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Patchwork history : tracing artworlds in the African diaspora

Essay on interpretations of visual art in societies of the African diaspora. Author relates this to recent shifts in anthropology and art history/criticism toward an increasing combining of art and anthropology and integration of art with social and cultural developments, and the impact of these shifts on Afro-American studies. To exemplify this, she focuses on clothing (among Maroons in the Guianas), quilts, and gallery art. She emphasizes the role of developments in America in these fabrics, apart from just the African origins.

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SALLY PRICE

PATCHWORK HISTORY:
TRACING ARTWORLDS IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

This paper considers interpretations of visual art in societies of the African diaspora, setting them within the context of recent theoretical shifts in the disciplines of anthropology and art history/criticism. I will be arguing for the relevance to Afro-American studies of these broader disciplinary changes, which have fundamentally reoriented scholarship on arts that, for the most part, fall outside of what Joseph Alsop (1982) has dubbed “The Great Traditions.” Toward that end, I begin with a general assessment of these theoretical shifts (*Part 1: Anthropology and Art History Shake Hands*) before moving into an exploration of their impact on Afro-American studies (*Part 2: Mapping the African-American Artworld*). I then adopt a still narrower focus, looking at historical interpretations of what we might (or might not) consider a single medium – the stitched-together fabrics on clothing (among Maroons), quilts (in the southern United States), and gallery art (in work by such artists as Faith Ringgold, Emma Amos, and Joyce Scott) – in order to assess scholars’ readings of the relationship between these forms and the edge-sewn textile traditions of Africa and the uses they have made of those readings in drawing broader conclusions about the culture history of the African diaspora (*Part 3: Seaming Connections*). Finally, I offer some thoughts on the conceptual and methodological approaches that might be most promising for future studies of artworlds in the African diaspora as a whole (*Part 4: Zooming In, Zooming Out*).

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ART HISTORY SHAKE HANDS

Looking first at shifts in the field of “fine arts” over the past two decades or so, I would argue that the increased attention to art *worlds* (or, in the writing of Arthur C. Danto [1964] and others, “artworlds”) ranks at the very top of the list. The complex workings – social, cultural, economic, political – that give

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structure, texture, and (contested or uncontested) meaning to the more traditional matters of objects and their collective history have been moving steadily into greater prominence. Both scholarly and popular writing on art has been engaging in energetic scrutiny of museum ethics, curatorial strategies, auction politics, market dynamics, collecting agendas, and the complex hierarchy of connoisseurship and authority. Artworks once viewed as visual entities set into more or less elaborate wooden borders are now being framed in a completely different sense, as contextualized productions undergoing contextualized readings. Setting art objects, artists' biographies, and the evolution of stylistic sequences more forcefully in the context of perceptions conditioned by social and cultural factors brings them closer to long-standing anthropological concerns and interests, and acts to erode the lingering temptation (stronger for some commentators than others) to view art history as the pristine, apolitical study of aesthetic forms. And sacred territories of art historical scholarship, where original works authenticated by erudite connoisseurship once held pride of place, are being quietly invaded by a growing interest in copies, fakes, appropriations, and derivative forms.

Approaches to "ethnographic" art have also undergone what we might consider sea changes over the same period. Especially pivotal has been a diminished focus on cultural isolates; just as art history/criticism has been widening its aperture on works of art, the study of societies and cultures is being set in broader fields of vision, with important repercussions for the anthropological study of art. While scholars once strained to discern the stylistic essences of particular arts in particular cultures, they are now directing their gaze more frequently toward the doorways where artistic and aesthetic ideas jostle each other in their passage from one cultural setting to the next. While the emphasis was once on abstracting back from an overlay of modernity to discover uncorrupted artistic traditions (Franz Boas holding up a blanket to block out the two-story houses behind the Kwakiutl natives he was filming for the anthropological record ...¹), modernization now lies at the heart of the enterprise, providing a springboard for explorations of cultural creativity and self-affirmation. While the site of artistic production was once located in lineages of convention within bounded communities, it now spreads into the global arena, pulling in players from every corner of the world, from every kind of society, and from every chamber of the artworld's vast honeycomb.

Not surprisingly, these shifts are being accompanied by a marked, if gradual, rapprochement among the various sectors of the popular and scholarly artworld. In museums, the most visible evidence has been an explosion, over the past decade or two, of exhibitions integrating anthropological and art historical issues and scholarship, juxtaposing arts from previously segregated

1. Public Broadcasting Service 1988.

categories, and calling attention to the defining (and redefining) power of display context. Concern with the ethics of cultural ownership is also moving center-stage, thanks largely to the rising volume of voices coming from third- and fourth-world populations, cultural studies programs, and spectators of the postmodern scene from the fields of literature, history, philosophy, economics, and political science. Rights of interpretation are under lively discussion; cultural authority is being renegotiated; the privileged status of long established canons is under attack; and museum acquisition policies designed to maximize the preservation of data and the growth of scientific knowledge are being contested by more ethically-focused debates aimed at responsible de-accessioning and repatriation.

We're also witnessing, across the board, a growing tendency for the hierarchies that assigned distinct roles (and value) to fine and folk, art and craft, primitive and modern, high and low to give way to investigations of these categories' interpenetrations and an insistent deconstruction of the categories themselves. This change is especially important for Afro-American studies, simply because writing on African diaspora arts has spread over these categories more (that is, has privileged one particular category less) than, say, writing on European or African or Far Eastern arts. While it would not be grossly off the mark to depict European art history as devoting its primary attention to the "fine" arts, African art history to "tribal" (or "primitive" or whatever label people use for the "not-so-fine") arts, and Central American art history to "folk" arts, people writing on arts of the African diaspora have shown a greater tendency to become as comfortable in one such category as another.

Although these changes are multifaceted in the extreme, they all operate in the direction of breaking down barriers – barriers between disciplinary perspectives, between geographical focuses, between hierarchized settings, between elite and popular media, and more. The signposts and contributing agents are too myriad to enumerate exhaustively here, but a few key markers will serve to evoke the general trend over the past decade or two. In 1984, prestigious art museums of New York City, from the Museum of Modern Art to the Metropolitan, hosted simultaneous celebrations of "tribal and modern affinities" in art, Maori art (organized by Maori curators and inaugurated with ceremonies that included nose-rubbing greetings between Mayor Koch and Maori elders flown in from New Zealand), Ashanti artifacts crafted from gold (for which the mayor returned as ceremonial host, this time in a massive parade through Central Park), Indian art from the Pacific Northwest, and arts of African adornment (see S. Price 1988). The Center for African Art opened its doors for the first time and Sotheby's and Christie's both held large, mediated auctions of "primitive" art. The next year the College Art Association added sessions on anthropological themes to its annual meeting for the first time. In 1988 and 1989, the Smithsonian sponsored major symposia explor-

ing the role of museums in a rapidly evolving social and cultural environment (Karp & Lavine 1991, Karp, Kreamer & Lavine 1992), and in 1990 National Public Radio, in collaboration with the Mexican Museum of San Francisco, formed the impeccably multicultural "Working Group on a New American Sensibility" to discuss the same range of issues for radio.² Meanwhile, Paris's global-art extravaganza, "Magiciens de la Terre," had been propelled into the center of a heated debate over its not-totally-successful realization of an uncategorized embrace of "the arts of the world" (Martin, Francis & Bouniort 1989). And since then, sparked partly by Jacques Chirac's agenda for establishing a museum of *arts premiers*, the city has hosted several large-scale international conferences designed to explore ethical and legal issues concerning cultural property, repatriation, and the like (see, for example, Vaillant & Viatte 1999, Taffin 2000, Galard n.d.). In Switzerland, nineteen contributors to an exhibit-cum-book entitled *L'art c'est l'art* (Art is art) reflected on this whole bundle of issues, including contact zones, cultural strategies behind today's art critical discourse, the international traffic in art, the classificatory transfer of objects from "ethnography" to "art," and the overlaps in categories of art such as "*contemporain, appliqué, populaire, classique, pompier, pauvre, transgressif, convenu*" (Gonseth, Hainard & Kaehr 1999). In the Netherlands, museum scholars have been asking hard questions about the political and ethical dimensions of museum displays (see, for example, Leyton & Damen 1993, Leyton 1995, Bouquet 1999). In England, Routledge has been bringing out one after another volume devoted to the same series of issues (see, for example, Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne 1996, Barringer & Flynn 1998). And on literally every continent, community museums, with vigorous local participation, have sprung up in unprecedented numbers, providing active loci for grassroots cultural creativity and self-representation.

The metaphor that many recent commentators have adopted to reflect this gaze on the artworlds of a planet-wide network evokes a jet-age scenario of travel, with or without cultural baggage: titles refer to art "in transit" (Steiner 1994), the "traffic" in culture (Marcus & Myers 1995), "unpacking" culture (Phillips & Steiner 1999), "destination" culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), and the like. Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1996:6) captured the flavor of this trend when he painted himself as migrant/smuggler: "Home is always somewhere else. Home is both 'here' and 'there' or somewhere in between. Sometimes it's nowhere ... Here/there, homelessness, border culture, and deterritorialization are the dominant experience." In short, Jim

2. The group met a number of times over two or three years. In addition to the organizers, it included Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Suzan Harjo, Steven D. Lavine, Lawrence Levine, Mari Matsuda, Raymund Paredes, Richard Price, Bernice Johnson Reagon, John Kuo Wei Tchen, Trinh Minh-Ha, Marta Moreno Vega, Jim West, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, and me.

Clifford (1997) was not acting alone when, with a flick of the pen and a wink of the eye, he shifted the gaze from roots to routes.

In the mid-1980s, when all these developments were just getting off to a roaring start, there was a real danger that even as new kinds of art were being graciously admitted to elite establishment settings, the conceptual perspectives and aesthetic frameworks of the artists and critics responsible for providing them were being kept out. When the sculpture was from Oceania, the interpretive text was still, more often than not, from a mainstream northern-hemisphere tradition of discourse. While this discrepancy has not disappeared, it is beginning to come under more explicit attack, and there seems to be some promise of change. Commentators across the board have noted, quite poignantly, that a central sticking point of every artworld, mainstream or otherwise, is the question of artists' control over meaning – or lack thereof.³ Supplying the product is one thing; having a say over what it represents (aesthetically, iconographically, referentially, historically) is quite another. As we will see below, the struggle over this issue is becoming an active part of new directions in the study of art in the African diaspora.

MAPPING THE AFRO-AMERICAN ARTWORLD

None of the developments outlined above were even distant rumblings when Melville Herskovits pioneered the study of African diaspora cultures in the 1930s. A quick mini-flashback to the environment that nurtured his vision and the ways that he applied and refashioned it will serve as backdrop for a consideration of current interpretations that both refine and modify that vision in the very different political, social, and intellectual climate of our own *fin de siècle*.

Herskovits's teacher Franz Boas, even while stressing the conservatism of "primitive art" and the heavy weight of tradition on its makers, radically rephrased the task of understanding such art, by placing the artist, rather than the object, at center stage. Boas insisted on thorough, first-hand field research, on the elicitation of native explanations, on attention to the "play of the imagination" (1908:589) and the role of virtuosity, and on consideration of the artistic process as well as the finished form. In this context, the development over time of cultural expression (such as verbal, musical, or visual arts) was not, as previous generations of scholars had often either assumed or argued, a reflection of unilinear human evolution, but rather a more complex mixture of diffusion, borrowing, independent invention, and a host of other processes effected by individuals both following the guidelines of their respectively inherited traditions and gently adapting them under the influence of their

3. See, for example, Belting 1987, Lippard 1990, Marcus 1995, Sullivan 1995.

creative impulses and their lived experiences, which included modest amounts of intercultural contact. In the regnant anthropological models of Herskovits's training, individuals were beginning to be recognized as something more than passive executors of an inevitable march from barbarity to civilization, but they remained firmly anchored in the cultural heritages of their birth, despite the leeway of individual difference and variable amounts of stimulation from "outside."⁴

In the context of a Caribbeanist journal, it is hardly necessary to spell out the ways that Herskovits built on this general foundation, developing ideas such as retention, syncretism, and reinterpretation. Suffice it to say such concepts served to bring a comprehensible sense of order, helping him to deal with the history of a social and cultural universe unlike any of those confronted by his anthropological predecessors (or even his peers) – one built by vast numbers of people wrenched from the settings of their birth, transported far away in death-drenched hordes, and forced to mold a viable way of life in cooperation with others from different settings who had undergone the same recent trauma. Unlike the work of American Indianists of his generation, which involved the analytical reconstruction of decimated cultural wholes (Boas's goal of abstracting back past modernity to reach a vision of what had once been a viable "authentic" culture), Herskovits's task centered on both loss and creativity, both rupture and continuity. Interpreting the world of Africans in the Americas was a new challenge, requiring the invention of new analytical tools, and those that Herskovits fashioned on the basis of his training and his multiple field experiences allowed him to propose models for cultural transitions of a rapidity unprecedented and unparalleled in the anthropological record.

Within this vision, history often took the form of continent-to-continent processes, involving peoples more than people and discernible largely through culture-to-culture comparisons. The historical study of art, which constituted part of the enterprise, followed suit. Artistic specificities in the New World tended to be explained in terms of more or less direct linkages to particular or generalized African origins more than to cultural developments in particular or generalized environments in the Americas, though the latter came into play as well.

4. Others trained by Boas were assessing the contribution of individuality to cultural patterns in the context of American Indian ethnography; see, for example, Ruth Bunzel's careful exploration of the creative imagination in Pueblo pottery (1929). Across the Atlantic, Herskovits's contemporary Raymond Firth responded to the British variant of this approach by stressing the freedom of individuals within the normative systems that served to circumscribe acceptable behavior and by focusing attention on "the position of the creative faculty of the native artist in relation to his conformity to the local style" (Firth 1936:28).

Still fast-forwarding through developments that need no elaboration in the present context, we zip past the Herskovits-Frazier debate (sensitively developed in Yelvington 2001) and pause at the Mintz and Price position just long enough to note its attempt to sharpen our vision of early cultural processes. Not eschewing Herskovits's claims for the importance of African input (as some commentators have imagined), but rather applying new standards for tracing the nature of intercontinental connections, Mintz and Price endorsed a position more firmly anchored in non-speculative history and more concerned with the actual mechanics of cultural process (in specific places, at specific historical periods, under specific conditions of colonial rule). They benefited, of course, from a wealth of ethnographic information that had not been available to Herskovits, but they were also writing at a time when many of their arguments had to be presented in programmatic terms. What they offered were suggestive leads that, when submitted to the test of further historical and ethnographic research, held the chance of producing a closer, more verifiable vision of the ways that real people, both individually and as groups, worked out cultural solutions to the challenges posed by their remarkable collective ordeal.

One linchpin of their argument came straight from Herskovits (1935:169): "to trace Africanisms in the behavior of [U.S.] American Negroes," he wrote, "comparison with the customs of the Negroes of the Caribbean must be made before we can think of correlation with the complexities of West African civilizations." The range of ethnographic sites he incorporated into his research reflected his firm commitment to the importance of thinking in broad comparative terms; his gaze on the arts was no exception. But in many subsequent studies of art, following through on the kind of all-encompassing spread that Herskovits attempted to include in his ethnographic field (spanning, on this side of the Atlantic, Brazil, Haiti, coastal and interior Suriname, Trinidad, the United States, Cuba, and more) has frequently provided the icing more than the cake.⁵ The widespread tendency to conceptualize "Afro- or African

5. There are, of course, many exceptions. To name just a few: Sandra Barnes's excellent collection of studies on *Ogun* (1997) explores variants of this West African god in the Americas in terms of religion, body arts, dance, and more; her introduction to the volume offers an insightful reading of the balance between specificities and common ground, and contributions by art historian Henry Drewal, performance theorist Margaret Thompson Drewal, anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown, and others bring materials from Brazil, Haiti and other parts of the Americas into focus with ethnographic research on West African societies. John Nunley and Judith Bettelheim (1988) integrate New Orleans, Brooklyn, Toronto, and London in their overview of Caribbean festival arts. And Richard Powell's excellent overview of contemporary U.S. African-American art and culture in the Thames & Hudson "World of Art" series (1997) shows a healthy willingness to stray beyond the country's borders when artists' lives and patterns of influence demand a wider purview.

America" as "Afro- or African U.S.A." has been responsible for limiting the scope of any number of comprehensive art surveys when more robust attention to regional comparison could have significantly enhanced the country-based insights. Widely read books such as Samella Lewis's *African American Art and Artists* (1990) and Sharon Patton's *African-American Art* (1998), which fail to mention even the most influential of Caribbean artists such as Wifredo Lam, show how persistent this tendency is, even among experienced scholars writing authoritative texts for today's market.⁶

Herskovits's call for a broad geographical definition of our responsibilities needs to be complemented by a parallel call for breadth in our disciplinary and "typological" vision of the field. Partly because of all the "traffic" that recent scholars have underscored, and partly because of the new prominence of crossover influences (folk/fine, etc.), scholars have begun to reflect increased awareness of the extent to which the study of art in this or that setting leaves important factors out of the picture.⁷ The "affinities" between Picasso's art and African masks or the Surrealists' love affair with the Pacific Northwest and Oceania in the early part of the twentieth century could be analyzed in terms of a "here" (homes, galleries, museums, and studios in Europe and the United States) and a "there" (remote settlements far away), with selected objects being transported along a one-way route. But artworld traffic now runs along a much busier thoroughfare – in terms of cultural geography, in terms of the hierarchy of traditional art scholarship, in terms of the

6. Regional scope inevitably raises the question of whether (and how) we can talk about "black" culture or art; see, for example, Powell 1997. In a series of lectures presented in 1997 at the College of William and Mary, novelist David Bradley argued against the notion of a "black" anything. Recounting the story of a student who once presented him with what she called a "black sonnet," he defended his position that she had produced nothing of the sort. To convince him that her poem was a "black sonnet," he told her, she would have to show that its metric structure was characteristic of poems by other black poets, and uncommon elsewhere. The fact that she had written a poem and that she was black, he insisted, was irrelevant to the definition of a genre of sonnet. My own position is that the common thread running through plastic and graphic arts in the (entire) African diaspora is not purely (or even necessarily) a matter of the artist's phenotype or the object's formal properties (though one could argue the case), but also emerges from more broadly-defined cultural orientations that nurture the form, meaning, context, and uses of art objects, as well as the nature of the creative process that produces them. More on this below.

7. Another (absolutely defining) contribution to the workings of today's artworlds that Herskovits had no need to consider in his vision of diaspora art (and remained virtually negligible when I began writing about Maroon art) is that of legislators, lawyers, and judges. The whole thorny bundle of questions concerning cultural property and the legal definition of artistic originality in an age of sampling and Photoshop are deeply entangled in multicultural ideologies and rapidly inflating economic stakes.

division between producers and commentators, and in terms of media. It is no longer a one-way route, it is no longer just the objects that are traveling, and participants from the African diaspora are among the most frequent flyers. While Picasso's exploitation of African masks as inspiration for the prostitutes in his *Demoiselles d'Avignon* may have caused European art history to turn a corner in the early years of the twentieth century, today's appropriative possibilities are being defined in more multilayered terms. The *Demoiselles* themselves have been reappropriated by African American artists – see, for example, Faith Ringgold's *Picasso's Studio* and Robert Colescott's *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama* (discussed and illustrated in Gibson 1998 and Patton 1998:236-38, respectively). Or again, Ringgold's *The Picnic at Giverny* depicts Picasso as the (nude) model in a gender-reversal of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, set in the garden of Monet's *Nymphéas*, with Ringgold and ten other (fully clothed) American women artists and writers having a picnic and discussing the role of women in art;⁸ Margo Humphrey's *The Last Bar-B-Que* gives a twist, at once self-critical and celebratory, to one of Western art history's most venerated scenes (Powell 1997:160); and in the hands of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who took from Pollock, de Kooning, and Rauschenberg on the one end and "the guys painting on the trains" on the other, a depiction of "him and Andy Warhol duking it out in boxing attire is not as innocent and playful as it appears to be" (hooks 1995:36, 42).

Diverse back-and-forths of cultural expression have nurtured developments in the diaspora ever since its transport-initiated beginnings, with significant contacts marking every period. The specifics of those contacts – the history of the late nineteenth-century slave trade to Cuba and Brazil, the migrations and return migrations linking Caribbean islands with Amsterdam, New York, London, Miami, Paris, and Toronto, the aesthetic notions carried by Haitian higglers, Saramaka loggers, southern U.S. day laborers, and the like as they travel away from home, the pilgrimages of late twentieth-century U.S. African Americans to West African sites determined by genealogical research, and so forth – are essential to respect in any attempt to map the arts of the African diaspora.

The border-crossing complexity of today's international artworld is apparent in any number of contexts. I cite a few random examples. Maroons from the rainforest of the Guianas now appear frequently on the stages of France, Germany, Holland, and the United States and their arts back home incorporate

8. The women include Emma Amos, Michele Wallace, Johnnetta Cole, and seven others – all identified; the text running between the acrylic-on-canvas scene and the patchwork fabric border, about 900 words, spells out the thoughts Ringgold wanted to communicate (about Paris, nature, painting, sexism and feminism, racism, artistic freedom) and preempts the critics' role by, for example, explaining why the artist at the easel is wearing a white dress. For the full text, see Cameron *et al.* 1998:131-32.

elements of Western culture such as satellite-launching rockets (in wood-carving motifs), and a Coca Cola bottling machine (in “traditional” genres of dance). Bob Marley’s music is global. Martiniquan plasticians trained at Paris’s School of Fine Arts devote much of their artistic energy to capturing the spiritual essence of Carib Indian culture. Romare Bearden worked into his collages the Vodou ceremonies of Haitian immigrants in St. Martin that he witnessed thanks to his friendship with an American graduate student in anthropology. Carnival art throughout the diaspora – from Toronto to Bahia and from Brooklyn to Notting Hill Gate – takes its inspiration from globe-wide offerings (Pocahontas as the mascot in Martinique after the Disney movie came out, Monica “A-Boca-de-Ouro” Lewinsky honored in Bahia’s 1998 Carnival). And so on.

The aspect of this global network that remains underdeveloped, relative to actual artistic production, is, as bell hooks has pointed out, art criticism. Citing a *Time* magazine cover story called “Black Renaissance: African American Artists Are Truly Free At Last” (October 1994), she laments that it

assessed the development and public reception of works by black artists without engaging, in any way, the ideas and perspectives of African-American scholars who write about the visual arts. The blatant absence of this critical perspective serves to highlight the extent to which black scholars who write about art, specifically about work created by African American artists, are ignored by the mainstream. Ironically, the insistence in this essay that the “freedom” of black artists can be measured solely by the degree to which the work of individual artists receives attention in the established white-dominated art world exposes the absence of such freedom. (hooks 1995:110-11)

While minor progress has begun to be made toward an African American presence in the art history programs of mainstream universities (I had one African American graduate student when I taught in the Princeton Art Department, the chair of Duke’s Art History Department is African American, etc.), most of the work remains to be done, even in contexts that should by any reckoning be well ahead of *Time* magazine: *African Arts* is still a largely white-run enterprise, Grove’s new \$8,800 dictionary of art (Turner 1996) consists of thirty-four hefty volumes, but has no entry on Romare Bearden, and the texts for many colleges’ introductory art history courses follow suit despite their 800-1200-page comprehensiveness. But it’s useful to remember that traditional entrees into a field are not the only ones, and it seems to me that, even without passing through academic departments or glossy magazines, African-American voices are beginning to contribute to the arena of interpretation and gatekeeping in other ways.

Unlike some African societies, where it is said that particular individuals are identifiable as “critics” (see, for example, Thompson 1973:22-23), communities in the diaspora tend not to assign artistic criticism to designated

specialists. Among Maroons in Suriname, for example, there is no notion of designated “connoisseurs” whose pronouncements about particular works of art might hold particular authority and there is no conceptual dividing line between artist and critic.⁹ And in the United States, Bearden took time out from his prolific artistic production to write both an analytical study of composition and a comprehensive history of (U.S.) African American art (Bearden & Henderson 1993, Bearden & Holty 1969).¹⁰

Indeed, African American (like other non-traditionally-mainstream) artists have begun exploiting, with increasing frequency and impressive vigor, direct textual means of getting their perspectives through. The effect is to force their intended focus onto the canvas (broadly defined) itself, to cut off at the pass irrelevant art historical readings, or at least underscore their status as outside opinions. Conceptual artist Adrian Piper represents a particularly stunning example, saturating her visual art with direct speech from artist to viewer – via cartoon bubbles, calling card texts, loudspeakers, headphones, or any other means she can harness. Much photographic art by African Americans also draws viewers in through text: Lorna Simpson combines body language and printed plaques; Clarissa Sligh’s art “always includes words ... as an attempt to correct what is written about black people as ‘criminals and on welfare’” (Lippard 1990:52, 21); Pat Ward Williams covers photographic works such as *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* with scrawled writing to create scathing political statement (Patton 1998:Fig. 130); and Floyd Newsum uses densely written script as a frame (Lewis 1990:182). Similar expressive strategies are central to the “image-text” art of Keith Piper (Mercer 1997:56) and others in the “Black British” artworld (Willis 1997). A long autobiographical poem by Nuyorican Miguel Piñero holds pride of place in an oil painting by his friend Martin Wong, who fills marginal plaques with additional texts, one

9. The generalization of art criticism within a given population means that studying its criteria often requires an openness to modes of expression that do not fit the researcher’s expectations. As Clifford Geertz (1983:94-120) has put it, “art talk” has been reported as rarely as it has for non-Western societies, not because people in such societies don’t engage in it, but because it frequently assumes forms that are different from those of Western art criticism. This important point has an exact parallel in discourse about history (see R. Price 1983:6-8).

10. It should be noted that this contrasts sharply with the European tradition in which, as Dominique de Menil put it, “Matisse’s ‘Those who want to give themselves to painting should begin by cutting out their tongues’ and Braque’s remark that ‘in art, there’s only one thing that matters: that which cannot be explained’ are brutal reminders that, as Malraux said it, ‘the only language of painting is painting.’ And even Baudelaire spoke of ‘the dreadful uselessness of explaining no matter what to no matter who’” (Babadzan 1984:11). (Or, as Picasso is said to have said, “Don’t talk to the driver.”) For more on the separation (and even counter-current agendas) of art production and art commentary, see Belting 1987.

of which he further inscribes as part of the painting itself in the form of hands signing for the deaf (Lippard 1990:194). And for U.S. artist Aminah Robinson, the narrative is embedded “deep inside the quilt,” but just to make sure it gets across, she supplements her simultaneously “traditional” and dazzlingly innovative patchwork pieces with handwritten stories that “snake and twist around” in a style critics have compared to the indirection of black rap (Grudin 1990:36-37).

Not necessarily emerging from these artists’ ethnic identity as such, the insertion of a verbal component into a visual work of art reflects, I would argue, their response to a system in which creative individuals marginalized by the mainstream art world insist on having their say – and in expressive modes of their own choosing. Examples from the work of Chicanos, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and others support this interpretation; the text/image merger has been carried to its logical extreme in the *imagenes apalabradas* (verbalized images) of Puerto Rican graphic artist Antonio Martorell, in which the very density of his cursive script becomes a powerful visual statement and the composition of his imagery constitutes its own interpretive text.¹¹ Even when such texts do not offer anything that could be construed as art critical “interpretation,” they perform the very important task of calling attention to artistic agency. Behind this work, they say, stands an articulate individual, someone with a specific point to communicate, who demands that as you, the viewer, commune with the visual form, you also listen for the (cultural, political, or social) message that it’s trying to get across.

Let’s turn now to the specific realm of African-American textile arts.

SEAMING CONNECTIONS

Acknowledging that textile arts were severely underrepresented in studies of African-American art until very recently, I begin with the most notable exception to the rule. Robert Farris Thompson has pioneered art historical connections across the entire “Black Atlantic” with stunning ambitiousness and personal gusto. In what is certainly the boldest attempt on record to pin down the seam that joins the textile arts of two continents, he has argued that “the creolized cloths of Bahia, the over-one-shoulder capes of the Djuka and Saamaka maroons in Suriname, and the string-quilts of the black South in the United States ... are unthinkable except in terms of partial descent from Mande cloth” (Thompson 1983:208). It is just this sort of connection-drawing that has inspired so many others interested in uncovering the foundations of African-American expressive culture to follow his lead. His enthusiasm, and the com-

11. See Martorell 1991 and 1995, Tió 1995, and, for further examples of the use of text in the imagery of a “multicultural” range of U.S. American artists, Lippard 1990.

patibility of his stance with an ideological climate thirsty for connectedness to the African continent, have prompted many to read such assertions as uncontested truths. What begins as an art historian's marveling at visual similarities of color and composition becomes, in its recycling, historical fact. Michael A. Gomez (1998:86), for example, writes: "the research of Thompson ... has revealed that, at least in the area of quilting, African Americans exhibit what are clearly Mande influences."

The joy that Thompson finds in similarities between cultural forms in African and African American societies has shown itself to be both contagious and ideologically empowering, and one might argue that pushing too hard on its foundation is an act of gross curmudgeonry. And yet, if the story of Africa's legacy to the Americas is to be told with the respect it deserves, it ultimately needs to fit with everything we know. In that spirit, let's take a dispassionate look at the basis of claims such as that which makes textile arts in Brazil, Suriname, and the United States "unthinkable" except in terms of Mande origins. Close examination of the endnotes to *Flash of the Spirit* (1983) reveals that numerous pivotal assertions cannot be traced by readers because the sources are listed as unpublished work in progress by himself and others (e.g., pp. 282, 284, 292, 298, 300) or because they rely on phone conversations (e.g., pp. 286, 287, 297), notes he made on a "family scrapbook" (p. 289), or "personal communications" (throughout). Furthermore, Thompson "modifies, elides, or adds to" some quotations (p. 300) and has "slightly retranslated" or "expanded" others (pp. 276, 277, 279, 281, 302). He has also "corrected" attributions (pp. 215-17, 279, 296), misreported statistics (pp. 215, 296), and given dates that are at best "informed guesses" (p. 275). A particularly striking feature of the scholarly apparatus is the tendency to document important claims by reference to studies that turn out to have been papers written for him by undergraduate students at Yale (Thompson 1983:293-94, 295-96).

Perhaps the ultimate indication that Thompson has successfully imbibed the essence of Anansi, the mischievous trickster spider of West African and African-American folktales, is provided on page 221 of *Flash of the Spirit*. There, an assertion of the power of patchwork dresses to afford protection against *jumbie* spirits in the British West Indies bears an endnote that reads simply: "*Yale Course Critique*, 1973, p. 60." Although few readers will go back to the original document, those who do will find the image of a handsome young man attired in a fashionable sports jacket for sale at the Yale University branch of Saks Fifth Avenue. The text (provided by a local authority on Caribbean patchwork?) explains:

In the Antilles, patchwork means good luck.

Every true West Indian wears patchwork so the jumbie has no resting place. The continentals who visit there will be joyfully received, when wearing our evil spirit-defying patchwork madras sport coat. Predominantly red or blue for 35 to 44 sizes, \$70.

This is not to say that informal interviews, phone conversations, personal communications, course critiques, and the like should be off-limits for responsible research; no scholar fails to use such resources occasionally to confirm, reinforce, or add rhetorical flavor to less elusive documentation. But the discovery of misrepresentation in sources that *are* traceable (through dogged, doubt-driven detective work – submitting ILL requests, consulting colleagues in various parts of the diaspora, conducting complex Internet searches, emailing middle-aged Yale graduates at their law offices and consulting firms) tends to unsettle the credibility of the myriad personal conversations, on or off the phone, on which Thompson hangs so much of his narrative. I offer just one more example from the realm of textile arts (for others, see S. Price 1999): Thompson (1983:215) presents an early nineteenth-century illustration of a garment labeled “Indian loincloth” (declaring on grounds of an alleged color preference that it had in fact to have been a Maroon loincloth, but see below), and speculatively linking it to Ashanti weavers “working under Mande influences radiating from Kong and from Bonduku, north-west of the Akan and north of Cap Lahou, whence sailed to Suriname 50 percent of a sample of Dutch slaving ships.” The source in his note could scarcely be more impeccable: Richard Price’s *The Guiana Maroons* (1976), pp. 14–15. The glitch becomes evident only when we look back at that source and discover that the “50 percent” figure does not refer simply to a random “sample of Dutch slaving ships,” but rather to a (56-ship) sample of *those Dutch slaving ships that transported Africans from the Windward Coast* – an area which, as Price’s pages 14–15 make clear, supplied between 0% and 49% of Suriname slaves (depending on the particular moment) during the course of the eighteenth century. (See S. Price 1999 for a demonstration that both the “corrected” attribution and the alleged color preference also crumble when tested against primary sources.)

Similarly mischievous tactics have been found to lie behind Thompson’s claims for unbroken historical continuities in Brazilian capoeira. Luiz Renato Vieira and Matthias Röhring Assunção (1998) examine a set of widespread myths that surround this dance/martial art form, including the idea that the *berimbau* (now considered “the soul of the capoeira orchestra”) can be traced directly to Africa, and label Thompson’s support for this popular misconception “a manipulation of sources and facts.” They cite his commentary on an 1835 engraving (“Jogar Capoeira ou danse de la guerre” by Johann Moritz Rugendas) in which the only musical instrument is a small drum, different from the *atabaque* used today, and in which “none of the traditional instruments of modern capoeira appear.” Thompson writes:

No later than 1835 berimbau ... was being used to fuel the capoeira martial art. This we know because Rugendas in an illustration shows two men in a roda, one doing the basic step, the ginga, at left, and the other, at right,

apparently executing a step called *queixada*. They are in combat. Hand-clapping and a drum accompany their battle. But close examination of a man standing next to the drummer shows that he has a musical bow and is pulling open his shirt, probably to place the calabash-resonator of his instrument against his naked stomach in Kongo-Angola manner. (Vieira & Assunção 1998:85-86)

Vieira and Assunção argue that if the painter had seen this supremely “exotic” instrument (depicted by other artists of his time, but never in the context of capoeira), he would have had every motivation to show it as part of the scene he was representing. Ultimately, they invite their readers to view the engraving and confirm for themselves that no *berimbau* lurks within its shadows.

These can easily be seen as picky, esoteric, and potentially irritating arguments – not the sort of sleuthing that historical and anthropological researchers normally like to conduct, especially because of the danger that it could be interpreted in personal terms. To my knowledge, the only other writer who has called Thompson to task in anything like this fashion is bell hooks (1995:114), who goes to some lengths to reiterate the non-*ad hominem* nature of her position. “Although I am critical of his theory and practice, this did not mean that I did not like him,” she writes, quoting herself speaking to a conference organizer who had assumed the contrary.¹² “The fear of being perceived as personally attacking colleagues, or of making personal enemies, effectively censors meaningful critique and closes off the possibility that there will be meaningful, dialectical, and critical conversation and debate among colleagues,” she continues, insisting nonetheless: “The theory and practice that inform Thompson’s work should be rigorously and critically interrogated.”

Sprinkling a few grains of salt on Thompson’s monumental contribution does not, fortunately, dessicate African and African-American textile research. On the contrary, there has been an explosion of attention to both sides of the Atlantic (with special weight given to the southern United States), a certain amount of it directly due to the inspiring lectures and writing of Thompson himself.¹³

Three central contributions to the African diaspora portion of this literature may serve to exemplify key aspects of current scholarship on the subject – Gladys-Marie Fry’s *Stitched from the Soul*, Eli Leon’s *Models in the Mind*, and Maude Wahlman’s *Signs and Symbols*. I begin with Wahlman and Leon.

12. The line she draws between personal affect and critical thinking applies just as emphatically to my own critique. During the five years R.P. and I spent in New Haven in the 1970s, dinners with the Thompsons ranked among our most enjoyable and stimulating social evenings. Conversely, I would argue, it is perfectly possible to admire the work of a scholar for whom one does not have a great deal of admiration in personal terms.

13. For starters, see Idiens & Ponting 1980, Ferris 1982, 1983, Fry 1986, 1990, Leon 1987, 1992, Grudin 1990, Vlach 1990, Wahlman 1993, Adler & Barnard 1995, Tobin & Dobard 1999.

We note, first, that both pay respectful homage to the quilters whose work is featured, in the form of individual photographic and narrative portraits. And both represent attempts to identify the African components in U.S. African-American quilts, taking care to raise the question of alternative influences from Euro-American traditions before, for the most part, dismissing them in favor of an African-based interpretation.¹⁴

The forty-four women and one man featured in these two books are all twentieth-century (U.S.) African-American quilters – most of the illustrated pieces postdate 1970. Their work is compared to numerous twentieth-century (or in a few cases undated) African pieces plus a light smattering of examples from other points in the diaspora (Caribbean islands, Suriname, Brazil).¹⁵ The illustrations thus create a corpus of several hundred contemporaneous elements, which serve as the visual foundation for the authors' arguments. In both cases, the thesis is that, in Wahlman's words (1993:vii), "most African-American quilting derives its aesthetic from various African traditions, both technological and ideological" or, as Leon (1992:3) puts it: "Carried in memory – transmitted from generation to generation without printed instructions – patchwork esthetics and technology had the potential, even under the extreme adversity of the African-American experience, to survive the Atlantic crossing and thrive on this continent."

In both cases, then, a historical argument is illustrated with an ahistorical corpus of objects. This leaves several (complementary, not competing) options for supplying the historical connection. Among the many possibilities, one could, for example,

- (1) delineate the features most responsible for the visual similarity in the late twentieth century (compositional principles, use of colors, etc.), and reason that they are most likely to have occurred via a generation-to-generation transmission in the specific realm of textiles;
- (2) scour museums, archives, and other primary sources for early African-American objects that display aesthetic or technological similarities with African pieces from a comparable period, thus pushing the visual match

14. It bears noting that "patchwork" and "quilt" are frequently paired, but definitely not synonymous terms. This distinction becomes relevant when we consider the nature of African textile traditions (barkcloth or woven strips edge-sewn along their selvages) since, as Leon points out from the start, it introduces different technical considerations in planning the composition. In contrast to the very great majority of both African and U.S. textiles, Maroon patchwork is *neither* quilted *nor* edge-sewn, another technical distinction that demands to be taken into account when examples from tropical Afro-America are added to the comparison.

15. Wahlman (1993) also includes one illustration of a cloth fragment from the eleventh-twelfth century; Leon (1992:12) dates one illustrated cloth as "c. 1870-1900."

- closer to a time when Africans were being transported to the Americas, reasoning that this increases the plausibility of asserting a direct, medium-specific continuity;
- (3) probe the recollections of African-American quilters (some of whom were quite elderly when they were interviewed by Leon, Wahlman, and others) for specific fragments of the collective memory that Leon evokes, working back toward a clearer vision of the technological, ideological, and aesthetic considerations that would have guided quilters in the middle and late nineteenth century;
 - (4) explore regional constants across the various textile arts of Afro-America through elicitation (from the producers and users of the textiles) of technological, ideological, aesthetic, or social associations, in an attempt to bolster and/or correct Western-authored speculation about what it is that constitutes a conceptual link between the African and African-American examples;
 - (5) expand the playing field to include aspects of life that have nothing to do with cloth, looking for evidence that particular features common to both corpuses of illustrations were kept alive in some form even when they were not being transmitted through textile arts.

Of these, option (1) enters the picture to some degree in virtually any exploration of the subject; it does not, however, pass (art) historical muster on its own, because of the extent to which it represents undocumented conjecture. For this reason, every scholar addressing the subject has attempted to supplement it with more specific, concrete arguments.

Option (2) is the strategy that Thompson tried to implement by reading an early nineteenth-century loincloth illustration as the depiction of an African-American artifact. The transmission he proposes is far from direct: the patchwork construction of the loincloth is attributed to a "radiation" of influence that occurred in an area to the northwest of the Akan and to the north of a port (Cap Lahou) that supplied a particular portion (more in Thompson's view than in my reading of the sources) of slaves to Suriname, where it was made by a Maroon and then traded to an Indian, whose preference for solid red (Thompson asserts) was strong enough so that he wouldn't have made it, but weak enough so that he might well have bought it from the Maroon.¹⁶ Like

16. The demonstration that this scenario doesn't hold, which depends on a number of ethnographic details and historical sources, has been spelled out in S. Price 1999. In addition to the data presented there, the illustrations of patterned Indian garments in Stedman's eighteenth-century *Narrative* (1790:319, 467) provide further proof against Thompson's claim that Indians wore only solid-color clothing, as does, in fact, the woman's pubic apron shown right next to the loincloth on which Thompson builds his claim of Mande influence.

Gomez (cited above), Wahlman has recycled Thompson's Mande/Akan/Cap Lahou/Suriname slave/Suriname Maroon/Suriname Indian scenario as fact, deleting two of the principle players (the Indian and Thompson) and, under the heading "African Textiles in the New World," declaring: "An 1823 illustration shows a Mande-like loincloth made from three strips of cotton, two patterned and the center one plain, as in nineteenth-century Asante cloth from Ghana" (Wahlman 1993:25).

Option (3) has been endorsed in principle by much of the recent scholarship on the subject, and the inclusion of biographical sketches signals a welcome respect for the individual artists behind the textiles.¹⁷ To date, however, the interviews on which these sketches are based have dealt mainly with anecdotal childhood memories rather than the stylistic specifics that would produce art historical depth; the artists tend to make mention of family relations, daily life, technical details of sewing, and the personal joy of creating a beautiful pattern, without devoting attention in any sustained fashion to the relationship between their late twentieth-century art and that of their grandmothers (that is, specific similarities *and differences* over time in materials, compositional principles, social uses, symbolic meanings, etc.).

The literature on African-American textile arts has also utilized option (4), though I would characterize its attention to other parts of the diaspora as scattered and relatively token, compared to what it could be. In general, the comparative material in U.S.-focused studies is selected on the basis of its power to support unifying connections, often through purely visual similarity, and thus constitutes an unrepresentative sample of the larger corpus.¹⁸

It is useful to note that the *début* of this literature on transatlantic connections in art came at a time when interest in African roots was exploding in the United States.¹⁹ From the flowering of Black Studies programs to the TV serialization of Alex Haley's *Roots*, a tidal wave of interest in the African contribution to American culture was sweeping the country. It was in this particular climate that outsiders defined the recognized range of Maroon textile arts

17. Photo-portraits, biographical information, and interviews on/with artists are becoming, if not standard, at least increasingly common in the literature on art of the African diaspora; see, for example, Beauchamp-Byrd et al. 1997, Brettell et al. 1989, Chopin & Chopin 1998, Ferris 1982, Fortune 1994, and SECCA 1990. This development constitutes a crucial enrichment to the field, allowing "folk" artists to emerge from the anonymity that much writing from an earlier era had consigned them to.

18. In other fields as well, succumbing to the temptation to select data according to how well it supports a pet theory carries significant, if imperceptible costs. For an exploration of the consequences of this risk in feminist interpretations of menstrual customs, see S. Price 1994.

19. As Eva Grudin (1990:7) notes, "Quilt texts published before 1970 hardly ever mentioned the existence of black-made quilts. Before 1970 the African-American quilting tradition was largely ignored, even in the black community."

(which included at least five aesthetically and technically distinct styles, from appliqué to cross-stitch), focusing attention virtually exclusively on the narrow-strip art in vogue during the half century ending around 1970. This continues to be true, even though the very different techniques that preceded and followed (or coincided with) that style have now been amply documented for about two decades. The choice, though unacknowledged as such, made strategic sense for scholars bent on establishing medium-specific links with Africa – narrow-strip textiles bore a striking visual resemblance to numerous African textile traditions and hence played well in the reconstruction of transatlantic tie-ins. Other forms of decorative sewing practiced by the Maroons receded into the background, and narrow-strip patchwork was offered up as “the” Maroon textile art as surely as men’s woodcarving had been presented as “the” art of the Maroons by earlier generations, who thus overlooked artistic forms produced by women. In photographs that set African textiles side-by-side with Maroon textiles (see, for example, Thompson 1983:216), there is no visual indication that one is composed of strips that are locally woven, salvaged, and edge-sewn while the other consists of pieces of imported trade cotton with raw edges that are seamed and then turned under on the wrong side to form a meticulously hemmed finish. Nor is it usual to call attention to this distinction in the accompanying text. Rather, the photographic similarity is assumed to speak for itself, testifying to the power of African sensibilities to survive the Middle Passage, slavery, and three centuries of life in the Americas.

This brings us to option (5). Leon’s notion of “models in the mind” flirts with this approach, interpreting the “uncanny similarities” visible between African and American textiles partly through an emphasis on spontaneous improvisation that plays out aesthetic principles and motifs from other media (designs painted on walls, chalked on walls, incised on calabashes, and hammered on brass containers), calling on them to “inform spontaneous esthetic decisions” in the medium of textiles as well (Leon 1992:21, 17, 4). This image of innovation in a particular domain drawing on models experienced outside of that domain is not far from the “underlying principles” that lay at the heart of Mintz and Price’s program for an understanding of early African-American culture history. The argument for attention to this option in interpretations of the developmental history of Maroon textile arts has been presented in detail elsewhere,²⁰ but a nutshell summary will be helpful here since it ultimately represents the most concrete demonstration of the “Mintz and Price” approach to transatlantic connections that I know in the realm of art.

It begins with a dilemma. Despite the visual closeness of Maroon narrow-strip patchwork to countless African textiles, we know from ethnographic,

20. The argument was proposed in S. and R. Price 1980 and has most recently been laid out in S. and R. Price 1999.

archival, and museological evidence that the Maroon version did not exist prior to the second half of the nineteenth century. If this realization forces us to abandon the idea that it was handed down from generation to generation (by which process it would have passed from one continent to another), how can we then account for the undeniable aesthetic similarities? The answer most compatible with the full range of evidence currently available hinges on a convergence, triggered by events in coastal Suriname, of continuities in separate domains of Maroon life. On the one hand, Maroon rhythmic aesthetics have always favored interruptive patterns in everything from informal speech, song, and folktales to dancing and drumming. On the other, Maroon visual aesthetics favor sharp color contrasts over close color blendings. Both of these preferences have been documented through time, beginning in the eighteenth century with the remarks of resident German missionaries who complained, for example, that sermons were being punctuated with interjections from the congregation (see R. Price 1990:254), or Dutch observations that Maroons liked to dress in combinations of “jumping-at-the-eye” colors (see, for example, Coster 1866:26-28, Van Coll 1903:538). Finally, we must factor in the sewing practice by which Maroon women have, for as far back as we have evidence, joined pieces of cloth with meticulously finished seams to create garments of the proper dimensions (see, for example, S. & R. Price 1999: Figures 4.1, 4.32, 4.33, 4.34, 4.35).

Stylized interruptions are not only crucial to every form of speech, narrative, music, and dance, but even enter into the conceptualization of personal feuds, creating an *hors-de-l'art* parallel to the disjunctive structure of patchwork; this is a culture in which the pan-Afro-American pattern of “call and response” informs literally every aspect of social and cultural activity. In terms of the aesthetics of color contrast, twentieth-century dress continues to reflect an explicit preference for wearing contrasts rather than blends (for example, a red waistkerchief with a yellow and green wrap-skirt). And long-term ethnography among contemporary Maroons has not only documented a continuation of the color preferences picked up by early observers, but also suggests the influence of those preferences in contexts undiscoverable through visual observation; Maroon women talk about their gardens as being intentionally laid out in patchwork-like alternations of rice varieties they classify as “red” and “white,” even though the different kinds look and taste virtually the same once they get to the cooking pot. As for sewing techniques, garments from every documented period of Maroon textile history include seams joining same-color pieces of cloth.

The most plausible reading of the nature of the connective tissue between African models and twentieth-century Maroon patchwork thus relies on the uninterrupted presence of such aesthetic and technical aspects of life in the interior of the Guianas in combination with specific events in Suriname’s economic and labor history. My own long-term ethnographic fieldwork, exten-

sive museum research, consultation of archives, and reading of the literature strongly suggest the following scenario. With cultural preferences that were deeply embedded in a variety of verbal, visual, and conceptual realms other than textiles, and with an equally strong but completely separate textile tradition of patching cloth through meticulous seams, the scene was set for Maroon seamstresses to create an art, executed with seams, that combined interruptive patterning and sharp color contrasts. There are compelling reasons to believe that both the aesthetic framework and the material technique were firmly in place, and that the only thing lacking prior to the twentieth century were the appropriate raw materials.

When Maroon men began earning enough money during their periodic wage-labor trips to bring back large amounts of cloth, and coastal stores began stocking bolts of colorfully striped trade cotton in addition to their earlier offerings of monochrome cloth, Maroon women, never hesitant to carry artistic ideas from one medium to another when material resources permit, would quite naturally have begun to play with the new materials. Narrow-strip patchwork would then have begun with an external spark (new cloth supplies) igniting an amalgam between long-standing elements embedded in the cultural life of the Maroons. Representing both a continuity and an innovation, these textiles can be viewed as reflecting the heritage of the earliest Africans in the Suriname interior, the creative spirit of their twentieth-century descendants, and the material dependence of Maroons on worlds well beyond the villages of the rainforest.

This approach to Maroon textile history is based on a profoundly pre-post-modern genre of anthropological research. Because the players in the story it reconstructs began to form a cohesive community three centuries ago, upon their arrival in the South American rainforest, our principal focus has been on New World developments, with the ethnographic and art critical contribution of Africanists supplying a historical base that recedes progressively as the Maroon story unfolds in time. The resulting model (developed more fully in S. & R. Price 1980, 1999) has depended, in innumerable very specific ways, on consideration of ethnographic detail through time, including attention to:

- cloth/thread/yarn supplies,
- names given to particular designs and embroidery stitches,
- cross-media design transfers and structural similarities (between different visual media, visual and musical or narrative genres, etc.),
- changes in fashion (as conveyed through interviews, song lyrics, travelers' accounts, linguistic play, and other sources),
- cultural principles of kinship and conjugal relations,
- labor patterns,
- trends in the consumption of coastal imports,
- understandings about gender-specific aesthetic preferences and aptitudes,

- techniques of sewing, storing, and laundering clothes (and even recycling them once they are torn),
 - the nature and frequency of aesthetic discourse,
 - the social environment of art-making,
 - the tools and sequences of steps involved in each medium,
- and much more – all very decisively followed through time as much as oral history, archival records, museum collections, and reading of the literature allow.

At this point, the pleas being made by African scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah to recognize “Africa” as a Euro-American invention (condensing “enough cultural diversity to satisfy the wildest multiculturalist” into a slave-era construct viewing it as “the home of the Negro” [1997:47]) deserve to be brought into the picture. As Appiah (1997:47) has put it:

Only recently has the idea of Africa come to figure importantly in the thinking of many Africans; and those that took up this idea got it, by and large, from European culture ... the central cultural fact of African life, in my judgment, remains not the sameness of Africa’s cultures, but their enormous diversity.

Despite art historical maps, routes of influence traced from Mande to Akan, invocation of the specifics of Kuba barkcloth, and the like, the bottom line of much recent writing on African-American textiles constitutes an effort to identify (and celebrate) their origins in a schematic, quasi-essentialized “Africa.”

Whether we phrase the problem of origins in terms of continents, countries, ethnicities, or personal contacts, no art springs nakedly from a particular source. People conduct their lives in social, economic, ideological, and physical environments, producing art on the same days that they cultivate gardens, hunt or fish, discipline children, perform rituals, discuss politics, worry about money, gossip with each other, sing, flirt, and daydream. Despite their brevity, mini-biographies like those presented by Leon and Wahlman make it clear that for the quilters who were interviewed, all these kinds of activities rubbed elbows in a single memory frame. Even the physical forms that bear witness to the aesthetic sensibilities of their makers and inspire the aesthetic admiration of their viewers carry quiet evidence of this embeddedness of art in non-art aspects of life. Discussing Akan goldweights in a recent exhibit, Appiah (1997:46) comments:

Anyone who has handled a decent number of the weights ... will have noticed quite often among these elegant objects, so obviously crafted with great skill and care, one that has a lump of unworked metal stuffed into a crevice, in a way that seems completely to destroy its aesthetic unity; or, sometimes, a well-made figure has a limb crudely hacked off. These amputations and excrescences are there because, after all, a weight is a weight: and if it doesn’t weigh the right amount, it can’t serve its function. If a gold-

weight, however finely crafted, has the wrong mass, then something needs to be added (or chopped off) to bring it to its proper size.

The visible form of works of art can depend, in ways that are invisible to the most discerning critic's eye, on considerations anchored in decidedly non-art areas of its maker's life. This is why we must exercise such care in characterizing, for example, an apparent staggering of design elements as "deliberate" (Wahlman 1993:47) or asserting that a medieval cloth's blue and white colors represent a "deliberate clashing of 'high affect colors' ... in willful, percussively contrastive, bold arrangements" (Thompson 1983:209). Aesthetic "deliberation" surely constitutes a fundamental prerogative of the artists themselves, and their increasing participation over recent decades in clarifying what is or is not the intent behind their art cannot help but introduce a salutary breath of fresh air into future art critical (and culture-historical) discourse.

Attentive readers will note that after singling out three key contributions to the literature on African-American quilts, I've gone on to discuss only two of them. No, I have not forgotten Gladys-Marie Fry.

Stitched from the Soul (1990) documents the world of slave seamstresses in the antebellum South. It describes the quilts in terms of their finished form but also (and more importantly for the issues raised in this paper) explores the world in which they were conceptualized, sewn, slept under, laundered, torn into wartime bandages, used to decorate graves or hide children escaping to the North, and more. In the process, we get precious glimpses of slave women expressing their individuality and humanity in an anonymizing, dehumanizing environment, and are able to see quilts as part of a specific social and historical setting. Focusing on a well-defined time period, and documenting her claims, not by phone calls, personal communications, or undergraduate term papers, but rather by ample doses of citations taken from books, articles, Ph.D. dissertations, and archival documents, Fry offers a textured portrait of a cultural environment that has often been slighted in traditional histories because of the dual blinders of sexism and racism. Historically and ethnographically specific descriptions of this sort are what we need more of in order to trace links across regions and periods in the African diaspora with real confidence, building, somewhere down the line, a less speculative basis than we have today for assertions about the role of Mother Africa and the expressive ways her children defined their new lives in the Americas.

ZOOMING IN, ZOOMING OUT

I end with two suggestions that point in opposing, but I would hope compatible, directions. As the "traffic in culture" continues to erode the distinctions once segregating first- and third- or fourth-(art)worlds, "high" and "low"

genres, producers and critics, and even anthropologists and art historians, lanes are being opened up in many exciting directions. With anthropologists reading art historical literature and vice versa, with artists increasingly demanding an interpretive role, and with the influx of voices from previously underrepresented groups gaining momentum, students of African-American art are becoming increasingly well equipped to complement research questions raised by the historical and cultural results of the Middle Passage with exploration of issues born of more contemporary geographical, ideological, disciplinary, and identitarian passages. We are intellectually enriched by being able to read the interpretive texts of Faith Ringgold's acrylic and strip-cloth story quilts, talk to Saramakas about the meaning of the dances they are performing on the Washington Mall, visit an exhibition of "Black British" art conceptualized by Caribbean-born curators based in New York, and study Romare Bearden's analysis of compositional principles, in which paintings of the Italian Renaissance are seen through the eyes of an artist equally familiar with the one in Harlem.

At the same time, the suggestive leads that such a multiplicity of resources can produce need to be reined in by the most rigorous scholarly standards, something the way a Saramaka possession god (powerful, inspirational, and untamed when it makes its first appearance) needs to be ritually "domesticated" before it can provide useful service to the community. In my own Maroon research, for example, probing details of the most nitty-gritty sort has turned out to be essential for an understanding of textile art history:

Where do Maroons get their thread, what do they use to tuck under the raw edges in preparation for hemming, and how close are their stitches? What words do they use to label these cloths as they pass from men's coastal purchases to conjugal presents to women's skirts to sacks of edge trimmings to unsewn patterns on the ground and then back to conjugal presents, men's formal wear, pieces of laundry, and finally threadbare rags? What roles do textiles play in marriages, in worship, in political investitures, in popular songs, in legal disputes, in funerals? Do people talk among themselves about aesthetic principles? What, if anything, do they have to say about symbolism? Why do they always fold clothes, wrong side out, into little wallet-size packets? Why do seamstresses sometimes lather up a newly-sewn textile with bar soap and leave it in the sun before rinsing out the suds? Why, after carefully concealing the tiny stitches used to make a seam, do they lead the thread onto a part of the cloth where it shows clearly before cutting it off? How do they deal with slips, errors, and botched designs? What features of a textile inspire praise (from men, from women) and what features are disparaged? Are clothes mended when they tear, and if so how? What tone do people adopt when they critique a six-year-old's first attempt to sew a patchwork apron? How do they talk about the obsolete arts of their grandmothers? What parts of

a garment do women use to test out new ideas and how do their experiments affect fashion trends? Do they cut the cloth with scissors, knife, or razor? Or is it ripped ... ?

Giving more consistent attention to these kinds of ostensibly "peripheral" questions (pushing them back in time with the help of every resource available, whether published, archival, museological, oral-historical, etc.), as a complement to the broader strokes that reflect visual images of African and African-American art forms, could save us from many enticing but ultimately untenable readings of Old World/New World connections. And if the Maroon case is any indication, a recognition that cultural continuities do not always respect boundaries between one context and another (that is, that they travel freely from textiles to songs, from drum rhythms to naming practices, from oracles to body language, and more) may often help to fill the breach. By simultaneously zooming in on the ethnographic "trivia" (at the scissor/knife/razor or seam/edge-sewn level) and zooming out to a gaze that places particular arts in their full cultural context and cultural systems in their full region-wide context, the complex and often very subtle ways that threads of African origin weave in and out of the diaspora's cultural fabric may come into clearer view. And as the discussion continues to shift from arthings to artworlds, the growing participation of commentators from one or another segment of the African diaspora, including the artists themselves, cannot but help lead to newly enlightening visions.

NOTE

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