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Jane Hindman

*CUNY Guttman Community College*

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"A little space, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness": African American Quiltmaking as Metaphor in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Jane E. Hindman

*It is an easy job to write stories with black people in them. I look beyond the people to see what makes black literature different ... whatever that ineffable quality is that is curiously black.*  
(Morrison, "Interview" McKay 427)



Anonymous. Log Cabin Quilt, c. 1870. Private Collection, New York. Permission granted by Williams College Museum of Art, 1994. Though composed of costly silk, this late nineteenth-century quilt depicts a rustic subject: black families; log cabin homes.

In her article "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," Deborah McDowell notes the "lack of precision and detail" that has marked Black feminist scholarship and theories. She posits what she sees as one essential for a more precise and complete definition: like feminist criticism in general, Black feminist theory can be seen as "a 'corrective, unmasking the omissions and distortions of the past-the errors of a literary critical tradition that arise from and reflect a culture created, perpetuated, and dominated by men'" (186). In order to capture the aesthetic which is uniquely Black, however, McDowell says Black feminist critics must

have an informed handle on Black literature and Black culture in general. ... This footing in Black history and culture serves as a basis for the study of the literature. Termed "contextual" by theoreticians ... [this] approach to Black women's literature exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published, and reviewed. ... [However,] while insisting on the validity, usefulness, and necessity of contextual approaches to Black women's literature, the Black feminist critic must not ignore the importance of rigorous textual analysis. (192-3)

Introducing the second essential ingredient in her recipe for a new Black feminist criticism, McDowell cites as "particularly useful ... Lillian Robinson's suggestion that 'a radical kind of textual criticism ... could usefully study the way the texture of sentences, choice of metaphors, patterns of exposition and narrative relate to [feminist] ideology'" (194, McDowell's insertion).

When she outlines a methodology for rigorous textual analysis, McDowell supports Barbara Smith's recommendation that Black feminist critics identify "as many thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities among Black women writers as possible" (194) and herself identifies some of these themes and motifs. Often citing the works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison as her examples, McDowell points to the "theme of the thwarted female artist figure, ... the use of 'clothing as iconography' ... [and] the motif of the journey" (194). I want to suggest another striking and recurrent "thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonality" among Black women writers that can be added to McDowell's list: the motif of quiltmaking, "the putting-together of scraps and fragments of no [apparent] value, making of them something new" (Parr 50). As I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, an examination of unique African American quiltmaking practices and distinctive contributions to the art form can provide some of the contextual understanding of a Black aesthetic that McDowell sees as essential. Further, I hope to confirm that the same sort of rigorous textual analysis others have used to illustrate how the metaphor of quiltmaking informs the work of Alice Walker can also be applied to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

In order to contextualize the practice of African American quiltmaking, we need to examine its origins in the days of slavery, for this context is what necessitated some of the unique techniques and aesthetics that distinguish some African American quilts from any others. At best, however, the research on slave quiltmaking techniques is sketchy and speculative. Because slaves were prohibited, even severely punished, for exhibiting literacy skills,

we do not have many first-hand accounts of slave women's lives. Among our richest sources of information are the thousands of interviews with ex-slaves and their descendants that were conducted in the 1930's under the auspices of the WPA Federal Writers Project, and from these interviews one can piece together a picture of the kinds and amounts of slave women's textile work. (Ferrero 44)

As a result of this enforced cultural code-switching, slaves often made two distinct types of quilts (a bifurcation that probably also accounts for the difficulties contemporary quilt researchers have in identifying any one definitive style of African American quilt). In their capacity as seamstresses for their mistresses, slaves stitched traditional quilts in the same intricate, exacting, repetitive patterns and techniques cherished by white quilters. For their own beds, slaves also did patch-work, but these quilts required greater ingenuity, dexterity, and resourcefulness given the economy of means, time, goods that restricted their construction. Left only with the stolen or gift scraps of the fabric from the "good quilts" that slaves made for their mistresses or with the strips or squares they cut from their own worn out clothes or breeches, slave quilters were forced to improvise; "the ingenuity with which slaves used 'throw away' or discarded goods is astonishing" (Fry 43). Creating original patterns for their personal quilts, slave quilters developed quilting techniques that allowed for broken patterns, multiple rhythms and color schemes, large stitches that facilitated quick completion of a project, and spontaneous piecing of often unique color combinations. African traditions and folklore likewise accounted for some distinctive techniques in slaves' personal quilts.

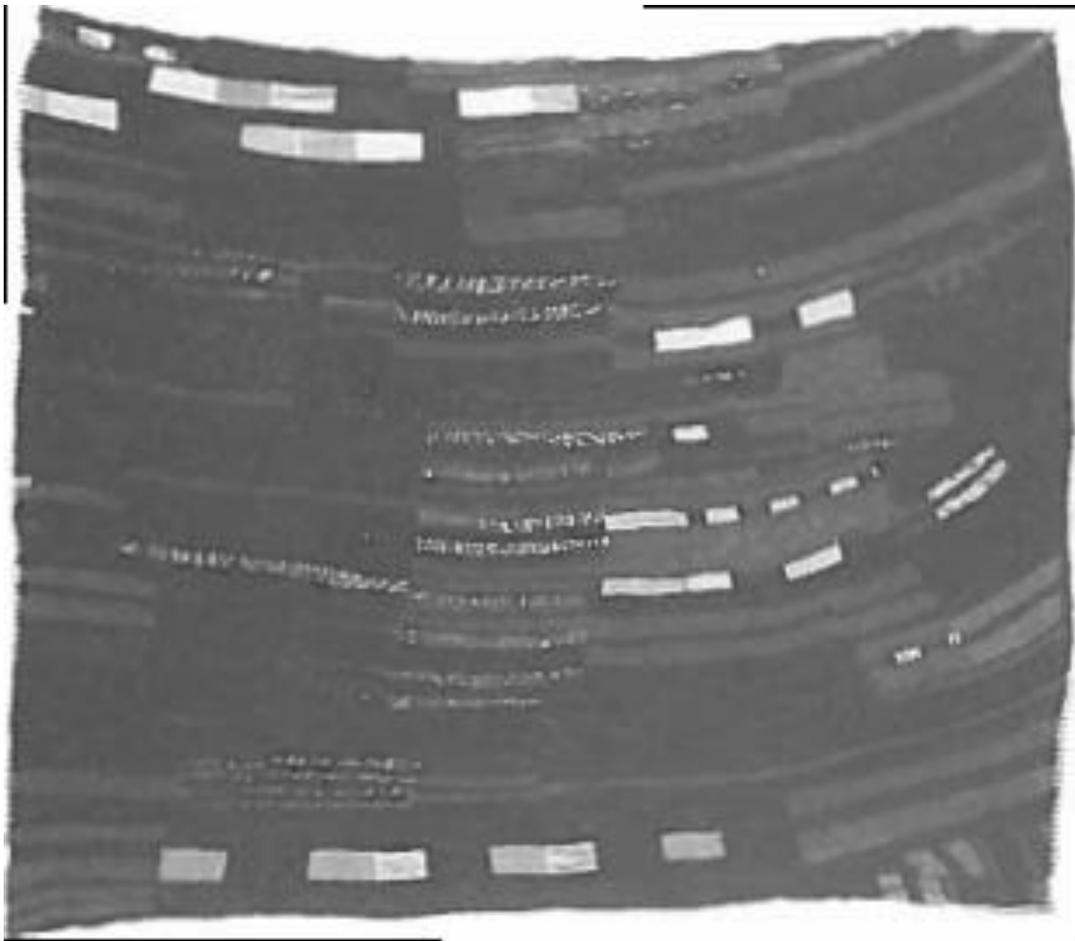
It was considered bad luck to make a perfect quilt [like those their mistresses probably demanded] or to use straight, unbroken lines. This attitude reflects the folk belief of plantation slaves that evil spirits follow straight lines and also that an imperfect quilt would distract the devil in the night. (Fry 67)

Because sufficient numbers of contemporary African American quilters have maintained these early techniques, some quilt researchers have deemed these improvisational characteristics as definitive of African American quilts:

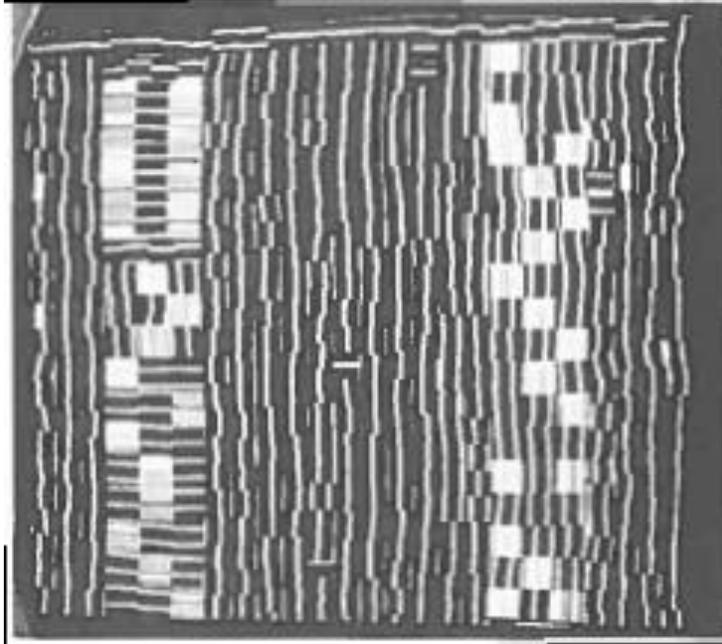
Sometimes colors are symmetrically or consistently arranged. More often scraps are pieced together as they come out of a bag or box, with aesthetic decisions made at the last minute. Because [African American! quiltmakers usually work with salvage materials of many patterns and colors, this piecing technique encourages asymmetrical designs and multiple patterns. (Wahlman, "African" 76) (See Figures 1 and 2)

Many black quilters gravitate to the unexpected. Ms. Horton [quilt historian and folklorist] puts it this way: "Because the aesthetic tradition of black communities encourages a high degree of personal expression and creativity, often black quiltmakers produce works that are particularly unusual, non-traditional, even eccentric. Accustomed to being ignored by whites, black quiltmakers have felt free to interpret their stories through techniques selected to please themselves rather than some out-side audience." (Grudin, "Diversity" 42) [See Figures 3 and 4]

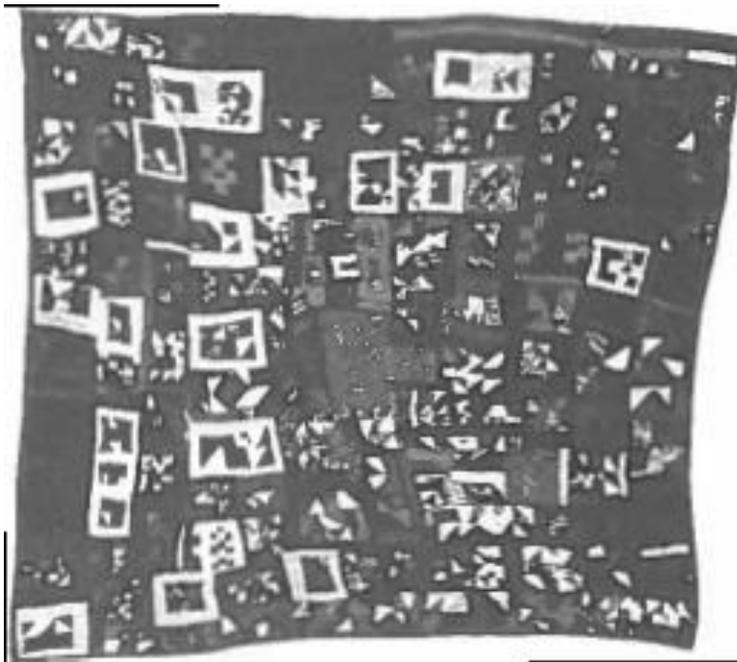
Thus, "the quilt as interpretive sign opens up a world of difference, a non-scripted territory whose creativity with fragments is less a matter of 'artistic choice' than of economic and functional necessity" (Baker and Pierce-Baker 714). Definitely African American or not, expertise with bricolage has been passed on through generations of proud slave and free quiltmakers and is certainly an important inheritance of contemporary African American quilters. Some claim, however, that



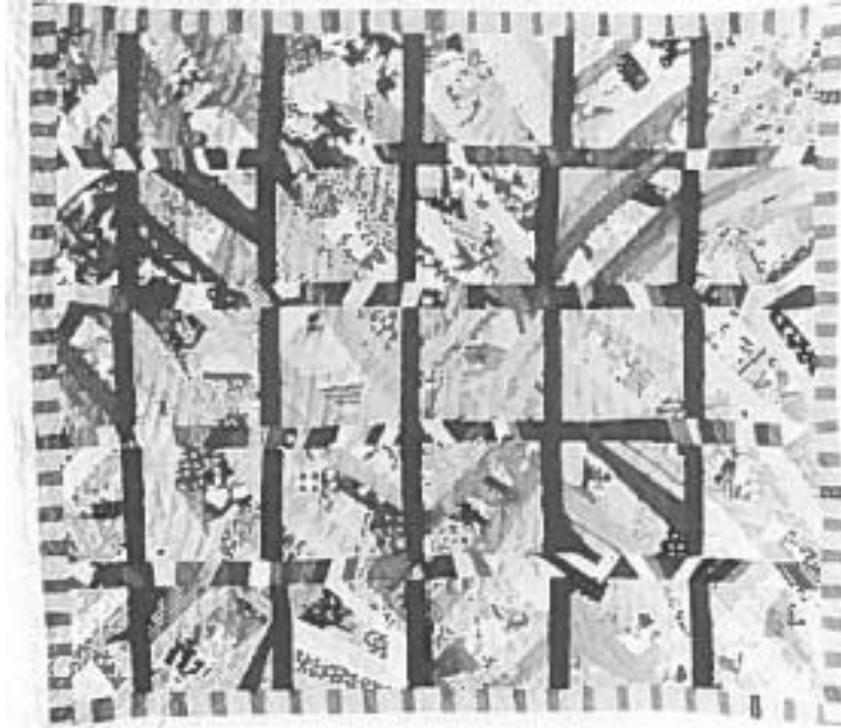
*Figure 1. String. Pieced by Rosie Lee Tompkins. (Leon 75). Permission granted by the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1994. This contemporary quilt demonstrates the use of extremely narrow scraps that give the technique its name. Because slaves' mistresses discarded string scraps as useless even for quiltmaking, string quilts were common among slave quiltmakers and have remained a popular choice for contemporary African American quiltmakers.*



*Figure 2. Compound Strip. Cora Lee Hall Brown. (Leon 66). Permission granted by the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1994. Strip quilts, comprised of several bands of cloth sewn together and then cut and rearranged into larger strips, are common among African American quiltmakers. Brown's arrangement demonstrates how asymmetrical designs and multiple patterns emerge from the stripping technique.*



*Figure 3. Framed Improvisational Block. Pieced by Rosie Lee Tompkins (Leon 43). Permission granted by the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1994. In her widely varied size, shape, and color patterning among these blocks, Tompkins demonstrates her individuality and penchant for non-traditional quilting techniques.*



*Figure 4. String Strip. Arbie Williams. (Leon 76). Permission granted by the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1994. By combining differently patterned and colored cloths with various string and strip quilting techniques, Williams creates complex movement and multiple rhythms in her contemporary quilt.*

this expertise has evolved into an aesthetic choice for contemporary quilters even if they have the means for the materials of a more conventional quilt:

African-American quilters prefer the sporadic use of the same material in several squares when the material could have been used uniformly because they prefer variation to regularity. "Off-beat patterning" serves to ... describe how Afro-American quilters control the improvisations and the term "multiple rhythms" describes how the quilters multiply the off-beat patterns and "carry them to complex aesthetic solutions," thus creating the impression of several patterns moving in different directions or multiple rhythms within the context of controlled design ... the symmetry comes through the diversity. (Brown 923-4)

However, while noting the emphasis on unique expression afforded by the contemporary examples of the African American tradition in quilting, we must not forget the original context of slave quilting, the political realities that demanded such economic ingenuity: "by the nineteenth century, slaves were generally given commercial blankets every third year. Quilts ... helped compensate for such meager supplies" (Fry 71); "another pre-[Civil]war account states that 'on very few estates are the colored people provided with any bedding; the best masters give only a blanket'" (Ferrero 45).

Another essential aspect of the context of slave quilters' creative responses to functional necessity is the opportunity that quilting afforded for women, men, and children to gather together

and share stories, gossip about plantation events, and news of escaped or captured fellow slaves. "Any gathering in the quarters for quilt-making . . . 'provided the means to build community through shared ritual,' " the means for teams of women to collaborate in order to provide the bedding needed by slave families; for the traditional games and singing, laugh and talk, food and folk so often lacking in slaves' quotidian existence; for courtship game activities that took place after the quilting (Fry 64, 75-80).

Especially in winter, when there was less field work to do, women would go from cabin to cabin to help each other make the necessary bedcovers for their families. Such self-initiated gatherings ... could be crucial to the slaves' psychological survival. Historian James Rawick argues that it was through such 'nonregimented social relations' that slaves 'created and recreated themselves,' achieving a sense of community. Given the constant threat to the black family unit under slavery, where members might be sold away, that sense of community was essential. (Ferrero 48)

Quilts provided freedom in yet more literal ways: a few documented cases illustrate that some slave women were able to buy their own and their family members' freedom with their needlework skills. "Probably the best known of these is Elizabeth Keckley, who became seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln. At one point in her life as a slave, Keckley supported seventeen people by her needlework skills" (Ferrero 45). As a means to another sort of freedom, patchwork was also used to send messages on the underground railroad; quilts containing the color black were hung on fences or lines to indicate safe houses for runaways (Fry 65).

This textual function of quilts points to an important African dimension of slave life and its importance in shaping the African American tradition. As Michelle Cliff describes this function,

the idea of levels of meaning, the deeper levels of meaning known only by initiates, the decoration of seemingly ordinary object with images of power, so that the ordinary object becomes endowed with this power, are things which [Harriet Powers'] quilt holds in common with the *mbugari* [symbolic appliqued cloths] of Ejagham women. (111)

Drawn to these deeper levels of meaning in which an ordinary object becomes endowed with power, Toni Morrison cites a "reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture" as one of the techniques she uses in order to capture those characteristics "other than melanin and subject matter ... [that] may make me a black writer" ("Unspeakable Things" 23, 19). In *Beloved* she uses the material object of a quilt itself, as well as the metaphor of specifically African American practices in quilting, as ways to render the complicated realities in the history and tradition of African Americans.

Several commentators, for instance Elsley and Tavormina have shown how the quilting metaphor informs the work of other African American women writers, particularly Alice Walker. Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker have adroitly developed the notion of the quilt as an "interpretive window" (714) on Alice Walker's work. They capture the essential African American aesthetic of piecing when they describe "quilting [as] ... tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos .... A patchwork quilt ... stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora" (706). Baker and Pierce-Baker further explain that, because the history of African Americans has been one of "lives conducted in the margin, ever beyond an easy and accepted

wholeness," the quilts made of the fragments of these lives offer a means by which the scraps can be joined. They assure us that

the sorority of quiltmakers ... possesses a sacred wisdom that it hands down from generation to generation of those who refuse the center for the ludic and unconfined space of the margins. Those positioned outside the sorority and enamored of whole-ness often fail to comprehend the dignity inherent in the quiltmakers' employment of remnants and conversion of fragments into items of everyday use .... [African-American women writers'] privileging of a distinctively woman's craft ... stands as both a sign of the potential effects of black women's creativity in America, and as an emblem of the effectiveness of women's skillful confrontation of patches and frag-ments in their lives. (713, 720)

Barbara Christian also notes black women writers' use of quotidian metaphors to capture the essence of African American life: "the denigrated *Other* ... struggles to declare the truth and therefore create the truth in forms that exist for her ... the creation of that truth also changes the perception of all those who believe they are the norm" (160). The very specific and "curiously black" metaphor of the African American quilt in particular illustrates best, I think, what Christian describes as the "deep philosophical reordering that is occurring in this literature" (162-3). *Beloved* abundantly evidences Morrison's belief in the redemptive powers of selective piecing and patching together of scraps of the past to create a truth in forms that exist for African Americans. Close textual analysis reveals the central importance of the quilting and piecing metaphor in the novel.

From the first paragraph of *Beloved*, we are pitched into a world disruptive and startling: "the reader [Morrison tells us] is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign" ("Unspeakable" 32). The novel's first reference to quilts is also found in the first paragraph: "first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them" (3). This is quite an unusual way to speak of a quilt: to mention neither quilt squares nor colors, neither quilt design nor pattern, but rather the packing, the batting, the unseen filler of the quilt. This "packing" might even be one of those lost slave quilts so tattered from use that it can only serve as stuffing for the next quilt, one hopefully less battered and overworked. This odd signification of a quilt contributes to what Morrison describes in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" as her goal in the novel's opening:

I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. [The reader is] snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense, (32)

without a quilt or a blanket or even the scraps to make one, but rather with only quilt packing and unspeakable memories to take as birthright from place to place.

On the second page, Morrison's narrator gives us direct explanation of why this world offers so little worth taking into the next; speaking of Baby Suggs, she says, "Her past had been like her present—intolerable—and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy she had left for pondering color" (4):

It was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate-colored, the floor, earth-brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown, and gray wool—the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange look wild—like life in the raw. (38)

Throughout, the novel contains very little color. This is, Morrison says, "color seen for the first time, without its history" ("Unspeakable Things" 33). In fact, the shattered world of *Beloved* is so anemic that a poor, white-trash girl, Amy Denver, is willing to travel all the way to Boston for just a scrap of carmine velvet. In a brief moment of glad anticipation, Stamp Paid spies a spot of color one day, but his find—the "red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair still 'dinging to its bit of scalp"—so disturbed him that, thinking of Baby's habit of pondering color, "he hoped she stuck to blue, yellow, maybe green and never fixed on red" (180-1). As for Sethe's sense of color, "one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it" (39).

Into this bleached, ghostly world comes *Beloved*, who is immediately born into the keeping room by her soft new feet.

Once there she collapsed on Baby Suggs' bed. Denver removed her hat and put the quilt with two squares of color over her feet. ... It took three days for *Beloved* to notice the orange patches in the darkness of the quilt ... She seemed totally taken with those faded scraps of orange, even made the effort to lean on her elbow and stroke them. An effort that quickly exhausted her, so Denver re-arranged the quilt so its cheeriest part was in the sick girl's sight line. (54)

In addition to the succor of the quilt of the past—the one that had belonged to Baby Suggs—storytelling sustains *Beloved*, an activity that "amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased *Beloved*) because every mention of her past life hurt" (59). Increasingly insatiable, *Beloved* craves the painful stories of the past that require sacrifice. For Denver the oblation is "giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her ... nursing *Beloved*'s interest like a lover whose pleasure it was to overfeed the loved. The dark quilt was there with them because *Beloved* wanted it with her when she slept" (78). *Beloved* gorges herself on the quilt and the stories, leaving Denver and Sethe hollow with hunger pangs.

In one of her early tales for *Beloved*, Sethe relates the history of her wedding dress, the one she surreptitiously made even though her white owners didn't permit her a ceremonious wedding. This story illustrates one of Sethe's literal experiences with piecing together fragments:

I took to stealing fabric, and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe. The top was from two pillow cases in her [the mistress'] mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in, and one of her old sashes we used to test the flatiron on. Now the back was a problem for the longest time. Seem like I couldn't find a thing that wouldn't be missed right away. Because I had to take it apart afterwards and put all the pieces back where they were. (59)

This story offers us the first clue as to the kind of piecing together of the past Sethe needs, how she should revise the dark quilt we encounter at the novel's outset. We recognize early on that Beloved's demands exhaust Sethe and Denver. The two orange squares of Baby's dark quilt are enough to quiet Beloved; the other pieces of that dark quilt, like Sethe's wedding dress, need to be disassembled, put back where they belong.

Another early clue to the kind of piecing that might hold together the fragmented world of 124 is the role model Baby Suggs offers. Before schoolteacher comes to the house on Bluestone Road and before she decides to crawl under the quilt and ponder color, Grandma Baby had been Sethe's sustenance, had

led Sethe to the keeping room ... bathed her in sections ... sat next to her and stitched gray cotton .... After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt ... greased the flowering back and pinned a double thickness of cloth to the inside of the newly stitched dress. (93)

Baby Suggs is the wise elder, the senior quilter who shows her daughter-in-law how to manipulate cloth and needle, heart and hand, to ease the pain of the "flowering back," how to pin a double thickness of cloth over the wounds of the past to keep them from bleeding into the newly stitched present. In times past when Sethe had not been able to hold together herself, it was Baby who showed Sethe how to connect the fragments of a slave woman's life, who "refurbished the baby faces of Howard and Buglar and kept them whole because in her [Sethe's] dreams she saw only their parts in trees .... [But after] nine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs ... [Sethe] demanded more: an arch built or a robe sewn. Some fixing ceremony" (86). Overwhelmed by memories of a past so insufferable its events stop even Baby's big heart, Sethe needs "some advice about how to keep on with a brain greedy for news nobody could live with in a world happy to provide it" (95). So she pilgrimages to the clearing in hope of finding wholeness again.

But the ceremony that does take place in the clearing, the "robe sewn," does not bring the relief that Sethe hopes for; it is during this trip that she realizes who Beloved really is. Afterwards

wrapped in quilts and blankets before the cooking stove ... it was then, when Beloved finished humming [the lullaby that Sethe had invented and sung only to her children], that Sethe recalled the click—the settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them. (175)

Once Sethe recognizes the quilt made when these pieces fall into place, realizes that Beloved is her murdered baby girl come back, she thinks, "I don't have to remember nothing .... I can forget it all now because ... you came back here to me and I was right all along: there is no world outside my door" (183-4). The image evoked by the description of specially designed and placed pieces is certainly familiar to a skilled piecer who will recognize the perfection inherent in such a quilt. And in certain ways connecting for someone else the pieces that have been planned to fit requires less ingenuity than spontaneous connection. But perfect quilts are absolute; they leave no room for improvisation, for justifying circumstances or confining contexts. This "perfect quilt," composed of those pieces of the past that click into place, does not distract the devil; its lines are too straight, its design too obsessively planned.

Its design has proves too much for Paul D. And so too for Sethe. "Wrapped in a timeless present," Sethe becomes paralyzed. She does have to remember as she never did before. She must remember the first time hummingbird needles stuck into her hair, the time she never told of when schoolteacher instructed the boys to write down her animal characteristics. She says to Beloved, "This is the first time I'm telling it and I'm telling it to you because it might help explain" (193). Sethe is forced to remember so she can explain why when schoolteacher came into the yard, "she just flew ... Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out away, over there where no one could hurt them" (163). When Sethe finally realizes Beloved's identity "Her mind busy with the things she could forget" (191), she literally wastes away; meanwhile, Beloved, nurtured by Sethe's undeviating attention and sacrifice, grows larger and larger till she loses all proportion.

What Sethe has forgotten is how to lay it all down wherever it falls, how to know when to stop justifying and planning, how to rip apart this "perfect quilt" of memories and put all the pieces back where they were. Her oblivion blocks her former skill at breaking patterns, of knowing just how to proceed even if "the plan" is interrupted; it keeps her stuck in time-consuming and dreary repetition of the same pattern: "Even when Beloved was quiet, dreamy, minding her own business, Sethe got her going again ... It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (252). Sethe becomes so enmeshed with the past that time is frozen and her identity is lost: "sometimes coming upon them [Sethe and Beloved] ... tacking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt, it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who" (241).

This view of the past is one that Morrison terms as the "master narrative, ... the ideological script being imposed by those in authority on everybody else" ("Morrison" Moyers). This master narrative moves Paul D against his will and leaves him not knowing whether or not he's a man, separates Paul and Sethe in its greed for constant attention and care, sucks the very life out of Sethe (and Baby Suggs and Howard and Buglar), keeps Sethe and Denver and even Baby isolated from the people in the community who could give them hope. Indeed, Morrison's own description of how Beloved's ghostly presence controls readers' perceptions in the novel also describes how the master narrative controls extra-textual perception:

The fully realized presence of the haunting is both a major incumbent of the narrative and sleight of hand. One of its purposes is to keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world. ("Unspeakable" 32)

In order to undo this powerful magic, some fixing ceremony must make new forms of this old story. It is Denver who begins the reconstruction; "it was she who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn't, they all would" (239). And from the grave, Baby Suggs, Holy, gives Denver advice in her stepping off of her porch, the edge of her world. Baby says

"Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout."  
But you said there was no defense [Denver argues]. "There ain't."  
Then what do I do?  
"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (248)

When Denver does go on out the yard and finds the help from other women that she and her family need, she discovers her own womanhood, her own identity: "The trail she followed to get to that sweet thorny place was made up of paper scraps containing the handwritten names of others" (248). By following that trail, Denver is integrated back into the community. She is able to make a quilt of names of people who assist her. As Denver ventures out to find the owners of the names written on the pieces of paper, she engages in conversations that associate her with a past distinct from the unspeakable memories that Beloved has resurrected in 124. The past evoked by Denver's quilt of names includes the times when Baby Suggs, Holy, opened up her big heart and her yard to the community, times when 124 was a place of refuge rather than revenge. These memories include "the tonic mixed there that cured a relative ... the border of a pillowslip, the stamens of its pale blue flowers French-knotted in Baby Suggs' kitchen by the light of an oil lamp while arguing the Settlement Fee ... the party with twelve turkeys and tubs of strawberry smash. One said she wrapped Denver when she was a single day old and cut shoes to fit her mother's blasted feet" (249). The names on these pieces of paper give new labels to the old times of 124 and to the women in it. The reference to the Settlement Fee intimates that this sort of quilt party can even redefine the political truth of a group.

The metaphorical quilt that Denver makes is pieced of whatever material is at hand (paper) and patterned as circumstances dictate (whenever the neighbors leave food), a circumlocutory design that makes her whole despite its indirection because it reunites her with a group and gives her an adult identity. Thus, this form of distinctly African American quilting brings to mind an essential context of slave quilting, namely those quilting parties "crucial to the slaves' psychological survival ... and [through which] slaves 'created and recreated themselves'" (Ferrero 48).

Denver's metaphorical quilting of pieces of the past also brings to mind the work of researchers like Marsha Jean Darling whose article, "The Disinherited as Source," claims that the "secret" lives of generations of black women have been what sustained them. Losing these secrets, she argues, would mean losing track of "description of ordinary people doing ordinary things ... [leaving us] very little idea of what the past was like for [many of] the people who lived through it" (48). It's this past, the folklore, the cultural past of her ancestors that Denver needs; her identity as an African American woman depends on the tonics, recipes, patterns, songs that provide remedy, sustenance, and beauty; she needs these signs of the power of her female ancestors.

Without a knowledge of the past, many Black women have lacked the ability to empower a sense of self apart from the racial, class, gender, and sexual oppressions in their interactions with others. ... The circumstances that form the context for the development and transmission of behaviors and values are crucial to a deep rendering of our history. (Darling 48-9)

Darling's claims point to different types of knowledge about the past. The story of the past that oppresses, terrorizes, victimizes, and subsumes African American women's identity is a part of the Euro-American, perfectly (even obsessively) designed pattern that denies political realities as it perpetuates them. The quilt of the past that nurtures is the one loosely constructed and spontaneously pieced of stories of individual people doing "ordinary" things. Because political circumstance made these stories difficult to collect (and because of the garish light these stories shed on dark political circumstances), they are all the more precious. It is the community that provides the stories which, in turn, provide the double consciousness of the past that is crucial to Denver's survival.

In an *undoing* ceremony, the community literally dismantles Beloved, a symbol of a master narrative not shaped by the wisdom and folklore of the African American community; the fact that she has not been ordered by this community precipitates her ruin.

She was wild game, and nobody said, Get on out of here girl, and come back when you get some sense. Nobody said, You raise your hand to me and I will knock you into the middle of next week. Ax the trunk, the limb will die. Honor thy mother and father that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. I will wrap you around that doorknob, don't nobody work for you and God don't love no ugly ways. (242)

After the ceremony, Beloved explodes, "erupts into her separate parts to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (274). The success of the undoing ceremony results from the double consciousness of new world and old world remedies, on code switching of traditions:

Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. They had no idea what they would do once they got there. They just started out ... almost like a regular workday. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like ... voices of women searched for the right combinations, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (257, 259, 261)

Succored by the community's performance, Sethe is able to reconstruct her past horror. Sethe is able to relive that murderous moment when she sees a familiar hat, "hears wings, [feels] little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings" (262). As "she lowers her eyes to look again at the loving faces before her ... she sees him ... now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind" (261-2). Like a therapy ritual wherein one is empowered to reconstitute the past and redefine a formerly victimized position, the fixing ceremony facilitates Sethe's new response to what she believes to be yet another white man come to take her baby girl: she turns her rage on him rather than on herself or her children. This time, the group saves her from a murderous deed, the same community who looked the other way when schoolteacher came into the yard.

This singing event alone, however, is not enough to nurture Sethe back to a whole life. After Beloved's exorcism, Sethe, like Baby Suggs, takes to the keeping room and lies under a quilt: this keeping room's power to hold unspeakable words spoken is certainly familiar to us. So is its patched-over quilt, the very one under which Baby Suggs' big heart finally stopped. It is under this same quilt that Paul D—who has also been supported and gathered by the community during his separation from Sethe—finds her, "Lying under a quilt of merry colors" (271).

The word "merry" has not appeared before in the novel. But Sethe recovers under this merry quilt "patched in carnival colors" (272). The adjective "carnival" is reminiscent of the one carefree time when the shadows of Paul D, Sethe, and Denver all held hands, "the very day Sethe and he had patched up their quarrel, gone out in public and had a right good time—like a family" (68). This penumbra of happier days before Beloved's coming signifies a final crucial element in the reconstructed quilt of carnival colors under which Sethe lies: the essential bond between the African American man and woman. The collection of color that Sethe needs is not completed by the community alone: even lying

under it, free of Beloved's physical presence, Sethe still thinks about the ink she made with which schoolteacher recorded her animal characteristics. She needs Paul D to help her gather herself, to help her recollect her treasure, her "best thing" (273). Sethe needs Paul D to tell her "'You got to get up from here, girl'" (271), needs him to rub her feet, bathe her in sections, hold together the parts like Baby Suggs used to do; she needs to "cry and tell him things they only told each other " (272). Likewise, Paul D needs Sethe to gather his pieces and give them back to him in the right order, just as Sixo's Thirty-Mile Woman had done for him (273). We see that the right order is provided for Paul D as "he sits down in the rocking chair and examines the quilt patched in carnival colors. He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking [that] only this woman Sethe could have let him have his manhood. ... He wants to put his story next to hers" (273).

We see, then, that the right order, the revision of the master's order, is a wedding of sorts, a ceremonious joining of two stories side by side; the African American quilt consists of colorful patches stitched over the dark quilt of the colorless past, a past that can finally be put to rest. Sethe is free to do as she wished she could upon first seeing Paul D: "trust and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank" (18). For the woman to whom "the future [had been] a matter of keeping the past at bay" (43), the future is reconstructed when Paul D says

"Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomor-row." He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers.

"Me? Me?" (273)

The paradox, the double bind resulting from a world that requires her double consciousness, is that though Beloved's coming is essential to Sethe's healing, so is the community's ceremony that exorcises Beloved. Such undoing allows Sethe to take apart the quilt of the past and piece together another one that includes the knowledge that she, not Beloved nor any of her children nor even her milk, is her own best thing.

Like Alice Walker's Maggie in "Everyday Use," Sethe emerges as "the sacred figure who bears the scarifications of experience and knows how to convert patches into robustly patterned and beautifully quilted wholes" (Baker and Pierce- Baker 718). Like Denver, Sethe takes her place among the community of quilters who are piecing together the fragments of the past and providing a spiritual center to their fragmented and chaotic worlds. In uncovering and reconnecting the fragments of this past, these artists are able to rename it, reinvent it, reorder it, patching over torn and soiled pieces to make of them a work of art at once beautiful and transcendent.

This process is indicative not only of the African American quilting tradition, but of the task that Morrison accomplishes in creating *Beloved*. And though Baker's and Pierce-Baker's exploration of quilting as sign does not consider how the metaphor appears in Morrison's work, their descriptions apply as fully to *Beloved*: "The crafted fabric of [Morrison's] story is the very weave of blues and jazz traditions in the Afro-American community, daringly improvisational modes that confront breaks in the continuity of melody (or theme) [or time] by riffing" (719). Christian's description of Alice Walker's artistic process seems equally applicable to the creation of *Beloved*: "Walker is drawn to the integral and economical process of quilt making as a model for her own craft. For through it, one can create out of seemingly disparate everyday materials patterns of clarity, imagination, and beauty" (qtd. in Baker and Pierce-Baker 714). Morrison's own descriptions of her style and process rely on the images of quilting:

I fret the pieces and fragments of memory because too often we want the whole thing ... although the fragment we are remembering may be, and very probably is, the most important piece in the dream. ("Memory, Creation and Writing" 388)

And that brings me to the book that I'm writing now called *Beloved*. I had an idea that I didn't know was a book idea, but I do remember being obsessed by two or three little fragments of stories that I heard in different places. ... Now what made those stories connect, I can't explain. ("A Conversation" 583)

Like Walker, Morrison employs images of literal quilts and themes of metaphorical quilt-making as "signs of functional beauty and spiritual heritage that provide exemplars of challenging convention and radical individuality" (Baker and Pierce-Baker 714). The signs are aptly chosen. In a quilt, they may appear as patches covering worn sections of an old quilt making them functional again. In a work of literature, this flexibility may appear as "something that works on the mind in different patterns. ... A crazy quilt story is one that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels" (Walker, qtd. in Tavormina 225). This symmetry in diversity is precisely the pattern we see in the narrative structure of *Beloved*.

It is not perhaps until we have completed the novel that we can understand what its pattern is, how the seemingly random pieces fit together. Morrison's storytelling is marked by many digressions that carry the reader on a circuitous route over, around, behind, beside, beneath what would appear to be her subject. Similar to the quilts of her ancestors, Morrison's pieces are often not fitted exactly: her pattern remains rough, provocative, but not precise. For instance, the fragmented sections (200-17) spoken by the trio of women are never totally connected; they invite myriad interpretations and still remain elusive. Likewise, neither the community nor the readers really know what happens to *Beloved*. Thus, neither the novel's characters nor we as readers have a complete understanding of all of its parts. The novel's diverse cloths of African, religious, and familial histories are loosely fitted but remain open to new revelations and textures. Just as "rhythimized African American quilts may represent 'resistance to the closures of the Western technocratic way' " (Brackman 45), the narrative leaves spaces for improvisational riffs and remains open even at its end. Morrison explains this phenomenon of her own and other black writers' works as

having a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. ... There is something underneath them that is incomplete ... that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more ("Interview," McKay 429)

Like the African American past that it seeks to explore, the novel is ambiguous, open for interpretation, "thematically and structurally ... characterized by the use of inversion ... always as a rendering of how complex any truth is" (Christian 52).

And finally, like the task of reconstructing the African past or like the quilting party's responsibility to piece together enough quilts for everyone, Morrison intends the reading of her work to be a communal enterprise. Just as Paul D and Sethe, Denver and the community, quilt together their stories, just as Morrison connects pieces of the narrative, so too the reader collects scraps of information and quilts them into her own coherent and ordered pattern. Morrison makes this dear in her explanation of her language:

My writing expects, demands participatory reading. ... The reader supplies the emotions ... even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and

spaces so the reader can come into it. ... Then we come together to make this book, to feel the experience. ("Morrison," Tate 125)

Quilters join talents to complete one project and thus learn to accommodate each others' fragments and spontaneously recreate the whole; African American quilters in particular employ an economy of means that often requires patching over worn out or used up sections of a quilt, reconstructing sections as required; so too the reader of *Beloved* revises her pattern to accommodate new pieces of information as they appear. We rearrange our conceptions, our understandings, even our world picture as we become enlightened. Our (and perhaps the community's) initial view of Paul D and Sethe, our initial judgments that travel "from his cold house secret straight to her too-thick love" are reshaped, our pattern of the whole history of slavery reworked, as we learn more about the past in the pieces of their stories. As Morrison describes such shaping,

every life ... has a rhythm, a shape—there are dips and curves as well as straightaways. You can't see the contours all at once. Some very small incident that takes place ... may be the most important event that happens ... , but you don't know that ... until much later. ("Morrison," Tate 124)

Interestingly, we readers may need other readers' perspectives, insights, pieces of the pattern to be able to make sense of the whole; this process itself reflects the most desirable aspect of the communal process of quilting whereby "only in the context of the whole can each individual contribution be understood and valued. ... Yet it is in fact their individuality that makes them [readers as well as quilters] part of the community" (Brown 928). From this reliance on others for completion, we may learn "the essential lessons of the quilt: that people and actions do move in multiple directions at once" (Brown 929). The necessity of community collaboration to decode a text also reflects a functional, political necessity in an essentially oral community's storytelling traditions: "African American quilts are asymmetrical in their designs and multiple patterns partly because of a traditional technical process and because of earlier, perhaps lost, desires to confuse the reading of text-like designs for strangers or evil spirits (Wahlman, "Religious Symbolism" 40).

The message of the quilt that Morrison gives us in *Beloved* is distinct, however, from the more romantic, nostalgic notion of how to reconstruct the history of the African American past that Alice Walker's quilt metaphors imply and indeed that Morrison's earlier uses of the metaphor indicate (cf. Hindman). In her speech accepting the Melcher book award, Morrison describes the novel as a memorial to the slaves, a way to tell their individual stories and so to honor their memories; in the novel itself, however, she also claims that "This is not a story to pass on" (275).

Deciphering this paradox requires the same multiple levels of consciousness that quilting in the African American tradition requires. The message of the quilt that is presented in *Beloved*, then, suggests that embracing the past without reservation is crippling, petrifying, even lethal to African Americans. Indeed, we see the shame and inertia Paul D experiences when he is seduced by the past, allows it to ravage his present, even though "coupling with her [Beloved] wasn't even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive" (264). We see Sethe's paralysis when she is "resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, nor regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept. Like a greedy child it snatched everything up ... her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine" (70). The dominant view of African Americans' historical past—stripped of individual stories, political realities, and ceremonious male and female unions—needs to be undone, patched over, reconstructed with patches of community wisdom, African tradition and folklore, song and symbol. Clearly the community is the source of redemption in *Beloved*, for without community the individual cannot thrive. It is the past of the community and of the

individual—a rewritten past that focuses on African American cultural traditions and aesthetics—that is the one to cling to. This revision, like the quilts made in quarters and in the master's house, is a feat that requires straddling different worlds.

What Morrison seems to imply about the piecing together of scraps of the past for African Americans in particular is that it is by piecing and reconstructing a past that includes all aspects of their tradition that African Americans find redemption. It is only by first gathering the pieces of the past and then, through acts of imagination, reordering them, that African Americans can escape the terror of history, can rename themselves, retell their American history. Because of its silent acceptance of the master narrative, the mainstream view of American history often denies the truth of the past as it relates to African Americans. Thus, authors like Morrison, characters like Sethe and Baby Suggs, Paul D and Denver, indeed readers like all of us need to uncover the fragments of true history when we can, and connect them, patch over the misrepresented or decontextualized pieces as well.

The resulting quilt of the past will not be like the neat, symmetrical, color-coordinated and rigidly controlled quilts created in European-American tradition. The reality of the past for African Americans is that truth and accuracy are difficult to uncover and appear in unpredictable and non-linear ways. Thus, quilters must use them spontaneously, as they become available, for it is only in the acts of piecing them together that the pattern emerges. As Wahlman explains, African American quilting suggests that the unique way in which any culture encodes beauty in the seen world is an indispensable tool for coping with an indifferent or hostile reality ("African Symbolism" 76). African American

[q]uilted design is a form of unity wrested by the sheer force of the woman [or even man] quiltmaker's will from chaos. ... it stands as both a sign of the potential effects of black women's creativity in America, and as an emblem of the effectiveness of women's skillful confrontation of patches. (Baker and Pierce-Baker 720)

Those willing to interpret the quilt of the history of slavery that *Beloved* presents will come to understand Morrison's use of images and language as metaphorical quilting. Further, we will identify thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities between Morrison's work and that of other prominent African American women writers and discover an element essential to delineating the directions of Black feminist criticism. The quilt is an excellent metaphor for feminine experience. Contextualizing black women writers' reality within the world of the African American quilt shows that specific types of quilts are excellent metaphors for capturing "whatever that ineffable quality is that is curiously black."

*JANE E. HINDMAN is a doctoral student in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona, Tucson. In addition to her work on African American quilting and contemporary black women's fiction, her dissertation examines the ways that discursive practice and pedagogy authorize academic discourse.*

## NOTES

1. See Gladys-Marie Fry's *Stitched from the Soul* for examples of Harriet Powers' applique bible quilts (87-88) and others' quilts (44) that reveal the African influences on slave quiltmakers.
2. Fry's book also depicts well the contrasts between the ordered, color coordinated pieces slave quiltmakers produced for their owners and those they made for themselves. Refer to pp. 29, 40-1, 47-8 for excellent examples.

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