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Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, 1983

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Faith Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* (1983) (Fig. 1) is the first in Ringgold's series of story quilts. In their materiality, these works are immediately domestic and feminised, a quality that is also explicitly addressed through the narrative Ringgold weaves onto the surface. There are two immediate ways to read *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*. Firstly, and most obviously, we can take the quilt at face value through the story that appears within its fabric, presented through image and text written in a Southern dialect. Secondly, through Ringgold's titular invocation of Aunt Jemima, this work declares itself as responding to that figure. Ringgold seeks to reclaim Aunt Jemima from her seemingly dismal fate as a deeply stereotyped caricature, often viewed as synonymous with the ubiquitous figure of the 'mammy'. In doing so, Ringgold not only negotiates the history of white representations of black women in advertising and the media, but is also in dialogue with the reimagining of Aunt Jemima by two other African American artists, Joe Overstreet and Betye Saar. Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* therefore needs to be understood as an attempt to speak to both struggles against white supremacist renderings of black femininity, but also as a work involved in a conversation concerning black representation and the politics of social transformation.

>>Aunt Jemima<< refers to the woman who appears on the front of the famous pancake mix, a brand developed in the 1889 and now owned by the Quaker Oats Company. Aunt Jemima originated as a character performed in blackface within a Missouri minstrel show. Wearing a bandana and apron, the performance involved a New Orleans style cakewalk accompanied by a song called >>Old Aunt Jemima.<<

Chris Rutt and Charles Underwood, two speculators who had recently purchased a defunct flourmill allegedly saw the show and came up with the idea to market a pancake mix as >>Aunt Jemima's<<. However, Rutt and Underwood's plans soon faltered and the Aunt Jemima trademark and the mill were sold to the R.T. Davis Milling Company in 1890. In 1893, Nancy Green was contracted to play Aunt Jemima in public appearances, beginning with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago that year. Green had been >>discovered<< by the R.T. Davis company as a 59-year-old servant for a Chicago judge who had been born into slavery. In role as Aunt Jemima, she greeted visitors, cooked pancakes, sang and told stories of plantation life – some real, some apocryphal – that formed the genesis of her character as a black domestic servant reminiscing over plantation life.

In the development of her character beyond personal appearances, the R.T. Milling Company also produced advertising, buttons and other ephemera, often emblazoned with the caption >>I'se in Town, Honey<< as well as Aunt Jemima's smiling face. Through advertising pamphlets that included comic strips, readers learned that Aunt Jemima was >>employed<< (read: owned) by Colonel Highbee, and that she had a husband, >>Uncle Mose<<, as well as two unnamed children solely described as >>pickaninnies.<< As a postbellum invention and one of the first major American brands, Aunt Jemima assisted in ameliorating guilt over slavery, and inextricably racialised domestic work within the American imaginary.

It is notable that Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* centres on the family life of Jemima, with this mobilised as the means to establish personhood. If the lines between slavery and servitude are frequently indistinct in the character of Aunt Jemima, this was partly produced by her primary commitment being to Highbee, with her own family relegated to the background. As Orlando Patterson writes in *Slavery*

and Social Death, slavery is dependent on the negation of humanness through natal alienation.¹ In this sense, Ringgold's narrative works to shift Aunt Jemima from myth to personhood through presenting a web of competing emotional, social and financial interests, as they are produced within the family. As a humanist strategy, the centrality of the family seeks to reclaim black female domesticity from the regime of terror experienced under slavery, and the continuation of this in the labour relations of black domestic servitude after the Civil War. This is not to mention the negative stereotypes that have been associated with black motherhood since at least the 1965 Moynihan Report, and continue to the present through, for example, the >>welfare queen<< stereotype. Despite the stripped back qualities of Ringgold's narrative, the emphasis on the family thus carries a weight of meaning when articulated in relation to the figure of Aunt Jemima.

The quilt is made up of 56 squares that contain patterned fabric where they do not present painted portraits of the characters referred to in those squares composed by handwritten text. The story begins with Jemima, the grandchild of two slaves, Granma and Granpa Blakey, who had bought their freedom in New Orleans. We learn that Jemima's parents, Ma Tilley and Pa Blakey, didn't want her to marry Big Rufus, but she did anyway, and the newlyweds went off to Tampa. Once in Florida, Big Rufus and Jemima began working as domestics for a white couple, named as >>Ole Man<< and >>Ole Lady<< Prophet. The story then details how Ole Man Prophet had always joked that he would leave everything to Jemima, much to the chagrin of Ole Lady Prophet. The next square tells of this promise coming true, after lightning struck the Prophet's house and they both died, leaving everything to Jemima, and making her and Big Rufus rich. Big Rufus and Jemima then moved to New York City and opened

¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, Cambridge, MA, 1982.

a catering and restaurant business in Harlem; the quilt also tells us that they have >>two children, Georgia and Lil Rufus.<<

Across the patchwork squares, Ringgold's story oscillates between a linear narrative, and supplementary information that disrupt any sense of continuity. The squares jump about in time, and often indicate character details and the broader context of the story rather than simply propelling the fate of the quilt's titular character. One important aspect is the almost taxonomical information about the colouring of the characters. Uncle Rufus is described as a >>high yallar<< whilst Aunt Jemima – like the figure used to advertise pancake mix – is very black. Their children take after their parents, with the genders swapped, so Lil Rufus is very dark, and Georgia is light skinned.

These details of skin tone link *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* with writing by major black literary figures, including Harlem Renaissance acolytes Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay. In 1928, Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* offered a view into the lives of black Harlemites, with social distinction frequently registered through skin tone. In one passage, McKay describes the arrival of a >>chocolate to the bone<< character called >>Gin-Head Susy<< from South Carolina to Harlem:

Civilisation had brought strikingly exotic types into Susy's race. And like many, many Negroes she was a victim to that...Ancient black life rooted upon its base with all its fascinating new layers of brown, low brown, high brown, nut-brown, lemon, maroon, olive, mauve, gold. Yellow balancing between black and white. Black reaching out beyond yellow. Almost-white on the brink of a change. Sucked back down into the current of black by the terribly sweet rhythm of black blood...'²

² Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, Boston, 1928, pp. 57-58

Such expressive proliferations of language to describe skin colour pepper *Home to Harlem*. As a feature of Harlem-specific language, the oblique quality of these taxonomies to outsiders was acknowledged by Hurston. At the back of her 1942 >>Story in Harlem Slang<< she published a glossary of Harlem slang that included the entry >>Colorscale: high yaller, yaller, high brown, vaseline brown, seal brown, low brown, dark brown<<.³

As in Hurston and McKaye's writing, colour difference in *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* is productive of drama through the way it inscribes social standing. As one square describes, >>Folks would think Jemima was Georgia's maid. Jemima would blow up like a balloon at this.<< Here, Aunt Jemima's blackness renders her motherhood temporarily void in the view of outsiders, returning her to the figure of the maid who is always domestic and never familial. Further details of characters' colouring appear throughout the story; Jemima's mother, Tillie Blakey, is described as >>half Indian and a real beauty<< while Georgia's husband is an >>evil, ugly black man.<< Jemima's son Lil Rufus married a white woman named Margo who he met whilst stationed in Germany during the Korean War, and they have three girls, Jemie, Jo Ann and Julia, that all >>...looked just like Jemima. They aint look nothing like they Ma Margo, she a scrawny little ole white gal.<<

The story continues with the business dealings of the family, noting that after her father Pa Blakey died, Jemima and Rufus gave over the restaurant business in Harlem to Lil Rufus and Margo. They moved back South to New Orleans, and opened another restaurant near Georgia's house. It is only through this detail that we learn Georgia and her >>Doctor Husband<< have moved to New Orleans. Much of the narrative works like this, where the reader feels as though they have missed something, only to

³ Zora Neale Hurston >>Story in Harlem Slang<< in Zora Neale Hurston, *Novels & Stories* New York, 1995, p. 1008.

realise a detail has been introduced casually. This produces a tone akin to the way stories are told within families, often with a level of presumption over one's knowledge of a cousin, or an aunt's life. The narrative then begins to wind up as we learn of hostilities between Jemima and Georgia's family that stem from her husband, Dr. Jones', prejudice. This is revealed by Jemima's >>grand chirun Peter and Annabelle<< who inform her that >>My Pa don't want you in our house<<. In response to this betrayal, Jemima's son Lil Rufus goes to his brother-in-law, Dr Jones. As Ringgold writes, Lil Rufus was >>mad as hell...when Dr Jones saw him he jumped in the pool, Doctors bag and all.<<

The story then ends fairly abruptly, with Jemima and Big Rufus dying in a fatal car accident, which results in a further polarisation between Lil Rufus and Georgia. As Ringgold informs us, >>Georgia, her doctor husband and them two worthless chirun a hers got Jemima's restaurant business and Ma Tillies's big fine house in New Orleans.<< In contrast to the upwardly mobile aspirations of Georgia, her brother Lil Rufus takes Big Rufus' and Aunt Jemima's bodies back to Harlem, in order to give them an African funeral. Jemima is dressed in an African gown, hair braided with cowrie shells, and Big Rufus is laid to rest in a gold dashiki. This dramatises different notions of liberation, via class ascendancy for Georgia, and afro-centricity for Lil Rufus.

Like *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, the narration of Ringgold's biography, *One Flew over the Bridge*, is frequently non-linear in character. Chapters overlap in terms of dates, and the trajectories of different individuals speed past, or lag behind Ringgold's in terms of dates when certain incidents took place. Towards the end of the book, Ringgold describes how she came to make *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*. Having been primarily a painter and sculptor, Ringgold writes that this was the third

quilt she had produced, and the first of her story quilts, works which integrate text and image somewhat like a picture book, comic strip or photobook. Ringgold describes *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* as a radical revision of the character and story of Aunt Jemima, as she had been conceived of both historically, but also in the re-imaginings of her persona within the civil rights and black power movement. She describes herself as having been compelled to make *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, because she was

Tired of hearing black people speak negatively about the image of Aunt Jemima. I knew they were referring to a big black woman and I took it personally. White people had Betty Crocker but I had never heard any of them say hateful things about her.⁴

Ringgold goes on to describe the ways Aunt Jemima had been transformed into >>a gun-toting revolutionary<< as an attempt to subvert her perceived docility, presumably referring to Joe Overstreet's *The New Jemima* (1964) (Fig. 2) and Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. (Fig. 3).

Overstreet's painting shows a grinning Aunt Jemima in a moment of armed resistance, toting a machine gun which is aimed at a representation of the earth, blasting pancakes instead of bullets that fly across the surface of the boxy construction Overstreet painted onto, mimicking the shape of the Aunt Jemima packaging. In the upper right hand corner, a hand grenade looms. Overstreet made this work after learning about Nancy Green, who he said reminded him of his mother

⁴ Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, Boston, 1995, p. 250

and grandmother, and described the image as seeking to supplant the stove with a machine gun.⁵

In Betye Saar's similarly boxy assemblage, presumably also referencing the packaging for Aunt Jemima's pancake mix, the background shows repeated blocks of the Aunt Jemima advertising image from the 1970s like a wall of fly-pasted posters. A statue of Aunt Jemima occupies the middle ground, holding a rifle in one hand, broom in the other, with a pistol tucked in her elbow. In the statue, Saar portrays Aunt Jemima through the idioms established in earlier advertising imagery, where her eyes and mouth were wildly exaggerated and minstrel-like, and her body stout and sexless. This depiction contrasts with the contemporaneous image of Aunt Jemima in the background, where the more overtly racist facial features of earlier advertising had been played down. In the foreground, Aunt Jemima's image appears for a third time, as a flat portrait held in front of the statue's stomach, somewhat like a sandwich board. Here, Jemima is shown in her role as nanny, clutching a white baby who appears distressed whilst she smiles. A fist representing the symbol of black power obscures the bottom half of this image, rising from a woven fabric at the bottom that offers an afro-centric ground from which Aunt Jemima's armed resistance swells. At the bottom, puffs of cotton obscure her feet. In both Overstreet and Saar's representations, Jemima is reimagined as an armed militant, with explicit reference to the contemporary politics of black power struggles manifested in the fist and African fabric that stand at the center of Saar's assemblage, clearly pushing the work beyond a simplistic revenge fantasy.

⁵ Interview with Joe Overstreet for *The World Goes Pop* exhibition at Tate Modern, 2015-2016. Available online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/ey-exhibition-world-goes-pop/artist-interview/joe-overstreet> (Accessed 07/05/2016.)

For Ringgold, it seems the limits of transforming Aunt Jemima into a >>gun-toting revolutionary<< rested in a concern that Overstreet and Saar's work reproduced the type of imagery that haunted the white backlash to the Civil Rights Movement, solely shifting Aunt Jemima from a figure that assuaged white guilt, to one that – in her explicit joy at the prospect of violence – justified the suppression of black liberation. Instead, Ringgold sought to situate Jemima first and foremost within a family structure that was *her own*, not Colonel Highbee's. As well as responding to the natal alienation of slavery, this also relates to a feminist affirmation of traditionally female roles with Ringgold describing her Aunt Jemima as a >>supermom<<, with a >>tireless devotion to nurturing.<<⁶ It is interesting to note that in the initial plans for *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, Ringgold had hoped her daughter, the writer Michele Wallace, would pen the story of Aunt Jemima. Michele refused, viewing Ringgold's remodeling of Aunt Jemima as anachronistic and out of step with contemporary feminist and black politics of representation. In another failed attempt to persuade Wallace, Ringgold advocated that she wanted to represent Aunt Jemima as the >>...one mainly responsible for keeping us together – as necessary to the family as she is to the race.<<⁷

Ringgold took up the task of writing the narrative and sought to foreground Aunt Jemima as a caring figure inextricable from domesticity, a quality also rendered through the form of the quilt. Historically, quilts are associated with communal craft activity among women, and tied to the domestic sphere. Within the story, it is notable that a turning point comes when Jemima and Rufus go and work as domestics for the white couple, the Prophets. No dates are given within the quilt, but as Lil Rufus, Jemima's son, meets his wife Margo in Germany during the Korean War, it is

⁶ Ringgold, p. 251

⁷ Ibid.

possible to hazard a guess that the moment of leaving New Orleans likely takes place in the 1920s. During the years after World War 1, new work opportunities arose for white women in clerical and sales positions, which led to a significant growth of African American women becoming domestic workers, taking up positions that white women had left. By 1920, 46 percent of all employed black women were working in ‘domestic services.’⁸ This was a phenomenon that mapped closely onto the Great Migration North, which in Ringgold’s account of Jemima and Rufus occurs after their inheritance from the Prophet’s liberates them from domestic servitude.

Business ownership is another key moment in Ringgold’s quilt, as Aunt Jemima and Big Rufus open up their restaurant and catering business in Harlem. This shift in the narrative is worth comparing with a 1921 advertisement for Aunt Jemima, titled >>Aunt Jemima Bids Goodbye to the Old Plantation.<< which I want to cite at length, to give a sense of how this journey from servitude to saleswoman was figured within the advertising campaigns of the R.T. Davis Milling Company.

Aunt Jemima turned. Through tear-dimmed eyes she saw what she was never to see again – her little cabin home. A thousand memories flashed across her mind. How happy she had been on that old Louisiana plantation! How kind, how noble, had been her “massa,” Colonel Higbee! She thought of the morning she first took her mother’s place in the big kitchen of her master’s mansion; of his unconcealed pride in her as she grew into fame through her skill as a cook.

Then, crowding out these bright memories, came those of the war – sad memories of the Colonel’s going; of the manse so desolate, long

⁸ Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth Century America*, Cambridge, MA, 2007, p. 211

crumbled in ruin. And she saw herself again – left alone with just her pickaninnies and a sheltering place, that sturdy little cabin.

Now some twenty years had flown. She had raised her little family and it, too, had gone. Aunt Jemima was quite alone. But you remember, perhaps, that she had sold to a big milling company in the North the pancake recipe that had made her famous, the recipe that no other mammy could equal. Well this was the day when she would carry out the stipulation of the sale which required her going to the mills and overseeing the preparation of a pancake flour to be made from her recipe and sold in a ready-mixed form. Grieved though she must have been to bid that last goodbye, she was happy, too. A new opportunity of service was open to her. If from a recipe a ready-prepared flour could be made, thousands could enjoy her pancakes as the Colonel's guests had done.

The sentimentality over Aunt Jemima's departure from the plantation corresponds to the fact that the R.T. Davis Milling Company was renamed the Aunt Jemima Mills Company in 1914. Therefore, at the moment of this advertisement, the company in name was supposedly >>owned<< by Aunt Jemima, a myth furthered by the description of sales which are figured as an extension of service, commodifying Aunt Jemima into a widely available labour saving device. Further along, the advertisement also emphasised that Aunt Jemima had been rewarded in gold for her services, rather than in a wage, or a stake in the company. For Michael Manring, this detail evokes the >old south<< as resistant to the >>stench of currency<<.⁹ Despite apparently >>owning<< the company, Aunt Jemima is neither speculator nor wage labourer. The

⁹ Michael Manring, *Slave in A Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, Charlottesville, 1998, p. 22

detail of the one off payment thus works to convey that Aunt Jemima had not travelled so far from slavery, despite her fame and exodus from her >>little cabin home.<< Slaves, of course, were bought rather than waged, with the development of capitalism and wage labour forming a contradictory pressure to the plantation system.

Ringgold's stress on Jemima as devoted to nurturing, on first consideration, would potentially seem problematic, not allowing her to travel quite far enough from her role as caretaker for Colonel Highbee. Yet, this valorization of historically feminine roles corresponds with certain feminist strategies of the 1970s-1980s. One important example would be the theoretical developments by writers including Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James who sought to stress 'woman's work' as foundational to the maintenance and reproduction of capitalism, rather than as a >>feudal remnant<<, as it had often been viewed by Marxist-Leninists. Politically, such views found their articulation in movements like Wages for Housework, beginning in the 1970s. Similarly, Lucy Lippard describes how the women's movement prompted female artists to begin >>shedding their shackles, proudly untying the apron strings – and, in some cases, keeping the apron on, flaunting it, turning it into art.<<¹⁰ Ringgold, with her use of quilts, forms an important figure here alongside Miriam Schapiro, who also worked with craft-based materials. In the years since, a debate has almost inevitably emerged over the political limits to affirming and reclaiming femininity. In relation to the visual arts, Martha Rosler argued that the valorisation of >>women's culture<< and >>traditional handicrafts<< were at risk of simply reproducing the repressive conditions under which they were developed.¹¹ For Ringgold's Aunt Jemima, this risk is doubled from the outset as she has long stood as a figure that apparently takes

¹⁰ Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, New York, 1976, p. 57.

¹¹ Martha Rosler, 'The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California' in *Artforum*, September 1977, pp. 66-74.

pleasure in her role as cook, nanny, housekeeper, not only in order to legitimise women's location within the domestic sphere, but also to erase, as Caroline Brown writes, >>the brutal specificity of slave regimes built on the maximum exploitation of human capital, becoming instead the incarnation of a benign and largely mythical plantation system.<<¹²

In discussing Ringgold's appropriation of Aunt Jemima, Brown describes her strategy as representative of an >>organic black feminism.<<¹³ Certainly, we could read the quilt along these lines, with the proffering of its organic qualities relating back to my argument that this work is deeply humanist through its investment in the family as a means to transform the figure of Jemima. However, it needs to be considered that the family presented in *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima* is in no way idealised, and therefore skirts any sentimentality towards relations shaped by patriarchy and other forms of social repression. Rather, Jemima's family designates kinship as a source of strength and as a site of struggles that are experienced both internally within the family unit, but that may also take place in relation to larger social forces. In particular, the language around skin colour foregrounds this; dramatising how social pressures intrude into, and are reproduced within the supposedly private sphere of the family. In this light, Ringgold's intent on portraying Aunt Jemima as a caregiving, property-owning figure with a family serves to convey her transformation along solidly socio-economic lines, rather than conveying merely hopeful sentimentality. Here, the reason to be afraid of Aunt Jemima may not lie in her transformation into gun-toting militant, but rather in the meaning of family ties as

¹² Caroline, A. Brown, *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art: Performing Identity*, London, 2011, p. 35.

¹³ Ibid.

inherently disruptive to the forces of oppression and exploitation that characterised the invention of Aunt Jemima as a figure of servitude for the white American family.

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Fig. 1 Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, 1983



Fig. 2 Joe Overstreet, *The New Jemima*, 1964



Fig. 3 Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972

