



Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gees' Bend Freedom Quilting Bee

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Anatomy of a quilt

The Gees' Bend Freedom Quilting Bee

NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES

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Fig. 1. Members of the Burns family of Coy, Alabama: Lessie Burns and three of her 10 children in 1968. The Burns family were sharecroppers, and one of hundreds of rural families trapped in the debt peonage system in the 'Blackbelt' counties of southwest Alabama.

The incredible quilts of Gees Bend, Alabama, true masterpieces of American folk art with their 'jazzy geometry', are currently on national tour following their initial display at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (November 2002-March 2003), finally receiving the recognition they've long deserved. While the first, ebullient review of the show by Michael Kimmelman¹ captures the bold, independent spirit of this distinctive art form, little is said about the artists and the community that produced these gorgeous 'tapestries' (especially during the quilters' most audacious and productive period, 1930-1970), except for noting that the quilters are descendants of the slaves who worked the local Pettway plantation which dominated the landscape. I'd like to supply just a bit of that missing context.

Surveying for civil rights

In 1967 I left New York City and went south to join the tail end of the American civil rights movement, which by that time had moved north - to Chicago, Detroit and New York. The remnant of 'the movement' in and around Selma, Alabama had, of necessity, turned to Black Power, making white civil rights workers like myself redundant and anachronistic. But rather than being sent home, I was assigned to Wilcox County as a field staff worker for the Southern Rural Research Project (SRRP, an SNCC-affiliated legal rights project²) to help conduct a large and detailed survey of almost 1000 Black farm households, representing over 5000 people, on the work, living and

health conditions among tenant farmers and sharecroppers in eight so called 'Blackbelt' counties of southwest Alabama.

We, the dozen or so quickly assembled and rapidly trained field staff, combed the more remote corners of the area, normally working in twos (one white worker, one black), going door to door and shack to shack with our sometimes invasive questions about people's access to food, healthcare and social services, about family composition, family illnesses and disabilities, relations with landowners, annual earnings, debts, and access to federal farm subsidies, cotton allotments and small loans. We found a ravaged population living for parts of the year on the edge of starvation and largely dependent on capricious federal farm programmes, families who survived during the lean winter and early spring months on a diet of starch, sugar, and fat - grits, biscuits, cornbread, peanut butter, fried bologna, fatback, Kool-Aid and coffee. Were it not for seasonal mustard and collard greens, field peas, and hunted meat - squirrels and possums - it would be hard to imagine how so many of them managed to stay alive at all.

With the help of two visiting civil rights physicians (the late Charlie Wheeler and Robert Coles) we were able to identify the signs and symptoms of malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies, including childhood rickets, pellagra and 'night blindness'. The 'average' Black farm household woman in southwest Alabama reported seven pregnancies by the age of 40 and had experienced at least one miscarriage or stillbirth and two infant or early childhood mor-

Fig. 2. Children of the Burns family. On behalf of his hungry children, Leroy Burns joined the Southern Rural Research Project (SRRP) class action suit 'Peoples v. the US Department of Agriculture' in 1968. SRRP lost in court but won in the mass media, with supportive editorials in the major newspapers and a CBS TV documentary, *Hunger in America*, finally bringing the US Food Stamp Program into the recalcitrant, white-dominated counties of southwest Alabama.



JOFREY CLARK

Acknowledgements. This piece was revised while I was a 2003 summer resident scholar at the School of American Research in Santa Fe. Everything I know about Gees Bend quilts I learned from the founders of the Freedom Quilting Bee – the late Estelle Witherspoon, Mattie Ross and Mama Willie. Linda Hunt, Mary McCarthy, 'UZ' Nunley, Kathy Veit and Donald Jelinek refreshed my memory about Gees Bend and our civil rights activities in Selma, Alabama. Jude Peterson recognized fine art when she saw it and did her best to market the quilts in Cambridge, Massachusetts. William Arnett, who in 1998 went to Gees Bend and purchased every quilt he could persuade elderly Gees Benders to pull out of crawl spaces, car boots, garages and rag bags – about 700 quilts in all for which he paid between \$100 and \$500 each – and who successfully badgered the art world (first in Houston, Texas and then in New York) to sit up and take notice, spent many hours on the phone discussing with a total stranger his passion for Black vernacular art, and for the Gees Bend quilts and quilters in particular. The complex story of the Arnett family's heroic and simultaneously problematic rescue and salvage project will be treated in a second installment ('Rags to riches').

I acknowledge the visionary work of the late documentary photographer, Jofrey Clark, with whom I travelled for several days through the Alabama outback and underbrush in 1968, pointing out tenant farm families he might want to photograph for our organization (SRRP). To the best of my knowledge Jofrey Clark's photos have not been archived. A few remaining in my possession appear here with the permission of Jofrey's mother. If anyone can provide any information about the whereabouts of Jofrey's photo collection I would be most grateful.

talities. It was the portrait of a third-world, pre-demographic transition nation. The hunger was particularly hard to bear in rural counties blessed with dark, rich soil and a long growing season. It was generated by landlords who restricted the subsistence crops, pigs and poultry permitted to the tenant farmers. 'The man [i.e. the bossman] don't want no competition. He wants us to buy everything from his store,' we were told.

After hunger, the greatest cause of suffering was the cold, wet winters that were accompanied by chronic respiratory infections, colds and flu for which the sharecroppers had no access to medicine except at the outpatients clinics at county hospitals, which were still segregated and which treated healthcare as a privilege rather than a right. As a despised white civil rights worker (and therefore classified as a 'negra' within the white system) I learned at first hand about the abysmal health care dispensed to non-whites. When I had to seek treatment for an infection I was sent to the County Health Department in Selma, where I waited all day alongside tired old men in ragged blue jeans and mothers and grandmothers toting their sick babies. All of us were 'treated' in full view of everyone else. I suppose the notion was that 'coloreds' had no sense of privacy or shame. These Alabama clinics of the mid-1960s made some of the apartheid clinics I encountered in South African townships in the mid-1990s look almost like model programmes.

As a whole, the misery we encountered was the product of landowner corruption and the system of debt peonage that had replaced one form of slavery with another, the slavery of hunger. We uncovered a clear pattern of white landowners intercepting the government subsidy cheques belonging to their tenants and extracting forced labour from the cheated farmers in exchange for food at the company store. All this was done with the tacit support of the local US Department of Agriculture agents. Cotton allotment cheques earmarked for Black tenant farmers were 'signed over' (with an 'X') to the landlords against outstanding 'debts' – mostly for coffee, flour, powdered milk and processed meats, and for seeds and farm tools sold to the tenants at hugely inflated prices and recorded with fraudulent bookkeeping. Most Black farmers in this older

generation were illiterate, and although they knew they were being cheated they did not know how or just how much they were robbed, or how they could ever dig themselves out from under a white conspiracy that used their own government against them.

Gees Bend

Assigned to survey the Black farm families of rural Wilcox County, I often travelled by foot, bicycle or even by mule in order to make contact with households located off the roads, tucked away in small clearings that seemed chopped out of the extensive woods or surrounding cotton fields in places with hauntingly evocative names like Lower Peach Tree, Boiling Springs, Ferry, Whiskey Run, Coy, and Possum Bend. But it was to Gees Bend (also known as Boykin), the home of those wildly imaginative quilters, that I returned to live and work for several months after our two surveys³ were completed, in order to peck out, on a portable typewriter, two final reports analysing the results; these were used in a class action suit, 'Peoples v. the Department of Agriculture', that reached a Federal Appeals Court in Washington, DC in the spring of 1968.

Gees Bend was different from the surrounding Blackbelt farm communities. For one thing, virtually all 500-odd residents of the broader area covering Boykin, Alberta and Miller's Ferry were Black, except for Mary McCarthy, a Head Start teacher, and her small family, and a lone and somewhat lost Vista volunteer⁴ from New Jersey named Chris Bello. Both were more than tolerated by the tightly-knit, closely interrelated, deeply religious community. Gees Benders had a reputation for being strong, proud and fiercely independent. Some said it was because they were part Cherokee Indian. Others (mostly whites) said that Gees Benders were just plain ornery.

'White folk are afraid of us,' Roman Pettway, then owner of the only small store in Gees Bend, once told me, flashing his brilliant smile. 'Why, even the white bread delivery man is "skerd"' to come into my shop. White folks doing business with us'un just buzz in and out. They think we are a little crazy back here, that we speak our own language and no white folks can understand it. They say we practise hoodoo (voodoo) and that we cast spells on people we don't like.'



KATHLEEN A. VEIT

Fig. 3. The late Roman Pettway in front of Boykin Mercantile Store, the first home of the Freedom Quilting Bee.

The residents of Gees Bend, the majority of them named Pettway (with a few Witherspoons, Mosleys and Bennetts interspersed) and who referred to each other by handy nicknames – ‘Little’ Pettway, ‘Red’ Pettway, ‘Fats’ Pettway, ‘Short’ Pettway, etc. – were better off, economically and socially, than their neighbours. After the slave-owning White Pettways (who bought up the original Gees Brothers plantation) sold their 4000 acres and left the Bend soon after Emancipation, the lands passed to another dynastic family, the Vander Graaffs of Tuscaoosa, who were absentee landlords until 1937 when they sold their river-bend outpost to a local branch of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) of the US government. President Roosevelt’s New Dealers ‘adopted’ Gees Bend as a special showcase project in cooperative farming. The new government helped local families construct their own homes, with solid roofs, screened porches and fenced-in gardens. With the help of FSA funds, Gees Bend families were able to install outdoor water pumps and privies and to purchase the once highly valued cast iron cook stoves.⁵ But by 1967 many of the homes were dilapidated, the privies no longer functional, and the outdoor water pumps were now seen as signs of social and economic underdevelopment and were grumbled about by Chris, the Vista volunteer, who wasn’t sure what, if anything, he was supposed to do about them.

In Gees Bend I lived in an abandoned two-room shack without electricity that had previously been inhabited by a troubled Black civil rights worker, James Austin, who’d been arrested and mistreated in the local jail and who, by the time he was released, was a violent and mentally unstable person. Unschoolled and functionally illiterate, James Austin had left behind some pages ripped from a diary of sorts and some discarded attempts to write home to his mother and girlfriend. The task had apparently beaten him – another humiliation. Full of hatred and desires for revenge, Austin was no longer useful to ‘the movement’ and he was definitely not wanted back in Gees Bend, a fiercely Christian, non-violent community for whom civil rights work meant following the examples of

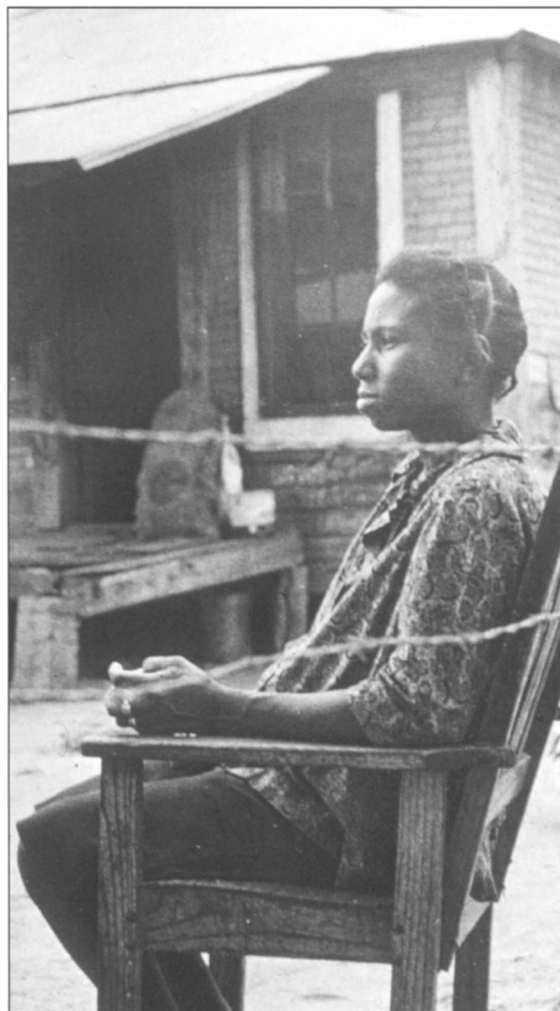
Fig. 4. Mrs Williams and her family (husband and nine children) were evicted after a lifetime spent as tenant farmers on the huge Minter plantation. They left still ‘owing’ Mr. Minter \$1600 according to his books. Mr. Williams told us: ‘It’s like this. We was always in debt to Mr Minter and no matter how hard we worked one year, he always figured it so that we still owed money. The most we ever cleared in a year was \$200 and lots of times we never cleared over \$16.’

Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. I learned an alternative meaning of the Christian mandate ‘to turn the other cheek’: as the people of the Bend interpreted this, turning the other cheek meant turning your eyes (and your respect) away from the depraved and pathetic man who unjustly harms you. It meant preserving one’s own dignity and demonstrating one’s personal and moral superiority. It was an interpretation of the gospel that Ghandi (were he a Baptist) would have embraced. And I am sure that Martin Luther King, who visited and loved Gees Bend, learned his non-violent philosophy as much from these backwoods churches as from his readings of Ghandi at Boston University.

James Austin’s abandoned shack (after he was shamed/drummed out of the community) was still earmarked as a ‘freedom house’ and it was given to me and two summer civil rights workers from Boston, Linda and Gary Hunt, to live and work in. We named the larger of the two rooms, where we set up our ‘office’ on a portable table and folding chairs, ‘the James Austin Study’ in honour of its troubled former inhabitant and failed diarist.

Quilting for freedom

The Austin study, which was covered by a tin roof, was unbearably hot as well as lizard- and bug-infested. It proved an altogether depressing, almost intolerable, place to work and write.⁶ Then one afternoon Gary came in with a bundle of ‘rags’ he had found out behind the shack. They were harlequin blankets – torn, with cotton batting spilling out, but patterned in magnificently multicoloured designs. ‘Look,’ said Gary, a recent graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, ‘it’s a kind of Southern psychedelic Op Art!’ And he unfurled the audacious banner-like quilts on the floor, displaying their large, bright, zig-zagging, razzle-dazzle geometric designs in deep red, blue, green



JOFREY CLARK

Fig. 5. The author with Linda Hunt and Robert Rembert, Jr, field staff of SRRP, typing up our SRRP survey reports on hunger and malnutrition in the 'James Austin Study' of our 'freedom shack' in Gees Bend, Alabama, in the summer of 1967.



GARY HUNT

1. *New York Times*, Weekend, 29 November 2002, B31.

2. The Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), which in 1967, under the direction of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, dropped the 'N' and opted for armed self-defence and Black Power. The presence of the few white 'hold over' civil rights workers still in Alabama during this period was a perennial embarrassment to the new leaders of SCC, and we were hidden away in non-strategic rural posts and totally excluded from any decision-making, indeed from any information at all, save what was deemed absolutely necessary.

3. *The extinction of the Negro farmer in southwest Alabama: A survey of relations between Blackbelt farmers and US Department of Agriculture* (1968) and *Hunger and malnutrition in southwest Alabama: A survey of 500 black households* (1968). Selma, AL: Southern Rural Research Project.

4. VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) was founded in 1964 as a domestic Peace Corps, aimed at seeking some solutions to urban and rural poverty through personal contacts between isolated poor communities and educated and idealistic trained volunteers. Since 1965 over 120,000 Americans have served as Vista volunteers. During the Reagan administration Vista was officially dismantled but its basic structure and its philosophy of community empowerment and self-determination were kept alive by grassroots organizations.

5. This history is recorded in chapter 3 of Nancy Callahan's *The Freedom Quilting Bee* (1987, University of Alabama Press).

6. However, in addition to completing the surveys that were submitted in the lawsuit, we were able to write a draft of an article for *Ramparts* magazine in the southern roots of northern discontent. See Linda and Gary Hunt and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 'Hunger in the welfare state: Nixon's guaranteed annual poverty' in *Ramparts*, Fall 1969.

and brown stair steps or black and dark yellow stars or pink and green spirals. Having just returned from Peace Corps work in Brazil, I could readily see the African diaspora at work but with a difference, for the geometric designs seemed to me as much Native American as African. The more you looked at the quilts the more the shapes drew you into a guessing game or a projective test – Was this meant to be a rabbit's foot? Was this one an umbrella? A man's bow-tie? A bear's claw? A two-step pyramid?

Though the nights in Gees Bend could be cool and we had no sleeping bags, which we had left behind for the larger civil rights crew in Selma, we decided to air out the musty 'blankets' (as we called them) and tack them to the walls of our common room. Almost immediately our spirits lifted and our writing improved. When Roman Pettway learned what we had done with the old throwaway quilts, he introduced me to the 'mother' of all Gees Bend quilt-makers, 'Mama Willie', and to her middle-aged daughter, Estelle Witherspoon, who in turn introduced me to several members of the newly formed Freedom Quilting Bee – including Mattie Ross, with whom I later lived for a spell in Gees Bend. Thus began my long love affair with Gees Bend quilts.

My appreciation of the art form was direct and unmediated by any skill or knowledge of the craft. As the granddaughter of immigrants from Eastern Europe (Bohemia) and raised in a European immigrant ghetto in Brooklyn and later in Queens, New York City, rural Alabama was my first contact with 'indigenous' American culture. The older women of Gees Bend, the granddaughters of slaves, were 'core' Americans (as I understood it then), a historically culturally isolated population in which men could discourse at length on American musical traditions (gospel, shape note and blues), and the women on the arts of American cookery, especially pastry-making (apple, sweet potato and pumpkin pies), while they practised a long-standing tradition of American quilt-making, all of which had escaped my extended family of more recent American vintage. The first Black-American home I lived in was Jesse Brook's rough-hewn log cabin in Coy, Alabama. 'Wow!' I remember thinking as I woke up that first morning on a quilt-covered, apparently Civil War-issue army cot in a turkey run connecting the two separate com-

munal rooms of the cabin, to the sound of Jesse strumming 'cotton mill blues' and the fragrant smell of porridge (or more likely buttered grits) and slab bacon cooking in a cast iron pot over an open fire, 'I feel like Abe Lincoln!' It was in rural Alabama that I first raised questions about the Black origins of some iconic American traditions, a topic that had, of course, occupied Herskovits and many other New World anthropologists. But to me it was a unique, if unsophisticated, revelation: American = Black.

The women of Gees Bend have been quilting at least since the beginning of the 20th century. They quilted for recreation, for emotional comfort and for warmth. In the mid-1960s, with the arrival of the civil rights movement in rural Alabama, the women of Gees Bend, Alberta and surrounding communities began to quilt for freedom. They were encouraged to do so by an extraordinary Episcopalian priest named Francis X. Walter, himself a civil rights worker, who saw, in the quilts airing on front porches, hanging on lines outside dilapidated shacks and draped over tattered sofas, not only objects of extraordinary beauty but a traditional 'craft' that could possibly offer the people of Gees Bend an alternative to subsistence-based farming, especially in the wake of a US dam project that had flooded the best farmlands in the Bend.

Led by a small group of women imbued with a sense of destiny and a strong faith in God's providence, the women of Gees Bend gradually built the cooperative into something of an economic mainstay of the community. Before the Freedom Quilting Bee the household income of Gees Benders was about \$1200 a year. Afterwards, an active quilter working with the Bee could double that income. So in the view of many Gees Benders, the Quilting Bee (modest as it was) seemed very much a godsend. But of course there were problems. Some of the men of Gees Bend did not want their women away from home during the day and shirking their household duties. The women had fun at the Bee, made close friendships, and began to organize around other issues like education and long-frustrated demands for better housing, paved roads, and telephone lines. Some conservatives of Gees Bend worried that the Bee was turning the heads of the ladies, making them a bit too free, too modern, too liberated. Meanwhile, there were good years and bad. The collective could only survive if the orders were steady and not dependent on the

Fig. 6. Inside a shack in Wilcox County, Alabama, 1968. Newspaper was used creatively for insulation, decoration and protection. 'The hants (ghosts) don't bother us so much if we paper our walls with lots of newsprint. They especially like the comic strips,' I was told.



JOFFEY CLARK

7. Sister Corita, a close friend and collaborator of the Berrigan brothers, Philip and Dan, who were at the time waging a Bakhtinian guerrilla war in America against the Vietnam War, outraged conservative Bostonians when they realized that her commissioned op art painting on an ugly utility tower near the Charles River was (on close inspection) a large portrait of Ho Chi Minh.

8. The Freedom Quilting Bee was a loosely structured cooperative. Individuals moved in and out of it freely. They quilted collectively, five or six people sitting around a table, talking and sewing at the Bee headquarters, a simple concrete building located a few miles down the road from Boykin in Alberta, Alabama. But women were, of course, free to quilt at home on their own quilts. Most quilters did both collective and individual work simultaneously. When William Arnett, the vernacular art collector from Atlanta, Georgia, went to Gees Bend in 1998 he had his heart set on buying up as many of the 'independent' quilts as possible, egged on by Mary McCarthy, who, like Arnett, felt that the Freedom Quilting Bee had 'corrupted' the vernacular art of Gees Bend quilting through the demands for quality control made by the retailers. This had resulted in a reduction of the repertoire to a few standardized patterns and the use of new and synthetic materials that were sent to the Bee from New York and Chicago (the introduction of corduroys and synthetics), London (the Liberty fabrics), and Amsterdam (the African dashiki fabrics).

whims of a public that was perpetually hungry for new fads and fashions, as the original New York- and Chicago-based consumers soon proved to be.

Marketing freedom quilts

After leaving the Bend in the late summer of 1968 I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts and soon after I wrote to Estelle Witherspoon, the head of the Bee, asking her if she had some 'extra' quilts, 'seconds' or 'thirds', perhaps, that I could try to sell locally to some craft shops. Within two weeks two huge boxes arrived at my apartment. The suggested prices ranged from \$15.00 to \$35.00. 'What are you going to do with all these, Nance?' Jude, my roommate, asked me, frowning darkly. 'I thought that you might want to sell some of them at Liberty House,' I replied, referring to the international crafts shop on Mass Avenue where she worked. Reluctantly at first, Jude picked through the stacked piles of quilts until her sharp eye fell on an exceptional quilt that came with a little yellow card attached with the name of the quilter and the design, in this case 'Jacob's Ladder'. Another of her selections was a crazy quilt called, appropriately, 'Joseph's Coat of Many Colors'. This design in particular sold well during the 1970s and 1980s: a Bloomingdale's brochure compared it to a stained-glass window.

After Jude had made her choice, I went door to door in Harvard Square with little success. While many of the retailers admired them and recognized the Gees Bend quilts as mould-breaking, they were stymied by the problem of used, second-hand fabrics, the uneven sizes and irregular stitching that would, they thought, make the quilts difficult to market. Finally the young, hip manager of one shop, the Door Store on the corner of Boylston Street near Harvard Square, agreed to take some eight or nine of the quilts on consignment. She thought she could persuade the owners of the shop that, if nothing else, it could be seen as a way of supporting the civil rights struggle still going on in the Deep South. Seeing their potential as art objects I tried to interest the Botoph Gallery on Newberry Street, Boston, in having a show, with an opening and a catalogue. Though Elizabeth Hubbard, the

savvy owner of the gallery, who frequently displayed the political-pop art serigraphs of the radical nun Sister Corita Kent' and her protégé, Mickey Meyers (who specialized in posters of Crayola crayons) immediately recognized the resemblances between her favourite artists and the Southern quilters of Gees Bend, she was doubtful. The quilts were so large, and her exhibition space was small. 'Might we just display one?' she wondered, but the plan never did come to fruition.

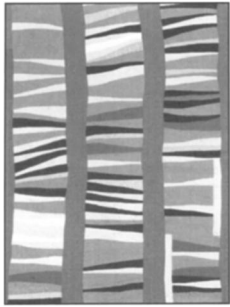
By now, my love affair with Gees Bend quilts had become something of an obsession, and I applied for a small loan with the help of a Harvard Business School consultant. The intense young man could not suppress a laugh when he learned that I intended to rent a small storefront on the 'wrong end' of Cambridge Street, near Somerville, and to fill the shop with a single product – African-American quilts. I told him that I could afford the \$200 month rent if I could just sleep (illegally) behind the counter every night. I left that meeting with my head bowed.

Discouraged but not yet beaten, I persuaded my friend Jude to rent a car for a few days so that we might take the quilts into the deep 'interior' of Massachusetts and Vermont, to shopkeepers and antique store dealers, people who really understood quality crafts and the art of quilting. But something akin to a bitter culture war would take place each time I brought out a sample of those decidedly, antagonistically un-Yankee Gees Bend quilts. 'They don't look right,' we were told. 'Their method is poor – look at the stitches, they're large, uneven, not even straight.' 'The colours are garish; they startle rather than soothe. Who would want to sleep under something like this?' These New England WASPS had their own ideas about quilt-making, something along the lines of Amish quilts – disciplined, structured, even-tempered designs. Wonderfully beautiful, of course, in their own way. But I was frustrated that these potential buyers could not see the ragged rhythms, the counterpoint, the atonal, call-and-response style of these African-American beauties. 'Think Georgia Sea Islands,' I tried to convince the straight-laced antique store dealers, evoking a similar tradition that they might recognize. But the antique dealers of Vermont just could not (at that time) think out of the box. These Gees Bend quilts represented a paradigm shift for which they were not yet cognitively and sensually prepared.

From commodities to gifts to art

At the end of this unsuccessful trip we packed up our Gees Bend quilts and headed home with me finally admitting defeat. 'I guess it was a weird idea – like bringing coals to Newcastle, except that our coals glowed in florescent colours,' I commented to Jude. I promised her that I would notify Estelle Witherspoon that Boston and rural New England just weren't ready for their amazing creations. Then Jude and I split the remaining quilts and we sent a check for the entire first batch, explaining to Estelle that, sadly, it would have to be the last batch as well.

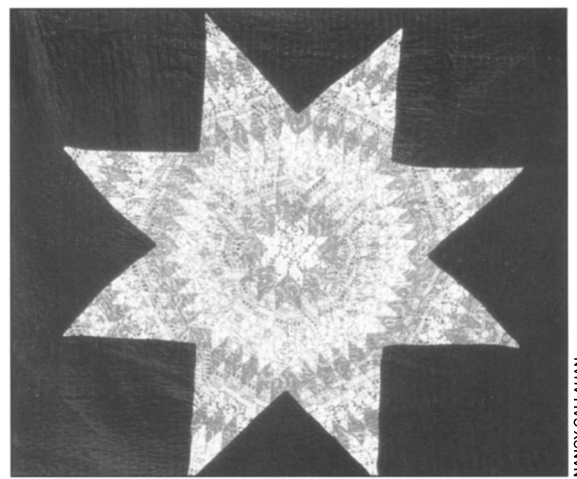
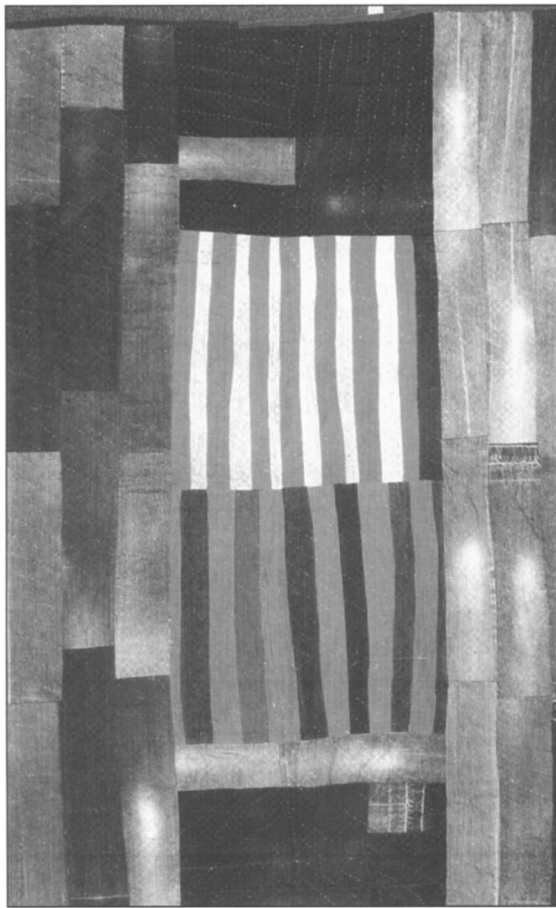
In subsequent years the quilts became my signature gift for all family engagements, weddings and births until I was finally down to just three of my favourites which I could not bear to part with, and these I carted cross-country several times during the 1970s and 80s when, now with my husband and three small children, we followed my academic jobs to Texas, North Carolina, Massachusetts and finally California. Of the remaining quilts my favourite was a red, brown and yellow pyramid, and it was one of the first belongings that would be unpacked in a new home. It wasn't home without it. The children snuggled under it, made tents out of it, and as the quilt aged it moved from wall hanging to bedspread to beach and picnic blanket to child's toy and even (I am



Figs 7 and 8 (above and right): Traditional Gees Bend quilt patterns. A detail of the pattern shown above is reproduced on the back cover.

Fig. 9 (far right): A Freedom Quilting Bee design made with fabrics from Liberty of London, obtained for the Bee through one its New York agents. The quilt was donated by Helen and Robert Cargo to the Birmingham Museum of Art.

Fig. 10. Estelle Witherspoon at the headquarters of the Freedom Quilting Bee, 1968.



ashamed to admit) to dog's blanket. When two of the last three quilts were reduced to shreds and patches they were cut up and used to cover a frayed armchair or to add colour to a coffee table. You see, I could never think of just throwing the whole thing out.

The original quilters of Gees Bend girded themselves with memories, not all of them sweet. They used whatever cloth remnants were at hand, including burlap, denim, corduroy, wool, terry cloth and, later, synthetic scraps. In the early days the patches were cut (or, when lacking scissors, simply torn) from used work clothes and from old gunny sacks used for picking cotton. To my eye the most beautiful quilts were those made from the sweat-stained work clothes of husbands who (all too often prematurely and 'suddenly') passed on. In snipping away at the familiar workaday denim overalls and figuring into the design the faded square of a husband's pocket or the ragged edges of a worn pants leg, the women could stay in touch during the day and at night wrap themselves in the feel and lingering scent of their loved one long after he was gone. I suppose it was the bodily/embodyed quality of the Gees Bend quilts that gave me the title ('Anatomy of a quilt') for this reflection. In a way I think of the quilts as the Holy Shrouds of Boykin/Gees Bend.

When I finally screwed up the courage to make my pilgrimage from Berkeley to New York City in January 2003 to see the Gees Bend exhibition, I asked my old civil rights buddy, Linda Hunt, to come up from Philadelphia where she now lives so that we could view the exhibition together. An illness prevented her from making the trip and in the end I had to face them alone. As I climbed the stairs leading to the large hall on the second floor of the Whitney Museum and caught my first glimpse of one of the 'star' pieces of the show, 'Work Clothes with Center Medallion of Red and Yellow Strip' by Annie Mae Young, my knees buckled under me and I had to sit down, take deep breaths, and rest my head, while scores of crab-like quilt aficionados climbed over me to get to the exhibition hall. I didn't blame their haste. It is a stunningly beautiful exhibition and one that will be touring the country until 2005. Fittingly, the quilts are currently being displayed at the Mobile (Alabama) Museum of Art where friends and relatives, as well as the quilters themselves, can more easily get to them.

The 70 quilts selected from William Arnett's private collection of more than 700 Gees Bend quilts are drawn from a broad representation of the quilters of Gees Bend. A decision was made, however, by the museum curators in consultation with William Arnett, to show only two examples from the vintage Freedom Quilting Bee (FQB) days (1965-1975), on the grounds that the quality of the Freedom Quilts was lower than that of the free-spirited, creative quilts made by independent individuals (some of them members of the FQB,⁸ others not) and without any



Figs 11 and 12. Gees Bend quilts in the Scheper-Hughes Household, circa 1969-1970.



NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES

Additional reading:

Beardsley, John et al. 2002. *The quilts of Gees Bend*. Atlanta, GA: The Tinwood Alliance.

— 2002. *Gees Bend: The women and their quilts*. Atlanta, GA: The Tinwood Alliance. (Two massive catalogues accompanying the Whitney Museum Exhibition).

Fry, Gladys-Marie 2002. *Stitched from the soul: Slave quilts from the antebellum South*. Chapel Hill, NC: Chapel Hill Books.

Jones, Clive (with Jeff Dawson) 2000. *Stitching a revolution: The making of an activist*. San Francisco: Harper. (For another view of the cultural significance and politics of quilting, loss and longing via the AIDS memorial quilt project).

direction from the marketing people and buyers for Bloomingdales and Sears Roebuck. According to William Arnett, and to Deborah Singer, the curator of the Whitney exhibition whom I interviewed in New York, commercial interests had turned the quilts into mere 'commodities' that were accessible to any American family who wanted one to grace a bed or a wall, even as they provided the women of Gees Bend with a steady income (albeit a minimum wage income) for almost three decades.

Now that the quilts of Gees Bend have left New York and begun circulating to other museums and locations in the United States, their magnificence will be shared with thousands – perhaps, by the end of 2005 when the show comes to a close, with millions of visitors. Post-9/11 Americans (as I learned from my visit to the Whitney

Museum) feel especially drawn to the soft comfort and loving embrace these quilts evoke. But the obvious contradictions between preservation and destruction implied in the purchase, display and cold storage of the entire corpus of Gees Bend quilts are not easy to resolve.

The irony is that there are no quilts or quilters left in Gees Bend today. At least, that's what I was told by Deborah Singer, the exhibition curator, as we sat in the Whitney Museum café over a plastic cup of cappuccino just below the exhibition hall. 'The Arnetts bought up every last quilt. The people were eager to sell. The old quilters are arthritic and the young people have no interest in quilt-making any more,' she said. 'Actually, from our point of view, that's not so bad. Maybe its time for the people of Gees Bend to learn some new skills. Perhaps woodworking, making hand-crafted toys, something the men could do as well as the women. Frankly, I think that with this exhibition we've probably reached a saturation point with quilts. We really don't need any more Gees Bend quilts.'

Today, the remaining Gees Bend quilts are being 'preserved in storage' by a private foundation in Atlanta, Georgia set up by the Arnett family with the help of a grant from Jane Fonda. William Arnett laughed when I asked if I could possibly buy one of the quilts and he refused to tell me their market value, just that they were now beyond the reach of ordinary mortals like you and me (not to mention the people of Gees Bend). The art experts, he said, have judged the quilts to be authentic and priceless works of art.

I am sometimes asked by acquaintances if I still have any of these priceless artefacts hidden away. A single tattered Bear's Paw (though we always called it Bear's Claw) in vivid Van Gogh blue and off-white, which covered our marriage bed in more flats and small temporary homes around the country than I wish to count, is all that remains of my Gees Bend collection. It is a vintage Freedom Quilting Bee design, made from standardized cloth, most likely sent to the Bee from one of its New York or Chicago department store outlets. In other words, my last Gees Bend quilt is 'not worth anything'. And truth be told, 'Bear's Paw' was not my own favourite quilt, which is probably why it is still with me. It was not rubbed to death like the others, the 'priceless' ones. Shredded in various places, its cotton batting more out than in, Bear's Claw has long been retired. It is carefully folded in an old sailor's chest we keep in the living room. But perhaps it's time that I coax the old Bear out of hibernation, lay him gently across the foot of our bed, and dream of the Pettways of Gees Bend. ●



NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES

CIVIL RIGHTS, ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Bars and String-Pieced Columns quilt made by Jessie T. Pettway of Gees Bend, Alabama, in the 1950s. Together with Annie Mae Young's *Work-Clothes Quilt with Center Medallion of Strips* (1976), this quilt features centrally in the exhibition *The Quilts of Gees Bend, Alabama*, shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (November 2002-March 2003) and now touring the United States until 2005. The women of Gees Bend, descendants of former slaves who worked for generations on the Pettway and the Gees Brothers' cotton plantations, made quilts to remember the dead, to ward off the cold, to entertain children, and to generate a small cash income.

The civil rights movement reached Gees Bend in the mid-1960s, when Martin Luther King preached at the local Baptist church. The Bend opened its doors to an influx of young 'freedom workers', and Gees Bend ladies began to quilt for justice through a peoples' co-operative called the Freedom Quilting Bee. When King was assassinated Gees Benders provided the mule that pulled his coffin to its resting place. Eugene Witherspoon presented King's widow, Coretta Scott King, with a king-sized 'Double Star' quilt as a gift from the Freedom Quilting Bee.

In this issue Nancy Scheper-Hughes recalls her years as a civil rights worker in Gees Bend, her enchantment with these quilts and her failed attempts to market them for \$30 each in Boston and New England, only to see them become priceless works of art some 30 years later.

Jessie T. Pettway is amazed that her old quilt, made in the traditional way from her family's discarded clothes, ripped carefully by hand and then re-sewn into a pattern that 'volunteered' itself, appeared on the front pages of the *New York Times*. A 'Southern white gentleman' named William Arnett approached Ms Pettway (and dozens of her neighbours) in 1998 and purchased most of the remaining quilts in Gees Bend. Jessie, aware that some journalists feel that she was duped and exploited, responds: 'I was just going along thinking that these quilts wasn't nothing... I was surprised [they] paid us as much as they did for my old quilts... I have got respect now for my work... To be paid so much for them and to see them be in museums and in magazines and newspapers makes me feel real good... The museum and the books [museum catalogues] have upgraded us. We are all so proud... We were celebrated! I told my own story about my own self... These quilts, they brought us from a mighty long way. And I hope we have a longer way to go...'

at

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