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The Culture of Resistance: African American Art Quilts and Self-Defining

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Black Feminist theory advocates the formation of positive self-definitions and the restructuring of denigrated social images of African American women. African American women have defined themselves and restructured social images using sites of resistance like music, literature, and art. This study suggests that African American women's art quilts are also sites of resistance to denigrated constructions of Black womanhood. Using Black Feminist theory as a starting point and field interviews with four African American quilters living in the Midwest, I examine how they construct their quilts as sites for re-defining themselves and resisting negative images.

Quilting New Images

The social images of the African American woman have served to control her status in American society. Because she has little control over the construction and circulation of images, like the mammy, the matriarch, the Jezebel, the welfare mother, or the tragic mulatta, she cannot deflect attention away from herself and onto the political and economic structures that often ensure her position as poor, exploited, and/or rejected. Yet, the African American woman has, in various ways, been able to psychologically resist these images in order to create and sustain self-definitions and self-concepts that empower her, her family, and her community.

Angela Davis suggests that African American women have resisted controlling images, defining themselves and protecting their self-concepts through the writing and performance of blues lyrics.[1] Lisa Anderson's work traces African American women's resistance through Black women's film and play productions.[2] Bonnie Thornton Dill's study depicts African American domestic workers as women who resist negative and controlling self-images by signifyin', showing deference to their white employers and the dominant social ideology while, at home, teaching their children to do the exact opposite.[3] But according to Patricia Hill Collins, one of the strongest forms of resistance lies within the literary form.[4] She states, "Literature by Black women writers provides the most comprehensive view of Black women's struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of denigrated images of Black womanhood."[5] While strongly agreeing with the scholarship of Davis, Anderson, Dill, and Collins, I suggest that an exploration of African American women's material-culture productions can reveal other important sites of resistance.

African American traditional quilts, in particular, have historically been sites of creative expression for Black women as well as sites of resistance to slavery and economic bondage. And, most recently, we have begun to recognize the important function and political implications of African American contemporary and art quilts as sites of resistance to race, class, and gender oppression. I believe that the African American art quilt also functions as a material artifact that affords African American women the opportunity to struggle with their own self-concepts and to define and re-define themselves as African American women. Not only does the African American art quilt function as a creative outlet and expression, but it functions as a coping mechanism in a society that does not value or respect Black women often enough. Thus, I have examined the quilts of Nedra Bonds, Kyra Hicks, Edna Patterson-Petty, and Sherry Whetstone-McCall as functional sites of resistance, positing that these women have rejected controlling images of Black womanhood, publicly displaying their self-definitions and self-concepts in the form of their quilts.

Evolving Definitions

Kyra Hicks has achieved a clearer self-concept despite social and media ideologies by sharing her experiences. She connects with African American women and other people by putting into quilt form her impressions of herself and her life, a goal she set for herself in 1991 after attending the Eva Grudin exhibit, "Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts." Seeing the tales of so many other African American women, who memorialized their foremothers and shared their self-concepts and self-definitions, fired Kyra to seek to do the same:

> I almost cried while looking at those quilts. I marveled at the creativity of those women who took bits of cloth and preserved their stories. That afternoon *I knew* that I wanted to tell my stories in fabric and *I knew* that I wanted to be on the walls with these women. It was as if I found my voice that afternoon—despite having no formal training and only a seventh grade sewing class for experience.[6]

Although she seeks to tell her stories, the shared experiences of oppression, stereotyped expectations and images have resulted in her simultaneously telling the stories of many African American women.

One story that Kyra has been able to share is that of being exhausted and fed up with the images of the black woman and, to some extent, the romanticizing of her position in society. Social scientists often view the position of the African American woman as one that is psychologically deviant from the normal, or European, standards.[7] To correct this, and because of a sense of pride, African American scholars often romanticize the plight of the black woman.[8] Despite the adversities—racism, poverty, poor healthcare, substandard housing conditions, rape—black women have consistently, physically and emotionally, survived. They are known as the monolithic "strong black woman." The image of the "strong black woman" is admirable to some degree; however, it has also been detrimental to the physical and mental health of African American women. The normal expectancy is that the African American woman *should* be able to withstand the pressures and challenges of life that no one else possibly could. This re-

sults in a life that is filled with significant stress and a society that does not take African American women's mental and physical health issues seriously.

To address such issues concerning her own life, Kyra created the quilt *Boxes #1*, which is simply a quilt of one green, five red, three floral, and three white square blocks, depicting the lower portion of a woman's leg as she has walked out of the unfinished border of the quilt (see figure 1). This quilt was designed after a conversation with a male in New York. After the conversation, Kyra began to feel as if she and other women were "boxed into behaving a certain way, [into] certain standards of living."[9] The quilt actually depicts a woman who has decided that there is definitely more to life than what a male-dominated society has decided for her. According to both Kyra and fellow quilter, Sherry Whetstone McCall, *Boxes #1* makes an impact upon African American women who see it.[10] There is an instant connection, seeing the leg of the woman, knowing that she will no longer stay within the confines of a box of boxes. She is free to move outside of the restrictions. The last box, the one green box in the quilt, is the last place that the woman steps. This box, so different from the others, indicates new beginnings and perhaps even blessings.[11] But, in essence, the quilt is the physical symbol of Kyra's own decision to walk out of society's expectations and into her own "evolving definition."[12]

Nedra Bonds also shares Kyra's belief in self-determination and self-defining. She stated, "The one thing I have control over is me. I work continuously to not change the world but to change myself into a positive human being."[13] Yet, Nedra *is* changing the world when she depicts her strong and manageable self-concepts in her quilts. Many African American women who have viewed Nedra's quilts believe that her quilts speak to their own issues of self-worth. Thus, these quilts can be viewed as a method of sharing alternative ways of coping with the conflict that arises between one's self-concept and society's controlling images.

One of Nedra's quilts that has made an impact on African American women who view it is *Get Off Me* (see figure 2). *Get Off Me* depicts a naked, pregnant African American woman against the backdrop of red, black, and green Pan-Africanism (indicating unity) and of pink

Figure 1: Kyra Hicks completed Boxes #1 after a conversation about the social roles of women. Courtesy of Kyra Hicks.

and blue satin and lace (indicating society's roles and expectations of women and femininity). In the woman's hand is money. Nedra noted:

> This piece is about burdens carried by women which have little to do with "being," but have a lot to do with how we are perceived as being. The symbols involved in lace and ribbons are contrasted by the cross and childbirth, symbols of pain and suffering. Yet, we run in spite of it all.[14]

According to Nedra, inherent in this message to, and for, African American women is that we do not have to participate in "all those things that women are supposed to be part of whether they want to be

Figure 2: Nedra Bonds created *Get Off Me* in order to demonstrate the many contradicting sides of expected female social roles. Courtesy of Nedra Bonds.

or not."[15] Along with running "in spite of it all," the African American woman can choose to run outside of it all.

Motherhood

When examining the African American woman's definition of motherhood, it is quite apparent that many have chosen to step outside of society's expectations. It is believed that on one hand, the African American woman is the "Mother Goddess," she is nurturing, not only towards her own children, but also to everyone. She places the needs and desires of everyone else before her own. She is the big, strong shoulder that everyone can cry on. On the other hand, she is the irresponsible mother who cannot control her sexual or reproductive urges. She has more children than she can care for which results in neglected children who, feeling unwanted and unloved, turn to a life of crime and poverty. These are the images of the mammy figure, the black matriarch, and the welfare mother. The circulation of these images is a necessity for the maintenance of the historically dominant socio-economic position of Euro-Americans and the "normative" ranking of Euro-American motherhood.[16]

The mammy figure symbolized the slave owner's perceptions of the appropriate relationship between slave owner and slaves. The mammy was obedient and non-threatening, providing exceptional and loving care for the white family while ignoring her own. The mammy, then, is the representation of the perfect African American female. Her behavior is easily manipulated to support the dominant ideology.[17]

Parallel to the mammy figure are the black matriarchs and the welfare mothers. These images developed during and after World War II when African American women had to find work to help support their families or seek what little assistance the government offered. Because the matriarch is a hard worker, often away from home and family, she is considered a failure at her womanly duties. And, because she fails at mothering, her children are often undereducated and delinquent. The welfare mother, the opposite of the matriarch, refuses to work. She is thought to be lazy and content with staying at home and receiving government pensions, and is a bad mother because her bad values

and lack of work ethic are passed on to her children who then never learn the importance of contributing to society.[18] Like the mammy figure, the matriarch and welfare mother images perpetuate dominant ideologies. They serve to place blame upon African American women for the economic and social conditions of them and their families, leaving dominant systems of oppression, like capitalism, free of scrutiny.

Despite such degrading definitions of African American motherhood, Edna Patterson-Petty has chosen to privilege her own personal definitions of motherhood and illustrates them in a series of quilts that include mother and child motifs. In defining what motherhood means to her and presenting those beliefs in a tangible form, Edna is able to create for the consumers of her art form an alternative way of viewing African American mothers. She stated, "I love doing mother and child type things because it is just near and dear to me because I'm a mother, and I enjoy being a mother."[19]

One of her first mother-child pieces was created after her twenty-three-year-old son was killed. *Mother and Child*, a small piece, similar to crazy quilting, is designed with dark blues, purples, and black to symbolize the darkness of this period in Edna's life (see figure 3). In the middle of the sewn-together crazy patches is a mother nursing a child who almost goes unnoticed. But Edna also thinks of this piece as the time when she was putting her life back together. The pieces were symbolic of her decision to persevere despite a bad marriage, the death of her son, and a lack of encouragement.

Inherent in this quilt is the importance of the mother-child relationship to the African American woman. The varying shades of purples and blues almost blend in with the abstract, angled and contorted form of the light, indigo-shaded mother; and the child, also light indigo-shaded, blends into the crook of the mother's arm, suggesting the inseparableness of the two. His drawn-in nose and eyes are almost imperceptible. This quilt moves beyond the image of the African American mother as bad. The quilt signifies a deep depression. And, yet, in the midst of the depression there is a mother figure that reaches beyond her difficult circumstances to nurture and protect her child. This type of image is significant in that it provides an alternative referent to what an African American mother can be, that is, responsive and nurturing in spite of her circumstances.

Figure 3: Edna Patterson-Petty completed this *Mother and Child* quilt as encouragement after the loss of a son. Courtesy of Edna Patterson-Petty.

Another of Edna's quilts that illustrates the importance of motherhood is *Rhythms of Life: From the Cradle to the Grave.* This quilt is also similar to a crazy quilt, a melange of African fabrics cut in varying shapes and pieced together. In the center of the quilt is a purple box trimmed in black. Inside of the box is a purple mother-figure that stares at a black image that represents both a cradle and a grave. This quilt especially speaks to the power of the mother to give life or death to a child, not physically, but emotionally. According to Edna, it is within the power of the mother to nurture a child into an existence as a socially aware and happy human being or into what could be a vicious circle of despair:

> I designed "Rhythms of Life" as a statement to young parents and children. A child can be born into this world under a cloud of doom or a cloud of glory. . . . Even though a child may not be physically dead, too often they are emotionally and creatively deprived if they are not nurtured, loved, and allowed to find their own life.[20]

Rhythms of Life is a teaching tool. The crazy pattern of fabric is symbolic of the hectic world that surrounds mother and child. It is the responsibility of the mother, at the center of the fabric(ated) chaos, enclosed in order, to create for her child the environment and peace that the child deserves. It symbolizes the seriousness with which motherhood must be taken.

Edna has defied the image of the matriarch and the welfare mother throughout her years as a mother. This defiance was not necessarily a conscious protest but was the unconscious desire to define for herself what she should and should not be doing with her life, while at the same time consciously choosing to be an appropriate role model for her children. Part of that definition was returning to school and having her children involved in this decision:

> A lot of people were not supportive. They couldn't understand why I would quit a job and go back to school . . . here I am black, four children. No one was encouraging. But while I was in school, I just drove my four kids around with me. Some of it was a hard struggle. But it was just something that I knew I had to do. It was beyond wanting to do it. No matter what I had to do and what I had to sacrifice to go to school it was still worth it.[21]

Here, we see Edna's inability to completely separate her self-definitions and decisions from the physical presence of her children. In a sense, her children are also a part of defining who she is.

Edna examines the importance of the child as a part of the African American woman's definition in another work called *Mother and Child*. In this piece a child is tied to a mother's back, and we are again reminded of the necessity for the mother to be the center of a young child's life, to nurture and support the child. One might also read the richness of the mother, depicted by the jewels hanging from her neck and hand, as symbolic of the value that Edna places on motherhood. This particular piece was inspired by a trip to Africa as Edna recognized the shared value that her African sisters placed on motherhood: "The women were never far away from their children. They had a little baby tied to them. It's wearing your child so they are never far from you."[22]

Mother and Child is also symbolic of the perseverance and belief in herself that Edna has fostered. She has achieved what society tells her is unachievable, success as a black woman, and she has remained loyal to her beliefs about motherhood. Edna's decision to re-define herself, quit her job, and attend school to become an artist, did not adversely affect her relationship with her children. As a matter of fact, her self-definition goes far beyond the image of the matriarch and welfare mother. Edna combined a strong work ethic with a nurturing and encouraging attitude toward her children in order to provide a better socio-economic situation and a healthier mental and emotional environment for her family. Her adult children now follow in her footsteps with successful careers and healthy concepts of family and parenting.

Edna's definition of and belief in motherhood is expressed in her quilts. Her definition and images are counter to that of the dominant ideology because she creates mother-figures who are at the center of their children's lives providing for them and supporting them while remaining whole and capable women. The mother-figures in these creations not only stand at the center of their children's lives, but they are fully aware that they do and choose this position because of their understanding of the magnitude of their presence. For the consumer, Edna's definition of and belief about motherhood is made real, more

valid, when the consumer can actually reach out and touch the expression of the belief. The most important point to consider when examining Edna's work, or the work of any other of these quilt artists, is that the images they construct are largely for themselves. They resist the images by physically defining themselves in quilt form, an act that aids in their psychological and physical well-being.

Beauty and Self-Presentation

Images like that of the matriarch and the welfare mother are pervasive in our society and are expressed in numerous ways, including in our society's standard of beauty. These standards are directly related to the historical construction of these images. The African was exoticized physically. The African's skin was darker, her features broader and fuller, her hair kinky, long or short; and it was believed that she had sexual organs that were larger than the "norm," evidence to white oppressors that the African naturally possessed a stronger sexual appetite.[23] A more "natural" appearance elevated the fears of those who had repressed their emotional and sexual psyches in favor of a more conservative and puritan agenda such as that associated with the Victorian era and the now infamous "Cult of True Womanhood."[24]

Establishing theories of the sexuality and appearance of the African female allowed the white male oppressors free reign in defining femininity and female roles for *both* African American and White women. Because the African was thought to be more sexually aggressive, the white woman was thought to be sexually pure. Therefore, white male oppressors could take continual sexual advantage of black slave women without taking responsibility for the immorality of their actions or the physical and emotional damage of rape.[25]

Further, establishing the "animal" nature and brute strength of the African woman allowed the white male oppressor to capitalize on her capacity to perform field labor. The African woman lacked femininity because of her superhuman strength and ability to cope. Because it appeared that she did not need the help of men and could head her own household and work in the fields like any man, she was considered to be more masculine. In contrast, the white woman was consid-

ered feminine and was, thus, allowed to perform more delicate, womanly duties such as supervising the care of the household and the moral education of her children. Both the white male and female had to believe that the black woman possessed beast-like qualities in order to rationalize her hard labor in the fields under conditions deplorable even for beasts.[26]

Media continues to portray the black woman as unfeminine, mammy-like, or super-sexual. She is often characterized in movies, commercials, and videos as an overweight, overbearing, asexual mother; a slender girl with enlarged sexual organs (buttocks and breasts) whose daily agenda is sexually duping some man in order to survive; or a mulatta, who almost fits the description of delicate white beauty because she possesses European features, but is unfortunately tainted with black blood and, thus, consistently wavers on the threshold of identity crisis.[27] White women are contrasted against these images as slender, long-haired, sexual but morally pure creatures.

Despite the fact that there is a marked difference in the perception of black women's beauty and white women's beauty, African American women are still expected to attempt to achieve the standard that has been set for white women, a standard that was established against the backdrop of the black woman's oppression. Studies show that African Americans who physically conform to a white standard of beauty receive the best treatment in hiring practices, real-estate sales, and customer service.[28] This means that many African American women have had to consider straightening their naturally kinky hair, bleaching their skin, and, in some drastic cases, undergoing cosmetic surgery.

The emotional wounds of never quite measuring up to society's standards have impacted the African American community as is apparent and has been examined in such works as Spike Lee's popular movies, *Jungle Fever* and *School Daze* , and Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*.[29] Yet, scholars do note that African American women are consistently defining and re-defining for themselves what it means to be beautiful.[30] The subject of Nedra Bonds quilt, *My Hair*, is further evidence of the wounds that are inflicted upon the self-esteem of African American women, and it is also evidence of the decision of African American women to define for themselves what constitutes African American female beauty (see figure 4).

Nedra's depiction of hair is closely tied to a deeply personal subject for many African American women. Elaborate hair-grooming, a social and ritualistic activity in Africa, was an activity denied many slave women in America. Instead, the hair was covered with rags or was straightened with butter or other oils. The hair, often kinky, became a marker that distinguished the African from the European, and it became a source of shame rather than pride for many African Americans.

Many African American women will reminisce about their Saturday night hot-combing rituals as little girls, sitting between the legs of their mothers, warned to remain still so as not to be burned. This ritual was a necessity as it kept the kitchen (nape of the neck) straight and the edges of the hair from forming into "grapes." The weekly straightening of the hair made the African American girl "presentable" for that week; however, if the little girl had straight hair, similar to the texture of Europeans, or long hair it was much easier for her to be presentable. Nedra remembered:

> I suffered "the hair thing." My brother had "good hair," my sister's was "bad" and mine was "in between." "At least" mine was long. I heard this kind of talk growing up just as do most girls my age.[31]

As is depicted in her quilt, Nedra went through various stages of hairstyles, from natural afro puffs to beaded braids, attempting to conform to society and family expectations. In Nedra's family, her long hair was a part of the role of being a woman even if long hair did not satisfy her own expectations:

> My grandmother would tell me that your hair is your glory like the rays of the sun. She'd put my head between her knees [to comb her hair]. I'm very tender-headed to this day. So we go through all [of] the long [hair stuff] . . . well, you know. And still it does not make us happy.[32]

After being "fed up" with the "hair thing" and never quite happy, Nedra chose to cut her long "in between" hair, not to find happiness, but recognizing that her happiness did not lie within the constructs of what society believes makes a woman beautiful.[33]

My Hair is a record of Nedra's experiences with her hair and the development of her self-concept. Yet, for most African American

Figure 4: Nedra Bond's three-dimensional quilt, *My Hair*, consists of a variety of hairstyles she has worn over the years and is a celebration of breaking free from the desire for perfect hair. Courtesy of Nedra Bonds.

women, *My Hair* is also a record of their own lives and experiences. The right side of *My Hair* is the quilted image of a woman's head that sports every hairstyle that Nedra has ever had. The head, painted and sewn onto fabric, includes pigtails, afros, braids, locs, jherri curls, and permed hair. *My Hair* serves as a reminder for African American women of the variety of hairstyles that they might have suffered through in a lifetime. In the quilt, the woman's obvious gloom is symbolic of an unhappiness with society's inability to accept the "kinks" as natural or beautiful.

The link to society is strengthened in the design of the left side of the quilt. This side of the quilt is a mixture of African-inspired fabrics as the background to a yellow sun with gold, metallic rays surrounding it. It is a pictorial metaphor in reference to the statement, "A woman's hair is her crowning glory." Although Nedra's grandmother used a variation of this statement, it is familiar in some form to most

Americans, as it has been commonly used to socialize young girls and boys to associate femininity and beauty with long hair.

At the same time that *My Hair* examines the results of the restrictive practice of conforming to Western beauty standards it also explicitly proposes freeing oneself from the confines of Western beauty standards. In this manner, the standards, in the form of the various hairstyles, are removed from the heads of African American women and are placed in the quilt, an altar where African American women can lay their burdens down. Turning away from these standards, even visibly recognizing the need to turn away, marks a significant point in establishing a self-concept and defining oneself.

According to psychologists, Alice Brown-Collins and Deborah Sussewell, it is at the point that the "Myself Referent" emerges from the African American female self-concept so that she can organize her experiences as a member of the African American community and her personal history and unique experiences in such a manner as to feel confident enough and possess enough self-esteem to make major decisions that are more inherent to her own personal beliefs. Nedra achieved this moment in her life, choosing to cut her hair "very, very short and natural." Nedra is no longer a slave to her hair or hair straighteners. Thus, the hairstyles in the quilt, "My Hair," are a reminder of the changes that she went through, attempting to conform to society's standards. The sun's rays are a memory of a beloved family member, but they are also a reminder of the various ways that African American women are defined by others, sometimes to their detriment.

Kyra Hicks also achieved a "Myself Referent," or self-defining, moment when she designed and quilted the *Cinderella quilt* (see figure 5). The *Cinderella quilt* depicts an African American Cinderella running away from the palace, her coach behind her, as a clock hangs ominously in the air, about to strike "30." On the quilt is the sentence: "Let's Cut to the Chase, I wear a size 9." Although a wonderfully humorous quilt, it speaks to Kyra's recognition of her approaching middle-age and it sounds clearly the ticking of the biological clock. Kyra wants to find the perfect mate, wants to marry, and wants to create a family. As a part of this equation, Kyra has been expected, like the majority of African American women to conform to certain

Figure 5: The *Cinderella quilt* is one that women often identify with. Kyra Hicks created this quilt in her 30s when she decided to stop waiting for a "Prince Charming." Courtesy of Kyra Hicks.

standards of femininity and beauty if she is to achieve status as a wife and mother.

The *Cinderella quilt* subverts the message that has permeated our society for many centuries: women have to physically, emotionally, and intellectually conform to male-constructed ideological images in order to achieve happiness and security in their lives. Central to the

quilt, and framed by a blue floral border, is the African American Cinderella. *Behind* her are the prince's castle and the coach that is meant to whisk her away. The fact that she is the center of this piece suggests that her desires and needs, including her self-concept, are as important as the Prince's desire to find *his* appropriate mate.

This Cinderella is dressed in a green and orange gown, bolder than the soft, pastel lavender and pink colors that are used to construct the castle and the coach. The boldness of this woman, so central to the quilt, foreshadows the appliquéd statement that surrounds her, "Let's cut to the chase, I wear a size 9." The colors seem to symbolize self-actualization, arriving at a point at which African American women choose not to conform to demands that are not beneficial to their lives in order to achieve something that they are capable of providing for themselves. Yet, this Cinderella makes it quite clear that there is room in her life for a prince, which is indicated by the fact that the path to the castle is not completely inaccessible to Cinderella. As a matter of fact, the yellow, winding path leads directly to her feet. This suggests that the prince willing to accept Cinderella as the woman that she conceives herself to be is the true "Prince Charming."

Kyra re-defined herself and set new standards when she designed the *Cinderella quilt*. In this work, Kyra turns the tables and establishes expectations of the male suitor. She suggests that he "forget the preliminaries" and "just buy the correct shoe size."[34] There is no need to try on different "outfits" in the form of society's constructed roles. Kyra is suggesting that the right mate will be one that accepts her for who she is and what she has come to accept herself as, a sexy, thirty-something woman who knows what she wants to achieve. This quilt is also the symbol for African American women who have turned away from the image of Cinderella, embracing their own self-sufficiency and supporting a different understanding of human relationships and of physical beauty.

Kyra also places American beauty standards on trial in her quilt, *Black Barbie* (see figure 6). This quilt's blue, pink, and yellow floral border symbolizes society's definition of femininity while at the center of the quilt is a Black Barbie of multi-hued brown skin in a black and white zebra-print bathing suit, reminiscent of the original Mattel 1959

Figure 6: *Black Barbie*, by Kyra Hicks, is a commentary on the social history of the world-famous doll. Courtesy of Kyra Hicks.

Barbie doll release. Three sentences, in red and black, can be read on the quilt: "Barbie America's Doll," "Barbie was never intended for me," and "Black Barbie has no name."

In the first message, Kyra tackles the perception of America's standard of beauty in the construction of a doll whose physical measurements are unrealistic for any female, black or white. Modeled after the German-produced Lilli doll, Barbie is the commercialization of patriarchal fantasies of femininity.[35] Pink, a color often associated with women and femininity, has become Barbie's color. She is sometimes sold in a pink bathing suit, but consumers can purchase pink coats, pink skirts, pink pants, and pink boots along with her pink convertible and her pink Malibu beach house. Barbie, who in her earlier versions ranged from a long or short-haired brunette to strawberry blonde, is now often a long-haired fair blonde. Her eye color ranges between green and blue, sometimes brown. Originally, Barbie was created as a role model for little girls; someone they could look up to and aspire to be like, for Barbie was the quintessential career girl with good morals.[36]

What is most apparent in the second message, "Black Barbie was never intended for me," is illustrated in the various skin shadings of the black Barbie. Because Barbie was conceptualized as a representation of white womanhood and white beauty she was meant to serve as a role model to those who could achieve white womanhood and beauty—white girls. Although Barbie had black friends, Christie and Julia, released in 1969, black versions of Barbie did not appear until 1980.[37] The varied brown hues of the Barbie in this quilt remind us that the black Barbie is just as unrealistic as the white Barbie. Although attempts have been made to diversify the black Barbie, she is still most often released in one shade of brown, usually with European facial features, light brown eyes, and long, flowing black hair.

The second statement and the third statement, "Black Barbie has no name," are relative to one another because they are a direct attack upon society's privileging of white women and European features over anyone that is not white or European. According to Kyra, the quilt was created because of the silent message that Barbie sends to young women in her form and in the advertising for the doll. She stated, "I

created the *Black Barbie* quilt after noticing how, in several ads for the doll, the black version was usually photographed behind the white version and rarely had a name of her own. What are we teaching our young girls?"[38] We can assume that our young girls are internalizing the silent message that representations of "blackness" or "Africanness" are secondary to representations of "whiteness." Ann duCille summarizes the situation best:

> The problem here is not simply semantic. Barbie has a clearly established persona and a thoroughly pervasive presence as a white living doll. The signature Barbies, the dolls featured on billboards, on boxes, in video and board games, on clothing, and in the Barbie exercise tape (as well as the actresses who play Barbie on Broadway and the models who make special appearances as Barbie at Disneyland and elsewhere) are always blond, blue-eyed, and white. Colorizing Barbie, selling her in blackface, does not necessarily make her over into a positive black image.[39]

Subtle messages like that portrayed in the Barbie doll are not so subtle to young girls who seek dolls and toys that are in their own image; or who believe that they are abnormal because they do not fit the image of current dolls and toys. Kyra, having experienced this conflict herself, chose to speak out, acknowledging the damage that forced unrealistic ideals of beauty can inflict upon the self-concepts of young women. By simply acknowledging the false standards that Barbie represents, Kyra is choosing to re-define for herself and other African American women what characterizes beauty and femininity.

The evidence that African American women have higher self-esteem; the fact that they are participating in Afrocentric acts such as allowing their hair to return to more natural states; and their decisions to directly state what they want and expect in life are prime examples of the fact that African American women have chosen to re-examine society's standards of beauty and femininity. Re-examining these concepts allows African American women the opportunity to build and renew self-concepts that privilege their own physical characteristics. Nedra and Kyra illustrate in their quilts their decisions to live by their own definitions and, thus, provide visual records of their renewed self-concepts.

Further Resistance: Defining the African American Quilting Tradition

Interestingly enough, the very object employed by African American women as a means of expressing their creativity and displaying their self-concepts has been subject to the restrictions of society's controlling ideologies. The American tradition of quilting is not, itself, exempt from the racism and classism that permeates our culture. Until the early 1980s African American quilts were not considered a part of the mainstream tradition of American quilting. African American quilts did not fit into the typical category of American "traditional" quilting because of the many forms that African American quilts take in order to follow function. Thus, African American women were often exempt from quilt shows and festivals because their quilts did not always follow a typical, traditional quilting pattern in what were considered traditional mainstream fabrics or colors. Poor women sewed together scraps that were available to them in the most aesthetically pleasing manner possible. What was available, however, did not always allow for perfectly symmetrical patterns or tightly stitched quilting. Many African Americans also chose colors that, within their worldview, appeared pretty in contrast to each other or symbolized something, even when they could not remember what that "something" was.[40]

The intersection of race and class impedes upon the social and artistic networks that might have been formed for African American women. Expectations and definitions that are placed upon African American quilters are nearly impossible to fulfill. First, many African American quilters exist outside of the structures and worldview that dictate a "traditional American quilt" art form. Those quilters who do manage to fulfill and adhere to expectations and definitions rarely become full members of the "tradition" because they find that the "tradition" is a key way to control the creative output of African American quilters, in essence repressing creativity or typing African American quilts. When this happens it is necessary for African American women to define for themselves what constitutes an African American quilting tradition, an African American quilt, and an African American quilter. The first art quilt that Sherry Whetstone-McCall

designed and quilted, *Rhythm in My Soul: The Dancer*, is her tangible decision to decide for herself what it means to quilt:

> I started quilting in 1992 . . . I had wanted to learn the basics. So, they [the teachers] started me out with the different blocks . . . twelve different blocks, and they were all very traditional, all very boring to me. I knew right away that this was not the kind of quilting that I wanted to do.[41]

Sherry sought the counsel and support of other quilters when she joined several quilt guilds. Even among large numbers of women, Sherry still felt confined to traditional patterns. Finally, she met a woman who was designing a quilt that depicted a woman teaching her granddaughter to quilt, and the quilt of the granddaughter projected, three-dimensionally, from the quilt. At this point, Sherry began to feel a better sense of what it is she, herself, wanted to create:

> I guess that was the first inkling that I got that maybe I could do my own thing. Because I was kind of like . . . I can't do that because that's not the norm. I was trying to be a follower instead of just going my own way. So, then I just kind of loosened up.[42]

That loosening up resulted in a quilt that took 160 hours to complete. The quilting of the sand, alone, took 60 hours, using a technique called stipple quilting which gives the fabric the actual effect of texture and graininess. Sherry also added three-dimensional effects by creating leaves with wires that can be shaped to project from the quilt and trimming the drums with lace and beads. The dancer is hand-painted.[43]

Rhythm in My Soul: The Dancer is both a conscious and unconscious piece of artwork (see figure 7). It was Sherry's intent to create a quilt that employed various mediums—appliqué, beadwork, paint, and quilting—which symbolized for her the freedom from inhibitions in the quilting world. Perhaps, unconsciously, Sherry chose the dancing woman because she represents so powerfully the freedom that Sherry sought. The painted body of the woman bends over gracefully, but the jerking-back motion of her arm suggests that the beat of the drum is strong and that her dance is unrestrained, natural. Inherent in the movement that is displayed in this dancer is the freedom of choice. In as sense, Sherry is the dancer, each movement a selection of a new medium, a new fabric, a new name.

Figure 7: *Rhythm in My Soul: The Dancer,* the first quilt Sherry Whetstone-McCall made, has a three-dimensional effect. Courtesy of Sherry Whetstone-McCall.

After the completion of *Rhythm in My Soul: The Dancer*, Sherry continued to design and create pieces that were representative of her aesthetics and beliefs, quilts that functioned to communicate those aesthetics and beliefs. But, Sherry also had to contend with a society that wanted to stereotype the work that she enjoyed so much, work that now was a symbol of her decision to "go her own way" instead of being a "follower." Sherry interchangeably names herself a quilt artist and textile artist:

> I'm a quilt artist, and when I started out I actually refused to enter shows that were for quilters because I wanted to see if my work would be accepted as art, as fine art. And, that was the only way I could tell if it would be accepted, to [enter it into] fine art shows. So, I did, and I got in. Then I started entering quilt shows. It has taken on quite a turn actually. People are starting to recognize art quilts like mine [more] readily now than they [did] in '92. People now recognize quilting as an art. I have a lot of respect for traditional quilters. It takes time, precision, accuracy, and patience. I have a lot of respect for it but I just can't do it. I never completed that quilt that I took in that class.[44]

Sherry's concept of self required that she participate in a vivacious and unique tradition, not one that was stifling to her creativity. Thus, in order to erase any conflict between her self-concept and her actual behavior, Sherry sought a quilt form that was more in balance with her personality. In the same manner, Sherry's need to name herself and her activity, a process according to African philosophy that actually breathes existence into those things that have not been called into being, ensures that the name reflects the "authenticity of *her* [emphasis mine] activity, not that of another culture."[45] By naming herself and her activity, Sherry resists racist and classist categories.

Sherry has managed to keep in contact with quilters like Nedra, Kyra, and Edna who have also established for themselves patterns of behavior that coincide with their self-concepts. Also naming themselves art quilters and textile artists, working within an African American tradition of quilting, these women have been able to address numerous issues such as ethnocentric beauty standards, hampering and confining definitions such as that of the "strong black woman," and false images like that of the welfare mother.

According to Simon J. Bronner, "objects are references people use

to tangibly outline the worlds they know, the ones they try to cope with, and those they aspire to or imagine."[46] The African American art quilt is this type of object. It has stood the test of time as a symbol of the beliefs that African American women hold about their families, their positions in society, and about themselves. African American women have managed to cope for nearly four hundred years with the intersecting system of race, class, and gender oppression. They have survived with their self-concepts and their self-definitions intact. We have clear evidence of this in their musical, literary, and video productions. But, we also have evidence in the material-culture production of African American women. More specifically, Nedra Bonds, Kyra Hicks, Edna Patterson-Petty, and Sherry Whetstone-McCall have used African American art quilts as a site of resistance against controlling social images. In their quilts they have symbolically retained the self-concepts and self-definitions that they have constructed and maintained for themselves in their daily lives.

Notes and References

1. Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

2. Lisa Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997).

3. Bonnie Thornton Dill, "The Means to Put My Children Through: Child Rearing Goals and Strategies Among Black Female Domestic Servants," *The Black Woman*, ed. La Frances Rodgers-Rose (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), 107–23.

4. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

5. Ibid., 83.

6. Kyra Hicks, interview by author, Arlington, VA, 3 February 2000.

7. The infamous "Moynihan Report" is a great example of this. The "Moynihan Report" of 1965 interpreted the results of surveys and population reports in African American homes. The social scientists who authored the report suggested that the increase in the delinquency of African American juvenile behavior was due to the lack of male father-figures in the home. This report was later used by men, especially of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, to support the belief that African American women were overly aggressive and emasculating. For discussions on this topic refer to the report, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of

Labor, 1965) and Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979).

8. This is not only a phenomenon of African American culture. European American culture also has a tendency to view black women as the monolithic "strong black woman" in literature and movies. Think about mammy in *Gone With the* Wind or Annie in *Imitation of Life*, two movies which depict African American women as strong, mothering types who can cook, clean, and nurture all day with little concern for themselves. When either culture privileges this image it negates the identities and the autonomy of African American women. For discussions on this topic refer to Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985); Angela Davis' *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); bell hooks' *Feminist Theory : From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

9. Sherry Whetstone-McCall, interview by author, Kansas City, MO, 31 January 1998.

10. Hicks and Whetstone-McCall, interviews.

11. The idea that this box could be a blessing is in reference to the idea that African American quilters will add a small, or large, piece of fabric in a color that seems inconsistent with the rest of the quilt as a blessing or other religious symbolism. See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983) and Maude Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993).

12. Hicks, interview.

13. Nedra Bonds, interview by author, Kansas City, MO, 22 June 1999.

14. Ibid.

15. Alice Thorson, "Feelings in Fabric," *Star Magazine*, 20 April 1997, 10.

16. Black Feminist scholars, sociologists, and historians have suggested that the circulation of images such as the welfare mother have averted attention from the real issues at hand. For example, rather than addressing the issue of the poverty of children and women in the United States, we blame the victim. The welfare mother image is familiar. It is an image of an African American woman, the mother of several children who chooses not to work. Instead, she and her family live off of the handouts of the government. What might be overlooked is the fact that many of these women do work but their low-skill, low-paying jobs do not provide enough income to provide adequate childcare, housing, transportation, food, and other monthly essentials. Ultimately, these women are portrayed as the "bad mother," incapable of providing her family's basic and moral needs. For discussions see Anderson, 1997; Christian, 1985; Collins, 1991; Davis, 1983; Lena Wright Myers' *Black Women: Do They Cope Better?* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1980); and Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

17. Anderson, 1997; Collins, 1991; and Christian, 1985.

18. Collins, 67–90.

19. Edna Patterson-Petty, interview by author, East St. Louis, IL, 26 February 1998.

20. Carolyn Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1998), 56.

21. Edna Patterson-Petty interview.

22. Ibid.

23. Christian, 2–7.

24. The cult of true womanhood refers to the Victorian ideology that women were the physically weaker, but morally stronger sex and, therefore, were responsible for the moral education of their households and society. Hazel Carby discusses the "cult of true womanhood" throughout her book, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

25. Both Carby and Christian talk about this throughout their works. Davis has a chapter on the physical and emotional effects of rape on slave and African American women.

26. Christian, 2; Collins, 43–66. See also, Sander Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late-Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 238.

27. Christian, 5–7; Collins, 78–82; and Kathy Russell, et. al. Concrete examples of this are Nell Carter on the hit television show, *Give Me a Break*, and the bi-racial character, Freddie, on the Cosby-inspired, A *Different World*.

28. See discussions of this and other studies in Russell, et. al.

29. *Jungle Fever*, 1991 and *School Daze*, 1987, directed by Spike Lee (Forty Acres and a Mule Film Productions); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970).

30. Alice Brown-Collins and Deborah Ridley Sussewell, "The Afro-American Woman's Emerging Selves," *The Journal of Black Psychology* 13, 1–11; Melissa Milkie, "Social Comparisons, Reflected Appraisals, Pervasive Beauty Images on Black and White Girls' Self-Concepts," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62, 190–210; and Russell, et.al., 1992. Russell, et.al.'s complete text covers this issue.

31. Nedra Bonds interviews.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Kyra Hicks interview.

35. See M. G. Lord, *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1994), 26–31. Barbie was the brainchild of Ruth Handler. While visiting in Europe Ruth saw the Lilli doll in a toy store and purchased three of them for herself and her daughter. Later, she developed Barbie's figure, using Lilli as the model. While Barbie was marketed as an American sweetheart, Lilli was a "pornographic caricature, a gag gift for men, or even more curious, for men to give their girlfriends in lieu of, say, flowers." Lilli, who was also the subject of a famous cartoon strip, was often advertised in skimpy or form-fitting clothing while posed in subtly suggestive positions.

36. Ibid., 50–57.

37. Ibid., 62. See also, Ann duCille, "Barbie in Black and White," in *The Barbie*

Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty, ed. Yona Zeldis McDonough (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 133.

38. Mazloomi, 95.

39. DuCille, 131.

40. Eli Leon, *Models in the Mind: African Prototypes in American Patchwork* (Winston Salem: Diggs Gallery, 1992) and *Who'd a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking* (San Francisco: San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1987); Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville: The Kentucky Quilt Project, 1990); Sandra German, "Surfacing: The Inevitable Rise of the Women of Color Quilters Network" in *Uncoverings 1993*, ed. Laurel Horton (San Francisco, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1994) 137–68; and Barbara Brown, "Dispelling Myths About African American Quilts," in *AQSG Blanket Statements*, Summer 1998, 1, 8–9 (newsletter #53).

41. Sherry Whetstone-McCall, interview by author, Kansas City, MO, 23 May 1998.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Sherry Whetstone-McCall, interview by author, Kansas City, MO, 31 January 1998.

45. Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy: Bedford Publishers, Inc., 1993), 56.

46. Simon J. Bronner, "The Idea of the Folk Artifact," *American Material Culture and Folklife: A Prologue and Dialogue*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1992), 14.