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## Anatomy of a Quilt: The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee

Nancy Scheper-Hughes

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**Anatomy of a Quilt**

The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee

# Nancy Scheper-Hughes



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Art lovers have recently been treated to exhibitions of a stunning collection of African American quilts from Gee's Bend, Alabama. But to most people, the artists and community that created them remain unknown. Bars and string-pieced columns quilt, 1950s, made by Jessie T. Pettway, cotton, 95 x 76 inches. Courtesy of Tinwood Alliance. (Images of quilts are available in color at [www.SouthernCultures.org](http://www.SouthernCultures.org).)

## [End Page 88]

The incredible quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama, true masterpieces of American folk art with their "jazzy geometry," on national tour following their initial display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, are finally receiving the recognition they have long deserved. Michael Kimmel's ebullient review in the *New York Times* captured for all the world to read the bold, independent spirit of this distinctive art form.<sup>1</sup> Kimmel said little, however, about the artists and the community that produced these gorgeous tapestries—especially during the quilters' most audacious and productive years between 1930 and 1970—except for noting that the quilters are descendants of the slaves who worked the local Pettway plantation that dominated the landscape. I'd like to add my experience to the story.

In 1967, with my usual sense of poor timing, I left New York City and went south to join the tail end of the Civil Rights movement, which by that time had moved north—to Chicago, Detroit, and New York. The remnant of "the movement" in and around Selma, Alabama, had, of necessity, turned to Black Power, making white civil rights workers like myself redundant and anachronistic. But rather than being sent home (where I belonged!) I was assigned to Wilcox County, Alabama, as a field staff worker for the Southern Rural Research Project, a SNCC-affiliated legal rights project, to help conduct a large and detailed survey of almost one thousand African American farm households representing over five thousand people. My research was part of a larger project detailing the working, living, and health conditions of tenant farmers and sharecroppers in eight so-called Black Belt counties of southwest Alabama.

We, the dozen or so quickly assembled and rapidly trained field staff, combed the more remote corners of southwest Alabama, where we went, normally in twos (one white worker, one black), door to door and shack to shack with our sometimes invasive questions. We asked about access to food and healthcare, and about family composition and family illnesses and disabilities, relations with land owners, annual earnings, debts, and access to federal farm subsidies, cotton allotments, and small loans. We uncovered a ravaged population often living on the edges of starvation and largely dependent for survival on capricious federal farm programs, families who went hungry during the lean winter and early spring months with meals comprised of starch, sugar, and fat—that is, grits, biscuits, cornbread, peanut butter, fried bologna, fatback, Kool-Aid, and coffee. Were it not for seasonal mustard and collard greens, and hunted meat—squirrels and possums—it is hard to imagine how so many of them managed to live at all.

With the help of two visiting civil rights physicians, the late Charlie Wheeler of Charlotte, North Carolina, and Robert Coles of Harvard, we were able to identify the signs and symptoms of malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies, including childhood rickets, pellagra, and "night blindness." The average African American woman in a farm household in southwest Alabama had experienced over seven [End Page 89] pregnancies by the age of forty and at least one miscarriage, stillbirth, and two infant or early childhood mortalities. It was the portrait of an endangered population in a Third World nation.



In 1967 Nancy Scheper-Hughes traveled to Alabama and took part in a civil

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rights-related survey of impoverished African American families. Pictured here are the children of one such family in Wilcox County...

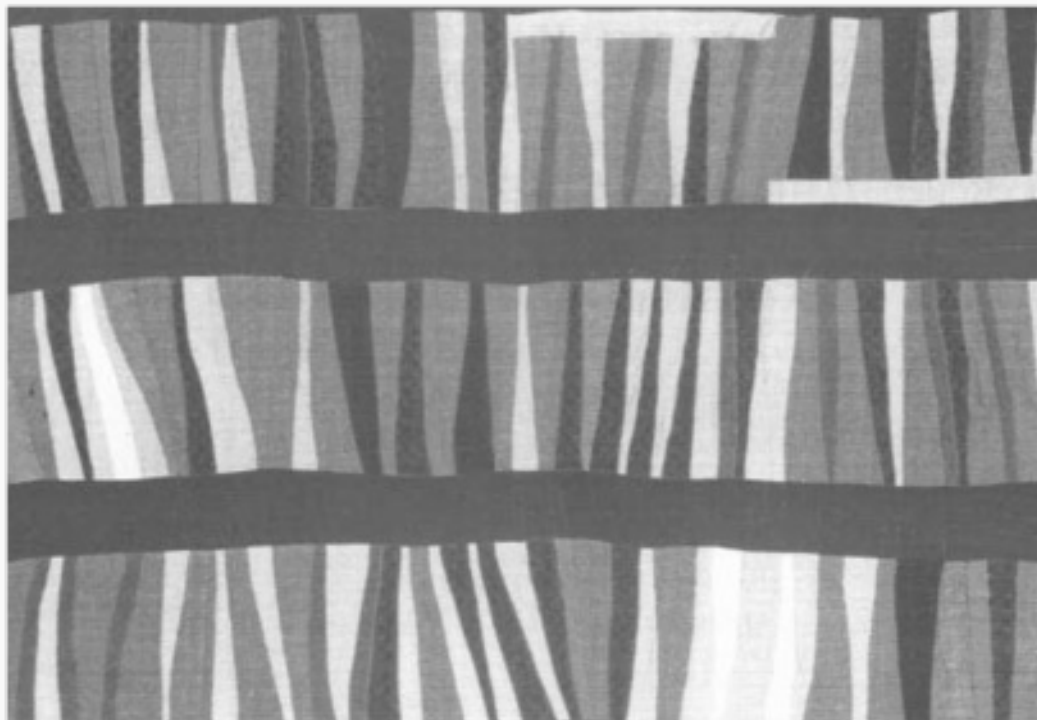


## Not Forgotten

# Anatomy of a Quilt

## The Gee's Bend Freedom Quilting Bee

BY NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES



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