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Dis/Cover/ing the Quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama

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Abstract

The phenomenally popular US exhibitions of quilts from the rural African-American community of Gee's Bend, Alabama, are analyzed here with a view to cultural politics, including issues of race, class and the stakes entailed in aesthetic taxonomy and description. The exhibition organizers, the catalog authors and enthusiastic critics generally classified the quilt makers' remarkable textiles not as "mere" craft but as art. The present essay, while concurring in that high opinion of the objects in question, argues instead for the prospective merits—both for the quilt makers themselves and for the "art world"—of reclaiming their status as craft production.

Keywords: Gee's Bend, quilts, Afro-Traditional quilts, African diaspora aesthetics, reception.

> Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.
>
> The theory behind our tactics: "*The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business.* All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."
>
> Zora Neale Hurston[1]

> You could tell stories about this piece, you could tell stories about that piece . . . They have songs to them.
>
> Lucy Mingo, quiltmaker[2]

The cover of the 2002 *Quilts of Gee's Bend* exhibition catalog (Figure 1) boasts a graphically stunning detail of a 1976 "work-clothes" utility quilt with a red-striped "medallion"—like a barred, although invitingly glowing, window—at the center of a richly variegated, faded indigo ("britches") field (Figure 2). Like the dozens of other quilts in the exhibition, dating from the 1930s to the present, this textile was on loan from the William Arnett Collection of the Tinwood Alliance of Atlanta, Georgia, a nonprofit organization devoted to vernacular art and artists of the southern United States. In a classic narrative of discovery, widely disseminated by the press, the (white) Arnett has recounted how he sought out the (black) author of the quilt in question, which he initially spied draped over a woodpile in a 1993 photograph whose caption identified "Annie Young" of "Wilcox County" as the quilter. Canvassing the remote reaches of Alabama where he expected to locate Young, Arnett could find no one acquainted with a woman so named. He finally sought out one woman widely known as "Nig" Young, in case she was a relative; and "Nig" turned out to be Annie. Dismayed to find a stranger on her doorstep at night she agreed to receive Arnett the following day, when she parted with the quilt or "cover" (as "Benders" also call quilts) that attracted him.[3] So dawned his awareness of a longtime, profoundly isolated community of marvelous quiltmakers whose work he would aggressively undertake to collect.[4] Affirmed reporters: "Everyone seems to agree: Life changed in Gee's Bend because of Annie Mae Young's quilt, the one made out of torn-up pieces of denim work pants."[5]

Like Annie Mae Young (b. 1928), most of the quiltmakers and other residents of Gee's Bend—an isolated place named after its founding plantation owner, Joseph Gee, with its distinctive location within a sharp

bend in the (un-bridged) Alabama river—are locally called by nicknames. Moreover, as the direct descendants of slaves, living mostly in hamlets historically constituted by slave quarters, many citizens of Gee's Bend share surnames, especially one imposed by Mark H. Pettway who in 1845 forced 100 or more of his slaves to walk across four states (from North Carolina to Alabama) to join the 101 Gee slaves, who then had to assume the Pettway name.[6] As one Bender explains, "A heap of people think that all these folks here was Pettways, but that ain't what they started with. They ain't even no kin, hardly. The man who was furnishing this place, he was a Pettway, and all of them went by him . . . Just like you take a dog somewhere and throw him out. That's how the people brought them here and just turn them loose."[7] Some Benders can recount how their enslaved ancestors were forcibly bred like farm animals and fed like hogs, with slop poured into troughs. Even after manumission, blacks living as tenant farmers or sharecroppers on Pettway land had to take the name.[8] "Maybe we weren't bought and sold, but we were still slaves until 20, 30 years ago. The white man would go to everybody's field and say, 'Why you not at work?'" recalled quiltmaker Arlonzia Pettway (b. 1923).[9] Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., who had delivered a memorably rousing sermon locally, Gee's Bend's nearly all-black citizenry would petition to rename their town "King." Numerous local women had marched beside King during some harrowing episodes of the civil rights movement and his casket would be drawn through the streets of Atlanta by two mules sent from the Bend. But the town got renamed Boykin instead, after a white congressman from Mobile, Alabama, to whom Benders had no connection.[10] They have shunned the town's official name just as they tend to shun their own official names in favor of community and self-given monikers. Following the public attention brought by the "Quilts of Gee's Bend" exhibition, however, the quiltmakers all now answer to their "proper" names as well as to a far stranger designation—that of "artist." "The women did not know they were artists," art critic Amei Wallach states portentously. "They know it now."[11]

An art collector and former dealer who had specialized in Western antiquities as well as Asian and African art before branching into African American visual culture, William Arnett has lately positioned himself with his sons as the foremost authority on and impresario for the Gee's Bend quiltmakers.[12] Among the ways he has wielded that authority is by singling out Annie Mae

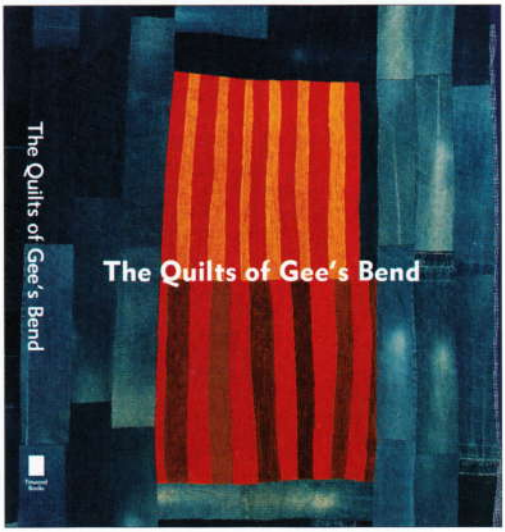

Fig 1 Cover of *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* with detail of quilt by Annie Mae Young. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

Fig 2 Annie Mae Young, Work-clothes quilt with center medallion of strips, 1976, denim, corduroy, synthetic blend, 108 in. × 77 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

Young as not only the best of her cohort, but as "one of America's greatest artists."[13] The only monographic essay in the Table of Contents of *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* is one on Young (though individual profiles of numerous other quiltmakers appear in the catalog too). And a separate space accommodated her production, in a kind of solo show within the show, when the exhibition was installed at New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art. Multiple quilts by other authors were dispersed throughout the show, which grouped work by formal or material affinities, making it difficult to constitute individual authors besides Young. Every one of the textiles on view was assigned to a particular author, however, reportedly a taxing feat given the objects' circulation between extended family households over time; the regional predilection for certain types of patterning; and the fact of fabrics used in common.[14] In stark contrast, a path-breaking show of patchwork quilts mounted at the Whitney some thirty years previously was dedicated to "those anonymous women whose skilled hands and eyes created the American pieced quilt." Notwithstanding that some of those quilts were visibly signed, no authors were credited—a fact that "makes mockery of all pretensions that male 'scholarship' is anything but a tool of sexist oppression," feminist critic Patricia Mainardi acidly charged at the time.[15]

Gee's Bend quiltmakers generally emphasize that the arduous, perennial labor of assembling their families' covers was done above all out of abject need on top of the backbreaking labor of farming and running households with, typically, many children[16] under exceedingly primitive circumstances. "Cover" meant life-sustaining shelter inside many a drafty rural dwelling. Loretta Pettway (b. 1942), another (now) celebrated Gee's Bend needlewoman, states bluntly, "I didn't like to sew. Didn't want to do it."—"But when I got me a house, a raggly old house, then I needed [quilts] to keep warm"[17] (Figure 3). Although these women had to sew in order to survive, it might be said that they did not, after all, have to sew with inventiveness, feeling or verve. But the moving lesson of Gee's Bend seems to suggest just the contrary: that creative expression was construed not as a frill in this destitute community but practically as indispensable. Spread not only on beds but also atop disintegrated flooring (for warmth and as children's seating) and hung at times on walls (to block drafts) as well as over clothes lines (both to dry and for public exposition) the quilts served vitally as both functional and aesthetic cover, alleviating grim environs. Although many of the women readily gave up quiltmaking once shrinking households or improving circumstances allowed, many of them nonetheless acknowledged not only the drudgery but also the creative interest and cultural meanings attaching to their needlework. Beyond providing warmth, a quilt "represents safekeeping, it represents beauty, and you could say it represents family history," observed Mensie Lee Pettway (b. 1939):[18]

> "I can point to my dead brother's pants or my father's shirt. Or I can point to my grandmother's dress and tell my kids what she did in that dress. We didn't have cameras growing up. We had quilts," said [Lucinda Pettway] Franklin, her voice breaking. "When we had babies to die,

Fig 3 Loretta Pettway, Medallion, ca. 1960, synthetic knit and cotton sacking material, 87 in. × 70 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

> you'd see this little piece of baby clothes in the quilt. It was a meeting place for us."[19]

Scholar Joanne Cubbs points out that Gee's Bend quilts "functioned as vehicles of memory" also because of the predominant use of cotton, the crop many of the Benders' enslaved ancestors were forcibly imported to pick; the crop they themselves had mostly harvested since childhood under virtually slavelike conditions, walking barefoot for ten hours and up to fifty miles a day in a sweltering climate.[20]

Feminists interested in women's craft production have often puzzled over the conundrum that needlework has historically provided "a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness," as Rozsika Parker succinctly put it.[21] Concerned to help redress that powerlessness, in 1973 Mainardi would contest the "false idea that quilts were 'collective art'."[22] Quilt tops are ordinarily crafted by individuals who enlist the work of fellow needlewomen through the legendary quilting bee, only for the laborious end-stage process of stitching the top to a backing (with a filler in between); and the quilt's author normally directs the most creative aspect of that process, namely the choice of patterning for the stitching. Likewise intent on the construction of individual

artist-authors, the curators of the Gee's Bend show would go to a different extreme from the organizers of the Whitney's 1971 exhibition. No matter the quality of a given quilt, "Where ambiguity remained [as to authorship]—and especially in the few instances when there was no information at all about authorship or provenance—the quilt was removed from consideration for exhibition and publication, in order that all works be documented by maker."[23] Though art historians have long proven crafty at using connoisseurship to construct authors whose names remain unknown—Masters of this and that—in this case, any quilt without a known author met with erasure.

The drive to assimilate the Gee's Bend needlewomen to the model of the author-artist as lone actor or, in certain cases, genius, would lead to some downplaying of the communitarian aspects of their process within the catalog text.[24] A countervailing story does emerge there, however: of the women sharing visual strategies (variants on the "Housetop" (Figures 4 and 5) "Bricklayer," "Lazy Gal," and "Nine Patch" patterns predominated in the Gee's Bend vicinity);[25] of their enacting a visual "call and response"[26] or "riffing" off one another's work; as well as of their using certain materials in common and, at times, sharing labor and quilting frames. (Recalled Mingo of her mother's circle of friends: "they go house to house. I think it was ten of them. They quilt four and five quilts a day, helping people.")[27] Respecting the community consciousness among the quiltmakers, the Arnetts reportedly required museums to host all of the women hale enough to travel to the shows' openings, rather than spotlight a chosen few, and they would guide the quiltmakers in establishing a collective, in part with a view to an equitable sharing of profits.[28] In the catalog text, however, William Arnett would erect the modernist gold standard of "the development of a completely personal artistic style" and he deemed such an achievement "relatively rare" among Gee's Bend quiltmakers, excepting Annie Mae Young (Figure 6). Notwithstanding that her covers may be described according to received quilting categories, Arnett would draw upon modernist convention to construct Young—reputedly less of a joiner than most of her peers—as "operat[ing] from the margins"; and he reportedly excepted her from participation in the quiltmakers' collective.[29] Graphically, the medallion quilt by Young that first attracted Arnett might well evoke modernist paintings,

Fig 4 Gloria Hopkins (b. 1955), Housetop with center medallion, ca. 1975, corduroy, 91 in. × 88 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

such as those produced by Frank Stella in the mid-1950s, for example—and the *New York Times* would mention Stella in reviewing the show. But the august names of white, male, European and US modernist giants such as Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Josef Albers and Barnett Newman resounded widely through the press coverage of the quiltmakers' work generally—even as critics noted the uncanniness of the relation given the virtual impossibility of the women knowing of such artists (not to mention, of course, vice versa).[30]

"I believe that [the Gee's Bend quilts] are entitled, every bit as much as a Frank Stella or a Kenneth Noland painting of that period . . . to participate fully in the esthetics of modernism," pronounced painter and critic Richard Kalina in *Art in America*.[31] This

Fig 5 Qunnie Pettway (b. 1943), Housetop, ca. 1975, corduroy, 82 in. × 74 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

annexation of Gee's Bend's textiles to the modernist empyrean was by no means predictable or assured beforehand, however. Although the exhibition catalog declaimed throughout the quiltmakers' status as artists (particularly in an essay by scholar Jane Livingston), a leitmotif of the first-person narratives also featured in the publication was the women's dumbfoundedness at the conceit that they had somehow unknowingly created high art while mundanely realizing their bedcovers. ("I didn't know anything about [the quilts] being art until the first time I saw them hanging in a museum in Houston, Texas. That's when I knew," Mary Lee Bendolph [b. 1935] would tell an interviewer.[32] When she began quilting, as a child, "I didn't know nothing about art. I ain't never heard [my mother] say nothing about art. Never as I know did she ever say anything about art.")[33] In an approach foreign to art texts, moreover, the catalog provided extensive sociohistoric information pertaining to Gee's Bend, emphasizing the community's distinctiveness, isolation and poverty. A documentary film that played throughout the show likewise stressed the rural context of the women's lives, showing them singing hymns as they quilted together—hymn singing being as much or more a passion than quiltmaking among the devout Benders. While the catalog and show delivered mixed messages, then, Arnett's overriding aim of constructing the quilts as important art was unmistakable.[34] The show circulated only to art museums and a million dollars solicited from actress Jane Fonda underwrote high-end catalog production more typically accorded canonical artists, plus an expanded version of the catalog published as a complementary book, and

Fig 6 Annie Mae Young, Blocks and strips quilt, ca. 1970, cotton, polyester, synthetic blends, 83 in. × 80 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

the above-mentioned film, made by Fonda's daughter, Vanessa Vadim and her husband Matt Arnett (William Arnett's son).[35]

Prior discoverers of the Gee's Bend quilts—Arnett was hardly the first—had mainly construed the textiles as impressive craft production. In 1965, Episcopal priest and civil rights worker Francis X. Walter sent Gee's Bend quilts to New York for some informal auctions to raise money for the struggling Benders.[36] The following year Walter helped to organize the Freedom Quilting Bee (in Rehoboth, close by Gee's Bend), a cooperative that employed those area needlewomen willing to standardize their typically idiosyncratic quilting practices. Since the Bee found little market for the improvisatory quilts formed of salvaged materials that were most characteristic of the area its membership was largely consigned to doing poorly paid, assembly-line-like contract work for outlets ranging from swank Manhattan decorators and department stores—which mostly dictated the conventional patterns they wanted realized—to the mass market retailer, Sears, Roebuck, for which Benders produced corduroy pillow shams from 1972 until the mid-1980s (while productively harvesting the plush fabric remnants for their personal quilting) (Figure 7).[37] Though the Bee's status as a black-owned and run enterprise did instill some local pride, its impact on quiltmaker creativity is generally considered

to have been adverse. Lamented Nettie Young (b. 1917), for one, "In the quilting bee time, I started using patterns, but I shouldn't have did it. It broke the ideas I had in my head. I should have stayed with my own ideas."[38] Annie Mae Young was rejected before she could even start at the Bee on account of her irregular stitching and piecing.[39] She was in the habit—fairly commonplace around the Bend, given the want of decent scissors—of tearing rather than cutting fabric, and she disliked working with "too many little bitty blocks,"[40] preferring to use relatively large blocks or strips of fabric often offset by smaller scraps deployed in interstices and around borders, a preference shared by many Benders.

Another discoverer of Gee's Bend's quilts was Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a civil rights worker posted in Boykin in 1967 as a field worker for a legal affiliate of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). Scheper-Hughes would conceive a deep admiration for Gee's Bend textiles during a period when she was helping to prepare a class action suit on behalf of "a ravaged population often living on the edges of starvation" blighted by deprivation-driven illnesses and swindled at every turn. "Having just returned from Peace Corps work in Brazil I could readily see the African diaspora at work" in Gee's Bend's quilts, she recalled, "but with a difference, for the geometric designs seemed to me more Native American." (Indeed, slaveholders at times interbred Native American men with slave women, including those held at Gee's Bend.) Relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1968, Scheper-Hughes attempted to interest area shops—including furnishing and craft merchants, antique dealers, and a Boston art gallery—in the quilts but consistently met with rejection from retailers "stymied by the problem of used, second-hand fabrics, the uneven sizes, and irregular stitching."[41]

Fig 7 Nellie Mae Abrams, Housetop variation, 1970s, corduroy, 87 in. × 80 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

To those whose concept of a successful quilt begins and ends with conventional quiltmaking protocol, in the 1960s as today (as I learned when my high opinion of Gee's Bend textiles was summarily refuted, in conversation, by an elderly American material culture specialist), a quilt that is asymmetric in its external outline or internal design; a quilt that does not boast neat, tiny, machine-like (yet handmade) stitching; a quilt that does not lie perfectly flat, is simply, *ipso facto*, a substandard quilt. Whatever pleasures quiltmaking has brought to practitioners it has also long served as a mode of disciplining girls and women, inculcating patience and

lashing them to a non-negotiable grid, that very emblem and barometer of normality. Although some Gee's Bend needlewomen admired and attempted conventionally patterned and structured quilts (while often skewing the conventions in the end) they mostly could not afford the time necessary for the technical intricacies of such projects and they unabashedly laid the quilts' disciplinary protocol to waste—a decision they made in common with innumerable other African American quiltmakers as specialized studies suggest. Arlonzia Pettway recalled having realized five "fancy . . . pattern quilts" in preparation for her marriage, after which her mother-in-law taught her "how to just follow my imagination . . . Jennie Pettway told me, 'You don't have to worry yourself trying to make a 'Star of Bethlehem' or any of those things you got to follow a pattern for. Just take what you know and do what you want to.' And that's what I did, and I do it yet, and it's a good way, too."[42]

Quilt scholarship generally has tended to downplay distinctively African American quiltmaking practices—"Afro-Traditional" quiltmaking as pioneering scholar Eli Leon terms it—and a separate literature on this topic (as well as on conventional quilts by black Americans) has only gradually emerged. By contrast with the strict regularity, conventionalized patterning and atomized units of what Leon calls "standard traditional" patchwork quilts, Afro-Traditional quilts generally exhibit some or all of a distinctive constellation of qualities: idiosyncratic stitchery; sharp color contrasts; the incorporation of sizeable pieces of fabric; a skewing of the grid; and above all, improvisatory—mixed, broken or flexible—patterning, including in the quilts' borders (Figure 8). Leon and some other scholars understand the types of quilts made in Gee's Bend as creolized confections, intermingling African diaspora with Euro-American elements.[43] "Like battle flags of some rebel nation," J.R. Moehringer would call Gee's Bend textiles; "No American quilts could quite compare, because these quilts weren't quite American."[44] Distinguished African-Americanist Robert Farris Thompson noted that, "A remorseless questing after novelty and spontaneity lie forever internalizable in Afro-Atlantic aesthetics . . . From Africa streamed to North America a percussive manner of handling textile color." In Thompson's view, the distinctively African American quilt is properly understood not as an "historical sub-set" of quiltmaking broadly, but "as its own discipline" with its own "lexicon" and "ludic manners of pattern-exposition" (Figure 9). He points to one such quiltmaker's complaint about patterns entailing strict repetition: "[it] just take the heart out of things."[45]

In 1987, Thompson conjured a day when art museums would award African American quilts "special rooms" and "special curators." But the status of those and other quilts within art museums remains unsettled, in some eyes. "It's High Season for Blankets, But Patrons Ask, 'Is It Art?'" exclaimed a *Wall Street Journal* headline printed days before the Gee's Bend show debuted at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas in September 2002. Reporter Brooks Barnes insinuated that by featuring quilt shows art museums were at once pandering to the public and succumbing to bottom-line thinking, seeking cheap ways to fill galleries (insurance and transport costs for quilts being a fraction of what they are for "fine"

Fig 8 Allie Pettway (b. 1917), Blocks and strips, ca. 1975 (one side of two-sided quilt), cotton and cotton/polyester blend, 88 in. × 80 in. (Collection: The Art Institute of Chicago. Robert Allerton Endowment). Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

arts).[46] In the event, press coverage in Houston was not especially effusive and some of it emerged in the papers' "Antiques" or "Lifestyle" sections with headlines such as "Humble Quilts Hang Among Fine Art." Before the Gee's Bend show opened at the Whitney, its second and would-be final venue, however, *Newsweek* magazine critic Peter Plagens made a breathtaking claim for the quilts as "no less than the equals—in unconventional color, bold and surprising composition, and subtle visual invention—of just about any abstract painting made by any trained artist living in one of the world's great cities."[47] Other prominent journalists soon followed suit, including *The New York Times*' chief art critic, Michael Kimmelman, who called the quilts "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Imagine Matisse and Klee . . . arising not from rarified Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South in the form of women, descendants of slaves."[48]

Like many others who came to share his elated response to the show, Kimmelman did not try to disguise an element of shock at his own lofty estimation of the quilts. And even as he classed Gee's Bend's best needlewomen (Young and Loretta Pettway by his account) with the modernist greats, his language—that image of the women emerging plantlike from "caramel soil"—might suggest another story, namely that of a fluky (or "miraculous") display of aesthetic

Fig 9 Jessie T. Pettway (b. 1929), Bars and string-pieced columns, 1950s, cotton, 95 in. ×76 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

genius by untrained intuitives not fully responsible for their own achievement. "The best of these designs . . . are so eye-poppingly gorgeous that it's hard to know how to begin to account for them," Kimmelman exclaimed, while conceding that "good art can never be fully accounted for, just described."[49] As for Plagens, even as he credited Young with a "sophisticated imagination"—and equally praised Mary Lee Bendolph, Jessie Pettway (b. 1929) and others—he too found something freakish in their accomplishment, marveling that: "It's as if something in the local water has produced a whole villageful of Paul Klees who create their vibrant work on a bedsize scale instead of in tiny watercolors."[50] What rendered the Gee's Bend quilts inexplicable, however, would be such attempts to dis-cover them—to reconcile bedcovers crafted by underclass black women to a history of modernist art production to which they could have no actual connection—no matter the graphic affinities, which are doubtless more striking within the leveling plane of reproduction than they would be in actual, material comparisons. While it might undermine efforts to position the quilts as "some of the most incredible works of art of the twentieth century"[51] they make more sense viewed in relation to a hybrid history of creative practices following from the African diaspora and in relation to the complex, intertwined histories of African American and Euro-American quilt production itself. "One might do better to search for connections to sources like West African textiles, suggests Jane Livingston, a writer in the show's catalog," noted Kimmelman in a parenthesis (after pointing more forcefully toward Newman, Stella, and others)—an astute suggestion that he and she both failed to pursue, in common with other reviewers of the show.[52] "Since many displaced African slaves brought to this country an aesthetic based on the belief that beauty, especially that created in a collective context, should be an integrated aspect of everyday life, enhancing the survival and development of community, these ideas formed the basis of African-American aesthetics," bell hooks, for one, has argued. "Cultural production and artistic expressiveness were also ways for displaced African people to maintain connections with the past. Artistic African cultural retentions survived long after other expressions had been lost or forgotten."[53]

Otherwise viewed, then, rather than it being strange that a context such as Gee's Bend should have generated such compelling textiles, it would in fact have been impossible for such objects to have emerged in any other kind of context. In the first place, there is the unbroken chain of connection to ancestors from Africa, and the multigenerational transmission of quiltmaking practices within families and communities around Gee's Bend. But also, the poignantly worn fabrics of the region's quilts look as they do because they clothed people who eked out a living on their hands and knees. Needlewomen salvaged scraps from battered clothing out of necessity and despite the rigors entailed in quilting the dense materials typically comprising work clothes, some of them disdained new and softer fabrics (when they became available) precisely on the basis that they lacked the "life," "spirit," or "love" imbued in used fabric.[54] A 1942 work clothes quilt by Missouri Pettway (1902–81), as an example, bears the remains of clothes left by her

deceased husband; practically all he had to leave her, those rags were the trace of his body, his life; she used them to create both a de facto memorial and something to serve in his absence to warm her at night.[55] This is a far cry, by any measure, from the paintings of the Princeton-educated doctor's son Stella, whose work—made out of store-bought hardware supplies upon his arrival in New York City—traveled immediately to the Museum of Modern Art and the top-flight Leo Castelli gallery. And if, by contrast with Stella's "pinstriped" paintings, Pettway's quilt does not adhere to a strict grid then neither does much else in Gee's Bend, where structures have mostly been pieced together from scavenged materials. (For that matter, "the grid" itself did not arrive in Gee's Bend until the mid-1960s when electricity became available, while running water and telephones were delayed until the mid-1970s.)[56]

That the quilts of Gee's Bend should generate widespread enthusiasm now—having failed to do so previously, despite receiving some high-profile exposure—probably has to do with the broadening parameters of a contemporary "art world" that has lately begun to bear some semblance to that epithet, as it has begun to deprovincialize itself. In the past, as Mainardi bluntly framed it, quilts were reflexively "underrated precisely for the same reasons that jazz, the great American music, was also for so long underrated—because the 'wrong' people were making it, and because these people, for sexist and racist reasons, have not been allowed to represent or define American culture."[57] Given this habitual depreciation of underclass culture, "It's very difficult to gauge what we [African Americans] have done as a people when we have been systematically subjected to the whims of other people," as poet Nikki Giovanni once lamented.[58] Among such "whims" is a tacit bias, on the part of those self-identified as cultivated, that aesthetic sophistication necessarily attaches to a knowledge of "fine art." Given that bias, much African American creative production must function as "testimony, bearing witness, challenging racist thinking which suggested that black folks were not fully human, were uncivilized, and that the measure of this was our collective failure to create 'great' art," bell hooks observed. From visiting the community of her own illiterate, quiltmaking grandmother (from whom hooks adopted her *nom de plume*), she recalls having learned the vital "place of aesthetics in the lives of agrarian poor black folks": "Old folks shared their sense that we had come out of slavery into this free space and we had to create a world that would renew the spirit . . . [N]o degree of material lack could keep one from learning how to look at the world with a critical eye, how to recognize beauty, or how to use it as a force to enhance inner well-being."[59]

The Gee's Bend quiltmakers' own accounts of their practice generally reinforce what the work itself visually attests: that these women have proven immensely resourceful, canny, exacting and discerning in their creative practices—"Many underclass black people who do not know conventional academic theoretical language are thinking critically about aesthetics," affirms hooks[60]—and that they have formed an exceptionally effective creative community. "Quilts is in everything," explains Mary Lee Bendolph; ". . . I see the barn, and I get an idea to make a quilt. I can walk outside and look around in

Fig 10 Mary Lee Bendolph, Housetop variation, 1998, quilted by Essie Bendolph Pettway, 2001, cotton, corduroy, twill, assorted polyesters, 72 in. × 76 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

the yard and see ideas all around the front and the back of my house. Then, sitting down looking at a quilt, I get another idea from the quilt I already made . . . As soon as I leave the house, I get ideas. If I go to church or someplace where a lot of people are at, I can see a pattern that I can take and make a quilt with."[61] (Figure 10). Lucy T. (Lunky) Pettway (1921–2004) reportedly carried a pencil and paper with her as she walked to the fields every workday

> to sketch ideas and observations. Sometimes a quilt drying on a line or a fence offered suggestions: a variation of the observed quilt, perhaps, or a variation of a detail, or a combination of colors. Something she noticed along the road or from the field might do the same . . . She sometimes took cloth scraps to the fields so that as ideas came to her while she worked, she could immediately create a quilt block during her rest break.[62]

And although "We didn't have no museum in Gee's Bend," as Bendolph notes, ". . . we would go from house to house looking at quilts and getting ideas about how I would like to lay mine out . . . When people would go to your house, they want to see your quilts."[63] To hang out quilts on the clothesline was "an act of affirmation and pride—and indirect competition—and it is always conversational in nature," explains material culture scholar Bernard Herman; "Quilts are meant to be seen and judged."[64]

Once the textiles moved from rural clotheslines onto urban museum walls, seasoned art critics would issue mostly favorable judgments. "It is rare to find an exhibition that throws something totally unexpected our way, that forces us to carve out a meaningful chunk of historical space to make room for a new body of work" observed Richard Kalina, for one.[65] Such praise would help to secure a long life and then an afterlife for the Gee's Bend show. Rather than concluding at the Whitney as planned, it would continue on to eleven more venues, drawing over a million visitors altogether. Before that tour was completed, moreover, a sequel exhibition—"Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt"—debuted in Houston in June 2006, with an itinerary of seven US museums slated to follow through October 2008. "The Gee's Bend quiltmaking tradition seems poised to become an important component of America's art history—not just as quilt art or African American art or folk art, but as art," exulted Arnett in the followup catalog.[66]

Instead of uniformly echoing such rhetoric, some journalists did think to point to other factors in the clamor surrounding the Gee's Bend shows, including the public relations benefits entailed in hosting the exhibitions for art museums whose audiences are typically white and affluent. A "symbolic redress of social injustice," was how Kenneth Baker of the *San Francisco Chronicle* positioned the show.[67] But some others adopted a more skeptical tone: "you get the sense there are too many white people patting themselves on the back for presenting the work of rural black women," averred a Houston reporter, self-described as a (one-time) "rural Southerner." The "pointedly romanticized vision of Southern rural life" on offer in the show's companion video troubled the same reporter, moreover, as did "the way the people who made [the quilts] have lost control of their cultural production and its presentation."[68] To my knowledge, however, only one writer would express real outrage at the Gee's Bend spectacle. This was curator Thelma Golden, who wrote in *Artforum* that the exhibition, "with its shockingly politically correct tone, under the transparent cover of high/low intervention and demolished media categories, was the most culturally repugnant, retrograde moment I have experienced, perhaps in my entire professional life." Despite this, Golden admitted, "Of course I loved the quilts. We all know the quilts are brilliant and beautiful. (I just wish the quilters were making a little more money for all their brilliance!)"[69]

On behalf of a group of the quiltmakers (many of whom are functionally illiterate), Rennie Miller would compose a rebuttal to Golden—a gesture that she came to reconsider once she resigned as director of the quiltmakers' collective due, indeed, to financial concerns. Miller "began asking the Arnetts about the money the quilters were earning years ago and was told the money was building up and 'was being taken care of,'" reported Ben Raines. But the collective that the Arnetts had helped to establish "didn't have any bylaws, no incorporation, so there weren't any rules," Miller alleges; "They would never tell us where the money was or how to get access to it."[70] The outpouring of public interest in Gee's Bend had prompted a demand for quilts that would spur a revival of the (dying) craft in the area;[71] and the cooperative was meant to centralize marketing of the new work and to distribute a portion of profits among

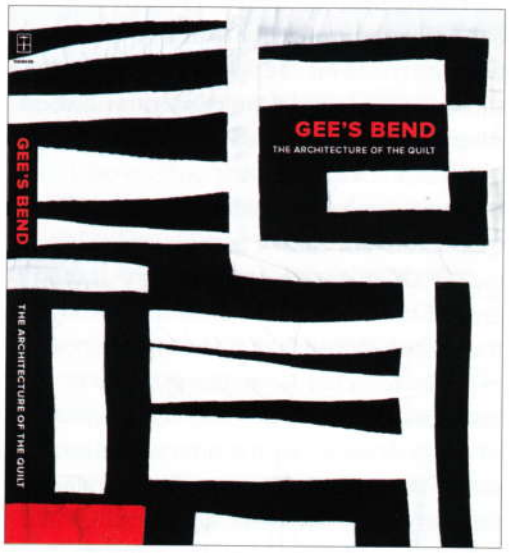

Fig 11 Cover of *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* with detail of Mary Lee Bendolph, Blocks, strips, strings and half squares, cotton, 92 in. × 85 in., 2005. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

members. But the most valuable quilts generally numbered among the vintage ones that the Arnetts had acquired for prices that, especially in retrospect, seem pitifully low.[72] While art writers and catalog contributors (characteristically) disdained to discuss financial matters, a 2002 "Design Notebook" article in *The New York Times* reported that Arnett paid "an average of $275 each" for the "roughly 530" quilts he acquired in Gee's Bend over a period of five years. Although he deemed that figure "three or four times the going rate"[73]—as well it may have been in a destitute region—elsewhere in the United States it is a price one might pay for a banal new quilt imported from China, say, not for a vintage, handmade quilt of almost any description, much less the glorified descriptions proferred by Arnett.

Having been accused in the past of exploiting the vernacular artists whose work he made his specialty, William Arnett subsequently formed the nonprofit Tinwood Alliance. Tinwood, which helped fund restoration of some of the quilts, would broker a number of the textiles to museums: the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston was reportedly given five quilts outright at the time of the initial exhibition, and numerous of the quilts included in that show were housed in public collections—including the Art Institute of Chicago, and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta—by the time of the sequel show. Those (latter) works are generally listed as partial purchases and partial gifts of the Tinwood Alliance and the quiltmakers themselves, poor women channeled into the unlikely role of museum donors.[74] Other quilts would be placed for sale with commercial galleries.[75] Arnett struck licensing deals with innumerable manufacturers for

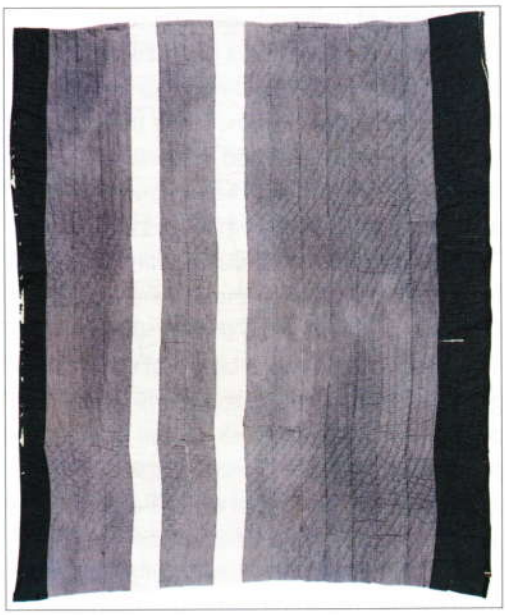

Fig 12 Loretta Pettway, Lazy Gal (or Bars), ca. 1965, denim and cotton, 80 in. × 69 in. Photograph courtesy of Tinwood Books, Atlanta, GA.

reproduction rights, and repeatedly spoke of "funnel[ing] any profits into the community, though he has not said how that would work."[76] In the fall of 2002, the Bend was said to have been

> divided between those who feel fairly compensated for their quilts and those who now consider them "a gold strike" for the buyers, in the words of the Rev. Clinton J. Pettway, Jr., pastor of Ye Shall Know the Truth Church. "We didn't know their quilts would have value, like Babe Ruth cards," he said. His mother sold some quilts to the Arnetts, which he regrets. "When I first heard about selling quilts I was against it," he said. "But at the time people needed the money. It was like

telling someone not to eat when food was in front of them."[77]

Reverend Pettway later acquired a new church building heavily underwritten by quiltmaker income, built on land donated by needlewoman Nettie Young, however, and upwardly revised his opinion of the Arnetts, calling himself their "number one supporter."[78] Regardless, more recently further questions have been asked about dealings on the part of the Arnetts.

As of 2002, Gee's Bend, located within one of the United States's poorest counties, was a "hamlet of 300 families, where 42 percent of the residents earn less than $10,000 a year"—and its history was even less prosperous.[79] One of the more vaunted Gee's Bend quiltmakers, Mary Lee Bendolph, has so much experience in making covers because she ran a household without electricity until she was forty-five years old. (Since filling was at a premium, piling half a dozen or more of the thin quilts on a bed was necessary and usual during colder months.) Bendolph made her first quilt at age twelve, taking "a whole year to find enough rags to piece it together."[80] Wearing a fertilizer sack for a dress, while picking cotton alongside her mother, she grew up with sixteen siblings, eleven of whom slept with her on a mattress stuffed with cornhusks. Her intermittent schooling ended at the sixth grade when, innocent of the facts of life, she bore the first of her eight children at age fourteen. Now a widow, she was regularly beaten by her husband, who once hurled a butcher's knife at her, just as she had been routinely beaten by men throughout her childhood.[81] Another of the Bend's most celebrated quiltmakers, the barely educated Loretta Pettway, survived an appalling childhood and an abusive marriage that yielded seven children. She was fifty years old before she saw her first twenty-dollar bill and as of November 2002 she was subsisting on about $5,000 a year.[82] "[W]omen have used their looms, thread, and needles both to defend themselves and silently to speak of themselves . . ." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar once observed; "they have sewed to heal the wounds inflicted by history . . . they have sewed . . . to hide the pain at the heart of their lives."[83]

Silent no more, Loretta Pettway has taken legal action against the Arnetts: "'It looked like they got my ideas and are making lots of money off my stuff, [but] they seem like they don't want to pay me', Pettway says. 'I said I just want you to give me what's due me'."[84] But the first to file suit was the lionized Annie Mae Young, who now avers: "I want justice . . . They didn't do me right."[85] As to the legendary medallion quilt by Young that graced the cover of the *Quilts of Gee's Bend*, Arnett would boast in the first catalog that he tendered "a lot" of money for it.[86] (Considering that he deemed Young "one of America's greatest artists" one might wonder whether he contemplated gauging what constituted a lot of money by comparison with what her putative peers' works might fetch—by comparison, say, with a Jasper Johns painting.) Young now reportedly says that Arnett gave her $3,000 for the coveted quilt, although with subsequent purchases, "He come on down from there to $250, then Matt Arnett, he'd take quilts and give me nothing. He's gotten a lot of quilts from me."[87] By Arnett's account, Young unearthed the medallion quilt at his behest from between a thin mattress and

springs, where it served as extra padding: so little did she value her retired bedcover. Utility quilts were not intended to last forever; made of materials that were often hard-worn to begin with, they went on to be hard-used, stained and torn, harshly laundered, used up, then recycled as rags or burned (to generate smoke to ward off mosquitoes). Young had burned some quilts only the week before Arnett appeared on her doorstep and, he says, initially rejected his offer to buy the medallion quilt, protesting, "I can't take money for this old, ugly thing." Arnett's account of this transaction could be interpreted differently however: hooks has told how her grandmother routinely safeguarded quilts underneath mattresses (and others mention similar practices).[88] Rather than being strictly derogatory, moreover, the term "ugly" was a sometime local descriptor, perhaps used especially in conversation with outside or white interlocutors, for Afro-Traditional quilts (by contrast with the pretty, conventional quilts that Gee's Benders were used to outsiders cherishing).[89] "[B]eauty is to be found at the limits of the ugly," in African aesthetics, South African critic Sarah Nuttall has recently argued, "since it is the ugly which has so often been the sign under which the African has been read." Yet "beauty always stands in intimate relation to ugliness, both in Africa and elsewhere, though this configuration of the beautiful and the ugly has often been suppressed in Western-based philosophies of aesthetics," she observes—with a view also to African diaspora aesthetics.[90]

The construction of the Benders' "ugly" quilts as art—"If I make it level, it won't be art, it'll just be a quilt. When one side's longer than the other side, that's what makes it art" Mary Lee Bendolph sagely noted—has proven a source of pride to many. Though at times she demurred, "I still don't know about art. I just sit down to make a quilt,"[91] following the success of the initial Gee's Bend exhibition, Bendolph would prove among the more willing of the quiltmakers to assume her newly assigned identity. (Unlike other modern artists featured by museums, however, she made her first "art" work at age twelve, in a medium she did not freely choose, to contribute to the family store of bedcovers.) As one of the most cheerful and extroverted of the quiltmakers, Bendolph would receive special attention in and around the sequel show. "I had always feared white people," she candidly admitted; "But since I have been making art, the fear left me."[92] At the debut of the second show, she "led the women, perhaps 40 in all, in a spiritual called 'We've Come a Long Way'."[93] In the same honor previously awarded to Young, a detail of a quilt by Bendolph would serve as the cover of the follow-up catalog (Figure 11)—a quilt based, for that matter, on a print that she had recently made at the behest of a Berkeley, California print publisher, working side by side with her daughter-in-law, Louisiana P. Bendolph (b. 1960).[94] The sequel catalog's table of contents would list Mary Lee as the author of an essay, moreover, as it does two other Benders who renewed their commitment to quiltmaking following the enthusiastic response to the first show, namely Louisiana and Loretta P. Bennett (b. 1960).[95] For her part, Louisiana proved effusively grateful for the social recognition that the shows represented. Noting that the elderly women of Gee's Bend (or, for that matter, those of her own generation) had "never got praise or anything"[96] she recalled

that when she spied her great-grandmother's quilt on the museum wall in Houston, at the debut of the first show, "I cried. I cried to see our history and our past up on those walls, and realizing that Mama—Annie E. [Pettway]—had left a legacy . . . [A]ll of a sudden she was important to other people in a way she had only been to us. It brought tears to my eyes, and I was so overjoyed inside."[97] Nor was she the only one tearing up: "to see so many people so touched by it, so moved by it, you know you saw people crying, they would be walking through and they would be crying" was "so special" she explained.[98]

The Gee's Bend quiltmakers "didn't make [the quilts] and think that anyone would ever see them, and here they were with all of these people looking at them," Louisiana Bendolph marveled.[99] The needlewomen had "rocketed from nowheresville into the art world on the strength of their creativity and the need to, as [Mary Lee] Bendolph explained, 'keep us warm, to keep our kids warm.' She concluded, 'You can make anything out of nothing because of the Lord'": so reported a critic for the design magazine, *Metropolis*, adding, "And I thought, Yes, this is what our country is supposed to be about."[100] As in this example, the dominant tone of the exhibition's reception was triumphal. Notwithstanding that the organizers did not disguise the dire circumstances of the Bend's populace—printing horrifying first-person accounts of chronic hunger, of abuse and of being made to endure continual pregnancy (bearing sometimes upward of a dozen children)—the accounts of the quiltmakers circulated by the press were predominantly sunny, stressing the wholeness of the social fabric of rural life and the joy the women take in their faith, their community, and of course their quilting. "Gee's Bend, which has four churches despite its tiny population, is a rich artistic and spiritual universe. You hear it in the music of the morning mockingbirds and the woodpeckers . . . You hear it in the poetry of the names of the people who live here, or are buried here," assayed the *Boston Globe*.[101] "We had no TV, no radio, no nothing. That's the way we learned—sitting watching our mamas piecing the quilt. When the sun came down you be in the house together, laughing and talking. We were more blessed then," stated Mary Lee Bendolph, according to *The New York Times*.[102] And the *Indianapolis Recorder* likewise cited the amiable Bendolph on the pleasures of life in Gee's Bend: "'It's a blessed place to be. I don't have to worry about being robbed or anything. You don't have to be closed in all the time.'"[103] The *Houston Chronicle* praised, in general, "The quilts' upbeat, funky energy [which] is without anger, hurry or ugliness. It breathes a nurturing, homespun good humor."[104] For that matter, press profiles of the quiltmakers ranged perilously close at times to reviving "happy darky" and all-giving "mammy" tropes of the antebellum south: "The lively and hug-happy women, who still live on the former plantation lands where their ancestors toiled as slaves, regaled their Orlando [Florida] admirers with spontaneous gospel songs and the loving stories behind their striking creations."[105] (Regardless of the warm reception they met with at the shows' openings, however, locally the quiltmakers' newfound celebrity won them the small reward that in neighboring Camden, the white folks are "'not as down as they used to

be,' as Mary Lee Bendolph says; 'They don't shut you up so bad anymore'."[106])

However wishful the press's vision of Gee's Bend may be, by all accounts the image of the quiltmakers as spiritually minded rings true. "Gee's Bend quiltmakers experience spiritual 'praise space' while they create," Bernard Herman explains; "Praise spaces can be both individual and social. Working alone, a quiltmaker may 'moan' or sing, reflecting on her relationship with God. Working in groups, quiltmakers also sing hymns and testify, bearing witness for each other as their needles pierce cloth."[107] Mary Lee Bendolph explains that, "When I make a quilt, I be praying and asking the Lord to help me do the work I do. I sing, I pray, I read the Word. I can't do nothing without the Lord's help."[108] And by Loretta Pettway's account, "The Lord built in me how to fit them [the quilts]. Because I needed them."[109] While comparing a quilt by Loretta Pettway (Figure 12) to a Barnett Newman painting, Jane Livingston would concede that the quilt's "strange spiritual resonance—its sense of completeness, of utter quietness—transcends almost any modern painting to which one might compare it."[110] As Robert Thompson had augured in 1987, "the day may come when we break through a rhetoric [surrounding quilts] proclaiming 'genius' and 'art' in favor of signalizing community occasions of the spirit, the making of protective baffles to guard loved ones in the night."[111]

Livingston has related that when she first encountered the Gee's Bend quilts (in photographs), they impressed her as "among the most striking, sometimes even shocking, things I'd ever seen. They looked like they might be the most daring, most imaginative, most unexpectedly outrageous and elegant designs since . . . what? Medieval heraldry? High Renaissance marble and stone church floors?"[112] Black "folk artists," Livingston exclaimed, "are emphatically not mere craftsmen."[113] But such assertions, which are rife in the literature on Gee's Bend, raise a key question: why are craftsmen and women reflexively said to be "mere"? Because elite culture so designates them, of course. Yet by dis-cover-ing the covers of Gee's Bend, refuting their status as handcrafted objects of utility and assimilating them to—or colonizing them for—art world purposes and discourses, critics deprive the quiltmakers of their rightful status as specialists in their own cultural form. "Contemporary intellectuals committed to progressive politics must be reminded again and again that the capacity to name something . . . is not synonymous with the creation or ownership of the condition or circumstance to which such terms may refer," avers bell hooks.[114] By undercutting the Benders' right to name or define what was originally and profoundly their own, by dictating to them what it is they have done, critics treat them much as they and their forebears have typically been treated by figures of authority, albeit with far more respectful motives—a difference that certainly matters to the quiltmakers. Before the Arnetts inducted them into the art world, "it seemed like nobody else cared," noted Mary Ann Pettway; "They came and let us know that we were creating artwork. Nobody cared before that."[115] While being designated 'artists' has undeniably had not only questionable, but also beneficial consequences for the Benders—including giving some of them a sufficient sense of agency to sue the

Tinwood Alliance in order to secure their financial due—the consequences for those of us who number among the elite are more doubtful, to my mind. For had we not drafted the quiltmakers into our ranks we might otherwise have been impelled to reimagine what it can mean to be cultivated. Annexing the quilts to a high art context defers their potential to reveal themselves as other or more than high art—as "shocking" and "unexpectedly outrageous . . . designs" or "things," in Livingston's words—and deflates "the revolutionary challenge black feminist [or female] creativity could pose to white male cultural hegemony," to borrow words from critic Michele Wallace.[116]

Art history has long evinced a troubling tendency whereby "'high art' can be bolstered by the art of the Other, and the transaction rendered morally frictionless by decontextualization in the ostensibly neutral space of a museum or gallery," as Kalina aptly observed.[117] The only troubled note concerning art politics to come from within the Tinwood-driven initiatives, however, was voiced by essayist Cubbs, who alludes (in the second catalog) to "a nagging feeling of unfinished cultural business," before proceeding to inquire pointedly:

> what are the implications of relocating a tradition of black women's creativity from the rural South within a modernist art canon mostly defined by the paintings of white middle-class men? Given the class-coded taste culture and normative white gaze of the mainstream art world, can the meanings of the Gee's Bend quilts be fully understood, or will they be eclipsed by Western art's notorious tendency to impose its own aesthetic history and formal paradigms on the cultural productions of others?
>
> Does the introduction of these patchworks into the art museum signal a remapping of the territories of "high culture", or is the popular interest in the Gee's Bend phenomenon simply a new form of primitivism, a voyeuristic desire to see how poor rural black folk live? Does the eager embrace of the Gee's Bend quiltmakers by the culture industry open up a conversation about race, class, and difference, or does it close down that discourse with the image of a happy and contented multicultural world?[118]

With a view to such insights, then, I mean to conclude that Gee's Bend's stunning textiles should not, indeed, be called "art." Consider some obvious reasons why not: artworks are never made from motives of material need yet the materials and processes of the quiltmakers followed from a pervasive, ingenious, necessary, and so involuntary custom and ethic of salvage—of time as well as resources.[119] The captivating shadings of the fabrics represent not strictly an aesthetic choice on the quilters' part, but rather the long hours they and their families spent toiling in the sun. Moreover, artworks (as conventionally defined) do not serve practical functions: no one sleeps beneath them; no one uses them to line drafty floors and walls; no one launders them.[120] Nor do people peremptorily orient artworks according to their own taste or whim: yet Gee's Bend quilts may be oriented differently in different publications, their character substantially determined, at the moment of public display, not by the women who made them but by book designers as well

as by curators (though installed vertically at the Whitney, the quilts are occasionally reproduced with horizontal orientations).[121] Gee's Bend quilts may not be counted as art, besides, because these now-celebrated needlewomen still earn meager amounts for their labor-intensive works by comparison to what the work of comparably lionized artists would bring, because their production has all along been different and has been treated differently from artworks. Gee's Bends quilts are not art, finally, because their makers had in fact no concept of art; because until recently no one valued them enough to see to it that they acquired basic nutrition, health care, and literacy, much less any knowledge of art. By discounting all of these facts—albeit through a gesture directed at rectifying them—art writers effectively act to deracinate these talented women, discounting or whitewashing the damning social reality that the very possibility of making art, along with myriad other social and cultural possibilities, was systematically withheld from them.

None of this is to say that Gee's Bends' finest quilts are not every bit as visually sophisticated as art critics say, much less that they do not deserve to be valued, financially and otherwise, as much as "high" art. Of course the quiltmakers' works ought to be collected, preserved, displayed, and acclaimed—but acclaimed for what they really represent. Among the destabilizing tidings that these poignant textiles finally bring is that craft can no longer be presumed to be "mere," relative to art. In the difference between what it is to choose to realize an artwork and what it is to proceed to, or have to, assemble and sew a bedcover—in that un-dis-covered place—lies much of the quilts' particularity and character. Gee's Bend's "songs" are as compelling, as layered, as moving and as exciting as art can be, or more so. But they do not amount to art because they amount to something else, just as complex and complexly aesthetic. That something else warrants less *knowing into* and more inquiry.

Notes

1 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1935, cited in Barbara Johnson, "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston," in "*Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 325 (emphasis added). "What Hurston rigorously shows," Johnson argued, "is that questions of difference and identity are always a function of a specific interlocutionary situation—and the answers, matters of strategy rather than truth," Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 324.

2 Cited in Joanne Cubbs, "A History of the Work-Clothes Quilt," in W. Arnett, J. Cubbs, L. Whitley, M.M. Gordon, D. Blum, A. Wallach, L.P. Bennett, M.L. Bendolph, L.P. Bendolph, B.L. Herman, *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, ex. cat. (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2006), 78 (ellipsis in original). Mingo was born in 1931.

3 William Arnett, "Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt," in Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, pp. 22–3.

4 "Of the few hundred women residents of the Gee's Bend area, more than 150 are now known to have made quilts of artistic significance . . . It is likely that more than 95 percent of the quilts made in Gee's Bend during the twentieth century and 100 percent of those from the nineteenth are now lost to history." Arnett, *Gee's Bend*, p. 14.

5 Linda Matchan, "With These Hands," *Boston Globe*, May 15, 2005.

6 Arnett, *Gee's Bend*, p. 15. See also John Beardsley, "River Island," in J. Beardsley, W. Arnett, P. Arnett and J. Livingston, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, ex. cat. (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2002), p. 26.

At present, about a third of Gee's Bend's 700 residents are named Pettway, with first names ranging from Albert, Bizzell and China, to Famous, Little, Sweet T., and Tank, Jr. Regarding the history of the use of unusual names by African Americans, see Newbell N. Puckett, "Names of American Negro Slaves," in *Studies in the Science of Society*, ed. G.P. Murdock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937), pp. 471–94.

7 Hargrove Kennedy, cited in William Arnett and Paul Arnett, "On the Map," in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 37. Arlonzia Pettway "says quilting started in her family with her great grandmother Dinah, who was born in Africa and was captured at fourteen. She was lured onto a slave ship, which was decorated with red ribbons and red lights because 'they thought African people liked the color red' . . . 'She was told she was bought for a price. She cost one dime.' Pettway was seven when her great grandmother died but she remembers Dinah's stories about making quilts in secret from torn-up old clothes, crouching in ditches with tree brush over her." Matchan, "With These Hands." See also Amei Wallach, "The Living Legacy of Dinah the Slave," in Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, pp. 143–9. By contrast with slave narratives by men, in those by women, characteristically, they "find ways to pattern their own lives after the heroism they perceive in their female elders. For women, there is always a strong female bond that exists with forebears, and this invests them with the power to resist, survive, and transcend their own oppression," observed Nellie Y. McKay. "The Souls of Black Women Folk in the Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), p. 232.

8 For example, quiltmaker Annie E. Pettway (1904–71) was "married to Ed O.—they said Pettway, but he was a Williams. They changed his name to Pettway because he was living on the Pettway place, and they had to change their name as long as they stay on the place," explains her son, Willie Quill Pettway, cited in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 140.

9 Amei Wallach, "Fabric of their Lives," *Smithsonian* 37(7) (October 2006).

10 "In the early '60s, King's voting rights crusade took aim at Wilcox County, where no black had ever cast a ballot, though blacks outnumbered whites four to three." J.R. Moehringer, "Crossing Over," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1999. At King's instigation the women of Gee's Bend (not the men, so as to protect their wages) marched for voting rights. It followed that the local ferry service was cut off, largely stranding the area, for the long road into Gee's Bend was then unpaved and there were only three cars in the community. Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, pp. 18–19. Unusually for rural, southern blacks, however, numerous of the Benders were landowners, thanks to an experimental, depression-era federal initiative: between 1937 and 1940, the Resettlement Administration and its successor, the Farm Security Administration acquired the Pettway plantation and adjacent lands and granted favorable loans to about 100 families to acquire parcels of land and newly built "Roosevelt" or project houses. (A subsequent initiative to sell leased farmlands to residents occurred in 1945.) Not being "tenant farmers" partially protected many Benders during the civil rights struggles since they could not be evicted. Land ownership also served to keep Gee's Bend more intact as a community over time than is often the case in the rural south, according to Beardsley, "River Island," pp. 21, 26, 28. See also Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 54. (The ferry service was not restored until 2006, per Wes Smith, "The Ladies of Gee's Bend," *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News* [Washington, DC] January 29, 2007 [reprinted from *The Orlando Sentinel* (Orlando, FL)].)

11 Wallach, "The Living Legacy," p. 148.

12 Arnett "began his career by dealing in international art, mainly African and Asian, but in the '80s, that market went sour. So Bill, a Georgia native, turned to the visual art of the backwoods South," believing that "'black vernacular art' . . . was the equal, in depth and breadth, of the Italian Renaissance," reports Lisa Gray. "Made in Gees Bend," *Houston Chronicle*, June 11, 2006. "Some thirty years ago, Arnett—whose primary interest at that time was the art of the ancient

Mediterranean, medieval Europe, and Asia—began collecting African art and then African American vernacular art," per Alvia Wardlaw, "Introduction," in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 8.

13 Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 21. "Annie Mae Young represents the artist whose works are beyond the norm of the collective genius at a great culture's core . . . Her kind of genius pushes at tradition's boundaries, while remaining aware of them, and in the process it advances the state of the art. They are always there: Hieronymus Bosch, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, J.M.W. Turner, Vincent van Gogh." Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 24. Young was termed "one of the great masters of American art" also by Jane Livingston. "Reflections on the Art of Gee's Bend," in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 57.

14 Quiltmaker Lorraine Pettway assisted in making some of the attributions, identifying the house the quilt had emerged from by burying her face in the fabric so as to locate its scent, as described in W. Arnett and P. Arnett, "On the Map," pp. 40–1.

15 Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art" (1973), in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 332–3.

16 Keeping their wives pregnant as continuously as possible is said to have brought a certain status to Gee's Bend husbands (as in many a poor rural society). Children were customarily counted by the head, in the same parlance used for cattle; Young speaks of having had "nine head of children," for example, in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 100. That terminology may bespeak the asset offspring represented as extra hands in the fields in a farming community where schooling typically came second to the exigencies of survival—including the burdens of feeding those many mouths. Even a quiltmaker born as recently as 1960 "worked in the field from sunup to sundown. And we went to school only if it rained," in blatant violation of US law; Louisiana P. Bendolph, "A New Generation of 'Housetops'," in Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 189.

17 Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 72.

18 Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 18.

19 Ben Raines, "Lawsuit Charges that Oldest Gee's Bend Quilts Stolen," *Press-Register* (Mobile, Alabama), June 23, 2007. For her part, Cubbs constructs the quilts as examples of (Foucaultian) countermemory, asserting that "it is their ongoing role within the narratives of black women's experiences and creativity that finally renders their most profound meaning"; Cubbs, "A History," pp. 77–8.

20 Cubbs, "A History," p. 73. Notoriously punishing to harvest, cotton was the central crop of slavery and of sharecropping. "Read in the most highly politicized way, Gee's Bend work-clothes quilts are emblems of exploited African American labor, the icons of a race-based caste system." Cubbs, pp. 74–5.

21 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 11.

22 Mainardi, "Quilts," p. 332.

23 Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 184. Not only the process of attribution, but also that of dating often proved difficult—Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, pp. 184–5.

24 The community consciousness in Gee's Bend has an unusual historical basis that bears noting. Besides effecting a redistribution of plantation lands to area residents during the late 1930s and 1940s (see note 10), the federal government also then founded the Gee's Bend Farms cooperative and established a community cotton gin, mill, and store as well as a cooperative clinic, a community center and a school. Although these ventures varied in their successfulness and were generally defunct by the early 1950s, for a time, "Virtually all Gee's Bend families joined the [farm] cooperative, to which they paid a dollar in membership fees"; see Beardsley, "River Island," pp. 27–8.

25 "Along County Road 29, many women refer to any quilt dominated by concentric squares as a 'Housetop', which reigns as the area's most favored 'pattern'. (This extended family of forms is generally called 'Log Cabin' among quiltmakers nationally)." Paul Arnett, "Introduction," in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 108. However, what normally constituted a single block of a Log Cabin quilt was at times extrapolated into an entire quilt of the Housetop type. What Benders termed a Bricklayer pattern may, similarly, be an extrapolation of an isolated block of what is often called elsewhere the "Courthouse Steps" design (itself a variant of the Log Cabin). "Nearly all Gee's Bend quiltmakers try [the Bricklayer] out, but they seldom use the pattern the way it is found elsewhere." Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 46. The Lazy Gal is a form of "bars" quilt, with long stripes of fabric laid side by side. "The ways in which Gee's Bend quiltmakers reinvent patterns or take a particular block and make it the singular focus of the piece demonstrate the talents that set them apart . . . In a Gee's Bend quilt, every shape is twice 'bent': by the penchants of the community tradition, and by the individual quiltmaker's style." Maggi McCormick Gordon, "Bending Geometry," in Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 113.

26 Wardlaw, "Introduction," p. 16.

27 J. Beardsley, W. Arnett, P. Arnett and J. Livingston, *Gee's Bend: The Women and their Quilts* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2002), p. 281.

28 "Currently the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective, consisting of about fifty quilters, is marketing the women's quilts on a website (www.quiltsofgeesbend.com), for an average price of $3,000 . . . Half of the money from the sale of quilts sold by the collective goes to the quilter who made it; the other half is divided among its members." Matchan, "With These Hands." "The quilters of Gee's Bend decided years ago they wanted the Arnetts to promote this work as a collective, so the entire community benefited and not just any particular artist," Arnett's lawyer Greg Hawley reportedly says; Ben Raines, "Gee's Bend Quilters Claim Big Rip-Off," *Press-Register* (Mobile, Alabama), June 5, 2007.

29 Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 25. Rennie Miller, the first director of the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective, "said that the Arnetts had always handled certain quilters themselves—the most famous members—never letting their work be sold through the collective, where the proceeds are split among the 50 members. 'He did Annie Mae that way. Her quilts were never in the collective. I have no idea how many she sold or for how much,' Miller said." Raines, "Gee's Bend: A Fight for Rights," *Press-Register* (Mobile, AL), June 15, 2007.

30 Michael Kimmelman, "Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters," *New York Times*, November 29, 2002. "The chances that poor black women in a remote corner of Alabama ever saw, much less were influenced by, any of [the canonical modernists] is slim to nil," remarks Kimmelman. Lee Krasner counts as an exceptional modernist painter who did happen upon and appreciate Gee's Bend textiles, but only in 1967 (well after arriving at her own mature style); see Livingston, "Reflections," pp. 54–5. Some critics imagine that the newspapers and magazines that quiltmakers typically used to paper their homes' walls, for warmth and for decoration might have included a quotient of modern art reproductions. But the magazine primarily mentioned in this context is *Progressive Farmer* and the newspapers were the local press of an agricultural region.

31 Richard Kalina, "Gee's Bend Modern," *Art in America*, October 2003, p. 107.

32 Chris Davis, "The Quilted Word," *Memphis Flyer* (Memphis, Tenn.), February 24–March 2, 2005.

33 Mary Lee Bendolph, "Mama's Song," in Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 174.

34 Prior attempts to cast patchwork quilts in such terms include not only the 1971 Whitney show mentioned above but also an effort mounted for a collection of Amish quilts formed by the Esprit clothing company; see Robert Hughes (with Julie Silber), *Amish: The Art of the Quilt* (New York: Knopf, 1990). In an important early feminist

essay regarding such initiatives, "Crafty women and the hierarchy of the arts," in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock," *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), the authors noted how, in order for critics to validate women's textile production aesthetically, they had to "creat[e] a new status for the maker[s]." Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 69.

35 Five Arnetts figure in the credits of John Beardsley et al., *Gee's Bend: The Women and their Quilts*: William as director/coeditor, Paul as coeditor/production chief, Matt as associate project director, Thomas as editorial consultant, and Harrison as publisher (with Paul and William sharing credits with a non-family member as designers, and William sharing credit with several non-family members as exhibition curators).

36 At those auctions, the quilts were "pounced on by an enormously sophisticated and discerning group of buyers," such as jazz singer Mabel Mercer and designer Ray Eames (wife of Charles Eames) at a top price of seventy dollars: see Livingston, "Reflections," p. 54.

37 Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 19. "'The Bee was the first business black people in Wilcox County owned', said Nettie Young, p. 85, an original Bee leader who learned to quilt at age 7. 'It was the first time I knew I was special, the first job I had, excusing cotton picking'." Patricia Leigh Brown, "From the Bottomlands, Soulful Stitches," *New York Times*, November, 21, 2002.

38 Beardsley et al., *Gee's Bend: The Women and their Quilts*, p. 366.

39 Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 21.

40 Annie Mae Young, cited in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 100.

41 Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Not Forgotten: Anatomy of a Quilt," *Southern Cultures* 10(3) (Fall 2004): 89–90, 94–7.

42 Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 96.

43 There is also a vein of Amish quiltmaking that entails large pieces of fabric, for example, and other of the attributes that Leon lists may be found in textiles by other white quiltmakers—most obviously in the case of the improvised-looking "Crazy Quilts" (which nonetheless often adhered to a kind of grid)—but he argues that it has been anomalous, historically, for numerous of these attributes to occur in a constellation excepting in work by African American quiltmakers; Eli Leon, "Who'd a Thought It," in *Who'd A Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking*, ex. cat. (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1987), passim. Among Benders, "Stitches are as individual as signatures," observes Arnett, *Gee's Bend*, p. 34. "It is almost as if symmetry in the Gee's Bend quilts is a condition established precisely so that it may be creatively violated," astutely noted Kalina, "Gee's Bend Modern," p. 107.

44 Moehringer, "Crossing Over."

45 Robert Farris Thompson, "From the First to the Final Thunder: African-American Quilts, Monuments of Cultural Assertion," in Leon, *Who'd A Thought It*, pp. 17, 12–13, 16. "North American quilt-tops . . . constitute . . . a very special case of African influence on New World art. The cultural inheritance, it seems to me, for good reasons both stylistic and demographic, may include elements of Mande and Akan and possibly Efik influence but is in the main probably overwhelmingly Central African," concludes Thompson. "From the First to the Final Thunder," p. 13. Notes Leon, "The enjoyment of the variation that inevitably results from approximation is one of the underlying parallel attitudes that suggest a continuity between African and African-American textile arts." By contrast, "If the standard-traditional American quilt is properly executed, its final appearance is largely predetermined by the choice of pattern and fabric. The quiltmaker has only to cut and sew the pieces correctly and they will fit together to make consistent blocks and relatively predictable quilts. This emphasis on precision piecing and exact pattern replication . . . is not conducive to improvisation," states Leon, "Who'd a Thought It," pp. 28, 30. Within Gee's Bend, there is reportedly a "range in attitude . . . about

strict adherence to patterns. While for some it might be a mark of achievement, for others it is an effort to be 'fancy', with overtones of social or artistic pretensions," per John Beardsley, "Pettway," in Beardsley et al., *Gee's Bend: The Women and their Quilts*, p. 219. For her part, Young says, "I never did like the book patterns some people had," in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 100.

46 Brooks Barnes, "Art and Collecting: Museums Cozy Up to Quilts—It's High Season for Blankets, But Patrons Ask: Is It Art," *Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2002. Barnes was not only targeting the Gee's Bend show; he related that, "eight big [quilt] shows [were] hitting art museums around the US this year." Barnes, "Art and Collecting."

47 Peter Plagens, "A Quilting Bee Bounty," *Newsweek*, November 18, 2002, p. 78.

48 Kimmelman, "Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters." Kimmelman's review, above all, "brought huge crowds to see the quilts and thus probably saved Gee's Bend from art-historical oblivion," in the estimation of Arnett, "Gee's Bend," p. 21.

49 Kimmelman, "Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters."

50 Plagens, "A Quilting Bee Bounty," p. 78.

51 Wardlaw, "Introduction," p. 9.

52 Kimmelman, "Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters."

53 bell hooks (Gloria Watkins), "An Aesthetic of Blackness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA.: South End Press, 1990), 105. See also Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, ex. cat. (New York: Studio Books, 1993). Southwall cites Fran Dorsey regarding the transmission of African aesthetics in the US amongst slave populations: "When people are not permitted to celebrate their traditional ceremonies, speak their own languages, or pass on their customs to their children, they do not relinquish those ideas; they just change the code so the oppressors cannot recognize what they are doing." Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, p. 116.

54 See Bendolph, "Mama's Song," pp. 176, 178, and Matchan "With These Hands." A number of critics noted that those quilts made of new materials, comprising covers not yet subject to wear, tended to have less resonance than those whose materials showed signs of use.

55 The quilt in question is reproduced in Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, p. 67. Arlonzia Pettway recalled: "It was when Daddy died. I was about seventeen, eighteen. He stayed sick about eight months and passed on. Mama say, 'I going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love'. She take his old pants legs and shirttails, take all the clothes he had, just enough to make that quilt, and I helped her tore them up." Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*.

56 Beardsley, "River Island," p. 27. Quiltmaker Irene Williams lived in a house that still had no electricity in 2002, at the time of the first Gee's Bend show, W. Arnett and P. Arnett, "On the Map," p. 43.

57 Mainardi, "Quilts," p. 344.

58 Cited in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, My Self," in Gates, ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, p. 183.

59 hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness," pp. 105, 104.

60 hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness," p. 112.

61 Bendolph, "Mama's Song," p. 178.

62 Arnett, "Gee's Bend," pp. 38, 46.

63 Bendolph, "Mama's Song," p. 176.

64 Bernard Herman, "Architectural Definitions," in Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 215.

65 Kalina, "Gee's Bend Modern," p. 104. As a white, urban, middle-class northerner unexposed to southern vernacular culture, I too was taken utterly by surprise by the impact of the show.

66 Arnett, "Gee's Bend," p. 55. The second show did not quite attain the high level of the first—which was generally meant to showcase the strongest work available, after all—but it contained

numerous impressive quilts, and revealed what the freshly inspired quiltmakers had been doing since the initial show's debut.

67 Kenneth Baker, "Celebrated Gee's Bend Quilts Blaze with Color," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 18, 2006.

68 Kelly Klaasmeyer, "Bee Gee's: An MFAH Exhibit Captures Quilting Heritage," *Houston Press*, October 24, 2002.

69 Thelma Golden, "The Quilts of Gee's Bend," *Artforum* 42(4) (December 2003): 126. Continued Golden: "It reminded me of reading Huck Finn in seventh grade at my all-white private school. I didn't hate Huck Finn, I just hated having to talk about it with everyone else as they had their racial revelatory moment." Thelma Golden, "The Quilts of Gee's Bend." (Most critics did not identify their own racial status, nor were the catalog contributors so identified, excepting Arnett.)

70 Raines, "Gee's Bend: A Fight for Rights." "An e-mail from one of the Arnetts' lawyers sent last week stated that the money from the licensing deals 'and all royalties/revenues are being held for the (quilters) and will be disbursed as determined appropriate.' The e-mail did not say who would decide how the money would be distributed," noted Raines, who added that Miller and some others had become skeptical about such assertions: "'undoubtedly the lady that wrote that article [Golden] seen something that we didn't see at that time. Some of the quilters still don't see it, but I do,' Miller said."

71 "When Bill Arnett first visited Gee's Bend . . . only five or six women were still making quilts, and few were making more than two or three a year." Matchan, "With These Hands." Some older needlewomen emerged from retirement following the success of the first show, while some younger women renewed a lapsed commitment to their craft.

72 Part of the value of the vintage quilts lay in licensing deals, for "the exhibition has fueled a veritable Gee's Bend industry: rugs, bedding, stationery . . . The quilters also receive royalties from the licensed products," reported Matchan, "With These Hands". Others published comparable claims: "The quiltmakers also have benefited from sales of spin-offs including fine art prints, postage stamps, art books, and stationery cards . . . Many have installed furnaces and air conditioners, modern appliances, new carpets and drapes, and added rooms," per Smith, "The Ladies of Gee's Bend." Arnett asserts that he had oral contracts with the quiltmakers broadly assigning their copyrights to him or to Tinwood. However, he has lately been sued, in part over this assertion: Annie Mae Young reportedly alleges that "Tinwood [Ventures] claims to own the intellectual property rights to the quilts produced in Gee's Bend prior to 1984, and, in turn, the company has leased those rights to manufacturers. While several of the companies involved in marketing products based on Gee's Bend quilts state in promotional literature that the quilters 'receive a royalty' for every item sold, Young's lawsuit states she has never received 'one penny from these enterprises'. In fact, Young said, she had no idea her quilt designs were being used for anything beyond a book, much less a line of rugs selling for $5,000 a piece. The suit seeks compensatory and punitive damages for 'commercial misappropriation of her work and likeness'... 'My mother was under the assumption that they were just selling quilts. She and the others, they had no idea their work was being sold on all kinds of designs in department stores and such...,' Y.C. Young [Annie Mae's son] said.... 'These women don't have the Internet. Many of them can't even read. They didn't have any idea they were making all this money off them'." Raines, "Gee's Bend Quilters Claim Big Rip-Off." Following the filing of Young's suit, the Arnetts reportedly tried to secure written acknowledgement of Tinwood's entitlement to copyright from as many as possible of the quiltmakers. Although the Arnetts have denied this intent (through their lawyers), Ben Raines, of the Mobile *Press-Register*, allegedly verified the nature of the document presented to the women with an attorney specializing in copyright law. Another lawsuit thus "alleges that Matt

Arnett visited [Loretta] Pettway—who cannot read—and offered her a check for $2,000, but only if she would sign an 'Alabama Bill of Sale of Personal Property' that her lawyers say may have conveyed to the Arnetts the copyrights to any quilts she sold to them. Pettway's suit accuses the Arnetts of 'gross exploitation' and perpetrating an 'extensive fraud'. 'My mom can barely write her name. She can't read a word', said Walter Pettway... 'She don't know what copyrights are...'. Walter Pettway said he believes his mother has made no more than $3,000 or $4,000 from dozens of quilts and says that the lawsuit is her only hope of getting a real accounting of what others have made off her work." Raines, "Gee's Bend: A Fight for Rights."

73 Brown, "From the Bottomlands."

74 "Some older quilts have been acquired by museums for more than $50,000, and contemporary Gee's Bend quilts have sold for nearly $30,000," according to Smith, "The Ladies of Gee's Bend."

75 Annie Mae Young is said to have been unaware "that the men taking her quilts were selling them for upwards of $20,000 apiece, according to her son. The lawsuit states that six of her quilts are currently for sale in that price range at a New York City gallery." Raines, "Gees' Bend Quilters Claim Big Rip-Off." Richard Austin, a specialist in art and antiquities with Bloomsbury Auctions of New York and London, "said that a deal governing how the Arnetts sell the Gee's Bend quilts through art galleries- as described to the Press-Register by Greg Hawley, one of the Arnetts' lawyers—did not appear to serve the interests of the quilters. Under that deal, the art gallery gets a 50 percent commission, the quilter gets 25 percent, and the Arnetts get 25 percent, minus 'shipping and promotion', according to Hawley. 'For the artist's agent to be making as much as the artist, that is extremely unusual', Austin said". Raines, "Gee's Bend: A Fight for Rights."

76 Brown, "From the Bottomlands." "[T]he proceeds of the licensing deals and various quilt sales, according to the Arnetts, have been poured back into the community, with Bill Arnett quoted in past interviews to have placed at least $1 million into a fund benefiting the community. More recently, the Arnetts told the quilters there was about $100,000 in the Gee's Bend Foundation as of May 7, according to quilters who attended a meeting held on that day." Raines, "Gee's Bend: A Fight for Rights." Arnett has never indicated what salary is drawn by himself and the many family members he has working on the Gee's Bend and Tinwood initiatives.

77 Brown, "From the Bottomlands."

78 Matchan, "With These Hands"; Arnett, "Gee's Bend," p. 54. Following a 2006 article that restated his critical comments (Gray, "Made in Gees Bend"), Reverend Pettway requested a correction (published June 14, 2006) that included the endorsement of the Arnetts cited here.

79 Brown, "From the Bottomlands."

80 Matchan, "With These Hands."

81 Moehringer, "Crossing Over."

82 Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, pp. 72–4.

83 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 641–2.

84 Glenn McNatt, "Controversy Blankets Gee's Bend Community," *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 2007.

85 Raines, "Gee's Bend: A Fight for Rights."

86 Arnett, "Gee's Bend," p. 23.

87 Raines, "Gee's Bend Quilters Claim Big Rip-Off." Continued Young, "So many, so many I made for them . . . Sometimes I'd just stitch the top, and he'd take them and have them quilted by someone else. But he'd never give me anything for just the top." Raines, "Gee's Bend Quilters Claim Big Rip-Off."

88 "In her workplace quilts were stored in chests and under mattresses," recalled bell hooks,

"Aesthetic Inheritances," in *Yearning*, p. 120. See also Wardlaw, "Introduction," p. 16. "Examples of quilts made by women who are now in their eighties, who have saved quilts made in their adolescent years—rodent-gnawed or water-damaged though they may be—illustrate the honored importance of this creative activity in their own lives," notes Livingston, "Reflections," p. 58.

89 See Cubbs, "A History," p. 76.

90 Sarah Nuttall, "Introduction: Rethinking Beauty," in *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, ed. Nuttall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 8. "Kant argues that different 'nations' have different aesthetic and moral sensibilities. The 'beautiful' and the 'sublime' are for him qualities of aesthetic and moral 'feeling', both of which, he concludes, Africans lack. The African, he writes, 'has no feeling beyond the trifling'; this he links to 'the ugliness of appearance' in the 'Negro', clear proof in his eyes of 'stupidity. Racist accounts, widely accepted into the time of European colonization and beyond, present the African continent as the metaphor *par excellence* for physical ugliness and moral decay." Sarah Nuttall, "Introduction: Rethinking Beauty," p. 9.

91 Davis, "The Quilted Word."

92 Bendolph, "Mama's Song," p. 178.

93 Karrie Jacobs, "Why I'm (Occasionally) Proud to Be an American," *Metropolis*, September 2006, p. 64.

94 "One of Mary Lee Bendolph's most original creations is a group of quilts . . . that were inspired by a 'fine art' intaglio print she herself made during the two weeks she spent with Louisiana at Paulson Press in Berkeley in the summer of 2005. She made prints based on her quilts, adapting one medium to another, then when she got home, she began to introduce the aesthetic of her prints into the quilts she made," Arnett et al., *Gee's Bend*, p. 27. Pam Paulson reportedly saw the Whitney show and "decided that it was 'important work to bring into the mainstream art world'." In February 2006, Mary Lee and Louisiana Bendolph opened a show of their prints and new quilts at the Addison/Ripley Fine Art gallery in Washington, DC; Linda Hales, "For Gee's Bend: A New Twist," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2006. The Bendolphs have remained supportive of the Arnetts during their recent legal difficulties, conceivably due in part to their relatively advantageous financial arrangements: "[Louisiana] Bendolph acknowledged that she has made several times more money than Annie Mae Young says she earned [i.e. $18,000] . . . because she has control of her copyrights. She said all of her income was related to a series of about 200 limited edition prints produced from quilts designed by her and her mother-in-law. 'I have the copyrights for the quilts on these prints because I didn't sell them to the Arnetts', Bendolph said, noting she keeps 90 percent of her earnings and gives 10 percent to the collective, instead of the usual 50/50 split." Raines, "Gee's Bend: A Fight for Rights." Dismayed by the litigiousness of some within her cohort, Mary Lee Bendolph protested that, "We all love the Arnetts," and "We don't want to make no more trouble," per McNatt, "Controversy Blankets Gee's Bend Community."

95 The essays by the Bendolphs are said, in the margins, to have been cobbled together from the transcripts of interviews by Matt Arnett.

96 Catherine Fox, "The Quilting Ladies of Gee's Bend," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 19, 2006.

97 Bendolph, "A New Generation of 'Housetops'," p. 193.

98 Cited in Fox, "The Quilting Ladies of Gee's Bend."

99 Bendolph, "A New Generation of 'Housetops'," p. 193.

100 Jacobs, "Why I'm (Occasionally) Proud," p. 64.

101 Matchan, "With These Hands."

102 Brown, "From the Bottomlands."

103 Jessica Williams-Gibson, "Quilts Hold Gee's Bend Community Together," *Recorder* (Indianapolis, IN), October 13, 2006.

104 Bill Davenport, "Pattern of Pride," *Houston Chronicle*, July 1, 2006.

105 Smith, "The Ladies of Gee's Bend." At the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, "All day the women mingled with visitors, signing books, shaking hands, and hugging—even, once, as a group, spontaneously singing old hymns in the gallery"; two "roundtables" with the quilters in the museum's auditorium sold out. Karen M. Duffy, "Exhibit Reviews," *Journal of American Folklore* 120(475): 94–9. "It's now expected that all the ladies will hug people they've just met. For some, it's not at all natural," reports Gray, "Made in Gees Bend."

106 Matchan, "With These Hands."

107 Herman, "Architectural Definitions," p. 214.

108 Bendolph, "Mama's Song," p. 176.

109 Brown, "From the Bottomlands."

110 Livingston, "Reflections," p. 58. (The quilt in question is reproduced on page 76 of the same volume.)

111 Thompson, "From the First to the Final Thunder," p. 21.

112 Livingston, "Reflections," p. 50. (Ellipsis in original.)

113 Jane Livingston, "Reflections on a New Generation," in William Arnett and Paul Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, vol. 2 (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2001), p. 65.

114 hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness," p. 112.

115 Raines, "Gee's Bend Quilters Claim Big Rip-Off."

116 Michele Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," in Gates, ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, p. 52. "Universities, museums, and publishing houses . . . run by white men and their surrogates, remain the unrelenting arbiters of cultural standards, which exclude or erase the diverse creativity of nonelite populations," Wallace pointed out; "even successful creative black women have next to nothing to say about the nature of commentary and interpretation in their respective fields." Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," pp. 53, 55.

117 Kalina, "Gee's Bend Modern," p. 106.

118 Cubbs, "A History," p. 77.

119 The "quilts embody a moral as well as a formal economy," noted Kalina; "In contrast to the larger culture of obsolescence, waste and disposability, in Gee's Bend nothing usable was thrown away." Kalina, "Gee's Bend Modern," p. 108.

120 It bears noting that at least some buyers of Gee's Bend quilts continue to treat them in this way, as bedcovers, such as Jane Fonda, who "keeps Gee's Bend quilts on her beds," per Gray, "Made in Gees Bend."

121 Though generally displayed as if they were paintings, the quilts often venture considerably into the third dimension, rather than lying more or less flat against the wall as conventional quilts by skilled makers typically will; moreover, some Gee's Bend quilts have dual display sides, rather than an absolute recto and verso. In the dozens of reviews I read, Kalina was the only writer to raise this surely critical point, albeit in an endnote (Kalina, "Gee's Bend Modern," p. 149 n.3). Between the contents of the two exhibition catalogs, the issue of orientation emerged in passing, only once: "The use of quilts for purposes other than bedcovers caused Gee's Bend quiltmakers to experience and conceive their quilts as both vertical and horizontal designs—like architecture, which is perceived from a variety of angles and positions, inside and out. Mary Lee Bendolph's quilts, for example, often have a clear upper side and a clear left side, like an x- and a y-axis framing their design and orienting them for viewings in different contexts," contends Herman, "Architectural Definitions," p. 215.