

QUILTING THE MIGRANT TRAIL:  
RHETORICAL TEXT(ILES) AND REHUMANIZING NARRATIVES

by

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate’s submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

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SIGNED: Sonia Christine Arellano

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to migrants all over the world who have lost their lives in search of something better, different, or safer for themselves and their families.

May you rest in peace.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines material cultural productions as meaning-making practices that memorialize migrant lives within a context that creates and sustains the conditions for migrant deaths. I explore the Migrant Quilt Project to understand the rhetorical force and function of memorializing quilts in neoliberal contexts where migrant lives are devalued and migrant deaths appear insignificant. Since the US Border Patrol first implemented the tactic of Prevention Through Deterrence, migrant deaths have increased, totaling almost 3,000 migrant deaths in the Sonoran Desert of Southern Arizona since 2000. As a response, activist quilters with The Migrant Quilt Project carefully craft quilts from clothing left behind by migrants crossing the desert. Each quilt documents migrant deaths from a specific year, as recorded by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, and includes the name of each migrant or “unknown” or “desconocido” for unidentified migrants that died that year. The quilts memorialize and humanize migrants to bring awareness to migrant deaths in the Southern Arizona community.

I examine the quilts of the migrant quilt project and incorporate insights from interviews with quilters. This analysis reveals that the quilters carefully compose their quilts and employ particular rhetorical strategies to accomplish three goals: to humanize migrant lives through (counter) narrative, to memorialize migrant lives to resist erasure, and to raise awareness of what the quilters term the “reality” human migration. I argue that these three goals ultimately function to challenge dominant narratives of migrants and teach viewers about the ill effects of immigration policy.

To theorize quilting as a method, this dissertation also focuses on my experience creating a quilt for the Migrant Quilt Project and explores the value of composing text(iles) as contributing to scholarly inquiry. Quilting as a method challenges traditional concepts of research and rigor to expand those concepts, which allows my particular project the opportunity to consider myself implicit in the plight of migrants. Quilting as method also facilitates a dialectical research process, which promotes an always changing perspective and research trajectory. This dialectical process expands understanding of the migrant experience and facilitates a thoughtful awareness when composing data representation. I argue that quilting as a feminist qualitative research method facilitates a nuanced understanding of the research questions about migrants and migrant representation.

Ultimately this dissertation considers the productive possibilities of studying text(iles) and also of making text(iles). In completing this research, I argue that studying and composing quilts promotes tactile research methods to value various literacies and qualitative data representation. This research also provides pedagogical tools for rhetoric and composition scholars to value various ways of knowing and to study overlooked histories in their classrooms. Lastly, this research provides the possibilities for people to learn about the experiences of migration and the ill effects of immigration policies on fellow humans.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTERVENTIONS OF QUILTS AND QUILTERS

This project studies quilts as material objects and quilting as a research method in order to learn about migrant deaths. Studying artistic, tactile projects such as quilts, specifically quilts that address social justice issues, provides important approaches to understanding the struggle of others and developing empathy for others, which is imperative at this particular political historical moment when fear has more influence than basic logic and facts. Studying quilting as a research method provides a feminist qualitative method that engages the researcher through an embodied and dialectical process to represent data visually and tactually, challenging traditional notions of rigorous research as void of the researcher.

As a starting point, this project draws from the history of Underground Railroad quilts and slave quilts, as well as the AIDS memorial quilts, as projects that engaged in social change through quilting and through traveling displays. The quilts analyzed in this dissertation focus on lives lost at a particular historical moment—when migration is criminalized and nationhood is important to secure—and in specific spaces and places—border communities, immigrant detention centers, and perilous deserts along the increasingly militarized US-Mexico Border. Quilt projects memorializing and honoring lives lost at this historical moment and in these spaces and places follow in the tradition of quilts as part of a social movement demanding awareness and accountability from dominant power structures. Therefore, this dissertation asserts as a foundational premise that quilts are rhetorical text(iles) worthy of study, historically and currently as they have and do facilitate social change.

At the center of this dissertation is the Migrant Quilt Project, a project that memorializes migrant lives. First in analyzing these quilts, I argue that through their powerful compositions, the quilts teach about the ill effects of immigration policy, particularly effects on humans. My analysis demonstrates how the quilters use particular rhetorical strategies to rehumanize migrants and claim that they are lives worth grieving. The tactile rhetoric of the quilts teaches the viewer about a migrant's journey and connects the experience of migrants to the emotional response of the audience. In other words, the quilts employ a tactile rhetoric that allows quilters to physically and emotionally feel and create the experiences of migration. Secondly, in creating a quilt for the Migrant Quilt Project, I begin to develop the concept of quilting as a feminist qualitative research method. Quilting as method provides researchers a different method of data representation that provides researchers an approach to data representation that is not only visual or alphabetic but also tactile. Such a method functions to expand notions of what counts as rhetorical, what counts as a text worth studying, and what counts as knowledge production within rhetoric and composition so that the intellectual work of women, of artists, and of activists is considered important to study in our field.

I began this dissertation work on the heels of strict anti-immigration measures as well as a period of intense discussion and action concerning increased police militarization and violence against black lives. It's important to note that the ideas in this dissertation developed within a context of current events concerning marginalized lives and connected to policy changes in the US—black lives matter movements and police brutality, immigrant rights and DACA, same-sex marriage and DOMA, transgender lives and bathroom bills, among many other groups of marginalized people. Therefore, I center

this dissertation within an ongoing discussion about how US society treats people in life and, most importantly, in death. As I finish this project, the US political context has shifted to more overtly hateful one with a new administration that fuels all the isms—racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, ableism, Islamaphobia and others. This dissertation also exists within a context that (re)members a rich history of text(iles). Quilts have a long history of working within social movements as maps, as statements to bring awareness, and as art. Historically the work of women, quilts have also functioned as a way to bring women together to create and convey their ways of knowing. In my research, the practice of quilting is as important as the product of the quilt in questioning and disrupting dominant, oppressive structures. Within this political context, the understanding the productive potential of quilts and quilters is imperative in promoting empathy and new approaches to research.

### **Dominant Power Structures and Migrant Deaths in Southern Arizona**

Dominant power structures in the US and worldwide that produce the conditions for migrant deaths include but are not limited to capitalism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity and nationalism (Mohanty, Duggan, Butler, Cacho). These power structures are legacies of colonialism within the US, and in this project I focus on their current instantiations and repercussions because various intersections of these structures have produced contexts optimal for injustices against migrants. For example, when detaining migrants in detention centers, Border Patrol separates women with children from men, because children are not supposed be kept in facilities for a long period of time without specific facility requirements. Women with their children are released to await their immigration hearing while men are kept in detention centers,

costing taxpayers to detain migrants and benefitting the private prisons that are detaining migrants. This is one example how migrants are treated differently within dominant power structures according to various intersections of their identities.

Moreover, migrants seeking asylum are treated as criminals, although many migrants present themselves at the US border and do not actually cross into the US illegally. In the name of nationalism and protecting US citizen lives, migrants are held to profit off of their detention. In contemplating how various power structures function to assign value or devalue migrant deaths, I discovered various actors at play in Southern Arizona. To understand how dominant power structures initiate and facilitate migrant deaths in Arizona, I first define a key term of this dissertation: Grievability according to Judith Butler. Then I briefly examine power structures underlying policy and legislation concerning migrants in the Southwest US.

In her post 9-11 book *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler begins a discussion about precarity and grievability. Within this context, she discusses the ways the US treated Muslim people after 9-11, and she considers, “how certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable” (XIV). In other words, she asks how could US Americans mourn citizens killed in the attack on the world trade center but then express no sympathy for people killed in Afghanistan or infinitely detained in Guantanamo. This was my entry point in thinking with Butler about how particular lives, in the case of my project non-citizen lives, are deemed not worthy of grief in death while others are. Butler says, “Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates

to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (*Precarious Life* XIV-XV). Butler's discussion initially facilitated my thinking about the connection between how migrant lives are treated in life and in death.

According to Butler the differential allocation of grievability is what decides migrant lives should not be included in obituaries in the newspaper or seen as a US national tragedy. In fact, upon researching the Migrant Quilt Project, I also found another quilt project named The Stolen Lives Quilt run by the conservative non-profit group The Remembrance Project. This quilt was part of a “national campaign to remember victims killed by illegal aliens,” including border patrol agents and average US citizens (“Home”). The website of the Remembrance Project, their email newsletters, as well as many public appearances by their co-founder all function to demonize migrants and reinforce the narrative that migrants threaten US citizen lives<sup>1</sup>. Examining the Stolen Lives Quilt alongside the Migrant Quilt Project provided a prime example of the differential allocation Butler discusses. Differing coverage and memorialization demonstrates how “grievability is publicly distributed” because as Butler claims, “we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building” (*Precarious Life* 34). While many migrants are only publicly memorialized in the Migrant Quilt Project—and even then many are unknown—the citizens of the Stolen Lives Quilt are often memorialized in numerous ways such as religious services, newspaper obituaries, and news stories.

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<sup>1</sup> The quote from this website has changed since I originally wrote this chapter. Interestingly, after the election of Donald Trump who has been connected with the project, the website of the Remembrance Project has been completely redone and improved. The project now uses different language no longer referring to migrants as illegal aliens as demonstrated in their new homepage statement: “Educating and raising awareness of the epidemic of killings of Americans by individuals who should not have been in the country in the first place” (“Home”).

Butler also claims that grievability is constituted through Others that we are connected to (*Precarious Life* 22). In my research, US citizens are constituted through the un-grievability of Others—in this case migrants. If US citizens are established as normatively human and, therefore, as lives worth protecting, then they are also lives worth grieving in death. As a result, migrant lives—especially migrants crossing illegally—are established as non-citizen, non-human and, therefore, as lives un-grievable in death. As I contemplated how the hierarchy of lives functions in the US—Who decides what lives are deemed grievable and worth memorialization? Under what social conditions are lives deemed grievable or not?—I considered the salient power structures that maintain a hierarchy of lives based on various intersections of these power structures.

Butler's notion of grievability facilitated my thinking through such questions as she further elaborated on the connections between precarity and grievability in her 2009 book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* As a basic premise, Butler asserts that arguing about what constitutes a life is not useful (7-8). She claims that because in order to live we must at some point die, that is what living is, we are all precarious by simply living (14). However, she claims that our goal should not be to destroy precarity, but to ensure that we are creating environments where life is possible (23). In other words, because we are constituted by others—defining I is against others and therefore even individuality is a social existence—we should be invested in minimizing or not contributing to the precarity of others.

In Butler's work about grievability, she's not outright defined what she means by this term, yet she discusses it in relation to successful mourning (*Precarious Life* 21). Therefore, I return to thinking through a textbook definition; the verb to grieve is to feel

sorrow over death or to mourn a death (“Grieve”). The noun grief primarily denotes sorrow but a secondary definition is annoyance or burden (“Grief”). While the noun grievance is an injustice or a wrong and secondarily a complaint (“Grievance”).

Considering these various definitions allows for an expanded understanding of how I apply Butler’s concept of grievability. Simply, I understand grievability as the ability and desire to feel sorrow and mourn the death of migrants. I also find considering the secondary definition of the noun grief worth examining as annoyance or burden.

Secondarily I understand grievability as the ability and desire to see migrant deaths as the burden of US government and citizens. While many people respond by saying those deaths are not the problem of the US or do not concern US citizens, I draw from Butler to consider how living beings are connected and therefore should consider how we are constituted by others. Moreover, building on the noun grievance allows me to consider grievability as the ability to understand migrants as experiencing an injustice and agreeing they should be righted, should be allowed to migrate globally. Butler’s notion of grievability, then, doesn’t have one static definition for me, but functions in relation to the various power structures defining the relationship between migrants and the context that allows their grievability. I will briefly discuss some of the power structures that have affected migrant precarity and grievability.

US policy and Arizona legislation have created conditions for migrant deaths to initially occur and to continue with no end in sight. Many people reference trade policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and later the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), as points of origin for increased migration from Mexico and Central America. Opponents claim that these trade

policies have pushed manufacturing jobs out of the US to countries where workers are exploited in the name of free trade and have also devastated Mexican farmers by making them compete with farmers in the US. As Anthropologist Jason DeLeón puts it, “Soon after Mexico signed on the dotted line, it found itself drowning in a pinche montón of subsidized gringo corn that crashed their economy and put millions of peasant farmers out of work” (6). Therefore, trade policies such as NAFTA and CAFTA-DR not only exploited factory workers in Mexico and Central America, but also negatively affected their farmers and contributed to migration north.

Proponents claim that these policies have seamlessly facilitated beneficial trade throughout North America. However, in their book *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*, authors Massey, Durand, and Malone, explain that NAFTA increased Mexican imports and extended connections between the US and Mexico while also restricting immigration (49). They highlight the contradictions of NAFTA as it sought to integrate markets across North America with the exception of the labor market (83). Politicians continue to disagree about the benefits and negative affects of these trade policies, but as Massey, Durand, and Malone point out, “U.S. policy toward Mexico is inherently self-contradictory, simultaneously promoting integration while insisting on separation” (83). In other words, the US took advantage of labor in other countries but did not want that labor coming in to the US.

Proponents and opponents alike cannot deny the affect these trade policies have had on migration, specifically from Mexico and Central America to the US. Although migrant deaths are incredibly high in numbers across the world, the terms *migrant* and

*migration*<sup>2</sup> throughout this research refers specifically to people crossing the US-Mexico border coming from Central America and Mexico. I use these words mainly because the site examined here, the Migrant Quilt Project, focuses on deaths of migrants found in the Arizona desert. According to Martínez et al, 95% of deaths identified in the Arizona desert originate from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and “86% of all identified decedents whose countries of origin are known are Mexican nationals” (14-15). Therefore, the data, sources, and sites used here intentionally focus on deaths of Mexican and Central American migrants, and their deaths are undeniably partially attributed to the need for migration because of NAFTA and CAFTA-DR. I also prefer to use the word *migrant* because it is not explicitly connected to a person’s legal status nor their relationship to the state, e.g. legal/illegal, documented/undocumented<sup>3</sup>. Migrant throughout this project denotes a human who has moved for various reasons, although I recognize that all words are bound within the capitalist context of the US that values trade over human quality of life.

While US Trade policy contributes to the reasons migrants move to the US, legislation and policies have made it more dangerous for migrants to cross into the US. Once migrants arrive in Arizona, the militarization of the border and current legislation have created a dangerous situation for migrants, including another major contribution to migrant deaths, the US border patrol strategy of Prevention Through Deterrence, which was implemented in the 1990s. This strategy plays a major role in pushing migrants to cross at more dangerous parts of the desert and in turn increasing the possibility of

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<sup>2</sup> I also often use the term *immigration* when I discuss US immigration policy because that is the term used by the government.

<sup>3</sup> See Plascencia for an interesting viewpoint on the framing of illegal and undocumented.

migrant deaths. Border patrol implemented prevention through deterrence in order to use the “dangerous geography of the south-west borderlands to act as a ‘natural barrier’” (Reineke and Martínez 49). In other words, urban border areas are more heavily guarded and patrolled than more remote and dangerous desert areas. Such a strategy effectively pushes migrants to cross in areas with less surveillance and rougher terrain, which scholars call the “funnel effect” (Reineke and Martínez 49). Migrants are often unprepared to trek through the desert for days, and the temperatures and wildlife in this area can be incredibly dangerous when unprepared for them. As a result, “[p]revention Through Deterrence set the stage for the desert to become the new “victimizer” of border transgressors” (De León 35). In other words, border patrol implemented this strategy expecting the dangerous terrain of the Southern Arizona desert to deter migrants from crossing, and if it didn’t, migrants would die as a result of their own choice to cross that dangerous desert. Therefore, Prevention Through Deterrence continues to cause migrant deaths, but this strategy also absolves the government of responsibility for those deaths.

Prevention Through Deterrence demonstrates the damage caused by neoliberal approaches to immigration policy because it evokes the concept of personal responsibility. Scholar Lisa Duggan’s work on neoliberalism, which she defines as the upward movement of money and power through strategic identity politics, focuses on what she calls neoliberalism’s master terms of privatization and personal responsibility (10). The two terms are interconnected, but I find the notion of personal responsibility most salient in conversations regarding migrant deaths. Duggan claims that privatization, the transfer of wealth and decision-making from public to individual or corporate institutions, effectively shifts the responsibility of inequalities (especially pertaining to

money) from the state to individuals and households through the logic of personal responsibility (12). Trade policy and the privatization of immigration security, first absolves the government of any responsibility for affecting the economy of other countries, nor creating a context that criminalizes migrants to the benefit of the government. Specifically, in the case of prevention through deterrence, NAFTA has facilitated the movement of people into the US, and Border Patrol has implemented the strategy of prevention through deterrence to simply deter people from crossing. This shifts the blame of a bad economy to their home country unable to care for their citizens, and the blame of migrant deaths on migrants themselves for choosing to cross. I reference this point throughout my analysis and focus on challenges to such narratives of personal responsibility. Moreover, I continually contextualize migrant precarity in a neoliberal society that values bodies that benefit the US through labor or income (as with private prisons).

As a reaction to migration to the US, draconian legislation such as Operation Streamline and SB 1070 demonstrates a clear connection between racialized and criminalized bodies in Southern Arizona. Implemented in 2005, Operation Streamline, which “requires the federal criminal prosecution and imprisonment of all unlawful border crossers” (Lydgate 1), essentially transitioned crossing from a civil offense to a criminal one. This caused an increase in criminal offences, but not necessarily an increase in migration. In other words, when people cite an increase in criminal migrants, the numbers do not account for the fact that a previously civil offense now qualified as a criminal one, increasing the number of criminal migrants while the number of migrants crossing has continued to decrease. Moreover, operation streamline imposed six-month maximum

sentence for first-time offenders and migrants who are attempting re-entry after being previously deported can carry a two-year sentence, but up to 20 years if they have a prior record (Lydgate 3). Operation Streamline not only increased the statistics of “criminal” migrants, but it also allowed the US to detain and imprison migrants for longer periods of time. Moreover, Operation Streamline facilitated mass immigration hearings and sentencing, moving more bodies through the judicial system without opportunities for fair representation and due process (Lydgate 1).

Operation Streamline functioned to further criminalize migrants in the US without legal documentation. However, this law specifically targeted and affected brown bodies of Central American and Mexican migrants. Because many migrants charged in mass hearings are apprehended while crossing the US-Mexico border, Operation Streamline mostly affects low-level, first-time offenders entering through an unauthorized checkpoint. Therefore, migrants entering on visas by airplane who overstay their visa or who enter with fake documentation at an authorized checkpoint were less likely to be mass sentenced according to Operation Streamline than those crossing through the Arizona desert. This is one example of how the brown bodies of migrants from Central American and Mexico are criminalized because of how they are racialized.

Another bill that works alongside Operation Streamline to criminalize racialized bodies of migrants is Arizona State Bill (SB) 1070—the infamous “show me your papers law.” This controversial bill requires people to present documentation that they are legally in the US when stopped by law enforcement. SB 1070 not only made traffic stops potentially immigration hearings, but it more importantly facilitated racial profiling. Police need reasonable cause to stop people, and that reasonable cause is now that

someone *looks* like they may not have proper documentation to be in the US[explain]. In other words, a person who is brown in Southern Arizona is much more likely to be stopped and questioned about their immigration status than a white person. This bill took the criminalization of brown bodies one step further by allowing the policing of all brown bodies implementing a similar mentality of Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*. Bentham claims that in various establishments—schools, prisons, hospitals—ideally the observer will always be able to watch those they want to observe. Because this is not possible, “the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so” (4). In other words, the concept of the panopticon is most useful not because people are constantly watched, but that they feel constantly watched. SB 1070 then created a culture of fear for brown people who thought they may be stopped by the police for being brown.

As a result of both Operation Streamline and SB1070 migrant detention and prisons flourished. For example, 1,800 of the 2,600 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention beds in Arizona are in facilities run by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest private prison corporation in the US (“Immigration Detention in Arizona”). SB 1070 made clear the relationship between private prisons, corporations, and legislation: “Of the 36 co-sponsors of SB 1070, 30 received campaign contributions from private prison lobbyists or companies including CCA” (“The Math of Immigration Detention” 7). SB 1070 also facilitated relationships between the local police and border patrol, essentially turning traffic stops into immigration hearings. If a person were to get pulled over for a traffic stop and could not produce documentation that they resided in the US legally, the person could be detained

by border patrol and potentially the process of being detention and deportation could begin. Increased apprehensions through routine traffic stops equated to more bodies in detention and more money for CCA, whose total revenue for 2015 FY was 1.79 billion (“CCA Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2015 Financial Results”). While the US contributes to the reasons migrants move to the US, Arizona has made it more dangerous for migrants to cross into the US. Once migrants arrive in Arizona, the militarization of the border and current legislation have created a violent context for migrants to live in fear. All of these conditions implemented and resulting from dominant power structures have increased the risk involved with crossing the US-Mexico border, specifically for migrants from Central America and Mexico.

Because these policies, strategies, and legislation all target and affect a particular population of migrants, those from Central America and Mexico, antiracist feminism is central to my work throughout this dissertation. According to Chandra Mohanty is “a feminist perspective that encodes race and opposition to racism as central to its definition” (253). I use antiracist feminism as a perspective throughout that continuously focuses on issues of race, class, and sex, within a hetero-patriarchal capitalist society. Because a racialized group (migrants) is at the heart of the conversation, this dissertation necessarily presents research through a lens that carefully tends to the subjectivity of people who have been traditionally excluded and othered. From the standpoint of antiracist feminism, my dissertation focuses on intersections of class, race, and gender of migrants because the policies discussed here purposefully racialize migrant bodies.

While migrant deaths are a world-wide humanitarian issue as thoroughly noted in the report “Fatal Journey’s: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration” by the International

Organization for Migration, which documents migrant crises around the world, there is also a noticeable shift towards nationalist and anti-immigrant movements justified by terrorist possibilities across the US and Europe. As this shift becomes clear, migrant deaths on the US-Mexico border continue to be a concern, although for different reasons, to those who care about migrant rights as well as those who fear migrants. The previously mentioned legislation and policies enacted by dominant power structures all function to facilitate migrant deaths in Southern Arizona. In the year 2012 the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner coded 171 deaths as undocumented border crossers (UBC). This number is not completely accurate in accounting for all deaths as they “only account for those bodies that have been found and recovered from the U.S. side of the border” (“Fact Sheet” 3). Between 1990 and 2012, 34% of UBC cases remain unidentified (Martínez et al. 14). These numbers only begin to provide an understanding of migrant deaths in Arizona. Unidentified human remains can only provide some facts and this understanding only includes deaths in one border state. Although they are shocking, such numbers and statistics are also distant and cold. They do not provide the stories behind the nameless or their families. Often named and unnamed migrants do not get a funeral service or a memorial to remember them by.

### **Challenges to Dominant Power Structures**

In response to these dominant power structures and the migrant deaths they facilitate, I explore how the tactile rhetoric of quilts challenges these dominant power structures. Minoritized groups of women traditionally made quilts to function pragmatically—as blankets to keep people warm—as well as politically—as textiles that expressed implicit viewpoints or explicit protest. I first examine the historical

contributions of various groups within the US with a focus on slave and African American quilters and quilters of the NAMES project because they are groups of quilters whose histories have significantly impacted the Migrant Quilt Project. I also examine how the Migrant Quilt Project functions to challenge a hierarchy of lives and tell the narratives of migrants who don't leave behind written records. The quilts examined here challenge narratives that dehumanize migrants: migrants are criminals and therefore not worthy of empathy; migrant deaths resulting from Prevention Through Deterrence are unintended; and migrants carelessly leave trash in the desert. Overall challenges come in the form of rehumanizing migrants in order to argue for their grievability. Moreover, I examine quilting to intervene in ways that dominant power structures also function in academia. Studying quilts as text(iles) and employing quilting a research method both expand notions of what is considered worthy of study and how. In other words, academia values written compositions as research and quantitative research methods, while quilting as method provides a tactile, non-linear composition and a qualitative research method. Such interventions also expand what counts as knowledge and who count as knowledge producers to include material objects and women activist-quilters.

I use the terms text(ile) and quilt frequently throughout this project. When I use the word text(ile), I intend to use word play to signify an important point. That the quilts I reference are a textile production (meaning made of fabric) and a text (meaning a complex artifact worthy of study). This is how I denote throughout that the textiles I study are necessarily products of intellectual and tactile work.

I take up quilts as the artifact of study because of their important history in the United States and because of their unique rhetorical qualities. As an academic in rhetoric

and composition, I am particularly interested in quilts because quilting and quilts are similar to writing (as an action and object) in that they complicate some of the traditional notions we associate with studying or creating this type of cultural production. For example, the composition, purpose, author, message, interpretation, presentation, and context of writing and quilting are complex. Quilts, just as collaborative writing, do not have one single creator and take collective decision making to complete. Similarly, each time a different person reads a piece of writing, it is interpreted differently, and the author has no control over that interpretation. Quilts can be read this same way, and in some of the quilts discussed here, creator and audience are often one in the same.

So although the quilts discussed here vary in their creators, they are similar because they are traditionally created. The quilts discussed here are sewn with needle and thread, most by machine, some by hand. They are pieced in ways that resemble traditional patchwork, and are quilted (the action of sewing the layers together) in traditional ways. These quilts are not traditional in that they don't use batting (the soft stuffing in the middle of the quilt) because they are not intended to be used, but instead displayed. In other words, the word quilt discussed here refers to fabric stitched together with needle and thread. I'll add that in the context of this dissertation, a quilt is a necessarily personal and political text.

Through this dissertation, I discuss the concept of tactile rhetoric. In this project, this concept references the ways that rhetoric—the ways that, in this case, an object can move people to accomplish a particular end goal—is tactile, and as a result, can be emotionally and physical effective. In other words, through touching a quilt, one can feel the affect emotionally and also one can feel the affect physically. Considering the tactile rhetoric of

quilts is important because it offers insight that blurs and pushes boundaries of what is rhetoric? With a project such as this, one can touch the quilts to physically feel the experience of migrants crossing the desert (for example a self mended pair of jeans) and one can touch the quilts to emotionally feel the experience` of migrants (for example the words copied from a love letter that was found in a pair of jeans). I will continue to think through and develop this concept because the visual/verbal divide is not sufficient in examining such complex text(iles).

### **Situating the Researcher**

The journey to this research project was simultaneously surprising and also not. While it seems as though I came to textiles and particularly quilts fairly recently, upon reflection I realized that textiles have been an integral part of my matrilineal history. As I will expand upon in chapter four, my stepmother comes from a family of feminist quilters from Oklahoma, while my mother is a self-taught seamstress. However, my research interests have always resided in examining the plight of migrants. When I started to volunteer for an immigrant intake center in Tucson, Arizona and came across the Migrant Quilt Project, the intersections of migrant narratives, migrant deaths, and textiles came together. I will expand upon these experiences later in this project, but I mention it now to demonstrate that my experience has always been central to my research. I've never attempted to be unbiased or removed from my research because, in my view, that's not possible and it's not the kind of research I want to do. What follows is scholars who have influenced my methodology as a researcher, and even though I do not always identify these theories throughout, they are at work in every aspect of my research.

Sandra Harding claims that “An epistemology is a theory of knowledge,” and therefore, epistemology answers questions about knowledge production such as who can be a “knower,” how beliefs are legitimated as knowledge, and what counts as knowledge? (3). In this way I see my choice in methods and methodologies reflecting what I think counts as knowledge and knowers—women, quilts, art, migrants, and community—which may challenge some values of the university such as textual products, positivist claims, academic discourse, empirical data, and peer-reviewed publications. Moreover, Nancy Naples claims “[o]ur epistemological assumptions also influence how we define our roles as researchers, what we consider ethical research practices, and how we interpret and implement informed consent or ensure the confidentiality of our research subjects” (3). Because I believe that my choices in what to study and how to study already reflect my human bias, I do not attempt to *remove* myself as the researcher in my study nor my writing. In fact, I intentionally insert myself in this dissertation, including narrative about how my background and personal experience have affected my research.

Harding says “[o]ne could reasonably argue that all evidence-gathering techniques fall into one of the following three categories: Listening to (or interrogating) informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records” (2). However, the ways researchers carry out these techniques vary. Considering Harding’s statement, my methods for collecting data engage in listening to interviewees (the quilters) and examining historical records (the quilts). However, I also engage in behavior (quilting) not just observe it. I make my argument about quilting as method through quilting and drawing from my experience.

I draw from Marjorie DeVault and Glenda Gross using open-ended, semistructured interviewing techniques and considering the conditions and conduct of interviews, and paying attention to asymmetrical power relations. I employ active listening, which is more than hearing words but processing them “allowing information to affect you, baffle you, haunt, you make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours” (216). I am influenced by Devault and Gross’s claim that an “essential aspect of feminist interview research interrogates the challenges of communication and the inherent contradictions in the desire to give voice to others” (173). I recognize the narratives presented here are constructed and reconstructed to provide a story, not the story, and just as the I do not give voice to the quilters, they do not give voice to the deceased migrants.

Although I move past the visual to focus on the potential of the tactile, I am nonetheless influenced by various theories of visual rhetoric. In her work concerning women’s needlework, Maureen Daly Goggin claims that the term visual rhetoric tends to reinforce the visual/verbal divide, which is a false division with silencing effects. She says, “Bifurcation of word and image—of visual and verbal rhetoric—permits thinking about semiotic production, circulation and artifacts in particular ways but also threatens to render invisible a whole host of other kinds of rhetorical practices, objects and participants because they do not appear on the dichotomized radar screen” (106). Therefore, we have difficulty analyzing and interpreting texts that do not fit neatly into the visual or verbal categories. Moreover, a text that does not fit a particular category may simply be analyzed according to one category, completely ignoring other aspects of the text and rendering an incomplete analysis.

This dissertation is influenced by other projects concerning quilts as memorializing, rhetorical texts. However, these other projects are other dissertations and theses, some in the book proposal stage, which indicates there is more work to be done theorizing quilts, quilters, and quilt making. My analysis will contribute to other projects that identify “quilting as a form of knowledge about memory, one of the canons of rhetoric,” (Amelon) that study the way “living memorials enrich our growing understanding of human persuasion,” (Graziano) and that argue quilts should be considered rhetorical texts (Bost). The quilts in this dissertation will be read as complex texts and material art that engages in conversations and arguments about migrants while simultaneously contributing to the memorializing process and to the historical record. Moreover, the analysis of these quilts will suggest they fit into a history of quilts contributing to social movements and raising awareness.

Lastly, I chose to not explicitly rely on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa in this project. However, her influence is undoubtedly in my everyday work as a Chicana-quilter-researcher. Therefore, I briefly mention her viewpoints that so intimately stick to my bones. First her refusal of dichotomies in some areas and her promotion of both/and influences the ways I approach my research and situate it within the discipline of rhetoric and composition<sup>4</sup>. She claims that “In trying to become ‘objective,’ Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence” (59). Moreover, she claims we should not split the creative and the intellectual. She references the need to study art as

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<sup>4</sup> While Anzaldúa rejects particular dichotomies, she reinscribes others in definitive ways I don’t find useful. This is one reason I don’t heavily rely on her work because I would not simply use the quotes I agree with and dismiss the ones I don’t and because this point is not the focus of my work.

non-static actions that are part of everyday life (88-89). These points influence my desire to study migrant lives that will never have a chance to provide written contributions to rhetorical studies, to center myself and my experience as a starting point for my research, and to study and develop creative methods such as quilting to provide nuances of tactile rhetoric.

Anzaldúa's term *la facultad* has influenced me and my work since I first read *Borderlands* before entering my PhD studies. In fact, I draw on this term in my master's thesis. Her notion of *la facultad*, "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface," I've always understood as reactionary awareness in order to protect oneself. She explains that once one develops this reaction, "[t]he one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world" (60). In other words, as a woman of color in academia, I've had to learn how to navigate academia successfully while also protecting myself and pushing back. This is also the case for minoritized populations in US society, not just in academia. *La facultad* has helped me maintain myself and be "successful" according to academic standards while completing this PhD. *La facultad* has helped me to understand how to have strategic relationships within academia, while also pushing boundaries and challenging axioms, knowing that many will disagree. *La facultad* has provided the confidence to pursue meaningful research even when it's not easy. I had to develop the strategies of *la facultad* a long time ago as a first generation college student. However, upon reading Anzaldúa, I was able to think more deeply about this concept as she named it into my consciousness. Even though, I do not explicitly draw from Anzaldúa, her work is an integral part of my methodology because it's an integral part of my everyday being.

## Chapter Summaries

Chapter two “Histories and Rhetorical Functions of Quilts in the US” reviews literature about quilts and quilters. First I provide a brief history of quilts in the US as told through prominent Western historical texts, and then I move on to discuss two groups of quilters that significantly impact my particular work: slave and African American quilters and quilters of the NAMES project. Examining scholarship about these two groups reveals that quilters complicate traditional notions of a single author, that many oppressed groups have used quilts to historically document opposition, and that quilting has become an important practice with communal and individual benefits.

Chapter three, “Activist-Quilters Challenge the Notion of ungrievable Lives” focuses on the Migrant Quilt Project and how it functions rhetorically to rehumanize migrant lives. This chapter first provides background about the Migrant Quilt Project and the activist-quilters creating quilts for the project. Using clothing left behind by migrants along the US-Mexico border, volunteer quilters make quilts memorializing and honoring migrant lives lost in a particular sector of the desert during a specific time period. Through the incorporation of legible clothing, bordados, and skulls the quilters rehumanize migrants using rhetorical identification. Through the strategies of naming migrants and listing cause of death, the quilters force viewers to face death and resist erasure of migrant lives. Lastly through emphasis on the “reality” of migrant deaths, activist quilters use their skills to contribute a critical viewpoint to the narrative of migration.

In chapter four, “Quilting as Method; Quilter as Researcher,” I first trace my textile familial history to explain how my past and present led me to this research project

and equipped me to develop quilting as a method. Then I review scholarship about quilting as a metaphor to demonstrate the lack of scholarship focusing on quilting as a research method, not just a metaphor. Then I explain my development of quilting as a method first explaining how quilts are a social text that necessarily disrupts academic notions of removing bias and apolitical research. Through my personal narrative, I demonstrate how the dialectical process of quilting teaches about the violent experience of migration. This chapter also takes up the ways that stories of survival are told through the textiles and textures. Lastly, I discuss the potential contributions of quilting as method.

In the concluding chapter, “Implications for the Field and Movement Towards Rehumanizing Immigration Policy,” I bring together the importance of feeling physically and feeling emotionally the plight of migrants and promote immigration policy that frames migrants as human. I discuss the contributions of my dissertation to studying quilts and quilting in rhetoric and composition. Not only do I make the case for quilts as rhetorical objects of study and historic record but I also demonstrate how quilts function to teach about the ill effects of US immigration policy. Moreover, I also develop quilting as method to promote tactile and quantitative research as well as consider the pedagogical tools provided by quilting. This chapter ends with a big picture discussion of migrant deaths as part of the larger story about the plight of migrants worldwide in hopes that the US will reevaluate our immigration policy.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HISTORIES AND RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS OF QUILTS IN THE US

The dominant history of quilts in the US as told through printed literature parallels other histories in that it follows a Western trajectory—originating in Europe and moving to the US—and erases the histories of marginalized groups. As quilting has long been considered the work of the marginalized, specifically women, erasure of groups within quilt history further marginalizes such groups. Although more recent quilt literature does not engage these various histories, it does challenge Eurocentrism by revealing traditional rhetorical notions as insufficient when studying quilts. Therefore, this literature review first briefly addresses a Western, Eurocentric history as told in printed US texts. Then I move to examine literature concerning two groups of quilters—African American and slave quilts and NAMES quilts—that follow in the tradition of marginalized quilters by using their skills as quilters to address issues of their time. The immensely different contexts of time, place, and people involved in African American, Slave, and NAMES quilt projects necessitates a careful examination of each group of quilters and their distinct and overlapping histories. Such an examination reveals the common threads among scholarship about these marginalized groups but with a thorough focus on the elements of quilter, quilt, and quilting.

The scholarship examined here suggests 1) quilters are varied and often difficult to identify, and they complicate traditional notions of creator; 2) the purpose of quilts are to document modes of expression marginalized groups used to represent collective experiences as well as challenge oppressive institutions; 3) the practice of quilting became as important as the product of the quilt in building community and serving the quilter to care for herself. Scholarship on these marginalized groups thoroughly discuss the rhetorical import of quilts and quiltmaking resulting from the literal and figurative

comfort people find in a quilt. This literature review is specifically concerned with the rhetorical force and function of quilts and the material consequences of both quilting and quilts in everyday histories and lives.

### **From Historical and Documentary Quilt Texts to Quilt Scholarship**

The history of patchwork quilts in the US is presented, paradoxically, as a linear one. Many scholars continue to understand the history of quilts in the US as having a historical trajectory originating in the East, but not moving past that origin, and developing in Europe, mainly influenced by England (Webster, Finley, Shaw, Roberts). In other words, although the scholars discussed here nod to quilt and textile work found in Egypt and Syria, they do not develop the history of textiles in those places. Instead, quilt history is developed in places such as Europe, which is historically presented as intellectually sophisticated. As a result, the early scholarship here documenting the history of quilts and quilters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is Eurocentric and focuses on quilters as white women (usually middle class) but did not name quilters as such, which effectively erases influence of other quilt histories in places such as Syria and Egypt.

Three seminal works set the stage for texts about the history of quilts in the US and established two main assumptions that have endured, even in some contemporary quilt texts: 1) that history of quilts in the US follows a Western trajectory traced from Europe to the US and 2) that discussing quilts actually means discussing quilts made by white middle-class women. Quilt scholars commonly recognize the first history of quilting in the US as Marie D. Webster's book, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* (1915). Although in her first chapter, "Patchwork in Antiquity," she claims that spinning and weaving originated with the Phrygians (Armenia), the Chinese, and the

Egyptians, Webster quickly centers a Eurocentric history of patchwork. In her second chapter, “Patchwork and Quilting during the Middle Ages,” she claims that soldiers returning from the Crusades with “luxurious artifacts” from places like Syria initiated trade with Europe and stimulated the textile art in Western Europe. The trajectory of quilting that she traces moves through the third chapter “Patchwork and Quilting in Old England” to the fourth chapter “The Quilt in America.” Moreover, Webster attributes sole responsibility to the English and Dutch for introducing patchwork and quilting to the US, but she neglects to mention influences by other peoples who also moved to the US or already lived in the US. As the first major historical publication about quilting in the US, Webster’s book provided the Eurocentric historical perspective that would be reproduced for many years following.

Ruth E Finley’s book *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* (1929) follows a similar Western-centered trajectory as Webster’s while also making a nod to patchwork in Ancient Greece, India, and China. Finley’s history functions similarly to Webster’s in discussing only white women of New England, Pennsylvania, and the Southern US who were “settling” the West (39). During this early time of quilt literature, Finley distinctly contributes to the history of quilting by including an entire chapter about quilting bees: “starting from the grimness of economic need, the quilt became a social factor. Soon no function was more important than the quilting-bee, in town or country. For many years it was the most popular form of feminine hospitality” (33). Apparent in Finley’s work are connections between quilting (what was thought to be a utilitarian skill) and community, particularly a feminine community.

*The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America* (1935) by Carrie A. Hall and Rose G. Kretsinger is an important documentary text. The contents of this book are organized in three distinct parts: “History and Quilt Patches, Quilts—Antique and Modern, and Quilting and Quilting Designs.” Hall and Kretsinger build on the history and community focus of the last two books, and they contribute to the existing literature by discussing artistic production and quilt circulation, topics not previously addressed.

Commonly accepted as the first published historical texts in the US about quilts, and generally the most recognized in US quilt communities, these three texts were influential and innovative because they provided photos of quilts, and they named and categorized types of quilts. However, their effects of centering white middle class women as quintessential quilters, are enduring. Although none of these books specifically named the quilters discussed as white women (often middle class), the authors assumed the quilters they discussed were white and their readers were white. Hall and Kretsinger make this assumption apparent when they discuss the ways pioneer women learned quilting: “There were no schools of design open to our pioneer mothers” (260). The authors even use the pronoun “our” as an authorial gesture to show an assumed genealogy from which their readers (and most quilters) come. So although these three seminal texts were innovative and contribute to an important history, they also erased the textile and quilt work of other countries and other groups of people thereby reifying quilt culture as white and quilt history as Eurocentric.

Some contemporary texts such as *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society* (1987) by Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber, depart from reproducing a linear historical perspective of quilts as one of the first books

to recognize the white history of quilting. The authors claim, “In nineteenth-century America, women of every age, class, racial and ethnic background sewed. But an accurate and well-balanced representation of that history is made extremely difficult by the lack of textile and photographic evidence of poor white women and women of color” (14). These scholars not only acknowledge the part that non-white middle class women played in the history of quilting in the US, but they also do not relegate discussions of Native American quilters or slave quilters to chapters separate from history. Ferrero, Hedges and Silber present a more inclusive history of quilting alongside the history of the United States.

However, other contemporary texts such as *The Quilt: A History and Celebration of an American Art Form* (2007) by Elise Schebler Roberts reproduces the same Western trajectory and history as Webster. Her history chapter chronicles quilts becoming distinctly American and moving with pioneer women across the US, and the chapter ends without mentioning any other types of quilters. Non-white quilters are relegated to their own chapter “Quilting for Identity,” which discusses slave-made quilts, and American Indian quilts among others. Another contemporary text *Quilts: A Living Tradition* by Robert Shaw categorizes quilts in the book by history, contemporary quilts, “Other Ethnic and Cultural Traditions” and art quilts, clearly implying that “ethnic” or “cultural” quilts do not have a place in history nor are considered art. Shaw also parallels changes in literature with changes in art, claiming that the style of literature moved away from British to American as the quilters moved away from medallion quilts to block-style quilts (29). Although contemporary documentary quilt texts include Native American and African American quilts, they continue to produce a demarcated history that maintains

“American” to mean white middle class. This demarcated history reflects the ways that dominant power structures normalize Western culture.

As intellectuals expanded sites of study to include material culture and practices of people previously not included in scholarly studies, scholars began to examine quilt histories integral to understanding quilting in the US. As a result, literature concerning quilts shifted to scholarship critically analyzing and “recovering” *other* quilt histories. The shift in literature aligns with the history of the US, as civil rights movements and movements for Ethnic Studies ushered in the integration of more women and people of color in academia. New student populations shifted research to study groups of people not previously studied in a scholarly way, which prompted more studies of quilts made by various groups of people—native Americans, Slaves, African Americans, and other groups of peoples (MacDowell, Benberry, Vlach, Hedges). In her dissertation, *Memory, Identity, and the Rhetoric of Quilts*, J. Jane Amelon asserts “With the formation of the American Quilt Study Group (AQSG) in 1979, the scholarship of quilt history documenting the identity of quilt-makers and establishing the importance of the memory aspects within a quilt became secure” (63). Amelon points to the establishment of AQSG as a moment when quilt studies made its place in academia.

Moreover, material culture of marginalized groups gained importance in academia as scholars looked past traditional intellectuals’ histories to consider forms of expression rooted in broader traditions that were previously deemed not scholarly. MacDowell et al. claim “as scholars turned their attention to underrepresented voices and increasingly incorporated gender, ethnicity, and class into their work, they found that quilts provided important material for fundamental research as well as information about families, labor,

and communities that did not exist in other oral or written sources or more traditional archival records” (xv). Therefore, the establishment of AQSG alongside inclusion of underrepresented voices in academia facilitated a turn to study many groups of quilters and consider various influences on the material productions of all quilts made in the US (Hedges, Ferrero, Vlach).

Scholars discussing African American textile productions focused on collective experiences and contributions to North American culture in order to challenge common narratives that deny agency and rhetorical awareness to African American artists. In 1978 John Michael Vlach published *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, which disrupts axioms about the artistic work of African Americans. For example, he challenges the linear progress from craft to expertise, and he advocates studying not only objects and their makers but the historical and cultural context within which they are produced. Vlach claims that conducting such a study of Afro-American quilts can provide “an example of how European artifacts may be modified by African canons of design and thus stand as statements of cultural survival rather than surrender” (44). He acknowledges that the artistic productions of slaves could be both a task demanded of their masters and provide choices in technique and design. In 1991, Vlach published *By the Work of their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife*, in which he discusses various types of African American artistic productions. Examining textile work, he claims that one can observe more African influence in earlier quilts compared to contemporary quilts (while other scholars challenge this assertion). Other literatures during this time discussed quilts produced by African Americans, with contesting ideas about how to study African

American quilt contributions, which will be expanded later in this chapter (Cuesta Benberry 1992; Maude Southwell Wahlman 1993).

More recent scholars focus on two other groups of marginalized people—frontier women and Native American women quilters—to demonstrate how quilting facilitates collective memory building, relationship building through collaborative quilting, and communal cultural ties. Cynthia Culver Prescott discusses the value of quilting for settler women<sup>5</sup> in the American far West to maintain relationships among fellow settler women. Prescott claims that first-generation frontier women were lonely because they were separated by such distance, so “sharing sewing and quilting projects across miles and generations helped them to overcome feelings of isolation” (113). According to Prescott, women engaged in collective memory building by sharing scraps of clothing to remember one another by, and also writing to one another about their sewing projects (113). The second-generation of Western settlers then learned to quilt, which included them into “informal network of friendship and mutual assistance that their mothers and older sister had built on the frontier” (114). Prescott focuses on the fact that the second generation of women, despite having more time because of technological advances such as a sewing machine, had higher expectations of their domestic work because of increased access to consumer goods. Prescott focuses on the changing roles of Western women in the United States in relation to their domestic labor and the evolving economy of the country. Her scholarship provides an example of how white women settling in the Western US used

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<sup>5</sup> Although Prescott, as many of the scholars in this section, does not discuss white women explicitly, she makes assumptions about the general “women” she discusses that denote the group of quilters to be white frontiers women.

quilting as a way to build and maintain relationships with other white women and their families within a difficult and isolated frontier life.

Other scholars similarly speak to the social function of quilts for white women in US history as women gathered to quilt collectively, gave quilts as a token of friendship, and created quilts to build bonds among various women. Discussing quilting in Georgia, Patricia Hunt-Hurst claims that quilting “allowed women in rural communities to come together not only for the purpose of quilting but also to share news, pass on information, practice technique, and help friends or family members complete their warm covers for the year” (534). Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood assert that friendship quilts are “a utilitarian object that would still serve rhetorically as a mnemonically charged marker of friendship” (19). Beverly Gordon and Laurel Horton discuss quilting as an embodied family heritage, and Elaine Hedges discusses the origins of women’s work as cutting across class lines: “All women sewed; it was an experience they shared, and it could create common bonds” (8). Of course many scholars discuss quilting bees as gathering places for women quilters to quilt and bond (Webster, Callahan, Sohan, and Elsley). As women gathered to quilt together, they also shared news and built relationships. Moreover, the utilitarian object of a quilt also served as a reminder of friendships among quilters. These scholars cover the important history of white women in the US whose quilting served as a social connection with other white women, friends, and family.

Scholarship discussing Native American quilters provide an important perspective of how Native Americans include particular design choices and have particular uses for quilts that reflect their distinct cultural values (Shaw, Roberts, MacDowell, Carocci).

Many Native Americans in the United States initially learned quilting forcibly in mission schools and churches. However, in her chapter, “A Gathering of Cultural Expression: North American Indian and Native Hawaiian Quiltmaking,” Marsha L. MacDowell claims “the primary context for learning [quilting] quickly became the family” (16). She asserts that various Native North American tribes integrated design choices and uses that support their particular ways of life. For example, “The Odawa give quilts as gifts in naming ceremonies; the Ojibwa use quilts as a ground covering to protect a drum from contact with the earth; and the Sioux drape star quilts over their sweat lodges” (4). Moreover, MacDowell claims that “color choices often reflect the Native quilter’s close spiritual ties to the natural world. Blue, the color of the sky, is often the background of an eagle star quilt design. Yellow, red, and orange—colors associated with the sun or fire—are frequently used in star variations” (30). In her scholarship, MacDowell makes it clear that although Native Americans were forced to learn quilting, they later created quilts for their own particular uses, created quilts with intentional colors and designs, and quilted to maintain ties to their culture and people.

MacDowell’s collaborative scholarship expands her focus from general discussions of Native Americans and Native Hawaiians to more specific discussions of Native tribes in the US, all with a common focus on the communal learning process of quiltmaking. In *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst’s co-edited collection demonstrate the diversity of named groups that have extensive quilting traditions. Their collection covers Lakota Star Quilts (Beatrice Medicine—Sioux), Hawaiian Quilts (Elaine Zinna and Marsha L. MacDowell) Yupik Eskimo women (Ann Fienup-Riordan), Akwesasne quiltmakers (Alex Jacobs—

Mohawk), and Hopi baby-naming ceremonies (Marlene Sekaquaptewa—Hopi and Carolyn O' Bagy Davis) among others. Scholars such as Matthew Liebmann discuss the Lakota star quilt as an example of hybridity because, as previously stated, their colonizers forced them to learn quilting, but they established their own particular designs and uses (83-84). Other scholarship focuses on the benefits of quiltmaking for the Native American community as well as interviews and first-hand accounts of Native quilting experiences, (Child, Bol and Menard, Penman). Scholarship concerning Native American quilts is not as extensive as other groups, especially considering the history of quilting in Native communities.

Scholars discuss both the pragmatism and the repurposing of quilts and quilting, and the common purposes of building and maintaining community within groups of frontier and Native American women quilters. Most importantly, scholarship explains how all groups of quilters found particular significance in their design choices and uses of quilts, despite their specific challenges. Discussing quilting as historically produced by marginalized groups, Van E. Hillard says, “Quilting has been steeped in tiring labor, meticulous skill, and the kind of thoughtful creation that emerges from maximizing the effect of limited resources. Quilting is emblematic of clever frugality, and is a metaphor of survival in the face of oppression and neglect” (116). Hillard’s notions of quilting as laborious and strategic in the face of challenges is salient throughout quilt scholarship discussing various marginalized groups.

Although scholarship about quilts and quilters is vast and varied, the remainder of this literature review focuses on two distinct groups of quilters—slave and African American quilters as well as quilters of the NAMES quilt project, which memorializes

people with AIDS (PWA). These two groups not only have a substantive amount of scholarship written about them, but more specifically, they are the most common groups of quilters discussed within the field of rhetoric and composition—scholarship produced by rhetoric and composition scholars or published in rhetoric and composition journals<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the scholarship about these two groups is particularly interesting because scholars do not agree about many aspects of these quilts—whether the Underground Railroad Quilt code actually exists, whether the commodification of the NAMES quilts detracts from its effectiveness, etc. Therefore, this literature review takes up these two groups of quilters because of the amount of scholarship focusing on the rhetorical value—possibilities to analyze quilts as texts through a rhetorical lens and consider the composition of a quilt as purposefully created—of studying quilts and because of the interesting scholarly conversations surrounding these groups.

### **Contentious Discussions about African American and Slave Quilters**

African American quilters have a complex history in the US, and many Africans had experience with textile work before they were enslaved by Europeans and brought to the United States, a fact often overlooked by historical accounts (Benberry 23). Textile production generally and quilting specifically have maintained throughout the years after slavery as an African American practice of cultural and artistic production. The quilters of Gee's Bend continue to be scholarly areas of interest, as well as a sort of recovery/revisionist history of African American quilters. Because many scholars question the validity of oral histories and question the attribution of quilts to particular

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<sup>6</sup>Other scholarly discussions address the inclusion and significance of quilts in literary texts, the purpose of quilts, the quilting methods of various groups, as well as current theories of quilting in the machine age (de Caro, Jordan, and Roach; Elsley; Davis; Chave; and Brackman).

people or groups of people, African American and slave quilts have been a point of contention among academics. The literatures reviewed here focus on the rhetorical import of African American and slave-made quilts and discuss 1) the difficulty of attributing quilts to particular creators 2) how quilts as storytelling devices and maps/codes function as a symbol of resistance 3) the act of quilting as a spiritual process, an African American female literacy (defined by Richardson), and as an opportunity for imagination.

Scholars agree that slave women worked with textiles as their household work in the white owner's house, spinning and weaving to make cloth, and sewing and quilting (hooks 118). In fact, there were "seamstresses specifically bought and brought into a household because of their sewing skills. Often such sewing abilities were prominently advertised on slave sale handbills" (Benberry 24). In her book, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese extensively covers the roles of slave and white women in textile production, sewing and quilting on plantations. She claims that "the extent and nature of these forms of household production differed from one plantation to the next, particularly with regard to specialization, and according to location and period" (179).

According to Fox-Genovese, slave women and their mistresses often sewed together in order to complete the immense labor (at least on a large plantation) of making clothes and repairing clothes for slaves (120). Fox-Genovese recognizes the importance of sewing and quilting for both mistresses and slaves, but emphasizes pervasiveness among slaves: "Of the many kinds of labor that slave women performed in the house or in the fields, in the cabins and gathering places of the slave community, textile work alone touched the lives of all. Some of their skills had African roots; others were learned

from mistresses and overseers' wives" (183). Because textile work was part of their expected labor, women slaves gained the knowledge to sew often from their mistress, sometimes from fellow slaves, and then passed down through generations (Fox-Genovese 178, 183).

Just as they do with the histories of many oppressed and marginalized peoples, scholars dispute the histories of slave quilters because there is not sufficient documentation to identify the impact of slave quilters, and by sufficient I mean evidence that dominant powers deem valuable such as written text. Some scholars claim that it is difficult to identify slave-made quilts because the ones made under the supervision of the mistress was usually attributed to the mistress, and those made for slave use, were made from scraps and used until gone (Roberts 98). While others claim there is really no evidence to say who made the remaining quilts and for what purpose. Cuesta Benberry says that the surviving slave quilts, which now belong to slave owners' descendants, were always assumed to be made for the slave owners' house. The negligence, Benberry suggests results because, "Although few quilts constructed by slaves for personal use are known, attempts have been made to assign design characteristics to this body of largely invisible work. Assertions are made that quilts slaves produced for themselves differed greatly from quilts sewn for their masters' homes" (27). In other words, we do not know in what fashion slaves made quilts for themselves. Furthermore, Benberry suggests that the history of the surviving quilts is controlled by those who own them, the descendants of slave owners. The scholarship about slave quilters confirms that slaves quilted with advanced technical skills, but the joint work of the slave and mistress, as well as the

oppression by the mistress, provides no consensus on who created (authored) existing historical quilts.

Similarly, there is no consensus among scholars on the accuracy of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code. In their book, *Hidden in Plain View*, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard explain the Quilt Code as directions sewn into quilts that guided escaped slaves on their path north. Although there is no empirical evidence of this theory, Tobin and Dobard rely on the oral history of a woman. Scholars like Heather D. Russell acknowledge the value of the Quilt Code stating, “Fact or myth, people agree that the idea of the Quilt Code is compelling” (203). For this literature review, the Underground Railroad Quilt Code is useful in considering the idea of author/creator. The Quilt Code challenges the notion that slaves were passively waiting for white abolitionists to save them, and instead suggests that slaves were present in creating their own escape by authoring quilts with the Quilt Code (Tobin and Dobard 54).

Although Tobin and Dobard’s work tells a history with slaves as active participants, other scholars provide historical accounts do not erase the political and important role of black quilters (free and enslaved). In *The Quilt: A History and Celebration of an American Art Form*, Elise Schebler Roberts, discusses abolition and antislavery quilts under the chapter, “Quilting for Social Change.” She claims that white women abolitionists would make quilts to sell at fairs in order to raise funds for publications and to help slaves escape (77). However, the discussion of slave-made quilts are under the chapter, “Quilting for Identity.” Roberts presents the work of white quilters as political and having a material impact, while the work of slaves and former slaves is seen to be inconsequential for any greater good, reinforcing the role of slaves as passive

bystanders waiting to be rescued. Moreover, Roberts mentions the Quilt Code controversy in her book, but does not provide any evaluative comments about it and remains neutral.

Scholars do not agree upon many aspects of the authorship and validity of quilts associated with the Underground Railroad. However, Heather D. Russell provides insight when she says regardless of the controversy surrounding the quilts, “It is indeed the case that the aesthetic choices of black women quilt-makers do reflect a tendency to ‘follow no known pattern of quilt-making,’ and as such, reveal a great deal about how their work engages with forms of knowledge and power” (204). In other words, black women quilters show they have the ability to read their audience, understand the purpose, make stylistic choices based upon an assessment of their rhetorical situation.

Scholarship discussing the history of quilts in the US also complicates the author/creator role by demarcating “American” and “African American” quilt design. While the style of traditional patchwork quilts is thought to be highly skilled and of European descent, the style of crazy quilts is thought to be crafts pieced together with bright colors of African descent (Benberry 28). This can be seen in some of the scholarship on African American quilts previously mentioned, as well as the white history of quilts in the US separated from slave quilting in the US found in most general histories. However, Benberry explains the devastating effect of labeling American and African American in this way:

By accepting without question the designation of the traditional American patchwork quilt as European, we effectively eliminated any role of African Americans in the evolutionary process that marked the development of the

distinctively American patchwork quilt. By denying African-Americans their part in the evolutionary process, it became easier to promulgate a spurious history of African-American quiltmaking America. (28)

Scholars have discussed such promulgation of a particular white history that erases the contributions of people of color, across disciplines and globally. Discussing African Americans, both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison claim similar occurrences affect literature as the literary cannon long recognized in the US has not only had a Western trajectory moving from England to the US but also continued to include only white writers as part of the “American” literary cannon while other groups were labeled as hyphenated American or another category all together. Walker gives an example: after a reading on a college campus, an audience member asked what she thought was the main difference between literature written by black and by white Americans. Walker said she was more interested in “the way black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story—the same story, for the most part—with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. Until this is generally recognized, literature will always be broken into bits, black and white, and there will always be questions, wanting neat answers, such as this” (Walker 5). Although Walker is speaking to the particular question black and white writers, her belief that all writers are writing one immense story holds true for all groups of writers of color who are measured against a normalized white perspective.

Moreover, Morrison speaks to these broken bits, claiming that scholars intentionally agree that, “because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without

relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States” (Morrison 5). Both Morrison and Walker speak to the separation of Black or African American literature and American literature, which erases the presence of black people as a key part of the history of the US. This occurs similarly with quilt history. Scholars such as Benberry and Sohan ask that researchers carefully consider the history and nuance of people not deemed mainstream. Scholarship that discusses the central role of slaves as quiltmakers whom affected the transformation of quilts in the US heed Benberry’s suggestion to “listen to what African-American quiltmakers say about their work” because it is “not useful to view African American quilts merely as isolated fold art objects, divorced from the lives of blacks and the social, political and economic conditions under which they have lived” (16). The lives of slaves, their quilting abilities, and their contributions to American history are much more complex, much like the quilts they made.

### **Quilts as Storytelling Devices and Maps**

In her article, “The Rhetoric of Quilts: Creating Identity in African American Children’s Literature,” Olga Idriss Davis examines the rhetoric of quilts as storytelling devices of resistance. She discusses stories that use quilts centrally to tell stories concerning the Underground Rail Road and African American familial traditions. Discussing the fact that black women were hurled into the brutality of slavery and forced to design coping strategies, Davis says, “I contend that Black women maintained their centrality to the African American community by creating a cultural form of resistance that would transcend experience, reshape their world, and re-invent the form throughout generations” (68). She claims that quilts as storytelling devices played a role in this

cultural form of resistance. Moreover, Davis explains that a quilt functions subversively because it appeared beautiful and represented skill, but simultaneously “the weaving of stories into quilts became a way for Black women to defy the system of slavery” (68). According to Davis, the quilt is important because the process of weaving stories into a material product maintains African American cultural identity by passing down the skill of quilting through generations and also by passing down stories crafted by those (slave women) whose stories are not often heard. This last part is important because Davis claims that quilts as storytelling devices are particularly impactful on black women to maintain cultural identity. She says, “The rhetoric or narrative of the quilt, the, reveals life in America through the experience of Black women and their ability to transcend adversity” (75). Davis makes an important connection between narrative and rhetoric suggesting that the rhetorical import of quilts as storytelling devices lies in their function not as only telling stories but as telling stories that are strategically composed in order to influence others.

Scholars use the quilts of the Underground Railroad to discuss the function of quilts as maps and signs. According to some scholars, quilts created by slaves and others functioned as maps and instructions for slaves to escape slavery to the Northern United States or Canada. In their book, *Hidden in Plain View*, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard meticulously analyze design choices of quilts to theorize the codes employed by quilters. They claim that the Underground Railroad Quilt Code made each choice concerning the quilt—pattern, knotting, and order of display—a code for slaves to “read” and facilitated escape to the North. They state that “together, the quilt patterns as metaphors and as signs instructed the escaping slaves on how to prepare for escape, what

to do on the journey, and where to go” (70-71). Tobin and Dobard claim that slaves strategically crafted the Underground Railroad quilts in a fashion that may have appeared to be a traditional “American” patchwork pattern but were coded with directions for escape. Tobin and Dobard’s work maintains the value of understanding how slaves used quilts as maps: “The Quilt Code gives us access to some of the secrets still remaining about the early years of escape from the plantations. It allows us to see how ingenious were these fugitives in crafting their own escape. The code confirms the use of quilts as visual maps to freedom” (67). Quilts as maps coded to facilitate escape for slaves further expands an understanding of the history of slavery and the active place of slaves in their own escape.

Rhetoric and Composition scholar Adam Banks discusses the significance of African American design in the Underground Railroad quilts. He claims that the quilts functioned “through cultural mnemonic devices developed in Black culture through African retentions and American realities. The quilts worked so well as such a set of signs because of the ways their instructions and maps were couched in a visual language of the everyday” (124). Banks suggests that the context within which these quilts were created—a historical moment where African cultural identities and bodies struggled to survive and exist within violent American racist realities—necessarily influenced the choices slaves made when constructing their own strategic codes within accepted “American” style text(iles). Moreover, he contributes to scholarship concerning African American quilts by connecting the material object, everyday visual language, and specific cultural devices to argue for the effectiveness of the quilts.

Both Banks and Davis continue to explain how quilts as storytelling devices and as culturally specific devices function as a symbol of resistance. Davis explains the significance of viewing the function of a storytelling quilt as also resistant: “The idea of the quilt as a storytelling device for resistance illuminates the brilliance of slave women to preserve the quilt tradition, and to shape the future through rhetorical means of naming, locating experience, and recalling the past” (74). Considering African American traditions of quilting from this perspective within the history of slave quilts, Davis identifies a subversive practice that continues for black women to craft their own stories and futures. Integrating their resistance through storytelling within the material culture of quilting, quilters created an object that functioned as both/and: “The quilt represents, on one hand, the African tradition of folk art and embroidery and, on the other, a political symbol of resistance by Black women to the oppression in America of being both Black and female” (Davis 68). As a symbol of resistance, quilts allowed slave women to facilitate escape, pass along quilting skills and stories to other generations, preserve connections to their cultural identity, and even re-shape their world.

Banks also claims that the quilt was a tool used to resist the system of slavery. He claims that there is much to be learned from considering the Underground Railroad Quilt Code. He says, “The quilts also offer some more substantive lessons for an African American rhetoric of design: that messages, even explicit instructions on how tools might be used toward liberatory ends can be designed and built into the artifacts themselves, and that the most important technologies and uses to explore are often the everyday” (126). Banks proposes that scholars look at the everyday artifacts that oppressors thought unassuming (such as quilts) in order to understand how the oppressed built such artifacts

into survival, and even escape, tools. Providing this picture of quilts—as everyday text(iles) facilitating escape using “culturally mnemonic devices”—Banks solidifies an understanding of quilts as text(iles) resisting slavery.

### **Quilting as a Process, Literacy, and Opportunity**

Many scholars examine how quilts function as a communicators medium, and scholars such as bell hooks discuss how quilting functions as a spiritual practice. In her chapter “Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand,” hooks explains how learning to quilt and the quilting process is a more conscious process than some think. hooks says her Baba saw “quilting [as] a spiritual process where one learned surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go. This was the way she had learned to approach quilting from her mother. To her it was an art of stillness and concentration, a work which renewed the spirit” (116). hooks explains that some quilters claim quilting is a meditative practice, and when one considers the history within which African Americans have quilted, the idea that this labor could also bring a quietness otherwise not experienced, makes the act of quilting quite meditative by offering time to oneself, to be in one’s own head.

hooks explains that for rural women, like her baba, quilting functioned as a particularly spiritual process for working because their daily life was entrenched in work. hooks says, “Fundamentally in Baba’s mind quilting was women’s work, an activity that gave harmony and balance to the psyche. According to her, it was that aspect of a country woman’s work which enabled her to cease attending to the needs of others and ‘come back to herself.’ It was indeed ‘rest for the mind’” (116). Hooks’s claim that quilting was a spiritual process is specific to working, rural women like her baba because

the continued labor of quilting was different than the other gendered labor she performed in that it was seen as giving back to herself. Similar to hooks, Alice Walker discusses her mother's quilt work as a moment "to unravel her own private thoughts" (238) and suggests that the textile work of working, rural black women comes from "powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling" (239). Davis, hooks, and Walker discuss the function of quilting as a practice to maintain some aspects of African American female identity, and a connection to oneself.

Another way the function of quilting serves African American women is as a literacy. According to Elaine Richardson, in her article "'To Protect and Serve': African American Female Literacies," African American female literacies are "ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society" (680). She claims that technologies such as quilting are exploited so that African American women are able to strategically overcome their situation within an oppressive, patriarchal and racist society. Richardson's article mainly focuses on the usefulness of such a literacy to navigate educational institutions, but her work is valuable in thinking about how various African American female literacy practices have and continue to benefit black women. Considering quilting as an African American female literacy offers an understanding of the socio-historic context of quilts produced by black women and provides the opportunity for resistance by maintaining African American cultural identity and survival.

Promoting the imagination of black women is another function of quilting. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese extensively covers the roles of slave and white women sewing

and quilting on plantations. She claims that sewing under the mistress's directions was restrictive because the slave must follow a mold as to not waste materials. However, quilting often occurred with other slave women. Fox-Genovese states,

Quilting offered slave women the chance to exercise their own imaginations. No White woman dictated their complex patterns, even if the pieces with which they worked were white women's scraps. No outsider interfered with the ceaseless flow of the gossip in which they delighted and through which they wove their own view of the world that usually impinged so heavily on their lives. (184)

For slave women, quilting within their own community of slaves could possibly provide an opportunity to be creative and use their imagination to piece together the scraps they had. Although Fox-Genovese does not attempt to minimize the cruel reality of slave women's lives, she discusses quilting as a moment of possible independence with their own imaginations.

Moreover, this tradition of imagination continues as bell hooks claims, "Symbolically identifying a tradition of black female artistry, [the quilt] challenges the notion that creative black women are rare exceptions. We are deeply, passionately connected to black women whose aesthetics, whose commitment to ongoing creative work, inspires and sustains" (121). hooks reinforces that historically and currently black women are creative and skilled, and that their quilts are carefully crafted material expressions of their creativeness and imagination.

This scholarship on slave and African American quilters, quilts, and quilting demonstrates Hillard's previously stated point that quilters continue to be make quilts

purposefully and despite specific and violent contexts. Although a contemporary project, the NAMES quilt is similarly a result of a specific and violent context. This literature review does not attempt to compare these two disparate groups but offers connections salient in the literature. Therefore, scholarship on the NAMES project will also consider quilters, quilts, and quiltmaking to understand how scholarship about both groups of quilters discuss the rhetorical value of quilts.

### **The NAMES Project and its Multiple Quilters**

Quilters of the NAMES project from the beginning and even now carefully craft quilts by personalizing them with the names and belongings of people who have died from AIDS. Cleve Jones and Marvin Feldman originally created the NAMES project, which has inspired many other memorial quilt projects. The AIDS memorial quilt was first displayed in Washington D.C. in 1987 as a visual intervention into the Regan administration's refusal to publicly address AIDS and to fund HIV/AIDS research. As such an intervention, the quilt intended to bring awareness to deaths from AIDS. By the mid 1980's, mass media in the US had painted AIDS as a "gay" disease occurring more densely in particular geographic areas. In 1984 *Time Magazine* referred to San Francisco, a city known to have a large gay population, as "Ground Zero of the Plague" (Jones and Dawson 99). Although US Americans now understand AIDS not as a "gay" disease nor as a US-only disease, during the 1980s the US was just beginning to experience and understand AIDS, which led to stigma and rejection of those who had the disease by society and family members. Despite a better understanding of HIV/AIDS, people continue to die from the disease, and the quilt has now grown to "[m]ore than 48,000 individual 3-by-6-foot memorial panels—most commemorating the life of someone who

has died of AIDS” (“The AIDS Memorial Quilt”). The literatures reviewed here focus on the rhetorical import of the NAMES project and discuss 1) the varied and complicated author/audience as quilter 2) how NAMES quilts are crafted as resistance to political and social exclusion of people with AIDS (PWA) by naming and memorializing those who have suffered and died of AIDS and 3) the act of quilting as a communal practice that serves survivors through a grieving and healing process.

Because various quilters continue to contribute to this ever expanding project, the NAMES project has complicated the traditional notion of author. Carole Blair and Neil Michel cite other scholars calling the quilt “authorless,” but they recognize that really the quilt has “tens of thousand of “authors.”” They claim that “there is no author in the classic sense that offers unified interpretive authority” (604). Because the panels are created individually (or by individual groups of people) and then pieced together, the larger final product is multivocal and does not have a single creator. Michel and Blair’s assessment that the assembled quilt does not have one identifiable author is accurate, but other scholarship focuses the work of identifiable authors creating individual panels.

In his article, “The Politics of Loss and Its Remains in *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*,” Gust A. Yep discusses a documentary *Common Threads*, which focuses on five people represented in the quilt. His article examines the concepts of loss and remains in this documentary, and does not focus much on the creators of the panels. However, the documentary is based on the book *The Quilt: Stories from the Names Project* written by Cindy Ruskin, photographs by Matt Herron, and design by Deborah Zemke, which discusses various aspects of the quilt, documents photos of many panels, and details more about the creators of panels. For example, the book recognizes that

many of the quilters were new to making textile products: “A note from one novice apologetically explains that the panel is the wrong size because it shrank in the wash. ‘I felt that it would be best to leave it to you all to sew a straight line,’ says Maurice Higdon of Portland, who marked the three-inch hem margin with a pink pencil ‘rather than botch up, making it so that you all had to rip it out and re sew it’” (Ruskin, Herron and Zemke 10). Including such information in their book, the authors provide some idea as to who were the authors/creators of many panels.

Jones also elaborates on who is contributing to the quilt. Many scholars note a partner or parent making a panel for their loved one, but not many scholars discuss strangers making panels. Discussing letters he received after the first display, Jones says, “Some of the letters came from people who’d made quilts for a person they’d never known. ‘I’m just a housewife,’ write a woman from Nebraska. ‘I thought there would be no recognition from his family. I feel bad about that. I feel bad about all the people who die of AIDS that nobody knows’” (138). Friends, family, partners, and strangers alike author/create panels. However, beyond the panels, the “making” of the quilt further complicates the traditional notion of the author/creator.

Each panel is collaboratively or individually made and submitted to the NAMES project. From there, volunteers collaboratively alter or repair panels and then piece individual panels together to craft a quilt intended for public viewing (10 Ruskin, Herron and Zemke). Volunteers might then take panels apart and reassemble them differently for another showing. This collective assembly and reassembly complicates the notion of author/creator.

Blair and Michel discuss one aspect of this complication with terms from rhetorical studies: invention and reception. They claim that the invention and reception of the quilt are complex for three reasons. First, the people or person make a panel privately and then release it into public, “So the relatively private inventional creation of mourning becomes a part of a larger, more public performance, over which the individual panel designer wields no control” (604). The panel presented alongside other panels as a whole quilt in public can facilitate a reception by the audience that the individual panel author may or may not have intended when they individually created it in private. Second, the NAMES quilt is continually growing and unfinished. People continue to be memorialized, and the quilt continues to grow, which presents an ever-expanding message (604-605). And third, the signature square<sup>7</sup> facilitates an augmented text that visitors can engage with. Blair and Michel say that “an invited mode of reception becomes an inventional process, with visitors becoming rhetors,” and the squares receive a lot of attention as “visitors eagerly read the recorded reactions and messages for other visitors” (605). Blair and Michel believe that the line between invention and reception has been blurred with the audience (viewers) engaging with the signature square, and through that contribution, they arguably become part of the creator. Scholarship in this section addresses the various authors and quilters of the NAME project and suggests that quilters complicate traditional notions of author/audience and invention/reception.

### **The NAMES Quilts Resisting Exclusion of PWA**

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<sup>7</sup> Every quilt after the 1988 showing includes a signature square. This square came about accidentally when the original organizers included a small square of fabric on the quilt to include their names and a note. This idea stemmed from friendship squares, a tradition where sewers would leave their names on a small part of the quilt (Jones 166). However, viewers began to also leave notes and names on the small square of fabric, and the interaction began. Now you can see the signature squares throughout the display for viewers to leave their comments (Jones 167).

Through the literature concerning the NAMES quilt, three salient purposes are apparent: to raise awareness, to name publicly and to archive. Most of these scholars identify rhetorical contributions of the quilt, and Judy Elsely specifically claims that the quilt works as rhetoric because it “quite literally invites a reading—the displays constitute the leaves of an enormous textile text” (43). She compares the reading of the quilt to reading a written text (which she also compares quilts to literature throughout her work). Elsely provides a starting point to understand how quilts are rhetorical texts that the audience reads and interprets.

The main and initial purpose of the NAMES quilt, according to Cleve Jones, was to raise the awareness of politicians in order to gain more funding for AIDS research. When President Bill Clinton visited the quilt—the first US President to do so—in 1992, Jones said in a one-on-one conversation with the President, “What we need right now is to put a lot more money into research and medication funding. We need \$195 million more than you requested from Congress for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program” (Jones and Dawson 239). In this instance, Jones made clear that his intentions were more than to simply raise awareness but to raise awareness in order to also fundraise. Whether or not advocating for more money is the stated purpose of each quilter, the quilt project still works to raise awareness, which arguably continues to facilitate Jones’s initial impetus.

In his first hand account of creating the NAMES project, *Stitching a Revolution: The Making of an Activist*, Jones explains that while attempting to gain attention from lawmakers the NAMES quilt also functioned to challenge the grievability of PWA. Jones assigns culpability to the politicians for not doing what they could to fund AIDS research. He states, “I did and do believe the quilt is very much an accusation, bringing

evidence of the disaster to the doorstep of the people responsible for it. We have never depoliticized it to that extent. We want the government to act. The political message is that human life is sacred” (170). The government’s lack of action conveyed the sentiment that the lives of PWA were not worth grieving, but Jones wanted to gain awareness to show the number of lives lost to AIDS and to show that they too are human lives worth grieving.

Jones claims that the quilt didn’t accomplish what they intended for it to initially, but the outcome was powerful nonetheless due to the cumulative effects of an ongoing process of making and remaking. He says, “Later, as our initial hopes that we’d ignite a cure failed, we broadened the message to emphasize education as a means of dealing with the ongoing epidemic. The message we promoted was that of memory, both individual and in the collective national conscience” (169). The quilt was originally intended to raise awareness and raise money for research to cure AIDS, but ultimately it became a collective space to remember people not valued in life and not always grieved in death.

A secondary purpose of the quilts is to name people who have died of AIDS in order to humanize them and resist their erasure from social and political realms. Jones explains how incredibly dehumanizing and devaluing the death of a PWA could be: “If there was an obituary, and often there was not, it would describe the cause of death as cancer. The slate was wiped clean, as if this person had never been. Close friends were erased; lovers were never identified” (xv). The NAMES quilt project intended to name people dying of AIDS, which seems simple. However, at a time when homosexuality was not widely accepted and AIDS was a new epidemic, families of PWA often kept the person’s cause of death a secret. Jones claims some families were angry that their child’s

name was included in the quilt because they did not want others to know that is how their child died (xv). Jones shows how PWA who did not have an honest obituary or maybe did not have family to bury them were erased in their death but remembered in the quilt.

Although Jones states that many people claimed the quilt wasn't "doing" anything (169), such a statement underestimates the power of naming and humanizing. Judy Elsey claims that the NAMES project shows viewers that the deaths of PWA are not just numbers: "The NAMES project thus seeks to restore individuality and by extension, dignity to those who have died of AIDS" (42). She claims that because the NAMES quilt literally names PWA, the quilt identifies people individually, and this naming provides dignity to the dead. The strategy of naming is powerful, especially in death; it recognizes that a human life existed. This practice of naming PWA reifies Jones's claim that all human life is sacred.

Scholars Carole Blair and Neil Michel claim that the rhetorical power of naming and personalizing comes from the fact that visitors learn intimate details about the lives of the people named because a story is told not implied: "In the large majority of panels, names are named, but the names take on faces, personalities, and personal histories. In sum, private lives are displayed publicly, not by means of commemorative supplement, but by design of the memorial itself" (607). Many of the quilters display the intimate details of people's lives so that the death is more than a number or a name. For example, one of Jones's favorite panels said, "Jac Wall is my lover. Jac Wall had AIDS. Jac Wall died. I love Jac Wall. Jac Wall is a good guy. Jac Wall made me a better person . . . Jac Wall is my lover. Jac Wall loves. I miss Jac Wall. I will be with you soon" (Jones and Dawson 236-37). There are many stories of people viewing the quilt on display and

seeing a panel dedicated to someone they knew, often someone they didn't know had AIDS nor that they knew had died. However, in seeing the panel, the name and the person were recognizable, which speaks to Blair and Michel's point that the details were intimate. Functioning to humanize the lives of PWA, the quilts name a PWA and also tell a story about a that life.

The quilts also resist erasure of PWA through naming. Discussing quilts as text(iles), Judy Elsely echoes this point:

By focusing on community and emphasizing relationships—between people, panels, fabric—the quilt offers more than aesthetic values; it dissipates a monolithic and prejudicial central power into a myriad of individual voices, each claiming power for itself without setting up competition with others. Moreover, the many voices resist the silencing that constitutes the culture's most effective way to marginalize AIDS and PWAs. (46)

In other words, through identification and humanization, the quilts remind the viewers that they are human like the PWA and the quilts also provide a complex understanding of the various lives represented in the quilt. The quilt works to re-distribute the power a monolithic story can hold to empower each individual person and their story. Elsely suggests that the quilt functions to resist erasure of PWA by collectively recognizing their power and individually recognizing their differences.

The NAMES quilt also has a lasting purpose as an archive, which, according to Michael DeLuca, Christine Harold and Kenneth Rufo, “records and makes accessible a (partial, contingent) history, a history that is more than the sum of the parts on its

timeline” (627). DeLuca, Harold, and Rufo claim, “The Quilt is, fundamentally and from its conception an archive, an instrument of memory. This instrument does not gain its power, its authority, from its visibility” (648). They argue that the power of the NAMES quilt now lies in archiving of the massive project because as an archive, the quilt allows viewers to forget—because the quilt is not always visible but must be sought out in an online archive—and remember—because the extensive database allows one to search any panel (648). Not only does the quilt continue to build and exist, but it will “remain visible as a site, a pledge, and a technology of memory long after the cotton threads have worn bare” (648). All of the panels will forever be accessible and visible because they have been documented and archived online. Therefore, DeLuca, Harold, and Rufo claim the NAMES quilt serves a purpose as an archive to allow people to recall and remember their loved ones.

In his first-hand account of creating the NAMES project, Cleve Jones discusses the items included in the quilt to show how it functions as an archive of a particular person:

locks of hair, record albums, souvenir postcards, a Barbie doll, whistles, crystals, a motorcycle jacket, a tuxedo, a shard of glass, foam rubber french fries, toy cars, a thimble, a cowboy hat, teddy bears, a pink Lacoste shirt, a Buddhist’s saffron robe, and even a padded jock strap. Notes were scribbled in corners; others were sewn in. Some panels held the ashes of the people they memorialized.

(Jones and Dawson 134)

As a text documenting a particular historical moment, the quilt is akin to reading the everyday history of a PWA in a textile archive.

The scholarship discussed in this section addressed the various purposes of the NAMES quilt. The quilt intended to raise awareness in order to gain funding and challenge grievability, to name people in order to humanize them and resist their erasure, and to function as an archive ensuring that the panels memorializing people will always be accessible.

### **Quilting as a Communal Healing Practice for Survivors**

The history of quilting is a collaborative<sup>8</sup> one as women often shared the labor of completing a quilt, and the NAMES quilt project is situated within this history. Public Memory scholar Van E. Hillard discusses the choice of a quilt for the NAMES project as essential to its current significance of bringing people together to mourn people with AIDS. He claims that the act of quilting reflects this unity as well: “Quilt production processes also have rhetorical import, enacting powerful models of cooperation, collaboration, and communal making. As a recognizable cultural sign, the quilt may be America’s most knowable representation of the form and function of collective relationships” (112). Traditionally the act of quilting is considered a collaborative process, and as previously discussed, the quilting bee is one of the most known examples of how people, usually women, come together to complete quilts. As a project that is done collaboratively throughout the process—created, composed for display, and collectively experienced—the NAMES project ensures that the act of quilting is essential to its effectiveness in community building.

However, Hillard points out that “quilting” with this project seems to take on two different steps. The panel is made by an individual or group of people who decide they

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<sup>8</sup> This rich collaborative history of quilters of color is not fleshed out in the works mentioned in this literature review and is generally unaccounted for in quilt history.

want to memorialize a life. Then the panel is “indiscriminately” sewn together with other panels for display. He says, “The AIDS quilt has been produced, in other words, by a collection rather than an authentic community of makers, and this distinction is echoed in its final product—in the varied, but non-unified diversity of its assemblage of individual panels. The AIDS quilt isn’t so much composed as it is accumulated” (120). Hillard claims that the act of putting panels together does not reflect traditional quilting and, therefore, does not produce the same communal qualities. The action of making the individual panel does. Because individual panels include meaningful objects and personal symbology sewn into the panel, Hillard says, “in the production of individual panels, the symbolic actions of traditional quilting survive: collaborative decision-making, work by an interested community to determine the shape of public representation, the application of textual, tactile, and visual forms to signal ideologic significance” (120). Generally, scholars do not discuss these two different steps of “quilting,” and they discuss the quilts based on the traditional notion of quilting as a communal practice.

Blair and Michel also argue that the act of memorializing lives both constitutes and serves survivors. They state, “Public memorials clearly are always about relationships. In the absence of survivor memories, there would be no public memorials” (609). It becomes apparent that without the death of a PWA there wouldn’t be a surviving family member, partner, or friend, so the survivor subject position is constituted through their relationship with the deceased. Moreover, the panel memorials wouldn’t exist without survivors to make them, more specifically survivors who deem the lives of the deceased worth memorializing and grieving. Blair and Michel claim that typically public memorials serve the survivors, and they believe that the NAMES quilt is particularly

evident of this because it is not simply for the survivors, but “its rhetoric is very much *about* them” (609 emphasis original). Evidence of their claim is seen in panels that express how the survivor feels about the deceased or the survivor’s relationship to the deceased. Again, scholars claim the intimate details of each panel contributes to the rhetorical effectiveness of the quilt. Blair and Michel don’t exactly discuss the process of quilting, but they do imply how the action of completing a panel creates the survivor and serves the survivor. Therefore, they believe in the process of creating a panel functions in a particular way for the survivors.

Similarly, Judy Elsley claims that making a panel offers survivors an opportunity to create a material object they have control over in a situation where they feel helpless as caretakers of PWA. The survivors often take it upon themselves to complete a quilt in some attempt to “do” something for their loved one. As a result, “Grief is, to some extent, formalized and ritualized so that it becomes if not manageable, at least acceptable” (Elsley 42). Elsley suggests that the act of quilting for the NAMES project provides a possibility for healing or working through grief, whether a group is completing a panel for their closest friend or a stranger is completing a panel for someone they never knew.

Elsley suggests that quilting for the NAMES project is a means by which to heal and promote change, so the quilt is not necessarily the end product. Comparing the NAMES quilters and other groups advocating change, Elsley says the quilters “show that the sewing itself, the finished quilt, the material product, is of secondary importance to the process of healing, community and transformation it represents” (72). In other words, creating a panel provides an avenue for healing, so that change is the important outcome,

not the material product. The material product in this case reflects the healing that has taken place for the quilter and/or for the community.

Although Blair and Michel and Elsley discuss how making a panel can serve the survivor, Elsely makes this claim with a positive focus while Michel and Blair do so with caution. Blair and Michel critique the language of therapy when used as a metaphor because it “depoliticizes the AIDS Memorial Quilt, rendering it as comforting and curative *rather than* as angry and confrontational” (610-12 emphasis original). They focus on not taking the metaphor too far so that the quilt is seen as facilitating productive mourning and political activism. Their viewpoint speaks to the importance of understanding the possibilities and limitations of creating a panel or quilting for the NAMES project.

### **Conclusion: The Productive Possibilities of Quilts**

The scholarship discussed here demonstrates that quilters, quilts, and quilting complicate traditional conceptions of author and purpose, suggesting that traditional rhetorical notions are insufficient to understand quilts and quiltmaking. In addition, the scholarship discussed here suggests that quilters throughout history made quilts to challenge oppressive institutions and provide a space for marginalized people to speak. Groups discussed here, African American and slave quilters and quilters for the NAMES project, show a long history of people using textile productions to facilitate material consequences—e.g. Underground Rail Road quilts to help slaves escape and NAMES quilts to raise funding for AIDS research. These projects provide an understanding of the resourcefulness of people who did not have a space to speak in public and recognized places. Moreover, these projects show that the choice to speak is personal and political.

As MacDowell et al. assert, “Among the fabric arts, quilts by far have been the vehicle used most frequently by women to express their allegiances, critiques, and experiences” (xiv). MacDowell et al. point to the rhetorical nature of quilts, and Davis reinforces this rhetorical nature as texts that convey a “legacy of a people struggling for symbols of expression through pieces of cloth and a myriad of colors” (68). The literature covering these two groups of quilters provides insight into a history specifically concerned with the rhetorical force and function of quilts and the material consequences of both quilting and quilts in everyday lives.

Literature about these quilters provides historical context and also demonstrates the need for more work examining the rhetorical value of quilts. In their recent book, *Quilts and Human Rights*, MacDowell et al. claim that a few publications examine human rights and quilts, but “[n]o one publication describes the global history of quiltmaking and its connections to human rights, describes and analyzes the various ways in which quilts have been used to address human rights issues, or connects the personal stories of the makers with the material objects” (xvi). My dissertation centers as its site a quilt project that is concerned with human rights and quilts, considering the implications of migration as a global issue. Volunteer quilters with the Migrant Quilt Project make quilts out of clothing left behind by migrants in the Arizona desert. In their quilts, these quilter-activists name each migrant death recovered in the Tucson sector of the desert for each year since 2001. This dissertation considers the human rights issue of migration as expressed in quilts and connects personal stories of the quilters alongside an analysis of the quilts. Although the rhetorical power of quilts has been established, reinforced, and challenged throughout the literature previously discussed, I make connections between

issues of migration, personal stories of quilter-activists, and the textile production of quilts in order to argue that the Migrant Quilt Project challenges the notion of non-grievable migrant lives. The quilts of the Migrant Quilt Project disrupt migrant narratives to argue for grieving migrant lives.

Although the quilts may not appear to facilitate incredible change, their effectiveness lies in considering them within a larger context of quilts advocating change. As MacDowell et al. claim about the large collection of human rights quilts in their book, “Each of these textiles marks a small step toward fostering positive change and providing a means to record the histories and memories of individuals whose stories traditionally are overlooked and under-recorded. When one considers the extraordinary number of quilts that have been connected to human rights, there is no doubt that the cumulative impact of this longstanding and widespread activity have been profound and substantial” (MacDowell et al. 4). Although the consequences may seem small or trivial, they are not because the labor of each quilt reflects a deep commitment to change. Quilts emerge in this dissertation as powerful public counter-histories, memorializing and story-telling crafts, archives, works of (folk) art and of subversion and resistance all in the name of documenting and grieving migrant deaths.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ACTIVIST-QUILTERS CHALLENGE

#### THE NOTION OF UNGRIEVABLE LIVES

Returning to Judith Butler’s considerations of how lives are determined worth grieving and under what social conditions, this chapter focuses on the dead, specifically the migrants who do not make it across the unforgiving Arizona desert. This chapter

expands the focus from *social death* (Cacho) to the literal dead. Increased migrant deaths accompanied by criminalizing anti-immigrant legislation and discourses contribute to what Butler refers to as lives deemed ungrievable. The high mortality rate of migrants crossing the Sonoran Desert reflects the policy and discourse that suggest these lives don't matter and are not worth grieving. However, the quilts examined here suggest otherwise and demonstrate how activists argue for the grievability of migrant lives. This chapter looks to material cultural productions as meaning-making practices that memorialize migrant lives within a geographical and historical context that creates and sustains the conditions for migrant deaths. Specifically, I explore the Migrant Quilt Project to understand the rhetorical force and function of memorializing quilts in neoliberal contexts where migrant lives are devalued and migrant deaths appear insignificant. I offer an analysis of the quilts themselves and consider, too, the insights offered by quilt-makers to reveal how the project humanizes and memorializes migrant deaths to challenge the notion of ungrievable lives. An analysis of the quilts and interviews with the quilters demonstrate how the work of the Migrant Quilt Project may seem inconsequential but can collectively facilitate meaningful social change.

The quilts of the Migrant Quilt Project are most dynamic when viewed in person. The sheer size of the quilts, the large number of named and unnamed migrants included, and the intricate techniques displayed in the quilts are arresting; they are capable of making the viewer take a breath and reflect on the deaths of migrants. Each quilt is made from clothing, but the quilter decides how they will use the clothing to compose their quilt. Interviews with quilters and visual rhetorical analysis of the quilts reveal that the quilters carefully employ rhetorical strategies to humanize migrant lives through

(counter) narratives that memorialize migrant lives to resist erasure and raise awareness of what the quilters term the “reality” of human migration. I argue that these goals ultimately challenge dominant narratives of migrants to assert the grievability of migrant lives.

### **The Migrant Quilt Project**

This chapter focuses on The Migrant Quilt Project, an ongoing textile project facilitated by the volunteer group Los Desconocidos, which means “the unknown” in Spanish and refers to the idea of lives lived and deaths endured anonymously or without recognition. This group of volunteers from southern Arizona is constituted by community members who go out into the desert just south of Tucson and collect items such as trash, clothing, backpacks, etc., left behind at lay-up sites<sup>9</sup> by migrants crossing along the US-Mexico border. The group discards trash and recycling and donates the collected clothing to be used in creating quilts for the Migrant Quilt Project. Although little to nothing is known about the migrants who leave the clothing behind, the quilts made from the clothing memorialize migrant lives lost in the desert by naming each dead migrant documented by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME). The project allows anyone to adopt a quilt (complete a quilt). The only requirement is that each panel includes “the names of individuals [migrants] who died in a specific year in a specific sector” (“About”). The quilts vary in their alignment with traditional quilting; some are patchwork quilts with embroidered names completed by one quilter and others use glued materials, embellishments, and craft paint, collectively pieced together. The Migrant Quilt Project intends to memorialize and honor each undocumented border

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<sup>9</sup> Places where migrants stop to rest, possibly shaded or near water left behind by humanitarian groups.

crosser whose remains are recovered in the Tucson sector by year. Quilts name each migrant or at the very least, name migrants as desconocido/a. The database documenting UBCs started in 2000, and the Migrant Quilt Project intends to complete a quilt for every year since 2001. According to quilter Peggy Hazard, volunteer quilters have completed 13 quilts and are currently completing two quilts to total 15 quilts documenting migrant deaths from 2001-2016.

Jody Ipsen, who started the Migrant Quilt Project in 2008, says she got the idea to name and honor dead migrants from the NAMES project. Cleve Jones and Marvin Feldman created the NAMES project in the mid 1980s, which made quilts to memorialize people who died of AIDS. The AIDS memorial quilt was first displayed in Washington D.C. in 1987 as a visual intervention into the Regan administration's refusal both to publicly address AIDS and to fund HIV/AIDS research. As such an intervention, the quilt intended to bring awareness to deaths from AIDS. The quilt has now grown to "[m]ore than 48,000 individual 3-by-6-foot memorial panels—most commemorating the life of someone who has died of AIDS" ("The AIDS Memorial Quilt"), and it has inspired many memorial quilt projects such as the Migrant Quilt Project.

Ipsen liked that the NAMES project honored one name with one quilt, but because she runs the project with her own money and without a non-profit status, Ipsen says 5,000-6,000 quilts to memorialize each migrant death was not feasible for the project. She decided that completing one quilt annually would produce a manageable number of quilts to memorialize migrant deaths (Ipsen 2). The Migrant Quilt Project, like the NAMES project, uses quilts to provide "a place of dignity for a people who'd been shunned in life and erased in death" (Jones and Dawson 169). The NAMES project and

the Migrant Quilt Project memorialize through naming the dead in order to humanize them and resist their erasure from social and political realms. Discussing the NAMES project, Carole Blair and Neil Michel claim that the rhetorical power of naming and personalizing comes from the fact that visitors learn intimate details about the lives of the people named because a story is told not implied: “In the large majority of panels, names are named, but the names take on faces, personalities, and personal histories. In sum, private lives are displayed publicly, not by means of commemorative supplement, but by design of the memorial itself” (607). Many of the NAMES quilts display intimate details of people’s lives so that the death is more than a number or a name, and the Migrant Quilt Project followed this concept by incorporating clothing and other details of migrant lives and deaths.

Similar to the AIDS quilt, many quilts of the Migrant Quilt Project use the dimensions of 3-by-6 feet for the completed quilt design, which is roughly the same size as a coffin. Using this size serves a specific function when the NAMES quilts are laid out on a lawn because viewers approach the coffin-sized quilt and look down on it the way they might a coffin. The same effect may be lost with the Migrant Quilt Project because the quilts are often shown hanging. However, the intention of the 3-by-6 feet size is the same: to replicate the experience of approaching a standard-sized coffin. The political nature of the AIDS quilt set a precedent that allows other memorial quilts to be seen, because of their medium as quilts, as advancing a political statement. Therefore, considering the history of the NAMES quilt as a project that protested the erasure of people and raised awareness about policy, the Migrant Quilt Project chose the medium of

quilts strategically, already situating the quilt within a history of quilts as critical, political, and rhetorical text(iles).

People often respond to the material productions of women historically and currently by asking, “what can quilts actually *do?*,” in this case about migrant deaths. This response not only minimizes the immense labor it takes to complete a quilt, but it also disregards the productive possibilities of material objects to affect social change. In their interviews, quilters of the Migrant Quilt Project explain how they respond to similar negative statements about their work and the positive impact they intend to make. Interviews of the quilters demonstrate how an average person responds to a particular feeling through action. The quilters here understand the negative effects of policy, and they show that average people can act to raise awareness and educate others. Most importantly, in a neoliberal context where having “real” effects can seem impossible, the quilters prove that their work contribute to meaningful change.

The quilters interviewed for this chapter have completed or are in the process of completing a quilt for the Migrant Quilt Project. I interviewed them during the spring of 2016, and each quilter discussed their involvement with the project. They have varied but knowledgeable backgrounds in textiles, quilt history, creative writing, and curating, and they have varied experience quilting, from beginning level to expert level. Each of the quilters expresses a deep commitment to raising awareness about the plight of migrants and migrant deaths in Southern Arizona. Jody Ipsen is the founder of the Los Desconocidos group, and she started the Migrant Quilt Project. She has a background in creative writing and is currently completing a quilt for the project. Ipsen resides between Utah, where she is also writing a book, and Tucson, Arizona. With an extensive quilting

background, Peggy Hazard collaboratively completed one quilt, and she was a curator for the Tohono Chul Park for many years. Jennifer Eschedor completed two quilts individually for the Migrant Quilt Project and has a background in quilting and textiles. Both Eschedor and Hazard reside in Tucson, Arizona, and are involved in the local community. I interviewed Hazard at her house, Eschedor over the phone, and Ipsen over video call, and I recorded each interview with a digital recorder. Although I had a list of predetermined questions, I also asked follow-up questions and let the conversation take us to new directions.

### **Constructing (Counter) Narratives to Humanize Migrant Lives**

#### *Legible clothing*

In the quilt they completed for 2005-2006, quilters Peggy Hazard, Suzanne Hesh, and Alice Vinson incorporate clothing to humanize migrants, thereby challenging a dominant narrative claiming that migrants are criminals and therefore not worthy of empathy. Because the quilters left the material legible as clothing, seeing the clothing reminds the viewer that the materials come from people who risk their lives crossing the desert. The durable, cotton clothing survives desert elements to be collected by the volunteer group, and most of the checkered and plaid collared work shirts, as well as the denim, are some shade of blue that vary from medium indigo to light denim, making the quilt appear from a distance as mostly blue. Up close, the viewer can see the varied fabrics in color, shape, and the viewer can recognize the checkered and plaid material in this quilt are from collared, button-up shirts. For example, a detached collar from a sky blue shirt with thin white stripes is stretched out in the lower left section of the quilt, and parts of the front buttoned placket from the same shirt is found throughout the quilt.

Although quilters could have cut and discarded the seams to only use flat, seamless material, the quilters instead left parts of the shirt such as the collar, cuff, and placket legible as clothing. The quilters also strategically deconstructed<sup>10</sup> and positioned jeans in their quilt. Throughout, you can see the full back pocket of a pair of jeans, as well as an unmistakable front pocket with the rivets in place around the iconic tiny pocket watch pocket. These parts of the jeans are recognizable as distinctly jean pants, not just denim material.

The deconstructed clothing reminds the viewer that the clothing comes from people and asks viewers to reframe migrants as humans first, not as criminals first. In her work, Lisa Cacho asserts that being an “illegal alien” is a de facto status crime, where “others’ perception that a person of a certain status is certain to commit future crimes and may well have already committed crimes unwitnessed” (43). In other words, a person is criminalized whether or not they’ve committed a crime, and are less likely to receive empathy because of their perceived criminal status. Many people see migrants this way and therefore have little sympathy for their deaths when crossing. In fact, Ipsen recounted an interaction with a group of women who were viewing a migrant quilt, and they said to Ipsen “That’s Mexico’s problem. . . . It’s against the law. They’re illegals; they’re crossing” (12). This is an example of how people, specifically US citizens, lack empathy for migrants because they see migrants through the lens of a de facto status crime.

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<sup>10</sup> This term is used in sewing communities to reference the taking apart of clothing, sometimes at the seams and left legible as clothing and other times to get the most material out of the clothing. A DIY movement promotes the deconstruction and reconstruction or repurposing of clothing found in thrift stores or in one’s own closet. For more information, see Rannels and Meng, Rannels and Alvarado, and Meyrich.

Because Operation Streamline<sup>11</sup> increased the number of criminal migrants by changing unauthorized crossing from a civil to criminal offence, I argue that regardless of a perceived or actual criminal status, migrant deaths should be a concern to the US public, period.

The deconstructed clothing in this quilt promotes such an empathetic view by challenging a perceived criminal status and promoting a common human view. Instead of focusing on the aesthetic composition of the pieces of material as with a traditional quilt, this quilt asks the viewer to think more critically about what they are looking at and consider the significance of the pieces of material. Seeing the clothing allows viewers to imagine the migrant who wore the clothing, promoting a view of migrants as individual people. The collared shirts are similar to the ones my dad wears. The jean pockets look just like a pair of jeans I own. Imagining the individual instead of a generalized, criminalized group can be impactful in asking the viewer to be empathetic towards migrants. The clothing then challenges the dominant narrative that labels migrants as criminals first and promotes a narrative of migrants as people.

Moreover, when the viewer knows that the specific type of clothing used in the quilt was left behind by migrants in the desert, the viewer considers the harsh conditions that migrants experience during their journey. Shirts like the ones found in this quilt are often used to work outside because collared, button-up shirts guard a person's arms and neck from the sun. The shades of blue with white in the checkered and plaid material are light so the shirts do not attract heat as dark shirts would nor did they easily soil as white

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<sup>11</sup> Operation Streamline imposed a six-month maximum sentence for first-time offenders and migrants who are attempting re-entry after being previously deported can carry a two-year sentence, but up to 20 years if they have a prior record (Lydgate 3).

shirts would. In his book *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, Jason De León presents semifictionalized ethnography—a narrative that is a composite drawn from interviews and field observations, and interactions with Border Patrol agents. In this narrative, De León chronicles a five-day journey of migrants to provide his reader with an idea of the experience of crossing. In this narrative, De León points to the importance of jeans in this journey stating,

Everyone's pant legs are decorated with yellowed cholla spines. When Carlos reaches down to remove some of them, they immediately stick to his fingertips. The jumping cactus is as alive as any animal out here. Lupe has tried to crawl under a giant mesquite tree to avoid the minefield of cacti. Her tanned arms are a mess of red swollen scratches. No one thought to wear a long-sleeve shirt in this natural laboratory where lessons in the evolutionary biology of extreme environments are learned firsthand.

(51)

The cactus De León is referring to is called the jumping cholla, which gets its name because the stems easily detach when brushed against, and the spines can be very painful to remove. Therefore, jeans and long sleeve shirts are important when crossing through the desert to protect a migrant from the sun as well as terrain that does not have a worn path to make avoiding cacti easy. Considering that migrants must plan for the desert environment, suggests that the US governments also planned for the migrants to encounter the harsh desert environment. There is no consensus about the intention behind the Border Patrol strategy of Prevention Through Deterrence. While advocacy groups say this strategy intentionally causes migrant deaths, the US government says the strategy

only aims to deter migrants. Then, when migrants die crossing, their death is framed as caused by their own risky choice. However, when viewers see these quilts made from the clothing migrants wore, they will come to understand how the desert contributes to violence against migrants<sup>12</sup>.

Including collared shirts and jeans can remind the viewer of or elicit the viewer to question the incredibly harsh travel experience migrants anticipate on their journey, challenging a dominant narrative about the “unintended” deaths caused by Prevention Through Deterrence. In asking the viewer to consider the migrant’s journey, the clothing humanizes the migrants and allows the viewer to imagine the person who wore the clothing. Leaving the collared shirts and jeans legible as clothing and including these specific pieces of clothing humanizes migrants by asking the viewer to empathize with and imagine the situation of migrants as fellow human beings.

### *Bordados*

Another striking element incorporated into this quilt are bordados<sup>13</sup>, which humanize migrants by visually representing their connection to loved ones in an important material object, challenging the dominant narrative that migrants carelessly leave trash in the desert. Bordados, which means embroidery in Spanish, are beautifully embroidered cloths used to wrap tortillas or food in, “handmade, generally by women, moms, and grandmas, and sweethearts” (Hazard 3). The bordados spread throughout this quilt include bright pink, yellow, fuchsia, and red flowers embroidered onto a white cloth; some display a single flower on its kelly green or chartreuse stem and others

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<sup>12</sup> See De León for a compelling argument that dead bodies resulting from Prevention Through Deterrence are a key component of the current border security strategy.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on bordados in the artwork of Valarie James, see Regan article.

display an entire bouquet pouring out of a large brown or bright yellow vase. Upon first glance and without any background information, the bordados seem to be another cloth left behind in the desert and included in the quilt, but the context is important to understand the significance of these cloths.

Because of these personal materials, the viewers can make a human connection between themselves and migrants. Even a viewer who has minimal knowledge of bordados understands that someone who cared about a traveling migrant packed and wrapped food for the migrant's journey. A person spent time and labor to embroider this piece of cloth with flowers, a simple and aesthetically pleasing image<sup>14</sup> for a traveling migrant. Anyone who engages in textile production understands the time and labor that goes into even these seemingly small projects. A person also spent time and labor to make the food packed in the bordado and send with the migrant for their journey. Facing a bordado explains to the viewer that migrants crossing the Arizona desert are someone's friend and someone's family, and they have at least one person in their life who cares enough to pack food for the journey. This reminds viewers of the quilts that the migrants who left behind bordados in the desert are humans who also left behind family and friends in their home country.

De León claims that many people refer to the articles left behind in the desert as trash. Both De León (170) and Robert Neustadt (1) recall stories of people connecting the trash left behind to the people who leave it behind, and both the trash and people are seen by some US citizens as worthless, easily discarded, and tarnishing the US. In Neustadt's

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<sup>14</sup> Other quilts in the Migrant Quilt Project include bordados with powerful personalized messages embroidered into them. For example, one says, "Duerme amor mio," and another says "Contigo en la distancia."

article about art made from collected migrant objects, an opponent of migration claims that making art from migrant “trash” is a desperate attempt to show respect for migrants because they are unworthy of being represented through art because of their criminal status (1). De León argues that using the term “trash” does not account for the fact that some items are not intended to be discarded and that studying such items from an archeologist’s perspective reveals much about the crossing process (170). Moreover, De León says that “a common racist assertion by anti-immigrant activists is that border crossers, and Latinos in general, have little regard for the natural environment and are prone to litter” (191). However, in his research, he found that migrants felt sorry for throwing stuff on the ground and usually did it because the items were no longer of use, they could no longer carry the heavy pack, or they unintentionally left items behind. My point in referring to the work of Neustadt and De León is to establish that a dominant narrative about the items migrants leave behind not only continues to express disdain for migrants, but also suggests that they do not care about the items left behind. However, when the viewer of this quilt sees the bordados, this dominant narrative is challenged.

In discussing her quilt, Hazard stresses her goals creating the quilt were to challenge dominant stories and get people to think about the plight of migrants. She says, “I think people need to hear, to know the other side, the real *human side* of the story. I’m trying to balance the rhetoric” (5 Emphasis mine). When Hazard says the “human side,” I interpret that as she wants people to look past the discussions of legality, criminality, and Americanness and consider stories about people, about human suffering. She is appealing to the viewer by humanizing the migrants to present a different viewpoint in hopes they may consider multiple viewpoints of the immigration discussion. As a meaningful and

sentimental gift to migrants, bordados convey the human side of the story, suggesting that migrants do not want to intentionally leave items in the desert but do out of the necessity of the journey. The incorporation of bordados has a humanizing effect for the viewer because the bordado serves as a reminder that the migrants are people with people who love them. When the viewer sees the borados as “traces of real people’s lives, traces of migrants’ desperate struggle for survival” (5), then narratives that claim migrants carelessly discard trash in the desert is challenged and migrants can be viewed as humans.

### *Skulls*

In another quilt of the Migrant Quilt Project, Jennifer Eschedor (2012-2013) also uses mostly denim to humanize and memorialize migrants. However, Eschedor crafts her quilt to tell the story of death, which challenges a dominant narrative that migrant deaths are not a problem of US citizens. She chose a skull to represent each death and included the cause of death on the quilt as well as the name or desconocido/a of each migrant. The 190 skulls are dispersed in ten rows with no set columns. Various shades of denim make up this quilt, some dark indigo and some regular colored blue jeans. Upon first glance, the quilt is jarring because it appears morbid and it also does not look much like a traditional quilt because of the plain blue jean background and cluttered skulls. Eschedor uses the skulls to force the viewer to piece together a gruesome narrative of migrant deaths.

Eschedor strategically uses the skulls to make migrant death front and center as the topic addressed in her quilt. In an interview with Peggy Hazard, Eschedor says, “I really wanted the skull to be used as a sign of death. Nothing cutesy; I didn’t want it to be

like Día de los Muertos in any way; I just wanted it to be dead” (24 Qtd in Hazard “What the Eye Doesn’t See”). Eschedor uses the term skull and so does Hazard in her article about the Migrant Quilt Project. In conversations with the quilters, they’ve expressed a critical perspective on the spectacle of Día de los Muertos, especially in Tucson. For this reason, I believe they use the term skull and not calavera. Similarly, for me the term calavera signals a celebration and honoring of death associated with Día de los Muertos, in both a positive and in a flippant way. However, I believe Eschedor’s intent was not to celebrate but as she says, to simply show death. Her representation of each migrant death as a skull elicits viewers to consider migrant deaths as part of the larger immigration conversation. Eschedor’s use of skulls functions to remind the viewer that regardless of outward appearances or individual experiences, each human eventually dies and that what is left behind, our bones, are the same.

Because common ceremonies of death do not include viewing a skull, facing the material remains of death in the quilt reminds the viewer of the reality of mortality. When viewers see the skulls, they consider not only death but what happens beyond death. Often, after a ceremony of death, we do not think of how long until the body decomposes to a skeleton, or once ashes are collected, we do not think of their form before we collected the powder. However, considering the last material instantiation of a human, the skeleton, provides an eerie thought. A viewer can’t help but connect the skull to the migrant clothing, which allows the viewer to contemplate how the migrants listed on the quilt were found in the desert. Were they decomposing bodies or only skeletal remains when found? Were they identified through dental records or identification found on their person. Were they even identified?

Eschedor explains how she contemplates the death of migrants when she completes her quilt. She says, “I got a little freaked out handling the clothing both times, because you can’t help but try to envision the people who wore the clothing and what their life stories were. I mean, clothing is . . . they’re very personal articles. Yeah. That’s just on a *very human level* that’s difficult. I just kept hoping that they were still alive and this was just their clothes ditched in the desert” (6 Emphasis mine). In discussing the feeling and reality of working with clothing from migrants, Eschedor considers the intimacy of clothing, and contemplates whether the migrant who wore the clothing she handled was still alive. She expresses that the clothing affects her at a human level, which is the same effect she wanted the skulls to accomplish. Her response to the clothing reinforces the possible response of viewers, connecting the clothing of migrants to the deaths of migrants represented in the skulls. Paralleling the skull of a migrant and clothing of the migrant, elicits a feeling of humanizing migrants and reminds the viewer that humans wore these clothes and humans died in the desert.

The skulls are overwhelming in number and appear cluttered, conveying the sheer number of deaths that year. Eschedor uses the skulls to place death front and center, which functions strategically to make the viewer consider the humanity of each person who died. Ultimately, the viewer is forced to face the topic of migrant deaths directly, and through humanizing the death of migrants, the skulls challenge the idea that migrant deaths are not the problems of US citizens, and ask the viewer to consider why so many people dying.

### **Resisting Erasure by Memorializing Migrant Lives**

#### *Naming*

An element that all of the quilts of the Migrant Quilt Project have in common is the strategy of naming migrants. Because the NAMES<sup>15</sup> quilts inspired Ipsen, she decided that The Migrant Quilt Project would use the strategy of naming, to focus on restoring individuality and by extension dignity to the dead (Elsley 42). The naming of migrants is important because they often do not receive burial or memorial services nor public obituaries. They often do not have a way to recognize their death occurred. Naming migrants in the quilts functions to resist the erasure of migrants in multiple ways: literal physical erasure of the body, erasure through not allowing funeral rites, and erasure as proof of the violent US policy.

For De León, the migrant deaths in the desert represent a form of necroviolence—violence enacted on bodies beyond death that is “offensive, sacreligious, or inhumane” (69). Although he argues that Necroviolence is blamed on the desert that was strategically employed by Border Patrol policies, I focus here on some of the ways that necroviolence attempts to erase migrant lives and deaths. Because often the bodies of migrants are lost to the desert elements and animals, there is not an identifiable body left. De León states that “The erasure of a body also prevents the necessary funeral rites associated with mourning from taking place” (71), and this state of not knowing what happened to a loved one leaves the family of migrants not able to move through a grief process. This necroviolence actually keeps the family from experiencing proper grieving. So when an actual body or enough physical evidence of a body can be erased, it also results in the inability to grieve and mourn that same person. Moreover, De León claims that “The complete destruction of a corpse constitutes the most complex and durable form of

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<sup>15</sup> See discussion in chapter two about the details of the NAMES project.

necroviolences humans have yet invented. The lack of body prevents a proper burial for the dead, but also allows the perpetrators of violence plausible deniability” (71). In other words, when the physical body is erased, and the family cannot claim that their family was lost to the desert, so the culpability of the desert, US policy, and Border Patrol policy is evaded. If the body is not found, it cannot, according to statistics measured by institutions, be claimed as a death resulting from broken US policy.

The strategy of naming in the Migrant Quilt Project works against this necroviolence by resisting erasure. Naming is powerful, especially in death; it recognizes that a human life existed. The migrant quilt project includes names of migrants but also includes desconocido/a (unknown) on the quilt. Including the unknown or unidentified recognizing even those who are not identified. This number of documented deaths from the PCOME is not completely accurate in accounting for all deaths as they “only account for those bodies that have been found and recovered from the U.S. side of the border” (Colibricenter.org “factsheets”). Between 1990 and 2012, 34% of UBC cases remain unidentified (Martínez et. Al. 14), so it is clear that even the lists of migrant deaths do not include the bodies that have literally been erased because the bones did not consist of an identifiable body or the bones were never found. Considering this, it is significant that even the unknown migrants are memorialized and named to the extent that they could be. Naming even the desconocidos/as says people’s lives and deaths will not be erased.

Moreover, naming challenges generalizing migrants in death. Speaking of the NAMES quilt, but applicable to the Migrant Quilt Project, Judy Elsely says, “[b]y focusing on community and emphasizing relationships—between people, panels, fabric—the quilt offers more than aesthetic values; it dissipates a monolith” because recognizing

the individual resists silencing even in death (46). Many migrants go unidentified and are at least named as desconocido/a or unknown. This is the most public recognition that person will get to memorialize their life so naming them resists their erasure from the public sphere.

### *Cause of death*

The cause of death is included in text below each skull to speak to the varied ways migrants die. Such details often convey the brutality of migrant deaths. The quilters also include visual of death such as the sun representing death from heat, the water washed over a skull representing death from drowning, the gun with blood around a skull representing death from a gunshot, and a noose representing death from hanging. These visual representations alongside the stated cause of death provides a complete picture for the viewer to imagine each migrant death. For example, instead of imagining a migrant dying from heat exhaustion or dehydration, the viewer knows that the cause of death is blunt trauma to the head or strangulation, both likely caused by another person. Then the viewer understands the violence migrants experience on their journey. Together, the skull, the stated cause of death, and the visual representation of death forces the viewer to make connections and construct narratives about migrant deaths. Recognizing the brutal deaths of migrants also memorializes their lives, acknowledging the precarity of their lives and deaths.

Knowing the cause of death forces viewers to think about all of the possible dangers migrants face. The power of including the cause of death and constructing a violent and true narrative of migrant death is that it connects the violence migrants experience in life with causes of their deaths. Judith Butler asserts “it is not that mourning

is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (XVIII-XIX). Part of the work that the Migrant Quilt Project does is this. In arguing for the grievability of migrant deaths, they are also bringing attention to the violence of migrant lives because as long as their lives are deemed not grievable in death, their lives will continue to be devalued in life. Violent portrayals of migrant deaths in the quilt facilitates such a conversation. The cause of death along with visual representations of the death function to make the viewer imagine the migrant’s death, not just a number, and consider the grievability of migrant deaths.

### **Raising Awareness of “Reality”**

In her interview, Ipsen elaborated on the mission that is shared on the website of Los Desconocidos, which claims that the mission of the quilts is “to raise awareness about the causes of migration and the deleterious U.S. foreign and domestic policies that have created the immigration crisis” (“About”). Ipsen claims that many people don’t understand how the US has contributed to the reasons migrants leave their home countries. She says, “We always look to Mexico and Central America and say, these countries need to get their socioeconomic, business-related industries off the ground and create jobs for themselves in their home countries” (Ipsen 3). Ipsen points to small-scale farmers to claim that the US is the one who has “actually taken away those opportunities of trade” (Ipsen 3). In other parts of her interview, Ipsen points to policies such as NAFTA and CAFTA-DR, as well as US involvement in the Guatemalan Civil War, as instances of the US contributing to the terrible conditions that migrants are fleeing. According to Ipsen, the project helps the general public understand how the US causes the very migration it opposes. Ipsen suggests that the US applies the neoliberal notion of

personal responsibility<sup>16</sup> to entire countries, blaming them for their own economic problems and absolving the US of any contribution to damaging the economy of Central and South American countries.

The Los Desconocidos website claims they are “an organization of like minded environmentalist, humanitarians, social justice advocates, artists, quilters and individuals who care deeply about the injustice of migration in a global economy” (“About”). Considering their stated mission and self-identification, this group and their intentions with the Migrant Quilt Project are clearly political. The self-identification is key in deciphering the place from which the Migrant Quilt Project speaks. The organization brings together varied experiences, knowledges, and expertise, but they are also brought together by one central issue: migration on a world scale and in relation to capitalism. They are critical of global policy and aim to raise awareness about how policy and economy contribute to the *why* of migration as well as the effects of militarization.

Their interviews elaborate and expose how migration is viewed in varied ways. Jody Ipsen clearly understands the local migration at the US-Mexico border within a larger context of migration across the world. She says, “We are starting to see global migration all over the world with Syrian refugees and people from Africa coming to Greece and other countries in Europe, fleeing war and poverty. It’s just not a U.S. crisis anymore and I don’t think it ever has been” (Ipsen 8). She continues stating that people have been migrating for thousands of years, just like other mammals (Ipsen 8-9). She understood the incredible loss of migrant lives in her local community within the larger

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the relationship between privatization and personal responsibility see Duggan.

context of migrant deaths throughout the world, and in response, started the Migrant Quilt Project.

Peggy Hazard claims that her views changed dramatically *after* becoming involved with the project. She says that now “anybody that will let me talk to them, I will talk their ear off about this, because I didn’t realize was I just didn’t realize the extent, and the reality of what was happening. I knew that it was something, I just didn’t know enough about it, and seeing the list that we were given . . .” (Hazard 4). When Hazard says list, she is referring to the list of names of migrant deaths for the assigned year of her quilt. These two responses from the quilters provides more information about the background of the Los Desconocidos group. While Ipsen started the Migrant Quilt Project in response to her understanding of migrant deaths in Arizona, Hazard came to this understanding after becoming involved with the project. The perspectives of the quilters show that although they started at different points of understanding, they both responded with action, involvement, and education of anyone who will listen to them. The Los Desconocidos self identification facilitates an understanding of how the message of the Migrant Quilt Project —migrant deaths should be grieved and memorialized— facilitates the purpose of Los Desconocidos—to raise awareness about the terrible effects of immigration policies.

Both Hazard and Ipsen mentioned negative responses from viewers of the quilts, either claiming that the quilts are not art, or that the topic of immigration does not belong in quilt showings. Ipsen says at one particular showing a group of women responded in a hostile manner claiming “they’re illegals, have no business in our country, it’s against the law” (12). She claims that the women did not understand “the root causes of migration”

because conversations addressing the causes occur within intellectual circles, but not within mainstream media outlets (12). Despite negative responses from people who lack a complex understanding of immigration, Ipsen wants to engage people and is willing to make people uncomfortable so that they question why migrants are dying in the desert. She says, “I’m willing to force people to question what our role is directly related to the crisis. It’s uncomfortable for them. I have talked with a lot of people who get really squirmish and are uncomfortable looking at the quilts and always wanting to debate me and talk to me about being anti-American” (11). Ipsen’s commitment to produce textiles that challenge and educate people follows in the history of quilts and textiles as powerful material objects. In fact, considering the needle as pen, Pristash et al. claim that women have engaged “with needlework as a form of rhetoric with the potential to shape identity, build community, and prompt engagement with social action” (14). In her interview Ipsen expresses a commitment to become involved in her community to promote action and change through quilts.

Eschedor said it was important for her to convey that “these were real people with real families, with real histories that died in just a simple attempt at freedom and the potential to better their lives. I mean, that’s pretty darn huge if you ask me” (4). She wanted to convey the intimacy and emotion she felt handling the clothes to the viewer. Her honest response reveals that even the quilters felt connected to the migrants as humans through their clothing.

Similar to Eschedor’s experience Hazard stated that “The reality of seeing that blew me away, and then handling the clothing, that was very emotional, even though we knew they weren’t from dead bodies, we knew the clothing wasn’t from dead bodies, but

you couldn't help associating the clothes with the names" (4). Hazard's point is important because as she states, the viewer knows the clothing did not come directly from the dead migrants listed by the PCOME but making that association is powerful. Moreover, Hazard speaks to the emotional labor of working with these clothes. She says, "When we were distributing the clothes, Alice picked up a little pair of 12 months sized overalls, and she just broke down in tears. The others of us too, this is the reality, these are from a baby that was out there" (8). Interviews with the quilters provides an emotional viewpoint of how the clothing works to humanize the migrants for the quilters who already believe the lives are grievable. Their responses also speak to the emotional labor of completing a quilt for the Migrant Quilt Project. Each quilter says they cry at some point or multiple points during the quilting process because the emotional connection with dead migrants they are memorializing.

In interviews, the quilters provided insight into how they see the quilts functioning to memorialize migrants. Ipsen believes the quilts will have lasting impact documenting current events:

I really feel like these names, in the Tucson sector . . . [they] are going to become a part of an historical event, a historical crisis that took place that will speak volumes for the deleterious policies that the United States have [*sic*] been involved in with creating the trade agreement, overturning President Árbenz in Guatemala and different other historical things we've been involved in that are just very, very painfully ugly that have created that immigration equation. Yes, I think that this will allow these quilts to speak on their own about these policies. (11)

Ipsen's viewpoint sees beyond the specific migrant lives named in the quilts. She sees them as part of a larger context of migration and international policy that forces people to move and to risk their lives in that movement. She believes the quilts function as historical record, an archive<sup>17</sup>, to document the current atrocities of migration.

Hazard focuses on the personal aspect that the quilts memorialize by naming the dead. She says, "[Migrants are] definitely invisible, so many people don't even realize what's going on, and then there are just these unnamed illegal alien criminals, like Donald Trump, they're rapists, and criminals right? That's what people think, and this shows that they're human beings, they're just like us. It is a way to memorialize, and honor their lives" (11). Hazard directly states that the quilts attempt to humanize migrants to challenge ideas of migrants as "illegal criminals" Interestingly Hazard continues stating, "Who knows? Maybe some of these people are criminals and rapists that are on our quilts, we don't know. All we have are names, but I tend to believe that a lot of them are just folks. There definitely is the memorial, and also I do see the quilts as historic documents that represent a time, and a place, and what's happening" (11). While Hazard pauses to say that maybe the migrants memorialized in the quilts are criminals, but she does not stop to say they shouldn't be memorialized if they are criminals. Her way of thinking is not common in discussions about immigration, which tends to create a hierarchy of migrants worthy of citizenship with criminals at the bottom. Hazard does not play into considerations of relational value. As Lisa Cacho claims, the value ascribed to lives within a neoliberal context is always relational. In other words, to ascribe value to a devalued population, this population must be evaluated in relation to other devalued

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<sup>17</sup> For more on the NAMES quilt as an archive see DeLuca, Harold, and Rufo.

groups according to a normative criteria (31). Peggy does not suggest that if the migrants on the quilt were criminals, they are not worthy of memorializing. Her statement shows that regardless of the details of the person's life, they are worth memorializing in the Migrant Quilt Project. Each of the quilters discussed their perceived reality of the causes of migration, the experiences of migrants, and the causes of migrant deaths. The quilters saw the clothing in the quilts and their composition of the quilts as telling a story about the unknown realities of migrant lives.

### **On Continuing: Quilts, Death, and Persistence**

The evocative power of the quilts is difficult to explain through language, and is something that must be felt, must be experienced. The first time I saw photos of the quilts, I was overcome with emotion seeing each individual name of migrants found dead in the Tucson sector. The first time I saw the quilts in person, my eyes welled up with tears as I touched the clothing; my chest tightened and my heart ached at the sight of so many "desconocido." Working with this project for almost two years, I continue to be awestruck by the power of the quilts. A visual analysis of these two quilts provides insight into how the quilters composed material texts to humanize and memorialize migrant lives in order to argue for their grievability. The quilts result in legible clothing telling stories of fragmented lives and gruesome deaths. Because the Migrant Quilt Project is an ongoing one, the narratives that continue to be told within the quilts are important in order to memorialize lives that tend to be deemed not grievable.

The quilters will continue to make quilts memorializing migrants as long as migrants continue to die. As quilters who advocate awareness and value memorialization, they believe the quilts are important to document migrant deaths and promote change.

Hazard says “I don’t think the immigration issue is going away . . . I do hope the visuals will have the power to perhaps soften people’s hearts a little bit about what’s going on, and help us find a middle ground on this story” (13). Statements such as Hazard’s demonstrate the commitment of the activist-quilters to facilitating change through their quilts. In their interviews, quilters elaborate on their feelings and their actions to promote change even within a neoliberal American society where the validity of their work is challenged because it doesn’t *do* much.

While Ipsen wants to directly engage in conversations challenging opposition, Hazard takes a different approach. She claims that she’s not even sure that she wants to be an activist out in the streets protesting, but she says, “I’m happy to use my own talents, and my own voice to help get the word out, and I really believe in what the quilt project is doing to get the word out . . .” (4 Hazard). Despite the negative responses, Hazard wants to do what she can to inform others about migrant deaths in the Arizona desert. As Maureen Goggin asserts, “Historically needlework has offered an alternative rhetorical space for those who have been denied participation in dominant discourses” (90). Although Hazard has not necessarily been denied participation, she expresses a desire to use her quilting skills to make a difference with the tools and voice that she has, which is not in a dominant space such as law or policy.

Scholars benefit from examining quilts as material cultural productions because of the resilient history of quilts and quilters. Van E. Hillard reminds us that, “Quilting has been steeped in tiring labor, meticulous skill, and the kind of thoughtful creation that emerges from maximizing the effect of limited resources. Quilting is emblematic of clever frugality, and is a metaphor of survival in the face of oppression and neglect”

(116). Quilts will carry on the rhetorical significance of resourcefulness despite marginalization and oppression. They function as a useful metaphor but also as an informative site of analysis, as they reflect the marginalized voices and spaces of cultural production. In a recently published extensive collection of human rights quilts, MacDowell et al. claim that, “Each of these textiles marks a small step toward fostering positive change and providing a means to record the histories and memories of individuals whose stories traditionally are overlooked and under-recorded (4). Similarly, when considered individually, the quilts of Migrant Quilt Project may have a seemingly insignificant impact on migrant deaths. However, the power of each quilt is broadened through the collective work of the project. MacDowell et al. claims that when one considers the total number of quilts, “the cumulative impact of this longstanding and widespread activity have been profound and substantial” (4). The work of the Migrant Quilt Project is profound and substantial because it continues to humanize and memorialize lives otherwise deemed not grievable.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### QUILTING AS METHOD; QUILTER AS RESEARCHER

I first started thinking about quilting as a method when I encountered a discussion joining quilting and researching in the introduction of *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln briefly discuss the researcher as bricoleur and quilt maker assembling or piecing together research (4). They claim “the quilter stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together. This process creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience” (5). My methods in the previous chapter employ this theoretical notion of researcher as quilt maker, piecing

together analysis of quilts and the voices of quilters. This chapter focuses on the practice of quilting as researching. To theorize quilting as a method, this chapter focuses on creating a quilt for the Migrant Quilt Project and exploring the value of composing text(iles) as contributing to scholarly inquiry.

Quilting as a feminist qualitative research method facilitates a nuanced understanding of the research questions about migrants and migrant representation. Considering quilting as a method offers three particular insights: First, it challenges traditional concepts of research and rigor to expand those concepts to consider myself and my readers complicit in the plight of migrants. Second, it facilitates a dialectical research process that promotes an always changing perspective and research trajectory. This dialectical process expands understanding of the migrant experience as a violent and incredibly difficult journey. Third, this approach facilitates a thoughtful awareness when representing data that asks for the composition to reflect newly presented data. Quilting as a research method enables me to understand how, despite many variables working against them, migrants continue to migrate as people have always done, not just for a “better life” but to survive. I first trace my familial history and the decision to study this project because it is important to understand that textile labor has been important throughout my life. In other words, my relationship to this project is not solely through the lens of academic work but also through my lifelong personal experiences. Then I examine how scholarship concerning quilting, mostly as a metaphor for research, falls short of developing quilting as a method of research. Lastly I discuss three contributions that *quilting as method* makes to feminist qualitative methods, broadly to scholarly inquiry and specifically to my project.

## **Coming into the Fold: Tracing a Textile Familial History**

My mom, Christine Moreno, is a self-taught seamstress. She taught herself to sew in her teenage years so that she could make clothes for herself, her sisters, and her mom. As the middle child of five, my mom only got new things when the family could afford new things for my mom and both of her older sisters. By sewing her own clothing, my mom had new clothes. The sound of a sewing machine at medium pace is the peaceful sound that filled my childhood. To this day, I push the sewing pedal at that same pace, no slower and no faster, because the sound brings me comfort. My mom ensured that my brother and I always had the best costumes at Halloween, and that my pants were always just the right length despite my short height. As a single mom, she worked full time, got us to our extracurricular activities, and still stayed up late nights sewing a Halloween costume or a dress for an upcoming school dance. She taught me to sew the same way she taught me to cook, without explicit instructions, by letting me watch and engage while she was doing it.

By the time I reached adulthood, I knew how to sew, but I couldn't tell you exactly how to thread a bobbin or what basting was. In other words, I had the knowledge to complete the action, but I did not have the language or theoretical understanding of advanced sewers. As I entered the dissertation stage of my Ph.D., I sought a tactile action to give me a break from reading and writing, so my mom gave me a sewing machine for Christmas and sewing lessons later that summer. What an incredible teacher she is, although an accountant by profession. She taught me with ease and reassured me that if I make a mistake, I can just rip the seam and try again. She made sewing a fun and low-stakes activity.

I never thought I would start quilting in my 30s, and I surely never thought I would ever be a quilter. My stepmom, Kathryn Arellano, was not a quilter, but she came from a family of feminist quilters from northeastern Oklahoma. When Kathy passed three years ago, I inherited a beautiful shadow box dedicated to my great grandmother and a double wedding ring quilt that my grandmother made for my stepmom and dad when they married. I recall being 10 years old and spending the weekends at my grandparents' house, sleeping in their spare room with one of my grandmother's homemade quilts. Because these material objects have what Nora Ruth Roberts calls "heirloom-value," a sentimental value that links one to their familial history, inheriting them has led me to deeply contemplate relationships between people and things, especially in death. I inherited many objects from my stepmom including cherished handwritten cards from her. These objects matter to me in ways that I never imagined they would, for they bring her into my everyday thinking. Both my mom and stepmom made their ways in the world as single moms and feminists, and they passed along sewing and quilting which brings my head and my heart to my current research on quilts.

The Migrant Quilt project was brought to my attention by Adela Licona when she shared a newspaper article with me as I was considering sites of analysis for my dissertation. *Tucson Weekly* covered an exhibit of quilts at the Tucson Meet Yourself event, which is one of a few public showings of the quilts. I read the article and then moved on to explore the website of the organization. As I looked through the Los Desconocidos website, I was overcome with emotion seeing each individual name of the migrants found dead in the Tucson desert sector. I experienced for the first time the evocative power of these quilts. My eyes welled up with tears as I read each name or

desconocido on the quilts. My chest tightened and my heart ached at the sight of so many “desconocido.” At this moment I decided to write about this project because I knew that others must feel this ache too. I believe that in feeling this pain, viewers would also come to understand the experiences of the dead. Through the material objects memorializing migrant deaths, the viewer connects their emotion to the experiences of migrants.

When I initially decided to focus this dissertation solely on the Migrant Quilt Project, I intended to simply study the quilts as texts. However, when I first met Peggy Hazard to view the quilts in person, she asked if I would be interested in completing a quilt. I said yes, without much thought about my limited sewing skills nor how the quilt would or could be a part of my dissertation project. Within minutes, Peggy handed me a list of names from 2002-2003 and some simple parameters. She called Jenny Eschedor to say I would stop by in a few minutes to pick up the clothing. I stopped at Jenny’s house and she took me into her studio workspace. She placed a plastic tub on the table and began to pull out clothing that the group had gathered for the quilts at lay-up sites<sup>18</sup> in the desert. I had no idea what I was doing, so I picked a couple of jeans and a few other interesting articles. Jenny put them in a black garbage bag and sent me on my way. And just like that, I was brought into the fold of the Migrant Quilt Project in a way that has changed my life and the direction of my research and scholarship. Although I didn’t know it at the time, the quilters were demonstrating the communal power of quilting. By bringing me into their circle of friends, they not only taught me about quilting, but also about issues of migration. They were my first exposure to understand that creating a quilt would provide knowledges about migration that I did not expect to encounter.

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<sup>18</sup> Sites where migrants rest and often leave items behind to lighten their load for the remainder of the journey after crossing the border.

## Stitching Together Quilting and Research

As I began the journey of quilting and interviewing quilters, I started to research connections between quilting and academic research. In researching this connection, I found that scholars have discussed quilts and quilting as a method of scholarly research and not just the subject of study. While some discuss quilting as a useful metaphor for qualitative or scientific research, others use making a virtual quilt as a feminist research method. Well-known scholars such as Slavoj Žižek and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use quilt or quilting as a metaphor for understanding small parts of the larger theoretical conception of their work. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek uses the concept of quilting as a metaphor to show how the parts of an ideological system are pieced together so that “they become parts of the structured network of meaning” (87). In their influential work, Deleuze and Guattari use quilts as a metaphor for making space comparable to embroidering insofar as patchwork is not read linearly from top to bottom. (476-477). Many scholars find these theoretical metaphors useful (see Saukko, Koelsch), and I have often been pointed to the work of Žižek and Deleuze and Guattari. However, I do not find their metaphors useful in understanding quilts as a mode of research. Because I am more concerned with the physical act of quilting and the material product of a quilt relate to the process and products of research. As I will discuss, the scholarship that considers quilts and quilting as a frame for scholarly does not really discuss quilting (in a traditional sense as pieced and sewn) as a research method.

### *Quilting as a Metaphor for Research*

Scholars often compare the action of quilting to another action. Many scholars use quilting as a metaphor to compare quilting and researching. In the introduction to *The*

*Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln dedicate a short section to “The Qualitative Researcher-as-Bricoleur and Quilt Maker.” They touch on the idea of the bricoleur or quilt maker as researcher, piecing together parts of research and using available strategies and methods (4). They speak of the methodological, theoretical, interpretive, and political bricoleur. Although Denzin and Lincoln thoughtfully make connections between the end result of an interpretive bricoleur’s labor, a quilt-like product that connects parts to the whole (5-6), they do not develop the metaphor of quilting as a way of coming to know felt experience. Instead they compare methodological practices of qualitative research to quilt making and a researcher to a quilter. This lack of engagement with the experience of quilts and quiltmaking is evident in the work of Leigh Ausband, quilter and novice researcher. Ausband compares quilting and researching by noting the parallels between the quilt process—planning, cutting, sewing, quilting, and binding—with the qualitative research process—initial planning, collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. Ausband uses these parallels as an example of how expanding the ideas of research to include familiar modes of making can help novice researchers clarify their processes. Working in the hard sciences, Maura Flannery uses the metaphor of quilting to describe scientific inquiry. She claims this metaphor can provide a feminist view of science that challenges the typical masculine metaphors.

#### *Metaphorical Quilting of Narratives*

Scholars also use the metaphor of quilting as a way to understand the piecing together of narratives. For example, Paula Saukko uses a quilting framework to piece together interviews with anorexic women. She makes “authorial stitches,” which she defines as “quote,” visible by placing different stories side by side and then by stitching

these stories together (303-304). She provides a more thorough understanding of their stories individually and also as part of a larger narrative about anorexia. Other scholars have used untraditional formats to highlight the stitching together of texts. Anne Bamford interviewed accomplished primary art teachers and used themes, spacing, and font to creatively piece together the narratives of the teachers. She metaphorically created a quilt with the experiences of teachers in order to present narratives in a manner that allows the researcher to see the patterns of different perspectives on the profession.

### *Virtual and Physical Quilting of Narratives*

Scholarship in the fields of psychology, education, and public health centers around the research potential in creating a virtual and actual quilt. For example, Lori E. Koelsch created a virtual quilt (online with a linked interface) to represent the stories of women she interviewed who “had experienced unwanted sexual activity, but did not subsequently label this activity as sexual assault or rape”<sup>19</sup> (824). Koelsch frames the stories within what she calls “Good Woman Discourses”—contradictory discourses that subordinate women, but also endorse liberal ideas of autonomy and entitlement to self-gratifying sex and relationships. Koelsch makes astute connections between the quilt metaphor and her research. She states, “[l]ike physical batting, discourses are often rendered invisible, but they are ‘seen’ by those who know they are there” (828).

Connections such as these show the usefulness of the metaphor when expanded past superficial parallels to consider quilting as a way of making connections visible.

Koelsch explains that virtual quilts help qualitative researchers and participants see “the

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<sup>19</sup> Koelsch claims that the women interviewed had nonconsensual/unwanted sexual experiences, but the women did not label these experiences as sexual assault or rape. Koelsch states that some experiences aligned with common definitions of sexual assault or rape, while other experiences didn't. However, none of the interviewees labeled the experience as assaults.

patchwork quilt metaphor is a means to present participant data as both unique and part of a larger whole” (823).

As Koelsch’s work suggests, the physical piecing of varied narratives can help us understand the process of learning and working in difficult environments in a visual manner. Yolanda Wattsjohnson uses quilting as a metaphor to translate constructivist pedagogy in a teacher-training class. She also assigns a quilt project, where students have to complete a physical quilt on an assigned topic. Wattsjohnson claims that quilting as a metaphor is extremely useful, but she doesn’t explicitly identify the quilt project as a method to teach the five conditions of learning defined by Driscoll<sup>20</sup>. However, through the quilting process, students could experience these conditions of learning firsthand by implementing them within their own classrooms. Erin Atkinson, Jenelle Job, Jacqueline Pei, Cheryl Poth, Teresa O’Riordan, and Lin Taylor focus on creating a quilt as a data collection method. Their study included 47 Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder prevention workers within a Parent Child Assistant Program who participated in making one square representative of their experiences as prevention workers. These individual squares were then pieced and quilted by a master quilter. In the end, Atkinson et al. claim that the quilt “added richness to the data collected by other means (e.g. focus groups), and has produced an understanding of the PCAP program and the passion of its mentors that cannot easily be expressed in words” (128). In other words, the quilt conveyed narratives of workers’ experiences through visual representations. Other researchers have had participants complete physical quilts as part of therapy. David Moxely, Holly R. Feen-

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<sup>20</sup> Driscoll’s five conditions include the following: 1) Complex, realistic and relevant environments that incorporate authentic activity, 2) social negotiation, 3) multiple perspectives and multiple modes of learning 4) ownership in learning, and 5) self-awareness in knowledge construction (180).

Calligan, Olivia G.M. Washington, and Lois Garriott used quilting as an art therapy invention with a group African American women leaving homelessness. They studied the positive effects of quilt meetings, and found that women benefitted from expressing their individual stories of homelessness and difficulties in transitioning out of homelessness and also from the catharsis of working with a support group.

Considering scholarship that bridges quilting and research, one can see that quilting as a method of research is not considered. The scholarship presented here shows that quilting as a metaphor is useful when discussing research. However, I argue that in not considering quilting a research method worthy of discussion, scholars are missing the possibility that such a method could contribute to rigorous and robust projects.

### **Quilts are a Social Text**

Quilting as a method of research challenges and expands traditional concepts of research and rigor to include quilts as texts that reflect rigorous research. Working within these expanded notions quilting with the Migrant Quilt Project, I have found myself and others complicit in the plight of migrants. While quilts are accepted as texts worthy of scholarly study, they are peripherally considered within the academic community as a product of rigorous research<sup>21</sup>. *The Sage Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, includes a short chapter about quilts. In this chapter, Helen K. Ball begins by explaining the axioms that quilts challenge: “The dominant discourse of social science writing is driven by textual styles that, in their commitment to authority, remove most traces of humanity, vulnerability, complexity and

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<sup>21</sup> Among academics accepting quilts as worthy of scholarly study, few focus on accounting for quilts by, about, and for people of color. The near absence of Latin@/Central American/Latin American scholarship on this especially in the field of Rhetoric and Composition speaks volumes about the need for further work.

uncertainty. The text is asocial. . . Oddly, in Western society, the positionless voice in the text is equated with authority, power, and influence” (364). She continues by asking why is it that scholars researching social issues remove themselves from the world and the social texts that they too are a part of? (364). Ball summarizes one narrative that quilting as a method challenges—the narrative that removing the researcher makes for more objective and rigorous research.

Moreover, in the presentation of research findings, the multiple actors involved are also removed. For example, when a scholar publishes research, aside from a thank you, the many people who provided feedback or suggestions on writing are not acknowledged as contributors (at least in fields that heavily revise published research, not like in the hard sciences). Moreover, when the pronoun I is used, some scholars especially outside of the humanities, do not see this as objective research. For example, in the hard sciences, the writing style often uses passive voice to remove the agency of the researchers. However, I believe scholarship lacks objectivity from the moment we choose what to study and how to study it. Quilts disrupt the idea that removing humanity from research makes it objective by showing that researchers and other people are involved in our research.

As an alternative to the traditional ways of researching that value objectivity and eliminate traces of the human researcher, quilting as method challenges traditional because quilts are a social text and quilting is a rigorous method that takes intellect and time to complete. Ball claims that quilts “offer the opportunity to explore the creation of a social text” –a text with people in them (366). Quilting as a research method makes my part in creating the social text apparent, which connects myself to the social issue and

allows a critical examination of my place within this social issue. Therefore, through quilting, I recognize that myself and other people, especially the dead migrants whose stories are represented in the quilt, are an essential part of the research project because we are all impacted and implicated in the social issue of migrant deaths.

The act of quilting makes clear that the quilt is a social text by including traces of human interaction and representation. The fact that quilts with the Migrant Quilt Project are made from clothing makes this connection clear. I had a difficult time working through my own privilege as a middle class US citizen and a graduate student completing a doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition and including myself in this social text. I have also learned immensely about the migrant experience in Southern Arizona through my research creating a quilt to memorialize migrant deaths. As I compiled this quilt I thought of my experiences compared to those of the migrants. When handling clothing, one can't help but imagine the life of this person. I thought about my experiences hiking in the beautiful Southern Arizona desert, prepared for the heat and terrain, and I considered how ill prepared migrants usually are, especially when crossing for the first time and how often migrants die from exposure and dehydration. Because I've had drastically different experiences in the desert and because I have a comparatively privileged subject position, I wanted to carefully represent the experience of migrants.

I realized that in completing the quilt, I am attempting to tell *a* story, not necessarily *the* story, but a mixture of those I've read about and encountered. In telling a compelling yet accurate story, I hope to move the viewers of the quilt, as the other quilts have moved me. I thought about what I have learned from the multiple sources and sites

that have informed my project. I know what authors such as Luis Alberto Urrea<sup>22</sup> and Jason De León<sup>23</sup> discuss in their research about crossing and dying in the desert. I know the single stories that documentaries such as *Who Is Dayani Crystal?* and *Which Way Home* have chronicled. I know what the migrants I worked with have told me<sup>24</sup>. I've seen the mother sobbing asking if her children will be taken away from her. I've talked with the children who said they hadn't eaten real food since they'd been in detention. I've cried as I watched a woman embrace the only family she had left as she was reunited with her brother in Tucson, Arizona. I realized that I have insights from various narratives of migrant crossings and death. The quilting process has forced me to work through considerations of how I represent the stories of migrants and has allowed me to come to conclusions that acknowledge the contradictions with my project while also allowing me to move forward with it. Considering myself as a researcher and composer of the quilt, considering the migrants whose clothing is incorporated into the quilt, and considering the migrants whose deaths are memorialized in the quilt, one can see that a quilt is in fact a social text.

Quilting makes me consider and articulate what counts as data and knowledge. When I assert that quilting is a method of data collection, I assume that many things are data that other researchers may not consider as such. For example, before cutting the clothing presumably worn by crossing migrants that has been collected in the Arizona desert, I carefully cataloged each piece. I made notes of what the article of clothing was

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<sup>22</sup> See *The Devil's Highway*.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*.

<sup>24</sup> This is based on my experience volunteering with the Alitas program facilitated by Catholic Community Services in Tucson, Arizona. This transition house received undocumented migrants (mostly women and children) recently released from detention. Alitas provided food, basic provisions, and a place to sleep, as well as transportation to the bus station for migrants to travel to family established in the US and await their asylum hearing.

and noted any distinguishing features. These practices are a form of data collection. As I carefully lifted individual items out of the black plastic bag, I noted the commonly short length of the pants I held in my hands. I noticed the patterned wearing down of the material at the hem of both pant legs, suggesting the heels of a person's shoes consistently stepping on the extra material of the too-long pants. I noted the "Made In" tags on each item of clothing and the brand-name tags of each article.

In the clothing that was given to me for the quilt, there is a black bandana with green marijuana leaves on it. I initially felt uncomfortable incorporating this into the quilt. I felt as though the viewer, knowing that this clothing was collected at lay-up sites, would pass judgment of the migrants as drug dealers or criminals, and that by incorporating this bandana, I would be reinforcing a common stereotype. However, in a discussion with the quilter I took a private class with, I expressed my political commitment to prison abolition. In saying this out loud, I realized that it was important for me to incorporate this bandana because it lends itself to the point that is important to me: migrants, regardless of criminal label, are people who are worth grieving. Just because a person wears a marijuana bandana, does not mean they deserve to suffer or die in the desert. This is one of many examples of how quilting as a method forces me to critically consider my position as a researcher. This data leads me to ask further questions and, in time, also to come to interpretive conclusions. Moreover, I was moved by the articles of clothing to consider not only what my quilt would look like but what stories it might convey. I then was able to reconsider what counts as knowledge and as knowledge production. The quilt is a textile composition that represents the data I have collected similar to how a written paper presents the data collected through other research methods.

Therefore, the quilt is a material product of the knowledge generated through my research.

In her work on feminism and method, Nancy Naples cautions researchers to remember “the methods we choose are not free of epistemological assumptions and taken-for-granted understandings of what counts as data, how the researcher should relate to the subjects of research, and what are the appropriate products of a research study” (5). Moreover, she claims that the research questions we ask are tied to “particular epistemological understandings of how knowledge is generated” (5). I recognize that quilting as a qualitative feminist method facilitates a creative production and practice I refer to as composing textiles. Such practices allow me to think more expansively about data and how it can be represented. The emotional, physical, and intellectual labor of quilting as method, reflects the rigor of this method just as other rigorous methods demand such labor from the researcher. The rigor necessary to complete a quilt demonstrates the rigor of quilting as a method.

In quilting, sewing the top pieces together is called piecing. After cutting the squares for the Tucson border sector in state of Arizona, I pieced those squares together. This part was simple. I sewed each square to another to create rows, and then pinned the rows together at the seams and pieced the rows together. This was a simple, basic task to complete. Then I returned to cutting the letters and numbers that will be at the top of the quilt stating “Tucson Sector 2002-2003.” Although simple, these tasks were exhausting, emotionally and physically. The emotional I expected; the physical surprised me. After piecing the state of Arizona with 35 squares I had to iron flat all the seams. I am right handed, so I iron seams with my right hand, which left a strain just inside my right

shoulder blade. This strain was exacerbated by using the rotary cutter to cut jeans. Denim is a thick material to cut, but I did not anticipate the seams I would need to cut to deconstruct jeans. The seams are thick, and odd shaped, and difficult to cut through.

When cutting the letters and numbers of “Tucson Sector 2002-2003,” I first cut the characters out in poster board, and then I found interesting pieces of the jeans to cut the characters out of, which proved more challenging than I anticipated. In the end, I cut most of the characters, but I had to take a break because my right hand was in so much pain. Not to mention I poked myself and drawn blood at least four times. My lower left back pain was irritated by the constant up and down and moving around in unnatural positions.

One night as I was cutting a pair of dirty blue jeans, I started to cry. I’d interacted with the clothes to the point that I felt desensitized, not like when I first received the clothing. I had begun to see the clothing as utilitarian materials that I needed to figure how to use best for this project. But this one night, I was reminded of the humanity, of the unspeakable experience behind the clothing. These were someone’s pants they left behind crossing the dangerous desert to get into the US. I went to bed thinking about the physical pain I was in and the exhaustion I felt, and how it was nothing compared to the pain and the exhaustion experienced by the migrants who left the clothes behind. My mind juxtaposed the small amount of bright red blood that immediately surfaced and pooled on my finger after I pricked it with the dull copper maroon blood stained throughout the light colored jeans I was working with. I wonder how these jeans got blood on them and think about how my pain is nothing compared to the plight of

migrants, before, during, and after crossing. My mind drifts from this pain to the material experiences of migrants.

### **Dialectical Process to Demonstrate a Violent Process**

Quilting as a method facilitates a dialectical research process that promotes an always changing perspective, which expands an understanding of the migrant experience as a violent and incredibly difficult one. As I returned to Tucson after the summer, I was ready to begin making the quilt. I first bought masking tape to tape out the measurements of the quilt on the floor in my office at home. I also outlined the major lines of the quilt in an elementary way with the masking tape. This gave me a better idea of the size I'd be working with and the length of materials I needed to complete various sections. As I started cutting, it was as Jenny had mentioned because I simply thought of making the most out of the material in order to complete my plan. The denim is difficult to cut through, so I used a combination of scissors and a rotary cutter. The first part of piecing seemed easy. I cut three pairs of jeans, one medium denim, one light denim, and one khaki denim, to make the Tucson border sector in the state of Arizona. I cut 6x6 squares using the 12x12 laminate floor squares to guide my measurements. Cutting the squares wasn't terrible with the right equipment, but cutting the letters was tough. With the first quilt I made in my quilt class, I completed each step before moving on to the next, but that has not been the case with this project. I've been completing this quilt in a dialectical manner, completing one part as I have planned but then making adjustments according to how that one part goes or doesn't go as planned.

When we write as academics, we may not think of how we construct the final written product. We may not think that our epistemology has shaped each and every

choice we make in presenting the data. However, in quilting, the construction of the end product, maybe because it's material and tactile, is overtly thought about while compiling data. Quilting allows me to demonstrate my rhetorical awareness through the composition of a material object to be interpreted visually. I have never been so acutely aware of my rhetorical choices as I am in completing this quilt. I sketched my ideas and tested them in various ways before cutting and sewing. Although most of these actions can be revised—for example I had to seam rip and re-sew some pieces of the quilt—the revision process can be difficult and possibly irreversible. Therefore, an incredibly important part of the research process is understanding how each piece can be put together effectively. Each choice I make is strategic and works to convey a particular meaning. It's not like doing research to compose a write up, it is research in order to compose a material object with interpretive meaning.

The research involved composing this quilt has proved to be a dialectical process, pushing me to inquire further about connections between migrant deaths, other players, and geographical borders. After finding a book about topographical map quilts, I thought of using a map in the quilt. Once I got the idea of maps, I got lost in a rabbit hole of looking at maps for about 3-4 weeks. I even looked into taking Geographic Information Systems (GIS) classes provided by the county. I printed maps, purchased maps, and simply spent a lot of time examining these maps. I decided to mark each migrant death on the quilt map and began to look at the Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants, which allows the user to create a custom map marking migrant deaths in the Arizona desert—per documentation of various entities such as Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner. This led me to question why the deaths are concentrated in one space,

which led to me more research about Prevention through Deterrence. I also questioned why the Tucson border sector designated by the US Border Patrol does not include all of Arizona.

Through my research, I discovered that prevention through deterrence pushes migrants to cross at more dangerous parts of the desert farther from major cities. In the Tucson Sector in Arizona, this means many migrants are crossing one of the most dangerous areas of the border. In fact, “[b]y 2000, 37 percent of all immigration arrests happened in this region” (De León 35). Moreover, migrants are more likely to die here than in other areas of the US-Mexico border because of the desert conditions. Jason De León argues that “[r]ather than being viewed as a key partner in the border enforcement strategy, the desert is framed as a ruthless beast that law enforcement cannot be responsible for” (43). This is just one example of the dialectical process of quilting—first deciding what data to represent on the quilt, then investigating why the data looks as it does, and then returning to deciding how to represent the data and the narratives behind the data on the quilt. During this process, complicated questions arise that force the researcher to re-think and revise the way they represent their data. Quilting as a method of data collection, then, facilitates not only a conscientious and critical researcher, but also a careful rhetorical composition of the final product that presents the data as a complex narrative with this dialectical process as the underlying, unseen parts of the quilt.

### **Telling Stories of Survival through the Textiles and Textures of Migrant Clothing**

Quilting as a research method facilitates a thoughtful awareness when composing data representation, whether it’s in the form of a research paper or a quilt. As a method,

quilting also assists the representation to reflect newly presented data. Specifically, with the migrant quilt project, this research method allows me as a researcher to understand how, despite many variables working against them, migrants continue to migrate as people have always done, not just for a “better life” but to survive. In other words, it moves me past a surface understanding to consider the many variables that influence the reaction of migration. I avoided starting to work on the quilt because the prospect of cutting this clothing was just too overwhelming. I knew eventually I would have to start cutting, and I asked the quilters in their interviews how they approached cutting the clothing. You can’t uncut what you’ve deconstructed. Moreover, as a rhetorician who deconstructs the rhetorical choices of creators and their creations, I felt an incredible responsibility to thoughtfully, carefully, and cautiously compose this quilt.

In researching quilts, I discovered the book *Art Quilt Maps* by Valerie S. Goodwin, an architecture professor who teaches principles of architecture through quilts. She creates incredible quilt maps to document the importance of place and space. This got me thinking about how little I knew about the actual geographical terrain of Southern Arizona. Even after filling out intake forms and writing the port of entry, I couldn’t tell you exactly where Douglass or Yuma were. Thinking about quilt maps influenced the design of my quilt. I decided I wanted to use a map and map the migrant deaths onto the map to show just how close to Tucson people are dying from basic causes like exposure and dehydration.

Quilting is the action of sewing through the three layers of material—the pieced top, the inner batting, and the backing. Sometimes quilting is done by hand for difficult designs or sometimes it is done with colored thread to stand out. Other times it is done for

necessity so that the batting does not fall apart in the washing machine and leave you with a lumpy blanket. One aspect that makes the quilts from the Migrant Quilt Project different is that they do not include batting. They will not be washed nor used as a cover to keep warm. Not including batting lends itself to a quilt that is easier to lay flat when displayed. I am not to the quilting step yet, but I imagine the quilting will be more pragmatic to hold the two sides together as opposed to a part of the design because the quilt already has many visually competing pieces. However, that may change once the top is completed. The back I've chosen is a neutral beige color cotton with green spiny plants, similar to ocotillo when they are not blooming. The binding is the material border of the quilt, which usually differs from the top and bottom to "bind" them together. When I purchased the materials for this quilt, I did not understand the various types of binding available. After taking a quilt class, I know that I will make the binding myself. Therefore, I will choose a particular pattern when it comes time to complete the binding for the quilt. Quilting and binding will literally combine the data represented in the quilt.

I carefully consider the narrative I present to reflect the data, and I heed Linda Alcoff's caution of speaking for and about others. However, she also claims that to "retreat" and say I can only speak for myself assumes an autonomous self not connected to others (20). Most importantly, she speaks to the repercussions of such a "retreat":  
(Could use this point to connect place and space the place of the desert and the space of the quilt)

But there is no neutral place to stand clear in which one's words do not prescriptively mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to demarcate a boundary between one's location and all others. Even a

complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance. (20)

I feel conflicted about speaking for or about dead migrants who are memorialized in the quilt because I'm aware of how it is problematic. However, I also know that feeling conflicted and being aware is not enough. Alcoff says we should strive to speak with and to rather than for others (23) and that speaking for others should only come out of "a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved" (24). I have attempted to do both of these suggestions, but I know not without flaws. I've worked with migrants who have crossed the US-Mexico border and have been detained. I consider their stories, but I also know their stories are vast and varied. I know that the Migrant Quilt Project does not involve migrants in the quilting nor the presentations of quilts. That is something I am aware of and would like to change. Through the composition of the quilt I also critique power structures that cause and are connected to migrant deaths. Quilting makes me think critically about the subject position from which I speak in order to bring awareness to migrant deaths resulting from US policy. It also makes me think critically about the position of the people about which I'm speaking. It makes me sit, and think about what I'm doing, why I'm doing it and what are the repercussions of it.

### **Contributions of Quilting as Method**

When I say that I study quilts, people usually respond with a surprised face. However, I challenge academics to look past their stereotypes of quilting as a craft that women do in their spare time or in retirement. I hope that scholars see quilting as a

research method that challenges traditionally valued methods and sites of analysis (individualistic, quantitative research with tangible results) within academia and as a method that provides the opportunity to conduct rigorous and thoughtful research. I carefully crafted a quilt for the Migrant Quilt Project. What I found is that quilting as a research method contributed to thorough and nuanced answers to my initial research questions: while many institutions—the US government, border patrol, US companies—deem migrant lives not grievable before death, other groups—PCOME, migrants’ rights groups, Los Desconocidos—are working to make migrant deaths visible.

Moreover, through a quilting method, I considered how my research questions could be challenged further to include more complex relationships as suggested in the concept of the “hybrid collectif.” I realize now that my research questions make many assumptions focusing on humans. I assume an autonomous idea of human agency. My question asks “how do we decide whose lives are grievable,” which is based upon an understanding of a collective, homogenous “we” and the questions assumes that the choice of grieving is a simple option. My second question “Who decides which lives are grievable and under what social conditions?” similarly suggests that a particular category of humans is able to decide which lives will be grieved under particular social conditions. I am not saying these questions are wrong, but instead wondering how they can be complicated to be context specific and include non-human actors. Or maybe consider the work that is done before death to affect these questions would also be useful to include in researching the answers to these questions. In other words, quilting as a method works as many methods should: It pushes the researcher to reconsider and revise their research questions to include new information and perspectives discovered in the research process.

These revisions may not take place in this project, but can push the next iteration of this project.

Lastly, quilting as a method facilitates thorough interpretive conclusions. What I mean by that is the quilt presents narratives of what Jason De León refers to as Callon and Law's theory of the *hybrid collectif*<sup>25</sup>. De León paraphrases the concept claiming that "people or objects don't act in isolation, but instead have complex relationships at different moments across time and space that sometimes create things or make things happen" (39). De León elaborates in his work *The Land of Open Graves* how the hybrid *collectif* functions specifically with migrant deaths in the Arizona desert asserting that the strategy of Prevention Through Deterrence set the stage for the desert to facilitate migrant deaths. However, quilting as a method has expanded my understanding of these non-human actants to include effects of trade agreements, geography, memorial efforts, and the border patrol. Therefore, the interpretive conclusions that I present in the quilt ask the viewers to make sense of these various parts that contribute to migrant deaths. Although this seems like so much to put into a quilt, Ball claims "[t]he quilts create movement, interactions, and thinking in nonlinear ways" (368). Perhaps it is because of this particular presentation of data that "[t]he realities that are revealed are rendered in such exquisite detail that they are unforgettable" (Ball 368). As a quilter-researcher I consider my political commitments, my epistemology, and my goal in completing this quilt. Quilting as a qualitative feminist research method challenges traditional notions of research and pushes me and others to consider more complex understandings of relationships that contribute to migrant deaths.

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<sup>25</sup> I use De León's definition here because he puts this term into the context of migrant deaths in the Arizona desert. For more on Callon and Law's theory see "Agency and the Hybrid Collectif."

CHAPTER FIVE  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD AND  
MOVEMENT TOWARDS REHUMANIZING IMMIGRATION POLICY

As I write this, a colleague received an email with a subject line, “Plead for help from an undocumented student”; a transgender undocumented woman was detained by ICE as she appeared in court to seek protection from domestic violence; People in cities across the US are staying home from work and school and protesting in the streets for #adaywithoutimmigrants. The 45<sup>th</sup><sup>26</sup> has exacerbated already existing immigration issues with his Muslim ban and plans to build a wall. This historical moment provides a clear exigency for thinking about and reacting to how we treat some of the most vulnerable populations who have been displaced and dispossessed. With a current administration that expresses explicit disdain for migrants and refuses to recognize the role of US policy in causing displacement of people, the US must work toward more humane and realistic immigration policy insofar as we care about our fellow humans, period.

My timely research asks scholars to reconsider the importance of textile productions, specifically quilts, as rhetorical objects of study, as well as an historical record documenting those who would otherwise not be documented. The rhetorical strategies employed in the quilts of the Migrant Quilt Project ultimately teach us about the ill effects of US immigration policy and promote more humane immigration policy. Studying and composing quilts also promotes tactile research methods to value various literacies and qualitative data representation. Lastly, this research provides pedagogical

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<sup>26</sup> I use the term the “45<sup>th</sup>” as I’ve seen many do on social media in order to not use the President’s name. Although I’ve not found research about it, I’ve observed that it’s a new trend to be subversive and perhaps disrespectful to not refer to the President by his proper name.

tools for rhetoric and composition scholars to value various ways of knowing and to study overlooked histories in their classrooms. Moreover, a focus on immigration issues at this historical moment elicits discourse surrounding ideas of belonging, nationalism, citizenship, and my research looks to material productions as one part of the larger immigration discourse.

### **Quilts as Rhetorical Objects of Study and Historic Record**

One main contribution of this dissertation is to advocate for studying textile projects as rhetorical objects of study and historic records. I challenge scholars of rhetoric and composition to reconsider how we study contributions of people who leave no written record to examine. Although rhetoric and composition scholars such as Vanessa Kramer Sohan and Maureen Goggin specifically discuss textile projects, there is still much work to be done, as textile projects addressing human rights issues continue to proliferate and scholars should expand on the productive potential of studying such projects. Because the visual and tactile possibilities of studying textiles. What follows is a brief mention of active artistic projects addressing current human rights issues and engaging material objects, some textile, others not. I briefly present these projects to demonstrate the many possibilities of sites at the intersections of art, activism, and academia to study in the field of rhetoric and composition.

The following artists make art from materials left behind or confiscated at some point during the migration journey. Artist Valarie James is one of the most covered by news media in Southern Arizona. Because she lives in Southern Arizona, and continues to be prolific in her art from migrant belongings, many bordados, she is well-known artist. James recognizes that the objects in her art reflect a common humanity, as in an

interview with *Al Jazeera America* she states, “I feel like my job is, as an artist, is to reveal the sacred in what’s been deemed profane. We have to remember that all of us, our culture, it’s in what’s left behind” (Amin and Gliha). Another artist Deborah McCullough had an art exhibit titled “Picking Up the Pieces: Artifacts from Migrants’ Journey” shown at the University of Arizona, where she displayed art made from items left behind by migrants on the trail (Coxon-Smith). Valarie James, Deborah McCullough, and Antonia Gallegos collaborated for a well-known public exhibit titled “Las Madres.” Made from items left behind in the desert, these three sculptures of women were a public memorial for migrants reflecting stories and struggles of women migrants (Amin and Gliha; “The Peculiar Sadness”). Each of these Southern Arizona artists make art from objects found in the desert and left behind by migrants crossing to represent the most moving narratives of migrants.

Another local Alvaro Enciso volunteers with the Tucson Samaritans, a group that leaves water for crossing migrants in the desert, and collects cans left behind by migrants while crossing the desert (“The Peculiar Sadness”). Enciso says that his artwork made from cans focuses on three themes: the elusive American Dream, the struggle of identity, and the status of always being an outsider or not belonging (“Interview: Alvaro Enciso”). A collaboration between photographer Richard Misrach and Mexican Composer Guillermo Galindo is “turning human trash found on the US-Mexico border into instruments, giving a new identity to fragments of lost lives” (Morgan). As a former janitor at a Border Patrol facility in Ajo, Arizona, Tom Kiefer collected items confiscated from migrants at the facility. He photographed common objects such as rosaries, deodorant, and toothbrushes and stated, “It’s very emotional, the magnitude of what this

about. I'm an artist and saw this stuff and thought it was important to make a record of this. I couldn't in good conscience let it go to the landfill" (Campbell). Another exhibition titled "State of Exception" is a collaboration between photographer Richard Barnes, artist/curator Amanda Kruglaik, and anthropologist Jason De León. This exhibition, which also displayed items left behind by migrants on their journey, traveled to various universities to be shown and is still traveling (Amin and Gliha; "Exhibitions"). Sculptor and artist Margarita Cabrera collaborated with the Arizona State University Art Museum and Desert Botanical Garden for the exhibit "Space in Between" which featured desert plants made from border patrol uniforms and embroidered with personal stories of migration by migrants ("Stitching together a Story of Immigration"). Each of the aforementioned artists use items found at some point during the migration experience to produce art making political statements and calling attention to the plight of migrants while also documenting the journey of migrants. Although not all of these projects include textiles, they are all art projects that function to teach about the ill effects of immigration.

Moreover, many artists and collaborative projects focus on issues of migration and human rights specifically through textile work. Projects such as the Social Justice Sewing Academy works with youth "to create emboldened and empowered leaders that are committed to addressing issues impacting their local and often times, larger communities" ("Home"). Through discussing critical written texts and learning to express themselves through sewing, students raise their critical consciousness in a creative way ("About Us"). Another collaborative project, started by textile artist Chi Nguyen, is the 5.4 million and counting project. She is collecting 5.4 million embroidered tally marks to

make into a collaborative quilt to document the number of women whose access to safe healthcare is at risk in Texas resulting from the *Woman's Health vs. Hellerstedt* court case (Maydew). People all over the US are holding stitch-ins to collaboratively contribute to the final quilt, which demonstrates the importance of this project created by and caring about all who are affected. In an interview with *Vice*, Nguyen states, "To me, it's not a Texas issue but an all-of-us issue" (Calderón-Douglass). Individual artists also engage human rights issues such as Priscilla Smith, a textile artist who focuses on social justice and anti war textiles. Smith claims that she uses evocative images to affect her viewers and to "provoke thought and emotion; to raise consciousness; and to galvanize change" (Smith). Similarly, Carolyn Cohen uses her textile art focusing on brutalization of women, children, and LGBTQ community worldwide to bring attention to the human rights issues faced by such othered groups (Cohen).

Each of these projects or artists pose similar yet varied possibilities of activism, resistance, and social change. Imagine if rhetorical studies took up textile arts as a category of research to provide a nuanced, current and historical perspective on important issues such as human rights? Just as the written and spoken contributions of activists (such as Ida B. Wells and Martin Luther King Jr.) have been examined to understand their rhetorical significance, textile works have much to teach us about how material objects are/have been rhetorical. Although marginalized groups such as women, African Americans, Native Americans, and Central and South Americans, and US Latinxs have long engaged in and recognized the importance of textile productions, the field of rhetoric and composition has room to expand in this area. As artist Judy Chicago states, "Systematically underrepresented in art history, textiles often carry the stories of those

whom society overlooks: women, children, slaves, immigrants, Aboriginal peoples, housewives, stay-at-home fathers, the ill, the disappeared, the displaced, and the grieving. We do a disservice to ourselves when we ignore the fact that textiles play an important role in telling our histories” (Prain 10). As textile work has represented those of marginalized groups that have not always had access to express themselves in dominant, written forms, scholars must consider the rhetoric of textiles in representing and documenting the stories of marginalized groups.

Examining a project such as the migrant quilt project, one can see that the rhetorical force and function of the histories told in the quilts contribute to our understanding of migration issues, particularly the plight of migrants and the contributions by US immigration policy. Therefore, the potential to learn about the material effects of current human rights issues and the possibilities of textile projects as historic records, demonstrate the need for more analysis of the rhetorical contributions of textile projects. Just as Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber state in their 1987 seminal text *Hearts and Hands*, people who had looked to alphabetic writing as a way of understanding the past, were starting to look at different sources, such as quilts. They claim that “women used their quilts to register their responses to, and also their participation in, the major social, economic and political developments of their times. Through their quilts women became, in fact, not only witnesses to but active agents in important historical change” (Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber 11). In other words, women have not only expressed themselves through their textile work, but they also have facilitated change through those textile expressions. Serving as textiles that have documented history and facilitated

change, quilts warrant a closer and more thorough study in the field of rhetoric and composition.

### **Quilts to Teach Us about Ill Effects of US Immigration Policy**

In completing this research, I've found that the average American has extremely varied opinions about and relationships to issues of US immigration. Although some Americans were once immigrants and others are the children of immigrants, many Americans are removed from the difficult experience of migration. For example, while I am a third-generation American and have lived in the same region of the US most of my life, I have friends who left their home countries of Colombia and the former Soviet Union who are intimately familiar with the difficulty of migration. Moreover, many Americans are not familiar with US history of intervention in other countries that has facilitated the cause of many migrations. I was not familiar with the US role in the Coup d'état of Guatemalan President Árbenz until I started volunteering with Guatemalan migrants released from detention, and I was curious why so many were fleeing their home country<sup>27</sup>. Understanding the historical occurrences of 30 years ago can be key to understanding current situations. The common narratives about migrants expressed by people in the US—they steal jobs, they are criminals, they live off the US welfare system, they should go back to their countries—demonstrates that the knowledge of US immigration policy and how it affects migration is not significant. Studying textiles such as the Migrant Quilt Project provides narratives that function as a heuristic to learn about material effects of US immigration policy on migrants.

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<sup>27</sup> At the suggestion of another volunteer, I read *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*.

To reinforce some antagonistic views towards immigrants, I'll discuss a few polls from 2016. In March an *ABC/Washington Post* poll reported that 36% of Americans would support the government efforts to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants back to their home countries, and later in July a *CBS/NY Times* poll reported that 27% of Americans believe that immigrants take jobs away from citizens ("Immigration"). According to a Monmouth University poll taken in August, 28% Americans believe their personal way of life is under threat from illegal immigrants specifically from Mexico ("Immigration"). A *CBS/NY Times* poll in September said that 25% of Americans believe that Migrants are more likely to commit crimes than Citizens, and *ABC/Washington Post* poll taken during the same month said that 24% believe immigrants weaken American society ("Immigration").

As reflected in these statistics, about one quarter of Americans care about immigration insofar as it negatively affects them personally or infringes on their individual rights or safety. In reality US immigration issues are caused by the US and is as much our problem as that of our neighbors and other countries around the world. In other words, such viewpoints dismiss the interconnectedness of humans and countries, and textile projects have the potential to teach viewers about this interconnected relationship. For example, many people perceive Mexico as a violent country, blame the corrupt government for their own problems, and focus on Mexico's need to reform. In supporting such viewpoints, the US completely absolves themselves of the detrimental affects of NAFTA and our part in the drug trade with Mexico.

As previously stated, the quilts of the Migrant Quilt project offer the opportunity to learn about migrant deaths in the desert resulting from various involvements from the

US. For example, once when I was teaching about the quilts in an undergraduate course, a student looked at Jenny Eschedor's quilt and asked why there was a noose on it. The student asked, "Who would hang a migrant crossing?" This facilitated a discussion about the violence that migrants experience when crossing from fellow crossers, coyotes, and border patrol. In instances like this, the narrative of the quilt not only teaches about the common death experienced from exposure and dehydration, but also teaches about deaths resulting from violence enacted upon people. Thinking about the possibilities of both types of violence, one seemingly indirect and the other direct, demonstrates how US policies like Prevention through Deterrence is actually a direct, intentional violence enacted upon migrants.

Other textile projects function similarly, such as the work of Bordados por la Paz (Embroidery for Peace). These are many collective social justice groups that embroider white handkerchiefs in various colored thread<sup>28</sup> with information—names, life and death dates, and details of death—concerning victims of violence in Mexico from transnational drug cartels. The organization originated in Mexico City with the group named Fuentes Rojas. Now groups all across Mexico and around the world gather to collaboratively embroider handkerchiefs to send to the organization (Rizzo<sup>29</sup>). On a website that connects multiple peace groups in Mexico, a page about the Bordados por la Paz groups states that their work aims to educate people and facilitate various goals:

darnos un espacio para repensar la situación por la que atraviesa nuestro México,  
conectar con el sentir de otras personas y saber que somos muchos los queremos

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<sup>28</sup> The color of the thread actually varies depending on the cause of violence: red for murder, rainbow for hate crimes violence, green for disappeared people, and purple for femicides (Rizzo).

<sup>29</sup> This citation denotes my own translation and paraphrase from the Rizzo text.

la paz, con justicia y dignidad para las víctimas de esta “guerra contra el narcotráfico”

to provide a space to rethink the situation that Mexico is experiencing, to connect with the feelings of other people, and to know that we are many who want peace, with justice and dignity for the victims of this “war against drug trafficking” (my trans.; “Bordados por la paz”)

Advancing their consciousness-raising agenda, as one news article title put it, the groups are “Bordadoras por la paz, en busca de Justicia con Hilo y Tela” ‘Embroiderers for peace, in search of justice with thread and cloth’ (my trans.; Rea). This project is another example of how textile projects can teach nuanced perspectives about a serious human rights issue, just as the Migrant Quilt Project teaches about the ill effects of US immigration policy.

Textile projects provide the opportunity to express narratives through material objects that not only force the viewer to lean in and look closely, but also engage the viewer to ask questions. A common question is, “why don’t people cross the right way,” meaning legally apply through bureaucratic channels. I offer a brief story that sticks with me to illustrate a complex answer to this question. Working in the migrant transition center Alitas, I encountered a young woman in her 20s who said she left Mexico with her young son because her husband was abusive, and she was afraid he would eventually kill her. Her only brother lived in the US, and he told her to leave Mexico and come live with him. After being apprehended at the border, she was released from detention in Tucson, Arizona, and her brother drove down from somewhere nearby to pick her up. When he arrived late at night, they hugged, and kissed, and cried. It made me cry, as I am the only

sister in a family with four brothers. That day I thought to myself (even though I am not sure my brothers and I share the same views on immigration) if I were in this situation, I am sure my brothers would value my safety above seeking proper channels or laws. All this is to say, the reasons people don't cross "the right way" are many, and those who judge may do the same if they were in the same situation. The narratives represented in the quilts force the viewer to think and question their immediate assumptions, and the narratives make clear that the humans crossing are intimately connected with other humans. As artist Judy Chicago claims, "textiles are a willing medium for stories both visual and verbal" (Prain 11). Quilts complicate the visual/verbal and provide the opportunity to learn about complex stories of migrants effectively told through a non-linear and tactile text.

### **Quilting as Method to Promote Tactile and Qualitative Research**

Shifting the focus from quilts to quilting, another major contribution of my dissertation is promoting tactile methods and qualitative research. Within a scholarly environment that tends to value empirical research and individual written data representation, my research values embodied, tactile processes and material representations of data that can facilitate meaningful social change. In promoting quilting as method, I ask scholars to consider what counts as knowledge and who count as knowledge producers. By demonstrating the dialectical process of quilting as a research method, scholars can see the intellectual labor that goes into composing a quilt just as the labor that goes into writing an article. In developing this method, I also ask scholars to consider how rigor is defined and by which processes we produce knowledge.

The value of a tactile method lies in the possibilities of learning varied information through various approaches. For example, the information gleaned from close reading alphabetic text will be different than information gleaned conducting an ethnography, which will be different than information gleaned from archival research. Similarly, quilting as a method of research provides the opportunity to engage in a research process involving a combination of approaches through the making of the quilt with your hands. Insofar as the field of rhetoric and composition is concerned with both rhetoric *and* composition, creating a quilt is perfectly situated to be a useful research method within our field. The quilter carefully considers the composition of the quilt as it is being created, and making a quilt to represent data creates many possibilities of research. In other words, the quilter-researcher is a rhetorician considering the rhetorical situation as she is composing her text—a quilt. Moreover, the quilter-researcher is engaging in a composing process as she makes the quilt. As a rhetoric and composition scholar, creating a quilt is another possibility of data representation, just as a journal article would be. However, when representing data visually in a quilt, the end result will necessarily be different than a journal article. Just as choosing the word *ask* over *implore* or the word *undocumented* over *illegal alien* is significant, so is the thread color you use in a quilt representing violence faced by migrants. Therefore, in quilting, the choices you make in composing are just as important as those in writing.

The value of qualitative research aligns with the narrative form of the quilts. In creating a quilt, the quilters are not trying to tell one universal story of migration. Instead, they are attempting to tell a story of migration that helps others to understand the hardship migrants can face. In her project *The Stitch Lives of London*, Rosalind Wyatt

discusses the larger story she was attempting to convey. She says, “It will not be a literal, narrative commentary on the history of London—it’s more about placing the ‘voices’ or garments side by side and seeing what effect that has. After all, that’s how we live—side by side, breathing the same air, with the same desires and fears” (Prain 40). I see the narrative work of the quilts functioning similarly. As the quilter composes the quilt of various articles of clothing likely belonging to various people, a narrative is created by simply putting the “voices” side by side. Providing qualitative data representation as people’s stories allows the viewer to consider the narratives represented in the quilt as a human connection and less cold and distant than statistics.

### **Quilting to Provide Pedagogical Tools**

The pedagogical implications of my research are many, in direct application as well as underlying values. Mainly, pushing the boundaries of terms and activities within a composition classroom, my research provides pedagogical tools for rhetoric and composition scholars to value various ways of knowing, studying overlooked histories, and expanding notions of composing.

My work first suggests that quilts as rhetorical texts and documentary texts, promote nontraditional ways of knowing and overlooked histories within the university classroom. By expanding terms such as composition, text, and knowledge, students are invited to consider some common terms beyond their static academic understandings. When quilts are seen as documentary texts, then quilters are seen as incredible knowledge producers and composers. When texts and compositions are considered beyond previous classroom experiences, students start to see themselves and one another as knowers and knowledge producers.

Moreover, students can make connections between seemingly different terms. Maria Damon discusses the etymology of text and textile, and drawing from Elizabeth Barber, claims that text and textile are actually the same. She states that because the same tools used for writing were also used for making shelter and clothing, “[t]he textile was not a primitive foreshadowing of the text to come” (Prain 33). In other words, it’s beneficial to challenge the binary that values alphabetic writing as superior to other forms of expression and to understand that textile and text are inseparable. Although quilting and alphabetic writing are not exactly the same, they are also not entirely different. When the hierarchy that puts alphabetic writing above all other forms of expression is challenged, students not only see their everyday literacy practices as creating knowledge, but they also see works—whether they be quilts, poetry, architecture—of historically othered peoples as rhetorically rich and worthy of study. There is much students can learn by considering quilting as an intellectually rigorous composing process, especially in a world that is materially focused.

Secondarily, my work offers new ways to think about quilting and composing in the classroom through assignments. In her chapter about “Storytelling” in her book *Strange Material: Storytelling through Textiles*, Leanne Prain discusses the safe space of textiles claiming that “[t]he very materiality of cloth has a sentimental resonance that is not apparent on paper. Some stories are easier to tell through craft” (Prain 16). My work suggests that asking students to expand their notions of composing by making a material object provides opportunities for learning beyond alphabetic writing. For example, I’ve designed an assignment to complete a literacy narrative through quilting. Because literacy narratives, as many stories of our lives, are not always linear with a narrative arc, a

climax, and a resolution, expressing a literacy narrative through a non linear, visual, material text such as a quilt provides different ways to think about how to present a literacy narrative. In teaching this, I've found that some students expanded what they considered literacy once they knew it would be told through a quilt. Another student thought differently about the actual narrative once they knew it would be visually represented. Prain continues discussing the safe space of textiles eliciting the memory of many receiving a paper back covered in red ink and differentiating the experience of working with textiles: "Fabric can eliminate the widely experienced phobias surrounding writing and critique. Textiles might be unpricked, but they can't be edited . . . There is no wrong way to tell a story on a cloth. The tactile, even comforting nature of textiles can conjure memories and inspire people to share them" (16). In my experience learning to sew, this was one of the most liberating lesson I was taught: if you mess up, just get your seam ripper out. The idea that there's no wrong way to tell a literacy narrative through quilting could be an empowering one for students to experience in a composition classroom.

### **Exigency: Migrant Deaths as Part of the Larger Story**

Each year migrants continue to cross into the US in search of something different than what their home country could offer. However, the story of migration is larger than the US/Mexico border and larger than migrants dying in the desert. The complex matrix of immigration issues spans histories and hemispheres, but all aspects are interconnected. Although my research is focused on one geographical location—the Sonoran Desert—and one issue—migrant deaths—I intend to elicit discussions, questions, and connections between the migrant deaths in the Sonoran Desert and issues of global migration.

Migrant deaths are occurring worldwide as migrants flee war-torn countries, economically fraught countries, and various destitute situations. In recent years the media has focused on Syrian refugees fleeing their country and attempting to enter Europe on small boats. Migrants similarly leaving North Africa on small boats to reach Spain have long risked their lives to get to Europe. Australia has had violent reactions to the refugees arriving from Asia, Middle East, and Africa, blocking boats and detaining migrants who don't die on the journey. These are just a few of the recent, well-known instances of migrant deaths worldwide, although there are many others not mentioned here.

Migration issues worldwide reflect the globalized and capitalistic nature of our current epoch. Issues of migration can be seen in every part of our global society: economics, education, environmental justice, agriculture, politics, violence, poverty, employment, religion, policy, and people's overall way of life. For example, trade agreements make for poor working conditions for some people in their home countries. US involvement in overthrowing foreign governments has left countries in political turmoil for decades. Access to basic necessities such as water, food, and electricity affect people's desire to move. Religious persecution as well as hate crimes force people to migrate for survival. While American politicians claim solutions are as simple as building a wall and Australian Politicians claim to just "stop the boats" (Chowdhry), these claims are grossly underestimating the complexity of immigration and what causes people to migrate.

All of this is to say that immigration issues in the US are a small part of a large, global issue, and therefore, I discuss migrant deaths as one part, perhaps the gravest part, of the overall dire situations migrants face. Considering migrant deaths in Southern

Arizona facilitates thinking about other violences migrants face on their journey, about legislation that criminalizes migrants, and about the life of migrants once they arrive in the US. Again, these are all interconnected issues and migrant deaths serve as an entry point to the larger discussion of immigration. In my research this entry point is important because the ways people are treated in death reflect the ways those same humans are treated in life. Judith Butler discusses connections between citizens and *others* stating, “If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation” (22-23). She first acknowledges that we are connected and constituted by our relationships to one another, and as a result, when we argue against the humanity of others, we are denying a key part of our own humanity.

In my dissertation, I believe that narratives do the work of making these connections among humans apparent. As Leanne Prain states, “[n]arrative is the binding thread of human experience and stories are the medium that we use to know one another and ourselves” (9). Through the quilts examined here, I believe that the human experience of migrants illuminates the connections among humans, so that all people see the death of migrants as events that affect us all. Perhaps when people who are privileged citizens that do not feel the need to migrate understand the need for others in less privileged positions to migrate for survival, citizens will be more empathetic towards the plight of migrants. Perhaps when citizens are able to look past the binary of “our security” versus “their problems,” we can address larger issues of migration. Perhaps when we stop accepting and participating in a hierarchy of valuing lives, we can see

migrant deaths necessarily connected to our own lives. Despite all of the reasons not to be, I am incredibly optimistic because of projects like the Migrant Quilt Project and because of programs like the Social Justice Sewing Academy (mentioned previously). As they claim, “[t]he ultimate goal of SJSA is to create conscious art activists who will use their creativity and imagination to change their world one stitch at a time” (“About Us”). As long as there are existing projects like the ones mentioned here and programs training youth to engage in such projects, I have hope that we can collectively contribute to small but substantial change one stitch, one quilt, one narrative at a time.



<sup>30</sup> Wilson Graham Photography

APPENDIX B: 2012-2013: Jennifer Eschedor<sup>31</sup>



<sup>31</sup> Wilson Graham Photography

APPENDIX C: 2002-2003: Sonia C. Arellano (in progress)



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