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"The Tradition of Old People's Ways": Gee's Bend Quilts and Slave Quilts of the Deep South

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The exhibit of Gee's Bend quilts has brought into focus a number of attitudes held by African American quilters in the Deep South toward cloth-wealth. Everyday textile works are valued because they "materialize memory": they transmit skills, family history, and palpable reminders of individuals whose clothes are recycled into "covers." These attitudes, we argue, create a complex relationship with commodity value in the dominant culture—value that is always part of museum display of objects designated "art."

We examine the meaning of such cloth-wealth by placing Gee's Bend quilts in the context of memories of slave quilts in the Deep South frontier communities. Second, we situate the dominant color, blue, in the Gee's Bend work-clothes quilts in the context of indigo production in the Deep South as well as the wider African diaspora. We argue that West African meanings of indigo as a sacred color coexisted with the memory of brutal indigo production in the plantation economy in the Deep South to create particularly powerful "blues" quilts.

The recent enthusiastically received exhibit of Gee's Bend quilts at the Whitney Museum of Modern Art in New York City marked an astonishing moment in which vernacular art became widely accepted as "high art." Blake Gopnik of the *Washington Post,* for instance, states, "The com-

plexities and irregularities of what these women turned out can make the work of the country's most famous abstract artists seem simple-minded and predictable."[1] This acceptance, in turn, has disturbed a number of hierarchies in the dominant culture. As Michael J. Prokopow, among others, argues, this exhibit brings to question how "cultural production" of art operates as well as how museums function as disciplinary institutions in a society.[2] Modern Western culture has assumed that art is created by individual genius, and not by the kind of community participation present in Gee's Bend. Western museums, furthermore, have drawn a strong distinction between art and craft, consigning most objects made for everyday use—as are these quilts—to the latter category; consequently, they have been excluded from consideration as "high art" except in rare moments. In the following study, we examine another related disturbance of long-held assumptions brought into focus by the exhibit: the relationship between commodity value and other values, aesthetic or spiritual.

African-American traditional culture has been notable in its ability to embed spiritual and aesthetic values in everyday practices like music and objects like quilts. This aspect of the culture that adds so much power to its productions also renders commodification of such practices and objects complex. When a price is paid for an everyday privately valued object like a quilt, its "value" sometimes becomes identified with the unstable commodity value that stands in uneasy relationship with African diasporic attitude toward cloth-wealth, considered of equal value to "hard" wealth of metals and precious stones so prioritized by the Western societies.[3] Toni Morrison represents this valuing of textiles vividly when Paul D in *Beloved* meditates on what would constitute an adequate memorial for the African Sixo: to a standard hard and lasting "arch built"—common in the dominant culture that traditionally commemorated with steel and stone—he adds the fragile and impermanent "robe sewn." Either activity would constitute a "fixing ceremony."[4] This robe, as well as the quilts that represent African cloth-wealth, constitutes what anthropologists Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider in *Cloth and Human Experience* call "treasure." When such treasure is hoarded it absorbs "value from the passage of time . . . not as capital for eventual deployment and merely for display, but as treasure to be saved in face of all exigencies that force its dissipation. More than an economic resource

or an affirmation of political status, treasure facilitates claims to the past—its names, legends, and events—that justify the transactions and extend the power of the living actors."[5] Cloth in a proto-capitalist society, argue Weiner and Schneider, can embody and retain what is most subject to decay—historically specific identities as well as what they call the "essential substances" of spiritual and moral life. Such textiles have no clearly defined connection to commodity value; their value lies in their materiality itself and the relationships they maintain between human actors through time.

We examine the presence of this attitude toward cloth-wealth by placing Gee's Bend quilts in the context, first, of slave quilts in the Deep South. Second, we situate the dominant color, blue, in work-clothes quilts in the context of the production and significance of indigo dye in the African diaspora. The use of indigo dye was, of course, common throughout the United States as was the making of quilts from worn work clothing. We argue that both continued to hold unique meanings to people whose ancestors came from indigo producing areas of West Africa and worked in the killing indigo fields in the Americas. These meanings have only recently found expression in print as fugitive oral traditions are increasingly given voice by a number of African-American writers interested in recovering the cultural values and aesthetic preferences brought by their people into the exchanges, translations, and appropriations that constitute the multi-cultural atmosphere of United States.

Attitudes toward textile work as "treasure" are discernable in the poor and isolated community that produced these newly considered works of art, where the conditions of production were overwhelmingly practical. The quilters themselves did not need the recognition of their work as "art" to know their value in creating community and in materializing memory. The quilts granted significant continuities to families that have lived outside of the written history of the dominant culture. Quilts and quilting as process remained special even as the need for warmth in badly insulated houses required almost continual recycling of cloth into covers. Older women insistently reminded girls that they needed to learn how to make quilts. Indeed, quilting seemed to mark the initiation of girls into the community of women. Many of the Gee's Bend quilters recall making their first quilts at the age of twelve or thirteen, a time when childhood

is giving way to puberty and the responsibilities of adulthood. Arlonzia Pettway, for example, recounted with vivid detail to the audience at the Brooks Museum opening at Memphis her impatience for the time when she could make her first quilt and her excitement during the day when it was finally quilted by a group of her elders.

The sudden interest in the quilts sparked by buyers in New York working through the local Freedom Quilting Bee in the 1970's turned these quilts into commodities, with pressure on the quilters to change the quilting practices and designs in response to the market as well as in response to the availability of new materials. Nancy Callahan's book on the topic recounts an increasing separation between what was privately valued and what sold on the larger marketplace, a situation that potentially threatened old traditions.[6] The stubborn resistance by many of the quilters to patterns provided by outsiders suggests that not individual quilts as much as a way of working, a sense of design, and clear preferences in the use of color may be what constitutes the "treasure" that "absorbs value from the passage of time" and is "to be saved in face of all exigencies that force its dissipation" that Weiner and Schneider name cloth-wealth.

The museum exhibit grants this cloth-wealth a vivid presence. With around forty quilts juxtaposed in large, uncluttered spaces, the richness of the tradition that produced such individually powerful pieces becomes apparent. In some special way, private quilts—as well as private stories—can gain additional spiritual value as they become public, even when by becoming public they are also commodified. African diasporic attitude toward cloth-wealth does not necessarily stand in opposition to commodity value, but remains in a much more complex relationship that constantly changes with the changing situation. The "treasure" invested in individual designs and private stories can continue to dominate the market forces in the museum exhibit in contrast to the Freedom Quilting Bee that encouraged standardization and anonymity. In the age of mechanical reproduction, it is not the physical quilt itself but the image of the quilt on mass-produced rugs, t-shirts, and scarves that will produce wealth for the community and thereby provide "cover" against cold and want. So far, the moving of the quilts from private valuing to a public one

has therefore benefited the community without changing the practice and meaning of the quilting.

Arlonzia Pettway's meditation on the 1942 blocks and stripes quilt made by her mother, Missouri Pettway gives a poignant image of this movement from private to public valuing: "It was when Daddy died. I was about seventeen, eighteen. He stayed sick about eight months, and passed on. Mama say, 'I going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love.' " The "shaping" of cloth and the subsequent power of the new object to "cover" another body, keeping alive love, denies the finality of loss. The original clothing helps to determine the pattern: "She take his old pants legs and shirt tails, take all the clothes he had, just enough to make that quilt, and I helped her tore them up. Bottom of the pants is narrow, top is wide, and she had me to cutting the top pant out and to shape them up in even strips."[7] The use of the word *shape* in Pettway's account is particularly revealing: giving form to something new to memorialize what has been lost constitutes one of the most powerful elements of African-American culture in music and in dance as well as in textile work.[8] The spirit of the dead is present even after the body has been used up. Used-up clothes, in turn, are not discarded as rags: to the vitality invested in them by the wearer is added the vitality of the quilter.

Similarly, an added vitality can be invested in the quilt that memorializes a mother and daughter working together to shape their mourning for their father and husband. The individual quilt has been sold, but once again potential "rags" have been saved and granted incremental meaning as the quilt now hangs on the museum wall. The connection the quilts create to the Gee's Bend community, past and present, can be extended to a larger community. As one of the quilters at the Memphis Brooks Museum opening said to the large and deeply moved audience: "We can see the Lord in your faces. And I know you love me." That the largely hostile world that surrounded Gee's Bend during most of its history can now be viewed by a quilter as a world full of "soul" and love adds to the power of cloth-wealth even when a quilt made to memorialize a kinsman is sold out of the family.

Other work-clothes quilts in the exhibit similarly reverberate with

richly layered associations to families, communities, and the constant additions to value that are inseparable from the quilts' aesthetics. The peculiar historical conditions suffered by Gee's Bend quilters add to the African diasporic valuing of cloth-wealth as forging connections between the generations as well as memorializing individual bodies. The quilters' ancestors were among the more than a million enslaved people who were moved from the Eastern seaboard into the frontier, then known as the Southwest, in the decades before the Civil War. Walter Johnson estimates that these years of migration saw more than "two thirds of a million interstate [slave] sales" with twenty-five percent of these disrupting first marriages and fifty percent destroying nuclear families. All sales dissolved "previously existing communities," changing names and separating children from their elders.[9] The ancestors of Gee's Bend quilters were not immune to such disruptions.

Although Mark Pettway relocated most of his slaves from North Carolina to Alabama in 1845, a number were obviously left behind or sold. This is made clear in the persistent Gee's Bend community memory of a child smuggled with the group. The trope of "the one saved" in cultural narratives always signifies "the many lost." In this context of disruption and loss, quilting itself began to represent "the one saved;" out of the many "rituals of remembrance" available to the fairly settled slave communities, only a few could be transported and preserved except in fragments in the Deep South during the subsequent years of stress of Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow social conditions. "We'd get together and make quilts just like we're praying together," states Mary Lee Bendolf. Mensie Lee Pettway seems to elaborate what "prayer" means: "A lot of people make quilts just for your bed, for to keep you warm. But a quilt is more. It represents safekeeping, it represents beauty, and you could say it represents family history." Furthermore, she adds: "We got a tradition of old people's ways."[10] In the memories of other African-American settlers in the Deep South in the decades preceding the Civil War this "tradition of old people's ways" that valued cloth-wealth is also subtly preserved. For them also, a quilt is "more" than keeping warm. Some of their stories are recorded in the five volumes of WPA 1930's interviews of former slaves published as *Mississippi Narratives* and *Alabama Narratives* in the series edited by George Rawick under the general title of *The American Slave:*

A Composite Autobiography. These accounts serve to place the meaning of Gee's Bend quilts in a larger cultural perspective.[11]

For enslaved people laboring in the frontier society of the nineteenth-century Deep South, the making of warm covers was, above all else, a practical daily endeavor, as it would be later for Gee's Bend quilters. Liza Strickland among others describes quilting as part of work on self-sufficient and isolated plantations that produced all its needed cloth (5. 9. 2065). Similarly Manda Edmondson remembers "knittin,' spinnin' an' weavin' gwine on mos' all de time, as hit took a heap o'civer." The need for warmth created as much of an on-going task as the need for light and cleanliness. The "lot ob quiltin'" that took place appears in the same paragraph as the making of soap and candles (2. 7. 675–76). In poorer frontier plantations, getting sufficient clothing often constituted a desperate endeavor. "Nakedness" became the metonym for the condition of servitude as much as did "hunger." Wash Hayes, after describing the usual cloth making and clothes, observes that slaves wore "mos' anything dey could git deir han's on" (3. 8. 965). Cloth work extended the workday in the Deep South beyond the standard "from sunrise to sunset." Since only a few plantations seem to have had specialized cloth-workers, many slaves spent rainy days–when no field work could be done—spinning, weaving, and sewing. They also did cloth work at night and were often required to fill a specific allotment of spinning in their cabins after a day's field work.

This common theme of home-produced cloth, which runs through the *Mississippi Narratives,* dominated the newly settled Indian lands. Therefore, the quilts that were made in the area would have been made from homespuns—material produced on the plantation. Frederick Law Olmstead's observations in the years just before the Civil War reinforce the memories of former slaves. He estimates that "half the white population in Mississippi wore homespuns with a wheel and loom appearing in every second house."[12] Truly such cloth embodied labor in its fullest, labor of planting, harvesting, processing, spinning, weaving, dyeing, wearing, and cutting.

In these narratives, however, quilting becomes distinguished from other work as well as other cloth-work: it is not considered strenuous, and can, therefore, be done by women too old to work at other tasks. Charity

Amity at age 84 states: "I kin 'tend de chulluns an' churn an piece quilts, but not able ter do much" (1. 6. 1199). Similarly Rina Brown records piecing as the last job she has been able to do: "I wus piecing quilt scraps when I seed me eye sight wus failin' me"(3. 8. 282). In the *Mississippi Narratives,* it is common for cloth-workers—as well as cooks—to be in charge of young children. Such work could therefore easily become a site where the old keep the young focused with stories and where, therefore, traditional cultural values are transmitted.

In the memories of many African Americans, the making of quilts radiates with the forging of relationships between generations of women.[13] Quilting as a compelling site for creating community also appears centrally in *Mississippi Narratives.* The activity is distinguished not only from strenuous labor, but is attached, strikingly, to activities opposite of labor. It becomes, curiously, connected with games children played. Belle Caruthers creates such juxtapositions in her memory: "On the plantation I played Hide and Seek, Squirrel and games like that. Sometimes we had quiltings and suppers. We always got three days off at Christmas" (2. 7. 365). Associated with play and free times, quilting regularly forms the occasion for community gatherings. This had been true in North Carolina where Dempsey Pitts grew up; in the evenings, she says, the enslaved were free. "Sometimes we had prayer meetings; sometimes, dances. The Women held their little quiltings, if they wanted to. Sometimes we just took our rest" (4. 9. 1715). In the Deep South, however, such free time was rarer with evenings often taken up with spinning. Thus on Saturday night is concentrated the memory of minor freedom. Callie Gray remembers: "Sad'day nights they would have fiddle dances or quilting" (3. 8. 865). Alice Shaw similarly connects quilting with music and dancing: "We had cornshuckings and quiltings sometimes on Sadday nights. And they sho would dance" (9. 5. 1921), as does Harriet Walker: "We had frolics an' dances wid fiddlin' music an' singin' wid old guitars. We had quiltings an' candy pullin's an picnics on de fo'th of July" (5. 9. 2159). Lizzie Fant Brown's memory adds food and a specific quilt pattern: "We had big times at the quiltings and big eatin' afterwards. They would make two quilts a night and they were nice quilts too with hems and everythings. The Nine Patch pattern was a beauty, with little squares no bigger then your thumb nail" (1. 6. 159). Lizzie Norfleet remembers

her parents telling about the years following the Civil War when community activities such as log rollings for men and quiltings for women would include food and occasion for ghost and witch tales and funny jokes (5. 9. 1638).

The importance of such quilting parties is emphasized by the fact that the slaves were willing to risk the danger of physical violence, which often surrounded them. Aaron Jones speaks of the ever-present threat to slaves who left their own plantation for such community activities: "The pat-a-rollers was tough. The niggers would slip off and go to candy pullings and quiltings at the neighbors farms and if the pat-a-rollers catched them they would whip them pretty bad" (3. 8. 1187). Hattie Suggs remembers patrollers intruding into the very houses where permitted gatherings were taking place: "I was quiltin' one night when de patrollers come. Niggers begin buckin' an jumpin' out de windows. Dey whipped Ant Jane. I 'member they made her pull her clothes down to her waist Dey said when dey come up: 'We come to whip you niggers pass or no pass' " (5. 9. 2076–77). In spite of such violence directed at something so seemingly harmless, the enslaved gathered to quilt, a clear testimony that the activity filled a need beyond that of just keeping warm. In turn, those sustaining the system of slavery seemed to recognize quilting as potentially subversive.

Quilts themselves are remembered with poignancy as valued and lost objects. They were mentioned frequently as an item Yankees appropriated. Juda Dantzler remembers the desperate hunger that followed such a raid: "They killed all the livestock . . . , destroyed all the potatoes and all the bee hives," but she also remembers in the same breath the loss of quilts: "and when they left they took the prettiest and choicest quilts and made flags of them" (2. 7. 555). Charity Jones also equates loss of food with loss of quilts: "Dey tuk all our grub in the smoke house an' pantry. Dey tuk de blankets an' quilts "(3. 8. 1198).

Most of these quilts would have been made from recycled workclothes. The homespun cloth out of which such garments were made is invariably remembered by former slaves in the Deep South as material that "never wore out." Since the patching and darning were nightly or weekly activities in the accounts, the material was not really immune to wear and tear. It was, however, the kind of coarse material that would take

many washings to become bearable next to the skin. Booker T. Washington describes wearing such a homespun shirt as a "most trying ordeal," as torture, as equivalent to the pain of pulling a tooth, as having "a dozen or more chestnut burrs, or a hundred small pinpoints, to contact with his flesh." Washington juxtaposes the sharply remembered pain with equally deeply remembered kindness: "One of the most generous acts that I ever heard of one slave relative doing for another" was done by his older brother, John, who wore Booker's new shirt until it was "broken in."[14] By the time such materials were available for quilts, they would have been considerably softened. Thus worn cloth would have been more valued than new. Cloth worn by particular people would have been even more valued. As Peter Stallybrass states in his study of cloth in proto-capitalist society, "cloth materializes memory" particularly powerfully, as the persistent imagery in language still reminds us: the living step "into the shoes" or wear "the mantle of the dead."[15] Similarly, old clothing newly pieced into quilts "shapes"—to use Missouri Pettway's word—not only the material but the memory, granting vivid presence to that which is absent. Such a quilt is further invested with the presence of the quilter, the "feeling of hands—the unrested hands of busy women: dry, warm, prickly," states Toni Morrison.[16]

The presence of such work-clothing quilts—and what they could mean—in African-American homes after the Civil War, is registered powerfully by Morrison in *Beloved*. She uses such a quilt throughout the book to mark the protagonist's slow and painful reckoning with her past, a reckoning that begins with Sethe's meditation on the quilt that had belonged to the healer, Baby Suggs:

> Kneeling in the keeping room where she usually went to talk-think it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate-colored, the floor earth-brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool—the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild—like life in the raw.

For the first time Sethe begins to find it "strange that she had not missed it [color] the way Baby did."[17] Morrison brilliantly depicts one effect of chronic shock—the loss of awareness of color. For Sethe, color comes back with her renewed ability to feel the full pain and loss she has suffered, a recovery marked by the transformation of the dark, muted, and sober work-clothes quilt into a "quilt patched in carnival colors"[18] by the end of the novel. Color becomes even more valued by those who have suffered the loss of color through chronic shock.

The initial quilt Morrison describes closely resembles Annie Mae Young's 1976 blue-jeans quilt with a center medallion made of orange-red, brown, and yellow stripes. Here also, as in Morrison's representation, the bright center makes the absence of brightness in the rest of the quilt "shout." The contrast between the muted and the bright works both ways, however, with the muted surface gaining power because of the "shouting" of vivid color. The depth of the blue surface is achieved by brilliantly focused patterns of light and shadow that the unevenly worn and faded fabrics have created through time and wear. The uneven wear, the fading, and the tearing against the pressures of the bodies engaged in strenuous labor under the hot Southern sun is imprinted in the fabrics. Some of the most powerful quilts among the Gee's Bend collection are those in which the quilter emphasizes rather than effaces the wear on the cloth by the body—the pockets removed and buttons lost reveal the unfaded cloth before the body began to labor in it; on the other hand, the marked fading and wearing in areas of the buttocks, knees and elbows gives us a sense of a living and moving body in its day-by-day pressure on the cloth. The effect of fading and darning allows the viewer to participate in the slow change of color through labor and light. Such time-shadowed textiles become true "blues" quilts, with an uneasy juxtaposition of sorrow and creative joy and a sense of recovery, always part of the blues, especially of the deepest blues in the "mood indigo."

In particular, the fading of "jeans" cloth into richly suggestive indigo hues constitute indeed a cultural recovery by recalling the importance of indigo dye in West Africa as well as in the history of slavery. For the West African ancestors of American slaves, indigo invoked the sacred in daily life, gaining primacy over other dyes in cultures that deeply valued color. Coloring what previously had no color is a peculiarly human activity

granted primacy by West African myths that present cotton, weaving, and dyeing as preceding cultivation of grain, implying thus that sustenance of the spirit is more important than sustenance of the body.[19] The production of indigo, in particular, was surrounded by ritual prohibitions, with the dyeing-pot situated at the center of the transmission of female knowledge and power in many West African areas. The Yoruba goddess of motherhood also overlooked the production of the blue adire cloth.[20] Similarly, in Sierra Leone, secret female rituals surround the indigo dye pot, requiring among other things abstinence from sexual relations.[21]

A Liberian tale elaborates the complex cultural symbolism associated with the dye, the color, and women's production and reproduction.[22] The people are granted the gift of indigo to make up for the withdrawal of the sky and the gods from the earth, when the priestess Asi learns how to process blue color from the plant through a set of seemingly accidental circumstances. She places her infant son on a white lappa on the ground where indigo plants are growing. As the baby's body crushes and his urine ferments the leaves, the cloth turns wondrously blue. While the child thus serves as the essential medium through which the secret of indigo is discovered, he is poisoned by the pollution created by the chemical processes his own body has helped to initiate. Asi's body similarly participates in further chemical transformations needed to fix indigo into a non-fugitive dye. She provides the necessary salt and ash as she weeps and covers her head with ashes from the dead sacrificial fire. Only after the people learn to control the dangers of indigo production is Asi's child allowed to be reborn. With this focus on death and grief, the tale explains why the processes by which the plant is transformed into the sacred color have to be surrounded with ritual prohibitions. The tale also represents the power of the color indigo. As in blues music, it relates two extremes of experience and gives unspeakable emotions—whether of worship or grief—a concrete expression. The blue becomes a palpable image of life and sacred powers; it also, however, remains associated with waste products of the body—urine and tears—and ultimately the dead body itself.[23]

In parts of the North American continent where the West African retentions were particularly strong—South Carolina Sea Islands and French Louisiana—indigo continues to represent the presence of the sacred, used

regularly as protection against evil. In both places, as in West Africa itself, the need to mark bodies with protection moved from cloth to skin. The West African Sokota Fulani tribe, for example, rubbed "indigo into the wounds to produce permanent blue welt designs on the face." Such indigo marks on the skin acted as "curative, preventive medicine, as well as protection against unseen, malevolent forces." [24]Attempts to reclaim this symbolically saturating indigo show up in the margins of a number of post-colonial texts written by African Americans. In numerous accounts, the blue-black skin of the enslaved Africans and their descendants functions as the tribal cicatrized marks that the West Africans began to put on their children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so that "the child stolen in infancy would know" its origin.[25] This pale reflection of the superabundance of the African color appears in Toni Morrison's enslaved African Sixo in *Beloved*: "His flame-red tongue hidden from them, his indigo face closed . . . Now *there* was a man."[26] We find similar depictions of blue-black skin of the African shaman in Julia Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* and in Ernest Gaines' The *Gathering of Old Men*, with the first novel set in the indigo producing area in South Carolina and the second in the former indigo fields in Pointe Coupee, Louisiana. In these fictions, skin saturated with the blue-black color constitutes a mark of an elusive survival of African culture, survival that has escaped the whitening skins caused by generations of rapes and enforced labor.

Ntozake Shange names her shaman heroine in *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo* after the plant: her closeness to her ancestors is characterized by the dye that has lent her its name. "She was particularly herself. She changed the nature of things. She colored & made richer what was blank & plain."[27] When touched by indigo, blank plain surfaces will be permanently changed by the superabundant African power to transform.

In the Deep South slave narratives, the color appears poignantly at the moment of freedom, as the Union uniforms become vividly associated with "shining." Mark Oliver elaborates on the response to the blue coats as these were allied with other images of power: "Them Yankee soldiers had buttons on their blue jackets that looked like real gold. They looked so rich and grand on them beautiful horses, it was no wonder so many wanted to go with them" (5. 9. 1667). Chaney Mack's memory turns this waiting for the blue coats into a vision of the sacred presence

of indigo: "We looked down dat way and say something blue coming wid something shining. We run in de house and tole 'em 'De world has turn blue, and wuz shinin.' My mother come to de door and hung up a white strip of cloth. Dat meant 'peace'" (4. 9. 1421).

However, also part of the cultural memory are the indigo plantations that in the American South represent one of the most painful chapters of slavery, involving both a systematic devaluing of African knowledge and destruction of African bodies. In Morrison's *Beloved,* Sethe's mother is reduced to a bent back on a Louisiana indigo field. African skill with this difficult and much desired dye, was noted by Europeans at first contact. Skills in processing the dye brought high returns on the global commodity market hungry for color, especially blue color. Europeans dressed their servants and armies in clothes dyed with indigo. According to the dyer William Partridge in 1824, "It is well known . . . that the African dyers are superior to those of any other part of the globe. The blue is so much more beautiful and permanent than that which is extracted from the same plant in other parts, that many have been led to doubt whether the African cloths brought into England were dyed with indigo or not."[28] At the same time that these eighteenth-century Europeans questioned African superiority, they exploited African knowledge by targeting indigo workers for enslavement on ships destined for British South Carolina and French Louisiana markets.[29]

Large-scale indigo production polluted the land and poisoned the slaves. In 1806, an English traveler, Thomas Ashe, confronts a wasteland left by one of these plantations in Natchez, Mississippi. For Ashe the ghostly presence of the African captives is rendered only too visible in memory: "The culture of indigo is nearly renounced. After several years of sad experience, the planters at length found out, that, on an average, it killed every Negro employed in the culture in a short space of five years."[30] Similarly, Bernard Romans, after his visit to indigo fields in Florida, describes the pollution created by dye works: it is "scarce possible to keep any animal on an indigo plantation, . . . even poultry scarce thrive but little where indigo is made." Discounting the bodies of the workers who are needed for all stages of indigo processing, Romans concludes that the poisoned atmosphere, which neither animals nor poultry can endure, represents the single "inconvenience . . . this profitable business

is subject to."[31] This dismissal of suffering by rendering it invisible makes dependence on African knowledge even more painfully ironic. The pollution of the land and poisoning of the enslaved also adds poignancy to the continuing love for indigo expressed in the African American textile tradition and other cultural narratives.

Although such large-scale indigo production on the North American continent ceased at the end of the eighteenth century, replaced with either cotton or sugar cane, the plant and the processes that produced the dye remained available. Former slave Bettie Bell from Mobile, Alabama, remembers the use of indigo to dye thread (1: 48) and Everett Ingram from Lee County, Alabama, remembers its use of dye cloth (1: 204). Cynthia Erwing, also from Mobile County, speaks of the men planting indigo and drying the seed that was then used by the women to dye dresses and palmetto hats (1: 137). During the Civil War, indigo was widely used by all classes according to Parthenia Hague in her memoir of life behind the blockade in Alabama.[32]

As the small scale African indigo production, carefully protected against pollution, gave way to a brutal plantation economy and global marketplace, so the kind of cloth desired also changed. The beauty of West African indigo cloth resides in the saturation of color and the play of light and shade on fabric immersed in multiple dye-baths with each piece coming out unique. Europeans, in contrast, wanted uniform color with which to mark their armies, their peacekeepers in the city, and their workers. Only with the replacement of natural indigo with aniline dye in the last decade of the nineteenth century did they get this reliably standard color.

Indigo in post-colonial texts whether in blues music or in quilts retains the poignancy of the double meaning of unbearable loss and equally deep desire that is written into the Liberian folk-tale. The color recalls the destruction of cultures, the extinction of other living things on its path, and the suffering of captured and displaced men and women. Yet it retains its connection with healing, with magical transformations. It can still tie together peoples from two continents in spite of centuries of disrupted culture. It can still represent the sheer magic of color that human beings have learned to extract from an unlikely plant through a difficult and dangerous process, and it represents the magic that lifts

human consciousness above the materiality in which it is rooted. All this magic becomes deeper with suffering.

Conclusion

Gee's Bend work-clothes quilts powerfully recall deep cultural meanings of a tradition that is continually transforming, even when threatened by the "vanishing" anticipated by too many reviewers. As the blue work-clothes quilts recall indigo-dyed cloth, so the play of light created by the direction of the nap of corduroy—made available through the Freedom Quilting Bee—can astonishingly achieve effects similar to the work-clothes quilts with their fabrics unevenly faded by wear, sweat, body pressure, and dirt. The ability to make use of available materials and to reshape them into new configurations that recall the old, serve to materialize memory and history. They literally keep alive not only the stories of ancestors, but the very bodies of those who suffered in indigo fields and around indigo vats, or labored in the jeans, overalls, aprons, and shirts.

Both the cloth and the color in the quilts in their unlikely survival materialize the memory of specific bodies, specific stories, and specific performances that are repeated through the generations; cloth and the color on cloth through such repetitions serve to establish that nothing essential has been lost to decay or death. That the objects doing such cultural work should be themselves so fragile, so subject to rot or fading, adds to their power. The meanings of such survivals, like the larger meanings of cloth and color, remain indeterminate and impermanent, requiring alternating forgetting and remembering through generations to keep them vivid.

Impermanence itself is valued in a culture that lives among such recurrences and surrogates. Materials, such as the work-clothes of Missouri Pettway's husband, can be reshaped into quilts. The lost art of indigo dyeing can be recalled by the patterns created by faded fabrics. The uneven fading in the work clothes quilts can in turn be recalled in the placement of the nap in the corduroy quilts. Such power to resist the "vanishing"—which some spokesmen in the dominant culture seem so fondly to seek in places like Gee's Bend—remains part of the power of the tradition that produced these quilts.

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Notes and References

1. Rpr. *The Times-Picayune*. New Orleans. March 28, 2003.
2. "Material Truths," *Winterthur Portfolio.* 38:1 (2003): 57–66. See also Richard Kalina, "Gee's Bend Modern," *Art in America.* (October 2003): 104–149.
3. See Richard Price and Sally Price, *Maroon Arts: Cultural Vitality in the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash Of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).
4. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 86.
5. Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian, 1989), 6.
6. Nancy Callahan, *The Freedom Quilting Bee* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1987). This book recounts the pressure on the quilters to produce work to strict specifications needed for mass market mainly from the viewpoint of the "outsiders" who were committed to economic development.
7. John Beardsley, et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002), 67.
8. This ability to renew tradition is discussed by Eli Leon in *Who'd a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1987), and Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993).
9. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19.
10. Beardsley, 18.
11. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1972–1978.) Citations to the five volumes of *Mississippi Narratives* and one volume of *Alabama Narratives,* both in supplementary series 1 of *The American Slave,* will be given in the text. Gladys-Marie Fry in her very fine recovery of early quilts, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina

Press, 1990), also uses the WPA interviews. She, however, makes no distinction between the more settled slave states like South Carolina and Virginia and the frontier settlements like Mississippi and Alabama. We realize that the WPA interviews have problems as historical documents including the length of time that had passed since slavery and the 1930's when the former slaves spoke, and the conditions of the interviews themselves in the Jim Crow South. However, even if the individual memories are suspect, they do articulate a cultural narrative that conserves attitudes toward quilts, attitudes that are reinforced by other studies, especially those by Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville, KY: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1992), and *A Piece of My Soul: Quilts by Black Arkansans (*Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2000); Roland L. Freeman, *A Communion of Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and their Stories* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996); Carolyn Mazloomi, *Contemporary African American Quilts* (New York: Clarkson Portrait/ Publishers, 1998), and Wahlman.

12. Frederick Law Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953), 506.
13. See especially the interviews of quilters published in Freeman and Wahlman.
14. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Penguin Books, 1901), 20–21.
15. Ann Rosalind Jones & Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.
16. Morrison, 78.
17. Morrison, 39.
18. Morrison, 272.
19. Mariette Joseph, "West African Indigo Cloth," *African Arts* 11 (1978): 34.
20. Wahlman, 78.
21. Joseph, 34.
22. A version of this tale is found in Appendix I of Claire Polakoff, *African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 221–24.
23. In many cultures, production of indigo is envisioned in complex relationship with reproduction. See Wahlman, 78; Joseph, 43; Janet Hoskins, "Why Do Ladies Sing the Blues? Indigo Dyeing, Cloth Production, and Gender Symbolism in Kodi," in *Cloth and Human Experience,* 41–76. Weiner's and Schneider's introduction to the collection summarizes Hoskins' argument:

"Analogous to birth and regeneration, Kodi textile dyeing is also vulnerable to the cycle of death and decay. Hoskins records that practitioners associate the unpleasant smell of the dyebath with putrefaction of rotting flesh, and consider the bath polluting to gestation. Pregnant women should not look at the dye pots, lest the sight of the dark and churning liquid dissolve the contents of their wombs. Reciprocally, menstruating women are kept from the pots, as the flow of their blood is believed to disrupt the dyeing process" (9). The analogue between dyeing and birth is even stronger with images of "quickening" used for both. The most respected women are simultaneously midwives and dyers.

24. Justine Cordwell, "The Very Human Acts of Transformation," *Fabric of Culture: The Anthropolgy of Clothing and Adornment,* ed. Justine Cordwell and Ronald Schwartz (New York: Mouton, 1979), 73.
25. Cordwell, 52.
26. Morrison, 22.
27. Ntozake Shange, *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1982), 40–41.
28. William Partridge, *A Practical Treatise on Dying of Woolens, Cotton, and Skein Silk* (1823, rpr. Edington: Pasold Research Fund, 1973), 121.
29. For South Carolina, see Peter Wood, "It was a Negro Taught Them," *Journal of Asian and African Studies.* 9 (1974): 160–79; for Louisiana, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century.* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).
30. Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America.* 3 vols. (London: William Sawyer & Co., 1808), 2:202–203.
31. Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida.* (1775, rpt. New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Co., 1961), 97.
32. Parthenia Hague, *A Blockaded Family: Life in Southern Alabama during the Civil War.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1888), 45.