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## *The Underground Railroad Quilt Code: The Experience of Belief*

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*The public response to the publication of Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad offers a complex example of a controversy involving the competing interests of authors, publishers, scholars, educators, and public audiences. Having observed and sometimes participated in the various dialogues created among these groups over several years, the author describes in this essay her personal journey through many layers of meaning. This presentation synthesizes personal experience, reflection, and interpretation, producing a useful case study in reflexive ethnology and the ideal of objectivity.*

I first heard about the Quilt Code in the fall of 1998, when a member of the Quilt History List mentioned a forthcoming book about the connection of quilts to the Underground Railroad.<sup>1</sup> I was particularly interested as the book was based on a narrative told by a South Carolina woman. As I remember, my initial response was a mixture of surprise and optimism. I have conducted research on quilting traditions since 1975, and I have lived in South Carolina since 1983. Precious little information on the quilts made by enslaved African Americans has survived, so I was hopeful that this book would add substance to that body of knowledge.



Gradually, more information emerged as the authors, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, were interviewed for newspaper articles.<sup>2</sup> As I read these tantalizing pre-publication features, I became disheartened. I realized that many of the details of the story did not correspond to what I knew about either nineteenth-century quilting or the realities of slavery. Despite these reservations, I still hoped that beneath such incongruous details there would be evidence of a believable family narrative. I purchased the book in early 1999, and I read it carefully with increasing dismay. I found the evidence insubstantial and the arguments unconvincing.

At the time, I recognized that there was little to gain, particularly as a white Southerner, in trying to debunk these beliefs. On one occasion, though, I responded to a member of the South Carolina Traditional Arts (SCTAN) email list who asked if anyone had read the book. I invited her to contact me off list, indicating that there were “some problems with the research” in the book. I thought this was a non-inflammatory remark, but I received a quick and challenging response, “What’s the matter? Don’t you believe that slaves were smart enough to figure out a way to escape?” This interchange demonstrated for me how the Quilt Code story had become so intertwined with the Underground Railroad that some proponents reacted to an attack on the former as a rejection of the latter.

In 2003, I presented a paper on the subject at the annual meeting of the California Folklore Society (now the Western States Folklore Society), under the jaunty title, “Revealed in Murky Research: The Underground Railroad Quilt Code.”<sup>3</sup> I was fascinated by the way that so many people seemed to be taken in by the Quilt Code. Although I had compiled pages of detailed notes of both major and minor factual and historical inaccuracies in the book, I realized that proponents of the Code tended to be unmoved by arguments of fact and logic. I decided to look at the material from the perspective of *narrative*. Referring to the basic recitation of the code elements attributed to Ozella Williams, I wrote “As a record of history, this narrative does not stand up to scrutiny. As a family story, however, the narrative is a beautiful and valuable creation embodying the triumph of survival and giving meaning and value to family traditions and possessions.” In this paper, I



concluded that it was the authors' use of "traditional narrative strategies and rhetorical structures" that caused the story to be so compelling. Even though the authors chose to interpret the original narrative as oral history rather than as family folklore, I decided to look at the way they employed folkloric devices in presenting their case.

Although Tobin and Dobard loaded their chapters with copious material from many sources in an effort to prove the *truth* of the Quilt-Code narrative, the hypothesis of my first paper was that Tobin's narrative, structured according to Labov's schematic, repeated in numerous television and radio interviews, and printed in newspapers, contains all the elements of *a good story, told as true*.<sup>4</sup> It is *that* story, I argued, that has convinced much of the readership, and many others who have not read the book itself, that its premise is true. In other words, through the informal repetition and wide distribution of its self-validated central thesis and argument, I suggested that the Tobin narrative functions as folklore—specifically, according to Nicolaisen's criteria, as legend—and therefore may be subjected to folkloristic analysis as such, rather than read simply as a report about a folk practice or belief.<sup>5</sup>

My paper offered what I thought was a rational explanation for the wide appeal of the Quilt Code, and I expected agreement from my academic audience. I assumed that my colleagues, as rational beings, would share my amusement and amazement at the attitudes of the uninformed general public. I was therefore taken aback to hear that at least one person's reaction to my paper was "I don't care what you say. I still believe the story is true." It was clear to me that this issue was more complex than a few citations about "narrative strategies" could explain.

At that point, along with my quilt-research colleagues, I tended to see the debate as the opposition of *truth* and *falsehood*. We generally assumed that if rational people were introduced to the factual and historical inaccuracies inherent in the Quilt Code, they would recognize and accept the truth. We have tried to address the issue by attacking the root cause—the book. But it is no longer the *book* that fuels interest in the Quilt Code, but the compelling *idea* that slaves used quilts to help them escape on the Underground Railroad. And this idea has taken on a life of its own.



I knew I needed to cultivate a different perspective on the Quilt Code. I decided to try to look beyond the book and the narrative, to ideas related to *belief*. Exploring the Quilt Code in terms of *belief* helped me to accept the enduring appeal of the story and the tenacity with which proponents held onto it. However, I continued to observe the phenomenon from a perspective of engagement on one side of the debate. In theory, I understood the value of objectivity, but I was unwilling to give up the righteous indignation that accompanied an adherence to the primacy of factual truth.

Roger Abrahams describes the need for a “double consciousness” that would allow us as ethnographers to observe events and experiences while maintaining “a recognition of [our] own culture’s notions of significant actions and their related emotions and sentiments.”<sup>6</sup> This is difficult because one of our prime cultural notions is that, although our research subjects may be motivated by emotions and sentiments, *we scholars* operate on the higher level of the intellect. When we become angry and indignant with what we see as superstitious and ignorant behaviors, we justify these responses as in service to “the Truth.”

In arguing the value of striving toward a “double consciousness,” Abrahams cites journalist Daniel Schorr, who adopted this kind of observational stance while being simultaneously a reporter and a participant in public events:

It made me feel more real not to be involved. Participants took positions, got excited, shaped events for woe or zeal, but what a strange paradox that seems—to feel more *real* but not to be involved—to be where it is happening but not to be engaged. . . . I remained the untouched observer, seeing the whole picture because I was not [actually] in the picture.<sup>7</sup>

If it were possible for quilt researchers to move toward this kind of objectivity, we might be able to see that the idea of the Quilt Code is appealing and popular because it lends itself to a personal, experiential, and materialized connection with “the fabric of America’s memory.” By making quilts using the patterns associated with the Quilt Code, contemporary Americans can participate in what they perceive as a



personal connection with historical events and figures in their own homes and communities. The physical and tactile experience of recreating the Quilt Code patterns invests the maker with a powerful bond to the story. The finished quilt embodies the maker's belief, and, when shown publicly, authenticates the narrative for others.<sup>8</sup>

It's easy for some of us to identify the fallacies associated with a belief in the Underground Railroad Quilt Code, and to offer smug comments that, of course, no compelling evidence supports the story. However, I think we are ignoring the fact that our own reactions—at times, very strong and emotional reactions—are based on *our* beliefs. We live in a society in which rumor, falsehoods, misinterpretations, and outright lies abound. But somehow we assume that it's just backward or unenlightened people who believe in irrational explanations, and that modern people are, or should be, accepting of scientific evidence and documented truth. In other words, we believe that the folks who defend the Quilt Code as fact are simply unaware of the evidence, and that, if they are introduced to the real facts, they will give up their beliefs. When this doesn't happen, we must confront our own confusion and anger about the truth of our own beliefs.

We may recognize that we are confronting a powerful set of beliefs, but we do not recognize in our own emotional reactions evidence that we too are acting from a set of deeply held beliefs. Scholars typically hold a strong belief in the supremacy of factual truth, and many further believe that we have a duty, a moral obligation, to debunk what we believe to be falsehoods, whether these are urban legends, superstitions, or pseudo-historical narratives. The idea that we scholars might be driven by our beliefs is a very difficult concept for most of us to accept. We can recognize the existence of powerful beliefs in "the other," but we are less willing to acknowledge that we too are subject to such influences. As a colleague, Paul Jordan-Smith, has observed, "The implication of debunking is that one knows 'the truth,' and that debunking is good for everyone because it unveils the truth."<sup>9</sup>

I want to share with you an example from my own experience that gave me insight into the experience of belief. In October 2006, my husband and I were visiting friends, and I was looking through a pile of books in their living room. I picked up one called *1421: The Year China*



*Discovered America*, by Gavin Menzies.<sup>10</sup> “That’s an interesting one,” said my friend Allen. “Is it speculative fiction?” I asked, dubious. “Actually, no,” he said. “You’d be surprised.” So I brought it home to read.

The book argues that, in the fifteenth century, Chinese sailing ships led a large multinational exploratory fleet that circumnavigated the globe and visited parts of Australia, Africa, and the Americas. The author, retired from the British Navy, offered various forms of evidence, including archival records, maps, studies of ocean currents, and—that poster-child of twenty-first-century research—DNA analysis.

My initial reaction to the book was mixed. I found the author’s style erratic and somewhat annoying. I thought he should have gotten more help from an editor to make his arguments more cohesive and concise, less repetitive and argumentative. However, I thought the evidence he presented was compelling, so I was willing to skim through some of the awkward parts. I was puzzled that the author reported encountering resistance from a number of established scholars. I supposed that Americans and European historians weren’t willing to accept the idea that the Chinese had visited America before the southern Europeans.

After reading the book, I found opportunities to share the ideas with others, and I was particularly interested in presenting the book in contrast to the Underground Railroad Quilt Code as presented in *Hidden in Plain View*. In my mind, the Quilt Code idea was so appealing that people accepted it even though the facts didn’t add up. In the case of *1421*, I thought the opposite was true, that a theory apparently supported by factual data was generally rejected because the theme of Chinese superiority is not popular in contemporary American culture.

On Wednesday, April 4, I was riding to a meeting with a colleague, Kathy Staples. After we discussed our immediate project, Kathy asked what other things I was working on, and I gave her an update on a recent article I had written on the Quilt Code. Kathy’s expertise is in early embroidery, not quilts, but she was fascinated by this controversy. We talked about the Code in relation to other myths of American History. I started to tell Kathy about reading *1421* and how I planned to write about it in contrast with the Quilt Code. As soon as I mentioned the book’s title, Kathy said “It’s crap.”





I was immediately taken aback. My first thought was how could someone as smart as Kathy be taken in by all those conservative scholars who cannot accept the truth? How could she ignore such compelling evidence? “Well,” I countered, “How do you explain Asian DNA found in Norwegian fishermen?”

“There were problems with the tests and the interpretations,” she said, which sounded awfully vague and utterly unconvincing to me. At that point I found myself experiencing a very interesting mix of thoughts, emotions, and related sensations. Either I was right and Kathy was seriously misinformed, or Kathy was right and I was an idiot for having been taken in by a hoax. At that moment, I felt a visceral need to figure out a way to convince myself and Kathy of the accuracy of the Chinese discovery of America. I wanted to avoid at all costs the idea that I was an idiot.

I realized right away that I was in the same position as the people who have bought into the Quilt Code. I knew this even as I listened to Kathy, aware that I was strongly predisposed to hold onto my belief in order to save my own face. I sat there, just being aware of the conflicting emotions and sensations in my body. Kathy filled the silence by describing how someone had proved that the enormous ships described by Menzies would have been ill-suited for transoceanic voyages. As I listened, I observed myself formulating a response: “Sure, they weren’t well-designed for the oceans. That’s why so many ships were lost and washed up on various shores.” But I remained silent, holding onto the uncomfortable state of conflicting emotions and thoughts, not knowing which end was up.

I was aware at the time that Kathy stated what she knew to be the facts in an objective manner. “The author misrepresented the work of a lot of scholars,” she said, “and they weren’t happy about it.” She didn’t say anything about my belief, my stupidity, or my credulity. She was probably as shocked as I was that our beliefs were at odds.

As I listened, I wanted to say in self-mockery, “I don’t care what you say. I still believe it’s true.” But I knew that Kathy would hear these words only literally, not recognizing that I was echoing the words I had heard in response to my first Quilt Code presentation in 2003. I saw that this unspoken statement operated on three levels. First, I still





wanted to hold onto my belief. Second, I recognized that my reaction was similar to that of the woman who was unconvinced by my paper. Third, although I did not say the words aloud, I recognized the humor of the situation, and this brought a smile to my face. I held onto this smile quite literally as a way to save face. Somehow being able to see the humor allowed me to consider that Kathy might be right, and, trying out this idea gave me a preview of a wave of embarrassment, as I contemplated the possible loss of respect for my intelligence.

I value being perceived as an intelligent person. I believe that my intelligence is what guides my work, my analytic research, my thoughtful writing. I believe that I am a natural skeptic. I pride myself for asking questions about things that generally go unquestioned. If I were wrong about this issue—and there was a part of me, stubborn and indignant, that held out for being right—then how could I justify these beliefs about myself? I found myself looking for an explanation for the cause of this particular lapse—if indeed it turned out to be a lapse—in judgment.

I thought my predilection might be related to the same impulses that led me to study Folklore. I tend to be interested in things that are outside the mainstream of popular culture. I'm interested in the alternatives, the oppositions, the quirky individual expressions of unknown, invisible people. Things have changed over a period of thirty years, but when I started researching quilts in 1975, my work was clearly along the margins of what was considered a valid research topic.

To me, the appeal of *1421* was that it inverted everything I thought was known about the history of Chinese isolationism; it shifted my perspective on early exploration and international trade from Europe to Asia. To some degree, perhaps I feel a personal connection with China. My sister's first husband was Chinese, and even after his death in 1987, family gatherings have continued to bring me in contact with his siblings, their children, and their grandchildren. In family photographs, I am surrounded by Chinese faces. Then too, I got the book from my trusted friend Allen, a biologist who has made a number of research trips to China and speaks Mandarin.

Even without these personal connections, however, I might be intrigued with the idea of early Chinese exploration. The book *1421* tells the story of people who were thought to have been content to



remain in the background of historical events, passive participants in an active world. But, as this book seemed to prove, they were actually agents of their own destiny, a race empowered by their actions, evidence of which has remained long hidden from public awareness. Does this sound familiar?

When I arrived home after my trip with Kathy, I looked at websites on both sides of the 1421 issue. I was quickly convinced that the story of the voyage was, at best, greatly exaggerated. Kathy was right. I had been utterly—willingly—taken in by this hoax. The only saving grace from this experience is that I now know, from personal experience, something about the power of belief. From those first moments in the car, listening to Kathy debunk my cherished notions, I was living proof that believing something deeply is not inconsistent with intelligence. Educated, intelligent, even skeptical people are subject to belief in compelling ideas, even when those ideas are presented in prose that is less than elegant; and, having bought into a belief, these intelligent people can resist contradictory opinions, even those coming from trusted friends and colleagues.

This experience gave me something I had been looking for—a more sympathetic understanding of those who believe in the Quilt Code. And, as I say this, I don't just mean the attitude of "Oh, you poor deluded souls, let me help you see the light." What I'm looking for is an enhanced respect, not for the beliefs themselves, but for the *believers* as people. Rather than seeing them as somehow less intelligent, less sophisticated, or less evolved than myself, I wish to respect them as human beings for whom their beliefs are part of a complex pattern of thoughts and behaviors that are interwoven with their personal identity. I would like to cultivate this attitude without regard to notions of truth or falsehood, fact or fantasy, because I don't think those are the keys to understanding belief.

I suspect that it's not possible for me to convey this attitude to anyone else. All I can do is to encourage each of you to watch for an opportunity to confront your own beliefs, whatever they might be. Sometime, when you least expect it, you will experience the momentary disequilibrium of a question directed to something in yourself that you do not wish to be questioned. It is then up to you whether you



decide to cling to your cherished notions or try to hold onto the discomfort long enough to be able to step back and smile.

True or false, right or wrong, beliefs are an integral part of what it means to be human. The Quilt Code controversy is not a battle between the forces of truth and the forces of belief; it is a conflict between two different belief systems. And, just as with religious beliefs, we can try to develop respect for the *believers* without sharing the belief.

### Notes and References

1. This essay is based on a longer and more substantial article, "Seeking Truth and Beauty: The Roles of Narrative, Belief, and Scholarship in the Quilt Code Debate," forthcoming in the journal *Western Folklore*, in 2008.
2. Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
3. Readers may recognize this title as a play on both the title of the book in question and the fictional company, Murky Research, cited in the credits of the radio program "A Prairie Home Companion."
4. William Labov, *Language of the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 363.
5. W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "The Linguistic Structure of Legends," in Gillian Bennett, Paul Smith and J. D. A. Widdowson, eds, *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend II*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 61-76.
6. Roger Abrahams, *Everyday Life: A Poetics of Vernacular Practices* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 111, 124.
7. Daniel Schorr, *Clearing the Air: A life in Journalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), vii, cited in Abrahams, 111. Schorr participated in and wrote about events related to the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s.
8. Abrahams describes *events* as "things that happen," and *experiences* as "things that happen to us or to others" (114). His discussion of the shift from *authority* to *authentication* in influencing personal transformation also has bearing on the Quilt Code controversy and its use in schools (112).
9. Paul Jordan-Smith, "Catching Code," email to Laurel Horton, 15 September 2006.
10. Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*, (New York: William Morrow, 2003).