

• *Guest Editor's Introduction* •

SPECIAL ISSUE
Quiltmakers in the Digital Age

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So much of our everyday understanding of culture comes from the construction of binaries: Hard versus soft. Cool versus warm. Masculine versus feminine. Respectively, these binary oppositions represent computing and quilting in the popular imagination; computers being seen as cool, hard, sleek and the preserve of men, whereas quilting is culturally constructed as soft and warm, fuzzy, feminine, motherly. Folklorist Simon Bronner observes both the crystallization and the breaking apart of these binaries as they relate to folklore and folklife in the Digital Age:

Such binaries include natural and artificial, public and private, analog and digital, group and network, relational and analytical, and especially folk and official. Although folklorists have previously noted that various communication technologies that emerged in the twentieth century, such as the telephone and photocopier, have altered the way that lore, as well as information, is spread, I find that the Internet, more so than any other media, has unsettled many of the prior cultural binaries, which is evident especially in what I call the transgressive folk web (Bronner 2009, 22).

What happens in the liminal online spaces where these binaries intersect, where these powerful, archetypal attributes collide? The pair of essays in this special issue analyze the people, objects, spaces, and cultural phenomena at the nexus of computing and quilting on the new transgressive folk web, or what I call

Fiberspace (Sikarskie 2011). Broadly conceived, *Fiberspace* includes the places in cyberspace that are related to sewing traditions and the textile arts. It encompasses textile websites, discussion forums, listservs, and blogs, as well as quilts on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, the **Quilt Index** (an online scholarly resource for quilt study), and much more.

Not surprisingly, these essays are among the few works to investigate quiltmakers and quilting in the Digital Age.¹ This can be attributed to the subject's relative newness—*Fiberspace* has only emerged in earnest in the past fifteen years or so—and more significantly, the almost counterintuitive nature of the “digital” quilt. Indeed, when one thinks of quilters and quilting, computers may be the very last thing to come to mind. After all, even in a culture boasting an increasing diversity of perspectives and voices, technology in the West continues to be constructed as a primarily masculine endeavor (Kramarae 1988, 5). And yet, women, including quilters of all ages are using sundry digital technologies.

Compounding the dearth of research on quilting in the Digital Age is the fact that many of the key sources on quilting and technology come from the period from the late 1980s to the mid to late 1990s. Two key works in the field of women, quilting, and digital technology are Judy Heim's (1995) *The Needlecrafter's Computer Companion*, and Judy Heim and Gloria Hansen's (1998) *The Quilter's Computer Companion*. The latter volume provided quilters with information about why they need a computer, how to buy a computer and peripherals, the best software for specific quilting needs, the best software for use with an ‘old clunker’ of

a computer, using software to update the design of traditional old block styles, using software to aid sewing, embroidery and appliqué, and using software for photo-transfer onto fabric. Though the book is excellent for studying quilters' attitudes toward computers and use of the Internet in the late 1990s, it does not light on how quilters are using digital technologies and Web 2.0 applications today.

Just what is this place called *Fiberspace*? Where is it? And who populates this brave new world? This special issue of *New Directions in Folklore*, "Quiltmakers in the Digital Age," seeks to locate *Fiberspace* in both theory and in quiltmaking and scholarly practice on the folk web and to explore the various uses of digital technologies by quilters and quilt scholars today. The first essay of this issue features the team of Marsha MacDowell, Mary Worrall, Amanda Sikarskie, and Justine Richardson, who use an inter- and multi-disciplinary approach (reflecting perspectives of folklore, art history, visual culture, women's studies, material culture, American Studies, digital humanities, and history) to examine the evolution of the [Quilt Index](#) website from a traditional digital repository for preservation and access, to a site for the co-creation of knowledge through user-generated content.

The second essay features the work of Rhiannon Gainor, a Ph.D. student at McGill University in library and information studies. Gainor takes a qualitative and interdisciplinary look at the information behaviors of twenty-five hobby quilters who own websites and blogs, investigating quiltmakers' statements of motivation, teaching tools, and expressions of personal creativity. She examines the data set from the contexts of library and information studies' everyday life information

seeking, sociology's serious leisure, and user interface design.

While the essays presented in this issue are by necessity inter- and multi-disciplinary, it should be noted that a major aim of this special issue is the situation of this scholarly work on quiltmakers and quilting in the Digital Age within the discipline of folklore studies. If we accept eminent folklorist Alan Dundes' rather versatile definition of "folk" as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common linking factor," and his equally flexible definition of "lore" as any of "several hundred forms of genres," then we may safely argue that the online activities of quiltmakers fall well within the bounds of folklore (Dundes 1999, vii).

In Dundes' volume, *Essays in Folkloristics*, he also notes that the size of a folk group can be quite vast, giving the example of folklore concerning the *Reader's Digest*, the readership of which was eighteen million (1978, 15). This figure of eighteen million readers is comparable to the approximately twenty-seven million quiltmakers in the United States who constitute the folk group of *Fiberspace*.² While industrialization and globalization have led to the dispersal of traditional folk groups, the Web has allowed for the coalescence of new folk groups, as well as the preservation of old ones in a new, virtual space.

Ultimately, the scholars whose essays are presented herein seek to answer key questions about makers, objects and cultures that inhabit this virtual space.

These questions include:

- What are the information structures of quilting websites?

- How does the folk ethic of quilting play out online? What does this tell us about the relationship of folk art and folk culture to Web 2.0?
- What roles do digital repositories of quilt images and metadata, such as the Quilt Index, play in *Fiberspace*?
- How can a digital archive, originally created for the preservation and access of folk art, become a site for the co-creation of user-generated content?
- How are digital quilts created, curated, and consumed within online social networks, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*?
- What are the futures of quilt study and quilt scholarship online, particularly for folklorists?

In exploring these questions, it is my hope that the old binaries that set quilting and computing, or women and technology, in opposition with each will be broken down, and that the picture that will emerge will be one that more accurately paints the folklife of quilters and quilting today.

Notes

¹ Brenda Danet (2003) is an exception. Kyra Hicks' (2010) source book *1.6 Million African American Quilters* is another one of the few published works on this subject. A book review of Hicks (2010) is included in this very issue of *New Directions in Folklore*; see the Table of Contents.

² The Alliance for American Quilts estimates that there are currently around twenty-seven million quilters in the United States, most of whom use the Internet for quilt-related activities.

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