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Between Heaven and Earth: Collective Memory Across Time and Place in the Quilts of Harriet Powers

Stitched among the the cotton squares of Harriet Powers' two surviving quilts are centuries of memories, handed down through oral tradition, written text, and now in this case, through large scale works of textile art. Born a slave in 1830s Georgia and owned by a white woman, Powers life and legacy lay at the meeting point of numerous marginalized identities. She was enslaved, then later emancipated after the conclusion of the Civil War. She was a woman of African descent living in the American south as a devout Christian. At the center of these numerous and varied adjectives used by scholars to describe the existence of Powers is her immense talent and skill as a quilter. Through the use of applique quilting, Harriet Powers created a representation of collective memory for the social, racial, religious, and geographical groups she was a member of. In her two surviving quilts, *Bible Quilt* (Figure 1) and *Pictorial Quilt* (Figure 2), these collective memories are pieced together through both machine and hand stitched squares. Powers' quilts are now preserved in the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, hundreds of miles away from their humble beginnings as piles of scrap fabric.

The concept of cultural, or collective memory originates from the work of twentieth-century art historian Aby Warburg. According to Warburg, cultural memory depends upon fixed, monumental events in the past around which the memories of groups of people are formed.¹ These memories are formed through "cultural formation" like visual art and oral

¹ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique*, no. 65, 1995, pp. 125–133. 129.

communication, as well as “institutional formation” like religious observance and worship.² In the case of Harriet Powers’ *Bible Quilt* and *Pictorial Quilt*, the fixed, enduring events around which she creates a visual cultural memory are rooted in a number of different “monumental events” that were inscribed on the bodies and minds of not only Powers herself, but those who came before her. The enslavement of African people in America after being ripped from their homelands, Biblical stories of suffering and redemption alongside enslavement and liberation, as well as natural phenomena and folk tales from the rural South serve as the foundational events and stories that the collective memory of Powers’ quilts are grounded in. As a formerly enslaved African American Christian woman from rural Georgia, all of these events are embedded in the cultures Powers was born into and created her works of art in. The memory of these events is specific to Powers not only as an individual artist, but as a member of marginalized and undervalued cultural groups as well. The memory of Biblical events like the Exodus from Egypt is not Powers’ memory specifically, but the memory of a people she belongs to. The memory of these events is constructed not only through the content of Powers’ quilts, but through her quilting technique and use of narrative textile in general as an emancipated African American woman.

Powers’ *Pictorial Quilt* and *Bible Quilt* are unprecedented in their use of applique to communicate Biblical and meteorological narratives in the confines of their squares, but quilting as a means of constructing cultural identity has been a staple of African American culture in the United States since long before the Civil War. Powers is located in a long line of female African American quilters, both enslaved and freed, who have shaped a tradition of using the oft

² Ibid.

neglected medium textile art to document the black experience in America and provide hope for the future of this marginalized group.³ Black women using textile art as a medium for liberation is one fraught with racialized and gendered meaning and a historic lack of documentation of quilts made by Black women in the Antebellum South is due not only to African American quilts being perceived as merely a craft made by a marginalized race, but as women's work as well.⁴ This lack of documentation complicates the argument that quilts like those of Powers are unprecedented, due to the simple fact that there may have been similar applique quilts created by enslaved women among the numerous surviving piecework quilts that are now lost to white supremacy and patriarchy. While many piecework quilts made by women of color survive (Figure 5), these quilts lend themselves to a more decorative textile object through their use of geometric shapes. The lack of figurative applique quilts from this time period could potentially be due to such objects not existing prior to Powers' work, but could also indicate that historic works of textile art that told the stories of African Americans rather than just displaying aesthetically pleasing patterns have been purposefully left out of the narrative of American visual culture. In short, of the number of quilts that have survived to the twenty-first century, Powers' *Bible Quilt* and *Pictorial Quilt* are unprecedented in their use of narrative applique, but other similar quilts made by African American women may have existed among the many piecework quilts that still survive today.

With both of Powers' quilts in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and The Smithsonian Museum of American History constructing most of what is known about Harriet Powers as an

³ Aleia M Brown, "War and Redemption in the Cloth: Quilting the Black Freedom Struggle, 1960-Present." Middle Tennessee State University, 2016.

⁴ Ibid. 8.

artist, even less is known about Harriet Powers' life as an individual. Small segments of recorded oral histories and one incredible piece of writing from the artist herself to a woman named Lorene Diver are almost all that is known of this skilled textile artist, and these documents come down through history as second hand sources, with the artist's one page memoir being the only piece of her writing in existence. For example, the woman who purchased Powers' *Bible Quilt*, Jennie Smith, wrote down Powers' explanations of the content of each of the quilts' squares at some point during the end of the 19th Century. These same descriptions were used in an article written by another white woman, Lucine Finch, in the early 20th Century.⁵ These descriptions from Powers herself, filtered through a white woman's lens, are the some of the only documented words from Powers regarding her quilts that are still in existence today. Disappointingly, no such interviews of the artist exist for her other remaining quilt, *Pictorial Quilt*, but an unrelated piece of writing from Powers herself has survived the test of time. In this letter she mentions a third quilt, still lost to history or gathering dust in an attic, and discusses her love for reading the Bible.⁶ Additionally, Powers includes the fact that she sold *Bible Quilt* to Jennie Smith after a Georgia fair in 1886. Apart from the interview discussing the subject matter of *Bible Quilt* and the short piece of writing from the artist that serves as a page-long memoir the rest of what is known about Powers can be found in the censuses of Clarke County. These county collected records show the various items that Powers bought throughout her life, like a buggy

⁵ Gladys-Marie Frye, "A Sermon in Patchwork": New Light on Harriet Powers by in *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, edited by Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. 82.

⁶Kyra E. Hicks, *This I accomplish: Harriet Powers' Bible quilt and other pieces : quilt histories, exhibition lists, annotated bibliography and timeline of a great African American quilter*. Black Threads Press, 2009. 38.

purchased in 1897.⁷ Her eventual abandonment by her husband, Armistead Powers, can also be found in these records. Through these descriptions of *Bible Quilt*, Powers' own few sentences about her life, and the census records from rural Georgia in the late 19th Century, an image of this elusive woman comes into view.

Despite the disappointingly small amount of knowledge about Powers' life, given that her own written memoir amounts to less than a page, the histories of her works of art are fairly well known. The earliest of Harriet Powers' surviving quilts, *Bible Quilt*, was first displayed by the artist at the Northeast Georgia Fair in Athens, Georgia in 1886.⁸ It was then bought by Jennie Smith, an art teacher at a girls' school, in 1891. Originally, Smith wanted to purchase the quilt during the fair, but Powers was unwilling to part with the elaborate and painstakingly rendered work.⁹ However, once Powers' family was in need of money, she relented and sold *Bible Quilt* to Smith, who only paid Powers a meager \$5 for what would later become a staple of African American visual culture. After purchasing her quilt, Smith later displayed it at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, and it remained in her possession until her death. In her will, the quilt was not specifically listed and instead became part of the "odds and ends" of her estate for the executor of Smith's will, Harold Heckman, to contend with and later own.¹⁰ After a friend of Heckman's regaled the Textile Department of what was then the National Museum of History and Technology in Washington, D.C. with the wonders of the quilt in his friend's possession, Heckman decided to mail *Bible Quilt* from Georgia to the National Museum

⁷ Gladys-Marie Frye, "Harriet Powers: Portrait of a Black Quilter." *Sage* 4, no. 1 (1987): 13

⁸ Kyra E. Hicks, *This I accomplish*, 15.

⁹ Frye, "A Sermon in Patchwork" 82.

¹⁰ Gladys-Marie Frye, "Harriet Powers: Portrait of a Black Quilter." 12.

of History and Technology where it was met with wonder and awe by the museum and accepted as a gift.¹¹ Making its way from the hands of Powers to a national museum in just a few decades, *Bible Quilt's* humble beginnings as rags later transformed in a spectacular work of art is a testament to Powers' talent and the tenacity of those who saw value in her work.

Throughout the study of Powers' quilts, scholars have noted the similarities between the techniques used by Powers and the technique used by West African textile artists.¹² However, these comparisons are often mentioned in introductory information regarding her quilts, or as offhand observations that are rarely interrogated. Some scholars, like quilt historian Cuesta Benberry, maintain that concluding African influence in American slave quilts should come only after exploring other influences.¹³ Despite this caution against "leaping to conclusions" regarding African influence, a formal analysis of West African applique textiles shows that while these textiles may differ dramatically in subject matter, the manner in which the narratives are depicted are very technically similar.¹⁴ In one particular African textile (Figure 3), dating to the 19th Century and created in the West African Kingdom of Danhome, the appliqued figures who stand in profile bear a striking resemblance to the figures in Powers' quilts. These Danhome figures possess facial features and articulated hands while Powers' figures do not, but their poses and construction are more similar to the pictorial representations in Powers' quilts than almost any other textile produced in North America during this time. Indeed, the narrative pictorial quality

¹¹ Ibid. 59.

¹² Frye, "Harriet Powers: Portrait of a Black Quilter." 11.

¹³ Frye, "'A Sermon in Patchwork': New Light on Harriet Powers" 93.

¹⁴ Maude Walman. *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*. Atlanta, Ga: Tinwood Books, 2002. 64.

of Powers' quilts was unprecedented in American quilting, so a Transatlantic inspiration is not outside the bounds of consideration and in fact is the most logical conclusion to draw.

Just as the figures in Danhome textiles are similar to those in Harriet Powers' quilts, the animals represented in these textiles resemble those used in *Bible Quilt* and *Pictorial Quilt*. Both of these quilts contain images of animals, and Danhome textiles frequently feature animals like oxen or bulls as central images (Figure 4).¹⁵ Just like the figures in these textiles, the animals are presented in profile, at times with curiously anthropomorphized features like eyebrows. In addition to both bodies of work being applied textiles with visual similarities, the uses of Dahome textiles are similar to the ways in which Powers' quilts were used and the very purposes they were created for. These West African textiles were used to record religious values as well as personal or group histories, the collective memories of the Danhome people, and Powers' *Bible Quilt* and *Pictorial Quilt* function in an identical manner for the histories of the groups these quilts represent.¹⁶ While it is nearly impossible to confirm whether or not Powers was ever exposed to these textile techniques prior to her enslavement in America, the similarities between these two groups of textiles separated by an entire ocean are too large to ignore. There is no record of where Powers' family was from in Africa, but it is clear that these textiles had a large impact on her quilting technique. Through creating quilts that visually and technically echoed those of West Africa, as well as paralleling their intended use, Powers implemented the collective memory of this geographically and ethnically specific art form in her works of art. The use of figures and animals in these bodies of work demonstrate that whether she intended to or

¹⁵Monni Adams. "Fon Appliqued Cloths." *African Arts* 13, no. 2 (1980): 28-88.

¹⁶Maude Walman. *Signs and Symbols*, 60.

not, Powers called on traditions of textile creation that stretched across time and place to demonstrate the memory of a culture she may no longer be physically part of, but one that influenced her cultural identity and artistic production.

The content of Powers' quilts is just as indicative of the collective memory she draws on as her technique and her place in the history of African American quilting. In both *Bible Quilt* and *Pictorial Quilt*, narrative scenes from the Old and New Testaments make up the scaffolding that holds the other themes aloft. Despite the fact that we only have Jennie Smith's records of Powers' descriptions of *Bible Quilt* rather than Powers own words, these descriptions of *Bible Quilt* are integral to understanding how this quilt fits into the collective Judeo-Christian memory. Of the eleven squares of this quilt, ten represent stories come directly from the Old and New Testaments. Represented in these squares are the stories of Adam and Eve's time in the Garden, the tale of Cain and Abel, Jacob's dream after his flight from Esau, the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist, Christ's crucifixion and betrayal by Judas, the Last Supper, and the Holy Family.¹⁷ Despite the fact that slaves brought to America early in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade were hesitant to accept Christianity, the large amount of Christian imagery in this quilt is indicative of the shift in the faith practices in of slave communities in the 19th Century.¹⁸ Christianity was once an oppressive practice used by slave owners to control their slaves, slaves themselves took charge of formulating their own faith traditions surrounding the Biblical text. In fact, a distinct blending of various African religious traditions with Christian tradition began to take place

¹⁷ Kyra E. Hicks, *This I Accomplish*, 14. Specific explanations of each individual quilt square for *Bible Quilt* can be found in the images section of this paper.

¹⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel" in *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*. Edited by Daniel. L. Fountain. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2010. 7.

during the 19th Century.¹⁹ This mixing of African tradition with the American South's religious tradition is obvious in Powers' use of African textile technique to communicate Biblical narratives and is a tradition that persists today in the unique relationships some African American communities have with the Christian church.

The Bible stories that Powers chose for *Bible Quilt*, as well as *Pictorial Quilt*, serve to connect her to more than the history of the Christian faith across time and place. While these religious stories make up almost the entirety of both quilts left in existence, the subject matter of these stories amounts to more than just events within the collective Christian memory. Human suffering figures prominently in both of these quilts, though more of *Pictorial Quilt* features images of trial and tribulation. Both quilts include a poignant image of the Crucifixion, the apex of human suffering that leads to the salvation of humanity in the Christian tradition. The Crucifixion in *Pictorial Quilt* features Mary and Martha praying and sobbing at the foot of the cross, unlike the Crucifixion in *Bible Quilt*.²⁰ This added layer of strife makes it clear that misery is a prominent and potent theme in *Pictorial Quilt*, as this image sits alongside squares that depict the suffering of Job, the diseased Israelites about to be healed by Moses, Jonah being swallowed by a whale, and angels who pour "vials of wrath" in the Book of Revelations.²¹ Powers' use of images of suffering in her quilts further connects her to the Judeo-Christian memory as it links Powers and others who were born into bondage with those who suffered for God in the Bible. Just as Christ suffered on the cross and the Israelites suffered in the desert after

¹⁹ Fountain, Daniel L. *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. 1.

²⁰ Kyra E. Hicks, *This I Accomplish*, 63.

²¹ Ibid. Specific explanations of each individual quilt square for *Bible Quilt* can be found in the images section of this paper.

being freed from Pharaoh, Powers and other slaves in America suffered and toiled for generation upon generation.

The parallels between the injustice of slavery in the American South and the enslavement of the Israelites in the Book of Exodus is a theme that has long since been a key component of African American faith. The suffering Jonah, the women at the tomb, and others that underscore Powers' quilts, *Pictorial Quilt* especially, is second only to the persecution the Israelites suffered at the hands of Pharaoh, and Powers' inclusion of scenes from the Exodus serves to connect her to the African American Christian idea of America being the new Egypt for Black Africans as taken from their own Israel and delivered into bondage in the United States south.²² The story Exodus was told and retold among faithful African American slaves, and was a story at the forefront of their thirst for liberation from bondage.²³ In representing the image of Moses healing the Israelites as they wander in the desert after God frees them, Powers calls attention to the fact that those who are favored by God will be freed and will be healed, just as she was emancipated and lived as a free woman after the conclusion of the Civil War. The Exodus was not just a story from a book to those living in bondage, but both a history and a prophecy at once that told of God's promise to free God's people, all documented in this quilt by a black woman who learned to read from studying the Bible.²⁴

While Judeo-Christian imagery is one of the key aspects of Powers' quilts, these narratives are not the only events included in Powers' work. *Pictorial Quilt* includes images of

²² Albert J. Raboteau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel" 2010, 9.

²³ Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book : African Americans and the Bible*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 83.

²⁴ Kyra Hicks, *This I Accomplish*, 38.

natural phenomena that occurred both before Harriet Powers' birth and during her lifetime. "Black Friday" in May of 1780, a day where the "sun went off to a small spot and then to darkness" is featured in the second square of *Pictorial Quilt*, along with the Leonid meteor shower of 1833, an "unusually heavy snowfall" in Georgia in 1895, and another meteor shower in 1846 also find their place among the Bible stories of Powers' second quilt.²⁵ By representing these phenomena in *Pictorial Quilt*, Powers links herself to the geographical location of the United States. Her inclusion of the "dark day" of 1780 is particularly interesting, given that this phenomenon occurred in the Northeastern United States before Powers was born.²⁶ Unlike the meteor showers and an unusual amount of the snow, this event would not have been anything Powers saw firsthand, but something she likely would have heard about through oral tradition. This event's inclusion in this quilt ties Powers to the United States as a whole, not just the rural south she called home. Powers' decision to insert this Northeastern United States natural event could potentially have religious implications as well, as the darkening of the sky is discussed in the book of Exodus in the Bible.²⁷ In the Exodus, a religious event that has already been demonstrated as important to African American Christian tradition, God commands Moses to "stretch out [his] hand so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt"²⁸. This darkness that fell over the Northeast in 1780 mirrors the darkness that fell over Egypt, where the Israelites were enslaved just as Black Africans were in the South and parts of the Northeast. Once again,

²⁵ Kyra Hicks, 2009, 63.

²⁶ Campanella, Thomas J. "'Mark Well the Gloom': Shedding Light on the Great Dark Day of 1780." *Environmental History* 12, no. 1 (2007): 35-58. 35.

²⁷ 36. The connection between this event and Exodus was found in this article, without mention of Powers.

²⁸ Exodus 10:21 NRSV

Powers connects the enslaved across time and place, this time through an unprecedented natural phenomenon.

While the unusual snowfall depicted in *Pictorial Quilt* does not seem to have any Biblical precedence, the meteor showers Powers finds important enough to include twice in her quilt do. Descriptions of falling stars abound in both the Old and New Testament, as well as in the Gospels. Over a dozen verses describe such a phenomenon, like Matthew 24:29 that discusses how “the sun will be darkened...and stars will fall from heaven” and the various passages in Revelation that speak of stars falling to earth.²⁹ This mention of the sun darkening in Matthew may also tie back to the “dark day” in the second square of this quilt, tying all these phenomena to the places in which they occurred as well as the Biblical precedent for such events. In addition to the falling stars, the quilt squares that depict meteor showers also contain an applique hand, described as “The hand of God” that shields God’s people from harm.³⁰ By mixing and fusing Biblical imagery with documented natural events, Powers again represents the collective memory of these events and ties herself to the land she lives in and the people of passionate faith that came before her.

All while living in the Reconstruction period of the American South, emancipated slave Harriet Powers created moving and monumental representations of collective memory through her use of African textile technique to tell the stories of those who came before her. Her quilts stitched upon the words of the Bible and the heavens from which stars and snow fall. By telling the story of the liberation of God’s chosen from Egypt to remember and mourn the enslavement

²⁹ Revelation 6:13, 9:1, and 12:4. NRSV.

³⁰ Kyra Hicks, *This I Accomplish*, 63.

and emancipation of her fellow slaves, Powers connects herself and the struggles of those like her to a story thousands of years old. By showing the suffering and later redemption of a miserable Job and crucified Christ, she aligns herself with and celebrates the people of God who had come before her, and suffered like her, for her and other people of faith. Further, Powers' use of natural phenomena reflected in stories from the Bible in her quilts alongside her West African applique inspired technique tie her to the geographic location of the United States while further rooting her work in the lands of West African that she had never trod. Harriet Powers was born a slave, freed, and abandoned by her husband. But above all, she was a black woman of God who preserved thousands of years of memory across time, place, and people in scraps of fabric stitched together to create quilts unlike any others that came before them.

Images



Figure 1. Harriet Powers, *Bible Quilt*, 1885-1886, pieced and appliqued cotton, 75 in x 89 in. National Museum of American History.

Square Descriptions from Kyra Hicks *This I Accomplish*, pg 14

Square 1	Adam and Eve naming animals
Square 2	Adam and Eve with their son, Cain
Square 3	The Devil, surrounded by seven stars
Square 4	Cain killing Abel
Square 5	Cain and his wife in the land of Nod
Square 6	Jacob sleeps next to an angel on a ladder
Square 7	A dove flies over John the Baptist baptizing Christ
Square 8	Christ crucified with two thieves. The circles represent “darkness over the earth”
Square 9	Judas and thirty pieces of silver
Square 10	Christ and disciples at the Last Supper

Square 11	The Holy Family (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph)
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Figure 2. Harriet Powers, *Pictorial Quilt*, 1895-1898, pieced and appliqued cotton, 68 in x 105 in. Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

Square Descriptions from Kyra Hicks *This I Accomplish*, pg 63

Square 1	Job praying for his enemies, Job's coffin
Square 2	"Black Friday" May 19, 1780
Square 3	Moses with a serpent preparing to heal the Israelites
Square 4	Adam and Eve with the serpent in the Garden of Eden
Square 5	Christ baptized by John the Baptist
Square 6	Jonah swallowed by a whale
Square 7	The creation of both male and female creatures
Square 8	Falling stars from the Leonid meteor shower of 1833
Square 9	Pairs of animals

Square 10	Angels called by god to pour vials of wrath
Square 11	Heavy snowfall in Georgia in 1895, people frozen where they stand
Square 12	Meteor showers, perhaps from 1846
Square 13	Bob and Kate Bell of Virginia who “knew nothing of God” and Betts, a hog who ran from Georgia to Virginia
Square 14	Pairs of animals
Square 15	Christ crucified between two thieves as Mary and Martha weep at the foot of the cross



Figure 3. Applique in several colors on a dark ground showing active fighting and predatory animals. Dedicated to the 19th Century King Glele. Musee des Arts Africains et Océaniens, Paris.

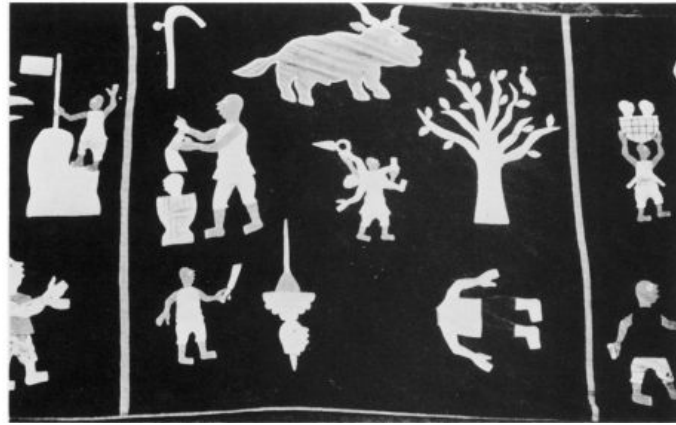


Figure 4. Detail of Palace Museum wall hanging. Devoted to the exploits of Gezo, 19th Century King of the Fon.



Figure 4. Unknown artist, red and white pieced and appliqued star quilt, ca 1880, cotton fabric and cotton batting, 72 7/8 in x 54 1/2 in, African American Museum of History and Culture, Washington D.C.

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