mrs. Summers says in a falsetto voice with pursed lips and lots of rapid eye blinking], you’ve turned the block wrong.’ And wouldn’t you know,” she continues in her natural voice, “that block was right in the middle of the whole quilt. Well, I wasn’t about to rip that one out!” As in the former joke/story about ripping out, Mrs. Summers seems to be using reported speech in this example to release tension, to subvert the authority of the teacher who demands the tedious work required to “get it right.” This subversion of authority seems pretty good-humored, though. For one thing, Miss Jordan herself (who is always a member of the audience for these jokes) laughs when she hears these renditions of her criticisms. For another, Mrs. Summers does not appear to be any real threat to Miss Jordan’s authority as a teacher: in other contexts wherein *she*’s functioning as a teacher because Miss Jordan is absent, Mrs. Summers constantly undermines her own authority lest anyone get the idea that she think she’s any more “expert” than Miss Jordan. She’s quick

to remind me of her view of her expertise: "I'm just an old lady telling you my way of how to do it. If you really want to know, you ask Miss Jordan."

And finally, further consideration of the complex context of the joke seems to reveal its main purpose: she told it as I was showing the women the finally-pieced top of my quilt and pointing out the mismatches in the pink block that I said I was considering ripping out. After telling her joke/story about the incorrectly turned block of her first quilt, Mrs. Summers explained that the mistakes were part of the story of any quilt: "Even at the quilt shows where they have the experts, if you look, you'll find mistakes. They're what makes it yours. That makes a quilt like life: it don't always work out just right. It's not perfect. There's always going to be parts that don't work out. . . . Someday you'll look back at this block in your quilt and remember important things about those mistakes. They'll remind you." She continued talking in general about people who had come to the class but hadn't really liked it, who—unlike me, she said—had left after only a little while. "After a while," Mrs. Summers went on, "people get used to our ways. But people like Kim, you know, she's too sensitive. She didn't like our jokes. But you need to get used to our jokes because you know jokes tell something serious too. . . . That's good, you know, because communication is so important. That's what our class is good for, teaching communication." I'd say that I must agree and add that Mrs. Summers' quilt talk has not only taught me about communication but also endeared me to her summer-green fresh humor and heart.

### *The Quilting*

How in the world are all these pieces going to fit together? What pattern is in these blocks, anyway? And what is all this [quilt] talk about? This essay is a new approach to research on the topic of African-American quilting. Like some other researchers interested in this sort of quilting, I am interested in exploring the aesthetics of African-American quilts, in trying to uncover what, if anything, might reveal itself as "that ineffable quality that is curiously

black," to borrow Toni Morrison's phrase.<sup>5</sup> Unlike those researchers, however, I am not using African-American quilts themselves as my focal point. Rather, I have chosen to direct attention to the conversations (specifically, the verbal performances) of African-American quilters. Accordingly, I have presented here four portraits of specific African-American women, characterized the ways that each of them talks, and delineated the different types of verbal performances that occurred among them in the context of a class specifically intended to offer instruction in sewing and quilting.

But that still doesn't explain how all these pieces fit together. Why, for instance, have I chosen this method, the "quilt-talk" approach? One very important reason is that African-American quilters themselves have been dissatisfied with others' characterizations of "their" quilts and their quilting practices. For instance, Marie Wilson felt compelled to respond to the legend describing some of the African-American quilts included in the 1990 "Two Centuries of Quilting Traditions" exhibition at The Museums in Stony Brook: "As an African-American who makes quilts, I have often been troubled by the statements that stereotype African-American quilts. In the years that I have been making quilts and enjoying quilts made by others, I have come to know that quilts made by African-Americans are as diverse as the people who make them."<sup>6</sup> Another African-American quilter rejects Eli Leon's theory about the connection between improvisation in jazz and in African-American quilting techniques: "He doesn't understand African-American quilts. He's so interested in his theory he just wants to look at one kind of quilt. . . . The African-American quilter has yet to answer for herself. But it's like pulling fleas off a dog to find one of them: they just don't want to come out and talk about their work."<sup>7</sup> This latter assessment echoes that of Roger Abrahams, a renowned folklorist and sociolinguist who has studied extensively language use among American blacks: "how women assert their image and values as women is seldom found in the folklore literature. We know even less about the verbal traditions of black women in particular."<sup>8</sup> Foremost authority on African-American quilting, Cuesta Benberry, also recommends work that will "give voice to the quiltmakers themselves. It is important to listen to what African-American quiltmakers say



about their work and to give them credence, whether or not their comments coincide with researchers' theories and interpretations."<sup>9</sup> Clearly, these critiques all demonstrate the necessity of work dedicated to considering African-American quiltmakers as a group of women asserting their images and values within their own quilt-making traditions. My study of this small group of women and their quilt talk is meant to do some of that work.

In making the choice to focus on the verbal behavior relevant to a particular item of folklore rather than on the material item itself, I am participating in what some folklorists call the study of "emergent culture." Unlike some approaches to folklore which spotlight remnants of a lost past and thus on "experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture," the study of emergent culture focuses on "new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences [which] are continually being created" and offers "a frame of reference able to comprehend residual forms and items, [as well as] contemporary practice, and emergent structures."<sup>10</sup> In other words, attempts to understand African-American quiltmaking that consider only the history and/or the material items of the practice are likely to uncover meanings, values, experiences that the dominant culture cannot understand or explain. This tendency may account for scholars' (essentialist at worst and simplistic at best) characterizations of African-American quilts and quiltmaking, characterizations built on theories not applicable to large numbers of the quilts made by African-Americans.<sup>11</sup> In her recent book about the contributions of African-American quilts and quiltmakers to American quiltmaking traditions, Benberry describes the inaccuracies and preconceptions of such research that focuses only on the residual forms and items of some quilts; currently in the field, she says, research must address the "need to dispel certain myths that had developed about African-American quilts. . . . It is certainly not useful to view African-American quilts merely as isolated folk art objects, divorced from the lives of blacks and the social, political, and economic conditions under which they have lived."<sup>12</sup>

Much more useful is the approach to folklore studies that prefers *verbal* behavior as its material for study, that considers the verbal

performances of a folk group as they emerge in natural contexts; this type of folklore research can give us a different window on the meanings, values, and experiences of a group. Especially if and when a group's values differ widely from those of the dominant group in a society, this new window—called a performance-centered approach to the study of folklore—is less cloudy. In the words of scholar Richard Bauman, "Performance may thus be the cornerstone of a new folkloristics, liberated from its backward-facing perspective and able to comprehend much more of the totality of human experience."<sup>13</sup>

Like others who have undertaken the study of verbal performance, I have interacted with a group in the capacity of participant/observer over a course of time, collected data concerning their face to face interactions,<sup>14</sup> and analyzed the data in an attempt to identify the "learnable and transmittable notions of order through enactment (especially in performance) that provide an impetus for those traditional items"<sup>15</sup> important to the group. In this case the items are those related to African-American quilting. Clearly, this group is a small one; its interactions will not necessarily reflect those of all African-American quiltmakers. Rather than a comprehensive or definitive study, my analysis is an introduction to a different approach to scholarly interest in African-American quilting. What I'm hoping, of course, is that my approach will help us move closer toward answering the question: What, *if anything*, is central and unique to African-American quilting as distinguished from others' quilting practices. I believe that any rewarding answer to that question must address myriad contextual considerations. The verbal performances of the group are only one aspect of this complex context, but one that has not yet, to my knowledge, been considered in the scholarly work dedicated to understanding the history and practices of African-American quilting. If this approach is of value, that value will be in answering questions like these: What, if anything, do these women's performances have in common with performances other scholars have noted among other African-American women? What if anything do the different types of performances in these women's sewing class have in common with each other? What might these commonalities teach us about the values, beliefs, and experiences that African-American quiltmakers present in their art?

Thus, in order to argue for the effectiveness of my approach, the appeal of the essay I am quilting, I need to make some connections between the scraps and blocks you've seen, to provide some answers to these questions. Here then, after the piecing of scraps into the four blocks I've already presented, I am trying to quilt together what I see as the forms of these African-American women's quilt talk: the showing-how-to-do-not-teaching-how-to-say performance of the quilting teacher who insists that students "get it right;" the sometimes cryptic, sometimes historically focused, sometimes intensely personal quilter's autobiography presentation; the signifying and reported speech jokes that release the tension created by having to get it right; the potentially co-optive form that I call telling-the-story-of-another's-quilt; and finally the telling-the-story-of-her-own quilt performance.

Now, on to the question are there any connections between this group's "talk" and that of other groups? Yes, I believe there are. For instance, Miss Jordan's and Lily Bacon's teaching-how-to-quilt-performances are quite similar to those other quilters attribute to their teachers. Pecolia Warner, an African-American quilter, describes the way her mother taught her: "If it wasn't right—if I made a stitch that was too long—she didn't do no laughing and talking! . . . She'd say to me 'That ain't right. Fix it right or else I'll put a strap on you!' . . . By me just watching her I learned how to do everything, see."<sup>16</sup>

Miss Jordan's (and other quilt teachers') primary quilt talk performance also reflects the style of teaching that Shirley Brice Heath categorized in her ethnographic study of two rural and poor communities—one black, one white—in North Carolina. Heath describes the black community's doing-rather-than-talking style as follows: "He [Darrett, who is teaching a group of young boys how to do a certain handshake] does not explain verbally how to do it. He says only 'Do it like dis,' as they repeat the interaction again and again. . . . Watching and feeling how to do something are more important than talking about how to do it."<sup>17</sup>

In addition, I see connections between some of the presentations among the women in the sewing group and what Roger Abrahams characterized as the verbal presentations that negotiate respect among the women of St. Vincent. For instance, it's quite likely that when

the women talk about the way Miss Jordan asks them to rip out a seam but “she says it so ‘sweet’ you’ll think ripping out’s an honor,” they mean “sweet” in the same sense that Abrahams does when he says that ideally an African-American woman “has the ability to *talk sweet* with her infants and peers but *talk smart* or *cold* with anyone who might threaten her self-image.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Abrahams’ discussion of how black women’s verbal presentations negotiate their positions in social settings helps explain what I initially thought to be irrelevant material that Mrs. Bacon included in her version of the quilter’s autobiography performance. When she was explaining to me how she learned to quilt during her early years spent in Texas, she highlighted how many children—her own as well as her parents’—she had had to raise and how very limited her resources had been. She listed all the good jobs that her children and grandchildren had had, as well as the names of the universities and colleges that some of them had attended. She spoke often and proudly of her grown sons and their offers to help her out financially; because she had refused these offers, they all agreed instead to furnish their mother with a plane ticket whenever she wanted to go visit family who lived out of town. All these details, though not necessarily relevant to the history of Mrs. Bacon’s life as a quilter, were nonetheless included in the story she told. In keeping with her standing as a respectable woman, much of Mrs. Bacon’s quilter’s autobiography evidences “respectability [which] is judged by how effectively her household is run,” how well a woman is able to bring her children up right.<sup>19</sup>

Negotiations of respect in quilters’ autobiographies and showing-how-to-do presentations in quilters’ teacher talk are not the only aspects of quilt talk similar to other patterns in African-American language stylistics. Quilt talk jokes are also very much like other African-American presentations. Like other instances of signifying, Marion’s joking—particularly when at my expense—obscured its addressee and relied on double entendre for its effect and on features of the context for interpretation of its meaning. Likewise, her jokes left the addressee and the audience with the responsibility to interpret the message, thus allowing her, the joker, to deny malice if a confrontation were forced.

Mrs. Summers’ joking performances are substantively different

from Marion's. Examples of reported speech jokes, that is jokes which center on recounts of someone else's speech given on a former occasion, Mrs. Summers' joking presentations demonstrate "the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a text—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting . . . . [Its subsequent] entextualization may well incorporate aspects of context, such that the resultant text carries elements of its history of use within it."<sup>20</sup> Folklorists define "entextualization" as a transformational operation that emphasizes the emergent structure of new contexts created by the recontextualizing capacity of this feature of verbal performance. So, for instance, Mrs. Summers' joking report of Miss Jordan's response to Georgia Allen's tearing rather than cutting the fabric squares allows the joker (Mrs. Summers) to undermine Mrs. Allen's authority as an elder in the community, to re-assert Miss Jordan's conviction that the patience and commitment necessary to "getting it right" are an important aspect of quilting, and to warn other listeners of the folly in trying to dupe Miss Jordan. Most importantly, perhaps, Mrs. Summers' joke allows her to spotlight her own performance skills, to earn not only laughs but also respect for her creative style at recycling discourse.

The same is true of Mrs. Summers' performances of the telling-the-story-of-another's-quilt version of quilt talk. You may recall her interpretation of the size and spacing of the squares in Rosie Lee Tompkins' quilt, her notion that the quilter had been suffering "lean times" during the piecing of the work. Her reading clearly indicates that a quilt, like other texts, can be subject to the same decentering and recentering of discourse that folklorists Bauman and Briggs discuss. Clear too is the emergent structure of the new context created when Mrs. Summers reads the quilt, a context that may reflect Mrs. Summers' own emotional landscape at the time or that perhaps is intended to explain some lesson to listeners whom she perceives to be suffering from a tight time of life and needing comfort or unaware of what it means to have to undergo "lean times" and in need of understanding.

You may also recall that when Mrs. Summers told the story of her own quilt, her performance was much less interpretive, much more

centered on the material construction of the quilt than on its symbolic meaning. Why is this? Why when she reads another quilter's work does she focus on interpreting the "referential" meaning of the quilt whereas when she reads her own, she highlights the actual context? It may well be that Mrs. Summers' reluctance to assign specific meanings to her own quilt, to read hers as closely as she read Tompkins, is intended to leave her quilt open for others' interpretations, to beckon creative recontextualization by some other teller. Art historian Eva Grudin tells us that quilter Lillian Beattie was quite reticent about revealing or assigning meaning to the characters in her narrative quilts; instead, "she set up these active, animated characters for the viewer to 'free associate' with. Once in a while she revealed particulars about one figure or another."<sup>21</sup>

We can see by now that at least some, if not all, of the types of quilt talk performances that I identified among this small group of women occur among other quilters; likewise, some if not all of the characteristics of these women's verbal performances appear in the presentations of other black female speakers. But what, if anything, can this look at quilt talk tell us about African-American quilting? Do we see any patterns here in the ways that these women use folk themes in natural conversations in order to convey culture-specific meanings? If so, what do these patterns tell us about the aesthetics of quilting for African-Americans?

First of all, it seems evident that, at least to some African-American quilters, "getting it right," is very important; at least some African-American quilters are clearly *not* creating broken patterns or multiple rhythms, *not* relying solely on improvisational responses to time or money constraints.<sup>22</sup> Miss Jordan's teaching performances demonstrate a commitment to this value. On the other hand, neither perfection nor claims to expertise seem particularly important either: the group's plethora of jokes about ripping out seams, the women's rejection of my joking wish to be an expert, and Mrs. Summers' condolences when I noted all the mistakes in my first quilt—all these indicate their tolerance of "mistakes" and inexperience. In fact, it seems that boasting about her quilting skills undercuts a quilter's credibility with this group. Rather, the women appreciate modesty, as well as patience and a willingness to make and accept

one's mistakes. These values probably explain their penchant for trial and error as a learning and teaching method: practicing and doing are much more important than explaining and being expert.

Finally, all quilt talk presentations that I've noted point to the premium the group places on individual expression: individual style in verbal performances, as well as in material production, are both highly treasured. The teacher's willingness to let students learn how to accomplish techniques in their own way, the quilter's deliberate ambiguity in interpreting the meaning of her quilt so that readers may find their own meanings, the joker's use of other's talk re-contextualized to the joker's own ends, the quilt-text reader's interpretations of another's art work in order to accomplish the reader's own rhetorical purpose, the autobiographer's use of her own quilting history as a way to negotiate respect—all of these forms of quilt talk point to the group's reverence for and active demonstration of individual style in expression. Likewise, and not surprisingly, the members of this group honor the act of reappropriation, whether that recentring appears in a reported speech joke, in creative readings of someone else's quilt text, or in objects of beauty and utility created from otherwise "worthless" scraps. Like the art of quilting itself, much of quilt talk—at least in this group—relies on recontextualization, on recycling someone else's speech or situation and infusing it with one's own style. While style is not the sole component of the art form, it is nonetheless the criterion which determines effectiveness and beauty within the use of the form. If and when "getting it right" and individual style compete for prominence among the values of these African-American quilters, style seems to take precedence. Witness Mrs. Summers' comments on the places in my first quilt where I got it wrong: "They're what makes it yours. . . . Someday you'll look back at this block in your quilt and remember important things about those mistakes."

I only hope readers are as generous with the flaws in my quilt essay. Like some African-American quilts, this essay constitutes a departure from previous, more traditional approaches. As such, it needs to be read not for its solid research results but for its implications and suggestions for further research. I am convinced that continued study of the content and context of the verbal performances

of African-American quilters will further our understanding of African-American quilting traditions and practices. For now, I must satisfy myself with Mrs. Summers' judgment of my second finished quilt: "I'll tell you one thing she learned: You can make something beautiful out of just scraps."

### Notes and References

1. Though all of the African-American women who attend the sewing class are by their own admission "eligible for the senior citizens' ten percent discount" offered by a neighborhood fabric store, Marion is the youngest of the group. I feel certain that this fact explains why she is always addressed by her first name while the other women of the group publicly call each other "Mrs." or "Miss" (both of which are pronounced "Miz"). However, on rare occasion and always in soft tones indicating an intimate and private conversation, Miss Jordan and Mrs. Summers address each other by first name only.
2. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying and Marking: Two Afro-American Speech Acts" in *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, eds. John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 161-79. Also, Marsha Taylor and Andrew Ortony, "Figurative Devices in Black Language: Some Socio-Psycholinguistic Observations," Center for the Study of Reading: Report No. 20. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1981).
3. Essential influence in my construction of this joke probably came from the book I had been reading the night before: Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, in *Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 207-85.
4. Featured in Eli Leon, *Who'd A Thought It?: Improvisation in African-American Quilting* (San Francisco CA: San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1987), 53.
5. Nellie McKay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison" in *Contemporary Literature* 24 (1983): 413-29.
6. *Women of Color Quilt Network Newsletter* 6 (1991).
7. Carolyn Mazloomi, telephone conversation with author, September 14, 1991.
8. Roger Abrahams, "Negotiating Respect: Patterns of Presentation Among Black Women" in *Women in Folklore: Images and Genres*, ed. Claire Farrer (Prospect Heights IL: Waveland Press, 1975), 58.



9. Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African American Presence in American Quilts*. (Louisville: The Kentucky Quilt Project, 1992), 16.
10. Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights IL: Waveland Press, 1977), 47–48.
11. I refer to characterizations given by, for instance, Eli Leon in *Who'd A Thought It* and by Maude Wahlman in "African Symbolism in Afro-American Quilts," *African Arts* 20 (November 1986): 68–76. Also refer to Wahlman's "Religious Symbolism in African-American Quilts," *The Clarion* 14 (Summer 1989): 36–44.
12. Benberry, 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Bauman, 48.
14. All of my observations and excerpts of talk I represent herein occurred between the dates of September 30 and December 3, 1991 during Tuesday morning sewing class held at the Northwest Neighborhood Center in Tucson, AZ. My records of the classes do *not* include actual transcripts of audio or video tape; rather, they are strictly from memory. After each class, I made copious notes to which I referred when I reconstructed the women's talk herein; hopefully, I am representing my almost immediate memories of the talk in the context of the sewing classroom with as little interference from time lapse and my own memory distortion as possible.
15. Abrahams, 59.
16. William Ferris, ed. *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts: Perspectives on the Black World* (Boston, G.K. Hall, 1983), 182–83.
17. Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 85–86.
18. Abrahams, 62.
19. Abrahams, 70.
20. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990), 73.
21. Eva Grudin, *Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts*. (Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, 1990), 80.
22. Again, I refer to those descriptions, offered by scholars such as Maude Wahlman and Eli Leon, which portray broken patterns and rhythms and improvisation as the definitive characteristics of African-American quilts.