

## **Narrative Quilts and Quilted Narratives: The Art of Faith Ringgold and Alice Walker**

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Traditionally, quilts are “women’s art,” and they reflect the pattern of women’s lives—a patchwork-like pattern of connection and compassion. In *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Alice Walker reports that when she looked for the creative spirit that contemporary black women have inherited, she found part of her answer in an anonymous black woman’s quilt hung in the Smithsonian Institution. Walker describes this unknown black woman from Alabama as “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.”<sup>1</sup> Following in the footsteps of that anonymous woman, a number of contemporary black artists work in cloth and words to create narrative quilts and quilt-like narratives although, until recently, neither quilts nor women’s writing were seen as “real art.” Faith Ringgold, for example, has made “politically engaged black feminist art out of quilting . . . and performance,”<sup>2</sup> and Alice Walker has won acclaim with her womanist prose. Each of these women is a quilting artist. Ringgold tells stories in cloth; Alice Walker stitches stories into quilted narratives.

Houston and Charlotte Baker suggest that, for African American women, the “patchwork quilt as a trope” offers a vast array of “interpretive possibilities.” Historically, the Bakers explain, black women were denied time and materials for artistic expression. Yet the women had to sew, and they had to make quilts. Quilts, in fact, were their tradition, the heritage that they could pass on to succeeding generations. The actual quilt, then, is a tangible bond between present and past, while the quilt as metaphor reflects “a communal bonding that confounds traditional definitions of art and of the artist.”<sup>3</sup> The artist, in other words, is usually defined as one who breaks new ground and stands alone outside the received tradition. Yet the quilt-artist is the *carrier* of tradition, embracing the past and creating continuity. In this manner, Ringgold’s narrative quilts and Walker’s quilted narratives stitch past and present together as they reflect and explore the patterns of black women’s lives.

Faith Ringgold is an internationally acclaimed visual and performance artist whose “narrative quilts” (this is her term) are included in her touring exhibitions. In the mid-seventies, Ringgold was working primarily with fabric, but she wanted to get back to painting. She decided to mix the two media by painting *on* cloth and by framing paintings *with* cloth. At the same time, she began to add text to her creations. In a 1972 series, for example, she painted short, haiku-like texts on landscapes; in other works she included terse statements by black women such as Sojourner Truth.

Then in 1980, Ringgold was commissioned to create a quilt for a traveling exhibition, a project which helped Ringgold realize, as she puts it, that the “quilt, so intimately connected with women’s lives, could become a most effective vehicle for telling the stories of their lives.”<sup>4</sup> Working with her mother Willi Posey, Ringgold created a pieced and painted quilt entitled “Faces of Harlem.” Containing no written text, this quilt tells its story entirely in pictures, but three years later Ringgold created her first “story quilt” (again, this is Ringgold’s term) entitled “Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima?” The Aunt Jemima quilt’s fifty-six pieces include squares of story-text about a revisionist Aunt Jemima. This Aunt Jemima is not a turbaned mammy, but rather a successful businesswoman whose mother runs a brothel in New Orleans. In addition to the squares of “text” that tell Jemima’s story, the quilt contains painted picture-squares depicting the other characters and squares of traditional quilting. The placement of squares in the overall design, however, at first glance appears peculiar. To “read” the text of the Aunt Jemima quilt, one begins at top left and reads down the left side; then one moves to top right and reads down the right side. Yet the quilt itself appears to be “centered” by a “title square” in the middle. In this manner, that is, through the strategic placement of squares, Ringgold implies the complex community of which Aunt Jemima is the center. The story-lines of other lives are part of Jemima’s story, yet these other lives have directions of their own. To consider Ringgold’s Aunt Jemima, in other words, is to realize the importance of “community.”

Later story quilts by Ringgold also contain text-squares, picture-squares, and traditional quilt-squares, and again the placement of squares in the total composition is crucial to the overall visual effect as well as to the story that is told. For example, text-squares in “The Wedding: Lover’s Quilt #1” are restricted to one vertical strip in the center, like the aisle of the church. This placement of text is appropriate, because the text-strip tells a story of infidelity and fear that divides bride from groom, family from family, and friends from each other. In “Sleeping: Lover’s Quilt #2” the text-squares comprise a sheet that partially covers two lovers lying in bed together. Yet while the “sheet” under which they both lie appears to bring the man and woman together, the story in the “text” describes the woman’s inner conflict and betrayal of her lover. The flowing text-sheet reads in columns, from left to right. It moves, in other words, only in one direction. And at the end of the story, it is clear that his outstretched hand will never touch her.

In contrast to these quilts that tell straight-line stories, Ringgold’s “The

Dinner Quilt” tells a story that is circular, like the overall design of the quilt itself. In the text, the narrator describes a typical extended-family dinner when she was young—how conflicts and liaisons simmered and brewed throughout the meal. Many years later, she understands much that had earlier been confusing, but she finds that understanding and adulthood have brought, inevitably, complicity. Like the text-squares that surround the dinner table on the quilt, the narrator of the story is likewise a part of the whole fabric. A similar circularity structures the quilt entitled “Change: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pounds Weight Loss Story Quilt.” In “reading” this quilt, one begins at the top center, moves roughly counterclockwise through picture-squares and text-squares, and ends up again at top center. The title is an apt description of the content. In the text-squares, Ringgold describes how she gained weight over a period of years, and then how she lost it. And the point of the convoluted, somewhat circular design is that one aspect of her life is meaningless without all the others, that no one’s life is as simple as a “beginning-middle-end” story. Ringgold’s weight gain and weight loss were complex processes that involved others as well as herself, and thus the quilt pattern abstracted from her experience is a complicated one. As Ringgold explained in our interview with her, “How the story fits into the design of the quilt is very, very important. . . . The story has to be woven into the total composition of the work.”<sup>5</sup>

The dividing line between visual art and verbal art is thus blurred in Ringgold’s narrative quilts, just as it has traditionally been blurred in metaphors of needle and pen. Spinning, weaving, and stitching are historically “women’s work,” and those who do this work with fabric have also long been equated with those who use words as their materials, creating verbal quilts as well as comforters. Female storytellers spin yarns and weave tales in the text-as-textile metaphor that includes Arachne, Ariadne, and Penelope as legendary personae.

Among contemporary writers, perhaps no one is more aware of this than Alice Walker. Her novel *Meridian*, she said in a widely quoted interview, was patterned like “a crazy quilt— . . . something that works on the mind in different patterns.” “A crazy quilt story,” she continues, “is one that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth.”<sup>6</sup> Barbara Christian has explored this quilting technique in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and in *Meridian*, but not in Walker’s other work.<sup>7</sup> Yet the influence of quilts pervades all of Walker’s fiction.

As if to make the metaphor of quilting explicit, in *The Color Purple* Walker (who worked on a quilt while writing the novel) makes clothwork one of the most important activities. Celie literally discovers and defines herself through her at-home clothesmaking industry. Fabric, yarn, thread, and piecework are suggested and exchanged between characters throughout the novel, and the quiltmaking of Celie, Sofia, and Corinne draws the women together in a common enterprise and community. Seeing in this quiltmaking one of the novel’s themes, one critic emphasizes the fact that “sewing is an act of union, of connecting pieces to make a useful whole.”<sup>8</sup> In one sense, Walker achieves through metaphor and verbal description what Ringgold does through fabric and paint, each using the quilt as,

in the words of critic Lucy Lippard, a “visual metaphor for women’s lives.”<sup>9</sup>

Walker creates a “visual metaphor” in her collection of stories, *In Love and Trouble*.<sup>10</sup> The stories are often angry, sometimes stoic, and always truthful about the harsh realities of black women’s lives. The characters within each story do not recur or interact, and there is no specifically common setting such as a city block or neighborhood. Yet this is not simply a random collection of unrelated tales. In the book, the stories are bonded together thematically, each telling of racial and sexual oppression. Further, the book is crafted like a pieced quilt—specifically a “strip quilt.” In this quilt design category, which is indigenous to Africa and often found in slave quilts from southern plantations, pieces combine to form large vertical or horizontal stripes that march from one end of the quilt to the other. The visual effect of these quilts can be striking, with each pieced “strip” different from the others and yet somehow a harmonious part of the overall design. The effect is the same with Walker’s stories. In the collection, which might be called a “quilted narrative,” each story delineates a separate life. No story’s characters cross into any other story. Yet in their very parallelism, the tales form an integrated whole, a “whole cloth.”

Indeed, this “whole cloth” is a tapestry depicting women in love and in trouble. “Roselily,” the first fiction, describes a woman who, on her wedding day, surrounded by her four children, prays that a loveless marriage will bring respectability. The next two stories deal with unhappy marriages, the fourth and fifth with parent-child relationships. Thus, the first five stories focus on love more or less ironically, but they certainly also contain a lot of trouble. In contrast, the last eight stories focus on trouble, but they also contain a lot of love. The stories are often angry, frequently grotesque, and unremittingly truthful about the harsh realities of black lives. One such reality, indeed the central reality for each protagonist, is foreshadowed in the book’s two epigraphs—excerpts that highlight the conflict between an alien world and a defiant self. The first epigraph, from Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*, tells of a young woman whose “personal spirit” brings her in conflict with authority and tradition. The second epigraph, from Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, is an exhortation to “hold to what is difficult.” Most of Walker’s characters manage to heed the words of Rilke, but Walker shows how alien and treacherous is the white world in which they must live. In “Strong Horse Tea,” for example, a white mailman refuses to help Rannie Toomer get a “real” doctor for her dying baby son, Snooks. In “The Welcome Table,” an old black woman is physically carried from a white church she had entered to pray. And in “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff,” a starving black family is refused food stamps because the parents and children don’t look ragged enough. Snooks dies of pneumonia, the old black woman falls over dead in the dusty road, and Hannah Kemhuff’s four children starve to death. This could be the stuff of melodrama, but Walker’s vision is subtle and complex, not melodramatic.

The mother of Snooks, Rannie Toomer, for example, is far from an attractive character. Illiterate and dull, her “long crusty bottom lip” hangs down while she listens, with her mouth open. Because she has not washed since her baby took ill,

she smells “like a wet goat.” Similarly unattractive, the old black woman who is bodily carried from the white church is clearly mad. She smells of “decay and musk—the fermenting scent of onionskins and rotting greens,” and her headrag is “stained with grease from the many oily pigtailed underneath.” When she thinks she sees Jesus coming down the dusty highway toward her, she emits “short giggles of joy, jumping about and slapping her hands on her knees.” Other characters are just as sad, perhaps even as embarrassing as these two. Yet in Walker’s compassionate art, in the tapestry that she creates, all the “pieces”—no matter how flawed—are important parts of the human community.

Two of the happier stories in this book, “Everyday Use” and “To Hell With Dying,” are often anthologized. In “Everyday Use,” a black country woman and her two daughters clash over the disposition of some family quilts, described by Walker as follows:

[The quilts contain] scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell’s paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War.<sup>11</sup>

These quilts are family albums, pieces of many lives stitched into one whole cloth. They are in fact like the quilt coverlet that covers Mr. Sweet in the last story in the book, “To Hell With Dying.” Mr. Sweet—an incorrigible alcoholic beloved by neighborhood children—dies on his ninetieth birthday, surrounded by people who love him, under a quilt coverlet that symbolizes the community of which he is a part. This is a community that knows pain, like the pain that drove Mr. Sweet to his alcoholic excesses. Yet it also knows love, like the love that surrounds Mr. Sweet again and again, saying “to hell with dying” and bringing him back from the brink of death. As Walker makes clear, the characters in these thirteen stories are a heterogeneous lot. Some of them find healing ways to deal with the world. Some of them are smart, beautiful, and successful. Many, though, are like Maggie in the story “Everyday Use”: “Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by.” Perhaps this very diversity is the point of the book, explained in effect by its sub-title: “Stories of Black Women.” Walker has commented that these are stories *by* black women, that is, stories that Walker herself heard or witnessed. Thus she has stitched together history and legend, life and imagination, to create her quilted narrative.

It is no wonder, then, that Faith Ringgold and Alice Walker admire each other’s work. Ringgold’s “The Purple Quilt” was inspired by Walker’s *The Color Purple*—a story-quilt inspired by a quilt story. Commenting about this quilt and others, Walker herself observed in a press release for Ringgold’s 1987 exhibition: “One feels the marriage of the stories with the quilts is true. . . . We are covered in the warmth of the stories. Sustained by the vivid history of these quilts.” Thus story-quilts and quilt-stories combine history and vision, tradition and innovation, practical use and uncommon beauty. If in their pieces they reflect the fragmentation and difficulty of women’s lives, they also reflect the role of

black women as “connectors,” as creators of community. From a scrapbag filled with bits of history and pieces of life-stories, such quilters as Ringgold and Walker create something coherent and whole.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), 239.

<sup>2</sup>Michele Wallace, “Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist.*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 59.

<sup>3</sup>Houston A. Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker, “Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker’s ‘Everyday Use,’” *The Southern Review* 21 (Summer 1985): 714.

<sup>4</sup>Thalia Gouma-Peterson, “Faith Ringgold’s Narrative Quilts,” *Faith Ringgold: Change: Painted Story Quilts*, Exhibition Catalog (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, 1987), 10.

<sup>5</sup>Interview, 27 September 1987.

<sup>6</sup>*Black Women Writers at Work*, (New York: Continuum, 1983), 176.

<sup>7</sup>Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980), 180-238.

<sup>8</sup>M. Teresa Tavormina, “Dressing the Spirit: Clothmaking and Language in *The Color Purple*,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 16 (Fall 1986): 224.

<sup>9</sup>Lucy R. Lippard, “Up, Down and Across: A New Frame for New Quilts,” in *The Artist and the Quilt.*, ed. Charlotte Robinson, (New York: Knopf, 1983), 32.

<sup>10</sup>Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble* (New York: Harcourt, 1967).

<sup>11</sup>Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 56.