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PLEDGING ALLEGIANCE: THE USE OF AMERICAN FLAG IMAGERY BY FAITH  
RINGGOLD AND EMMA AMOS

by

SANTANA NASH

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond, PhD

ABSTRACT

This study will examine two African American female artists, Faith Ringgold and Emma Amos, and how they used variations of the American flag in their body of works for social commentary. By examining their use of this motif, their goals of conveying messages about civil liberties, race relations, and gender identity will be highlighted. By the conclusion of this study, I will provide a clearer understanding of how both artists used the image of the American flag to challenge its messages of patriotism. I will also examine the connection between their shared use of the flag to demonstrate how the iconic symbol can be used to communicate a lack of civil liberties, as well as racial and gender inequality in the United States of America.

INDEX WORDS: Civil liberties, Race relations, Gender identity, Pan-Africanism, Black  
nationalism

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RINGGOLD AND EMMA AMOS

by

SANTANA NASH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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2023

PLEDGING ALLEGIANCE: THE USE OF AMERICAN FLAG IMAGERY BY FAITH  
RINGGOLD AND EMMA AMOS

by

SANTANA NASH

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May 2023

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my family, whose consistent moral, emotional, spiritual, and financial support has gotten me where I am today.

When I was skeptical about pursuing a thesis track for my master's degree, it was my mother (Paula Nash) who pushed me to further my research, so I want to dedicate this to her.

I also dedicate this to my sister (Morgan Nash) who has always been a call away when the high-stressed environment of school gets to me.

Lastly, I dedicate this study to my father (Willie Nash) who recently passed away. While dealing with the death of my father in the middle of graduate school was difficult to cope with, it was his voice in the back of my mind and in my heart that guided me to the finish line.

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I would like to acknowledge and give my warmest thanks to everyone who has helped me in my pursuit of educational prosperity, specifically in the field of Art History. To my committee members, your guidance, support, and advice since starting graduate school have aided in my development as a better art historian, so I thank you.

To my committee chair (Dr. Susan Richmond), thank you so much for your consistent advisement and enlightenment which carried me through all the stages of my writing and helped me further my research and produce my thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge and give special thanks to my mother (Paula Nash), who has supported me in every step of my educational career, and my boyfriend (Henry Spencer III), who became an avid listener when I needed to clarify the jumbled knowledge existing in my head.



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

History tells us the first American flag came about on June 14, 1777. It is oft repeated that female Betsy Ross planned and created the flag. Although the flag has taken various forms since its creation, its purpose of inspiring unity, liberty, and patriotism in the United States is one that has persisted. Nonetheless, many contemporary artists recognize that the symbolism of the American flag was built on a country that did not believe in equal rights for all. Two African American female artists, Faith Ringgold and Emma Amos, used variations of the American flag in their bodies of works for social commentary. This thesis will examine their use of this motif and what they were attempting to accomplish with it. Specifically, I indicate how the two artists used the flag to convey messages about civil liberties, race relations, and gender identity.

Easily known as one of the most influential and prominent African American woman artists, Ringgold was born and raised in Harlem, New York. She has often taken a political approach in her art and has an oeuvre that includes works related to the civil rights movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the Feminist Movement. Whether she addresses the political implications of being Black, a female, or both, she continuously uses imagery that supports political activism. Through her use of distinctive mediums and motifs, Ringgold has become a leading figure in illustrating racial and gender equality. One motif that she regularly uses and is well-known for is the image of the American flag. For Ringgold, the American flag has always been a powerful symbol. The artist's interest in the flag as an icon was stimulated by Jasper John's flag paintings; however, Ringgold believed his images to be incomplete because he remained "politically neutral and made no reference to the hell of racial violence that was erupting in America."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), vi.

African American visual artist Emma Amos (born in Atlanta, Georgia) is less prominent than Ringgold, however, she too regularly utilized and examined the American flag to question freedom, justice, and equality in the United States.

Through their practices, Ringgold and Amos worked to create a space for the entire Black community while highlighting and emphasizing important aspects of being Black women living in America. Specifically, the two artists' regular incorporation of American flag imagery in their works is revealing of their goals. While Ringgold has bluntly used flag motifs as a social and political act, Amos adopted a less overtly political approach that included a personal undertone. For Ringgold, the emphasis on Black nationalism in her work is bold in the way it advocates for the unity and self-determination of the entire black race. On the other hand, Amos' focus on a communal Black identity is less overt but the emphasized tone and message are still collective. Even though they have different methods and emphases, both artists' works evolved into critiques of sexism and racism which worked to empower women and people of color in the three decades following the civil rights era.

Because Ringgold was extremely prominent and influential in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, there is more literature produced on her than on Amos. Lisa E. Farrington's book *Faith Ringgold* is the most beneficial to my argument. In her book, Farrington provides an in-depth overview of the artist's personal story and work.<sup>2</sup> This book also highlights Ringgold's goals and themes centered around Black nationalism and fighting discrimination. However, Farrington's explicit lack of discussion on Ringgold's specific use of the American flag motif in her work is where this thesis will pick up.

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004).

Unlike Ringgold, Amos and her practice are not as well known, so, unfortunately, the literature on the artist is sparse. The most recent and in-depth scholarship comes from a retrospective of the artist's work that originated at the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Georgia. The exhibition catalog for this show, *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey*, was edited by art historian and curator Shawnya Harris. It has essays by Harris, and other art historians, one of whom is Farrington.<sup>3</sup> The catalog explores Amos' history, influences, and creative process, as well as offers a timeline of her life.

Unfortunately, there is only a limited number of sources that connect the two artists. It also seems previous studies on these artists do not explicitly discuss their shared use of the American flag. This makes my analysis unique because, through my argument and research, I will offer new evidence about how Ringgold and Amos used similar imagery and motifs to make claims about their Black female identity. Each chapter will cover a different topic and will highlight both artists' thoughts about unjust inequalities present in America. By the conclusion of this thesis, I will provide a clearer understanding of how Ringgold and Amos used the image of the American flag to challenge its messages of patriotism. I will examine the connection between their shared use of the American flag to demonstrate how the iconic symbol can be used to convey messages about the lack of civil liberties, as well as racial and gender inequality in the United States of America.

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<sup>3</sup> Shawnya Harris, *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2021).

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: CIVIL LIBERTIES

Both Ringgold and Amos have used the image of the American flag to underscore America's historic lack of individual rights protected by law, also known as civil liberties. Through the incorporation of this motif, the artists have posed questions about the flag, its design, and what it truly symbolizes. While the artists have not always directly said what they were attempting to accomplish through their inclusion of the flag, their frequent use of the symbol and its many variations is tied to messages of race relations, gender identity, and Black nationalism in the United States. This is surmised because both Ringgold and Amos strived to create works that added to the civil, racial, and gender discourse constantly taking place in America during the late 1900s and today.

Farrington argues that for many, Ringgold's subject matter was radical, but for the artist, it was a result of the many obstacles that hindered her artistic pursuits.<sup>4</sup> Through a career that spanned almost six decades, Ringgold has successfully employed numerous mediums and subjects in her role as an activist. Ringgold never shied away from politics in her work, even though she was aware many viewers considered her work too controversial to support. In addition to highlighting politics, Ringgold also used her work to serve as civil discourse.

In society, engagement in civil discourse is meant to enhance understanding and support various functions, such as freedom of speech. This discourse is evident in Ringgold's work because through her artistic depictions, she presents the world with images that effectively address the large racial and gender problems that exist in America. According to Farrington, Ringgold's artistic social commentary was considered radical, especially given its militant posture and its ability to arouse emotion in the viewer; however, it was also a necessary step in

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), v.

exposing the hypocrisy of race and gender in the United States, which the artist did through her use of the flag.<sup>5</sup>

Like many other Americans, Ringgold (and Amos) recognized the history of the American flag was built on a country that did not believe in equal rights for people of color and women. Because of this, many artists, including Ringgold, incorporated the icon in their works to emphasize the problems present in America. By using the symbol of the flag as a visual metaphor for racial and gender conflict, Ringgold exposed how such a supposedly sacred symbol of the nation actually cultivates and breeds inequality.

While civil rights focus on discrimination based on race, civil liberties are the basic freedoms that can be found in the Bill of Rights and are guaranteed by the United States Constitution. Although civil rights should be guaranteed in America, during the height of Ringgold's career, they were still being denied due to discrimination and racism towards people of color. As a result, much of Ringgold's work documented these issues. Her artwork also emphasized the idea of civil liberties. Because civil liberties are not directly about discrimination based on being a minority, and because there are specific laws in place, these are addressed more seriously in the United States.

In 1970, Ringgold created a piece that combined the American flag with the issue of civil liberties to demonstrate how these freedoms were consistently being violated in the United States. During this year, Ringgold, along with artists Jean Toche and Jon Hendricks, helped organize the *People's Flag Show* at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City. They invited all kinds of artists to participate in the week-long event to test the boundaries of

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<sup>5</sup> Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, vi.

“repressive laws governing so-called flag desecration.”<sup>6</sup> Ringgold and the others came up with the concept for the show after a gallery owner was tried and prosecuted for displaying works that incorporated the American flag and criticized the country. In her book about art during the time of the Vietnam War, author Lucy Lippard notes that the *People’s Flag Show* was specifically inspired by *Radich v. New York*, which convicted New York art gallery owner Stephen Radich of casting contempt on the American flag for presenting sculptures that included the national symbol in 1966. The famous case involved the sculptor and ex-Marine Marc Morreal, whose one-man “anti-war” show prompted Radich’s arrest and conviction.<sup>7</sup>

During the politically charged decades of the 1960s and 1970s, several events and political causes made use of the flag. In 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin placed the flag on the moon to signal a profound achievement for the country and the world. Additionally, during the period of the Vietnam War, the government consistently used the flag to encourage support for the war and express views about its supposed morality and necessity. In contrast to the government’s “positive” use of the flag, citizens utilized it to voice their concerns. During the Civil Rights movement, activists carried the flag in an attempt to remind the nation that freedom and equality should be provided to everyone, including people of color. Many anti-war activists also employed it in protesting involvement in different conflicts, especially the Vietnam War during the sixties and seventies. Because many activists used the flag in exercising what they believed to be their civil liberty of freedom of speech, the government began to institute flag desecration and protection acts. These laws not only targeted protestors, but artists as well.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Atkins, “A Censorship Timeline,” *Art Journal* 50, no. 3 (1991): 35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/777212>.

<sup>7</sup> Lucy Lippard *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1990), 26.



In her efforts to advocate for civil rights and civil liberties, Ringgold and others organized the *People's Flag Show* to fight censorship in the arts, and to ensure American citizens were entitled to freedom of speech, which is the First Amendment listed under the United States Constitution. To test these liberties, the exhibition included flag works by several artists. Although not explicitly an anti-war event, the show still expressed many anti-war sentiments in that there were several pieces that referenced the Vietnam War and even some that disproved of it. Over 150 artists submitted work to the show and during its opening ceremony, numerous installations and pieces were presented. This included a performance piece in which the organizers burned a flag together. The exhibition opened on a Monday, and by Friday, the police had raided and closed it. Ringgold, Toche, and Hendricks (now known as the Judson Three) were arrested for Vietnam War-inspired flag abuse and desecration of the flag.<sup>8</sup> Although the show was short-lived and the group eventually had their charges overturned by the New York Civil Liberties Union, the exhibition and its work went down in history.



Figure 2.1: Faith Ringgold. *People's Flag Show*, 1971. New York, The Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>8</sup> Atkins, "A Censorship Timeline," 35.

Ringgold created *People's Flag Show* as an exhibition poster for the “People’s Flag Show,” which was about civil rights and liberties. The poster was reprinted from a collage made by Ringgold in collaboration with her daughter, writer, and artist Michele Wallace.<sup>9</sup> In this work, Ringgold uses the format of the actual American flag, but she makes several changes that hold meaning. While the work resembles the traditional flag, Ringgold replaces the stars with information about the show, such as the title, date, and location, and she replaces the stripes with text that emphasizes and questions how she (and others) views the American flag. The text reads:

The American people are the only people who can interpret the American flag. A flag which does not belong to the people to do with as they see fit should be burned and forgotten. Artists, workers, students, women, third world peoples, you are oppressed, what does the flag mean to you? Join the people’s answer to the repressive U.S. Govt & states laws restricting our use and display of the flag. Sponsored by the independent artists flag show committee.<sup>1011</sup>

In the text, the collaborators question who can really interpret the flag. Additionally, they also make the bold claim that the flag does not actually belong to the people to do with as they please, thus questioning freedoms and choices in America. The choice of location for this text is also extremely important to the meaning of the work because on a regular American flag, the stripes represent the original thirteen colonies, which is meant to be a symbol of unity. However, Ringgold substitutes the stripes for text that points out the flaws of America while simultaneously posing questions (which may or may not be rhetorical).

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<sup>9</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Politics/ Power* (New York: Weiss Publications, 2022), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Faith Ringgold, *People's Flag Show*, 1970, New York, The Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>11</sup> While Faith Ringgold created the design for the work *People's Flag Show*, her daughter Michele Wallace claims it is her handwriting that creates the stripes of the flag.

Mary Lodu, “Michele Wallace,” *The Third Rail*, January 19, 2018, <http://thirdrailquarterly.org/mary-lodu-michele-wallace/>.

In *People's Flag Show*, Ringgold's choice of color is also something she deliberately manipulates to make a statement. The flag and the colors most associated with the United States are red, white, and blue, all of which have symbolic meanings. Red is meant to symbolize valor, white is meant to symbolize purity and innocence, and blue is meant to signify justice.<sup>12</sup> In this poster, Ringgold only uses two colors to create her American flag, a red background and black text. By excluding the color white, Ringgold insinuates that neither the flag nor the country is pure or innocent because it was built on blood and violence stemming from injustices of all types. Additionally, Ringgold lists some of the groups that have experienced these inequalities such as artists, workers, students, women, and third world peoples, and explains how they are oppressed by America and its subsequent flag. The artist's reference to third-world peoples is significant given the country's conflict with Vietnam during the time this was created. Ringgold's inclusion implies solidarity with the people America was at war with, proving the oppression is widespread beyond the nation's physical border.

*People's Flag Show* provided a space for Ringgold, and many other artists at the time to express how they felt about censorship and civil liberties. During the show, she exclaimed, "How dare you tell artists what they can do? That's the beginning of some really bad funk."<sup>13</sup> She, as well as many others, used the American flag, a common symbol of patriotism, success, and togetherness, to explore the nation's fraught relationship with its citizens.

In *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* from her *Black Light Series*, the artist also uses the motif of the flag to address civil liberties. Ringgold's *Black Light Series* was created to reconcile her own lived experience as a Black woman in the United States. In order to do this, she decided

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Burr Todd, "The American Flag," *The Journal of Education* 38, no. 25 (1893): 415. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44039241>.

<sup>13</sup> Ringgold, *Politics/ Power*, 44.

to not use white in this series, claiming “black is the presence of all color, [while] white is the absence of color.”<sup>14</sup>

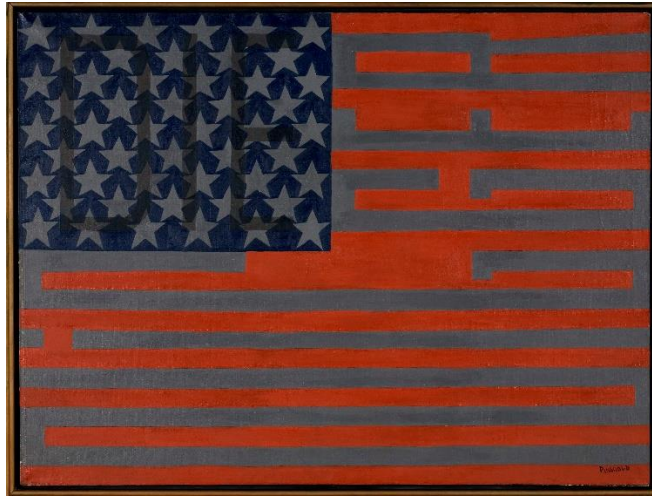


Figure 2.2: Faith Ringgold. *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, 1969. New York, ACA Galleries.

Ringgold created this painting in 1969 as a response to the Apollo 11 moon landing where the flag was planted on the moon. During the time of the moon landing and the Vietnam War, the flag was used outside of America to signify the strength, power, and unity of the nation, but as Ringgold claims, for many at home the symbol had an alternative meaning of injustice and inequality. In *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, Ringgold claims the flag was her way of saying “too many American people go to bed hungry, while the government spent billions to place their flag on the moon.”<sup>15</sup> By creating this work and making this claim, Ringgold emphasizes how the country and its primary symbol of patriotism contradicts itself.

To create *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, Ringgold used the traditional colors of red and blue, but they are somewhat muted, and she substituted the usual white of the flag for a grayish color. At first glance, the flag may appear normal, but once the viewer moves closer, it is clear

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<sup>14</sup> Ringgold, *Politics/ Power*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

that Ringgold altered the stars and the stripes of the flag. On top of the stars, she included very faint gray letters that spell out the word “die.” On a different angle, she substitutes the normal stripes and transforms them into the second word of the title. By using the flag to embed words and display them in various distortions, Ringgold creates an optical illusion which mimics the rights and liberties that are supposedly present in the nation.

When examining *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, a viewer may believe Ringgold’s work to be one thing, a traditional American flag; however, upon closer inspection and longer focus, the true nature of the work becomes evident. The same can be said about the United States Constitution and its amendments. At first glance, the amendments seem to solidify the rights and liberties of citizens in America, but upon closer inspection in the form of lived experience, one can see past this illusion. Ringgold’s *People’s Flag Show* illustrates how freedom of speech (the First Amendment) was not being upheld, and this work proves a similar thing. *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* also demonstrates how three of the amendments were being ignored at the time: The 13th, 14th, and 15th (also known as the reconstruction amendments) which were created to provide African Americans with the rights and protection of equality and citizenship.

Not only does *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* work to draw attention to how civil liberties in the United States are not being met, but Ringgold’s strategic choice of phrase highlights an even larger issue, racial inequalities not protected by civil rights. Again, the flag is meant to signify freedom, justice, and equality, but in this work, Ringgold uses a derogatory phrase for the title to highlight how America really feels about people of color. This also comes during the time of the Vietnam War when many of the soldiers who were drafted and recruited were people of color. During the war, although African Americans as a minority in the general

population were only 12%, 31% of the ground combat battalions were African American.<sup>16</sup> While fighting racial injustices, these Black men also fought for a country that either wanted them to remain at a lower position of power, as they were during the period of enslavement, or that simply wanted them dead. Ringgold's use of the flag and this radical phrase not only defines America's relationship to injustice, but also depicts her personal relationship to what one may call, a national symbol of hate.

Similar to Ringgold, Amos was also an activist artist whose work evolved into critiques of sexism and racism. She always claimed that walking into her studio as a Black woman was a political act and the work she produced highlights this, especially her pieces that incorporate the American flag.<sup>17</sup> Amos regularly dealt with issues of class, race, and gender roles, and like Ringgold, she addressed the overlapping issue of civil liberties. For example, Amos was the only female member of Spiral, a collective of African American artists founded in the 1960s for discussing the purpose of the Negro artist in the struggle for civil liberties.<sup>18</sup> From the beginning of her artistic career, Amos believed in conveying important messages about rights and liberties in her works; however, unlike Ringgold, Amos' work which addressed civil rights and liberties focused less on the Bill of Rights and more on the legal protections of citizens in order to create equal conditions for all Americans.

To expose and comment on the lack of civil liberties and rights in America during the late 20th century, Amos regularly created works that depicted variations of the American flag.

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<sup>16</sup> "Research Guides: American Minority Groups in the Vietnam War: A Resource Guide: Introduction," Introduction - American Minority Groups in the Vietnam War: A Resource Guide - Research Guides at Library of Congress, <https://guides.loc.gov/american-minority-groups-in-the-vietnam-war#:~:text=Approximately%20300%2C000%20African%20Americans%20served,the%20U.S.%20Army's%20fatal%20casualties.>

<sup>17</sup> Shawnya Harris, *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2021), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey*, 11.

Although she incorporated the flag much later than Ringgold, in using the motif in her work of the 1980s and '90s, Amos still spoke to continued debates over flag desecration. During this time, tensions surrounding the national symbol began to rise because previous laws which prohibited the desecration of the American flag were invalidated by the Supreme Court in 1989. After this invalidation of laws, Congress attempted to pass a flag desecration amendment, which only aroused highly publicized debates about free speech, symbols, and even the right to protest.<sup>19</sup> Many artists, including Amos, joined these debates by creating works that used the flag to reveal the contradictions between the nation's magical promises and its harsh realities, especially for people of color.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 2.3: Emma Amos. *Sold*, 1994. New York, Whitney Museum of Art.

In Amos' *Sold* from 1994, she incorporates the American flag as a central image, but she also uses a photograph and other symbols to interrupt the motif. Amos disrupts the flag by

<sup>19</sup> John A. Clark and Kevin T. McGuire, "Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Flag," *Political Research Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (1996): 775. <https://doi.org/10.2307/449137>.

<sup>20</sup> Phoebe Wolfskill, "Photographic Disruption in the Art of Emma Amos," in *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey*, ed. Shawnya Harris (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2021), 68.

placing a large symbol of a checkmark in the middle. Additionally, instead of including the usual stars of the flag, the artist alternatively adds a picture in their place.

Amos regularly included photos in her work and claimed that, unlike painting or printmaking, photography does not seem to lie.<sup>21</sup> However, her use of “ordinary” photographs makes the viewer truly consider the photo’s relationship with the work of art, which disrupts their assumed role as documentary objects and gives them new meanings and associations.<sup>22</sup> Amos often used her personal photo collection which included images of family members in her work. Many of these images were inherited from and taken by her godfather, George Shivery.

In *Sold*, Amos includes one of Shivery’s photographs of three Black figures wearing price tags around their necks. At first glance, the image seems to simply depict three people of color, but upon closer inspection, the figures in the photo are not life-like. Instead, they resemble stereotypical portrayals of African and African American subjects which were regularly depicted on various collectible objects. For example, derogatory images of the Uncle Tom character or the Mammy stereotype were reproduced in small figurines which would then be sold. They were often highly desired collectible objects by white citizens because they depicted Black people as content, smiling, and obedient, which were the makings of the perfect Negro.<sup>23</sup> The photograph Amos includes seems to highlight a similar racial stereotype. Although blurry, the three smiling

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<sup>21</sup> Wolfskill, “Photographic Disruption in the Art of Emma Amos,” 64.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>23</sup> In her *American Icons* series from 1989, African American photographer Carrie Mae Weems was known to photograph many of these stereotypical racial figurines. Her display of these figures was meant to explore issues of race, family, class, and even gender. While controversial to some, Weems’ series could be read as a reclamation of these racist images and thus, can lead to a form of empowerment. Although Amos does not explicitly say this is her goal in the work *Sold*, her inclusion of the photograph with the Black figurines addresses similar issues as Weems’ *American Icons* series.

Elizabeth Humphrey, “Featured Artists: Carrie Mae Weems,” *There is a Woman in Every Color: Black Women in Art*, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2021. <https://courses.bowdoin.edu/there-is-a-woman-in-every-color-2021/artistic-exploration/american-icons-untitled-salt-and-pepper-shakers/>.



Black figures are evident, and scholar Phoebe Wolfskill has even surmised they could be fishermen figures with their fishing poles removed.<sup>24</sup> Although the true function of the depicted figures may be hard to determine, Amos intentionally included this obscurity by removing the figures from their original context and placing them in a setting that highlights selling and purchasing. By replacing the repeated stars of the flag, those that signify captured bodies of land (states), with repeated sold bodies, Amos is bluntly making a claim about the history of America.<sup>25</sup>

Similar to Ringgold, Amos also incorporates these stereotypical figures to convey specific messages about civil rights and liberties in the country. Her depiction of the Black figurines works to juxtapose the American flag's promise of freedom, liberty, and democracy, with the harsh realities of the nation's history of denying millions of Africans and African Americans these liberties and rights, even after the amendments were made to ensure them. The photograph also suggests that American identity is tied to "sold" Black bodies, highlighting issues of enslavement as well as its aftermath, which included racist conceptions of inferiority in order to keep people of color as second-class citizens.<sup>26</sup> While freedom is said to be something that can never be bought, in this work, Amos comments on how it was something that was frequently sold during America's dark history of slavery and subsequently perpetuated through the sale of racist objects intended to denigrate Black subjecthood.

The way Amos intentionally alters the photograph is also important. Instead of simply attaching the image to her work, Wolfskill points out how the artist paints the photographic

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<sup>24</sup>According to scholar Phoebe Wolfskill, the smiling Black fisherman figurines come from a long history of racial stereotypes that imagine black people smiling, content, and "in their place."

Wolfskill, "Photographic Disruption in the Art of Emma Amos," 69.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 70.

image in shades of green, red, and yellow, framed by a deep blue.<sup>27</sup> Although Wolfskill claims Amos' use of color is meant to exaggerate the figurines, I would also argue that the artist's subtle use of red, green, and yellow highlights the Pan-African flag, which she could be referencing to symbolize Black liberation among the figurines and subsequently, among Black Americans. Additionally, by employing these specific artistic elements, Amos further highlights the commodification of these specific figurines, and thus, the commodification of the black body during the period of enslavement. Her use of bold colors works to display the figurines as eye-catching commodities, which also highlights the dehumanizing qualities of the figures.<sup>28</sup>

Amos' decision to include three figures also holds significance and although it has not been explicitly commented on in the context of the work, the symbolism is important. Similar to Ringgold in her *People's Flag Show*, Amos may be emphasizing the number three in order to comment on the 13th Amendment. The photographic image she includes works to highlight America's dark history of slavery, and although the 13th amendment was created to officially abolish slavery, it can still be argued that the practice persisted in many forms after this. Specifically, even though the practice of enslavement was abolished, it was still allowed when used as punishment for a crime.<sup>29</sup>

Another interpretation of three involves Bill Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill (which was passed the same year the work was created). This bill included a federal "three-strikes" provision which required mandatory life imprisonment without possibility of parole for those who commit federal violent felonies if they had two or more previous convictions for violent felonies or drug-

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfskill, "Photographic Disruption in the Art of Emma Amos," 71.

<sup>29</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the United States Constitution states that "neither slavery or involuntary solitude, except as a punishment for a crime, where the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

U.S. Constitution. amend. XIII, sec. 1.

trafficking crimes. While some believed this to be a positive step for crime reduction, others blamed the provision for mass incarceration, especially of people of color. Because many believe imprisonment and prison labor is a form of modern-day enslavement, in this reading of the work, Amos included three figures to address the three-strikes law, thus further emphasizing America's history and relationship of treating its Black citizens as property and labor.

In *Sold*, while the photograph makes up the stars of the flag, Amos retains red and white stripes that look similar to the traditional American flag. Upon closer inspection though, one sees that the artist has constructed a large painterly flag and interrupts the stripes with a large white checkmark. By including this checkmark, Amos references a transactional approval, further emphasizing black bodies being sold, or even highlighting society's approval of this harsh American history, which is so evident in how we Americans wave the flag. Amos' construction of the stripes also holds a message for the viewer. Instead of creating the crisp and precise lines every American is used to seeing on the flag, the red stripes of Amos' flag seem to bleed into the white stripes. This intentional imagery emphasizes the painful history behind the stars and stripes and the bloodshed caused by injustice and a lack of upholding civil liberties in this country.

### **3 CHAPTER THREE: RACE RELATIONS AND BLACK NATIONALISM**

Working between the 1960s and 1980s when racial tensions were at an all-time high, both Ringgold and Amos created art that also emphasized Black nationalism and racial pride. The artists' choice to depict these frameworks within the context of the American flag motif highlights a deeper meaning of Black citizenship in America. Although the two used the flag in different ways, with Ringgold approaching its use as a social and political act and Amos

adopting a more personal undertone, both still succeeded in their goals of conveying messages about racism and pride.

In Ringgold's work, her emphasis and depictions of Black nationalism advocate for the unity and self-determination of Black citizens living in the United States. She also juxtaposes her depictions of Black nationalism by exposing the reality and pains of the ugliest forms of racism in order to call attention to the historical injustices the culture has had to endure.<sup>30</sup> She takes the symbol of America and alters its traditional appearance to create a visual metaphor that exposes racial conflict and emphasizes politics of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement.

Beginning as a revolutionary movement in the 1960s, the Black Power Movement (BPM) stressed racial pride, economic empowerment, and Black nationalism. While it influenced the Civil Rights Movement and both had similar motives, many of the BPM's early leaders believed that civil rights activism did not go far enough. Because of this, Black Power had a more militant façade along with other supposedly "radical" groups, including the Black Panther Party. This group was a Black power political organization founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton. While Ringgold believed in civil rights, the so-called "radical" nature of her works, along with her push for racial and cultural pride aligned the artist more with the concerns of the Black Power Movement, which she directly and indirectly supported in her body of work. One of

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<sup>30</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), v.

her most seminal and emblematic works which exemplifies how she used her art as a political outlet is *The Flag is Bleeding* from her *American People Series* in 1967.



*Figure 3.1:* Faith Ringgold. *The American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding*, 1967. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art.

Her first fully developed painting series, Ringgold's *American People Series* documented the unflinching reality of what it meant to be a Black American citizen. In this series which highlighted a range of works and depictions, she regularly contrasted the experience of white American citizens with that of Black citizens. Additionally, she highlighted the experience of being a woman. According to scholar Farrington, the series included images of social satire by depicting exaggerated and sometimes ironic images of African Americans as isolated and uneasy characters subsisting in a hostile environment.<sup>31</sup> In *The Flag is Bleeding*, Ringgold underscores this confrontation through an approach that employed political commentary on issues of racial tensions to expose the injustice present in America.

*The Flag is Bleeding* demonstrates Ringgold's frequent use of the American flag in her body of work. In this work specifically, the flag is superimposed over the three main figures. In

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<sup>31</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image* (England: Oxford University Press, 2005), 135.

the same way the national symbol is known to obscure the harsh realities of the country, Ringgold uses the flag as a screen to hide the larger issues that are occurring within the work, and thus, in America. At the same time that the flag is layered on top, it also seems to be a backdrop for the three subjects who are interlaced into the motif. By doing this, Ringgold makes another statement that racism and inequality are interwoven into the fabric of the flag, and thus, into the history of the United States. The three subjects she depicts are a Black man, a blonde-haired white woman, and a white man. While the white man and woman are dressed formally and appear to stand unharmed, the Black man wears a black turtleneck and appears to be bleeding. According to author Robert Henkes, the bloodshed suffered by the African American race is a profound concern of Ringgold's, which explains why the Black subject is the only one who appears to be actually bleeding from a wound.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Flag is Bleeding*, Ringgold shows her artistic prowess by emphasizing the importance of layers and how they can also have different meanings attached to them. For example, the piece literally has multiple layers, with the image of the bleeding flag and the subjects being interlaced as evidence. For the three subjects, although there is a divide between race and possibly even class based on the differences in attire, the subjects still have their arms linked. Having the three subjects connected between the image of the bleeding flag seems as if Ringgold is attempting to say they are unified in bloodshed. However, although the image and the title claim the flag is bleeding, the blood in the work is shed directly from the Black man as a result of racial injustices. Furthermore, while the two white subjects appear physically unharmed, the Black man is shown holding a knife while bleeding from what appears to be a stab wound or a gunshot to the heart. He applies pressure to his wound, but with this gesture, also appears to

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Henkes, *The Art of Black American Women: Works of Twenty-Five Artists of the Twentieth Century* (North Carolina: MacFarlane & Company Publishers, 1993), 95.

pledge allegiance to the American flag. Ringgold employs this double meaning to comment on the Black man's dilemma of respecting a country that does not accept him only as a means of survival. By depicting the Black man with a literal bleeding heart, Ringgold could also be highlighting the Black race's empathetic (and forced) history of attempting to help build America. For example, Black labor built the United States and many Black soldiers joined the military and fought in wars for the country they hoped would respect them, but that respect never came to pass.

The inequality and disrespect of people of color is further demonstrated by Ringgold's choice to conceal the Black figure's face behind the stars of the flag. The amount the body and face are shown can be correlated to the amount of freedom, liberty, and justice each subject receives in the country. While his face is fully concealed, the woman's face is only partially concealed, which may reflect Ringgold's thoughts on gender inequality as well. But while the Black man and the woman have their faces covered, the white male stands large, taller, and more visible than the others. Farrington suggests this may imply the social and political dominance of white males in American society.<sup>33</sup> Although the Black figure holds a knife (possibly in self-defense) the prideful and almost aggressive stance of the white male, with his legs spread and his hands on his hips, radiates confrontation and violence more than any other figure.

Ringgold's depiction of the Black man is extremely important because she strategically illustrates the subject in a black turtleneck and an afro, the well-known uniform of the Black Panther Party. As a dedicated activist for Black Power and Black Nationalism, Ringgold had a very close relationship with the Black Panther Party. She designed several political posters

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<sup>33</sup> Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image*, 140.

defending and supporting the organization, further justifying her inclusion of the organization in this work while also highlighting her views on the power of Black identity.<sup>34</sup>

The Black figure is also likely a Black Panther because of his hand gestures. During this time, the group adopted the gesture and the image of the clenched fist. This symbol, known as the black fist, became associated with black power and pride and its most widely known usage was by the organization. Although the depicted subject does not hold the iconic revolutionary fist in the air, he still seems to hold the fist, just lower by his side with a knife clenched in the same fist. Because the Black Panther Party used to be known as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, it further explains how the weapon the man holds could be for self-defense. He may be literally defending himself from the white man on the other side of the work or defending himself as a Black man in a country where injustice and racial harm occur frequently and end in literal bloodshed, as portrayed in the work.<sup>35</sup>

At first glance, it appears that the subjects in *The Flag is Bleeding* are standing in harmony with their arms interlocked, but upon further inspection, this is not the case. In addition to the tension between the Black male and the white male, Ringgold also attempts to depict underlying tension between the Black male and the white female. Although Farrington argues the female is acting as an arbiter between the two men, she may only be cosplaying as the mediator and, in reality, is complicit in reinforcing the Black oppression that already exists.<sup>36</sup>

Ringgold has depicted the woman with heavy eyelids, glassy eyes, and large bags under the eyes, all known to be indicators of tears. In this way, Ringgold could be indicating her

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<sup>34</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Politics/ Power* (New York: Weiss Publications, 2022), 40.

<sup>35</sup> Jessica C. Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party," *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 3 (2001): 412. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1562458>.

<sup>36</sup> Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, 21.



victimhood.<sup>37</sup> Her inclusion works to expose a deeper reading of the work that argues when a white woman cries, especially in the context of victimhood (against people of color), her reality is immediately visible, acknowledged, and legitimized.<sup>38</sup> Her depiction could also be a suggestion of the white woman's "fragility" while Black citizens had to be more stoic and tough-skinned to survive living in America.

Lastly, Ringgold's strategic choice of flag type in this work adds to its meaning. While the flag may appear traditional (other than the "bleeding" stripes), when closely examined, it is evident that instead of the traditional 50-star flag, this one only shows 48 stars. This is a peculiar fact because the last two states in America were added in 1959 and the 50-star flag was officially established in 1960; however, seven years later in 1967, Ringgold is still using the 48-star flag. While there are several reasons the artist may have done this, it is clear that she continuously underscores the past in her works. She references the history of enslavement, racial turmoil, and more in her work to show how little has changed in the present. By using an older version of the flag, Ringgold emphasizes America's dark past of racial inequality and claims how it is still affecting the present and will possibly affect the future if changes are not made.

In her work, Amos also used a combination of the American flag motif and human subjects to address race relations in the United States. Even though the two female artists were active in similar decades, Amos' pieces involving critiques of racism and sexism did not develop until later in her career.

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<sup>37</sup> Ringgold's depiction comes after the incident of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was abducted, tortured, and lynched by white men after being accused of offending a white woman. This is arguably the most well-known case of a white woman's tears and victimhood oppressing black men.

<sup>38</sup> Mamta M. Accapadi, "When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color," *College Student Affairs Journal*; *Charlotte* 26, no. 2 (2007): 210. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ899418.pdf>

The previous discussion of Amos' 1994 work *Sold* was about her use of the flag to expose issues of civil rights and liberties in America, but the same work can also be used to emphasize the racial inequalities that were present as well. For example, her inclusion of the Black figurines in place of the stars worked to expose America's dark history of slavery and injustice, as well as the forcible use of the Black body for advancement. Another work by Amos where she challenges racial tension through her display is her work *Targets* from her *Falling Series*.



Figure 3.2: Emma Amos. *Targets*, 1992. New York, RYAN LEE Gallery.

Around 1986, Amos began to transition into her *Falling Series*, where she made works which depicted multiple subjects from diverse backgrounds in the act of literally falling. By depicting people falling, Amos was able to comment on and express the anxiety and worry she felt about various social ills, including homelessness, the AIDS epidemic, poverty, and of course racism. Through repeatedly depicting falling subjects, Amos was making a statement about the falling of Western civilization, not only due to politics but due to a general lack of empathy in

society as well.<sup>39</sup> Amos' societal concerns and anxiety, especially about race, are all depicted in her 1992 work, *Targets*.

In *Targets*, Amos uses a variety of mediums and bold depictions to wrestle with the politics of race in America. Her use of a bright blue background and the kente cloth African fabric for the border stands out. The two figures, one male and one female, located in the center of the piece also capture the viewer's attention. The man wears a red shirt and blue and white plaid pants, while the female wears a red and white plaid dress. Although Amos does not explicitly depict a traditional flag in this work, the male subject's pants resemble the blue and white star section on the American flag, whereas the female subject's dress resembles the red and white stripes. Amos intentionally uses two types of plaid for the subjects' clothing to make this distinguishable. In contrast to the plaid pattern on the man's blue and white pants, which is smaller and thus looks like white stars on a blue background, the plaid pattern on the female's dress is much larger and resembles stripes. By doing this, the artist incorporates the flag into her work as a form of societal critique, even if she employs it in a non-traditional manner.

In *Targets*, the male subject holds the female subject while he has a bold look of fear on his face. This is seen in his widened eyes, as well as his wide-open mouth. Whereas the man looks up and behind, the female looks down, also donning a distressed look on her face. Both subjects seem to be engaged in a free fall, which is fitting because the work is from Amos' *Falling Series*.

By depicting the couple plummeting into the unknown, anxiety penetrates the piece. In this manner, Amos portrays the worry she felt at the time about racial tensions in America, which were often out of control and unpredictable. The falling Black couple is surrounded by assorted

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<sup>39</sup> Harris, "Emma Amos: Color Odyssey," 31.

items, including an outstretched white rabbit, a picnic basket, and a target, also known as a bullseye. While these inclusions may seem random, they are all connected and work with the untraditional depiction of the American flag to reference racial injustice in the country.

First, the target is a symbol that implies victimization, such as the well-known phrase, “he has a target on his back.” This interpretation immediately makes the viewer think the subjects are targets or are being targeted. Although possibly not intentional, Amos’ depiction calls attention to targeted racial violence and hate crimes which have existed in America for centuries and unfortunately still continue today. Not only does the incorporation of this symbol imply victimhood, but also the distant placement of the subjects from the targets could symbolize a miss. This intentional placement by Amos highlights the Black citizen’s plight in America, but it is also used to display the resilience and strength of a group that continues to move forward, even after constantly being targeted in (and by) a country that will never accept them and their accomplishments.

In addition to the bullseye target, Amos also includes a rabbit, another literal target used for sport. Unlike a regular rabbit though, this rabbit is a white hare, which holds great significance in both art and literature. Amos may be referencing Lewis Carroll’s 1865 novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. In this English story, Alice chases a white rabbit down a rabbit hole, where she then freefalls until she lands in Wonderland, a dream world.<sup>40</sup> It has been interpreted that following the white rabbit means following an unlikely clue and finding oneself in an extraordinary situation, either good or bad.<sup>41</sup> This interpretation can be applied to Amos’ *Targets* because as the subjects are falling, they also seem to follow (or chase) the depicted white

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<sup>40</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, (New York, Boston: T. Y. Crowell & co 1893).

<sup>41</sup> Justin Clemens and Dominic Pettman, “‘Look at the Bunny’: The Rabbit as Virtual Totem (or, What Roger Rabbit Can Teach Us About the Second Gulf War),” In *Avoiding the Subject: Media, Culture and the Object* (Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n1c6.7>.

rabbit down his rabbit hole. This reading adds to the anxiety and the worry fostered by the work because it reinforces the idea that what lies below is uncertain. As in Carroll's novel, it could be a dream-like world where racism and injustice in America do not exist, or the subjects could be falling into a setting where these racial tensions are extremely heightened. Amos' depiction works to demonstrate this uncertainty about how race relations in the United States are going to evolve in the future.

Lastly, along with the subjects dressed in flag patterns, the target, and the white rabbit, Amos includes a picnic basket, which similarly works to comment on the history of race relations in America. Although not proven and often debated, it has been suggested that the word 'picnic' derived from the phrase 'pick-a-nigger-to lynch.'<sup>42</sup> This phrase was said to refer to the slaveholding practice of making a lynching a social gathering where people shared food, laughed, and celebrated. Although many scholars have debunked the origins of the word, others still believe that 'picnic,' like many other terms, was likely used by some as a code word for lynching.<sup>43</sup> Even if the origin of the word is not definitive, Amos possibly includes the picnic basket to underscore this debate and also comment on America's history of racial violence, including the period of enslavement and the decades that followed.

Although they may do it through unconventional and non-traditional methods, both Ringgold and Amos use the motif of the American flag to convey painfully truthful messages about the country. America's dark history of racism and injustice has affected Black Americans for centuries, and through the inclusion of the flag in their work, the two artists both protest and expose the racial and social (and gender) injustices that have continued to persist.

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<sup>42</sup> Yohuru R. Williams "Anatomy of an Untruth: The Controversy Over 'Picnic' and the True Cause of Lynching," *Black History Bulletin* 65/66 (2002): 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214642>.

<sup>43</sup> Williams "Anatomy of an Untruth: The Controversy Over 'Picnic' and the True Cause of Lynching," 9.

#### 4 CHAPTER FOUR: GENDER IDENTITY

Through their shared use of distinctive mediums, images, and motifs, both Ringgold and Amos were known as leading figures in creating works that addressed and illustrated aspects of their gendered identity. Along with class and race, both artists often explored gender in their works to comment on the state of all three in the art world and in society as a whole. While they used different methods and practices to display gender identity and gender issues, they both incorporated the image of the American flag to do so. They also recognized the importance of intersectionality in feminism and repeatedly used this concept to actively fight sexism, misogyny, and gender discrimination through their practice.

The term intersectionality was coined by scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw and was heavily explored and expanded on by numerous feminist scholars, including bell hooks. Intersectionality works to explain how multiple systems of oppression and discrimination depend upon and reinforce each other to lead to systemic injustice and social inequality.<sup>44</sup> This is especially evident in Black women's fight for gender equality, as they faced being doubly discriminated against for the color of their skin and their gender. Ringgold's body of work (and her life) represents her understanding of intersectionality as an artist and as a citizen. Along with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power era, Ringgold also experienced the later women's rights movement first-hand, an affinity that stemmed from years of experience with gender bias.<sup>45</sup> As a Black female artist in the United States, Ringgold regularly experienced encounters that revolved around sexual oppression, racial discrimination, or both simultaneously. Because of this, she often used her work to expose the treatment of Black women in America.

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<sup>44</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image* (England: Oxford University Press, 2005), 134.

Similar to her other series, she also created numerous feminist works and series to confront race relations and the absence of Black women's voices.

In Ringgold's 1967 work *The Flag is Bleeding*, the artist uses a combination of the American flag and specific depictions to comment on the state of race relations in the United States. She incorporates the depiction of a Black man, a white man, and a white woman, though Farrington points out there is a notable absence of an African American woman from the narrative.<sup>46</sup> Ringgold follows up this observation with a claim about Black women reluctantly standing behind their men and how the work was meant to show that.<sup>47</sup> Another reason she may have chosen not to depict a Black woman could be because she wanted the focus of the work to be more about racial tensions than gender inequality; however, in later works, she began to depict scenes that also questioned the treatment and the role of Black women in America.

Ringgold's 1967 *The Flag is Bleeding* was such a seminal work, not only for America but also for her career, that thirty years later, she created a second edition of it. *The Flag is Bleeding*

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<sup>46</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Faith Ringgold* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), 23.

<sup>47</sup> Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, 23.

#2 emanated the same political power as the 1967 version, but her depiction and message differed drastically.



*Figure 4.1:* Faith Ringgold. *The Flag is Bleeding #2*, 1997. England, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery.

*The Flag is Bleeding #2* is a quilt painting that depicts an American flag and a Black woman with what I would interpret as two younger female children. The woman is possibly a self-portrait of Ringgold and the two young girls, her daughters, Barbara and Michele Wallace. Like Amos, in her later works, Ringgold began to incorporate distinct aspects of her identity in her works, but she used them to make political statements as well. In this specific work, the political commentary Ringgold makes is about gender identity and the oppressed view of Black women in the United States.

*The Flag is Bleeding #2* is from Ringgold's series *The American Collection*. This series includes eleven quilts that follow the story of either one Black woman or multiple women and emphasizes the realities of being a Black woman in America.<sup>48</sup> Similar to the 1967 version, the

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<sup>48</sup>Jennifer S. Musawwir, "Faith Ringgold: An American Icon," *DailyArt Magazine*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/faith-ringgold-at-the-new-museum/>.



second version features a bleeding flag. The mother figure is also bleeding from her breasts. This imagery questions the role of a mother and even questions the role of America as a mother to all its children. Because a mother is also known to nourish her children with milk produced in her breasts, Ringgold's depiction of blood (instead of milk) dripping from the mother's breasts runs counter to nourishing one's children with milk. Instead of using milk, the mother figure is forced to symbolically nourish her children with her own blood, blood which does not aid in the growth of the children but keeps them small. In this metaphor, the blood is generational racism that is passed from the mother to the daughters, furthering the cycle of oppression in younger generations.

Similar to the earlier version, the blood shown dripping from the stripes of the flag is shed directly by the mother as a result of combined gender and racial injustices. The mother figure is also depicted with bloodshot eyes and appears to be crying blood from her right eye. In literature and mythology, crying tears of blood is understood as symbolizing a variety of things, including being a premonition of violence.<sup>49</sup> This reading works with Ringgold's quilt because she attempts to demonstrate how Black women are negatively treated in America and how such ill-treatment fuels both gender and racial conflict. Crying tears of blood is also a way to signify someone is inhuman.<sup>50</sup> Ringgold may have used this depiction to expose how historically, much of America has viewed the Black woman as less than human. This is extremely evident in the way the first waves of the Feminist Movement excluded Black women.

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<sup>49</sup> In Homer's "Iliad," he writes how Zeus "wept tears of blood that fell to the ground." Zeus' tears of blood act as a premonition of violence.

<sup>49</sup> E. J. Hutchinson, "He Wept Tears of Blood," First Things, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/10/he-wept-tears-of-blood>.

<sup>50</sup> Hutchinson, "He Wept Tears of Blood."

In *The Flag is Bleeding #2*, Ringgold deliberately places the mother behind the stars and stripes while the children's bodies are superimposed on top of the flag. By positioning the figure of the older generation behind the flag, Ringgold insinuates that historically, the identity of people of color, especially women, was obscured and not included in the American symbol of justice and unity. She then places the children in front of the flag to emphasize her wish that future generations of Black women (including her children and grandchildren) will finally gain true membership and equal rights.

Like Ringgold, Amos also used the image of the American flag and the knowledge of feminist scholars to explore gender themes. For example, in an interview where feminist bell hooks interviewed Amos, the two discuss how growing up in segregated Black communities only further exposed gender differences in a way that race was not highlighted.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 4.2: Emma Amos. *Equals*, 1992. Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts.

Amos repeatedly used the American flag motif in order to ask viewers to engage with uncomfortable and even contradictory feelings about gender issues in the country. One of her

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<sup>51</sup> bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New York Press, 1995), 171.

works which includes the flag and conveys messages about her gender identity is *Equals* from 1992. This painting was part of Amos' 1990s *Falling* series, which is when the artist wanted to express her anxieties about the past, present, and future of America.<sup>52</sup>

Like Ringgold's *The Flag is Bleeding #2*, *Equals* includes a self-portrait of the artist free-falling in front of a large American flag. Through this falling depiction, Amos communicates a sense of displacement and lack of grounding as both an African American and a female in a predominantly white and male world. Similar to her earlier works, here the artist swapped out traditional elements of the flag. She replaced the traditional stars with an image of Black people in front of a Southern rural cabin. Amos' inclusion of this photograph taken by her godfather is reminiscent of her work *Sold*. Shivery's image depicts Black laborers in the rural South during the Great Depression. While the identity of the workers is unknown, Wolfskill has suggested that the workers were probably tenant farmers or sharecroppers, a system which was often known as "slavery by another name."<sup>53</sup>

Next to Shivery's image, Amos includes a large red equal sign in the center of the flag, which gives the artwork its title. By placing this symbol between her self-portrait and the image of the Black laborers, Amos connects her identity (as well as many other Black Americans' identities) to the one in the photograph, thus making a statement about lineage and history. The presence of the equals sign also signals how both women and people of color want equality in the United States.

In addition to acrylic paint, *Equals* also includes African textiles. The work is bordered by Ghanaian kente cloth with the image of Malcolm X printed on it. By doing this, Amos

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<sup>52</sup> Shawnya Harris, "Emma Amos: Color Odyssey," in *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2021), 29.

<sup>53</sup> Phoebe Wolfskill, "Photographic Disruption in the Art of Emma Amos," 65.

continues to feature and equate herself with the history of influential Black Americans but does so in a way that still represents African lineage.<sup>54</sup> The inclusion of Malcolm X's image may be an acknowledgment of a speech given by the activist in 1962 in which he claimed that Black women are the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected people in America.<sup>55</sup> Amos' specific depictions in *Equals* not only works to expose issues of race in America, but also comments on the need for gender equality in the country.

Echoing the flag in the background, Amos depicted herself wearing the colors of the flag. Dressed in a red shirt, white pants, and a blue jacket, the artist further connects her Black female identity to the flag, and thus, to the nation. However, by depicting her body in a free fall, she offers the viewer a sense of disruption by suggesting the nation does not offer gender protections to all.<sup>56</sup>

Throughout *Equals*, Amos has included star-shaped collage elements which are scattered across the work. Many of the star shapes appear to be created in a similar African fabric as the border, thus continuing the idea of the importance of African ancestry. The collaged stars also appear to include various symbols. For example, one of the stars on the bottom has an eye in the center. While this imagery is open to interpretation, the eye is reminiscent of the Eye of Providence, most famously known for being on the reverse side of the U.S. one-dollar bill. This eye, also known as the all-seeing eye of God, is meant to represent divine providence.<sup>57</sup> Amos possibly includes this image in her work to serve as a reminder that humanity's thoughts and actions are always being observed, even the unjust ones such as discrimination against both

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<sup>54</sup> Harris, "Emma Amos: Color Odyssey," 33.

<sup>55</sup> Feminista Jones, "Malcolm X Stood up for Black Women When Few Others Would," *Medium* (Zora, August 7, 2020), <https://zora.medium.com/malcolm-x-stood-up-for-black-women-when-few-others-would-68e8b2ea2747>.

<sup>56</sup> hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, 185.

<sup>57</sup> Matthew Wilson, "The Eye of Providence: The Symbol with a Secret Meaning?," BBC Culture, November 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20201112-the-eye-of-providence-the-symbol-with-a-secret-meaning>.

women and people of color. In a number of the collaged stars, Amos also places a star within a star. Throughout the work, there appear to be cutouts of stars coming directly from the Confederate flag. By placing the modern American flag on top of a flag with a troubled history of injustice, Amos argues that inequality of the past can certainly present itself in the future, it just may be disguised differently.

The work of an artist is often closely aligned with the life of the artist, and in both Amos' and Ringgold's cases, their work that repeatedly employs the American flag bears testimony to their fight to achieve acceptance and recognition in a country that is both racist and sexist.<sup>58</sup>

## 5 CONCLUSION

In the United States, the image of the American flag is arguably the most well-known and recognized symbol that represents the nation and everything it stands for. Its design is meant to represent the original 13 colonies and the country's 50 states while its symbolism is meant to evoke ideas of freedom and justice. Through America's history of countless hardships, wars, and conflicts, the flag has stood as reassurance that democracy will always prevail.

Even though the flag is such a powerful positive icon meant to unite and uplift the country and its citizens, the dark history that lies beneath the symbol and the country it represents shines brightly between the alternating red and white stripes. Many affected parties began to realize America's idealistic notion of justice and equality for all was more fiction than fact. This resulted in an increase in commentary about the flag and its symbolism, and although they were not the first (and definitely not the last) to do so, Ringgold and Amos became leading

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<sup>58</sup> Faith Ringgold and Curlee Raven Holton, *Faith Ringgold: A View from the Studio* (Boston: Bunker Hill Publishing Inc, 2014), 9.

figures in the world of visual art when it came to employing the American flag in their oeuvre to criticize the nation.

As presented in my thesis, the use of the flag in the works of Ringgold and Amos criticizes the country by identifying and revealing centuries worth of colonialism, racism, and sexism, all of which continue to persist today. By using the flag to expose a lack of civil rights, racial tensions, and gender issues, the two artists demonstrate the crisis present in the nation by claiming that democracy does not and will not always prevail.

Through my research, I add to the scholarship of two talented female artists by highlighting their shared use of the American flag in order to accomplish a debunking of the “American dream” myth and expose the reality of the nation. Specifically choosing to compare the works of Ringgold and Amos also contributes new knowledge to the field of art history. Although both artists' awareness and connection with each other have been slightly documented, the similarities in their styles, images, and meanings have not.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, my comparison of Ringgold and Amos could lead to more research about African American female artists using the motif of the American flag in their works. Questions about the generational effects of Ringgold and Amos' works may arise when looking at the pieces of Sonya Clark, Sheila Pree Bright, and Bisa Butler, who also use the American flag and its variations to comment on Blackness and identity while simultaneously critiquing the nation. The work created in this later generation is also politically synonymous with the works of

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<sup>59</sup> It has been documented by art historian Shawnya Harris that Faith Ringgold and Emma Amos' work and social circles did overlap slightly. Both women have a connection to Spiral, the famous New York-based African American art collective from the early 1960s. While Ringgold was denied membership, Amos became the first woman to be invited into the all-male group. Furthermore, the two artists have briefly referenced one another through depictions in their works, but the connection between their shared use of the American flag has not been thoroughly researched.

Shawnya Harris, “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey,” in *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2021), 24.

Ringgold and Amos, however, instead of citing the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, newer social justice movements such as the Black Lives Matter Movement are referenced. In the end though, each artist, whether creating art in the 1970s or the 2000s, has proven the historic inequality that continues to be bred and cultivated in the nation through the “sacred” symbol of the American flag.

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