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Author(s): Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling

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The Freedom to Say What She Pleases: A Conversation with Faith Ringgold

Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling
The University of New Hampshire

You asked me once why I wanted to become an artist. It is because it's the only way I know of feeling free. My art is my freedom to say what I please.

—Willia Marie Simone, in *The French Collection, Part I*



Portrait of Faith Ringgold in front of *Dinner at Gertrude Stein's*, 1992. Photo credit: C. Love.

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to the authors c/o Melody Graulich, Department of English, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824.

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In “Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand,” bell hooks looks for—and finds—a model of a woman who has defied the “further erasure of the aesthetic legacy and artistic contributions of black women”:

This writing was inspired by the work of artist Faith Ringgold, who has always cherished and celebrated the artistic work of unknown and unheralded black women. Evoking this legacy in her work, she calls us to remember, to celebrate, to give praise. (*Yearning* 115)

Ringgold’s innovative work, which combines visual imagery and stories, has become increasingly known and celebrated in recent years. Her latest series of story quilts, *The French Collection, Part I*, is her most ambitious work to date. She is currently at work completing a related series of quilts, *The French Collection, Part II*. Because they represent her most recent work, we were particularly interested in discussing many aspects of *The French Collection* with Ringgold, especially the topic she defines as a central theme in one of the quilts, “The Picnic at Giverny”: “the role of women [and especially African-American women] in art.” Throughout the following interview, Ringgold looks from many angles at the role of women in art and the diverse influences on African-American women artists. She discusses the “great masters” of the French modernist tradition and African-American artists and writers, her family’s storytelling tradition, feminist interpretations of the past, unheralded artists who worked in fabric and other media, the importance of recreating the lives and voices of historical African Americans, the production of her art, the writing of children’s books and her understanding of children as an audience, and current issues in art history concerning female sexuality and the male gaze.

Ringgold has been an important figure in a course we team-teach at the University of New Hampshire on American women artists and writers because her work addresses our mutual interests as a literary critic and an art historian; although she was trained as a visual artist, the written word has been an essential aspect of Ringgold’s work for the past decade. Throughout the interview, held in Ringgold’s studio in Manhattan’s garment district in July 1992, we had a rare opportunity to contemplate the second quilt of *The French Collection, Part II*. “Dinner at Gertrude Stein’s,” recently completed, shows a fictional gathering of literary and artistic greats, starring Zora Neale Hurston. The guests in Stein’s art-filled salon are prominently painted in the large central area of the quilt. As in most of Ringgold’s story quilts, the painted pictorial area is bounded by several levels of fabric frames.¹ A thin single band of fabric surrounds the image; then a horizontal, light-colored band, on which the story’s text is written, is placed above and below the image; and finally, a broad, brightly colored patched border frames the entire quilt. Thus, the pictorial image and its

accompanying narrative are literally pieced together and held within the same frame. In “Café des Artistes,” a work in progress, we were lucky to get a closer look at Ringgold’s working method. Although Ringgold said that she usually completed her paintings before they were placed in their quilted border, the painting in this work was incomplete, although it was already set in its quilted frame. Ringgold said she had “only painted on it about twice.” Indeed, the figures were barely blocked in, and rough sketches in magic marker were taped to the walls. We stood directly in front of this quilt when we discussed it late in the interview, taking turns reading aloud from the narrative bands which had already been inscribed and quilted.

Faith Ringgold is one of the most outstanding artists alive today. Born in 1930 in the Harlem neighborhood where she still spends half the year, Ringgold came from a close family, whose love of storytelling was an important early influence. By her senior year in high school, she had decided she wanted to become an artist. She enrolled in New York’s City College in 1948 and graduated in 1955 with a B.S. in art education—having married, divorced, and had two daughters within a year of each other. In 1955 she began teaching art in the New York City public schools, where she stayed until 1973. In 1984 she became a professor of art at the University of California, San Diego, where she teaches two quarters a year.

Ringgold’s self-definition as an artist began in earnest in the early 1960s, after she received her Master’s of Fine Arts degree and her children no longer required constant care. She took her mother and her two daughters to Europe to see the art that she had been studying. When she returned, she claimed her former dining room as her studio, an important gesture establishing art making as a major priority in her life. She began to try to find a way to create images of black people, technically by finding a way to render black skin tones, and thematically by producing portraits of members of her community, of “real” black people, whose images had been absent in her formal art education. “Instead of looking to Greece, I looked to Africa,” she said.

Ringgold’s first mature style, formulated by the late ’60s, is characterized by such paintings as “The Flag is Bleeding,” with its bold, flat colors, abstracted form, and political message, which distinguishes it from the then current pop art, which it superficially resembles. Inspired by African masks and Tibetan tankas and influenced by her mother, Willi Posey, a dress designer, Ringgold began during the seventies to work with fabric to frame her paintings and to create a series called *The Family of Women*, fierce, haunting, mixed-media masks, with their mouths open, allowing them to speak. Her collaboration with her mother lasted until Posey’s death in 1981. By the mid-1970s, Ringgold was animating the characters she made, first by stuffing their bodies to give them greater dimension, and

then by creating environmental performances with the figures she had made, as in “The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro.”

In the early 1980s, Ringgold achieved a breakthrough when she conceived the story quilt. For Charlotte Robinson’s “The Artist and the Quilt” project, a collection of quilts made by contemporary women who usually worked in high art media, she collaborated with her mother on her first quilt, “Echoes of Harlem,” portraying the painted faces of people she had known while growing up (Robinson 103–105). When she could not find a publisher for her autobiography, *Being My Own Woman*, she realized editors and publishers controlled what black women could write about their lives, and she began to embed narratives in her quilts, at first in single works such as “Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemima?” (1983) and then in multiple-quilt series such as *The Bitter Nest* (1988), an intricately plotted story about some of Ringgold’s major themes: marriage, sexuality, family, mother-daughter relations, African-American social history, and female self-expression. All the narrators of Ringgold’s quilts are African-American women who speak with authority in their own voices. Some are young girls who speak with the spunk and assertiveness of Toni Cade Bambara’s narrators; others ponder their sexuality and their relations to men and to their mothers, like Hurston’s Janie Crawford or Alice Walker’s Celie; others tell stories about their communities, like Gloria Naylor’s narrators. Many of Ringgold’s stories—“Slave Rape Story Quilt” (1985), for example—reflect the interest in piecing together and retelling historical fragments we see in works by Toni Morrison or Shirley Anne Williams. Long acclaimed as an important visual artist, Ringgold deserves more attention as a writer, and *Being My Own Woman* certainly should be published.

With eight quilts in Part I and four in Part II, *The French Collection* is her most complex work to date, a *Künstlerroman* in quilts in which Ringgold inserts an African-American presence into the tradition of Parisian modernism in which she was trained. Her protagonist is a young African-American woman, Willia Marie Simone, who goes to Paris to study art in the 1920s; her story Ringgold describes as a “fantasy,” “a surreal meditation on things we’ve never done but would have liked to have done” (“An Introduction to *The French Collection*” 11). Willia probably takes her name from Willi Posey, for Ringgold says that the series is a “tribute” to her mother, but that Willia can also “best be described” as her own “alter ego.”

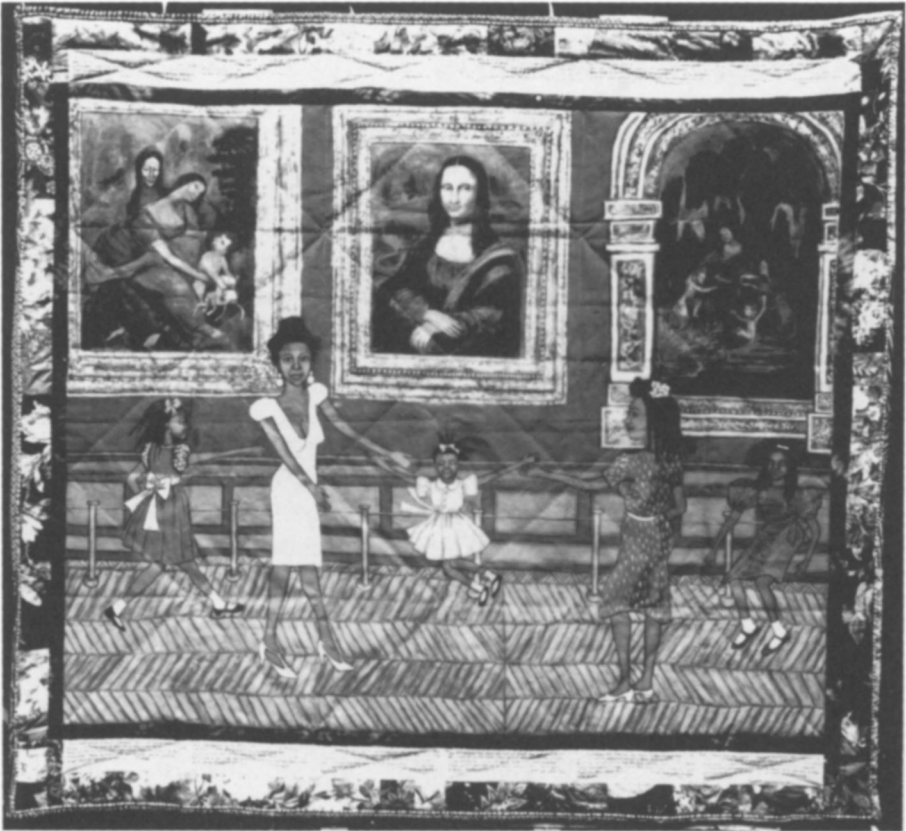
Each quilt presents a fictional gathering of a cast of characters interpolated with at least one “masterpiece” of the Eurocentric tradition. As in “Dinner at Gertrude Stein’s” (p. 1), in each quilt a large painted image is bordered by a textual narrative from which the quotations below are taken.² In the first quilt of the series, the three daughters of Willia’s friend Marcia go “Dancing at the Louvre” (p. 6), in front of the Mona Lisa and other works by Leonardo. In “The Picnic at Giverny,” Willia is

painting a group of contemporary feminists who sit, clothed, in Monet's famous garden, while a naked little Pablo Picasso sits in the corner, a reversal of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, in which two clothed men picnic with a nude woman. In the story, Willia speculates about a woman's freedom to "paint like a woman," to find her own subjects, to "inspire—Liberate" (21, 20).

Ringgold creates interesting counterpoints between images and texts. In "The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles," (cover) the National Sunflower Quilters Society of America, whose membership includes activists such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Mary McLeod Bethune, meet in a sunflower field at Arles, where they encounter a "tormented little man," Vincent van Gogh, whose presence is disturbing because he reminds them of Dutch slavers. The dead members of Ringgold's family are shown gathered in "Matisse's Chapel at Vence" discussing slavery. Grandma Betsy tells one of her mother's stories about the mother's uncompromising encounter with the grandson of a "slaver" and concludes that "white man got to live his own story and we got to live ours." The story emphasizes the importance of sharing stories of the past generations; Great-Grandma Susie, "looking strong at 110, just sat there being real proud of Grandma Betsy, her storyteller daughter" (30).

The series also explores themes related to being a woman artist, especially of African-American heritage, in the bastion of male artistic hegemony. Through Willia, Ringgold asserts that, rather than being models and muses, women can be the speaking subjects of their lives. While posing in "Picasso's Studio" (p. 8), Willia is told by the African masks in his "Les demoiselles d'Avignon", "You go ahead, girl, and try this art thing. . . . We just want to let you know you don't have to give up nothing" (33). Willia's Aunt Melissa says, "The only thing you have to do is create art of importance to YOU. Show us a new way to look at life" (33). The quilts are a strong affirmation of the creative authority of African-American women and its redemptive potential. The National Sunflower Quilters say, "Now we can do our real quilting, our real art—making this world piece up right" (24). They remind Willia that "one of the ways we know our true history and culture [is] from the art," and she vows: "Some day I will make you women proud of me too" (24).

The affirmative vision of *The French Collection* characterizes all of Ringgold's work. Discussing a quilt from her "Woman on a Bridge" series, "The Winners," which shows a woman running across a bridge to win the New York City Marathon, she said, "If it hasn't happened, I just make it up. Much of it has to do with believing you can do something"; "drive and determination," she said, go a lot further than talent in becoming a successful artist.³ Spunk, faith and confidence also characterize Cassie Louise Lightfoot, the narrator of Ringgold's first children's book, *Tar Beach*, a



“#1 Dancing at the Louvre,” *The French Collection, Part I*, 1991. 73½" × 80½" oil/canvas, pieced and printed fabric, artist's collection.

Caldecott honor book, and the winner of both the Coretta Scott King Award for illustration and a *Parent's Choice* Gold award. Based on Ringgold's story quilt, "Tar Beach," now owned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and echoing African folk stories about people who fly, *Tar Beach* presents Cassie flying over the George Washington Bridge and concludes "anyone can fly." Ringgold's second children's book, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (her first book written especially for children), was published in 1992, and she is currently working on another children's book, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*, a revision of another story quilt, "The Dinner Quilt." Soon Ringgold will expand her vision into yet another medium with her recently commissioned mosaic for the 125th Street IRT subway station. She plans to execute two murals, each thirty feet wide,

showing people flying. During the fall of 1992 she traveled to Morocco to research the mosaic process.

Ringgold's daughter, Michele Wallace, a noted cultural critic, has said of her family that "our fascination with language, storytelling, and naming is our legacy" ("Baby Faith" 154). Now let's listen to Faith Ringgold claim her "freedom to say what she pleases."

MW: As you know, both Melody and I heard your talk last spring at the University of New Hampshire, where you showed slides from *The French Collection*, so we're so glad to have this opportunity to talk with you about the series. What is the allure of France?

FR: I was trained, very early, to copy French artists—Degas, Utrillo, Cézanne. Actually not so much Picasso and Matisse as the earlier ones. They were the masters that we were made to emulate. Those artists were in me, and I had to get that out. That can be very deadly, you know, that probably finished off a lot of people, not being able to get those artists out of their heads.

MW: Your aim in *The French Collection* was to come to grips with the influence of those modern masters?

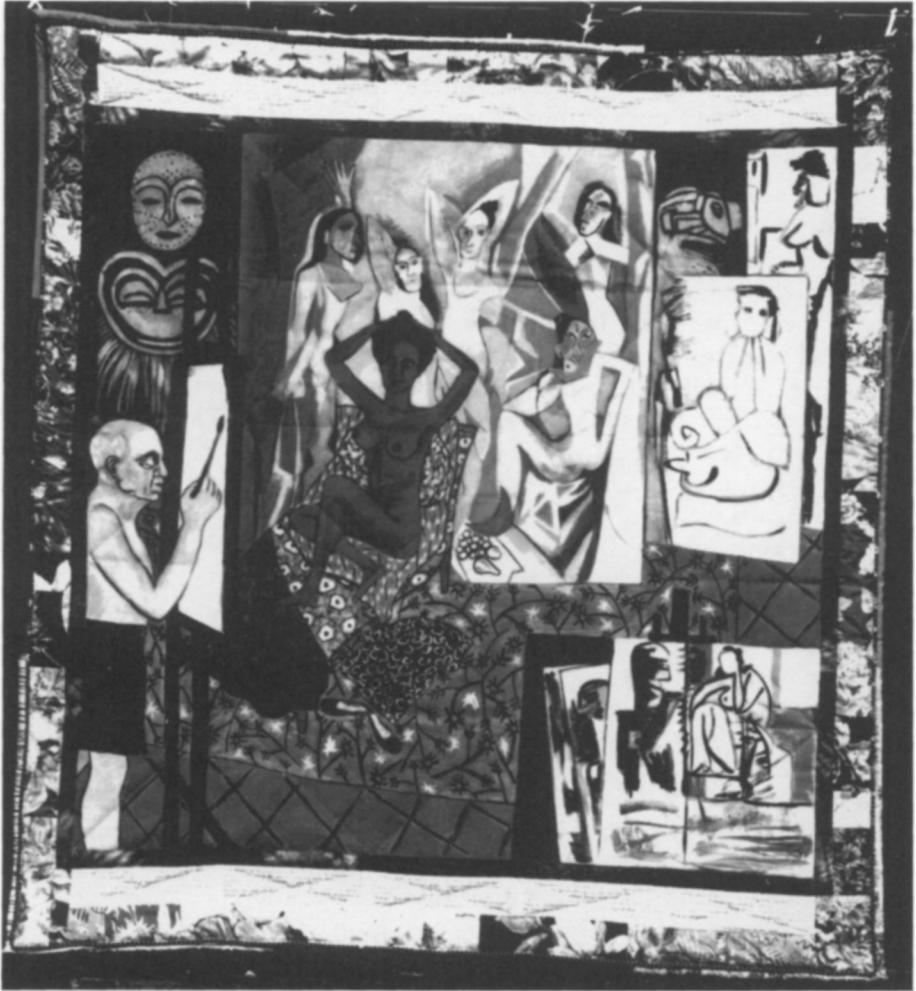
FR: Obviously I've been influenced by them, but they're not bothering me. They were at one time. That's why I can now go back to France, because now I can just enjoy it. I found my own way, and I can use them or not use them. I consider influences they have had on me positive, and I accept them. That early training gave me a certain respect, let's say, and taught me the art of copying and so every now and then I have to go back and do that. Even before I went to school I used to copy from my brother's and sister's history books. They had these great etchings of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, and then they would have all the presidents. I would copy them just to see if I could draw Abraham Lincoln looking just like Abraham Lincoln.

MG: There probably weren't many African Americans in those history books. The novelist Paule Marshall has described going to the library as a little girl and the importance of her discovery of the African-American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar to her belief that she might become a writer.

FR: In my church school we saw some of the accomplishments of African Americans, but in public school, no way, uh-uh. But later I found those people on my own.

MG: Was that the reason you began writing children's books?

FR: Oh, yes, that's a nice idea. But other people are also doing it now. But I didn't have any children's books like that when I was a kid. Neither did my daughters, but my grandchildren do. You have a tendency to forget, but it's true, if I think back, my kids didn't have that but my grandchildren, they're getting it all. It's wonderful.



“#7 Picasso’s Studio,” *The French Collection, Part I*, 1991. 73" × 68" oil/canvas, pieced and printed fabric, artist’s collection.

MW: Do you read your children’s books to your grandchildren?

FR: Oh, they’ve heard it. When I had the book up on the wall, little Faith danced around and read each one out loud and little Teddy and the little baby pretended she could read.

MW: Do they ever say, “Oh, come on, Grandma, I don’t like this,” and then you change it?

FR: Sure. They’ll say, “Wait a minute, I don’t understand that.” And I’ll say, “I haven’t worked on that yet. I didn’t get that down yet. I’m

working on that. Do you think that needs work?" "Yeah, I do." It's great. They're very savvy.

MW: One of the things that intrigued me about *Tar Beach* was how you developed sequences of paintings in the book from the panoramic view of the quilt.

FR: Some people try to figure out how I did the whole book from just that one picture. I had to think up those other pictures just by looking at the story. My stories are always visually vivid, anyway, because I'm an artist. So it's easy to make a picture out of what I write because that's the way I think. Each section engages you, holds you, makes you read the next one. And anywhere you start reading is okay. You don't have to start at the beginning. You can start anywhere and you should start seeing things. When they see one of my story quilts a lot of people go away with all different kinds of ideas about what the picture is because they're seeing things they've read sometimes, not things that are there.

MW: How did you coordinate the images and the text?

FR: We made the dummy book first and then added the words. You get your story and then you put it on the pages. I know how many pages I want text on before I start the story. And that's the same thing I do with the quilts. I know exactly how many frames I have to write: it's six at the top and six at the bottom. I know it's six frames, I know how deep the frames are—six twelve-inch-by-three-inch blocks—then I find out how many words I can fit in there. It's very technical. The woman who does the writing for me always complains, "You're putting too many words here, I can't get them in." And if she makes a mistake, we're dead, so everything has to be very carefully calculated.

MW: So someone else actually prints the text.

FR: Yes, somebody else physically writes the text. I have to keep my mind on what I'm doing in the paintings, not be thinking about anything else, be very tunnel-visioned. She's very good. She also lays out my books. Her name is Lisa Yi, and she's a wonderful quilt maker and painter.⁴

MW: Are you working on other books?

FR: I just finished *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*. This is the first text I've written for children. *Tar Beach* was not written for children, it's just written for people, but it turns out to be great for children too. It was written to help recall childhood, to help you think back on your childhood.

MW: Well, I once flew as a child. You're also working on a children's book based on "The Dinner Quilt"?

FR: Yes. That story is finished, and I hope to put the book illustrations up on the wall this weekend. I like to put my books on the wall, line 'em up so I can see each page break and the whole thing. But I have not done the drawings for the book yet. It's called *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*.

MG: Aunt Connie is the character who embroiders placemats, which always reminds me of Judy Chicago.

FR: Well, the story's changed, because although "The Dinner Quilt" is about childhood, it is really a very adult story.

MG: With lots of sexuality. The little girl narrator, Melody, "plays doctor" with her cousin.

FR: Yes. There are a lot of nudes in my paintings, and I never thought about it. I've always had sexuality in my art because I think it's normal, it's a part of life. So when it comes to relating to children, I don't want to be caught in a trap and made to do asexual things. But I don't want to expose them to things they don't understand. I mean I don't want to lead a sexual revolution for children. So I would consider "The Dinner Quilt" not for children. It's about the kind of thing that children do, all of them [expose themselves to each other], but I don't need to point it out to them now. It's more interesting when you become an adult and you look back on what you did as a child. A child probably wouldn't understand it in the way it should be understood, so I rewrote it. Now, rather than placemats, there are painted portraits of women who come alive. Rosa Parks invites them into the attic and she tells the children that Aunt Connie made them, created us to speak to you, to tell you who we are and about our struggle.⁵

MG: And it sounds like Aunt Connie is an avatar of Faith Ringgold because, isn't that part of your goal, to tell kids about historical figures and about their African-American heritage?

FR: Sure. Kids are such a wonderful audience. For them learning is fun, it's wonderful, because every day is full of new things to try and they're not ready yet to be blasé about it. So it's nice to teach kids.

MW: Does this relate to your years as a teacher?

FR: Oh, yeah, you never get away from teaching, do you? That's in you, and I come from a long line of teachers, so there you go. My mother's stories were like lessons.

MG: Do you retell her stories at all in your work? Alice Walker says in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens": Is the story I tell really my mother's story? Do you see yourself doing that?

FR: No, I don't think I retell her story, but I tell stories for the same reason she did. There's something similar about it. She told stories to show you the continuity and to emphasize her moral code, her culture. She was giving you all the reasons why you should x, y, and z through stories, and they were always about real people and real events and real things. You know I never heard any of those myths.

MG: No stories about little girls flying?

FR: No. I heard stories about real people doing real things that would be similar to actually taking wing and flying—people making great achievements from very humble beginnings.⁶ She wanted you to know who every-

body else was too and so she would illustrate everything with a story. So that's really what I'm coming from. I guess I did that with my kids too. They hated it. They were very bored. Well, I couldn't roll my eyes at my mother. I had to sit there and listen. And she would tell stories to our friends, and I would say, "Oh mother, please," but they would say, no, we want to hear this.

MG: Unlike your mother's stories, yours don't have clear morals; they are so nonjudgmental and often end ambiguously. Some people have pointed out that they're like the West African dilemma stories in that sense: they don't resolve an issue or come to a conclusion.⁷

FR: My mother's stories did, though. That also makes us really different. My mother knew exactly what everything should be and why, and her stories illustrated that.

MG: Do you think your daughters will feel that way about you?

FR: Sure, absolutely, that's right, we just continue that process. My mother was outlandish, and my daughters think I am. You know, I wanted her to just calm down and be natural and normal like other people and she never would, and they would like me to do that, and I never will.

MG: Did the relationship of Celia Prince to her mother in *The Bitter Nest Quilt* reflect your relationship with your mother?⁸

FR: That's all of us—that's me and my daughter, that's me and my mother. Yes, because my mother was like that, my mother was very much the center of anyplace she was. If she was there, everybody knew it. I never heard her say she was nervous or felt shy. And I never saw her looking as if she were shy, feeling shy or nervous. She would sing out in church and she had a terrible voice; she sang off key but that didn't bother her one bit. She would have sung for the whole group if they had asked her.

MW: Celia also resented her mother CeeCee for making herself the center of attention, but CeeCee was deaf and mute.

FR: Well, CeeCee's a lot like my mother but then she's a lot not like her. Her muteness was the way to get past her husband, the doctor, and all of what he was in a time when women weren't important, and social standards were very important. So she had a very difficult time. I'm saying that maybe she was never deaf, maybe she just pretended to be deaf to get the attention, in order not to kill herself. A lot of women become drunks in a situation like that, they become quiet alcoholics, they go into themselves and they go into hospitals, a lot of people go crazy. She found a way to live her life which is what everybody's trying to do anyway. That was her way, and she had the courage to do it.

MG: She emerges after her husband's death and gets her voice back. Finding one's voice is such a recurring theme in your work. Was *The Bitter Nest* series inspired by *The Color Purple* and the trouble some families have?

FR: Yeah, I was writing it in 1985, the same year I read *The Color Purple*, and I was really fascinated, thinking, “Boy, family, you know, what does that mean, why do families have to stay together, why can’t they just break up and go their way? Somebody’s going to be bad like that, to hell with it. Let him go. Why did she feel like they had to stay together—that’s interesting.”

MG: Family, marriage, and sexuality are often very positive themes in your work.

FR: Yes, I don’t have people doing really bad things to each other.

MG: The husband in *The Bitter Nest* series is oppressive because he’s a patriarch, the “head of the family” rather than an abusive husband like those in *The Color Purple*. I was struck at UNH when you said, “We are deeply limited in the kinds of lives we can claim as our own.” You went onto talk about how publishers want to publish stories about African-American women that deal with incest or rape or all sorts of terrible victimizing experiences.

FR: And if they’re not there they want you to put them there. I always have to look for their insertions, or their translations of something I say, or what they think the African-American woman’s experience is. And they want to hear that again and again and again and again. It’s a huge problem for African-American women and other people of color: other people decide what their experience is and they want to hear that and nothing else. Artists don’t see themselves that way. They don’t see themselves in this limited framework as always being a black family that is centered on a specific kind of adversity or pressure which is like a formula—the strong black mother and the father who’s not there and the kid who’s bad and can’t read. It’s not the way it is all the time. It’s like that sometimes, but it would be nice to be able to have the different levels and shades of being that white men allow themselves to have. They can be anything. And they present themselves on television, movies, everywhere, as anything, every level of anything. That’s what we’re all trying to do, show, give our lives the broad context and not limit ourselves to somebody else’s picture of who we are. Native Americans and Asians face the same problem.

MW: So were you told that “nothing happened” in your autobiography, *Being My Own Woman*?

FR: Yeah, right, nothing happened. You didn’t get thrown out the window. You didn’t get beat up. Nothing happened. And I don’t know when that’s going to change. I did publish some pieces of *Being My Own Woman*, like the one where my kids go to Mexico.⁹ And there are some other ones.

MG: The two published pieces I’ve seen both concern mothering—one about your mother and one about your struggles as a mother.

FR: But in my book there are also stories about my father.

MW: I'd love to hear a story about your father.

FR: Let me see if I can think of one about him. Well, my father used to take me to the bar. I sat on the bar and I was given milk to drink, which I was actually allergic to, and then I would entertain his drinking buddies by reading the different signs in the bar. My mother was very upset but there was nothing she could do because my mother was a housewife. My mother, like all women in the thirties, couldn't get jobs. In the forties women started going to work because of the war, so my mother started working in 1942 and divorced my father. Took back her maiden name and divorced him. But before that she had to be a housewife. She had to be taken care of by him, and so the courts said you gotta let this man take his daughter out on his day off. My father worked for the sanitation department, he drove their truck, he had one day off during the week, and he was our support. Once, my father disappeared with me. He came to the courthouse, where my mother would pick up support money from his paycheck, and he grabbed me and ran down the street with me and we got on the train. I remember him asking me where did I want to go and what did I want to do—he wanted to make sure I had some fun before he took me home. My mother went back into the courthouse and she said, "My husband just ran off with my little girl." And they said, "Oh, don't worry about that, he'll be back before nightfall. He has to go to work tonight, so he'll have her back before sundown." And I was, but that was very scary to my mother. But my father was a very unthreatening person; he never hit us. No, my father was a lot better than I gave him credit for when he was alive. I should have appreciated him more because his life was hard, unfulfilled. My mother fulfilled her life; she went out and did. They started out together, you know on the rooftop, in the twenties, playing their violins, going to church and with their dreams. And then they got married, they had three kids and my father got stuck in a dead-end job. I think that he knew that and she knew that he wasn't going to be able to grow. He had a family to take care of.

MG: Like your quilt, "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?" that story is such a challenge to stereotyping of African-American men, who supposedly always walked away from their families.

FR: If it had been true, we wouldn't have survived, because there were no jobs for women.

MG: Did you develop the idea of story quilts because you wanted to tell your own stories, the ones the publishers wouldn't accept in *Being My Own Woman*?

FR: Yeah, I think that's what artists do, generally speaking: they have a vision to communicate and feel their story is not being told. I wanted to do

it for women. I wanted to show what that life was for an African-American woman.

MW: You once said that your quilts are not autobiographical.

FR: No, but they are based on what I know from growing up. They're stories that come from the period that I knew and the people that I knew, not necessarily me. Take *Tar Beach*. Unlike the father in the story, my father was not a construction worker on a bridge, and he *was* in the union, in the Teamster's Union. But I don't think he liked his job. I think he would have aspired to do more. My father is the kind of person who would have made a great teacher. He was very famous for what we call "chastising," which was a long, long story. Oh, a super-duper story about all the reasons why you should never do what it was you did. Which didn't seem bad at all before he started but we would just end up crying and he would be crying. And we would all be crying and it was worse than any spanking ever could be. He was a wonderful public speaker. He could really retain your attention. He was extremely entertaining and good with groups of people. So was my mother. He didn't have choices and that's what that book was about—it's about not having choices.

MW: But your quilts often present characters with *lots* of choices, with possibilities.

FR: I have choices, but that's me. That's not everybody. I had some things that a lot of people that I grew up with didn't have. I mean there weren't a lot of African-American people going to college when I went. I never realized that until later. I realized there were none in my class, but I didn't really realize how unusual that was, to be my age with degrees. I don't feel personally limited. I feel there were limitations placed on me, but I don't feel any personal limitation.

MG: One of the things I really like about your work in that respect is that you simultaneously show the limitations that African-American women face and then you also show the creative possibility, the richness of Afro-American culture and the ways to transcend those limitations or to make choices. Seems like you're sometimes doing two things at once.

FR: Yeah, and that's easy to do because in order to do any of this you have to get rid of all the limitations at least in your head.

MG: One of the things that really struck me in *The French Collection* was when Willia said, "Should I paint some of the great and tragic issues of our world, a black man with his chin to the ground toting a heavy load, a black woman nursing the world's population of children or the two of them together as slaves? No, I want to paint something to inspire, to liberate. I want to do some of this women's art." I thought that was just great. It really reminded me of the whole conflict between Richard Wright and

Zora Neale Hurston. Does one paint the tragic reality of life or do you inspire and liberate the imagination?

FR: You do what you want to do. One of the good things about writing children's books is that I don't get a lot of attention from the African-American literary community because they don't think children's books are important. My daughter said to me, "Are there children's bookstores that just sell children's books?" I said, "Michele, what's wrong with you? You've been in them." But what she was really saying was, "You mean to say these children's books merit a whole bookstore." I haven't attracted their attention in any big way so they're not trying to tell me how to explain the race.

MG: I'm reminded of your quilt on Bill Cosby, "Camille Cosby's Husband's Quilt," and all the flack he took from African Americans about his show, about how unrealistic it is when in fact it mirrors his life.

FR: Right, his life and a number of other African Americans who live that way. I'm an artist, which is also not at the center of African-American culture as far as the literati is concerned. They don't think visual art is important. I do. Because visual art, visual artists, are seen as these struggling poor people who spend their whole lives being anonymous, making things that nobody wants. And nobody understands why they want to do that. They say, "I certainly don't want *my* kids to go to college to be any kind of artist. Be a doctor, be a lawyer, be something. Don't do this art stuff." These people have been totally cut off from their experience as artists. In Africa you see a whole different thing. They want their kids to go to school to be doctors and lawyers and stuff, but they also love their art and they use it. And they can't conceive of life without it. There are groups of people who have been creating art for centuries. We don't have that here. The art here comes from our black middle class, essentially. So it's always with a great deal of struggle that any black person becomes an artist because they don't have the support of their community. But it's good in another way, because they're not watching you, they're not trying to tell you what to do because they're really not paying any attention and by the time they do pay attention, you're so well formed, it doesn't matter what they think. It's too late for them to have any real effect on your production, on your life. Whereas that's not true with writing.

MW: You were talking about African-American community not thinking much about visual artists, but you yourself have written about some earlier African-American artists. When did you become aware of the work of Lois Mailou Jones, for example?¹⁰

FR: She had a show in New York in nineteen sixty something. And I went running down there. That's what would happen—I'd read in the

paper that someone was having a show. Romare Bearden had his show in '64 and Jones had her show.¹¹ It was hard to find these things out. There weren't all that many opportunities to discover these people. And so it was nice to go and see if you could meet them. So I've actually known her since then. Romie Bearden I never did get to know.

MG: Meta Warwick Fuller appears in some of your quilts. Has she influenced your work?¹²

FR: Her work is so wonderful. I love her work.

MG: When we first started, you were talking about needing to get out of your head some of the classic painting tradition. But do you ever have that kind of a reaction to people like Meta Warwick Fuller or Jones? Are they people that you're trying hard to get into your head, rather than having to get rid of, as influences?

FR: I see them as pre-women's identity. I don't emulate their work. I emulate them. I think that their spirit is wonderful, that they were able to do what they did was wonderful, but I'm much more inspired by the younger women today who are doing art out of being a woman.

MW and MG: Like who, for instance?

FR: Well, Clarissa Sligh. Emma Amos.¹³

MW: Do you know Barbara Chase-Riboud's work? She wrote that article in *Essence* about the exhilaration of being an African-American woman artist living in Paris.¹⁴

FR: Yes, she loves it. She's been there forever. She's part of the scene.

MW: Do you think that she's in some way acting out that French Parisian *artiste* role? Like Willia, she couldn't be an artist in America?

FR: Because of the racism. See, that's what I was trying to deal with with Willia. She went to Paris in the 1920s when she's sixteen. She's gotta figure out all these things. Who am I? That's constantly coming up, and I know that a lot of the Americans that are over there now, when I'm over in Paris—there's this constant thing where they're saying, "Oh, don't do that. The French don't like that." I don't care what the French like. African Americans and white Americans, too, feel put up against the wall when they go to Europe because we don't have this strong, recognizable cultural base. But that's why everybody emulates us, for our persistent vulgarity.

MG: The Sunflower Quilters (cover) really express an issue that I think is central to the rest of your work when they say to Willia, "We are all artists. Piecing is our art. We brought it straight from Africa." And by sending all those women who "are our freedom" and who sit around the quilt, Aunt Melissa makes Willia realize that "we know our true history and culture from the art" (*The French Collection, Part I*, 24). You were talking about the lack of a cultural base but you repeatedly point to a really strong cultural base, passed through women.

FR: Yes, but that's why they don't want to recognize it, because of those last few words that you said—"passed through women." It didn't make any money so it's not important. But you have to decide what's important and not allow those other people to do it. And that's the way we've always managed to change things. That's why we need to have everything vulgarized, because if art is not vulgarized, then the rest of us can't participate. We gotta knock it down and vulgarize it or a whole lot of us can't get in there.

MG: Do you agree that we are all artists?

FR: Yeah. Art is free. That's why you don't make any money at it. Because it doesn't cost anything to make it. You don't have to really go anywhere to do it. You can make your dolls. You can make your quilts, you can make them out of rags, you can use old clothes, you can use your friends, you can sit around and commune with your friends and have some dinner. You can make a social event; the slaves did it. After working in the fields all day, they would have a quilting bee, and it was like a party. And they could actually make something that they could give to somebody: they could pass something on. They couldn't enjoy the luxury of an object. they were cut off from the drum, they were cut off from the mask. But they weren't cut off from those skills of sewing and appliquéing and piecing things together. And when they were sitting there they were talking and respecting each other because the best way to learn to respect another person is to work with them. And to let them show you their skills and then you see theirs and together you make something and there is a bond that grows there. Now, that hasn't been talked about a lot, but it should be. The visual art tradition of black people has been seriously cut off, which affected us during the sixties as we tried to find ourselves and to discover who we were as artists. Because if we look back to the 1800s with Bannister and Joshua Johnston and those artists who did the landscapes, they had no connection with black people.¹⁵ They painted portraits of white people, they did landscapes that were just like anybody else's landscapes, and they had no vision of anything that had their image. Black people did not define themselves until the '20s. And that's why I love Meta Warwick Fuller and Sargent Johnson and William Johnson.¹⁶ I love his work. He's been a strong influence on me. So William Johnson and Palmer Hayden and Aaron Douglas came up with those black figures which must have been very controversial and very upsetting, but they were the first ones who did.¹⁷ That was the Harlem Renaissance.

MW: And that was the first time that there was an African-American visual aesthetic. . .

FR: Image of ourselves.

MW: But you must know Harriet Powers and her famous "Bible Quilt."¹⁸ Do you think she was the only. . .

FR: Harriet Powers was a quilt maker, and the quilt makers were ahead of everybody. It's not until the 1900s, early 1900s, that abstract art became prevalent. The quilters were doing it before that, but nobody thought it was art so it didn't matter. Powers certainly did it; they all did. We need to take the everyday and make it the high. And we can take that high and we can make it the everyday.

MG: In a way the art becomes a comment on the everyday or a way of exploring the significance of the everyday in our lives. We both read an article about you and Elizabeth Catlett, who also writes about art being of the people.¹⁹ Was she an important figure for you? She's a little older than you.

FR: She is an absolutely wonderful artist. I came to know about her rather late because she's a woman, and she was not thrust at me with the same vigor that the men were when I did finally find out about them. I know a lot about her now, but she was not one of those who could influence me because when I was in that formative period I didn't know about her. It was the men and it was the tradition that the quilt makers come from which is the traditional African crafts—fabrics and all of that stuff—that is really embedded in all of my work.

MG: We're looking at the wonderful Gertrude Stein quilt where you're trying on Stein's voice. Could you talk a little bit about voices that might have influenced you?

FR: Each time I write a story I have to try to find the voice. Until I get the voice I can't get very far. I have to figure out who's talking and why? So, with this one I knew I wanted to have them there [the figures on the quilt include "two white women," Stein and Toklas; "two black women," Willia and Zora Neale Huston; "three black men," James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes; and "three white men," Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and Leo Stein]. I knew that there would be some strange feelings for everybody in the room, you know. And that it would be a very intellectual evening that some people might vulgarize . . .

MG: Like Zora, for instance, the only one laughing.

FR: Of course. And I didn't want Gertrude to speak, but how are you going to have her there without having her speak? So then I used her voice, to speak—to let other people speak. So that was the way I worked that out. And I got an idea for doing that from reading a book she wrote that's about three African-American women. [Ringgold probably has in mind *Melanctha*.] And that was a very revolutionary idea for a story. But I found I couldn't get a story out of that story. But I really like the way she writes. It feels a lot to me like the blues. You keep repeating it: "Woke up this mornin and I was blue as I could be. Oh lord I woke up this mornin . . ." You just keep saying it over and over. So Stein is wonderful, yeah. And then I wanted to put Zora in there because I knew she would be outlandish

and wild, and so I let her speak. I couldn't let James Baldwin speak at all because, though he is so very eloquent on so many subjects, he didn't know what to say where women were concerned. Well, you can't do everything. But Baldwin is the one who calls Richard Wright a "Mississippi Pickaninny." And of course they all were just absolutely thrown by that. So this is part of my humor, I guess. My playing around with these intellectuals, the literati. And that's what Hurston did; they hated her for that; they made her pay. They ousted her, they covered her up, they got rid of her. They totally got rid of her until the seventies when Alice Walker uncovered her.

MG: Is that when you read her, in the seventies, or did you come across her before?

FR: No. I didn't. Nobody did. Zora Neale Hurston, who's she? So they can do that; they can really cover you up. They got her good and covered up. She appears in a lot of my work. She will be in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's* [Ringgold's latest children's book, mentioned earlier].

MG: You've said you'd like to try on Hurston's voice. Are you trying it on there?

FR: She doesn't necessarily speak in her voice. There are twelve women, and they're not able to speak that much. I use historical African-American women a lot; they just keep coming back to me. They tell what they came through and who they were, which is enough for kids to comprehend. Because the kids won't know any of these people. That they exist at all and did such remarkable things is going to be an amazement. In "The Dinner Quilt," Aunt Connie gives a lecture on the women she's embroidered on each placemat, but in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's*, Aunt Connie's voice fades into the background, and the portraits of the women get off the wall and get in the chairs. And then they start talking to the children. The adults don't know about this, only the children. And so I selected three women to speak, because economy is it. But that's the magic of storytelling anyway; you don't tell everything. So when the pictures go sit in the chairs and talk, I have to figure out, who should speak? And what do I want them to say? So I figured that Sojourner Truth should speak. And she does a very short "And Ain't I a Woman?" She talks about having thirteen children and most all of them were sold into slavery. And then Harriet Tubman gives her famous statement about "If I couldn't be free."²⁰ And then the last speaker is Maria W. Stewart. She is the first American-born woman to speak in public. She was a lecturer, and she was criticized for speaking. And I don't know where I'm going to find a picture of her. Maybe there are no pictures of her.²¹

MG: Earlier you talked about having to edit certain things out from children's books, especially sexuality, and about Zora Neale Hurston, whose treatment of female sexuality emphasizes both its richness and its

costs. You seem to share her ambiguous treatment of relations between women and men. Your work simultaneously shows the strong sexual connection between men and women and the sometimes problematic consequences. You raise the issue of how men look at women in several places, in the “Matisse’s Model” quilt in *The French Collection* and elsewhere, where you have said, “It is time that we women comment on our men. They have always done it to us” (quoted in Gouma-Peterson, 13).

FR: Oh, yeah, they comment on us. I don’t have the same fear about commenting on them that some younger women have. I feel that I can do what I want.

MW: You’re really giving men the female gaze in *The French Collection*, in quilts like “A Picnic at Giverny,” where Picasso is sitting in his birthday suit surrounded by clothed women, an obvious comment on Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*. Was that a deliberate comment on the whole problem of women being presented in the male gaze?

FR: Oh sure, and women do, sure we look at them all the time. That’s why they wear those suits, a heavy-duty symbol of power and male identity, that suit.

MG: In *The French Collection*, you also present daughters gazing at their mothers, so to speak. In your preface you imply that Willia’s story is a fantasy retelling of your mother’s life that merged into your own life. Thinking of a comment you made at UNH, “As much as possible I think artists ought to be writers. When you just leave it to other people to say who you are you might turn out to be anybody at all,” I wonder how you would feel about your daughter, the writer, telling your life.

FR: Oh, I would be horrified, because I don’t think she knows and/or understands my life in the way that I understand my life. I don’t think that she’s able to comprehend it. She doesn’t really know my work either. I know we had a really big discussion one day about women working, and I was saying that when I was growing up women didn’t work. It didn’t matter what color they were, they didn’t work. They worked in the home and tried to find something they could do in the home. If they worked outside the home, they were domestics or teachers. If they were teachers and they were black, they could not teach in New York, so when they came north they lost their jobs. They could teach in the South. My mother’s mother was a teacher and when she came to New York, she had to stop teaching and be a dressmaker; all the women in my family sewed.

MG: Because it was something they could do in the home, like the soft sculptures you did when your children were young?

FR: Right. I was back in there sewing in the house with ironing board up and everything, ironing. . . So I said you have to understand that men had to support their wives. But Michele just didn’t want to talk about it; to her that was not important; it was not significant; it was almost anti-

feminist. But that's the way it was, if you want to understand the development of a group of people's culture from that to this. Michele has a tendency not to want to see that, and I don't think she's different from other young women, not to want to understand some of the humdrum kinds of everyday, nitty-gritty things that used to be, that are very important to understand so that you can not get stuck in a lot of stereotypes. I also seriously resent the feminist attitude of the seventies that said "our mothers had no voices; they can't speak, so we must speak for our mothers." I mean, what is that? Who made that one up, you know?

MG: You have to look for different ways of speaking. Alice Walker believes her mother spoke with her garden. Instead of focusing on muteness and tragic victimhood, you need to look for the possibilities for self-expression that were really there.

FR: You really have to let people do what they can do and they want to do and don't try to change them. I think in a lot of ways, daughters in the early seventies saw feminism as an opportunity for them to be their mother's mother. To have something to say about who their mothers were. But you see that's what I was trying to have Michele see, because I think she thought her grandmother, my mother, was always out of the house working, but when I was a child she was right there in the house. I'd wake up in the morning she would have already been up and she would be washing clothes in the tub. And I would hear her, no washing machines, there would be this scrubbing of the clothes on the washboard and it would be uh-uhm, uh-uhm, uh-uhm, and she would be talking. My mother was a big talker to herself. She used to talk to herself out loud, hold lengthy conversations with herself, and the conversation would be her plans for the day. Instead of sitting down and writing it out, while she was washing she'd say, "Yes, God spare me today." It was always, "God spare me today. I'm going to take Andrew to get his eyeglasses and then I got to get that dress for Barbara that is on sale at Klein's for half price. Then I've got to take Faith to the doctor, she's gotta get her shot," and she'd go through her whole day. She was very organized. And from listening to that I knew just what was going to happen with everybody in the family that whole day. She would be in there washing and telling herself what it was going to be.

MG: *The French Collection* raises so many questions about mothering, which I wanted to ask you about in terms of your own life. When Willia says, "I wanted to make art, not babies," she faces that age-old dilemma of the woman artist: can I be an artist *and* a mother? And she sends the kids back to Aunt Melissa to raise. How do you feel about that dilemma? Do you think that being a mother kept you from being an artist?

FR: It kept me from being an artist until 1964. And I was thirty-three going on thirty-four. And I had my kids young and that was the reason I could do it because they had gotten up to some size where they could give

me a few minutes. I could actually get them over there and I could be over here, and without saying, “Get out of here.” I don’t see how young women do it who have children.

MG: Would you give up the opportunity to have kids then if. . . ?

FR: Oh I don’t know about having them today; I don’t want you to ask me that question. Once I had them . . . because I didn’t know about having children, I love children, but with both of my boyfriends—my husband that I first married and the second one—we always had a lot of kids around us. But I never said, “I’m gonna get married and have kids,” and when I saw myself married, when I was fantasizing about me and my husband, I didn’t see any kids: it was just the two of us. He was a famous musician and I was a famous artist and there were just us two: no kids, no kids.

MW: So is that one of the ways in which Willia is an alter ego for you, as you have said: she has kids but she doesn’t have to care for them or give up her career for them?

FR: Yeah, right, and guess what? They love her. She doesn’t even have to pay the price, which is why most women wouldn’t dare give up their kids. I could have rather easily given up my kids and walked away because I had that kind of mother, the kind who could take care of everything. But I didn’t want to have to explain that. I don’t want to live any part of my life and then have to live it over again, trying to fix it. My mother didn’t walk away from me, so why would I want to walk away from my children? They were great kids. But I could understand somebody who was very career-conscious.

MG: Do you think your art has been enriched by your having not only been a mother, but having been a caregiver to children?

FR: Well, I don’t think there is any way you can substitute that experience. And having made those kinds of sacrifices is something you can’t substitute either. And I don’t think it was detrimental. I think my art would be different. And many of my friends have said to me, “I don’t have kids and I couldn’t do what you’ve done, so what the hell are you talking about?” But I think it made me want to grow, to make up for all those years when I couldn’t. . . I sent them to baby camp, and I remember the first year when I came back home alone, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I couldn’t believe that I didn’t have anything to do because they weren’t home.

MG: What are you working on now?

FR: I am going to Morocco to look at the mosaics and to do “The Moroccan Holiday” quilt for *The French Collection, Part II*. And right now I’m finishing the café quilt for that series, the one on the wall, the “Café des Artistes,” which is about Willia and the café. She’s getting very sophisticated, and she makes proclamations. That’s what they used to do in those

cafés. Guys would get up and proclaim this and make a manifesto about that: “From here on all artists should. . .” And they would argue about it. And so she makes up a manifesto and proclaims that artists have to pay attention to the contributions of African-American women. And of course they have to listen to her, it’s her café. Come on over here and let me show you who’s sitting up there when she makes this manifesto. [We all walk to quilt.] She’s got all the black artists over here. Yes, this is Tanner and Jake Lawrence and this is Sargent Johnson, this is Romie Bearden, and this is Ray Saunders, my friend in Paris.²² And this is William Johnson. I don’t care whether they were actually there or not, I put them there. And this is my friend who is in Paris, Ed Clark.²³ Now, here are Toulouse-Lautrec, Utrillo, and van Gogh and Gauguin. And here’s Elizabeth Catlett, and this will be Augusta Savage and Lois Mailou Jones and Meta Warwick Fuller and Edmonia Lewis.²⁴ Hell of a crowd, right? And so they’re just all there listening to Willia talk all this stuff. Her café is on the Boulevard St.-Germain in Paris. That’s my favorite section of Paris with the church right across the street. And you know she shows her art in her café—she’s actually quite successful. She makes a lot of money selling her work. But she has to map it out in her own way.

MG: This is great [reading]: “I have a proclamation to make for which I beg your indulgence. This is the colored women’s manifesto of art and politics.”

MW: And then these are the voices of the people in the café who are listening?

FR: Yeah, they keep yelling out stuff at her.

MG: “Go home,” they yell.

MW: “You should go home. Silence. Shut up.”

FR: “I am an international woman,” she says. “My African ancestry dates back to the beginnings of human origins, a million years ago in Ethiopia. The art and culture of Africa have been stolen by Western Europeans and white people have the power, enslaved and forgotten.”

MG: “We wear the mask that has a new use in cubist art.” I love the little references like that in your work [to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask”].

MW: Can I ask about your technique in executing these quilts? Is the image in your mind before the story or is the story in your mind?

FR: I really have to know what the story is. That’s why I can’t do “Moroccan Holiday” yet. I know that Willia goes to Morocco to meet her daughter, and the idea is that she’s going to have this talk with her to explain to her why she didn’t raise her. And when they’re there, they meet with Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, people like that. And she is explaining to her daughter how difficult it is

for a woman to have a voice, especially in the presence of these kinds of men, and how you have to learn to hear what they say, appreciate what they say, and learn to translate it into terms that you can understand and use.

MG: Which is what you've been doing in the whole *French Collection*. That whole story reminds me of the contributions of Aunt Melissa. I mean, she couldn't have done that without Aunt Melissa. And there are always those women who keep the everyday life going, who sustain the life of the artist going to Paris.

FR: And I didn't want them to be raised by Willia's mother because you have a different kind of relationship with your mother. So I wanted it to be the auntie who would give her the money and say, "Go ahead girl, do it. You can do it." So, in "The Moroccan Holiday," the daughter is actually a filmmaker, and she's on her way to South Africa to do a film. And her mother thinks that she's giving her political savvy, opening her eyes to what's going on in the world and fantasizing that she's a part of that. But in reality this kid is going to South Africa; she's going to make a film. She's saying, "What are you talking about?" She's doing it without her mother.

MG: Perhaps the greatest fantasy in *The French Collection* is Willia's husband dying and leaving her enough money to support her art. Can you be an artist and still have children or have a heterosexual relationship with a man?

FR: You can have a heterosexual relationship with a man; it doesn't have to be positive. That, I think, is a very difficult issue because I don't think that men like their wives being artists. I really don't think they like that. It seems that it's not like having a job, it's having too much of a voice, it attracts too much attention. And when I say artists I mean any kind of work where you're making statements. Where you're really doing work that has nothing to do with getting paid, actually. I mean you get paid for it but you would do it anyway. You'll never take a day off unless you want to. And kids don't like that and men don't like that. So, it's very hard. But I've been married thirty years. It took me a long time to figure out what I was supposed to be doing. I do what I want to do. I do exactly as I please, for the first time in my life.

Notes

¹ In her first quilts, such as "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?" Ringgold painted each block separately, but soon she settled on the procedure of using the entire central area as a field for her imagery.

² Ringgold has reprinted the stories and black-and-white reproductions of the quilts from *The French Collection, Part I* in a book of the same name. Page numbers refer to that book.

³ This comment and a number of others within the interview come from a talk Ringgold gave at the University of New Hampshire in March 1992.

⁴ Lisa K. Yi received her M.F.A. from Columbia in 1987. She makes her own quilts now and collaborated with Ringgold on a story quilt, "My Best Friend."

⁵ The women are Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Maria Stewart, Augusta Savage, Dorothy Dandridge, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Madame Walker, Mary McLeod Bethune, Marion Anderson, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks.

⁶ Ringgold discusses flying as an African-American folk tradition in the afterword to *Tar Beach*.

⁷ See, for instance, Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Faith Ringgold's Narrative Quilts."

⁸ "The Bitter Nest," a story in five quilts about Dr. Celia Markham Prince and her "eccentric, artistic mother," Cee Cee, also highlights "the romantic period of the Harlem Renaissance." The first two "chapters" are excerpted in Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions*.

⁹ In this excerpt, Ringgold explores her daughters' teenage rebellions and her response to them. See "from *Being My Own Woman*" in Baraka and Baraka, *Confirmation: An Anthology of African-American Women*. Along with other pieces of Ringgold's writing, portions of *Being My Own Woman* are reprinted in Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions: Writings by Women Artists*.

¹⁰ Lois Mailou Jones (b. 1905, Boston, MA), a painter, is currently Professor Emerita at Howard University. She participated in the Harlem Renaissance, studied at the Académie Julian in Paris, and has made several trips to Africa. She was the teacher of many leading black artists. For more information, see Charlotte Rubinstein, *American Women Artists*. Ringgold has also written a short piece, "Lois Mailou Jones."

¹¹ Romare Bearden (1914–1988), one of the most noted contemporary African-American artists, worked with mixed media and collages; he applied cubist formal means to black experience.

¹² Meta Vaux Warwick Fuller (1877–1968), a realist-impressionist sculptor, studied in Paris, where her style was influenced by that of Auguste Rodin. She was ahead of her time in using African-American subjects in her work. See Rubinstein for further information.

¹³ Clarissa Sligh is a narrative photographer who also makes artist's books. Her first solo show was in 1984. Emma Amos attended Antioch College, studied art in London, and was an original member of the Spiral Group in the 1960s. She makes mixed-media works from paint, kente cloth, and her own weaving. She appears in Ringgold's "The Picnic at Giverny." For further information see Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*.

¹⁴ Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1936), a sculptor and writer who has lived in Paris since 1961, received her B.F.A. from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. In "Why Paris?" she discusses the long-standing "love affair" between Paris and black Americans who were able to experience acceptance without racism there.

¹⁵ Edward M. Bannister (1828–1901) was born in Canada and lived in Providence, RI; he was a landscape painter. Joshua Johnston (1790–1824) was the first professional black portrait painter in the United States.

¹⁶ Sargent Johnson (1888–1967) was a sculptor, painter, and ceramist. William Johnson (1901–1970) was born in South Carolina, then went to New York and eventually abroad to study art. He painted African Americans involved in a variety of cultural activities, in a broad, flat style and in bright colors. In a recent children's book which resembles Ringgold's books, *Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie*, Gwen Everett uses Johnson's paintings from the National Museum of American Art to tell the story.

¹⁷ Palmer Hayden (1890–1973) painted rural and urban aspects of the black experience and worked for the WPA. Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was a muralist with works in the New York Public Library and Fiske University Library.

¹⁸ Harriet Powers (1837–1900?), an ex-slave living in Georgia, made two known "Bible Quilts," distinguished by their use of appliqué to depict biblical narratives and astronomical events. The first, owned by the Smithsonian, was purchased in 1890 by a white schoolteacher, Jennie Smith, who recorded Powers's description of the panels. The second is owned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Powers's "Bible Quilt" is probably the one Alice Walker writes about as made by an "anonymous black woman" in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens."

¹⁹ Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1919), an American-born sculptor and printmaker who has lived in Mexico since 1947. She studied with Lois Mailou Jones at Howard University and received her M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. She says that she “works from dual necessities—social as well as aesthetic” and that “uneducated people have the same cultural needs that we fortunate university people do. . . . Since the earliest times people have had this compulsive need to express themselves” (quoted in Witzling 340–41). The article comparing Ringgold and Catlett is Freida High Tesfagiorgis, “Afrofemcentrism and Its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Ringgold.”

²⁰ The full statement is, “There was one of two things I had a *right* to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me” (Bradford 65).

²¹ Stewart’s dates are 1803–1879. She reprinted her speeches and writings from the 1830s in *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* in 1879.

²² Henry O. Tanner (1859–1937), a painter of religious subjects, studied with Thomas Eakins and was an expatriate in France. Jacob Lawrence (b. 1917) worked for the WPA, did paintings about Harlem and about civil rights, and taught at the University of Washington in Seattle.

²³ Ed Clark (b. 1926) is a painter.

²⁴ Augusta Savage (1900–1962), who studied in Paris, was a sculptor and teacher. She has been described as the “moving spirit” behind the Harlem Art Center of the Federal Art Project. Her sculpture commissioned for the 1939 World’s Fair, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” a tribute to black American music, was destroyed after the fair.

(Mary) Edmonia Lewis (1843?–1909?), a sculptor, was the daughter of a black father and a Chippewa Indian mother, raised by her mother’s tribe after her father’s death. She attended Oberlin College, studied in Boston, and lived in Rome after 1867, where she was associated with a group of American women sculptors condescendingly dubbed “the white Marmorean flock” by Henry James.

For more information on both women, see Rubinstein.

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