

That's Not Your Story: Faith Ringgold Publishing on Cloth

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Abstract

During a public dialogue in 2019 African-American artist Faith Ringgold described her original publisher's disappointment that the biography she had written did not recount experiences of subjugation – experiences Ringgold suspected were an expectation of her gender and race. This 'rejection' precipitated Ringgold's turn to the textile as an alternative surface upon which she could publish. After hearing Ringgold recount this experience, I found a new appreciation for her story quilts, exemplified in works such as *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983), *Slave Rape Story Quilt* (1985) and *The Purple Quilt* (1986), which mark a particular phase in her career. The effectiveness of Ringgold's insistence that her quilts be understood as art rather than craft remains unclear. What can be acknowledged is that these textiles provided a useful, and ultimately successful, route to publishing narratives drawn from her experience and imagination which defy the narrative expectations of her generation of black women artists and writers.

Faith Ringgold's artistic career, which now spans more than five decades, includes activism, writing, as well as performance art and the creation of paintings, political posters and quilts. Born in Harlem, New York, in 1930, Ringgold is an African-American artist who has been acknowledged in the context of the United States by art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson as "one of the earliest feminists to incorporate textiles into her practice."¹ Her published writing includes numerous children's books and a memoir, *We Flew Over the Bridge* (1995). Despite enjoying considerable acclaim, Ringgold's own acknowledgement that "I can't get through the world without recognizing that race and sex influence everything I do in my life" presents us with the intersectional politics that have long impacted her career.² In this writing I move away from some of the more well-rehearsed aspects of Ringgold's career as an activist,³ painter,⁴ and performance artist,⁵ to focus on one specific aspect of her artistic practice: the relationship between text and textile found in Ringgold's storytelling quilts, and the events that led her to use textile as a surface on which she could publish.

In a public dialogue with Serpentine Galleries Artistic Director Hans Ulrich Obrist to accompany her eponymous solo exhibition in London (6 June–8 September, 2019), Ringgold recounted her original publisher's reaction to an early draft of her memoir, first titled *Being My Own Woman*, which would eventually be published as *We Flew Over the Bridge*:

She [the publisher] said this is not your story. And I said, oh my goodness. First, she had said before that she was going to publish my book. I don't know why she just looked at me and decided that my book was going to be one way. And it wasn't that way. So, when I did give her my autobiography

*growing up in Harlem and going to City College and all the trials and tribulations, she decided that's not your story. Because most of the writers, black women writers, who had written their stories at that time were writing stories of all the horrors their lives had brought them. Well I am sorry. My life had not been a horror. I hadn't gotten raped and thrown out the window, beat up, and all that. That didn't happen to me. So, what am I supposed to do? Make that up so that I get published? And maybe some of them did that too. I don't know. But I decided I wanted to tell my story.*⁶

When Obrist asked Ringgold how she arrived at the format of the story quilt, she returned to the topic of publishing: "Well, how can I get published? How can I get my word out there?"⁷ "The way to do it is to write it on my art. Write it. Nobody can stop me from doing that. I do have speech in that regard."⁸

Where Ringgold has recounted the challenges she faced publishing her memoir, Curlee Raven Holton adds that Ringgold "has been called a feminist, but she is quick to remind us that the feminist movement did not naturally seek out faces that looked like hers."⁹ American art historian Alissa Auther notes that "Ringgold's and other feminist artists' search for an artistic identity outside the mainstream is intimately connected with their legitimate desires to practice professionally in an art world hostile to their presence."¹⁰ "In Ringgold's case this was an assertion of racial identity in art that necessarily questioned the Western marginalization of African art as craft."¹¹

Recalling her childhood, Ringgold notes, "I grew up in Harlem during the Great Depression. This does not mean I was poor and oppressed. We were protected from oppression and surrounded by a loving family."¹² In Ringgold's case, the initial "failure" of her biography in the eyes of her original publisher to recount an experience of poverty or violence, which she had not, in fact, lived, inspired her decision to turn instead to writing on textiles. "Later, Faith would note that this was the beginning of her inclusion of actual written text in her work and perhaps the beginning of her formal career as a writer."¹³ Ironically, turning to cloth as a place of publishing also drew Ringgold's practice into debates about the value of art versus craft that risked compounding the marginalisation she already experienced by virtue of her gender and race. Auther notes, "Importantly, Faith Ringgold's exploration of the art/craft divide demonstrated that these relations were informed not only by gender but also by race, expanding the feminist critique of aesthetic hierarchy beyond its connection to the domestic sphere."¹⁴

The Quilt as Storyteller

Quilts appear across a broad range of cultural contexts and historical moments as storytellers at times storytellers under duress. Under General Pinochet's dictatorship of Chile (1973–1990), stitched textile *arpilleras* smuggled out of the country announced missing husbands, sons and brothers of those who had sewn the cloths before other forms of reporting, such as radio and newsprint.¹⁵ In Zimbabwe, projects such as the Weya Appliqués sewn in the late 1980s and through the early 2000s are also part of a storytelling tradition, initially financed by tourism, but eventually confronting topics such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic.¹⁶ More recently, exhibitions such as *Life in the Margins* at Spike Island, Bristol, recognised the career of Filipino American artist Pacita Abad (1946–2004), whose large scale works combine painting and *trapunto* and share similarities with Ringgold's aesthetic.¹⁷ Ringgold herself wrote of Abad's work: "Widely travelled, Abad creates her work from the point of view of an international woman of color. Those of us who have also travelled extensively know that creative women of color are working all over the world and are not merely 'minority' figures within the narrow confines of the Western art world."¹⁸



Figure 1: In sequence: Pacita Abad, *If my friends could see me now*, 1991, acrylic, painted canvas, gold yarn on stitched and padded canvas; *L.A Liberty*, (reverse), 1992, acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons, mirrors, gold thread, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas; *Life in the Margins*, 2020, installation view, Spike Island, Bristol. Works courtesy the Pacita Abad Art Estate, photograph by Max McClure

But African-American scholar bell hooks also cautions against sweeping comparisons. She calls, without deploying the term, for what we may today name as recognition of intersectionality at work:

*The work of black women quiltmakers needs special feminist critical commentary which considers the impact of race, sex and class. Many black women quilted despite oppressive economic and social circumstance which often demanded exercising creative imagination in ways radically different from those of white female counterparts, especially women of privilege who had greater access to material and time. Often black slave women quilted as part of their labor in white households.*¹⁹

The warning hooks offers is applicable to reading Ringgold's quilts, whose family history is the experience of enslaved labour: "Willi Posey [Ringgold's mother] described watching her grandmother, Betsy Bingham, boil and bleach flower sacks to line the quilts she sewed. Susie Shannon, Betsy's mother, was a slave in antebellum Florida who made quilts as part of her duties."²⁰

Textile production, most acutely cotton, and American slavery were mutually dependent. As Sven Beckert observes in his extensive study of cotton's history, "Cotton demanded quite literally a hunt for labor and a perpetual struggle for its control [...] the attendant physical and psychological violence of holding millions in bondage were of central importance to the expansion of cotton production in the United States and of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain."²¹ While hooks's warning is accurate with regards to Ringgold's family history, she also runs the danger of pressing autobiographical expectation onto the work in a manner similar to Ringgold's early experience with publishing. Quilts, for all their capacity for storytelling, have also been subjected to overclaims regarding their narrative influence.

One example of the inflation of the storytelling potential of quilts is found in the contribution quilts may have made to enslaved individuals navigating the Underground Railroad.²² Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G.

Dobard published a largely contested book arguing that quilts literally held in their patterns codes, which directed enslaved individuals who travelled towards their freedom in American States where slavery was not legal.²³ The premise that these codes, retold through oral history communicated by one quilt shop owner, Ozella Williams in Charleston, South Carolina, functioned as coded maps has been roundly disputed, perhaps most effectively through basic recognition that travel occurred on foot at night where hanging quilts as markers or maps would not only have raised suspicions, but also been impossible for those travelling under the cover of darkness to see.²⁴ As Fergus M. Bordewich writes:

*The larger importance of the Underground Railroad lies not in fanciful legends, but in the diverse history of the men and women, black and white, who made it work and in the far-reaching political and moral consequences of what they did. The Underground Railroad was the nation's first great movement of mass civil disobedience after the American Revolution, engaging thousands of citizens in the active subversion of federal law, as well as the first mass movement that asserted the principle of personal responsibility for others' human rights. It was also the nation's first interracial political movement, which from its beginning in the 1790s joined free blacks, abolitionist whites and sometimes slaves in a collaboration that shattered racial taboos.*²⁵

Tobin and Dobard's writing about the Underground Railroad turned potential into fact, but in the absence of substantial corroborating evidence. For many other examples globally, textiles, and perhaps quilts in particular, do deserve recognition not only as storytellers, but as storytellers with the potential to communicate alternative and unsanctioned versions of history. The inverse is also true: the quilt as structure, metaphor and symbol appears and contributes to fiction writing.

Literary Quilts

Scholarship about the appearance of quilting in American literature includes Elaine Showalter's reading of similarities between quilt and narrative structures in American women's writing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁶ Showalter writes, "I would like to suggest that a knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate and ingenious design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women's writing."²⁷ Much like hooks, and despite her enthusiasm for the range of circumstances in which quilting took and takes place,²⁸ Showalter calls for an attention to specific contexts: "in order to understand the relationship between piecing and American women's writing, we must also deromanticize the art of the quilt, situate it in its historical contexts, and discard many of the sentimental stereotypes of an idealized, sisterly, and nonhierarchic women's culture that cling to it."²⁹

Showalter is far from alone in her line of inquiry. Sunny Falling-rain uses a similar reading strategy to trace the structure of what she views as the crazy quilt in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987):

*Morrison literarily created a patchwork crazy quilt. Every component of the crazy quilt has a counterpart in the novel. The range of literary techniques used to develop the novel as a crazy quilt includes direct statements about quilts, colors, fabrics, and quilting, and their meaning in the lives of the characters. But the author also created very subtle techniques to imitate quilting structures, techniques which I believe could only have been noticed by someone knowledgeable about quilting someone looking for structures reminiscent of the crazy quilt.*³⁰

I would add that the quilt in *Beloved* exists not only in fabric remnants and quilting structures that Falling-rain traces throughout the novel, but also in patches of colour claimed from the body:

Her past had been like her present intolerable and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left for pondering color.

"Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't."

And Sethe would oblige her with anything from fabric to her own tongue. Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color. Sky provided the only drama, and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principal joy was reckless indeed.³¹

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982), which inspired Ringgold's *The Purple Quilt* (1986), also gives textiles and sewing considerable influence within the narrative.³² The book's main voice is Celie's, with much of the book told through letters between Celie and her sister Nettie, who works as a missionary with the fictitious Olinka people in Africa. A quilt is used to trigger memories on Corrine's, Nettie's employer and fellow missionary, death bed and confirm accurate biological motherhood.³³ Designing and sewing trousers allows Celie some economic and personal empowerment in the cottage industry she names Folkspants Unlimited.³⁴ And the importance of visual beauty found both in the textile and in textile-like fragments in *Beloved* seeing pink in winter carried on the tongue is also apparent in Walker's novel when Shug, after introducing Celie to her own sexuality, observes, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."³⁵

On a number of occasions hooks also refers to quilts in her essay writing. In versions of her writing published in *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* the layout of text and "patches" appear while hooks recalls the aesthetic inheritance of her own childhood.³⁶ Small white blocks, devoid of text, initially punctuate the page and disrupt the expected rhythms of consistent columns of words. As hooks's writing progresses, some empty blocks start to be partially filled with sections of images from Ringgold's quilts, initially incomplete, then building towards completion as the writing unfolds, suggesting yet another approach to Showalter's historical inquiries.³⁷

Faith Ringgold's Storytelling Quilts

Ringgold's strategy of publishing on cloth emerged in the 1980s, exemplified in story quilts such as *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983), *Slave Rape Story Quilt* (1985) and *The Purple Quilt* (1986). Her use of textile materials is credited to the influence of her mother, Willi Posey Jones, a local fashion designer, and Ringgold's viewing of *thanka* paintings.³⁸ The feminist author Michele Wallace, one of Ringgold's two daughters, reflects that her mother "saw in these unframed scrolls" of fifteenth-century Tibetan and Nepalese *thanka* paintings at the Rijksmuseum in the summer of 1972 "a solution to her problem in moving, storing and transporting paintings [...]. Paintings on tankas [sic] could be rolled."³⁹ Ringgold herself explains in an interview from 1975:

Who said that art is oil paint stretched on canvas with art frames? I didn't say that. Nobody who ever looked like me said that, so why the hell am I doing that? So I just stopped; and now I do sewing and all kinds of things. Sewing has been traditionally what all women in all cultures have done. What's wrong with that? Politically speaking, I think some women would probably say, "I don't want to be placed in the

bag [of] women's art... sewing." Okay, that's your choice... I don't want to be placed in the bag where I think that all art is about making something that nobody can move. Making some big, monumental, monolithic thing which I can't even afford to do... Feminist art is soft art, lightweight art, sewing art. This is the contribution women have made that is uniquely theirs.⁴⁰

Wallace observes that the *Slave Rape* series (1972) "serve as predecessors of an idea more fully conceived in the story quilts in the 1980s" through their use of a fabric border inspired by the *thanka* paintings and supported by the guidance of Ringgold's mother's sewing skills. Each work in the three-piece series contains a central painted image of unclothed and partially camouflaged by foliage "African women resisting captivity and sexual assault".⁴¹ The works are framed by pieced cloth edging, which belie the material expectations of the white cube to conform to right angles and straight edges. Arguably, the fabric could have been stitched straighter, the compositions more balanced, if that aesthetic had been desired. This treatment of the textile, but not the details of stitching, is a stylistic trait that runs throughout Ringgold's work with cloth.

But sewing is not, as Ringgold claims, "what all women in all cultures have done". Walker addresses this European and North American stereotype late in *The Color Purple* through a dialogue between Celie and Albert, the husband Celie's stepfather essentially sold her to and who subjected her to rape, who have reached some form of reconciliation through their mutual love and rejection by the same woman.⁴² Celie has learnt through her sister's missionary work in Africa that textile traditions such as sewing are not organised as she has experienced in America and tries to share this knowledge with Albert. Their dialogue offers a poignant vignette of the gender norms they live with:

Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing, he said. Men spose to wear the pants.

So I said, You ought to tell that to the mens in Africa.

Say what? He ast. First time he ever thought bout what Africans do. [...]

And men sew in Africa, too, I say.

They do? He ast.

Yeah, I say. They not so backward as mens here.

When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it.

Well, nodboy gon laugh at you now, I said. Here, help me stitch in these pockets.

But I don't know how, he say.

I'll show you, I said. And I did.

Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes.⁴³

Ringgold later collaborated with her mother on what is credited as her first quilt in 1980 *Echoes of Harlem*.⁴⁴ The quilt is composed of blocks of painted faces, without accompanying text, which Auther has described as, “a sewn grid of pieced fabric with strong references to the African-American quilting tradition in its use of remnants and improvisational contrast of color and pattern”, noting that Ringgold later expressed her regret at not following her mother’s original idea for the border, “afraid the pattern would look unprofessional. Once she came to understand how her mother’s interest in the freehand piecing of the quilt border related to the African American quilting tradition, she regretted not following through with the original idea.”⁴⁵ In dialogue with Obrist, Ringgold reflects on the quilt’s content:

FR: In the 1960s in Harlem, there was a riot every five minutes in the street.

HUO: You could see riots in the street, you experienced them, but footage wasn’t reported on the TV or in the newspapers?

*FR: No, nothing at all. I could not understand that you could be standing in the street and you would not see anything on the news when you got home. It occurred to me that someone was keeping information back.*⁴⁶

Ringgold’s observation could easily be applied to other contexts where textile-making offered an early record of violence, such as Chilean *arpilleras*.



Figure 2: Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?*, 1983, installation view Serpentine Galleries, London, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 80 in/228.6 x 203.2 cm, courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York, NY

Credited as her first story quilt, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983)⁴⁷ uses 56 panels to tell an alternative narrative about the face of the American brand of pancake mix “reconfigured as a black feminist icon, a woman who prospered in business, who is attractive, youthful and nobody’s slave.”⁴⁸ Ringgold has described the quilt’s reception at the time as “very controversial” and explains that in her version of the story Aunt Jemima is an entrepreneur.⁴⁹ The text panels run from top to bottom, but read from right to left with the exception of the final panel, which is centred at the bottom of the quilt.⁵⁰ Panel 1 of the quilt reads:

Jemima Blakey (fig A) didn't come from no ordinary people. Her Granma and Granpa bought they freedom out a slavery in New Orleans. Granma Jemima Blakey they called her Aunt Jemima too made cakes and catered fine parties for them plantation owners in Louisiana. And Granpa Blakey was a first class tailor too. From memory he could make a suit of clothes fit like a glove. They was sure smart people, them Blakeys. And Jemima was just like 'em, hard working, and God-fearing till the day she died.

The story goes on to tell of Jemima's marriage to Big Rufus, despite her parents forbidding the match, her move to Tampa, Florida, and work as a house keeper until lightning, literally, strikes the house, leaving Jemima the only survivor. The lightning strike creates an inheritance for Jemima and Big Rufus, who move with their children to New York where they open a restaurant. The tale then twists and turns through the marriages of the couple's children and a further move, this time to New Orleans, before Jemima and Big Rufus die in a car crash and their children inherit. Thalia Gouma-Peterson has credited this and many other of Ringgold's storytelling quilts as examples of narratives that bring together "elements of folk lore and anecdote with the African and West African Dilemma Tale, traditions Ringgold had absorbed from her mother's storytelling", acknowledging that Ringgold's stories tend to remain open-ended, rarely confirming a definitive conclusion or suggesting a single correct outcome.⁵¹ *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* remains a curious mixture of fantasy and moral meaning, and starts a pattern that appears across a number of Ringgold's storytelling quilts.



Figure 3: Faith Ringgold, *Slave Rape Story Quilt*, 1985, intaglio, 86 x 74 cm, Newark Museum, New Jersey, image © and courtesy of Faith Ringgold

In *Slave Rape Story Quilt* (1985) "the text takes precedence over the images",⁵² with a composition based around a wide-centred cross of white fabric with text filling all but the four most central squares that are filled with human figures instead.⁵³ The written story is longer than many other examples of Ringgold's story quilts and tells of a mother and daughter travelling on the slave ship *Cariolle*, the mother's suicide after giving birth, drowning her rapist with her, and what Gouma-Peterson reads as another open ending.⁵⁴ If *Echoes of Harlem* (1980) allowed Ringgold to recount through images her personal memories of individuals at a specific moment in history, *Slave Rape Story Quilt* (1985) relies much more heavily on the written word to convey a narrative.



Figure 4: installation view of Faith Ringgold's *The Purple Quilt* (1986) in *Judith Leiber: Crafting a New York Story* at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2017, courtesy the Museum of Arts and Design, photograph by Jenna Bascom

A year later, *The Purple Quilt* (1986) is an unusual example of Ringgold clearly drawing her inspiration from another narrative: Alice Walker's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and its subsequent film adaptation, directed by Steven Spielberg (1985). Main characters are painted in tall oblong blocks, with excerpts from Walker's text included in panels of a similar format to the right and left of the mid-section of the quilt, framed by further characters' torsos and tie-dyed blocks top and bottom.⁵⁵ Ringgold's incorporation of Walker's text is a strategy that does not appear often in her work. Exceptions are part 2 of the *Jones Road* series (2010), in which she quotes from notable historical figures: Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Gouma-Peterson writes of *The Purple Quilt*, "In this work then, as in *Slave Rape Story Quilt*, Ringgold claims narrative authority for a triple Black female voice (her own, Alice Walker's, and Celie's [Walker's main character]) to interpret women's experience through an art form (the Quilt) that has often been considered a collective, anonymous creation."⁵⁶

Walker herself has poignantly raised the issue of African-American quilters' anonymity:

*in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world [...] Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago." If we could locate this "anonymous" black woman from Alabama, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.*⁵⁷

Showalter rightly points out that "Piecing and quilting were not anonymous arts, although the names and identities of quilt makers have frequently been suppressed by contemporary art history and museum curatorship."⁵⁸ But both Walker and hooks offer a warning against forgetting the circumstances of historical quilting traditions in African-American culture.

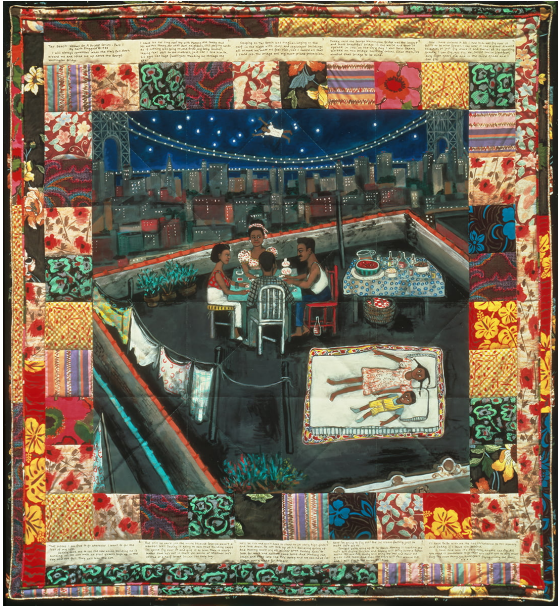


Figure 5: Faith Ringgold, *Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach*, 1988, acrylic on canvas 74 x 69 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY, image © and courtesy of Faith Ringgold

Six years after *The Purple Quilt* honours Walker's authorial voice, Ringgold's own written and quilted voices come together in *Tar Beach* (1988), a painted story quilt now held in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum collection and the first in a series of five named *Women on a Bridge* and a children's book⁵⁹ with the same title (1991).⁶⁰ Narrated through the voice of eight-year-old Cassie Louise Lightfoot, Ringgold's story recalls her childhood experience of summer evenings escaping the heat on the (tarred) rooftop of the apartment building where she lived as a child. Imagining her perspective high in the sky looking down on the rooftop and nearby George Washington Bridge, the narrator explains: "Sleeping on Tar Beach was magical. Lying on the roof in the night, with stars and skyscraper buildings all around me, made me feel rich, like I owned all that I could see. The bridge was my most prized possession."⁶¹

The story goes on to recount the bridge's opening date to be the same as Ringgold's date of birth, her father's construction work on the bridge followed by his experience of unemployment and exclusion from the union "because Grandpa wasn't a member."⁶² Hand-written text panels appear at the top and bottom of the quilt, while the book version is accompanied by additional illustrations.⁶³ Racism is not expunged from the narrative, but Ringgold has arrived at a didactic outlet through the format of children's literature, which brings together elements of autobiography and fiction.

While Ringgold's strategy of publishing on cloth began with work made during the 1980s, Michele Wallace reflects that the publication of *Tar Beach* (1991) followed by her memoir *We Flew Over the Bridge* (1995) "removed the urgency that she had initially felt to include her stories in her quilts".⁶⁴ Nonetheless, it is not an artistic approach she abandoned. *Coming to Jones Road Part 1* (1999–2000) and *Part 2* (2009–2010), a series even referred to as *tankas* in some of the part 2 work's titles of acrylic on canvas framed with fabric borders include text taken from notable historical figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, which create a background frame around each individual's face. More recent works, particularly her *French Connection* series, continue to mix literary and artistic references.⁶⁵

Ringgold has continued to create paintings and textiles with political content. The acrylic canvases *American Collection #1: We Came to America* (1997)⁶⁶ and *The American Collection #6: The Flag is Bleeding #2* (1997)

depict, respectively, an ocean of black bodies swimming towards a black dreadlocked Statue of Liberty and an American flag dripping red blood and partially concealing a black woman who stands with two children holding on to her waist. Today, at nearly ninety years of age, she continues to make work, having earned the status of an established and celebrated artist. But the intersection of race and gender, in Ringgold's case stereotypical assumptions, which first led her to publish on cloth, draw her work into a complex relationship with craft. Auther, whose section on Ringgold in *String, Felt, Thread* is titled "A Painter Who works in the Quilt Medium" acknowledges:

On the one hand, Ringgold's invention of the unstretched, fabric-framed painted image represented a critique of the boundaries and hierarchies of the art world that affected her as an African-American female artist. On the other hand, the defensiveness of her insistence upon the label "painting" for these works when the value of their hybridity was questioned also reveals an equally significant investment in succeeding in that same art world. From Ringgold's point of view, the goal of overcoming or breaking down the boundaries between art and craft important to a given work's formal and political significance could only be carried out in the name of art.⁶⁷

Ringgold's initial impetuous to publish on cloth came from a pressure to disclose a life of greater subjugation than she had experienced. The textile has provided a useful, and ultimately successful, route into the publishing world where she wanted her voice to be heard. The effectiveness of the importance she placed on her quilts being understood as art rather than craft is today much less clear. Instead Ringgold's storytelling quilts mark a particular phase in her career possibly as much of interest for what they led from, and to, than how they stand alone.



Figure 6: installation view Serpentine Gallery, London: (left) Faith Ringgold, *American Collection #1: We Came to America*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 74.5 x 79.5 in, 189.2 x 201.9 cm, courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter; (right) *The American Collection #6: The Flag is Bleeding #2*, 1997, acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced border, 76 x 79.5 in, 193 x 201.9 cm, Private Collection, courtesy Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London

Footnotes

1. Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art + Textile Politics*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. 2017. p. 14.
2. Ringgold, Faith. Press Release Serpentine Galleries. 6 June–8 September 2019.
3. With her daughter Michele Wallace, Ringgold co-founded the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973: “By the 1970s, Ringgold, with Wallace, was leading protests against the lack of diversity in the exhibitions programme at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, and in 2018 saw her work included in an exhibition there on the subject of protest.” Press Release, Serpentine Galleries.
4. Ringgold’s painting practice includes a number of works that depict the American flag—another type of pieced textile—including early works such as *The Flag is Bleeding* (1967–1969) and *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969). *Flag Story Quilt* (1985) is made of pieced fabric with blocks of text written between alternating tie-dyed stripes made at the height of Ringgold’s time working with quilts that incorporate text. *The American Collection #6: The Flag is Bleeding #2* (1997) return to acrylic on canvas but include pieced borders. In response to Hans Ulrich Obrist’s question “Why did you start painting flags?” Ringgold explains: “There was a feeling in those days that you should not condemn the American flag in anyway. The flag was like a private object and if you did express any feelings about what was going on in America with a flag you would be jailed. We organised the People’s Flag Show at the Judson Memorial Church in 1970 inviting hundreds of artists to create a work that would express our protection of our freedom of speech, works of art using the US flag. Together with Jean Hendricks and Jon Toche of the Art Worker’s Coalition, I got arrested but eventually exonerated.” Ringgold, Faith. Press Release Serpentine Galleries. Transcript interview, p. 29.
5. Ringgold’s series of quilts and performances on the topic of her weight include the *Change* series of quilts: *Change* (1986), *Change 2* (1988) and *Change 3* (1991) all subtitled *Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*.
6. See “An Evening with Faith Ringgold”, which took place at Conway Hall on 6 June 2019. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcUPrr9nNJg> (accessed 2019-12 -12). 40 min. 14 sec.
7. *Ibid.*, 41 min. 49 sec.
8. *Ibid.*, NB: The transcript of the interview published with the press release differs slightly from “An Evening with Faith Ringgold”. The printed version reads: FR “I’d written my autobiography, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, but couldn’t get it published because I was told ‘this is not your story’. Because I’m a black woman, publishers were telling me that it’s not my story and their idea of ‘my’ story was that I was born in poverty and grew up on welfare and got raped and beat up and thrown out the window. Well, I’m sorry, that’s not my story. This is my story, and I feel that freedom of speech is very important. I’m determined to have it [...] HUO So you wrote your story out instead on these quilts.FR That’s right, because I thought ‘I will not allow anyone to keep me from voicing my story.’” p. 32.
9. Holton, Raven. “Curlee with Ringgold, Faith”. In *Faith Ringgold: A View From the Studio*. Boston, MA: Bunker Hill Publishing in association with Allentown Art Museum. 2004. p. 9.
10. Auther, Elissa. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2010. p. 100.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
12. Holton, “Curlee with Ringgold, Faith”, p. 24.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
14. Auther, *String, Felt, Thread*, p. xxii.
15. See Agosin, Marjorie. *Scraps of Life Chilean Arpilleras: Chilean Women and the Pinochet Dictatorship*. Translated by Cola Franzen. Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press. 1987; Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*.

16. See Schmahmann, Brenda (Ed.). *Material Matters: Appliques by the Weya Women of Zimbabwe and Needlework by South African Collectives*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press. 2000; Noy, Ilse. *The Art of the Weya Women*. Harare: Baobab Books. 1992; Hemmings, Jessica. "Emerging Voices: the Weya Appliqué Project of Zimbabwe". In *Reinventing Textiles: Postcolonialism and Creativity*. Edited by Paul Sharrad and Anne Collett. Winchester: Telos Art Publishing. 2006. pp. 97-111.
17. "Trapunto refers to a quilting technique that Abad began experimenting with in the late 1970s in which canvasses are padded and stitched before being painted and layered with a range of printed textiles and objects, including buttons, rickrack, sequins and shells. Characterised by their vibrant colour and intricate construction, these works combine a broad range of styles, subjects and techniques, from social realist tableaux incorporating indigenous textiles to richly detailed abstractions inspired by Korean ink brush painting, Indonesian batik and Papua New Guinean macramé. This pluralist approach to image-making across cultures, histories and styles underpins Abad's work throughout the decades. Focusing on her depictions of the experiences of immigrants and her engagement with diverse cultural traditions, the exhibition at Spike Island offers an idiosyncratic perspective on transnational art and culture." Information On Spike Island website, available at <https://www.spikeisland.org.uk/programme/exhibitions/pacita-abad/> (accessed 2020-03-21).
18. Faith Ringgold quoted on Spike Island exhibition wall text of Pacita Abad exhibition, quoted from Kim, Elaine H., Machida, Margo and Mizota, Sharon. *Fresh Talks/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2005.
19. hooks, bell. "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand". In *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*. Edited by Joan Livingstone and John Ploof. Cambridge, MA, and London: School of the Art Institute of Chicago and The MIT Press. p. 329.
20. Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers. 1991. n.p.
21. Beckert, Sven. *Empire of Cotton: A New History of the Global Capitalism*. London: Penguin Books. 2015. p. 110.
22. Ringgold published *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers) in 1992. The book flap reads, "In *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, Cassie returns to the skies. Flying way up, so far up that the mountains look like rock candy and the oceans like tiny cups of tea, Cassie and her brother, Be Be, encounter a fantastic train—the Underground Railroad train—and a tiny woman in a conductor's uniform. The woman is Harriet Tubman, who transports Cassie and Be Be back to the terrifying world of a slave plantation and on a desperate— but ultimately triumphant—journey of escape. Drawing on historical accounts of the Underground Railroad and the facts of Harriet Tubman's life, and on the rich resources of her own imagination, Faith Ringgold has created a book that both recounts the chilling realities of slavery and joyfully celebrates freedom."
23. Tobin, Jacqueline L. and Dobard, Raymond G. *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. New York, NY: Anchor Books. 2000.
24. Driessen, Kris. "Putting it in Perspective: The Symbolism of Underground Railroad quilts". In *Quilt History* www.quilthistory.com/ugrrquilts.htm (accessed 2020-03-15).
25. Bordewich, Fergus M. "History's Tangled Threads". *New York Times*. 2 February 2007. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/02/opinion/02bordewich.html> (accessed 15 March 2020).
26. The focus in this writing is American literature and quilting traditions, but examples of this scholarship are not exclusive to America. I have attempted similar strategies when reading quilting as a metaphor and structure in Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera's fiction and, more recently, Indian novelist Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996). See Hemmings, Jessica. "How All Life is Lived, in Patches: Quilting Metaphors in the Fiction of Yvonne Vera". In *The End of Unheard Narratives: Contemporary*

- Perspectives on Southern African Literatures*. Edited by Bettina Weiss. Heidelberg: kalliope. 2004. pp. 235–250; and Hemmings, Jessica. “Rereading and revising: Acknowledging the smallness (sometimes) of craft”. *Craft Research*. Vol. 9. No. 2. 2018. pp. 273–286. DOI: 10.1386/crre.9.2.273_1.
27. Showalter, Elaine. “Piecing and Writing”. In *The Poetics of Gender*. Edited by Nancy K. Miller. New York, NY: Columbia University Press: 1986. p. 227.
 28. *Ibid.*, pp. 223–224.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 227. NB: italics in original.
 30. Falling-rain, Sunny. “A Literary Patchwork Crazy Quilt: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”. In *Uncoverings*. American Quilt Study Group. 1994. p. 112.
 31. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. 1987. p. 4.
 32. Walker’s earlier short story “Everyday Use” (1967) also casts the quilt in a prominent role: “Walker wrote the short story, ‘Everyday Use’ in her thirties—first published as one of thirteen stories about women in a collection of her writing titled *In Love and Trouble* in 1967. In it, Walker creates the characters Maggie and Dee—two sisters with vastly different regard for the material culture of their childhood. Narrated by the sisters’ mother, the story pokes gentle fun at Dee’s ‘back to Africa’ values and interest in re-appropriating craft objects—made out of necessity—as souvenirs. The family’s hand stitched quilts are the point of greatest tension, cherished by both sisters, but for extremely different reasons. Dee despairs of her sister (who ironically is the one who has learned how to quilt), ‘She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use.’ Walker’s story highlights two conflicting value systems that the textile is often torn between.” Hemmings, Jessica. *The Textile Reader*. London: Bloomsbury. 2012. p. 436.
 33. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Phoenix ebook. Loc 1811.
 34. *Ibid.*, Loc 2120.
 35. *Ibid.*, Loc 1916.
 36. hooks, bell. “An Aesthetic of Blackness: strange and oppositional”. In *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*. Edited Joan Livingstone and John Ploof. Cambridge, MA and London: School of the Art Institute of Chicago and The MIT Press. 2007. pp. 315–332.
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. Ringgold, Faith. Press Release Serpentine Galleries. Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. p. 32.
 39. Wallace, Michele, *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 40. Auther, *String, Felt, Thread*, p. 105, originally cited in “Conversations with Faith Ringgold on the Politics behind Black Feminist Art”. Interview with Sandra Kaufman. 10 May 1975.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 103, originally cited in “Interview with Faith Ringgold by Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson. In *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1981. p. 172; “Conversations with Faith Ringgold on the Politics behind Black Feminist Art”. Interview with Sandra Kaufman, 10 May 1975.
 42. Walker writes: “I’m real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how it felt when she left me. Then the old devil put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me real quiet. Way after while I bent my stiff neck onto his shoulder. Here us is, I thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars.” Loc 2757.
 43. *Ibid.*, Loc 2763–2768.
 44. Ringgold, Faith. *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press. 2005. p. 78 and p. 250.
 45. Auther, *String, Felt, Thread*, p. 116.
 46. Ringgold, Press Release Serpentine Galleries. Interview, p. 29.
 47. The title also offers a reference to the Edward Albee play of 1962 *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

- adapted into the 1966 film of the same name directed by Mike Nichols, which starred Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and centred around a volatile and drunken late-night dialogue between two couples, with both husbands working as academics.
48. Wallace, Press Release Serpentine Galleries. Interview, p. 19.
 49. Ringgold, *Ibid.*, p. 32.
 50. Ringgold's daughter Michelle Wallace explains of *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* "It was the only story quilt that Faith ever made by hand and entirely alone, without any kind of assistance (traditionally quilts are made by groups). As such, it took her an entire year. I would count it among the works that Faith made as a way of honouring and mourning her mother's death." Wallace, Press Release Serpentine Galleries. Interview, p.18.
 51. Gouma-Peterson, Thalia. "Faith Ringgold's Narrative Quilts". *Arts magazine*. Vol. 61. No. 5. January 1987. p. 64.
 52. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
 53. Thalia Gouma-Peterson sees in the composition a "cross-shaped core which also looks like an open ceremonial book (a Bible)". *Ibid.*
 54. Gouma-Peterson writes: "In *Slave Rape Story Quilt* the narrator is the heroine herself, Beata, a young slave girl on a South Carolina plantation whose mother was raped by a drunken sailor, on the slave ship Cariolle, while eight months pregnant. Beata's mother gave birth to her daughter on the ship's deck and with her last gust of strength she plunged over the side of the vessel in to the deep dark water, taking the sailor with her. 'Ain neither of em come up out of that water once.' Throughout the complex plot which ends with Beata herself being raped by the 'Cap'n Cariolle' (who may have been her father) and the birth of her daughter, Rebecca, the heroine is sustained by the memory of her mother, whose story she 'grew up listening to Cap'n Cariolle tell... in his garden' as she 'lay in the bushes nearby.' She 'built a spirit shrine of stones and flowers for Mama' and regularly ran to the Old Plantation to talk to her. Beata's concluding words, 'We don't belong nowhere Mama. But we staying Mama. Rebecca and me ain gonna have to die like you Mama. We gonna live an be free,' are bittersweet and, again, inconclusive." *Ibid.*
 55. A cropped version of Ringgold's *The Purple Quilt* appears on the cover of Duchess Harris's *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. 2009.
 56. Gouma-Peterson, "Faith Ringgold's Narrative Quilts", p. 68.
 57. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens". In *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Edited by Angelyn Mitchell Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press. 1972/1994. p. 407.
 58. Showalter, "Piecing and Writing", p. 227.
 59. In a 1994 interview Ringgold clarifies, "*Tar Beach* was not written for children, it's just written for people, but it turns out to be great for children too. It was written to help recall childhood, to help you think back on your childhood." Graulich, Melody and Witzling, Mara. "The Freedom to Say What She Pleases: A Conversation with Faith Ringgold". *NWSA Journal*. Vol. 6. No. 1. Spring 1994. p. 9.
 60. *Tar Beach* also appears on the cover image for *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (2005), first published in 1995 by Bullfinch Press.
 61. Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers. 1991. n.p.
 62. *Ibid.*
 63. Ringgold likens the layout of the book to that of creating a quilt: "I know how many pages I want text on before I start the story. And that's the same thing I do with the quilts. I know exactly how many frames I have to write." Graulich and Witzling, "The Freedom to Say What She Pleases", p. 9.
 64. Wallace, Press Release Serpentine Galleries. Interview, p. 21. Full quote: "The initial reason for including stories in her quilts was as an alternative means of publication in the face of the difficulty Faith found in

getting her memoir *We Flew Over the Bridge* published. This included a rejection by Charlotte Sheedy, a famous feminist literary agent, who had the temerity to tell her, after having read the first draft of her memoir, that what she had written was ‘not her story’. [...] The successful publication of her memoir in 1995, as well as her children’s books, in particular *TarBeach* (1991), removed the urgency that she had initially felt to include her stories in her quilts.”

65. See Graulich and Witzling “The Freedom to Say What She Pleases”, pp. 1-27.
66. Writing about *We Came to America*, Wallace recalls, “According to the narrative that was written for this painting, although not published, Marlena has a dream while crossing the Atlantic with her brother of the slaves walking on water back to Africa, joyfully celebrating their escape.” Wallace, Press Release Serpentine Galleries. Interview, p. 21.
67. Auther, *String, Felt, Thread*, p. 107.