

The Quilters of Gee's Bend: Art and Resilience

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects

Art, Anthropology, English language arts, Film, History, Sociology

Themes

Bearing witness, Cultural preservation, Cultural diversity, Resilience, Social justice

What Students Will Uncover

The significance of quilting in Gee's Bend, Alabama, and its contribution to culture, art, and society

Essential Questions

- How does quilting preserve cultural and familial stories?
- How might art catalyze change?
- What is the significance of Gee's Bend, Alabama, in the civil rights movement?

Lesson Overview

Students watch a film about five women quilters living in Gee's Bend, Alabama, and explore the cultural significance of quilting and its connection to place. Students engage in learning experiences to consider the significance of the quilters' lives, their art, and their



COMPANION FILM

While I Yet Live

by Maris Curran

Materials

Online access to the film "[While I Yet Live](#)" by Maris Curran

[Google Earth](#) or map

[Project Zero's Visible Thinking | I Used to Think... Now I Think](#) (PDF)

"[Quilts](#)" by Nikki Giovanni (Poem)

[Note-taking sheet: Film Analysis tool](#)

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

[SEL Competencies](#)

[C3 Framework](#)

[CCSS ELA Standards](#)

relationship to Gee’s Bend, including the history of voter suppression in Alabama during the civil rights movement.

Key Issue

The women quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, reveal the complexities of their social and economic history and share cultural heritage stories through quilting, leaving a legacy of creative artistry.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze the importance of quilting as a form of art and activism
- Recognize how cultural traditions are passed down through generations
- Explore the connections between the civil rights movement and Gee’s Bend, Alabama
- Understand how communities in Alabama have experienced voter rights suppression

Background

Putting the Photo Essay in Context

This section is intended for the educator and provides information about the film and the connections between the women quilters in Gee’s Bend, Alabama, voting rights, and the civil rights movement.

Gee’s Bend, Alabama, is a town with a complex cultural and historical heritage. As a result of both geographic and socioeconomic conditions, the Black community of Gee’s Bend has struggled to achieve economic independence, viable access to voting, and social equality. In 1935, Gee’s Bend became part of the Federal Government’s Resettlement Program, which sought to help farmers struggling with extreme poverty. The old Pettway plantation was bought and then rented to the tenants who were descendants of the original enslaved African Americans who were forced to work there^[1]. An isolated and impoverished community, Gee’s Bend— officially named

1. Donna R. Causey, “Gee’s Bend was a part of Federal Government’s Resettlement Program in 1935 and a part of Roosevelt’s New Deal plan.” Alabama Pioneers, n.d.

Boykin after a white segregationist— is surrounded by water on three sides. For years, town members depended on a rickety ferry to transport them to Camden, the nearest commercial town and polling place, where residents were systematically denied their right to vote. After the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed, the legal barriers to voting were removed. However, the ferry many depended on for transportation to polling places was suddenly taken out of commission by white officials in 1962 in an attempt to make it more difficult for the community of Gee’s Bend to travel to Camden. To vote, many residents had to take a forty-mile overland route to Camden, and most community members did not have access to a car.^[2]

The ferry service was finally restored forty years later in 2006. Although the physical as well as the legal path to voting largely cleared, the town continues to suffer from economic and social inequality and the ongoing effects of historical injustice.^[3]

The quilts reveal complexities of their social, economic, and cultural history and represent a triumph of resilience and creative artistry.

During the historic 1965 march on Selma, known as ‘Bloody Sunday,’ Civil Rights leader John Lewis, along with other activists, led a march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge to advocate for equitable voting rights, including for those in Gee’s Bend. At this time, only two percent of African Americans in Dallas County, Alabama, were registered voters.^[4] Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also encouraged the people of Gee’s Bend to try to vote. He said, “You are somebody. Cross the river for Freedom.”^[5]

While I Yet Live by Maris Curran tells the story of five African American women who live in Gee’s Bend and are descendants of enslaved people who worked on the Pettway Plantation and still bear the Pettway name.^[6] The women are acclaimed quiltmakers who have been recognized for their artistry and storytelling. Their work has been on exhibit at the Smithsonian, in museums around the world, and has been featured on U.S. stamps. The quilts reveal complexities of their social, economic, and

2. Clyde Haberman, “Martin Luther King’s Call for Voting Rights Inspired Isolated Hamlet.” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2015.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Christopher Klein, “How Selma’s ‘Bloody Sunday’ Became a Turning Point in the Civil Rights Movement.” *History.com*, updated July 18, 2020.

5. Amie Wallach, “The Fabric of Their Lives.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2006.

6. Causey, “Gee’s Bend was part of...”

cultural history and represent a triumph of resilience and creative artistry.^[7]

Quilts have been used by people around the world to express important historical, cultural, and religious symbols and stories within their patterns. For African-American quilters, quilts were used for many various purposes such as warmth, decoration, and as an artistic medium to tell their own unique stories. For the women of Gee's Bend the art of quilting has been passed down from generation to generation from the early 20th century to the present. "Gee's Bend quilts carry forward an old and proud tradition of textiles made for home and family....And while they learn from one another and know each others' styles, they strive to be themselves. Each quilt is both the signature of an individual and the banner of their community."^[8]

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Engage students with this exercise before introducing the story.

1. Ask students to read Nikki Giovanni's poem "[Quilts](#)."
2. Ask students to describe the symbolism of quilts in the poem.
3. Read the last three stanzas out loud. Ask students to describe the purpose of a quilt across multiple generations. What memories might quilts contain?

**When I am frayed and strained and drizzle at the end
Please someone put me in a quilt**

**That I might keep a child warm
And some old person with no one else to talk to
Will hear my whispers**

**And cuddle
Near**

Nikki Giovanni "Quilts"

7. Wallach, "[The Fabric of Their Lives](#)."

8. [Gee's Bend Quilting Collective](#).

Engaging with the Story

Before watching the film, introduce students to the story and provide specific tasks of observation.

1. Tell students that they will watch a short film called *While I Yet Live* by Maris Curran. The story is about five African American women living in Gee's Bend, Alabama, who are preserving their family tradition of quilting.
2. Ask students to look up Gee's Bend, Alabama, on a [map](#). Share that the residents of Gee's Bend have long struggled to gain fair voting access due, in part, to the geography of their town. (*Note to educators: the Background section provides additional information for reference and context.*)
3. Give students the following [note-taking sheet](#), which is organized into these four themes: family, art, culture, and history. Ask students to write down any notes, observations, and quotes from the film that stand out to them.
4. Watch the film [While I Yet Live](#) by Maris Curran (15 minutes).

Delving Deeper: Discussion Questions

Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the story. (Note for educators: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. Ask students to complete the [note-taking sheet](#) after watching the film. Engage the whole class in a discussion by inviting students to share their thoughts and observations about each theme (family, art, culture, and history).
2. Building off of students' observations, lead a discussion using the following prompts centered on the four themes:
 - Describe the women in the film, their homes, and their experiences and feelings about quilting.
 - Gee's Bend—35 miles southwest of Selma, Alabama—is home to 700 residents, most of whom are descendants of enslaved people who worked for generations in the fields of the local Pettway plantation. How do the women feel about living in such a small tight-knit community? How do the women describe the advantages and challenges of living in a town where everyone knows each other?
 - The art of quilting has been practiced and passed down through generations by the women of Gee's Bend since the mid-nineteenth century. The quilts embody rich elements in the history of African American art. Describe the family stories shared throughout the film.
 - How do quilts themselves tell stories?

- “You can look at a quilt and it can give you a feeling of something. You know it can give you love. You can see love. You can see peace. You can see joy in different quilts,” said China Pettway. In what ways do the quilters express joy and love for their art form? How does the act of singing connect the quilters?
 - There has been an ongoing struggle for the people of Gee’s Bend to acquire equitable and fair access to voting rights due to, in part, their geographic location. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Gee’s Bend in 1965 and encouraged residents to register to vote and to participate in the march to Selma, Alabama. Why do you think Dr. King insisted on having the voice and vote of this community heard?
 - W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, “How curious a land is this,—how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise!” If you were to describe to someone who was unfamiliar with the people and place of Gee’s Bend, how would you describe their untold story, their tragic past, their laughter, and their promise?
3. [Using Project Zero’s Thinking Routine](#) (pdf) “I Used to Think Now I Think...”, engage students to reflect on their knowledge and thoughts about quilts after learning about the Gee’s Bend quilters.

Reflecting and Projecting

Challenge students to consider the film’s broader implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas from various points of view.

1. “Quilts have always engaged the pressing social and political issues of their time. They have been deployed throughout history by marginalized people to confront instances of violence, oppression, and exclusion,” said art curator Lauren Applebaum. Conduct research to explore how artists around the world express issues of inequality. Use the [Google Arts and Culture Collection](#), which features women artists whose work explores inequality from various perspectives. Create a visual presentation to share your selected artist, a detailed biography, highlights of her artwork, and the ways in which she is addressing inequality.
2. Visit the [International Quilt Study Center and Museum](#) on the Google Arts and Culture platform. The museum is home to the largest public quilt collection. Choose a quilt in the collection and gather the following information: artist name, date, dimensions, and location. What drew you to learn more about this quilt? Describe the story of the quilt. Share your findings with the class.
3. The last song in the film is an African-American spiritual called “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” composed by Wallis Willis. First recorded in the early 1900s, the song had a resurgence during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Research to listen to additional songs from the civil rights movement. As a starting point, use this

resource from [NPR | Songs from the Civil Rights Movement](#). Many of these songs contain jazz and blues origins. While jazz “speaks for life,” said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., blues “tell the story of life’s difficulties — and, if you think for a moment, you realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music.” Choose one song and write a short essay detailing how its lyrics tell a story of “life’s difficulties” and how it communicates a “sense of triumph.”

What’s Happening Now

Provide students with follow-up activities and resources to explore current events and updates to the story.

1. In February 2020, in recognition of Black History Month, Etsy partnered with [Souls Grown Deep](#), a foundation whose work is dedicated to the preservation of southern African American artists. The work of nine women quilters from Gee’s Bend is now [featured on Etsy](#). Their shops provide quilts, cloth face masks, and other items.
2. Follow Gee’s Bend Quilters on Instagram [@geesbendquiltmakers](#).
3. Explore the Soul’s Grown Deep Foundation’s [exhibitions page](#) where they keep a list of updated events featuring Black artists from the South.



Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How will you learn about the issues of voter suppression?

Many individuals today continue to face inequities and voter suppression in their communities.

1. American political leader and voting rights activist Stacey Abrams has served for eleven years in the Georgia House of Representatives. She continues to fight to ensure everyone, especially those in the Black community, have a fair right to vote. Read more from [*Time Magazine*](#) about her work in the 2020 election, where she initiated a massive voter registration effort that significantly increased new voter registrations.
2. Abrams founded the organization, [Fair Fight Action](#), which aims to promote fair elections around the U.S. The organization has documented voters sharing their voting stories. [Watch one of the voter's stories](#). Share the story you watched with a family or community member and ask if they have experienced or witnessed voter suppression.

[SDG 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Across Countries](#)

Companion Texts

These texts are recommended by teachers who are currently using While I Yet Live in their classrooms.

- *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the 1965 Selma Voting Rights March* by Lynda Blackmon Lowery
- *Because They Marched: The People’s Campaign for Voting Rights that Changed America* by Russell Freedman
- *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* edited by Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, Dorothy M. Zellner

Resources

- [“Gee’s Bend was a part of Federal Government’s Resettlement Program in 1935 and a part of Roosevelt’s New Deal plan.”](#) Alabama Pioneers, 2020. (Website)
- [“Fabric of Their Lives.”](#) *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2020. (Website)
- [“Gee’s Bend Pastimes to Patchwork Tour.”](#) Sweet Home Alabama, 2020. (Website)
- [“The Quilts of Gee’s Bend: A Slideshow.”](#) National Endowment for the Arts, 2020. (Organization)
- [Museum of Fine Arts Houston.](#) (Organization)
- [The Smithsonian.](#) (Organization)
- [“Gee’s Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt and African American Quiltmaking Traditions.”](#) A Resource Guide for Teachers from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (PDF)
- Gerson, Livia. [“The Surprisingly Radical History of Quilting.”](#) *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2020. (Website)

Connections to National Curriculum Standards and Frameworks

SEL Competencies (CASEL)

- **Self-awareness.** The ability to accurately recognize one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- **Social awareness.** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

- **C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12.** Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.
- **C3.D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- **C3.D2.Civ.8.9-12.** Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.
- **C3.D2.His.2.9-12.** Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- **C3.D2.His.8.9-12.** Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5.** Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Film Analysis Tool | While Yet I Live

Directions: While watching the film, pay attention to the following themes: family, art, culture, and history. Write down any evidence from the film (quotes, images, etc.) connected to these themes.

Family	Art
Culture	History

We Want to Hear From You

We'd love to hear how you integrate (or plan to integrate) this lesson into your classroom. What were your favorite takeaways and student responses?

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