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THE ART OF AMINAH BRENTA LYNN ROBINSON:  
AN ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

DISSERATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By  
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* * * * *

The Ohio State University  
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ABSTRACT

How do people construct meaning and ascribe value to the work of Columbus artist, Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson? This study examines how family, friends, community members and business associates produce different meanings and values regarding her life and art work. This study serves as a resource to others in building interpretations of the art work of Aminah Robinson.

The method is open-ended ethnographic inquiry combining various qualitative dimensions: empirical, descriptive, interpretive, and analytic.

I identify and analyze five factors used by participants in the study for building meaning about Robinson's works. The five factors are: (a) knowing the artist and basing meaning on that relationship; (b) information received from the artist is used to make meaning; (c) drawing on personal experience; (d) seeing the meaning, finding clues visually in the work; (e) basing the interpretation on readings and research.

The most often-used factor for meaning making is drawing on personal experience. Participants drew mainly upon their lived experience. Not every person articulated exactly how they make meaning, but I interpreted their understanding from analysis of the conversations.
Participants described what they value about Aminah's work. I identified five different factors: (a) valuing the relationship with the artist; (b) valuing how the work teaches about history/humanity; (c) personal reasons for valuing the work; (d) valuing the visual/aesthetic qualities; and (e) not valuing the art for investment reasons.

The study is significant for its content and methodology. The content contributes new information to multicultural education. The method addresses ways multiple views can be used to construct meaning and value from art work. The research shows that immersion and intuition are significant aspects of conducting ethnographic inquiry based on oral history.
Dedicated to the memory of Sydney Edward Robinson
and the person who gave him life,
Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.
They say it takes a village to raise a child. In the same way, it takes a team to finish a Ph.D. I want to acknowledge my team because I truly have not done this alone. Thanks to God. There is a God and she is benevolent. Thanks to the study participants, my co-authors: Aminah Robinson, A. J. Olson, Susan Saxbe, Gisela Josenhans, Ursel White Lewis, Kojo Kamau, Sue Scott, Sharron Barnes, Joseph Canzani, Carl Solway, Fran Luckoff, Peggy Draeger, Edith Smilack, Cornelia Bailey and Nancy Banks. Thanks to my advisors Vesta Daniel, Don Krug, William Nelson, and Sydney Walker who were patient and generous guides. Susan Tillett, Carol Allen, and Donice Wooster provided spiritual guidance. Lisa Hillis provided smiles, accurate transcriptions, and computer expertise.

My friends, a circle of women, always sent positive energy my way: Lee Chorpenning, Carol Gigliotti, Monica Kridler, Carol Kirwin, Pat Thompson. My family of origin sustained me in their way: mom and dad gave me life and always have faith in me and love me. My siblings Richard, Karen, Barbara, Nancy, and Catherine did weekend patrol. Mollie, Fred, Joseph, and Nashwa, you helped, too. My sons, Christopher and Alexander always gave me their love and forbearance. You can have the computer now.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Making sense of art works is a complicated, non-linear process that is challenging because meanings and values are not stable. There are many possible interpretations of works of art, some better informed or thought-out than others.

Creating meaning from works of art, in my experience, is a gradual process rather like making baklava, a middle Eastern confection. Simple ingredients are carefully combined in translucent layers to create a rich delicacy. In this study I will argue that meanings about works of art are constructed from processes of interpretation. Meanings become relevant when the work of art is connected to one’s life and experience. For example: how does this art work connect to me; how can I relate to it; how is it significant for me? I will demonstrate how meanings are gradually acquired and change with time and experience. Individual understandings of works of art, when shared with others, contribute to and enrich the range of possible meanings. Meanings are not universal. Instead, meanings are collectively constructed from processes of interpretation and understanding.

How do human beings make personal meaning from art works? What contributes to meaning making? How do people come to understand, and perceive the meanings, of an
art work? Can the process of meaning-making be described? How is the value of a work perceived? These questions are addressed in this dissertation. I examine how meanings are derived from and value ascribed to the work of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, a Columbus-born artist with a considerable local and a growing national reputation.

I am interested in how people make sense of art works for themselves; how people come to their own meanings. I do not subscribe to the practice of telling people what an art work is about. I do not believe one person can teach another person. One person presents opportunities for growth or learning. People grow and learn when they are ready, if they want to. As the Buddhist proverb says: When the student is ready the Master appears.

In this study, I examine how people figure out things about art themselves, and then reflect on how situations might be created so people's understanding of art are enriched.

Other people's impressions and discoveries about Aminah's work enrich my perspective. Each person sees things differently. I collected and analyzed these varied perspectives and stories about Aminah's work. Sharing these perspectives will lead to enriched understandings of the artist and her work.

Statement of Problem

How do people create meanings from and ascribe value to the art works of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson? This question came out of my desire to know more about this artist and her work. I wanted to understand it better and then share my discoveries.
Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the study is to examine the processes used by many different people to create meaning and ascribe value to art works. I am interested in how my own understanding of Aminah's work has changed and grown over the years. My voice is included: I am a participant in the research. How have I constructed meaning? I wondered how my process of creating meaning compared to the way other people create meaning. Writings about Robinson and her work revealed a wide range of interpretations. Some were simple, others complex and insightful. This diversity in written interpretations led me to ask people, who are close to the artist, to share their insights with me. I examined how various people create and share meaning, using an open-ended, qualitative inquiry process involving "face-to-face interactions" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. xi).

The secondary purpose of the study is to gather a varied resource of materials that can be examined to create meaning from Robinson's work. I gathered stories about the artist and her life, as well as people's different perspectives on the meanings and value of the work. These personal reflections enrich my appreciation for the work and the artist.

Finally, I want to share insights about Robinson and her work with the community: teachers and academics, family and friends.

Context and Meaning

Is it necessary to have information surrounding a work of art, such as artist biography, artistic context, cultural context, social and economic climate, in order to understand the work and create meaning? One might say, "If the artist could have said it in"
words she wouldn't have made the art" (N. House, personal communication, October, 1994). Indeed, there is something very immediate and visceral about directly experiencing Aminah's art, and much to be experienced without an awareness of extensive contextual information. Yet, many believe context is crucial in understanding art works (Barrett, 1985; Eaton, 1994; Fiske, 1989; Hart, 1992/93; Krug, 1992/93). Aminah expressed her strong sentiments about the importance of context:

In order to understand any artist, you have to understand the body of work they have produced in their lifetime (Robinson, 1994b). You can't just take one piece of art from an artist and say you understand what's at the heart of their work. You have to look at all of their work. Absolutely! All those things [that surround the artist, the time in which she lived] impact. (A. Robinson, personal communication, January 16, 1995)

As I embarked on one of my research trips, Aminah encouraged and supported my efforts: "You are getting a well-rounded view of a person in a community...and how community has influenced me" (A. Robinson, personal communication, December, 1995). Context is important. Community, in the broadest meaning of the word, is important.

Is it possible to create meaning from and understand the significance of an object that has been separated from its cultural context? Each culture has a unique point of view, so if a viewer attempts to make meaning of a work from an unfamiliar culture, there is danger of misunderstanding (Fiske, 1989). Dewey (1958) asserted that for significance or meaning to be understood, we must consider the use and context of the works. "When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance" (Dewey, 1958, p. 3). It is probable that if one depends solely on a surface reading of an art object,
with no consideration of contextual information, one will misunderstand it (Macauley, 1979). The conclusion will be ill-informed. Examining context can enrich understandings as well as prevent misunderstanding.

Things, like the objects Aminah makes, are significant not on their own but when they are connected to their location (Fiske, 1993). Aminah's work is significant because it is connected to her life, and her location. When a viewer is aware of this, meaning is created. Aminah's work reflects her unique experiences: people, places, objects, and how these things affect her identity.

Aminah's biographical background as well as its relationship to her culture aids in shaping understandings of her work. "[P]ersonal biography can be taken to a level which does not emphasize the individual but focuses on the experience of a people or culture" (Daniel, 1996 p. 82). Aminah presents aspects of her cultural experience through her work. However, Daniel (1996) cautioned that not all artists "will treat recurring life themes, subjects and images similarly (p. 82)." I examined how Aminah's work and perspective is unique.

Dewey (1958) asserted that "every culture has its own collective individuality. Like the individuality of the person from whom a work of art issues, this collective individuality leaves its indelible imprint upon the art that is produced" (p. 330).

Van Maanen (1988) said "culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation" (p. 3). Perhaps Aminah's life experiences have left an
impression on her that can be discerned in the objects she creates. Through conversations with the artist and others, I gained clarity on how Aminah’s life experiences and culture are evident in her work.

Need For The Study

Educational researchers have examined the many ways people create meaning from the world (Butler, 1987; Eaton, 1994; Lather, 1992; McCarthy, 1986; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Encouraging multicultural education, Heard (1989) discussed "a way of knowing that emphasizes understanding through reflection, interactive relationships, and transformation" (p. 12). My research illustrates an intuitive, non-linear way of knowing or understanding.

Particularly by preserving oral stories, this study expands the written resources available about Aminah Robinson. This research features the perspectives of many people: artist, researcher, artist's family and friends, and community members. It is more comprehensive than previous endeavors by authors of magazine articles and catalog essays.

Clarify Understandings

This study provides information that may clarify the reader’s personal understandings of Aminah's work. Aminah Robinson said "Sometimes it's frustrating when other people don't understand what you're talking about or what you are doing (Robinson, 1995c)." She once exclaimed, "Nobody understands me, my work. They think I'm a crazy woman" (A. Robinson, personal communication, November, 1994). She seemed frustrated
about being misunderstood, and using her precious time and energy to inform other people about her work. As an educator, I appreciate and value her work. This dissertation provides resources and the opportunity for her work to be understood.

Aminah has been called a folk artist, or naive artist (Wright, 1994). According to Aminah, this is an inappropriate label for her work. She adamantly stated: "I am not a folk artist. People want to pigeonhole me. I am an artist, no more, no less, I just am" (A. Robinson, personal communication, November 4, 1994). The term folk art can be used in a pejorative sense and to take advantage of artists, assuming "the folk who created this work . . . [do] not fully understand and appreciate its aesthetic value" (hooks, 1990, p. 117).

The term folk artist is generally applied to someone who is not formally trained. The fact Aminah graduated from the Columbus College of Art and Design may disqualify her from the folk art category. I prefer not to make distinctions between artists who are formally trained and those whose education is considered informal. None-the-less, using the term "folk art" to describe Robinson's work is inappropriate.

This study adds to research on women and African American artists. Because the work of women and African American artists is rarely or sporadically presented (Ambush, 1993, p. 15), it is important to gather and disseminate information about their accomplishments. My own difficulty in finding materials on women and African American artists indicates more research is needed. As more information becomes available, a diverse range of artists can be included in curricula. When a diverse selection of artists is
represented, the erroneous representation of white males as the only worthwhile artists will be counteracted. Janson's (1970) survey of art history has been a standard text at many universities and contains no women or African American artists.

This research serves to counter the effects of "aesthetic negation" of African American experience (Ambush, 1993) prevalent in our schools. Art educator Carol Allen (personal communication, August, 1994) asserted that students must have various types of artists to identify with. She is gratified when her students learn about artists who are not mainstream, and reflect a diverse population in schools.

Methodology

My method is open-ended inquiry combining various qualitative methods. Research methods often relate to the personality and world view of the researcher (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992), and my methods fit my goals. Researchers create new methods for research when "the knowledge they seek requires it" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 219). Most of the background information about Aminah is contained in the memories and experiences of family and community members. Through conversations, I examined meanings about Aminah's works and how the work is used and valued. My method combined: interviews, ethnographic inquiry (Van Maanen, 1988), interpretive analysis, and storytelling (Bolen, 1994; Scott, Krug, & Stuhr, 1995).

My aim is to provide a variety of resources for creating one's own meanings, not to tell others what Aminah's work means. A recent report from the United States Department of Education (1994) supported the concept of encouraging readers/students to create their
own meanings. It suggested that instructional methods be changed to encourage higher order thinking, and that "higher order thinking involves self regulation...[and] imposing meaning, finding structure in apparent disorder" (p. 20). I organized the materials: artist quotes, biography, interviews, etc. The reader's learning process will involve finding meaning in the various materials provided. I also analyzed the materials using Merriam's suggestion to simply make "sense out of the data" (p. 127). I used a systematic, yet, intuitive process of interpretive analysis, detecting emerging themes and patterns that were "indicated by the data" (Merriam, 1988, p. 133).

There are many points of view represented, so it is likely each reader will come to different conclusions about Aminah's work. Because each reader makes sense of the material in her or his own way, there will be "multiple solutions" (United States Department of Education, 1994, p. 19) and interpretations. Regarding making sense of or interpreting art, Barrett (1990) stated there are various informed interpretations, but there is no one correct interpretation.

Significance

This research is significant because it is an opportunity to get to know Aminah, to share time with her and to get to know and understand her. The experience enriches me personally and professionally. As I looked at my own process of trying to understand Aminah's work I reflected on that experience and applied it to other learning situations.

This study is significant because it documents an important Columbus-born artist adding to the city's cultural archives. Aminah's work traces Columbus's history, as well as
the wider community of human beings. The people of this community can be proud of her achievements and celebrate her accomplishments. Aminah Robinson is recognized both inside and outside her community.

Significance For Educational Settings

Readers of this document will gain knowledge about how Aminah's art reflects her history and life experiences. Her experience may parallel that of many other Americans.

Students and teachers who are conscious of the experiences of others, in a general or specific way, may possess a tool that eases them into a more comfortable fit in diverse contexts. One strategy for creating a healthful curricular ecology is to consider aspects of belief and behavioral systems which are not dominant in American society but may be highly significant to the success of many students. (Daniel, 1996, p. 82)

Because Aminah's work incorporates belief systems of non-dominant segments of society, examining it will be fruitful for teachers and students. Aminah grew up in a federally funded housing development, her family "did better" (A. Robinson, personal communication, 1994) and moved to another neighborhood. They still kept contact with their roots and friends. Aminah's family valued church, caring, and watching out for one another. Her work acknowledges the accomplishments of Black entrepreneurs in Columbus, and people who have been key to the everyday vitality of her community. Aminah's work documents and celebrates the cultural richness of communities like Poindexter Village and Sapelo Island, Georgia. Poindexter Village is the area of public housing where Aminah grew up in Columbus. [See Appendix C] Sapelo Island is a small, isolated and culturally and historically rich Gullah community where her father's family has roots. Gullah communities, which still exist on the coastal islands of southeastern United
States, were formed by enslaved Africans and have strong retentions of African culture, including language. Gullah communities are not widely known about, yet are an important aspect of American history and culture.

This research provides a resource for educators who wish to diversify their curriculum. It contributes to the growing body of information on women and African American artists. All teachers need to diversify curriculum.

Even if your classroom appears to be homogeneous, include materials that encourage exploration of diverse perspectives and experiences. Do not assume that your students will be forever in the enclave of your classroom...and provide students with many opportunities to identify the nature of American-ness. (Daniel, 1996, p. 87)

Significance of Method

The method is significant because it is a model of a unique and effective way to collect, record, and present information about an artist. Heard (1989) called on teachers and researchers to "develop methods of discourse and examine creation of meanings embodied in multicultural experiences and objects" (p. 13).

Conversational or dialogic and/or polyphonic methods of presentation are significant. Heard (1989) said that "multicultural art education . . . requires critical, dialogical examination of knowledge sources in cultural contexts and of current artistic goals, developments and processes" (p. 9). Because my research about Aminah uses a contextual orientation, it impacts the way the material is used by learners (Heard, 1989). In the classroom, students may uncover materials that lead to discussion and learning.
Overview of the Chapters

Chapter Two contains the contextual background materials. It examines contexts such as the biography of artist. It examines the artistic context and how Aminah's work relates to other artists work in the current artistic stream. It also includes the historical/cultural context of the work, an examination of the concept of African retentions, Africanisms in the work of African Americans, and Africanisms in Aminah's work.

Chapter Three describes and defends the methodology. My method is open-ended inquiry combining various qualitative methods. Using semi-structured interviews, interpretive analysis, and ethnographic inquiry, I incorporated multiple perspectives. Ethical issues and reliability are discussed.

Chapter Four is a description of my learning journey. It is a chronological description of the process. I present what I did and when, summarizing each interview, including some of my field notes, and my impressions of the interviews. I describe the moments of insight; the times when I made crucial connections. It is a map of a process of learning.

Chapter Five is an analysis of the interviews, field notes and articles for patterns and aberrations. The analysis reflects the purpose of the research (Holsti, 1969), focusing upon these questions:

What is Aminah's work about?
How do people create meaning? What experiences/information help people make sense of artworks?

How do people ascribe value to the work of Aminah Robinson?

What patterns and themes emerge in the process of meaning making and ascribing value?

The analysis has three levels: description of the data, interpretation, and lastly inferences based on the data. The inferences emerge from the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 1988, p. 142). It synthesizes information gathered on the journey.

Truth be told, the analysis proceeded as the research was conducted. Merriam (1988) said "analyze as you go" . . . or you risk having unfocused material that is repetitive and overwhelming in volume. (p. 124).

The intensive period of analysis involved reading through all the data several times, making notes in the margins, seeking patterns and insights, looking for links, and writing about insights I gained.

Chapter Six examines implications for art education and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Chapter two is composed of contextual background research. It examines contexts such as the biography of the artist, the historical, cultural, and the artistic context, Africanisms, Africanisms in the work of African Americans, and Africanisms in Aminah's work.

Artist's Biography

Aminah's resume reads like the Yellow Pages or an encyclopedia. It takes hours to read and contains over 25 pages of the information. It describes her more than 20,000 works, her numerous awards, exhibitions, lectures, and programs. She has enriched us with her amazing presence.

Poindexter: Growing-up Years

Aminah was born on February 18, 1940, in Columbus, Ohio's community of Poindexter Village, one of the first federally funded housing projects in the country. Poindexter was built, as Aminah says, "on top of" a neighborhood once known as The Blackberry Patch. Aminah explained

The people who came out of the Blackberry Patch were people who migrated from the south, like my family. . . . They carried their traditions and their customs and passed on many things to me and my two sisters and the extended community of
Poindexter Village. [These traditions] are still being passed on today, not only through me but through the younger generation (Robinson, 1995b). Many of these stories from the Blackberry Patch were handed down to me by my Uncle [Alvin] and my family. My uncle began to pass on many of the stories way back. He would never allow me to use a microphone, you know, anything. I had to hand write everything he said and he allowed me to do that. (Robinson, 1995a)

Uncle Alvin also supervised Aminah's artistic development. Her sister Sharron remembers "he would sit there with the easel, and I remember him giving her instructions like 'do you see this, do you see that, now you need to shade in this and you need to do that'" (Barnes, 1995).

Aminah said Poindexter "was not welfare, let me make that very, very clear. Poor, yes. People believed in working hard until they can do better, and they did" (Robinson, 1995b). It was a tight, harmonious, safe, and enriching place to grow up (Robinson, 1995a). Aminah said, Poindexter is "at the core of her, and of her work" (Saxbe, 1995). "You see, not only my family but the community of Poindexter Village nourished me with the rich traditions and rituals" (Robinson, 1994b).

She had a supportive, loving (Scott, 1995), yet strict (Robinson, 1994a) upbringing. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson raised three girls: the eldest Sandra Sue, Brenda [Aminah], and the youngest Sharron. Aminah's younger sister Sharron remembers

They [our parents] raised us to be responsible, and I commend them for that. The household was very busy now that I think back on it, because we lived in Poindexter Village, and the rooms [were small]. . . My sister, Sue, played the piano. She would be practicing her piano lesson at the same time Brenda [Aminah] was [painting], at the same time that I was watching cartoons. Can you imagine? . . . There was a lot of activity at one time in one room. (Barnes, 1995)

Aminah's art production began at a young age. She made things with her family, handmade books, paper, drawings, journals, writings, and assemblages. Mrs. Robinson
taught her daughters sewing, needlepoint, spinning, weaving, button-work, doll-making, even soapmaking. Aminah remembers, "She made all our clothing, unusual, different clothing. She made beautiful dollies out of a mixture of sugar and starch. Our apartment was so little and so beautiful" (Chenfeld, p. 54). Aminah recalled how her father made books for his children. "He'd stomp out the paper—bags, newspapers, all kinds of paper. He'd make us books, make up stories" (p. 54). Sharron remembers

There were things always around the house to use your imagination. That was encouraged. I think that is the reason [Aminah] is the way she is now. Sue and I are craftsy. You know, we still do things with our hands. But she's the one that really expounded on getting into the art work itself. (Barnes, 1995)

Particularly Aminah's father was supportive of her art and creativity.

It was my father who worked with me. . . . My father is the one who really encouraged me and did something about it. My father gave me what I needed to survive and continue. . . . He gave me encouragement when others saw nothing. (Robinson, 1995a)

Sue, Aminah's older sister, remembers their father

Doing a lot of things with us. But he always catered to Brenda because he could see that Brenda had the talent. My father [helped her a lot.]. My mother taught us a lot of the things, domestically. I think Brenda took it more seriously than either of us, the domestic things, creating things. My mother crocheted a lot. (Scott, 1995)

Aminah also credits her mother's influence. "My mother did a lot of button work all the time we were growing up. She was fabulous. We took it for granted. Fabulous. I owe her my life" (Robinson, 1994b).

When she was 8, Aminah began documenting her community, starting with family members and neighbors. Poindexter was then the kind of place where young children walked to school and everyone knew their neighbors. The little girl sketched all over
town, including inside the local undertaker’s. "It got to be so I could tell what they died from" Aminah recalled (Lewis, 1994). Sharron recalled a teacher giving Aminah "gobs of art materials. So teachers even recognized then that she had something special" (Barnes, 1995).

Aminah was introduced to artists Emerson Burkhart and Roman Johnson at the age of nine by her father. They worked as artists together, sketching on the street. "They treated me like an artist, not like a kid" (A. Robinson, personal communication, March 31, 1995). This exchange shows how much this relationship meant to Aminah.

SUSAN MYERS: So you met Roman [Johnson] when you were nine.
AMINAH ROBINSON: And Emerson [Burkhart]. My father said "I want you to meet two real artists." Emerson and Roman, all my life, treated me like an artist. They didn't treat me like a little girl or a woman, or anything; just an artist, up to this day. They just treat me like an artist. Now, Emerson has passed. But he just treated me like an artist.

Emerson lived right around the corner from Poindexter. He came in Poindexter and did a lot of painting. . . . We'd paint and draw on the street, draw and paint.
SUSAN MYERS: They were your mentors, weren't they?
AMINAH ROBINSON: Right. (Robinson, 1995a)

Mrs. Ursel White Lewis

Aminah was fortunate to have several mentors in her life. In 1950, while [working on an oil painting of] her sister, Robinson met a woman who was to be very influential in her life, Mrs. Ursel White Lewis. Mrs. Lewis recalls their first meeting.

[Aminah's] older sister was recommended to me as a model for a style show I was putting on. I went to her house to meet the older sister. There she was painting her younger sister. She had an easel set up. She was the first African American artist I had ever seen. I said "Where have you been all my life!" Here I meet this youngster and I was deeply touched. I became friends with her family. This youngster, I became close to, it seems as if she was a little genius, budding. (U. Lewis, personal communication, 1994)
Well, I was just shocked, because to watch her work and to look at a person so young working with such intensity! She didn't stop to look around at me or to listen to what I was saying to her mother. She continued, she was focused on work, and I was focused on her, thinking someday that maybe I could get her a show. I'm always thinking ahead. That day came, and I was able to present her to the public. (Lewis, 1994)

Mrs. Ursel White Lewis made an impression on Aminah, teaching her, taking her under her wing, encouraging her. Mrs. Lewis's friendship impacted Aminah and they had mutual respect for each other.

MRS. LEWIS: [Aminah] had been educated here [in the North]. I had been educated in the South when the schools were segregated and we studied Negro history, that's what they called it. She had had no Negro history. She had none. She needed to know. I knew she did not know very much about her people in general. I'm a southerner, born in Oklahoma City, reared under southern customs in the state of Missouri, educated in segregated schools. I had had the opportunity to know a lot about my own people. All of my teachers were of my race: principal, president of the university, all of that.

AMINAH: I, too, was raised under segregated schools in the elementary. But my teachers gave me nothing. It wasn't until you [Mrs. Lewis] came along that I got anything. Nothing, other than from what you gave me.

MRS. LEWIS: So I brought her books and articles. I told her about my grandparents who had been slaves. They had lived long enough so that I could hear about their lives. It was transferred to me. Aminah was like a sponge. You know, when you take a dry sponge and put it in a bowl of water. It soaks it all up, and in the morning it's dry again, it absorbed all the water. That's how she was. I gave her the Carter G. Woodson book [The Negro in Our History], that had been our book in school. She was like a sponge. We would talk all the time.

My job was to get the books and get the information to her. I had the benefit of having slave grandparents that had lived a long time. My grandfather died at 97 years, my grandmother died at 113. They were able to hold on to their mental faculties. As a small child, I came up listening to what they had to say and was always interested, from day one. I was the one grandchild that was always interested.

Every summer, I would go visit my grandparents, and the first thing I'd say to them, "Grandpa, tell me some more about the Civil War, tell me some more about slavery." He was happy to do it. My grandmother, she was a house slave. My grandfather was a field slave; both in the state of Missouri.

SUSAN MYERS: Did you try to share these stories with other people or it was just something for you?
MRS. LEWIS: It was basically for me until I met her [Aminah]. I found out you could tell Aminah a story, and she would develop it. When I found that out, I gave her the story. And the rest is history. (Lewis, 1994)

Mrs. Lewis was one of the first to show African American art in Columbus. During intermissions at church meetings or at the Masonic Lodge, Lewis would organize programs including "pianists, dancers, performers . . . there was a lot of talent there" (Fuller, 1990).

At the time of the completion of this work, [1950] a friend of mine who remains a friend to this day, Ursel White Lewis, strung a clothes line at the corner of Champion and Mt. Vernon on the near east side of Columbus, Ohio, and had a little art show. So that was my first art show. (Robinson, 1994b)

Mrs. Lewis explained

As soon as I could, I got a program and I asked her [Aminah] if I could show her work at the program. It was a style show. I had the models wear only black with white gloves. They would bring her paintings on stage. I asked Aminah about her paintings. I gave the information to the audience. It was at the East End Masonic Temple, Long and Miami. We also ended up at Vets Memorial. We had her show in '60, '61, ask her, twice . . . I'd start telling the public about her work the way I was understanding her work. It gave people an idea of what this young contemporary artist was all about. (Lewis 1994)

In later years, when Aminah had married and moved away from Columbus for a time, Mrs. Lewis kept in contact by letter, always encouraging and guiding. One letter contained this advice: "Your work must represent you and you alone" (Lewis, 1994).

Aminah considers Mrs. Lewis her "friend in art" (Lewis, 1994).

Aminah's son Sydney knew how key Mrs. Lewis's support had been to his mother. The following is from a letter he wrote to Mrs. Lewis in 1981.

Mrs. Lewis, you're the kind of person all people look up to because you were a great, loving, beautiful and grand. You're one in a million, and I love you. I thank you so much for what you have done. You went out of your way to put your own
money, to make copies of the prints, just so I would have money for my college education. I also know you worked with my mother when she was younger than me. And you then helped create a beautiful human being. (Lewis, 1994)

**Walking to Adulthood**

Aminah's first work to incorporate homemade books with writing and images was done at age 18, and it was a departure for her. Entitled "Confusion: Dream to Accomplish," it won a third prize in the Fine Arts Exhibit at the Ohio State Fair in 1958. During and after art school, she continued to document her world and the people in it.

Aminah attended the Columbus College of Art and Design. She remembers the experience fondly. She stated,

> That was one of the finest experiences that I have ever had at CCAD. Joseph Canzani was my teacher, and many others. I have never ever had an instructor and professor who taught so well, who knew he was a master. I am so grateful to have been his student at the time. (Robinson, 1994b)

Mr. Canzani remembers Aminah.

> She was a student, a freshman. I knew she was from Columbus, somewhere out on the east end. She was so enthusiastic; wide-eyed enthusiasm, glued to the instructor. Those days I taught drawing, painting, design, color. I was all over the place. This little girl was there most of the time. So I recognized her talent. She was talented. She could draw very well and she could create very well. But most of all Aminah . . . had that type of enthusiasm that carried with it an emotion. It was like an emotional attraction to want to be an artist . . . fervent.

> There she was wanting to learn, learn, learn, and she appreciated just about everything. . . . She grew and worked and she always did her homework. We killed those kids with homework, but she did them [the assignments] all the time, and she just learned. (Canzani, 1995)

Edith Smilack met Aminah when she was teaching at CCAD. She vividly remembers her first contact with Aminah and the subsequent friendship that continues to this day.

> I got up there [before a class of students at CCAD] to talk about art, and Aminah's sitting right in front of me. I'm looking down and I see something moving on her
chest. She had a chameleon on a chain that was walking around her chest, and at that moment I just fell in love with the kid. I thought, "Boy this is a unique character." She didn't crack a smile or anything. I just kept on looking at that chameleon and talking. That was my first introduction to her.

Then I got to know her pretty well. I used to go to her home and I met her parents. Her father was still alive then, and her mother and her sisters and the whole family actually. The next thing I knew, she was engaged to this soldier, sailor, I can't remember. I have pictures of them and the baby sitting out there on the deck.

It doesn't happen with everybody, you know, but there are certain people that you sort of, you could spend five minutes of your time with them of your life and you're bonded to them forever. It's as if you've known them throughout eternity, and that's the way I've always felt about Aminah. (Smilack, 1995)

Aminah married a man with the same last name in 1964. They had a son in 1967.

Aminah recalls

Finally, my son arrived in '67. So I began to make books for him and he made books for me, and so we made art for to celebrate the different holidays. They are a collection of tiny, tiny books—needlework, beadwork and just carved leather. (Robinson, 1994b)

Aminah and her husband separated in 1971. Since then she raised her son, Sydney, on her own, working full time for the Department of Recreation and Parks, caring for Sydney, and also working on her art. Aminah remembers, "There were other times when there wasn't food in the refrigerator. . . . It's not easy being an artist, working a job and raising a child, but I never thought about not being an artist" (Gilson, 1990).

She created homemade books for her young son, and works of art that could be used in a functional way everyday for all the members of her family. These included carved leather bags, quilts, tablecloths, homemade books with stories and music and works of art they could hang on the walls (A. Robinson, personal communication, March 31, 1995). She also did some large paintings on pellon.
In 1971, Aminah met yet another person who was to influence her life in a profound way. Aminah recalled,

Ursel White Lewis, my lifelong friend, introduced me to Elijah Pierce in 1971. . . . Mr. Pierce, this great man, influenced my life and became my teacher and my mentor. I'm talking about the walks in going through the spiritual nature of living life every day. I loved Mr. Pierce, (Robinson, 1994b)

Pierce was "just my friend," Aminah explains. "My mentor, my teacher—he inspired me. . . . He taught me how to walk. Oh, yes, we took walks." (Mallett, p. 16)

He helped me through a very hard time. I'd draw and he'd carve and talk to me. I had my own ways of working but he influenced my thinking. He brought me back to the realities of tradition. He brought me back to what was important—the way you walk and talk—keeping your mind on the work. He did a carving of me. Mrs. Pierce said, "Come to the studio. Me and Mr. Pierce have something to give you." He did a portrait of me in a flower garden. I did books on him and paintings for him. I made book for him, The Wisdom of Elijah Pierce. When I read it to him, he cried. (Chenfeld, p. 58)

America to Africa: Finding Aminah

In 1979, the Columbus arts community, organized by photographer Kojo Kamau, raised funds to enable Brenda Lynn Robinson to travel to Africa where she acquired the name Aminah.

There were over 3000 pieces produced from the African Pilgrimage Series. . . . I think this experience, which I was given by the citizens of Columbus, Ohio. It was Kojo and Marianne Williams who made it possible to send artists to Africa — was a wonderful experience. It turned my life around, and I hope it will turn others' lives around as well. (Robinson, 1994b)

The trip fused Robinson's African roots with her already strong cultural heritage. She visited Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and Egypt. In Egypt, a mysterious incident occurred. The tour guides, a Sheik and his wife, looked at Brenda and told her that her name was Aminah.

I did not know that my grandmother's name was Aminah until I returned from Africa. It was given to me, [in Egypt] but I never took it seriously until I told my
father. My father said, "What did you say? They gave you a name and what was it?" I said, "Aminah." He said, "Well do you know what your grandmother's name is?" I said, "Pearl." He said, "No, it's Pearl Aminah." That was the reason why I added it onto the family name legally. That was an amazing experience. (Robinson, 1994b)

Aminah's work changed dramatically after the African trip, in color and size most notably. The drafting of the images was more free than before. Aminah's work had always been expressive, but after the African trip, it looked as if something was emotionally unleashed for the artist. The impulse to document her family and heritage has remained fairly consistent. It was reinforced by the African trip.

**Sapelo Island: A Family Link**

In 1983, Governor Joe Frank Harris of Georgia invited Aminah to "document" the Hog Hammock Community of Sapelo Island. This island was the home of her father's family until the Emancipation Proclamation led to the migration of some family members to Ohio. It was on Sapelo Island that Aminah found members of her family who still used their Arabic names and remembered their Arabic roots (Chenfeld, p. 57). Aminah remembers,

I was able to stay there and draw and paint and talk to the residents. We sat around Mattie Carter's table, you see, and all of the ladies from Hog Hammock Community, we all sat around and made quilts and caught up on the gossip. It was fun, exhilarating, most inspiring. . . . There were a thousand pieces coming out of Sapelo Series, for example the Sapelo Quilt with the music boxes which documents the community of Hog Hammock. . . . Another body of work coming out of Sapelo is called the Sapelo Walkers. These are just people from Hog Hammock. You have the basketman, like Mr. Green. You have the lady who is taking the plants to the market. . . . the Ropemaker, the Boatmaker, the Flourmaker, and Woman Resting. She's watching, keeping an eye on the two sisters walking. (Robinson, 1994b)
Aminah's paternal grand-aunts, Cornelia and Bertha, hailed from the island, so Aminah's trip in February of 1983, had personal genealogical significance for the artist, as well as historical and folklore importance. The Sapelo works are in line with her concerns about family, documenting, folk life, and people. The works demonstrated skills learned from others, like her mother and other community members. The series include sculptures, drawings, paintings, quilts, fabric hangings, documentary journals, and books. Almost every possible media is used: paper, fabric, mud, sticks, beads, embroidery floss, leather, nails, paint, pencil, crayon, pastel, buttons, and more.

A Reputation is Established

Aminah Robinson received three fellowship grant awards from the Ohio Arts Council: in 1980, 1987, and 1989. As a result of her 1989 award, she was invited by the Institute of Contemporary Art, New York, to participate in a six-month residency program at P.S.1, a former public school in Long Island City, Queens (Griffith, 1990, p. 7). Aminah talked about her experiences in New York:

I walked the streets to draw after being in the studio. One of the experiences that I had was the birthing on the C-Train. [See Appendix D] That was an experience! The lady had a baby on the train! I saw so much homelessness in New York. I mean, I've always seen it but I've never seen it like that. It was devastating. There are people, people, so many people. But there was something very strong in them. Something had happened maybe in their lives which could happen to any of us, and we, too, could be homeless. (Robinson, 1994b)

In 1990, Robinson was the subject of the first major exhibition to honor a living artist at the Columbus Museum of Art. She considers the exhibition in 1990 and a major commission at the Columbus Metropolitan Library in 1991 "a turnaround in her life" (Robinson, 1994b).
Since 1992, she has illustrated three books, *Elijah's Angel, The Teachings,* and *Sophie.* Her work was exhibited at the prestigious Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus. She has completed several large commissioned pieces, that are displayed in public and semi-public spaces: The Columbus Foundation, Columbus Metropolitan Library, Riverside Methodist Hospitals, and The United Way. Most recently, her work was included in an exhibition of works by prominent contemporary artists.

Aminah lost her son Sydney in 1994. She dedicated the 1994 address to the Ohio art educators Annual conference to him:

Good Evening. During the course of our lives, we cross many bridges if we are to move on in life. My life has been no exception to the many magical bridges that continue to carry me safely across. Though the traditions of honoring those who have died and of recognizing death to be an aspect of life by remembering, release, transformation, celebration and mourning, I dedicate this evening, this presentation that I will give to you to my son, Sydney, who recently passed. Sydney had a very significant role in the evolution of my life and work during the 27 years he dwelt among us. He was the joy of my life. (Robinson, 1994b)

Aminah Robinson is a prolific artist whose work and life deserve to be shared with the world.

It takes time to produce work. It takes everything you have because it takes your life to leave something for those who are coming after. That's why I do it. You have to give it your life, and that's all you can do because you have to commit your life, commit your life. It's hard to look back over because it takes so much time, but loving every minute of it. (Robinson, 1994b)

Because Aminah's work is so closely tied to her family and cultural roots, it is important to examine the context of Aminah's cultural heritage. The next section includes research from this century that attests to the strength and resilience of cultural traditions over many generations.
Africanisms/African Influences in Art of African Americans

There was a widespread belief that, when Africans were brought to North and South America and forced into slavery for hundreds of years, no part of their culture survived the terrible trip across the Atlantic or the living conditions in the New World. In addition, there was a racist, Euro-centric belief that the culture(s) Africans were uprooted from was "primitive" and uncivilized, not really worth retaining (Herskovits, 1941/1958; Locke 1940/1968). Research shows that neither of these beliefs are true. In fact, many elements of African culture survived slavery, and the African cultures were and are in fact complex, sophisticated civilizations. The support for these assertions comes from a variety of academic fields: anthropology, ethnography, history, art history, and cultural studies. In this section, I examine the attempts in this century to find and acknowledge African influences on the culture of the New World, primarily the culture of Black Americans.

The works of Melville Herskovits and Alain Locke are of primary interest. Herskovits was an anthropologist whose wide ranging research looked at civilizations in Africa, South America and North America. He is credited with coining the term "Africanism" (Vlach, 1978), a cultural trait that can be traced to African origins. He fought two myths. First, Africans arrived in the New World "culturally naked" (Shaw, 1973, p. 5) and secondly, "the prevailing idea that Africans left behind them primitive disorderly societies" (Shaw, p. 5). Herskovits' lifetime research "demonstrated that African customs and traditions are still part of the linguistic, religious, social, and artistic life of black people throughout the Americas. In addition . . . life for all Americans is influenced by the living heritage of Africa" (Shaw, p. 5). His vision was unique, because earlier
scholars claimed that slaves brought to the New World were stripped of their social heritage, leaving behind everything but their dark skin and "a tropical temperament" (Herskovits, 1941/1958, p. 3). Thompson (1969) also felt it was wrong to say that African heritage was obliterated. African heritage was routinely denied. Some feel the motive was racial exploitation (Vlach).

At about the same time Herskovits was struggling to dispel the myth, Alain Locke, a philosopher, art historian, and critic, was laboring under the "cultural zero myth" that Herskovits would eventually dispel. Locke said that the American Negro was artistically different from the African. Why? Locke asserted:

There is an historical reason. Slavery not only transplanted the Negro, it cut him off sharply from his cultural roots and his ancestral heritage, and reduced him to a cultural zero by taking away his patterns and substituting the crudest body labor with only the crudest tools. . . . Slavery severed the trunk-nerve of the Negro's primitive skill and robbed him of his great ancestral gift of manual dexterity. (Locke, 1931, p. 171)

Locke believed the Negro was handicapped in the plastic arts and was "trying to recapture ancestral gifts and reinstate lost arts and skill" (p. 171).

Some early commentators apparently admired the creative efforts of blacks in the New World, but had a skewed view of their cultural legacy. For instance, in 1925, art patron Albert Barnes wrote:

A *primitive* [italics added] race, transported into an Anglo-Saxon environment and held in subjection to that fundamentally alien influence, was bound to undergo the soul-stirring experiences which always find their expression in great art. . . . it is a sound art because it comes from a *primitive nature* [italics added] upon which a white man's education has never been harnessed. . . . The psychological complexion of the Negro . . . [was] inherited it from his *primitive ancestors* [italics added] and which he maintains to this day. The outstanding characteristics are his tremendous emotional endowment, his luxuriant and free imagination and a truly great power of individual expression. (p. 19)
Barnes' comments are pejorative even though they were intended to be complementary. His comments remind me of the misguided concept of the noble savage. Yet, to Barnes's credit, he did see compelling attributes in the work of Black Americans. For example he also asserted "the white man in the mass cannot compare with the Negro in spiritual endowment" (p. 20).

Several authors emphasize the importance of studying African cultural origins and sources (Herskovits, 1941/1958; Locke, 1925/74; Schomburg, 1925/74; Thompson) and do not take a condescending attitude toward African culture as did Barnes. Schomburg said, that "depreciation of Africa has sprung up from ignorance of her true role and position in human history. . . . The Negro has become a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture" (Schomburg, 1925/74, p. 237). Scientific study of African culture and appreciation of the African crafts were suggested as remedies to the inaccurate view of African culture.

Artist John Biggers felt removed from his heritage until he spent several months in West Africa (Bearden, 1993, p. 436). He did not feel his African culture was lost. During his 1957 trip to Africa, Biggers recalled,

When I heard the great drums call the people, when I saw the people respond with an enthusiasm unequaled by any other call of man or God, I rejoiced. I knew that many of the intrinsic African values would never be lost in the dehumanizing scientific age-just as they were not lost during the dark centuries of slavery. (1962, p. 30)
While in Africa he felt a sense of belonging and saw many aspects of African life that were familiar to him. He described these as "Africanisms in our life which [I] simply had not been able to claim" (p. 30) because he was unaware they were African retentions.

In the latter part of this century, we have become more conscious of the subtle workings of culture. Without citing direct African retentions, historian, Gaither (1989) asserts that slaves created meaning in their lives from a "framework" brought from Africa "religious, mythical, political, historical, psychological, and ontological" (p. 17). This framework provided the slaves with a sense of how to relate to the world. While hard proof of such a framework is difficult to point to, research from this century supports Gaither's assertion. (Ferris, 1989; Herskovits, 1941/1958; Vlach, 1978; Thompson).

**Alain Locke: Look to Africa**

Alain Locke contributed to an entire generation's perceptions about the power of African culture. He graduated from Harvard, was the first Black Rhodes scholar, and a professor of philosophy at Howard University for 40 years (Bearden, 1993). Locke was virtually the only African American academician writing on African American art (Bearden, 1993). Even though Locke felt American Negroes had been stripped of their culture, he initiated and supported artists efforts to reclaim their cultural legacy from Africa. Alain Locke (1931) encouraged black artists to be aware of "our ancestral arts" (p. 243) and to accept "the ancestral legacy" (p. 242). In the 1920s, artists' use of African themes and stylistic elements was validated. Locke believed that prior to 1915, Black artists were affected by European oriented training and produced fine work when they did get training. In the 1920s, though, he said they had a different point of view. There was "a
new freedom and dignity" (Locke, 1931, p. 174). He saw three categories of Black artists, each of which, despite their stylistic differences, placed an emphasis on "racial subject matter" (Locke, p. 174).

He felt it was important to attempt to bring Negro artists into contact with African art (Locke, 1931). In the twenties he believed the American Negro could not connect with African art, meeting African art objects "in as alienated and misunderstanding an attitude as the average European westerner" (Locke, 1925, p. 255). He suggested that artists learn from African art, as part of an effort "to develop our artistic talents" (Locke, p. 256). Locke made his collection available to artists. The lessons to be learned from African art included "intellectually significant form, abstract design, formal simplicity, restrained dignity, and the unsentimental approach to the emotions. And more important still, since Africa's art creed is beauty in use, they call for an art rooted in the crafts, uncontaminated with the blight of the machine, and soundly integrated with life" (Locke, 1931, p. 174).

Locke did not suggest that artists copy ancestral traditions, but rather, in 1931, suggested they "recapture this heritage of creative originality, and to carry it to distinctive new achievement in a vital, new and racially expressive art" (Bearden, 1993, p. 245). He believed that African Americans would make a contribution to visual art as they had to music (Locke, 1968). Regardless of Locke's suggestions, talented black artists of the early 20th century continued to emulate artistic conventions based on European conventions. Even artists of the Harlem Renaissance conformed to conventions of the Western tradition (Gates, 1990, p. xii).
Melville Herskovits

Melville Herskovits, in his very productive career as an anthropologist, was a visionary with respect to recognizing African retentions in the Americas. He was interested in many aspects of culture, and took a multi-disciplinary approach to his work. His writings contain consistent themes, but his ideas changed as his research uncovered new information.

In 1925, Herskovits defined culture as the "elements of the environment which are the handiwork of man himself" (p. 365). All peoples possess culture. It is a result of their history, developed over time and always changing (Herskovits, 1925). Looking at African Americans in 1925, he observed no traces of the African culture. He then thought African Americans had "absorbed the culture of America" (Herskovits, 1925, p. 360) and eventually became "Americanized" (p. 360). He asserted that after slavery was abolished Negroes strove to attain standards set by the white community. In school, they learned "not the languages and techniques of their African ancestors" (Herskovits, 1925, p. 354) but those of this country. What of the ancestral culture of African Americans? He said the Africans were brought here "endowed with a culture which had been developed by him through long ages in Africa. Was it innate? Or has it been sloughed off, forgotten, in the generations since he was brought into our culture?" (Herskovits, 1925, p. 356).

Herskovits was willing to question his own observations that there were no remnants of African culture retained in the New World. After many years of painstaking, dedicated study, he discovered many African retentions in the New World. Almost every scholar I came across made reference to Herskovits' work, a fitting tribute to his vision.
In his 1941, *Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits described his studies as ethno-history, combining science and history and called for further cross-disciplinary study (Herskovits, 1941/1958, p. 301). He felt it was important to compare Blacks in the New World with their ancestral populations. He further believed the study must involve more than correlating the behaviors of aboriginal Africans and Blacks in the United States. It must consider the customs and beliefs of blacks from the entire New World and the cultures of Africa where most slaves were brought from, a restricted area. Blassingame (1973) found that he gained new insights when he considered African-descended peoples in Latin America.

Herskovits (1941/1958) asserted that Africanisms are retained in varying degrees. He believed that when two cultures come into contact with each other, one was not obliterated. He suggested concepts such as cultural borrowing, culture affecting one's personality, and individuals acting upon the patterns of a culture, causing change. Acculturation is the change that occurs in a culture when sustained first-hand contact with another culture occurs. African culture, upon contact, was strong and resilient. He even suggested that white culture in the United States may have itself been influenced by Africans, just as it had been influenced by European settlers. This seems like a potentially unpopular assertion for 1941. Scholars in the 1980s are very comfortable with this idea, asserting that the ethos of Afro-American culture has affected the "national, common culture" (Gay, 1987, p. xii).

Significantly, Herskovits said that in Africa he was looking not at "primitive" peoples but what he termed "non-historic peoples," non literate peoples relatively
unaffected by European influence. He displays a politically correct sensitivity by saying he will not use terms like inferior or superior in referring to different populations, but rather dominant/minority (1941/1958, p. 29-30). Herskovits' work is key to my study because from his mentor Franz Boas, Herskovits "learned the importance of Arts in the unfolding of culture. . . . Art as an integral part of culture, became one of the themes of his career" (Shaw, 1973, p. 5).

Artists Go Back to Africa

Between the 1950s to the 1970s there was a trend toward artists "going home" to Africa and a sense of "cultural nationalism" in the arts communities. These trends were exhibited by artists traveling to post-colonial Africa, Black militant art, and what he calls neo-African Art. Neo-African artists used symbols and features of African art in an attempt to reclaim the African "spirit" (Gaither, 1989, p. 23). The term spirit is used over and over again in reference to Africa and Africanisms. Traveling to Africa allowed artists to connect "to the reality of Africa" (Gaither p. 32) the inner sense, not just the surface. In Ananse: The Web of Life in Africa, artist John Biggers tells through words and exquisite drawings, of his trip to Africa in 1957. He said he had a "feeling of belonging. . . . [and] found that it [African art] is basically religious" (Biggers, 1962, p. 29). He also saw some disturbing trends. Some African art schools taught the European art tradition "at the expense of the rich African art heritage" (p. 30). This was a tendency he recognized, "to accept the white man's images indiscriminately. . . . it has thwarted the cultural development of the American Negro" (p. 30).
Several trends and organizations reflected the cultural nationalism of African Americans at this time. In the 1960s and 70s, "Black Art" was dedicated to cultural liberation of Blacks (Gaither, 1989, p. 25). The program for CONFABA, the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art at Northwestern University in May of 1970 stated that Black Art is politically and spiritually functional, not art for art's sake, it was "art for people's sake" (Gaither, p. 26). AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) believed that art should emphasize the family, community, and nationhood of African peoples in America, and be about social and political liberation (Gaither, p. 26). Artists developed an iconography to symbolize black pride, power and nationalism, for example: the use of the colors red, black, and green; the clenched fist, double axe, and ankh; and the zig zag and other patterns derived from Africa (Gaither, p. 29).

**Robert Farris Thompson**

Building on the work of Locke and Herskovits, art historian Robert Farris Thompson has made major contributions to our understanding of African retentions in the art of African Americans. From his earliest writings, one can detect the same multi- and cross-disciplinary approach that Herskovits embraced. Thompson came at the subject with an art historian's eye and mind. His studies of African art, and the art of African-descended persons in the New World continues to enrich what is a growing field of study. Thompson's work will be examined in depth in the next section.

**Characteristics Called Africanisms**

Africanisms are cultural traits that can be traced to Africa. Which cultural characteristics have been identified as Africanisms and how do they inform our view of the
cultural production of African Americans? It is important to view these cultural traits in relation to one another, Vlach (1978) stated, since "an Africanism is not an isolated cultural element, but an assertive proof of an alternative history. It is a link to an unwritten past. It is an index of the existence of African influences" (Vlach, 1978, p. 2).

Identifying Africanisms is a complex process, involving close and thorough examination of the cultures, the cultural producers, and the cultural products. To begin with "the study of African art requires a comprehension of cultural background and socially sanctioned drives as well as a knowledge of the principles of aesthetics" (Herskovits, 1947/1967, p. 62). To accomplish this, one must combine research from different fields like ethnology and art history (Gay, 1987). Combining different fields presents the possibility of conflicting methodologies. Herskovits (1947/1967) takes issue with the tendency of art professionals who believe that considering the cultural significance of art could detract from appreciation. Herskovits (1935/1966) asserted that culture is learned, and the sum of many varied behaviors it is important to look beyond the surface. Blassingame (1973) said that thoughts, beliefs, values and behaviors constitute culture. We must also be aware that Africanisms are not distinct, separate forms that are easily labeled.

African resonances should not be seen as cultural wholes imported intact but as surviving parts of Old World cultural practices; although often continuing in concept and spirit, they are increasingly divergent in form from the original cultural practices. But culture is not static. . . . What may remain consistent is how a people respond to change, order, and each other. (Harris, 1993, p. 109)

Art is based on ideas, so that an African idea embedded in an object may not be apparent to all viewers and even misinterpreted based on Anglo traditions (Vlach, 1978).
Objects made by African Americans share a "similar creative philosophy" and that we must understand the "intellectual premises" (Vlach, p. 2) upon which they are based. What we are looking for is a "cumulative knowledge, collective consciousness, and shared heritage . . . soul" (Yearwood, 1987, p. 137). Not only does one need training in various disciplines to effectively detect Africanisms, but use sensing, intuitive faculties (Blier, 1990, p. 152). Detecting and finding Africanisms is a complex process made more difficult by the fact that the researcher is examining personal, intimate beliefs and practices. Once, when Herskovits was talking with a Bush Negro about burial rites, the "informant" suddenly stopped explaining. Herskovits tried to prod the man into talking further with him, but was told, "White man, long ago our ancestors taught us that a man must not tell anyone more than half of what he knows about anything. I have told you half of what I know" (1941/1958, p. 156). To make matters more complex, there may be traditions which survive, "even though the local people have forgotten the meaning" (Holloway, 1993, p. xvii).

History, geography, culture, must all be considered. Many Africans forcefully brought to the New World came from the Guinea Coast area (Herskovits, 1947). The traditions of this area are important to consider because "rarely does a culture give way entirely before another; that the result of contact is a new synthesis far more often than extinction" (Herskovits, 1947/1967, p. 60). There were "common denominators" (Herskovits, p. 297) that Africans drew on to reinterpret their culture and not fade into the European culture. The term "negritude" was coined to mean a unique talent for artistic expression that was the result of "distinctive African and New World Experiences"
culturally transmitted from generation to generation" (Drake, 1987, p. x). The term "double consciousness" (Gay & Baber, 1987, p. 349) was first articulated by W. E. B. DuBois.

The most obvious Africanisms are found in the areas of music and dance (Blassingame, 1973; Herskovits, 1941/1958; Thompson, 1969). Africanisms in the visual arts are not accounted for in early research. Vlach (1978) believed some retentions were not known about when Herskovits did his studies. The artist John Biggers asserted that Herskovits and others of his generation missed many Africanisms because they "did not recognize African ways of doing many ordinary things, sitting, standing, walking, fashioning tools and garments" (Bearden & Henderson, 1993, p. 430). On his 1957 trip to Africa, Biggers observed many of these actions firsthand, recording his visual and written impressions in *Ananse: The Web of African Life*. Neither Herskovits (1941/1958) nor Blassingame (1973) devote a separate section for visual art, but similarities contained in other parts of the culture can be applied to visual art. Art historian Thompson (1969, 1983) was one of the first to methodically make connections between the visual traditions of Africa and African Americans. I examine African cultural retentions that can be most readily applied to the work of visual artists.

**Emotion, Everyday Life and Spirituality**

In Africa, art as an expression of culture is connected to everyday life, and activities. It is a way "of making meaning out of experience" (Gay, 1987, p. 5). One of the most important aspects of African culture is its connection to everyday life, "the beauty in vital application to life and use" (Locke, 1940/1968, p. 208), its functionality. Gay uses
the term "style" to denote how even most common things are injected with flair and finesse. Process may take precedence over product; "how" a thing is done is often more important than "what" is done (Gay, p. 5). In looking for Africanisms, we must look at the content of the works as well as the process of art-making (Vlach, 1978).

Expressiveness and emotion are often noted as a cultural influence from Africa (DuBois, 1961; Gay, 1987; Herskovits, 1941/1958). Referring to the legacy of African ancestral arts, Locke said "the American Negro brought over an emotional inheritance, a deep-seated aesthetic endowment" (Rozelle, 1989, p. 143). There is an "expressive flavor, verve, or quality which distinguishes Black culture from other lifestyles (Gay, 19878, p. ix).

Spirituality is often mentioned in relation to African and African American culture. DuBois (1970) mentions "a peculiar artistic spiritual quality" (p. 178), and Thompson (1989) discusses qualities of "transcendence and spirit-possession" (p. 100). Transcendence can mean to climb over, or go beyond limits of, and to be separate from the material universe, be close to the divine or spirit (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 1419). Herskovits (1941/1958) mentions that African religion has an intimate relation to daily routine. Spiritual matters seem to pervade African cultural aesthetics.

An Oral Tradition

"Black culture is, fundamentally, an oral and aural culture that can best be seen, felt, understood, and appreciated through telling, experiential encounters" (Drake in Gay, 1987, p. xvi). In Africa and African American communities, the purpose of communication is the transmission and preservation of culture, usually transmitted through an oral
tradition like griots and storytellers (Baber, 1989, p. 81). There is even an African word "nommo-power of the spoken word" that refers to the prominence of the oral tradition in African culture (Baber, p. 80). While the oral tradition is key, Simmons (1972) says we cannot understand or convey Black American culture unless the oral, aural, visual, and written traditions are seen together (p. vi).

One of the most important cultural legacies from Africa is the folk tale (Blassingame, 1973, p. 23; Herskovits, 1941/1958; Thompson, 1969). The folk tale was very resistant to European culture, and provided entertainment, education and transference of folk wisdom (Blassingame, 1973, pp. 31 & 127). Africans carried this treasure of vital oral traditions to the New World in "their hearts and minds" (Gay, 1987, p. 2). Blassingame says that 30% of African American proverbs have direct African origins.

The very title of the book Long Memory, symbolizes the authors' rejection of the view that African Americans were "rootless" (Berry and Blassingame, 1987, p. x.) people. "Whatever they do black people talk to each other. They have always done so" (p. x.). The authors examine past experiences of African Americans to build a more complete, complex history of African Americans. Their entire premise is built on the assertion of many cultural traditions being passed along and held in memory, either individual or collective.

Not only was much culture passed along orally, but in some areas, aspects of African language were retained. "The center of African linguistic survival was along the Georgia-South Carolina coast, where the slave had little contact with whites"
The Gullah dialect that still can be heard in that area has language patterns that are African in nature (Blassingame, 1973, McFeeley, 1994; Thompson, 1969). As late as the 1940s the Sea Island Blacks had African names and used "more than 4000 words from the languages of more than 21 African tribes" (Blassingame, 1973, p. 30).

Improvisation and Syncretism

Improvisation is key in Africa (Gay, 1987; Vlach, 1978). Improvisation is not only found in verbal or musical arts, but is a "pan-African reality" (Vlach, p. 4). Because improvisation is so embedded in the culture, it figures in many aspects of the visual arts—choices in subject matter, materials used, art processes, etc. Several researchers use the phenomenon of "syncretism," a way of retaining ones heritage while adopting outwardly the culture of another, to find Africanisms (Herskovits, 1941/1958; Vlach, 1978). An example of a syncretism is how Africans in the New World readily accepted Catholic saints. This transition could be made because the gods of the pantheistic African religions were reinterpreted as saints. European forms were made to serve African functions because "Christian forms were so similar to African religious patterns" (Blassingame, 1973, p. 21). The process is a very subtle one, and provides the rationale for researchers to talk with cultural producers. Only by listening carefully, or by knowing what questions to ask can one detect how deeply rooted are the influences, and discover the underlying meanings. Researchers cannot depend on interpretations based on their own perspective.
Religion

African religious traditions were adapted in the New World (Blassingame, 1973; Herskovits, 1941/1958; Vlach, 1978;). As mentioned earlier, religion is an intimate aspect of life in Africa. Many African religions believe the universe is ruled by great gods (Herskovits, 1941/1958, p. 86). The Ibo religion included belief in a supreme being (Blassingame, 1973, p. 15) and the Yoruba have the concept of one God and "words to express sin, guilt, sacrifice" (Blassingame, p. 72). Many African religions are polytheistic, and slaves adapted their beliefs to reverence for Catholic saints (Herskovits, 1941/1958; Vlach, 1978).

In African thought, there is no absolute bad or good, these qualities are relative. Neither can anyone, even a diviner, know the absolute truth (Blier, 1990, p. 142). In looking at the African American concept of the devil, this must be kept in mind. The devil is conceived of as more of a trickster figure than completely evil (Herskovits, 1941/1958). This philosophy toward good and evil can also account for the reconciliation of magic and charms with the European religion (Herskovits, 1941/1958). Evidence of belief in charms, magic, conjure, and voodoo are seen in African American culture (Blassingame, 1973; Herskovits, 1947; Thompson, 1990).

Animal imagery is prevalent in West African religion and mythology and seen in walking sticks here in the United States (Blassingame, 1973; Perry, 1989). In particular, snakes or serpents that figure in the mythology are considered supernatural beings (Herskovits, 1941/1958; Thompson, 1989).
Spiritual traditions of Africa had a large impact on the lives of the Sea Island Gullahs, even though they were often hidden within the practice of Christianity (Creel, 1990, p. 71). For instance, there is an emphasis on the total well-being of the community with the individual as only a part of it (Creel, 1990, p. 72). In the Sea Island culture, humans are double beings with inner and outer entities. The outer entity can be seen and decays at death. The inner entity can be eaten by "bad medicine" or helped by good medicine or *minkisi* (Creel, 1990, p. 82).

**Family & Cult of the Ancestor**

In West Africa, social organization is based on the family (White, 1987). The family tended to be patriarchal, and bonds of affection between mothers and children were very strong (Berry, 1982; Blassingame, 1973). Large families were prized because children represented prestige and economic advantage (Berry; Herskovits, 1941/1958). The extended family was also very important (Berry; Herskovits; White). This concept of solidarity and unity based on the family was continued in the Americas even though families and tribes were purposely split apart during the Middle Passage and in captivity in the New World (White).

The "symbolic family relationship" (White, 1987, p. 33) is an influence from Africa. Often family terms like auntie, brother, or uncle were used for non-blood relatives (Berry, 1982; Herskovits, 1941/1958; White). In contemporary times, what White calls "fictive kinship" (p. 24) continues to be a source of support and assistance. These are persons to be counted upon, and can occur with peers or be inter-generational. This tendency to "extend family boundaries, privileges and responsibilities" (White, p. 32) to
non-blood relatives serves to solidify group cohesion. Hurston (1971, p. 237) used the expression "My people! My people!" as the only one that could encompass persons so different, varied and diverse yet unified (White, p. 32).

Respect for elders is a predominant Africanism (White, 1987; Herskovits, 1935/1966, 1941/58; Blassingame, 1973). Example of this deference might be turning ones head when laughing, or speaking to elders or respected persons with ones eyes averted. These are signs of respect, not inattention (Herskovits, 1941/1958).

Reverence for elders includes reverence for elders from the African past (Herskovits, 1941/1958; White, 1987). Herskovits refers to a "tenacious Africanism" (Herskovits, 1941/1958, p. 151), an emphasis on "the cult of the ancestor" (Herskovits, 1941/1958, p. 151), a recognition that human power does not end with death. Elaborate funeral rites indicate not only the importance of ancestors, but assure their goodwill as well (Blassingame, 1973; Herskovits; Thompson, 1989). Thompson (1983, 1989) particularly looked at graveyard decoration.

**Visual Resonances**

Many elements of ancestral African culture were faithfully retained, remarkably by American-born slaves (Blassingame, 1973; Vlach, 1978). This most often occurred where there was less exposure to European culture, in places like the Sea Islands off Georgia and South Carolina, and areas of Alabama and Mississippi (Blassingame; Herskovits, 1941/1958; Thompson, 1989; Vlach;). For example, "sweet grass" basketry in South Carolina is the longest surviving example of African craft in the United States (Perry, 1989).
Herskovits (1941/1958) noted these woven trays are coiled, a technique from West Africa, and that the coils go in a clockwise direction both in baskets from Africa and in the Sea Islands. Some pottery, particularly vessels with faces, have stylistic similarities to wood sculpture from Zaire/Kongo (Perry, 1989). It is thought these face vessels may have had spiritual value since examples were found in places other than the Sea Islands, New York, Ohio, and in the vicinity of Underground Railroads. Since slaves only took with them their most prized possessions, the presence of the vessels is remarkable (Perry, 1989). Even though quilt-making is not an African tradition, the designs of many African American quilts bear a striking resemblance to African textiles (Perry, 1989).

The use of shells indicates the existence of the spirit, or refer to the sea. Shells are often pressed into burial mounds, out of concern for the deceased and for protection. In 1975, Bessie Jones, from St. Simon's Island, Georgia said, "the shells stand for the sea. The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back. So the shells stand for water, the means of glory and the land of demise" (Thompson, 1990, p. 174). Many African American artists incorporate shells in their work, particularly cowrie shells. The use of mirrors or shiny reflective objects often seen in African American art also refers to the spiritual world. These mirrored surfaces reflect light, so you can see through to the other world, the world of the ancestors (Thompson, 1990, p. 174).

Africanisms in Artist's Works

Yearwood (1987) discussed, in general terms, the relationship of African American artists to their African heritage. He has identified three major, sequential trends in Black expressiveness based on artist's "relationship with their ethnic heritage and the broader
The trends include "social realism" that presents positive, desirable character traits, the "best" citizens, portraits and aspects of middle class black life. The second trend, "modernism," is not a realistic or literal representation of lives, but rather more interested in symbolism. In modernism "the artist wants to convey the image of an idea about Black experience through the use of commonly shared, memory provoking symbols" (Yearwood, 1987, p. 144). It is subtle, not obvious or direct, and represents all strata of black people. Modernism looks inward, celebrates historic roots, embraces African origins and African American folk traditions, is expressive of cultural identity, using art as a means to understand social relations. The third trend, "Protest Art" is a "direct and forceful protest against forces in opposition to Black life and culture" (Yearwood, 1987, p. 152). It is linked spiritually to the African past. Protest art has a political purpose, and can use traditional African media. Yearwood said each approach arose at a time when its aims "coincided with the social agenda of the black community" (p. 162).

Africanisms may be specific references to the ancestral past of Africa or more broadly conceptual approaches influenced by African culture. Some Africanisms may come about intentionally, such as in the work of an artist who has traveled to Africa, or studied African art. Africanisms may be indirect or less intentional. That is, the African influences are imbedded in the artist's cultural makeup. Some artists may not be aware that certain characteristics of their art are Africanisms. Herskovits (1941/1958) uses three separate terms to refer to different degrees of Africanisms, strict retentions, syncretism, an adaptation of new cultural form that remains conceptually African, and reinterpretation.
In 1989 and 1990, a major exhibition traveled the United States that dealt with African resonances in the art of African Americans. It was organized by the Dallas Museum of Art and was entitled *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art*. An extensive catalog accompanied the show.

**An Artistic Context**

In addition to examining the biography of the artist, and the historical and cultural context of the artist, it is helpful to examine Aminah Robinson's artistic context. In this section, I examine the work of several artists whose work shares characteristics with Aminah's. Some work is similar visually, in style and in choice of materials. Other works share similar themes or are conceptually linked to Aminah's work. I want to consider more than formal aspects of the work. "The way one 'sees' an object and comes to 'understand' it usually is dependent on considerations outside the work itself" (Blier, 1993, p. 158). So while I may begin with formal connections, I must also consider contextual issues.

**Artistic Traditions**

In addition to specific artists, there are several artistic traditions to which Aminah's work relates. These traditions are quilt-making, book-making, and woodcarving. The African American tradition of quilting is hundreds of years old (Grudin, 1990). Africans brought to America several sewing techniques relating to quilt-making: "piecing, appliqué, and embroidery" (Grudin, 1990, p. 7), even though the American bed quilt was an unfamiliar form. In Colonial days, slaves made quilts for themselves and their masters.
"The African-American quilt-making traditions is old and strong and continual, a significant part of American quilting history" (Grudin, 1990, p. 7). Until recently however the tradition has been rarely mentioned or studied.


Aminah asked me about my studies, and I told her I was asked to place her works in an artistic context. Some of the artist's whose work I felt shared affinities with hers are: Pierce, Biggers, Bellows, and Tanner. "What about some women?!", she asked adamantly. So I mentioned Ringgold and Stout. She said, "How about Elizabeth Catlett?" (A. Robinson, personal communication, March 18, 1995). I had heard of Catlett, but wasn't very familiar with the work. Aminah brought out a large book. I leafed through it, exclaiming about the beautiful wood sculptures. Aminah said several times that Catlett had left the country because of the racism. She'd moved to Mexico. Aminah told me she knew Catlett. I did not make an immediate connection between Catlett's work and Aminah's. But on reflection, I think Catlett probably is a role model for Aminah, a woman artist, a determined, outspoken person. While their styles are quite different, the subjects are similar. The works are expressive, proud, joyous, strong depictions of people.
Faith Ringgold

Faith Ringgold's recent work is visually and conceptually similar to Aminah's. Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) has explored a variety of media, but in the 1980s she began stitching and painting on quilts (TimeLife Books, 1994). The works are documentary in nature, not only documenting the act of making, but celebrating the lives of African Americans. She has illustrated a children's book, *Tar Beach*.

Elijah Pierce

Elijah Pierce's work is linked visually and conceptually to Aminah's. Elijah Pierce (1892-1984), the son of a former slave, lived most of his life in Columbus, Ohio, making his living as a barber. He was also a lifelong woodcarver. The art works were discovered in the art community in the 1960s. His work became sought after by collectors outside his own community and his work was the subject of exhibitions at the Columbus Museum of Art both before and after his death. The 1993 show traveled internationally (Connell, 1992).

Pierce's work came out of artistic and religious African American traditions. He was not academically trained. His work documented aspects of his own life and times, as well as Bible stories and folk tales. The work is energetic, colorful, and often narrative.

Robinson formally met Pierce in 1971 and subsequently spent much time with him drawing, talking, and listening. She considered him her "friend, mentor . . . and spiritual counselor" (Robinson, 1992b).
Renee Stout

Renee Stout's work is visually, conceptually and spiritually very similar to Aminah's. Renee Stout's (b. 1958) multi-media works are influenced by the writings of Robert Farris Thompson. An art historian, Thompson has studied the art of many African cultures, and is one of the first art historians to draw connections between African and African American art. Stout's work has spiritual qualities. She used many natural objects and material to construct her pieces. In the exhibition, "Astonishment and Power," her works were juxtaposed African minkisi, or charms. While she does not imitate or copy minkisi, her works have visual, conceptual, and cultural connections to them. The purpose of the exhibit was to demonstrate a link between a contemporary artist and an African historical cultural tradition. In the exhibition handout, minkisi are defined as objects which are fabricated, have power in them, are "things that do things" (National Museum of African Art, 1993, p. 5). Minkisi are "all are filled with magical ingredients" (National Museum of African Art, 1993, p. 6) and become an object "through which a spirit can be approached" (National Museum of African Art, 1993, p. 12). Stout does not duplicate minkisi, but her work is infused with conceptual and formal characteristics of minkisi (MacGaffey & Harris, 1993). While Stout is conscious of African influences in her work, part of her attraction to them is intuitive. The artist eloquently acknowledges her intuitive connection to minkisi.

There is something about the things that come from that region [the Kongo] that I just react to the most, and I don't know why. I would like to know that myself, what it is, what is that connection that is almost like I can look at this and immediately understand something? (MacGaffey & Harris, p. 154).
Renee Stout intentionally includes Africanisms in her work. Thompson (1989) said "the cultural tastes of Renee Stout's ancestors" (p. 104) speak to her. Stout is conscious of this. In discussing her 1990 work, "Spirit House," she said

My work has been influenced by African American "voodoo" and the African, Native American, and Mexican cultures. All of these cultures are very spiritual. In my work I explore the spiritual in search for answers to my questions about the human condition. (Hall, 1992, p. 27)

Her piece speaks to the plight of the homeless. The artist believes everyone should have a home (Hall, 1992).

Henry O. Tanner

I sensed a connection between Aminah's work and Henry O. Tanner's painting "The Banjo Lesson." The work is a sensitive depiction of an older man showing a younger boy, who is on his lap, about playing the banjo. The scene is a modest one, set in modest surroundings, showing the passing along of a tradition. Driskell (1990) called this work "an important definition of the Black experience as seen by a Black artist" (p. 18). Aminah depicts the passing along of traditions. She documents everyday places and people. Coincidentally, she had a book on her bookshelf about Tanner.

John Biggers

John Biggers' work is similar conceptually to Aminah's. Born in 1924, and one of the first Black artists to travel to Africa (Rozelle, Wardlaw, & McKenna, 1989), he took a study trip in 1957 to West Africa. Biggers said, "As an American Negro, my lifelong desire had been to bridge the gap between the African and American culture" (Biggers, 1962, p. 4). From Lowenfeld, Biggers learned a little about African sculpture, but "African
art remained devoid of significance . . . I felt cut off from my heritage, which I suspected was inestimable and something to be embraced, not an ignobility to be scorned" (Biggers, 1962, p. 4).

Biggers traveled to Africa in an attempt to connect to, in fact to embrace his cultural heritage. He noted that "many of [his] American brothers, in their flight from the stereotyped concepts of our race, had also flown from their real selves and had created a grotesque, unattainable image based on Caucasian attributes" (Biggers, 1962, p. 4). Biggers wanted to be true to his "real self" (Biggers, 1962, p. 4) and a large part of his real self was his African heritage. His first trip to Africa was a tremendous, positive experience, yet he says that at first the impact of Africa almost paralyzed his creative efforts!

His immediate response to the trip was Ananse: The Web of Life in Africa, a book containing documentary realistic drawings and journal entries from his trip. Biggers, like Aminah is a documenter of the world around him. His work after the African trip changed. It reflected the visual, cultural, and historic understanding he gained from the trip. The work became more colorful, and integrated African with American motifs. The work also became less strictly realistic, and took on a more dreamlike, layered quality.

Biggers later work from 1987 showed a combination of African and American visual elements and patterns. It also referred to the connection between African traditions and the lives of African Americans. Africa and the New World are fused in his works. The works are about cultural heritage and are very densely woven visually and conceptually. "Shotguns," for instance, makes reference to Black women as the strength of their
households, the shotguns style houses typical in the south; African textiles, masks and baskets; and the railroad track as a symbol of travels or passages in general and specifically the underground railroad (Rozelle, et al.). Each element in the painting is charged with visual, cultural, and historic meaning.

George Bellows

George Bellows was a documenter like Aminah. George Bellows was a Columbus-born artist who documented the life around him. He did paintings, drawing and prints of his family and friends, sporting events, and life in New York City in the teens and twenties. His works include numerous family portraits, and landscapes and seascapes depicting where he vacationed in Maine. His style and some of his subjects were adventurous for the time, but the work is traditional in its use of art materials.

Like Aminah, Bellows subjects were familiar to him. His drawing skills were extraordinary. While his works do serve as documents, Bellows was not consciously painting to preserve a slice of history, the way Aminah does. Aminah's father encouraged her artistic expression. He also made drawings, two which are framed in her kitchen. On a visit to the artist's home, I noticed that the father's drawings are very, very similar in style to Bellows! There is a muscular, vigorous energy to the drawn lines, and a dramatic interplay of light and dark.

Cultural Context of Sapelo Island

Sapelo Island is one of the hundreds of sea islands off the southeastern coast of the United States. Its Black residents are descendants of the slaves who once cleared and cultivated the plantation on the island. Because they were isolated from the mainland, the
slaves retained many of their Africanisms: language -Gullah or Sea Island Creole, a blend of Archaic English and several African languages (Cerruti, 1971); religion; ways of tying up one's hair (McFeely, 1994); and craft traditions (Herskovits, 1941/1958; Thompson, 1969; Vlach, 1978;).

In 1994, there were 67 people living in Hog Hammock, all descendants from the slaves on Thomas Spalding's cotton plantation (McFeely, 1994). Some of the slaves were purchased along with the land in 1802, and others by Spalding between 1802 and 1812 when he made the island one of the most productive plantations in Georgia (McFeely, p. 14). Spalding died in 1851.

When the United States Navy reached the sea islands during the Civil War, Spalding's heirs put most of their slaves on boats to the mainland. Older, infirm, and the youngest slaves were deserted (McFeely, p. 66). The slaves forced inland were marched almost 200 miles into Georgia's interior, supposedly out of the reach of the Union forces. But they were in the path of Sherman's 1864 March to the Sea (McFeely, p. 15). Liberated by the Union Army, many walked back to the coast, following Sherman's army. Going to the only place most had ever known as home, some eventually made their way back to Sapelo. Many of the now-war-refugees did not (p. 82).

There is a twisted history to the ownership of the lands of Sapelo after the Civil War. In 1865, General Sherman issued an order that reserved the lands of Sapelo for freedmen and "the sole and exclusive managements of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves" (McFeely, p. 90). Freedmen were given warrants for specific plots of the land. In time, and as a result of dirty politics and persistence by white descendants of
Spalding, the ownership of these lands reverted to whites (McFeely, pp. 129-145). While the descendants of the slaves stayed in Sapelo in several communities or "hammocks," they did not retain clear ownership of the lands they worked and lived on. In the early part of the twentieth century, the white landowner forced all of Sapelo's 500-plus residents inland to Hog Hammock, where the settlement remains to this day (McFeely, p. 149).

Recently, Sapelo was purchased by the state of Georgia which has set about to make it a wildlife preserve. Sapelo is now home to the Marine Institute of the University of Georgia and the largest island-born Black population of all the Sea Islands (Cerruti, 1971). R. J. Reynolds, Sapelo's last owner, endowed the Institute. After the island's purchase by the state of Georgia, there was concern about what would happen to the residents of Hog Hammock, whose ancestors were brought there from Africa and have been there ever since. For now, their fate rests in the hands of the state of Georgia. McFeely (1994) firmly believed the state owes it to Sapelo's people that their land holdings are "guaranteed to the present residents or their descendants in perpetuity" (p. 150). For all the sea islands, there is a collision of various interests: communities, manufacturing, fishing and shrimping, resort areas, and natural untouched lands.

What is it like there now? That is what Aminah went to find out in 1983, to get to know the people, the folklore, the practices, the way of life of Hog Hammock. During her visit, Aminah found relatives (Johnsons) of her father's family. She also found practices that were familiar to hers, things her father's family had done and believed and passed along to her. Her art pieces and documentation go a long way in answering the question of Sapelo's current situation.
McFeely's book, *Sapelo's People* also describes life on the island. What is so remarkable to me is that there are no illustrations, maps, or photographs in McFeely's book. As a visually oriented person, I was desperate for some visual stimulus. It is a shame Aminah's Sapelo's works are not published by a major company, yet, to add to the public's sense of the uniqueness and beauty of the island and its inhabitants.

Aminah Robinson is not the only non-resident to have an interest in Sapelo. In 1994, the American Bible Society, published the culmination of over 15 years work: *De Good Nyews Bout Jedus Christ Wa Luke Write*. It is the first book of the Bible to be published in Gullah. There are thousands of people who speak the language, many on Sapelo Island. Gullah "is not only a completely worthy, but also a truly beautiful vehicle for the conveyance of God's Good News" (American Bible Society, 1994, preface). When it is read aloud, it is very melodic and sounds like the speech of Caribbean natives.

The next chapter examines the methodology of this study. I describe how the biographical, historic, cultural, and artistic contexts this chapter are integrated with the data collected for this study.
Chapter three examines the methods used to collect and analyze data. It includes information about the investigator, and describes "measures taken to ensure a trustworthy study" (Merriam, 1988, p. 194).

My method is open-ended inquiry combining various qualitative methods. Aspects of case study, interviews, and interpretive analysis are combined. This hybrid approach was used to meet goals and insure research questions that are answered (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). A combination of methods is required to counteract the "bias[es] at the heart of most academic disciplines, methodologies and theories" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 6; Reinharz, 1992).

Qualitative Research

"Broadly defined, research is systematic inquiry" (Merriam, 1988, p. 6). Qualitative research generally has more "idiosyncratic" methods (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, p. 2) than quantitative research. In education, qualitative research is gaining acceptance and no longer considered substandard in the research community (Eisner & Peshkin 1990). Research that
emphasizes process, discovery, insight and understanding, and context, (Merriam, p. xii and p. 3) has the most to contribute "to the knowledge base and practice of education" (Merriam, p. 3). A qualitative approach aims at description (p. 7) and understanding meanings rather than making predictions (p. 16). Its intent is to share rather than prove observations (Belenky, et al, 1986, p. 16).

Researchers must be disciplined about method, because "method . . . distinguishes research activity from mere observation and speculation" (Shulman, 1988, p. 4). Disciplined inquiry need not be sterile and stiff. Good research can be "free-ranging and speculative" (p. 5), but it must also stand up to careful scrutiny by others in the academic community. Different methods use different ways to ask questions (p. 11).

Case Study

My study focuses on one artist and the meaning and values derived from her work. Therefore case study methods are used to guide the investigation. Case study research is about forming questions rather than finding answers, and is "inductive in nature" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 182). "It is impossible to identify all the variables ahead of time" (Merriam, 1988, p. 7).

Case study is not strictly a method, but a way of organizing data so that the character of the subject is preserved (Stake, 1988, p. 256). The researcher sets boundaries, emphasizing the case, and then looks for themes or issues, and patterns (p. 258). Interpretive case study may "illustrate, support or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to data gathering" (Merriam, p. 27-8). For example, my perspective changed from privileging the artist's voice over all others
to valuing multiple perspectives. Multiple viewpoints, realities and methods of expression must
be acknowledged (Merriam, 1988), valued (Harding, 1995, p. 13), and then interpreted rather
than measured (Merriam, 1988).

Accessibility is an advantage of case studies. The reader experiences a phenomenon
through another's perspective, providing a vicarious experience. This is enlightening because
we learn something about the researcher as well as the phenomena examined. The more
possibilities one is aware of, the more one can imagine, or envision.

In case study research it is important to: 1) keep records of inquiry arrangements and
activities; and 2) search for patterns (Stake, 1988, p. 271). Interviews consist of far more than
the recorded voices; expressions of body language, environmental factors are missed by an
audio tape recorder. My written records of arrangements and activities surrounding the
interviews inform the research and contribute to the conclusions drawn about meaning.

Use of Dialogue and Conversation

Meanings are not static or singular, rather, they are constructed and are a product of
social interaction (Blumer, 1969). I rely heavily on conversation, one type of social interaction,
as a data gathering method. Conversation is encouraged as a method for conducting research
and for teaching (Krug, Scott, Stuhr, 1995). Conversation and dialogue are fruitful and exciting
methods for learning. They are at the heart of my research method. I aim to learn about
Aminah's work and its meanings, through a series of dialogues with the artist, her friends, and
collectors. "The dialogic method is at the heart of the pedagogy for multi-culturalizing art
education" (Heard, 1989, p. 9). Dialogic and polyphonic methods of research acknowledge
position and impact of the researcher (hooks, 1990; Rabinow, 1986).
Researchers "should strive to create wherever possible the *conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to* rather than for others"[italics added] (Alcoff, 1991-92, p. 23). Speaking for another has been called "arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate" (Alcoff, p. 6). Direct conversations from many sources and points of view comprises much of this research.

Interviews, self interviews, and dialogues are viable "alternatives to traditional academic prose" (hooks in Olson & Hirsh, 1995, p. 108). Such techniques "feel more real to people" (p. 109). Putting the personal back into academic writing is legitimate as well as effective because when you want someone to shift perspectives you don't usually begin with theory. Theory can put people off by being too abstract or full of jargon.

**Research Subject or Participant?**

Sometimes researchers talk about their "subject." The concept of talking about someone rather than with someone is presumptuous. My research is mostly talking with Aminah, and with other people about Aminah and her work. In my view, the idea of a person being a "subject" of research is demeaning and limiting. Aminah and her work are certainly central to this research, but I do not use the term "subject" as in "Aminah is the subject of this research." She and all the other interviewees are participants in the work, or short term partners (Reinharz, 1984) in a "jointly told tale" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 136).

**Ethnographic Inquiry**

Ethnography is a "written representation of a culture or selected aspects of a culture" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 1) through discovery and description (Spradley, 1979, p. 17). Ethnography has come to mean "rather than studying people . . . learning from people" [italics
added]" (p. 3). So Aminah and the others interviewed are not my "subjects." They are participants in this study. Each participant is one of my teachers, and I assume a "naive . . . special learner role" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). "Ethnography starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance" (Spradley, p. 4). I do not know exactly where the road is going. My own curiosity and experience leads me to sources.

The researcher is a seeker of insights, rather than a lofty expert. "Informants are a source of information. Literally they become the teachers for the ethnographer" (Spradley, 1979, p. 25). How the insights are shared is important. The researcher should describe the participants realities "in their own terms" (p. 11).

Genuine ethnography is different from ethnographic method (Merriam). I do not want to study and describe a particular culture. Rather, I use ethnographic inquiry through techniques such as: direct observation, interviews, and field notes. Ethnographic interview is an effective method "for the investigation of meaning" (Spradley, 1979, p. 7). Ethnographers make inferences by "what people say, from the way people act, and from the artifacts people use" (Spradley, 1979, p. 8). As I talk to people and observe them, I make educated guesses.

Aminah uses ethnographic techniques to do her life's work about her own culture. She has kept handwritten notes and journals and sketchbooks since she was a young child. She carries a sketchbook, pens, and pencils with her, slung from a shoulder holder. She is always ready to record her impressions. Her sisters remember her always having a book with her, and studiously working, recording her impressions in it. Aminah saved each journal, as well as copies of her correspondence and letters she receives. These journals are kept in file cabinets, drawers, and bookcases. Her home is an archive.
Oral History

Oral history of the popular, subordinate culture is valuable and differs from the written history of the dominant culture (Fiske, 1993). Oral ways of knowing differ from comprehension of written text. Oral tradition has been falsely labeled ignorant by a Eurocentric view that places preeminent value on historic/written record. Lomax (1993) believed in the power of oral tradition and its relationship to other aspects of the culture. Black African oral styles and performance styles had "clearly represented and reinforced the fundamental structures of African society" (Lomax, 1993, p. xiii.). For Lomax, oral histories were a way to find "cultural wellsprings [and] describe the dynamics of their constant creativity" (p. xiii.). Lomax found these orally transmitted cultural traditions "were both powerful and stable" (p. xiii.).

Some researchers are concerned that orally told stories will not come across in printed form. Lomax (1993) found that "recorded prose, when transcribed, curled and capered beautifully in print" (Lomax, 1993, p. xi). He hoped "black intellectuals might overcome their prejudices against the oral tradition of the rural and unlettered blacks" (Lomax, 1993, p. xii.). As early as the 1930s and 1940s, Lomax valued oral traditions when many were distancing themselves from "stereotypical concepts of their race" (Biggers, 1962, p. 4).

Multiple Viewpoints

All education is "historically and socially constructed, . . . it is not neutral or objective" (Dei, 1994, p. 3). Both Dei (1994) and Belenky (1995) assert the value of examining alternate ways of knowing the world. Examining multiple viewpoints adds to scholarship. I believe educators must question the dominant Eurocentric scholarship that asserts a single expert,
authoritative voice and perspective. People must affirm and acknowledge alternate ways of knowing, rather than marginalizing any group's perspectives. Seeing many perspectives is a more accurate balanced view of the world we live in. Belenky (1995) valued collaboration rather than solo authorship as a way to gain clarity and "let the bold ideas come forth" (in Olson & Hirsh, 1995, p. 88). Collaborating, or building knowledge together, requires hard work. Aminah said to me, "Well we'll do it together then" (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 16, 1994).

Collaborative projects "can be so much more complex because it tries to hold everybody's perspective. It allows for an extended dialogue and, thus, for coming to clearer, sharper understandings of the essence of things" (Belenky, in Olson and Hirsh, 1995, p. 98). Everyone gains from multcentric perspectives because they come to know the "complete account of events that have shaped human history" (Dei, 1994, p. 20). "For Belenky, collaboration is clearly more than just a good way to get work done. It is vital to education and crucial to the survival of the world" (Hirsh & Olson, 1995, p. 82). Belenky espouses a process of constructing knowledge, in which the knower acknowledges and takes responsibility for shaping knowledge. Like Belenky, I also want the readers to fashion their own learning path through the material.

This research represents many voices (each clearly identified), a polyphony (Rabinow, 1986; hooks, 1990, 1995) about Aminah's work. The reader will have a rich, multi-dimensional experience because of the viewpoints presented. "The role of research is not to find the correct interpretation . . . but to expand the range of interpretations available to the research consumer" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 194). Lomax (1993), Gruen (1991) and Blassingame (1973) wove
together several sources, interviews, memories, field notes, recordings, autobiography, personal records, and historical information because the resulting mixture met their purposes. This combination of sources sets the rich mood of each book.

Hearing other's impressions enriches my perspective. I loved listening to people's discoveries. Everyone sees things differently. I am interested in listening to and sharing different people's perspectives and how they arrive at their perspectives.

A recent trend toward multi-disciplinary research reinforces my wish to examine many viewpoints. Many authors indicate a need for interdisciplinary research (Aggers, 1992; Herskovits, 1941/1958; Thompson, 1982). "The study of African art requires a comprehension of cultural background and socially sanctioned drives as well as a knowledge of the principles of aesthetics" (Herskovits, 1941/1958, p. 62). He suggested combining the resources of ethnology and art history. In Flash of the Spirit, Thompson (1982) retells a Nigerian proverb: "One tree cannot make a forest . . . In other words, a person who does not work together with his colleagues and friends will not accomplish very much" (p. ix.). Thompson thanked people from many disciplines who he worked with and learned from—Herskovits's wife is among them.

Aggers (1992) applauds "de-disciplining" because the disciplines "falsely separate topics and methodologies" (p. 17). In Expressively Black, the editors attempt to get at not only one element of the culture but at the "full spectrum of the pulse beat" (Gay & Baber, 1987, p. xv.) of Afro-American culture. Africanists must train themselves in many disciplines to be effective researchers (Blier, 1993). Because art is integral to life, researchers "must learn about society broadly rather than art more narrowly defined" (Blier, p. 155).
Robert Farris Thompson (1990) set a good example in this regard for his fellow art historians. He examined music, gestures, religion, and objects. It is necessary to look at many disciplines when looking for African influences on American art, since culture has so many dimensions. Philips (1990) suggested a researcher must have the triple expertise of an Africanist, an Americanist and a Europeanist, to be effective. As he examined African influences on white America, he hoped his synthesis would diminish "the interdisciplinary wrangling and lead instead to a more holistic and comprehensive interdisciplinary understanding of American society" (p. 237).

Narrative Construction

Crafting the presentation of the study is key. Giving the reader a "vicarious experience" (Stake, 1988, p. 260) would take a literary gift—that not every researcher has—but it is something to aim for. A quality study has rich data not simply presented raw or unmediated by the researcher, but also leaves room for the reader to come up with a unique interpretation, that is perhaps "significantly different from the researcher's narrative" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 196). The readers of a study may fashion their own learning path through the material if the researcher provides "low inference descriptions of behaviors" (p. 196) and excerpts from transcribed interviews.

How shall I weave all this information together to tell a compelling story? There are literary devices that ethnographers could use to make their writing more interesting and compelling. These "practices are unwelcome in academic discourse, and are viewed as exhibiting bad taste, if not bad writing. This hyper-formality and lack of experimentation is unfortunate and dulls both the representations and the mind" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 144). Van
Maanen advocates loosening up academic tightness, not standards, for purposes of more effective communication. My aim is to avoid jargon, to present the material in accessible language, like a story, or tale (Buford, 1996; Krug, 1992/1993; Lamott, 1994; Van Maanen, 1988). Writing this dissertation is a lot like crafting a story, a piece of fiction. There are characters, plot, dialogue, flow and movement. I want the piece to be accessible and enjoyable to read.

Academics should work to narrow the gap between "the conditions of . . . everyday lives and academic ways of explaining the world" (Fiske, 1991, p. 164). hooks (1990) promoted and practiced a style of conveying knowledge which made it accessible to a wide range of readers. She often included anecdotes and details of her personal life. Hooks asserted, "when you tell a story about how you use an abstract idea or bit of theory in a concrete situation, it just feels more real to people" (Olson & Hirsh, 1995, p. 106). Like hooks, I use methods and a style of presentation that is accessible, non-academic.

Krug (1992/1993) used interviews in his research, so his method of shaping the stories is illuminating, as well. He placed the conversation first followed by an interpretive analysis. Gruen (1991) used only quotes strung together with no analysis. He shifted back and forth, every half page or so, from one person's story to another. This jumpy, personal, multi-dimensional method created a rich tale about an artist's life. It is like spinning around the artist Keith Haring in space and time in a huge spiral—viewing, hearing, and experiencing his life through many lenses. At times the tale was confusing because it was not told in strict linear order, nor were the characters/interviewees introduced. Yet, all in all, it is well-crafted, and provides a rich reading experience.
Gruen's role, at first glance, was as an arranger of the words of others, the way a film director organizes scenes. But on more thoughtful examination, one sees that Gruen shaped the book's character, not only by the arrangement of the written snapshots, but by the questions he asked of the participants. The study is a "joint intellectual product" (Clark, 1985, p. 183) of the interviewer and interviewees. The researcher has particular responsibility for power over the final product that must be considered thoughtfully.

Dash's film direction technique reinforced my impulse to arrange things in a non-linear way. Bambara (1992) discussed Dash's method of telling the story, "Dash's eschewing of a master narrative in favor of a non-linear, multilayered unfolding—one more in keeping with the storytelling traditions that inform African cinema" (page xiii). Dash employed "dual narration and multiple point of view camera work rather than a hero-dominated perspective" (page xiii).

Mary Belenky asserted, "narrative has become a particularly important tool for social scientists who are trying to understand thinking" (Olson & Hirsch, 1995, p. 84). There is a "narrative revival" (Buford, 1996, p. 11) particularly in non-fiction. Buford gave the simplest definition of story: "a piece of writing that makes the reader want to find out what happens next" (1996, p. 12). He mentioned a new trend called "narrative law" which uses "stories to argue cases," rather than "stick to more 'rational' methods—argument, precedent, the scientific presentation of evidence" (Buford, 1996, p. 11). There are parallel trends in history writing, science writing, and writing in art education (Scott, Stuhr, Krug, 1995).

Interviews

In this study a primary data-gathering method is conversation with an interview of the artist, the artist's family, friends, fellow artists, collectors, dealers, and other community
members. In choosing participants for the study, I began by contacting the artist, Aminah Robinson. After several conversations with her it became apparent, I could learn a lot from people close to her: family, friends, and people she talked about often. The artist encouraged me to consult other people. After talking with family and close friends, my inquiry moved outward to community members Aminah had come in contact with. Several people’s names kept coming up in articles or conversations, most of whom I pursued. My inquiry gradually moved outward to involve people who had never met Aminah but who had a connection to her work. Perhaps, they had seen it, had taught about it, were interested in it. These people had seen Aminah’s work and were willing to talk with me about their perceptions and interpretations.

**Semi-Structured Interview**

My interview technique is most like semi-structured (Reinharz, 1992), open interview, or depth-probing interview (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Semi-structured interviews involve the subjects in "the construction of data about their lives" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 18). In semi-structured interviews, I ask questions about particular topics and accept that the flow of conversation influences how the information is obtained. This form of data collection differs from survey, or structured interview because it encourages discovery, allows for "clarification and discussion," (Reinharz, 1992, p. 18) and "offers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Semi-structured interview avoids "control over others and develop[s] a sense of connectedness" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 20). In a semi-structured interview or conversation power is shared. In a structured interview the interviewer is in control.
In the Appendix are the sets of questions I developed for my interviews. One set is for the artist. One set is for everyone else. The questions are grouped into four categories: about Aminah and your relationship with her; what the work is about; explaining the work; and valuing the work. Each interview is unique because each person’s perspectives and experiences with Aminah are unique.

The questions were developed after I had conducted several informal face-to-face and telephone interviews, done considerable reading and written my proposal. A researcher does unstructured information gathering before structured interviews. Prior information "shapes the questions asked" (Tomm, 1989, p. 3). Yet, there is room left in the more structured interviews to allow "new information categories to arise" (Tomm, 1989, p. 3) because the interviewee knows better than the researcher "what the important questions are" (p. 4).

Interviewing skills get better with practice. For Lomax (1993), it was a year by year process, not a quick skill to be learned. Interviewing informants depends on a cluster of interpersonal skills. These include asking questions, listening instead of talking, taking a passive rather than an assertive role, expressing verbal interest in the other person, and showing interest by eye contact and by other non-verbal means. (Spradley, 1979, p. 46)

I have noticed Aminah’s gift of talking to people, particularly when we were on Sapelo. She was able to get to know people a little better than I was. Her friendly, indirect way of talking with people yielded better results than my method of directly asking questions.

For the interviews, I used a portable tape recorder. Field notes were recorded in several notebooks that I have kept over the years. I made notes before and after each interview. I tend to be a journal writer anyway, so the impulse to record events, encounters and my reactions is one I have developed through my life. I made notes on each phone call related to the research, sometimes in my notebook, or on whatever paper was available at that phone. Ideas came to
me when I was driving or walking, doing mundane activities. I kept a small notebook in my purse, and routinely made mental notes to myself. All stray handwritten notes were taped or pasted into my journals. I also photocopied all my correspondence related to the research, such as thank you notes, letters of inquiry or introduction, sympathy notes, etc. These were taped into my journals also.

I called my participants on the phone first, and tried to make an appointment. I suggested I come to them, at their convenience. I prepared a list of questions, an interview guide, to ask the participants. I used the interview guide [Appendix A and B] in several ways. If the interviewee asks for the questions in advance, I sent a copy of the interview guide ahead. If the participant did not care to see the questions in advance, I brought two copies of the guide to the interview, giving a copy to the interviewee and keeping one for my reference during our conversation. I made it clear that I wanted to have a conversation, not go down the list of questions. Belenky et al, (1986) "proceeded inductively" (p. 11) and used an "interview guide" (p. 11). My interview guide was mainly for reference as the conversations progressed. It reminded me of the topics I wanted to cover, and also phrased the questions different ways. This was helpful, especially when one way of asking a question did not achieve good results. Rephrasing questions is a technique I have also used in the classroom.

I always took a hostess present to interviewees. I took a tape recorder, let the participant know when I was turning it on, and explained about my promise not to use their recorded words unless they approved. Everyone I talked with reviewed the transcriptions of our conversations so that they can allow or disallow use of their words. This encouraged freedom to converse, without fear of the recording machine capturing and taking away
someone's words. Ethically, the interviewee should have the option to approve the text before it is seen in print. It is important to be responsible to Aminah, and all the interviewees in this regard (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Alcoff (1991-92) said, critically, that "intellectual work certainly has not been guided by the mandate to get permission from those whom one is speaking about" (p. 12). This surprises and appalls me. One's words are part of one's creative and intellectual property (V. Daniel, 1994, personal communication). I obtained interviewees' permission.

List of Conversations

Since September of 1994, I have tape recorded a number of conversations. (** indicates the interview guide was used.

5. February 17, 1995. Conversation with Kojo Kamau.(**)
7. March 2, 1995. Conversation with Sandra Sue Scott.(**)
9. March 10, 1995. Conversation with Aminah at her home.(**)
10. March 18, 1995. Conversations with Aminah and two presentations about her work at the Dublin Literacy Conference.

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Analysis

Merriam suggest three levels of analysis: 1) description of the data; 2) interpretation of the data by devising categories, and lastly 3) build theory by making inferences based on the data. The inferences emerge from the interpretation of the data synthesizing information gathered on the journey.

Description of Data

Chapter four describes the data. I crafted the chapter as a time line, to tell the story in chronological order. First I had to decide that a chronology how I wanted to tell that part of the story. Once that was decided, I put all my interviews, field notes, and library research together in one computer file. There was so much information! My next step was to summarize the field notes and interviews so as not to get lost in mountains of data.

Then, I considered how to present this chronology so it was interesting and compelling. Day by day? Like a daily or weekly journal? I decided to go by month writing summaries for each month, quoting from my data when necessary. Peter Mayle's (1989) remembrances of his
year spent in France, *A Year in Provence* was organized by chapters recounting each month. I also decided to showcase moments of insights within the month by month report, little bursts of insight.

**Analysis of Data**

Researchers suggest various ways to conduct analysis. Truth be told, my analysis proceeded as the research was conducted. I began to see patterns in the data as I was collecting it. Merriam (1988) said "analyze as you go... or you end up with unfocused, repetitive and overwhelming in volume" (p. 124). My data collection began in August of 1994 and continued through August of 1996. After describing the data, I used interpretive analysis in five steps:

1. Read through all data (not just the summaries found in chapter four) making notes in margins original categories about meaning and value.
2. Group comments by category, compare read through again.
3. Develop new categories.
4. Consider context of each comment.
5. What does this mean? Synthesize and build theory.

These steps are expanded upon below. Step 1. Read through all data. Once data has been gathered the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* "devised a labor-intensive method for a contextual analysis of data" (1986, p. 16). Merriam suggests that data that has been organized chronologically or topically should be read through several times, making notes or questions in the margins (p. 131). My intensive period of analysis after all the data was collected involved reading through each interview and my field notes several times, making
notes in the margins. Based on my research questions (Holsti, 1969), I began the analysis with two categories in mind: making meaning and ascribing value. I noted any instance where either meaning or value was alluded to.

This process was very labor intensive. I compared the comments and patterns emerged that gave the research focus. I saw tendencies, regularities and patterns without assuming that there is a universal sequence of method for meaning making (Belenky, 1995, p. 96).

Step 2. Group comments by category, compare read through again. In this step I went through the data again pulling all highlighted areas from the originals, transferring the quote or part of field notes to a computer file. As I did this, I further refined the categories, sub-dividing the comments on meaning this way: 1) what people say her work is about, and 2) instances where people said or alluded to how they came to their meaning making. I also sub-divided the value comments into two groups: a) what people value in Aminah's work and b) how they decide on value, the criteria they use.

Step 3. New Categories. Now I had four groups of data to work with. I looked at each group separately and again looked for patterns. The first group was: what do people say her work means? I collected all quotes where they explicitly said "the work is about or means this" and arranged them and rearranged them so similar meanings were together. It remains more or less a listing of meanings people draw. The next section was how people come to make meaning. Categories emerged: a) participants could say so because they knew the artist; b) the artist told them so; c) they drew their interpretation on their own life experience. Then two more categories emerged: d) they can see it in the work; e) based on what they read or researched.
I divided what participants valued into several categories: a) they valued the relationship with the artist; b) they valued the work because it teaches history; c) they valued it for personal reasons; d) they valued it for aesthetic reasons; e) they explicitly said they did not value art for investment. Not valuing art for investment purposed is a variation on personal reasons, but since several people stated it, I consider it a sub-pattern of its own.

Participant's criteria for valuing was the most difficult to put into categories. I found: a) personal criteria, b) discussions about the functioning of the art world and how this affects the dollar value of the work. People mention being aware for the power and functioning of the art world even thought they don't use the same criteria for ascribing personal value. They realize that for the work to get out, there is an art world and a market that it works in.

Step 4. Consider each comment in context. Who said it, what else did I know about the speaker that might give me insight into why they said what they did? This contextual analysis of the interviews, an analysis based on the relation of their words to who they are (Belenky et al, 1986) was most helpful in drawing inferences. In some cases inferences are made, some of the participants come right out and explain their reasoning.

Step 5. Synthesis, looking for links. Merriam (1988) calls grounded theory that which is "grounded in the data and emerges from them" (p. 142). The insights are based on the analysis.

Ethical Issues and Reliability

Researchers must take measures to insure that the findings are believable. The reliability of a study is increased by triangulation, that is, comparing at least three independent sources with each other (Blassingame, 1973; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1988, p. 271). The
comparison of sources in itself is instructive, since reality is multidimensional and ever-changing (Merriam, 1988, p. 166). In this study, there are many interviewees with independent points of view and memories, so credibility is increased. Other sources for comparing the interviews include: newspapers, personal correspondence, exhibition catalogs, and the artist's extensive archives. This combination of approaches creates a multi-layered, many-dimensional portrait of the artist, her work, and people's understandings of the artist and her work. Yet, the difference "between the data and the researchers interpretation" (Merriam, p. 179) must be clear to the reader.

Safeguarding Participants

Concern for ethical issues must be considered early on in training so researchers can "recognize and deal with ethical problems" (Rynkiewich & Spradley, 1976, p. 50). The Principles of Professional Responsibility adopted by the Council of the American Anthropological Association, in 1971 declared several over-arching ethical principles:

Consider the informants [participants] first, "protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy" and "safeguard their rights, interests and sensitivities" (Rynkiewich & Spradley, 1976, p. 184). Gaining consent for use of the words of others is crucial (Alcoff, 1991/1992; Belenky et al, 1986; Rynkiewich & Spradley, 1976). Simply referencing a source is not sufficient.

I promised each interviewee a transcript of our talk. I have promised not to publish their words without their permission. I have a pact with my participants, they will review and approve any of their quotes before going to publication (Belenky in Olson & Hirsh, 1995, p. 86). I will not capture their words, and use them in a context that they don't agree with. Several
Interviewees [Canzani, Draeger, Josenhans, Luckoff, Robinson, and Solway] choose to edit the transcripts to improve clarity or keep sensitive thoughts private. Art dealer Carl Solway expressed his appreciation:

I've extensively edited for coherence and clarity—please revise and use only the revised text—thanks for giving me the opportunity to do this! Regards, Carl (C. Solway, personal communication, November 1995).

There are times when I wished the participant would have let me use certain comments because they provided insights, yet I absolutely respected their privacy and sensitivity and have deleted remarks whenever they requested. Together the interviewer and the interviewee create a historical record, the interviewer being an active participant (Clark, 1985; Young, 1995). Clark calls the result of an interview a "joint intellectual product" (p. 183) acknowledging the interviewer's role.

Clearly communicating the objectives of the research to the participants is another important aspect of getting consent (Rynkiewick and Spradley, 1976 p. 99). My common sense and manners told me I should do so. This impulse was reinforced when I read the following: "we Indians have been surveyed too much and we never see the results" (Rynkiewick and Spradley, p. 83). In addition, manners told me the participants should get something back other than a bound book, something "they [the informants] consider useful" (Rynkiewick and Spradley, p. 84). I took a hostess present to each participant like cookies, a book, or candy. I also sent a handwritten thank you note to each participant.

Interviews can be heavily edited to portray the view of the author, as in the case of the W.P.A. slave interviews screening out material that gave a negative portrayal of the south.
(Blassingame, 1973, p. 375). I attempt to be aware of why I am editing. It is mainly for the purpose of clarification rather than for the purposes of shedding positive or negative light.

The participants must believe the researcher is trustworthy. Each person I have called for an interview asks me if Aminah knows I am doing this research. Those who know her, know how she values her privacy. About Kojo's reluctance to speak to me without Aminah's knowledge, Aminah said, "He knows how I am!" (A. Robinson, personal communication, February, 1995).

Subjectivity of Researcher

My identity and experience, ethics, sensitivity and integrity (Merriam, 1988) impact the study. My point of view influences how the material is written and understood (Banks, 1993; Heard, 1989; hooks, 1990). I must acknowledge my subjective position is part of the entire research process (Peshkin, 1988). Researchers must carefully examine their motive (hooks, 1990) and point of view (Heard, 1989). Our subjectivity is like the fishbowl that is apparently invisible but structures a situation (Morrison, 1992). Researchers must be aware of these invisible structures and analyze how the effect upon the research (Harding, 1995; Rabinow, 1986).

A researcher's subjectivity affects the results of all research (Peshkin, 1988). Throughout the process, one must identify it, examine it, and "attend" (p. 17) to it in a systematic way. Rather than avoid or deny the fact that I arrange the work, or claim that to be neutral (Alcoff, 1991/92), I will state my position and analyze its effect.

Subjectivity cannot be eliminated but should be tamed. Is it possible, for instance, to have a race-free attitude? Morrison says it is not, that to attempt to do so would be like
lobotomizing (Morrison, 1992, p. 12), removing part of one's brain. Racial attitudes are there and should be dealt with, examined. Sandra Harding said we may not "intend to be racist but never-the-less makes racist assumptions because we haven't questioned these assumptions as they have arrived from the dominant culture" (Hirsh & Olson, 1995, p. 31). We must examine how, for instance "white supremacy [is] manifested in the ways we use language" (hooks in Olson, 1995, p. 116).

To uncover subjectivity, one should be aware of "warm and cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18). My attempt to uncover and analyze aspects of my subjectivity follows.

*Everything Aminah does is terrific.* Aminah is the best source. Part of me wants to believe this, but it is too all or nothing, it limits my ability to see things from other perspectives, and to objectively evaluate.

*The magnitude of the information overwhelms me.* I often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of Aminah's work and life. She is very prolific and exceedingly complex. I find myself needing to step back and take a breath. I also think this feeling of being overwhelmed tells me something about the need to edit.

*I want to help Aminah. I want to remedy a situation.* She should be famous. She ought to be famous. She deserves it. I must be aware that Aminah is not a child who needs to be helped. I do feel strongly about her deserving recognition, and need to be aware of overdoing my enthusiasm.

*I want justice.* Accomplishments of women and African Americans should be noticed. Racism sucks. I get so mad! I want things to change. I'm one little person who can make a difference, but I can't change the world. I need to be realistic about my influence.

*Value for family stuff and history.* Like Aminah, I have a personal attachment to family traditions and the value of family history. I need to be aware that not everyone shares my value system.

*The non-research human, the personal stuff.* I don't push my interviewees when they are evasive. I believe what people tell me unquestioningly. I must be aware of these tendencies in myself, and how they can either help or hinder the research process. (Myers, S., 1995)
Do I have enough distance? "Necessary anthropological distance [is] being separate enough to prevent an easy identification, yet close enough to afford a charitable, if critical understanding" (Rabinow, 1986, p. 259). Without enough distance, "there is a danger of being unable to dismantle data, select from them, and re-order the material" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 212-213) and a great chance the material will not be presented coherently (Rynkiewick & Spradley, 1976; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

In discussing research about a culture other than one's own, Myra Kaye, a Navajo Native American graduate student said that often an outsider just doesn't "get it" (M. Kaye, personal communication, January 17, 1995) and that there are times when maybe the outsider shouldn't. It isn't their business. She said there are times when even a person inside the culture should not ask to have certain things explained (M. Kaye, personal communication, January 17, 1995).

I am from a different cultural background than Aminah, I wonder if all the immersion I have done makes me better equipped to look at her work. Her work comes from a culturally different place, shouldn't I be an insider? Over the past several years I have consciously and unconsciously immersed myself in many aspects of African American culture, in an attempt to get a more thorough perspective of American life. I have researched visual artists Romare Bearden, Glenn Ligon, Mel Edwards, Alison and Bettye Saar. I read novels by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, McMillan, Alex Haley, and Zora Neal Hurston. I read autobiographies by Hurston, Maya Angelou and Nathan McCall. I attended lectures by Angelou and director Spike Lee, have seen Lee's movies, and taken a course in the Department of Black Studies. I studied blues, jazz and rap in a determined way and attended a play about Hurston. I learned
through personal friendships. I mention this not to make a laundry list, but to note that I have examined many different aspects of African American culture, not just visual art. Because my life experiences and early education was limited, I have attempted to rectify my ignorance and immerse myself in aspects of American life I previously had limited contact with and knowledge of.

The researcher must be careful not to take advantage of participants. Susan Saxbe discussed being careful with Aminah.

SUSAN SAXBE: I find that I'm always giving her gifts, bringing her things, but she does that to me too. She constantly is giving me gifts. Not just her friendship, when we sit there and talk and have tea together and coffee. For instance, I was over there just awhile ago looking at something. She did this pot. I said, "Oh, Aminah, I love this. I've never seen you do anything like this. I absolutely love this. Some day I'm going to have you do one for me. She said, "You can have this one. I said, "Aminah, forget it! No way!" and I changed the subject.

SUSAN MYERS: Okay, but why did you say that. You loved it, why did you refuse it?

SUSAN SAXBE: I think she gives things away too easily, and I think it would be very easy for people to take advantage of her. She's given me things and then I come home and I write her a check and say this is not for what you just gave me, this is to help buy buttons and fabric or whatever.

Now there are times that I have taken things. You know, she's given me some dolls that I've accepted. Usually that is after I've brought a client over who has written her a nice check. I think she just wants to do that. Sometimes I won't argue with her, but usually I do.

SUSAN MYERS: So you don't want to take advantage of her.

SUSAN SAXBE: No, I'm real careful about that. I could probably get a big wall hanging if I wanted to, but I'm real careful. (Saxbe, 1995)

Examining one's subjectivity is a necessary part of any research project. Aspects of the researcher's personality, background, education, experiences and biases do affect the research study and must be acknowledged. Safeguarding study participants is another important aspect of research, as is presenting reliable information.
In the next chapter, the journey of this research is examined and chronicled. While some aspects of this research process were idiosyncratic and particular to this study, many aspects of the process may be helpful for other researchers to consider.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF THE JOURNEY

Chapter Four is a time line, a description of my journey. It includes an introduction of the participants and my impressions and summaries of the interviews drawn from my field notes, and correspondence. I highlight moments of insight, when I made crucial connections. This is a story of a process of learning.

Throughout the research, I reflected on the changes and insights within my own understanding of Aminah's work. Each letter, phone call, and interview added depth to my perspective. Part of analyzing data is to "write memos to yourself about what you are learning" (Merriam, 1988, p. 125). In this chapter, I note insights as they occurred to me, and then present two short stories that chronicle my growing sense of understanding.

Setting the Scene

In the last chapter, I introduced myself and addressed the issue of my subjectivity affecting this study. The other participants in the research, in order of their appearance in my life include:
Gisela Josenhans is a docent at the Columbus Museum of Art and the Wexner Center. Gisela introduced me to Aminah and has been a supporter and encourager of Aminah, promoting her work in many different ways. Gisela is enthusiastic, smiling, always sharing, generous, full of life, and strong.

Aminah Robinson. When asked to introduce herself to readers of the dissertation Aminah responded, "As I walk" (A. Robinson, personal communication, April 29, 1996).

Susan Saxbe was in one of the first docent training classes under my tenure at the Columbus Museum of Art. When asked to introduce herself to readers of this study, Susan wrote,

Since my graduation from Ohio State in 1971, I have been actively involved in the arts. I am currently associated with Winning Images, an art consulting firm representing numerous artists in Columbus, Ohio. I have been a docent at the Columbus Museum of Art for the past ten years. I am currently working towards a masters degree at Ohio State University and plan to finish in December of 1996. My interest is public policy and arts administration. (S. Saxbe, personal communication, April 8, 1996)

A. J. Olson and I met in graduate school in the Department of Art Education at The Ohio State University. We have much in common, both having worked in art museums for many years. We share a love of contemporary art and long intense circuitous conversations. A. J. is key to this study because she first alerted me to the beauty, power, and possibility of this dissertation topic.

Ursel White Lewis has been a mentor and supporter of Aminah's since Aminah was 8 years old. When asked to introduce herself to readers of this study she wrote, “Aminah
Brenda Lynn Robinson was the first African American artist I met. She was very young and busy painting. That was one of my greatest thrills in my life” (U. W. Lewis, personal communication, April 6, 1996).

**Kojo Kamau** and Aminah attended high school together. He was instrumental in providing Aminah the opportunity to go to Africa. His career as a photographer has included work in the Air Force, in the medical illustration department at The Ohio State University, and as a free lance artist. At the encouragement of Mary Ann Williams, he began exhibiting his photographic work in 1975. He opened a gallery called Kojo Photo Arts Studio in 1978, which he operated until 1982. He and Williams co-founded ACE, Art for Community Expression, about the time the studio opened. He recently retired from the University and devotes his time to making photographs and selling them at art shows across the country.

**Sharron Barnes** is Aminah's younger sister, by three years. She posed for Aminah's first oil painting. Sharron is an energetic, fit woman who is very no-nonsense and direct. She is practical, hard working, and very loving. Sharron raised three grown daughters and currently works at the Columbus Department of Recreation and Parks where she does "everything there is to do" (S. Barnes, personal communication, February 1, 1995). In February of 1995 she was recognized as employee of the year. I commented, "Your parents raised some hard-working girls." She responded, "They raised us to be responsible" (Barnes, 1995).
Sandra Sue Scott is Aminah's older sister by two years. Aminah said about Sue: "My older sister is smart. She has a way, believe me... Sue is quiet, thoughtful and brilliant." Sue is a tall, elegant, gracious, and calm woman. She works for the federal government and has raised two grown boys.

Carl Solway represents Aminah, providing her with several major shows at his highly regarded Solway Gallery in Cincinnati. He is unhurried, calm, thoughtful. His comments were flecked with humor. He is sincere and down-to-earth.

Joseph Canzani founded and presided over the Columbus College of Art and Design for more than 30 years. He taught Aminah during her early years as an art student.

Peggy Draeger and I became friends after our teenagers became buddies. She is finishing a degree in industrial design major with a focus on interiors at The Ohio State University. She is very creative and intelligent. Like me, she balances the demands of a family and university studies.

Edith Smilack is a good friend and supporter of Aminah's, who taught Aminah at the Columbus College of Art and Design. She is an artist and writer who has been involved in the arts in Columbus for many years.

Fran Luckoff, a Columbus arts patron and collector, is the first person to buy Aminah's work. Fran Luckoff is generous, elegant, disciplined, and likes beautiful things.

Nancy Banks, with her husband Caesar, owns and operates the Weekender on Sapelo Island Georgia. She grew up on nearby St. Simon's Island. She married Caesar Banks, who grew up on Sapelo and for a time they lived on St. Simon's Island. Recently
she and Caesar built the first bed and breakfast on Sapelo. She makes baskets, sews, fishes, cooks fabulous meals, among other activities. Nancy is lovely, smiling, shy, sensitive, welcoming, accommodating, and professional.

Cornelia Bailey was born and raised on Sapelo Island, Georgia. She met the artist when Aminah did research on Sapelo in 1983. I talked to Cornelia during my visit to Sapelo Island in December 1995. Cornelia Bailey is strong, proud, perceptive, and had great knowledge of Sapelo Island's history and people.

The Night My Dissertation Topic Found Me

One pleasant, very warm, late-summer evening, A.J. Olson and I attended the opening reception of The Huntington National Bank's corporate art collection. I'd been invited by a friend whose art consulting firm had acquired and assembled the collection of Ohio artists. We found a mob scene at the reception! Several hundred people crammed into the very elegant office building. On the first floor were beautifully arranged tables with fancy food. Most people talked energetically as they held drinks and plates of food. It was nearly impossible to see much art. Luckily, the collection was dispersed over three floors of the office building. A.J. and I were determined to get away from the crowd and see some art in the offices upstairs. We skipped the second floor to search for a sculpture by Aminah Robinson, an artist whose work we both admired. In a hallway outside several cherry-paneled offices on the third floor, we discovered Aminah's sculpture, a woman, about three-feet high, situated on a waist-high ledge.

The multi-colored piece was crafted from many different, wonderfully textured materials; fabric, sticks, buttons, and a mud-like clay. We both tried to see the backside of
it, since the front view was so intriguing. The sculpture cried out to be fondled, yet we both hesitated, affected no doubt by our years of working in museums. The figure was awkward-looking, as if it depicted an older person, unsteady on her feet. It was a very welcome sight in the slick, sterile office setting.

Once I realized the woman/sculpture was one of Aminah's "Sapelo" pieces, I gave A. J. some background about the series. Aminah had discovered, through conversations with her grand aunts, that some ancestors had lived on Sapelo Island, a sea island plantation off the coast of Georgia. On Sapelo, the enslaved population retained more of their Africanisms than slaves on the mainland (McFeely, 1994; A. Robinson, personal communication, spring, 1986). Aminah visited the island first in 1983, and produced a series of works about Sapelo's history and people.

A. J. remarked that she had no idea about the complex historical aspects of Aminah's work. She loved hearing the stories and prodded me with additional questions. We found more and more objects embedded in the sculpture, a thimble, shells, and more buttons. We conjectured about possible symbolic meanings of the materials. Floating near a table filled with desserts was the artist herself, Aminah! Now Aminah could answer A. J.'s questions. I introduced A. J. to Aminah. A. J. remembers this first encounter.

She is wonderful to look at. She's striking looking, but she doesn't look like any one else I know. That's why I say she's otherworldly. . . . I always associate the dusk with her, as being on some kind of threshold. . . . Her skin tone has a greyness to it that suggests to me that kind of [softness] . . . things like Zinfandel and beaujolais, and bat wings—not seeing them, feeling them. That kind of softness . . . She is in another space. It's a kind of a calm that is centered. That kind of dusk is what I mean. . . . They talk about people who have vision in both worlds—that kind of dusk. (Olson, A. J., 1996)
The three of us engaged in lively conversation full of half sentences, phrases, and exclamations. We were engrossed in our conversation, but after some time it became clear that the reception was over. So we broke up our little conversation circle.

On the way home, A.J. said she felt very lucky to have encountered Aminah, and have the opportunity to ask her questions and get a sense of the artist as a person. She also commented that she sensed that Aminah and I connected strongly as human beings. There seemed to be a bond between us. Even though I had not seen Aminah in several years, I admired, cared deeply for, and felt very able to communicate with her.

I ventured, "Someone really ought to get down all those stories about Aminah and her work." A.J. responded, "That sounds like a good dissertation topic!" (A.J. Olson, personal communication, August 1993) At that moment I knew she was right! How wonderful and enriching it would be to spend time with Aminah, to talk with her, and eventually write with an artist I loved. I tucked the idea away. Life intervened, the quarter began.

First Encounter: A Lasting Memory

I first became aware of Aminah and her work in 1981 when I began, what was for me at the time, a dream job, working at the Columbus Museum of Art. My main responsibility was coordinating a large docent program - over one hundred volunteer tour guides who gave tours to over 20,000 people each year. I trained the docents, coordinated their schedules, planned family and children's programs, and generally kept this large educational effort moving along.
The docents came from many walks of life. All shared an intense love of art and a desire to share their love of art with other people. One particularly enthusiastic docent was Gisela Josenhans. I found her to be energetic, lively, curious, passionate, very intelligent, a voracious reader and learner, always a teacher, a generous spirit.

Gisela Josenhans often told me about a wonderful artist she knew. After several months, Gisela invited me, along with a group of about 15 docents, to her home for lunch and to meet with the artist, Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. I agreed to attend. My life at the museum was a hectic one, and I rarely went out to lunch, in fact I rarely took time away from my desk for lunch. But, on the appointed day, I left a pile of work on my desk and found my way to Gisela's house.

I noticed Aminah right away—an elegant, long, thin, quiet, yet intense woman with large brown eyes, her hair pulled up. She was like a piece of art, colorful, intricate, elegant. I particularly noticed the way she carried herself—in a very humble, soft, magical way. She looked fragile.

Once lunch was over, the program began. Once Aminah began to talk I was hooked in, along with everyone else. She seemed a little shy at first, but once she began showing her work, there was no shyness, only a desire to share her life, and world, and art. Aminah's art pieces were intriguing, very textured, colorful, intricate. Aminah had researched an area of Columbus she called Poindexter Village. I had never heard of this area. Aminah had grown up in Poindexter. It had history, people, stories, and a rich legacy that she was resurrecting in her works. I was amazed and captivated! That was my first encounter with Aminah.
Second Encounter Reinforces My Initial Enthusiasm

In 1985 I was asked to curate an exhibit for the 1986 Ohio State Fair Fine Arts Building. The focus of the exhibit was assemblage. I asked dozens of Ohio's museums and art centers, and private collectors for permission to borrow works in their collections that incorporated collage and assemblage techniques. I also considered contemporary Ohio artists whose work would strengthen the exhibit. Aminah's work immediately came to mind.

I called Aminah to arrange a time to discuss borrowing a piece. She agreed to meet with me at her home/studio. It was an absolute treat for the senses. Other people have described the unique experience of visiting Aminah.

As she sits in her large ornate chair, Gift of Love, that she continues to add to over the years, she holds her beloved dog Boo Boo in her lap. The unusual chair is decorated with figures sculpted from other objects. Each figure contains a music box, as do many of Robinson's soft sculptures and figures. (Gilson, 1990, p. 1F)

Aminah's cluttered, colorful life-filled house is rich with her own paintings and sketches of Elijah Pierce as well as his wood carvings of the animals, people, and stories he loved. . . . A walk into Aminah's house is an unforgettable, incomparable experience. It breathes. It talks. It throbs with her creative energies. It's a staggering tumult of her works. There is no empty space. Walls, shelves, floors, doors, closets are layered with pieces of every medium, of mixed media, of every combination. Unfinished and almost finished and never-to-be-finished works lie, hang, sway, roll, fold, and pile. Buttons, beads, threads, hinges, crayons, clothespins, paints, shells, rags, bags, pouches, shreds, photos, letters, news clips collect into the materials of a child's paradise. (Chenfeld, 1989, p. 58)

Visiting Aminah's house is like entering a whirlwind of images: everything from weary or wonder-filled faces to giant gnarled hands and cobbled streets. The smells of wood, leather, paper, and coffee and hot apple pie provide an aromatic backdrop to her stream of ideas and anecdotes about the people and the work. . . . Her house is perhaps the most resonant example of "home" one might ever encounter. Finished and unfinished work is everywhere. Amidst her own works and those of Elijah Pierce, Mary O. Merrill, Ricky Barnes, and others, books, jars
of buttons, a piano, rocking chairs, her son Sydney's graduation photos, magazines, memorabilia, and the ubiquitous "Boo-Boo", her chihuahua, who rolls his eyes and squirms to get onto the artist's lap. (Griffith, 1990, p. 23)

No matter where I look there is something colorful to see. Each object has a place and a purpose. During my visits, we moved around the house, sometimes relaxing on the couch, sometimes standing in the kitchen drinking good, strong, sweet coffee, sometimes squeezed into the studio area. Our conversations were never linear. We talked about life in general, her life, and her passions relating to telling of stories. At this time, 1985, Aminah was working on the Sapelo Island pieces.

I lost track of time whenever I visited Aminah. I usually left several unscheduled hours available around our visits because the visits went on far longer than I expected. I found myself asking lots of questions. She was always willing, wanting to talk and share. I was struck not only by the beauty and complexity of her work, but by the stories behind the pieces and by Aminah's personality.

On one of my visits, I brought her a collection of buttons I'd had since art school. Many were given to me by my grandfather, who had been a tailor. I loved those buttons because of their different colors, sizes, textures, materials. I kept thinking I'd use them for something one day. At this point, I knew that Aminah would use them well, far better than I ever would.

Aminah generously lent her Sapelo Quilt to the Fair exhibition. I used it as the centerpiece to the show at the entry. My experience with Aminah and the Sapelo Quilt itself, stand out vividly in my mind, out of more than one hundred pieces in the show.
Almost ten years later, in 1994, I was a part time lecturer and graduate student at The Ohio State University. After three years of course work, it was time to think about a research topic. I was absolutely delighted when we encountered Aminah at the Huntington reception, and A.J. said that gathering the stories around Aminah and her work sounded like a great dissertation topic! I realized this project might incorporate many aspects of my graduate study: contemporary art, interviewing, women artists, and multicultural curriculum. Would Aminah agree to work with me? I finally decided there was nothing more I would rather do than devote my energies to recording Aminah's stories about her work. I discussed the idea with several people and received only encouragement.

The Story

A month by month accounting of the active, conscious pursuit of my dream, the intensive period of research, follows. I liken it to the process of making a complex tapestry, and use a weaving metaphor throughout. In the weaving process, as in the research process, there are many sections. Both weaving and research are laborious processes that use many materials. A complex, textured, story or tapestry emerges at the end of the process.

In this work, Aminah is like the warp. She is like the supporting, lengthy, threads that determine the basic tapestry pattern. The stories I collect are like the yarns used in weaving. The yarns that are shuttled back and forth over and under the warp threads impart color, texture, and strength to the tapestry. I am like the weaver of the tapestry. My job is to weave together all the many yarns, textures, and colors to create a cohesive,
understandable piece of art. The computer, for me, is like a weaver's wooden loom. Its structure is large enough to hang and save the yarns on, and its mechanisms allow the weaving to be pulled together and finished.

July/August 1994: Is the Warp Willing?

The phone listing I had for Aminah was disconnected, so I contacted Susan Saxbe to inquire about the current number. Susan was very positive about my idea to chronicle Aminah's life and work. She offered her help and encouragement and told me that Aminah's son, Sydney, had died. I was heartbroken. This was a terrible tragedy.

I left a message on Aminah's machine. A return message from her said she was no longer doing interviews. I called back to implore and Aminah picked up the phone! She was hesitant, inquiring "What is your research about?" (A. Robinson, personal communication, July 1994) I expressed my desire to gather and record the oral history surrounding her life and work. Her cooperation and permission were key to the project. I reminded her of our encounter at the Huntington reception, and of our previous acquaintance. Would she be willing to work with me? Aminah asked for time to think about my request. I sent her a sympathy note, including a picture of myself and my family, since I wasn't quite sure she remembered me, and I hoped for the best.

Coincidentally, in July, Newsweek reviewed a book entitled Sapelo's People: A Long Walk Into Freedom. How wonderful to find a book about the very place about that Aminah had completed a whole series of works! I rushed out, found a copy at the local bookstore, and poured over it. I was grateful for the historical details, but frustrated by the fact there were no photographs, drawings, maps, or diagrams in the book. I still couldn't
quite picture Sapelo. I thought that Aminah's Sapelo pieces would complement this historical work nicely! They would round out the reader's impressions. It was too bad McFeely, the book's author and a historian, didn't work with an artist like Aminah. I wondered if he knew about Aminah's visit to Sapelo, or had seen any of the work she created? Did the people on Sapelo know about the work that came out of Aminah's 1983 visit?

Early in August, I received this note from Aminah.

Dear Susan,
I have received all of your letters including the beautiful photo of your family. Yes! We have known each other for some time. One is not always prepared for the untimely loss of a loved one. My son passed on July 17, 1994. I thank you for your prayers and deepest sympathy. We will get together at some point soon. Best, Aminah. (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 8, 1994)

I lent my copy of Sapelo's People to Susan Saxbe, and decided to send Aminah a copy. Aminah left this message on my answering machine.

Hello Susan, this is Aminah. I just came in and I found the Sapelo's People. Thank you very very much. It is superb. And yes, I do know all of the people that he speaks of and all of the places. Because these things are what my work is about. Everything is pertaining to the work that I have done on Sapelo, years ago, since '83. I wanted to thank you. I thank you . . . . Thank you very much. (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 30, 1994)

On the same day she mailed me this note.

Dear Susan, Sapelo's People: A Long Walk Into Freedom by William S. McFeely is wonderful! I can't wait to get into the reading of it—as I look at the contents—the work is most reflective of the Sapelo series (1983-present) I have produced. I am very happy to see this historical work out. Many thanks for this wonderful book! Best always, Aminah. (A. Robinson, personal communication, August 30, 1994)

I began compiling an archive of information about Aminah's work, using files at the Columbus Metropolitan Library, the Wexner Center, and the Columbus Museum of
Art. I revisited Aminah's 1991 commission at the library. I also saw more recent commissions at Riverside Methodist Hospital and the Columbus Foundation. The staff at the Columbus Foundation was enthusiastic about Aminah and her work, and generous in giving me color reproductions of the exquisite piece on display at their Broad Street headquarters.

I realized the articles I found about Aminah and her work were helpful, but struck me as being too much on the surface. There was much more to be expressed and discovered.

September/October 1994: Wool Gathering

Believing strongly in my research idea, Susan Saxbe encouraged Aminah to meet with me. She arranged our first meeting for mid-September. Together, Susan Saxbe and I visited Aminah at her two-story frame home, a treat for the senses! Aminah greeted us at the door, asked us to wait a minute, put her larger dog outside, then admitted us to the "treasure house." There was so much to see and experience. Her living room was filled with books, pictures and art. Every surface was covered with an image or texture.

"May I turn on my small tape recorder?" I inquired. We discussed confidentiality of the tape, so Aminah agreed. As we wandered around her treasure-box-house, I asked Aminah to clarify stories about her family. Eventually, Susan asked to see what Aminah was working on. Aminah showed us some wonderful, breathtaking works, most in-progress!

A huge, 6-foot by 10-foot, waist-high table almost filled her work room. Art materials surrounded the table, encroaching onto its different corners: embroidery thread,
fabric, buttons, paint tubes, colored pencils, and bottles of dye. The table was covered by a large, rolled, fabric painting, only a portion was revealed for Aminah to work on.

We visited for several hours, all the while I ran the tape recorder. I asked Aminah to meet with me once a month or so, to continue our conversation. Aminah was reluctant to commit to a regular schedule. She had work to do and seemed a little skeptical about my motives. However this day gave me a basis for my research proposal.

To prepare for writing my research proposal, I had weekly discussions with Dr. Krug, focusing on method and purpose. Both he and Dr. Daniel suggested readings that assisted my shaping of the proposal. I maintained phone contact with Aminah, partly to make arrangements to tape record her keynote address to the Ohio Art Education Association Annual Conference. I was still transcribing all of my tapes. It was very slow going.

As I continued to gather and read articles about Aminah, I realized I could not do my study, if she didn't agree to work with me. I sensed hesitation on her part. My visit to her home and transcription of the tapes reinforced my feeling that the artist is a fabulous source of information and insight. Events in my life seem to have led me to this project. Yet, this project is not in my control or power.

November/December 1994: Collecting Yarns

A phone conversation with Aminah predicted one major theme for our discussions this month. “You know what I am not, I am not a folk artist. People want to pigeonhole me. I just am. I'm just an artist. . . . Folk, I think it's a racial thing” (A. Robinson, personal communication, November 4, 1994).
On Friday, November 11, 1994, Aminah addressed the OAEA at the Hyatt Regency, dedicating it to her son Sydney. Many Ohio art educators were familiar with Aminah and her work. The crowd was awestruck and amazed by Aminah's range and power.

After much discussion about consent issues and ownership of one's words, Aminah allowed me to video tape the address. We agreed that no use will be made of the tape unless Aminah expressly gives permission, not shown to classes, or on television, anywhere unless it is with her permission. Within a week, I copied the video tape for Aminah, and showed her how to use it in her VCR. I transferred the audio component to an audio tape in preparation for transcription. I gave Aminah a draft copy of my research proposal, so she had a clearer idea of my focus.

On Saturday, November 12, Aminah called to say she was very touched by the standing ovation at the conference. It had never happened before and brought tears to her eyes. "Did you see me cry?" (A. Robinson, personal communication) she asked.

Aminah asked questions about my research proposal. She was concerned that people at the university wanted to tell me what to do, what to say about her work. I assured her that was not the case. Aminah seemed very reluctant and hesitant during this conversation. We talked at length about consent issues, about her approving anything I wrote. My dissertation research would be a joint project. I told her that my fate was in her hands. I knew at any moment she could decide not to work with me and that was her prerogative.
A few days later, I noticed an article in the paper that mentioned "colorful folk art murals that depict Columbus history and the major part the Ward family has played in it" (Wright, 1994). I was quite sure this was a reference to Aminah's work and decided to write a letter to editor, pointing out the artist's name and addressing the folk art issue. Aminah said, "I am not a folk artist!" I asked for Aminah's input for and permission to send the letter.

In a visit to discuss the letter, I also casually mentioned my strong desire to meet Mrs. Ursel White Lewis, whose name I'd noticed in several articles and in the OAEA address. Aminah told me that Mrs. Lewis wouldn't do interviews and probably wouldn't meet with me. This was disappointing. I wanted so much to talk to someone who had known Aminah a long time.

Suddenly, Aminah picked up the phone, dialed Mrs. Lewis's number, and then offered me the phone receiver! Aminah was beginning to trust me. Mrs. Lewis and I had a terrific conversation about her early memories of Aminah. When I gestured for a pen and paper, Aminah handed me a sheet of mossy-green pastel paper to write notes upon. I felt as if I ought to draw on it, not write on this exquisite paper, but continued to furiously scribble down Mrs. Lewis's comments. After about ten minutes, I asked Mrs. Lewis for a face-to-face meeting, so that I could listen more intently and not have to take notes. We set a date at Aminah's house for the next week.

November 18, 1994 was a bitter, cold day — perfect for me to bake blueberry muffins for Mrs. Lewis and Aminah. The three of us sat in Aminah's living room. I gave
Aminah and Mrs. Lewis a draft of the letter to the editor of the *Columbus Dispatch* addressing the folk art reference to Aminah's work. Aminah was pleased with the content.

At this point in my research, I did not have a standard set of interview questions, or an interview guide. I simply wanted Mrs. Lewis to tell me stories about Aminah's early years. The interview with Mrs. Lewis provided me with a vivid picture of Aminah as a young girl in her community. It also taught me about Mrs. Lewis's role as a visionary, community activist. Sometimes when I asked questions, both Aminah and Mrs. Lewis suggested books to me (Connell, 1992; Woodson, 1972). Aminah enjoyed the visit as well as this letter indicates. She also suggested more reference books.

Dear Susan,

Our visit yesterday at my home with Mrs. Lewis and you was great! Thank you again for the blueberry muffins and all your kindnesses. Have you had a chance to get the Elijah Pierce catalog yet? There is information in this catalogue that you may want to examine: pages 10 and 11 by the late Robert Bishop; pages 13-25 "Doves and Pain in Life Fulfilled" by Gerald Davis; Elijah Pierce and the African American Tradition of Wood Carving" by Regenia A. Perry and "A holy place--a tribute to Elijah Pierce" by Aminah Robinson pages 65-68.

As you have already noted through our conversations, my work is not a vehicle for any for the "isms," not political in any form, as for example feminism, racism, or---no isms. However my work is about people, historical data, traditions, lost communities, and always the minkisi. Check Robert Farris Thompson's book *Flash of the Spirit*. (A. Robinson, personal communication, November 18, 1994)

I realized that Aminah was consciously guiding me, providing clues about the deeper meanings of her work. I sought out the books right away, trying to find out about minkisi.

Despite my reading, I was still confused about the unfamiliar term. I quizzed her about it during our next visit, November 28. Aminah told me

You are the first one to go past the surface of my work. I'll tell you things about my family, my people, when you are ready. It's all in my work. I'll tell you, I'll tell you. The charms, the minkisi, it's real! It's real! [I learned about them from] my
grandmother, my mother, my father. When asked to have something explained I
got the back of the hand. You live it. That's how you find out. It's not "folk," it
goes way back.

SUSAN MYERS: What is it I sense in your work, something hidden?

AMINAH ROBINSON: Humanity. But it's all out there in plain view. It's there.

(A. Robinson, personal communication, November 28, 1994)

Now I saw that the minkisi, and the traditions from Africa were used consciously and
were more deeply imbedded than I first imagined. I had much to learn and understand.

In December, Susan Saxbe suggested that I accompany her when a client was
purchasing a piece from Aminah. Since all I wanted for Christmas that year was art by
Aminah, I asked to be that client. I sought Susan's professional advice and Aminah's
indulgence, since I wanted to run the tape recorder during our visit to select art.

On December 21, 1994, Susan, Aminah and I conversed while I chose several
pieces: a collage, two drawings and a pin. Acquiring art pieces directly from the artist was
a wonderful experience. Coincidentally, my letter to the editor appeared in the Columbus
Dispatch the same day. We were all thrilled the letter had been published.

Dear Sir:

While I enjoyed reading your recent Blue Chip Profile in BusinessToday about Mr.
Eldon Ward and his family business, I'd like to point out two errors—one of
omission, the other of fact. You mention the only distinctive feature of Ward's
office as "folk art murals depicting Columbus history and the major part the Ward
family has played in it." You fail to mention that the art works adorning Ward's
office are by the prominent Columbus artist Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.
Robinson's splendid work may also be seen at the Columbus Metropolitan Library,
Riverside Methodist Hospital, and at the Columbus Foundation. She was the
subject of an exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art. She does not refer to
herself as a folk artist. The term folk artist is generally used to denote art by one
who is not formally trained. I would prefer not to make distinctions between artists
who are formally trained and those whose education is considered to be informal.
But using the term to describe Robinson's work is inappropriate. She is a
contemporary artist.
I was drawn to the article because I'd learned of the Ward company's long, illustrious history through Aminah's work. She discussed Ward's large fabric paintings at the Ohio Art Education Association's Annual Convention at the Hyatt Regency, just three days prior to your article. At the end of her featured presentation, Aminah received a standing ovation from more than 600 art educators from all over the state. She is an inspiring, prolific artist who deserves to have her work recognized. Thank you for this opportunity to set the record straight. (Myers, S., 1994)

I began to realize how sensitive and thorny the folk/fine art issue was. Yet it must be dealt with, since people persisted in categorizing Aminah's work as folk. I noticed Aminah was beginning to trust my intentions and my integrity.

January 1995: Guidance from Master Weavers

My research proposal was approved by my generals committee and by mid-month I received my exam. The questions applied directly to the study: one asked me to consider case study method and conduct interviews. Others required historical and cultural reading. Yet another focused on artistic context. I began gathering books, and commenced reading.

My advisors were Dr. Daniel, Dr. Krug, Dr. Nelson and Dr. Walker and, unofficially, Aminah Robinson. Thank goodness for their vision.

Soon after receiving my exam, I brought Aminah some beeswax and an ARTnews article featuring her music box piece. Beeswax can be used to strengthen embroidery thread. We talked about many things. She told me about when her mentor, artist Elijah Pierce became famous. Aminah said, when he became famous . . .

They took up all his time so he couldn't work. They kept coming around and coming around and taking up his time, so he couldn't work. [He told her] "if it ever happens that you get famous, don't let them take your time so you can't work." I'm not going to let that happen to me! This person come over, and that person come over. And what happened to all that information? What happened to all those
interviews? Where is it now? I don't see it. All I knows is that it took Mr. Pierce's time away from the work. Who wants to be famous? Because then all they do is take up all of your time.

No! [I don't want to be famous.] What I want to do is make a living. I've been doing that. I did it with my son, I've been doing it in the last few years. I want to make a living so I can do my work. I have to work. I have to get to the work. I'll talk to you, but I'm not going to talk to a lot of different people. (A. Robinson, personal communication, January 18, 1995)

I realized how I must be careful about taking Aminah's time, respecting her priorities and wishes.

February/March 1995: Spinning Yarns

I spent considerable time gathering reference books for my candidacy exam, in particular information about Africanisms. I discovered the work of Herskovits and Alain Locke. My reading crossed several disciplines: anthropology, art history, Black studies, and psychology. Aminah gave me the names and numbers of people to interview, including her sisters.

On February 17, 1995 I interviewed Kojo Kamau, my first semi-structured interview using an interview guide sheet. Kamau was a stately figure, tall, lean, and reserved, who thought carefully before he spoke. He told me he took the name Kojo in 1970. Kojo told me

As a matter of fact, Kojo means unconquerable, and Kamau means quiet one. That's Yoruba, a West African language. I wasn't born with this name, but I selected this name in 1970 from a book that had the meanings in it . . . . I chose my name based on my personality at that time. (Kamau, 1995)

We talked at his home, on a street of large, older, elegant homes on Columbus's east side. The two-story brick home was immaculately kept, and pleasantly cluttered at the same time, filled with art on the walls, on tables, shelves, and cabinets. There was an
eclectic mix of wood sculpture, paintings, and photographs. Kojo said, "You can see I am a collector" (K. Kamau, personal communication, February 17, 1995).

We sat in the dining room, kitty-corner to each other, he at the head of the long wooden table. He asked to make his own tape of our conversation. I promised to send him a copy of mine right away. "Does Aminah know you are doing this," (K. Kamau, personal communication, February 17, 1995) he inquired. He knew how Aminah felt about her privacy. During our conversation, I discovered as much about Kojo as I did Aminah. Getting to know him, and see the art work he made and collected increased my understanding of his comments about Aminah's work.

March was a month of intense interviewing. I contacted Aminah's sisters and interviewed them both in one week! Because of my recent readings about Africanisms, some of my questions aimed in that direction. Could Sharron Barnes, her younger sister, and Sue Scott, her older sister, confirm any cultural ties to African ways?

On March 1, 1995, I interviewed Sharron Barnes. She seemed guarded and somewhat reluctant over the phone. When I arrived at her home she welcomed me warmly. Her home on Columbus's east side, was comfortable and neat, with nothing on the walls. Sharron explained she was re-painting. In the kitchen were craft-like decorations. The dining table was covered by a beautifully embroidered tablecloth. We talked at the kitchen table where we both felt comfortable. Sharron first told me the story about having to sit still, Saturday after Saturday, so Aminah could paint her portrait. She
delighted in telling me humorous anecdotes. Both she and her sister Sue told me they took after their mother in terms of interests and disposition, while Aminah took after their father.

On March 2, 1995, I interviewed Sandra Sue Scott. On the phone Sue sounded soft, willing to talk, and easy-going. When I mentioned I was researching about Aminah's life and work, Sue said, "Aminah, she's a researcher herself -- she researches all kinds of things before she paints" (S. Scott, personal communication, February 28, 1995). At her home in Berwick, on the east side of Columbus, we talked in her kitchen, where she said she was most comfortable. During our visit she showed me three pieces of Aminah's hanging in the living room. Sue expressed a much deeper historic and cultural sense of the work than Sharron. She seemed very proud of Aminah and more interested in the cultural links to Sapelo and Africa than Sharron.

On March 7, 1995, I interviewed Susan Saxbe, a bundle of enthusiasm and energy. Her east side home was about 80 years old, full of eclectic decorations, ranging from sleek furniture to funky dolls, baskets, and pots. There were realistic and abstract paintings and sculpture displayed. We talked in her living room. I sat on the floor on one side of a coffee table. She nestled in an overstuffed love seat. We discussed the meanings and values in Aminah's work, particularly in the art world. Susan said,

I have such a strong feeling for her. It's not like I see her every day or talk to her every day, but I certainly think about her an awful lot. When I leave her house, I am high as a kite for days. It's a very spiritual feeling. I feel like I have this new friend... there's so much to learn about her, and I'm intrigued by her. I'm constantly learning something about her and want to know more (Saxbe, 1995).
On March 10, 1995, I interviewed Aminah again, referring to other conversations I'd had with her sisters and friends and focused on the Africanism question. It was an enlightening conversation. Aminah suggested several more people to interview: Joseph Canzani, Edith Smilack, Gisela Josenhans, Fran Luckoff, Denny Griffith, Roman Johnson. I asked her about Carl Solway, her dealer, too. Aminah said, "I like being with you because you are a hard worker. I like that! No one has been as serious as you. No one. No one has wanted to dig" (A. Robinson, personal communication, March 10, 1995).

On Saturday, March 18, 1995, I took Aminah to and from her speaking engagements at the Dublin Literacy Council Conference. We spent the entire day together, a real treat for me. I heard, and recorded, her two presentations, watched her interact with people who wanted autographed copies of her books, and spent private time with her in the teacher's lounge. The day was long and exhausting, broken up with book signings and talks. My recent readings had awakened even more interest on my part, so I asked her lots of questions. Aminah was used to being by herself. She sometimes felt pressured by my inquiries. I realized I must back off a little. I decided to just be there with her and not always be working.

At the end of March, I finished the general exam. Aminah read through every word before I turned it in. She asked that certain conversations be taken out. I complied with Aminah's wishes.

On March 30, I had a rare opportunity to hear art historian Robert Farris Thompson speak in person. Thompson's scholarship guided me throughout my studies! Several cars full of faculty and student from OSU ventured to Miami University for the
talk. It was a remarkable experience; affirming and instructive. He was not a stodgy academician, rather I found him to be brilliant, insightful, enthusiastic, and accessible!

The next section is a summary of the insights that lead to my interpretation of Aminah's work at this point in time, March of 1995. I present it like a short story inserted into the dissertation. It shows that beginning to understanding the deeper meanings in the art work was a gradual process. Events leading to my deepening understandings are highlighted.

Collecting Yarns and Making Connections

A Sketch/Sample Weaving: Minkisi and Superstitions

This is a short sample-story-weaving, showing my process of discovering deeper meanings in Aminah's work. Early on, I sensed there were hidden, layered meanings in the work. Dr. Nelson alerted me to the term Africanism and I researched its history. By the end of March, this is what I found out through readings and interviews and insights.

Much of Aminah's work is tied up in ideas from African culture. Some instances are overt, while some are embedded in the cultural traditions and not as obvious. Aminah focuses on her ancestors: their lives, their accomplishments, their spirit and energy. She has a sense of continuum of history and a value for community and extended family. Much of the content of Aminah's work has been given to her orally, so the art work continues the telling of these oral tales. There are links to African spirituality in her work as well. Her materials come from her surroundings and are purchased, addressing a concept central to African life—there is no distinction between life and art. Aminah refuses to make a distinction between kinds of materials. By simply looking at her work, I sensed that these
aspects of Aminah's work were African resonances. In our conversations and communications mentioned below, it is shown how Aminah confirmed the African resonances.

With Africanisms, it is important to proceed with care, "within the artist's own declarations of intent" (Thompson, 1989, p. 109). Artist's intention is not the only criterion, as some artists may not be aware of or conscious of African retentions in their work. It is a valuable launching point, and since Aminah was accessible and willing to discuss her art, I referenced her comments as often as possible. Another source of information in checking the veracity of my guesswork, were people who are familiar with Aminah and her work: family, friends, fellow artists, and art critics. I am also indebted to the pioneering work of Herskovits and Thompson. Both researchers became very familiar with African traditions in order to draw links between cultures across the ocean. I relied on all these sources to draw conclusions about African resonances in Aminah's work.

Conversations with or letters from Aminah support my interpretation about Africanisms in her work. Soon after I began my research Aminah sent me a letter, I believe, to alert me to African influences in her art. "... my work is about people, historical data, traditions, lost communities, and always the minkisi. Check Robert Farris Thompson's book Flash of the Spirit" (A. Robinson, personal communication, November 11, 1994).

Until that week, I had never heard the word minkisi. I sensed she was giving me a clue. Aminah said her work was about minkisi. Thompson (1983) defined minkisi as
"visionary objects which embed spirits in packaged earths," (p. 101) but I was still puzzled. I was not aware that her work was about visionary objects, though I sensed spiritual aspects of the work.

Then I made a connection! Back in September, while looking at a large quilt, I pushed on several pouched, irregular, puffy areas— I had asked Aminah, "Are there blankets inside of these?" Aminah had answered, "I have a lot of layers [pause] of different materials. And I put little notes and things inside the little materials that I have. There's a lot of layers [pause] in some parts, that's why it's very uneven, very uneven" (Robinson, 1994b). Then Aminah had changed the subject! But something struck me about the way she talked about the layers and "things," making me curious. What was inside the quilts?

I pursued Aminah about charms and minkisi. I quizzed her about it during our next visit, November 28. Aminah said

You are the first one to go past the surface of my work. I'll tell you things about my family, my people, when you are ready. It's all in my work. I'll tell you, I'll tell you. The charms, the minkisi, it's real! It's real! [I learned about them from] my grandmother, my mother, my father. When asked to have something explained I got the back of the hand. You live it. That's how you find out. It's not "folk," it goes way back.

SUSAN MYERS: What is it I sense in your work, something hidden?


Dr. Daniel and Dr. Krug led me to more readings. I found that minkisi were part of the African Kongo religion that is also found in the Americas, charms or sacred medicines usually in the form of a pouch, vessel, or altar. It is believed minkisi are very powerful and embody a spirit. They can contain graveyard earth, quartz crystals, bones, sticks, and
feathers. They are used for protection, physical or psychological healing or for blessings. Thompson (1993) called them "portable sacred medicines" (p. 48). I wondered if Aminah's quilts could be concealing treasured, powerful objects?

Discussions with Aminah's sisters, Sue Scott and Sharron Barnes, revealed more about the possible influence of African practices. They told me about traditions passed through the family.

SUE SCOTT: My father's parents were from the Sea Islands, it seemed like they practiced a lot of voodoo --to me it might have been voodoo.
SUSAN MYERS: When you say "practice," what is that?
SUE SCOTT: I think put a curse on you. They would say things like "put a curse on her." They had little dolls, but I don't know. I don't remember what it all meant. I just knew that they were practicing, I called it, voodoo. . . . I remember my mother's mother, my grandmother. I remember her throwing--I think it was salt--after every place that they had ever been. She'd throw salt, if she didn't like a person, that's what she did. Now she was not as superstitious as my father's people, but she had her little ways.
SUSAN MYERS: You were aware that grandma and grandpa were superstitious. Like opening an umbrella inside the house.
SUE SCOTT: Yes, we still don't do that, do we, Steve? [her son] . . . That side of the family was different, and it might have been because they did have a different type of raising their children, but my father didn't seem to have any of those ideas; sticking pins in dolls. I don't ever remember seeing him do that. The only thing I remember is when we wanted to get a microwave, and he said, "we don't need a microwave. I'm not eating anything with all those bugs flying around in it." And I said, "bugs?" "Yes, you are having bugs going all through your meat." He never did have a microwave. Maybe he was around it like we were and just never picked up on it. (Scott, 1995)

Sharron had less specific memories of superstitions, but memories none-the-less. I asked Sharron if she thought there was a connection of the traditions through Sapelo.

SHARRON BARNES: For me, in talking to her I would think so because on Sapelo, the superstitions that they had are some of the same superstitions that we have heard in the family. The connection's there. Like throwing salt over your shoulder, dumb stuff. But the superstitions are there. I think it kind of broke up
when my dad married my mom, because my mom didn't believe in that . . . voodoo hoodoo witchery stuff. I think people from Sapelo are really into voodoo and superstitions.

[These superstitions are] things you can relate to because they have been spoken in the household. You never really know where that came from or how it was accepted. Or why would you say something like that. Then when Aminah came back [from Sapelo] and said [to us], "these are the things that happened in Sapelo, that had been passed on." —Generations down, it's back here in Columbus with my family. (Barnes, 1995)

Later that month, Aminah added clarification.

AMINAH ROBINSON: I first became aware of the word [minkisi] through the Flash of the Spirit [Thompson; 1983]. But I've known about this flash, these things that have been going on through communities and families all my life. I've seen it, been a part of it, so I know that that's real and that's true. It's more prevalent today than you would think.

SUSAN MYERS: And it's from your father's family.

AMINAH ROBINSON: Yes.

SUSAN MYERS: Sharron said your mother would have nothing to do with this.

AMINAH ROBINSON: Yes, but it's also [from] my mother's family as well. My grandmother, she would throw salt in a minute. [Imitating her grandmother] "Don't come back here!", and strong leaves here voodoo bags all over. Red flannel [bags]. My uncle would put them on us when we had colds to keep away the bad spirits and everything. We wore those.

SUSAN MYERS: What's in them?

AMINAH ROBINSON: Garlic and all that stinky stuff. It was my mother's family, my grandmother's, my great aunt's, and the community . . . It came through the children and it still is going today. (Robinson, 1995a)

I pressed Aminah to explain what was inside the quilts.

AMINAH ROBINSON: I have a lot of stuff in there. And things from different family members or people.

SUSAN MYERS: They said they never threw away hair when they cut it or nails. You save it all.

AMINAH ROBINSON: Never. Oh absolutely not. [alarmed] Who told you that about the hair?

SUSAN MYERS: It's in these books I'm reading, Aminah. (Robinson, 1995c)

Aminah smiled and nodded. Later that day, she publicly alluded to the things that are inside her quilts and why they might be there.
There was another body of work, the Poindexter Series. This particular quilt was 18 years in the making. . . . That particular quilt has buttons and things inside of it. . . . books, music boxes. Esther Saks in Chicago owns this quilt. I told her she shouldn't put that quilt on the wall. It should go on the bed where she can sleep under it because something evolves from pieces that are inside of that quilt. It didn't make any difference. She [Esther] put in on the wall [laughs] (Robinson, 1995b).

Once Aminah saw I was reading and discovering things on my own, she was willing to verify my insight. She made reference to something evolving from the things inside the quilt. I sensed she meant powerful, helpful, healing, calming, informative, protective "things" evolving from the pieces inside the quilt. Seven months before, she would not tell what was inside the quilt and why it was more than just batting. My initial intuition about "things" being in the quilt was legitimate. It took reading and investigation on my part, and time and trust on Aminah's part to admit it. She often said, "When you are ready, I'll tell you. When it's time, you will know."

I asked Aminah about if an Afrocentric world view informed her life.

AMINAH ROBINSON: [Afrocentric] is in choices. Going back to the living of day in and day out 24 hours a day --you are what you are! Regardless of attitude and how one projects it to other people. Because that's imbedded, it's too deep, you can't get rid of it. You just can't get rid of it. It's there. So with me, I have lived with Afrocentric all my life.

SUSAN MYERS: Did you call it that?

AMINAH ROBINSON: No! You don't have to call it. It's just a word, you know a new word. We be callin' ourselves certain things all through the history of this country. I'm just Aminah, coming from a very wonderful community and family, [that] traces back into slavery on Sapelo Island, Georgia and from Angola where the Gullah language was taken. You can't erase that. That's been. We've had Afrocentric living and life since we been here [in the Americas]. You can't get away from that! . . . You have to carry on this other life or this other way. But that is not going to erase what is imbedded in you from the day your great great great grandparents came over. You can not erase that, so it is the way in which we live, regardless! Of where we go and who we are. It's always there. (Robinson, 1995c)
I realized that African resonances live on in the work of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson to teach us all with lessons about humanity. These cultural resonances were in her work before she even was aware that they were from Africa. She now consciously carried the traditions on through her work, its style, its materials, and its inner meanings. These traditions and deeper meanings were essential to her work. I became determined to search further, and to educate others about these fascinating aspects of Aminah's work.

April 1995: Sophie Conversations

Aminah asked me to type her speech "Sophie Conversations" for her address to the National Library convention in May. It was eloquent and full of indications about the richness and many layers of meaning in her works. She referred to the layers in her working process and the layers of meaning imbedded in the work.

Sophie Conversations [excerpt].

I began working on the first layer of conversations, or drawings, or studies . . . I prefer to call the first layer of studies conversations, because they are free, natural, internal and honest. These first conversations never have time to linger. They are constantly moving. When I go into the second layer of conversations, the drawings become a little more concentrated, a little more extroverted. And as I begin to work more and more to the listening of the SOPHIE story, the conversations grow into actual paintings. Mem Fox's SOPHIE story becomes everybody's story! As I approached my last set of drawings, or in-depth conversations for SOPHIE, more humor, more spirit, more family values came into the conversation. I had re-lived and transformed memories of my own experiences into the SOPHIE story . . . . SOPHIE is the story of all families. It has been especially true of my family. As I was in the midst of working on the SOPHIE illustrations, sad and ironic, I learned of my SON'S untimely death. SOPHIE became a great healing force in my life.

It has been a privilege and opportunity to illustrate SOPHIE by Mem Fox. It has opened the inner-sanctum of my soul to the life-cycle of energy that surrounds our daily lives. Just as the moon always follows the sun, and the day reaches into the night, so it is with our lives and the family we embrace . . . reaching and holding secure the birthing, the living, and the dying, from one generation to the next. (Robinson, April 1995d)
Because I had spent so much time in the last six months talking with Aminah, I gathered deeper meaning from these words than I would have before. She mentioned how her own life experiences were incorporated into her work. She referred to the importance of family members, living or not. She also alluded to the universality of these themes in all our lives.

May 1995: Meet the Dealer

On May 3, 1995 I interviewed Carl Solway at his gallery in Cincinnati, in a downtown warehouse district. Carl, a soft-looking man about my height, with grayish curly hair in pleasant disarray, welcomed me. He proudly showed me around the building. It is a combination of exhibition spaces, workrooms, art storage areas, and file rooms staffed with Carl's workers. It was an art factory, containing equipment and work areas for the fabrication of art works. I saw some in-process projects. One was a Nam June Paik piece for a major exhibit.

We finally settled down in his office, a very long thin room. He didn't mind the tape recorder, but was very diffident at first--as if he wondered "what can I possibly tell you. I am nobody special." On the contrary, I found him to be very astute, articulate, and intuitive. Much of our conversation revolved around the art market and the art world. Carl allowed me to Xerox lots of information from his files, a nice addition to my archives.

June 1995: Understanding the Power of Words/Yarns

This month, course work with Dr. Chanda took me away from direct involvement with the interviewing aspect of my project. With Dr. Chanda's guidance, I took time to examine language and theory. I deconstructed the term "primitive" because it had been
often applied to Aminah's work. Because of the negative associations the term carries with it, I think it is applied inappropriately, as the term folk art has been. Here I briefly summarize my work with Dr. Chanda, a deconstruction of a troublesome term.

"One purpose of a deconstructivist reading is to point up the covert interests and motives in play when critics and art historians lay claim to authentic 'truth'" (Norris, 1988, p. 19). Should we believe everything we read? Are words and their meanings objective, and stable? The process of deconstruction says no, and shows how language is not stable.

The commonly accepted meaning of the term primitive is: crude, unschooled, rough, from an uncultured civilization, lacking finish, grace, sophistication. The etymological basis of word is different in emphasis. It is derived from Latin, and Middle English. It means first (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1962).

The term primitive is often used in art history in a pejorative manner. The term is used by Janson (1970) to reinforce hierarchy and otherness and has derogatory connotations.

"Primitive" is a somewhat unfortunate word: it suggests -quite wrongly- that these societies represent the original condition of mankind, and has come to be burdened with all sorts of conflicting emotional overtones. Still, no other single term will do better. Let us continue then, to use primitive as a convenient label for a way of life that has passed through Neolithic Revolution but shows no signs of evolving in the direction of the "historic" civilization. (p. 22)

Referring to African art, Alain Locke (1940) avoided derogatory associations.

... instead of influence of arty sophistication, just the opposite lessons of vigorous simplicity and vitality... of art with a sound and vital rootage in its own cultural soil, not art based on clichés, coteries or restricted audiences... Laymen continue to think that these distortions are due to the crudity of the African's techniques or his primitive childlike satisfaction with a caricature symbol. His sculptural skill belies this. If he wished to be he could be realistically accurate. So
we must consider his work not a crude copy of natural forms, but as a purposeful creation of mass design, with free distortion of natural shapes into arbitrary stylized forms expressing abstract design. (p. 207-208)

Eleanor Heartney (1994) noted that the word "primitivism has fallen into disrepute along with the cluster of colonialist and Euro-centric assumptions it implies" (p. 58). Price (1989) examined the troublesome term, primitive, in a full length book. She looked at the relationship of power to our use of the word, and at the supposed difference between "objects d'art and ethnographic artifacts" (p. 58). It is a well-researched, multi-disciplinary, deconstructionist tome. It was enlightening for me to examine why some words have loaded meaning, or carry pejorative meaning. Then we must decide whether or not to use them, or use them carefully and with clarification. We could associate the word primitive with more positive characteristics like: authentic, sincere, less diluted, original.

Now that I have used process of deconstruction, I understood even better the offense taken by Aminah to the term folk art. She consciously embraced attributes and techniques of both so-called fine art and folk art traditions and doesn't want her work pigeon-holed by terms that may subtly put it down.

July/October: Dust Gather and Wool Gathering

Unfortunately, the Solway tape had a buzz on it and it took most of the summer to get it transcribed. I spent the summer recuperating, and thinking things over. I just let things sit, even though it created anxiety for me not to write or do more interviews.

On September 13, 1995, I interviewed Joseph Canzani. He had retired as president of Columbus College of Art and Design just a month prior to our interview, but still kept office hours. Canzani sat behind his desk during our conversation, keeping himself aloof,
in demeanor, in attitude. Canzani remembered Aminah as a student and had vivid recollections of her as a student. He didn't have a sense of her post-art school work. He appreciated that Aminah welcomed criticism and that she worked very hard.

When the Canzani and Solway transcripts were complete, I sent them to each interviewee for perusal and approval. Both men edited the transcriptions and returned them to me. This was the first instance when participants took the opportunity and time to edit the dialogues. I was pleasantly surprised! In later months, I found most other interviewees edited their comments.

During the autumn, taking a dissertation seminar with Dr. Walker forced me to focus on the changes in my project. It helped me clarify my thinking about materials gathered in the past several months and focused my efforts on multiple perspectives on meaning and value in Aminah's art.

This autumn, I also had a very strong feeling I must go to Sapelo Island before finishing my dissertation. There must be things or people there for me to learn from. The planning process for the trip to Sapelo Island forced me to clarify my thinking even more. I resumed interviewing participants.

**November 1995: Spinning Yarns**

On Friday, November 10, an acquaintance, Peggy Draeger agreed to join me on a trip to Cincinnati to see the show of Aminah's at the Solway gallery. Peggy had never seen Aminah's work in person, but vividly remembered the photographic image of Aminah's
sculpture on my textbook cover. About a week later, Peggy agreed to be interviewed for my research. Peggy was the first person I'd interviewed who didn't know Aminah. On November 17, 1995, I interviewed Peggy Draeger at her home.

SUSAN MYERS: You don't know Aminah, you don't have a relationship with her, but what do you know about her?
PEGGY DRAEGER: I would envision her being very, very thoughtful—probably somewhat quiet but somewhat methodical, but obviously somebody very, very open, open and sensitive to things going on around her. As far as pinpointing an age or associate economics background, I don't have a clue.
SUSAN MYERS: Just from seeing the work, you envision these qualities.
PEGGY DRAEGER: Yes, I think she would be somebody I would really enjoy meeting. I imagine her as being very sage, very wise. (Draeger, 1995)

Peggy and I talked about making meaning and ascribing value to Aminah's work. I discovered she has a remarkable visual memory, an avid interest in art and design, and collects art works on a modest scale.

On the same day, later that afternoon, I interviewed Edith Smilack. Edith is small, lively, introspective, and active. Her house is full of fascinating objects, chaotic and wonderfully interesting. The view outside from the dining area is forested, lovely, wild and green. The following excerpt from our conversation shows that she has principles, and acts on them.

SUSAN MYERS: You knew Aminah before she married.
EDITH SMILACK: Oh, yes. I met her in 1958. I had graduated from Ohio State University in 1956 with a bachelor of arts, and I was out of school and trying to work on my own. When I graduated from Ohio State I had 44 hours over. I must have had five majors, Fine Arts, French, Russian, English, music.
SUSAN MYERS: You said you invited Aminah to show with you. And that things weren't good for blacks in those years —
EDITH SMILACK: Oh, not at all. They weren't invited to do anything.
SUSAN MYERS: So that was unusual for a white and black artist to show together?
EDITH SMILACK: Oh, yes. We [Aminah and I] touch base every now and then and I know she's there and she knows I'm here, and she knows I love her and I know she loves me. It's just one of those things. (Smilack, 1995)

My conversation with Edith showed me how early Aminah was dedicated to her art making. It also helped me see how important people like Edith Smilack have been in Aminah's life.

December 1995: My Sapelo

Ever since knowing about Aminah's pilgrimage to Sapelo Island, Georgia in 1983, I became very curious about Sapelo. I had never heard of Gullah islands or communities. Aminah's large body of work was fascinating to me. So was the actual location. For years I'd thought about going to Sapelo. In September of 1994, Susan Saxbe and I talked to Aminah about going to Sapelo together. After my months of study and interviewing, I decided I really had to see Sapelo for myself.

After much consultation with Aminah, I made my travel and lodging reservations for Sapelo. Aminah told me people she remembered from her trip. I wanted to follow up with people who'd met Aminah. Unfortunately, several people, including Mattie Carter had passed on. Knowing that I was going to Sapelo, Dr. Daniel suggested I view the film Daughters of the Dust. I rented it and watched it three times in a weekend. It was a beautiful, evocative, very rich film. I ordered the book about the making of the movie too, two copies, one for me and one for Aminah. I prepared for my trip, sending ahead supplies, reading Sapelo's People again.

On December 3, 1995, I interviewed Fran Luckoff who was the first collector of Aminah's work. Her newly remodeled home on Columbus's east side was filled with
remarkable a variety of art, sculpture and decorative objects, rather like a museum. She offered me ballet slippers to wear as I entered, to protect the painted flooring. Even pieces of furniture were art-ful objects! Our conversation gave me insights into the early years of Aminah's career.

The next day, just a week before my trip to Sapelo, I interviewed Gisela Josenhans for my study. Her home, like Luckoff's, is full of wonderful art and collected objects, a comfortable family home where she raised three now-grown children. I loved hearing Gisela talk about her relationship with Aminah and her deep respect and passion for her work. An accomplished photographer, Gisela has for many years taken it upon herself to chronicle in photographs Aminah's show, talks, book signings. During our conversation, she showed me several volumes of scrapbooks containing programs, photos, news articles, art critiques and letters all pertaining to her long relationship with Aminah. Gisela is enthusiastic, generous and down-to-earth. I promised to write to her from Sapelo. I think she wished she was coming along.

From Tuesday, December 12 to Thursday, December 21, 1995, I visited Sapelo Island, Georgia. The natural aspects of the island were wonderful. The human aspects of it were puzzling.

While waiting for the ferry, I struck up a conversation with two men who were raised on Sapelo, although they now lived on the mainland. They both loved Sapelo, visiting relatives there often. March Grovner told me, "Once you touch the ocean here you will have to come back" (M. Grovner, personal communication, December 12, 1995).
had a feeling he was right. Both men were curious about my reasons for visiting, and very kind to keep me company during the long wait. We talked about our favorite sports teams and our respective homes and families.

It was clear I was a stranger, and everyone I met was gracious. Everyone I met seemed interested in seeing the works Aminah did about Sapelo. On the ferry ride I talked at length with Becky Newell, the wife of a University of Georgia professor who has lived on the island for nearly 17 years. She was actually familiar with Aminah's work, having relatives in Ohio who had seen the 1990 show. She said "I have to warn you that the Sapelo's People book made some island residents mad" (B. Newell, personal communication, December 12, 1995). Some people felt the author had not spent enough time on the island to write a book. I wondered, had he taken people's stories from them? Becky's comment was a helpful clue about the mixed reaction my visit received.

The trip to Sapelo was an intense learning experience that I documented in lengthy journal entries and with many rolls of film. It would take another book to tell about. I spent most of my time walking and biking; sketching, listening, and writing; enjoying the beauty of the island flora and fauna. I met residents of Sapelo and day workers, State Department of Natural Resources workers. I had lunch at the senior center on weekdays, and attended church on Sunday. I toured the former plantation mansion and grounds. I spent a morning with Allen Green, a basket maker. I bought a couple baskets. I made special friends with a three year old boy, Kyle, and his great-grandmother, Miss Viola Johnson, who ran the general store. I missed my two children, so I needed someone to play with as much as Kyle did. While I met many people, only one person agreed to allow
our conversation recorded on tape, Cornelia Bailey. I had vague promises and
appointments with other people, but none panned out. I decided to enjoy my time in this
special place and not become invasive or pushy. I was an outsider. Time would tell.

January 1996: Sapelo Insights

After Christmas I sent follow-up letters to everyone I met on Sapelo: thank you
notes and candy to Caesar and Nancy; toys and dried fruit for Viola and Kyle; the
transcription for Cornelia; a museum catalog for Mrs. Green; a check and request for
sweet grass baskets to Georgina Grovner. I felt the need for follow-up trips to get a valid
picture of this unique place, and to establish trust and relationships.

Nancy Banks sent me a beautiful letter responding to my request that she share her
thoughts about Aminah's work. During my visit in December, she had asked about my
research and I'd left a catalog and several Aminah-illustrated books with Nancy and
Caesar. Nancy's letter was a welcome surprise, considering how reluctant people had been
about sharing their thoughts when I was there. Nancy's letter brought tears to my eyes. It
was a work of art in response to Aminah's art. I shared the letter with Aminah, who was
very touched as well.

Aminah and I discussed a trip to Sapelo in February, around her birthday. I made
solo reservations because the air travel rates were good. Aminah was very resistant. About
two weeks later, she called to say "We're going to Sapelo, all of us!" (A. Robinson,
personal communication, February, 1996). Her sisters were going also! It would be the
sisters' first trip to Sapelo. So I made the reservations and arrangements for the our entire
party.
The next section illuminates how my interpretation of Aminah's work continued to change throughout the research process. My insights came little by little. Sometimes though, I would integrate several insights, and voila! I would come to a much deeper understanding of some crucial aspect of Aminah's life and work.

A Sample Story-Weaving About Insights

It never occurred to me that someone might not like Aminah's work, let alone take offense at it. Without exception, everyone I had ever met loved the work or was awed by it. I was so caught up in the work that I was quite sure everyone else thought it was wonderful too. Aminah had alluded to people in the community not liking her work, not accepting her work, having trouble with it, not understanding it. This was outside my experience.

In December, I interviewed Gisela Josenhans. Gisela lent me the images she had made of Aminah's works, particularly the Sapelo pieces. I wanted to show the island residents some of the work that had come out of Aminah's 1983 trip. Gisela willingly made copies for me and also cautioned me.

GISELA JOSENHANS: [When you go to Sapelo] I would really test the waters first as to what the experience with Aminah was and what they thought of her. Then maybe little questions come, and say, how is she, what is she doing, and then gradually [ask them about her work]. Seeing themselves reproduced this way, you don't know if it strikes them as offensive. It may be a very natural thing for them to see themselves in these stick figures, but they also may not, and I would test the waters. (Josenhans, 1995)

This notion astounded me. Why would anyone take offense at Aminah's wonderful works? They were so evocative and tender, respectful and loving. Gisela suggested it may offend them to see the exaggerations of size and proportions of body parts, the use of
mud, the sticks for arms and legs. All the qualities I found so endearing and appealing, might give offense? I tucked the notion away, but was quite sure everyone would be delighted with the work once they saw it. Thank goodness Gisela alerted me to the possibility that the people of Sapelo Island might not have positive reactions to Aminah's work. Otherwise, I would have been caught off guard.

Gisela's photos turned out to be a very useful addition to my collection of images of Aminah's work. In my day pack, I carried a little book containing these images with me on my travels around the island. When someone asked why I was on Sapelo, I explained. An artist friend had been to Sapelo years ago, done hundreds of works as a result of her research and trip and that I was intrigued enough to want to see the place and meet the people for myself. I was curious to know what the people of Hog Hammock thought about the work my friend had done.

Everyone who saw the images was polite, seemed to be interested and accepting. Then I went to visit Cornelia Bailey, the self-appointed gatekeeper and matriarch of the island. With great anticipation about her reaction, I showed the pictures to Cornelia. Cornelia was one of the few people I came across, who had met Aminah back in 1983, and the only one who was willing to talk with me. We talked about Aminah's 1983 visit and the Sapelo body of work.

From the beginning of our conversation I sensed resistance on Cornelia's part. She finally allowed me to turn on the tape recorder, but there was a television blaring at one end of the room that only the two of us occupied. I found it difficult to concentrate on our conversation and hear all she said because of the racket. I prayed the tape would pick up
our conversation. In the first few minutes of our conversation, Cornelia alluded to the very thing Gisela warned me about. She said Aminah had sent her a couple images for the Sapelo Exhibit, but she had not shared them with her people because she thought that most people in Hog Hammock would have an ambivalent, if not negative reaction to the work. At first she explained it in terms of the island residents' notion of what is art.

CORNELIA BAILEY: [Some of the older people on Sapelo would say,] "What is this art? We don't look like that. That doesn't represent us." And to them, it's not art. Art to people [in this community is a] painting on the wall and flowers and trees and that kind of stuff. "That's pretty, who did that." This is like, "what in the world is this?" So often with simple people art is something you can look at and identify, not something you have to look at and try to figure it out. (Bailey, 1995)

I pressed Cornelia about this because I was still astounded that anyone would take offense. I asked her if she took offense. "No," she said.

It didn't offend me personally but it offended me because I knew it [would] offend other people. I didn't want my people to feel offended by anything that somebody did . . . .Now, I can see what she is getting at in these because these are iron pipes. Mama would have looked at it and said, "looks like nothing but a bunch of pipes and junk to me." She wouldn't see the music . . . . So, it depends on who you talk to. And how you describe it. (Bailey, 1995)

I was still confused and pressed her to explain. Eventually, she got to the heart of the matter.

You have to be Black for one thing to understand. If you're Black, [you've heard] repeated the same story over, that you're not attractive, your hair is not pretty and everything about you is way behind every other race. Then you look at this and people look at this [and might say], "Who's mocking me? Who's making fun of me?" (Bailey, 1995)

It made me uncomfortable to hear someone say Aminah's work was mocking people. I was sure this would hurt Aminah's feelings. Cornelia went on.

For years you've been told your hair was one way, your built was one way. You never had time to stop and think, well, God, molded me this way for a good
purpose. He wanted me to be this way, not with straight hair and even a slender build. This is the way He made me because this is the way He wanted me to be. But we was told that you didn't fit the regular mold with everybody else. "Well, hold it here now, you know, we're mocked enough in our life and berated and here comes this." What makes me worried is here comes this by one of us. So, see? The acceptance between what one person sees and what the other sees.

It's totally different. If a white person had did this, for instance, they [Sapelo's residents] would have said, "Well, they always think we are weird. They don't know no better." A black person did this and they go, "What's wrong with him or her?" You see? This is the way people think in this area. (Bailey, 1995)

I wondered if this was how everyone in the community would see it? When I returned to Columbus and had the tape transcribed, I was hesitant to give it to Aminah, as I did with all the tapes. I wanted to spare her feelings. So I gave it to her with a warning that my conversation with Cornelia was disappointing and I thought somewhat critical.

Aminah was not the least bit phased by what she found in the transcript. She called me and said, "People been saying things like that about my work for years. People in this community have always said these things about my work. It has not been accepted, the work, by people in this community" (A. Robinson, personal communication, January 1996). It finally dawned on me, when Aminah spoke of this community, I had assumed she meant the Columbus art community. Now I realized she meant her community, the African American community --her sisters, her nieces, her friends neighbors, other black artists, perhaps even Mr. Ward?

Until Cornelia spoke to me so bluntly about why a black person might take offense at a depiction like this, it didn't occur to me. Of course I was not from the community, I had not grown up hearing the things she and other Black folks had. I could not see it from that point of view until she so graciously and honestly shared her view with me.
I made another connection. Maybe this resistance Cornelia describes is similar to Aminah's resistance to the use of the word folk art about her work! To some people folk qualities are not endearing or to be celebrated, they are embarrassing and shameful. A.J. Olson addressed the so-called folk qualities in Aminah's work.

A.J. OLSON: [The lack of artifice] is very appealing to me. But, that's a thing that kind of troubles me. It causes me to reflect. It troubles me that it would be a limited and reflexive way of relating to something. . . . Being attracted to it by its rawness and lack of artifice. The rawness doesn't bother me so much. My concern comes to me in conjunction with . . . talking about Black folk art and associating the quality of folk with it, and diminishing it in some way. What's interesting in her work is that I think it really contradicts all of that. So does Joe Grant's. Another person that I think about is Bettye Saar's work and Alison Saar's work. There is something there.

If I were her, what would infuriate me about it [calling her work folk art] would be the limitations placed upon it. That people would see it as automatic, and not realize the thing she stresses - the work that has gone into it, and the insights and the intellect. When she does all these things with the buttons -- she may have a different way of talking about her work than I do--but I guarantee you this is not an accident. . . .my God, nobody can do all that and not be aware of it going on! (Olson, A.J., 1996)

Aminah's resistance to the term folk art goes well beyond what I initially believed to be an inappropriate label. The resistance is about a refusal to buy into the dominant society's long history of neglect of, ignorance about, and disdain for otherness.

February 1996: A Miracle on Sapelo

Just before the three Robinson sisters and I traveled to Sapelo Island, Aminah suggested that we each get a journal, and plan to write about our trip. She suggested, "When we go to bed at night, we can put down what we remember about the day. When we go to our rooms." (A. Robinson, personal communication, February 1995). The sisters
laughed a little. I thought it was a great idea. I hoped the sisters did too. It seemed Aminah wanted everyone to record/remember special events, to record their impressions so the experiences can be remembered.

By the evening of February 16, 1996, a Friday evening we made it safely to Sapelo, settled into our rooms, briefly visited Miss Viola and Kyle at the general store, then had our first luscious dinner in the Weekender’s dining room. After dessert, Nancy and Caesar came out to join our conversation. Gary and Andre, who were having dinner and a bottle of wine at a neighboring booth, got talking with us about art. Aminah suddenly got a curious look on her face as we debated about contemporary art. She pulled me aside to whisper "should I bring it out?" (A. Robinson, personal communication, February 16, 1996). I had no idea what she meant. Then I realized, her suitcase had not contained clothing. It contained one of her pieces!

Aminah and I excused ourselves to retrieve the art work from her room. We carefully set the bundle on a cleared-off dining table, then rolled it out. Oh my! How to even explain the wonder of it! The absolute thrill of discovery and wonder about this gem Aminah had created! We needed to put two tables end to end. Everyone worked together to rearrange the entire dining room. Out came the precious gift. Out came Aminah's talking about it. It is Dad's Journey, she said. The sisters and brothers; the tucked away books; the textures and buttons; the beads and charms.

Nancy Banks kept saying, "I believe we are sisters in spirit" (N. Banks, personal communication, February 16, 1996) to Aminah even before the piece was unrolled. I was getting the wonder shivers. Something magical was happening. We were all awestruck and
profoundly affected. There were moments of awed silences, groans and moans of appreciation, and wonder. Nancy "read" and understood the piece, without Aminah even explaining. Nancy and Aminah had never met before this evening!

The sisters had never seen this piece before. I had never seen it before. Now we shared this miracle together. The piece was heavy, weighty, full of meaning, full. Aminah kept saying, "It isn't finished, it isn't finished" (A. Robinson, personal communication, February 16, 1996). Gary and Andre were amazed and appreciative. "How lucky for us," said Gary, "You never know what to expect on a trip to Sapelo" (G. Peterson, personal communication, February 16, 1996). I had been trying to describe Aminah's work to Gary and Andre. Now they saw and felt and experienced it for themselves. How does one describe the experience? The buttons and beads were so weighty and beautiful, so very inviting to touch. Nancy soaks it in. Oh, yes, they are sisters in spirit.

On Monday morning, February 19, 1995, Lucy Lea came to call on us at the Weekender. I wanted Lucy and Aminah to meet! I knew Lucy would love the work and as a stringer for the mainland paper, Lucy wanted to do a feature story about Aminah's visit to Sapelo for the Darien News. It took a while to get warmed up. For a time, she and Aminah were not connecting. Lucy's big camera was in the way. The questions were in the way. Aminah was suspicious. But then the tide turned. Lucy shared some of her own photos with us. Aminah loved them. We all did. Eventually Aminah agreed to bring out Dad's Journey. Another miracle, another chance to breathe this piece in. I took charge of Lucy's camera so these two artist-women could warm up to each other.
March-August 1996: Setting the Warp, Seeing Patterns, Weaving

Spring and summer are spent organizing and writing the dissertation chapters. In August, the research came full-circle. I decided to interview A.J. Olson about meaning and value she found in Aminah's work, since A.J. was the one who first saw the beauty of this project. I wanted her perspective about Aminah's work, as well. Luckily, A.J. was spending the summer in Columbus. Her insights were remarkable.

When Aminah read the transcript of my conversation with A.J., she said: "She really sees into my work. Even you [Susan] didn't see what she saw in the buttons." I told Aminah, "I am really just a gatherer, not any kind of expert. I am learning from all these perspectives" (A. Robinson, personal communication, August, 1996).

This chapter provided a time line and chronicled the linear chronological process of the research. In the next chapter, I analyze and synthesize the interview data according to two main categories: making meaning and ascribing value to Aminah's work.
CHAPTER 5

PATTERNS AND IDIOSYNCRACIES IN MAKING MEANING
AND ASCRIBING VALUE

Chapter Five is an analysis/synthesis of the data. It examines mainly the interviews and focuses on four questions: what do people say the work is about; how do they create those meanings?; what do people value in the work?; and what criteria do they use to ascribe value to the work? I examine patterns and idiosyncracies in the process of meaning making and ascribing value, and investigate individual differences in these processes.

Creating Meaning: What is the Work About?

To obtain deeper and multi-faceted meanings from Aminah's work, I examined different people's perspectives with regards to their process of making meaning and their process of ascribing value. Many participants explicitly state what they think Aminah's work is about. These statements are arranged in the first section of this chapter. Statements with similar content are grouped together. I arranged the comments so the content flows from one idea to another.

AMINAH ROBINSON: It's a living—a vibration through the lives of others. It has nothing to do with Aminah. It takes on a whole new life. I'm just a part of it. It has nothing whatsoever to do with me. It's a vibration of this community and these people; they carry it on. It's not just a visual that somebody put up on a wall, even

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though that's part of it. It takes on another life through a community that has passed this same vibration on through me. It's my life's work. I will never let people forget where they came from. It's important because of our children coming up today. They need to respect that tradition. I think by respecting the traditions and what came before, they in turn will learn to respect people making their way. (Robinson, 1995a)

NANCY BANKS: I've not been privileged to meet Ms. Robinson, but I feel the drawings tell me something about her, that she doesn't want us to forget where we came from and she wants to give us something to hold on to in the future. (N. Banks, personal communication, January 2, 1996)

SHARRON BARNES: Her work is about the things that she has encountered in growing up, because every piece that she has made or done pertains in some kind of way to something that she has experienced. I think she's telling more [than about herself, she's telling], about what has happened in the black community; things that have happened in the black community. (Barnes, 1995)

SUE SCOTT: [Aminah's] emphasis is on her community; the family; her immediate community within the city here. It extends over to Africa, because a lot of the work she does has that African influence. (Scott, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: Aminah has gone through 50 different lives. Her favorite thing [to say] is that she's walking. As you walk, you experience different things. In her work you can see so many different places that she's been. So, if a person stands—if a person is not moving, then you don't see much movement in their productivity either. But when a person is moving and producing, you can see where they have been, and Aminah's been lots of places; physically and mentally. If there's something that she wants you to understand—she paints and she does history. (Kamau, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: To me Aminah's art is about people, history, making connections, love, spirituality, community and family. Aminah takes such pride in her art, as does anyone who is privileged to own her work. Through her artwork she is able to bring others into her works—a wonderful place to be. (S. Saxbe, personal communication, April 8, 1996)

Her work is about her life growing up. But she [also] does a lot of things that she sees now. For example, she spent time in New York, which is where the Homeless Series came from. But she does seem to keep going back to her roots... (Saxbe, 1995)
A.J. OLSON: There were all of these circles and cycles surrounding her art like connecting... Here were all these buttons cast, literally cast is the way she arrays them, in this dispersal this generous dispersal. I thought how wonderful it was that it just set up these vibratory waves of connection. (Olson, 1996)

SUSAN SAXBE: She's weaving it all together—her life, her memories. She's sewing them together; whereas another artist goes out and looks at a landscape and paints the landscape the way they see it; she [Aminah] is weaving her life together. Connectedness is what her work is about. I think she's trying to put those parts of her life together... It's about history; an innocence that once was; her life. I think in a lot of ways she's a historian. (Saxbe, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: She's a historian; I think that's what Aminah's work is about. Aminah is making work about Black history and the preservation of the culture, celebrating it. Her work is totally positive. It's highly spiritual. (Solway, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: I imagine her filled with all these memories and interpretations of memories and visual meanings. I imagine her mind just churning these things around and then churning them out. She's trying to make sense of her everyday world, I guess, in a way recorded, but also communicated. (Draeger, 1995)

A.J. OLSON: To me what the buttons were... it's this notion of connecting—and the tenuous connection that we have with things. To fasten something with a button isn't to link it very strongly. It's not like super glue or concrete or cement, it's tenuous. You think of how many places in the world, it's sufficient and it just serves. I think it serves best sometimes those kind of connections where things are buttoned. (Olson, 1996)

EDITH SMILACK: She's really reporting. She's like a reporter. Her work is story-like. She's reporting things in the only way she knows how... It's very simple too. There are no pretensions. She just paints what she feels and sees. I think she has to feel it. She's always storytelling. (Smilack, 1995)

FRAN LUCKOFF: [It's about] Sapelo, and of her family. She does only her Black people... It's a history of her people. I don't know anyone who's done that exactly like she does. I see things that people put together with some beads and some color and different materials, but Aminah always has more to hers than that. She has a history in the work. (Luckoff, 1995)
JOSEPH CANZANI: She says that it is [about] humanity. She's saying her feelings. [Her work is] about her life—all people. They are all human beings. She sees people who created [her] and now [she] expresses her world: "Look how wonderful it is, look how expressive it is!" (Canzani, 1995)

GISELA JOSENHANS: Her work is all about the love of the human being. And of course, it's the African-American community. . . . You see, she can grasp that community feeling. She has that whole humanity in her work. That's what distinguishes her so much. (Josenhans, 1995)

I asked A.J. Olson, "What do you sense moves through Aminah's work?" She responded,

A.J. OLSON: Generosity. I think that is what is really important in this world is opening ourselves; Nino Fidencio says, "a heart thrown open." He's a healer. I think that's what we all want, is to throw our heart open. But it's the scariest thing to do. I mean not only is it the scariest thing to do it is the scariest to do. Not just in the sense level, but in the real level; and I think that's what she does. . . . I think that is what she really does. (Olson, 1996)

I tried to get Aminah to tell me about the inner, deep meaning in her work. I asked her, "What is it I sense in your work, something hidden?" She replied,


AMINAH ROBINSON: My work is not a vehicle for any for the "isms" not political in any form, as for example feminism, racism, or—no isms. However, my work is about people, historical data, traditions, lost communities, and always the minkisi. Check Robert Farris Thompson's book Flash of the Spirit. (A. Robinson, personal communication, November 11, 1994)

How Do People Make Meaning from Aminah's Work?

In analysis of the data, I found meanings were derived in five ways: (a) the participant knows the artist and base the meaning on knowing her; (b) the participant received information from the artist that they used to make meaning ("she told me"); (c) the participant drew on personal experience; (d) the participant saw the meaning, or found
it visually in the work; (e) the participant based the interpretation on readings and research. The following section groups the interview data by the five categories listed above.

**Based on the Participant Knowing the Artist**

KOJO KAMAU: She works like there may not be a tomorrow, which means that she works like she's not going to be here tomorrow so she has to finish today. I have been knowing her a long time and she has always worked that way! At one point, I felt like maybe she knew something that the rest of us didn't know; something about life that she knows and she's trying to get all this out. (Kamau, 1995)

SHARRON BARNES: Every piece that she has made or done pertains in some kind of way to something that she has experienced. Like my Uncle giving detailed information about the Blackberry Patch. . . . She would go to the library and get more information to make sure it was accurate, and then she would do the painting on that. Just from the story. . . . It was something either she experienced or someone she knew told her about it.

Most of the information she has is from my father's side of the family. She did not have a lot of information about my mother's side of the family. . . . She [Aminah] was different. I wasn't interested [family stories]. My mother would kind of discourage that going back and telling everything. [My mom would say,] "What are you telling her that? She doesn't need to know that. We're living for today. Tell her about what she should be doing in the future." That type of thing. But she [Aminah] wanted to know what happened back there; who was successful; what black businesses developed?

SUSAN MYERS: How old do you think she was when she was quizzing him on these things?

SHARRON BARNES: Probably a young teenager. (Barnes, 1995)

Aminah's older sister, Sue Scott remembered the impact their father has on the girls.

I remember my dad doing a lot of things with us, but he always catered to Brenda because, I think, he could see that Brenda had the talent. Most any place we would go, she would choose to draw. If we went somewhere on the bus, she would draw. SUSAN MYERS: Did she carry a notebook with her?

SUE SCOTT: Yes. She always did, and I don't know why.

SUSAN MYERS: How young do you remember seeing her with the notebooks?
SUE SCOTT: Oh, [about five years old]... most of the time she would have her little notebook. (Scott, 1995)

Edith Smilack has known the artist since Aminah was in art school. her reflections are based on decades of knowing Aminah. Edith reflected,

[Aminah]s very childlike. She's a grown woman but with a childlike soul. She explores. Her art really is more like formed caricatures of things and people; even the hands are exaggerated like Ben Shahn's. She sees everything with such a purity and sweetness and wholesomeness; it's as though she's seeing it for the first time. She could have seen it a million times; she still sees it at something very unique and original. I think she's captured that in her work, and I think that's what shows through.

That's Aminah, she finds beauty in everything; a button, a little piece of dead leaf, everything is—I think it comes natural to her. She has to express herself, she really does. (Smilack, 1995)

SUE SCOTT: Aminah, she's a researcher herself--she researches all kinds of things before she paints. (Scott, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: I just remember in high school that she was always serious about the art, you know. She was serious about art and many of us were in the art class because it was an easy credit, we thought, and you got to work in all the different mediums, clay and charcoal. (Kamau, 1995)

EDITH SMILACK: We were very good friends. I spent my life painting and sculpting and working in fine arts. I used to see a lot of Aminah. I liked her. I liked the way she talked and thought. She saw life very clearly and understood it very clearly. Her main love was painting and sculpting. That's all she wanted to do.

I can really relate to her. I think if there's such a thing as life before or after, I'm sure knowing Aminah for all eternity. She's special. She's very mystical. (Smilack, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: Her art is her life. People that know her know that. (Saxbe, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: You're not selling the work, you're selling the [artist] person. You have to talk to the clients about who made this work and who they are and why and what they are about. That's why personal relationships [between a dealer and an artist] are important, because you know them well enough to express who they really are as human beings. Because the work is the person! They are synonymous. (Solway, 1995)
FRAN LUCKOFF: I think it's fun to learn a lot about the artist and how they live and where they come from. (Luckoff, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: [We thought of sending Aminah to Africa] because she worked the hardest, she deserved to go, and I knew it would have an impact on her work. I just knew it. (Kamau, 1995)

EDITH SMILACK: No, I don't think you have to know her to understand her work. If you want to get into the soul of the thing it helps, but I think you can comprehend her work, it's there, you know. Very few people can do that, take the essence of a thing or a person and mark it down with very simple lines, that's true art. (Smilack, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: Well, I see it in her work. And I see it from the way she talks about the work and her life. (Solway, 1995)

GISELA JOSENHANS: Aminah says, "I have all these colors around me and I have to cover them because they all talk to me." She has this perfect communication with her art work. There is no need to think about composition or what shape and color. It's all intuitive, and that's what makes her that phenomenal artist that she is. Even there are these arguments, oh no, she's a folk artist. No, she has gone to CCAD. Doesn't make a difference with her. She learned in CCAD very important things that she's using, but that didn't change any of her humanity and artistry. I think ultimately that's what you see. (Josenhans, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: What I see in it is a history of her life because a lot of it is personal and historical. . . . I am not an art expert and I don't claim to be one. I just present and collect. . . . [If people ask,] "why the hands and the feet so big?" I'd tell them, it's her interpretation; I guess the feet are big because we, as a people, have had to stand tall. So she puts emphasis—and we work with our hands—so these are two very important parts of our body. That's how we have survived. So it shows in her work.

SUSAN MYERS: Did Aminah tell you that?
KOJO KAMAU: No. That's how I interpret it. Somehow. I feel like I've talked to her enough to know that—in other conversations that really don't have anything to do with art, just in general conversations and speaking historically and stories that she's told. (Kamau, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: I was attracted to her art and to her, and I wanted to hear her speak. I felt like I was listening to a poem when she spoke, when she talked about Sapelo. . . . When she speaks about something that really means a lot to her, she speaks in poetry kind of form; not in rhyme. I was totally attracted to the way she spoke. It flows; it's very beautiful. The way she speaks is an art in itself. (Saxbe, 1995)
SUSAN SAXBE: The way she uses fabrics and buttons and all that just interested me so much. Since I have known Aminah Robinson—I will never look at buttons and fabric samples the same. When I go into stores and they have old fabric samples, I ask them if I can have them for Aminah. Who would ever think that you would pay attention to old fabric samples? But I do now! And music boxes . . . I never did before I knew Aminah Robinson; how important they are to her; the buttons and the beads. (Saxbe, 1995)

Based On What the Artist Said

SUSAN SAXBE: A lot of these people in her pieces have names. They are people she knew and you wouldn't know unless she told you. She'll show me a piece and there might be 10 people in the piece and she'll say, "now that's me"--she puts herself in pieces, too--"now that's me and that's so and so, and that's so and so" . . . (Saxbe, 1995)

EDITH SMILACK: I remember when my husband died in 1968 and in that mourning period, I went to see her and she tried to console me. The only thing she said to me was, "We have to be free to create. We just have to be free." That's what she said to me "You have to be free to create." (Smilack, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: Well, I see it in her work. And I see it from the way she talks about the work and her life. (Solway, 1995)

SUE SCOTT: What she wants her work to say, most of it has got to do with Africa. Even with the rhythmic sayings that she has, those are derived from across the sea there. . . . These are things that have been passed along. When we were younger, we all played games. . . . The mothers sat there and watched; we would play games, and most of them were rhythmic games. [Aminah] said, "do you know where those games came from?"—after she came back from Africa—she said, "the little kids over there play those type of games." I said, "Oh, they do?" She said, "Yes, most of those are from across the ocean." (Scott, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: I learn bits and pieces every time I go over there. There are so many people involved in Aminah's life; now and in the past . . . Aminah is very complex. There are things about her life, community and it's the weaving together of everybody in her family [See Appendix E] and the people. . . . I think in a lot of ways she is a historian. (Saxbe, 1995)

SUE SCOTT: I think it [the trip to Africa] brought her to where she knew who she was and what she wanted to do in life. She came back with a new name. She said she felt like she was safer there than she was over here. She said you could lay down in the street over there and go to sleep and nobody would bother you or
your belongings. She said you could go into a store and leave your belongings out on the street and nobody would bother them. . . . She told me that every day in Addis Ababa [Ethiopia], she would go into this temple and just draw, and the people would let her come in every day and that's all she did was draw. I remember she said she went to the place where they loaded the slaves up on the ship; she sat in there and drew. She said it made her—I can't say upset, I guess it was—heart-wrenching knowing all that had gone on in that room. (Scott, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: Whenever I can get the client to meet Aminah, I do. They love to talk to Aminah about it, and that's why I like my job so much. I get to bring people to her house and she gets to tell them, and I get to listen. You know, you were there. . . . Definitely. I want the client to meet her. (Saxbe, 1995)

MRS. LEWIS: I would ask her what did she have in mind when she was doing this? First I'd ask the name of it, like The Street. And she would tell me. And then I'd ask her to explain her work, and she could. She did it. And I would write it down. And we'd talk on the phone. (Lewis, 1995)

**Drawing From Personal Experience or Personal Reasons**

CORNELIA BAILEY: It's not that hard to interpret a thing. You just have to look within yourself and then go from in to out and you can interpret most things. You have to go within and you have to know yourself and you have to know your people in order to do that. So, if you don't know yourself, then you can't interpret that at all. You have to know what you're about to say and how you're about to say it because everything you say refers to you, yourself. When you're interpreting something, you're giving somebody a piece of yourself and your thoughts on what you see in that picture. You have to know yourself. If you don't know yourself . . . you can't interpret it. (Bailey, 1995)

A.J. OLSON: I could go on about these buttons for ten years. The buttons in their profusion made a real link. I thought that everyone must have a button can at home. . . . I think about all these cans of buttons; when I was a little kid I'd just sit there and sort them, and I'd look at them. Actually, they were probably the first art objects that I ever saw in abundance. There were so many of them, there were so many different kinds! You could speculate about their histories, and they evoked all kinds of things from the past; where they might of been, and what they might have done, and what they stood for. Many of them you didn't see anymore. I remember that they were just such treasures and so wonderful. What impressed me about her work was the associations that I connected in the work distributed with all these. (Olson, 1996)

KOJO KAMAU: We [Kojo and his wife] went to Africa for the first time, and the trip was so inspiring. . . . I knew Aminah and I knew how hard she works, and I
knew that if she went to Africa it would have to have an effect on her art work because it had one on mine. I knew that that would really give her a whole bunch of stuff to do, and it did.

I knew the impact it [Africa] had on me and I knew, any artist who goes has to be affected because you can't just go home and not be affected. (Kamau, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: You can see that Aminah has something special in her work. Maybe because I like to communicate in my work and she likes to communicate in her work, that we might have something in common there, I saw that. (Kamau, 1995)

When viewing Aminah's work at an exhibition in Cincinnati, I noticed my companion, Peggy Draeger was drawn to the part of the Poindexter Quilt with the words "Tuesday is ironing day." Peggy explained,

We grew up that way; Monday was always wash day and Tuesday was ironing day. Who has a rhythm like that anymore? Well, my life growing up, this routine was brought in from the outside. It was brought in from our domestic help which was black, so that [personal experience] added a whole other layer of meaning to me. It was always Ruth that did the washing and the ironing; and she was a stabilizing influence in our family. Ruth was like this rock in our family. She's the one that kept our lives from being chaotic. So that [image and thought of her] raised warm feelings for me. (Draeger, 1995)

JOSEPH CANZANI: I'm so sensitive to everything. Most people don't get it. You have to be responsive to the quality of greatness; you have to educate your eyes. Most people don't know what they see. They think they do—because they have eyes they think they know how to see, but they don't. Everybody has to get educated. (Canzani, 1995)

CORNELIA BAILEY: Now, I can see what she is getting at in these because these are iron pipes. This is a rendering of art that is different from what these people [who live in the Hog Hammock Community]] would understand.

If you take it to Pop, he's 92 years old. When someone asks him, what can you see, and he'd say, nothing. He wouldn't see anything in there, even if you describe it. He's a pretty astute little man but he would have said, "nothing." And Mama would have looked at it and said, "looks like nothing but a bunch of pipes and junk to me." That would be it, because they wouldn't see the music. They wouldn't see the hand. They wouldn't see the tuning fork.
Yeah, [those are things I see] and from all of that I would see music, I would see music in the expression of the faces here. So, it depends on who you talk to, and how you describe it. (Bailey, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: [Consider this] wonderful piece of a mother holding her child. If you're a mother and you're looking at a piece like that, there's not a whole lot you have to explain. You just kind of fall in love with it. You connect. A lot of her work, I don't think, needs explaining. (Saxbe, 1995)

CORNELIA BAILEY: Even if you're black, you'll never get to know Sapelo. [Even] if you come for a length of time, you're considered an outsider. No matter what color your face is, you are an outsider still because there are things about Sapelo you will never know; never feel, learn, touch at all [unless you have] been born into this group. But other than that, it will escape you. (Bailey, 1995)

I asked Sharron Barnes, Aminah's younger sister, if knowing Aminah helped her understand the work. Sharron responded,

Sure, it brings back the memories, a lot of memories. Some things that have vanished in my mind, and as soon as I see it I remember it . . . Oh, I forgot they even existed. (Barnes, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: Steve's mom used to make quilt tops out of old feed sacks from the farm. Chicken feed would come in these—she'd made dresses from these feed sacks. They would be cotton—somewhat of a coarse cotton, but always a pattern, color, flower or plaid. I've got a couple of them down in the basement. She would cut those up and then they would take the wool from the sheep and kind of fluff that up and put that down as batting or matting and then she put the quilt tops and just tied them together.

I just wonder if those were feed sacks [in Aminah's piece]. It looked old. It looked like it could have been something from the forties, thirties. [Maybe] it was something laying around that her mother may have had. A lot of city people did keep chickens. It immediately gave me this rural connection to the woman, and of course, the straw hat is what is worn around the fields. (Draeger, 1995)

Cornelia Bailey and Nancy Banks both saw metaphorical meaning in the work. They saw beyond the surface of the work and gave several suggestions for symbolic meaning of the images. Cornelia commented on a photographic reproduction of a

**CORNELIA BAILEY**: I can figure it out. I can figure most things out and a lot of people can't. You have to work your mind to figure out exactly where it's coming from or what led up to it. [For instance,] the Basket Woman.[See Appendix F] . . . I can look at it and interpret this as the interweaving of a lot of culture, [and] a lot of colors. You can look at it and see the religious aspect of it where the man is in the lead and the woman is always following. You can look at it from the aspect of time, as time travels, how we travel, how we went from one phase to another phase. So, it depends on how you want to look at this. So, it's not one thing. You cannot get one [interpretation]—you can't look at it and say, oh, yeah, this is definitely a woman making a basket like my grandmother used to. (Bailey, 1995)

Nancy Banks's comments are quoted directly from a letter she wrote to me.

Some of my feelings about a few of the selections [in *The Teachings*, a book by Aminah] are as follows:

In "Keep You Eyes On The Prize . . . We are encouraged to keep our hands on the chariot.
In "Hold On" . . . We are encouraged to keep our hands on the plow.
In "Woke Up This Mornin' With My Min' On Freedom" . . . the arms and hands are crossed abreast, denoting elation!
In "Weeping Mary" . . . The hands are used to cradle the face of the figure.
In "Scandalize My Name" . . . Give her my right han'.
In "Deep River" . . . The thumbs of the hands appear to be twiddling, signifying deep thoughts.
In "Give Me Jesus" . . . The hands appear to be ready for accepting a precious gift.
In "We Shall Overcome" . . . We walk hand in hand.
In" I'll Take the Wings of the Morning" . . . The hands appear to be positioned in the form of a pair of wings.
In "Motherless Child" . . . The empty hands have no mother to embrace.
In "I've Been Buked" . . . The hands appear to be clinched in determination, so as not to let anything hold her back.
In "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" . . . The hands denote the low sweep of the chariot.
In "I Got a Key to That Kingdom" . . . The hands are clasped in gratitude with the facial expression showing elation.
In "Amazing Grace" . . . The hands are lifted denoting a superior power.
In "Be Still And Know" . . . "They nailed him to a tree" through his hands.
In "Free At Last" . . . The hands and facial expression compliment each other denoting jubilee. (N. Banks, personal communication, January 2, 1996)

I See It In the Work

CARL SOLWAY: I see it in her work. And I see it from the way she talks about the work and her life. (Solway, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: What I noticed about her work--there's this common thread--and that's a pun because she has threads that run throughout her work. There seems to be such a connectedness. If you look at a lot of her pieces, and there's a group of people, they are all holding hands. (Saxbe, 1995)

NANCY BANKS: As I thumbed through The Teachings, the part of the drawings that caught my attention was the size of the hands in proportion to the rest of the bodies and figures. It seems special emphasis was placed on them in the drawing. This started me to thinking about the importance of hands. (N. Banks, personal communication, January 2, 1996)

GISELA JOSENHANS: Look at her art, and it's not just the work that I have in my house, it's in every one of her images. It's community; it's the human individual, it's family. (Josenhans, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: That I noticed, and I loved the colors. And I noticed that she changes her [palette]. She has an incredible eye for color and putting colors together. She can put combinations of colors together that I have never seen together and they are just so beautiful. And the building up, she does this too. She's always building these fabrics up; they are very cubistic . . . She does a lot of layering; working on top of each other. Things always seem to be overlapping and connected. (Saxbe, 1995)

EDITH SMILACK: She always had this ability to express herself in simple, powerful terms visually, always directed to the point. (Smilack, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: Every time you look at her work, you see something else. I was looking at some pictures last night; I noticed that a lot of times she will put heads upside down like this. (Saxbe, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: I think you can relate to her art without knowing her because it really says so much. It tells you a lot about the community that she comes from or background or where she's been. I don't think a person has to know her to receive something from her work at all. (Kamau, 1995)
EDITH SMILACK: I don't think you have to know her to understand her work. If you want to get into the soul of the thing it helps, but I think you can comprehend her work, it's there, you know. Very few people can do that, take the essence of a thing or a person and mark it down with very simple lines, that's true art. (Smilack, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: I could show you better. This was a piece that she did in 1973 of Elijah Pierce. [The first piece he showed me was 18-by-24-inch, black, pen and ink, with white conte on a greenish felt paper.] This was the kind of thing that she was doing back in the seventies, and, of course, it didn't have a lot of color to it. After she went to Africa and she came back, she was doing things like this. [He shows me a large fabric painting hanging in the stairwell]. . . Which has bright color and a lot of action—there's a lot of stuff going on in there. (Kamau, 1995)

SUE SCOTT: And I can see how her art has changed over the years. [When she came back from Africa it became] more straightforward. (Scott, 1995)

EDITH SMILACK: It shows in her work. She has a sensitivity, I think, almost supernatural. (Smilack, 1995)

NANCY BANKS: Ms. Myers, I could go on but I won't prolong your time, I think I've made my point. As I browse through Sophie I notice the same emphasis on the hands. (Banks, 1996)

Readings, Research, Contextual Information

In this section, four participants mention the importance of contextual information informing interpretation of art works.

PEGGY DRAEGER: [The information that the quilt was about Poindexter Village] definitely changed my view of what I was looking at. Suddenly I wasn't looking at this place that could have been anywhere in any situation; it was somewhere down the street from me. It just had a different meaning. The meaning became very relevant to my life and it also probably stopped me from imagining other places and other lives and other things. (Draeger, 1995)

NANCY BANKS: In her introduction Ms. Robinson mentions that the spirituals "continue to reach out and offer hope." I believe that the hands in the drawing compliment the spiritual by offering the gesture of "reaching out." (N. Banks, personal communication, January 2, 1996)

CORNELIA BAILEY: These young people you teach have to know history; they have to know the inter-makings of people in this particular area or any area similar
to this. They have to do studies on everything from slavery, basket making; just a whole inter-network of people from one stage to the other. That is not a picture of some guy selling fruit on the corner there. You have to interpret what kind of fruit he's selling or why he is selling it. So, he's selling cantaloupes and cucumbers on the street here; he might not like the cotton-picking thing. He's selling it because it's a business. He's making money from it to support himself and his family. So you can interpret why he's selling it on the street, you know, because he probably can't afford a rental place for one thing. (Bailey, 1995)

MRS. LEWIS: Always. No matter what show, I wanted a catalog, that's necessary. [Seeing the show] . . . still didn't give me the information that I needed to truly be able to appreciate it. Seeing a show one time can't do it, therefore, the catalog was a Bible to me, because not only just seeing [the work matters]. I could come home and study that. (Lewis, 1994)

Valuing Art Work

I asked the participants if they valued Aminah's work, and why. Some people questioned my use of the word value, wondering if I meant monetary value. I answered, "Not necessarily." I asked them to use the term as they understood it. In this section people describe what they value about Aminah's art work. I found five different categories: (a) the participant values the relationship with the artist; (b) the participant values how the work teaches about history/humanity; (c) the participant has personal reasons to value the work; (d) the participant values the visual/aesthetic qualities of the work; (e) the participant does not value the art for investment reasons.

Relationship With the Artist

GISELA JOSENHANS: This wonderful friendship that she allowed me to have with her—that's the most valuable thing in all of this. (Josehnans, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: From my point of view, as a dealer, after you have done this all these years, the clients are less interesting. Their motives aren't always pure and their hearts aren't pure [laughs]. And their intentions aren't what you'd like them to be; and have the work treated the way that you would like it to be treated.
The best part about the whole profession is working with the artist, you get to be close to the creative process. And eventually, to a degree, to assist. That's how I want to work in my old age, you know, move away from the clients and closer to the artist. (Solway, 1995)

FRAN LUCKOFF: Well, I love trying to be a part of [artist's] life in some way, you know, to promote them. But I like to do things like that. I think it's fun, and you learn a lot about the artist and how they live and where they come from. (Luckoff, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: The really serious collector knows that the reason they are collecting art is the entry point and the price of admission to the best creative activities of their own lifetime. . . . They are paying the price of admission by buying work to access to the creative energy of their own lifetime, the best creative energy, they want access to the person. (Solway, 1995)

Value How the Work Teaches History/Humanity

FRAN LUCKOFF: Well, it's a history of her people. I would think that would have great value. I don't know anyone who's done that exactly like she does. I see things that are comforters that people put together and they use some beads and they use some color and they use different materials, but she always has more to hers than that. She has a history on it, and she plans it up in her head very carefully. She'll work till 4 or 5:00 in the morning without stopping, without eating. (Luckoff, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: Absolutely, her work is valuable in the sense that it's a document, a record, and it's valuable in the historical sense. What makes art valuable is its contribution as the record of the experiences of that person. Some artist's work is valuable because its makes a contribution to the visual vocabulary. [It is an] exploration of materials, formal questions, which to me is that aspect of art I find boring. (Solway, 1995)

SUSAN SAXBE: I would not know what Poindexter Village was if it wasn't for Aminah Robinson. I don't think I knew who Elijah Pierce was until I saw an Aminah Robinson piece. She's done so much on Elijah Pierce. She really is a history writer. She is writing history about her community. I don't see anybody else doing it.

I think she is [a historian] in a way. She's telling all these stories about Poindexter Village, to me that's a historian. I was never into history growing up; yet I can sure get into this kind of history because it's visual. I can see it through her art. This is the bottom line—I can learn history, the history of Poindexter Village, because Aminah Robinson does it through her art. And so someone like me who is a visual person, I can really learn history. I have learned more history by
being a docent at the museum, by looking at paintings... I learn about history through art. That's how I learn about history 80% of the time. (Saxbe, 1995)

GISELA JOSENHANS: It's the whole Sapelo story she tells and this loving portrayal... I think this is how she sees them. [For most observers] those are people that kind of walk along the road. The minute she puts that image onto a piece of paper, onto a piece of cloth, they become distinctive, appreciated human beings. That's what she did with the homeless; she takes the essence of people. (Josenhans, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: The art market isn't always an appropriate measure of the value of work. If you take this work and you bury it, and when there is an archaeological in the year three thousand— you uncover that work— you know something about the year 2000 from looking at that work. (Solway, 1995)

GISELA JOSENHANS: She can grasp that community feeling. [Her piece, See Appendix G] the music box project, hers stands so far above the other ones. She has that whole humanity in that piece. That's what distinguishes her so much. (Josenhans, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: That quilt - Poindexter Village - what a historical quilt! I think you could learn more by looking at that and being drawn into it than probably if she had written a memoir of what it was like growing up. (Draeger, 1995)

Value for Personal Reasons

SUSAN MYERS: So, to you, Aminah's work is valuable because she's your sister.

SHARRON BARNES: Yes. And it brings back [memories]. Everything she does it's about how and when we grew up. She remembers things that I wouldn't think of remembering! But because she has put it down on paper and saved everything and remembered all that stuff. (Barnes, 1995)

Aminah's older sister Sue was showing me a large painting by Aminah. It was hung in her living room and depicted the artist Elijah Pierce. She mentioned Aminah suggested that Sue donate the piece someday.

SUE SCOTT: I said I'm going to keep it until I get tired of it. But I don't think I'll ever get tired of it.

SUSAN MYERS: So, if you could pick a piece— do you think about choosing something to have?
SUE SCOTT: Yes, the one that she had at the museum [a buttonwork piece]. She said she had already donated it. I just fell in love with that one.

SUSAN MYERS: What makes it valuable to you?

SUE SCOTT: It's part of the family. I don't think I will ever give it up. Because she made it and I just feel like it's part of the family now; I'm not going to give it up. [The pieces bring back memories for me]. Then when people we grew up with come to her exhibits, they say, "Oh, I remember!" It just brings back a lot of memories.

SUSAN MYERS: She's the record keeper for all of you, isn't she?

SUE SCOTT: All of us, yes. She has a really good memory. Yes, she can remember. (Scott, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: A lot of [Aminah's] pieces, I can relate to because I've been there, so that has special meaning and I've taken a photograph similar to it. (Kamau, 1995)

EDITH SMILACK: I think she sold it there [in Puerto Rico] and I felt so terrible. I would have loved to have had that. It was a lovely—it was a small book and it was illustrated and it was called My Friend Edith. I'd love to find it. Aminah would know who she sold it to I think, and I would love to have that today. (Smilack, 1995)

A.J. OLSON: I guess what struck me about that was her generosity, in just setting all of these [buttons] loose: the common ones, the rare ones, the old ones, the precious ones. They were just all arrayed there, for you to look at. That's what really knocked me out about her work. (Olson, 1996)

CARL SOLWAY: I don't work with anybody that I'm really not close friends with. And if we can't maintain a feeling of closeness as friends, then it doesn't work. (Solway, 1995)

When Sue Scott, Aminah's older sister, found out her father's people were from Sapelo Island, Georgia, It intrigued her.

SUE SCOTT: I said, "how [could that be]?" And, well, Brenda, she does all the research and she has it all right there. I guess it's meant to be for her to find that out... I just wonder how they got out. Why did they leave, you know?... Like my husband's family, they are from Alabama, and they had to leave because the Klan was after the father, so the whole family left. (Scott, 1995)

AMINAH ROBINSON: Art has to be consistent within your life regardless of what comes and goes and must be a part of your diet. It must be a way of life. I don't see that with anybody else in this family. Art is not a way of life, you see. It is
a way of life [for me]. It's always been a way of life, and I think that's where the
difference is, because I refuse to conform to other people's ways. I have my own
way, I have my own life, and this is what I'm going to do. . . . It is not just my life,
it is a way of life. It's beyond my life, and that's the difference. (Robinson, 1995a)

A.J. OLSON: Where in the heck did she get all these buttons? It occurred to me
that she must have enormous resources, and that they must be personal, not
monetary. There would be no way that you could get all these buttons by
purchasing them. Even if you were looking in old shops and buying them, or
buying them at garage sales. Now I may be wrong on this. When I looked at her
work I speculated that her work had this aspect where a lot of other people knew
she used buttons and would give her buttons. (Olson, 1996)

GISELA JOSENHANS: The Sapelo one that we have downstairs, it was brilliant
when we got it [and now the colors have faded]. But I have a choice, either I'm
going to put it away into a box and I'll never see it again, or I'm going to have it
out. And the room, of course, is sunny down there. But it's such a joy to have it
there. So I guess if it gets kaput, what can you do, right? (Josenhans, 1995)

FRAN LUCKOFF: I've loved art since I was born. I don't think I'm a collector, I
just think I buy what I like. I'm an art major. I'm a designer. We all lived a life with
art, and I don't want to be without it. (Luckoff, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: But when you started looking at a piece like that on a day to
day basis. I can't think of a more wonderful place [to put the sculpture] than in a
dull office. Either you can smile at when you glance at it, or something that would
only for a moment take you away from your mundane task, or just something that
hits you that's creative. It's great. I can't imagine not having [art around me].
(Draeger, 1995)

GISELA JOSENHANS: I like to live with them. Sometimes I find just before I go
to bed I just wander around my house and look at these paintings because they all
have personal connections - all of the things that we have in the house. We have
never bought anything that doesn't have the personal connection. I know the artist
behind it and I usually try to keep up with what happens to that person.
(Josenhans, 1995)
The next two comments show how two personal opinions or valuations can be opposed, depending on the personal views of the person. Cornelia Johnson explains why Aminah's depictions of people might cause a person to de-value the work. A.J. Olson explains why the same depiction is endearing, and appealing.

CORNELIA BAILEY: Now, they would want better from a black person than a black person's concept of them than this. A more skillful drawing. A more skillful rendering of the culture and of the people. The hair with the bun in the back wouldn't do. Now if this hair had a wrapping around it and tied in front, yes. If this feet were smaller in a shoe of some kind. Never on a stool. He was sitting on a stoop or sitting on a chair, but never on a stool or whatever. The people here would want a more true to form art rendering than this, because that's what they like. (Bailey, 1995)

A.J. OLSON: When I say the lack of artifice that makes it so poignant for me . . . I mean that it's not polished, finished, controlled; that it doesn't display what many people would associate with a skill in representation—all of those things. That it has gotten out there, that it seems real direct.

SUSAN MYERS: Which is very appealing to you. (Olson, 1996)

The next several comments are about valuing pieces other than Aminah's, but reveal personal reasons why people ascribe value to art.

SUSAN MYERS: Do you have any of Elijah Pierce's pieces?
SHARRON BARNES: No. I wish I did . . . Because the things that he did also reflected the black community and it's things you can relate to. (Barnes, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: I probably have a dozen prints and paintings stored up somewhere. If I could, I would be absolutely voracious in buying art. I mean, if I could afford it, I would continually buy art. Was it Virginia Wolff who said, "you can either buy art or clothes." I think maybe there's this point in your life when you do make that kind of decision. (Draeger, 1995)

The following participants value a particular work because of their memory of acquiring it.

KOJO KAMAU: There's one piece I have that means more to me than all the rest of them and it's because it's the last piece that my wife and I bought together. I
hadn't thought a whole lot about it. It's at the bottom of the stairs. I was walking
down the stairs one day and I looked at it. Then I thought I'm not going to buy any
more art. But then [eventually] I bought more art. (Kamau, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: This is one of my favorites behind the chair. Steve and I
bought that. We were on a bicycle trip and we biked to this little town called St.
Cirq le Popie where Andre Breton lived many, many years. His widow, I think,
was still living there, and it kind of attracted an artists' colony. I think 50 people
lived there in the winter time. And we walk into this little shop, and I start trying to
speak French with this woman about buying a print. Turns out she's from
Pennsylvania. She had gone to the Beaux Arts Art School in Paris. She's probably
about my age and settled in St. Cirq. She was turning out these unbelievable prints.
That's what I like. I like discovering. (Draeger, 1995)

Value For Visual/Aesthetic Characteristics

SUSAN SAXBE: I do know that once people have a piece of Aminah's, they want
another one and another one, and you just can't help it. You just fall in love with
her work and it's always an excuse to see her again too. (Saxbe, 1995)

FRAN LUCKOFF: I really loved it and I had to have it, oh yes. If I wanted to help
her I could just hand her the money but she wouldn't have taken it. But that isn't it,
I really wanted it. You buy what you love. I don't think there's any other way.
(Luckoff, 1995)

SUE SCOTT: I just fell in love with that one. Certain things will draw me to the
pieces. The colors were dark with a real stark brightness. The colors were real
white, yellow; all the bright colors. There was a lot of work. There was
embroidery and it had a lot of buttons. I'd love to have that one. Then there's one
at the library—there's a quilt that they have that I would have liked. It depicts the
near east side. (Scott, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: But [her sculpture] had a real lyrical quality to it. I
remember that lyrical quality with the iron at the top and just the wonderful colors
and forms at the bottom. It's a beautiful piece. (Draeger, 1995)

A.J. OLSON: I was also impressed as I looked at these buttons, that there were
some that had to be rare because they were precious. You are going to wonder if I
looked at anything besides the buttons, yes I did. But the buttons are where I was
really stuck to it. She had ones that were, as I remember them, semi-precious
stones, and ones that would have been, if you wouldn't have gotten them, and they
looked new some of them, and they would've been expensive buttons. (Olson,
1996)
I asked Kojo Kamau how he would choose one piece to purchase out of an entire exhibit at his gallery. He responded,

People say I have a good eye. I'd just select what I liked and what I could afford. Being able to afford it has something to do with it. (Kamau, 1995)

EDITH SMILACK: Oh, absolutely, yes [her work is valuable]. I don't want to call it primitive, because she's way beyond that. They are just Aminah paintings, that's all. I don't want to call it primitive. I don't think she's primitive. She's got too much soul in her. She just puts herself into it, that's all. It's that simple. She's a great illustrator. (Smilack, 1995)

FRAN LUCKOFF: I think she had a lot of ability and I love looking at her things. . . The painting I have was the first work of art that she ever sold. It is of the welfare line in front of Buckeye Savings and Loan. The figures are like a Degas painting; the skill of her drawing! It's completely different from anything you've ever seen of hers. I've been very happy with that and I thought it should have been in the museum. I offered it to him [the art museum] but he did not want it. I'm glad because I just love it so. (Luckoff, 1995)

PEGGY DRAEGER: I just wanted people to enjoy it. It just seemed like it should be a piece that people should see and enjoy. (Draeger, 1995)

GISELA JOSENHANS: This is what I love most about Aminah, her draftsmanship. I will always treasure this over everything else that I have bought or that she gave to me, because it's just the real essence of her. (Josenhans, 1995)

GISELA JOSENHANS: If I had a choice of buying a drawing or a painting, I would go for the real drawing. I have two in the family room from her New York Series.

It's the draftsmanship and her collaging of all sorts of different material. She can take a green leaf out of the Franklin Park and embroider it with beads. Who can do this? (Josenhans, 1995)

**Art Is Not an Investment**

FRAN LUCKOFF: [Referring to a man she knows.] He buys things, I think for their investment value. He puts them in a warehouse. I wouldn't want to live with half of them but they have a value.

SUSAN MYERS: You live with all your art.

FRAN LUCKOFF: Oh yes, that's all I want. I mean, that's why I say I'm not a real collector; that type of a collector. I really live with my art. I really love it. It's my life I guess. (Luckoff, 1995)
SUSAN SAXBE: I never buy art for the investment. It's funny, because I sell art and that's the question everybody ask me; is this going to be worth something five years from now. . . I don't [buy for investment], and I don't suggest it to clients. Rarely do you get rid of your art work or sell your art work. If anything, I give things away or lend them to people. I've never resold a piece of art work, but that's just me. I don't buy for investment reasons.

I know which artists I deal with that probably will be worth more than other artists. I can probably tell you which artists, but I don't buy for that reason. SUSAN MYERS: Is Aminah one of those artists, whose work is going to increase in value?

SUSAN SAXBE: Certainly. Absolutely. (Saxbe, 1995)

KOJO KAMAU: Aminah's pieces, like most of us, were very reasonable at first. You weren't aware of what was going to happen, that the price was going up. That's not why you buy them. That's not why I buy them. I buy to support the artist. . . . When I first opened the Gallery, people weren't buying much of anything, so most of the artists who exhibited, I would buy something so they could sell something. I'd buy something so they [the artist] could say they sold something. (Kamau, 1995)

How Art Worlds Dictate or Affect Value

This section addresses participant's views of how art world values affecting Aminah's work. The next several comments refer to different ways for setting a dollar value for the works, including the artist getting involved in the process.

SUSAN MYERS: Do you help her set the value?

SUSAN SAXBE: I usually discuss price with Aminah ahead of time. The way I state it is, "What do you want for this piece? I don't want you to ask anything less. When it leaves your house, I don't want you to say, 'Gosh, why did I let it go for $1000?' So give me the amount that you absolutely want to have for the piece, and let's not take anything less."

Aminah doesn't like to talk price. It makes her uncomfortable. She'll end up saying, "Well, I don't know, you can just have it." So I really try to help her.

SUSAN MYERS: Do you ever say, "No, that's too little?"

SUSAN SAXBE: Yes, a lot.

SUSAN MYERS: Do you ever say it's too much?

SUSAN SAXBE: Never, never, because I never think it is. I think she's very fair with her pricing. (Saxbe, 1995)
SOLWAY: I had a conversation with Aminah recently about the prices for her work which I never had before. I mean, I would always suggest the price of the work, and last week was the first time that Aminah wanted to get involved in that process. It was about how to price this piece that we're taking to Chicago, and it was the first time I ever heard Aminah have concern about how much the work sold for, or might sell for. Concern in the sense that: were we pricing it high enough?

SUSAN MYERS: So she's concerned with values; money values.
CARL SOLWAY: For the first time, yes. Prior to this Aminah is very sort of nonchalant about the price, and really never, in my opinion, placed a strong enough value on her work; dollar value. (Solway, 1995)

The next several comments refer to characteristics of the work itself, such as size, color, and materials used. These characteristics affect how value is ascribed.

SUSAN MYERS: How do you figure out what something is worth money-wise?
SUSAN SAXBE: Pricing with artists is the hardest thing to do, unless you are an established artist and you know you can get X amount of dollars from your work. But most artists know they can sell a piece for say, $2400, because usually it is the same size as another they sold for that price.

I think it's also how much time she spent and what she's willing to let it go for. Her fabric pieces, I think she calls them the rag-a-nons; with the buttons and all the threads and the details, obviously those are going to be a lot more. Then she's got the pieces where she's just painted on the fabric. Those are going to be less, usually.
SUSAN MYERS: So part of it has to do with maybe how large it is and then how much effort and time went into it.
SUSAN SAXBE: Yes, effort and time, right. (Saxbe, 1995)

The next section contains discussions with research participants about how external factors in the art world affect value and reputation. Becker (1982) in *Art Worlds* described how art worlds work and pieces fit together in art worlds. He examines how they interrelate, and how thought processes influence the working of art worlds. Art worlds are about relationships of one thing to another, makers, distributing, philosophers, critics, etc. Rather than define art worlds Becker described processes. Art worlds are in constant flux. Sometimes the change is gradual, sometimes it is drastic. There are drifts in
conventions. Becker's analysis of the processes of art worlds helped me understand why it is so difficult to place value on art work, and establish an artist's reputation. The processes are constantly changing, the rules, the philosophies, the players.

Getting the work out and building a reputation is a fluid process. Mrs. Lewis, for instance, consciously thought about and planned the proper kind of exposure for Aminah's work.

MRS. LEWIS: One time I was over to her home talking with her mother. She was there. And I said to her, 1960, "I'm going to join the museum." It wasn't a museum then, it was a gallery. "Because of you." I looked at her and told her and she looked up at me, her mother looked at me. Nobody said a word. I said, "Because I feel if I do that, eventually you'll get a chance to exhibit, and I believe you should." She just looked at me. Now tell her what you said after I left.

AMINAH ROBINSON: I said, "Poor Mrs. Lewis. It'll never happen."

MRS. LEWIS: And I stayed with it and it happened. I couldn't see any reason why she couldn't [exhibit at the museum]. But I realized that being on the outside of an institution, you do not know anything about the inner workings of it. (Lewis, 1994)

Lewis made contact with the curator at the museum to get a valuation of a work she owned by the artist Roman Johnson. She was considering donating it to the museum. She had other motives, as well.

MRS. LEWIS: I still had something else in my mind. For I would be back again. But when I came the next time to see them, I had Roman Johnson's work. I said, "I have something I would like to donate to you, if possible. If it meets your standards." So I took the sheet off of it, and they started looking and examining the work. I could tell they were pleased. And when I left, they told me I'd hear from them, which I knew I would. And when I left, Mr. Bishop said, "Mrs. Lewis, you have found yourself a very fine artist." I said, "Thank you". And I went on to see the exhibit. The letter came that it [the Roman Johnson piece] had been accepted. And so it's still there. (Lewis, 1994)

Later, Mrs. Lewis took a piece of Aminah's to the museum for a valuation, in an attempt to get the work noticed by the curator.
MRS. LEWIS: I told him I'd like to bring something in of a very fine artist I thought. And I'd like for him to take a look at it and see if it met their standards. And if so, I would donate it. That's the way I put it. I never assumed that anybody had to take anything because I brought it in. And I never brought it in on the basis of anything but art. (Lewis, 1994)

AMINAH ROBINSON: I don't want my work just marketed. I want it to get in these museums and tour the world. It [the Sapelo Series] should have been shown then. (Robinson, 1995c)

SUSAN SAXBE: There's a real dichotomy here. There's a big part of Aminah that wants her work seen, and I don't think it's that she wants to be famous. The dichotomy is that there's part of her that knows she should be famous and knows that everybody should know her work, and then there's the other part of her that wants to just be right where she is. (Saxbe, 1995)

Other participants talked about getting the work in front the right people, or into the best collections.

CARL SOLWAY: We placed the work [a major sculpture by Robinson, My Lord What A Morning, See Appendix G] with the best collector. Exactly to the right place. It's important where the work goes. Because it gets the work the kind of authority that it deserves. But that's not always the easiest thing to accomplish. (Solway, 1995)

FRAN LUCKOFF: Immediately when I saw it, I said "I really love it." . . . I thought well, I should see if I can get some other people to go to her home because to me it's so interesting. That big chair [a large work in Aminah's home] I'd love to see that in our museum, but she wants to put it in the Smithsonian. I would help her try to get it in. I know some people who could help her. (Luckoff, 1995)

CARL SOLWAY: If the artist isn't in New York City, that's really hard to do; that's the fundamental reason why it's hard to build a career in New York from some place outside New York. If you're a historian or critic and you go to a gallery to see a show you like, and you want to write about that show, you want to meet the artist and write about the person. But that person isn't there if they live in the Midwest. (Solway, 1995)
Becker (1982) asserted "art worlds [are] the producers of art" (1982, p. 351). Becker's analysis emphasized the collective nature of making and consuming art. In the end, "the world of art mirrors the society at large" (Becker, p. 371). Carl Solway described how the art world reflects society.

One likes to think that it is a bona fide free market but it probably isn't. Well, here is a case in point. We represented an artist whose work was sold by his New York gallery, some eight years ago to a very important collector for $20,000. Well, this New York collector had some financial reverses in his business. It's one of those situations, and this work came into auction yesterday. It sold for $3500. What does that mean to the artist's career? How will this auction effect the ability to sell work now? It's disastrous!

SUSAN MYERS: It is. And it has nothing to do with the artist.
CARL SOLWAY: Has nothing to do with the work either. (Solway, 1995)

Susan Saxbe explained how she advises clients when they are buying art. What things other than personal taste make an art work worth having? She responded,

I say [to clients], first of all, I can't guarantee anything about any artist. But consider a few things: is the artist showing; is the artist working; is the artist producing work either for themselves or to sell? If I work with an artist who maybe makes two pieces a year and never has any exhibits, I would say that their pieces are not likely to go up in value. But if an artist is spending their life doing this and working, especially artists like Aminah—this is their life, this is their livelihood—I would say there is going to be a greater opportunity for their work to go up in value than someone who might be a teacher and also an artist. . . . How many shows they have had and when were these shows; were these shows 10 years ago or in the last three years? . . . What corporations they are in, how much are they producing, are they doing this full time? Those are the kinds of things you look at. So if I were going to bet money, of all the artists that I represent in Columbus, there's a greater chance of her work increasing in value than any other artist I know. (Saxbe, 1995)
The object "is not the art work as an isolated object or event but the entire process through which it is made and remade whenever someone experiences or appreciates it" (Becker, 1982, p. 214). Things other than the art object itself affect an art work's meaning and value. Aminah commented about the affect of museum exposure.

SUSAN MYERS: You always seem so surprised that Susan [Saxbe] and I like to look at your work, and when people want to buy your work!

AMINAH ROBINSON: That's unbelievable! It's because of the way Susan has marketed my work and it came through respect with the museum exhibit in 1990, and the respect that came with the Wexner Center exhibit, Will Power. I sense that helped. (Robinson, 1995a)

Carl Solway discussed how pricing affects a work and how the auction market functions. He said,

This whole question of money and dollars and the artist is very problematic. Art is priced by resistance. If there's resistance to the price, then it's probably priced about right. If there's no resistance to the price of the work, then it probably is not high enough. It's always just at that edge where there's a little bit of resistance.

SUSAN MYERS: It's intuitive.

CARL SOLWAY: Yes, so you try and keep it right at that edge. If the resistance is so much that nothing happens, then it's priced too high. So it's right at that edge of resistance.

SUSAN MYERS: And you don't have any formulas.

CARL SOLWAY: There's no scale for that. [You have to look at] the whole picture. You couldn't take Aminah's work and put it into auction now because there's no established audience for it at auction. There are not enough people who know the work so there are not any active buyers out there on a national basis who would bid for the work. And if you're talking about any artist who doesn't have auction experience, what does investment mean because there's no published market. The market is the auction. [Aminah's work] avoids the auction circuit now because the auction probably wouldn't take it to sell since the work isn't known well enough. Eventually when enough work gets out into the world, then there's the proper recognition for the work, then something falls into auction. (Solway, 1995)
Patterns in Creating Meaning

In this section, I discuss patterns in participant's creation of meaning and participant's idiosyncrasies in creating meaning. Most participants could articulate what they thought the work was about. I found five different ways that people make meaning from Aminah's work. All participants indicated some method they use to derive meaning from art works.

The first way is from their personal remembrances of her, knowing her they surmise a certain meaning for a piece. They draw on personal remembrances of the artist and their relationship with her. Most of the participants who know Aminah drew on memories of their personal relationship with the artist.

A second way people make meaning is by listening to the artist and having the artist tell them about the meaning. So sometimes they learn directly from what the artist says. Most participants who had met the artist created meaning by considering what the artist had told them.

A third way people make meaning from art is to draw on their own personal experience in the world. Their experiences not related to the artist. They bring personal experience and make personal meaning to pieces. Every participant interviewed used personal experience to draw meaning.

A fourth way people make meaning is by looking at the work and seeing what is there. They will say I can see this, I can see that. They are using their observational skills and say their interpretation comes from looking at the work. Most participants use visual clues in the work to determine meaning.
A fifth way that people seem to find meaning in art is by doing reading or research about the artist to the circumstances of the work. Only a few participants mentioned using readings or outside research to create meaning.

The most often-used method for meaning making is personal experience to understand art works. To make meanings from art people draw upon their lived experience. Sometimes a person is able to explain their interpretations. They will be explicit and say, "it means this because . . . " Not every person articulated exactly how they make meaning, but I made inferences in the analysis of the conversations. I notice the most commonly combined basis for making meaning is personal experience combined with what they see in the work. Another common way to create meaning is to combine knowing the artist, with looking at the work, with their own personal experience. Most participants use personal experience to make meaning.

Patterns and Idiosyncracies in Valuing Art Work

I also found patterns in what participants valued in art works. Most people could tell me what they value in a work. It seemed easier to explain what they value in a piece than to explain their criteria. People value different aspects of the art. Most participants could articulate what they valued in art work. These reasons fall into five categories: (a) A few value their relationship with the artist; (b) Several value how the work teachers history or reflects a place and time; (c) Most participants expressed why a work has personal value, these reason have more to do with the person than the art piece; (d) Several valued work because of its aesthetic qualities and will say so; and
(e) Two participants speak very specifically about not buying for investment. This falls under the personal value category, but is worth mentioning separately.

Ascribing value and criteria for valuing art seems to be more idiosyncratic than creating meaning. While most participants have personal criteria for valuing art, no other category of valuing was mentioned so often. Here I summarize the participants idiosyncratic attitudes towards valuing art work.

Aminah Robinson has an awareness of art world values, but focuses more on personal value. She wants more than for her work to be shown and sold; she wants it taken care of and preserved, for future generations. She said her work is for those who will come after her. When Aminah discussed value she often talked about how her father "knew" about her gifts and supported, encouraged, and understood her. She realized that not everyone in her family values or valued her life-choice of being an artist until recently. Now they support her more than they did earlier. Aminah said,

See, art has to be consistent within your life regardless of what comes and goes and must be a part of your diet. It must be a way of life. And, see, I don't see that with anybody else in this family. Art is not a way of life, you see. (Robinson, 1995)

Aminah said that being an artist is more than a career choice, it goes beyond her, it is part of the community. "Yes, it's beyond my life, and that's the difference. See, man cannot rule a way or a path, it's God that does that. That's the difference. And that's what I follow" (Robinson, 1995). Aminah was reluctant to guess at what other people value in her work, "You'll have to ask them because I can't speak for them" (Robinson, 1995). She does like it when someone who she knows will care for it buys her work.
Aminah wants her work recognized, but is concerned with the effect fame might have on her ability to work. She mused about the effect getting famous had on Elijah Pierce and told about him warning her not to let it happen. She said,

I'm just happy this work is here today in my lifetime. Today is what we have. I cannot see tomorrow, I can only dream, and I hold fast to those dreams, and I hope that somehow somewhere the work will inspire many of our young people to go on and to hold fast to their dreams. But do what you have to do today; do the work today, that's all we have. (Robinson, 1995b)

Aminah's sister Sharron Barnes valued Aminah's work because her sister made it and because she can relate to it: the work is about things "reflected the black community" (Barnes, 1995). Aminah's older sister Sue Scott also valued Aminah's work because her sister did it, "it's like part of the family" (Scott, 1995). Sue valued the cultural aspects of the work, such as its relationship to African retentions. Sue also talked about really wanting particular pieces of art. She appreciated Aminah's hard work and visual qualities, such as colors or textures. Both sisters seemed relatively unconcerned with art world values of the work; personal value predominates.

A.J. Olson, Peggy Draeger, Nancy Banks, and Cornelia Bailey emphasize personal value and educational value. None of these participants knew Aminah when I interviewed them. Because they did not know the artist, I wonder if they felt more free to depend on their personal experience in interpreting the work.

Susan Saxbe, Gisela Josenhans, Carl Solway, Ursel White Lewis, Edith Smilack, Fran Luckoff, and Kojo Kamau placed more focused on personal values than art world values. They have assisted the development of Aminah's art world reputation. They are
aware of how the art world ascribes value, but of their personal collecting is guided by personal instincts. Each has known the artist for many years.

Carl Solway is the most articulate about expressing his understanding of how the art world works. Solway would not try to increase art world value for an artist he did not believe in. He is the most active in leading the artist toward art world acceptance and building the work's art world value. What makes this difficult is there are no clear-cut guidelines to establishing art world value. Both Saxbe and Solway believe writing about the work talking about it may bring it more art world recognition and value.

Conclusion and Synthesis

What factors affected participants creation of meaning? Meaning is most often created by gathering information, from the artist or the art work or based on personal experience. Context seem to have an impact on creating meaning. Knowing the artist does not seem to impact one's ability to find deep meanings in the work, as I originally thought it would. Some people are able to create meanings without knowing lots of biographical and historical information. However, meanings tend to become more complex as participants found out more contextual information, though not necessarily getting it from the artist.

What factors affected participants ascribing value? The participants were aware of outside information like art world values, but ascribed value based on very personal criteria. Those who know the artist seem most convinced they should assist her in making it in the art world. Ability to articulate ascribing art world value to works depends on the
person's life experiences. The multiple views addressed by my participants support Becker's thesis that many factors affect value in art worlds.

This chapter provided an interpretive analysis of multiple perspectives concerning meanings and values about the work of Aminah Robinson. The last chapter examines implications of the content as well as the methodology of this study.
Chapter Six examines implications for art education and makes recommendations for further research. The research methods of ethnographic inquiry and multiple voices in interpretation have applications to art criticism and art education. The content of the study has implications for education, art education, and art history. The content can also be used by educators at many levels and in many situations to make curricula more representative in terms of gender and race.

The content and methods are applicable for art educators who wish to diversify and enrich their curriculum. The methods, especially the use of multiple voices, intuition, and immersion, are significant. Considering and valuing multiple points of view in interpreting art works can strengthen the fabric of interpretive endeavors. Instead of taking the stand that there is one authoritative or expert for interpreting any work of art or body of work, this research shows the value and richness to be gained from layering and considering many perspectives.

Constructing meaning about works of art, influences and affects how works of art are relevant to viewers. It is not a solo endeavor. Interpreting works of art is not cut off
from the artist's culture and history, nor is creating meaning separate from the perceiver's experience. The inter-relationships of lived experience, culture, and history, dialogue about art works, and perceptions of art works function together in the creation of meaning. This research demonstrates how conversations about meanings and value are instructive and fruitful.

Immersion in many aspects of an artist's life and culture is a valuable method for conducting research. It can sharpen one's vision and contribute to more intimate understandings. Coming at the topic from many perspectives and disciplines is valuable. Examining the social, historical, and cultural context of an artist's life is important for interpretation and understanding. The value of immersion combined with first hand experience is also highlighted in this study. While much of the material presented here is personal and idiosyncratic, it can be taken out of the personal realm and serve as a guide to other researchers who wish to conduct a similar study.

Use of an intuitive, reflective, open-ended research method is also of value. Seeking knowledge with an open mind and an openness to divergent paths and directions are both important attributes for a researcher. A willingness to learn from research participants and from the research process itself is significant. When I talked about the research process being intuitive and sensing, rather than rational and going strictly according to plan, Aminah said, "That's because nothing grows straight!" (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 19, 1996). Education should be a growth process. The content and process of this research present a challenge to learners and teachers to be reflective and intuitive.
Reflection on the research process as well as the research data yielded many insights for this researcher. Revelations and insights gleaned from reflective thinking were often the most profound and illustrative. The process I used may not be strictly a model for other researchers to follow, but rather a "bright line" (P.T.K. Daniel, personal communication, 1996) to guide future endeavors.

Implication of Multiple Voices in Interpretation

When I began this research, it was with a presumption that the artist should be the most important and privileged source of information about her art. In my own learning, I have found artist's quotations and artist's discussion of their work helpful in understanding their art works. Many researchers also value the artist's point of view in understanding art works (Bearden and Henderson, 1993; Ferris, 1989; Lippard, 1985; Vlach, 1978). Artist's stories help us understand their vision. "Artist voices are especially important in shaping a more complete understanding of black art because we experience their creative vision through their narrative" (Ferris, 1989, p. 75). When planning an exhibition of African American decorative arts, Vlach (1978) looked not only for objects, but for "people who could educate" (p. ix.) him. He valued people as teachers about the works, as well as written information. In writing their extensive overview of African American artists, Bearden and Henderson (1993) found "individual histories to be most revealing" (p. xiii.).

As my research progressed, I found value in the artist's and others' views as well. Blier (1993) questioned whether the artist's voice should be privileged above all others. She considered privileging the artist's voice an art historical fetish, a belief based on an irrational and untenable position. She challenged the notion of artist-centered derivation of
meaning, because "meaning is richer than that model allows" (p. 147). One needs a variety of perspectives to create meaning. Unlike other disciplines such as anthropology, history and political science, "art history is rigid and stuck in its traditions" (Blier, p. 156).

The more participants I interviewed, the more I saw how multiple points of view helped me weave a beautiful, complex picture. Because I came to the research with an artist-centered bias, I was surprised at the insights provided by persons who had never met the artist. Now that I have both the artist's and others point of view, I can provide many perspectives and let the reader decide which interpretations make the most sense to them. There is no need to compare multiple points of view to find one best answer, there are multiple perspectives, none of which need to be declared inferior of superior (Sandell, 1991).

The research process itself generated opportunities for deeper understanding of Aminah and her work for each participant. The interviews were informative for both the interviewee and interviewer. Since Aminah read each interview, she gained by hearing many perspectives about her work, and her life experiences. Each time I gave Aminah a transcript of an interview I had conducted, she would call me to give me her reaction and impressions. There were many moments of discovery for the artist. She enjoyed reading and hearing what others said about her work. Aminah and I may be learning the most because we can examine all the research data, every interview, all the field notes. The research process has given us opportunity for long conversations which are enlightening.
for us both. We also have had the opportunity to develop trust and respect for each other. The relationship we have cultivated is one of the most powerful aspects of the research for me.

This research demonstrates that ethnographic inquiry is a valuable tool for art educators. It also points to the importance of recording material that is passed along orally as well as opinions and points of views of people who might never be asked to contribute. Oral history and keen observation are key in learning about artists. It has the potential to transform the curricula. For instance, a class could find an artist in their community, talk to the artist and people who know the artist. Using ethnographic inquiry they could gather information. Research can be conducted in places other than libraries. There is much valuable information about artists right at our fingertips, if only we think to ask. Aminah Robinson spoke about the importance of this research for education.

The work you have done, the dissertation, contains the power of the spirit the work is something unusual—your way, your method. The power of the spirit cannot be put into numbers and a little frame; you can’t contain this powerful spirit. I’m so against anything being labeled. People, critics in this world try to contain this spirit world. The spirit cannot be seen, it is hard to talk about. But you Susan have brought out a lot of that power. You can’t contain that power. Can you catch the wind? It’s like trying to catch the wind.

If teachers used your way, things would blossom and grow. It would make a big difference to our children. (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 19, 1996)

Recent educational literature suggests these methods are in line with current trends. Collaboration and cooperation are often mentioned (Belenky et al, 1986; Donmoyer, 1990; Sandal 1991; Belenky, 1995), for classroom investigation at many levels. Teachers are encouraged to build curriculum with their students (Donmoyer,
Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Teachers and students could find artists and related sources to interview about art, meaning and value. A connected class that engages in "stretching and sharing" (Belenky et al, p. 223) is a productive and exciting place to be.

By reflecting on my learning and research process, detailing it chronologically, I am sharing the processes that were necessary to conduct the work. This provides insight into my method, and shows how idiosyncratic the process can be. "So long as teachers hide the imperfect processes of their thinking, allowing their students to glimpse only the finished products, students will remain convinced" of their own inadequacies in relation to their teachers of professors (Belenky et al, p. 215). Because I am interested in how people learn to understand art, it is important to examine my own learning process. Then I can consider the many ways in which people are able to gain enriched understandings of art.

Belenky et al (1986) said we must "connections over separations, understanding and acceptance over assessment and collaboration over debate, accord respect to and allow time for the knowledge that emerges from first hand experience . . . encourage students to evolve their own patterns of work based on the problems they are pursuing" (p. 229).

While I will not generalize about how people create meaning and ascribe value from this study, I will present several possible avenues of inquiry in regards to making meaning and ascribing value to art works. Subsequent research might examine if the patterns of meaning making and ascribing value found here are applicable to other artist's work and lives.
Implications of Content: Multicultural Education

Grant and Sleeter (1989) presented the following as goals of Multicultural education. I looked at these goals to see which, if any, my study addressed. "1. To promote an understanding and appreciation of America's cultural diversity; 2. To promote alternative choices for people regardless of race, gender, disability, or social-class background; 3. To help all children achieve academic success; 4. To promote awareness of social issues involving unequal distribution of power or opportunity" (Grant and Sleeter, 1989, p. 144).

My study addresses the first goal, because it examines in depth the work of an artist, who is a woman, and who is African American. There are few women and African American artists discussed in art history and art education. This research provides much needed contextual, and interpretive material about an important artist. It also investigates aspects of the African American experience in the United States.

Goal number two is addressed by examining the biography and the content of Aminah's work, the issues it addresses, the techniques and material she uses, her philosophy. Students can see that being an artist is a choice for them, not just people found in text books, whose gender, culture, and social position differ so dramatically from theirs. I remember being curious as a young girl about women artists, especially Americans. When I was a teenager, I was encouraged when I found the biography of Mary Cassatt. Women could become important artists, I realized. But, Cassatt was independently wealthy and gave up marriage and children for her career. These were things I could not relate to. Students need people they can relate to who engage in a
variety of pursuits. Aminah Robinson is a fine example for people interested in being artists. From day one, Aminah knew she was an artist and struggled against financial, emotional, practical concerns to be what she is. Her story is a fine example for aspiring artists of all backgrounds.

Goal number four is addressed in the content of Aminah's work. She addresses family and community histories, illuminating honestly some of the realities of unequal distribution of power, especially relation to the position of African American in our society. It addresses American-ness and the concept of an American identity. Her work is about herself and her community, but goes well beyond, transcending the east side, Columbus, African American community. Aminah reflected on this research,

It's not about color. It's not about race, but it has everything to do with race. You do not have to be part of a particular race to understand. It has to come from the heart. Race has everything to do with living in America, but race has nothing to do with the person working on the research.

You had to immerse yourself because many things were not given to you, as many things were not given to Black people in America. (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 19, 1996)

Her works makes specific references, but relates all humanity. This research is a tool to transform the curricula in elementary and secondary schools, universities and museums, as well as other community based educational institutions by offering extensive background materials on a non-mainstream artist, whose work does not readily fit into a particular style.

Another implication of this research include pointing out the value of interdisciplinary research. It was necessary to become familiar with several different
disciplines to conduct this research: anthropology, art history, history, black studies, biographical writing (Pachter, 1979), and philosophy. Readings in all these areas were necessary and their value is reinforced by this study.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are more than a dozen other possible interviewees suggested to me by the artist and other research participants. Expanding this study to include those people is not within the scope of this project, but a worthwhile goal for subsequent research. Persons I would like to interview include: Roman Johnson, an artist Aminah "apprenticed with"; Laverne Brown and Smokey Brown, community member and gallery owners; Denny Griffith, friend of the artist and administrator at the Columbus Museum of Art; Mem Fox, author of the book *Sophie* which Aminah illustrated; Mem Chenfeld, a friend of the artist; Michael Rosen, a writer who collaborated with Aminah on several books; Lizzie Solway, Carl Solway's wife who has known Aminah a long time; childhood friends of the artist Barbara Jemison Kelsey, Sandra Capitol Jamison, Odette; Aminah's nieces and nephews; residents of Hog Hammock Community, Sapelo Island—Yvonne Grovner, Dan Gardner, Ben Hall, Florence Hall, Viola Johnson, Lucy Lea.

Another worthwhile research endeavor is to examine the effect of language and terminology on understanding and valuing. How are meanings and values affected by labels such as folk artist, fine art contemporary artist, feminist art? Aminah has expressed strong feelings about such labels. Labels are often used as shortcuts to understanding, and can lead one astray in the many ways to search for meaning.
Synthesis and Conclusion

Buttons

Two years after beginning this research in earnest, Aminah and I sat on the couch in her living room, discussing the drafts of the chapters for the dissertation. We reflected on the two years that had passed since the intense research began. We talked about how valuable the process had been for each of us. We marvelled at how many participants were eagerly awaiting the final draft. We dreamed about getting a publisher. Aminah showed me a wonderful miniature book about buttons recently given to her by Susan Saxbe. The book even had a button suspended on a string as its built-in bookmark. It pictured buttons from many different geographic locations and eras. It was a lovely present.

I expressed my deep appreciation to Aminah for sharing her life with me. I exclaimed about how much I had learned and seen since beginning the research. How helpful it had been to hear many different points of view! When I started the research, Aminah was the only person I thought about interviewing. Had it not been for the many perspectives received from the other participants, I would never have come to understand the work as I did now. How lucky I was to have so many people help me in my quest! There were so many things I could articulate now that I had only sensed many years ago.

Aminah said seriously and quietly,

The buttonwork is at the core. When you get to the button work, you'll be there. A.J. got to the core. She expressed it. The buttonwork is important because of the long traditions in the family, my mother. The traditions it represents and of the connections it makes" (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 4, 1996).
I reminded Aminah that I was unable to understand and articulate the importance of the button work years ago. But even though I couldn't articulate the power and importance of the buttonwork in 1986, I had given her the box of buttons that had been my grandfather's way back then. I admitted now, that I had been reluctant to give the buttons up in 1986. It was a hard sacrifice to give away the precious buttons. But at that time, somehow I knew it was right. I knew the buttons belonged with Aminah. She shook her head in agreement, and added, "It isn't about me. It goes beyond me" (A. Robinson, personal communication, September 4, 1996).

Reflecting back on all the interviews, I remembered Sue, Aminah's older sister said that the buttonwork piece was one she really wished she could own. Sue said it was because of all the work that went into it, and all the colors. I realize now there was also an element of the buttonwork being a continuation of her mother's traditions. I reflected on Susan Saxbe saying that the "RagGonNons" (a term Aminah used to describe the unique body of works that incorporate fabrics, dolls, buttons, beads, music boxes, paint, etc.) were more valuable than other pieces of Aminah's. Susan said it was because of the work and material that went into the RagGonNons. I reflected on the miracle I witnessed on Sapelo Island in February of 1996, when Aminah showed us the beautiful piece she brought with her, *Dad's Journey*. Why had she brought that particular piece to Sapelo? Why did this piece have such a dramatic impact on those who were lucky enough to encounter it? I reflected on A.J. Olson talking about the piece of Aminah's she's seen six years ago at the Wexner Center. Her ability to recall the impression the work made on her. The works are visually powerful, spiritually powerful.
For years I have been intrigued by Aminah Robinson and her work. It was not until I began intensive research and interviewing that my interpretations of her work grew and developed. Forming interpretations is an ongoing process, that continues for me, and all other people interested in Aminah's art work. For me, Aminah Robinson's works are about history, generosity, connections, human existence as it links and fastens us one to another. Yet, people must ultimately create meanings about art works for themselves.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

ABOUT AMINAH AND RELATIONSHIP WITH HER

Tell me about your first encounter with Aminah.
Tell me about your first encounter with Aminah's work.
What struck you?
What attracted you?
What kept your attention?

[Tell me about subsequent encounters.
Have you seen where she works?
What do you know about her life?]

Does knowing her as a person affect how you understand her art?
How you value her art?

WHAT IS THE WORK ABOUT?
What do you think her work is about?
and how did you figure that out?
What do you think influences her work, what is under the surface?
[How do you figure out what a particular work means/is about?
Do you get it all at once?]

EXPLAINING THE WORK
When someone else sees/looks at Aminah's work, do you explain it? What do you tell them?
Have you talked to Aminah about these pieces?

VALUING OWNING THE WORK
Do you own any of her work how do you use it/display it?
Why do you own her work?
What of hers would you like to own?

[Do you collect other artists work?
Is Aminah's work valuable?
How valuable do you think it (Aminah's work) is?]
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE: QUESTIONS FOR AMINAH

ABOUT AMINAH AND RELATIONSHIP WITH HER
Do you think if people know you it affects how they understand your work?
Do they need to know you, something about you?
Does it help? How?

WHAT IS THE WORK ABOUT?
What is your work about?
What do you think influences your work, what is under the surface?
Do you... How do you think people will figure that out?

Tell me about the materials you use.
Tell me about the subjects you choose.
Tell me about your early years as an artist.
Tell me about the influence of:
-Pierce
-School teachers
-Mrs. Lewis
-Your family
-books-Flash of the Spirit
-formal education
-African trip
-Sapelo trip
-race
-gender

EXPLAINING THE WORK
When someone else sees/looks at your work, do you explain it?
What do you tell them?
Do you think your work is misunderstood?

VALUING OWNING THE WORK
Why do you think people want to own your work?
How do you assign value to a piece? Do you get advice?
Is your work valuable?
How valuable do you think it (Aminah's work) is?
Does it matter to you how others value your work?
That they want it?
Is there a difference to you between commissions and other pieces from the heart?
When people buy you work, how do they display it?
Do you collect other artists work?
Figure 1. *Poindexter Village Button Book Necklace*, 1981. Shells, buttons, thread, leather, wool and rags on felt. 32 x 14 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches. Private Collection. Photograph by Todd Weier. Copyright Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.
Figure 2. *Birthing on the C Train* (detail), 1989. Dyes, ink, house paint on cotton. 37 x 571 inches. Photograph by Todd Weier. Copyright Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.
Figure 3. *Family Album*, 1995. Mixed media on wood with music boxes and paint. 71 x 52 x 7 1/2 inches. Private Collection. Photographer Chris Gomien. Copyright Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.
Figure 4. Basket Woman. 1984. Wood, mud, buttons, fabric, rope, raffia, and artificial flowers. 50 x 17 x 14 inches. Photograph by Todd Weier. Copyright Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.
Figure 5. *My Lord What a Morning*, 1994. Antique organ pipes, acrylic paint, ornamental iron pieces and music box mechanisms. 10 x 8 x 10 feet. Photographer Chris Gomien. Private Collection. Copyright Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.
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