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Meaning Through Materiality: Bisa Butler's Expressive Portraits

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by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Art History and Visual Culture
at
Lindenwood University

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Meaning Through Materiality: Bisa Butler's Expressive Portraits

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This thesis examines how Bisa Butler creates meaning through the materiality in her quilted portraits. Bisa Butler is of West African and American descent and incorporates part of her own identity in her quilted portraits using Dutch wax prints and other highly patterned textiles. Not only does Butler connect her identity in her quilted portraits, but she also connects the meaning of these textiles to the figures in her portraits. This thesis explores the materiality of Bisa Butler's *Colored Entrance* (2023), along with *The Passion of Questlove* (2023) and *Grandpa* Zakani (2004), to argue that in this new development of her artistic production, Butler creates intentionality by incorporating specific materials that further advance the meaning of her works.

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Introduction

Contemporary quiltmakers are at the crossroads of tradition and the avant-garde, weaving the threads of identity, ancestry, and innovation into their creations. Experimenting with new materials, techniques, and designs, contemporary quiltmaking artists breathe new life into centuries-old practice and maintain the intricate process of cultural identity and storytelling. Contemporary quilt artists push the boundaries of their craft and address contemporary issues by integrating traditional techniques such as patchwork and applique with modern materials and unconventional textures. In this way, artists symbolize the multidimensional nature of identity. Traditional and progressive techniques demonstrate the way in which identities are woven from cultural, historical, and personal threads. This demonstrates the intersection and complexity of ancestral roots and the contemporary landscape.

The study of the progress of contemporary quiltmaking reveals extensive insights into the intersection of art, identity, and heritage. By examining the layers of each quilt's narrative, including the choice of colors, patterns, and themes, and the personal heritage of the artist, one can gain a deeper appreciation for the relationships between identity and ancestry. By infusing their work with personal stories, cultural symbolism, and reflections on social issues, artists highlight the intricate ways their creative expression intertwines with their understanding of themselves and their heritage. Through the medium of quiltmaking, one is reminded of the lasting impact the past has on the present and future. Just as a quilt is comprised of various fabrics, each with its own story, individuals are comprised of different influences and experiences that create their identity. Quilts are more than utilitarian objects; they are a legacy and a testament to the lives and stories of the quiltmaker. Contemporary quiltmakers navigate the

balance between tradition and innovation, producing art reflective of human experience – a reminder that our identities and ancestries are interwoven in a complex, everchanging narrative.

Illustrating the deep connections between quiltmaking with the exploration of identity, ancestry, and materiality are contemporary textile artist Bisa Butler's (b. 1971) dynamic portraits that serve as an embodiment of these themes. Butler was born in the United States with her maternal roots are in Louisiana and Morocco, with her paternal origins in Ghana. She integrates imagery sourced from American archives, including the Internet, Library of Congress, and photography books by Deborah Willis, James Van Der Zee, and Gordon Parks, and integrates vibrant textiles of West Africa in her portraits.[1] Her quilts form a connection between the past using rediscovered black and white photographs from American archives and other sources that brings them to the present and reimagining these images by using textiles that are also inspired by her own heritage.

Combining the centuries-old tradition of quiltmaking that uses form, color, and patterning in a futuristic, creative style, Butler threads together untold narratives and historical contexts, while adding her own stories in each piece through her choice of materials. Butler incorporates an eclectic medley of non-traditional quilting materials, such as lace, chiffon, wool, and silk, which she skillfully juxtaposes with striking hues and intricate motifs derived from West African textiles, thus offering homage to the deep and abiding legacy of African Diasporic histories. Employing intricate techniques of quilting, Butler meticulously crafts life-size portraits that resonate with the storied tapestry of African American history where "enslaved [B]lack women

[1] Patricia Malarcher, "Bisa Butler: Expanding the African American Quilting Tradition," *Textile Museum Journal* (Spring 2019): 28.

would sew, weave, spin, and quilt for their enslaved households."[2] At the heart of her artistic oeuvre resides the thematic exploration of identity: the identity of the subjects in her portraits, as well as her own personal identity as creator. Butler's works serve as a tribute to the countless individuals of the past whose stories have been forgotten, while simultaneously celebrating her own heritage and the vibrant tapestry of her ancestral culture. However, one emerging facet in Butler's most recent works (produced between 2023 and the publication of this thesis in 2024), is that she has begun creating portraits that include more well-known characters, as opposed to the anonymous models she as utilized in earlier portraits.

Colored Entrance (after Department Store, 1956, by Gordon Parks) (2023) [Fig. 1] is the quintessence of the themes of history, identity, and narrative presented through a quilt measuring ten feet by five feet. The viewer is presented with two life-size figures in the center of the composition, with a sign stating "Colored Entrance" in the upper left corner. The tropical floral background is defined by three values of warm pastel-orange-colored tones. These tones include dark tones as the negative space between the mid-tone and glistening silky neutral pale orange floral motifs. These known figures, Joanne Wilson, and Shirley Kirksey (later Blackwell), stand under the "Colored Entrance" sign while looking to their left beyond the picture plane.

Butler created the modulation of these figures using both traditional and non-traditional quilting methods. Suggesting three-dimensional modeling of the figures' skin, Butler uses analogous color schemes to show the deeper shadows against the highlights in their arms, face, and legs. For example, the left side of Wilson's face displays different cool hues of violet and blue, while the right side of her face has hues of green and turquoise. This darker shade below

[2] Freidenrich, "Portraits in Craft," *American Craft* 81, No. 3 (2021): 24.

the projecting zygomatic arch shows the concave nature of the mandible while the protruding element of the zygomatic arch itself has a lighter scheme, thus causing a highlight. In contrast, Kirksey's representation of light and shade are warm tones of magenta, purple, red, orange, and yellow, with the only cool colors showing the depth of the orbital bone and the opposite side of the nose.

The intricate patterning adorning the attire of each figure presents a nuanced interplay of contrasting relations. Notably, the clothing displays a mid-century style, with an A-line silhouette gracing the woman and an empire silhouette adorning the girl. It is important to emphasize that the textiles employed by Butler do not adhere strictly to historical accuracy but rather reflect a thoughtfully interpretive approach. This interpretation resonates deeply with the vivacious textiles of West Africa, exemplified by the iconic Dutch wax prints and other highly patterned textiles. Remarkably, each facet of the dresses bears witness to a discerning selection of disparate patterns. The juxtaposition of the woman's dress starting with the skirt's textile diverges distinctively from the waistline band, which, in turn, markedly contrasts with the textile employed for the bodice and sleeves. Butler's appliqued technique renders the drapery folds in each figure's dress by overlaying translucent fabrics, which indicates shadow in each of the garments. Incorporating these appliqued techniques further connects Butler's heritage to her artistic practice.

This thesis will analyze the artist's ancestral and material connections in Bisa Butler's *Colored Entrance* (2023) where she emphasizes the materiality of the piece. Butler brings materiality to the foreground by having historical connections to the patterned material, a strong affiliation with her lineage and quiltmaking, and further connecting the material to a deeper narrative of the figures. Although *Colored Entrance* is a historical testament of Civil Rights

Movement and Jim Crow segregation of the American South, the focus will not be on the historical background, but will be on the material connections to Butler's family history of sewing and quiltmaking and a narrative with the figures in the piece. In addition to analyzing the narrative aspects of materiality in *Colored Entrance*, this thesis will also further analyze artworks in Butler's oeuvre including *The Passion of Questlove* (2023) and *Grandpa Zakani* (2004), which connect to both Butler's ancestry and narrative aspects of her subjects through materiality. In her earlier works, Butler's concentration was on found photographs of anonymous African Americans incorporated into the longstanding tradition of quiltmaking. This thesis will focus on her newer works in the artist's oeuvre that incorporates more well-known reference photographs and subjects, including Joanne Wilson and Shirley Kirksey from *Department Store, Mobile Alabama* (1956) by Gordon Parks [Fig. 2] and musician Questlove from the band The Roots. Multi-media artist Yinka Shonibare also connects to the themes of identity, ancestry, and history in his work *Scramble for Africa* (2003) using Dutch wax prints. Both artists use the materiality of their work to comment on African diaspora and the deeper history of African identity through the usage of Dutch wax prints throughout their oeuvre.

Literature Review

I. Current Literature on Bisa Butler

Recent literature surrounding Bisa Butler's oeuvre focus on the themes of memory and the connectivity to marginalized African American histories. In her 2021 article titled "The Fabric of Diaspora: Memory, Portraiture, and Empowerment in the Quilts of Bisa Butler," art historian Nancy Demerdash, focuses on the components of history found in Bisa Butler's works, such as the longstanding tradition of quiltmaking and the reinvention of historic photographs in a newfound contemporary medium, which consequently, creates further dignity and dandifies her subjects. Demerdash's argument channels the "dandyism" seen in the well-dressed, well-presented portraits of the sitters. Quoting scholars Monica Miller and Shantrelle Lewis, Demerdash states that "a dandy is often defined by their hyperbolic, self-consciously performative self-perseveration" and is far more than being a "snappy dresser," and the "Black male dandy deploys witticisms and uses finely tailored suits to transcend marginalized societal status and invisibility."[3] Having well-dressed figures contributes to the notion of Butler's portraits bringing the subject seen differently. Further, Demerdash states that Butler's "intermedial fiber practice is preoccupied with resuscitating Black subjects in order to reinvent how they are remembered through the photographic archive itself [by] inject[ing] life into her subjects [and] giving back identities that have been 'lost to history.'"[4] Butler's artworks displays

[3] Nancy Demerdash, "The Fabric of Diaspora: Memory, Portraiture, and Empowerment in the Quilts of Bisa Butler," *The Textile Museum Journal* 48 (2021): 166.

[4] Demerdash, "The Fabric of Diaspora," 165.

each sitter in their best dressed fashions that relates to reevaluating them as more than an unknown subject from the past.

Similarly, authors A.W. Eaton and Charles Peterson relate Butler's body of work as a pragmatic example of a "liberatory" example that is also tied in a symbolic partnership of aesthetics and the ethno-political. According to Eaton and Peterson, "liberatory" artistic practices that "fundamentally and centrally aim to overcome systems of injustice such as colonialism and imperialism, racism, patriarchy and sexism... or other systems of hegemony and oppression... liberatory artistic practices aim at social transformation through artistic means, where 'artistic' should be constructed broadly to include all sorts of aesthetic practices traditionally excluded from the realm of 'art,' such as quiltmaking."[5] Liberatory artistic practices connect to Butler's body of work where she further elevates the status of unknown African Americans into the realm of high art, thus, liberating the presence of the subject. Butler's quilted pieces using vintage black and white photographs reflect her ongoing engagement with expressing the "resilience and innate dignity of the African American experience."[6] Furthermore, Eaton and Peterson argue that Butler uses portraiture, not as masquerading in the grand tradition of oil painting, but challenging the artistic capacities and potentialities of textiles and quilting by celebrating the materiality of textiles and the artistic act of sewing that radically expand this form and practice toward new possibilities.[7] Butler accentuates the medium's capacity that celebrates subjects, acknowledges

[5] A.W. Eaton and Charles Peterson, "Place, Race, Gender, and Materiality: Bisa Butler Making the Last, First and the First, Last in the Modern Museum." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 10 (2022): 3.

[6] Pamela A. Parmal, Jennifer M. Swope, and Lauren D. Whitley, *Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories* (Boston: MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts: 2021): 210.

[7] Eaton and Peterson, "Place, Race, Gender, and Materiality," 7.

and emphasizes their pride, and to conveys subliminal depth and the complexity of their individuality.

Through internet-based magazines and newspapers, critics had positive reactions to contemporary artist Bisa Butler's textiles portraits exhibitions. In March 2020, *Vogue Magazine* covered one of Butler's smaller exhibitions at the Claire Oliver Gallery in Harlem, New York titled *The Storm, the Whirlwind, and the Earthquake.* Whereas Butler previously based her quilted portraits on photographs from World War II and the Farm Security Database, this exhibition mostly focused on photographs dating from 1870 to 1910, featuring Black people whose names were not recorded.[8] Highlighting unidentified individuals reconsiders their presence in a historical context. Grace Edquist emphasized Butler's process where "she thoroughly researches the people of the time and place where the photographs were taken, hoping to glean information about who they might have been, how they would have dressed, and what they would have wanted… no longer lost to the arc of time, Butler's subjects are celebrated, given portraits that radiate beauty and reverence"[9] Further, Butler states, "I operate in a way like a cultural anthropologist… I like to imagine a life for the images I see… a lot of times in my work I'm trying to dispute falsehoods and stereotypes... I'm trying to refute that and set the story straight."[10] In this exhibition, like many of her others, Butler establishes a new narrative of African American voices being highlighted using historic photographs.

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[8] Grace Edquist, "Depth, History, and Reverence: The Intricacies of Bisa Butler's Quilted Portraits," *Vogue Magazine,* March 3, 2020, https://www.vogue.com/article/bisa-butler-artist-interview

[9] Grace Edquist, "Depth, History, and Reverence."

[10] Steven Johnson, "At the Art Institute, Bisa Butler's Quilted Portraits Depict Black Figures in a New Light," *Chicago Tribune,* February 18, 2021, https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/museums/ct-ent-bisa-butler-art-institute-quilts-0218-20210218-ajm5wq77ujd75hampofa7hkpwu-story.html

Butler's 2023 exhibition *The World is Yours* at the Jeffrey Deitch gallery in New York recontextualizing how African Americans were viewed between the years 1950 through 2021. Inspired by a song (with the same title) by hip-hop artist Nas, the song resonated with Butler, where she is quoted saying, "We can make of this world what we want. The power is within us. We got to claim the power," and continues, "They're really claiming their space; like, not only do I belong to be here, but I am fabulous."[11] Using found photographs, these portraits reimagine the identities of each sitter, making a once old, forgotten photograph into their own narrative. Needelman also compares Butler to Faith Ringgold in this article, where she "has reached heights not seen since Faith Ringgold,"[12] where both artists reenvision the lives of African American experiences. Continually, Lucas Knight's article wrote that her works can be seen in the "lineage of renowned textiles artists like Faith Ringgold, Romare Bearden, Harriet Powers, and the quilters of Gee's Bend who elevated quilting from ubiquitous artifact to a powerful art form capable of shedding light on the African American experience… Butler's quilts create a space for the narratives and contributions of African Americans to be acknowledged and celebrated."[13] Using past artists as inspiration, Butler's quilted portraits further recognizes the African American experience in a new sense of the quiltmaking medium.

These scholars have highlighted the different avenues of Butler's artistic practices as a liberatory feature throughout her oeuvre, which is relevant and contributes to the understanding of Butler's work. However, there is more to analyze about the intentionality of Butler's

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[11] Joshua Needelman, "Hip-Hop's Next Takeover: Quilts," *The New York Times,* May 15, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/15/special-series/quilting-textiles-bisa-butler.html

[12] Needelman, "Hip-Hop's Next Takeover."

[13] Lucas Knight, "Bisa Butler: The World is Yours at Deitch Gallery, NYC," *Artefuse,* May 26, 2023, https://artefuse.com/2023/05/26/bisa-butler-the-world-is-yours-at-deitch-gallery-new-york/

materiality that further highlights the issues of power, oppression, race, and colonization, which is absent from current criticism on Butler. Therefore, this thesis addresses this gap in the conversation and presents further analysis of her materials in understanding Butler. The subsequent chapter delves into the procedural aspects and material characteristics of Butler's artworks, elucidating how her body of work not only establishes a recontextualized identity for the subjects depicted in the portraits but also intricately ties into her own personal identity and themes of oppression and race.

Analysis

This chapter will explore the significance of materials Bisa Butler uses in her artworks, dissecting the relationships between form and content, tradition and innovation, and the evolving dialogue between artists and their cultural contexts. Materials are not only vessels for creativity but active participants in the articulation of artistic meaning. Materiality unveils the layers within artworks, illustrating how artistic practices both preserve and challenge established customs. The interweaving of materials with identity, heritage, and societal commentary becomes a focal point, highlighting the ways in which artists engage with, respond to, and contribute to the evolving tapestry of expression.

Colored Entrance (2023), original source material is Gordon Parks' photograph *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama* (1956), is a testament of historic remembrance of the vicious turmoil during the American Civil Rights Movement and life under Jim Crow Laws in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[14] It also pays homage to African Americans as recontextualized subject matter and ties to Butler's African ancestry through the choices of colors, patterning, and Dutch wax prints. The focus of this chapter will be on the physical characteristics of Butler's materials and their symbolic significance in shaping narratives throughout her chosen textiles.

[14] Racial segregation in the American South. For further information, see Elizabeth Guffey, "Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South," *Design Issues* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 41-60. Along with https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/what.htm and https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/jim-crow.html.

In the original photograph by Gordon Parks, *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama* (1956), the main figures were dressed in light pastel colors: the woman on the left, Joanne Wilson, in a pastel blue A-line shaped lacy dress with white shoes and a large post earring in her right ear, and the girl, Wilson's niece, Shirley Kirksey (later Blackwell), on the right in a white or pale yellow three-tiered lacey dress with ankle-high white socks and black strapped shoes.[15] Joanne Wilson is quoted saying, "I always wanted to look neat and nice… Dressing well made me feel first class. I wanted to set an example."[16] The power of being well-dressed changes the way one feels about their appearance along with how one is perceived. Maurice Berger, a cultural historian, curator, and journalist, commented that Parks' segregation photographs demonstrate the "ambitions, responsibilities, talents, and rituals of an upstanding and law-abiding [African American] family [that] mirrored those of white Americans."[17] The figures are standing outside an establishment under the glowing neon sign, "Colored Entrance" that transforms an ordinary scene into a scene of social commentary. In the background, a now vintage 1950s style automobile is driving on the street along with plain gray-tan colored buildings with neon signs on each establishment that places the twenty-first century viewer into a different period. In choosing to reformulate into a quilt this photograph by Gordon Parks, Butler is not only commenting on the African American experience in the United States that includes oppression,

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[15] Owoh, "Bisa Butler Summons Black History in Her Quilted Arts."; Bisa Butler (@bisabutler), "Come check out the preview of my exhibit @gordonparksfoundation opening tomorrow 10-4!," Instagram video, February 1, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CoI1G4rMBj5/?igsh=MW91NDg4eGx3OGI3ag%3D%3D.

However, some sources believe that the two female figures in Gordon Park's original photograph are a mother and her daughter relationship instead of aunt and her niece. See Kyle MacMillian, "Gordon Parks," *Art in American,* February 25, 2016, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/gordon-parks-62119/

[16] Maurice Berger, "With a Small Camera Tucked in My Pocket," in *Gordon Parks: Segregation Story,* ed. Michal Raz-Russo and Peter W. Kunhardt Jr. (Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2014/2022) 22.

[17] Maurice Berger, "With a Small Camera Tucked in My Pocket," in *Gordon Parks: Segregation Story,* ed. Michal Raz-Russo and Peter W. Kunhardt Jr. (Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2014/2022) 23.

power, and segregation, but also the importance of family responsibilities and setting the right example for future generations.

I. Quiltmaking as an Artistic Practice

To better understand Butler's choice in using quiltmaking, it is important to acknowledge the progression of quiltmaking as an artistic medium. Quiltmaking has been a longstanding tradition in the scope of Euro-American history including in African American communities. However, quilting practices was not seen as a high art form, which included painting, printmaking, or sculptural techniques. Quilting was seen as a folk-art tradition of Black communities; notably, the 1966 Freedom Quilting Bee in Gee's Bend, Alabama that was a testament of the celebration of community and tradition in this rural region. Women in the Gee's Bend community created their own "museums" where women would hang their quilts outside during warm days and women would go from "house to house looking at quilts and getting ideas about how I would lay mine out" and sharing visual strategies.[18] The artistic heritage and originality of these Gee's Bend quilts defy traditional Euro-American categorizations, as they used stitching and materials to create quilts from secondhand scraps and fabric, which disrupted the standard of quilting. Using found materials from old textiles enabled artists, like Bisa Butler, to incorporate secondhand materials in their works to create further narratives.

African American artist Faith Ringgold unites high art with folk art by combining quilting techniques with oil painting in her figurative quilt stories. Ringgold reconstructs the quilt

[18] Vanessa Kraemer Sohan, "The Needle and the Pen," in Lives, Letters, and Quilts: Women and Everyday Rhetorics of Resistance (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2019): 121 (quote from Mary Lee Bendolph).

as a feminine pastime to the display of quilts in public galleries and museums. Ringgold further weaves representations of the African American experience within the art historical lens. Traversing between 1990-1997, Ringgold's *The French Collection* exemplifies "multiple simultaneous modes of intervention into representational systems that have been erased, ignored, misrepresented, and devalued her as a woman, as a person of African descent, and as an artist."[19] From walking The Louvre to immersed within twentieth century modern paintings, the fictional character Simone is immersed in various art historical compositions. *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* (1991) [Fig. 3] was the fourth installment of *The French Collection* that depicts a compression of time involving nineteenth and twentieth century African American artists and activist. Among these artists and activists include (from left to right) Madame C.J. Walker, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ella Baker with a shy Vincent van Gogh holding a bouquet of flowers in the background waiting their acknowledgement.[20] Hertha D. Sweet Wong not only relates the presence of van Gogh to the reference of Western art, but also the social and political turmoil of the past including the underlying themes of oppression, power, and colonialism. In the narrative, Sojourner Truth reveals that she lost a child to "a Dutch slaver in the West Indies," where the women ponder, "should the Dutch man be held accountable for what his country had done?"[21] Additionally, the field of sunflowers is also Ringgold's visual representation of van Gogh's series of paintings of sunflowers.

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[19] Hertha D. Sweet Wong, "Faith Ringgold Story Quilts," in *Picturing Identity: Contemporary American Autobiography in Image and Text*, 196-213. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018, 201.

[20] Wong, "Faith Ringgold Story Quilts," 206.

[21] Wong, "Faith Ringgold Story Quilts," 206.

Allowing the viewer to see the women's hard work, *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* is in a tilted perspective, with the women surrounding it on the far side. Not only does the quilt symbolizes the labor required to accomplish the quilt, but the quilt also symbolizes the motivation these women endured throughout the constant dismissal of their efforts, which is a metaphor for standing tall in the face of adversity. Part of this changing narrative Ringgold expresses in this quilt is piecing together an alternative history that includes African Americans, women, and artists, and more importantly, African American women artists. The background consists of a row of buildings in the same architectural style as the buildings in Arles, France, with a field of sunflowers consuming the middle ground. The character Simone explains to the women that she came to France to "seek opportunity" that was inaccessible in the United States.[22] In a prior quilt from *The French Collection,* the character Simone explains why she went to France: "In French said I was beautiful... they called me Mademoiselle Precieuse. In America I would be just another [B]lack bitch."[23] Ringgold emersed these women in a different place that further relates to their distant nature they identify with in their country. Framing the painted canvas is the visual-text relationship between image and narrative that is reoccurring throughout Ringgold's oeuvre. The outer edge surrounds the scene with floral and tie-dye fabric, framing the elements of the inner scene. The progression in African American quiltmaking allowed insight on how this medium was first ignored to being viewed as an intrinsic artistic medium, such as Faith Ringgold's figurative story quilts. This allowed a foundation for contemporary artists, like Bisa Butler, to continue using quiltmaking as a medium that draws on African American stories, identity, in the style of portraiture in the craft medium.

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[22] Wong, "Faith Ringgold Story Quilts," 206.

[23] Wong, "Faith Ringgold Story Quilts," 204.

II. Dutch Wax Printed Textiles

Before exploring the materiality of Butler's quilted portraits, it is important to understand the history of colonial powers and domination of Dutch wax cotton market. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) set up colonial roots in the East Indies, now known today as Indonesia. In various ports such as Java and Bativia in the Dutch East Indies, the VOC set up a global monopoly in trade. The Dutch East India Company brought Asian textiles from India to the Netherlands and Europe and then sold them to the Dutch West India Company (WIC) or private traders. During the seventeenth century the Dutch West India company served to formalize textile commerce between Europe and Africa.[24] Textiles were the most important merchandise for the African market for the Dutch West India Company with over half its exports to West Africa consisted of textiles. European textiles have been traded in West Africa since at least the fifteenth century and in the following four centuries, textiles were a major trade item in the exchange of gold, kola nuts, and slaves.[25]

The fabric known as Dutch wax print derives its name from the manufacturing process associated with the Dutch. One variety that is closest to the original Indian batik technique starting with plain white cotton fabric covered with wax or resin is run through copper rollers carved with the designs; the base design that remains on both sides of the cloth once the first layer of wax or resin is washed off is then complemented with multiple additional cycles of dying and printing that produces a two-sided fabric printed with rich, multi layered design and

[24] Christopher B Steiner, "Another Image of Africa: Toward an Ethnohistory of European Marketed in West Africa, 1873-1960." *Ethnohistory* 32, no. 2 (1985): 91-110.

[25] Christopher B Steiner, "Another Image of Africa: Toward an Ethnohistory of European Marketed in West Africa, 1873-9160." *Ethnohistory* 32, no. 2 (1985): 91-110.

color combinations.[26] Another variety of these imitations that resembled the design of wax prints but was machine produced with engraved metal rollers and without the use of wax or resin that became known as Java prints. These Java prints, however, were not produced on Java but in Europe and these imitation fabrics were introduced into West Africa in the second half of the 19th century.

Initially, European traders brought Asian textiles to Africa since the somber tones in European fashions did not appeal to their African customers and the brightly colored patterns did not appeal to Europeans. From around 1750 onwards, cotton factories became more successful at imitating the colorful prints from India; at first the patterns were copied from Indonesian examples, but the cotton printing industry in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe soon began to create designs specifically for the West African market.[27] Additionally, in the nineteenth century, styles were derived from a mixture of European peasant ornamentation along with nature- based motifs that were reminiscent of seventeenth century western embroidery and silk styles in combination of Indian symbols.[28] These prints were preserved in the oldest clothes served as inspirational sources for designing wax print. In the nineteenth century the cheaper European cotton prints from the Netherlands, Britain, and then later, West Africa cotton prints

[26] M. Amah Edoh, "Redrawing Power? Dutch Wax Cloth and the Politics of 'Good Design,'" *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016), 261.

[27] Ineke Van Kessel. "Wax Prints in West Africa: Unravelling the Myth of Dutch Colonial Soldiers as Cultural Brokers." in *Forts, Castles, and Society in West Africa: Gold Coast and Dahomey,* edited by John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu, 91-118. Koninklije Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2019.

[28] While under rule of the India, China, Islamic clerics, and the Dutch, the Javanese were influenced by an influx of ideas from a variety of cultures, thus some Chinese, and Buddhist themes were incorporated in Javanese batik: the Chinese mythical snail, dogs of Fo (beasts in pairs guarding the entrance of Buddhist deities; Indian chintz or "Tree of Life;" and Islamic geometric designs. For further information, see Tunde M. Akinwumi. "The 'African Print' Hoax: Machine Produced Textiles Jeopardize African Print Authenticity." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 5 (2008), 181-82.

gradually came to dominate the African market substituting the centuries longstanding tradition of the fashions from Asia. However, scholars, like Tunde M. Akinwumi, believe that these textiles are not "authentically African textiles" because of the designing and production process outside the African continent. He states, "Using the term 'African Print' for all brand names mentioned is only acceptable to its producers and makers, but to the critical mind, the term is a misnomer and therefore suspicious because of its origin and most of its design characteristics are not African," thus, disregarding the prints as "authentically African, but rather European 'African Cloths.'"[29] Counter to this argument, M. Amah Edoh justifies that "Dutch wax cloth has been so thoroughly appropriated into West African cultures that the cloth is now identified both within Africa and beyond as a quintessential West African cultural artifact" where they are worn by men, women, and children across different socio-economic classes and is crafted into elaborate three-piece outfits from special occasions to casual dress.[30] However, the production of Dutch wax prints keeps their customers in mind when designing these vibrant textiles.

Vlisco, a Dutch Company out of Helmond, has dominated the Dutch Wax print landscape for the last 150 years. Frans van Rood, head of design at Vlisco in the early 2000's, describes their reasoning that they deliberately employ European designers: "most Africans appreciate innovations that come from abroad, not those that come from within... We interpret what we see in the African streets, and we see what our own imaginations come up with. We mix the two, and that provides for a constant process of creation and innovation that wouldn't happen

[29] Tunde M. Akinwumi, "The 'African Print' Hoax," 179.

[30] Edoh, M. Amah, "Redrawing Power? Dutch Wax Cloth and the Politics of 'Good Design,'" 261.

otherwise."[31] The designers have been traveling to African since the 1980's to have a better sense of the places where the designs were worn and seeing which designs have been doing well by visiting market stands of traders who sold Dutch wax designs and tailors who partnered with the company as well as meetings with local artists and visits to historical or tourist attractions, listened to their concerns they had about the printing quality, or the difficulty of selling all the cloth they had in stock.[32] The Creative Director focuses on doing good design that demonstrates respect for the company's consumers because it meant not approaching them as African consumers in the need of exceptional customization but rather as consumers deserving of the best designs.[33] While the textiles are designed and produced in Holland, the company relies on the insight of vendors and tailors in West Africa that are selling the product. Thus, the company respects their consumers, not as purely African consumers, but as consumers that deserve the best designs.

Not only does she communicate themes of oppression and power by incorporating Dutch wax printed textiles throughout her oeuvre, but Butler also connects these prints to the ancestral Ghanian background of her father and communicates a further narrative of the figures. In the following sections, this thesis will be the first of its kind to dive into Butler's reasoning for incorporating specific patterned textiles throughout *Colored Entrance* by using direct quotes from the artist seen in interviews and social media posts to further support the importance of the materiality of her quilted portraits.

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[31] Christopher B Steiner, "Another Image of Africa: Toward an Ethnohistory of European Marketed in West Africa, 1973-9160." *Ethnohistory* 32, no. 2 (1985): 91-110.

[32] Edoh, M. Amah, "Redrawing Power? Dutch Wax Cloth and the Politics of 'Good Design,'" 265.

[33] Edoh, M. Amah, "Redrawing Power? Dutch Wax Cloth and the Politics of 'Good Design,'" 267.

III. Butler's Application of Material and Patterning

One captivating element that is apparent in Butler's work is the use of the dizzying textiles, patterning, and materials throughout her oeuvre. In Butler's rendition of Parks' photograph, the figures are set in an orange floral background consisting of three values of orange: dark, medium, and light. As Demerdash comments, Butler's oeuvre does not contain glossiness across the surfaces in her textiles and fabrics.[34] However, *Colored Entrance*'s background contains a lustrous, silk-like material that also creates contrast in patterned textiles through color and fabric against the figures in the foreground. In previous quilted portraits, Butler chose more matte textiles and textures; her recent artworks have implemented shinier materials, thus indicating a shift from her older artworks to her new series of artworks starting in 2023.

Jeff R. Donaldson, founder of the AfriCOBRA movement, referred to this quality of materiality in his AfriCOBRA manifesto as, "color that shines," describing the vibrancy and saturation of the color artists should use throughout their pieces.[35] In Butler's case, she not only creates works of art that are vibrantly colored, but also creates artworks that "shine" using lustrous materials. Butler says, "I find that the types of fabrics help me communicate ideas: lace can make you think of something delicate, denim can make you think of durability, and silk satin may make you think of wealth and opulence."[36] In *Colored Entrance*, Butler further elevates the prestige of her subjects by having them in a silk-satin floral finished setting. Butler states in her

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[34] Demerdash, "The Fabric of Diaspora," 160.

[35] Jeff R. Donaldson, "AfriCOBRA Manifesto? 'Ten in Search of a Nation,'" *Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30, (Spring 2012), 81. The manifesto was first published in *Black World*, October 1970, 80-86.

[36] Owoh, "Bisa Butler Summons Black History in Her Quilted Arts."

Instagram post about *Colored Entrance* that the "creamsicle coloring of the background reminds me of summer days and happier times and that's the aura that I wanted them to be surrounded by."[37] Butler positioned the figures in a warm-colored setting to convey a more positive sentiment, rather than the harsh reality presented in the original photograph. Not only does Butler communicate the liberatory nature of her artworks through subject, as scholars have mentioned in past articles, but she integrates these liberatory practices throughout her chosen materials, textiles, and color schemes. Butler liberates the figures in their iconic poses and separates them from a context and society of oppression and segregation, even though the reminder of oppression is still looming overhead. Alternatively, she changes their surroundings to instill a sense of warmth and nostalgia that takes power away from the brutality of racism.

One aspect that stands out in *Colored Entrance* not seen in other quilted portraits in Butler's oeuvre is evidence of the external world. The inclusion of "colored entrance" sign from the original photograph and identifies the racist setting in which the photograph was taken. Butler states, "Selecting the parts of it… the young woman, her niece, and the colored entrance sign; these were the three things that were protagonists in a play and there's the victor, hero, and the villain. There's that dynamic that exists that attracted me."[38] The incorporation of the sign on the upper left corner, places the figures in a specific period, along with their clothing and hair styles, capturing the essence of the obstacles facing them as African American woman in the 1950s. The red and green sign uses these complimentary colors to highlight this element of the

[37] Bisa Butler (@bisabutler), "Come check out the preview of my exhibit @gordonparksfoundation opening tomorrow 10-4!," Instagram video, February 1, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CoI1G4rMBj5/?igsh=MW91NDg4eGx3OGI3ag%3D%3D

[38] Bisa Butler (@bisabutler), "Come check out the preview of my exhibit @gordonparksfoundation opening tomorrow 10-4!," Instagram video, February 1, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CoI1G4rMBj5/?igsh=MW91NDg4eGx3OGI3ag%3D%3D

original photograph. The green ground fabric is encompassed with twisting and intertwining white flower buds. Of the fabric, Butler says, "I chose the green fabric with white flower buds because it reminded me of the way I've seen cotton look on a vine [branch]."[39] Jacoba Urist, a journalist for the *Smithsonian Magazine* that interviewed Butler in 2023, interprets this statement as "allud[ing] to the role of African Americans in the cotton industry."[40] Not only does the fabric depict cotton-like iconography, but the fabric is made of cotton material itself, which further connects to the cotton industry of African American's ancestors. The crimson red velvet fabric Butler used for the lettering of the "Colored Entrance" sign, Butler says, "resembles veins and red blood; I want the sign to invoke the horror and trauma of chattel slavery on a human body."[41] Each material Butler chooses for the "Colored Entrance" sign connected to the history of African Americans dating back to the horrors of the Jim Crow era shown in the original photograph.

Butler reimagines Gordon Park's original photograph's pale, pastel-colored dresses as dizzying, brightly colored patterns for both subjects' dresses in her rendition of *Colored Entrance*. Each section of their dresses, however, is created with mis-matched fabrics instead rather than a single design; each subject's dress has one pattern that is repeated elsewhere. Butler also uses specific fabrics that connect to their background of the person being depicted. Specifically, Wilson's dress is sectioned into four large sections, with four different patterning: the skirt, waistline, bodice, and sleeve [Fig. 4]. The skirt and sleeve of her dress was made from Vlisco's Dutch wax print titled "Michelle Obama's Bag," inspired by the first lady's visit to

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[39] Jacoba Urist, "The Genius Behind Bisa Butler's Vibrant Quilts," *Smithsonian Magazine,* July/August 2023, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/bisa-butler-quilts-portraits-vibrant-color-180982331/.

[40] Urist, "The Genius Behind Bisa Butler's Vibrant Quilts."

[41] Urist, "The Genius Behind Bisa Butler's Vibrant Quilts."

Africa in 2009 and the handbag she carried on the tarmac. Butler explains "where she [the woman, Joanne Wilson] has lived in the Jim Crow South, there is a future beyond… There will one day be an African American first lady."[42] Butler intentionally chooses this fabric to further connect the past with the present by incorporating symbolism from the twenty-first century in Wilson's 1950s styled skirt. The fabric entails a pink tie-dye ground with wavy, interlacing, black vine-like lines. Butler stitched on top of some of the lines with pink thread to enhance the movement of this pattern. The shirt is decorated with a pink ground with semi-overlapping curved purses with two visible handles in green, blue, and golden coloring and a flower hanging from the chain of a handle. This creates color contrast and color vibrancy. Each purse is varied in patterning: some have a light green face with light blue in the upper portion; some are checkered with emerald-green, hunter green, and gold; some purses have a golden upper portion with varied green lower section; and all the purses have an assorted color flower. Wilson also holds a clutch purse [Fig. 5] in her left hand, as her right hand is taking something out or putting something in. The top of the purse resembles the "Michelle Obama's Purse" textile, with the same golden-green and blue flower as the purse just below to the left. The abstract purple flower textile material in the bodice is represented on the bottom and side of the purse. On the edge of the flap of the clutch purse are the words "RESPECT: LOVE: STRENGTH," which are uplifting words of encouragement.

The waistband of Wilson's dress consists of maroon-velvet ground with flowers in a row. The deep violet flowers are outlined in a gold fabric and consist of diagonal lines to show the petals in the middle of each flower. This pattern called "Obaapa," or "Good Woman" is popular

[42] Urist, "The Genius Behind Bisa Butler's Vibrant Quilts."

in the West African markets, which symbolizes the caregiving, feminine perception, and in this case, caring for her niece.[43] The bodice of her dress is made up of purple fabric with subtly abstracted flower petals embellished with shimmering textile. Jacoba Urist notes that this purple fabric was designed by City of Joy, which is a refuge in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo for women in that area that are recovering from war-related violence, where the flower petals "commemorates the refugee's physical healing."[44] Wilson's shoes are made from a Dutch wax fabric titled, "Michelle Obama's Shoes."[45] Butler's choice of textiles for Wilson's clothing commemorates healing and better times.

For Shirley Kirksey's dress [Fig. 6], Butler continued with the same silhouette shape and three tiers for her skirt. The patterning on Kirksey's bodice is in a complementary color scheme of yellow leaves and a large purple flower with a neutral white for another kind of flower. The large purple flower can also be seen as part of her bow set on the right side of her hair. The tiered portion of her skirt consists of an alternating pattern of iridescent warm colored swirls of pale yellow-gold and pale pink overlapping each other; this pattern is repeated on the bottom tier. The second tier incorporates a complimentary color scheme of blue and orange, adding to the vibrancy of the textile. This pattern includes circular formations with the blues and oranges swirling to the center, resembling a large lollipop. This lollipop pattern is also repeated as Kirksey's puffy sleeves, as the bottom ruffles are the repeated warm colored textile from the first and third tier. These swirling, whimsical fabrics evoking lollipops were included by Butler

[43] Urist, "The Genius Behind Bisa Butler's Vibrant Quilts."

[44] Urist, "The Genius Behind Bisa Butler's Vibrant Quilts."

[45] Seen on "Colored Entrance" museum plaque from "Materfamilias" exhibition at the Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, NY (February 2-April 14, 2023) and "This World is Yours" exhibition at the Jeffrey Deitch Gallery in New York, New York (May 6-June 30, 2023).

intentionally she says to "symbolize things that my [Butler's] own little girls loved – candy and toys."[46]

Butler renders the hair of her subjects meticulously. Wilson's hair contrasts with her cool toned skin color with warm-toned colors of magenta, yellow-orange, and lemon yellows and with a neutral brown. Her hair is interlaced and folded resembling a methodically positioned braided updo hairstyle. Additionally, Kirksey's hair was rendered using a deep violet colored textile with simple lavender floral outlines. In addition to connecting Kirksey's lollipop-printed outfit to the personality of a young girl, Butler also relates the portrayal of flowers in her hair as part of her personality. She comments, "she is a young girl, so I want her to have that sweetness and that delicacy."[47] Butler describes that her choices of fabric also relate to "African American hair texture, that it is bunchy. It does have a kink to it. It can have a curl to it. It doesn't necessarily lay flat. I'm not discounting anybody's hair texture that does lay flat, including Black people who have straighter hair or wavier hair, but with this particular girl [from *The Warmth of Other Sons*] I'm saying like her natural, puffy hair texture is beautiful."[48] By adding the floral textile to Kirksey's hair, Butler relates to the young girl's personality as sweet and delicate, as well as the possible texture of her hair.

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[46] Owoh, "Bisa Butler Summons Black History in Her Quilted Arts."

[47] Stephanie Stebich, "Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 7:53 (Assessed March 2, 2024, 2024).

This quote is related to the young girl represented in another one of her related works, *The Warmth of Other Sons,* where Butler incorporated three-dimensional flower textures that represents the girl's textured hair.

[48] Stephanie Stebich, "Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 7:58 (Assessed March 2, 2024, 2024).

The meaningful selection of materials that comment on the themes of history, identity, and even fantasy using wit and humorous undertones is likewise present in the work of British artist Yinka Shonibare. His art, like Butler's, utilizes Dutch wax prints throughout his oeuvre that ties to his ancestral background along with connotations of past historical events. Shonibare was born in London of Yoruba descent, was raised in Lagos, Nigeria, and educated as a young adult in Britain.[49] His iconic use of printed West African fabric combined with Victorian signifiers, such as the period fashions for each of his characters, asks the viewer, what is African and what is European? The cloth is a metaphor for the entangled relationship between Africa and Europe, how the two continents have invented each other during the [European] Victorian era, that links colonialization and exploration.[50] The historical joke Shonibare alludes to is while this fabric referred as Dutch wax that looks "African," it is often also worn to indicate Black pride in Brixton or Brooklyn; however, this printed fabric is based on Indonesian batik, manufactured in the Netherlands, Britain, and other countries (including some in West Africa), and then exported it to West Africa where it is popular but foreign commodity, thus, Shonibare's message is nothing is as authentic as it seems.[51] Shonibare's *Scramble for Africa* (2003) [Fig. 7], consists of fourteen headless mannequins sitting around a table that has a printed map of African in the center. The title coincides as the nickname for the 1884 Berlin Conference where European powers were "scrambling" to have a portion of the African continent. Having the African continent in the center, shows how European powers carved up the African continent solely for

[49] Robert Stilling, "An Image of Europe: Yinka Shonibare's Postcolonial Decadence," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 299.

[50] Nancy Hynes, "Yinka Shonibare: Redressing History," *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (2001): 60-61.

[51] Nancy Hynes, "Yinka Shonibare," 60.

the exploitation of natural resources with little regard for culture or ethnicity, leaving Africans torn by artificial political lines.[52] Shonibare comments on the oppressive nature of European colonization by including the map of Africa These mannequins are dressed in traditional Victorian era styled suits; however, the fabric was not traditionally Victorian, but designed and made using Dutch wax printed textiles. As Robert Stilling states, "dressing these European diplomats in pseudo-traditional African garb, Shonibare installs 'African' presence at the scene of a conference from which African representatives were entirely absent."[53] Like Butler, Shonibare dresses his characters in Dutch wax prints as a testament of recontextualizing historical narratives and commenting on the deeper history of African identity.

Continually, the Butler's quilted portrait *The Passion of Questlove* (2023) [Fig. 8 and Fig. 9], Butler applied lustrous glass beads to mimic the texture of the man's hair over appliquéd lace. This quilted portrait depicts Questlove, also known as Ahmir Thompson. Butler incorporates specific patterns and movement throughout Questlove's hair. There are multiple areas of these radial compositions of beads, which resemble a floral pattern, with the movement of beads surrounding these motifs. The beads swirl around the other areas of his hair. In addition, Questlove's beard is constructed using a shiny floral-patterned fabric that imitates the courser texture of men's beards. To show the glossy, smooth material of Questlove's glasses, Butler used geometric fabric with shiny details. Butler creates deeper meanings in this portrait using classic West African textiles with motifs, like her other quilted portraits. The repeated motifs illustrate Questlove's name throughout his clothing, using "the heart, Philadelphia on his lapels, drums,

[52] Robert Stilling, "Yinka Shonibare's Postcolonial Decadence," 302.

[53] Robert Stilling, "Yinka Shonibare's Postcolonial Decadence," 303.

and vinyl records to celebrate @theroots. The colors selected were influenced by the set from the Summer of Soul documentary."[54] Butler references the concept of love in the singer's last name by incorporating hearts in his clothing. He is also associated with the music scene, since he is a DJ; therefore, his clothing also contains vinyl CDs and drums, which relate to his involvement in music. Butler experiments with an array of materials and textures throughout each of her artworks in her oeuvre that relates to appearance and personality of the sitter in her portraits.

IV. Implementation of Color

To better understand Butler's implications of color and subject matter, it is worth exploring the COBRA and AfriCOBRA movement, which began in the 1960s. COBRA (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists), later turned into the AfriCOBRA movement (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists); its main mission was to give "give voice and visual form to Black histories and realities... to foreground social, political, and economic issues and inequalities through their works."[55] The COBRA/AfriCOBRA Manifesto, written by Jeff R. Donaldson, was first published in October 1970, it stated the following about subject matter:

> … [I]n this spirit of familyhood, we have carefully examined our roots and searched our branches for those visual qualities that are more expressive of our people/art… We strive for images inspired by African people – experience and images that African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience…We try to create images that appeal to the senses – not to the intellect… [that] may be placed in these three categories: 1. Definition – images that deal with the past; 2. Identification – images that relate to the present; 3. Direction – images that look into the future.[56]

[54] Bisa Butler (@bisabutler), "The Passion of Questlove The New York Times Magazine @nytmag..." Instagram photo, October 12, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CU8EThrFuiO/?hl=en.

[55] Nancy Demerdash, "The Fabric of Diaspora," 159.

[56] Jeff R. Donaldson, "AfriCOBRA Manifesto?" 80.

The AfriCOBRA movement could also be seen as a predecessor movement to the Afro-Futurism movement that also recontextualizes African American experience that considers the roles of African Americans in society from the

Donaldson, one of the founders of this movement, emphasized the importance of reflecting on one's ancestry to encapsulate the African American experience. This experience includes artistic images that relate to the past, present, and future. Butler's oeuvre is an embodiment of Donaldson's manifesto, in that she highlights people of the past and relates to the present and hopes that her art changes the way people view African Americans in the future. At the time of Butler's studies at Howard University in New Jersey, Donaldson was the dean of fine arts with other members of the AfriCOBRA movement, where she took similar approaches to her work as her mentors.[57] First starting with portraits of family and friends, then moving to unnamed African Americans mostly in the United States as her subject matter, and her electrifying usage of color throughout her quilted portraits.

Butler's vibrant quilted portraits use color theory and unnatural color usage, a design element inspired by the AfriCOBRA movement of her mentors at Howard University. In his 1970 manifesto, Donaldson explained that one of the qualities of the AfriCOBRA movement was to emphasize their image making with the use of color:

> *Color*... Color that is free of rules and regulations. Color that shines. Color that is expressively awesome. Color that defines, identifies, and directs. Superreal color for Superreal images. The superreality for our everyday thang. Color as bright and as real as the color dealing on the streets of Watts and the Southside... and in Harlem... and everywhere we are. Coolade colors for coolade images for superreal people. Superreal images for SUPERREAL people.[58]

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past, present, and future. For more on AfroFuturism, see Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Si-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013) and Ingrid LaFleur, "Visual Aesthetics of Afrofuturism," filmed September 25, 2011, at TEDx Fort Green Salon, Brooklyn, NY, *YouTube*.

[57] Nancy Demerdash, "The Fabric of Diaspora," 159.

[58] Jeff R. Donaldson, "AfriCOBRA Manifesto? 'Ten in Search of a Nation,'" 81. All original emphasis.

Donaldson emphasizes the term "superrreal" in his manifesto, which highlights the connection between "real" Black identity and the artistic iconography implemented in the movement. One motif for the pictorial representation of the "superreal" imagery is the brilliant color applied. Art historian Rebecca Zorach explains the "superreality" through imagery with boldness of color as "a form of surrealism that was not distortion but reality-plus, refusing to abandon the intensity of life as lived in favor of a separate, pure, or even fantastical aesthetic experience."[59] This partially compares to the twentieth century art movement of Surrealism as not an alternate reality, but as an enhancement of reality, where artists, like Butler, are creating super-real images with the embellishment of subject matter and technique.

These "Coolade" colors implemented by the AfriCOBRA movement are the color of people's realities: neon yellows, royal purples, deep indigos, fire engine reds, and key lime greens are seen throughout a variety of regions in American and West Africa. Butler's expressive color in her portraits were inspired by Black identity and the popular hues, or "superreal" hues, throughout different communities that Donaldson, her mentor, stressed in his manifesto. She further explains in a 2022 interview with Washington Post reporter Robin Gavhan:

> [The AfriCOBRA movement] Embraced Black identity [which] also came with a new color palette which they wanted to determine for themselves not only just using color to depict a human being but using color to depict an African American person whose roots are in the continent. What were the textiles like what are the bright yellows and the bright oranges and the reds and the indigos like what are the colors that you would see if you traveled to Africa in the 1960s or if you walked in any urban city in the 1960s that were those colors that the young hip people were wearing and they called those the 'CoolAde Colors.'[60]

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[59] Quoted in Nancy Demerdash, "The Fabric of Diaspora," 160.

[60] Robin Givhan, "Race in America: Giving Voice with Bisa Butler," Washington Post Live, Published June 2, 2022, Video, 6:00. (Accessed February 5, 2024). https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-post-live/2022/06/02/race-america-giving-voice-with-bisa-butler/

The implementation of "Coolade" colors in Butler's oeuvre are described as bright, vivid colors known for their intensity and extreme saturation. These colors are reminiscent of different textiles and fashions. Butler further elaborates on the Coolade color palette:

> Coolade colors, so 'cool' as in 'hip, cool, with it' and what are these people wearing. It's interesting that they were translating those colors to paint and now I'm translating them back to textiles because they were influenced by those fashions. They also talked to us a lot about using color to express emotion. You hear that a lot in our language: someone has the blues, or green with envy, or I was so angry that I felt myself go red, or turn red, or felt red so I'm using those colors in an enhanced way to give those insight.[61]

Butler relates vibrant colors like reds, yellows, and blues worn in West Africa and inner urban cities to human emotion. Color is intricately tied to psychological states. The artist's manipulation of color, including the deliberate alteration of the pictorial space, serves as a psychological expression. This manipulation entails color associations that establish a connection between the ambiance depicted and the viewer's emotional experience. The temperature of colors contributes to an overall atmosphere, with warm tones such as red, orange, and yellow evoking a sense of joy, while cool colors like green, blue, and purple create a more somber mood. For example, longer wavelength colors, like red, are experienced as arousing, passion, sexual readiness, while shorter wavelength colors, like green, are calming.[62] Beyond mere aesthetics, color functions as a powerful communicator of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, conveying messages, concepts, or experiences through variations in hue, saturation, and value in terms of

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[61] Robin Givhan, "Race in America: Giving Voice with Bisa Butler," Washington Post Live, Published June 2, 2022, Video, 6:40. (Accessed February 5, 2024). https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-post-live/2022/06/02/race-america-giving-voice-with-bisa-butler/ https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=rdxgqEiz3FY

[62] Andrew J. Elliot and Markus A. Maier, "Color Psychological Functioning," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, no. 5 (2007), 250.

lightness and darkness. Butler applies these colors in her work to signify both the colors' connection to cultural heritage and identity, and the inner depths of human emotion.

Butler portrays her subjects' skin tones in warm or cool colors based on each person's personality or emotion Butler feels when first analyzing their portraits. For example, if a person has a calm facial expression, she may use cooler tones to portray their calm calming demeanor, but a person with more serious facial expressions may be depicted using warmer tones to highlight their determined expression. Butler says:

> One of the Harlem Hellfighters looks kind of calm, his head is kind of like tilted lean back to the side. When I see that I'm thinking maybe this young man is the one who was cooler, calmer maybe he was calm under pressure. I'm using colors that indicate calmness like the blues and the greens of like a calm water somebody who has more level. On the on the converse of that, there's one young man at the top and he's kind of frowning in a way he's looking at the viewer or looking at the photographer like 'I do not trust you; I'm not only reading you but I'm finding you inadequate in some way.' I used a lot of reds and oranges with him because I thought that his personality seemed very kind of forceful and red is that passionate color, it can be anger, it can be passion, or it can be power.[63]

Butler uses color to communicate human emotions and personalities in her quilted portraits and uses color to express her subject's roots by using an African color palette, including vibrant reds, indigos, and yellows. Similarly, in *Colored Entrance,* Joanne Wilson's skin tones are comprised of intense, dark indigos, royal violets, deep ocean turquoise and lighter seafoam and chartreuse greens with lime highlights. Her demeanor is tranquil, as she looks at some element beyond the picture plane and is reaching into her clutch purse. The cooler tones used to render her skin reflect her calm composure. Furthermore, Butler incorporates hues of warmer colors in Kirksey's complexion on the right. Kirksey has a more dynamic facial expression, so the skin tone reflects

[63] Robin Givhan, "Race in America: Giving Voice with Bisa Butler," Washington Post Live, Published June 2, 2022, Video, 7:30. (Accessed February 5, 2024). https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-post-live/2022/06/02/race-america-giving-voice-with-bisa-butler/

her emotional intensity. Butler may also be commenting on liveliness of childhood by using a warmer color palette for the little girl's skin complexion. The girl's skin hues mimic the colors of the twilight sky. Lemon-yellow highlights illuminate the higher planes of Kirksey's face, including the bridge of the nose, cheekbones, the forehead, and the right side of her leg. Tangerine-orange and fire-engine red reveals the mid-tone values used all over the skin. Magenta coloring begins with the darker values of the shadows, where reddish-purple are positioned between the deep violets of the darkest shadows and the reddish oranges of the mid-tones. Balancing the color scheme of Wilson's skin color, the girl's eye sockets contain the same indigos, royal purples, turquoise and seafoam to light green highlights seen in the depiction of her aunt. Having these rich colors juxtaposed next to one another in the subjects' skin tones, illuminating the skin, creates a focal point for the viewer. Butler creates balance in this piece by rendering warm and cool colors, allowing the viewer's eye to move around the picture plane.

As discussed, throughout Butler's oeuvre, her portraits contain unnatural skin coloring using warm and cool tones. Butler's works goes beyond the interpretive qualities of color as psychological input of emotions instilled by the subjects. Butler provides a social commentary based on race. Butler states, "I use color to communicate emotion but also to speak to the African American tradition of using rainbow toned colors to describe complexions… I create my figures in a myriad of tones to deliberately blur that line from light to dark [skin]; my figures must be understood on their own but not in terms of light or dark."[64] Ranges of colors are utilized to establish subjectivity of the figures and creates uniqueness among them. One

[64] Ogonnaora Owoh, "Bisa Butler Summons Black History in Her Quilted Arts to Motivate the Fight for Black Lives." *OkayAfrica,* June 22, 2020, https://www.okayafrica.com/bisa-butler-summons-black-history-in-her-quilted-arts-to-motivate-the-fight-for-black-lives/

reasoning for this deliberate utilization of rainbow colors of skin tones is because of the audience Butler tries to capture. She explains her color usage based on race in a 2020 interview:

> I am definitely trying to get people to see beyond race… the race of my subject is obvious in their features, but my original audience was the subjects themselves, who were mostly African Americans and Africans from the continent… I like to subvert the colorism in the community where you can see the people are Black but where a person's complexion is not used as a descriptor. I deliberately confuse that with my skin color choices so that it becomes unclear. Once viewers must concede that it is not going to be revealed, that have to deal with the subjects on different terms.[65]

Butler's approach allows viewers to see beyond the race of her subject and to see more about the context of the portrait. Butler continues stating, "The African American community has always used colorful language to describe our complexions. A person with very light skin is called 'yellow' or 'red-boned' if they blush easily. A very dark-skinned person can be referred to as 'blue-black.'"[66] This allows the viewers to interpret a different signifier for skin color, which creates further subjectivity and interpretation. The viewers focus more on color interactions, facial expressions, and pattern choices than the race of the sitters because of the color choices Butler made in depicting skin tones.

V. Identity Through Materiality

Quiltmaking stitches together the past with the present. It melds cultural history, personal narratives, and heritage through this medium. Butler's ancestry strongly associated with the materials and patterning in her art. Sewing had been an important part of daily life where women would make clothes for their whole family. This skill was passed down to multiple generations in Butler's lineage from her maternal grandmother to her mother and finally down to her. Because

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[65] Michèle Wije, "Photography and Quiltmaking Transformed: A New Approach to Portraiture," in *Bisa Butler – Portraits*, ed. Erica Warren (Yale University Press, 2020), 29-30.

[66] Owoh, "Bisa Butler Summons Black History in Her Quilted Arts."

of this skill being passed down through each generation, Butler connected this skill to her oeuvre and went from painting to fiber and even sewing her own clothes. In a 2020 interview, Butler states, “My grandmother, Violette, grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana, born and raised. She used to sew all kinds of clothing…Women in that era, mostly American women and probably some men too, sewed to supplement their clothing choices. It wasn't like now where clothing is so affordable… In those days, it was cheaper for them to sew an outfit than to buy it. So, Grandma Violette and my mother taught me how to sew, and I was sewing my own clothes at Howard as well.”[67] Sewing was a key component in the African American community, where they would be stitching together clothes, quilts, and memories.

Patterned textiles became an essential feature of Butler’s body of work, she creates a distinctive appearance with patterns from found textiles. Butler combined many of different patterns, textured textiles, and colors to create a narrative with her portraits. Butler explained that during her time in college, one of her professors posed a simple question when she was struggling with her works: Why not create works like how you dress? Butler explains that when she was in college (just like now), she would wear African printed clothing and mix the different textures and patterns together, and her professor asked, "Why don't you use fabric… Look at how you dress. Use the parts of you in your work that you use so well. You're always combining textures and colors. It looks funky; it looks cool."[68] Butler also relates the utilization of fabric to what is familiar to viewers. She states:

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[67] Stephanie Stebich, “Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler,” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 16:14 (Assessed February 21, 2024).

[68] Stephanie Stebich, “Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler,” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 14:07 (Assessed February 21, 2024).

> We are responding to different things. Then when you see different types of fabrics since we all use them. We are all dressed. I think from the moment we wake up--we sleep on sheets, we are wearing clothes. There are very few times in our day outside of being in the shower or in the bathtub that you are not touching some sort of fabric or some sort of texture, so we know what these things feel like, and they invoke ideas and memory. I think that is what makes my artwork very accessible to everybody because not everybody has a painting box and a painting studio in their home, but everybody has fabric all over, and many, many people have quilts.[69]

In an earlier portrait, in addition to other found materials, she began using her father's *dashikis* that also started a new artistic philosophy where her "fabric choices tell a story, and I wanted [to use] African cloth. I didn't have a lot of money; I was in school, so I thought, 'I'll just use my father's *dashikis*.' But, in essence, I was using pieces of my father's life and his actual DNA. When we wear our clothing, our skin rubs on that clothing, so the DNA is infused, but I didn't realize that at the time until I put it together. I felt a certain spirit and passion..."[70] By using her father's *dashikis,* she promoted further interpretation into a deeper meaning behind her artworks. Because she completed a portrait that is based on her presumed grandfather from Ghana, [Fig. 10], Butler utilized her father's clothing, her grandmother's dress remnants, and raw silk and leather from her mother's sash.[71] Not only do these articles of clothing belong to current members of her family, but the materials also have parts of her family members embedded in the

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[69] Stephanie Stebich, "Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 6:57 (Assessed March 2, 2024, 2024).

[70] Stephanie Stebich, "Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 21:40 (Assessed February 21, 2024).

Dashikis are a colorful, longer shirt-like garment worn by men and women that is known to West Africa.

[71]Bisa Butler (@bisabutler), "Begin at the beginning: Where I started and where I am now..." January 3, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/bisabutler/p/C1pyTGbu0oV/?img_index=1

Butler's grandfather from Ghana passed away sometime around 1954 with no photographs saved. Butler completed this portrait by researching "Northern Ghanian man" as a reference photograph. For further explanation from Butler, see Stephanie Stebich, "Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 21:40 (Assessed February 21, 2024).

clothing that creates a portrait of Butler's unknown grandfather. Butler explains the importance of this portrait: "This portrait was significant because it represents the beginning of my artistic philosophy where the fabric used to a portray[al] someone reflects their lifestyle."[72] This began her artistic philosophy where her portraits tell a story of unknown people throughout history and use different materials, textiles, and patterns to create a narrative.

In Butler's later works, the dimensions of her quilts became more life-size, and she began to use higher quality fabrics, including Dutch wax prints, further tying the materials she utilizes in her portraits to her ancestry. Butler continues to use different mis-matched materials, textures, and patterns, as she began to do as a college student. Fabric and other materials allow Butler to connect each portrait with personal and cultural history. Butler comments, "My portraits are quilted because fabric is the medium that speaks to me… I choose a lot of African fabric because my roots are in Ghana so I use a lot of cloth that comes from the continent and I love using African Cloth because the women there name the fabric based on folktales and wise tales and these fabrics were printed in the 1800's and they're so popular that they continue to be printed today, so people recognize them."[73] Butler uses a variety of fabric worldwide, including Dutch wax prints from Haarlem, Holland; a Ghana textile company that is based out of Ghana; and a Nigerian batik from a company out of London, along with the Garment District in New York City, and New Jersey-based fabric shops.[74] Butler comments on the vast options of worldwide

[72] Bisa Butler (@bisabutler), "Begin at the beginning: Where I started and where I am now..." January 3, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/bisabutler/p/C1pyTGbu0oV/?img_index=1

[73] Bisa Butler (@bisabutler), "Innovation is at the core of every piece I create…," Instagram Video, February 2, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C22iM7hOhyN/?igsh=MTY0bzdhZDJqNmFzYw%3D%3D.

[74] Stephanie Stebich, "Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 53:24 (Assessed March 1, 2024, 2024).

fabric: “There's beautiful fabric of all kinds. I love the intersection of American fabric and foreign or African fabrics or Indian fabrics. I like the idea of lace and silk and cotton combined with denim, leather, and wool. So, I'm interested in different varieties of textures and colors.”[75] Because of the interconnectivity of global markets, artists like Butler can combine influences of diverse cultures in their works of art, including influence of their own ancestry.

Physical techniques Butler incorporates in her quilted portraits are also connected to quiltmaking techniques, as well as textile techniques of West Africa. One quiltmaking technique consists of appliqued techniques consisting of overlayed material. *Colored Entrance,* Butler modulates the figures’ garments using this appliqued technique. For example, to show the folds in Wilson’s skirt, Butler used lace that creates shadowed folds which shows the left side of each fold darker than the right, indicating the light source is coming from the right side of the picture plane. This technique is also shown throughout the bodice and waistband of Wilson’s dress, as well as the skirt of Kirksey’s dress. For Kirksey’s dress, the appliqued technique is shown throughout the three tiers of the skirt, along with the folds of the boddice and sleeves. Because Butler used this appliqued technique to show modulation using translucent lace, the original pattern is still present through the lace but less saturated. Butler also places multiple layers of the fabric on top of each other, creating a darker value while keeping the integrity of the original fabric that the viewer can see through the lace.

Appliqued techniques are also seen in Butler’s most recent artworks that incorporate beaded materials sewn to the surface. In *The Passion of Questlove* (2023) [Fig. 10 and Fig. 11], there are multiple uses of the appliqued techniques. First, Butler overlayed multiple layers of

[75] Stephanie Stebich, “Clarence Smith Distinguished Lecture: Bisa Butler,” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Published November 20, 2020, YouTube Video, 54:33 (Assessed March 1, 2024, 2024).

lacy, mesh fabric as the shape and coloring of Questlove's hair, and the thickness of his hair. The middle of his hair is thicker than the outside of his hair, showing more of the background color through the lace. Butler meticulously sewed glass beads in a pattern to highlight the texture of Questlove's hair. Both overlayed methods consist of appliqued techniques that Butler incorporated to show texture through fabric and materials. Between the physical utilization of the patterned textiles of Dutch wax prints and the technical application of appliqued techniques, Butler incorporates these characteristics as a testament of her ancestral roots of West Africa and African America.

Conclusions

Quiltmaking has been a longstanding tradition in the Euro-American customs including in the African American community. Butler inherited this major movement of quiltmaking as high art from artists like Faith Ringgold where she further incorporated quiltmaking practices in her art. Ringgold's story quilts combined both quiltmaking and painting practices, whereas Butler embraced quilting in its entirety by creating her portraits using solely fabric. Butler's portraits are also seen as a "liberatory" artistic practice which, as A.W. Eaton and Charles Peterson argue, aim at a social transformation through practices which were excluded from the realm of art, such as quiltmaking. Liberatory practices also aim to overcome the systems of injustice such as colonialism, racism, sexism, and oppression. Artists such as Butler, Shonibare, and Ringgold used their artistic practices to highlight social injustices such as oppression, sexism, racism, and colonialism in their works of art. This thesis continues Nancy Dermerdash's arguments with Butler's more recent series of artworks, including *Colored Entrance,* which highlighted her utilization of color that further tied to the AfriCOBRA movement and materiality.

The materiality of Butler's portraits not only highlights the themes of memory and history, but also her own identity as an African American and of African descent. Incorporating Dutch wax prints relates to Butler's paternal descent from Ghana, along with her maternal African American influences of quiltmaking and sewing. This thesis includes primary sources by Butler that have never been included in a scholarly analysis of her work *Colored Entrance* (2023). These primary sources include direct quotes where Butler explains her reasoning behind materiality of her artworks that connect to her ancestry and decisions for incorporating certain Dutch wax prints that also further creates a narrative regarding the figures. For Butler, the fabric in her portraits function in at least two ways: using Dutch wax prints in relation to her Ghanian ancestry; and further connecting the named wax prints to her figures in the portraits. While *Colored Entrance* has many historical connotations, including the Jim Crow Laws of the American South, which could be another paper's focus, this thesis was purely focused on the materiality of Butler's work and the textile associations within her work. Butler continues to create these dazzling portraits of unknown, and now, known subjects that use textiles that connect to both her subjects and her ancestry.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Bisa Butler, *Colored Entrance (After Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, by Gordon Parks, 1956)*, 2023. Cotton, silk, wool, velvet, and lace, quilted and appliqued. Photographed by Author.

Figure 2: Gordon Parks, *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama* (1956). Archival pigment print. Photographed by Author

Figure 3: Faith Ringgold, *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, 1991. See Wong, Hertha D. Sweet. "Faith Ringgold Story Quilts," in *Picturing Identity: Contemporary American Autobiography in Image and Text* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

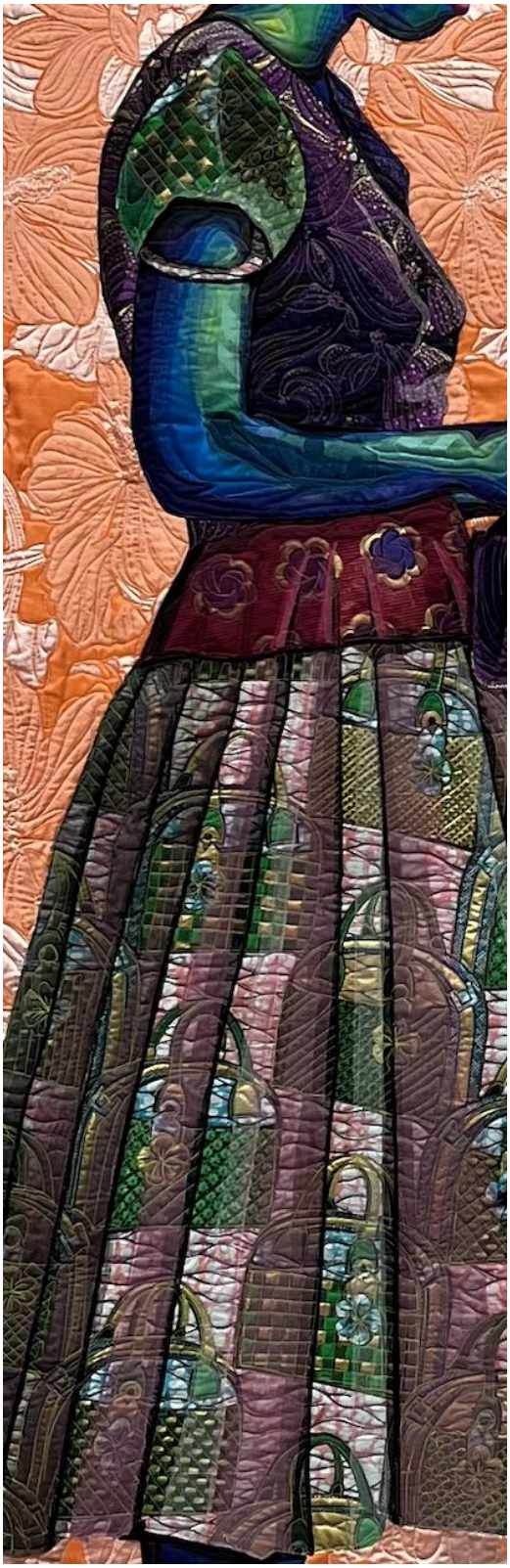

Figure 4: Bisa Butler, *Colored Entrance (After Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, by Gordon Parks, 1956)* (detail), 2023. Cotton, silk, wool, velvet, and lace, quilted and appliqued. Photographed by Author.

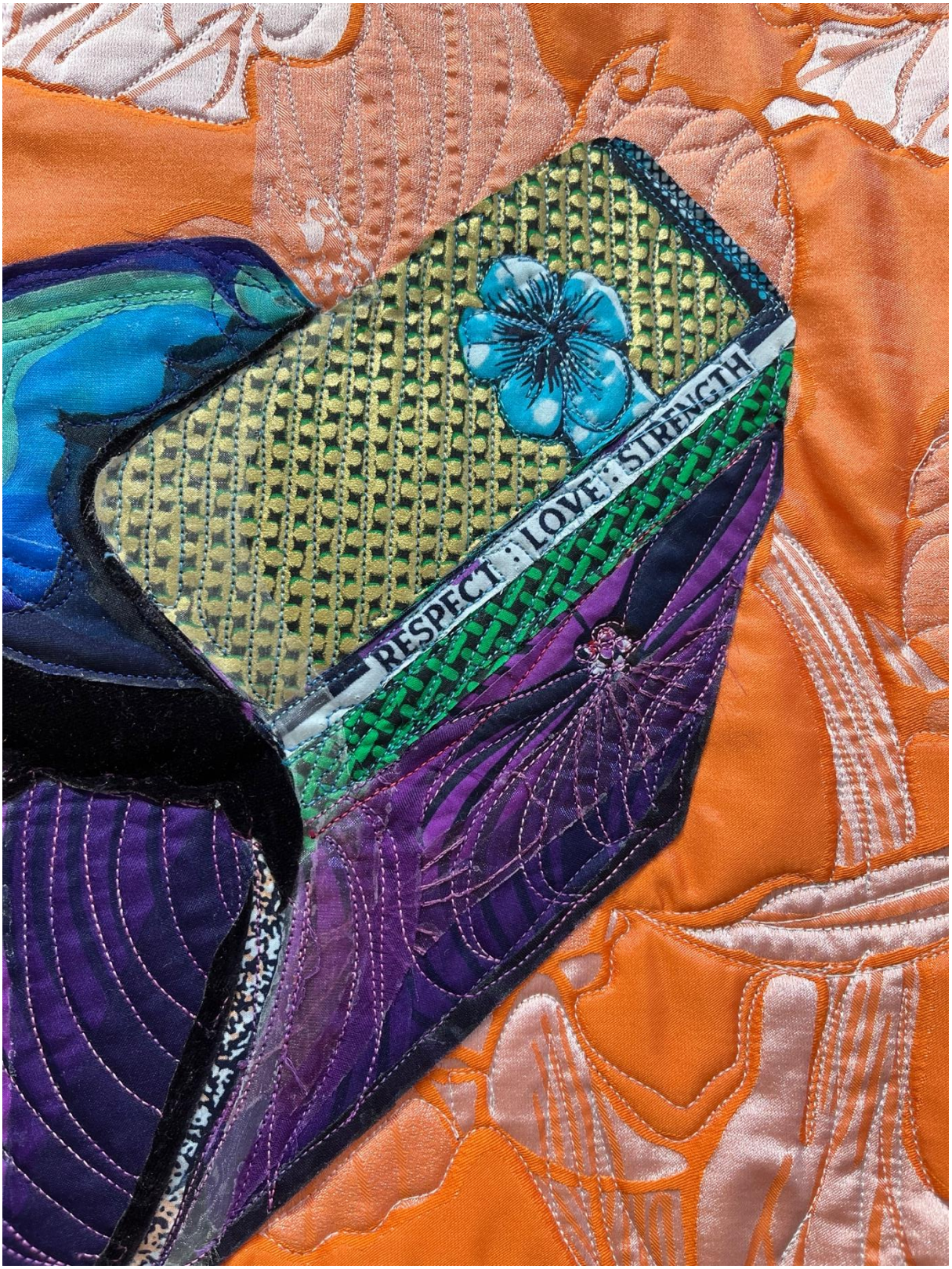

Figure 5: Bisa Butler, *Colored Entrance (After Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, by Gordon Parks, 1956)* (detail), 2023. Cotton, silk, wool, velvet, and lace, quilted and appliqued. Photographed by Author.

Figure 6: Bisa Butler, *Colored Entrance (After Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, by Gordon Parks, 1956)* (detail), 2023. Cotton, silk, wool, velvet, and lace, quilted and appliqued. Photographed by Author.

Figure 7: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Scramble for Africa*, 2003. Fourteen life-size fiberglass mannequins, fourteen chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton. See Stilling, Robert. “An Image of Europe: Yinka Shonibare’s Postcolonial Decadence.” *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 299-321.

Figure 8: Bisa Butler, *The Passion of Questlove,* 2023. From a photograph of Ahmir Questlove Thompson by Daniel Dorsa. Cotton, silk, wool, velvet, lace, jet glass beads and vinyl quilted and appliqued. 36”x23”. Photograph by Author.

Figure 9: Bisa Butler, *The Passion of Questlove,* 2023 (detail). From a photograph of Ahmir Questlove Thompson by Daniel Dorsa. Cotton, silk, wool, velvet, lace, jet glass beads and vinyl quilted and appliqued. 36”x23”. Photograph by Author.

Figure 10: Bisa Butler, Grandpa Zakani, 2004. Cotton, raw silk, linen and wool quilted and appliquéd. 20” x 24”. From Bisa Butler’s Instagram.

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