

Curriculum: Comparing Herstories

Overview:

The purpose of the following pages is to not only to demonstrate hands-on ways to bring arpilleras into the classroom, but also to explore the possible connections one could make between the arpilleras' social movement in Chile and the history of African-American quilting in the United States. Superficially speaking, these two topics may seem to have very little in common, yet when one delves a little deeper quite a few commonalities emerge—for example, art and craft as social protest, women's social movements, or story-telling through art.

The materials below provide information and resources to help teachers discuss these connections in the classroom. Included first is a short overview of the significance of arpilleras in Chilean history. The rest of the materials focus on quilting: its history, significance for women, and role in the African-American community. Print resources and links to relevant websites are provided throughout.

The History of Quilting Among African-American Women in the U.S.

Above, we wrote of arpilleras: “Their artistry with humble cloth is vibrant testimony: history in textile form, every bit as compelling as any other of the visual media. The detail and composition of the works can be simple or intricate. Each one tells a story; each one conveys a message.” I believe that we can make a very similar statement about quilting in the African American community. In *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters*, Patricia Turner discusses her own realizations on the significance of quilting. She writes about how she came to think of “the role art and craft can play in anchoring the stories that African Americans tell about themselves and their pasts. In the two decades since, I’ve come to realize that stories of individual and black collective experience can be narrated through quilts” (p. 1). Just as the arpilleras tell an important story, so do quilts. While the story they tell, and the manner in which they tell it, are different, there are enough similarities to make the comparison of quilts and arpilleras an interesting area to consider. As so many teachers already cover content areas like slavery, the Underground Railroad, and the Civil Rights Movement where a study of quilting could easily be included, a comparison study of the two art forms offers a way to bring in the story of the arpilleras.

What is a Quilt?

In order to begin a comparison, students must first have a definition of both art forms. Arpilleras are defined in the preceding pages. The following definition of a quilt comes from Susan Meeske’s “Quilt Me a Story” which is

available at <http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/professionaldevelopment/childlit/books/MEESKE.pdf> . Meeske’s piece offers simple and straightforward background information on quilts that could even be used as supplementary reading with students.

Meeske writes, “A quilt is comprised of three layers. The top is either pieces of fabric stitched together to form a pattern or it is a solid piece of fabric. The center of a quilt contains batting or filler. . .The final layer of a quilt is the backing. This is usually a solid piece of fabric, but some quilts do have pieced backings.”

Quilting as Constructed Stories

While quilting certainly isn’t limited to African American women in the United States, that is our primary interest here, as the role of quilting in this community has significant similarities to the role of arpilleras in Chile. There are a number of easily accessible and informative resources on quilting available. Listed below are the resources used to put much of the following information together. Where possible, they have been linked to their online location.

- Fry, Gladys-Marie. (1990). *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Dutton.
- Meeske, Susan. “Quilt Me a Story.”
Found at <http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/professional-development/childlit/books/MEESKE.pdf>
- Susurro, Potente. (2009). “BHM: African American Women Quilters as Herstorians and Keepers of Our Dreams.”
Found at <http://likeawhisper.wordpress.com/2009/02/25/bhm-african-american-women-quilters-as-herstorians-and-keepers-of-our-dreams/>
- Turner, Patricia. (2009). *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

While quilting in Africa was largely done by men, in North America it was done mainly by women. As slaves, African American women were charged with sewing, mending, and other textile work as part of household chores. Often they used discarded fabric or rags to piece together blankets for the colder months. In her book *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South*, Fry discusses both the art and the freedom or autonomy represented by these quilts. Meeske discusses the importance of the quilting bees that allowed slaves to gather without being watched by their owners.

Quilting was significant for women in a number of ways. Susurro provides an excellent discussion of the importance of quilting for African American women in her blog post, “BHM: African American Women Quilters

as Herstorians and Keepers of Our Dreams.” Through her discussion, the similarities between the roles of both arpilleras and quilting for women become quite obvious.

She writes:

Women quilters used the symbols above as well as innovations in the form developed in the colonies, to mark down the history of their families and their struggles. They were the first African American historians and their stories were invaluable at a time in which slaves were denied literacy and colonials did not care to mark their lives except in terms of ledgers and occasional notes. Despite the fact that the WPA Slave Narratives included references to the importance of quilts (for income) and later collection as art by primarily white female collectors/educators, it was most often slave ledgers and white slave and plantation owners letters and diaries that early historians went to when writing our lives back into the historical record.

Women also used quilts to protect their families and their homes. Often words or symbols for protection were woven into quilts, particularly those that hung over doors or were meant to cover children.

Both before and after slavery, quilting provided African American women with homosocial bonds. As one of the modern quilters from the Pacific Northwest African American Quilters organization argues, quilting bees allowed African American women with limited funds an opportunity to come together and socialize after church or in the evenings with very little economic investment. . .It is also true that quilting bees have always proliferated in working class and subsistence level communities among both white and black women.

The same interviewee argued that quilting also helped secure bonds between black women in the same community through “sister quilts.” Sister quilts were done by the quilting bee to mark key rites of passage, 50th birthdays, graduations, births of children, etc., and were presented to the group member only when completed. The key elements of these quilts were a combination of personal aesthetics of the recipient and memorialized oral history of her life and/or connecting her life to larger African and African American themes. Though these quilts may have different names in other parts of the country, they are common. In my own life, my grandmother made “sister quilts” for the women in our community and in our family and when my closest friend had her first child, the first thing I thought to do was ensure she had a quilt whose symbols reflected our shared African and African American pasts as well as hopes for the baby’s future. The quilt maker who helped me put it together was absolutely familiar with the form, though she had not made one for a newborn before.

The tradition of quilting was passed on along gendered lines as well. Women learned quilting from each other including white women teaching black women during slavery, black women teaching white women especially in antebellum, and especially women passing the knowledge down from generation to generation. Most modern quilters site their mothers’ or grandmothers’ work as an inspiration for becoming quilters.

One of the most obvious connections between the role of African American quilts and arpilleras may seem to be the use of quilts as part of the Underground Railroad. Yet, this is a controversial subject that has been hotly debated within the quilting community, especially among quilting historians. Many argue that the idea that a Quilt Code was used to help direct runaway slaves is merely a myth. Again, I'm going to defer to Susurro's discussion of this debate. Not only does she explain the controversy, but she also shows how, regardless of the truth of the Quilt Code, it's now an important part of the dialogue.

Susurro writes:

*There has been much controversy over whether or not quilts symbols were used along the Underground Railroad. There are two major proponents of the theory, Gladys-Marie Fry's book *Stitched from the Soul* and Tobin and Dobard's *Hidden in Plain View*. Fry's book argued that the color black meant refuge, triangles indicated prayer, etc. but offers no substantial citations for her deductions. Tobin's book is based on the report of an African American quilter who remembered a history of using quilt patterns as a way to escape slavery; according to some, the quilter was hounded by Tobin for "meaning in her quilts" and by others that her "quilt code" was given freely. This matters b/c it goes to the credibility of the account and the role of informant as possible trickster; unfortunately, Tobin's source died before the book went to print. The patterns in question. . .include "Bear's Paw" to follow animal tracks north through the Appalachians, "Flying Geese" as other escapees, "Drunkard's Path" is the erratic route, and other patterns meaning wheels, cabins, crossroads, etc. There were also symbols in the stitching and tying of quilts. There were no actual quilts made just the memorization of pre-existing quilt patterns as a remembered road map to freedom. Tobin and Dobard argue that this symbolic language would be in keeping with other maps to freedom like "negro" spirituals. Despite criticism from quilt historians about the utter lack of textile evidence for such a story, Tobin and Dobard remind that slaves did not make, carry, or look for quilts but rather memorized quilt patterns.*

The dispute seems to stem largely from a lack of evidence in the textiles themselves, pattern dating that precludes certain pattern use, and leaps of logic that do not leave room for existing ambiguities in the known record. (see link for a list of historian and quilter criticisms of the quilt code here – scroll past the yellow block text to the actual documented piece) Others have argued that the confusion comes from popular names for patterns like the "under ground railroad pattern". . . Names related to slavery and freedom cropped up in antebellum and may have fused with oral histories of escape to create a "quilt code" after the fact. There are also stories of Tubman giving a quilt to an abolitionist, though no mention of a quilt code. Also fictional accounts of the quilt code were published in both children's and young adult literature, and some historians have argued that people wanting to make money manipulated the fiction(s) to turn them into fact.

What is important for this post is that regardless of whether these symbols were actually used in the railroad, they have become a part of modern symbolic language among some African American quilters. In the modern version, these elements are used to tell the story of escape to freedom, in quilts honoring Tub-

man, or as border art in quilts connecting our past to our present. In this way, they serve a new purpose that can be deconstructed through the quilt code but do not necessarily have to reflect an actual historical reality or worse “exotica” for capitalist gain. Instead they can be seen as reterritorialization from a largely white imaginary of black quilting forms into one of African American storytelling, like the Penny Sisto quilt to the right that frames Tubman with the supposed symbol for safe house. As elements of modern herstory technique they remain significant and need to be recognizable to those analyzing quilt content.

Despite (or maybe because of) the controversy, the idea of the Quilt Code can be a powerful lesson for our students. A number of children’s books have been written about the Quilt Code, and it’s a valuable discussion for the classroom. In examining the arguments for or against the reality of a Quilt Code students can learn how historians study and examine the past to come to conclusions about what is historical reality. Even beyond this, it’s important for students to consider why or how historical myths come to be presented as truth, and why they become so powerful.

Below are listed various books and lesson plans for teaching about the connection between quilting and the Underground Railroad. Keeping in mind the controversy surrounding this topic, it will be up to you how you present the information provided in the books and lessons to your students.

Supplementary Resources

- Grady, Cynthia. (2012). *I Lay My Stitches Down: Poems of American Slavery*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman’s Books for Young Readers.
- Hopkinson, Deborah (1993). *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. New York: Scholastic.
- Hopkinson, Deborah (2001). *Under the Quilt of Night*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Vaughan, Marcie (2005). *The Secret to Freedom*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

RELATED LESSON PLANS

- Mathwire.com has a number of lesson ideas and resources related to the Freedom Quilts and their mathematical patterns. These can be found at <http://mathwire.com/quilts/quilts.html>
- Really Good Stuff provides a number of ideas for how to teach about the connection between the Underground Railroad and the Quilt Code. Students study the Underground Railroad by learning about the quilts—and the secret escape codes quilters stitched into them to guide their people to freedom. Included here are a number of templates that can be used to teach various quilting patterns. Lessons and resources can be found at <http://page.reallygoodstuff.com/pdfs/154227.pdf>
- ReadWriteThink has a lesson plan for using Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt in the classroom. This can be found at <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/escaping-slavery-sweet-clara-127.html>
- At <http://ses.westport.k12.ct.us/squire/idivsqares.htm> find pictures and explanations of the Quilt Code Squares.

Procedure

In the earlier pages of this guide we shared an activity based upon Marjorie Agosíin’s poem “The Arpillerista.”

This activity is expanded upon through the comparative poetry lesson below. For this approach, we’ve included another poem, “Basket,” taken from *I Lay My Stitches Down: Poems of American Slavery*, a book written by Cynthia Grady and illustrated by Michele Wood.

Through analyzing the two poems, students gain knowledge both in literary analysis and historical content. In comparing the two poems for similarities and differences, students deepen their knowledge of these two historical periods and art forms. Some background knowledge of the two contexts will be necessary for students to complete the analysis.

Suggested questions for analysis include:

1. What symbols are included in both poems?
2. How does sewing become a form of resistance in each poem?
3. In each poem, the arpillera or the quilt represents a way to tell the artist’s story or history, to connect them to her past. How does each author communicate this?
4. How does the practice of creating the art (the arpillera or quilt) help the artist to heal or feel better about their situation?

The Arpillerista

The arpillerista,
artisan of remains
burns with rage and cold
as she tenderly
picks through the remnants of her dead,
salvages the shroud of her husband
the trousers left after the absences
submerges herself in cloth of foaming, silent blood
and though she is fragile she grows large,
sovereign over her adobe hut,
her ragged scraps
and determined to tell her story
truer than the tale woven by her sister Philomena.
Disruptive and beautiful she
puts together her flayed remnants
like a greenish forgotten skin
and with her disguised thimble
hidden in the pocket of her modest apron
and her harmless needle
she conjures up victorious armies
embroiders humble people smiling, become triumphant
brings the dead back to life
fabricates water, bell towers, schools, dining rooms
giant suns
and the Cordillera of the Andes
peaks opening like portals
of this splendid city.

Marjorie Agosín
Scraps of Life

Basket

Each night I take my patches, blocks, and scraps
of fabric from the basket by the chair;
my thimble, thread and needle comfort me.
I lay my stitches down and troubles fall
away. Before too long, I'm breathing with the
rhythm of my quilting—listening
wide with every fiber of my soul:
the praise songs of my people; voices of
my kin; drumbeats of my motherland form
the threads that weave the fabric of my life.

—

Cynthia Grady
I Lay My Stitches Down