African American Quilting and the Art of Being Human: Theological Aesthetics and Womanist Theological Anthropology

Jeania Ree V. Moore*

_In her collection_ In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983), Alice Walker explores how African American women preserved and passed down a heritage of creativity and beauty in spite of brutality. I argue in this essay that African American quilting forms a revelatory subject for the womanist project taken up by theologians. As both symbol for and implementation of the creative practice Walker heralds, quilting unearths aesthetics as vital to being human. Theologically rendered, quilting unfolds theological aesthetics for and with womanist theological anthropology. Theologically engaging historical, literary, and personal narrative, I show how womanism and quilting enrich theological conceptions of aesthetics and personhood.

In the title essay for her collection _In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose_, Alice Walker asks a question that gives pause: “What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day?” By raising this question, Walker pulls back the veil on desecrated humanity and brings into view the creative spark as central to being human. In her essay, she peers unflinchingly at the history of African American women, probing how “that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit” was sustained and passed down through generations of black women. She finds that, despite centuries of what can only be

---

* Jeania Ree V. Moore is an M.Phil. student in Christian Theology at the University of Cambridge, where she is a Gates Cambridge Scholar. She received an M.Div. from the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and a B.A. in Humanities from Yale University. She is on the path for deacon’s ordination in the United Methodist Church.


described as a violently quotidian psychosomatic vivisection, African American women have held onto and nourished their creative spirit. Beholding a quilt in the Smithsonian Institution depicting the Crucifixion and labeled “made by ‘an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago,’” Walker identifies the unmistakable artistic impulse and spiritual insight that shine through the limitations of media and role.3 Beholding, in her mind’s eye, memories of her mother at work in her gardens, Walker describes how her mother’s creativity in cultivating the earth beautified space, nourishing herself and others. When working in her gardens, her mother was blindingly radiant, almost “invisible—except as Creator . . . involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.”4 So suffusing Walker’s world that her “memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms,” the Beauty of this Creator (She) is Walker’s inheritance.5

Walker’s use of a quilt alongside her mother as an example of black women’s persistent creativity is an invitation to regard quilting as a subject for womanist theological anthropology. While womanist and feminist scholars have used quilting as a rich descriptive metaphor for women’s theological practices, none have engaged it as a critical source for theology.6 In light of Walker’s essay, and my own history, I set out to do just that. As a fiber artist born and raised in a family with generations of black quilters, I know intimately the manifold meaning quilting holds as labor, art, heirloom, and tradition—that is, as both historic symbol and as live act. In this essay, I bring that meaning to bear on theological reflection. Moving beyond metaphor to the specificity of cultural practice and material object, I claim African American quilting as a revelatory subject for womanist theological

---

Anthropology. Deeply rooted in Walker womanism, quilting demands the engagement of theological aesthetics with womanist theological anthropology, calling attention to the theological profundity in black women’s encounters with art and beauty. Quilting reflects both how black women have been unseen, exploited, debated, and legitimated as fully human, and how black women have expressed, inhabited, celebrated, and lived their humanity regardless. Pieced together in womanist frame, African American quilting extends constructive theological critiques around knowing and being (epistemology and ontology) from black women’s tradition, thereby displaying the contributions this tradition makes to theology as a whole.

I can never fully articulate the meaning black quilts and quilters hold in my life, but will attempt in this essay to give some measure of theological voice to the legacy of creativity and love I inherit from them. I dedicate this essay to the quilters of my family: my grandmother Jean Arthur Mills (1930–2008), great-aunt Joan Marie Banks (b. 1930), great-grandmother Katherine Alberta Worrill James (1910–1990), and great-great-grandmother Mary Anna Elizabeth Fleming Worrill (1874–1942). Thank you for your Beauty.

**African American Quilting in Historical and Contemporary Perspective**

In *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters*, folklorist and cultural studies scholar Patricia A. Turner claims that the changing role and “status of African American quilts and quilters reflects the obstacles, challenges, and achievements of black America.” Turner’s demonstration of her thesis through critical analysis and personal story provides entrée to quilting as a site for womanist theological anthropology. Following her lead, I examine quilting as both an analytical touchstone for the struggles and successes of black women, and as a space where black women have been “ordering the universe in [their] personal conception of Beauty.” Quilting thus engaged yields fruitful accounts for theological reflection on black women’s personhood.

Turner pinpoints Harriet Powers’s Bible quilt exhibited in the Negro Hall of the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition

---

in Atlanta, Georgia as the first instance of public attention for black quilting (Fig. 1). Though practiced by both sexes and today found widely across the socioeconomic spectrum, black quilting dates from the antebellum era as socioeconomically and racially marginalized, non-textual women’s work. African American quilters were literally and figuratively beyond the pale as largely non-literate, non-male, and non-white subjects, and black quilting sat outside the bounds of what counted as cultural production worthy of public attention, preservation, and value. As seen in Powers’s story, the ways in which black quilting began to cross these bounds reflect larger patterns in the public consideration of black women’s humanity. Harriet Powers, a formerly enslaved woman, had first showcased her quilt featuring biblical scenes and symbols with sophisticated stitching and appliqué in 1886 at a local exposition, where white artist and teacher Jennie Smith offered to buy it for ten dollars. Initially refusing to sell, Powers found herself in dire economic straits a few years later and sold the quilt to Smith for five dollars. Smith exhibited the quilt at the Atlanta Exposition, where she hoped that “all who are interested in art or religion in their primitive state will take the time to go see it.”9 Alongside paintings by Henry Ossawa Tanner, Powers’s quilt and other items demonstrating a “distinct race influence and character” were segregated in the Negro Hall.10

How Harriet Powers and her quilt came to public attention and historical note illustrates the social, cultural, and economic capital of a white public that historically has circumscribed black quilts and quilters. Jennie Smith’s purchasing power and interpretive authorial voice are concrete, complex manifestations of the white gaze. As Turner notes, knowledge of Powers is largely due to the actions of Smith, who transcribed Powers’s words in a short oral history and, by exhibiting the quilt, indirectly led faculty wives from Atlanta University to Powers’s work, facilitating a commissioning engagement and second Bible quilt. Yet in that relationship transactional power, historical authority, and artistic interpretation are fraught with inequity that follow along the fault lines of race and class. Comparing Powers with Henry Tanner, who also had a white sponsor but was able to relocate to Europe to escape racism and pursue his art, highlights the intersecting division of gender. A black female quilter, Powers faced a unique set of obstacles: “racism, sexism, and the fact that she was limited to a

9 Turner, Crafted Lives, 106.
10 Turner, Crafted Lives, 106.
mode of aesthetic and spiritual expression that lacked widespread credibility.”¹¹ She had limited agency in pursuing and controlling her craft.

Though Powers’s Bible quilt marks the first noted public appearance of black quilting, it was another century before black quilting gained widespread and sustained public recognition. Including black quilters among its representatives of America’s diverse cultural heritage, the inaugural 1967 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife saw the debut of black quilting on a national stage. While the accolades and attention black quilting began to accrue after this event established for it a public profile, Turner notes that familiar issues of agency also impinged on black quilts and quilters. Though the rural Alabama quilters featured in the festival showcased quilts as a means

of socioeconomic empowerment, forming the Freedom Quilting Bee the year prior as a collective marketing tool, interpretive agency was undermined as the “African retentions” debate soon latched onto black quilting as a site of consideration. Academics theorized that “vestigial,” innate African aesthetic forms could be identified in black quilts. This established sociological debate carried loaded anthropological implications. It posited African American cultural production, and African Americans themselves, as either “African” or “American,” where, problematically, “African” denoted primitivity and was construed monolithically, and “American” suggested cultural progress and modernity. Like Smith’s description of Powers’s Bible quilt as “primitive” and the Negro Hall notion of a “distinct race influence and character,” these views determined black quilting, black cultural production, and black women using the familiar and treacherous terms of essentialism and authenticity, crystallizing a racist historicized frame. In aesthetically defining how the art world, academe, and general public received black quilting, these views socioeconomically circumscribed the tradition and practice. What quilts received attention and were accorded value depended on which quilts, and quilters, were deemed to be appropriately, identifiably, and essentially “black.”

First faced by Harriet Powers, these issues of public acclaim and authority haunt African American quilting, affecting rural black quilters to the present day. Turner and art historian Bridget Cooks document the complicated success of Gee’s Bend. Quilts made by rural black women in Gee’s Bend, Alabama came to national attention in 2002 when well-known art patron and collector William Arnett curated an exhibit, *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*. Sparking a museum tour, second exhibit, U.S. postage stamp, critically acclaimed play, Pottery Barn home furnishing line, and more, the quilts of Gee’s Bend became a national phenomenon. While the quilters of Gee’s Bend were now compared with the likes of modern artist Paul Klee instead of theorized as exhibiting a “primitive” aesthetic, issues similar to those Harriet Powers faced manifest in their situation. A white sponsor with

---


significant clout in the art world brought the quilters to public attention and facilitated their profits, as well as his own. Like Smith, this sponsor gained cultural control over the quilts he purchased and exhibited. Interpretations exoticizing the socioeconomic marginalization, extreme poverty, and geographic isolation of Gee’s Bend directed the quilts’ aesthetic meaning, as did the quilts’ transformation from utilitarian objects in their makers’ eyes to abstract expressionist art in the eyes of an overwhelmingly white art public. (Turner notes that when she visited the exhibit at the de Young Museum of San Francisco, she, her son, and the security guard were the only African Americans present.) The quilters themselves also underwent profound transformations in which their agency was—and remains—a point of issue, articulated both by concerned onlookers and by some of the quilters, several of whom are illiterate, in a now-canceled lawsuit against Arnett. The continuing echoes of Harriet Powers’s story reveal the complicated success in the external treatment and perception of black quilting, black cultural production, and black women.

The meanings and uses of African American quilting given by those within its practice, however, also shape the contours of black quilting. They reveal quilting as not simply a stage on which black women’s struggles and success against racism, sexism, and classism appear writ large, but also as a window to the personal world of black women. This personal significance commands as much, if not more, of Turner’s hermeneutical stress in Crafted Lives. While the historical trajectory of quilting reveals oppression and overcoming, the act of quilting is itself consistently a space of liberation and self-made meaning.

Turner attends to the personal meaning of quilting through nine intimate and engaging profiles of contemporary black quilters. Ranging in age from eight to eighty-plus, and in locale from Alaska to Louisiana, these quilters—eight women and one man—demonstrate the diversity of black quilting and refute essentializing assessments of its meaning and makers. Quilting is both a familial inheritance and a vehicle of social statement for Ora Poston Knowell (Oakland, California), who makes three-dimensional quilts to protest the epidemic of urban violence and to honor its victims, which include two of her sons.

---

14 Turner, Crafted Lives, 190.
Knowell grew up sleeping under quilts in the rural South, and transformed this familial utilitarian practice into an artistic and political one with personal and public significance. Jeannette Rivers (Zachary, Louisiana) quilts as part of a self-sufficient lifestyle stemming from her upbringing in the rural, sharecropping South. Rivers learned to quilt as a young girl from older women in her community, and made quilts from scrap fabric throughout her life. This utilitarian practice did not exclude artistry: Rivers, who was “always fooling around with quilt pieces” as a child, created her own designs as an adult.16 For professional fiber artist and teacher Ed Johnetta Fowler Miller (Hartford, Connecticut), quilting is an artistic medium, a mode of investigating themes of culture, community, and identity. Miller has gained prestigious recognition for her work blending textile techniques from across the African diaspora and other communities of color. Quilting for Elliott Chambers (Mobile, Alabama/northern California) is likewise a profession but one with domestic overtones. Chambers, an educator and administrator who grew up knowing how to sew, wooed his wife in college with a handmade quilt. After her passing decades later, he made a quilt from her clothes and eventually became a quilt conservator specializing in African fabric restoration. For Tiffanie Newton Williams (Fairbanks, Alaska) and her niece, Cyré Cross (Omaha, Nebraska), quilting is a bonding activity and means of conveying familial love. Newton Williams learned to quilt in an integrated group of women and, passing the skill on to her niece, invests familial significance in both the process and end product. For Riché Richardson, Ph.D. (Montgomery, Alabama/Sacramento, California), Marion Coleman (Wichita Falls, Texas/northern California), and Daisy Anderson Moore (Texas/Louisiana), quilting is an expression of family pride and cultural heritage. Richardson, an academic, creates quilt portraits depicting African American cultural and political themes. Coleman and Moore use photo transfer technology and other techniques to quilt images of family and friends.

Quilting in my family reflects this kaleidoscopic snapshot. As was the case for many of the quilters in Crafted Lives, quilting traveled with my family as part of the Great Migration, journeying from our roots in the South to, in my family’s case, Pasadena, California. Quilting, as much as quilters and their families, was changed by this journey and the socioeconomic transformations that followed. What was

16 Turner, Crafted Lives, 18.
African American Quilting and Being Human  

a predominantly utilitarian practice of necessity in my great-grandmother’s time became an artistic craft of choice a generation later, with my grandmother Jean and her twin sister Joan using African fabrics to convey cultural pride through textile meditations on heritage and family (Fig. 2). Art and utility, however, are not mutually exclusive. Like various quilters in Crafted Lives, including author Patricia Turner, Jean and Joan joined local African American quilt groups committed to both preserving tradition and supporting its artistic evolution. The quilts my grandmother and great-aunt made reflect this inclusive vision: quilts in our family feature on walls as framed art and on beds, sofas, and tables as covers, pillows, and table runners. The details of quilter Daisy Anderson Moore’s rekindled interest in quilting also connect with my family’s engagement with quilting, and illumine the larger thesis of this essay. Moore regained interest in quilting as an adult following recent historical scholarship claiming that black slaves used quilts as secret codes on the Underground Railroad. While this theory—and the book that promoted it, Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad—provoked strong reactions from academics, who criticize it as relying on scant evidence, it has been embraced by many African American quilters, such as Moore and my grandmother, who celebrate it by reproducing quilts featuring these code patterns. The question of its veracity aside, this theory’s claim and its own hotly contested viability hinge on the invisibility of black quilting. As black women’s work, African American quilting was doubly screened from public acclaim. That very screening, while borne of oppression, also facilitated subversive potential. Quilting indicates the power of the margin, and those quilters who reproduce “quilt code” patterns today celebrate that power.

This marginal, hidden power intimates quilting’s import and potential as womanist site. As seen in the examples considered here, African American quilting both displays the world where black women struggle against and overcome collusions of race, class, and gender, and it witnesses to an inner world of the quilter’s own making, a world where she is Creator of meaning and being—a world that endures, despite the tumult of the outside. This world, an aesthetic interiority, is what Alice Walker finds to be “handed on” as black women’s inheritance. This inner world is not hermetically sealed off from the world beyond, but is rather, in and through the quilt (be it artistic meditation

or cover made for bodies), the very channel through which the quilter engages that which lies beyond her Self. Testifying to a personal world of meaning and agency, quilting thus contains a Self-constituting effect, one that is not isolating but which locates the quilter as a Self in relation. Manifest in quilts, the inner world of the quilter is an epistemologically and ontologically vitalizing space where meaning is made, forms come into being, and both are declared, shared, and celebrated with Self and others. As with Walker’s mother, quilters in light of their quilts are Creators.

Turning to Walker provides a deeper look at this inner world, locating its roots via quilts in womanism and drawing out its epistemological and ontological significance.

**Figure 2.** Joan M. Banks, great-aunt of the author, displaying her quilt, “African Squares On Point” (2010). Hand Pieced by Joan, Machine Quilted by Nadine, 100% cotton. Pasadena, California. 2010. Behind her is a framed Dresden plate quilt piece, salvaged from a large quilt made by a mother and daughter pair: Joan’s mother (the author’s great-grandmother), Katherine Alberta Worrill James (1910–1990), and grandmother (the author’s great-great-grandmother), Mary Anna Elizabeth Fleming Worrill (1874–1942). Photo by Andrea V. Mills, the author’s mother, February 2016, Pasadena, California.
African American Quilting as a Source for Alice Walker and Womanism

Speaking with acclaimed quilt documentarian and folklorist Roland L. Freeman in 1992, Alice Walker recalls quilts her grandmother made as being “very serviceable, very heavy and really for warmth, and, well of course, beautiful.”18 She describes the presence of black quilting in her life growing up poor in rural Georgia:

Well, my mother was a quilter, and I remember many, many afternoons of my mother and the neighborhood women sitting on the porch around the quilting frame, quilting and talking, you know; getting up to stir something on the stove and coming back and sitting down. My mother also had a frame inside the house. Sometimes during the winter she would quilt and she often pieced quilts.19

Walker’s memory pinpoints the aesthetics of black quilting as communal, material, vernacular, and personal. These aesthetics evince Walker’s womanist ethos, hinting at quilting’s prominence for her and its significance for womanism. Attending to Walker’s literary and personal engagements with quilting uncovers black quilting’s roots in Walker womanism.

In her essay “Writing The Color Purple,” Walker describes the arduous process by which the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel emerged from her mind. The rural setting and characters refused to materialize in urban New York, so she made a transcontinental move to rural northern California, leaving behind much of her life but taking with her a quilt: “I bought some beautiful blue-and-red-and-purple fabric . . . and a quilt pattern my mama swore was easy, and I headed for the hills.”20 Slowly, a symbiotic relationship ensued between her, her characters, and her quilt:

There were days and weeks and even months when nothing happened. Nothing whatsoever. I worked on my quilt, took long walks with my lover. . . . My quilt began to grow. And, of course, everything was happening. Celie and Shug and

19 Freeman, A Communion of the Spirits, 149.
Albert were getting to know each other, coming to trust my determination to serve their entry (sometimes I felt re-entry) into the world to the best of my ability, and what is more—and felt so wonderful—we began to love one another.\textsuperscript{21}

This relationship, in which Walker, her quilt, and the characters of her novel were each intimately formed by the other, locates Walker’s dual artistic identity and the trifold nature of the artwork then in process. Walker was quilter and writer—the priority of the two identities being, crucially, difficult to grasp—and the artwork underway was literary, textile, and social. That Walker speaks in personal terms, and describes her relationship with the characters of her novel as one of “love,” throws into relief quilting’s form and function. Quilting was for Walker as utilitarian as it was artistic, an epistemic necessity and ontological act manifest in personal terms.

One of Walker’s most beloved short stories provides another look at quilting.\textsuperscript{22} “Everyday Use” (1973) tells the story of sophisticated older daughter Wangero’s return home to her mother and her shy, stay-at-home sister in the rural, black South. Wangero had left Mama, Maggie, and her name for college and the more cosmopolitan world. Formerly “Dee,” a family name going back generations, she became “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo” while away to escape “being named after the people who oppress” her.\textsuperscript{23} While home, Wangero lays claim to Grandma Dee’s quilts, seeing them as fashionable in light of her recently acquired aesthetic. Upon learning that they are promised to Maggie, Wangero protests, “Maggie can’t appreciate these quilts! She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use.”\textsuperscript{24} Though she had rejected the quilts when offered them upon leaving for college, Wangero now presumes to know their true value—“priceless!”—and proper use: “‘Hang them,’ she said. As if that was the only thing you could do with quilts.”\textsuperscript{25} Maggie, used to defeat, concedes to her sister: “She can have them, Mama. I can ’member Grandma Dee without the quilts.”\textsuperscript{26} Confronted with the stark

\textsuperscript{21} Walker, “Writing The Color Purple,” 358.
\textsuperscript{23} Walker, “Everyday Use,” 53.
\textsuperscript{24} Walker, “Everyday Use,” 57.
\textsuperscript{25} Walker, “Everyday Use,” 57–58.
\textsuperscript{26} Walker, “Everyday Use,” 58.
differences between her daughters, Mama perceives Wangero’s interest as trendy chicanery, a performance by which even Wangero herself is deceived, and decidedly bequeaths the quilts to Maggie.

As for Walker in writing *The Color Purple*, quilts in “Everyday Use” hold epistemological and ontological significance. In giving the quilts to Maggie, Mama affirms one way of knowing and being—vernacular, personal, and organic—over another—imported, impersonal, and mechanized, relying on style to dictate value. Though scholars have interpreted this distinction as one distinguishing utilitarian quilts as “real” black quilts and quilts made as art to be hung as not, I find that such readings misconstrue the case and rely on problematic essentialized notions of “conventional blackness.” The distinction Walker draws is not between art and utility, but between an epistemological and ontological integrity on the one hand, and falsity on the other. The explication of worth asserted by Wangero splits the integrity of knowing and being found in the quilts, the integrity in which the quilts are held together with Grandma Dee as signs of her creative power and knowledge.

Truth, beauty, and justice accompany this integrity and beatify the daughter who truly honors it. Wangero, whose performative, styled identity contrasts with Maggie’s unassuming mien, is more stereotypically attractive than Maggie and appears as someone who “has held life always in the palm of one hand, [someone to whom] ‘no’ is a word the world never learned to say.” Maggie, physically scarred from a house fire that also left her socially withdrawn, speaks and moves “like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her,” someone who knows the short end of the stick as her “portion.” Mama’s realization of the rightful quilt heir is a recognition of truth and beauty in Maggie, not Wangero. It is a moment of divine epiphany, hitting “just like when I’m in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout.” Mama’s bequeathing the quilts to Maggie is the concomitant act of justice following her vision of truth and beauty. Truth, beauty, and justice,

---


classic transcendental, form an aesthetic whole of knowing and being. They are here extant not as abstract ideal but as material reality manifest in textile and flesh, quilt and quilter/quilt inheritor.

Walker’s various engagements with quilting thus extend the conclusions drawn earlier. Quilting forms a powerful sacred space for black women’s personhood, nourishing a Selfhood that is exquisitely existential and, in that, vitally relational. In “Everyday Use,” quilts signify and protect black women and their ways of being and knowing. In Walker’s own life, quilting is a source that leads her to knowledge—of herself, her stories, and the world. In both cases, quilting’s transformative effects are ontological and epistemological. African American quilting, as art and utility, is involved in the being of human for black women. Present in black women’s experience and in Walker’s literary and personal worlds, African American quilting emerges as a prime site for womanist theological anthropology.

African American Quilting: Womanist Theological Anthropology and Theological Aesthetics

In her introduction to the landmark anthology on womanist praxis, theory, and methodology, Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas defines womanism as “an epistemological revolution.”31 Significantly, this epistemological revolution entails an ontological reformation: knowing is implicated in being. Knowing is simultaneously relational and subjective, as it is based in the person, and persons are—and truth is—only relationally. As M. Shawn Copeland states, “Womanists are their own foundations.”32 Mutually implicated, epistemology and ontology weave as the warp and weft structuring womanist truth. The epigraph to the anthology’s Acknowledgments captures this inseparable Gestalt:

“I think, therefore I am.” —Cartesian Philosophy  
“I am because we are.” —African Proverb.

Knowing and being are as one.

33 Floyd-Thomas, “Acknowledgments,” in Deeper Shades of Purple, xiii.
Fittingly, references to quilts pepper the poems and essays of the anthology, pinpointing quilting as an archetypal symbol for womanism’s embrace of this proverb as a fundamental tenet. Engaging quilting with a theology of the arts and phenomenological reflections on beauty explicates, in doctrinal and experiential terms, the profundity of this tenet. The following thus brings to light the theology implicit in the foregoing literary and historical exposition.

In *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, Jeremy Begbie situates a theology of the arts within the frame of an *ars divina*, the divine art of God’s economy in creation. This economy is Christocentric and contains a theological anthropology patterned on divine creativity in Christ, the Mediator—“agent, sustainer, and goal”—of creation. Since, through Christ’s humanity, “our humanity has been incorporated into the divine life” and affirmed, we find the “very foundation and source of . . . authentic creativity” in Christ. Human creativity is part of the *imago Dei*, the irreducible relationality of human being patterned on the nature and work of the Triune God. God redeems and transforms the disorder of creation through Christ with his Spirit, thus defining creativity, and the ensuing creation, as relational and transformative. Human creativity—the agential knowledge—and creation—the resulting effect—are accordingly also transformative and intrinsically corporate.

Begbie presents his theology of the arts, centered on transformation and relationality, as an antidote to the prevailing view and state of the arts in Western society. Tracing a Kantian legacy of aesthetics influenced by a Cartesian epistemology, Begbie finds the current view and state of the arts to be one of alienation, which is at odds both with how humans have historically engaged the arts and with his relational and transformative theology. Among the deficiencies he diagnoses are a subordination of the arts, sensuous and material, to the spiritual and immaterial; a view of the artist imposing, rather than discovering, order and form; a separation of aesthetic experience from knowledge, undercutting the epistemological legitimacy of the arts; and a belief in “art for art’s sake,” which sees art as (1) self-contained and unconnected to external subjects and realities, (2) properly viewed

---

with disinterested contemplation, and (3) definitively separate from action.37

To counteract these flaws, Begbie offers parallel corrections founded on his theology of human creativity in light of creation. Using the work of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and scientist Michael Polanyi, Begbie enriches epistemology and ontology for the arts by affirming aesthetic experience as a source of knowledge and claiming an essentially corporate context for knowing and being. Both Gadamer and Polanyi are “convinced that without a community, without other people (living and dead), without a common language, shared traditions and common authorities, there simply can be no knowledge.”38 Gadamer’s critique of the “subjectivisation of aesthetics” affirms aesthetic experience as a means to genuine knowledge and not simply self-awareness divorced from objective reality.39 Extending this critique by asserting that in art, “we are questioned—our self-understanding is revealed, illuminated, and challenged,” Begbie upends the Kantian view of the artist imposing form and of art as self-contained.40 Instead of the artist imposing form and meaning, the artist is the one formed as meaning engages her. This inherent dynamism does not dissolve the subject, but, rather, establishes her as such, as a being and source of knowledge given the relational nature of knowledge and the world. Polanyi’s communal epistemology, in which the process and substance of knowing are intrinsically corporate, affirms this revision of artist and art (which applies to viewer and art as well). Notions of artist and art as alienated from the world and as thereby epistemologically bereft, break down before a relational repositioning of knowing and being.

While Begbie does not treat beauty in his theology of the arts, the category is essential for the broad umbrella of theological aesthetics. Elaine Scarry’s phenomenological analysis of beauty in On Beauty and Being Just offers an approach befitting my inquiry. Writing that beauty is “allied with truth” and “creates, without itself fulfilling, the aspiration for enduring certitude,” Scarry, a non-theologian, indicates the nature of her investigation as one lying perpendicular to theology,

37 Begbie, Voicing Creation’s Praise, 191–197.
38 Begbie, Voicing Creation’s Praise, 202.
39 Begbie, Voicing Creation’s Praise, 199.
40 Begbie, Voicing Creation’s Praise, 199.
touching on a concern for the ultimate reality of things. As womanism is not inherently theological, womanist identity and methodology include diverse religious identities and no religious identity, and Alice Walker is herself not Christian, Scarry’s phenomenology of beauty provides an assessment whose accessibility befits womanism’s origins and broad commitments. Her analysis identifies, in precise experiential terms, what “happens” in beauty. From a Christian perspective, the “happening” is freighted with theological meaning; phenomenologically expressed, it can remain significant from a non-Christian perspective. In identifying quilts as aesthetic subjects for womanism and womanist theology, I locate their significance as holding from both sides of a religious divide.

The ability to lead to truth is one of several conclusions about beauty Scarry draws that highlight beauty’s transcendent location and function. Among her many insights, Scarry finds that beauty is sacred, unprecedented, lifesaving, life-giving, corrective, and can serve as a powerful instrument of justice. The awakening to error (“corrective”) is particularly salient for Scarry, as it is the generative process that leads one on to truth. She writes,

> The experience of “being in error” so inevitably accompanies the perception of beauty that it begins to seem one of its abiding structural features. . . . The act of perceiving . . . beauty has a built-in liability to self-correction and self-adjustment, so much so that it appears to be a key element in whatever beauty is. . . . Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation.

Beauty, according to Scarry, is thus a powerful event of cognitive circumstance with relational import—that is, it is ontologically transformative. It corrects and refocuses how one sees oneself in the world. It forms community, opening one up to error, to others, and to a realm beyond, of the sacred and true. Beauty is sacred, unprecedented, lifesaving, life-giving, and engendering of justice via regard for others.

---

Begbie’s theology of the arts and Scarry’s findings on beauty cohere with womanist insights on knowing and being as interrelated, and find expression in black quilts as practice, object, and legacy. Begbie’s theology of the arts matches the *imago Dei* perceived in African American quilters. The creativity of the quilter reflects God’s Triune Being and the divine relational and transformative economy in creation. Her choices in material (color, fabric, placement), purpose (utilitarian, art, social statement), and meaning (personal, communal, or other) transform reality and display her creative agency imaging a Self in relation. Alice Walker’s interrelated being with her embryonic novel and growing quilt is a striking image of the perichoretic Art of Trinity as Creative: an intimate, formative, and transformative relation of love. *Meaning engages her*, as Begbie writes. In quilting, the inner world of the quilter is expanded onto the canvas of outer reality—knowing becomes as being, and being is a knowing.

In Scarry’s terms of beauty, African American quilting and quilts are holy work and objects (sacred) that transform (unprecedented) and, in so doing, enact an epistemological jolt (error) of salvific ontological import (lifesaving and life-giving) engaging the individual quilter and others (justice). Scarry’s description phenomenologically captures the narrative movement in “Everyday Use,” where quilts, a locus of truth, herald beauty and facilitate justice. This justice is concrete, coincident in the materiality of textile and flesh: Maggie’s recollection of Grandma Dee as person, rather than Wangero’s warped remembrance of her as a desiccated symbol for interior decorating, reflects the good, the true, and the beautiful, and Maggie consequently receives the physical quilts. Maggie’s reception of the quilts is a real, social recalibration of power—beauty enacts justice not simply as sign, but in fact. The thwarting of Wangero’s attempted coup, and those of others throughout quilt history, inheres in the physical quilts and is, simultaneously, the protecting of Maggie’s and Grandma Dee’s personhood. Beauty, protecting persons, is an Almighty tool in the work of resisting oppression.

Thus theologically seen as art and beauty, African American quilts and quilting materialize womanist theological anthropology and flesh out its relational epistemology and ontology. The personhood of black women resides with and in the fabric of the quilt. Quilts as channels of theological anthropology are an expression of the creative spark, a liberative tool, an epistemological strategy, and a communal inheritance. Exemplary of Begbie’s hope that “one of the main contributions of
a modern theological philosophy of art will be to challenge the frequent assumption that our primary appeal ought to be to the visual arts,” African American quilting powerfully illustrates his revision of a Western philosophy of art.\(^\text{43}\) Tangible and tactile, quilts claim the importance of the material as a way of knowing. They deny the separation of art and action in their form as objects of utility, a form that also resists the existential separation of artist and art from the world beyond. Relationality inheres in quilts as covers made, often communally, for people. As art to be hung or bedding to be used, quilts retain this significance in their form, gesturing to categories, realities, and persons beyond the quilter and locating her as a relational Self. Womanist metonym, instance of beauty, and exemplar of human creation, African American quilting is a signifying subject that unravels the seams of skewed yet dominant Western notions of art, knowledge, and humanity.

**Conclusion**

I don’t always know where the germ of a story comes from, but with *The Color Purple* I knew right away. I was hiking through the woods with my sister, Ruth, talking about a lovers’ triangle of which we both knew. She said: “And you know, one day The Wife asked The Other Woman for a pair of her drawers.” Instantly the missing piece of the story I was mentally writing . . . fell into place . . . I also knew *The Color Purple* would be a historical novel, and thinking of this made me chuckle. In an interview, discussing my work, a black male critic said he’d heard I might write a historical novel someday, and went on to say, in effect: Heaven protect us from it. The chuckle was because, womanlike (he would say), my “history” starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear.\(^\text{44}\)

In signifying against a Western view of the arts, African American quilting stakes its womanist grounding and reflects the subversive

\(^{43}\) Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, 207.  
humor and insight of the historiography Walker recounts for *The Color Purple*. The “womanlike” nature of Walker’s generative historical event is similar to that of black quilting: both are found outside the purview of the traditional societal gaze designating who and what is worthy of value and note. Such a location, however, while implying a lack of power, simultaneously indicates potentiality: an ability to topple, disprove, overturn, and deny the hegemonic pretensions of the center. Such is the power of the margin. Furthermore, in addition to challenging the center, the margin possesses its own standing, as its own space. In a theological anthropology of creativity and beauty, black quilters are not simply persons resisting oppression. They are images of God.

The profound theological implications of this imaging are suggested in Walker’s description of what happens in quilting as creation. She explains that the process of quilting slows one down to experience being “alive in the moment you have,” to the point at which one gets a “glimpse of eternity”:

> And the process of quilting gives you that . . . it’s in the creation. That’s where your joy is. It’s a gift . . . They are giving you what’s left. The quilt . . . is what’s left. And we look at a quilt, a sand painting, or any genuine work of art and we say, “Oh, how beautiful!” As I do every day. But I know I’m just seeing what’s left. What’s really amazing is what was going on when she was making this quilt. You know, I mean, boy, when she was just whoever, doing her art, what a state of being! . . . And [quilting] is even higher because it’s communal. It’s one thing to get into eternity by yourself, but to get into it with five or six other people, all of them cooking and talking about whatever. It’s really incredible. I mean, you’re talking about some high states of being . . . . People who take drugs are trying to get their eternity . . . . But . . . you don’t need drugs to get it. You need creative work to get it. You need creativity to get it. You need to create just like, whoever created all of this—the earth, the cosmos—needed to create.45

Along with her wry remarks on the origins of *The Color Purple*, Walker’s comment on quilting directs attention to time and creation, and to the significance of time for human existence regarding art, being, and knowledge. Creation is, in Walker’s words, a medium to eternity. From a theological standpoint, eternity is more properly timelessness (rather than unending time); expressed temporally, it is past, present, future, beyond, before, and then some. It thus pervades human history—manifest in the flesh of Jesus, the hem of his garment, the hubbub of “five or six quilters . . . cooking and talking about whatever”—and, simultaneously, is totally other: atemporal. Eternity, God’s time and space, is the “already” and the “not yet,” together; it is eschatologically extant.

Captured in quilting, this temporal focus illumines the theological profundity of womanism’s epistemological revolution, locating a theology of creation—and concomitant philosophy of history and time—therein. Womanist theology, as a liberation theology, is broadly concerned with historical time, past, present, and future. In her essay in the *Deeper Shades* anthology, Nancy Lynne Westfield reflects this tripartite temporal focus in positing Alice Walker’s definition of “womanist” as “more a prophecy than a definition.” Westfield correspondingly writes “between past tense, present tense, and future tense,” believing that Walker’s definition “is a literary work that spans the generations and speaks us into the future—in then, now, and yet to be.” Thus Westfield concludes that in writing her own essay “it seemed fitting, even necessary, for verb disagreement.” Westfield’s intentionally mixed-up tenses and identification of “womanist” as an epistemology of prophecy locate the force and truth of knowing in the past, present, and future. Womanism’s characteristic historical concerns—ancestral knowledge; the re-writing of history; the creating of canon; a priority on speaking, knowing, loving, and writing our Selves into history, into being—are thus not only a wrestling with the fact of black women’s historical erasure and contemporary silencing (a response to suffering past and present), but are a manifestation of womanism as epistemological revolution (a knowing that is

---

48 Westfield, “Mama Why . . . ?,” 129.
anticipatory and determinative, located in past, present, and future). Epistemology—Cartesian or otherwise—is the compressed accordion of a certain history; ergo, epistemological revolution necessarily entails historiographic revision, not only of what we know, but of knowing itself. Genesis makes it plain. Creation is the writing of history, the beginning.

Quilts, thus, are black women knowing. Quilting as creation is the starting of history. It is the point at which knowledge and being begin.

Quilting, Walker, and womanism offer much to the study of what it means to be human. They underscore the value of locating, making, and realizing art and beauty not just in traditional arenas, but in the world at large and in our Selves. Quilters stitch this truth in time and space, displaying in fiber form Copeland’s mantra, “Womanists are their own foundations.” Combined with Begbie’s view of artistic inspiration as not a “divine takeover” but as a movement by which the artist becomes “not less human but more human, not less free but more free,” Walker’s commentary on creation and time in quilting illumines the African American quilter as quintessentially reflective of the imago Dei. Her language of transcendence shows the act of creation as one by which humans, getting a glimpse of eternity, mirror the Divine. This is, the Deeper Shades anthology announces at the outset, the first tenet of womanism: “radical subjectivity”—or, “Feeling a whole lot like God.”

---

50 Begbie, Voicing Creation’s Praise, 227–228.
51 RevSisRaedorah, “Radical Subjectivity,” in Deeper Shades of Purple, 16.