

Gathering, Sewing, Giving: Chronopolitics of Black Women's Quilting

Crystal S. Rudds, Assistant
Professor of English
TRIC Research Fellow, 2024



Project Description

This project explores how Black women use quilting and sewing circles to flout chronopolitics, hierarchies, & labor demands that a capitalist, patriarchal society imposes. The Oakley Square Sewing Club is a group of senior Black women that meet in a subsidized housing development in Chicago. For almost a decade, they have sewn quilts and other material items using both formal and improvisational techniques. They mentor younger female residents in the complex and organize to host several youth development and charity events throughout the year. Alice Walker in her now canonical tome, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), defines *Womanism* as the praxis and qualities of being “outrageous, audacious...Interested in grown up doings...[preferring] women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength...Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” Epitomizing Womanism, the club regularly partners with local organizations to extend care to neighbors and youth. Retired and, in some cases, receiving public assistance, the club shifts the ordering of privilege and vulnerability through partnering with one of the major hospital organizations in Chicago to provide pillows for NICU babies and their families, among other activities.

The following were objectives of the first phase of this project:

- 1) Examine the intersectional dynamics threaded through the Oakley Square Sewing Club's community relations through qualitative methods, including observation, informal focus groups, and semi-structured one-on-one interviews.
- 2) Submit proposals to the annual meetings of the National Women Studies Association and American Studies Association to present on the women's work
- 3) Collaborate on the actual presentation(s) by funding at least two members' attendance at a conference

"We start at six, but we don't really pay attention to the time; we finish whenever we feel like."

--Ms. Audrey Adair

"For some of the women, it's like therapy ...they stay until they get ready."

--Ms. Donna Lewis

Still shot from the "Knowledge as Product" segment of *Ways of Knowing* (2018), a short film by On the Real Films, commissioned by arts research group HoneyPot Performance of Chicago and featuring the Oakley Square Sewing Club. We were given permission to debut the film for the project.

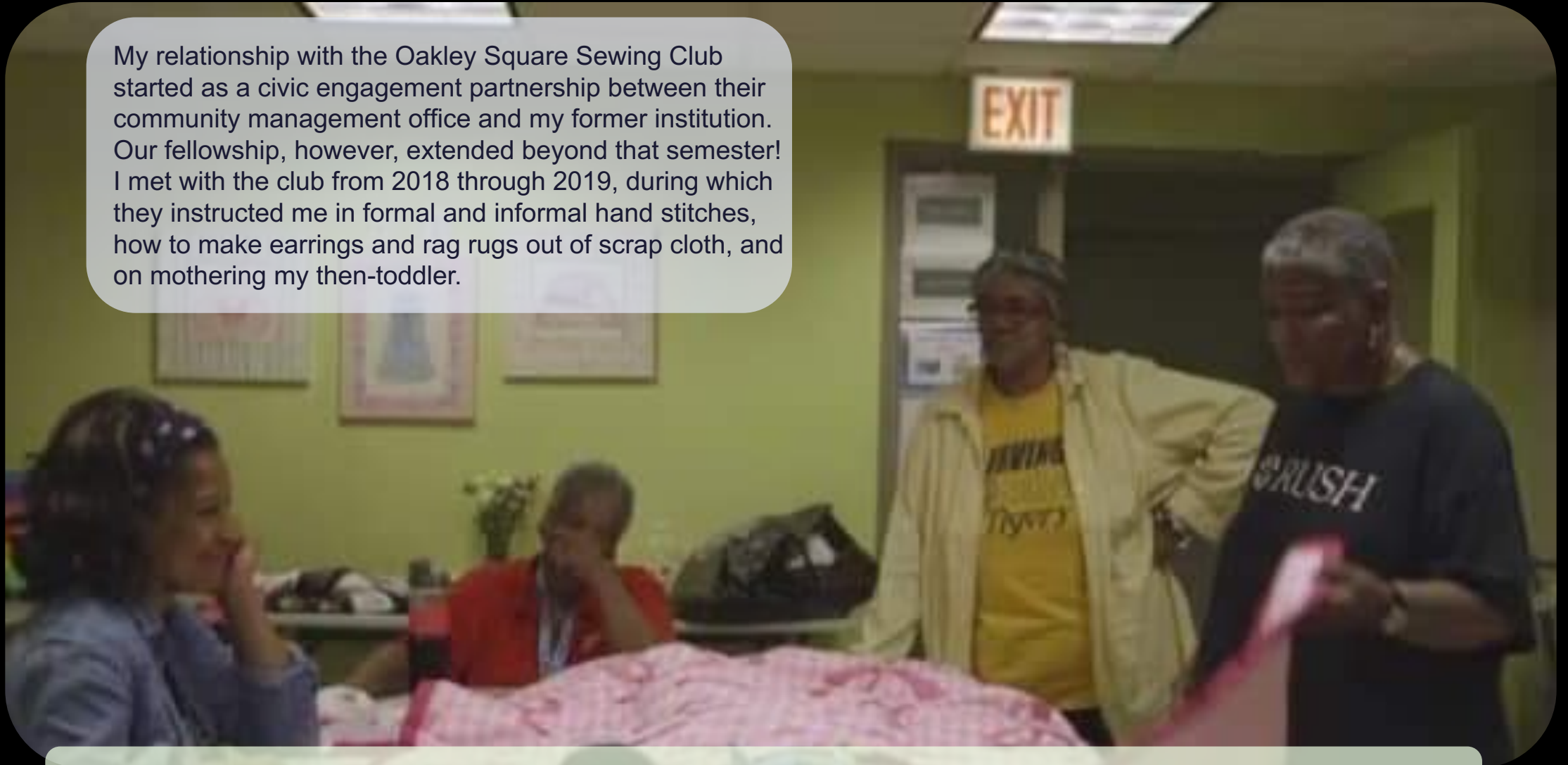


L-R: Ms. Carol Smith, Mrs. Mary Batups, Mrs. Donna Lewis, Shaquille Harness, Ms. Yvonne Harness, Ms. Audrey Adair, and Ms. Sandra Ramsey (center); Photo credit: Kalynn Dunn, Freshly Exposed



Midweek Sewing Meeting; Photo credit: Kalynn Dunn, Freshly Exposed

My relationship with the Oakley Square Sewing Club started as a civic engagement partnership between their community management office and my former institution. Our fellowship, however, extended beyond that semester! I met with the club from 2018 through 2019, during which they instructed me in formal and informal hand stitches, how to make earrings and rag rugs out of scrap cloth, and on mothering my then-toddler.



Midweek Sewing Meeting; Photo credit: still shot from the *Ways of Knowing* (2018), composed by On the Real Films



L-R: Donna Lewis, Audrey Adair, and Sandra Ramsey; Photo credit: Crystal Rudds

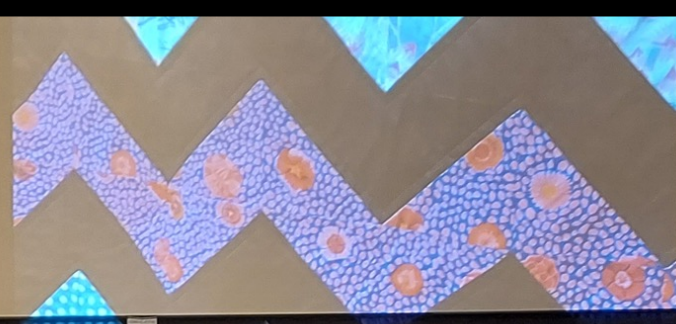
Event Summary

The proposal was accepted by both conferences! Three club members were able to attend NWSA 2024, and one was also able to attend ASA. I interviewed each member on her life story and relationship to sewing, quilting, and the Oakley Square community. We discussed the theme of the conference all together and then decided on individual talking points.

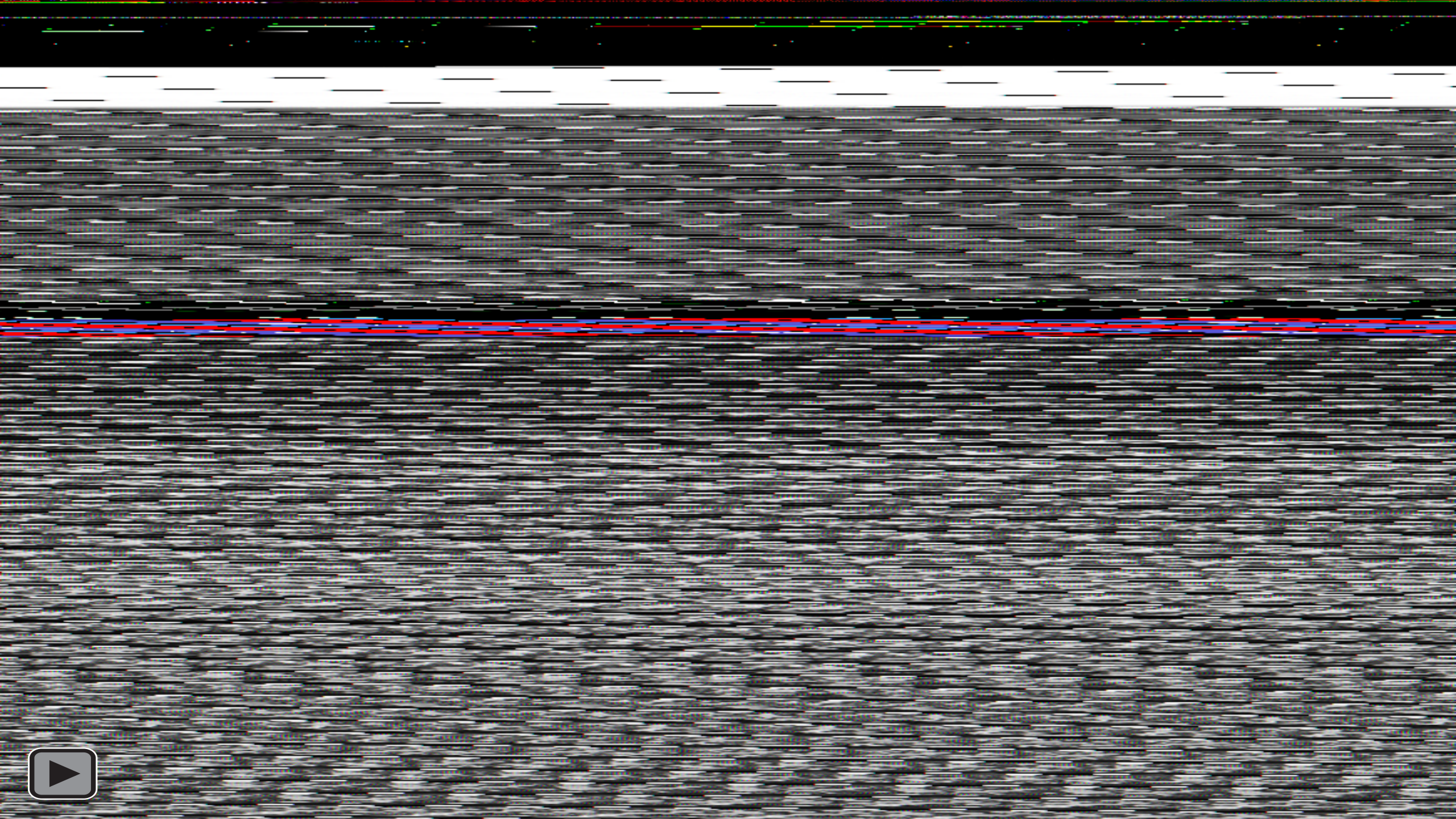
Joined by other scholars on the panel, Ms. Lewis, Adair, and Ramsey shared about original couture they were proud of, their community activism, and the history of quilting, including traditional African American quilt patterns (see video on next slide). I synthesized my observations and participation with them under the grant title, “Gathering, Sewing, Giving: Chronopolitics of Black Women’s Quilting,” remarking on the significance of their meeting place in the housing development’s “kitchen space”, the continuous “othermothering” (Collins 1990) they provide the community, and their measurable and immeasurable generosity—at least 300 blankets for teenaged mothers; 1300 pillows for NICU babies; and food, back to school supplies, and quilts for family and community members in need or “whenever [they, the club] feel like.”

Quilting as Critical Sociality

NWSA 2023



ANNUAL MEETING OF THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S STUDIES ASSOCIATION, 2024
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND





**ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION, 2024
MONTREAL, CANADA**



Thinking Intersectionally

In contrast to Alabama's well-known Gee's Bend quilt circle, Oakley Square's members have not commoditized their quilts or services; and they partner with large, established institutions in Chicago, including a local hospital and community college, pooling their own funds to buy fabric and materials for blankets that they would want themselves.

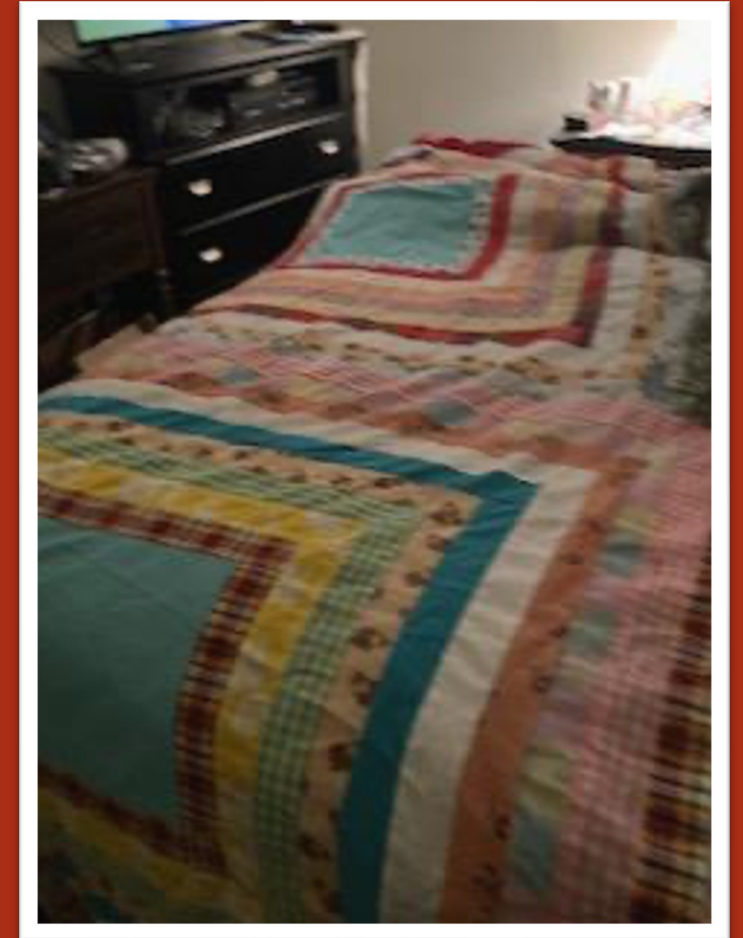
Thinking about this dynamic and its intersectional dimensions unveils a chronopolitics that resists the demands of capitalist and patriarchal hierarchies and illustrates a legacy of snatching freedom in Black women's making practices. bell hooks asserts in "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand," Black women know the aesthetic value of their art and, therefore, their donation of this art should be viewed as a choice. Moreover, Butler (2019) argues quilting "may serve as one of many responses to the negative stereotypical media images of African-American women that include the 'Mammy', 'Jezebel', 'Matriarch', and 'Welfare Queen' (p. 600). While Oakley Square is a tight-knit community with many residents having lived there over 30 years, recent violent incidents on property has made a sponsoring hospital close its onsite clinic. The withdrawal or suspension of services often occurs in those communities that need the services the most. Yet, the Oakley Square Sewing Club affirms their stature as uneven partners with this hospital and greater Chicagoland by continuing to plan co-sponsored events. hooks warns us that the "semantic intricacies of quilt making remain incomprehensible to the individualistic sensibility invested in myths of a postindustrial society" (156). So, whether Oakley Square donates their quilts or exchanges them for in kind services may not matter because, within the context of hooks' argument, what their praxis gains them are weekly experiences of time with one another, the precious, invisible commodity of fellowship.

We also just had fun!





Samples of Audrey Adair's craft work



Samples of Audrey Adair's craft work



Samples of donation blankets created by the Oakley Square Sewing Club

Next Steps

Although not explicitly stated as an objective, one of the aims of this project was to promote Black women's ways of knowing in richly textured geographies. We feel that facilitating the means for the Oakley Square Sewing Club to present on a national (and international) stage achieved this end. In addition, a photo summary of each conference was shared on the social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram. The club members who participated all had experience in public speaking through their church, community work, or former employer; therefore, it's possible that empowerment and a sense of accomplishment were only an indirect benefit of the presentations. Both conference audiences inquired into the Club's website or digital presence. This is something the Club plans to consider as it may be a way to invite donations to support their mission. Regarding the next step of the research supported by the TRIC grant, the second phase of the project is conceived as a scholarly or peer-reviewed journal article. The ladies have yet to express whether they want to present at future conferences.

Works Cited or Referenced

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Presentation Contributors

Ms. Audrey Adair has one son by birth and a host of children that she claims. She has worked for the airline industry, the City of Chicago, and in education. She is also a seamstress and master quilter.

Ms. Donna Lewis, retired Board of Education employee, was born on Chicago's west side and is mother to six children. She is an entrepreneur, an accomplished seamstress, and an ordained minister.

Ms. Sandra Ramsey, mother of five, othermother to hundreds, was also born on the west side of Chicago and has been a formidable community organizer for over 30 years, using her talents to leverage resources for neighborhood youth, formerly incarcerated persons, and the unsheltered.

Crystal S. Rudds is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Utah where she teaches twentieth century literature and theory, Black feminism, and Afrofuturism.



Photo credit: Kalynn Dunn, Freshly Exposed