

Chapter 4

Constructing Quilts, Online Communities, and Quilter Legacies: A Narrative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Quilting is a fertile ground for exploring sociohistorical issues related to women in society as they are shaped by greater access to online tools and environments. Such tools and environments have many affordances in terms of personal expression, community building, and female empowerment. This narrative case study presents the story of an online quilting artist named Faye, whose family quilted for generations and who now advocates for women's rights, the broadening of permissible themes in quilting art, and an end to censorship. The story of the author's personal relationship to quilting is also provided. The chapter concludes that Faye's and the author's stories embody the concept of family legacy in quilting and the honoring of this tradition across generations. Additionally, it is suggested that Faye's story highlights deep divides within the online quilting community as online female quilting artists challenge traditional quilting themes and approaches to self-expression. Lastly, the chapter argues that more work needs to be done in exploring the roles of women in textile-based arts as they develop self-governing online communities using modern technologies.

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INTRODUCTION

For many quilts are merely beautiful presentations of color and patterns, but to those who know how to read them, they contain complex stories and meanings. (Ball, 2008, p. 365)

Quilts fulfill many purposes. They are utilitarian by nature, but can also be experienced as works of eye-catching visual art. In another sense, quilts express narratives about the societies in which they were created and the artists who produced them. The study of quilts, quilting, and quilt makers presents a valuable sociohistorical peek into the roles of women, our understanding of art history, shifts in research-based paradigms, and the impact of technology on traditional arts and the lives of quilters. In the current technological climate of the Internet age, quilting communities are changing and taking on new forms. Quilters in recent years have moved their craft online, developing complex networks and communities through blogs, Flickr, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and online shops to name a few environments. Chanksy (2010) argued that access to technology (e.g., online payment methods, Website builders, digital photography, linking to other sites) has made it easier for women engaged in textile-based work to create their own stores and businesses. Within online communities there are also a broad range of lively and cultural activities used for leisure and to promote commerce: quilt-a-longs, finish-a-longs, fabric swaps, virtual bees, photosharing quilting festivals, pattern publishing, and a dizzying array of others. To date, a limited number of researchers have examined online quilting communities. As academics we are grossly behind the action – scrambling to assemble some kind of picture about what new online groups are doing, saying, and how they are interacting.

This chapter provides evidence for a general lack of care, and mistreatment of the quilting community throughout history and suggests that online communities may both hold the key to

emancipation of quilters, while paradoxically reinforcing some of the communities oppressive roots as dictated by legacies from the past. I include both an overview of quilting history as seen through the academic literature, as well as the story of Faye, an online quilting artist with a deep family connection to quilting and a strong voice for anti-censorship in quilting practice. I interviewed Faye in the winter of 2013 by telephone. At the time I kept notes with my general thoughts and reactions to our interactions. This, along with my own personal story of quilting is provided in the results section. The aim is to begin to piece together the cultural parts that have led quilters to their current footing, and to encourage greater levels of emancipation and freedom for women making quilting art in online communities both for their pleasure and/or livelihood.

Lastly, a quilt for the purpose of this chapter is defined as a multi-purpose artifact that houses visual elements, narrative elements, and socially mediated practices, which are interpreted and granted degrees of meaning, based on the perceptions of the viewer and the artist. Here I draw from the work of Berger (1973) who asserted that our expectations about a piece of art dictate how we see it, as well as Ball (2008) who has highlighted the multiple-faceted nature of a quilt.

Narrative Research

The conception of a well-formed narrative differs in various cultural contexts. Our capability for symbolization allows for an infinite variety of expressions, restricted only by cultural filters. (Horsdal, 2012, p. 30)

Although narrative inquiry is becoming common in educational research, its research methods, practices, and designs are still being developed (Chase, 2011; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Creswell, 2012). Chase (2011) identifies four central types of narrative research in modern academia: stories involving the lives of patients in therapeutic set-

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