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### And That's How I Feel on the Gudaha: A Quilting Project from a 4-6th Grade Classroom from the Somali-Bantu Community-Based Tutoring Program of Syracuse

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## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

Over the past year, I worked with 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade students in a Saturday tutoring program for the Somali Bantu Community Organization of Syracuse. Most of our students were born in Kenyan refugee camps or in the United States. Few have ever been to Somalia. All are labeled as English Language Learners.

The tutoring program supplements the students' schoolwork by giving the students additional opportunities to practice math, reading, and writing skills. The classroom has begun a theme of semester-long projects. Our most recent was a quilt.

### **Background**

The Somali Bantu are a unique culture. The Somali Bantus are an ethnic group whose ancestors were taken from Southern Africa in the 1800s and sold as slaves along the Somali coast. They are originally from today's Mozambique, Tanzania, and Malawi.<sup>i</sup> It has been said by community leaders here in Syracuse that Somali Bantus are traditionally a farming people.

Since the Civil War in Somalia in 1991, 12,000 Somali Bantus have resettled in different parts of the United States.<sup>ii</sup> Major areas of resettlement include Tucson, Arizona, Minneapolis, Minnesota,<sup>iii</sup> San Antonio, Texas, and Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>iv</sup> There is also a settlement of Somali Bantus in Syracuse.

The number of the Somali Bantu refugees who settled in Syracuse alone is estimated to be over 500 individuals and over ninety-five families.

—Somali Bantu Community  
Organization of Syracuse<sup>v</sup>

Before being brought to the United States and other areas around the world, Somali Bantus were placed in refugee camps in Africa after fleeing Somalia. The most common refugee camp was in Kakuma, Kenya.

As a group, the Somali Bantus continue to be a persecuted ethnicity in Africa. Though the refugee camp offered schooling, including English language learning, many Somali Bantus were excluded because other Africans did not want to learn next to them.

When we came to the refugee camps in Kenya we [sent] our children to attend primary and secondary schools and only 5% of them have been formally educated because some Somali Somali students refused to study alongside Bantu children. This resulted [in] the Somali students [attending] separate classes, and in some cases in separate schools. [We] struggled hard and complained to the implementing agencies to make sure our children's [rights] to education are secured. Luckily we successfully solved the issue. And now when we came to the United States we are not having the same problems we [had] in Somalia and in the refugee camps...

—Somali Bantu Community  
Organization of Syracuse<sup>vi</sup>

Most Somali Bantu converted to Islam because of slavery—as it is in Islam law that a Muslim cannot own another Muslim as a slave. Since the end of slavery, however, some Somali Bantus have converted to Christianity.<sup>vii</sup> In any case, most Somali Bantus continue traditions of animism, including such practices as healing dances and magic.<sup>viii</sup> All of the students in our 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom are Muslim. The majority of boys wear American-style clothing, while the girls wear full dress and hijab or headscarf.

*When<sup>1</sup> Somali Bantus first arrived in Syracuse, the teachers in the Syracuse City School District were not well briefed on the cultural differences. So no one knew what to do when the Somali Bantu girls were traumatized when the American boys pulled off their hijabs. After some emergency cultural orientations for teachers, the transition for the more recent immigrant students has gone much smoother.*

Our students speak several languages, including Maay Maay and Zigua. These Bantu languages are completely oral-based. In order to write in these languages, our students use the Roman alphabet, as used in the United States, and rules of phonetics. Many of the students also know some Arabic because of their studies with the Koran.

Somali Bantus emphasize the importance of family. Many of our students have more than five brothers and sisters. Because in some cases our 4-6<sup>th</sup> graders are the oldest children in their families, much of their week is spent helping to care for their younger brothers and sisters. This makes focusing on a Saturday morning quite difficult when it is one of the few days, or even hours, one is free.

*One student is having a difficult transition—her mother was married and began having children at the age of 13. This student just turned 13. She told one of the tutors that she is happy she is no longer in Africa because she doesn't want to be married. She spends the majority of her time at home caring for her seven younger brothers and sisters. She appreciates how much her mother has done for her and claims that she is happy to help.*

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<sup>1</sup> For explanation on font changes, please refer to Chapter 5.

## **Saturday Program**

I began working at the Somali Bantu Community-Based Tutoring Program in September 2008. It just kind of fell in my lap. I was looking for a service project to get involved in after my work concluded with the Youth Empowerment Program, an after-school program at Bellevue Middle School Academy in the Syracuse City School District (SCSD). While researching other agencies in Syracuse, two Somali Bantu community leaders came to the Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service (CPCS) and asked for volunteers to help with their tutoring program. The program, which had begun in the living room of someone's house, had grown so large that they were expanding to Dr. King Magnet School in the SCSD. I jumped at the opportunity.

The first semester was a whirlwind. I was only around for a semester because I went abroad in the spring. But during the three months that I volunteered with the program, I acted as a liaison between the Syracuse University (SU) and Somali Bantu communities. A retired schoolteacher prepared lessons for all grade levels, adding up to over 100 students. The program met, and continues to meet, on Saturday mornings from 8:30-11:30 AM.

There was a strong mantra in the beginning that it was *the Somali Bantu program*. Though we wanted to bring in materials, we did not think it was our place to get too involved or take over the program in any way. We wanted to make sure it stayed the Somali Bantu program, not the CPCS or SU program. However, the overall program made a huge impact on me, as it was a combination

of this tutoring program and my work as a peer consultant in the SU Writing Center that sparked my interest in learning more about working with English language learners.

The Saturday program proved to be quite challenging: we did not have test scores of any of the students, making it likely to have a group of students with a wide range of abilities. Some students had been in the United States for several years while others had arrived months or weeks earlier. SU Literacy Corps and CPCS tutors were spread out across all the classrooms, making it difficult to be able to make a difference with such high student to teacher ratios. Finally, there was a great deal of “in between” time between worksheets and lessons, causing us, as tutors, to get quite frustrated not only keeping the attention of the students, but also managing the classroom.

Upon my return to the program this past fall, we decided to create an assessment for the first day in order to split the students up according to how well they could read, write, and complete simple mathematics activities. We gave a brief assessment that the director of the Literacy Corps helped us to put together. Upon reviewing the evaluations, we realized how much simpler it was knowing what students could do so that we could plan lessons in advance. We asked the community leaders if they would mind if we wrote the lesson plans, and they seemed to be happy to pass the responsibility on to us.

To make the most impact, we moved all of the 14 Literacy Corps tutors to the 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. The School of Education and African Students Union took Pre-K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade and the International Young Scholars through the Office of

Engagement in Hendricks Chapel took 7-12<sup>th</sup> grade. In our 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, we tried to keep the same format of what the Somali Bantu volunteers were teaching: reading, writing, and mathematics.

### **The Holiday Book Project**

When trying to find things to read about, I came across websites for teaching immigrants and English Language Learners that suggested a unit on holidays—particularly American-influenced holidays. With the approval of the community leaders, we began a holiday project with the modest intention of creating dialogue with our students. We hoped it would cause them to feel comfortable talking about popular American holidays, such as Christmas, when they come from an environment where few of their school peers have ever heard of Ramadan or Eid. We chose seven holidays on which to focus: Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Christmas, Ramadan, Thanksgiving, Independence Day (United States), and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

The students were broken up into groups and assigned a holiday. They used library books to research their holiday and wrote blurbs that highlighted a specific aspect of the holiday, such as food, activities, or history. This project required outside work and a great deal of cultural and religious sensitivity on the part of the tutors, but the end result was much more than we could have predicted. The students wrote very impressive writing pieces and drew inspiring pictures.

We had originally intended to print out copies of the students' writing and drawings, "bind" the pages together with string, and distribute them to the

students. But the students' writing and drawings deserved much more than that. The book had grown to represent cross-cultural understanding and hope. Private donations helped us to fund the book and the result was the published *People Come From Many Places and Travel Miles and Miles: A Student Guide to Some Pretty Important Holidays*.

We sold the book at Starbucks on Marshall Street and the SU Bookstore with proceeds designated to buy supplies for the program. The SU Bookstore even welcomed two of our students for a book signing at the Annual Faculty and Staff Shopping Gala in December. The community leaders told us that the students' parents were impressed and proud that their children are published authors. They said they would encourage other parents to also send their children to the Saturday program.

### **The Quilt Project**

The success of the book project led us to work on another large project this semester. My co-coordinator and I chose to do a quilt. Though we had originally considered doing another book project, it was a great deal of work. We also wanted to set a precedent for the future coordinators of the 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom to do a different large project each semester.

We wanted the students to feel a personal connection to the project. With the historical ties to African textiles, we felt that quilts were a perfect fit. We also liked the possibility of exploring a different medium of published work for the students and the ways it integrated literacy, art, history, cultural understanding,



and community. There were many ways we could take lesson plans with all of these connections.

We especially liked the idea of having personal narratives involved with the quilt. We wanted to have the tutors (17 this semester) and students (nearing 50 altogether) show a little of their identities on their individual patch of the quilt. With this concept in mind, we wanted to use the quilt as a vehicle to store memories. We wanted the quilt, and more specifically, the poetry on the patches of the quilt, to be an outlet for tutors and students to have their voices heard.

I continued to research English Language Learner (TELL) pedagogy. At the beginning of the project, I was resistant to labeling these students. At a previous after-school program at which I worked, the ELL students were stigmatized, treated like they had learning disabilities. My interest in inclusive education caused me to strongly resist and oppose this stigma. But as I began to learn more about ELL pedagogy, I learned that this stigma does not have to happen. There are cultural differences that need to be addressed, and more importantly, understood. I was beginning to learn that in ELL, it did not have to be about “proper” English, but rather about cross-cultural understanding and cross-lingual learning.

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This research paper will begin by comparing what experts in the field of ELL say about teaching methods and the activities that are implemented on Saturday mornings. I will discuss the importance of African American quilts as a part of American history. After the literature review, I will describe how the

tutoring program, the quilt, and this entire project is a hybrid genre and a form of resistance. Finally, I will provide a quick overview of the Saturday tutoring sessions from this semester and the steps it took to create the quilt.

Before reading further, it should be said that this quilt project is not about the research and it is not about me. This narrative only represents one perspective of how the events of this past semester have unfolded. It is about 59 individuals who have come together, combining their talents and backgrounds. It is about the community that was created in the classroom over the course of a year, the relationships that have formed, and the continuous exchange of teaching and learning from all. This project was created for the students and tutors of the 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom of the Somali Bantu Community-Based Tutoring Program.

## *Chapter 2: ELL Pedagogy*

English Language Learner (ELL) pedagogy has transformed in the last decade. There are other terms being thrown around, like English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). But for the purposes of this paper, I will most use the terms ELL or Teaching English Language Learners (TELL).

The label ESL—or English-language learner (ELL) or whatever acronym is used—is problematic because it masks significant underlying differences that have serious consequences. There are also many negative features associated with the label. There are ESL students who have never learned to read in their first language and those who have never attended school prior to immigrating. On the other hand, there are those who have attended school and who have learned to read some English. ... There are those who have entered as poor refugees and those who have entered as rich refugees. There are those who have entered when they were 6 years old and those who have entered at 14 to 19.

—Lee Gunderson<sup>ix</sup>

I have seen all of these with our 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade students. Even within a classroom of only Somali Bantu students, there is a difference between those who speak Maay Maay and those who speak Zigua. There is a large difference in the students who have been here for several years and those students who just immigrated.

*In past experiences in working with ELL students, I tried to relate. Five years of Spanish in high school and another two semesters in college. I wouldn't say I'm fluent by any means. But I appreciate Spanish-speakers who tolerate me. And it allows me to empathize with those speaking a non-native language—particularly those who do not feel fluent: translating in your head before speaking*

*or writing; not having the vocabulary to feel like you can really express yourself; little confidence.*

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We received no ELL training before we went into the Somali Bantu program a year ago. We saw a video on Somali Bantu refugees in Arizona and went to a brief question and answer orientation about what the program was like. And then we began tutoring at the program.

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The Somali Bantu program is different from many ELL classrooms in New York State. Many ELL classrooms have students from a variety of backgrounds. While our students are individuals, it is relatively unique to have only Somali Bantu students in a program.

Because technically we're just tutors, we do not have training in TELL. True, the experts say:

“...the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is a professional discipline that requires specialized training.”

—TESOL Position Statement  
on Teacher Quality...<sup>x</sup>

And I don't disagree. TELL requires a great deal of sensitivity and understanding of linguistics and cultures. But we, as tutors, care. And I believe that is the first step. As college students, we are willing to get up on Saturday mornings, only hours after many of our peers went to sleep, to go to a local elementary school and tutor 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade students. We go to their award ceremonies and plays. We go to their after school programs.

As a collective, we have tutored at numerous other schools and after-school programs. So we realize that the most important thing we can provide to our students as tutors is letting them know we care. We want to be at the program with them.

*In some of my past experiences, teachers seemed to consider teaching only as a job. Students were not allowed to access all parts of the room. Not wanted in the classroom if different from other students. True, this was not the case in many classrooms I have been in. But seeing that these models exist—seeing teachers who would rather socialize with one another than with the student(s), has caused me to tell my students regularly how proud I am of them.*

We hold high expectations for our students in the Somali Bantu Tutoring Program. We try to specialize lesson plans as best we can for each individual student. Working with them over the course of a year has allowed the tutors to know how much to push the students. And the students continue to impress and astound us.

True, the students are not perfect. Some come to the program with a lot going on at home. And don't want to do schoolwork on a Saturday morning because—understandably—it's their one day-off. Others are treated unkindly in school because they are viewed as different. And they push back.

True, we do not have much training, but as tutors, we try to be creative to make educational games so the students want to be in school on a Saturday morning. Like Bingo. Battleship Spelling. Math bobsled. Writing postcards from

different planets. Jeopardy. We can empathize that the students do not want to be in school every day of the week. So we try to make learning fun.

True, I am by no means a perfect tutor. I learned a tough lesson when I realized I was letting my biases of one student's attitude prevent me from getting to know her and appreciate her intelligence. But we can get over ourselves and recognize the prejudice. And start over.

### ***TELL Methods***

Ideally, we would like to have one tutor for each student. Common sense tells us that we would be able to make the most progress with each student if we were able to provide one-to-one tutoring. But there's not enough space in the classroom for that. We are able to provide a 1:3 ratio.

Due to space constraints and the need to have a co-tutor to work off of, we have created group dynamics in our classroom. It just makes the most sense after you've been in our classroom. Students are able to interact and learn from one another. Tutors work in pairs to create different dynamics within the group. For example, they can take turns leading a group activity. Or, if they notice one or two students struggling, one tutor can take those students aside while the other tutor works with the rest of the group.

This was particularly difficult before we knew what the students could do—how fluent they were with reading and writing in English, and how well they could decipher mathematics. In some cases, we had to randomly place students who recently immigrated to the United States. The amazing thing about our

students though, is that it's never about "intelligence" with them. It's more about whether or not they know something yet. Like decimals. Or vocabulary. As opposed to other classroom environments I have encountered, it's not, *You're stupid*, it's, *He doesn't know that yet*. The big word is yet. He will know. Just not yet.

And in many cases, in the group setting, students will assist one another—especially in translating. *One student last semester who recently immigrated to the area did not know much English. This was a unique problem to us as tutors because the majority of students speak English quite well—which is possibly another reason why it's okay that we're not professionally trained in TELL.*

*But one student who was pretty advanced in her group made it a point to sit next to the student who spoke minimal English and worked with him on assignments. And by the end of the semester, the student with minimal English was quietly speaking up and answering questions in the group. In English. Yeah, we probably did not do much to help with his English acquisition, being that we only met on Saturdays. But he did feel comfortable enough to speak up at the end. And I believe we created this comfortable environment by letting him know we cared and engaged him in the material.*

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Early ELL pedagogy taught:

Principle 1: All humans are individuals.

Principle 2: Individuality is also cultural.

Principle 3: Social group membership and identity are multiple, contradictory, and dynamic.

Principle 4: Social group membership is consequential.

Principle 5: Methods of studying cultural knowledge and behavior are unlikely to fit a positivist paradigm.

Principle 6: Language (learning and teaching) culture are mutually implicated, but culture is multiple and complex.

—Dwight Atkinson<sup>xi</sup>

If one has not been in an ELL classroom, these might seem obvious. And they are. But one might not recognize how true they are until she has actually experienced it for herself. Especially in a classroom in which all of the students practice the same faith and trace their roots to Somalia. But everyone practices faith in different ways. Some students love to write, while others love science. Some love to read, while others love math. Some love to dance, while others love to chat. It changes completely from student to student. And you can only begin to understand this through individual interactions.

If you were in the classroom, you would learn that many of the students' choices and lives revolve around their culture. Like Islam—the girls wear hijab and full dress. The students have scars from traditional medicinal practices. Several girls have nose piercings. The majority of our students have a number of brothers and sisters, as family—especially large family—is a high priority in the Somali Bantu community.

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The interesting thing in learning about other cultures and individuals is that it has forced me to look at my own cultures and the ways in which I identify



myself. Just a few years ago, I did not really think that I had a unique culture. I come from a small town. I was raised Catholic, but I would say I'm more faithful than religious. I am descended from primarily Irish and German roots, but it's not like my family and I enjoy Guinness or bratwurst more than the next guy.

It was through my interactions with the Sudanese community on Syracuse's north side, a *Journey of Understanding* while abroad, and the Somali Bantu tutoring program in which the tutors are just about as diverse as most of the SU campus gets, that has caused me to reexamine my culture. They have helped me to redefine culture and identity and have opened me into believing that these "definitions" and ideas are always changing.

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Regarding the third principle of the ELL advice, I've come to understand how we exist within different circles, different social groups. Some of which can be considered "contradictory" and "dynamic." As a simple example, the students in the Somali Bantu program are caught between many cultures, including traditional Somali Bantu culture, refugee culture, American culture, and youth culture, just to name a few. This makes the ways that they see the world and the ways that they learn very unique to each and cannot be simplified by phrases like "your culture" and "American culture" (as the above article continues).<sup>xii</sup> These phrases are much too complicated and cannot be oversimplified. Again, these concepts could not really be learned until actually experiencing these cultural similarities and differences.

The fourth principle Atkinson discusses refers to the fact that we, as

humans, are social beings. And through our social interactions, different dynamics are created. Specifically in the ELL classroom, these dynamics create inequity through “dominant models of education and culture” which “affect[s] all language learning.”<sup>xiii</sup>

When we, as tutors, first began writing lesson plans for the 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, we took some ideas from our own past teachers. In this way, we were pushing American-dominated lessons on to the students—lessons that may have worked for us, but did not necessarily work for our students in the Somali Bantu program. But we learned from these experiences and have tried to allow the students much more say in the lesson plans. Similarly, the tutors, through their close and consistent interactions with the students are learning the ways that their students learn best (i.e., visually, musically, mathematically, etc.) and have begun to apply techniques and strategies in order to help each individual student.

The fifth principle relates to flexibility and ethnographic research in order to study TESOL. This type of research favors qualitative methods over quantitative methods, and for this, has been criticized for being unable to be reliable, general, and measurable.<sup>xiv</sup> But by being in the classroom, you realize that many things—particularly in working with young students—are simply not quantifiable. The students must be read and heard. Understanding must be reached. In many cases, this is the most valuable research available.

Finally, Atkinson’s sixth principle emphasizes that TESOL would not be possible if culture were not also taught. This was certainly our focus last semester through the holiday project—as religions and holidays are, in many instances,

central to culture. We, as tutors, learned about culture through our students. And the students, in turn—hopefully—learned culture through the different experiences that their tutors wrote about on their patches of the quilt. Through our experiences in the classroom, we have learned that cultures are multiple and complicated. It is because of this that we have tried to create an environment in which we are all learning—rather than a dominated dynamic of only us, as tutors, teaching about culture.

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The experts also say:

The extent to which ESL educators value participants' linguistic resources in teaching is a measure of our willingness to address basic inequities in the broader society. As we let go of the need to enforce English only in the classroom and open our ranks to community expertise, students will gain greater control of their own learning.

—Elsa Roberts Auerbach<sup>xv</sup>

Yes, I agree that there should be room for students to be able to write in their first language—especially to understand complicated concepts. There is absolutely no reason to make students feel uncomfortable by forcing them to only use English. But what does a tutor do when it's almost more difficult for the student to write in their native language? Using Roman letters and concepts of words?

Yes, I suppose this would be ideal. But what about students whose first language is not written? This creates a whole other dynamic when the first language does not even have letters and “grammar” rules to follow. This brings up a challenge of quite literally starting from scratch. In theory, we have had it rather easy because the large majority of our students in the Somali Bantu program are

quite literate in English already.

*In order for Maay Maay and Zigua to be written on the quilt, words had to be spoken and then written out based on how they sound using English basics. In retrospect, this is one of my personal critiques of the quilting project—perhaps by asking students to write in their oral language, I was not respecting their first language. I was trying to make it something else. Similarly, related to cultural identities, the Somali Bantu community really enforces the ideas of becoming immersed in “American culture,” and in this way, it seemed like some of the students felt uncomfortable writing in anything but English—as this is the language they are supposed to write here.*

In a report originally commissioned by the United States government:

Policy constraints on education opportunities prevent students from the opportunity to become biliterate in public schools. These constraints prevent students from demonstrating their knowledge or their potential in languages other than English, they view students’ cultures as “barriers to learning,” thereby reducing the discourse about their education needs to that of “learning English.” Policy constraints that limit assessment and instruction for ELLs to English medium programs with English-only assessments similarly limit the potential for researchers to explore a wide range of issues regarding instruction and assessment for language minority students.

—Kathy Escamilla<sup>xvi</sup>

The 2000-08 Administration did not print this report because the researchers did not produce the findings that the government had hoped it would. Nevertheless, this report provides similar findings as Auerbach on monolingualism: that it hinders more than helps ELL students. This form of instruction limits students from reaching their potential. Perhaps even more strides can be made in the field of ELL in the US with this understanding more firmly in place.

More recent TELL methodology suggests:

In multimodal texts, knowledge is not made available in English only; rather, it is made available to ESL students in multidimensional ways, that is, through the combination and integration of language, images, graphics, and layouts. Such materials from diverse text types have the potential to motivate, excite, and engage all learners...

—Lasisi Ajayi<sup>xvii</sup>

This is certainly something that we could use more of in our classroom.

The quilt, itself, provides a form of multimodal learning, as it is a form of art and literacy. But this expert suggests other genres, such as posters, advertisements, photographs, graphics, etc. This makes a great deal of sense because visuals can sometimes provide much more stimuli for students regarding the ways in which they think. After reading, we sometimes have the students do free-writes and draw pictures with a similar concept in mind, like with the postcards from other planets, signs of spring worksheet, or the imaginative ecosystem animals. But perhaps next time, we could reverse the graphics and start with those from the beginning.

### **Learning by Doing**

I suppose theories and learning from experts are important starting off points. But I learned a great deal more from putting these theories into practice and being able to compare the expert's testimonies to real-life scenarios. Trial and error. Learning from mistakes. Learning from successes. Learning from the relationships that were built. Research is necessary as a starting off point, but I have learned the most about ELL teaching/tutoring by actually being in a

classroom. This seems to be the direction that education programs in the United States might be heading:

More practice, less theory, more hands-on experience.

—Arne Duncan, April 18, 2010<sup>xviii</sup>

Actually being there and having these real-life experiences has taught me much more than any book could have.

The 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom has also taught me the importance of collaboration. I am constantly learning from my peer tutors—through the strategies and techniques that they use with the students. Along the lines of culture, learning from my peers has also taught me that there are many strategies that can be employed—not just what I think is “best.” It has really made me take a step back and rethink how and why I tutor.

Having a co-coordinator has helped me, especially with brainstorming. In many cases, she has also helped me to think more logically and rein in my ideas. Similarly, having supervisors to give suggestions and endless support has done much more for the lesson plans and how my learning has evolved.

I have learned many things by actually being in the classroom and having these real-world experiences. It taught me to be organized, to always have a back-up plan. It taught me to anticipate possible scenarios based on past experiences in order to plan ahead. It taught me to work with different cultures—both the students as well as my peers. It taught me patience and how to work collaboratively. It taught me to be flexible and reflective. Most of all, it taught me the infinite ways that learning from doing can help others and it taught me to allow this learning to happen for my tutors.

### *Chapter 3: Quilts*

Though there are many ways a person could study quilts, from various cultural perspectives and crossing centuries of time, I chose to focus on African American quilts, particularly during the early to mid-1800s. This genre just began to be studied in the 1970s, so not much scholarship has been written, but more needs to be written. This oppressed form of writing is not being acknowledged nearly enough.

Slavery in the United States began in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 and lasted until the Thirteenth Amendment was passed in 1865.<sup>xix</sup> Most slaves were taken from West Africa.<sup>xx</sup> Slaves were treated as property and brutal beatings were a common occurrence.<sup>xxi</sup> The institution of slavery was so terribly all-consuming that many of its ramifications continue to be felt today.

Slave masters thought that they took everything away from their slaves. In the southern colonies, or what is now the southern United States, slave masters took all belongings, family, and pride from slaves. But what they didn't know when they forced slaves to live in unlivable conditions, separated families, and dehumanized men, women, and children, was that they allowed slaves to keep some of their strengths. Strengths that were embedded in African cultures for generations.

Slaves<sup>2</sup> brought with them strong traditions of oral history. These traditions were obviously not practiced in Eurocentric<sup>xxii</sup> writing. Slaves wrote through spoken word. Like griots, storytelling musicians in West Africa, oral history was continued among slaves to “record and transmit ancestral lineage, customs, beliefs, events, names, dates, and legends from generation to generation.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Stories were told via memory, using mnemonic devices.<sup>xxiv</sup> Because few Africans could read or write (words-on-paper form), oral histories in the colonies worked to the slaves’ advantage, as slave masters would not allow slaves to learn to read or write. When Africans were forced into slavery, they were separated from family members and others who spoke the same language, making it necessary to learn English. But they kept this tradition of oral history, passing stories down from generation to generation.

Similarly, African men used to create intricate, bold, mismatched and geometric textiles. When forced into slavery, slave masters not only enforced Eurocentric forms of sewing and quilting, they also enforced Eurocentric gender roles.<sup>xxv</sup> Women became seamstresses, though men helped when necessary.

Slaves learned to make European-style quilts flawlessly: muted colors, typically, Victorian floral patterns, precise and organizationally linear, tight stitching, repetitive, matching fabrics. Mistresses would win awards at county fairs for the quilts that their slaves made.<sup>xxvi</sup> But when quilting for themselves,

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<sup>2</sup> Because of the dehumanizing nature associated with slavery, I will use the term, “slave” or “slaves.” To say “people” would be eliminating the fact that almost everything was taken away. It would be re-writing history to try to make it sound like it really wasn’t “that bad.”



slaves created and wrote quilts in African traditions. This work has been called creole art,<sup>xxvii</sup> as the combination of Eurocentric quilts and African textiles created a new form. Non-linear, geometric patterns, loose stitching, fabric scraps, and bold colors characterized this hybrid art form. The non-linear patterns kept evil spirits away,<sup>xxviii</sup> demonstrating that quilt writing transcended human communication to a spiritual level.

As an art form, quilting was purposeful, functional. Patchwork appeared in blankets as well as clothing. The quilts were so well used many did not survive. These quilts were also lost through fire and were left behind after the Civil War.<sup>xxix</sup> It has been said, however, that many functioned to help slaves escape.

## Underground Railroad

Quilts made for masters may have been used on the Underground Railroad. The stories of this history are passed down through oral tradition. These stories identify specific codes and symbols on quilts, which helped escaped slaves reach freedom. This system has been called a visual language.<sup>xxx</sup>

Ties on quilts may have been used as a scale of distances to travel between safe houses, a sort of map.<sup>xxxii</sup> Some block patterns<sup>xxxii</sup> may have symbolized



to gather belongings,



to follow the North Star,



to change clothes to blend in,



Cleveland, Ohio, which had several paths leading to Canada.<sup>3</sup>

Many other block patterns may also have been used on the Underground Railroad.

Quilts containing black fabric may have been placed outside of houses to signal safety.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The complexity of this visual language has not yet been fully recovered.

It is difficult to prove that quilts were used on the Underground Railroad.

The codes and symbols were passed secretly between only trusted slaves, free

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<sup>3</sup> All images and code translations: "Quilt Blocks," MRKOLC. 27 Apr. 2010 <http://mrkolc.com/quilt%20blocks.htm>

people, and abolitionists. Many quilts did not survive. Slaves were forbidden to write in the traditional Eurocentric form. There is no “hard evidence” that the code-system existed. Traditional Eurocentric thinking prevents the acceptance of storytelling as real evidence.

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One of the most famous abolitionists, Harriet Tubman, was a quilter. Before marrying John Tubman in 1843, she made a quilt.<sup>xxxiv</sup> It is uncertain whether she made this quilt as a way to stay calm, anxious at the prospect of marriage, or as a gift to her new husband, with intentions of keeping the two of them warm. In any case, a quilt was made.

After escaping the first time, Harriet went back for her husband, but he had remarried. From then on, Harriet was “determined to give her life to brave deeds” and became the Moses of her people.<sup>xxxv</sup> When leading fugitive slaves north, to pass time during the day, Harriet would sew scraps of fabric together, moving ahead on foot by night.<sup>xxxvi</sup> It is uncertain whether she pieced scraps together to stay calm, anxious about the lives of the fugitive slaves and herself, or as a gift to the fugitives, to keep them warm once in Canada.

*This connection led me to the Harriet Tubman House in Auburn, New York. Being a native Central New Yorker, I've always wanted to go to this historical site, ever since the 5<sup>th</sup> grade field trip to the William Seward House just down the road from Harriet Tubman. Learning that Harriet Tubman created quilts was a perfect excuse to finally go.*

*Apparently, the tour guide is not allowed to talk about quilts and their relationship with the Underground Railroad. Unless someone else brings it up. Luckily, since I was researching, I did. But the tour guide admitted that she did not know anything about Tubman making quilts. She did say she was familiar with the theories on the code-system of quilts on the Underground Railroad. She continued that it is difficult to prove because some of the patterns that were supposedly part of the code-system were not believed to have been used on quilts until many years after the Civil War.*

*After a brief introduction and video about Harriet Tubman's life in the visitor's center, the guide took us to Tubman's house. Though she had originally made it sound like Tubman was not associated with quilts in any way, the first room we walked in highlighted two quilts. One quilt was on a side table with framed pictures sitting on top. The main quilt, however, hung on the right wall. It had blocks of all the patterns I had learned about in my research. I became excited, but the guide explained that the quilts in this room were created by a group of quilters from Baldwinsville, New York. The blocks seemed to match my research too eerily—as if the quilters in that group had read the same books I had.*

*Tubman's room held more promise. There was a quilt on her bed and a quilt on the nearby chair. The quilt on the bed had a crazy pattern to it, but had many colored ties. The quilt on the chair was a bow-tie quilt. The guide said that Tubman's nieces had sewn the quilts and donated them to the Harriet Tubman House. She pointed out what I had noticed: the ties on the bed quilt.*

**Guide:** *It was said that the ties represented some sort of scale that the slaves would travel. But these ties are much too close together to really mean any distances, I think.*

*Though I had been excited, she was probably right. Another quilt was in the dining room from the Baldwinsville quilters. It seemed that the only authentically African American quilts were the ones in Tubman's room. And it was fascinating to learn that her family had created them.*

*On the ride home, I somehow got into a discussion with my companion about going back in time to a part of history that we can now only imagine because of passing time.*

**Companion:** *Wouldn't you like to go back in time and go with Harriet Tubman on one of her trips to Canada?*

*No. I don't think I'm tough enough to do what she or her passengers did. She never lost a single person on the Underground Railroad. When they complained and tried to go back, she would hold a gun to their head. And of course, they would keep walking north.<sup>xxxvii</sup>*

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Before 1970, nothing about African American quilts was studied.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Crafts from African American men were mentioned, such as blacksmithing, but quilting was not considered a skill during slavery. It was done in "free" time after a full day of chores/work.<sup>xxxix</sup> It was considered to be an enjoyable hobby.

Though most of the slave quilts from the early to mid-1800s no longer exist, many family members, generations later, continue to quilt in the styles of their ancestors: bold colors, loose stitching, asymmetrical and rhythmic patterns. The quilters of Gee's Bend have been creating quilts since the 1920s. Gee's Bend

is an island in Alabama.<sup>x1</sup> Their quilts are based on generations of quilting in geographic isolation. As many as four generations have helped piece together quilts. They are now exhibited in museums all over the country.<sup>xii</sup>

Modern-day African American quilters, including quilters from Gee's Bend, do not recognize the African heritage in their quilts. They simply cite that it's the way their mothers and grandmothers made quilts. Many think their individual style of quilting is unique to their family. But their quilting is actually similar to many other African American women's styles of quilting.<sup>xliii</sup> In this way, it seems that the continuity from Africa continues, but the women credit their style to more recent lineage.

### *Chapter 4: Resistance*

If we accept storytelling as evidence, quilts used in the Underground Railroad were a form of resistance for slaves. Even if this portion of history cannot be proven through Eurocentric means, the quilts that slaves made for themselves can also be seen as resistance.

African American quilts push boundaries of resistance. Resistance is commonly thought of as sit-ins and rallies. Much resistance is done for rights and luxuries. But slaves used quilts as a medium for resisting. They resisted for individual and cultural survival. Through quilts, they also preserved identity. Slave masters used basic principles of scientific racism<sup>xliii</sup> to legitimize slave identity,<sup>xliv</sup> believing slaves to be pieces of property, rather than human beings. Slaves resisted this legitimizing identity by creating their own communities. Communities that stuck together and helped one another survive the day-to-day torture. They preserved community identity by continuing African traditions of oral history and textiles. They preserved community by surviving together.

Autoethnography is a rhetoric of resistance. It is a genre unto itself that gives voice to those who feel voiceless.

...autoethnographic text...[is]...a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in repose to or in dialogue with those texts.

—Mary Louise Pratt<sup>xlv</sup>

Slave quilts have similar characteristics to autoethnography. In the hybrid genre of creole art, African Americans challenge European representations of

them on the quilt. Slaves were thought to be property. It was believed by slave masters that slaves did not have the mental capacity to be literate. But slaves proved slave masters wrong by using the codes and symbols on quilts. By reaching freedom, slaves proved that they were literate, just not in the typical words-on-paper way.

African American quilts push the definition of art from expression to function. Slave quilts acted as a barrier to protect slaves from evil spirits as well as the cold. African American quilts continue these traditions today. These quilts express resistance against traditionally European quilts, by continuing to demonstrate loose stitching, bold colors, and asymmetrical designs.

African American quilts are rhetorical. They resist linear thinking by relating and integrating everything, from nature to humans to spirits, incorporating traditional African belief systems. There is no one or other, but all together.

These quilts also push the definitions of writing. On the Underground Railroad, quilts were used as a form of visual communication. Quilts allowed slaves, as well as abolitionists, to communicate with one another. Putting words on paper would have broken the entire system by providing evidence to slave

Typical Eurocentric forms of writing are linear. Writing is words on paper written from left to right, up to down. But this is not how everyone writes. Many languages, such as Hebrew, write on paper from right to left, up to down, while others, such as East Asian scripts, write from u p t o d o w n, right to left. Still, others, such as Aztec script, do not even define writing in the linear-form of words on a page. Quilting challenges dominant conceptions of writing by also writing in a written-wordless, nonlinear-form.



catchers. Today, quilts continue their oral traditions by passing on this intricate system of codes and symbols on the Underground Railroad.

Narrative quilts, or quilts that tell stories through shapes and pictures on the quilt, are unique to America, originally attributed to African Americans. Harriet Powers, a former slave, is one of the most well known narrative quilters. She wrote stories from oral tradition onto quilts, depicting biblical scenes and slave life.<sup>xlvi</sup> Though census data tells historians that she could neither read nor write, she proved to be literate by writing intricate stories on quilts, such as accounts of actual astronomical events like eclipses and comets.<sup>xlvii</sup> But it is not just Powers' quilts that combine visual communication and oral tradition. The Gee's Bend quilts exemplify the traditional forms of African American quilting. They use asymmetrical lines to ward off evil spirits. Their quilting techniques were passed from generation to generation through oral history.

African American quilts challenge assumptions about research. Eurocentric forms of research seem to restrict people to physical forms of evidence, such as paintings and diaries. The creole quilts, or the quilts slaves made for themselves, are only in recent decades being recognized as a legitimate medium to study academically. But because oral tradition does not fall into this category of valid/evidential research, it is difficult to prove that quilts were used on the Underground Railroad. In this way, one of the strengths that slaves were able to preserve from their African lineage is silenced to this day.

Thinking about oral history as a legitimate source of information is beginning to be reconsidered, however. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that oral histories are just as important as written histories:

...the laws of evidence must be adapted in order that this type of evidence can be accommodated and placed on an equal footing with the types of historical evidence that courts are familiar with, which largely consists of historical documents.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Hopefully, this judicial precedent will assist in legitimizing oral history in other mediums and disciplines. Evidence of African American quilts of today and the symbols on the Underground Railroad are not the only oral histories that are being silenced. Perhaps in accepting oral histories as a form of writing, rewriting history<sup>xlix</sup> can be possible.

The problem with oral history, however, is that evidence can be lost forever when an older person dies.

In Africa when an older person dies, a library burns.  
—William Ferris<sup>1</sup>

As older African Americans die, the gap in time between when these quilt codes were used and now continues to grow. The stories may not be continuing to the next generation.

Slave quilts—both in the Eurocentric form intended for slave masters as well as the creole art form intended for slaves—push boundaries. These quilts make us rethink. They make us reevaluate. They make us want to explore more. By putting their own identity on quilts, slaves created an infusion of art and communication that in some ways, continues to this day. But in other ways, they

continue to be silenced. In order to finally listen, we may have to reconsider the ways in which we think about resistance, rhetoric, research, and writing.

### **Hybrid**

In some ways, autoethnography is a hybrid form of resistance. The “oppressed” write in the “oppressor’s” language as well as their own native language. It is a clear rhetorical strategy for the oppressed to take control, to rewrite their version of history. The oppressed are not letting the oppressors speak for them (ethnography), they are speaking for themselves. By identifying themselves as the oppressed, they are not asking for pity. They are asking for the respect that their arguments deserve, but which have been silenced by those in control. It can be said that the term “hybrid” is a form of resistance in and of itself, as it goes against the norm.

Just as African American quilts are considered a hybrid art form, the quilt made with the Somali Bantu Tutoring Program is also a hybrid. While most quilts allow the visual aspect of the quilt to communicate, we actually wrote poetry on the quilt. Though there are 60 patches, the overall aesthetic of the quilt provides the piece to tell more than 60 stories. Our quilt combines literacy with art, which is why, in its hybrid form, it is a literacy quilt.

On another level, several of the tutors and students chose to use hybrid language, switching freely between English and another language.

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

—Gloria Anzaldúa<sup>li</sup>

*In the beginning, I loved this idea. I encouraged our students to write in more than one language, as I saw it as a celebration of their native tongue. In retrospect, however, I think I may have initially pushed the idea too much. Firstly, it was unfair of me to ask the students, whose first languages are oral, to write their native languages. The tutors did not seem to mind and most of the students did not seem to mind, but one student in particular, I learned later was uncomfortable writing in Maay Maay.*

*Her poem read “That’s how I feel on the Gudaha.” Her poem was about her gudaha<sup>4</sup> and outside self, explaining that she is happy, shy, and funny on the gudaha, but people do not always see that from the outside. When I first read her poem, I thought it was wonderful because the reader could guess what gudaha meant from the context. But when other students were creating their patches the following week, she was adamant about creating a new patch completely in English.*

*Student: But people won’t be able to understand what I wrote.*

*Me: I think they’ll be able to figure it out.*

*Student: (After extended silence) I just want to do a new patch.*

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<sup>4</sup> I will not translate this word for you. You can probably figure it out by context. If you are wondering why I am being firm about this, please see the Anzaldúa quote on the previous page.

*Though I was disappointed, it seems logical that coming from a community that emphasizes the importance of learning English, she would want her patch to be in English. Because of this lesson learned, my liking of this student's original work, and this Capstone Project being a representation of how I feel on the gudaha, I thought this quote would be an appropriate project title.*

### *Chapter 5: Methods*

This entire Capstone Project is an example of autoethnography and therefore, resistance. It should be said that I am only writing this paper the way that I see it. I am not writing on behalf of anyone else. As you move on to the findings section, each described session of the tutoring program should be seen as only my subjective viewpoint. The other tutors and students in the classroom provide an entirely different perspective and may choose to emphasize different aspects or have completely different insights. Because I am only writing on my own behalf, as a person in the tutoring program, I am writing an autoethnography, as opposed to an ethnography.

This Project is also a hybrid in that it is not just a traditional research paper. In this way, it is also a form of resistance. It is a multimodal project that incorporates many layers and ways of seeing the quilt unfold. It is necessary to see pictures of the quilt as well as the movie with the students' and tutors' voices reading their poetry to fully understand the research portion of the Project.

This research paper in itself is also a hybrid form of resistance. It mixes the traditional style and organization of writing with several other strategies. I intentionally used italics to depict my voice telling a story. Within these stories, I differentiate between people speaking by using a script-style format. I do not directly quote anyone because as the story is coming from memory, it would be impossible to say that those are the exact words that were used, but the general idea is there. Finally, rather than using in-text citations, I use endnotes so the

reader can accept the expert's testimony and immediately move back to the conversation I am having with an expert.

To make my points about the ways in which we define writing, I played with the text of the paper. I altered the text direction, used non-linear formatting, and when showing the quilt patterns, I did not use the names of the blocks, but rather what the blocks actually look like, moving beyond words on a page. These strategies were purposeful and represent my language in the context of research paper language. My language is also represented in the fact that I fluctuate between academic-style writing and my own voice. Because this Project is my autoethnography, these strategies are deliberate.

The quilt is also a hybrid form of resistance. Though it has been said that many quilts, especially African American quilts, are already a hybrid and a form of resistance, the quilt we created at the Somali Bantu Tutoring Program resists these forms of quilts. It also incorporates actual writing with a narrative quilt, creating an entirely new genre of a literacy quilt. And within some of the patches, students and tutors wrote in multiple languages, creating hybrid languages.

In a way, the poetry on the quilt represents a form of resistance. Children, especially immigrant children, are rarely able to have their voices heard. This tends to also hold true for college students. This quilt project was a way to have these marginalized groups be heard, in their own words and in their own writing.

One final explanation: although this Project is written in my voice, when I refer to planning and tutoring at the Saturday program, I only use the term "we." This is to recognize the fact that this project would not have happened without the

tutors. All of the planning and activities for the tutoring program were a collaborative effort.



## **Chapter 6: Findings**

*Looking up at the wall, a quilt hung in the SU Literacy Corps office from several summers before. I looked at my co-coordinator, nervous she would think it was a bad idea. **What do you think about doing a quilt...?** She gave me her usual look: she's always the logical one who has to rein in my big ideas.*

*This time, however, she thought it was a great idea. We began brainstorming about the glitter, the fabrics, the pipe cleaners, and the fabric markers. We thought each tutor and student would have his/her own patch. We were so excited that we began to consider what our own patches would look like. Then we wondered how we were going to sew the patches together. Neither of us knew anything about quilting.*

*Remembering an interest in a club several years before, I looked into the Hendricks Chapel Quilters. Looking at their website, it seemed like our tutoring program would fit into the types of work that they did. So we met with one of the leaders of the organization at the end of the fall semester to see if a quilt like the one we were suggesting would be possible. She said it would definitely be possible. She and the other members of the quilting group set in to help us plan out what the quilt would look like and suggestions for how to go about creating the patches.*

*(Week 1)—January 30<sup>th</sup>*

The first week back. All of us were excited to see the students again. A few tutors were meeting the students for the first time. But we had a lot to accomplish.

The students filed in as usual. Some were unimpressed to see us again. Some were excited. A month is long time to be away from someone you were just beginning to know. As things settled down, it became noticeable that we didn't have the same number of students. Some new faces, too.

We began by introducing the quilting project. One of the people from Hendricks Chapel Quilters talked about quilts, keeping their attention much better than we usually do. She passed around quilts for the students to touch and see up close. The kids asked questions. Some said their families make quilts. We had some time, so she read a Polacco book on quilting. The tutors watched in astonishment as the kids sat quietly and listened.

I passed around short readings on Amish, Civil War, and Underground Railroad quilts. The tutors read with the students. It was a brief introduction. Wasn't sure if the students really got what we were planning.

We did a writing activity to give the students an idea of what to write about on their patch. We asked them to list five identities to which they belonged. We used examples to explain. Identities like Muslim. Female. Somali. Brother. Etc. We asked them to circle the one with which they most identified.

*(Week 2)—February 13<sup>th</sup>*

The Writing Machine. We had different stations that each tutor pair volunteered to lead. It was an invention theme. A creating theme.

Nametags were prepared in advance. We used the identities from the week before as inspiration. The nametags prompted for the inventor's name. And little facts about him or her. Like favorite food. Or favorite superhero power. And asked for the inventor's identity. This was so the lead inventor (tutor) could simply look at the inventor's nametag and suggest something to write about if writer's block struck. Plus, in most cases, the interactions at the stations would be the first time the students and tutors had interacted and knowing names quickly would be helpful.

There were seven stations of poetry writing:

- Cinquain, or Five-Line Poetry
- I Was/I am Poetry
- I Am Poetry
- Moment Poetry
- Acrostic Poetry
- Artifact Poetry
- Inside Outside Poetry

The students began writing at their first stations. It lasted close to 20 minutes. Even though some were not done, we had to get to more stations so that the students could have choices in what poem they wanted to write on their patch. The second station was about 15 minutes. The next three were only about 10 minutes. A system had grown. A few students shuffled in late and they were placed at a table to begin writing immediately.

We asked the students to hand in all writing samples. I read them all as soon as I got home. For each student, I put the pieces in order of what I thought told the most about the student. I learned a lot about my students that day.

*(Week 3)—February 20<sup>th</sup>*

We had the students practice what was going to be on their patch. They practiced on scrap paper that had 6x6 squares. That was how big the patches were supposed to be. I planned on a lot of erasing and tongues-sticking-out-in-concentration. But the students flew through the practice and said they were ready for the real fabric patches.

I handed out the fabric and the crayons hesitantly. The students seemed to take to it like any other writing/drawing activity. Their comfort made me uncomfortable. I stressed that they had to be very careful because I did not have many extra pieces of fabric if they wanted to start over.

But that was not necessary. The work that they produced in a short amount of time exceeded my expectations. By a lot. And I thought I had set the bar high. Some wrote the poetry and drew something to go with the poetry. Others drew and had the poetry fit into the drawings. There were many colors and styles of patches.

A community leader walked around and helped students translate their poetry. If they so desired. I tried to go around to everyone to offer it as an option. But it was usually the students whose tutors wrote in a different language on their own patch who asked for help translating. Or, some felt confident enough to

figure out how to write in their own language. Many of the students who chose to write in another language tended to use it with English. To create a hybrid-language poem.

A handful of students did not finish. I asked them to promise that they would be at the program the following week to finish their patch. We were having difficulties with attendance rates. We were only getting about half of the number of students who attended the previous semester. We were told by community leaders that it was because of the weather. Understandable. But I hated to leave some of our students from the previous semester miss out on being a part of the quilt because of the weather in January and February.

*Week 4—February 27<sup>th</sup>*

Cancelled. Snow. Must re-plan. And be flexible.

*Boys and Girls Club—March 3, 5, 8*

Our attendance rates were quite low this semester—usually reaching only half the number of students we had on our attendance list. We were told by community leaders that it was because of the poor weather. This seemed reasonable considering Syracuse winters. We heard from the students that other students had Koran lessons. Still, others said their friends were not attending anymore because they thought their tutor had left him/her.

Regardless of why our attendance rates were so low, I went with one of the tutors to the Boys and Girls Club, Central Village, where many of our students

go during the week. The first day, I felt overwhelmed by the format of the program because I was not familiar with it. I mostly worked with one table and had three students complete their patches and two more re-do theirs. Because I was having a difficult time focusing on these students, I barely noticed the many others I did not get to. I left some blank patches for my fellow tutor and decided to come back in a couple days.

On the second day, the tutor with whom I went to the program rallied up all of the children we needed to do patches. Surprisingly, without much complaining or resistance, the students sat right down, cranked out some poetry, and finished their patches. Only a couple students did not finish this time. My fellow tutor held on to the patches and worked with the students on them the following week and returned them to me as soon as possible so that the quilt could continue.

*Week 5—March 13<sup>th</sup>*

This was the first day of Syracuse University's spring break. Initially, because I am from the Syracuse-area, I intended on stopping by the program alone to pull students out of the classroom who had not finished their patches because of the snow cancellation. When I mentioned it to my co-coordinator, she said that she wanted to come, too. She had missed the students because she had spent the previous two Saturday programs interviewing for graduate schools.

Ambitiously, and because we already had some lessons written, we decided we would actually try to teach a lesson. Just the two of us. When we suggested this to our superiors, they said we could open it up to the rest of the tutors in case they were interested. To our delightful surprise, two tutors were excited to come to the program to help.

I was able to have the five or six students who had not yet finished their patch of the quilt, finish. With only four of us there, however, I really appreciated the rest of the tutors who make the program seem so effortless every other Saturday.

*Week 6—March 27<sup>th</sup>*

Met for the tutoring program. The quilt was being sewn, so we didn't do anything related to the quilt during this session.

### *Conflict in the Community*

*The week before we presented the quilt to the students and the rest of the Somali Bantu community, I received a phone call from one of the tutors. She was upset because our students who go to the Boys and Girls Club, Central Village during the week were telling her they were not coming to the tutoring program that Saturday. She told me that there had been a conflict in the community: supposedly the parents of the different languages were upset with one another because of something that had happened. They didn't want to send their children to the program anymore.*

*In the office, we hurriedly wrote emails to the community leaders. We let them know we had heard rumors that the students were not planning to be at the program on Saturday. We had been planning on having some of the soccer players from the university come in, have our student-celebration party, and, most of all, show the students the quilt. Though the soccer players ended up canceling at the last minute, we were still concerned that we wouldn't have any students. We received very politically neutral emails back, saying that the community leaders could not force the students to come, but they would send out plenty of reminders that it was the Syracuse University tutors' last day at the program.*

*Luckily, there were around 20 students on the last day. But even the students that came were upset that some of their other friends could not come because their parents wouldn't let them. This demonstrated to me that the conflict had nothing to do with the children, but everything to do with the parents.*



*Since the last Saturday, I have heard several stories regarding the conflict in the community. The first had to do with a traditional Somali Bantu wedding ceremony in which several of the younger people came dressed in American clothes, not traditional Somali Bantu attire. The elders, apparently, were furious.*

*The other story I heard related to some of the parents' disapproval of how the Saturday program was being run. Supposedly, they were disappointed in the Americanized ways that their children were being taught. One community leader tried to explain that they should be grateful that students from Syracuse University were volunteering their time to tutor and write lesson plans. Another community leader was much more blunt: he told the parents that he could be doing other things on a Saturday morning and if they didn't like the way the program was run, he would be happy to step aside and let them run the program. None of these parents stepped up.*

Whatever the story, this was a lesson in working with a community-based tutoring program. Though ideally, the program is meant to bring members of the community together, there is no way to control what can happen. And if the conflict is, in fact, about the youth of the Somali Bantu community becoming too Americanized, it would probably not be the best idea for Americans to suggest conflict management strategies that are Eurocentric-based.

In a strange turn of events, by the end of the semester, the quilt has become more than just a project for the classroom. It has grown to demonstrate that the Maay Maay and Zigua students can be together, contrary to what their parents believe. In its most physical form, these students are integrated, sitting

peacefully side-by-side on the quilt. Perhaps the quilt can later be used as an example for the rest of the community to demonstrate that different people can still work and play together.

### *Final Day: Presenting the Quilt*

We had a slight fear that the students would be unimpressed by the quilt. We were not sure what their reaction would be, especially considering their individual patches were the last thing they saw. We were even more afraid of the possibility of students not showing up because of the conflict going on in the community. We had a back-up plan to get the bus back earlier, just in case.

We began with a class discussion about the quilt. *How many of you remember what a quilt is? How many of you remember what we were making this semester? How many remember making the patches? Well, it's finally completed!*

When we unfolded the quilt and held it in front of the class, the room erupted with applause. Certainly did not expect that. We placed it on a nearby table and invited the students and tutors to come up. It was wonderful seeing them touch the quilt and look for their friends', as well as their own, patches. When that began to die down, we invited students to read their poetry aloud. Also surprisingly, we had some bold volunteers who marched right up and read their poetry. Their personal poetry. When we moved on to another activity, I pulled students out individually to recite their poem to audio.

As the student appreciation party began to die down, I asked everyone to get together for a group picture with the quilt. We all got together—some sitting,

some standing—in the center of the room. A friend of mine took the pictures. With the quilt in the background, the 40+ faces shown in the photograph seem to represent a quilt in itself, carrying with them many different stories.

### *Quilting*

The Hendricks Chapel Quilters meet Monday nights from 7:00-9:00 PM. When we first proposed the project, we could see the skepticism. This made us a little nervous, too.

But we went almost every Monday. The quilters' lingo and arithmetic was mind numbing. How people can multiply and add mixed numbers so quickly is completely beyond me. We (re)learned to cut. We (re)learned to measure. We (re)learned how to use a sewing machine. We (re)learned the blind stitch and general uses of a needle and thread. We met the other quilters and saw their beautiful designs. After putting so much time, frustration, and heart into their quilts, they would all be sent to a chosen donation center.

We had initially bought fabrics in case we did not receive the donated fabrics from the Somali Bantu community, which was the initial intention of the project. We chose a bright orange fabric with subtle white swirls, a hint of yellow mixed with the orange. For the intersecting axes, we chose a brown fabric with black swirls, so that it would go with any of the patches the students and tutors made. We chose a green-based, plant-like fabric for the back of the quilt. The community leaders had mentioned the color green because the Bantus are traditionally a farming people. We figured that the green fabric was too

complicated for the front of the quilt. Finally, we chose yellow thread for the ties, to match the orange fabric, but so that the yellow would still stand out.

To create the patches, the quilters suggested using regular crayons right on the Muslin fabric. The patches would be ironed to solidify the crayon in the fabric. Though we were slightly upset that we couldn't use glitter, pipe-cleaners, other fabric, etc., we decided that the quilters knew what they were talking about. We left the overall planning of the quilt to their expert ideas.

A couple weeks into cutting the fabrics, we somehow lost the orange fabric. Though panic immediately struck, we decided it was for the best. One of my concerns from the beginning was that the orange fabric would be too "Syracuse University" orange, taking away the focus from the Somali Bantu community and placing it on the university community instead. Our only choice was to switch to the green fabric. This ended up being the perfect decision. The earthy tones that the green and brown make up on the front are subtle, but colorful. The yellow thread really makes the quilt pop. We were also worried that the bright orange would distract the viewer from the actual patches, but green seems to be a perfect complementary color. On one of the last quilting days, we chose red for the back because of the boldness of the color, but also because it was one of the few large fabrics that would fit our very large quilt.

We sewed almost every Monday of the semester, including the Monday of Spring Break, in which two of the quilters came in just to help me with this quilt. We also met on a Saturday, one of our non-tutoring days, for a quilting marathon. People brought fruit, coffee, tea, donuts, chicken wings. After five hours, we had

almost completed the quilt. The plan was to come the next Monday to do the ties and we would be done.

Everyone was so supportive. We were a little nervous that when we turned the quilt back outside-out, things would not line-up properly. But they did, and everyone smiled and clapped for us. But it was almost anti-climactic. We still had a great deal of work to do.

On that final Monday, we took some of the biggest needles I have seen—roughly the size of my entire hand—and sewed the last of the quilt: the ties. With this completed in only 20 minutes, the finishing of the quilt seemed even more anti-climactic. And with so much more to do (like writing this paper), we left as quickly as possible. It wasn't until the next day that I realized that we never really figured out the logistics of hanging the quilt. Judy and I met in an emergency session a couple days later to sew a piece of white fabric to the quilt for a dowel to fit through for hanging.

The whole experience of sewing the quilt still seems unreal. It went by quite quickly: Judy reminisced about her initial skepticism of our timeline on the last day. It was a surprise to all of us how quickly everything came together in the end. Though the quilt did not turn out the way we had initially planned, the result has proven to be much better than what we had intended.

We had originally hoped for more of a community project than what resulted as we were looking forward to more tutors and Somali Bantu community members getting involved. However, I believe that the quilt is a perfect artistic and metaphoric way to represent community. The patches are purposefully and

sporadically dispersed: student patches are integrated with tutor patches; busy, colorful patches are integrated with simpler patches; and, most importantly, those students who speak Maay Maay are integrated with those students who speak Zigua. So, although most recently the parents in the Somali Bantu community cannot get along, the quilt and these students are showing that this integrated community is still possible.

## *Chapter 6: Conclusion*

This has been quite a journey.

Sure, I learned about teaching English language learners. I have learned to accept this subject as a legitimate study and not as a form of labeling students with disabilities. But there is still a great deal more to learn about teaching English language learners. So much so that I am considering continuing to study this field in the future. I have learned that it is important to recognize the cultures that I associate myself with before learning the cultures of others, including my students. But there is still a great more to learn, as this must be seen as an ongoing and evolving process. I have learned some of the strategies and ways to write lesson plans, not just specifically for English language learners, but for native English students, too. But this must be altered on an individual student basis—there is no cookie cutter way to use these strategies or write these lesson plans. I have learned the infinitely important ways putting theories into practice can have on learning. But there is still much more theory to learn and to put into practice. I have learned that even when maintaining high standards for my students, they will continue to impress me.

Yes, I have learned a great deal about quilts. I have learned the basics of the history of quilts in the African American community. But there is a great deal more to learn due to the fact that not much is written about these pieces of art. I have learned the basics of making a quilt. But there is a great deal more to learn due to the fact that quilting seems to be an art form as well as a hobby that takes decades to master. I have learned the relationship between African textiles and

African American quilting. But there is a great deal more to learn due to the fact that the little that is written (in Eurocentric form) does not mean more information is not out there, particularly regarding textiles and quilts from southern and eastern Africa. I have learned the ways that quilting can be a form of literacy, both with and without words written on a patch. But there is a great deal more to learn about the many ways to represent literacy.

Yes, I have learned a great deal about resistance. I have learned that it is a genre in and of itself. But there is a great deal more to learn due to the fact that there are so many examples, reaching many different mediums. I have learned that creating something as hybrid is a form of resistance. But there are many forms of resistance and a great deal more written about the many ways that resistance can be produced. I have learned that there are various forms of oppression. But there are many more ways and perspectives of looking at oppression, and, more specifically, (re)thinking and (re)looking at the many ways that the society in which I live is Eurocentric (i.e., as simple as the picture to symbolize the bathroom; how many women around the world actually look like that?).

I learned about communities. I learned a great deal about the Somali Bantu community, a minority ethnic group from Africa. But there is still a great deal to learn, as the only way to truly know a culture is by being immersed in it for many years. I learned a great deal about the quilting community on campus. But there is still more to learn about the many people who come together to make quilts at Syracuse University. I learned a great deal about the challenges and rewards in



connecting two communities, in this case, the Somali Bantu and Syracuse University communities. But there is a great deal more to learn about the collaborations of these communities and the boundaries of getting too involved.

Yes, I learned a great deal about my students and my tutors. I learned about the complications my students seem to be having in keeping their roots in the Somali Bantu community, while at the same time, becoming Americanized. I learned about my tutors and came to appreciate the various strengths and backgrounds that they brought to each tutoring session. I learned about the many individuals that make up our classroom community. But there is always more to learn about the students, about the tutors, and the ways in which each person in our classroom community is unique.

I learned quite a bit through this study. But the more I learned, the more I realized that there is so much more to learn regarding each angle. The learning is complicated and infinite and I believe that finally recognizing that is realizing that this journey of learning is never really complete.

**Poetry from Quilt**  
*Students*

**Khadija Abdalla**

I love science  
and social studies  
My outside self  
is a sister  
is happy My inside self  
Love Khadija. I love Khadija.

**Binto Abdi**

I like to play ball.  
I like to school.  
I like watching wrestling.  
I am from Somalia.  
I am a female.

**Megeno Abdi**

Hasanad  
I like helping old people, children, and others because it makes me feel special  
and hasanad.  
Meya seto gola ku sideya wandu, wazana, na ma basana ya kukalay mazi bago  
casamba yu ni gausa wadi naho na pata hasanad.

**Rakio Abdukadir**

I was excited to move from Somalia  
I was new in school  
I was smaller now I am older  
I am in a different school  
I can speak more English  
I am taller than before.

**Egal Adan**

I was... Nice, polite, and never fight. Walalkeey kiioo yar may dhimadey madi  
ani yaraayi.

Now I am... cool, polite, I am smarter than a fifth grader. May jeely iniiani dheelo  
iyaari badan.

**Hassan Aden**

Miya ni Hassan nahua Somalia miye si tagola kus esiga moira.

**Nimo Aden**

Hijab

Pattern

Long

I like to wear hijab

It is our religion

It is important to us to wear

Sometimes it is red and blue

Different colors

**Maryan Ahmed**

I was so nervous I didn't know how to speak in English. Now I am in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I grow up with everybody that speaks in a different language.

**Mohamed Ahmed**

I am happy everyday when I play soccer and we play four square in the soccer. I scored a goal but we did not win. It was fun.

**Mustafa Ahmed**

I was

When I was started school I was so nervous. I was making a new friend. I was scared. I don't know English.

**Hassan Ali**

Hassan

African

Smile

Smart

Attack

Nice

**Salah Ali**

Sometimes I like to draw  
And play video games  
Like I always do  
And play with my sister  
Having candy for lunch, breakfast and dinner.

**Khadija Aqil**

Kind  
Hoping  
Apple  
Dad  
Ice skating  
Jumping  
Art

**Mohamud Farah**

When... I was a first grader I was a good student, shy, care, I was not speaking English. Now I'm a 4<sup>th</sup> grader. I learned a lot of math and about my country.

**Dadiri Haji**

Dad takes me to the store  
And gives me money  
Daddy signs my work  
Ice cream is what I buy and I  
Really like what my dad does for me  
Is really fun and nice for his children

**Abdi Hassan**

Who fears nothing.

Walbinki absadrani

**Fatuma Hassan**

I am Fatuma  
Daughter of reading  
Who needs nothing  
Who loves family and friend  
Who sees different kinds of things  
Who hates mean people  
Who fears scary spooky movies  
Who dreams of being an angel  
Who loves poems about butterflies  
Hassan

**Isha Hassan**

Me and my cousins want to play outside. My cousin is Hawa.

**Malik Hassan**

My mom is the nicest person  
And I like to play soccer  
Like my big brother  
It makes me happy when I play  
Kind and nice

**Mohamed Hassan**

Some people say you have big eyes. Some people say you have big ears. Some people say you are bad.

**Juma Hussein**

Just like my whole family  
Unlike some of my friends  
Muslim person is the kind as I am  
A lion is my favorite mammal.

**Maryan Hussein**

Muslim  
 Amazing  
 Reader  
 Youngster  
 Awesome  
 Nice

Multiplication  
 Adding  
 Talented  
 Helpful

You should always do your best.

**Hawa Jabril**

When I was a kid  
 I used to go to the beach in E.P  
 When I grow up a little I used to go to school we take swimming lessons

**Khadija Kulmiya**

My inside part is loving my name and running fast. Well people say I'm a fast runner and I am happy about it and I don't care what people say about me. My outside part is being happy and not mad and people say I don't look happy.

**Arbayi Mohamud**

My inside self is that I feel happy and shy. I am also funny on the inside but, some people think I'm not. That's how I feel on the inside.

**Hawa Mohamud**

I am Hawa  
 Daughter of Yere  
 Who needs to go shopping  
 Who loves their family  
 Who sees Briana  
 Who dreams of...  
 Beautiful stuff  
 Mohamud

**Shaban Mohamud**

Drawing  
 Fun, enjoyable  
 Thinking, focusing, sculpting  
 Fun, good, awesome, wonderful  
 Art

**Abdi Mukoma**

Apple are Abdi's favorite  
 Bananas are Abdi's favorite  
 Donuts are Abdi's favorite favorite snack.  
 Ice cream is Abdi's favorite.

**Hassan Mukoma**

A nice boy

**Mariamo Mukoma**

Marvelous  
 Athletic  
 Respectful  
 Intelligent  
 Active listener  
 Magnificent  
 Outstanding

**Mukoma Mukoma**

My favorite sport is soccer  
 Unhappy sometimes  
 Kind and respectful  
 Orange and apple are my favorite  
 My friends are nice  
 A friendly person

**Zanabo Musa**

A hijab

It is pink and long with colorful letters. It's soft and small like a bunny. It's important to me so I don't have to show my hair.

A Hijab.

**Fatuma Muse**

Math

Adding  
 Multiplying  
 Subtract  
 Divide  
 Solving

Happy  
 Great  
 Glad  
 Smart  
 Hard

**Mustaf Muse**

I am Mustaf  
 son of the earth  
 who needs parents  
 who love my community  
 who sees people  
 who hates enemies  
 who fears nothing  
 who dreams of being a cop  
 who loves bike riding  
 who lives in the world

**Maslah Muya**

Jump Rope  
 Role, jump  
 Movement, exercise, strength  
 happy, exciting, playful, cheerful  
 Style

**Binti Omar**

Ball play  
 Introduce myself to people  
 Nice to other people  
 Teacher=I want to be a teacher  
 Ice cream is good for me



### **Murjani Ramazani**

I am a boy  
 I am a sport  
 I am a music  
 I am a student  
 I am a reader  
 I am a soccer player  
 I am an artist  
 I am a kind boy

### **Tawakal Rashid**

Love  
 Proud  
 Malik  
 Friendship  
 Family  
 Care  
 Happy

### **Amina Sharif**

In 1<sup>st</sup> grade I started to do math and my teacher taught me how to speak english. She taught me how write ABC. She taught me how to make doll house our of blocks. Now in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I'm learning how to do fractions. She taught me multiplication. Math's my favorite subject.

### **Jamal Yerow**

Basketball  
 Orange with a stripe. A little hard but soft. A basketball is hard like a person's head. A thing to play with other people.  
 Basketball.

### **Moulid Yerow**

Soccer ball  
 White and black  
 Smooth like cloth  
 Hard like a rock  
 Soccer means playing with my friends  
 Soccer ball

*Tutors***Vivian Asakoma**

[No poem, just picture]

**Briana Cacuci**

“To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour...”

--William Blake

**Feng Fenny**

Fenny  
Energetic  
funny  
tomboy  
cheerful  
shy

**Kelci Gagliardi**

August 27, 2005

was the saddest day of my life.

When my Poppy died I had a difficult time coping with the sadness.

He was one of my best friends.

He always gave me advice and compliments, made me laugh, and could cheer me up with his smile.

I continue to miss him every day.

I love you Pop –Kelci

**David Gerster**

Redneck  
Poor, white  
Belittled, but never down  
Working, farming, slurring  
American

**Polina Grigortsevich**

Practical  
 Outstanding  
 Lively  
 Intuitive  
 Nation  
 Active

**Binta Jammeh**

Amal fullah ak fidah  
 chi sa aduna  
 Djegele sa mbocka  
 ak sa harit  
 Bul fateh sa mbopa

**Christina Jones**

Music  
 Soul, Life  
 Dancing, Singing, Praising  
 Touches, Listens, Races, Embraces  
 Song

**Gabriela Krawiec**

I am a box of paints  
 I am an immigrant  
 I am a sea storm  
 I am here

Jestem skomplikowana  
 Jestem ciepla jak piec  
 Jestem czarownica  
 Jestem tu

Soy una hoja de papel  
 Soy un fuego  
 Soy un estudiante  
 Estoy aquí

**Vanessa Longshaw**

A Horseshoe  
 Silver, #####  
 Strong, Solid  
 Unbreakable like a loved one's promise  
 #####  
 Horseshoe

**Stephanie Narvaez**

La ambicion es la única potencia que puede luchar contra el amor.

**Ashley Owusu**

My outside wears sweater, jeans and leather boots.  
 My inside self is smart, shy, artistic, caring, hard-working. What you see inside is a big heart, a friend, a sister, a daughter, and a granddaughter.

**Samantha Potter**

A Softball

Neon yellow with bright red stitching. Hard and smooth, the opposite of soft.  
 Feels like a puff of smoke when you hit it. It's hard work and passion, blood, sweat and tears together.  
 A softball.

**Jason Rigali**

Jrags

**Graham Rogers**

The Most Exciting Day of My Life

I was most excited when I first went to college.  
 I was nervous but I looked forward to making new friends.  
 I felt sad when I got to Syracuse and said goodbye to my parents,  
 but I was excited to begin the next adventure in my life.

**Amanda Stessen**

I am a learner  
 I am a tutor  
 I am a thinker  
 I am a listener

I am snow  
 I am grey skies  
 I am changing trees  
 I am countryside

I am music  
 I am books  
 I am sports  
 I am art

I am a friend  
 I am a sister  
 I am a daughter  
 I am a granddaughter

**Arkie Tassew**

For me they  
 Are my rock. The reason for  
 My existence. Lift me up when  
 I am down and  
 Love me unconditionally. I have  
 Yet to learn to love to that extent.

**Bailey White**

I am Bailey  
 who loves to laugh  
 who sees her height  
 who hates judgment  
 who fears small spaces  
 who dreams of succeeding  
 who had found poems of rainfall, inspiration, and beauty  
 White

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<sup>ii</sup> “About Us.” Somali Bantu Community Organization of Syracuse, 2009, 18 Apr. 2010 <<http://www.somalibantucommunity.org/id30.html>>.

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<sup>iv</sup> “Somali Bantu Refugees Celebrate Mother’s Day.” Hiiraan Online, 2009, 19 Apr. 2010 <[http://www.hiiraan.com/news2/2008/may/somali\\_bantu\\_refugees\\_celebrate\\_mothers\\_day.aspx](http://www.hiiraan.com/news2/2008/may/somali_bantu_refugees_celebrate_mothers_day.aspx)>.

<sup>v</sup> “Literacy Programs.” Somali Bantu Community Organization of Syracuse, 2009, 18 Apr. 2010 <<http://www.somalibantucommunity.org/id8.html>>.

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<sup>vii</sup> “Somali Bantu: People.” Center for Applied Linguistics, 18 Jan. 2004, 18 Apr. 2010 <<http://www.cal.org/CO/bantu/sbpeop.html>>.

<sup>viii</sup> “Somali Bantu: Religious Life.” Center for Applied Linguistics, 18 Jan. 2004, 18 Apr. 2010 <<http://www.cal.org/CO/bantu/sbpeop.html>>.

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- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.* 645.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xv</sup> Roberts, Elsa Auerbach, “Reexamining English Only in the ESL Classroom,” TESOL Quarterly [Vol. 27, No. 1], Spring 1993: 9-32.
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<sup>xxiii</sup> Tobin, Jacqueline L. and Dobard, Raymond G. Hidden in Plain View. (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 37.

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<sup>xxv</sup> McClintock, Anne, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest, (New York: Routledge, 1995) 35.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie, Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts and the Antebellum South. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: A Chapel Hill Book, 1990) 16.



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<sup>li</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria, Borderlands: La Frontera. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) 81.

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