I have always admired the art of the quilt, but only recently have I come to appreciate why these objects are so important in our culture—and, more important, why we should care about quilts and quiltmakers and do all in our power to preserve and share their history.

Few people realize the scope of the quilting world. Industry estimates place the number of Americans engaged in quiltmaking in the millions and the annual revenues associated with quiltmaking (excluding buying and selling quilts) at $2 billion. This is just the United States. At a recent exhibition in Japan, 250,000 visitors attended in one week. How, then, can so many people—almost all of them women—be engaged in an area of aesthetic creativity that the rest of us know so little about? How is it that few surveys of American art include quilts, and, if they do, they are invariably one Baltimore Album or one Amish or one African-American story quilt? The answers are complex and reveal, in part, the prejudices of the mainstream artworld. The one theme that unites them is that of voice.

Few objects are more closely bound to the living voice of their makers than quilts. Do not think that every quilt tells a story, rather imagine that every quilt is the maker’s touchstone for reflection, personal passage, and conversation. Time and circumstance, however, grind away at the living voice until the words and memories of the makers become detached from the objects in which they are so artfully embedded. The relationship between voice and artifact is strong, of course, in other objects, but few are so personal, powerful, and everyday as the quilt. There is a quality of writing in quilting, writing that is autobiographical, transgenerational, affecting, and instructive.

In a tape-recorded interview quiltmaker Teddy Pruett, in her rich Florida accent, described this relationship between voice and object:

"When I was a child I had a real leaning towards writing, I was just real excited and thrilled by the written word. I was so excited because someone can have a thought in her mind, and [she] can put it on paper. And when you read what's on this paper that thought is transferred into your mind and you have an emotional reaction to it. And I think that is just the coolest thing in the world. And after I started making quilts like 'Rotten Bones'
Teddy Pruett's interview was collected as part of a national project to record the stories of living quiltmakers and pioneered by The Alliance for American Quilts, a not for profit organization based in Louisville, Kentucky. A team of volunteers has collected nearly 250 such interviews so far in a national grassroots effort named "Quilters' S.O.S.-Save Our Stories". They transcribe the interviews, return them to the quiltmakers for final editing, and then place each interview with accompanying photographs online in a fully accessible archive (www.centerforthequilt.org). A downloadable manual guides the volunteers through the process. The Alliance's task is to preserve the relationship between object and voice, and to share that intimacy with succeeding generations. That so many quilts fall silent may be a product of the historic course of women's experiences, but it shouldn't be so. The desire to preserve and share the living history of quiltmaking animates these volunteers and the fear of time and loss spurs them on. The silence one feels when voice and object become divorced, when a quilt is labeled "anonymous", is too painful to go unanswered. In their growing numbers, these interviews have become a quilt of their own.

Why quilts matter depends a lot on whom you ask. Nostalgia, a longing for an imagined past, inspires some; love of craft and the beauty of the handmade object attracts others; and, the need to recognize and validate women's contributions to American culture galvanizes many others. Quilts matter to me because of their transcendent humanity. In the wake of a national catastrophe like 9/11 and in the ongoing AIDS epidemic, quilts became a medium for the expression of feelings of loss, anger, love, remembrance, and the need to understand where words failed. Their making is a meditation; their completion, an investment of memory in cloth and thread from which stories are summoned for the telling. The Alliance and its volunteers are preserving those voices.

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Bernie is a Board member of The Alliance for American Quilts. The Alliance's first regional Center for the Quilt was established at The Center for American Material Culture Studies at the University of Delaware in 2000.