

# THE QUILT AS TEXT, THE TEXT AS QUILT

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**Abstract.** Based on Afro-American, feminist and genre studies, this paper discusses the way in which Afro-American women re-thing the world and their identity in a creative manner. The work is divided into two parts: “the quilt as text” and “the text as quilt”, separated by a prelude, an interlude and a postlude. The former shapes the frames the manner in which the quilt woven by Black women can be “read” as texts, as authentic documents of spiritual survival. The latter proposes an inter and intra –textual analysis of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, a novel which could be deciphered like a quilt, by means of the symbolic arrangement of various social and racial strata.

## *Prelude*

This is a story to pass on. This a story in which words are patches, the structure is a patchwork, and the images are “the figure in the carpet” (Showalter 225-27). Literally or metaphorically, its piercing message sews together the works of many female generations, their tedious fatigue of simple, everyday gestures. The secret meanings woven on the textual loom are transmitted, decoded among women in literature, art, and culture.

Drawing on African American studies, feminist and gender criticism, as well as on symbolic readings, the present paper is doubly aimed at discussing the quilt as text and the text as quilt. Our transdisciplinary arguments on the parallelism between women’s texts and women’s textiles are supported by such critics as Elaine Showalter, Barbara Christian, Thadious Davis, Jutta Rateike, Margot Anne Kelley, and others.

On the one hand, the notion of textual quilt will be explored, taking into account its meanings, etymology, historical development, main characteristics, and, complex signification. Part of the American folklore (defined by Zora Neale Hurston as “the boiled down juice of human living”), quilts present an essentialized form the accumulated experience of several female generations. Moreover, the cultural

practice of quilting appears as an instrument of crossing borders — which can be personal, social, political, religious, racial, or national.

On the other hand, the notion of textured fiction will be discussed. By proposing inter- and intra-textual readings of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, this paper revisits the silences and gaps of the previous African American writers from new a narrative perspective<sup>1</sup>. The author shows her awareness of the deep interconnection between her own writing and other writers' works, as revealed by her confession "I learn that the writer's pen is a microphone help up to the mouth of ancestors and even stones of long ago" (Walker 1988: 144).

The paper thus discusses how the African American women's textual quilts draw upon the huge potential of the black women's "muzzled" creative spirit. Remodeling their precursors in an innovative melting p(l)ot, contemporary female writers offer ground-breaking versions of the unknown (hi)story of black womanhood, while their view upon character and genre has its roots in both their literary and artistic tradition.

### **Part I: The Quilt as Text**

*The Webster's Dictionary* offers several definitions to the noun quilt: "1. a coverlet for a bed made of two layers of fabric with some soft substance, as wool or down, between them and stitched in patterns or tufted through all thicknesses in order to prevent the filling from shifting 2. anything quilted or resembling a quilt. 3. a bedspread or counterpane, esp. a thick one. 4. Obs. a mattress" (1180). *The Webster's Dictionary* also points to the etymology of the term, coming from the Latin *culcita*, meaning "mattress," "cushion," a word that evolved into *cuilte* in the Old French.

A practice that can be traced back to ancient Oriental cultures, quilting was brought to Europe in Medieval times "by the Crusaders and subsequently used in clothes;" worn by both women and men, "the main function of quilted clothing [was] thermal insulation" (Rateike 2000: 10). Brought to America by the European immigrants, in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the quilting techniques evolved into the specific American form of quilted bedcovers. The Industrial Revolution contributed to a new development in the history of the quilt, so that the expansive process of manufacturing a quilt was replaced by "the mechanization of the making of cloth: the power loom, the spinning jenny, the cotton gin" (Barber 1994: 33). Praised in the 19th century as an encompassing frame of female virtue,

criticized in the 20th century as a reflection of the choking aspects women's lives, quilting has recently come to represent a significant characteristic of female resourcefulness. To borrow from Showalter, quilting has turned out to be a "creative manipulation of conventions" (1986: 228).

In *The American Quilt: Aesthetic Practice and Cultural Criticism*, Jutta Rateike cogently notes:

Quilting became one of the domestic skills that many girls learned at an early age from the female members of the family, typically their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, and in the course of the nineteenth century a distinct female culture developed around this practice... In addition to utilitarian and 'best' quilts, which comprised the vast majority of all the quilts that were made at that time, women also created quilts as symbols of and ceremonial objects for essentially all social events and rituals in their families and communities (2000: 16).

The utilitarian and symbolic aspects of quilting overlap in the description of events from women's daily lives. A social and personal mirror, the quilt becomes a text to be read at several levels: the class hierarchy, the ethnic background, the religious belief — all of them are transfigured in its palimpsestic message.

At a social level, the cloistered creativity of quilts speaks both of repression and expression, of strengthening and also trespassing the separate female sphere. Quilting can be envisaged as a means of reinforcing "the cult of true womanhood" (Welter 1966), the stereotypical image of woman as static and virtuous, as the pillar around which the whole household gravitates. Nevertheless, quilting can be a symbol for resistance, a catalyst for self-assertion that bounds women together in spite of social, racial, cultural or religious boundaries. In an in-depth analysis of the ways in which folklore can be seen as a strategy of border crossing, Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown explains that quilts are material forms of folklore and therefore part of a "folklore aesthetic" that "designates strategies by which these women transgress borders and locate sites of intervention" (1999: 3). Like all the other forms of folklore, quilts generate a multicultural dialogue across traditions, as well as a genuine sense of communion across generations.

At a personal level, quilts engender "the traffic between multiple and various identities" (Davies 1994: 119). The technique of cutting small bits of fabric and

sewing them in a harmonious whole suggests the ultimate cohesion that the disparate fragments of female existence can assume in the artistic process. As psychic therapy, quilting has a cathartic role in a healing process that reconnects the disparate parts of one's identity. Quilting thus attains a dialogic function in reconstructing womanhood, by means of a "non hierarchic way of organizing language" (Bretteville 1974: 117). As in the Greek myth, one can be either Athens — the goddess whose academically trained skills follow strict rules — or Arachne — the mortal weaver whose originality goes beyond imposed artistic models.

At a textual level, quilting can be symbolically seen as an artistic version of *écriture féminine*, which, through the piercing and stitching techniques, conflates both the pen and the needle:

A knowledge of piercing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate and ingenious design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women's writing (Showalter 1986: 227).

Showalter draws once more our attention to the similarity between the process of quilting and that of writing. Not just the sewing of a text, but also the reading of a quilt become significant. Instances of stories in which this similarity appears emerge as colorful threads in the American literature: Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Quilting Party in Our Village," Louisa May Alcott's "Patty's Patchwork," Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*, Kate Chopin's "Elizabeth's Socks," etc.

In the context of the African American culture, quilts gain momentum from the importance of reconsidering, of rewriting women's former oppression and marginality. In African American texts, quilts highlight the huge potential of black women's creativity, which "expands traditional Western notions of art to include such artifacts of 'everyday use' as gardens and quilts" (Walker 1983: 137). For such an African American writer as Alice Walker, the process of writing itself is similar to the art of quilting, which presupposes the assemblage of various patches belonging to different text(ure)s, and their transference from one (narrative) space into another.

Accordingly, the most striking characteristic of African American quilts is their "promise of creating unity among disparate elements, of establishing

connections in the midst of fragmentation” (Kelley 1994: 176). As we shall argue in the next part, quilts transcend the temporal dimension, representing the valuable, local heritage that strengthens the mother-daughter connection. Creating intergenerational links, quilts can be seen as lieux de mémoire, in Pierre Nora’s words, sites of interaction between history and memory, between the collective and the personal (Nora 1994). Quilts thus have the anamnestic function of metaphorically joining the disparate pieces of women’s existential fabric into the material complexity of their daily craft. To borrow from Morrison, quilts are “rememories,” that is, images of past events and persons (Morrison, 1987). Initiating a counter-history, they make us re-member the hidden facts of women’s lives that have previously been dis-membered.

### *Interlude*

Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” conveys a simple, powerful message. Set in the late 60s, at a time that challenged the previous definitions of the African American identity, the story encompasses the conflict between tradition and innovation. The story is told from the perspective of the mother, who presents the contrasting views of her two daughters in relation to the role of a quilt. While her elder daughter (Dee alias Wangero) perceives the quilt as an exquisite object to be displayed in a museum, the younger one (Maggie) sees the quilt as an object of daily use. Mama stands as an example of strong femininity who is not a contemplative, but a practical person, able to value the material side of tradition.

Caught between two conflicting views, Mama realizes both the phony perspective her older daughter who adopts the white people’s consumerist standards, and the traditional perspective of her younger daughter who sticks to the long-established African American female practice. Referring to the distinction between the use and misuse of heritage, Barbara Christian specifies:

In critically analyzing the uses of the concept of heritage, Walker arrives at important distinctions. As an abstraction rather than a living idea, its misuse can subordinate people to artifact, can elevate culture above the community. And because she uses, as the artifact, quilts which were made by Southern black women, she focuses attention on those supposedly backward folk who never heard the word heritage but fashioned a functional tradition out of little matter and much spirit (1994: 130).

For the beautiful, fashionable Dee who has changed her name, who has a new lover, and who rejects her former identity, quilts signify just abstract heritage to be taken away from its local environment and be transplanted in exhibitions. On the contrary, for the humble, disabled Maggie who refuses to leave her native place, quilts are living heritage to be put to everyday use.

Ultimately, Mama's symbolic gesture of giving Maggie the quilts expresses her appreciation of the girl's knowledge of quilting, a craft which has been transmitted to her by the older generations: "It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself" (413). Like Mama, Maggie is aware of the function of the quilt as a lieu de mémoire that connects the family history. Quilting becomes a symbolic mosaic, in which scraps of clothing worn by the family members at important events are synchronically envisaged: "In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Granpa Erza's uniform that he wore in the Civil War" (412).

## **Part II: The Text as Quilt**

An extended quilt, Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) weaves together both inter- and intra-textual readings that encompass black women's personal development in relation to their African American community and their specific Southern psychogeography. Walker's rewriting can be symbolically compared to the art of quilting, since both offer cross-cultural and cross-temporal representations of female identity. The idea presented in "Everyday Use" — of sewing together patches of cloth belonging to different generations — can be also traced in Walker's revisional technique of transplanting and transforming former literary ideas. In this way, *The Color Purple* consciously rewrites Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as texts belonging to the 19th century African American women writers (Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, and Frances Harper).

Walker's relation to her literary precursors can be implicitly traced in the two line motto of *The Color Purple*: "Show me how to do like you/Show me how to do it" Belonging to Stevie Wonder, the motto brings into attention a vernacular song with textual implications. On the one hand, the ambivalent song can be read against the Western literary tradition as a signifying mockery of the Eurocentric grand

narratives, on the other hand, the song may refer to the African American tradition, whose assistance the author invokes and whose “vacant spaces” she rewrites (Iser 1978: 210).

Moreover, the scriptural connotations of the song resonate with the metaphor of gazing explicitly present in Hurston’s title, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Reconsidering Hurston, Walker’s character does not look up at God, (or ask for His mercy as in the slave narrative tradition), but tries to establish a way of communication by writing to Him, in order to make God symbolically gaze down upon her. The novel is accordingly conceived as an elaborate series of stitches/sketches, of letters/monologues addressed by Celie to God at the beginning, and later to her sister, Nettie<sup>2</sup>.

Walker has no anxiety of influence in considering Hurston as one of her literary precursors. Henry Louis Gates cogently argues that Walker’s novel “Signifies upon” Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “by troping the concept of voice” (1988: 243). In the same direction, Michael Awkward affirms that Walker transforms Hurston’s text into a “matrix” for her novel. Even though Hurston belongs to the Harlem Renaissance generation of the 1930s, and Walker to the postmodern period of the 1980s<sup>3</sup>, the same thematic concern with women’s identity development is the red thread of both novels.

Indeed, both novels celebrate women’s polytropic character through their achievement of an autonomous identity, the importance of women’s bonds, and their relationship to the black community. Several intertextual threads should be established between Hurston’s Janie and Walker’s Celie: both heroines are Southern black women who live in the 1920s and 1930s; both of them are orphans (their mother is absent or dies); for both of them attaining womanhood through marriage signifies psychological death; both of them have two men in their lives who treat them either as “mules” only good for hard work or as objects of desire; both of them experience self-awakening through a nonconformist relationship to either a pariah protagonist (Tea Cake in Janie’s case) or a woman singer (Shug in Celie’s case); last but not least, floral imagery and symbolic colors acquire a primordial role in their lives, expressing the stages of their inner quest. Hence, Hurston’s and Walker’s texts propose “a new gynocentric culture in which the originally abused and marginalized becomes the new loci for order and spirituality” (Brogan 1999: 187).

However, departing from Hurston, Walker uses the technique of an epistolary novel in order to quilt the disparate patches of Celie's identity. As a basic means of self-expression, Celie's first letter signifies her first step towards independence. When she starts writing, she actually initiates a process of self-examination in which she learns how to decipher her body as a text upon which racial, social and sexual relations have left their imprint. For Celie, writing becomes a therapeutic act of healing, of rendering visible her invisible trauma, of preventing her from becoming a dead subject in language<sup>4</sup>.

It is the moment to notice that one of Walker's main strategies of textual quilting is to revise the 19th century models of black womanhood, such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), or Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892). Focusing on women's situation during slavery, all these texts are representative for what Robert Stepto calls "the pregeneric myth" of the African American literature, the quest for literacy and freedom" (1979: ix).

Like Celie, the 19th century heroines dare to reinvent themselves, to achieve a harmonious, independent self by stitching together the fragmented parts of their existence through the acquisition of a literate voice. One may first notice that "the trope of the talking book" (Gates 1988: 240) has different figurations in the 19th century female tradition. Wilson's Frado achieves psychological freedom through her reading of books that become her "constant companions" for "her soul's refreshment" (115-16). In the same direction, Jacobs' Linda Brent uses her newly acquired skills to read and write as an instrument of outwitting her master and finally achieving her own and her children's liberation. Likewise, Harper's Iola places her high education on the altar of the social uplift of her whole race, transforming her life into a symbol of Christian virtue. Like her precursors, Walker's Celie learns that writing letters represents a means of self-reliance and resistance to the unaccountable events she is forced to pass through.

In spite of the above similarities, Walker diverges from her precursors. The original pattern of Walker's textual quilt emerges out of her womanist ideas. While the 19th century authors focus on an abolitionist goal as they intend to awaken the their predominantly white audience's consciousness against slavery, Walker's aim is mainly feminist or womanist, (McDowell 1995), as she strives to enlighten both her black and white audience's consciousness for the emancipation of the women of color. While Wilson's, Jacobs' and Harper's major goal is racial and social, (as they



fight against the institution of slavery), Walker's main concern is psychological and sexual, (as she struggles against the gender prejudices).

In this direction, the epistolary genre allows the reader to concentrate on Celie's most intimate reflections, which are narrated in the first person and directly convey the stages of her psychological and physical development. A progress should be noted from the first childish letters that divulge doubt and lack of knowledge to the mature ones that document her progression to self-revelation. One could argue here that Walker un-quilts the 19th century tradition. Unlike Jacobs or Harper, Walker writes about a real act of rape. If Jacobs' Linda manages to avoid the sexual innuendoes of her white master, if Harper's Iola escapes an attempted rape, Walker's Celie is repeatedly raped by her father and by her husband.

With its social and sexual undertones, the haunting image of the "good girl" is intricately sewn both in Walker's text and in most of the writings of the 19th century African American women, who strove to defy the representation of the black woman as an epitome for insatiable sexual appetite. Jacobs' Linda, Wilson's Nig, and Harper's Iola are instances of virtuous heroines who attempt to demystify negative clichés of femininity.

In the 19th century, polarized representations of femininity used to contrast the pure image of a Madonna (associated with white womanhood) with the debauched one a Jezebel (associated with black womanhood). Walker revises this tradition, shedding an ironic light over woman's so called "virtue," which in an abusive system is equivalent with silence. This is why Celie's remark "I don't never git used to it" indicates the first sign of her polytropic character and resistance to male will (3). Accordingly, Celie's text has the purpose of undermining its patriarchal context. In her case, rape is no longer "an instrument of silencing, but the catalyst to Celie's search of voice" (Cutter 2000: 166). Her narratological act of internal resistance will later assume forms of external resistance, since she learns to defy verbally her male aggressors.

At an intra-textual level, Celie's technique of writing similar to the process of quilting underlines such dichotomies as speech vs. writing, the mind vs. the body, and the masculine vs. the feminine<sup>5</sup>. Through a Derridian lens, her text functions as a substitute for speech through a logic of supplementarity, in which writing is both an addition and a substitute for speech. In a context in which speaking is denied to her, Celie transforms her speakerly writing into a vehicle of truth and self-expression. All

this may account for a text that deconstructs the opposition between writing and speech. As her letters include the voices/speeches/texts of the other characters, so her identity is constructed by interaction with the other women that contribute to her self-definition.

Celie's plurivocal, polyphonic text resembles the African American quilts, which incorporate various materials in a distinctive whole. In an emblematic scene, Celie makes together with Sofia a quilt out of the "messed up curtains," torn in the fight between Sofia and Harpo. As Judy Elsley points, for Celie the quilt represents a step towards "the paradigmatic process of claiming herself" (72). Moreover, it also appears as a symbolic bond with another woman, taking into account its pattern called "Sister's Choice:"

Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance a get. It a nice pattern call Sister's choice. If the quilt turn out perfect, maybe I give it to her, if it not perfect, maybe I keep (53).

As the opposition between writing and speech is effaced, so is that between the body and the mind and the outer and the inner self. Through a schizophrenic self-representation, Celie initially detaches herself from her body, from which she feels totally estranged. Her effacement is obvious in her letters addressed to God that are left unsigned. Only when she starts writing and later sewing in a process of self-discovery, she surpasses her somatophobia and puts her signature on her text(ure). Hence, her self-awareness is validated in her writing and sewing, and the reshaping of her body-text takes place in a textual mirror.

In this light, Celie's newly achieved self-autonomy manifests both from an auctorial and sexual point of view. In order to assert her autonomy, Celie moves away from Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s house and starts a business with pants. Significantly, her creative impulse has at its basis a destructive one, since she wants to kill her husband who obstructed her communication with her sister by hiding Nettie's letters. The "razor" is accordingly replaced by the "needle" that becomes an instrument of self-expression, of proving her self worth and abnegation to the others. As trousers encode strong connotations of masculinity, Celie passes through a process of virilization while she sews them. Shug exclamation indicates Celie's independence: "Girl, You on Your Way" (181).

In an ironic key that turns the initial situation upside down, Celie starts to be assisted in her work by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Notice that Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ do not change their roles, that Celie does not become Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s suppressor. The end of the novel does not offer the easy solution of a world turned upside down, of feminine independence and masculine subservience. In this way, in Walker's text the conflict between the masculine and the feminine spheres is mediated and takes place at the meeting point where Celie's virility is counterbalanced by Albert's femininity. Their dialogue sends us back to the motto of the novel, "Show me how to do like you/Show me how to do it," which can be this time reconsidered through Celie's perspective as an initiator who bases her remarks on an African model.

And men sew in Africa, too, I say.  
They do? He ast.  
Yeah, I say. They not so backward as mens here.  
When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it.  
Well, nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Here, help me stitch in these pockets.  
But I don't know how, he say.  
But I show you, I said. And I did (230).

The conversation brings along a reconfiguration of the domestic space, which is no longer just a feminine area, since a male character becomes part of it. Negotiating a symbolic terrain for the masculine and the feminine spheres to meet, Walker suggests that Celie's character becomes autonomous only when she manages to come to terms with the past, when she overcomes her feelings of hatred<sup>6</sup>.

### ***Postlude***

As argued in this trans-disciplinary paper, the quilt-text and the text-quilt allow the crossing of various boundaries: that between the social and the personal level, between the old and the young generation, between speech and writing, the mind and the body, the masculine and the feminine etc. Metaphorically speaking, the pen can be seen as a figurative needle that stitches various separations in intricate textual embroidery. Similar to the patterns of a quilt, various leitmotifs blend in a

harmonious chorus that transcends former literary representations where Manichean positions are preserved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thadious Davis observes that for Walker “one way of structuring ‘the common thread’ is by means of generations; she values the strength and purpose black generations have given to her writing, but she refuses to reduce their meanings to platitudes or to ignore the complexities of their lives” (110).

<sup>2</sup> One could argue that Walker reconfigures the Augustinian tradition of *Soliloquia* (dialogues in solitude with God) from an African American female perspective.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard W. Bell includes Walker in the neorealist tradition together with John Oliver Killers, John Alfred Williams, Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones, but he acknowledges that *The Color Purple* appears as an exception, a novel that is not “historical and mimetic” (268).

<sup>4</sup> One must also notice that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* have been either criticized or praised for various reasons. Some of the “manifest flaws” of the novels consist in their failure to achieve realist fiction (Hite 1989: 103), their romantic atmosphere and happy endings. Hazel V. Carby stresses the fact that Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an unrealistic novel, in which the black folk are represented as “happy and healthy” (1990: 90). Criticizing Walker, Lauren Berlant notices in her novel the gap between the “aesthetic” and “political” discourses, harshly concluding that the author highlights “individual essence in false opposition to institutional history” (1988: 868). In the same direction, bell hooks strenuously objects to Walker’s focus on the main character’s personal oppression and lack of focus on the collective sufferance of the African American people—a fault that can be traced in Hurston’s text as well (1990). However, other critics have raised their voices to re-evaluate these (mis)readings of Hurston’s and Walker’s texts. Berlant’s and hooks’s observations about the distance between the personal and the political in Walker’s text are reconsidered by Linda Selzer who argues that Walker is able to combine the “domestic perspective” with “an extended critique of race relations” (1995: 68). The same note is struck by John F. Callahan when he discusses *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as “a thematic fusion of intimacy and immensity, personal and impersonal reality,” “lyrical imagery” and critical approach to “the limitations of the community” (1988: 116, 121).

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Linda Selzer considers the effacement of another opposition: the one between races. She insists on two instances present in the novel that bridge the gap: Miss Eleanor Jane (the white woman raised by Sofia) coming to work for Sofia, and Alphonso’s decision to employ white people in his store. However, Selzer concludes that even if the novel “suggests that feelings of racial identity can transcend national boundaries, the novel provides no such reassurances that the boundaries between races can be successfully negotiated” (1995: 76).

<sup>6</sup> Notice here that the dichotomy between the masculine and the feminine sphere was also reduced in Spielberg’s adaptation of the book to his 1985 movie *The Color Purple*. Carol

Dole analyzes the changes Spielberg operates to the book, as his main point was to create equilibrium by cutting certain scenes of the novel or adding new ones. Dole shows how a mainstream white male director adapted “Walker’s feminist, matriarchal novel about the Southern rural black experience” by “softening both Walker’s celebration of female culture and her harsh portrayal of male culture” (Dole 1996: 12-13).

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