

Hidden in Plain View

Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, PhD
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A griot (pronounced greeOAT), charged with the task of memorizing and conveying the history of a community, is an important figure in the African oral history tradition. As William Ferris is quoted in the book's forward by Maude Southwell Wahlman, "in Africa when an older person dies, a library burns" (13). To the good fortune of many, Jacqueline Tobin has managed to transcribe the irreplaceable knowledge of a modern-day griot, Ozella McDaniel Williams of Charleston, South Carolina. The fact that Williams was in the twilight of her life even at their first meeting, makes the Tobin's story seem all the more urgent and fortuitous. A griot and skillful craftswoman who produced countless numbers of quilts throughout her life, Williams appoints Tobin, who wins her trust with her sincere and intense interest, as the one to whom Williams will relate her immense knowledge of the African-American quilting tradition. To Tobin, Williams more simply states "write this down".

Tobin engages Raymond Dobard, an Art History professor at Howard University and a nationally-known African-American quilter in his own right, to assist with conveying this important addition to the body of knowledge, which touches the fields of both history and art. As Tobin and Dobard say, so many messages could be "within" a quilt that the thing itself becomes a "fabric griot" (35). Sadly, these quilts were often made of poor materials and frequently laundered in harsh lye so that not many that were actually produced in the era of American slavery survive today. Nevertheless, *Hidden in Plain View* chronicles the various meanings of quilt patterns which survive and are still in use today: the Monkey Wrench, the Wagon Wheel, the Crossroads and the Log Cabin to name but a few. Even the knotting of a quilt often had significance. For a people with poor literacy, quilts served both as mnemonic devices and sources of hidden messages. Even today, when slavery is over, the quilts serve as a present day reminder of the hope and perseverance without which the Underground Railroad would have never existed. Quite symbolically, there is archival evidence that Harriet Tubman was herself a quilter and sewed together small pieces of cloth in order to make "comforters" for escaped slaves coming to Canada (62-3). The quilts and quilt patterns are still themselves a mnemonic device for us all. This book, however, allows that the messages within the quilts become a little less "hidden". Ozella McDaniel Williams passed away on May 17, 1998 - two weeks after Tobin had last spoken with her.

An Underground Railroad sampler quilt made by Chrissie Nash of The Quilter's Line in Markdale, Ontario, Canada was inspired by *Hidden in Plain View*. A picture of Nash's sampler quilt is on the cover for this volume of *Northern Terminus*. Visit www.quiltersline.com for more details.



Karin Foster