

bell hooks

belonging

a culture of place



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A CULTURE OF PLACE

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Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand

To write this piece I have relied on fragments, bits and pieces of information found here and there. Sweet late night calls to mama to see if she “remembers when.” Memories of old conversations coming back again and again, memories like reused fabric in a crazy quilt, contained and kept for the right moment. I have gathered and remembered. I wanted one day to record and document so that I would not participate in further erasure of the aesthetic legacy and artistic contributions of black women. This writing was inspired by the work of artist Faith Ringgold, who has always cherished and celebrated the artistic work of unknown and unheralded black women. Evoking this legacy in her work, she calls us to remember, to celebrate, to give praise.

Even though I have always longed to write about my grandmother’s quilting, I never found the words, the necessary language. At one time I dreamed of filming her quilting. She died. Nothing had

been done to document the power and beauty of her work. Seeing Faith Ringgold's elaborate story quilts, which insist on naming, on documentation, on black women telling our story, I found words. When art museums highlight the artistic achievement of American quiltmakers, I mourn that my grandmother is not among those named and honored. Often representation at such shows suggests that white women were the only group truly dedicated to the art of quilting. This is not so. Yet quilts by black women are portrayed as exceptions; usually there is only one. The card identifying the maker reads "anonymous black woman." Art historians focusing on quilting have just begun to document traditions of black female quiltmakers, to name names, to state particulars.

My grandmother was a dedicated quiltmaker. That is the very first statement I want to make about Baba, mama's mother, pronounced with the long "a" sound. Then I want to tell her name, Sarah Hooks Oldham, daughter of Bell Blair Hooks. They were both quiltmakers. I call their names in resistance, to oppose the erasure of black women — that historical mark of racist and sexist oppression. We have too often had no names, our history recorded without specificity, as though it's not important to know who — which one of us — the particulars. Baba was interested in particulars. Whenever we were "over home," as we called her house, she let us know "straight up" that upon entering we were to look at her, call her name, acknowledge her presence. Then once that was done we were to state our "particulars" — who we were and/or what we were about. We were to name ourselves — our history. This ritualistic naming was frightening. It felt as though this prolonged moment of greeting was an interrogation. To her it was a way we could learn ourselves, establish kinship and connection, the way we would know and acknowledge our ancestors. It was a process of gathering and remembering.

Baba did not read or write. She worked with her hands. She never called herself an artist. It was not one of her words. Even if she had known it, there might have been nothing in the sound or meaning to

interest, to claim her wild imagination. Instead she would comment, "I know beauty when I see it." She was a dedicated quiltmaker — gifted, skillful, playful in her art, making quilts for more than seventy years, even after her "hands got tired" and her eyesight was "quitting." It is hard to give up the work of a lifetime, and yet she stopped making quilts in the years before her dying. Almost ninety, she stopped quilting. Yet she continued to talk about her work with any interested listener. Fascinated by the work of her hands, I wanted to know more, and she was eager to teach and instruct, to show me how one comes to know beauty and give oneself over to it. To her, quiltmaking was a spiritual process where one learned surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go. This was the way she had learned to approach quiltmaking from her mother. To her it was an art of stillness and concentration, a work which renewed the spirit.

Fundamentally in Baba's mind quiltmaking was women's work, an activity that gave harmony and balance to the psyche. According to her, it was that aspect of a country woman's work which enabled her to cease attending to the needs of others and "come back to herself." It was indeed "rest for the mind." I learned these ideas from her as a child inquiring about how and why she began to quilt; even then her answer surprised me. Primarily she saw herself as a child of the outdoors. Her passions were fishing, digging for worms, planting vegetable and flower gardens, plowing, tending chickens, hunting. She had as she put it "a renegade nature," wild and untamed. Today in black vernacular speech we might say she was "out of control." Bell Blair Hooks, her mother, chose quiltmaking as that exercise that would give the young Sarah a quiet time, a space to calm down and come back to herself. A serious quiltmaker, Bell Hooks shared this skill with her daughter. She began by first talking about quiltmaking as a way of stillness, as a process by which a "woman learns patience." These rural black women knew nothing of female passivity. Constantly active, they were workers — black women with sharp tongues, strong arms, heavy hands, with too much labor and too little time. There was always work to be

done, space had to be made for stillness, for quiet and concentration. Quilting was a way to “calm the heart” and “ease the mind.”

From the nineteenth century until the present day, quiltmakers have, each in their own way, talked about quilting as meditative practice. Highlighting the connection between quilting and the search for inner peace, the editors of *Artists in Aprons: Folk Art by American Women* remind readers that:

Quilting, along with other needle arts, was often an outlet not only for creative energy but also for the release of a woman's pent-up frustrations. One writer observed that “a woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn't freeze, and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn't break.” Women's thoughts, feelings, their very lives were inextricably bound into the designs just as surely as the cloth layers were bound with thread.

In the household of her mother, Baba learned the aesthetics of quilting. She learned it as meditative practice (not unlike the Japanese Tea Ceremony), learning to hold her arms, the needles — just so — learning the proper body posture, then learning how to make her work beautiful, pleasing to the mind and heart. These aesthetic considerations were as crucial as the material necessity that required poor rural black women to make quilts. Often in contemporary capitalist society, where “folk art” is an expensive commodity in the marketplace, many art historians, curators, and collectors still assume that the folk who created this work did not fully understand and appreciate its “aesthetic value.” Yet the oral testimony of black women quiltmakers from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, so rarely documented (yet our mothers did talk with their mothers' mothers and had a sense of how these women saw their labor), indicates keen awareness of aesthetic dimensions. Harriet Powers, one of the few black women quiltmakers whose work is recognized by art

historians, understood that her elaborate appliquéd quilts were unique and exquisite. She understood that folk who made their own quilts wanted to purchase her work because it was different and special. Economic hardship often compelled the selling of work, yet Powers did so reluctantly precisely because she understood its value — not solely as regards skill, time, and labor but as the unique expression of her imaginative vision. Her story quilts with their inventive pictorial narrations were a wonder to behold. Baba's sense of the aesthetic value of quilting was taught to her by a mother who insisted that work be redone if the sewing and the choice of a piece of fabric were not "just right." She came into womanhood understanding and appreciating the way one's creative imagination could find expression in quiltmaking.

The work of black women quiltmakers needs special feminist critical commentary which considers the impact of race, sex, and class. Many black women quilted despite oppressive economic and social circumstances which often demanded exercising creative imagination in ways radically different from those of white female counterparts, especially women of privilege who had greater access to material and time. Often black slave women quilted as part of their labor in white households. The work of Mahulda Mize, a black woman slave, is discussed in *Kentucky Quilts 1800–1900*. Her elaborate quilt "Princess Feathers with Oak Leaves," made of silk and other fine fibers, was completed in 1850 when she was eighteen. Preserved by the white family who owned her labor, this work was passed down from generation to generation. Much contemporary writing on quiltmaking fails to discuss this art form from a standpoint which considers the impact of race and class. Challenging conventional assumptions in her essay "Quilting: Out of the Scrapbag of History," Cynthia Redick suggests that the crazy quilt with its irregular design was not the initial and most common approach to quiltmaking, asserting, "An expert seamstress would not have wasted her time fitting together odd shapes." Redick continues, "The fad for crazy quilts in the late nineteenth century was a time consuming pastime for ladies of leisure." Feminist

scholarly studies of black female experience as quiltmakers would require revision of Redick's assertions. Given that black women slaves sewed quilts for white owners and were allowed now and then to keep scraps, or, as we learn from slave narratives, occasionally took them, they had access to creating only one type of work for themselves — a crazy quilt.

Writing about Mahulda Mize's fancy quilt, white male art historian John Finley's comments on her work made reference to limitations imposed by race and class: "No doubt the quilt was made for her owners, for a slave girl would not have had the money to buy such fabrics. It also is not likely that she would have been granted the leisure and the freedom to create such a thing for her own use." Of course there are no recorded documents revealing whether or not she was allowed to keep the fancy scraps. Yet, were that the case, she could only have made from them a crazy quilt. It is possible that black slave women were among the first, if not the first group of females, to make crazy quilts, and that it later became a fad for privileged white women.

Baba spent a lifetime making quilts, and the vast majority of her early works were crazy quilts. When I was a young girl she did not work outside her home, even though she at one time worked for white people, cleaning their houses. For much of her life as a rural black woman she controlled her own time, and quilting was part of her daily work. Her quilts were made from reused scraps because she had access to such material from the items given her by white folks in place of wages, or from the worn clothes of her children. It was only when her children were adults faring better economically that she began to make quilts from patterns and from fabric that was not reused scraps. Before then she created patterns from her imagination. My mother, Rosa Bell, remembers writing away for the first quilt patterns. The place these quilts had in daily life was decorative. Utility quilts, crazy quilts were for constant everyday use. They served as bed coverings and as padding under the soft cotton mattresses filled with feathers. During times of financial hardship which were prolonged

and ongoing, quilts were made from scraps left over from dressmaking and then again after the dresses had been worn. Baba would show a quilt and point to the same fabric lighter in color to show a “fresh” scrap (one left over from initial dressmaking) from one that was being reused after a dress was no longer wearable.

When her sons went away to fight in wars, they sent their mother money to add rooms to her house. It is a testament to the seriousness of Baba’s quiltmaking that one of the first rooms she added was a workplace, a space for sewing and quiltmaking. I have vivid memories of this room because it was so unusual. It was filled with baskets and sacks full of scraps, hatboxes, material pieced together that was lying on the backs of chairs. There was never really any place to sit in that room unless one first removed fabric. This workplace was constructed like any artist’s studio, yet it would not be until I was a young woman and Baba was dead that I would enter a “real” artist’s studio and see the connection. Before this workplace was built, quilting frames were set up in the spacious living room in front of the fire. In her workplace quilts were stored in chests and under mattresses. Quilts that were not for use, fancy quilts (which were placed at the foot of beds when company came), were stored in old-fashioned chests with beautiful twisted pieces of tobacco leaves that were used to keep insects away. Baba lived all her life in Kentucky — tobacco country. It was there and accessible. It had many uses.

Although she did not make story quilts, Baba believed that each quilt had its own narrative — a story that began from the moment she considered making a particular quilt. The story was rooted in the quilt’s history, why it was made, why a particular pattern was chosen. In her collection there were the few quilts made for bringing into marriage. Baba talked often of making quilts as preparation for married life. After marriage most of her quilts were utility quilts, necessary bed covering. It was later in life, and in the age of modernity, that she focused on making quilts for creative pleasure. Initially she made fancy quilts by memorizing patterns seen in the houses of the white people

she worked for. Later she bought patterns. Working through generations, her quilting reflected both changes in the economic circumstances of rural black people and changes in the textile industry.

As fabric became more accessible, as grown children began to tire of clothing before it was truly worn, she found herself with a wide variety of material to work with, making quilts with particular motifs. There were "bitches quilts" made from bought woolen men's pants, heavy quilts to be used in cold rooms without heat. There was a quilt made from silk neckties. Changes in clothing style also provided new material. Clothes which could not be made over into new styles would be used in the making of quilts. There was a quilt made from our grandfather's suits, which spanned many years of this seventy-year marriage. Significantly, Baba would show her quilts and tell their stories, giving the history (the concept behind the quilt) and the relation of chosen fabrics to individual lives. Although she never completed it, she began to piece a quilt of little stars from scraps of cotton dresses worn by her daughters. Together we would examine this work and she would tell me about the particulars, about what my mother and her sisters were doing when they wore a particular dress. She would describe clothing styles and choice of particular colors. To her mind, these quilts were maps charting the course of our lives. They were history as life lived.

To share the story of a given quilt was central to Baba's creative self-expression, as family historian, storyteller, exhibiting the work of her hands. She was not particularly fond of crazy quilts because they were a reflection of work motivated by material necessity. She liked organized design and fancy quilts. They expressed a quilter's seriousness. Her patterned quilts, "The Star of David," "The Tree of Life," were made for decorative purposes, to be displayed at family reunions. They indicated that quilting was an expression of skill and artistry. These quilts were not to be used; they were to be admired. My favorite quilts were those for everyday use. I was especially fond of the work associated with my mother's girlhood. When given a choice of

quilts, I selected one made of cotton dresses in cool deep pastels. Baba could not understand when I chose that pieced fabric of little stars made from my mother's and sister's cotton dresses over more fancy quilts. Yet those bits and pieces of mama's life, held and contained there, remain precious to me.

In her comments on quilting, Faith Ringgold has expressed fascination with that link between the creative artistry of quilts and their fundamental tie to daily life. The magic of quilts for her, as art and artifice, resides in that space where art and life come together. Emphasizing the usefulness of a quilt, she reminds us: "It covers people. It has the possibility of being a part of someone forever." Reading her words, I thought about the quilt I covered myself with in childhood and then again as a young woman. I remembered mama did not understand my need to take that "nasty, ragged" quilt all the way to college. Yet it was symbolic of my connection to rural black folk life — to home. This quilt is made of scraps. Though originally handsewn, it has been "gone over" (as Baba called it) on the sewing machine so that it would better endure prolonged everyday use. Sharing this quilt, the story I tell focuses on the legacy of commitment to one's "art" Baba gave me. Since my creative work is writing, I proudly point to ink stains on this quilt which mark my struggle to emerge as a disciplined writer. Growing up with five sisters, it was difficult to find private space; the bed was often my workplace. This quilt (which I intend to hold onto for the rest of my life) reminds me of who I am and where I have come from. Symbolically identifying a tradition of black female artistry, it challenges the notion that creative black women are rare exceptions. We are deeply, passionately connected to black women whose sense of aesthetics, whose commitment to ongoing creative work, inspire and sustain. We reclaim their history, call their names, state their particulars, to gather and remember, to share our inheritance.