Gathering Stitch:

Quilting and Community Organizing in the 19-20th-Century United States

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Abstract

This thesis examines quilting as a radical form of collective empowerment and a key aspect of visual and material culture. The study of regional quilting communities and their associations with progressive social movements within 19th-20th-century United States history sustains the creative praxis of marginalized social groups using quilt-making to strengthen their political objectives, financial stability, and cultural unity. Quilts are investigated as a political, multi-cultural, and intergenerational medium practiced by racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, including the Lakota Nation, Hawai'i, and Black quilters from Gee's Bend, Alabama. Quilters who face discrimination based on their gender or sexuality are also a predominant focus of this thesis as it examines the participation of Queer quilters in the *National AIDS Memorial Quilt* and the Suffragette movement's employment of the medium. Quilting has empowered these groups to preserve their cultural identities, resist institutional oppression, and assert their agency. Using feminist, decolonial, and Marxist critical approaches, alongside visual and contextual analysis, this research positions quilting as an artistic strategy that collapses predominant fine art hierarchies and outlines alternative narratives. This research organizes quilts into ceremonial, utilitarian, and symbolic classifications to analyze the diverse roles of quilts in their historical contexts, demonstrating how stitching can become a method of storytelling, recording memory, and building collective solidarity. This thesis concludes by highlighting the evolving roles of quilting in contemporary art and activism. It encourages further research, preservation, and community engagement to support the sociopolitical legacy of quilt-making.

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Quilting is an art form deeply rooted in its makers' intentions, reflecting shared cultural histories, socioeconomic realities, and belief systems. Through its versatility, fabric can be a record of significant events driven by struggle, joy, and resistance. Community involvement in quilting is integral to how the process can incite solidarity and social change. Quilting techniques live on and adapt with the societies that practice them, transforming finished works into testaments of the identities and desires of their makers. This thesis argues that quilting combines hand-making with activism to dispute predominant narratives surrounding art, gender, and race. Research into several 19th-20th-century quilting communities and movements within the United States illustrates the extensive ties between textile arts and sociopolitical activism. This can be observed in the histories of racial and ethnic minority groups that leveraged quilts as tools of political resistance and cultural continuity. For example, Lakota tribes ensured the stability of Native American traditions by implementing star quilts into ceremonial customs as a replacement for painted buffalo hides after the 19th-century buffalo slaughter caused by European colonization. Hawaiian quilters adapted appliqué techniques to reference native wildlife and emblems tied to the nation's sovereignty movement. Similarly, the Freedom Quilting Bee, a Black women's cooperative in Gee's Bend, Alabama—drew upon intergenerational quilting practices to promote financial liberation from the system of tenant farming inherited from the exploitative legacy of plantation owners. Communities facing oppression based on their gender and sexuality also strategically employed quilting to transgress social norms rooted in homophobia and sexism. Quilting bees hosted by Suffragettes contributed to public funding for women's voting rights and labor reform. In the following century, the *National AIDS Memorial Quilt* established an expansive memorial during the AIDS crisis,

raising public awareness and replacing the statistical death toll with personalized panels honoring the Queer community.

The Social Roles of Quilts

Quilts can serve as objects of comfort, manifested by the communion of hands that tirelessly stitched it into creation. They unfold from this foundation to serve varied purposes in relationship to the cultural contexts of their makers. To simplify the broad range of artistic intentions behind a quilt, this thesis will group the following examples into major categories regarding their functions and social significance. Some categorizations include (but are not limited to) utilitarian, symbolic, and ceremonial quilts. These classifications illuminate the diverse social and historical roles of quilts. However, as a medium with a diverse breadth of techniques, styles, materials, and artists, the purpose of a quilt can encompass multiple categories or expand beyond these expectations.

The utilitarian function of quilts was intrinsic to 19th-century American women in post-industrial agricultural communities. Spinning, weaving, and stitching were fundamental skills, as quilts were essential to keep families' beds warm, creating makeshift sleeping areas, insulating the home as window and door coverings, or hanging privacy walls.[1] Quilts designed, displayed, and viewed in a manner that references a specific meaning could be classified as an item with symbolic use. Hawaiian appliqué quilts exemplify this significance, as the intricate decoration and careful display of the quilts inside the home during gatherings are prioritized over daily use. The importance of Eight-Pointed Star quilts within Lakota giveaway events demonstrates the ceremonial usage of quilts. Lakota quilters often give star quilts as gifts in naming ceremony

[1] "Quilt Discovery Experience," National Parks Service, n.d., https://www.nps.gov/home/planyourvisit/quilt-discovery-experience.htm.

giveaways, effectively sharing a part of themselves through the months of labor and careful intent embedded within the object.

Labor, Class, and Hand-Made Resistance

Quilts can become cloth topographies of intergenerational perspectives and social landscapes. Often, the medium lends itself to the exchange of political messages through patterns bearing symbols of civil rights organizations, slogans anchored to fabric using embroidery or appliqué, and quilters backing revolutionary initiatives through fundraising sales. When quilters unite their ethics into a physical work of art, this action can reverberate into broader social changes, distinguishing quilt makers as effective agents of cultural transformation. Sewing is a cycle that implies expressions of force, destruction, and mending through threading a needle, by puncturing fabric, and stitching these perforations together again. Like the dual-sidedness of stitched fabric, the needle can become a talisman of both transgression and renewal.[2]

Hand-making has been historically positioned as an act of protest against exploitative conditions of mass production and industrialization under capitalism. In Karl Marx's *Simple Value-Form*, fabric becomes a way to understand how commodities are valued—not just by their utility, but by the human labor embedded within them.[3] Marx defines the value-form by outlining the transformation of material and labor. In the text, he uses a coat as an example, which is made from twenty yards of linen.[4] Thus, the value of the linen relies on the human labor ingrained within it and its material use. Marx calls this the relative value-form—where a material

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[2] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984; repr., London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 1984), xix.
[3] Marx Karl, Andy Blunden, and W. Suchting, "Economic Manuscripts: The Value-Form by Karl Marx," ed. Mike Roth, The Marxists Internet Archive, 1978, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/appendix.htm.
[4] Marx Karl, Andy Blunden, and W. Suchting, "Economic Manuscripts: The Value-Form by Karl Marx."

accumulates worth through its potential to become a commodity.[5] Once the linen is fashioned into a coat, it takes on the equivalent value-form, expressing the linen's value to the commodity and the amalgamation of human labor carried into its final existence as a garment.[6] This framework reflects how the history of textile manufacturing and the mechanization of cotton production was a catalyst for the formation of capitalism, positioning the practice of hand-making as significant to collective counteraction against divided and standardized systems of labor.[7] Hand-made textiles, like quilts, can be regarded beyond their practical use; they bear the tactility of human labor and serve as records of cross-cultural experiences, historical events, and transformations of spaces, both physical and conceptual. During the Industrial Revolution, the class, race, and gender-based distinctions of 'craft' versus 'fine art' and 'amateur' versus 'skilled' became a focus for textile artists aiming to collapse these binaries.[8] Fiber artists employed accessible media to highlight the social value of hand-crafted work marginalized within conventional artistic hierarchies.

Quilting and Community

As a social art form, quilting facilitates the exchange of personal and collective stories. The establishment of quilting bees, which are gatherings between quilters with the motive of finishing a neighboring artist's quilt top, were popularized in 18th-19th-century colonial America.[9] Women engaging in textile production traces back to ancient Paleolithic civilizations, such as tight-knit nomadic societies where needleworkers created clothing from natural materials such as bark, animal skins, and fur, with bone needles and thread made from animal veins and

[5] Marx Karl, Andy Blunden, and W. Suchting, "Economic Manuscripts: The Value-Form by Karl Marx."
[6] Marx Karl, Andy Blunden, and W. Suchting, "Economic Manuscripts: The Value-Form by Karl Marx."
[7] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 31.
[8] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, 7-10.
[9] "Quilting Bee," Textile Research Center Lieden, September 3, 2014, https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/organisations-and-movements/clubs-and-societies/quilting-bee.

tendons.[10] Forming weaving guilds, sewing circles, and quilting bees was essential for women's social mobility and companionship, leading to group cohesion and a stable sense of identity.[11] Social events made specifically for women allowed these artists to traverse between the boundaries of private, personal, and public spheres during an era of patriarchal restrictions on women's socialization and creative freedom. Quilting bees assembled essential networks for liberation, evident in the Antebellum South, where enslaved women sometimes held evening frolics—quilting parties where they shared materials, songs, and stories.[12] These gatherings allowed Black women valuable time to socialize and work collaboratively without the supervision of slaveholders.[13] Quilting events are a long-lasting tradition, encouraging artists to teach and learn new skills alongside their neighbors—transmitting material culture across generations.

Individual expression and transformative collaboration are balanced in quilting communities, akin to piecing (sewing different fragments into a unified whole). Small actions accumulate to fill a larger space, relating to the material process and the social impact of quilt-making. A quilting bee is based on teamwork, as members dedicate themselves to realizing a fellow quilter's design, which can fortify mutual support and encouragement. Community reinforcement occurring in group-based hand-working is explored in Gayle Plessner's dissertation, A*n Exploration into the Transformational Process of Traditional Hawaiian Quilt Making*.[14] Plessner describes quilting as a medium that delivers the soul of the maker, their

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[10] O. Soffer, M. Adovasio, and D.C. Hyland, "The 'Venus' Figurines," *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (August 2000): 531, https://doi.org/10.1086/317381.
[11] Kristin M. Langellier, "Appreciating Phenomenology and Feminism: Researching Quiltmaking and Communication," *Human Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 1994): 66, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01322767.
[12] Floris Barnett Cash, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," *The Journal of Negro History* 80, no. 1 (January 1995): 32, https://doi.org/10.2307/2717705.
[13] Floris Barnett Cash, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 32.
[14] Gayle Plessner, "An Exploration into the Transformational Process of Traditional Hawaiian Quiltmaking" (2016): 35, https://www.proquest.com/openview/4b20e65f87ca68c6e9bbb38a3d58397c/1?cbl=18750&pq-origsite=gscholar.

community, and their environment into a tangible realm. The creative life of an individual and their shared social bonds are present throughout the start of a quilting project to its completion, preserving Hawaiian tradition and providing benefits to the group's social, emotional, and physical well-being.[15] The Hawaiian *kukui lau* (echo quilting) technique bridges a quilt's material with the spirituality of an individual and the outside world. Stitched lines emerge from the center of a quilt, opposite to lines quilted inwards from the border.[16] In Hawaiian culture, the rippled pattern of converging lines symbolizes love and *mana* (spirit), emanating into the macrocosm and eventually returning to the individual quilt-maker.[17]

How Social Context Characterizes a Quilt

Quilts combine three layers, including a decorative top, batting, and backing.[18] Still, like language, quilt styles are elaborations of their region, culture, and period. The availability of materials used in the quilter's circumstance is noticeable by the fabric type, choice and thickness of batting, thread, stitching method, color palette, and the intricacy of the quilt's design. Quilters with abundant resources may lean toward styles with rich variations of patterns, materials, and techniques. Examining the 19th-century trend of quilts made in the crazy style, with quilt tops characterized by a wide assortment of small luxurious fabric scraps and thick, multicolor stitching, points to generous circumstances. Crazy quilts rose in popularity because of tailoring companies that distributed fabric samples and provided quilters with diverse colorways, patterns, and textures to form opulent quilts at a discounted cost.[19] The occupations of members in a

[15] Plessner, "An Exploration into the Transformational Process of Traditional Hawaiian Quiltmaking", 45.
[16] Plessner, "An Exploration into the Transformational Process of Traditional Hawaiian Quiltmaking", 45.
[17] Marenka Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai* (Common Threads Press, 2024), 11.
[18] Susan Wainscott, "Technological Advancements in the Quilting Arts Technological Advancements in the Quilting Arts" (2022), 3, https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1483&context=bis437.
[19] Carol Sauvion, "Craft in America" (Public Broadcasting Company, December 27, 2019), https://www.pbs.org/video/quilts-episode-yhkwcj/.

quilting collective also influence the material qualities and how liberally fabric is used in a quilt. When work clothes are the most available fabric source, the textures of worn denim, canvas, and thick cotton or flannel reflect the socioeconomic reality of a quilter's family. Lutisha Pettway's 1950 *"Bars" Work-Clothes Quilt* is intricately pieced from denim, a material that communicates her family's tenant farming history and resourcefulness as a working-class mother.[20] By using fabric from worn denim work clothes, Pettway could bring comfort to her children despite facing systemic racism that limited economic opportunities for Black communities.[21] The thickness and surface design of a quilt also relates to the socioeconomic status of an artist, with thicker batting used for utilitarian quilts needed to keep families warm, in contrast to thinner, decorative quilts in which the batting's priority is to enhance the relief of the surface design. Stitching informed by a quilter's socio-cultural setting is apparent in Hawaiian appliqué quilting with *Moa Waewae*, the Chicken Feet stitch. This technique references the outline of the now-extinct birds' feet to fill negative space in quilt tops while recording a part of the land's ecological history.[22] In Marsha MacDowell and Kurt Dewhurst's book, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, the Mohawk quilter, Doris Benedict, recalls preserving the physical memories held by fabric, stating that each scrap of fabric used in a quilt was from clothing donated by relatives.[23] When quilts made from repurposed clothing become old and worn, quilters can acknowledge their sentimental value by recycling them into batting used in new quilts instead of discarding or selling them.[24] Recycling materials is a resourceful way to bulk up a new quilt with accessible

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[20] "'Bars' Work-Clothes Quilt - Lutisha Pettway - Google Arts & Culture," Google Arts & Culture, 2017, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bars-work-clothes-quilt-lutisha-pettway/jgH8Y8rV5JE5IQ?hl=en.
[21] Lutisha Pettway, *"Bars" Work-Clothes Quilt*, 1950, Denim and cotton, 1950, Houston, TX, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/lutisha-pettway/work/bars-work-clothes-quilt.
[22] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 24.
[23] Marsha MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions* (Museum of New Mexico Press in Association with Michigan State University Museum, 1997), 18.
[24] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 22.

materials without leaving behind the layers of memory in earlier creations. Collaborative environments similarly influence the art form. Quilting bees played a primary role in the evolution of quilt styles, with hand-drawn patterns frequently passed along the group and reinterpreted by each member. Like a game of telephone, this led to drawings taking on alternative forms and meaning with each rework. This artistic exchange is apparent in the popularity of the 19th-century quilt patterns 'Indian Hatchet' and 'Indian Trail' named by white Americans, suggesting a heavy influence of designs sourced from Native American quilting communities.[25] When multiple signatures appear on the same pattern, the quilters' collective effort in designing it traces back to them.[26] Shared social motivations between a group often influence the patterns, color palettes, and end goal for the quilts, which could include activist fundraising projects, ceremonial use, and memorial events.

Quilting traditions adapt through time, relating to a culture's circumstances. New technologies and materials, modes of community collaboration, access to instructional documents, and design trends all pushed the art form to develop. Synthetic fabrics, the widespread publishing of pattern & instruction books, and the invention of sewing tools like the longarm quilting machine during the early 19th century extensively shaped the advancement of quilting aesthetics.[27] Some quilting communities learned the foundational skills of quilt-making through colonial influences yet radically elaborated upon these teachings to create culturally distinct layouts and techniques that aligned with their artistic heritage and design sensibilities, notably in the creative development of Hawaiian appliqué and Native American patchwork

[25] Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society* (San Francisco: Quilt Digest Press, 1987), 68.
[26] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 127.
[27] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 169; Wainscott, "Technological Advancements in the Quilting Arts Technological Advancements in the Quilting Arts", 14.

motifs. Quilting bees and guilds promoted workspaces with shared equipment and resources, broadening the diversity and reach of the art form.[28] Throughout the 20th century, the exchange of patterns facilitated reinterpretations of European American quilt styles, quilting publications, fabric use, and quilts made as gifts or paid piecework between racially integrated quilting societies in the rural South.[29] With advanced improvisations upon commercial patterns, women of color challenged the aesthetic criteria of the white quilting sphere that devalued work outside of a standardized, conservative framework meant to emphasize American patriotism.[30]

Social Marginalization in Quilting History

Artists who did not fit the mold of white, affluent, married Christian women often became marginalized in the mainstream quilt world. They were even excluded from being recognized for decorative folk art and ranked low in the hierarchy of fine arts. Quilters underrated because of sexism and racism, were suppressed throughout history by prevailing Eurocentric attitudes in the arts that restrained diverse representations of American culture. Divisive terminology created during the 18th-19th century continued these biases, using categories such as 'primitive', 'folk', and 'decorative' art to describe work associated with artists who were not white, male, or afforded entry into expensive art academies.[31] Consequently, decorative arts, such as textiles and needlework, suffered devaluation, reinforcing the notion that women's artistic contributions should prioritize aesthetics over practicality.[32] These

[28] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 38.
[29] Teri Klassen, "Representations of African American Quiltmaking: From Omission to High Art," *Journal of American Folklore* 122, no. 485 (July 1, 2009): 313, https://doi.org/10.2307/40390070.
[30] Vanessa Kraemer Sohan, "'But a Quilt Is More': Recontextualizing the Discourse(S) of the Gee's Bend Quilts," *College English* 77, no. 4 (March 1, 2015): 310, https://doi.org/10.1086/317381.
[31] Patricia Mainardi et al., "Feminist Art Journal," *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (1973), 22, https://doi.org/10.2307/community.28036282.
[32] Patricia Mainardi et al., "Feminist Art Journal," *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (1973), 22, https://doi.org/10.2307/community.28036282.

misconceptions persist in contemporary art spaces, even as quilts achieve increased visibility in museum exhibitions. The Whitney Museum's 2002-2003 exhibition, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, exemplified this tension.[33] While the show brought heightened public attention to Black quilters from a rural Alabama community, it also contributed to a mythologized narrative—framing the quilters as culturally isolated folk artists and evaluating their work primarily through comparisons to the 20th-century abstract painting movement, minimalism.[34] Exhibitions like the Whitney's broaden exposure for quilt-making, but often fall short by offering reductive interpretations. By praising the quilts primarily for their visual proximity to pre-existing (white, male-dominated) modernist style, curators risk erasing the distinct culture, lived histories, and creative agency of Black quilters. As a result, the specific aesthetics and political traditions rooted in the heritage of women of color are undermined.[35]

Beginning in Renaissance Europe, hierarchal membership restrictions on craft guilds often excluded women from achieving prominence in the fine arts arena.[36] Weakened economic stability discouraged working-class women from participating in craft or trade occupations.[37] The rise of ideological discourse about essential differentiation between the sexes became a basis for European social structure, thus feminizing textile work as domestic craft, separating women's art into an entirely different category in the 16th century.[38] Many male artists comfortably practiced mediums at the top of the artistic hierarchy, including painting, sculpture, and architecture, during a time of restrictions based on class, race, and gender.[39] By the Industrial

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[33] Neal Conan, "'The Quilts of Gee's Bend' a Showcase of Distinctive Work by African-American Artists," *National Public Radio*, February 4, 2003, https://www.npr.org/2003/02/04/970364/the-quilts-of-gees-bend.
[34] Neal Conan, "'The Quilts of Gee's Bend."
[35] Mainardi, et al., "Feminist Art Journal", 22.
[36] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 60.
[37] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 60.
[38] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 61.
[39] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988): 12-15.

Revolution, applied, or decorative arts, were placed toward the bottom of this hierarchy, relating to the higher concentration of women engaging with these techniques.[40] The romanticism of white womanhood and domestic virtue linked to textile arts also discriminated against the working class and women of color who influenced the art form.[41] Influences from people of color are visible from the inception of quilting history. The foundation of piecework, appliqué, and quilting traditions date back to Syria, Egypt, India, and China, with the earliest depiction of the art form seen in an ivory carving (3400 B.C.) from the first Egyptian Dynasty, with a quilted mantle worn by the Pharoah.[42] These sewing methods eventually traveled to America and Europe through immigration, substantially reshaping American design.[43] Dismantling white supremacist narratives that distort the past is essential for recognizing and elevating the cultural traditions and innovation that made quilters of color unique in American history.

Lakota Quilters

Christian missionaries introduced the art form to Native American cultures during the mid-late 18th century after settling on indigenous land.[44] At trading posts and military ports, colonizers and fur traders brought cloth, needles, and blankets.[45] Eventually, quilting became enforced by European women through the establishment of mission schools and churches, emphasizing assimilation to Christianity in Native American territories.[46] Coinciding with the targeted mass eradication of buffalo brought on by westward expansion and unregulated hunting

[40] Joyce Burnette, "Women Workers in the British Industrial Revolution" (Economic History Association, March 26, 2008), https://eh.net/encyclopedia/women-workers-in-the-british-industrial-revolution/.
[41] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 14.
[42] Mainardi, et al., "Feminist Art Journal", 18; Dalton Gentry, "A Brief and Incomplete History of Quilting," *Missouri Star Blog* (blog), March 1, 2021, https://blog.missouriquiltco.com/a-brief-and-incomplete-history-of-quilting/..
[43] Mainardi, et al., "Feminist Art Journal", 18.
[44] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 5.
[45] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 5.
[46] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 5.

from European colonization, quilts became a utilitarian replacement for the buffalo-hide robes that were previously used as ceremonial objects, warm bedcovers, clothing, and visual historical records.[47] Hide painting motifs such as geometric sunburst designs appeared in quilt patterns as a continuation of this artistic tradition, as Native American quilters experimented further with the medium's potential.[48] Although Native American women mainly learned lessons on European sewing techniques and patchwork quilting styles, their work eventually branched out into unique forms that embraced distinct tribal identities and unifying symbolism. Lakota women of the northern Great Plains appropriated these quilting practices into their material culture, with the Eight-Pointed Star pattern being one of the most popularized designs inspired by the Morning Star, representing fulfillment, release from darkness, and the start of a new day.[49] Each point illustrates the stages of life ranging from infancy, youth, maturity, and old age, the four directions of prayer frequently expressed within a color palette of black (west), red (south), yellow (east), and white (north) taking on different variations within the pattern.[50] Native American communities later established quilting bees, continuing the inheritance of quilting traditions within tribes as a place of community involvement to collaborate on quilts for giveaway ceremonies and fundraising events.[51]

Quilts become heavily integrated into spiritual gatherings and events marking rites of passage, with Sioux Eight-Pointed Star quilts draped over sweat lodges for purification ceremonies, used as a protective shroud for individuals embarking on vision quests to receive

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[47] "Buffalo Robe (Article) | West," Khan Academy, n.d., https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-americas/native-north-america/native-american-west/a/buffalo-robe.
[48] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 113.
[49] "An Evolution of Expression," National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d., https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/evolution-expression.
[50] "Native American Star Quilts | International Quilt Museum - Lincoln, NE," International Quilt Museum, 2014, https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/exhibition/native-american-star-quilts.
[51] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 15.

visions or guiding messages, worn by medicine men in Yuwipi healing ceremonies, and exchanged at giveaways to celebrate births, naming ceremonies, graduations, weddings, memorials, sports tournaments, and other impactful achievements.[52] During naming ceremonies, an individual receives a Lakota name that marks their identity, honored achievements, and spirituality. These occasions celebrate the recipient with public respect, including singing their given name in an honoring song, a giveaway to mark this rite of passage, prayers, and a feast.[53] Giveaways are an integral part of the naming ceremony and are a customary demonstration of love and admiration as Lakota people welcome individuals into their communities. The giveaway proceeds after the recipient of the new name covers the ground with a large blanket. Subsequently, their family will approach the blanketed area with gifts to place upon it. All attendees are encouraged to accept gifts from the blanket given to the named individual, symbolizing community integration.[54] The ceremonial usage of the star quilt acknowledges the identity of newly named individuals and their place within a Lakota tribe while emphasizing the generosity and artistic merit of the quilters who donated their time and handiwork to the giveaway. These traditions have maintained quilting as an integral part of Native American history, with artists transforming techniques brought by European colonizers as a means of assimilation into emblems of fortified tribal cohesion and reciprocity. This cultural continuation is illustrated in the 20th-century quilt art by Rebecca Blackwater, exemplifying Lakota heritage through ledger scenes, a historically male-dominated art form.[55] Native American women have been agents of cultural transmission through their labor, as quilting became a meaningful outlet

[52] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 113.
[53] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 115.
[54] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 130.
[55] Rebecca Blackwater, *Quilt*, 1915, Cotton cloth and thread, 1915, Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/643691.

for articulating their identity during a time of creative restriction.[56] As Native American women taught their descendants quilting techniques, they ensured the longevity of ethnic traditions to be treasured by future generations.

Women's Suffrage Quilts

Women's participation in quilt-making extended to the Suffrage Movement of the mid-19th century, using quilts as banners airing political messages, and popularizing the use of Suffragette symbolism in fashionable quilt patterns. Sunflowers have a rich significance in literary tradition, mythology, art, and religious contexts, often representing values such as loyalty, hope, and endurance.[57] Kansas Suffragists embraced their state flower in 1867 to embody the causes of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which became their official emblem in 1896.[58] Artists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Cassatt furthered associations between the flower and the Women's Suffrage movement. Stanton wrote under the alias "Sunflower" for the first women's newspaper, *The Lily*, and Cassatt created the painting *Woman with Sunflower* in 1905, a portrait of a mother wearing a sunflower pinned on her dress as she holds a young girl in her lap.[59] Suffrage fundraisers, like the Kansas Sunflower Supper, often sold quilts created by Suffragists to contribute to the feminist cause.[60] Although the quilt pattern used for the Sunflower Supper remains unknown, sunflower patterns rose in popularity within quilting catalogs, such as the Three Fl'd Sunflower pattern, first appearing in 1805 from the popular Midwestern publisher Ladies Art Company.[61] The 19th-century Temperance

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[56] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 115.
[57] Roxanne Cullen, "How Sunflowers Became Tied to Suffrage Movement," Big Rapids Pioneer (Hearst Newspapers, September 23, 2024), https://www.bigrapidsnews.com/opinion/article/sunflowers-tied-suffrage-movement-19777724.php.
[58] Cullen, "How Sunflowers Became Tied to Suffrage Movement."
[59] Cullen, "How Sunflowers Became Tied to Suffrage Movement."
[60] Michele McLaughlin, "Suffrage Quilts #1," *Pennsylvania Piecemaker* (blog), October 12, 2019, https://pennsylvaniapiecemaker.blogspot.com/2019/10/suffrage-quilts-1.html?m=0.
[61] *LAC No.074-Three Fl'd Sunflower*, 1895, Quilt pattern, 1895, St. Louis, MO, Michigan State University Museum; Cuesta Benberry Ephemera Collection, https://quiltindex.org/view/?type=publications&kid=12-91-616.

movement aligned with suffrage, where quilts patterned with the Temperance T and Drunkard's Path arrived for auction at fundraisers.[62] Women's rights quilting bees emerged a few decades after the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, the first official women's gathering meant to amplify the mission of the Suffragists.[63] Donations from private sponsors and funds earned from craft fairs allowed women's organizations to form around social reformist causes including abolition, temperance, enforcement of child labor laws, prison reform, equal pay, and voting rights.[64]

Women's inventive approach to textile production stretches back to prehistory, with weaving often regarded as a metaphor for creation.[65] Approaching the 19th century, women in agricultural communities assumed the responsibilities of maintaining the home while producing necessary goods for their relatives by farming staple crops, spinning thread, weaving fabric, and sewing.[66] Women's role in the domestic space became emphasized from a young age because mothers taught their children to sew as early as 2-3 years old.[67] Because it could be performed at home, weaving was considered a practical skill for women managing domestic responsibilities, including childcare.[68] As a result, textile work became fabricated into the center of 'women's work' for decades.[69] Political groups that sought to advance women's role in the public domain understood this by using textile arts to reconnect women and reclaim art forms rejected by patriarchal hierarchies. As industrialization accumulated momentum in the United States, an ideology known as the 'cult of true womanhood' arose as a conservative reaction toward

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[62] Ferrero, Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 89.
[63] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 94.
[64] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, *28, 83*, 94.
[65] Carol Christ, "Weaving the Fabric of Our Lives," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 1 (1997): 132, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002303.
[66] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 11,16.
[67] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 16.
[68] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 16.
[69] Carol Christ, "Weaving the Fabric of Our Lives," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 1 (1997): 133, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002303.

domestic skills becoming mechanized, such as factory cloth production.[70] Some women felt removed from the traditional roles they identified with, and the public and private spheres became increasingly divided. Sewing became a sign of leisure and domestic virtue for those who had the means and time to stitch during the Victorian era and a household obligation for others.[71] With art forms like weaving becoming increasingly machine-driven and inexpensive, mass production generated less detailed work.[72] The Arts & Crafts movement, popularized by the artist and writer William Morris, emerged synchronically with the Suffrage movement. Followers of the movement advocated for social revolution, uniting artists with equal opportunities for designers and craftspeople—minus the sexual division of labor that restricted Victorian creativity.[73] However, the movement is critiqued by textile scholars such as Rosika Parker in her 1894 publication, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, noting that the message of unification emphasized by Morris was not unfamiliar, as women had been writing the same sentiments in pattern books years before the wave of the Arts & Crafts movement.[74] Morris also refrained from challenging the social expectations of Victorian femininity—failing to extend meaningful support for women's labor.[75] Despite persisting stereotypes, women aimed to employ textile art that uplifted revolutionary ideas about their autonomy by continuing the tradition of banner carrying used by the 1830s Trade Union Movement.[76] Suffragists created fabric banners that applied politically progressive slogans with a combination of embroidery, painting, quilting, collage, and stumpwork, supported by appliqué

[70] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 22.
[71] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 22-23.
[72] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, 31.
[73] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 179..
[74] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 180-181.
[75] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 180-181.
[76] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 197.

signatures.[77] Women subverted feminine expectations associated with needlework to construct artwork that aligned with their cause, expanding the boundaries of the domestic sphere. The private and public worlds merged through embroidered banners and suffrage quilts, backing their message while creating group solidarity in sewing circles and quilting bees.[78] The link between quilts and women's experiences continues as a theme in contemporary art, notably in Louise Bourgeois' work using fiber arts to examine gender, sexuality, and family history.[79] Her practice follows the legacy of women practicing textile arts by emphasizing metaphors of soft comfort and repetitive stitching as a method of feminist critique and personal narrative. In this way, she reinforces the enduring political and phenomenological nature of fiber arts, re-envisioning the quilt as a historical record of women's lives.

The National AIDS Memorial Project

When fabric bears the texture of memory, a quilt becomes an archive. In 1978, the assassination of the openly gay American politicians, Harvey Milk and George Moscone, created a wave of mourning for the LGBTQ+ community, a targeted attack during a time of struggle against America's oppressive political system.[80] Cleve Jones, an activist who knew Milk as his mentor, honored these men by creating the largest community art project in the world, now known as the *National AIDS Memorial Quilt* (NAMES Project) in 1985.[81] Jones chose a quilt as the medium for the monument after organizing a candlelight march in remembrance of Harvey Milk and George Moscone.[82] At this service, he requested attendants to write the names of their loved ones on placards to be pasted onto the San Francisco Federal Building. After observing the

[77] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 197.
[78] Ferrero, et al., *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*, 97.
[79] "Quilting," Moderna Museet, 2015, https://sis.modernamuseet.se/objects/88030/quilting.
[80] "The History of the Quilt," National Aids Memorial, 2021, https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history.
[81] Jess Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt* (Common Threads Press, 2021), 29.
[82] "The History of the Quilt," National Aids Memorial.

amalgamation of posters lining the walls, he realized it had taken the shape of a patchwork quilt.[83]

Currently, the quilt holds over 48,000 panels, notorious as a space for collective mourning within the LGBTQ+ community as people grasped the immensity of loss during the wake of the AIDS crisis.[84] Quilters appropriated embroidery traditions to immortalize the experiences of lost lovers, friends, and family members while resisting the negligent attitudes of the Bush administration, an act of passion previously seen within Victorian mourning embroidery and Civil Rights quilts.[85] Each panel is a personalized mosaic of cherished clothing items, keepsakes, quotes, and photographs, stitched into a multicolored arrangement—making the quilt a monument of grief and adoration. Every panel measures roughly three feet by six feet all around, approximating the average size of a grave. This striking visualization of mortality made the quilt nearly impossible to ignore, ensuring bystanders would identify with the memorial and respect the humanity of the deceased.[86]

Pink triangles and red ribbons appear on numerous panels, symbols communicating the political urgency of the AIDS crisis. The former originated during the Holocaust when Nazi guards branded inverted pink triangles onto the uniforms of LGBTQ+ people inside concentration camps.[87] The symbol reached wider recognition through its reclamation by the Queer community, notably used by the Act Up Organization to promote AIDS research and justice for victims and their loved ones.[88] "Silence = Death" often accompanies the pink triangle

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[83] "The History of the Quilt," National Aids Memorial.
[84] Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt*, 29.
[85] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 135; Mainardi, et al., "Feminist Art Journal", 20.
[86] Jennifer Power, "Rites of Belonging: The AIDS Memorial Quilt," in *Movement, Knowledge, Emotion: Gay Activism and HIV/AIDS in Australia* (ANU Press, 2011), 145, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hd2p.9.
[87] Ellen Caminiti, "The Significance of the Pink Triangle," National Center for Lesbian Rights, June 28, 2024, https://www.nclrights.org/the-significance-of-the-pink-triangle/.
[88] Caminiti, "The Significance of the Pink Triangle."

on quilt blocks, such as panel #2306-7 of *The NAMES Quilt* made for the actor and AIDS activist Ortez Alderson.[89] Pins, t-shirts, and posters spreading AIDS awareness simultaneously rose in popularity, urging viewers to resist complacency in the face of significant loss perpetuated by the inaction of the US government.[90] In addition, the red ribbon appears in appliqué to symbolize HIV/AIDS awareness in the 1990s. The Visual AIDS Artists Caucus designed it in 1991 to encourage public commitment toward fighting the ongoing crisis.[91]

Contributors to the quilt project tactfully controlled the reactions of people outside the LGBTQ+ community by setting a specific mood at events hosted by the organization. These funerary rituals emphasized solemnity, as quilters exposed their newly made panels to the public eye as they merged with the quilt.[92] As the quilt traveled through global tours and unfolding ceremonies, a radical type of funerary rite was established without the church as a host.[93] Because many Catholic churches and Protestant denominations largely contributed to the moral stigma against the disease, the rituals facilitated by the NAMES Project became a counter-memorial.[94] Volunteers worked through grief, challenged homophobia, and personified their losses to replace mere statistics. Each block signified someone's identity and values, deepening the national awareness and emotional impact of the quilt. The quilt remains a testament to Queer visual culture, successfully urging government administrators to behold the trauma of the communities most affected by the crisis. In effect, the organization raised money to fund research and establish public services for people affected by AIDS.[95] Participants with varied

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[89] Arthur Gursch and Theresa Costanzo, *Panel #2306-7, Ortez Alderson*, n.d., Quilt, n.d., National Aids Memorial Quilt, https://www.aidsmemorial.org/interactive-aids-quilt.
[90] Caminiti, "The Significance of the Pink Triangle."
[91] "Visual Aids Artists Caucus - about - Independent Curators International," Independent Curators International, n.d., https://curatorsintl.org/about/collaborators/6400-visual-aids-artists-caucus.
[92] Bryan-Wilson, *Fray : Art and Textile Politics*, 209.
[93] Power, "Rites of Belonging: The AIDS Memorial Quilt," 156.
[94] Power, "Rites of Belonging: The AIDS Memorial Quilt," 147.
[95] Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt*, 30-31.

skill levels received sewing lessons to help mend their social networks. The quilt preserved LGBTQ+ history for future witnesses, promising that the memories of relationships shaped by both joy and tragedy would survive.

Project leaders strategically chose the medium because of its associations with domestic comfort and Americana aesthetics, becoming a persuasive tool for subverting the negative stereotypes associated with the Queer community.[96] The quilt's iconographic language drew from American folk art, evoking themes of heritage, familial loyalty, and ties to the places we call home. *The NAMES Quilt* contradicted social norms of the 1980s-90s and bent implications of conservative American nostalgia related to the medium, asserting that Queer people have always existed throughout the nation's history, and deserve to be respected in the past, present, and future.[97] Mainstream moral prejudice towards the gay community was apparent in the lack of public concern lent to the crisis, leading to delayed access to diagnosis and treatment.[98] As a response, the political demonstrations brought by the NAMES Project unflinchingly addressed the nation's comfort with ignorance. Quilting's rural traditions—associated with community, mourning, and domestic care, propelled the movement's visibility beyond San Francisco, even reaching audiences in conservative Midwestern and Southern states through the medium's cultural resonance and emotional relatability.[99] Quilting expanded from 'women's work' to everyone's work and expressed remembrance through a material softer than stiff granite gravestones.[100] Gendered divisions of labor were removed from sewing, where men, women, and

[96] Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt*, 29.
[97] Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, 190.
[98] Rory Herbert, "The Homophobic AIDS Crisis of the 1980s," The Gale Review, May 17, 2017, https://review.gale.com/2017/05/17/the-homophobic-aids-crisis-of-the-1980s/.
[99] Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, 209.
[100] Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt*, 30.

non-binary people learned to quilt using machines and fabric supplied by donors.[101] Sarah Joy-Ford, a contemporary quilter, examines Queer quilting culture, transforming lesbian archival ephemera into stitched stories of devotion through her work.[102] Modern-day Queer art highlights how textile hand-making traditions and quilting bees sustained timeless relevance, credited to the history of LGBTQ+ people who fostered environments that equally valued all laborers.

Hawaiian Quilting

Hawai'i's extensive history relating to the nation's environment, spirituality, leadership, and material culture profoundly connects to appliqué, a foundational quilting method that matured into a distinct Hawaiian art form. *Ahupua'a*, Hawai'is ancestral land division system, often appears as a uniting theme in the quilting style, with geological, sociocultural, and ecological elements from the *makua* (uplands) to the *makai* (ocean) in vibrant compositions.[103] Life-sustaining natural resources that nourish the islands arrive in pattern forms, such as the *Kalo* (taro root), *'Ulu* (breadfruit), and *Lei Mamo* (feathers from the now-obsolete Mamo bird, traditionally used to embellish royal capes and lei).[104] Hawai'i's social customs, knowledge, and language intertwine with beliefs regarding *āina* (land) echoed in the island's artistic lineage.

Protestant missionaries from Boston, who sailed on the Brig Thaddeus to Kawaihae, Hawai'i ushered in quilting by 1820.[105] Only a few days passed before sewing circles assembled, the first directed by Queen Kalakua and four of her chiefesses, stitching alongside seven

[101] Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt*, 30.
[102] Sarah-Joy Ford, "Quilting the Lesbian Archive," The Quilter's Guild, September 7, 2022, https://quiltersguild.blog/2022/09/07/quilting-the-lesbian-archive/.

[103] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 6-9.
[104] *Hawaiian Quilt, Lei Mamo Pattern*, 1930, Cotton, 1930, New York, NY, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/751995.
[105] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 9.

missionary women on the ship deck to create a cambric gown.[106] Missionary women taught colonial patchwork quilting techniques, which Indigenous women eventually adapted into distinct expressions of Hawaiian identity during the early 19th century.[107] Many Hawaiian women found that the Euro-American patchwork techniques taught by white missionaries, involving cutting squares of fabric apart to piece them back together, was an unfulfilling process.[108] Alternatively, Indigenous women developed a style made from entire pieces of cloth that preserved traditional Hawaiian design functions.[109] Fresh forms of needle-turn appliqué implemented *kapa lau* (single-piece central design) patterns cut from one section of fabric and folded into quarters or eights. As folds unwrapped, symmetrically balanced motifs of local blossoms, wildlife, and geographic forms appeared, later attached to contrasting-color fabric.[110] Potentially sourced from designs printed on the traditional vegetable felt, *kapa* (barkcloth), radial geometric silhouettes recur in Hawaiian appliqué quilts.[111] Contemporary experimentation has evolved *kapa moe* (barkcloth quilts), as shown in Bernice Akamine's work, such as *The Queen's Quilt*.[112] Before sheep's wool shipped to the islands, plush tops from native ferns filled quilts' batting, reflecting the comfort and abundance of Hawai'i's organic resources.[113]

Quilting guilds and workshops created a tight-knit community for Hawaiians, where gathering hands crafted quilts with an accumulation of mana engrained into the fabric.[114] Patterns morphed in meaning and presentation as they passed between quilters, with a *lau* (basic pattern

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[106] "Historic Hawaiian Quilts: Early Quilts & Quilters," Quilt Index, 2025, https://quiltindex.org/view/?type=essays&kid=4-101-1
[107] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 119.
[108] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 119.
[109] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 179-180.
[110] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 38.
[111] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 9.
[112] Bernice Akamine, *The Queen's Quilt*, 2023, Kapa, 2023, SFCA Art in Public Places Collection, https://sfca.hawaii.gov/art-in-public-places-collection-recent-acquisitions-may-2023/.
[113] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 22.
[114] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 10.

created by an individual) edited by each recipient of ownership.[115] Families often pass appliqué quilts down from generation to generation.[116] Some Hawaiians preserve these heirlooms in cloth-wrapped chests, saving them for special occasions or "airing".[117] During parties, personal quilt exhibitions occur as the hosts unpack quilts from storage, carefully draping them over all the beds in their homes.[118] To properly honor the creations of the quilters, the quilts are gently folded away from any bed corners to be sat upon[119]. Within these celebrations, the bed becomes a modest platform for the artwork. By arranging quilts gifted to the host, this display embodies the symbolic act of gathering family and friends into the same household, even if the quilts' makers cannot be physically present.[120]

Beyond their formal characteristics, Hawaiian quilts are inherently political. The development of Hawaiian appliqué coincided with a period of forced cultural assimilation, missionary influence, and the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. In response to these political challenges, quilting became a meaningful act of cultural stabilization and resistance, grounding Hawaiian identity in an art form that affirmed an ancestral history of land stewardship. Before the 1898 annexation prompted by the United States' forceful interference, Hawai'i was an established kingdom governed by the ali'i at 'Iolani Palace. Queen Lili'uokalani, the last monarch to lead Hawai'i before the American coup d'état of 1893, was a staunch advocate for Hawaiian sovereignty and the pre-existing systems of reciprocity between humans and land.[121] Displaying responsibility for proper land management, the Hawaiian people refused

[115] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 38.
[116] Marsha MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort*, 179.
[117] Marsha MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort*, 178.
[118] Marsha MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort*, 178.
[119] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 11.
[120] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 11.
[121] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 61.

to diminish its value through monetary transactions. The land was not owned, bought, or sold under the ali'is' leadership—but people were granted rights to access land under the agreement to take care of it.[122] Imperialism became a pressing issue for Indigenous Hawaiians, as their land sovereignty was temporarily revoked by the British Lord Paulet in 1843, thinly veiling European commercialization of Hawai'i's rich natural resources, as a mission of protecting British interests and Hawaiian citizens.[123] The conflict between the British and King Kamehameha III intensified as Europeans occupied Hawaiian land for five months, exploiting raw materials through privatization.[124] To minimize land degradation, the ali'i formed treaties with Great Britain and France during the 1850s.[125] However, the colonial presence escalated during the late 19th century, as American citizens swarmed the Islands to profit from real estate and agriculture.[126] The struggle for Hawaiian independence reached a peak in 1891 when Queen Lili'uokalani took the throne after the death of her brother, King Kalākaua. The king died four years after being held at gunpoint to transfer power to U.S. imperial forces among members of the (non-native) 'Hawaiian League', setting a tumultuous scene for the new queen's reign.[127] Queen Lili'oukalani sought to reinforce Hawai'is old constitution and power structure.[128] Later, her experience mirrored her brother, when U.S. Marines cornered, arrested, and dethroned her at gunpoint in 1893.[129] She surrendered the throne peacefully, knowing that defending herself against the unlawful siege of power would be classified as an act of war.[130] Ultimately, Hawaiian annexation

[122] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 59.
[123] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 60.
[124] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 60.
[125] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 60-61.
[126] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 61.
[127] "'Bayonet Constitution' Takes Native Hawaiians' Rights - Timeline - Native Voices," Native Voices (National Institute of Health , n.d.), https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/372.html.
[128] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 61.
[129] Thompson-Odlum, *Mauka to Makai*, 61.
[130] "Kūkahekahe: The Overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani," Kamehameha Schools, January 19, 2022, https://www.ksbe.edu/article/kukahekahe-the-overthrow-of-queen-liliuokalani.

occurred during the Spanish-American war in 1898, strategized by the U.S. government for military advantages.[131]

During the queen's imprisonment at the 'Iolani palace, she used quilts to record her country's history and struggle against foreign militarization.[132] *Queen Lili'uokalani's Quilt* was assembled with clothing scraps, including silk, satin, velvet, and decorative brocades that signify her regal status.[133] Appearing in the central blocks, she embroidered "Imprisoned at 'Iolani palace… we began the quilt here", with the name of her companion at the palace, Eveline Melite Kilioilani Kaopaokalai Wilson, stitched alongside her signature.[134] The work serves as a comprehensive timeline of colonial violence within Hawai'i, formed in the style of a crazy quilt. Symbols of hope appear in the forms of a phoenix and the Hawaiian coat of arms, and references to U.S. correspondences, such as fans, a code for letters addressed to President McKinley protesting annexation.[135] These symbols continued in the language of Hawaiian quilts, with the Hawaiian Coat of Arms (a crown decorated with kalo leaves, a shield, and the royal twins Kame'eiamoku and Kamanawa wearing feather cloaks and helmets) appearing in patterns supporting Indigenous land stewardship. The coat of arms is often accompanied by the *Kānaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiian flag), as citizens were concerned about losing their flag after the U.S. overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy and annexed the territory.[136] *Ku'u hae aloha*, translating to "my beloved flag" captions the flag on many Hawaiian quilts, representing the alliance of

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[131] "The Spanish-American War, 1898," United States Department of State (Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, 2018), https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/spanish-american-war.
[132] Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt*, 22.
[133] Lili'u Loloku Walania Kamaka'eha , *Queen Lili'uokalani Quilt*, 1895, Crazy quilt, 1895, Honolulu, Hawaii, 'Iolani Palace, https://quiltindex.org/view/?type=essays&kid=4-101-1.
[134] Bailey, *Many Hands Make a Quilt*, 22.
[135] Joyce Hammond, "Celebrating Quilting & the Women of the Hawaiian Monarchy," Historic Hawaii Foundation, n.d., https://historichawaii.org/2021/03/19/quiltshonoringwomenofhawaiianmonarchy/.
[136] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 181.

Indigenous people to their ancestral land and protesting the intrusion of U.S. occupants.[137] Appliqué quilts hold a significant role in land activism to this day, as artists retell the stories of their people and maintain their determination to preserve the culture and autonomy of Hawai'i.

The Freedom Quilting Bee

Gee's Bend, Alabama, nestled within an arc of the Alabama River, is a town shaped by the artistic inheritance of Black quilters. The Wilcox County rural community, with 6,000 acres originally purchased by the plantation owner Joseph Gee of North Carolina, has a significant history tied to the slave trade.[138] Seventeen enslaved people farmed the plantation under Gee until he accumulated serious debt, transferring ownership of ninety-eight slaves to Mark Pettway in 1845.[139] Pettway, whose last name was assigned to generations of Black Americans in the town, traveled by wagon to Gee's Bend, with one hundred Black men, women, and children that walked to the new plantation.[140] The legacy of white supremacy enabled by these men resumed after the Civil War through the tenant farming (sharecropping) system in the 'Black Belt' counties of Southwest Alabama.[141] This crescent location was historically characterized by plantation agriculture, with a high population of Black farmers who descended from enslaved people.[142] During the Great Depression, many Black families were severely affected by the system of debt bondage.[143] Previous enslavers who became landlords of these southern farming communities restricted access to farmers' subsistence crops and livestock to limit competition

[137] MacDowell, Dewhurst, *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, 71.
[138] "History of Gee's Bend," Visit Gee's Bend (Souls Grown Deep, 2014), https://www.geesbend.org/history-of-gees-bend.
[139] "History of Gee's Bend," Visit Gee's Bend
[140] "History of Gee's Bend," Visit Gee's Bend
[141] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee," *Anthropology Today* 19, no. 4 (August 2003): 15, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.00203.
[142] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee," 15.
[143] "History of Gee's Bend," Visit Gee's Bend

and economic independence for Black workers.[144] The corrupt system carried on by white landowners cheated tenant farmers of government subsidy checks through interception, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture disregarded.[145] As landlords forced their employees to harvest food for their company stores, the debt burden weighed heavier on Black families.[146] In the mid-1960s, the mismanagement of land ownership culminated in the construction of a dam on the Alabama River.[147] To prepare for infrastructure construction, the Army Corps of Engineers obtained a vast span of acres of land that this farming community resided in.[148] During the dam's development, countless farmers were left with few employment options and received no financial relief from the government during their displacement.[149]

These systemic inequalities assembled generations of Gee's Bends' quilters who practiced the art form since the onset of the 20th century.[150] With a determination to find freedom from the white-owned business contracts that haunted their community, the Freedom Quilting Bee was conceived. The artist and activist, Estelle Witherspoon, and local priest Father Francis X. Walter, co-founded the organization in 1966, following the pulse of the Civil Rights Movement.[151] The Freedom Quilting Bee created a national impact for Black artists, as it was one of the first cooperatives made for and managed by Black women in the United States.[152] Quilting traditions were cultivated by the organization, reinvigorating the art form with a robust economic boom throughout southern neighborhoods. Before the Freedom Quilting Bee, the average income for Gee's Bend inhabitants was $1,200 a year, doubled by the sale of quilts made

[144] Scheper-Hughes, "Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee," 16.
[145] Scheper-Hughes, "Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee," 16.
[146] Scheper-Hughes, "Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee," 16.
[147] Alison Jacques, "Freedom Quilting Bee," 2021, https://alisonjacques.com/exhibitions/freedom-quilting-bee.
[148] Jacques, "Freedom Quilting Bee"
[149] Jacques, "Freedom Quilting Bee"
[150] Scheper-Hughes, "Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee," 18.
[151] Nancy Callahan, *The Freedom Quilting Bee* (University of Alabama Press, 2005), 63-64.
[152] "History of Gee's Bend," Visit Gee's Bend

by the collective.[153] Social connections deepened between quilters, and quilts transformed into unparalleled styles, initiating the personalized "patchwork look" that became a trend of the 1960s.[154] Activists from the Freedom Quilting Bee used their platform to promote political action in Alabama's rural communities, encouraging Black voter registration. Women from Gee's Bend congregated at the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, carrying bundles of their quilts to present to Martin Luther King Jr. during his sermon in 1965.[155] Dr. King praised the local quilters for their work, motivating the women to register for the upcoming election and follow him in a Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.[156] The relationship between the Freedom Quilting Bee and the Civil Rights Movement successfully opened new possibilities for the circulation of Black culture, and community-wide economic empowerment.[157]

Before the Civil Rights Movement, Black quilting traditions were planted in northern states during the Great Migration, as over 400,000 Black Americans searched for industrial work opportunities.[158] Quilt patterns and folk-art techniques inherited by Black cultures in the South blossomed throughout northern regions, reshaping American aesthetics, and earning further recognition for Black creativity.[159] Post-WWII, Black women's pay increased along with the visibility of their artistic achievement in the 1960s, creating an economic demand for quilts produced by Black businesses.[160] Meeting the commercial upsurge, women employed by the Freedom Quilting Bee sold their work to well-known department stores, among Bloomingdale's,

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[153] Scheper-Hughes, "Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee," 18
[154] Floris Barnett Cash, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," *The Journal of Negro History* 80, no. 1 (January 1995): 37, https://doi.org/10.2307/2717705.
[155] Stella Hendricks, "A Timeline of the Freedom Quilting Bee," BMA Stories, March 8, 2021, https://stories.artbma.org/timeline-the-freedom-quilting-bee/.
[156] Stella Hendricks, "A Timeline of the Freedom Quilting Bee."
[157] Cash, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 38.
[158] "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 36-37.
[159] "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 37.
[160] "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 37.

Saks Fifth Avenue, and Lord and Taylor.[161] Although these transactions provided financial security for southern Alabamian communities like Gee's Bend, Alberta, and Possum Bend, the quilts commissioned by these corporations were standardized in size and design, appealing to mainstream American tastes.[162] Eventually, quilters branched out from the uniformity expected by white consumers, exploring improvisational compositions and individualized patterns on their own terms.

Designs with hundred-year histories were re-envisioned by modern quilters, who learned techniques from their mothers and grandmothers, honoring the tradition of quilt-making as a means of empowerment and survival.[163] Quilting has remained a potent form of discussion between southern Black artists, navigating their individuality and the spaces they occupied with each stitch. Organizations like the Freedom Quilting Bee created a pathway for Black women to redefine the material and social conditions of their lives while disassembling the claustrophobic binaries of 'fine art' versus 'craft'.[164] Their experimental quilts became a political basis for reclaiming the value of domestic labor and challenging the erasure of hand-making under industrial capitalism. A revolutionary quilting style was birthed from the Freedom Quilting Bee, mirroring the quilters' rural environment with compositions comparable to abstracted barn roofs, fabric sourced from work clothes and feed sacks, and clothesline displays that turned backyards into outdoor museum exhibitions.[165] Looking to Gee's Bend's use of patterns like the Pine Burr and Housetop testifies to the dialogue between classic designs and inventive flair. Historical techniques and compositional arrangements were leveraged to illustrate symbolic content and

[161] "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 37.
[162] "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 37.
[163] "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," 37-38.
[164] Vanessa Sohan, "'But a Quilt Is More': Recontextualizing the Discourse(S) of the Gee's Bend Quilts," *College English*77, no. 4 (March 1, 2015): 301, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24240050.
[165] Sohan, "'But a Quilt is More': Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee's Bend Quilts", 295.

relate to the current culture of the area, with creative innovation rebounding from quilter to quilter. The Pine Burr pattern originated from Black Americans, with one of Loretta Pettway of the Freedom Quilting Bee's quilts achieving status as the official Alabama State Quilt in 1997.[166] The pattern was used by the organization to fund the Civil Rights Movement in the early 20th century and accumulated impressive three-dimensionality as more prairie points (folded triangles of fabric) were sewn onto the quilt in concentric circles.[167] Arie Pettway's 1980 *Sixteen-Block "Pine Burr" Variation* showcases exploration with patterned and textured fabrics, framing, and spacing in twelve pine burr arrangements with neon green centers, and four with green plaid circled by prairie points in red, orange, and dark green—a contemporary take on the pattern.[168] A similar approach, retaining the familiar elements of the pattern but modernizing its style, was used in the adaptation of the iconic Housetop pattern. The echoed squares joined by rectangular strips of cloth typically frame a central quilt patch, which was later simplified and combined with abstracted styles to create variation.[169] Arising from the Log Cabin pattern from the Civil War era, these quilts historically occupied Union fundraisers.[170] Steeped in this history, Gee's Bend quilters intertwined their cultural environment into improvisations upon the Housetop, including fabric from their family's farm clothes, replacing uniform colorways with saturated tones and prints, and creating linear arrangements similar to the overlapping wood rafters on a barn roof from a bird's-eye view.[171] The history of the Freedom Quilting Bee shows how Black quilters

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[166] "Alabama State Quilt | Pine Burr Quilt," State Symbols USA, April 29, 2014, https://statesymbolsusa.org/symbol/alabama/state-cultural-heritage-symbol/pine-burr-quilt.
[167] Suzanne Labry, "The Pine Burr/Pine Cone Quilt," Quilts, Inc, March 9, 2020, https://www.quilts.com/suzys_fancy/pine-burr-quilts/.
[168] Arie Pettway, *Sixteen-Block "Pine Burr" Variation*, 1980, Cotton, cotton blend polyester double-knit, 1980, Austin, TX, Blanton Museum of Art, https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/arie-pettway/work/sixteen-block-pine-burr-variation.
[169] "Object Story: Log Cabin, Light and Dark Quilt | the Huntington," Huntington (The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, n.d.), https://huntington.org/educators/learning-resources/spotlight/object-story-log-cabin-light-and-dark-quilt.
[170] "Object Story: Log Cabin, Light and Dark Quilt | the Huntington," Huntington
[171] "Object Story: Log Cabin, Light and Dark Quilt | the Huntington," Huntington

built strong relationships through mutual aid and political involvement, enriching their community and leaving a legacy that extended beyond the Wilcox County line.

Conclusion

Ultimately, quilters facilitate cultural commentary by stitching records of their lives onto durable cloth. The fibers of a quilt can contain the social circumstances of the moment they were sewn together, reflecting manifold cultural values as relics of identity, ceremonial objects, necessities of the home, community offerings, and demonstrations of social resistance. Historically, the ‘fine art’ vs. ‘craft’ debate has marginalized artists outside the dominant white male paradigm, whose creations are frequently undervalued within art history. Quilting was allocated a traditionally feminine distinction in the arts, yet women of color were excluded from the mainstream quilt world, which often favored conservatism over diversity. Yet, the patterns and techniques of quilters of color were adopted by and marketed to white audiences, showcasing the originality of their work in the development of iconic American quilt styles. Quilting is still a thriving art form, alive in the practice of contemporary artists pushing the boundaries of material and technique to reflect the past decades and the full potential of the medium. The continued research and preservation of quilts, and support for community quilting initiatives are necessary to sustain the history and radical future directions of quilting. Examining quilts in relation to cultural traditions and identities dismantles the assumption that quilting is a predominantly white art form. This perspective investigates the varied meanings woven into their designs and underscores the connection between cultural context and material culture. The cross-cultural significance of quilting highlights its unique role in demonstrating how individual contributions can create powerful collective expressions of the human experience. Quilts signify more than domesticity and treacly nostalgia, but provide viable artistic avenues for those with

limited opportunities and resources while questioning conformist social conventions. Quilts serve as intricate symbols, highlighting the struggle between the stifling notion of ‘virtuous femininity’ and a desire to break free from the limits of these classifications.

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