

MULTIMEDIALITY AND THE NARRATIVE ARTWORK OF FAITH RINGGOLD

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MULTIMEDIALITY AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

In one of his seminal essays on culture and representation, György Endre Szőnyi outlines his basic premise on the mediality of culture.¹ He departs from Clifford Geertz's definition that views culture as "the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" and argues that through storytelling we construct ourselves as individuals as well as express our sense of belonging to a community, one that is able to understand and interpret our stories. He proposes that culture operates as a symbolic system which is constituted as "social practice by which a community constructs, interprets, and represents its own identity."²

Through a wealth of examples taken from Greek antiquity to postmodernity, Szőnyi illustrates that cultural representations may be expressed through various forms of media and that they are thus "tendentiously multimedial and intermedial."³ Initially employed as a popular term in the digital world, multimediality acknowledges the complexity of communication in terms of forms of content that are integrated in various constellations – therefore, it crosses traditional boundaries between various methods of artistic creation. Traditionally, notes Mitchell, Western literary theory has been "resolutely iconoclastic, that is, antipictorial, antivisual, antispacial, even, at the most general level, antimimetic."⁴ Multimediality, however, undermines this rather bleak position by recognizing that "verbal storytelling can be substituted or completed, or contested by pictures, gestures, dance, music, or by a number of other media in an infinite variety of combinations."⁵

This study focuses on the narrative quilts of Faith Ringgold, an Afro-American artist, whose alternative and subversive creations combine text and image, words and pictures, to convey a story, a narrative, to the reader/viewer. The paper first introduces the artist and the trajectory of her artistic development, with particular attention to her fiber art and its use in a multimedia setting. The second part of the paper focuses on her very first

¹ György Endre Szőnyi, "The Mediality of Culture: Theories of Cultural Representations", *IKON: Journal of Iconographic Studies / Časopis za ikonografske studije* 7 (2014): 73–84.

² *Ibid.*, 74.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Space, Ideology, and Literary Representation," *Poetics Today* 10, no. 1 (1989): 91.

⁵ Szőnyi, "The Mediality," 74.

narrative quilt, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* (1983), with a concern about how various artistic traditions and forms have been incorporated to formulate a cohesive narrative, one that breaks away from racist and sexist distortions of mainstream practices of marginalization, giving her both voice and visibility as an Afro-American woman and artist.

FAITH RINGGOLD AND HER FIBER ART

Ringgold was born in 1930 in Harlem, New York City, a place she called home for most of her life. Her childhood there was not one filled with experiences of deprivation, poverty and violence, but rather with memories of a safe home of comfort in the middle of this vibrant Afro-American cultural hub. She took to drawing at a very young age, particularly when she had to stay home from school because of her asthma, so it came as no surprise that she decided to study art.⁶ She received both her BA and MA degrees in art education from the City College of New York in 1955 and 1959, respectively. She started painting to supplement her salary as a teacher: her classical landscapes, such as *Untitled: Provincetown 3* from 1958, a cubist harbor scene depicting the town where she would summer with her two daughters, and her still lifes, such as *The Artist's Studio* from 1948, were all scenes conceived in the tradition of the great European masters that she had been exposed to through her education. However, events in the streets of Harlem during the Civil Rights Movement prompted her to paint what she experienced as an Afro-American woman. As a consequence, in 1963 she started her very first series by the title *The American People* (1963–67), which problematized social and economic tensions that divided American society so deeply during the 1960s. In addition, she also engaged in political activism, first fighting for racial recognition, which then shifted into struggle for Black women's equality by the 1970s.

Her education in classical painting motivated her to tour the grand art museums in major European cultural capitals, such as Paris, Rome and Amsterdam, where she could appreciate many of the original paintings she was asked to copy as a university student. Her visit to the Rijksmuseum in particular left a lasting mark on her art: it was there in 1972 that she encountered Thangkas for the first time. These were roll-up Buddhist paintings on silk surfaces from Tibet, used during meditation. Inspired by these soft images, Ringgold decided to abandon regular solid frames for her canvas paintings and employ fabric borders as frames instead. This was her initial step towards adopting fabric in unique and creative ways in her hallmark art – which was a material very close to her heart. Her mother was a sought-after dress designer and seamstress, so Ringgold not only

⁶ Lisa Farrington, *Faith Ringgold* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), 12.

learnt how to sew from her, but also grew up witnessing her creative ideas taking shape through the medium of fabric.

Ringgold's later trips in 1976 and 1977 took her to West Africa, which not only provided her with further ammunition to enrich her art, but also contributed to her "personal, intellectual and spiritual liberation."⁷ By then, she was spurred on by her African cultural heritage: she had been engaged in producing wooden masks, inspired by the sacred Dan masks worn by men during ritual performances and festivals in Liberia. The shapes, the highly stylized, geometrical forms, flat planes of natural colors and muted tonality employed on African masks had a lasting impact on Pablo Picasso and Cubism as early as the 1900s, a fact of which Ringgold was keenly aware. However, she wished to return to the original craft of creating masks to deconstruct, transform and appropriate these objects so that they could be metamorphosed in the American context. When making the masks, in addition to painting, she also applied raffia, beads and appliqués as decoration and often attached dresses to them which she designed in collaboration with her mother. As a result, Ringgold was able to create complete personas with marked gendered identities, such as her series of *Women's Liberation Talking Masks* (1973–89), which she would then integrate into her performance art.

In parallel, she also experimented with textiles in another art form: sculpture. This form of expression has been associated primarily with hard physical materials in the West – such as different kinds of stones, especially marble or granite, and metals, particularly bronze – and has been reserved for the male artistic realm perhaps even more than any of the other visual art forms. Ringgold challenged this artistic practice through her life-size soft sculptures of people – which may also be conceived as enlarged textile dolls that women would create for their daughters to play with. At the intersection of traditional masculine art and feminine craft, she subverted male-dominated ritual practices.

In addition to exhibiting these pieces, Ringgold also included them in various performances she staged: by combining different media – such as her images, masks turned into masquerade and soft sculpture, with Afro-American music and improvised African dance movements – within the same production, she created truly multimedia art performances through which she could tell her stories. The very first of these masked performances, as Ringgold called them, was held in 1976, entitled *The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro*. It was a 30-minute-long enactment of the funeral of two African Americans, embodied by two life-size soft sculptures dressed in black, delicately

⁷ Iren Annus, "The Unheroine: The Figure of the Spinster in Doris Lessing's 'The Trinket Box,'" in Nora Sellei and Jack Waudby, eds., *She's Leaving Home: Women's Writing in English in a European Context* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 58.

decorated with white beads and black tassel fringe. The deceased figures were Buba, a man who had died of a drug overdose, and his wife, Bena, who had then died of grief.⁸ The actors in this “improvisational performance” were all volunteers who were instructed to create dialogues fit for the specific scenario as well as to engage in movements to gospel music by Aretha Franklin playing in the background. Authenticity was also lent to the performance by the setting, which was a church building.

Through the theme of drug exploitation, this performance portrayed the conditions of Afro-Americans in the US after two centuries of racism and marginalization: the self-destruction that comes with a lack of recognition and the resultant psychological struggle that drives the historically also emasculated Afro-American men to engage in crime and substance abuse that causes their premature death – which Ringgold must have known about first hand as she had divorced her jazz musician husband because of his drug addiction. This is how, in this performance, the social and political narratives intersect with her very personal story. The understanding of true love and enormous pain felt by the departure of her beloved husband breaks the heart of the wife who dies after him – not just symbolically, but also literally. This folkloric storyline of mythical dimensions functions as a counter-narrative to stereotypical portrayals of African Americans, rooted in the institution of slavery, as lacking in commitment, maturity and long-term emotional devotion that the institution of marriage in Western societies presumes. This specific mask performance, thus, was a direct exposition of and attack on the long history of racism in the US.

THE MULTIMEDIAILITY OF NARRATIVE QUILTS

Ringgold’s recognition of the power of patriarchy not only within the white American community, but also the Afro-American one triggered her involvement in activism for Black women’s equality. Her Afrofemcentrism⁹ was perhaps most pervasively conveyed and systematically expressed in her story quilts, described as her image/text narratives. In these art pieces, Ringgold drew specifically on Black culture and portrayed her own Afro-American female experience as intersecting with the collective experience and

⁸ Faith Ringgold and Josephine Withers, “Faith Ringgold: Art,” *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (1980): 208, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177658>.

⁹ It is a term defined by Freida Tesfagiogris as expressing “a state of consciousness that asserts [Afrofemcentric artists] race, sex and artistic ability, the three major entities of existence which direct [their] lives and work.” Freida High W. Tesfagiogris, “Afrofemcentrism and its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Ringgold,” in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 474.

history of Afro-American women in general. As Finley asserts, “the quilt became a palette on which Ringgold not only shares her talent as an artist, but also her experiences as a black woman.”¹⁰ She expanded the concept of her fiber-framed canvas paintings to using quilts as the basic surface upon which she could experiment with various art forms. The multiplicity of cultural relevance of quilt and quilt-making bound her to this art form which then became her trademark for many years to come.

The quilt as a quintessential segment of American folklore has carved its place in the shared imagination. However, it has been a widespread craft with a substantial history of many centuries. The oldest patchwork, an Egyptian bed canopy of colored leather squares, is dated to 980 BC.¹¹ A rich quilt collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum¹² in London displays quilts from the Middle Ages from India, the Far East and Europe, where it appeared around the 12th–13th centuries. Quilts, which contained a basic sheet, upon which some filling was placed with a decorative top layer, stitched together for decorative purposes as well as for keeping the filling in place, were quite popular at the time. The patchwork method was frequently employed in making bed covers, but earlier examples show evidence that other methods, such as stuffed quilting, were also in use in preparing warm and beautiful pieces of clothing – which probably developed from quilted armor that had become quite common in Western Europe by the 14th century¹³ – as well as wall hangings, such as the Tristan Quilt “from 13th-century Sicily [...] depicting 14 scenes from the medieval legend of Tristan and Isolde – lively depictions of battles, ships and castles.”¹⁴ In the fashion of the famous Bayeux Tapestry, some sections also contain inscriptions in addition to images, to clarify the storyline.

It may come as no surprise, then, that many cultural groups have laid claim to transplanting quilting to what would become the US, including the early settlers from the Dutch Republic and the British Isles, all of whom brought with them their textile traditions.¹⁵ It came to maturity in the second quarter of the 19th century, when a unique American quilting style started to emerge, characterized by a block style and appliqué

¹⁰ Cheryl Finley, “Visual Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation,” *Callaloo* 37, no. 4 (2014): 1031.

¹¹ Elsie S. Roberts et al., *The Quilt: A History and Celebration of an American Art Form* (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2010), 16.

¹² “An Introduction to Quilting and Patchwork,” Victoria and Albert Museum, London, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/an-introduction-to-quilting-and-patchwork>.

¹³ Roberts, *The Quilt*, 20.

¹⁴ “An Introduction to Quilting.”

¹⁵ Certain groups, such as the Amish and the Latter-day Saints, are known for their quilt-making even today.

design, along with special design elements, such as the Star of Bethlehem.¹⁶ American genre paintings, such as Edgar M. Ward's *The Quilting Party* (1892), stand witness to the popularity of quilting parties at the time, a favored social engagement for women who gathered to work on a quilt, while also chatting and enjoying drinks together. Some of the depictions, such as John L. Kimmel's *The Quilting Frolic* (1813) and Henry Bacon's *Quilting Party* (1872) attest to how young men, potential courtiers, were also allowed to frequent these parties in case young women were also present. Probably today's quilting circles, guilds and national societies also evolved out of this tradition.

Until recently, however, this craft had been associated with white women,¹⁷ and African American quilt-makers "have been rendered doubly invisible: by both dominant racist social discourses and masculinist black discourses."¹⁸ This was the case even if the quilt reflected very different traditions¹⁹ and experiences, such as some of the pictorial quilts produced by former slave Harriet Powers, which clearly integrate African fable storytelling traditions through panels that portray groups of animals, but also include panels depicting episodes from the life of Southern slaves told through figurative representations.²⁰ As far as we know, Faith Ringgold's great-great-grandmother was also a Southern slave and quilt-maker, from whom the craft was passed down from generation to generation, until finally Ringgold also learned the art from her mother.²¹ For Ringgold, this personal family tradition binding generations together was not only an intimate experience, but also a tool through which to make the personal political and the political personal and to start claiming double visibility by transforming a traditional craft done in the private, domestic space into what is now regarded as proper contemporary art on display in public galleries and museums.

With this subversive act of countering racist and sexist practices of representation, she also joined an emerging community of Afro-American women writers, such as Alice

¹⁶ Roberts, *The Quilt*, 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁸ Hertha D. Sweet Wong, *Picturing Identity: Contemporary American Autobiography in Image and Text* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 197.

¹⁹ One such example is the quilt-making community in Gee's Bend, Alabama; see William Arnett et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta: Tinwood Press, 2002).

²⁰ On a debated theory regarding the semiotic significance of the quilt in the underground railroad, see Floyd Coleman, "The Importance of Decorative Arts in African American History: Foreword," in Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, eds., *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 5–6.

²¹ Faith Ringgold: Tell It Like It Is, directed by Louise Lockwood (2019; London: BBC), <https://vimeo.com/376453995>.

Walker, Toni Morrison, Phyllis A. Perry and Phyllis Lawson, who not only returned to the theme of quilts and quilt-making in some of their works to signify the creative energies of womanhood and the power of united sisterhood, but also employed it as a narrative technique, a method to collect and connect loosely related episodes, stories and fragments of experiences into a cohesive storyline, thus creating texts which Elaine Showalter describes as "verbal bedcovers."²² In fact, in everyday use the quilt may operate as a vehicle to re-collect memories and re-connect with people who engaged in making the quilt or whose items of clothing provided the scraps for it. Narrating the quilt as the eyes of the beholder wander around the surface integrates two media, the visual and the verbal bedcovers, with the quilt functioning as memorabilia.²³ As for literary works of art, Ringgold was inspired by Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and, through the strategy of interartistry, she engaged in a dialogue with the novel when completing her piece entitled *The Purple Quilt* (1986). It combines quotations from the novel with imaginary portraits of the characters – portraits which these characters would not have had the privilege of having had done otherwise. Through this quilt, Ringgold was able to expand the base for inter-artistic dialogue with other Black women artists, confirming and validating common denominators in the shared experiences of Afro-American women and their narrative representations.²⁴

When Ringgold originally turned to using complete quilts in her art, which were often 80–90 inches in size, she used the patchwork quilt as the canvas upon which she painted her images. The first of her quilt paintings was *The Echoes of Harlem* from 1980, which was also the last project on which she collaborated with her mother. An acrylic painting on textile, it contains 30 face portraits, each representing different ages, genders, skin complexions and facial expressions that capture the way residents respond to life in Harlem. The arrangement of the portraits in the middle in a rectangular shape and then in rows on all four sides of the quilt with corner pieces reflects one traditional design pattern that many quilt-makers employed.

Ringgold soon expanded her artistic engagement and started to supplement her images with texts, through which she was able not only to share her story, but her *version* of the story, ultimately challenging and subverting traditional mainstream American

²² Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," in Nancy K. Miller, ed., *The Poetics of Gender* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1986), 187.

²³ Iren Annus, "Subversion through the Quilt? Mormon Auto/bio-histories from the Domestic," in Erzsébet Barát, ed., *Spaces in Transition* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2005), 12–3.

²⁴ Margaret M. Dunn and Alice Morris, "Narrative Quilts and Quilted Narratives: The Art of Faith Ringgold and Alice Walker," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 15, no. 1 (1992): 29.

narratives of the Afro-American past. Farrington described these narrative quilts as “acrylic paintings that are quilted, cloth bordered, and accompanied by original storybook narratives, written directly onto the canvas.”²⁵ Her first story quilt, which integrated image and text, was her widely acknowledged *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima* (1983), a title that immediately relates to three cultural products: a nursery rhyme about fear and the big bad wolf, a drama by Edward Albee which integrates the name of Virginia Woolf into the title, and the subversion of this by replacing her name with that of Aunt Jemima, an iconic figure of stereotypical representation as well as of economic and social exploitation of African American women. Albee once said that the title of his 1962 drama, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* means “who’s afraid of living without false illusions.”²⁶ Ringgold’s title plays on names and asks the same question with reference to the status of Afro-American women in particular: who’s afraid of living without false illusions about them?

Although this piece is a story quilt, only the text carries the narrative content, while the imagery only includes bust portraits of the various characters that appear in it. The images are therefore not the visual articulation of the storyline on their own. The text is hand-written in vernacular Black English on white sheets of fabric, each a quilt panel, placed next to painted portraits of the characters, arranged as if on two pages of an open book. Each new pair of pages is lined up below the previous two pages in two columns. The pages of the text are numbered, but the images are referred to in the text like figures, identified by letters of the alphabet. The pages which are arranged in a rhythm that outlines a rectangular central area on two sides, are to be read on the right and then on the left, from top to bottom, and the last page is located in the middle at the bottom of the rectangle. The title of the story quilt is in the very middle, right above the portrayal of the central character, Aunt Jemima. Except for three of them, the portraits in the middle section appear with a yellow background, while the frame includes portraits only with a dark background, which alternate with squares that are traditional geometrical quilt patterns. A rather narrow fabric edge completes the composition. In addition to the nine pages that include the narrative, two squares also contain the words “only you can prevent” and “break your match” – potential words of encouragement to other Black women feeling trapped in a web of social deprivation.

Ringgold thus produced a patchwork quilt which provided the basis for the visual and verbal appliqués. Sellei found patchwork quilts to be “rhizomatic, non-hierarchical [...]”

²⁵ Farrington, *Faith Ringgold*, 155.

²⁶ William Flanagan, “Edward Albee, The Art of Theatre No. 4,” *The Paris Review* 39 (1966), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4350/the-art-of-theater-no-4-edward-albee>.

allowing connections between any points in the framework, also in the Deleuzian way, by allowing multiple entries and multiple exits for interpretation, resisting any notion of the obvious centre.²⁷ This harmony, however, is interrupted by the panels of pages and portraits, which lend a new dynamism to the quilt, giving primacy to the narrative. But the color coding and the arrangement of the panels, while creating an overall pattern of a rectangular center with a frame, confuse the viewer as different visual clues guide one to different focal points. One of these is the central panel which is the cover page: its location as well as the oversized letters written in various bright colors catch the eye immediately, as do the white panels with their tiny letters. The bright yellow background of the portraits within the rectangle definitely attracts the gaze, and the images of women with no names specified, painted on dark scraps, create the frame which is visually less exciting than the middle section. This color coding creates a kind of hierarchy, placing the story on white pages in the center, which, through regular interruptions, then guides the viewers in exploring the middle portraits, in a set order, leaving us to contemplate the images of the frame last, with our own rhythm. This multimedial integration of text and image creates a constant flow between the verbal and the visual in the mental processing: it departs from the written text but then leaves it all behind and creates an interface of balance by the end that creates harmony between the two forms of expression and not an opposition. The quilt can be fully explored and the narrative best understood through the oscillating and permeating movement between the media of text and image.

The images are portrayals of Aunt Jemima's family members. Depicted with a monochrome background, these images are rather simplistic, one-dimensional, almost child-like drawings, with a clear outline that is colored in. The shapes of the people are often not quite symmetrical and proportionate, and definitely follow the same pattern; for example, the depictions of the women follow the same body outline. Ringgold used a small range of colors and ignored tonality, so the portraits are rather flat with no mass or dimensions. At the same time, everyone is portrayed in clothes with bright colors and busy patterns, from stripes and plaids to flowers and tiger prints. Everyone is very smart, as if we were looking at a fashion catalogue of various dresses Ringgold's mother had designed and made. Aunt Jemima is portrayed as a most beautiful woman, with a sophisticated, kind face, make-up that accentuates her soft features, stylishly dressed with tasteful white pearl accessories like a model, holding herself with elegance and dignity. Her appearance could be no further from that of the brand faces that have been used on product labels for over a century.

²⁷ Nora Sellei, "Quilting as Collective Self-Narrative by Women," in Teodor Mateoc, ed., *Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English-speaking World (I)* (Oradea: Editura Universității din Oradea, 2017), 186.

The story itself is a “contemporary folktale written in traditional Black dialect [... which] combines elements of folklore and anecdote with the African and West Indian dilemma tales.”²⁸ Dilemma tales are a common form of tales in which narrators present listeners with a difficult choice that usually has ethical implications, and the listeners must make their moral decision in the end. The dilemma in this case is presented in the title which frames the narrative by being repeated as the closing sentence. In addition, the dilemma is also brought forth by the storyline which departs from hegemonic narratives of traditional Afro-American female stereotypes and by the fact that, unlike in folk tales, the figures are not simplified stock characters but more complex and at times morally ambiguous figures. The anecdotal features are unique additions to what otherwise seems to be a family saga with compressed content as this nine-page story chronicles the lives of four generations of Aunt Jemima’s family.

Aunt Jemima has been an iconic cultural figure in the US for over a century, initially the trademark of a pancake mix represented by a Black woman. The idea was conceived during a vaudeville performance in 1889 but took its final form when, “in order to bring the trademark to life, former slave Nancy Green was hired for the First Columbian Exposition of 1893 [...] where she cooked pancakes, sang, and told stories.”²⁹ It exploited the traditional stereotype of the mammy, a “faithful, obedient domestic servant [...] that] symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power.”³⁰ The face and character of Green intersected with the mental image of the simple but kind, smiling, warm-hearted, full-figured, asexual reminder of the Black female slave and house servant who is objectified, domesticated, dominated and exploited, and “willingly accepts the position assigned to her.”³¹ A century later, the Quaker Oats Company described this trademark as symbolizing “warmth, quality, good taste, heritage and reliability”³², elegantly ignoring the way in which it also became integral to the iconography of race in the US. It was this practice that Ringgold challenged and re-con-

²⁸ Thalia Gouma-Peterson, “Faith Ringgold’s Journey: From Greek Busts to African American Dilemma Tales,” in *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold’s French Collection and Other Story Quilts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42.

²⁹ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

³⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 72.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

³² Witt, *Black Hunger*, 23.

figured, thus constituting an alternative reading as for who Aunt Jemima could have become.³³

In Ringgold's narrative, Aunt Jemima is a successful businesswoman, although she continues to be related to cooking: she owns and runs a popular restaurant and catering business in New York with her husband. Her grandparents were dark-skinned Black slaves living in New Orleans, where her half Native-American grandmother ran a brothel and thus managed to earn money to buy their freedom. Her parents wanted Jemima to marry a doctor. Instead, she ran away with the man she loved, and both became servants to a white family, the Prophets. Because of a tragic accident, she inherited their money, which she invested in a restaurant that brought well-being and comfort to her family. Their son married a white girl from Germany and maintained good relations with Jemima and her husband. They inherited the New York business when Jemima and her husband returned to New Orleans, where their light-skinned daughter who had married a doctor lived. He resented them and turned their children against them, whose tragic car accident on their way to open a new restaurant in New Orleans ends the story. In many ways, it is a regular family saga, with struggles and triumphs,³⁴ which may appear in any family, regardless of its race. Some core American values, such as morality, religious devotion and the Protestant work ethic, are integrated into the storyline, as are issues of children's revolt, interracial marriage, lack of respect and toxic family relations that cast shadows on an otherwise successful life.

Through her alternative biography of Aunt Jemima, Ringgold claims her back for the Afro-American community: she is no longer the objectified face reproduced endlessly to make profit for a white company, but a master of her own life. By appliquéing this family saga on the surface of a quilt, with patchwork patterns of natural sites with flowers, leafed tree branches, sparrows that alternate with monochrome surfaces and triangles with African geometrical patterns, Ringgold integrates their story into a broader environment and community, that of other Afro-American women (and their families), who surround them, rendering the frame nameless, but not faceless. Through her numerous other narrative quilts and over twenty books she wrote and illustrated for children, Ringgold continued her struggle for racial and gender equality.

³³ In 2020, as an acknowledgement of the racial tone and its negative impact on the Afro-American community, Quaker Oats Company announced the re-branding of their products trademarked as Aunt Jemima, a decision that stirred up further debate about the possible contemporary interpretations of the trademark.

³⁴ Wong, *Picturing Identity*, 197.

CONCLUSION

“Cultural representation is knowledge, ideology and politics that we employ when we think and act.”³⁵ Faith Ringgold is keenly aware of the intricate structural interplay between these factors and has been able to contest mainstream cultural practices through her innovative and provocative art. Her narrative quilts, through which she embraced her African cultural traditions and her Afro-American community, provided her with exceptional tools to intervene in the long tradition of racist and sexist views, narratives and stereotypes of the majority society. By correcting and re-claiming the communal past, she has been endeavoring to re-build the communal present, thus countering biased white, patriarchal domination.

Her symbolic narrative quilts, these “politically charged stories”,³⁶ contributed immensely to this project. “The story has to be woven into the total composition”, said Ringgold.³⁷ Through the method of textual rupture, her very first story quilt obliged the reader/viewer to engage with the piece, constantly oscillating between the verbal and the visual, image and meaning, tradition and innovation, personal and communal. Her re-configuration of art through the interface of two media was an irreversible initial step toward dismantling boundaries between art forms as well as between the communities who produce them.

³⁵ Szőnyi, “The Mediality,” 81.

³⁶ Lockwood, *Faith Ringgold*.

³⁷ Dunn and Morris, “Narrative Quilts,” 29.