

# Rhetoric of things

## Retoryka rzeczy

9 (1) 2022 EDITORS: ANNA M. KIEŁBIEWSKA, ANNA BENDRAT

EWA KLĘCZAJ-SIARA

UNIWERSYTET TECHNOLOGICZNO-HUMANISTYCZNY IM. KAZIMIERZA PUŁASKIEGO W RADOMIU, POLSKA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3769-2728>

ekleczaj@tlen.pl

### Quilts and the rhetoric of Black resistance and joy Quilty a retoryka czarnego sprzeciwu i radości

#### Abstract

Originally sewed as bed covers and home decorations in the residences of white owners, African American quilts were marked with deep cultural and political meanings once Black enslaved women got involved in producing them for their own use. Quilts became transmitters of cultural values, and thus became part of a Black female artistic tradition cultivated until now. This tradition is inexplicably linked to the rhetoric of resistance and resilience. Although quilt-making is usually defined as a slave art form, its power of political protest cannot be undermined in modern times when it is being revived in Black communities facing racial obstacles. Quilts acknowledge Black trauma while accentuating Black joy. The article analyzes a range of visual and verbal rhetorical strategies employed by artists in selected quilts made for the Minneapolis quilt project *We Are The Story* (<https://textilecentermn.org/wearethestory/>), which emerged in response to tragic deaths of many Blacks caused by the police. The article will assess the effectiveness of quilts as political tools in the continuing Black struggle.

Pierwotnie tworzone jako domowe nakrycia i dekoracje w domach białych właścicieli, afroamerykańskie quilty zostały naznaczone retoryką sprzeciwu w momencie, gdy czarnoskóre kobiety zaczęły produkować patchworki na własny użytek. Wówczas quilty jako medium przekazujące wartości kulturowe stały się nieodłączną częścią tradycji artystycznej czarnoskórych kobiet. Tradycja ta jest silnie związana z retoryką sprzeciwu i wytrzymałości wobec przeciwności losu. Chociaż quilty są zwykle definiowane jako niewolnicza forma artystyczna, ich znaczenie wzrosło w ostatnich latach, kiedy Ameryka mierzy się z licznymi konfliktami rasowymi. Quilty mogą wyrażać traumę związaną z dyskryminacją rasową Afroamerykanów, jednocześnie wskazując na istotną koncepcję 'czarnej radości'. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje werbalne i wizualne strategie retoryczne stosowane przez autorów quiltów w ramach projektu *We Are The Story* (<https://textilecentermn.org/wearethestory/>), tworzonych w odpowiedzi na liczne przypadki śmierci czarnoskórych Amerykanów z rąk policji. Artykuł podejmuje próbę oceny skuteczności zastosowania quiltów jako narzędzi politycznych w trwającym procesie walki czarnych o równe prawa.

#### Key words

quilts, Black joy, Black resistance, racism, police brutality  
quilty, czarna radość, czarny sprzeciw, rasizm, brutalność policji

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**EWA KLĘCZAJ-SIARA**

UNIwersytet Technologiczno-Humanistyczny im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego w Radomiu, Polska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3769-2728>

ekleczaj@tlen.pl

## Quilts and the rhetoric of Black resistance and joy

*Hard Times Require Furious Dancing.*

Alice Walker

In 2015, after decades of racial pain and misrepresentation of Blacks in American media, Kleaver Cruz, a Bronx-based writer, started a digital movement known as the Black Joy Project, which promotes Black joy as a form of resistance. It implies that joy and pain are not mutually exclusive. As Cruz argues, “Centering on Black joy is not about dismissing or creating an ‘alternative’ Black narrative that ignores the realities of our collective pain; rather, it is about holding the pain and injustice we experience as Black folks around the world in tension with the joy we experience in the pain’s midst. Black joy is healing, resistance and regeneration” (Cruz 2017). The Black Joy Project focuses on community transformation as well as personal healing. Its proponents are growing in numbers, including social activists, bloggers, and artists. In response to the most pressing issues of race and equality, they use a variety of rhetorical strategies to produce narratives or material objects as forms of protest. Patchwork quilts, being an old form of expression of Black Americans, have recently become a “new” medium to promote Black joy in the face of experiencing racial pain. Quilts are the space in which artists try to imagine what it is like to be Black beyond systemic racism.

### Quilting – a “new” form of protest

Quilts have always been marked with the rhetoric of resistance and protest (Wahlman 2001; Mazloomi 1998, 2021). From slavery times until now, quilts are an expression of visual and textual discourse of racism. Originally made as bed covers and home decorations in the residences of white owners, they were enriched with deep cultural and political meanings once enslaved Black women got involved in producing quilts for their own use. They inscribed onto them a variety of symbols which served as instructions to fugitive slaves along the secret paths known as the Underground Railroad or as incentives to other Blacks to rebel

against discrimination. The symbols included such elements as bow ties, bear paws, or log cabins, which were part of the visual language known by slaves. As Marie Claire Bryant explains, the pictures indicated the need to dress in disguise, follow an animal trail, or seek shelter (Bryant 2019). Quilts were also produced to remember individual achievements and family stories. They included important dates or names of locations, and were frequently made of the clothing that belonged to some family members. Passed down from generation to generation, they became a link between the present and the past, and, if interpreted as a warning, also an instruction for the future.

With many contemporary African Americans facing racial problems on a regular basis, quilt making has been revived as a form of protest, and simultaneously as a mode of celebrating Blackness. In her study of everyday rhetorics of women's resistance, Vanessa K. Sohan regards quilting as recontextualized forms created in response to the social circumstances of the twenty-first century. She defines recontextualization as "the process by which composers deliberately reform, reinvent, and reconstruct the languages, media, and modes available to them" (Sohan 2020, 148). In her discussion of the discursive nature of quilting she takes a temporal and spatial approach and points out how quilting allows the creators within specific time and place "to cover, protect, and enrich the lives of their loved ones and themselves" (Sohan 2020, 118). The role of quilts has extended from mourning victims of racism to soliciting political action, resisting new regulations and decisions taken by the police, as well as reversing existing stereotypes about Blacks. Being a combination of words and images, contemporary quilts are powerful counternarratives to the white imaginary of Blackness. Rather than focusing on Black Americans as culprits, they present them as victims of racial inequalities. Using a variety of artistic techniques as well as incorporating popular slogans into their works, such as "Black Lives Matter" or "Say Her Name," modern quilters respond to recent events affecting Black men and women. Drawing on the Black female creative tradition, including different types of women's activities by means of which they could express their emotions (such as cooking, gardening, or quilting), today's artists use the thread and the power of words to reveal what contemporary Blacks feel about their pain as a group or individually. As well as manifesting the racial pain, quilts celebrate Black history and the potential of many Blacks to become active participants in the march toward freedom. Thus, they generate Black joy by offering empowering stories of Blackness. Many quilters prove that "joy is resistance," as Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele argue in their study of Black resilience (Lu and Steele 2019, 823), and they find it difficult to resist Black pain and trauma without reveling in Black joy.

As public art forms, quilts commemorate the victims of dramatic events and inspire viewers to resist the threats of our times. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt of 1987, composed of 42.000 images made by a diverse group of artists as well as ordinary people, is a seminal work in contemporary quilt making. The quilts include names of AIDS victims, dates of birth and death, as well as pieces of the people's personal belongings. The 1985 San Francisco march commemorating the victims of the epidemic became an inspiration for Cleve Jones to produce the AIDS Quilt (Howe 1997, 112). When Jones saw the placards held by the marchers, he imagined a patchwork quilt. Originally exhibited on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., during the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the selected panels could be seen online as well as in many local museums across the country. Known as "the Moby-Dick of quilts" (Howe 1997, 109), the quilt raised awareness of the AIDS epidemic and served as a sort of mentor text for other artists and activists. Created in a similar mode, the World Trade Center Memorial Quilt of 2015 honored the victims of the 9/11 attack. The Covid Memorial Quilt, started as a school project in California in 2020 in order to recognize those who did not survive the pandemic, is still in progress. It has become a global initiative created by people from all over the world who keep enlarging the quilt with their own squares. The individual patchworks usually include names of the victims, their photos, personal belongings, such as masks or pieces of their clothing, or images of their homes and hospitals where they passed away.

*We Are the Story: A Visual Response to Racism* (2021) is the most recent quilt project of such a large scale. It consists of eighty-nine patchwork quilts made by artists of different races as a response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, in May 2020. The idea of making the quilt came from African American artist Carolyn Mazloomi, who, being inspired by solidarity marches and protests in Minneapolis as well as in many cities all across the country and abroad, put up an open call for quilts related to the issue of racism. Within two months, she received over four hundred quilts from all over the world, out of which she selected eighty-nine works to be exhibited at various venues in Minneapolis on the first anniversary of Floyd's death. Altogether there were four solo and two group exhibitions of "Racism: In the Face of Hate We Resist" and "Gone but Never Forgotten: Remembering Those Lost to Police Brutality," curated by Mazloomi at Minneapolis Textile Center. The quilts highlight the history of civil rights, police brutality and racism in America, expressing the authors' individual experiences as well as the collective Black resilience and joy in the face of injustice and terror. The collage of heterogeneous images combines individual stories into one large counternarrative. The quilts are projects of healing and resilience. They give a sense

of community not only to African American people, but to all viewers who feel the effects of racism in their lives.

The Minneapolis project provides the story of racism from the perspectives of the victims and their families, which is contrary to mainstream media images of Blackness, most often presenting people of color in negative terms. This type of quilting resembles the literary practice Ebony Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo refer to as “restorying,” defined as “a process by which people reshape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse” (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016), and the pedagogical (literacy) strategy Roberta Price Gardner refers to as “counter-visuality.” The creators of the quilts revise standard representations of Blackness by means of their stylistic choices, “the purposeful contortion of subjects and objects... to convey certain sentiments, intrinsic characteristics, conditions, or ideologies” (Gardner 2017, 126).

While patchworks correspond to the original rhetoric of quilts, which Olga I. Davis defines as “making a space for oppressed voices to name their experience, reclaim their history, and transform the future” (Davis 1998, 67), contemporary quilters also experiment with the form. Drawing on the slave tradition of quilting, which is based on combining different pieces of fabric into one whole, they apply new sewing techniques and add new elements such as real objects, drawings or photographs. While a typical slave quilt consists mostly of regular geometrical patterns, modern patchworks are more elaborate as far as the layout is concerned. They look more like paintings, with central elements placed in the foreground as well as some components on the side of the quilt. Ivonne Wells’ quilt *American Icons* (1995) is a typical example of a modern patchwork, which is rich in details arranged as a situational pattern rather than a geometrical structure. As Maude Wahlman argues in her study, a quilter “takes a basic pattern idea and then does variations on it just as musicians will do with a jazz piece” (Wahlman 2001, 10). This improvisational method combines the tradition of the needle with the power of words, thus quilts are both visual and verbal narratives. Slogans, included in quilts, just like contemporary hashtags in Black popular culture, imply resistance as well as healing. In their study of online Black rhetorical strategies, Lu and Steele (2019) discuss the use of hashtags as resistance. They point out that “Black communities often craft hashtags that require pre-existing knowledge of African American history and culture for full participation” (Lu and Steele 2019, 827). These hashtags include, among others, #freeblackchild or #carefreeblackkids, which were created in response to mainstream media demonizing Black childhood. The written elements of quilts can be interpreted in a similar mode. They are responses to current events as well as the historical past.

Although the historical significance of utilitarian and artistic quilts has been widely discussed in research studies, contemporary protest quilts created in response to social and political events open a new scope of scholarly debate. The following sections of the article analyze a sample of quilts from the overall 89 images chosen for the *We Are a Story* project. The quilts have been selected on the basis of the subject matter of protest and the artists' innovative ways of presenting the concept of Black joy in the midst of the protest. The visual interpretation of quilts is based on Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's (1996) three categories of meaning: representational (including the subject matter, the setting and the people), interpersonal (focusing on the relationship between the viewer and the image), and compositional (that is the layout of the image). The aim of the close reading analysis of selected quilts is to demonstrate how they operate rhetorically to convey the message of resistance and joy.

### **From Black pain to Black joy**

Carolyn Crump's quilt *Cracked Justice*, focusing on the American "cracked" justice system, is one of the most popular quilts of the collection, frequently mentioned in media coverage of the project. Hand painted and machine quilted, it is made of cotton fabric and batt, as well as acrylic paint. A scene of resistance dominated with bright yellow color, it depicts the events which took place in Minneapolis in the wake of Floyd's death, the largest protests since the civil rights period. The quilt depicts people of various races who wear yellow T-shirts with Black Lives Matter statements. From the distance, the protestors look less individual and become representative of a large group. The focus of the image centers on the action rather than the subject-viewer relationship. While crying out their slogans, the protestors are teargassed by the police. Among the crowd, there is a Black woman who sits in the middle of the street, an image placed just above newspaper sketches of Black people who were killed by the police. The woman's posture is symbolic. In her left hand she holds a "Black Lives Matter" banner and raises her right fist in the air, a gesture referring to the violent interventions of the Black Power movement back in the 1960s. In the background, white looters enter the stores through the broken windows. The whole scene is dominated with an iconic mural of Floyd being made by a white artist. Placing white people among the crowd of protestors as well as the looters is a counternarrative to the stereotyped media images of whiteness, conventionally associated with innocence and lack of interest in racial issues. The image symbolizes the civil unrest which has spread beyond the Black community. The people seem to be representative of the whole U.S. society, giving equality to all races, which is one of the overarching goals of

the Black Lives Matter movement. The location is unambiguous, thus indicating that the scene could take place anywhere in the country. With a clear layout and a myriad of details, the quilt invites the viewer to share the experience of those people, as victims of police brutality, as defenders of the cause, or as oppressors. Despite the omnipresent aggression and violence, the woman in the center of the image appears to be calm and hopeful that things will change. Her stillness is an expression of her peaceful resistance, resembling the non-violent behavior of the 1960s civil rights protestors led by Martin Luther King, Jr. As Cleaver would say, the calm composure of the female figure, her fortitude and a joyful stance are integral to the survival of Black people living in America.

Reveling in joy in the face of racial oppression is perfectly portrayed in Eileen Doughty's quilt *Dancing in Spite of Tear(s)/Gas*. Inspired by a news photograph of a Seattle protester, running with an open umbrella among police officers shooting tear gas, the artist transferred the meaning of the image into a textile form, made of cotton fabrics, threads, and tulle. The structure of the quilt is divided into two parts. On the right there is a police line made of several identical figures holding police shields, which is separated from the other side with a cloud of tear gas. On the left, there is a crowd of over forty figures in different colors and poses. Some people dance, while others have their hands in the air, which does not mean that they surrender to the police. This gesture suggests that the people do not intend to use violence against police forces and they request similar treatment from the officers. Interestingly, some of the people from the crowd hold open umbrellas in their hands and try to skip over the cloud of tear gas. The figures are colored green, which conventionally symbolizes growth and renewal. It seems that there is a chance for change. The dancing figures are not suppressed with racial pain. Instead, they revel in joy and celebrate what is yet to come. As the author of the quilt points out, "Some protestors have been severely injured by the military-style reactions, but are still there in spirit, as are people across this country who know our rights" (Mazloomi 2021, 34).

The motif of dancing figures, resembling traditional African dancers, is incorporated into Gwen Triay Samuels' quilt entitled *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*, a phrase borrowed from the title of Alice Walker's book of poems. It is a direct reference to the old African American slave tradition of dancing as a way of losing the chains of mental slavery and plucking up the courage to stand up and fight for justice. With her innovative work, Eileen Doughty goes away from the traditional function of quilts as tools for remembering and mourning the past to that of healing and inspiring the audience to take action. In the middle of the quilt there are some pieces of African fabric combined into one rectangular structure with an embroidered quote from Alice Walker's poem – "Hard times require

furious dancing. Each of us is proof.” The central part is surrounded with small embroidered images of African dancers in a variety of poses. Amongst the figures are the appliqued statements “Say Her Name” and “Black Lives Matter,” which directly address the viewers with a message of resistance.

Equally effective is Cynthia Lockhart’s textile composition *Enough is Enough... Stop the Killing*. Known for her dimensional works, marked with rich colors – mostly red, brown, and blue, organic shapes, and direct references to her African ancestry, Lockhart openly specifies her primary aim of making her unusual quilts. In her interview for Cincinnati’s Gallery, she explains: “I believe an artist is called to create and to inspire others. This is a unique gift. The journey of life, its path and my faith, continue to be a rich source of my inspiration... It is my desire that my artwork encourages our human family to see the endless possibilities of Hope, Joy and Love” (Rama). Lockhart’s quilt is a mixed media collage structure of ten facial contours, all made of textiles in different colors and unique patterns, with elements of beading, applique, and hand painting. All of the faces look upwards in the same direction. Their mouths are open as if they wanted to sing or call for action. As Lockhart states in her presentation of the quilt during a zoom event hosted by Curator Carolyn L. Mazloomi and Textile Center Executive Director Karl Reichert (honoring the release of the new book *We Are the Story: A Visual Response to Racism* by Paper Moon Publishing), the multiple faces represent past victims of racial atrocities, from slavery until now. One of the faces represents George Floyd. It has a ray coming from his eye, which connects him with what is still going on in America. The artist emphasizes the fact America must recognize what Black men and women have had to endure in their country for over four hundred years. For this reason, she included another visual symbol—a prominent eye in one of the faces, which represents the revealing, uncovering the dehumanization and appalling treatment of Blacks. Finally, adding the slogan “Black Lives Matter” at the bottom of the quilt, the artist urges America to make atonements for its wrongdoings. As well as demanding change, the quilt, with its myriad of colors and African style patterns, celebrates Black people’s achievements and contributions to American culture and economy. A variety of stones and beads placed around the eye reflect all hidden achievements of Black Americans which have not been included into American history. This positive aspect of Black life, as well as the feeling of pride in belonging to the Black race, paradoxically helps contemporary Blacks overcome racial obstacles and find joy in their everyday lives. As Lockhart states in her commentary on her quilt, “Despite all the adversity that was put in our pathway; still we rise!” (Mazloomi 2021, 84).

Explaining the position of white people in the racial conflict is an important objective of many contemporary quilters, which helps to relieve the racial pain.



Some artists use the strategy of contrasting Black and white bodies as “different targets,” as it is presented in Marjorie Diggs Freeman’s quilt *Different Targets... Why?* The piece addresses the difference in how people are treated by police forces. It depicts wounded bodies of two boys who were shot by the police. While the white boy is incapacitated, the Black one has injuries on his chest and head, thus making the point that police shoot unarmed African Americans to kill. As well as being the objects of criticism, there are lots of white Americans among the activists of the Black Lives Matter movement. They participate in protests and fully understand the Black cause, which is made clear in some of the quilts. Carolyn Crump, the creator of *Cracked Justice*, celebrates the fact that “we are not standing alone this time, but that our white sisters and brothers have taken up the cause and are marching alongside us to tell the world that Black Lives Matter” (Mazloomi 2021, 26), which is an act of regeneration and healing for African Americans.

### **Resistant strategies of quilting**

Contemporary quilts are genres of visual argument which can shape people’s attitudes and inspire them to take action. In his article “The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments,” J. Anthony Blair stresses the importance of quilts’ visual properties which “resonate the audience on the occasion and in the circumstances” (Blair 2004, 51). Conveying the sense of realism and reading the intended audience is, in his view, part of the success of the rhetor. Contemporary quilt artists use a variety of verbal and visual strategies to make their points clear to a wide audience of viewers. As the works are often the outcome of the artists’ immediate response to dramatic events, they are charged with emotions and work as a desperate call for action. As quilter Georgia Williams has put it, “I decided to create a quilt to try to capture and release emotions that I just did not know how to deal with. Each of the elements of the quilt has a specific meaning” (Mazloomi 2021: 184). Repetition of verbal statements and the reuse of images conventionally associated with protests seem to be the most popular rhetorical devices. With a variety of repetitive slogans appearing in the composition, quilts become new narratives about Blackness that speak to the contemporary racial tension. “Black Lives Matter,” “No Justice No Peace,” “Stop Police Brutality,” “I can’t breathe” (which is a direct reference to George Floyd’s crying before he was murdered), “8 minutes 46 seconds” (that is how long three police officers were kneeling on George’s body, which caused him to suffocate to death), “Mama” (which is a tribute to all mothers whose children were killed), or “Hands up don’t shoot” (which originated after the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014) are the most popular statements used by quilters to build

their scenes of protest. The statements do not only refer to the past victims of racism but the current situation of the U.S. society which denigrates many people of color. The incorporation of such powerful words into the structure of the quilts implies that they can work as a mode of civic performance. As Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites note in their study of public visual materials, iconic statements or images propose roles and acts for citizens to imitate or identify with (Hariman, Lucaites 2007, 33). They are a call to action to challenge the injustices exercised by law enforcement. Multiple figures or faces of Black people, representing either the victims of police brutality or the protestors responding to dramatic events, seem to be an effective way of raising viewers' awareness of the large scale of the problem. Without details on their faces, we perceive them as a powerful mass rather than fragile individuals. The figures of protestors are frequently portrayed behind clouds of smoke or tear gas symbolizing unnecessary violence and aggression. But all these are neutralized with unusual responses of Black protestors who keep dancing in the crowd or reveling in Blackness, thus offering hope and peace in a place of destruction. In her discussion of quilts produced in response to heartbreaking happenings, Sylvia Hernandez admits: "I feel I need to make pieces that might show them [the events] in a beautiful, heartfelt way to take some of the ugliness away for a minute" (Mazloomi 2021, 199).

The strategy of locating lists of authentic names on the patchworks has a large affective impact on the viewers who are brought closer to the problem by analyzing individual stories. It is a way of personalizing the reality. The printed names of Black lives stopped by the police indicate that there is an unending list of tragedies taking place in American families. Carol Larson makes the point by calling her quilt *Somebody's Child*, suggesting that all those young people belonged somewhere and left their families in despair. By placing the names of unarmed African Americans killed over the last few years, quilters give voice to the victims and acknowledge that they all mattered. In her quilt based on the structure of the U.S. flag, entitled *Inspangered*, Angela Lanier places first names of young African American victims of police brutality in the stars, suggesting that all these people are part of American history. However, she leaves three blank stars at the top of the quilt, which are meant to stand for hope that there will be no other victims. Although most of the cases of police misconduct affect African American men, there are also women who suffer racial discrimination. "Say her name" is a popular statement applied by quilters in order to raise awareness of how many Black women experience police violence. Felecia Tinker, who included portraits of five women with their names (Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Tanisha Anderson, Alberta Spruill, and Atatianna Jefferson) in her quilt entitled *Say Her Name*, adds an optimistic comment to her work: "It is my hope that saying their

names will keep the memory of these women in the forefront and lead to social reform. In our oral tradition, a way to keep the memories of our ancestors and loved ones alive is to say their names. I hope we are challenged to say her name and *stay woke*” (Mazloomi 2021, 116).

Many quilt artists draw on the rhetorical use of colors, based on shared connotations of certain hues. White is usually associated with racial oppression, black with racial victimization, and red with violence and blood. Johnetta Miller labels different parties of the racial conflict by using contrasting colors in her quilt *I Have Lived with Injustice All My Life*. A variety of black and white images showing African Americans as slaves or protestors are placed upon a bloody red background symbolizing painful results of racial injustice. Likewise, in Deborah A. Moore Harris’s quilt *American Legacy*, it is the colors that result in its visual demand rather than the words that are the only element of the composition. There are upright words, *American Legacy*, decorated with small images of the U.S. flag. The same words are reflected, but they are no longer decorated with the flag. The meaning of the image can be inferred from the use of red paint splattered like blood over the word “Legacy,” indicating the historical suffering of Black Americans and speaking directly to the theme of violence. The colors of the Pan-African flag – red, black and green – are also frequently applied by quilters to represent solidarity among people of African descent, as is the case in Betty Leacraft’s quilt *Nation Time 2020: Power and Protection from Racial Terrorism*. In these and other quilts, colors enable the viewers to connect images or words with certain meanings, thus creating new narratives of Blackness.

### **The impact of contemporary quilts**

Black protest quilts are a material reflection of American legacy. They have always been produced in response to social and political issues concerning Black life in various historical periods, from slavery to the civil rights movement, and the Black Lives Matter protests. Scholars consider quilting to be a metaphor of African American experience (Hedges 1977; Davis 1998; Mazloomi 1998; Wahlman 2001). Quilts combine the personal and the political. As Lawrence Howe stated in his article on the AIDS Quilt, “quiltmaking is an art in which one collects, conserves, and orders fragments into a pieced whole, it facilitates the expressions of personal intimacy and political purpose... , bringing them together into one composite artifact” (Howe 1997, 113). Making a panel for the quilt is both an individual act and a collective initiative. It involves stitching together different stories, which are combined into one large petition to the government and the whole society. The power of quilt projects cannot compare to individual letters or

creative work produced by a single artist. Because of its collective nature, quilting spreads the sense of community. Historically produced by groups of Black women during the meetings they called “quilting bees,” quilts have survived as “collective” genres, with the exception that now they gather a larger community of quilters and viewers across different races, genders and nationalities.

Quilts activate emotional responses from a wide audience of viewers. As African American feminist writer bell hooks reports on her grandmother’s quilting, “It was a form of meditation where the self was let go... it was art of stillness and concentration, a work which renewed the spirit... a way to ‘calm the heart’ and ‘ease the mind’” (hooks 2009, 156). Similarly, in her study of contemporary African American quilts, Mazloomi points out that there is a “connection between the making of quilts and the attainment of inner peace” (Mazloomi 1998, 66). However, it is not only the artist but also the viewer who can experience positive feelings while observing quilts. Originally created as bedcovers to provide warmth, quilts have always been ascribed healing and nurturing qualities. Thus, they can be therapeutic in a way that they provide solace and comfort to those who experience social and political inequalities of our times.

Black protest quilts make people think deeply about their connections to systemic racism. They involve the audience in the act of witnessing rather than passive observation. Having some prior contextual knowledge of racial issues in the United States, their attitudes can be reshaped once they encounter images produced by those who personally experienced racial pain. Inspired by the hopeful elements of the narratives included in the quilt, viewers can also become familiar with the concept of Black joy, and finally appreciate the contributions of the Black race to American culture.

For Mazloomi, quilts were a natural reaction and educational touchstone to the events of 2020. “Throughout history, Black liberation movements have been deeply influenced by our cultural gifts,” she said in a news release (Chekroun 2020). Producing protest art has always been a significant part of social and political movements in the U.S. Mazloomi believes this form of art is “a vehicle for change and consciousness” alongside organizing efforts of the Black community (Chekroun 2020). Mazloomi’s idea to create a collection of protest quilts was a call to arms, especially to Black women who wanted to respond to the cries of the Black child. George Floyd was calling his “Mama” at the site of his death, which was perceived by many Americans as a symbolic cry of the nation. The women’s response was immense, and its effectiveness is yet to be measured. Undoubtedly, the quilts have sparked new debates about racism and equality in the United States and abroad. They have given voice to those who were historically silenced, and through the material objects they were able to tell their stories of pain. Not all

quilts are just about acknowledging Black trauma. Some are accentuating Black joy and healing. Black protest quilts celebrate Black people's resilience and perseverance. As collective counternarratives, they reshape the ways people see racism by attributing Blacks new characteristics. Quilts have an important story to tell, so "let the artwork do the talking" (Mazloomi 2021, 5).

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