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**A CULTURAL ILLNESS:  
WOMEN, IDENTITY AND EATING PROBLEMS  
IN FAITH RINGGOLD'S *CHANGE* SERIES**

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**A Thesis in  
The Department of Art History**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A Cultural Illness: Women, Identity, and Eating Problems in Faith Ringgold's *Change* Series**

**Lori-Ann Beaudoin**

The female body is a “surface” that is inscribed with a plurality of meanings. It stands as a metaphor of our culture and in relation to the construction of femininity. Residing in a consumer culture obsessed with appearances, or the “proper” representation of self, the female body has become a status symbol that has been transformed from a fixed natural given, to a shapeable cultural product. The painted narrative quilt series *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* by contemporary African-American artist Faith Ringgold expresses profound issues about women, identity, and eating problems.

The *Change* series is a testament to the continuing struggle that Ringgold has with food. Eating problems are a current and prevalent epidemic that affect many women. Having suffered from a compulsive overeating condition, Ringgold has used this series to voice her experience and concerns with eating problems. The woman's desperate struggle for self-identity against various social hegemonies sometimes results in a troubled relationship with food and culture. Far too often, the effects of eating problems debilitate women's entry into culture and society both physically and psychologically. Through the use of photomontage and text, Ringgold's quilts articulate her eating patterns from the early 1930s through to the 1980s. She discloses her eating habits of the different “women”, (all of them, of course, being herself) who are portrayed on the quilts, and voices the construction of femininity, identity, and eating problems as signs of a cultural illness.

*The following is dedicated to  
Barb & Reg*

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates the painted narrative quilt series *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* (1986-1991) by African-American artist Faith Ringgold. In considering the *Change* series as being symptomatic of a cultural illness, I will show how it expresses profound issues about women, identity, and eating problems. To understand how I have approached Ringgold's *Change* series from a perspective that links the construction of femininity with cultural manifestations, I will, by way of introduction, first situate Ringgold's creative activity within the realm of her personal autobiographical writings. This I will follow with a synopsis of the critical writings of her work to explore the standard approaches to her pieces that I will challenge through this thesis.

Measuring up to her commitment of instilling her voice as both a black woman, artist and feminist, Ringgold has entered the political and social arenas of the art milieu with a profound sense of communal and individual identity. This has led her to produce poignant works of feminist art, rich in both their formal, aesthetic and symbolic meanings. A narration in itself, Ringgold's art insistently focuses on her identity as an African-American woman seeking to effect change both personally, and with women collectively. Concerned with the black woman as subject and as agent, Ringgold combines women's issues with an awareness of the politics of gender and race in how they affect all women in a patriarchal society.

Currently the public profile of Ringgold is as follows.<sup>1</sup> Beginning her artistic career more than thirty five years ago as a painter, Ringgold is best known for her painted story quilts, art that

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<sup>1</sup> Document entitled "May I introduce myself?" on Ringgold's biography was obtained from the internet, <http://www.artincontext.com/artist/ringgold/default.htm>

combines painting, quilted fabric, and storytelling. Ringgold's oeuvre is also comprised of soft sculptures, murals, paintings, performances, and serigraphy. In all her work, Ringgold makes socio-political statements about, and responses to, women and the black community, and the collective need to effect change in our society. She has exhibited in major museums in the USA, Europe, South America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. She is in the permanent collection of many museums including the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Museum of Modern Art. Her first book, Tar Beach was a Caldecott Honour Book and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award for illustration, among numerous other honours. She has written and illustrated five children's books. She has received more than seventy five awards, fellowships, citations and honors, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Fellowship for painting, two National Endowment for the Arts Awards and eleven honorary doctorates one of which is from her alma mater the City College of New York. Ringgold is married to Burdette Ringgold and has two daughters, Michele and Barbara Wallace, and three granddaughters. She is also a professor of art at the University of California in San Diego, California. In contemporary American art as well as African-American and feminist circles, Ringgold is a prominent figure recognized and sought out by critics, historians, and audiences alike.

The "self" that Ringgold has projected throughout her own writing began in the 1980s with her first politically-charged article, "Those Cookin' Up Ideas for Freedom Take Heed: Only a Watched Pot Boils"<sup>2</sup>, Ringgold expounds upon notions of race, class, gender, and art as being affected by the flaws found within the American Constitution. Talking about a society that does

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<sup>2</sup> Faith Ringgold, "Those Cookin' Up Ideas for Freedom Take Heed: Only a Watched Pot Boils," Art Journal 50 (Fall 1991): 84-86.

not care about its future,<sup>3</sup> Ringgold explains how she has used her art as a vehicle of cultural expression to voice issues of identity, race and gender politics within our culture. Among the numerous politically charged works that Ringgold has produced are, *The Flag is Bleeding* (1967), *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power* (1967), *Die* (1967) and *Echoes of Harlem* (1980). The early 1980s represents a turning point in Ringgold's art as it takes on a personal approach, and is a manifestation of both issues of identity and the personal impediments that she has experienced throughout her life.

In 1995, Ringgold produced her autobiography We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold.<sup>4</sup> In it, Ringgold describes her life as a young child growing up in Harlem, including some of her childhood memories which were of meal times. "I wasn't a fat child, but I never missed a chance to eat."<sup>5</sup> From in-depth analyses of the relationships with her mother, husbands, and parental politics with her daughters, Ringgold reveals through narrative her experiences and extends them into her story quilts. In addition, woven into her autobiography, Ringgold also discusses her position as a black artist producing art and entering the dominant white art milieu. For Ringgold, it is imperative that her art and the art of other black artists be acknowledged as meaningful works of art. But according to Ringgold, "right now the art world continues to have a field day and for the most part the only team players are white men."<sup>6</sup> In this

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<sup>3</sup> According to Ringgold, "the flag is burning," suggesting that there is no reason to be an American if someone else is going to wave your flag and dictate your ideas, since no law can suppress freedom of expression. See "Those Cookin' Up Ideas for Freedom Take Heed: Only a Watched Pot Boils" Art Journal, 50 (Fall 1991): 84-86.

<sup>4</sup> Faith Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 270.

illustrated memoir, Ringgold discloses the wall of prejudices in being a black woman and succeeding as an artist, but she does so against a personal backdrop of her eating problems.

The art criticism of Ringgold's oeuvre centres principally on her quilts and the narratives that they tell. In these articles, there is a consistent, almost repetitious approach to Ringgold's work in relation to: African-American artists; the quilted form; and the linkage of craft to family and ethnic traditions. The first theme, that of African-American art, is represented in the following cluster of reviews from 1987. For instance, in "Faith Ringgold's Narrative Quilts" Thalia Gouma-Peterson presents a survey of Ringgold's art.<sup>7</sup> She examines the discourse of Ringgold's quilt production, in relation to Ringgold's abiding concern with Black culture, its history, and its roots in a tradition of mixed African, rural American, and contemporary urban elements.<sup>8</sup> While Gouma-Peterson additionally provides a detailed formal analysis of a few selected narratives, the article's principal focus centres on the narratives themselves. Similarly, "The Quilts of Faith Ringgold" (1987)<sup>9</sup> by Gregory Galligan examines briefly Ringgold's ongoing inquiry of the black portrait in relation to the historical drama that lies behind people's appearances: "That concern was apparent when she first began to discover her identity as a Black artist in the socially turbulent decades of the '60s."<sup>10</sup> He also discusses Ringgold's conception of the quilt method as a structural format by which her group portraits are arranged rhythmically. Moreover, Galligan highlights Ringgold's quilts and her "patchwork sense of self-

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<sup>7</sup> Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Faith Ringgold's Narrative Quilts," Arts Magazine 61 (January 1987): 64-69.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Galligan, "The Quilts of Faith Ringgold," Arts Magazine 61 (January 1987): 62-63.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 63.

identity”<sup>11</sup> as a symbolic language, but circumvents any further analysis.

In 1987 also, Ringgold’s art production, like the sculptures and prints produced by Elizabeth Catlett, was reviewed as a form of Afrofemcentrism, where Black women artists project a sense of consciousness that asserts their race, sex and artistic ability.<sup>12</sup> An article that only loosely considers Ringgold’s art, “Afrofemcentrism and its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Ringgold”<sup>13</sup> scrutinizes closely the differences between feminist art and black feminist art. Freida High Tesfagiorgis explores the ideological and aesthetic fruition of Afro-female-centered consciousness in the works of Catlett and Ringgold. Tesfagiorgis recognizes that there is no major text on the art of Afro-American women, nor any major art historical text on American art that includes the art of Afro-American women, with the exception of an increasing number of informative catalogues that document the works of black women artists. Consequently, the review of literature in this area remains limited. The author describes the feminist ideologies of Afrofemcentrism, relates it to black feminist issues embedded in the art of Catlett and Ringgold, and distinguishes between Afrofemcentrism and feminist art, drawing references from feminist art critic Lucy Lippard and feminist writer Gayle Kimball.<sup>14</sup> While the notions of Afrofemcentrism in art thematically project black women’s realities over idealism, and assimilate collective experience and history, feminist art figures differently, she states, as it

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Freida High Tesfagiorgis, “Afrofemcentrism and Its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Ringgold (A View of Women by Women),” *Sage* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 25-32..

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., See Tesfagiorgis’ analysis where she elucidates Lippard’s notions regarding the concerns of feminist artists and differentiates between Afrofemcentrism and feminist art: 26.

evolves from women's "political, biological and social experience in this society."<sup>15</sup> Tesfagiorgis further addresses Catlett and Ringgold as the two most prominent American artists who have been identified as "black feminist". As Afrofemcentrists, Tesfagiorgis compares the works of both artists, with an extensive analysis on black political consciousness as being an intrinsic element expressed in Catlett and Ringgold's art. While Tesfagiorgis avoids discussion of Ringgold's quilts, her analysis concentrates on the visual manifestation of Afrofemcentrism in Catlett and Ringgold's art that preserve black and women's culture in America.

Over a five year period, the approach to Ringgold's work continued to focus principally on formalism with brief remarks regarding the ideologies embedded within the quilts. For instance, in 1992, "Faith Ringgold: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery,"<sup>16</sup> Roberta Smith examined Ringgold's quilt productions. While brief in its analysis, Smith presents a concise and richly layered context of Ringgold's quilts that immediately positions the artist at the forefront of contemporary art. The author describes the quilts as a combination of art and politics, pattern painting and portraiture, appropriation and personal narrative. "Issues of race and sex abound, insinuated in complex and subtle ways, but never superseding the artist's sense of beauty."<sup>17</sup> Smith additionally raises, yet refrains from developing, the issues of female solidarity and individual struggle that pervade Ringgold's art, which is undeniably a visual politic that speaks clearly for itself.

The second principal theme in the criticism of Ringgold's art production, also on a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Roberta Smith, "Faith Ringgold: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery," The New York Times 14 (February 1992): F 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



superficial level, is an analysis of Ringgold's story quilts as a narrative form of quilt making. In 1988, in "Quilt Survivals and Revivals"<sup>18</sup>, Patricia Mainardi examines the development and function of the quilt tradition in relation to art quilts. She addresses in brief Ringgold's painted story quilts as recounting the lives of Afro-Americans complete with text, that "emphasize the contradiction between the warm secure feelings evoked by the quilt form and the reality of lives often anything but serene."<sup>19</sup>

In 1989 Ringgold's quilts were first reviewed in American Craft<sup>20</sup>, a journal dedicated to alternative art forms historically associated with quilt making. In a review of Ringgold's exhibition of story quilts at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York, Pamela Scheinman questions why Ringgold's quilts are tempting to be translated as truth, when the artist describes them as pastiches of overheard conversations, newspaper reports, and relationships shared between friends and family. Once again, Scheinman focuses only on a few of Ringgold's quilts from a formal approach and the influence of African design and rituals.

The third central theme, also casually explored, examines the validity of Ringgold's position as an artist in contemporary high art. In 1991, "In Search of an "Authentic" Vision,": Decoding the Appeal of the Self-Taught African-American Artist"<sup>21</sup>, the author challenges, interestingly enough, the notion of whether the work of self-taught artists like bell hooks and Ringgold is somehow more "authentic" since it is "produced outside the mainstream art world

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Mainardi, "Quilt Survivals and Revivals," Arts Magazine 62 (May 1988): 49-53.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>20</sup> Pamela Scheinman, "Faith Ringgold/Bernice Steinbaum Gallery," American Craft 49 (February/March 1989): 72-73.

<sup>21</sup> Kinshasha Holman Conwill, "In Search of an "Authentic" Vision: Decoding the Appeal of the Self-Taught African-American Artist," American Art 5, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 2-9.

hierarchy, the place where the *only* real artists are nurtured?”<sup>22</sup> Ringgold’s quilts and sculptures for example, are described as referring to the traditions of craft handed down from her seamstress mother, Willie Posey -- folk traditions she and other feminist artists have helped validate within a fine art context.<sup>23</sup> The author also raises the romantic notion of art interpretation and the intentions of Black artists, trained or untrained, as being inextricably linked to notions of African-Americans as a group and their role in society as a collective. In following the dictates of the mainstream art world, Ringgold runs a greater “risk as a fine artist to incorporate folk traditions and imagery in her work, than it is for a self-taught artist to follow the dictates of what is presumed to be a natural affinity.”<sup>24</sup>

The continuing tradition of fabric story-telling in African North American society, one in which oral histories are recorded and shared, was the theme for an exhibition held at the Museum for Textiles, Toronto.<sup>25</sup> Ontario quiltmaker Judith Tinkl describes the ongoing contribution of black people and artists in North American culture, and although her analysis is brief, she pays tribute to Ringgold’s artistic voice as a quiltmaker.

Thus while the critical reviews have marginalized the contribution of Ringgold’s art production, they have also disregarded the issues that relate to feminine constructions of identity and contemporary cultural processes. With the exception of Elizabeth Richardson’s review of Ringgold’s *Change* performance presented at The Woman’s Building, Los Angeles, 1987, there has been little discussion of the *Change* series. My objective in writing this thesis therefore is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Tinkl, “This is not a Poem: This is a summer quilt,” Ontario Craft 21, no. 2 (May/June 1996): 20.

to challenge some of the reductive ideologies that critics have addressed thus far, and investigate the series that Ringgold produced over a five year period. Since it has been overlooked in these brief reviews, including Ringgold's autobiography where she devotes only two pages to describe her performances, yet is a work that consumed her for over five years, I will deconstruct the *Change* series in order to expose its hidden agendas as intrinsic aspects of our culture.

In the following therefore, I am moving in a new direction, away from the connective threads that have typecast Ringgold's art and position as an artist. In doing so I will re-read Ringgold's *Change* series employing an approach that differs from what has been previously engaged. In this research methodology, I aim to deconstruct the *Change* series through a feminist approach. I will examine how Ringgold's *Change* series is symptomatic of a cultural illness, and in terms of how women, identity, and eating problems relate to the practice of femininity.

In Chapter One, I scrutinize the practices of femininity, the female body, and eating problems as signs of a cultural illness. Establishing this cultural illness as a social phenomenon, I consider feminine practice and eating problems from both historiographical and feminist approaches. The writings of Michel Foucault in History of Sexuality<sup>26</sup> will be scrutinized in relation to Susan Bordo's essay, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault"<sup>27</sup> in conjunction with the work of Becky Thompson, A Hunger So

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<sup>26</sup> See Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 An Introduction, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> See Susan Bordo, "The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault," Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstruction of Being and Knowing, ed. Alison M. Jaggar (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989)

Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems<sup>28</sup> in order to substantiate what I am theorizing as this cultural illness.

In Chapter Two, I examine Ringgold's narratives in *Change* and *Change 2* as semiotic signifiers, specifically as indexical and symbolic signs of women and eating problems within the feminine paradigm. The writings of semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce on reading images against the grain, reveal the gaps and absences of Ringgold's narratives.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I relate Becky Thompson's writings to the practice of femininity and eating problems in *Change 3*. Therefore, I investigate Ringgold's *Change 3* (a "group" self-portrait in the nude), from a cultural studies perspective. With a focus on the representation of Aunt Jemima, I address the quilt as a narrative that is symptomatic of issues based on identity, race, collectivity, and eating problems. In essence, I argue *Change 3* as the embodiment of the practice of femininity, women, identity, and eating problems as signs of a cultural illness.

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<sup>28</sup> Becky Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE FEMININE PRACTICE, IDENTITY AND EATING PROBLEMS**

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the practices of femininity, the female body and eating problems as signs of a cultural illness. Eating problems are a current and pervasive epidemic that often debilitate women's entry into society both physically and psychologically. The symptoms of these conditions manifest themselves what are commonly known as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and compulsive overeating. The conventional medical attitudes towards eating problems are based on the notions of psychological disorder and intellectual incompetence, therefore labelling these problems as "eating disorders". My argument disclaims this concept of "disorder", arguing that eating problems are a social phenomenon.

In the discussion that follows, I will consider the feminine politic and eating problems from both historiographical and feminist approaches. The historical demography of the body developed by Michel Foucault in History of Sexuality<sup>1</sup> will be explored primarily in relation to Susan Bordo's essay, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault"<sup>2</sup> and related feminist approaches. Since the practice of femininity and eating problems are not culture bound or race specific, the writings of Becky Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems<sup>3</sup> will also be introduced in relation to Foucault and Bordo's perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of what I am

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<sup>1</sup> See Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 An Introduction, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> See Susan Bordo, "The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault," Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstruction of Being and Knowing, ed. Alison M. Jaggar (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989)

<sup>3</sup> See Becky Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

positing as this cultural illness. Within this context, I will investigate and expose the “hidden” texts of eating problems, the practice of femininity, and identity as determinant signs of a cultural illness.

The female body according to Bordo is a powerful symbolic form that can be interpreted as a medium of culture. The body, she says, is a surface on which the “central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body.”<sup>4</sup> The female body’s voluptuous curves and identifiable “feminized” parts are surfaces that are both desired and objectified as indices that voice the expected practices of femininity. As a socially constructed form, the female body dynamically implies a plurality of interrelated meanings, conveying compelling aspects of our culture. The female body can be examined as a cultural medium whose changing forms and interpretations reflect historical change and conflict. The politics of gender correlate poignantly with the history and politics of society. The female body with its so-called “femininity” stimulates intrigue, fascination, and controversy and also causes women to adhere to, endure and suffer from the cultural ideals governing the perfect, beautiful female body.

As part of membership in our society, women have to learn how “to be a body.” To a large extent, what a woman observes in the mirror is what she uses as a measure of her self-worth as an individual.<sup>5</sup> The food, diet, and fitness industries supported by the media, have strategically convinced women today that thinness signifies self-improvement, self-control, and

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<sup>4</sup>

Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 13.

<sup>5</sup> Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 58.

the responsibility for achieving the body ideal of slenderness.<sup>5</sup> In North America, we also reside in a consumer society obsessed with appearances and “proper” types of self-representation. The body, especially the female body, has become a status symbol that has been transformed from a fixed natural given, to a malleable cultural product.<sup>6</sup> There are rules for this construction and production of femininity. For example, women are expected to learn to “feed” others, and not the self. In our culture, self-nurturance reflects selfishness and greed, and does not accord with the rules of femininity. By adhering to the doctrines of femininity, of “feeding” others, women continue to be viewed as emotional and physical nurturers in our culture. Also, while taught feminine ideals, women must also learn to embody the language and virtues of masculinity: self-control, determination, emotional discipline, and mastery. Their bodies often voice symbolically the language of masculinity through their slenderness and/or corpulence by resisting it. Consequently, these attributes place constraints on the lives and bodies of women. Femininity, Susan Brownmiller, explains, is at its very best a “tradition of imposed limitations.”<sup>7</sup> The feminine canon has worked successfully in reshaping and sculpting the female body in order to preserve the “body-beautiful, body-young, and body-healthy.”<sup>8</sup> The preeminence of practice over ideology in relation to the feminine ideal reminds us how our bodies have been trained, shaped, and “impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Tseëlon, The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life, 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Brownmiller, Femininity (Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1984), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Tseëlon, The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life, 5.

masculinity, and femininity.”<sup>9</sup>

If the female body as a thin, slender form is a metaphor of our particular historical, localized culture, eating problems are a prevalent and current epidemic that are culturally programmed and gender-related. Conversely, the pressure to be thin and the effects of eating problems can also debilitate women’s entry into culture and society both physically and psychologically. This desperate struggle for self-identity against various social hegemonies, sometimes results in a troubled relationship with food. Those suffering from eating problems are often considered to be decadent, self-absorbed, and heavily implicated in causing this “disorder.” Skewed assumptions about eating problems that relate to race, class, and sexuality have also undermined women with these problems. Often misinterpreted and misguided, eating problems, I argue, are like other physical and mental conditions that are not race and class specific, but affect women of specific cultural constructs unilaterally whether they be of different racial, ethnic or sexual backgrounds.

As the woman’s body is a surface that has been etched with, and manipulated by, codes and regulations in order to uphold the feminine practice, eating problems are therefore interwoven into the constructed ideologies that have to a large extent shaped and sustained the identity of women. Moreover, the woman and her body are no longer an authentic ‘self’, but part of a larger cultural system where her identity subsequently remains fragmented. The fragmented self is a product of the social constraints and expectations that are placed upon women and their bodies and the thinness paradigm.

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<sup>9</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 14.



There is no one cause-and-effect relationship with eating problems.<sup>10</sup> The link between the cultural norms of thinness and the woman is mediated by a plurality of factors such as education, family, and other social influences. Our significant others are the mirrors that reflect us, thus what others value in us provides a paradigm of selfhood. We learn to see ourselves, in part, according to the ways others see us in terms of social standards. These catalysts essentially translate and embellish the messages that society fosters. To a large extent, self-image develops through the processes of social interaction. In relation to the body, these determinants often manifest themselves as rewards and/or punishments that urge women's bodies toward thinness.

Weight also plays into the notion of how we see ourselves. As an important part of appearance, weight affects young women's sense of social and psychological well-being. The body and its appearance are the principle characteristics measuring self-worth. Although physical appearance is important to men, their traditional socialization processes stress the importance of cognitive achievement as a primary determinant of self-esteem and self-image.<sup>11</sup> For the most part, what some women observe in the mirror is what they use as a measure of their self-worth as an individual, and specifically as a woman. Not "measuring up" to societal expectations of what constitutes femininity and the perfect body type may sometimes lead to strong feelings of inadequacy, of never feeling "good enough."

The cult of thinness, therefore, becomes a powerful trap as society constantly addresses what is the "right" or the "wrong" body and treats the bodies of women accordingly. The current notion in our culture proclaims, what is beautiful is good, what is thin is good, and what is fat

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Hesse-Biber, Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity, 58.

is bad and worthless. The feminine construct undeniably fits within the “good” category. The more feminine, the more beautiful, and therefore, the better. An important parameter, according to Foucault is that throughout history the rules of femininity have become normalized practices. These rules have come to be culturally transmitted and accepted more and more through the display of standardized visual images. The notion of femininity itself has become a discipline of shaping the “appropriate” representation of the self, specifically the body. Feminine practices require certain specificities, and are often expressed through bodily discourse, and namely by images that represent what clothes, body type, facial characteristics and expressions, movements, and behaviours are required. Undoubtedly, because femininity has become formalized, it is an inextricable part of our social discourse. These attributes further denote success, acceptance, intelligence, and happiness. Some women follow or are trapped within the practices of slenderness and femininity, because there are rewards that come with the “package.” Thinness provides some women with a sense of power, self-confidence, and femininity. Moreover, they attain male attention and/or protection including social and economic benefits.

Susan Bordo’s feminist analysis discussed above draws from the work of philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault explores how historians have studied the body in the field of historical demography or pathology; “they have considered it as the seat of needs and appetites, as the locus of physiological processes and metabolisms, as a target for the attacks of germs or viruses; they have shown to what extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be purely biological “events” such as the culmination of bacilli, or the extension of the lifespan.”<sup>12</sup> He argues that the body is also directly involved in a political field, and explains

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (New York: Vintage, 1979) cited in Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the Body (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 139.

how relations of power control it by investing in it, marking it, training it, torturing it, forcing it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, and to emit signs.”<sup>13</sup>

Returning to Bordo’s inquiry we can begin to understand how the female body projects these signs via eating problems, and provides a paradigm of one aspect in which potential resistance is used in the preservation and reproduction of existing power relations.<sup>14</sup> Bordo has developed this idea further by elucidating how the body and eating problems undergo a transformation of meaning that is both constraining, enslaving and fatal, yet at the same time, liberating, transforming, and life-giving.<sup>15</sup> Through a detailed critical reading of anorexia nervosa, Bordo calls for the need to reconstruct feminist discourse about the body, in order to account for the “insidious and often paradoxical pathways of modern social control.”<sup>16</sup> The life of the female body is interpreted as mirroring and serving a male-dominated culture. The female body is essentially the personification of culture. Similarly, Susie Orbach argues that the body is the site where the woman etches “her understanding of the meaning and possibilities that exist for her, as the place she tells of her position in the world - the world of the family, the sexual world, the school, the wider public sphere, the gendered world, the world of class, of consuming, of possibility and impossibility.”<sup>17</sup> Historically, the notion of body morphology or body syntax

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Susie Orbach, Eating Problems: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Treatment Model: The Women’s Therapy Centre Institute (New York: Basic Books, 1994) x.

has provided a “blueprint” for diagnosis and/or vision of social and political life.”<sup>18</sup>

The anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu like Foucault has argued that the body is a “practical, direct locus of social control.”<sup>19</sup> According to Bourdieu, culture is “made body” whereby table manners, proper so-called feminine etiquette, and the practices of femininity are converted into automatic, habitual activity.<sup>20</sup> “The regulated body”, Bordo states, “practices at and habituates itself to the rules of culture,”<sup>21</sup> in many ways functioning as a machine (Fig. 1).

The advertisement, “Rolling Thunder: the new rules of the open road” where the female figure is exploited as a sexual object is an example of this culturally induced performance. The use of a lustrous beaded handbag and belt draws the viewer’s eye to the woman’s reclining body where her hips, thighs, and torso are exposed purposely to view. The female body is represented as a gem to be gazed upon, an object of desire and a visual spectacle. Moreover, like the highly polished finish of the motorcycle, the sleekness of the woman’s skin denotes her thin body as a seductive object. Like “rolling thunder” and the “open road” headlined, the manner in which the body reclines suggests its “openness” or sexual invitation for the male to “ride” the motorcycle, and in turn, the female body. The body has been historically trained, shaped, controlled, and embossed with the stamp of desire, masculinity and femininity. The female body in particular is in a continuous state of being manipulated, probed, and improved by dominating social apparatuses.

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<sup>18</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 15.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 94.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 13.

According to various studies<sup>22</sup>, many women are spending more time on the management and discipline of their bodies than ever before. In North America and other Western countries, the 1970s and 1980s have been a period with a strong emphasis on thinness in young women.<sup>23</sup> In survey after survey, it has been shown that eighty five percent of American women diet chronically and seventy five percent feel humiliated by their body size and shape. It is not surprising therefore that a large number of women and young girls have been so preoccupied with their body image and losing weight.<sup>24</sup> This pursuit of perfecting one's appearance is an ever-changing, elusive ideal of femininity without end or rest because it requires women to persistently attend to the constant changes and demands predicated by fashion and other forms of visual communication. The female body has become what Foucault terms the "docile body", a body whose energy and force(s) are used for external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement. The exacting, regulated disciplines of diet, make-up, exercise, and dress are central organizing aspects of time and space in the lives of many women. As such, women in our culture are rendered less socially oriented and more concentrated on self-modification. Through these disciplines, the body is in a constant state of modifying itself, often beyond its capabilities. It is also through these practices that many women continue to feel insufficient, and

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<sup>22</sup> See Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the Body, Kim Chernin, The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), Francette Pacteau, The Symptom of Beauty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), and Claudia Moscovici, From Sex Objects to Sexual Subjects (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Donald A. Williamson, Assessment of Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia, and Bulimia Nervosa (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990) 1.

<sup>24</sup> Susie Orbach, Eating Problems: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Treatment Model: The Women's Therapy Centre Institute, xi.

to sense a lack of self.<sup>25</sup>

Historically, women were romanticized as delicate, wistful, and sexually passive, yet we are no longer told what “a lady” is or of what femininity consists. Rather, because femininity has become largely a manner of constructing an appropriate external visual self, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse. These are images that address what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and so-called “proper” behaviour are required. The rules for femininity are projected through the cover of Harper’s Bazaar (Fig. 2), “Fall’s new dress code: 100% sexy”, for example, where a beautiful model represents the female icon. The model’s provocative gaze and stance, single-buttoned leather blouse exposing the roundness of her breasts, and hand directed towards her sex promote female sexuality and femininity. Cultural expectations of women have been translated into specific attitudes about appearance, and they influence the way women perceive their body image and sense of self. The discourse of art representation is another form of visual discourse where these cultural norms are also explicated. Art has provided an archetype for the expression of society’s current aesthetic values. It has encompassed everything from the voluptuous women depicted by Rubens (1577-1640) and Renoir (1841-1919) to the delicate and ethereal women of the Pre-Raphaelites. With these new women, “a new beauty emerged, withdrawn, melancholic, delicate and frail.”<sup>26</sup> The fashion industry in turn adopted this new image and advocated the thinness ideal, or more precisely, the feminine ideal. Significantly, in 1930 Helena Rubinstein wrote that “an abundance of fat is not

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<sup>25</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 16.

<sup>26</sup> Mervat Nasser, Culture and Weight Consciousness (London: Routledge, 1997) 2.

in accord with the principles that rule our conception of the beautiful.”<sup>27</sup>

The discourse of femininity - the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite “lady” idealized in terms of her delicacy and dreaminess - is not to be associated only with the cultures of that period.<sup>28</sup> The most powerful ideological representation of femininity in that era, affecting women of all classes, as feminine practice it has gone through a process of redefinition and re-modelling disseminated into present-day discourse. From Helena Rubinstein’s insistence on thinness in the 1930s it has been continuously reconfigured into the 1960s and early 1970s as Bordo states with “the practices of the body - media imagery, beauty pageants, high heels, girdles, make-up, simulated orgasm” - in relation to today’s representations.<sup>29</sup>

To critique however the feminine practice appropriately requires an analysis that departs from these exaggerated stereotypical feminine attributes. Returning to Foucault, as Bordo has, a feminist appropriation of his notions offers a number of relevant insights. First, Foucault argues “that sexuality is not governed by reproduction”, (but as Bordo has argued in relation to femininity), it is “linked from the outset with an intensification of the body - with its exploitation as an object of knowledge and an element in relations of power.”<sup>30</sup> Following this notion, Bordo states: “we must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and levelled against another, and we must think instead of the network of practices, institutions, and

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<sup>27</sup> Helena Rubinstein, The Art of Feminine Beauty (New York: Liveright, 1930), cited in Nasser, Culture and Weight Consciousness, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 15, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 An Introduction, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) 107.

technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination within a specific domain.”<sup>31</sup>

One must begin to describe a power whose central processes are not repressive, but are in fact constitutive.

Bordo takes even further the feminist premise that patriarchy, which limits women’s access to power both within and outside the family, can be seen as a root of women’s eating problems.<sup>32</sup> From Bordo’s perspective, patriarchy is not the only cause of eating problems, although it does help in fostering and sustaining boundaries upon women, both socially and sexually. Patriarchy does not create eating problems, yet it does support the barriers that block or impede woman’s entry into society. As a result, eating problems may signify women’s many hungers for recognition, achievement, encouragement, and identity within a society.<sup>33</sup>

Foucault explains that dominant ideology is meaningful and important only when it is resisted.<sup>34</sup> This is also its power since a dominant ideology is often consciously felt only by those who contest it, and by those who are encouraged, and sometimes forced to accept it. The dominant ideology in relation to eating problems is that, if you are thin, then all of your problems will be erased, and anything you want could be yours, if only you were thin. What is needed therefore, is an analysis of power “from below”, signifying a power whose aim is to generate forces, make them grow, and order them, rather than one dedicated to impeding forces, making

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<sup>31</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 15.

<sup>32</sup> Becky Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women’s Eating Problems (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, History of Sexuality, 95.



them submit, and/or destroying them.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly useful when applied to the notion and aesthetic ideal of femininity, where the emphasis depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices toward the propagation and representation of gender and identity.

Consequently, many women have become vulnerable to these practices with what could be more accurately defined as the disorders of culture. We often hear of the horrifying skeletal slenderness of a woman afflicted with anorexia. We hear about the thousand of calories that a woman consumes in a single binge, of the hundreds of dollars spent on food which is vomited up moments after ingestion. These various forms of addictions - starving, overeating, and purging - can result in severe debilitation. Teeth blacken and fall out, stomachs and intestines may rupture, and severe disturbances in electrolyte balance can develop. These types of symptoms are being constantly addressed in medical journals, the media, and fashion magazines. We hear little or nothing at all of the relationship between eating problems and social identity. The media seldom express what eating problems might signify in the context of femininity. How does identity figure in, or insert itself within the context of eating problems?

The symptomatology of eating problems also reveals itself as textuality. The woman's loss or breakdown of bodily functions, and feeding others while starving self are imbued with symbolic meaning. As well, these problems have political connotations within the various rules governing the historical construction of gender and femininity. The body has become deeply rooted, or inscribed with an ideological construction of femininity that is indicative of the discourse within which it operates. This type of construction, according to Bordo, is "always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing racial, class, and other differences and insisting that *all*

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 94.

women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal.”<sup>36</sup> In present-day discourse, a woman may shift her needs for an entry into culture from its social constraints by focusing her priorities on her body. In order to find a position in society, women often succumb to cultural practices and the feminine ideal that consequently facilitates the onset of their eating problem. Once the body is inscribed within the cultural practices of femininity, it becomes a part of a larger dominating system. Consequently, while the woman’s identity is fragmented and/or loses its sense of self (identity), her body (that has been inscribed by cultural codes) is subjugated, paradoxically, to further improvement.

The construction of femininity is at times what Bordo claims, a “caricatured presentation of the ruling feminine mystique.”<sup>37</sup> In relation to eating problems, the feminine construct is articulated in disturbingly poignant statements: exaggerated, extremely literal, and parodied representations of the feminine aesthetic ideal. Women suffering from anorexia, for instance, identify themselves as a caricature of the contemporary ideal of hyperslenderness for women. The body of a woman with an eating problem also presents itself as a powerful graphic text for the viewer/interpreter. This ideal thus becomes the norm for many women. The emaciated body of the anorexic, often grotesquely ravaged, is simply an interpretative beginning. Slenderness like corpulence yields a plurality of meanings, and they all vary from one woman to the next. For instance, while the notion of a thin woman’s body signifies all that is beautiful, good, and desirable in our culture, her entry into the dominant male milieu is that less difficult. Admiration is given to the thinner female figure. The Duchess of Windsor was quoted as saying, “one

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<sup>36</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

cannot be too rich....one cannot be too thin.”<sup>38</sup> As a culture, “we” desire favourable things and aspire to the good in life. As such, the body is an important site that determines whether our culture is good or not. Conversely, fat signifies all that we reject in culture. Negative associations ascribed to fat women include being: out of control, gross, repulsive, greedy, self-indulgent, slothful, asexual, offensive, and unhealthy. Apart from its stigma, however, being fat can also embody an opposing configuration of meaning to represent strength, substance, power, protection, rightful anger, protest, rebellion, safety, and the ability to sustain boundaries against the feminine and thinness ideal.<sup>39</sup> Also, while thinness represents success, power in the marketplace, and the power of will over need, it also encodes a counterpart that is equally important. The thinness paradigm can also signify lack of power, vulnerability, inhibition of desire and appetite, and fear of sexuality (flesh).<sup>40</sup> These dichotomies of fat and thin, good and bad, strong and weak, successful and incompetent, sexual and asexual, independent and dependant, masculine and feminine, need to become more fluid and less hierarchical as attributes.<sup>41</sup> By identifying and disassociating these attributes from fat and thin body, the self will then be able to integrate the body as a “healthy” place to live in.

From this perspective, the concern is not food, per se, despite the seriousness of food obsessions among women. Food obsessions are caused, in part, by the need for female transformation that are expressed through them. Many women use eating as a coping and

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<sup>38</sup> Nasser, Culture and Weight Consciousness, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Carol Bloom, Laura Kogel, and Lela Zaphiropoulos, “Working Toward Body/Self Integration” in Eating Problems: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Treatment Model: The Women’s Therapy Centre Institute, (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 121 and see subsequent analysis on the notion of fat as a good caretaker.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

empowering mechanism. Women classified with an eating problem frequently have had a history of severe trauma, sexual abuse, family dysfunction, and/or physical abuse.<sup>42</sup> Food intake and the manipulation of it are culturally approved ways where women can gain some influence over their environment. Of one woman afflicted with an eating problem, Kim Chernin writes how,

the vegetables she eats, chewing them carefully and with a “reverent smile,” have acquired symbolic meaning for her, and she defends her right to them with a vigour and passion that seem puzzling even to herself. For now, if she gives in, even on one occasion, she is in danger of losing the only way she knows of expressing her own desire to be a unique and distinctive human being with a world view that unites her to her generation and separates her from family ethos. For this girl, eating alone in her room, food and her attitude toward food had become urgent and overpowering because they were an attempt to provide herself with a rite of passage into society and the next stage of her development.<sup>43</sup>

Control of her own body is a substitute for control over her life. Rejecting food intake, for instance, may signify for example a powerful message about a dysfunctional family with a history of sexual abuse. Overeating may also provide a sense of safety and security in order to soothe for example emotional distress from criticism and dieting imposed by the family at a young age. In response to constant teasing about her weight, one woman recalls, “I will show you. I can be as fat as I want. I will still have friends. I would go eat. Stuff myself. I would go get candy. Steal candy. Candy bars. Hide them in my pocket.”<sup>44</sup>

The struggle against the “natural self” is one of the essential and hidden agendas of food obsession. A woman obsessed with losing weight for instance is also thought to be caught up in the struggle against her sensual nature.<sup>45</sup> A woman describes how she despises all those parts

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<sup>42</sup> Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Kim Chernin, The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity, (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 165.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Chernin, The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness, 10.

of her body that continue to identify her as female; “if only I could eliminate my breasts, cut them off if need be”.<sup>46</sup> For her as with many anorexics, the breasts represent a bovine, unconscious, vulnerable side of the self.<sup>47</sup> She tries desperately to change and alter her body in an attempt to control, govern, limit and sometimes even destroy her appetite. According to Chernin, the female body and her hunger are like sexual appetite, the expression of what is natural in herself; it is a futile, heartbreaking and dismal struggle to be so violently pitted against them.<sup>48</sup> Depending on what defence mechanism a woman finds natural for herself, she will respond to it accordingly, whether it is through the manifestations of anorexia, bulimia, and/or overeating. Paradoxically, hunger can for some women fill them with despair instead of integrity. For example, a woman who eats by herself, purges secretly, and refuses to eat or share food with others is plausibly responding to her sense of isolation in the struggle for identity. If she feels that she is not able to assimilate to her culture, she expresses this despair through the manner that she chooses to prepare, consume, or eliminate her food.<sup>49</sup> With overeaters, this hunger and despair seem to return continuously, despite the numerous attempts they try to control them.

For many women with eating problems, therefore, food acts as a nurturer. Food functions as a means for self-expression and power; whether it is to act out personal affliction through the body, and/or to exert some control within “their” world. Food has the ability to act as a foil to the fears and anger of many women. In other words, many women suffering from eating problems appropriate our culture’s mandate of thinness and femininity, and turn it into a

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<sup>46</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault”, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Chernin, The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 104.

drastic coping process. By aspiring to the cultural mandate of thinness, women often engage themselves in calorie restriction, chronic dieting, bingeing and purging, including the use of diuretics and/or laxatives. These types of dependency allow the woman to feel “alive” and in control of the transformations (extreme weight loss or weight gain) taking place.

The control of female appetite for self-identity is my primary interest in examining how the rule governing or underlying the construction of femininity is female hunger. This includes female hunger for power, for independence, for sexual gratification and admiration for upward social mobility in a gendered world. This relationship of hunger, self-identity and the feminine surfaces in the eating problems of the anorexic, bulimic, and overeater as follows. The body of the anorexic, for instance, articulates the containment of female hunger in a bold and grim fashion. The principal aspects of anorexia consist of an intense fear of gaining weight, and a disturbance of body-image, including emotional and/or physical problems. The ideal of slenderness, including starvation and emaciation, and the diet and exercise habits that have become inseparable from it, provide the illusion of meeting, through the body, the demands of the contemporary ideology of femininity.<sup>50</sup> It is as though the pursuit of slenderness and the denial of appetite intersect with the contemporary requirements for women to embody masculine virtues. In some ways, the haggard and wasted body of the anorexic resembles a male’s body.<sup>51</sup> In a sense, the anorectic’s “female” parts, such as her breasts and hips are considerably less apparent than in the body of the average woman. The bodily parts of the anorexic are reduced to planes and echoes that of a thin male’s body. The slender body is stripped of traditional

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<sup>50</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 19.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., see Bordo’s analysis of women learning to embody the “masculine” language and values, 18-20.

female attributes and is identified with the muscularity and leanness usually deemed “appropriate” for males. As Bordo elucidates, this adrogynous ideal ultimately exposes its internal contradiction and becomes a war that tears the subject in two; a war explicitly thematized, by many anorexics, as a battle between male and female sides of the self.”<sup>52</sup> Losing her conventional femininity with her breasts, hips, and curves taking on a dimension of their own, the anorexic begins to feel untouchable, inviolated, out-of-reach of being hurt, and “hard as the bones etched into her silhouette.”<sup>53</sup> The anorexic rejects the parts of her body that expose her as female, and her transformed masculine body provides her with a sense of power. For one woman, “the sense of accomplishment exhilarates me, spurs me to continue on and on... I shall become an expert [at losing weight]....The constant downward trend [of the scale] somehow comforts me, gives me visible proof that I can exert control”.<sup>54</sup>

The body symbolism of many anorexics is continuously, and obviously linked with dominant cultural associations. The anorexic is cognizant of the social and sexual vulnerability in having a female body; many, in fact, were sexually abused as children.<sup>55</sup> Paving her way into the male, privileged milieu while denying and rejecting her so-called femininity, her entry into the male domain signifies an opportunity for her to be valued, safe, and invulnerable. Beyond this paradigm, the woman loses control and her sense of self, and the symptoms of the illness are initiated. To be both valued and protected, signifies for the anorexic, analogous aspects of her survival. She has become impenetrable by pursuing conventional feminine practices, in this

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>53</sup> Bordo, “The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 23.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

instance, the rigid discipline of perfecting the body as an object to the extreme. The anorexic's pursuit of femininity actually deconstructs into radicalness and "splits open" the notions that our culture has coded as male.

Feminist writer Susie Orbach interprets anorexia as a "series of unconscious feminist protests".<sup>56</sup> The anorexic engages herself in a hunger strike, signifying a political discourse in which the action of food refusal and dramatic bodily transformation, "expresses with [the] body what the anorectic is unable to tell us with words", namely her disapproval of a culture that suppresses and disdains female hunger, makes women ashamed of their needs and appetites, and demands that their bodies be in a constant state of improvement.<sup>57</sup> Ironically, the anorexic is often unaware that she [her body] is voicing a political statement. "Through embodied rather than discursive demonstration, she exposes and indicts those ideals, precisely by pursuing them to the point where their destructive potential is revealed for all to view."<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, the same gesture that expresses protest or resistance, may also suggest retreat or seclusion. One can interpret this form of protest as also being part of the eating problem's attraction. According to Kim Chernin, the "debilitating anorexic fixation, by halting or mitigating personal development, assuages this generation's guilt and separation anxiety over the prospect of surpassing our mothers, of living less circumscribed, freer lives."<sup>59</sup> While the body of the anorexic is one that protests the conventional and contemporary constructions of femininity, it is also a form of resistance that is counterproductive, and in turn, self-deconstructing.

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<sup>56</sup> Orbach, Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor of Our Age, 102.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Bordo, "The Body and The Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault," 21.

<sup>59</sup> Chernin, The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness, 21.



Bulimia has often been viewed as an extension, and in many ways a complication of anorexia, whereby food intake can no longer be controlled and a stuffing binge ensues. The condition has been described as chronic episodes of binge-eating, a feeling of lack of control over binge-eating behaviour, regular self-induced vomiting, abuse of diuretics and/or laxatives, dieting or fasting, constant concern with body weight and shape, and/or increased exercise to prevent weight gain.<sup>60</sup> The syndrome has three principal characteristics: strong urges to binge, frequent use of purgative methods to avoid weight gain, and a fear of weight gain. Similar to anorexia, the long term effects of bulimia are debilitating: severe throat, intestine and stomach injuries, dehydration, problems with blood pressure, liver, and depletion of electrolyte balances.

Specific factors which may predispose women to anorexia, bulimia and overeating include extreme dependance on social opinion and judgement, the need to excel academically, perfectionism, control issues and problems with identity, body-image and/or self-esteem. It has been argued that the cause of eating problems has to do with the complex relationship between the thin ideal, the stigma of being overweight, and the industries of fashion and diet.<sup>61</sup> In combination these social elements can indeed prove to be explosive factors in women's lives. Yet as I mentioned previously, I do not believe that there is *one* cause-and-effect aspect with eating problems, but that they emanate from and are magnified by a plurality of factors.

While the ideal of thinness is constantly being reinforced and admired, overeating is loathed and feared. What was historically regarded as a sign of affluence has now come to signify carelessness, incompetence and greed. In North American culture, a slim and beautiful

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<sup>60</sup> Nicolette Ann Starkie, "Women and Body Order: A Sociology of the Body," M.A. Thesis, Concordia University, 1995, 115.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

woman represents the “ideal” of what is considered feminine and meaningful, whereas an overweight woman often signifies, for many, everything that they fear and deplore.

Compulsive overeating is characterized by uncontrollable binge eating without extreme weight control behaviors such as purging and/or starving. There are various socio-psychological factors which may cause the onset of overeating, specifically fluctuating eating habits, increased anxiety vis-à-vis the thinness paradigm, and increased weight gain. Studies have shown that compulsive overeaters seldom purge using self-induced vomiting, diuretics or laxatives.<sup>62</sup> They do, however, report using dieting and occasionally resort to using diet pills to control their eating.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, not all overeaters have a body image disturbance as is found with bulimics and anorexics. Since compulsive overeaters are usually overweight, they are generally dissatisfied with their body size. They do not, however, distort body size, nor do they prefer an unrealistically thin body size.<sup>64</sup> These attributes are part of what distinguish a compulsive overeater from a bulimic. As with anorexia and bulimia however, compulsive overeating is a complex issue and is manifested in varying degrees by women. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the factors causing one woman’s condition are different for another woman.

In summary, with eating problems, the woman’s body may be viewed as a surface on which historical feminine constructs are exposed, through their physical signs, in an extreme and highly distorted form. It is without question that these constructions are articulated in a language of extreme suffering. It is as though “these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and

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<sup>62</sup> Donald A. Williamson, Assessment of Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia, and Bulimia Nervosa, 6.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 7.

violence that lurks just around the edge, waiting at the horizon of “normal” femininity.<sup>65</sup> Here, the body translates its attempt to include or exclude itself within cultural ideologies, into physical anguish in coping with the problem. Functionally, the symptoms of eating problems weaken, confine, and abuse the sufferer, while simultaneously altering the body into a fetishistic or abhorred surface. As a result, the transforming body figures as a contemporary icon for both the male and female gaze, as women from an early age strive to achieve the thinness archetype.

The practice of femininity is one that must not be overlooked. Anorexia, bulimia, and compulsive overeating often develop, in part, from the practice of femininity. It is a discipline that has become culturally acknowledged and accepted as the main route to acceptance and success for women in our culture. The female body which tries to either conform to, or resist the rules of femininity, has become a culturally negotiated surface. As a mediated form, the body is identified as a “useful body” rather than an “intelligible body”.<sup>66</sup>

The role of the female body translates what it is to be beautiful, and therefore “feminine.” The identifiable parts of the female body suggest notions of “femaleness”, and the more that they are transformed to standardized ideals, the more feminine the woman. The bodies of women have been specified into an ideological context that undermines their identity as individuals. Not only are their bodies targeted by and fall prey to cultural practices, they also serve, paradoxically, to uphold the feminine canon. To achieve a specified norm of beauty, and body type, a specific form of feminine praxis is required and imposed.

Accordingly, I feel that eating problems are, in part, a serious form of identity crisis

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<sup>65</sup> Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” 20.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 136.

among women. This is the aspect that I intend to focus on in considering Ringgold's *Change* series in the following two chapters. The core of the problem for many women today is not solely sexual, but a problem of identity: a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique. Many women who suffer from an eating problem also suffer from a feeling of emptiness. Therefore, women who have problems with food are struggling for identity. Chernin states that, "there is something eluding us here about our struggle; something hidden, something secret, something ignored by all our explanations. Left in shadow, it must continue to cause the severe debilitation and crisis we observe today. Women suffering from eating problems are telling us, in the only way they know how, that something is going seriously wrong with their lives as they take on the rights and prerogatives of male society."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Chernin, The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity, 19.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FAITH RINGGOLD'S *CHANGE* AND *CHANGE 2* AS SEMIOTIC SIGNIFIERS

In this chapter, I examine the theory of semiotics in relation to Ringgold's *Change* and *Change 2* series. Originally, semiotics began as a science of signs and sign usage, whereas practitioners presently address the polysemic nature of signs which enables texts to be deconstructed. I consider both *Change* and *Change 2* as indexical and symbolic signifiers of women and eating problems within the context of the feminine paradigm. The writings of semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce in relation to the reading strategy of reading images against the grain reveal the gaps and margins of Ringgold's narratives. It is not one meaning, but several indexical and symbolic signs that I argue constitute the structure of *Change* and *Change 2*.

The painted narrative quilt series, *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* (1986-1991) expresses profound issues about women, identity, and eating problems. Before I begin a semiotic analysis of *Change* and *Change 2*, it is important to provide an initial discussion of the relationship between Ringgold's *Change* performances and art. Having done that, I will relate *Change* and *Change 2* to other works Ringgold produced concurrently with the series.

The series *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* (1986-1991) is a testament to the continuing struggle that Ringgold has with food. The series is autobiographical, and signifies the weight fluctuations that Ringgold has experienced throughout her life. Having suffered from a compulsive overeating condition, Ringgold has used this series to voice and perform her experience and concerns about issues that have become increasingly prevalent among many women today.

In direct relation to the *Change* series, it is significant to mention at the outset the reasons why Ringgold decided to turn to performance art. In 1980, Ringgold's career was in "limbo", as she states, and she desperately needed a major New York exhibition to show her work produced over the past twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Despite her recognition from numerous exhibitions in college museums and galleries throughout the United States, Ringgold was intent on showing her work in New York since she had not done so in ten years. Determined to document her experience as a black woman artist, which "seemed important to her then as breathing" and to "tell" her life-story, Ringgold thought that performance art as an oral publication, was the ideal alternative to her autobiography.<sup>2</sup> She states, "I had also just written my autobiography but could find no one interested in publishing it. Since I couldn't "tell" my story in either of these traditional ways, I looked for an alternative."<sup>3</sup>

Ringgold's performance method was inspired by the African traditions of combining storytelling, dance, music, costumes, and masks into a single production.<sup>4</sup> Ringgold had observed this type of performance when she first visited Africa in the late 1970s.<sup>5</sup> For Ringgold, performance was simply another approach to tell her story, "rather than to shock, confuse, or irritate the audience."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Ringgold's art, including the *Change* series, is comprised stylistically of African elements in terms of its storytelling, design, composition, and color.

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<sup>1</sup> Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, 237.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 238. For further discussion of the relationship of Ringgold's performance masked art and story quilts, see Ringgold's We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, chapter 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Craving for food began in Ringgold's early childhood in the '30s. In the '50s, after an unsuccessful marriage, Ringgold's tendency to overeat began to rule her life. Ringgold states that,

In the 1970s, food was a feminist issue and you were a fat feminist. Always looking for a quasi-politically correct reason to eat. And of course you found plenty of them. In the '60s it was being a wife and mother, the rejection of being a black artist and other oppressions. In the '70s it was all that and being a woman too. The 1970s kept me wondering when I'd get enough pain. You didn't have to eat over that. You didn't solve anything by having two dinners at one meal....By the 1980s you had finally eaten yourself into a corner. The only way out was cold turkey without the dressing.<sup>7</sup>

Unsuccessful for years in her efforts to lose weight, but fed up after breaking her scale at 258 lbs., Ringgold decided to reinforce her determination by making it public. In 1986, Ringgold lost a hundred pounds over a span of a year.<sup>8</sup> By putting her eating problem at the focus of her art, Ringgold made a commitment to shed her weight. In January of 1986 at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in New York, upon losing one hundred pounds, she presented the story-quilt of her "eating" life, and committed herself to future performances and a video documentary of her weight-loss process.<sup>9</sup>

The performance piece, *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, was Ringgold's method of using her art to make a public commitment not only to lose the weight but to keep it off.<sup>10</sup> This was Ringgold's first performance in which, significantly, she appeared without a mask signifying her tenacity to 'change'. In all of her other

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 245-246.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Richardson, "Faith Ringgold: "Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt," 65.

<sup>10</sup> Ringgold, *We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 241.

performance pieces, such as *Being My Own Woman: An Autobiographical Masked Performance Piece* (1980) where she created her first autobiographical performance, *No Name Mask Performance #1 and #2* (1980-1985) in which she and her daughter performed various thematic appearances, and *The Bitter Nest* (1985) a story about Ringgold's troubled relationship with her daughters in order to give "Mother"(herself) a voice, Ringgold had worn a mask until the very end of the performance.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the other performances, the absence of a mask in *Change* throughout the performance signifies Ringgold's voice, commitment, self-confidence and pride in having achieved a difficult and personal undertaking.

Performed one year before, there is a significant psychological relationship between *The Bitter Nest* and the *Change* performances. While the former performance was not overtly autobiographical, it did draw parallels with the latter piece. *The Bitter Nest* masked performance was written at a time when Ringgold and her daughters were having uncompromising differences. Weary of hearing how her daughters felt about her, Ringgold created the piece to give the story's mother a voice, who was both deaf and dumb.<sup>12</sup>

... To make up for her inability to hear or to speak, Ce Ce [the mother] communicated with her guests by performing for them in elaborate costumes and wearing a mask. Celia, her daughter, was embarrassed by her mother's eccentric ways and generally alienated by Ce Ce's being deaf and dumb. Celia became a doctor like her father, but much to Dr. Prince's horror had a child out of wedlock. Over Ce Ce's objections, the doctor forced Celia to give up her child so as not to disgrace the family name; the boy was raised by a family friend. However, when the doctor died, Ce Ce and Celia became reunited with Celia's son... Magically, Ce Ce was now able to speak and the story has a happy ending. This performance piece is not autobiographical, but it does dramatize a happy conclusion to a family's lifelong struggle over irreconcilable differences... At the end of the performance the audience was invited to come onstage and tell their own family story.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 240-241.



While Ringgold does not address overtly her personal relationships with her daughters in *The Bitter Nest* story, she nonetheless draws parallels to some of the experiences of her personal life.<sup>14</sup> Because Ce Ce's deafness and dumbness annihilated her on account of her daughter's embarrassment, her sense of isolation can be also linked to Ringgold's weight problem as a form of alienation. Yet once Ce Ce is able to speak and hear, she and her daughter are reconciled, and Ringgold performed without a mask to suggest the story's optimistic outcome.

Thus, the unmasking in *The Bitter Nest* story leads to the *Change* performance, where Ringgold is finally mask-less. Where Ce Ce communicated with her guests by performing for them in elaborate costumes, Ringgold also communicates to her audience by performing in an elaborate hand-sewn quilted coat. To celebrate the weight she had lost, Ringgold performed *Change* unmasked again suggesting the optimistic outcome of her struggle, in another relationship, with herself and her eating problem. Where the voice of *The Bitter Nest* performance is finally heard, so too does Ringgold's voice and unveiling in *Change* address aspects of identity and self-acceptance.

The story Ringgold performed in *Change* relates to the eating patterns that had led her to gain weight. Through the use of photomontage and text, Ringgold's hand-sewn quilt which she wears in the performance articulates her experience and frustration with her eating patterns from the beginning of the 1930s through to the 1980s. Also significant is that this performance was Ringgold's first time using images of herself. Like photography which has the scientific

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<sup>14</sup> For a complete analysis and understanding of Ringgold's life and experiences as a black woman, and artist, and her personal and family relationships, see Ringgold's biography, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold.

ability to capture reality in time, the use of photomontage in *Change* similarly reveals the authenticity of Ringgold's biography. By documenting her life-story in a visual form, Ringgold is equally authenticating her voice. Ringgold's performance voiced both her frustration in dealing with her compulsive overeating problem and her determination to keep the weight off. "I am out to prove something right here and now... I can change, I can change now!" is the triumphant affirmation at the centre of Ringgold's performance work.

The performance was divided into six acts, one for each decade, and for each act Ringgold recited anecdotes that related to her eating habits over the years.<sup>15</sup> A plate was made of the images and etched subsequently onto canvas, and pieced into a quilt along with the text for each of the six decades. Ringgold began her performance wearing the heavy story-quilt that juxtaposed passages of text and photo-etched pictures relating to her eating habits from every period of her life (Fig. 3). The particular style of coat Ringgold wore resembles the costumes depicted in *Mrs. Jones and Family* (1973) (Fig. 4), from the *Family of Woman Mask Series*. Inspired by the Dan masks of Liberia,<sup>16</sup> the costumes cover the entire bodies of the figures represented (Ringgold's mother, with Faith and her brother and sister). Despite the brightly colored dresses of the figures in *Mrs. Jones and Family*, the shape of Ringgold's black and white quilted coat is reminiscent of the traditional rituals of the Dan masks.<sup>17</sup> By portraying herself in a similar costume and stance for the *Change* performance, Ringgold addressed the body of the mask as a powerful sign of identity.

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix A: *The Change Song*, appendix B: *The 1950s*, and appendix C: *Pain*.

Since the *Change* series is in Ringgold's private collection, I was unable to view the quilts personally and therefore provided only the textual descriptions that are included in Ringgold's autobiography.

<sup>16</sup> Ringgold, *We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 201.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

To portray the weight she had lost, Ringgold duplicated it in pounds of water by collecting twenty empty two-litre soda bottles filled with water and weighing collectively approximately a hundred pounds. The bottles were then divided into two groupings of ten bottles each, and placed in two black garbage bags. They were tied securely with heavy cord leaving a longer cord for Ringgold to pull the bundles during the performance (Fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> The reasons why Ringgold used the materials she did for this performance have not been addressed, yet it is plausible to interpret the empty soda bottles as a signifier of the hourglass-shaped figure that represents feminine ideal. Since Ringgold has expressed her frustration with her weight, she may be articulating the pressures of the “American dream” to be thin, and therefore, feminine. By enclosing the bottles in opaque garbage bags, Ringgold may be in fact denouncing the feminine practice and ideal by covering the hour-glass shape of the bottle/female form. Despite the cultural demands to be thin and Ringgold’s struggle with her eating problem, the performance signifies a positive change towards self-acceptance. Moreover, securing the bags with heavy cord connotes the notion of the umbilical cord, and that there is no escaping from your body, yourself, and who you are in the world.

Following her *Change* performance and quilt, Ringgold produced the *Change 2: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* in 1988. For this appearance, she was scheduled to lose an additional thirty pounds in order to attain her desired weight goal. She states, “I must admit I failed to do that, but still I was fortunate because I didn’t gain back the weight I had lost.”<sup>19</sup> Ringgold created another quilted coat pieced with

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

photographic images of herself that were lithographed onto canvas. In the centre of the quilt, Ringgold painted her self-portrait representing her fictitious weight loss of the proposed thirty pounds.

For the performance, she sang songs that she had written to voice her disappointment and contentment at losing weight and keeping it off. The performance was a high-spirited narrative of Ringgold's history of eating, and a document of her attempts to change. The piece incorporated a drummer and an assortment of percussion instruments, and consisted of several texts and rap songs:

In 1986 I lost 100 pounds. In 1988 I gained it all back. No! In 1988 I continue to pursue my goal to lose an additional 30 pounds. Change 2 is about trying to lose 30 pounds. The songs and raps I will perform for you are written on the Change 2 quilt and this performance costume. I can't sing or dance and 30 pounds might just as well be 300, but I am still trying. That's what it takes to change.<sup>20</sup>

Ringgold also attributes part of her weight gain to the relationship she had with her mother as an adolescent, and is expressed with resentment in the following:

***Mama Made Me Do it***

Mama made me do it [repeat 2 times]  
Told me to clean my plate [repeat 2 times]  
That's how I gained this weight  
... ,  
Told me eat to grow strong [repeat 2 times]  
My mother was never wrong  
... ,  
Mama taught me to be good [repeat 2 times]  
Said shut up girl and eat your food.<sup>21</sup>

In her first *Change* performance, Ringgold focused on the eating patterns that had led her to gain weight, and in *Change 2* she presents a different type of history that concentrates on her

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 243-244.

“mama”. Furthermore, Ringgold equates eating with “good”, yet it was her “mama” that made her do it. Ostensibly, as Ringgold has interpreted, there are different ways of reading one’s own history. For Ringgold, the performance functioned as a therapeutic approach, and she realized that “never mind who’s to blame, it’s me that’s got to change.”<sup>22</sup> The *Change 2* performance was also a narrative of her eating habits and her efforts to change, yet a change that was emotionally and physically painful:

***Pain***

Pain, pain pa-a-a-ain  
I feel a pain in my knee  
So bad I can’t see ...

***I Hate to Exercise***

I hate to exercise [repeat 2 times]  
Fast foodin’ all over the place  
It doesn’t matter how big my size  
Can’t do it ...

Accordingly, Ringgold’s series is a vivid representation of the personal impediments with which she is struggling. By documenting the story of her life, Ringgold’s series has functioned in a positive vein in “changing” her self-image and identity. Ringgold overcame a tendency in her life, a dependency which was her life, and a disease that she believes was steadily killing her.<sup>23</sup> While Ringgold’s series is biographical, it nonetheless speaks out to and draws parallels with women who suffer from, or who have experienced an eating problem. Moreover, the context of eating problems, in terms of the vulnerability of self-image when constrained by the “practices” of femininity, is what lies at the heart of the series. I believe that viewers, especially

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., See text for the song *I Just Got to Change*, 247.

<sup>23</sup> Richardson, “Faith Ringgold: “Change: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt,” 66. This article references Richardson’s presence at Ringgold’s *Change* performance at the Woman’s Building, Los Angeles, April 3, 1987.

those who have an eating problem or have experienced one, are therefore able in some way or another to identify with the series.

Identifying with visual images can be a difficult process since meanings shift, and therefore, are not always discernible. To analyse the *Change* series, it is important to consider the gaps and margins. The messages that Ringgold has connoted are plural, and these meanings can be interpreted from a multi-faceted approach regarding issues of: anorexia, bulimia, compulsive overeating, sexuality, gender, race, the feminine construct, and problems with identity and weight. Furthermore, each message takes on a different meaning for each viewer. There are no fixed meanings when interpreting the series. Rather, it remains “open” for continuous deconstruction, and therefore, its meanings are shifting continuously. Also, due to the intertextuality of its narrative context, viewers/readers bring to the series their proper “cultural baggage”. The room for interpretation thus remains extensive and ongoing. Therefore, the ideas that I am proposing throughout my discussion are not fixed, but comprise indefinite variations when reading the series. It is however embedded within a myriad of signs that are indicative of women, identity, and eating problems. It is central to a study of these signs to understand how they are coded effectively. Semiotics in conjunction with a feminist critique is the best approach to employ.

The methodology of semiotics is the study of signs and sign usage, voice and content, and the ways that they produce meaning. It is a study where meanings are coded, or ‘encoded’ in cultural things, in order to be decoded, or split open by the reader or viewer. Signs produce meaning(s) and in relation to this series, they have the ability to produce a narrative. Semiotics is also concerned with the ways that signs function socially, how they are organized in processes such as languages and codes, and how they are produced and disseminated. It can be also

applied to the theory of language, including any cultural phenomenon such as literature, fashion, and film.

A major contributor to semiotic philosophy is Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) who viewed the science of signs as being a structure of logic. He distinguished between three types of signs: the icon, index, and the symbol, which are all based upon the relation between the object signifying and that which it signifies.<sup>24</sup> The primary aspect of an icon is that it bears a resemblance to its object. The likeness may be the extreme or subtle resemblance of a photograph for instance, such as Harper's Bazaar's cover model who represents the feminine icon. An index, on the other hand, does not necessarily bear resemblance to its object, but has a direct connection with its object.<sup>25</sup> The uses of the English language for instance are confirmed indexes in our discourse, such as emaciation and the refusal to eat are indexes of anorexia-nervosa. The physical signs of anorexia are indexical by their connection with the body. The usage of icons and indexes is a necessary aspect of language, yet its rationalization of it relies directly on symbols.<sup>26</sup> A symbol is a [sign] that refers to, and determines its object or signified. According to Peirce, symbols develop from other signs, particularly from icons, or from various signs partaking in the nature of icons and symbols, and therefore, we think only in signs.<sup>27</sup> The skeletal body of an anorexic may be read as a symbol of near death, debilitation, and/or

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Childers, and Gary Hentzi, The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 272.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas A. Sebeok, A Perfusion of Signs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>27</sup> Charles S. Peirce, Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965-66) 2. 300. [References are to volumes and paragraphs, not pages, thus 2. 300 refers to paragraph 300 volume 2.]

psychological incompetence.

It is appropriate to deconstruct the *Change* series from a symptomatic approach, that is, reading the series “against the grain”. This type of reading strategy has become, for obvious reasons, a principle reading method for feminist critics. Issues of sexuality for instance, are often removed from an image’s centre, but as readers/viewers, we are able to pick them up in the silent margins.<sup>28</sup> Instead of examining what the meaning of a text says overtly, viewers should attend to what the text is not saying by considering its gaps and margins. It is important to consider not what the text says, but what it does **not** say. For instance, in the texts and songs for Ringgold’s *Change* performance, she describes the physical and emotional pain of being overweight: consuming those “chocolate eclairs, chips, and ice cream,” and hating to exercise, although by moving around, “you’ll lose that weight”.<sup>29</sup> These underlying messages can be translated as symbols of Ringgold having a problem with her weight and eating habits.

Documenting her life-story in the series, Ringgold voices indirectly issues of eating problems and the practices of femininity in our culture. The ambiguity of the series is understood further in relation to the ideologies of philosopher Pierre Macherey. He uses the notion of the cracked mirror to describe the relationship between ideology and text.<sup>30</sup> The series functions as a mirror and can be interpreted as a “cracked surface”. Its meanings are elusive, since the reflected images and meanings are conveyed only in their partiality. According to Macherey, “the relationship between the mirror and what it reflects is *partial*: the mirror selects, it does not

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<sup>28</sup> Lynne Pearce, Woman, Image, Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 9.

<sup>29</sup> Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, 246.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



reflect everything... The secret of the mirror is to be sought in the form of its reflections".<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the series is expressive of what it does not reflect, as much as what it does reflect.

In reading *Change* (Fig. 6) against the grain to expose its gaps and margins, it is important to consider not only the ideological underpinnings of the piece but also its formal characteristics that function as signs. Often these signs will appear to oscillate from icon to index to symbol. The icons are Ringgold's photographs throughout the quilt since they represent Ringgold herself, and the indices are the texts inscribed throughout the quilt that produce a narrative patterning. The symbols represent the quilt's boundaries, non-bodily representations, including its decorative aspects such as composition that draws from African sources. The quilt is comprised of seven black and white photo etchings and eight textual panels within which Ringgold has inscribed her life-story. The cross-like stitching creating triangular spaces in a rectangle that Ringgold employs throughout the quilt is an ancient design of African textiles attributed to the Kuba tribe of the Congo region of Central Africa.<sup>32</sup> Like symbols of a ritual that encourages repetition, Ringgold is using these Kuba triangular spaces and words to indicate a similar type of rhythmic cadence in dieting similar to the polyrhythms used in African drumming.<sup>33</sup> Compositionally, the repetitive use of diagonals functions also effectively, as it draws the viewer's eye to specific images, also this time indexically connected to Ringgold's concern with the appearance of her body. Ringgold has drawn within each printed panel a pattern outlining various body shapes. While this can be read as a formal guide for the layout of images, the delineated body frames in relation to the body can be also interpreted as the

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<sup>31</sup> Pierre Macherey, A Theory of Literary Production (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 120-122.

<sup>32</sup> Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, 189.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

underlying indices of Ringgold's personal shame in struggling with her problem.

Not only does Ringgold make references indexically and symbolically to her eating habits throughout the piece, she similarly elucidates issues of identity, and the imposition of the feminine practice on the body. In the central right panel, Ringgold portrays herself as an artist and political activist. Interesting to note is the juxtaposition of Ringgold and her mother standing before her painting *The Slave Rape Story Quilt* (1973), and the image of herself exposing her swollen legs. The theme of *Slave Rape* is based on the narrative in which Ringgold placed herself symbolically in the time of her female ancestors, "those brave African women who survived the horror of being uprooted and carried off to slavery in America."<sup>34</sup> Portraying herself as the victim in *Slave Rape*, Ringgold's thin body is exposed in its entirety with the exception of a few leaves covering her, which seemingly appear to protect her from being further violated. In like manner, the distant gaze of an overweight Ringgold with her fleshy legs exposed to the viewer and arm clutched to her chest, also extends the notion of the female body as an index of desire. The exposure of skin within these two frames, especially the desired parts of the female body, delineates Ringgold symbolically as a victim of rape. As a woman, her body is expected and conditioned to practice the feminine ideal. Yet because of her corpulence, Ringgold's body does not ascribe to the cultural paradigm of femininity and is therefore not beautiful. However as in *Slave Rape*, the body still remains objectified hence a victim of rape. Linked to notions of identity and sexuality, Ringgold describes how a black woman once asked her if *The Slave Rape Story Quilt* was a narrative about her life and Ringgold replied, "slavery is not something I can

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<sup>34</sup> For a full description of Ringgold's *Slave Rape* series and her art produced in the 1970s that focused on the theme "Is there a woman's art?", see Ringgold's, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 197.

forget about.”<sup>35</sup>

Not only is the *Change* quilt expressive of what it does reflect, but it is also symptomatic of what it does not reflect. For instance, the notion of the cracked mirror introduced above in the writing of Macherey to describe the relationship between ideology and text is disclosed in the central panel of the quilt. The six photomontages that enclose this particular narrative draw the viewer's eye to the quilt's essence, to the present day, where Ringgold affirms with her hands resting defiantly on her hips that, “I can change, I can change now.”<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, the collage of images depicts Ringgold as a content and self-assured woman. Moreover, the panel is overshadowed by an image of Ringgold in full stance wearing a bodysuit. Unlike the other images that represent Ringgold in full attire, this depiction is indexical by its connection with the female body. Her entire body is exposed deliberately in order to voice the success of her personal and physical change(s). The particular stance Ringgold employs in the centre of *Change* and again in *Change 2* (Fig. 7), with her arms bent at the elbow and with both hands turned in touching her hips in a pose of strength is one of determination. This demeanor correlates to Ringgold's experience in a Black Arts Theatre travelling show, 1966, where she confronted poet and playwright Leroi Jones, the show's sponsor, with her work.<sup>37</sup> Surprised by Jones' size, Ringgold expressed “I thought you were a big man,” and he replied, “big, how?” “You know ... big,” alluding to Leroi's height as well as weight.<sup>38</sup> Ringgold describes that,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>36</sup> See Appendix A: *The Change Song* for a description of central panel in *Change*, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> Ringgold's, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 153.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

the conversation ended with my arms bent at the elbow, with both hands turned in touching my hips in a gorilla pose to show Leroi what seemed so hard for him to understand. I was a fool, but he was a little dude with a big man's rap and that was all I was trying to say.<sup>39</sup>

Her self-poise in the centre of the quilt is further demarcated by Ringgold's ongoing reference that she can change now both physically and emotionally vis-a-vis the feminine paradigm.

In *Change 2*, Ringgold employs a similar compositional arrangement of images and text, yet it is considerably smaller than *Change*. Unlike the cross-like patterning Ringgold used in her first quilt, it is the diagonal configuration of the images themselves that draws the viewer's eye to the quilt's mecca. The use of repetition once more is an interesting method since Ringgold's narrative is based on her body and her intention of losing another thirty pounds. Unlike *Change* that concentrates on Ringgold's life and family, *Change 2* focuses exclusively on Ringgold and her body. Ringgold repeats five self-images, iconic in strength and conviction, juxtaposing them twofold and symmetrically against a painted thin self-portrait, and clearly, voices her personal triumph.

The objective of this piece was for Ringgold to shed another thirty pounds, yet because she was unable to, she painted an idealized self-portrait of the proposed weight loss and of her desired body type. While both *Change* and *Change 2* are comprised of Ringgold's self-portrait in the centre of the quilts, and with hands resting on hips, they differ ideologically. Where Ringgold depicted herself in a bodysuit in *Change*, she has now featured herself in a bathing suit to display her excessively thin body. Despite Ringgold's personal intentions, this image translates further as equating thinness with the feminine ideal. Hence, Ringgold's illustrated

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

body type is an index of beauty and what is revered in our culture. Demarcating her body to its extreme ideal form, the image is also symbolic of the ideological illnesses found in our culture, that also voices the practice of femininity, and the thin female body as an object of desire.

Ringgold's "new" body is deeply inscribed with an ideological construction of femininity that reflects the discourse within which it operates. The contemporary ideal of slenderness is articulated through the body of an emaciated woman who stands defiantly with her hands placed upon her hips. By pursuing conventional practices of femininity, Ringgold's image voices to its extreme the rigid discipline of perfecting the body as an object. Paradoxically, while Ringgold's body resembles the haggard body of an anorexic, it does not appear to articulate signs of extreme suffering. Rather, Ringgold's demeanor and stance are indexical of the control, felicity, and fulfilment in having attained the thinness criterion when in fact she did not. With this exaggerated characterization, Ringgold has reminded the viewer of her ongoing concern and struggle with her weight problem, a desire of the ideal unrealized. Lurking behind the anorexic-like figure, stands a colossal and overpowering shadow who is about to engulf symbolically the tiny and skeletal Ringgold. Perhaps Ringgold desires to be as thin as her fictitious delineation, yet she is cognizant that, as her shadow reminds, threatens and may overcome her, such a yearning only remains an ideal.

Part and parcel of the feminine practice and the thinness paradigm is the obsession with exercise. The more one exercises, the more one will shape one's body to the cultural ideal of femininity. Ringgold deplores exercising, as she articulated in one of her songs *I Hate to Exercise in Change 2*, yet she knows that any type of physical activity will help her to shed weight. In *Woman Painting the Bay Bridge* (1988) (Fig. 8) from the *Woman on a Bridge* series (1988), Ringgold depicts herself as an ideal body type painting the bridge and holding a can of

red paint with the inscription that reads “pain”. The height of the bridge translates as a symbolic signifier in that the body must undergo extreme measures to attain the thinness paradigm. The deliberate absence of the letter “t” in the word pain to spell paint, symbolizes Ringgold’s painful struggle in shedding weight and not being able to keep it off. In the rap song *Pain* for Ringgold’s *Change 2* performance, she associates her overweight body and the consumption of food with pain:

I feel a pain in my leg  
Like I’m pullin’ keg  
Can’t get up those stairs  
Stop eatin’ chocolate eclairs ...<sup>40</sup>

In like manner, the aerial woman in *Woman Painting the Bay Bridge* holds a dripping paint brush that points to the crown of the bridge, but she is unable to touch it. This is symptomatic of Ringgold’s hunger to be thin.

Likewise, Ringgold’s attempt to change is voiced in the gaps and margins of the relationship between *Change 2*, *Double Dutch on the Golden Gate Bridge* (1988) (Fig. 9), and *The Winner* (1988) (Fig. 10), also from the *Woman on a Bridge* series. The exceedingly thin body that characterizes Ringgold in *Change 2* is an idealized outcome of the physical mobility required for this piece, which Ringgold performed for this piece twenty-five times. Functioning also as a form of exercise, Ringgold’s performance articulates that despite the “pain” involved in losing weight, if you,

Move around shake your body  
Walk a mile and you’ll smile  
You’ll feel good, you’ll feel great

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<sup>40</sup> Ringgold, *We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 246.

You'll lose that weight"<sup>41</sup>

For instance, in *Double Dutch on the Golden Gate Bridge* produced in the same year that *Change 2* was created, Ringgold illustrates herself in the centre of the turning skipping ropes performing double dutch - a pastime for many children that combines play and exercise.

In *The Winner*, Ringgold characterizes herself running in the lead of a marathon. All of the figures have numbers on the front of their shirts signifying their differences in weight. As the only woman depicted and distinguished by her physical attributes in contrast to her male counterparts identified by their moustaches and build, Ringgold identifies herself as weighing a hundred and fourteen pounds. In addition, the female figure, because she is delineated as excessively thin, resembles the masculine body of an anorexic woman. Trailing behind the skeletal female body are runners identified with increased numbers on their shirts, hence the increase in body weights. Inserted beneath the woman is a banner that reads "winner." In *The Change Song* in her *Change 2* performance, Ringgold sings,

But if you remember this simple phrase  
You'll be a winner for the rest of your days  
I can change, I can do it...<sup>42</sup>

Accordingly, as *Woman Painting the Bay Bridge*, *Double Dutch on the Golden Gate Bridge* and *The Winner* elucidate about Ringgold's thin body in *Change 2*, for the female body to "win" in our culture it needs to be thin, but to attain this ideal the body must be disciplined to daily activity in order to fulfill the mandate of femininity.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix A: *The Change Song*.

The ‘hidden centre’ of the series is indeed Ringgold’s eating problem. At first glance, one may think that the series represents an African-American woman throughout different stages of her life as in *Change*, or of a contented thin woman wearing a bathing suit in *Change 2*. However once the image is translated “beyond its frame”, the viewer brings forth his/her own interpretation, a reading analysis that is (entirely) subjective. Since Ringgold has written on her quilts, the text becomes the visual object itself as it is read beyond its “frames”. Once the text is translated, the hidden centre exposes itself into a compelling narrative. It is not one meaning, but several indexical and symbolic signs that have been challenged thus far that constitute the structure of *Change* and *Change 2*.

In both *Change* and *Change 2*, Ringgold has used her body as a powerful symbolic form, and a surface on which cultural codes are inscribed poignantly. She has characterized her body as a medium of culture by the various passages of text that accompany the seven images. Ringgold has expressed her body, and in turn, ‘woman’s body’, as a surface on which historical feminine constructs are exposed through their inscription in extreme delineation. *Change* and *Change 2* have additionally drawn the viewer into a narrative of complexities, revealing the personal impediments Ringgold has experienced throughout her life vis-a-vis the feminine archetype.

For example, there is the image in the lower left panel of *Change* that depicts Ringgold modelling for her mother, a fashion designer by trade, at a fashion show in the 1950s (Fig. 11). According to Ringgold, being a model seemed an unnatural thing to do, yet “you (Ringgold) were a connoisseur of a pork chop sandwich - and that was natural to you”.<sup>43</sup> It is plausible to

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<sup>43</sup> Excerpt taken from Ringgold’s quilt *Change*, and see Appendix B: *The 1950s*.



postulate that by modelling for her mother, Ringgold was shedding her identity in order to conform to the rules of femininity. At the same time in her *Change* performance, Ringgold modelled her quilted coat for a different purpose - to reclaim her identity and voice. Moreover, Ringgold's self-portrait in *Change 2*, connotes the removal or shedding of her coat to reveal an excessively thin body in a bathing suit. Undeniably, Ringgold has voiced something intrinsic about the role of the female body in relation to fashion. 'Woman' is a figure imaged and desired in the world of fashion. Serving as both a material representation, and as a cultural sign of femininity, fashion functions discursively in producing female sexuality and the practices of femininity such as the advertisement of a caucasian woman portraying a Japanese playboy (Fig. 12). The model is depicted in a piece of black lace lingerie. The style in which the garment is cut emphasizes the woman's bosom as the point of focus. The shadow beneath the woman's chin draws the viewer's eye to her exposed cleavage, and provides the illusion of a heart-shaped form, symbolizing her sexuality and her breasts as feminine objects, and in turn, as commodities of masculine desire. In Ringgold's image however a contradiction of the marginalized continues to haunt, in the shadow of a Ringgold denoting not love but self-hate and failure.

At the mecca of this industry's ideology, woman has to learn how "to be a body". Essentially, the role of the fashion industry vis-a-vis the feminine construct is to feature the "proper" body type. Yet once again, what constitutes the so-called "proper" body type? By fostering and sustaining such practices, women often feel a need to aspire to the feminine ideal. Woman is forced to fetishize herself because of the inherent encroachment of male desire. Consequently, many women develop a negative self-image and their identity fragments. Moreover, they may negotiate their position and body in society through a mutilated body image condition, be it through anorexia, bulimia, or compulsive overeating. It is plausible to argue

therefore, that fashion operates discursively in producing the fetishization of femininity, which in turn, is the fetishization of woman.

Accordingly, Ringgold's struggle with the feminine construct has been a challenging and difficult process. Trying to measure up to the cult of thinness has, because of her weight problem, denied her access into the feminine paradigm. As seen in *Change*, Ringgold's body that is depicted in the centre of the quilt symbolizes a parodied representation of the feminine ideal. As an overweight individual, and specifically as a 'fat woman', Ringgold's body inserts itself into the current cultural notion of what is considered slothful, "bad", "unfeminine", and therefore, meaningless. The size and shape of Ringgold's body is consequently a determining cultural factor of whether her body is admirable or not. The culturally coded meanings that are ascribed to the overweight body additionally affect, and in many instances effect, the collapse of the woman's identity. Like Ringgold, the body of an overweight woman signifies a powerful graphic text for the viewer. Her body has become 'coded' and typecast, suggesting that it be read as a cultural statement, but more precisely a statement about gender.

One learns how "to be a body" by acquiescing to the demands of cultural doctrines. In *Change 2*, Ringgold defines the practice of femininity through its extreme manifestation. Here, Ringgold portrays the outcome of her intention to lose another thirty pounds. Yet, once again the cult of thinness functions as a trap as society addresses what is the "right"- suggested by the elated grin across Ringgold's face, or the "wrong" body type in the shadow. While Ringgold's body 'finally' inserts itself with the feminine construct this is not her real body but a projection of an icon-like ideal. Her highly-exaggerated slim body embodies the current ideology of what constitutes femininity and beauty still unattainable. Thinness is proclaimed as a positive feminine

practice, yet it is also reductive ideologically, in the dark shadow, as an element of a cultural illness.

Furthermore, the difference in Ringgold's body from *Change* to *Change 2* mirrors and reinforces the dictates of the feminine practice. Ringgold has depicted her body as the "appropriate" surface representation of the female body. Undeniably, the practice and personification of femininity is expressed in its absolute meaning. This idealized depiction Ringgold has portrayed of herself, suggests not only her need to 'change' emotionally, but also physically in order to be accepted and valued. Thus, Ringgold's transformed body figures as a contemporary icon for both the male and female gazes, and as sexual object and the 'feminine' archetype, symbolic of the problematic system of practices that foster this cultural illness.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### CHANGE 3: A CULTURAL ILLNESS

Can you imagine a party where everyone invited is a manifestation of yourself? I am having such a party, and finding, it is fun and a great way to get to know myself. It's been a long time since I learned anything new about myself. But what I don't know is who am I -- really? At my party, everyone invited is actually me, and therefore knows me so there is no need to posture and pretend. The extreme manifestations of me showed up at the party uninvited, and were snubbed. Can you imagine a party such as the one I suggest, with only me there or you there; in every possible expression of myself or rather of yourself? Wouldn't you like to be surrounded by yourself? Can you imagine what you would look like, be like in every color, shape, form and combination of your being?

I am often so demanding. I want everything I fantasize to be good and come true. If I fantasize something bad like eating a chocolate cake, I change it quickly to salad, or I deny the whole thing. But who can deny over-eating?

All of my guests came to the party in the nude. They were every degree of weight loss and gain I've had over the years. I was shocked though delighted to meet them all face to face. Among them was a best friend, though we have fallen out lately, who sometimes eats only one low-fat meal a day. I prefer the woman who is often too busy to eat; and picks over her dessert until her ice cream melts, and makes her cake soggy. This is one woman who is my greatest fantasy, though she will never be invited to my party again. I identify with her too closely. She eats nonstop and never gains weight.<sup>1</sup>

*Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*

While Chapter Two discussed *Change* and *Change 2* from a semiotic perspective, in this chapter, I will discuss Ringgold's *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, 1991 (Fig. 13) from a cultural studies approach. In considering the narrative in *Change 3* as symptomatic of issues based on identity and collectivity, I will draw upon the series in two ways: first, in relation to representations of Aunt Jemima; second, in relation to *The French Collection* produced at the same time. The work of Becky Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems*, which discusses the practice of femininity and eating problems as omnipresent aspects in all cultures, provides an important methodological context in relation to *Change 3*.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix D: *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* for a complete text of *Change 3*.

It is precisely with *Change 3*, that compulsive overeating, bulimia, and anorexia voice a symbolic significance within North American culture. As a prominent cultural message, the cult-of-thinness has, undeniably, reached across the race and class spectrum. Those suffering from eating problems are thought to be young, white, middle-to upper-class women desperately trying to mould their figures to social standards.<sup>2</sup> Ringgold disclaims such stereotypes by situating her condition, identity, and art at the forefront of these ideological illnesses.

To understand why women across this race and class margin experience eating problems requires clarifying what constitutes the “culture” in the culture-of-thinness paradigm. Thinness is an institutionally-supported criterion for beauty. Popular culture, for instance, is key in supporting a tyranny of slenderness, and it is also one that is based on the glorification of whiteness, youth, and paradoxically, able-bodiedness. As mentioned previously, cultural practices and conceptions inform and ground specific behaviours, and shape the woman’s body in their own image of what constitutes the feminine ideal. It is the cultural that actively produces meaning by its own social, semiotic, and symbolic processes and principles. Accordingly, these meanings are materially constituted in discourses and practices.<sup>3</sup> However, these criteria and ideologies of what constitutes the feminine ideal are not only constructed and associated with the dominant discourse of the white race. The ideological underpinnings of femininity do affect, in one degree or another, women of *all* races and cultural backgrounds.

In *Change 3*, the women of various body types and sizes represent Ringgold’s fluctuating weight gains and losses over the years, a testament to the continuing struggle that she

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<sup>2</sup> Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women’s Eating Problems, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Griselda Pollock “Feminism/Foucault-Surveillance/Sexuality,” in Norman Bryson’s Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 3.

has had with food. Its narrative describes the eating habits of the different “women” (all of them being Ringgold herself) who are portrayed on the quilt.<sup>4</sup> Devoid of any photographic images portraying Ringgold, the quilt is comprised of seventeen black women who are represented in a variety of stances. The majority of the figures are in a frontal position with the exception of four who are depicted from the side. While the bodies of the women are dissimilar in their characterizations, each woman is smiling. Is this suggestive of a celebration of bodies? Are these women voicing something against the practice of femininity, and in turn, suggesting that women accept their bodies as a part of their identity? Is this the underlying intention that Ringgold is stating? From reading the text that surrounds the image, facetious in overtone, it is plausible to interpret Ringgold’s struggle with food as a negative and frustrating experience. Ringgold has clearly defined her voice against the practice of femininity. The frozen or plastic-like smiles of the nude women translate the female bodies as objects of the male gaze. Yet because Ringgold has characterized the women in various body sizes and types, it is also plausible to assume that *Change 3* is satirizing the practice of femininity and the feminine ideal.

Furthermore, the portrayal of large and thin women as a collective is symbolic of the women who are affected by, and refuse to be, a part of the feminine discourse. While Ringgold’s objective is to document “her” life-story in the *Change* series, it is this image in particular that addresses something wider beyond that of [her]self. The inclusion of “different” women and body types denotes clearly a collective yearning to challenge and dismantle the practice of femininity fostered by social hegemonies. The notion of this collective yearning in *Change 3* makes reference to a twelve-part, painted story-quilt series. Ringgold’s *The French*

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix for a full description of *Change 3*.

*Collection* series (1991) was produced at the same time as *Change 3*, as an opportunity to paint in the manner of Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso, and Matisse:

I had a story to tell about a young black woman who went to Paris at age sixteen to become an artist and never returned to America. As the story goes, Willia Marie (the story's heroine) becomes a successful artist and makes a name for herself in the modern art movement and exchanges ideas with the great artists of her time.<sup>5</sup>

Portraying herself as Willia Marie in *The French Collection* series, Ringgold rewrites the discourse of art history in order to voice her identity and accomplishments as an artist within the canon.

In *The Picnic at Giverny*, 1991 (Fig. 14) Ringgold portrays a social gathering of twelve women and an androgynous nude figure sitting in isolation in the foreground. The black woman artist, being Ringgold herself, does not paint the group of women as sensual or idealized figures of the male gaze, who gaze out to the viewer, but as actual women with different body types. Ringgold has included both white and black women at the picnic where there is a sharing of food, and a celebration of bodies signifying a sense of unity among them. Moreover, the women have been disassociated from the nude figure. By uncovering the androgynous body in juxtaposition to the clothed women who are depicted frontally, the masculine figure interprets itself as a satirical reflection of what the female body is supposed to represent. The figure also infers a symbolic message about the practice of femininity fostered largely by the male outlook, and how women are expected to uphold and display it. The manner in which the figure is delineated against the group of women suggests their unwillingness to practice and be a part of the feminine canon.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

Interesting to also consider is the inclusion of brightly colored flower patches throughout the quilt's border which diverts from the linear African design elements found in the border of *Change 2*. Due to the consistent formal resemblance in both *Change 3* and *The Picnic at Giverny*, the different floral imagery identifies with the different women that are portrayed, hence symbolizing their solidarity vis-à-vis the practice of femininity. This may be translated further as a statement to “change”, which in turn, is addressed to women of all races. By resisting the codes that have largely constructed the feminine ideal, these women will not allow their identity to be fragmented. The underlying meanings that Ringgold has translated are both complex and plural, and are reflective of the disorders located in and propagated by our culture.

By portraying the women as self-assured and nude individuals, *Change 3* connotes “their” voice against the cult-of-thinness archetype. Unlike *Change 2* that voices the ideal feminine body type in relation to exercise in *Double Dutch on the Golden Gate Bridge*, *The Winner*, and *Woman Painting the Bay Bridge*, *Change 3* goes against the grain of the thinness archetype. This notion translates how Ringgold has asserted her identity throughout the progression of the *Change* series: from images of her fully clothed in *Change 1*, to a self-portrait of her in a bathing suit in *Change 2*, to a nude self-portrait in *Change 3*. Recognizing Ringgold's purpose in producing the series, to document her life-story, I believe that it does voice a journey towards self affirmation as important to all women regardless of whether they have an eating problem or not.

Some cultures do not necessarily overvalue thinness, but associate corpulence with positive attributes of wealth, fertility, and femininity. One example is the woman in Puerto Rican communities, where being overweight is a sign of health and prosperity and signifies,



paradoxically, “to the black woman that she is doing a good job.”<sup>6</sup> By associating black with abundance, and the black woman with food, her involvement in the kitchen connotes her success as both nurturer to the family and the family’s participation in a particular culture. Unfortunately, this notion of what the black woman signifies in our culture has been coded in the language of the dominant culture of the white race. Despite their racial and cultural derivations, women like Ringgold are subject to the same pressures to attain an ideal of beauty as are white women in North American society.

Issues of appearance are a principal currency for **all** women’s access to both identity and power in North American culture, and thinness is its foremost component. “Fat” women are vulnerable to ridicule and discrimination, and its standards are clearly gendered. Being a fat woman is a “far graver mistake” than being a fat man.<sup>7</sup> For white and black women, thinness may function as a sign to judge their physical attractiveness. According to Thompson, the emphasis on the slender body in terms of what it signifies about our society and culture, is in fact, more troubling than health concerns.<sup>8</sup> Discursive practices are consumed with glorified images of youth, whiteness, thinness, able-bodiedness, and wealth. Dissatisfaction with appearance often serves as a “stand-in” for issues that are largely ignored, and are in many ways still invisible especially among women of color. The historical view of black women as “bodies without minds”, for instance, underlies their invisibility, in their incapacity to develop

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<sup>6</sup> Hesse-Biber, Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

psychological and physical problems.<sup>9</sup> The belief that black women are somehow untouched by eating problems dismisses them as incapable of being seduced by cultural discourses of femininity.

The stereotype that eating problems are a “white girl’s” issue essentially typecasts and dismisses women of color, like Ringgold. I question why these women have been overlooked in the context of eating problems and removed from medical analyses. Why is it that the media and theorists focus their attention primarily on the white ‘golden girl’ image and stereotyped images of eating problems? As Thompson elucidates, the answer lies in the way that ideology about black women’s bodies has been invisibly inscribed onto what is professed about white women’s bodies.<sup>10</sup>

In like manner to *Change 3* and *The Picnic at Giverny*, *Picasso’s Studio* (1991) (Fig. 15), is symptomatic of Ringgold’s yearning to reclaim her voice vis-a-vis the feminine construct. Modelling before Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* 1906-1907, Ringgold personifies herself as one of the femmes. However, unlike the cubist forms of the femmes, Ringgold’s seated nude body stands in as the object of the gaze. Many of Picasso’s (1881-1973) works were influenced by African art, and in *Les Femmes d’Alger*, he has appropriated African sculpture to construct the female (white) form as an icon. Ringgold however reappropriates the black form (her own), and in *Change 3* the black female body from African sculpture is present in its entirety, not changed by Picasso. In addition, where *Change 3* and *The Picnic at Giverny* embody the collectivity of different women, *Picasso’s Studio* not only expresses issues of racial

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

differences, but the context of how the black female body is perceived vis-a-vis the feminine ideal.

Also important to consider, at this juncture, is the relationship between Ringgold's early paintings and the *Change* series. Ringgold states that her art has been criticized by older artists as "protest" art, and at times, has been dismissed as history painting or social realism.<sup>11</sup> Ringgold however has called her art, specifically her paintings from the 1960s, "super realism", for the reason that she wanted her viewers to make a personal connection with the images and the message(s) that were connoted. For example, in *Between Friends* (1963) (Fig. 16) Ringgold depicts an ambivalent encounter between a black and white woman. This painting was inspired by the women who attended weekly poker parties at the Goldsberrys where lifetime members of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) entertained an interracial group of high-powered friends.<sup>12</sup> Ringgold thought that the white women were representing their husbands, and she was cognizant of the animosity between these women.<sup>13</sup> Similarly in *The Cocktail Party* (1964) (Fig. 17) from the *American People Series* Ringgold portrays a social gathering with only one black male. *The American Dream* (1964) (Fig. 18) often read as based on white capitalist philosophies, can also can be translated as the dream that has been fractured. Ringgold has depicted a woman who is half white and half black, although she is predominantly white, and who is wearing a large diamond for all to view. The painted

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<sup>11</sup> Ringgold, *We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 147. Ringgold does not mention who the older artists are, but she alludes to the fact that they were people who had been "badly burned during the Communist scare in the fifties and now wanted to keep their noses and palettes clean. Art for them was an abstraction, a fragment of an idea that nobody could understand, much less condemn."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

black arrow points to the white, clear gem of the woman's hand signifying that white power dominates the black race. Yet because the woman is divided as both a black and white woman, Ringgold's image asserts that both their identities within American culture stand as authentic and equal identities.

In a similar vein, Ringgold draws a parallel with the *Change* series and her "super realist" paintings. She has created a candid narrative of her eating patterns and has exposed it for all to view. While the series expresses issues that are personal to Ringgold, it also articulates profound and truthful statements surrounding the notion of the American dream. While Ringgold's intentions are not to denounce patriarchal institutions, the series does reproach the processes that foster and uphold the practices of femininity. In the fashion advertisement for Dolce & Gabbana one black and two white mannequins, their thin bodies depicted as the archetype of the feminine ideal, display the "new and sexy look" (the feminine ideal) for the upcoming season (Fig. 19). Similarly, as Ringgold described in various texts and songs in her performances, the *Change* series exposes poignantly the gravity of eating problems and aspects of self-improvement in present-day discourse.

For instance, there is the power of racism and classism which informs and influences standards of appearance. While white skin does not protect an overweight woman from weight discrimination, it does protect her from racial discrimination. Paradoxically, black skin protects the corpulent woman from weight prejudices. The omnipotence of casting stereotypes, of the "fat black mammy" for instance, signifies the damage of assuming standards of beauty as being solely gendered. This approach serves further as a method to understanding why girls - across race, class, religion, and ethnicity - may turn to food as a reaction to what they regard as injustices vis-à-vis the feminine construct.

Aunt Jemima is a case in point. As the most well-known black woman in North America, Aunt Jemima is an icon. She represents ideologically what it *is* to be a black woman as she constitutes part of North America's racial and cultural fabric. The image of Aunt Jemima is associated with the robust black woman, and therefore most black women are assumed to resemble what she portrays. Her image has evolved into a corporate brand name: the archetypal "mammy", her shiny, scrubbed black face beaming, and her crimson head-rag tied smartly in a square knot.<sup>14</sup> The notion that black women are what Aunt Jemima embodies and portrays sustains them as being typecast.

If you asked me, I'd say that Aunt Jemimas are the world's "supermoms." I've admired women like Aunt Jemima for their tireless devotion to nurturing. Personally, I was a reluctant supermom; I've always feared that a supermom could spend a lot of time in the kitchen feeding others, but never really feel fed herself.<sup>15</sup>

Historically, the "mammy" symbolized the mythic Old South of "inoffensive slavery, grace, and abundance; she dominates the kitchen, or she instructs the young ladies in decorum, or she buries the family silver in the orchard so the Yankees won't steal it."<sup>16</sup> Presently, Aunt Jemima presides over the 'wholesome' breakfast of pancakes immersed in syrup. Images of Aunt Jemima remind people of how race, class and gender are understood. It is cultural discourse that has fostered these understandings, and consequently, sustained racial stereotypes.

*Change 3* in contrast goes "against the grain" of what is typically perceived of the black woman in returning to African sculptural sources. For Ringgold, who produced *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, in 1983 (Fig. 20) the notion of Aunt Jemima interestingly enough is inspired by

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<sup>14</sup> Diane Roberts, The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region, (London: Routledge, 1994) 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Roberts, The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region, 1.

the memories and death of her mother in 1981, and the reconciliation with her daughter. In this quilt, Ringgold tells the story of Jemima Blakey whose grandparents bought their freedom out of slavery in New Orleans.<sup>17</sup> For Ringgold, the story of Aunt Jemima is a feminist issue that all women should be concerned with, and that needs to be understood as more than “a big black woman with a rag on her head”.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, Ringgold juxtaposes panels of text and images of Jemima's lineage. The portrayal of Aunt Jemima is characterized by the corpulent women depicted at the edges of the quilt. The sombre-colored images that border the quilt are symbolic of the contemporary African-American stereotypes that foster the identity of Aunt Jemima as a maternal caretaker. For instance, the representation of the large African-American woman wearing an apron and kerchief, as Ringgold illustrates, may signify for one individual the notion of “Aunt Jemima,” while for another, it may simply connote notions of race, culture, and identity of African-American heritage. Consider for instance, the plump “Mammys” and “Grandmas” who symbolically have prepared a variety of food products: Aunt Jemima, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Paul, and Grandma Brown. These women are depicted as robust and generous women, and ironically, they are linked to the obsession with good wholesome food. Unlike her white “fragile” and thin counterpart “Betty Crocker,” pictorial representations of a slender African-American woman selling food products are seldom advertised.

As well, the image of a mother and her seven children in *Mother's Quilt* 1983 (Fig. 21) produced after the death of Ringgold's mother, brings to mind the notion of Aunt Jemima as a

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<sup>17</sup> Ringgold, *We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 252.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

cultural matriarch. In a discussion with her daughter Michele regarding Aunt Jemima, Ringgold says,

... just think of her strength. No one ever raped Aunt Jemima. They hate her because she is not vulnerable. Isn't she the onewho takes care of the children - her own and everyone's else's - and yet is able to make something of her life? Isn't she the ultimate female survivor, the one mainly responsible for keeping us together - as necessary to the family as she is to the race? Don't you think she's the sacrificial lamb who loves those who often don't love her?<sup>19</sup>

The quilt was designed from eight doll shapes cut out of black satin fabric, where each wears a doll's dress designed by Ringgold's mother, and appliqued onto a bright red cloth background that is flanked by a colorful floral border. The faces have painted and embroidered details and the hair is made of red, blue, orange, green, and pink braided yarn. The large doll shape depicted in the centre of the quilt with her braided hair tied in a knot overshadows the smaller doll shapes, signifying her maternal and cultural influence.

Notwithstanding, it is virtually a culturally accepted ideology that African-American women overweight. Associating black with abundance and wholesomeness is not only discriminatory but perpetuates this truism. Ostensibly, for some black women, weight preoccupation is not a central concern, but it is one among many factors that impede black women from attaining 'beauty' and the feminine ideal.<sup>20</sup>

Representations of white and black women are undeniably controversial issues. The body is circumscribed and defined according to gender, race and class. It is Western culture that is preoccupied with controlling women's bodies, and in turn, categorizing them according to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 251-252.

<sup>20</sup> K. S. Buchanan, "Creating Beauty in Blackness," in Consuming Passions: Feminist Approaches to Weight Preoccupation and Eating Disorders, eds. C. Brown and K. Jasper, (Toronto, Second Story Press: 1993) 37.

standard ideologies. Interesting to note, is the notion of the black woman's body as "excessive and flagrantly sexual" which differs from the ideology of purity and modesty that has defined the white woman's body.<sup>21</sup>

Undeniably, Ringgold's series resists our culture's perception of the feminine construct and eating problems as a white woman's problem.<sup>22</sup> Literature suggests that women of color with eating problems, particularly black women, feel a sense of inadequacy in relation to white women when coping with their problems in therapy. The association of eating problems with "whiteness" has made some women of color unwilling to seek help.<sup>23</sup> By getting help, Thompson states they may feel as though they are "selling out" or being treated as an oddity by friends or medical professionals.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the racist underpinnings of some health care policies historically have also led some women of color to avoid seeking help out of fear of being treated in a prejudicial manner.<sup>25</sup> Such an ideology however is both reductive and discriminatory, and is one that is predicated on the white mentality. The emphasis on thinness is not a universal phenomenon, but is equally forceful across race and ethnicity, despite their cultural differences. Across the racial and cultural spectrum, the criteria of femininity and thinness have their differences. The practice of femininity within the context of eating problems is not a monolithic set of practices, but is an issue that is prevalent and distinct for each woman, race, and culture. By only considering eating problems as a "white" dilemma, (we) are

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<sup>21</sup> Roberts, The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region, 5.

<sup>22</sup> See Thompson's analysis on biased notions regarding race and eating problems, 14-15

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



deliberately isolating women of color including different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Like biased notions of class, the notion that African-American or African-Canadian women are somehow immune or untouched by cult of thinness is based on long-standing dichotomies - good/bad, pretty/ugly, sexually uptight/sexually loose - about white and black women.<sup>26</sup> White women are often depicted as frivolous and obsessed with their appearance, while the portrayal of the black woman is often seen as the unattractive and plump “mammy”, which Ringgold’s series clearly challenges. The former is also typecasted as being incapable of being thin, or who is invulnerable by the pressures of the feminine ideal. These divisions have fostered inaccurately the notion of black women as being separate from a society in which the practice of femininity is an integral part of the socialization of **all** women.<sup>27</sup>

Such distortions are one of many reasons why issues of black women with eating problems are often unaccounted for in literature. In the literature that I have reviewed<sup>28</sup>, research studies that were conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s indicate that the thinness paradigm is spreading beyond the white middle class, and that eating problems are increasing among black women. The notion that eating problems do not affect women of color is completely misleading, yet is a stereotype that has, in part, shaped the identity of the black woman. The perception that fat is more acceptable among black women and the Black community is both dangerous and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>28</sup> See Susan Gutwill, “Women’s Eating Problems: Social Context and the Internalization of Culture,” in eds. Carol Bloom, Andrea Gitter, Laura Kogel and Lela Zaphiropoulos, Eating Problems: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Treatment Model, (New York: BasicBooks, 1994): 1-27, Hesse-Biber, Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity, Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women’s Eating Problems.

reductive. *Change 3* voices the association of eating problems with “whiteness” as being clearly erroneous.

Literature additionally suggests that there are aspects of African-American or African-Canadian culture that historically have protected against a demand for very thin bodies.<sup>29</sup>

According to one researcher,

the increasing affluence among some blacks, and thus their access to traditional white middle class values, and the homogenization of life style and priorities, perhaps as a result of the increasing influence of the media, have finally penetrated the black culture: the young black female (and perhaps the male) is getting fatter and is becoming more concerned about her fatness.<sup>30</sup>

The research I have reviewed indicates that black women are not as concerned with their bodies and the practices of femininity as white women are. According to Gladys Jennings, Associate Professor of Food Science and Human Nutrition at Washington State University, “there’s a cultural standard from our African heritage that allows for more voluptuousness and padding on black women.”<sup>31</sup> Some black women authors for instance, include positive images of corpulent women who enjoy food, and celebrate black women of various sizes and shapes. In her poem, Audre Lorde rejects the notion of thinness as an ideal and celebrates size, unlike Ringgold who is struggling with it, and is cognizant that the feminine paradigm is largely a white issue:

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<sup>29</sup> See Hesse-Biber’s analysis “Joining the Cult of Thinness” 69-79, and her discussion on Thinness and Black Culture, 109-112 in “New Recruits for the Cult of Thinness: Young Girls, Men, and Ethnic Women”, Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity. See also, Thompson’s multiracial analysis “Making “a Way outa NoWay” in A Hunger So Wide and So Deep, 1-26.

<sup>30</sup> See L. K. George Hsu, “Are Eating Disorders Becoming More Common in Blacks?,” International Journal of Eating Disorders 6 (1987): 122.

<sup>31</sup> E. White, “Unhealthy Appetites,” Essence (September 1991): 28. See also C. S. W. Rand and J. M. Kaldau, “The Epidemiology of Obesity and Self-Defined Weight Problems in the General Population: Gender, Race, Age, and Social Class,” International Journal of Eating Disorders 9 (1990): 329-343.

Either heard or taught  
as girls we thought  
that skinny was funny

or a little bit silly  
and feeling a pull  
toward the large and the colorful  
I would joke you when  
you grew too thin.

But your new kind of hunger  
makes me chilly like danger  
I see you forever retreating  
shrinking into a stranger  
in flight  
and growing up  
Black and fat  
I was so sure that skinny  
was funny or silly  
but **always**  
white.<sup>32</sup>

The poetry Lorde writes suggests the ideology fostered by white capitalist power structures that have, in turn, fostered and sustained stereotypes of the black woman. Cultural festivities for instance where food is prepared and eaten are principal underpinnings of maintaining racial identity.<sup>33</sup> Celebrating food is a tradition in itself that protects against internalizing a value of thinness, and that dissuades from identifying and getting help for an eating problem.<sup>34</sup> The discourse of celebrating food as an ethic has been attributed historically to the black woman and her culture. Furthermore, it is stipulated that black women maintain their cultural roots and

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<sup>32</sup> See Audre Lorde, Undersong. Chosen Poems Old and New, revised ed. (New York: Norton, 1992): 142.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., and see Appendix D: *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt* that describes Ringgold's relationship with food as both a form of celebration and resentment in shaping her identity.

<sup>34</sup> See Thompson for a full analysis regarding the celebration of food as an ethic, 10.

strong bonds through their relationship with food. The “essence” of black culture, for instance, has been handed down through oral history in the African tradition, through the selection and preparation of “soul food”.<sup>35</sup> This practice has become a signifier of a black woman’s identity:

the Black woman gains a sense of pride as she watches her extended family - her man, her children, and maybe her grandparents, sisters, nieces and friends - enjoy the soulful tastes and textures prepared by her skillful hands.<sup>36</sup>

Hesse-Biber elucidates further that the reason why black culture is determined to “hold on to native foods by bringing seeds into America” may be symbolic of the omnipresent determination to preserve the African culture through food.<sup>37</sup>

Ringgold’s story quilt *The Dinner Quilt*, 1986 (Fig. 22) can be understood visually as a celebration of “soul food” yet signifies ideologically a different meaning. Despite the quilt’s narrative, where two cousins first meet at a family dinner and have an immediate attraction for one another, and set out to find their aunt’s surprise paintings which she intends to present to the family at dinner<sup>38</sup>, the gathering of relatives including the arrangement and quantity of food on the table denotes a communal feast. The preparation of “soul food” thus was, and still is perhaps a principal determinant of a black woman’s culture and an important factor that establishes her identity to it.

For Ringgold however, her relationship to food reflects both a form of celebration and indignation in dealing with her problem, and in shaping her identity. Inasmuch as Ringgold is an over-eater and hungers for “a piece of chocolate cake and ice cream until she is supplied with

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hesse-Biber, Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity, 110.

<sup>38</sup> Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: the Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, 260.

a fix”<sup>39</sup>, she does not celebrate food in the same way that “soul food” is exalted. Ringgold rejoices in eating everything that is “bad” for her, yet resents the fact that she gains weight from her celebration. For example, Ringgold describes herself as preferring,

... the woman who is often too busy to eat; and picks over her dessert until her ice cream melts, and makes her cake soggy. You might know I never ever see her. We once had breakfast together to plan a trip to Paris. I happen to know that she hates French food - all that bread and butter and patisserie. But she was as usual too busy to eat breakfast - or go to Paris.

This is one woman who is my greatest fantasy, though she will never be invited to my party again. I identify with her too closely. She eats nonstop and never gains weight.<sup>40</sup>

Ringgold’s series, particularly *Change 3*, exposes the reality that women of color are also caught within the web of the feminine ideal, and counters the focus of medical research on “white statistics”. It is not my intention to delve into and discuss medical facts surrounding eating problems, but to elucidate that health research and theorists should be race-conscious when examining women and identity within the context of eating problems. There is an increased presence of African-American and African-Canadian women with eating problems who have been affected by various social and racial injustices.

Ringgold intends to produce another quilt and performance entitled *Change 4* in the near future. The theme of the quilt and performance has evolved from a daily documentation of Ringgold’s food intake, exercise, work, entertainment, feelings either pleasant or traumatic, and daily happenings. Ringgold’s proposal in producing the quilt is, that if she makes a public document of her behavioral patterns, then she will be forced to transform them in order to make

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<sup>39</sup> See Appendix D: *Change 3:Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

herself more acceptable. As a public form of self-therapy, Ringgold will not only reveal the food she consumes, but other aspects that are going on in her life and how she contends with them. Ringgold states that she has been in therapy, although she has never kept a journal of her daily behaviour.<sup>41</sup> Yet the series in itself functions as a type of journal that is both forthright and sensitive in its approach.

In *Change 3*, we are encouraged to re-investigate and re-question the practice of femininity and racist assumptions of all women, and to acknowledge eating problems as significant responses to the illnesses of our culture. A multiracial analysis signifies that notions of women from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds are embedded both explicitly and implicitly in notions about white women, and that is impossible to understand any of them without the others.<sup>42</sup> The very images of what a woman *is* in our culture have depended largely upon how we think about the practice of femininity, identity, and race, and how they in turn govern our assumptions. Conclusively, the collective group of women Ringgold has portrayed in *Change 3* is symbolic of the illnesses that are inscribed by, and reflective of, our culture.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, A Hunger So Wide and So Deep, 16.

## CONCLUSION

The art critics of Ringgold's oeuvre, I explain at the outset of this thesis, have marginalized the contribution of Ringgold's art production, emphasizing its commonality with other black female artists and its relation to textile arts. As such, they have overlooked the issues I have explored in this thesis. These are relations to feminine constructions of identity and contemporary cultural processes. From this perspective, my inquiry examines the cultural production of femininity, identity, and eating problems as being symptomatic of a cultural illness. Focusing on Ringgold's *Change* series, I ground my investigation within a semiotic and cultural framework.

Chapter one scrutinizes the practices of femininity, the female body, and eating problems as signs of a cultural illness. By establishing this cultural illness as a social phenomenon, I consider the feminine politic and eating problems as a socially constructed form, wherein the female body dynamically connotes a plurality of interrelated meanings, conveying compelling aspects about our culture. Being "feminine" members of society, women have to learn how "to be a body." The female body, I contend, is a powerful symbolic form that can be translated as a cultural metaphor. The writings of Becky Thompson's, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems* in relation to Foucault and Bordo, I introduce and correlate as a methodological approach for developing this notion of cultural illness. Within this context, I expose the hidden texts of eating problems, and show how the practice of femininity and identity construction in relation to anorexia, bulimia, and overeating are not psychological illnesses, but problematic signs of cultural conditioning.

Chapter two examines Ringgold's narratives in *Change* and *Change 2* as semiotic signifiers, indexical and symbolic signs of women and eating problems within the feminine archetype. Reading these images semiotically, I locate the gaps and absences of Ringgold's narratives and discover what *Change* and *Change 2* do not articulate overtly, namely the negative agenda of our culture in promoting and sustaining the thin female form as an ideal. In attempting to become, through diet and exercise, this culturally imposed feminine symbol, in public actions of creation and performance that expose her private struggle, Ringgold reveals herself as object, acted upon by the dominant culturally imposed practices to which she has subordinated herself. At the same time, she subverts these as subject contending with the complex notions relating to herself as male-female, mother-daughter, teacher and artist in the associations and allegiances that these connections entail.

The third chapter approaches Ringgold's *Change 3* more directly from a cultural studies point of view, as a reflection of issues about group identity and collectivity. I present the series in two ways: first, in relation to Ringgold's positive ideological representations of Aunt Jemima and her reconnecting with African artistic forms; and secondly, in relation to *The French Collection* series that Ringgold produced at the same time as *Change 3*. It is with *Change 3*, that I demonstrate how Ringgold confronts the North American culture cult-of-thinness, challenging imposed racial stereotypes, and colonial appropriations in ways that reach across the spectrum of race and class. The group portrait in *Change 3*, all versions of Ringgold's varying body shapes, I interpret as a conceptual renewal of African sculptural forms. In this way, Ringgold reclaims a female collective image that is construed elsewhere in a different non-Western time and place. I also reveal, how in *The Picnic at Giverny* (in *The French Collection*



series) by positioning herself as artist painting a collegial individualized group of black and white women of various shapes and sizes, she also puts to question the practice of culturally mandated femininity as that which affects all women. Further within this multiracial analysis of *Change* 3, I suggest how women from different racial, ethnic or cultural backgrounds are controlled both explicitly and implicitly in Western dominant ideologies as they relate to the white woman.

To summarize, the female body, a “surface” that is inscribed with a plurality of meanings, figures as a metaphor of our culture. Residing in a consumer culture obsessed with appearances, or the “proper” representation of self, the female body has become a “shapeable” cultural symbol and commodity. Not only is the *Change* series a testament to the continuing struggle that Ringgold has with food. It appertains to all women trapped within the thinness paradigm. While Ringgold has used the *Change* series to voice her experience and concerns with eating problems, the series also conveys how cultural practices have the ability to threaten and encroach upon the lives of women. For women, the struggle for self-identity against the various social hegemonies of our culture can be a difficult undertaking both physically and psychologically.

This thesis aims to debunk cultural practices of the feminine paradigm, and addresses the struggle that women through their bodies are demanded to uphold. The female body with its so-called “femininity” continues to stimulate intrigue and conflict, and compels women to follow, endure and suffer from the cultural ideals governing the perfect, beautiful female body. By examining the *Change* series as a voice that speaks to all women, I address how the body politic expressed through a personal struggle to be thin, in turn, exposes a profound cultural illness.

**APPENDIX A:**  
***The Change Song***

***The Change Song***

Because I think you are so very nice  
I want to offer you some good advice  
You may be rich, you may be poor  
Living' high on the hog  
Or stretched out on the floor  
You may be a professor  
With knowledge to burn  
Or just a young kid with a lot to learn  
You may be black, white, red, yellow  
Or inbetween  
You may be kind or a little mean  
But if you remember this simple phrase  
You'll be a winner for the rest of your days  
First stand up everyone in this place  
Now put a great big smile on your face  
Everybody ready? Let's go!  
This is the phrase you need to know  
I can change, I can do it  
I can change, I can do it  
I can change, I can do it  
Now!<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Excerpt taken from Ringgold's *Change 2* performance story quilt. See Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, 243.

**APPENDIX B:**  
***The 1950s***

***The 1950s***

We had something called dates in the 1950s. Not the ones you eat, but I ate on all of mine. I was in my twenties, and it was a very romantic time. When young men came to call on me instead of bringing me flowers they brought me pork chop sandwiches. They were fried, cost seventy-five cents and were better than steak. That was romance in the 1950s – greasy food.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 245.

**APPENDIX C:**  
***Pain***

***Pain***

Pain, pain pa-a-a-ain  
I feel a pain in my knee  
So bad I can't see  
Make me hobble around  
And twist my hip  
I'm sorry I ate those chips

I feel a pain in my back  
Feel like it could crack  
Make me holler and scream  
Stay away from that ice cream

I feel a pain in my leg  
Like I'm pullin' a keg  
Can't get up those stairs  
Stop eatin' those chocolate eclairs

Will this end? [Joan Ashley asks me]  
Yes [I respond]  
When? [Joan Ashley asks me]  
Now [I respond]  
How? [Joan Ashley asks me]

Move around shake your body  
Make a sound make it hearty  
Walk a mile and you'll smile  
You'll feel good, you'll feel great  
You'll lose that weight [repeat 3 times]  
Oh yea!<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 246.

## **APPENDIX D:**

### ***Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt***

#### ***Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt***

Can you imagine a party where everyone there is a manifestation of yourself? I am having such a party, and finding it is fun and a great way to get to know myself. It's been a long time since I learned anything new about myself. I talk to myself and I understand and accept my point of view. But what I don't know is who am I -- really?

At my party everyone invited is actually me and therefore knows me so there is no need to posture and pretend. Even our disagreements and rejections are stimulating and enlightening. The extreme manifestations of me showed up at the party uninvited, and were snubbed. One was eating a fried pork chop sandwich from a greasy bag. When she left in a huff, she got stuck in the door.

But can you imagine a party such as the one I am suggest, with only me there or you there; in every possible expression of myself or rather of yourself? Wouldn't you find that intriguing? Wouldn't you like to be surrounded by yourself: the You who are your repressed dreams and fantasies; your second helpings, midnight binges and lackluster, lazy, barefoot TV-watching cookie-monster demons? Can you imagine what you would look like, be like in every color, shape, form and combination of your being? You could answer some very pertinent questions like "Why do you eat so much?"

Because you already know the person you are talking to is really you, you could ask anything. But ask only a thin you about over-eating; otherwise the answer could lead to a second helping.

I am often so demanding. I want everything I fantasize to be good and come true. If I fantasize something bad like eating chocolate cake, I change it quickly to salad, or I deny the whole thing. But who can deny over-eating?

All of my guests came to the party in the nude. There were every degree of weight loss and gain I've had over the past 40 years. I was shocked though delighted to meet them all face to face. Among them was a best friend, though we have fallen out lately, who sometime eats only one low-fat meal a day. She caught me eating her food once, when she came late for a lunch date. This woman exercises and works out, has facials and dress fittings and is a very together person. I love being around her even though I consider her diet of only low-fat, low-calorie food compulsive and far too rigid. I have not seen her lately.

There is another woman who likes only to look at food. She is a culinary voyeur. I admire that. She will prepare delicious food and never eat it. I am very fond of her, though I rarely see her.

There is another woman who always wants to "do lunch." I don't do lunch, I eat lunch. The only thing I like to do when I eat lunch is order more. When I crave a piece of chocolate cake and ice cream it is she who supplies me with a fix. "I'm here for you any hour of the day or night," she says. But, I don't want to know her. I have told her that, "although I think you are basically a nice person, I find your presence very threatening. You are simply not my type." But still she sticks to me like glue.

I prefer the woman who is often too busy to eat; and picks over her dessert until her ice cream melts, and makes her cake soggy. You might know I never ever see her. We once had breakfast together to plan a trip to Paris. I happen to know that she hates French food -- all that bread and butter and patisserie. But she was as usual too busy to eat breakfast -- or go to Paris.

This is one woman who is my greatest fantasy, though she will never be invited to my party again. I identify with her too closely. She eats nonstop and never gains weight.

There were two very large women who had eaten three days of hors d'oeuvres each before dinner. They invited me out for coffee-cake and ice cream after dinner. Really!<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Excerpt taken from Ringgold's *Change 3* quilt. See Ringgold, We Flew Over The Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold, 248-249.

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Fig. 1 Advertisement for Dolce & Gabbana, Harper's Bazaar, August 1999.



Fig. 3 Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story  
Quilt *coat*, 1986.

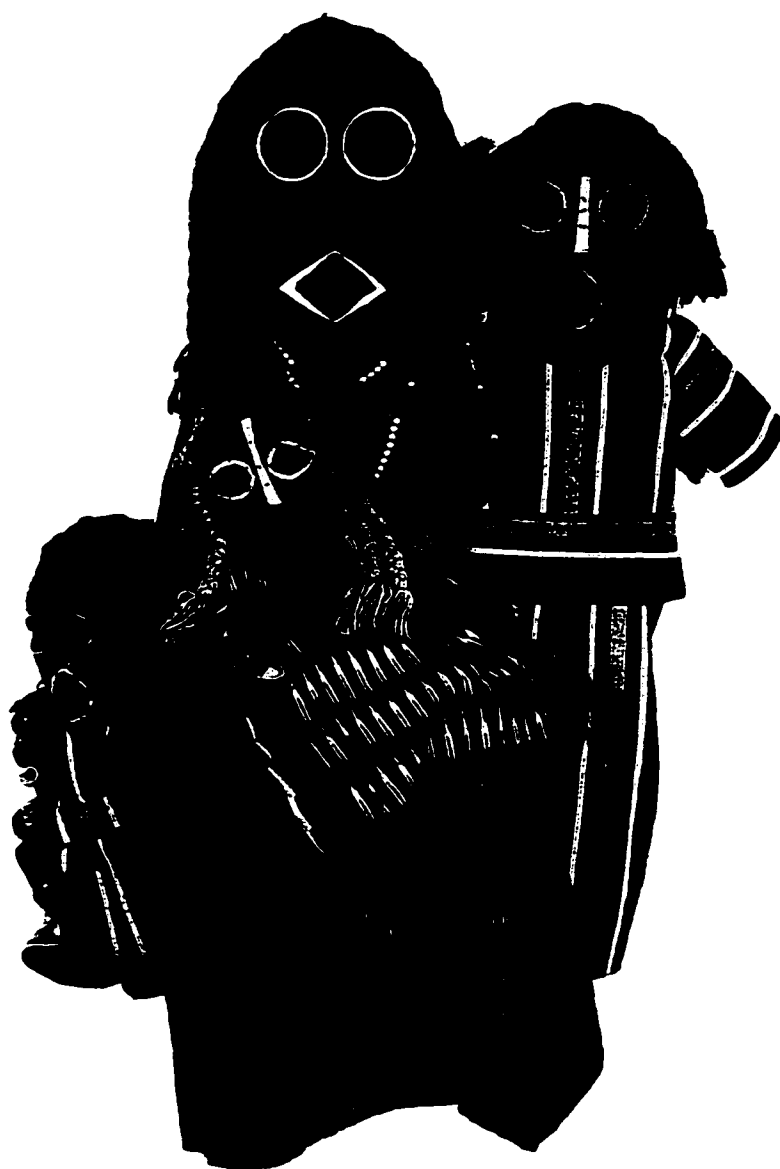


Fig. 4 Faith Ringgold, *Mrs. Jones and Family*. 1973  
From the Family of Woman Masks Series  
Acrylic on canvas; embroidered and pieced fabric  
60 x 12 x 16 inches





Fig. 5 Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt *performance*, 1987.

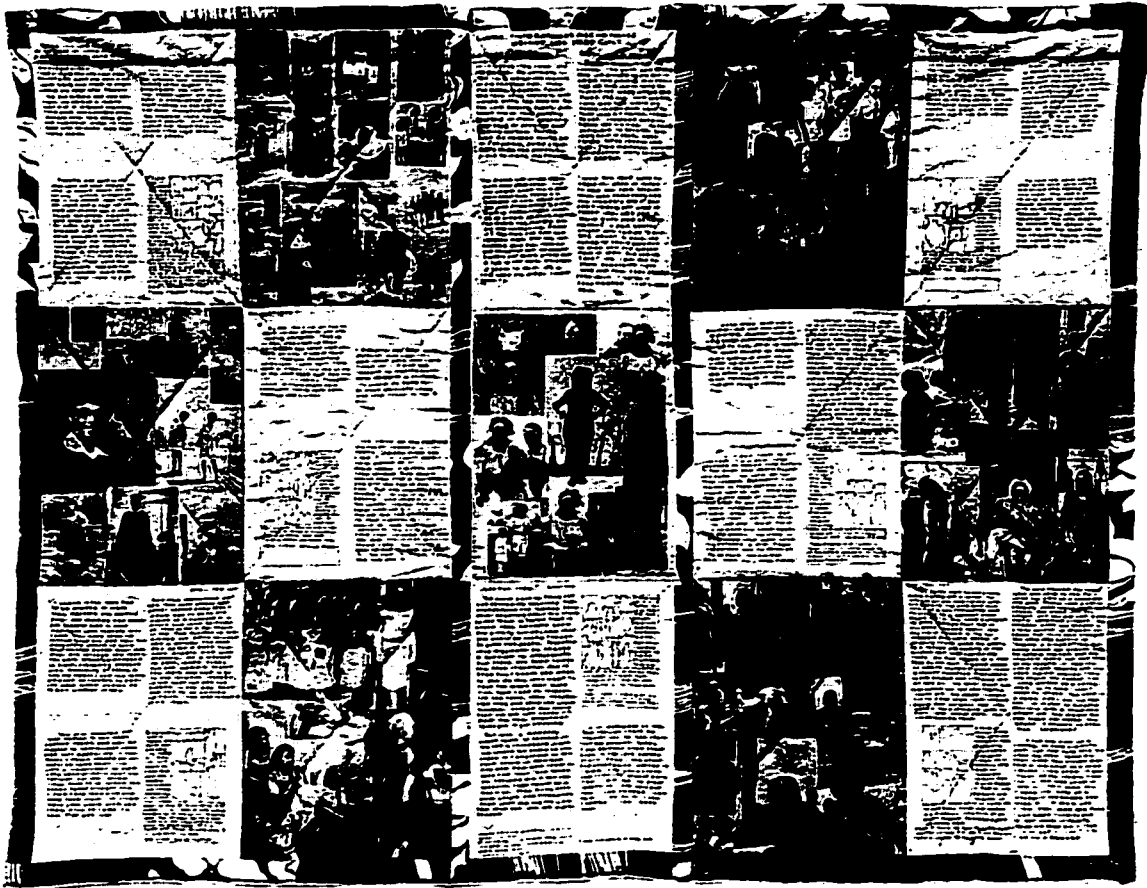


Fig. 6 Faith Ringgold's *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance StoryQuilt*, 1986. From the *Change Series*  
Photo etching on silk and cotton; printed and pieced fabric  
57 x 70 inches

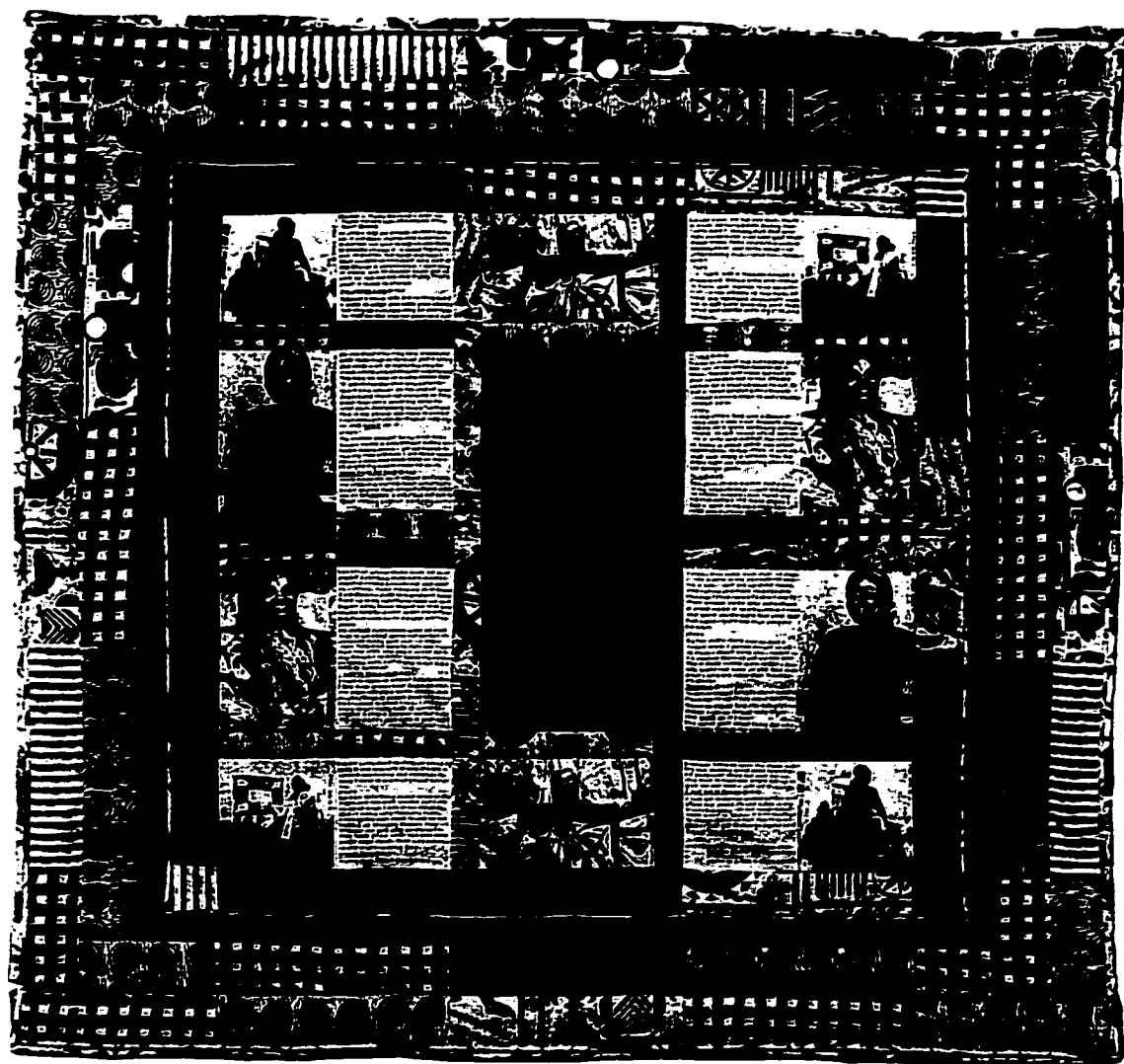


Fig. 7 Faith Ringgold's *Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance StoryQuilt*, 1988. From the *Change Series*  
Acrylic on canvas; photo lithography on silk and cotton pieced fabric  
62 x 62 inches



Fig. 8    Faith Ringgold's *Woman Painting the Bay Bridge*. 1988.  
From the *Woman on a Bridge Series*  
Acrylic on canvas; printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
68 x 68 inches

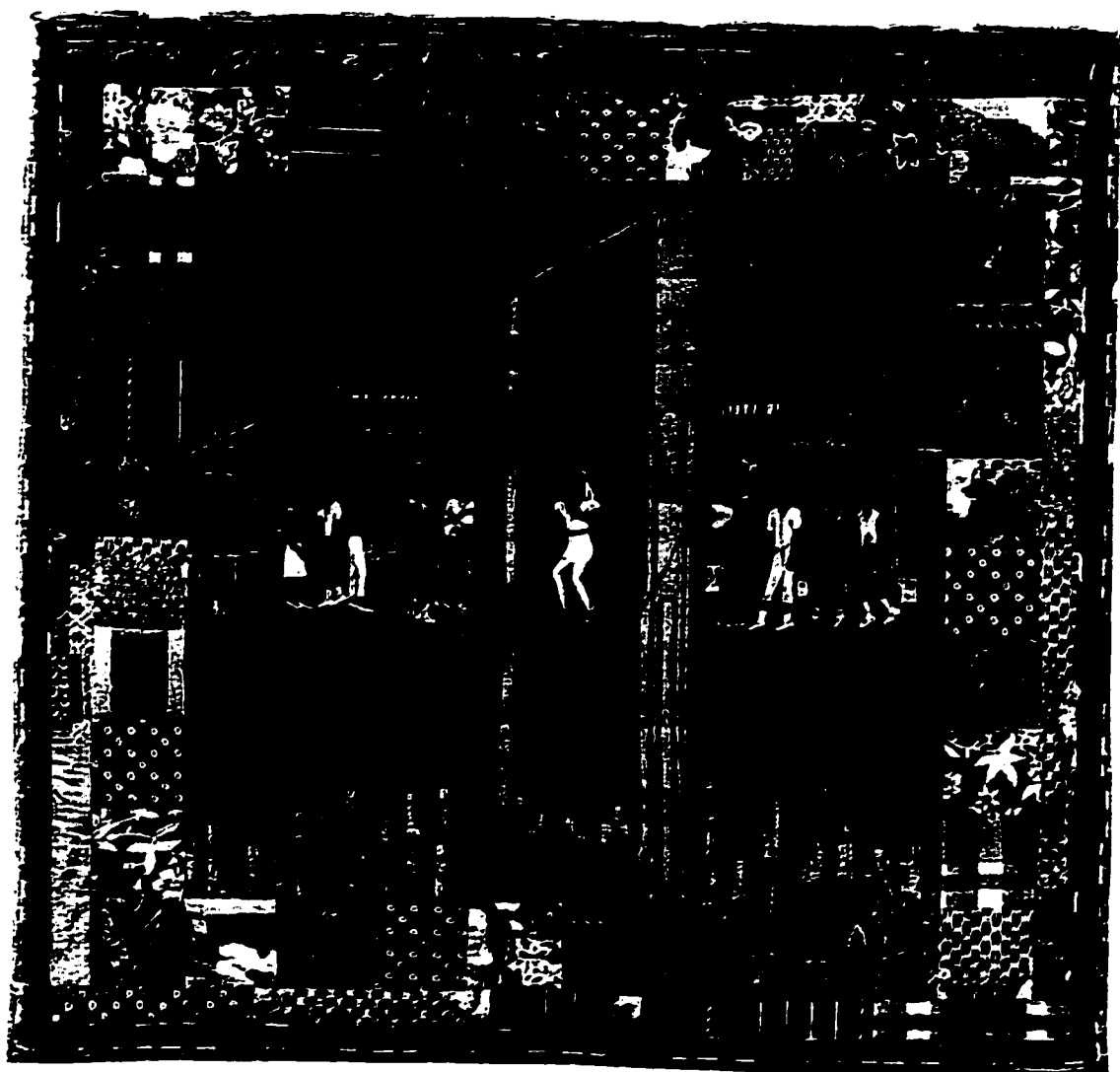


Fig. 9    Faith Ringgold's *Double Dutch on the Golden Gate Bridge*, 1988.  
From the *Woman on a Bridge Series*  
Acrylic on canvas; printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
68 ½ x 68 inches

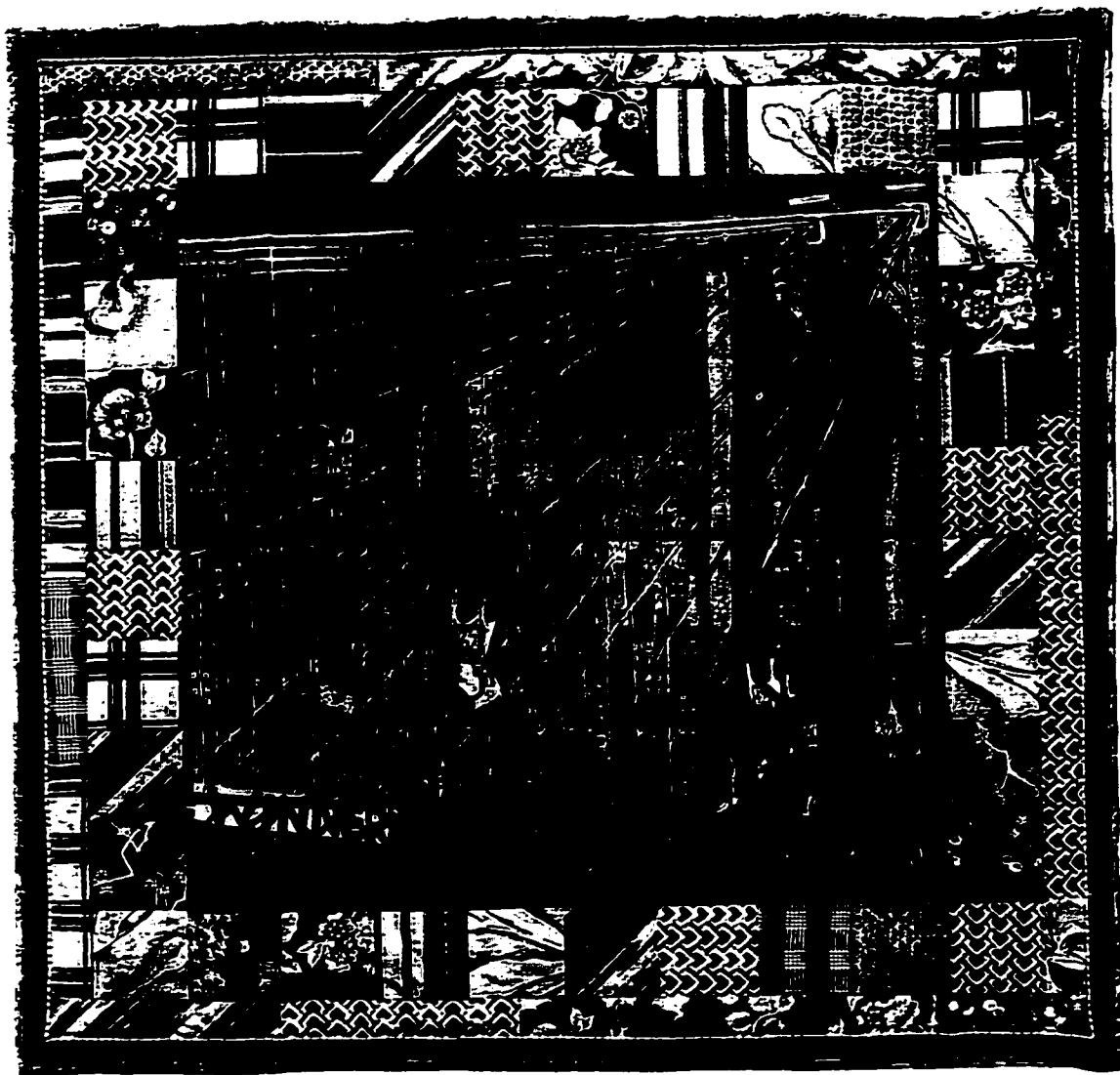


Fig. 10     Faith Ringgold's *The Winner*, 1988.  
From the *Woman on a Bridge* Series  
Acrylic on canvas; printed, dyed, and pieced fabric  
68 x 68 inches



Fig. 11 Photograph of Faith Ringgold modeling for her mother, 1950s

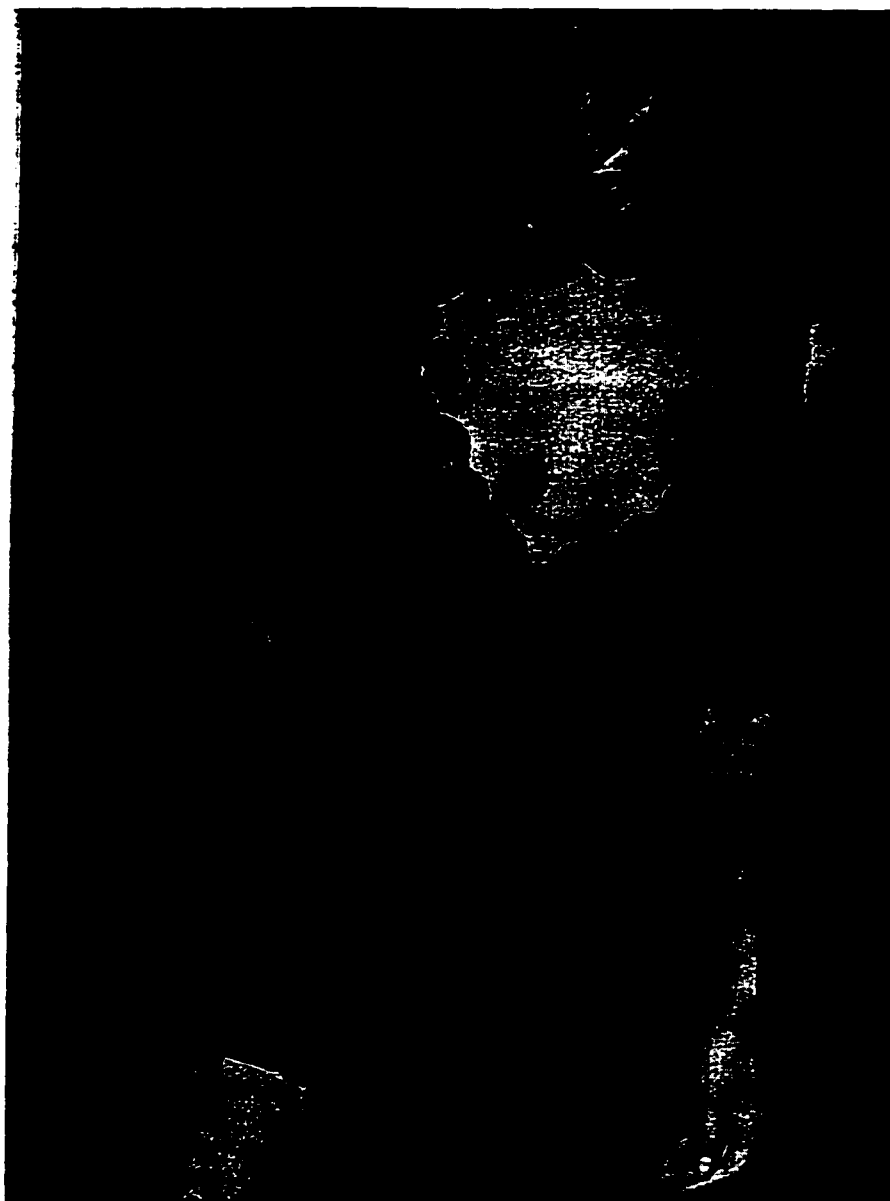


Fig. 12 Advertisement for *Japanese Playboy*, Harper's Bazaar, August 1999



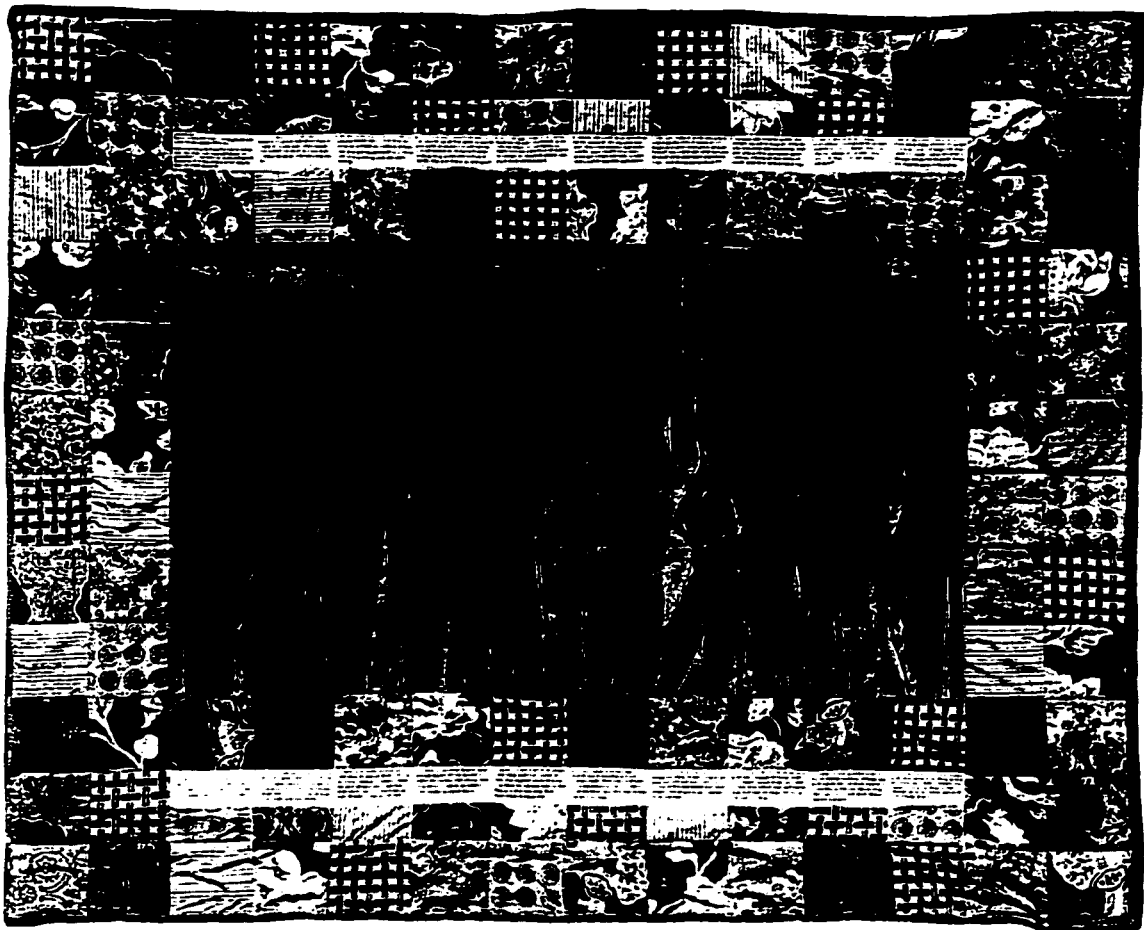


Fig. 13    Faith Ringgold's *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss*  
*Performance Story Quilt*, 1991. From the Change Series  
Acrylic on canvas; pieced and fabric border  
73 ½ x 80 ½ inches



Fig. 14      Faith Ringgold's *The Picnic at Giverny*. 1991.  
From the French Collection Series. Part I: #3  
Acrylic on canvas: pieced fabric border  
73 ½ x 90 ½ inches



Fig. 15      Faith Ringgold's *Picasso's Studio*, 1991.  
From the French Collection Series. Part I: #7  
Acrylic on canvas; pieced fabric border  
73 x 68 inches



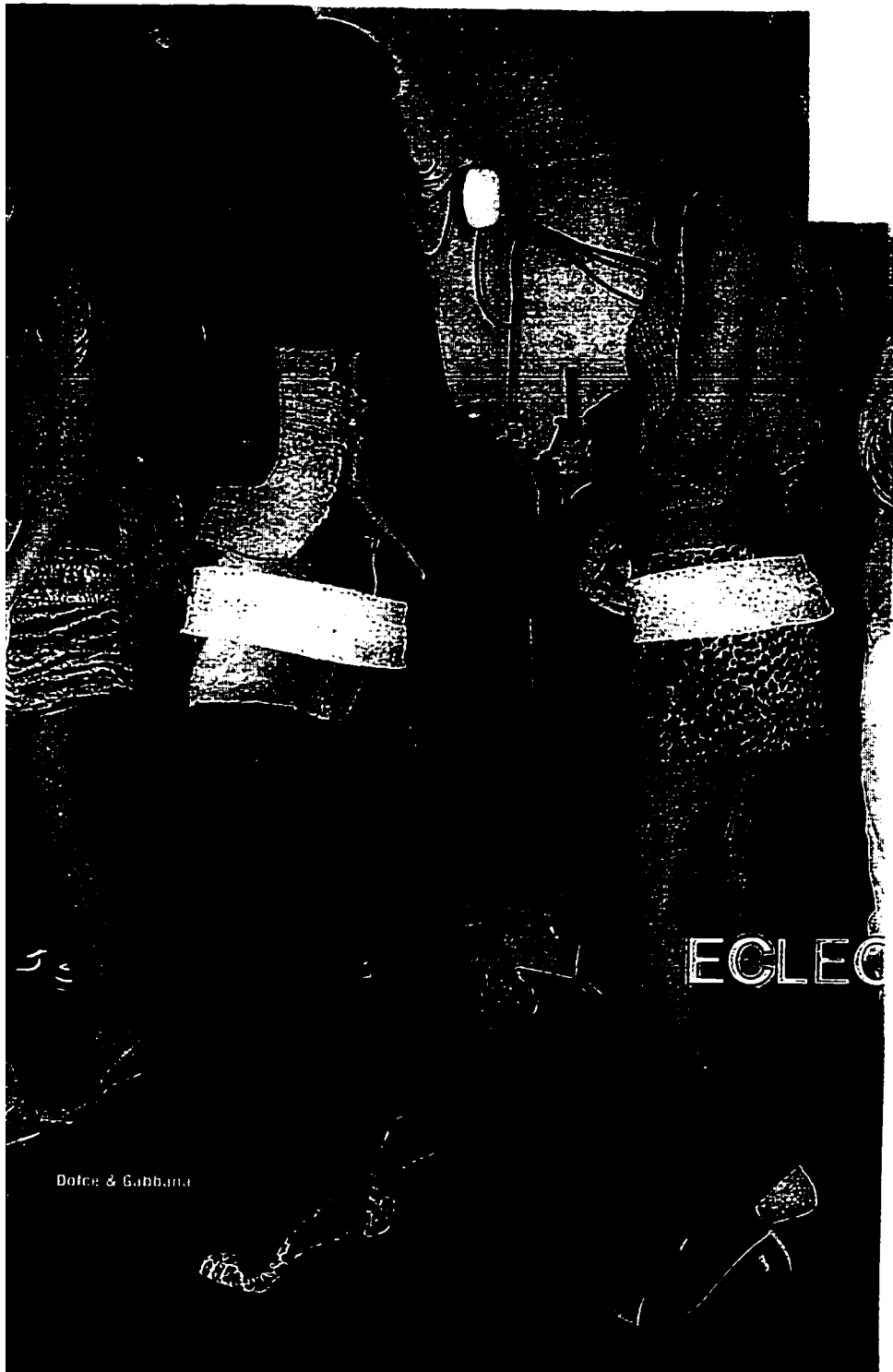
Fig. 16      Faith Ringgold, *Between Friends*, 1963.  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 40 inches



Fig. 17 Faith Ringgold, *The Cocktail Party*,  
1964. Oil on canvas  
42 x 24 inches



Fig. 18 Faith Ringgold, *The American Dream*,  
1964. Oil on canvas  
36 x 24 inches



9 Advertisement for Dolce & Gabanna, Harper's Bazaar, August 1999.

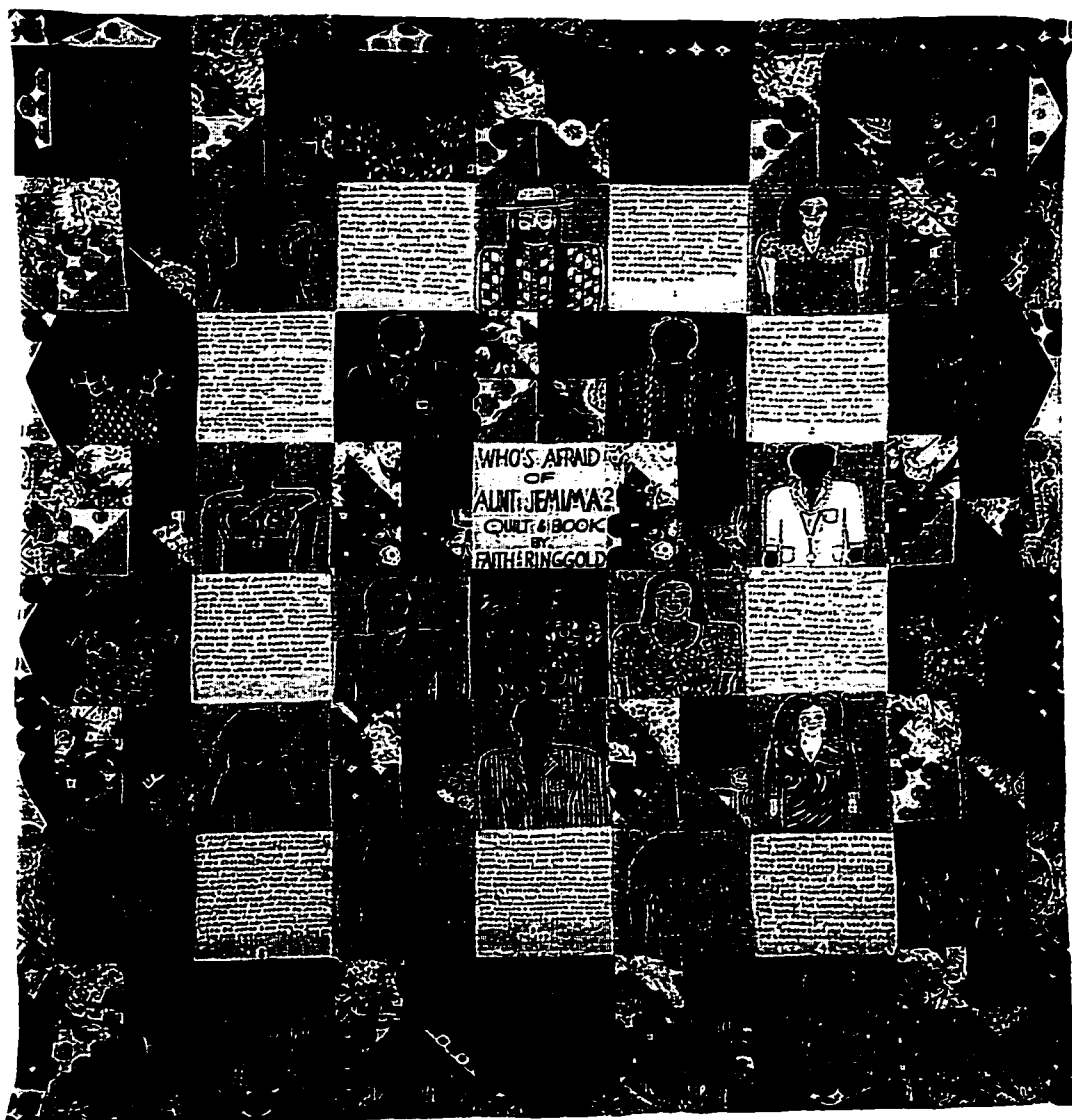


Fig. 20 Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* 1983  
 Acrylic on canvas; pieced fabric with sequins  
 90 x 80 inches



Fig. 21      Faith Ringgold, *Mother's Quilt*, 1983  
Acrylic painted, appliquéd, and embroidered fabric with sequins  
58 x 43 ½ inches



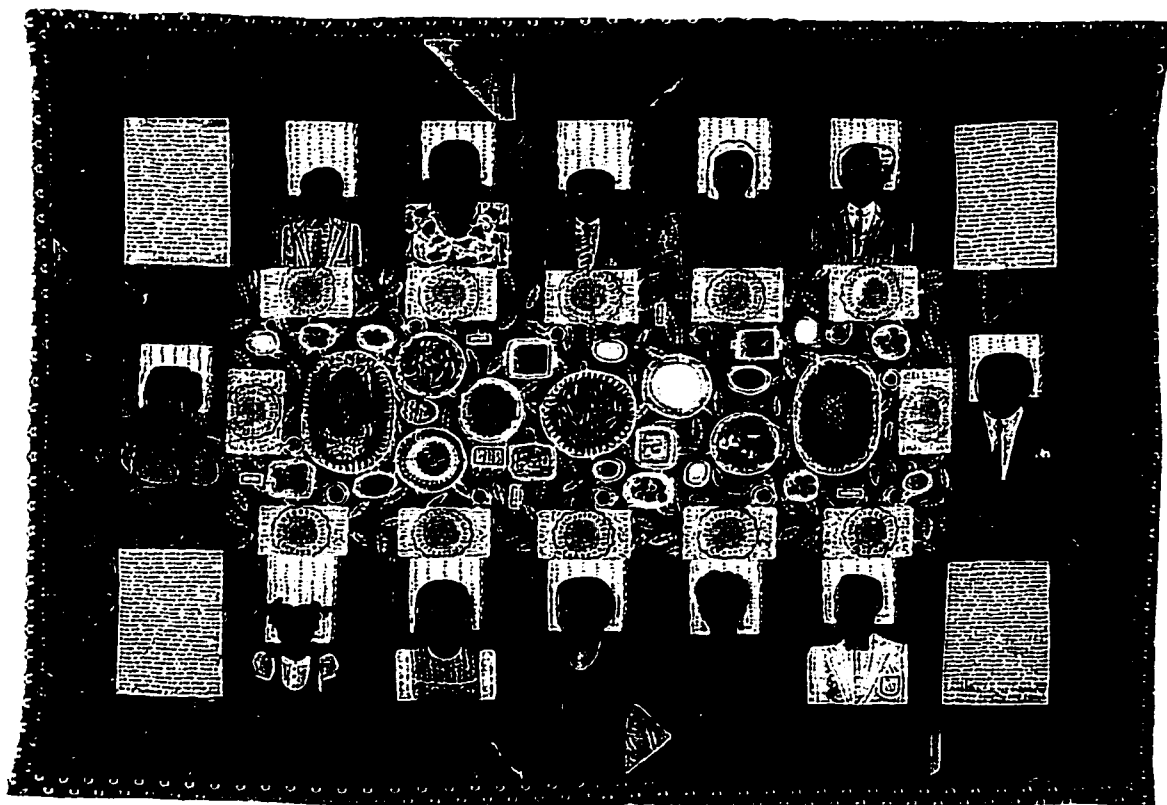


Fig. 22      Faith Ringgold's, *The Dinner Quilt*, 1986  
Acrylic on canvas; dyed and pieced fabric with sequins and beads  
48 1/2 x 66 inches