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Underground Railroad Quilt Codes: What We Know, What We Believe, and What Inspires Us

May 3, 2019 | Marie Claire Bryant (/authors/marie-claire-bryant) | Comments (/magazine/underground-railroad-quilt-codes#disqus_thread)

According to legend, a safe house along the Underground Railroad (https://amhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/slavelife/more.html) was often indicated by a quilt hanging from a clothesline or windowsill. These quilts were embedded with a kind of code, so that by reading the shapes and motifs sewn into the design, an enslaved person on the run could know the area's immediate dangers or even where to head next.

> Bow Tie = *Dress in disguise to appear of a higher status*
>
> Bear Paw = *Follow an animal trail through the mountains to find water and food*
>
> Log Cabin = *Seek shelter now, the people here are safe to speak with*

I can see the promise of such a system. Nimble fingers working in secret, armed with needle and thread, engaging with a visual language, doing their part for freedom. I want to believe it happened. Some do, and maybe it did, but others question the authenticity of such events.

Sharon Tindall is a Virginia-based quilter, educator, and one in a tradition of contemporary quilters who design textile works inspired by this "quilt code."

"When I'm creating a quilt, I'm focused on the purpose of the quilt," she says. "I'm thankful I am able to create something of comfort."

Tindall hopes her handmade quilts hanging in the Johnson House (https://www.johnsonhouse.org/), a crucial station on the Underground Railroad and now a National Historic Site in Philadelphia, embody the spirit of the house and the presence of those who passed through. Built in 1768 in the heart of Germantown, Johnson House's woodwork, flooring, and glass are all original to the house.

"You really get a sense of enslaved people there," she says. "I walked around where they slept, where they ate. You feel their presence. The slaves, the Johnson family who protected them, that presence was the colors in the sky of the quilt. I want to convey a message of hope, freedom, love for the slaves."

Though not all of her quilts are coded, Tindall is a believer and defender of the codes. She recently gave a lecture about them to a full room in Johnson House. Our conversation stretched to weeks as I sought more detailed information about how they were used.

At its center, a quilt is an assemblage of historical and creative cues in the form of fabrics, shapes, symbols, textures and colors. Quilts were often made to commemorate important family events such as marriage, a birth, or moving to a new place. Often made from scraps of old dresses, burlap sacks, and dish cloths, it gives physical, even functional, form to a family or individual's past and present. Tindall uses combinations of cottons, raw Dupioni silks, Swarovski crystals, natural fibers, Malian mud cloth (https://folklife.si.edu/malian-bogolan/smithsonian), and even glitter to convey the spiritual, intangible components of her narrative compositions. For Tindall, the quilts become vehicles for the voices and footprints of people running for their lives.

"The orange is life, or light," she explains, pointing at the glowing horizon line on her quilt, *The Johnson House*. "They could feel or sense light through their struggle of trying to get to freedom."

Prior to 1999, the codes were unheard of even to the African American quilting community. That's according to Marsha MacDowell, a quilt scholar and director of the Quilt Index (http://quiltindex.org), a massive online catalog of more than 90,000 quilts. In 1999, Jaqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard published *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* , and the story cycloned through trusted centers of news and knowledge: the *New York Times Book Review*, NPR, and others. National Geographic and the Kennedy Center developed elementary school curricula that referenced the codes.

None of these institutions questioned the veracity of Tobin and Dobard's story; instead, they published book reviews as human-interest pieces, calling it "captivating" and "fascinating," and the public lapped it up like hard fact. When we see an uplifting story online, printed in Times New Roman, we tend to just accept it as truth. Soon the story has lifeblood independent of its origins, and

there's no stopping it.

"Almost every February, stories appear in papers across the country," MacDowell explains, referencing African American History Month (https://www.africanamericanhistorymonth.gov/). "If you're wondering about our irritation, I think it's more frustrating that the codes keep getting presented as fact."

That is to say, the authenticity of quilt codes is, among other things, a matter of emphasis. Maybe the protocols for experiences of *belief* versus *fact* are just different. When a person believes something, they have no need of proof. Not dates, examples, nor firsthand accounts. They don't have to do anything except *believe*. For something to qualify as a fact, it needs evidence. To define "fact" is no easy undertaking.

Some historians float the issue that many of the quilt patterns cited as directives for enslaved peoples probably did not yet exist during the height of the Underground Railroad, between 1850 and 1860. Based on surveys of quilts made during these years, the evidence for some of these patterns just isn't there, breaking the spell of this captivating story.

> Drunkard's Path = *Zig-zag as you go along in case you are being stalked by hounds*
>
> Double Wedding Ring =*Now it is safe to remove your chains and shackles*

Sharon Tindall uses a historical pattern made up of triangles and rectangles called Flying Geese.

I asked Tindall what the Flying Geese quilt pattern meant and how it assisted runaways on the Underground Railroad.

"Flying geese are blue; the sky is blue, red and black," she responded. "Follow the geese flying north. If the sky wasn't clear, look for or listen to the geese flying north in the spring."

I was disappointed by her answer because I didn't understand. It came off like verse, or a nursery rhyme. Were they supposed to wait until spring if the sky wasn't clear? Were they literally supposed to follow the geese? How could this interpretation of a quilt block have directed slaves hundreds of miles along a cruel course, across canyons and rivers, all the way to Pennsylvania, Ohio, or Indiana?

Whether or not you believe Tindall's interpretation, you might agree her belief provides poetic justifications for belief versus fact. Quilts allow Tindall to sustain a conversation about these men and women who were valiant, who fought slavery by taking the ultimate chance—running, and maybe even trusting the message on a blanket when everything was at stake—and encouraging others to do the same.

"If people's lives are at stake, then it stands to reason that there would be no trace of the quilts," Atlanta-based quilt scholar Mary Twining-Baird argues. "Of course there is no documentation! Literally, if anyone found out they could lose their lives."

Twining-Baird specializes in *kente cloth (https://www.si.edu/sisearch?edan_q=kente)* quilts made on the Sea Island chain off the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, but she maintains a firm stance on quilt codes.

She encountered an old quilt that "was stitched like it had been sewn with a crowbar."

"It was a map, of course! The wide woolen stitching lines were roads."

Unfortunately, the quilt was lost in a flood and there are no pictures, which serves as logic for the general dearth of material evidence of quilts codes today. After all this time, they have been lost or have fallen to pieces.

For Tindall, a quilt can be like a prayer. The pretext for her belief in quilt codes is not unlike a person trying to explain or provide supporting evidence for a belief in God. Simply put, she has faith.

"I consider myself a Believer in Jesus Christ, woman of Faith, storyteller and a creator of quilts," she wrote to me. "I have taken the gifts God has given me and I'm returning them back to Him through the quilt codes."

Scholar Marilyn Motz has a definition for belief (https://www.jstor.org/stable/541314?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) that seems to fit: "a process of knowing that is not subject to verification or measurement within the framework of a modern western scientific paradigm."

As she points out, "the term *belief* actually calls into question its own validity." And anyways, "we usually describe our own beliefs as knowledge."

So, if we truly believe something, as Tindall believes that enslaved people running north were guided by the Flying Geese pattern in quilts, we may have trouble seeing the difference between belief and fact.

In every culture, there are beliefs, myths, urban legends, rumors, even conspiracy theories that rise to the status of sacred narrative whether or not they are "true." In many cases of folklore, hard facts may not influence a belief. Such is the case with Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, who believe the spirits of their dead take up in particular animals, namely pigs and birds. Should we be concerned with hard evidence the Kaluli can provide for these deep-rooted belief systems?

Stories, recipes, personal experiences, and all the things that were whispered to us when we were young often outweigh scientific fact. They matter because we believe them, so, naturally, and sometimes quickly, they become some of the disparate pieces of the systems that define us.

Regardless of the disputed history, it has been twenty years now that Tindall and other quilters have been making coded quilts: glimmering, spiritually charged, stop-you-in-your-tracks, hanging textiles based in deeply believed and debated historical events. Are these quilts harming anyone?

"The risk is that it is not a true story," MacDowell says. "The danger is that you start questioning people's belief systems and how they get their information."

"I've found some people have a hard time thinking or believing anything they cannot see or touch," Tindall says. "I simply ask them, 'Do you think it's possible?' Nonverbal communication, symbols, and secrets are all forms of communication."

Finally enslaved peoples were free to roam without running. Between 1910 and 1920, the African American population of Detroit, Michigan, increased by more than 600 percent. These Americans migrated to the Midwest from the rural South saying *Godspeed!* to segregation laws and seeking industry jobs during what is known as the Great Northern Migration, or the Black Migration. They carried with them quilts and the stories of an enslaved South.

While Tobin and Dobard were writing *Hidden in Plain View* in the late 1990s, MacDowell was in Michigan with a group of graduate students documenting African American quilts and recording stories. MacDowell's team recorded almost fifty interviews. No one said anything about a code.

"One woman who was originally from South Carolina but lived in Detroit said she learned quilting as a child in South Carolina. Her mother taught her (as did her grandmother teach her mother) that you always hold a needle pointing in the direction of the North as you quilt it, because that is where opportunities are. Someone else we recorded said that her family hid important papers in the binding of the quilt.

"Now, I would not jump to any conclusions that every African American quilter held their needle pointing to the north, and that is the problem with the *Hidden in Plain View* book. They jumped to conclusions without documentation."

MacDowell's fellow quilt-scholars posited the subject of her whiteness. Was her whiteness a factor in not hearing that story?

"We had a whole battery of people who were doing those interviews in Michigan, both black and white, and no one heard that story."

MacDowell has done the research. She knows how rampant the story of quilt codes has become. She especially knows that it's out of her hands. While researching quilts in South Africa, she made the acquaintance of contemporary quilters who have—"lo and behold!"—caught wind of the book and started coding quilts of their own.

"There will always be people who believe," she concedes.

Perhaps the code, true or not, is a vehicle for African Americans to explore the trauma they inherited—and the hope. Tindall shared her beliefs on a trip to Liberia, a West African nation originally founded as a colony by the American Colonization Society to repatriate freed and free-born black people from America. There she met weavers who were braiding in a code she herself is using. She felt a kind of kinship.

Nowadays, some African American women make coded quilts for their daughters and granddaughters, and that will keep happening. Whether or not the codes are "real," Tobin and Dobard are responsible for a twenty-year tradition of craftsmanship that has cropped out of a confidence in what they wrote, in the codes. Now the lineage of artisans using quilt codes is robust. For them, the codes are poetry, healing, and, especially, a means of expressing history.

Marie Claire Bryant is a poet, storyteller, and archivist interning at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. She was previously the director of publishing for Cfile Foundation, where she wrote, edited, and published extensively on the topic of contemporary and historic ceramic arts.

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