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Quilts and Their Stories: Revealing a Hidden History

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Embedded in every quilt are many, many stories. Quilts contain stories about the quiltmaker; stories about why, when, and how the quilt was made and used; stories about where the fabric and patterns were acquired: the list of stories goes on. Some of these stories—or histories—can be deduced by examining the physical evidence—such as words and pictures—directly presented on the quilts. Some stories, however, are known only through other sources such as household or diary accounts, state quilt inventory records, manufacturing records of the production of fabrics or patterns, and newspapers. In the last twenty years, the use of another source of quilt stories—oral histories—has greatly expanded our knowledge about quilts, their makers, and their production and use. In this lecture I will examine not only ways in which oral accounts are critical to our understanding of quilting but also the challenges oral accounts sometimes pose in building a body of quilt scholarship.

But first, let me share with you a story. It is a personal experience story. This past June, my husband and I, accompanied by our nineteen-year-old daughter Marit, were on a business trip in South Africa. After a long week of meetings with museum colleagues in Cape Town, we took Saturday to drive the tip of the Cape of Good Hope (check your maps or globe—it is the southernmost tip of Africa). The entire tip is now protected as a large nature reserve supporting incredible vegetation and much wildlife. As we paid our admission at the re-



serve entrance, we noticed large posted signs warning people not to feed the roaming baboons because they are aggressive and could be dangerous. When we got to the parking lot at the very tip of the Cape, we saw quite a few baboons, especially near the food stand and lots of people around were taking pictures of them. Well, as we were exiting the lot and driving slowly by one sitting on top of a car, Marit and I rolled down our windows to take a picture. Before I could even get my camera focused, that baboon, with a single quick bound, came right in my window, hopped over my shoulder to the back seat, plunked down beside Marit, and started ripping into our bag of snacks. Needless to say, Marit managed to quickly unbuckle her seat belt and hopped out of the car as did my husband Kurt and I.

For a few frantic moments we did not know what to do as the baboon sat there, with the car running on idle, ripping into food bags. To make matters worse, since our windows were down and the car doors were open, some more baboons started coming toward the car. Bystanders were yelling conflicting advice (like do not aggravate them, go get the park guards, close/open the windows, close/open the doors, etc.) but fortunately, after throwing my backpack out of the car and carrying some of our food, the baboon hopped out. We jumped in the car, rolled up the windows as quickly as possible, and drove away! We were sort of dazed but laughing; we could not believe how fast it had all happened and that Marit actually had just been sitting in the back seat strapped in next to a baboon! So—how is that for a wild-life adventure? PS: We all decided that they need to revise the park's baboon warning signs with a new added line that says "Keep your car windows rolled up!"

Now, this version of an incident that really happened is essentially the rendition I emailed from South Africa to my family back home. Since we left the park I have retold that story a few times myself, conscious that in each retelling I altered the story slightly—sometimes to add or shorten it (because of the time allotted to telling the story), sometimes to tailor elements to the audience who was listening (who either needed to have more or less explanation about certain parts with which they were either familiar or unfamiliar). For instance, to a resident of Cape Town there was a predictably shared understanding of South African wildlife, the Cape, and perhaps inexperienced or unin-



formed tourist actions. When I told it to our Michigan State University Museum colleagues (who include mammalogists), the story elicited shared stories about wildlife behavior. Sharing the story with other world or frequent travelers prompted stories about the unusual adventures often encountered during travel.

I also have been present when Kurt and Marit told their versions of the experience. Basically their story was the same but they told it with some slight variations. Their memories and their perceptions differed in small but significant ways: the number of baboons that were approaching the car, the distance of the baboons from the car, the number of bystanders, etc. Yet, by the end of the summer, the oft-told story, despite its many subtle variations, had retained its key elements: the suddenness of a wild animal's actions, the comic quality of Marit being seat-belted next to a baboon, our immediate inability to figure out a solution, our ingenuity in getting out of a fix, and our relief that the episode ended with no one being hurt and nothing being damaged. Within our immediate family, the story is used to illustrate our shared delight in encountering new environments as well as to reinforce the acknowledged personality characteristics of each of us (as in our daughter's distinctive laughter which was enjoyed by the strangers witnessing our dilemma).

Later in the summer, at the annual Labor Day reunion of the MacDowell family, one of my brothers who lives in Washington, D.C. and who had received my original emailed story, told me he got a great laugh out of the story. Moreover, he had told that story to a lot of his friends and co-workers. Now, the story, which had been a personal experience story, was being retold by someone who was not even there! I wondered how he would tell it, what elements were important to him and his sense of his audience, and why did he tell it? Was it to illustrate another point of his own? Was it to convey that he had this crazy older sister who was always traveling off to distant parts of the globe and having adventures not common in a day-to-day existence? I do not know and can not answer, because I was not there to hear his telling of my tale.

So what does this story about baboons at the Cape of Good Hope have to do with quilts and their stories? Actually a lot. Our ability to understand quilt-related stories has everything to do with our under-



standing of the origins of the stories, the relationship of the story to the teller, the uniqueness of the story, the reasons for telling the story, and, lastly, the audiences who hear the story.

Most of us are engaged in quilt research because we are interested in not only the textiles as works of art and exemplars of fabrics and techniques, but also as the vehicles to uncover stories which help enrich our understanding of our world, both past and present. We seek to learn about the lives of individual quiltmakers, owners, and users, about women's history, about cultural history, about textile history, about the relationship between the fabricated pieces and the spoken and written word—to name but a few quilt-related interests. In those searches, the collection, documentation, and analysis of orally-told stories can help to further that understanding.

Perhaps one of the first, and best-known, publications based on research entailing extensive interviews with quilters was Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buford's *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art: An Oral History* published in 1977. Cooper and Buford interviewed approximately thirty quilters in their homes and community centers scattered across New Mexico and Texas. Some were interviewed for a short time and some over the course of a couple of days. The stories quilters told of their own quilting experiences as well as the experiences of their relatives, friends, and neighbors revealed both intensely personal and individual histories. When taken as a whole, their orally-told histories revealed many experiences that, for this set of women, were common or typical: using cotton gleaned directly from the fields for the filling or batting of quilts; participating in Wednesday night, church-based quilting groups; learning to quilt—often before ten years of age; the use of recycled fabrics and the treasured use of new fabrics; the prevalence of Lone Star or Star of Bethlehem quilts; community traditions such as making Friendship and Album quilts; the closeness of mother and daughters through quilting; making and using quilts as fund-raisers for community needs or to help those in need; making quilts as a means of finding solace in the face of illness, tragedy, death, and hardship; and the necessity of quilts for warmth (especially in the dugout homes many pioneer families lived in). The basic stories had many, many similarities because the women themselves shared many common life experiences. Through these commonly-told stories



connected to quilting, we gain a wider glimpse into what life must have been like for these women who were among some of the first families, post-Native settlement, to establish homesteads in this part of the country.

Yet the stories also reveal experiences that were completely unique to some individuals and not shared by the other women. These are the stories that we understand are deeply personal and reveal more about the individual and less about the community. Listen to the following three accounts.

The first story helps us understand the reasons why a quilter prefers to use one pattern over another:

Before my father died, he was a lumberman; we lived in a forest near Lufkin. He built our house. It was a log house and it was plenty big, two fireplaces. He had plans all laid out to make it bigger when the family grew and when he could get the time.

He put such care in fittin' everything just perfect. He always whistled when he worked. Sometimes he and Mama would whistle harmony. We all turned to listen to that when it happened. I was always allowed to choose if I wanted to work outside with Papa or inside with Mama. When I was younger I dearly loved workin' outside with him. Well, every time I make a Log Cabin I think of him. It just comes naturally, making a Log Cabin.¹

Likewise, the second story I am going to share also reveals why a particular pattern is preferred, but this story also shows how quilts can serve as reminders of shared experiences and of individuals:

I like straight-line quilts. The first quilt I ever worked on was like that. Papa was setting up fence around the place he homesteaded, and Mama decided to make this fence-row quilt. That's when I started piecing, when I was five years old. And it was a piece of work we all did together. I asked her in later years what she did with those stitches. She said she just left them in the quilt, 'cause she liked to see them reminding her of that time. She never took out any of our stitches, though maybe she had to quilt a little closer to make it look right.²

The third story presents to us the ingenuity of the maker in constructing a design and the meaning that quilt had for her and her sons. It also tells us about the husband's mixed feelings about a man's role in quilting:



My husband tells about the time he got sick with the measles. He was six years old. His mother set him to piecing a quilt and every other block he set in red polka-dot pattern. Said it was his measles quilt. He wouldn't like me to tell it now I know. But lots of cold nights when I'm at the quiltin' frame on one side of the fire, he pulls his big old chair up on the other side and cuts pieces for me. He's even done a pit of piecin' from time to time.

It's a sight, that big old long-legged man with his boot toes turned in to make a lap to do his piecework on.

We've got a fair long road from the highway and three loud dogs out there. They all always sound off when somebody turns up our road. And let me tell you, he can git rid of that work quicker than a gnat can bat an eye, when them dogs commence to barkin'.

Plumb tickles me.³

Of course, these stories put a human face on quilting, reveal the person behind the needle and thread, and give voice to the motivations, inspirations, beliefs, and attitudes of the quilt's maker. Nevertheless, when we enjoy the stories, we recognize them as unique. For instance, we understand that the story about the red and white quilt called the "measles quilt" was about a distinctive work and name; it was not a pattern name or choice of fabric commonly made by other quilters in this community or elsewhere when they or members of their family were afflicted with the same illness. In other words, what we can glean from this story is limited by how that story was collected and the way the story was presented or interpreted. Perhaps Buford and Cooper actually gathered other stories about the making of "measles quilts" and just did not report them in the book, or perhaps the tradition existed but Buford and Cooper did not happen to collect other stories, or perhaps it was just simply a unique story. Though it amuses me to think about the possibility of a tradition of making red and white polka-dotted quilts when someone has measles—after all it is plausible since measles is such a common childhood illness and I have heard many other stories related to techniques used to comfort children with measles or chickenpox—at this point in time there is only this one known published story about a single instance.

Over the course of the last twenty years there have been many other studies, published and unpublished, which have been based wholly or partly on diaries, memoirs, and oral histories. My own studies of



quiltmaking have heavily relied on such sources. These sources are replete with unique stories of quiltmaking experiences, some of which have been incredibly compelling as potential indicators of perhaps more widely-shared experiences. I encountered one such one, courtesy of a reference from Nancy Hornback, in the course of research on quiltmaking among Native peoples in the United States and Canada. It is as follows. A Choctaw woman, Sarah Ann Harlan, reminisced in 1913 to Muriel Wright about a quilting party she attended in 1857 shortly after she moved to Skullyville, the Choctaw Indian Agency west of Fort Smith, Arkansas. Her memoirs, published in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, recalled:

So, not long after this, there came a lot of Indian women to invite me to a quilting. Quilting was the order of the day then, and they always had a big pow wow. The men furnished the meat and barbecued it, and wild game as well. Well, I went to the first one, and saw barbecued beeves, hogs, venison, and thought it enough to satisfy an army. I was always treated royally. The Indians kept coming until I verily believe there must have been six or seven hundred people at this quilting. They had arbors all over the ground and the quilts were hung in them. They were beautifully pieced. Here I prided myself that my mother had taught me to quilt beautifully; I knew my quilting would not be criticized. An old [Choctaw] lady by the name of [Susan] Hall who ran a hotel at Skullyville, and who, by the way, was my brother's mother-in-law, was one of the examiners of the quilting. When she got to me she said, "Well, you quilt fine." I remarked to her, "mother taught me to quilt."

Now you see, this was bordering on civilization. Prizes were given to the best quilters. I received a strand of white and red beads. They were real pretty. I wish that I had had sense enough to preserve those beads. Even to this day I watch bead counters to see if I can duplicate those beads. I would enjoy myself at these big gatherings, but they failed to drive the tears away. You know old man Time does all those healing properties.⁴

After first encountering this account, I so badly hoped that I would come across photographs of pow wow quilting bees, other written memoirs or orally told stories, or perhaps newspaper accounts of that event and ones like it. I had hoped to find that quilting pow wows were common among Choctaw, or even among Southern nations, or, better yet, throughout Native communities. Alas, though I found quite a bit of data on other types of historical displays of Native quilts in



other settings and even information on quilts shown at contemporary pow wows, I have yet to find additional corroborating evidence of historical quilting pow wows. Thus, as a scholar, I could only report that there has been a long-standing tradition of the public display of quilts in many different tribal settings. Sarah Ann Harlan's beautifully-told account of the quilting pow wow is, until proven otherwise, a personal story of a unique event.

Early in this year [1999], one person's story became the basis for the book, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* written by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, Ph.D., that has swept the nation and captured a wide popular audience. Sales were propelled by appearances by the authors in advance of the publication when they would not reveal the "secret" prior to the book's issuance and in post-publication appearances on such shows as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and in reviews in *USA Today* and *The New York Times*. By early October 1999, the book was listed as #662 of the top-selling books on the amazon.com sales list. Tonight I am not going to re-analyze all of the criticisms this book has already received by those engaged in the scholarly study of textile history. I think, however, it is worth examining the dangers of using one person's story—without any corroborating evidence—as every person's story. Essentially, Tobin and Dobard present Mrs. Ozella McDaniel Williams's story of the "Underground Railroad Code" or "Quilt Code" [the authors' title, it is unclear if it was what Mrs. Williams called it] as, and I am quoting here from the jacket cover to the book, "proof that some slaves were involved in a sophisticated network that melded African textile traditions with American quilt practices and created a potent result: African American quilts with patterns that conveyed messages that were, in fact, essential tools for escape along the Underground Railroad."⁵

Thirty-three pages into their book, long after presenting "the code" essentially as fact, the authors give this brief two-paragraph qualifier that it is in fact just a theory:

Based on my knowledge as a quilter/historian, Jacki's expertise in women's stories, and our combined research, we were able to formulate a theory of how this Quilt Code may have worked for slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad. Our interpretation of the code is based in part upon in-



formed conjecture. While we believe that our research and the piecing together of our findings present a strong viable case, we do not claim that our “deciphering” of the code is infallible. Nor do we insist that our perspective is the only one for viewing the code. We have written the book in a way that encourages questions. We leave room for the reader to add her/his own ideas and thereby contribute to the growing body of knowledge. In the spirit of quilting, we invite you to join us in juxtaposing ideas so that patterns and meanings are revealed.⁶

While the authors claim that “Ideally, we would have several of the special slave-made quilts containing the patterns and stitching mentioned in Ozella’s story-code to analyze,” they provide a variety of excuses why there are no extant examples.⁷ Ignoring the fact that oral histories, diaries, and photographs could have also provided corroborating evidence, the authors admit that “We have thus found ourselves obliged to reverse conventional procedures, having to present a theory before finding a wealth of tangible evidence.”⁸

The remaining 175 pages of the book are devoted to providing the reader with information on how some scholars have found ways in which African-Americans have embedded other “secret” information in various elements of culture, including quilts. The authors also present examples of contemporary quilts made by African-Americans, including those by Dobard himself, using the same patterns. The publication is presented as a scholarly work, filled with citations to other work on the Underground Railroad, African textiles, secret symbols, African-American culture in general, and African-American quilts in particular.

What is troubling though is that at no time is Mrs. Williams’s story corroborated or is information given about Dobard and Tobin’s efforts to do so, particularly within her own family and community. For instance, we learn Williams had siblings but we do not hear if they had even been asked whether they knew the story. Did Williams have any offspring? Had they heard the story? If not, why? Why did Williams entrust Tobin with the story? Did she ever share the story with other quilters? If not, why? Also troubling is that Dobard and Tobin spend four pages examining how “The Code” parallels the quilted work of the fictitious Clara of the children’s story *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*.⁹ Presenting the popular children’s book as a valuable source of



data to support the code is to make a mockery of quilt scholarship and of the value of oral histories in that scholarship.

In a foreword to *Hidden in Plain View*, Floyd Coleman writes that “Tobin and Dobard have taken quilt scholarship to another level.”¹⁰ Tobin and Dobard will have shared “the code” with thousands but, despite Coleman’s assertion, they will not have advanced quilt scholarship. Quite the opposite, they will have embedded in our collective public mind a story so romantic and compelling that it, like the story of Paul Bunyan, will move into the realm of stories that, despite their origin, become part of our belief system. Obviously, unless the wide-scale distribution of *Hidden in Plain View* flushes out other corroborating evidence of the “Quilt Code,”—which it has yet to do—Mrs. Williams’s story, like that of the Choctaw quilter Sarah Harlan, should remain just a wonderfully told personal story.

The ramifications, however, of the national promotion of this story as fact, not theory, and the dangers of accepting Mrs. Williams’s story as every person’s story has already been seen in numerous forms this year. Let me just share how embedded this story has become in our nation’s conscience.

On February 22 of this year [1999], an article, entitled “Black History Gets Creative,” in the *Lansing State Journal* reported on a Black History Month Project at a local elementary school:

Students learned slaves used specific quilt patterns to relay messages to escaping slaves. A quilt with a bow tie or hourglass for instance was a sign to runaway slaves that the area’s residents were friendly and could be trusted. . . . “Each quilt told a message” said the teacher who developed the lesson, “And it was a message they were to memorize on their escape to freedom.” . . . Students used donated fabric to trace and copy the nine patterns slaves used to navigate the Underground Railroad, an escape network carved out by abolitionists.¹¹

About a month later I received a call from a member of the education staff at a regional public museum in Michigan. The individual wanted to know what else could go along with the Quilt Code blocks they were putting in the Underground Railroad resource kit they were preparing for loan to schools.¹² The readers’ comment section of amazon.com included this August 15, 1999 testimonial from a woman in California:



The information was an eye opener and just confirmed what we already knew. We are a strong, beautiful, intelligent people descended from survivors of slavery. Imagine using codes and patterns to lead a people through the Underground Railroad and unto Canada and freedom. My sister and I are taking up quilting to keep the tradition alive.¹³

Then, just this past weekend, while at a national arts conference in Boston, I heard from the head of a major community-based youth arts program in Pittsburgh that the kids had worked all summer on quilts just like those which had been used on the Underground Railroad.¹⁴

Certainly, as we turn to oral histories as sources of data about quilting history, we must remember to consider a number of important factors when we begin to present and analyze that data. Who originally tells the story, when, where, why; are there other stories that are similar and, if so, what are the variations and similarities; and who retells the story, why, and in what context. All must be considered. A quilt-related oral history, like any other source material, is but one piece of data in the testing of a theory or in the description or analysis of a quilt topic. It must be supported by solid scholarship that corroborates and substantiates the story.

Now, to bring us all back to my story of the close encounter with the baboon in South Africa. Does every visitor to the Cape of Good Hope, who does not know better, end up with a baboon in the back seat of their car? Well, I hope that neither have I suggested that scenario nor have you construed that. I do hope, however, that if you ever visit that parking lot at the southern most tip of Africa, you will remember to keep your windows rolled up. Thank you.

Notes

1. Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buford, *The Quilters, Women and Domestic Art: An Oral History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1977; paperback edition, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), 65.

2. *Ibid.*, 39–42.

3. *Ibid.*, 39.

4. Muriel H. Wright "Sarah Ann Harlan: From Her Memoirs of Life in the Indian Territory," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 39, no. 2 (1956), 304–05. [Thanks to Nancy Hornback for bringing this to my attention.]

5. Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, Ph.D., *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret*



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Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad (New York: Doubleday, 1999), jacket cover.

6. *Ibid.*, 33.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Deborah Hopkinson, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).
10. Floyd Coleman, "The Importance of the Decorative Arts in African American History," in *Hidden in Plain View*, 5.
11. *Lansing State Journal*, 22 February 1999, 4B.
12. Personal communication with staff member of Kalamazoo (Michigan) Valley Museum, March 1999.
13. Reader's comment on Amazon.com, 15 August 1999.
14. Personal communication with Joshua Green, 8 October 1999.