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Floor 4



***Dancing at the Louvre:  
The French Collection  
Part I, #1***



***Picasso's Studio: The French  
Collection Part I, #7***



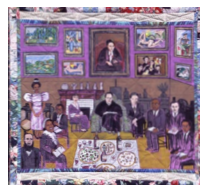
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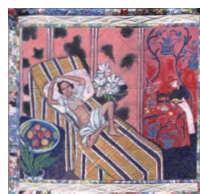
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***Dancing at the Louvre: The French Collection Part I, #1, 1991***  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio. Gift of David  
Horvitz '74 and Francie Bishop Good, 2017.5.6

1. Dear Aunt Melissa,

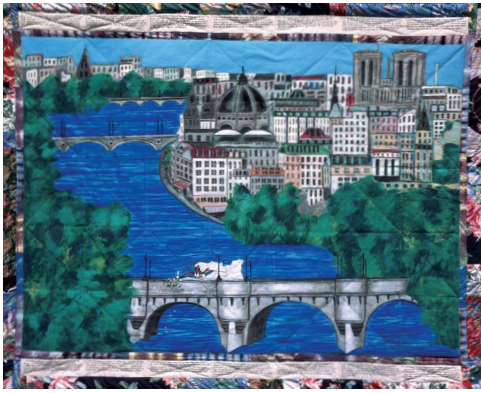
Marcia and her three little girls took me dancing at the Louvre. I thought I was taking them to see the *Mona Lisa*. You've never seen anything like this. Well, the French hadn't either. Never mind Leonardo da Vinci and Mona Lisa, Marcia and her three girls were the show.

2. They ran me ragged. Marcia wanted to go one way and the children another. The baby girl wanted to jump. The other two wanted to run, and did. Then they all just broke into a dance when we finally found the *Mona Lisa*.
3. Pierre used to say, "*Cherchez le fauteuil roulant*, just get a wheelchair at the door of the Louvre, 'cause if you don't you're gonna need one going home." I've been to the Louvre a hundred times, but never have I seen it like this. It was like looking at the pictures upside down from a racing car going 100 *kilomètres à l'heure*.
4. Now that Marcia is married to Maurice, and they have moved to Paris, she and her children are determined to speak *le bon Français parfaitement* by morning. I had to put her straight about me and the children. You know how it is with friends, they all want to tell you who they think you are and how to live your life, and why.
5. Well I told her straight out, "Marcia, you known damn good and well your papa never went past the third grade." And that was food in those days, 'cause he wasn't supposed to do that. But my papa was a school principal. He finished Lincoln Academy in Lynnsville. And I got the diploma to prove it.
6. Papa taught in Florida, South Carolina, and Georgia. I got all his licenses and test scores. Papa and Mama was both teachers. We didn't come up like no weeds. Not saying she did either. But I resent her telling me that my children belong in France. And that I should be raising them, not you.
7. Papa never allowed those Campbell boys in our yard. Chauncey, Buba and Percy, both of Marcia's brothers was allowed in our yard. Now I'm saying he was right 'cause Papa *était un* snob. But I remember Papa, in the little pinstriped coat he used to wear and his glasses on the end of his nose.
8. Papa was something. "No, young man, you go out of this yard. The Simone girls are doing their chores and they have their studies, supper and to bed. *Allez vous en!*" Then he'd hit that tail at the back of his coat like a period and turn at the same time. And those Campbell boys would fly out of our yard.



9. Papa wasn't too keen on Marcia either, but she always had a little way about her, like she thought she was *très chic*. Marcia doesn't remember any thing about growing up poor in Atlanta. As far as she is concerned she was born in a first class cabin on the S.S. Liberté on her way to Paris, sipping Möet and smoking a Gauloise.
10. You should hear the story she told us about how she used to set the table for diner with silver service and *cristal* every night 'cause her father would get upset if he came home and the table wasn't formally set for supper. We were at the Paris party and her husband, Maurice, was present so I just "uh-uh'd" her.
11. But I remember the time we saw those Campbell boys coming out of Miss Baker's back door carrying food. They said they were cleaning out her ice box and the food was spoiled. Then Miss Baker came over crying to Papa that all the food in her icebox was gone. Papa sat Miss Baker down to our supper table and went straight over to Marcia's house.
12. And there was Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, and their three sons sitting at their kitchen table in the dark eating Miss Baker's food. When Papa came in they started coughing and gagging. They almost choked. But not Mademoiselle Marcia. Papa said she was on the back porch nursing *un cristal de limonade* and reading *Madame Bovary*.

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**Wedding on the Seine: The French Collection Part I, #2, 1991**  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Private collection

1. You could say, I ran *comme un dératé*, like a bat outta hell. There was only one thing I could think about. Get out of this church and get some air. Never mind what this crowd thinks about it. Run, girl, run. To the river fast as you can. And get rid of these damn flowers and this wedding veil and train. What is this, a funeral?
2. I've only been in Paris 6 months. I came to be *une artiste*, not a wife. I don't even know the language. Pierre is American born with French parents, so he speaks *l'Anglaise et le Français parfaitement* though he loves everything American, *le plus noir que possible*. But what about his family and friends?
3. There is something in the way they look at me, as if to say: How did you get so far away from home, *l'enfant*? Will you become civilized, or will you remain just a beautiful savage dressed in a Paris frock? The French believe that they are *the* unique civilization. But what about the Bastille, the Nazi collaboration, the Haitian and Algerian revolutions?
4. They will kill with a glass of wine raised for a toast. *Vive la France!* And if you will be just as dead as if you had your throat cut in some back alley in Harlem over 25 cents and a bottle of beer. Is it because I am a little black girl from Harlem that I don't believe their charade?
5. Why did I marry this Frenchman? I hardly knew him. He's more than twice my age, and white. We have very little in common. *Il sera un bon mari. Il est très riche et généreux*. They all said. "You will be very happy with him my dear. His family has been in Paris for three generations. He is practically French."
6. The wedding procession was hot on my heels. Pierre was holding up the rear puffing and blowing. *Ne l'arrêtez pas d'aller! Elle reviendra. Elle est le mienne maintenant*. "Let her go. She'll come back. She's mine." I ran even faster. "Pierre will make you a great husband," someone yelled at me. Or will he make me over into his shadow?
7. Could I be *une artiste* and a wife? "Take a studio in Paris or in our chateau in the South," Pierre said. But I don't even know if I can paint. Now I may never find out. I ran even faster down the narrow streets to the Ile de la Cité past the Notre Dame Cathedral and on to the Pont-Neuf, overlooking the Seine.
8. I could have run forever. The wedding procession was gaining on me. I had to make a statement. Something more than "I obey" and "I do." Cause I don't, I won't! I hurled my bouquet into the river and it landed on the Bateaux Mouches and the crowd of tourists looked up and applauded me with *Vive la France!*



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9. I made my statement. Would it be the last I'd make? Oh God, don't let me sink like those flowers. I want to live a life of making art, not babies and dinner and beds. I looked back at the wedding procession. They stood frozen, waiting for my next move. Pierre was in the front row. An aging man, *résolu*.
  10. What does Pierre know about me and the way I was raised in our little tiny apartment in Harlem? Does he understand what my mother and father sacrificed to give me the little they gave me? Does he know that as meager as our life was it was beautiful, and that we loved each other as we were rich?
  11. What do I know about Pierre's family and his life in the Fifth Avenue town house he was born in in New York City? Who was the pretty black girl who changed his diapers and took care of him? Did she look like me? When he is holding me and telling me how much he loves me, is it memories of her that make his voice tremble as it does?
  12. Will our children be French? Or French speaking coloreds? And why have I waited till it is too late to ask these questions? Is it because the answers are not as important as *amour*? For whatever reason, I know he loves me. But that's no reason to run away.
  13. Later I learned that Pierre had a serious heart condition with only a few years to live. No wonder I never had to put up with a mistress. He had *assez d'amour seulement pour moi*. We were together—death do we part. Not much time for art or anything else but being with Pierre, and two babies—one a year and then...
  14. I was again on the Seine, without flowers, applause or a wedding procession in hot pursuit. I was remembering our wedding day. They were right all the time—Pierre was *un bon mari*. But would he leave me alone? Could I do my art? Within just three years Pierre died, leaving me alone with my art and my two babies.

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***The Picnic at Giverny: The French Collection Part I, #3, 1991***  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Collection Barbara and Eric Dobkin

1. Dear Aunt Melissa,

Today I was invited to paint in the garden of the celebrated painter Claude Monet at Giverny. There, in an area of the garden composed of water-lily ponds, with weeping willow trees and beautiful flowers everywhere, was a group of American women artists and writers having a picnic and discussing the role of women in art.

2. I strolled through the beautiful *jardins*, taking in the fantastic, beautiful flower beds and trees, passing over the matrix of Japanese bridges that connect the wildly wooded areas of the *jardins* with the fields of flowers near Monet's house. Then I settled on the same area near the water-lily ponds flanked by weeping willow trees near the American women who were picnicking.
3. I kept seeing Manet's *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe*, the painting that caused such a scandal in Paris. It was not allowed at the salon because it showed Manet's brother-in-law and a male friend having a picnic with two nude women, all of whom were recognizable. I kept thinking: why not replace the traditional nude woman at the picnic with Picasso in the nude, and the 10 American women fully clothed?
4. That would be crossing Monet's beautiful *Nymphéas* with Manet's scandal, and a reaction to the conversation about the role of women artists to show powerful images of women. They were discussing female nudes in the company of fully clothed men in paintings like Manet's *The Picnic*. Seeing it and wondering what to paint, this seemed a good idea to begin *ma nouvelle conscience*.
5. What to paint has always been my greatest problem as an artist. And then how to paint it? These were the questions I looked hard for answers to. Now there is the role of women artists? Some special niche we can occupy, like a power station? A woman artist can assume the rights of men in art? And be seen? I am very excited to meet these women. This may be the very first day of my life.
6. They are speaking of *la libération et la liberté* for women. Sometimes we think we are free, until we spread our wings and are cut down in mid air. But who can know a slave by the mere look in her eye? Ordinarily I would just paint the *jardin* and include in it some of these women at a picnic. That was before the question of freedom came up. Is it just the beauty of nature I am after?
7. Monet painted his most wonderful masterpiece, *Décorations des Nymphéas*, of the garden and the water-lily ponds. Those paintings hang in the circular galleries of the Musée de l'Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris. That must be wonderful, to have your work so approved and



revered by people to have them hanging in a space specially made for it. What does that amount of respect feel like?

8. Can a woman of color ever achieve that amount of eminence in art in America? Here or anywhere in the world? Is it just raw talent alone that makes an artist's work appreciated to the fullest? Or it is a combination of things, *la magie par une exemple, le sexe pare une autre, et la couleur est encore une autre*, magic, sex, and color.
9. One has to get the attention one needs to feed the magic. There is no magic in the dark. It is only when we get it that we know a transformation has taken place, a wonderful idea has been created into art. If we never see it we never know, and it didn't happen. Isn't that why I and so many other negro artists have come to Paris—to get a chance to make magic, and find an audience for our art?
10. Should I paint some of the great and tragic issues of our world? A black man toting a heavy load that has pinned him to the ground? Or a black woman nursing the world's population of children? Or the two of them together as slave, building a beautiful world for other to live free? *Non!* I want to paint something that will inspire—liberate. I want to see some of this WOMEN ART. *Magnifique!*
11. What will people think of my work? Will they just ignore it or will they give it some consideration? Maybe tear it apart and say that it is the worst ever and this artist should have her brushes burned and her hands, too. And isolate me as a woman artist because I am no longer trying to paint like, or to be like a man. Paris is full of these women artists who have no first names, wear men's trousers and deny they are married or have children.
12. I paint like a woman. I always paint wearing a white dress. Now I have a subject that speaks out for women. I can no more hide the fact that I am a woman than that I am a Negro. It is a waste of time to entertain such subterfuge any longer.
13. There are enough beautiful paintings of nude women in the world. I now want to see nude men painted by women, or nude men in the company of fully clothed women. *C'est de la fantaisie pure*. The men are expressing their power over women. But I am not interested in having power over anyone. I just want to see nude men in the company of fully clothed women for a change.
14. I am deeply inspired by these American women and their conversations about art and women in America. It makes me homesick for my country. And for their women's movement. I have created this painting *Picnic at Giverny par la tribut*. They have given me something new to ponder, a challenge to confront in my art, a new direction. And pride is being a negro woman.

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***The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles: The French Collection Part I, #4, 1991***

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Collection Oprah Winfrey

1. The National Sunflowers Quilters Society of America are having quilting bees in sunflower fields around the world to spread the cause of freedom. Aunt Melissa has written to inform me of this and say: "Go with them to the sunflower fields in Arles. And please take good care of them in that foreign country, Willia Marie. These women are our freedom," she wrote.
2. Today the women arrived in Arles. They are Madame Walker, Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells, Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune and Ella Baker, a fortress of African American women's courage, with enough energy to transform a nation piece by piece.
3. Look what they've done in spite of their oppression: Madame Walker invented the hair straightening comb and became the first self-made American-born woman millionaire. She employed over 3000 people. Sojourner Truth spoke up brilliantly for women's rights during slavery, and could neither read nor write. Ida Wells made an exposé of the horror of lynching in the South.
4. Fannie Lou Hamer braved police dogs, water hoses, brutal beating, and jail in order to register thousands of people to vote. Harriet Tubman brought over 300 slaves to freedom in 19 trips from the South on the Underground Railroad during slavery and never lost a passenger. Rosa Parks became the mother of the Civil Rights Movement when she sat down in the front of a segregated bus and refused to move to the back.
5. Mary McLeod Bethune founded Bethune Cookman College was special advisor to Presidents Harry Truman and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Ella Baker organized thousands of people to improve the condition of poor housing, jobs and consumer education. Their trip to Arles was to complete *The Sunflower Quilt*, an international symbol of their dedication to change the world.
6. The Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh came to see the black women sewing in the sunflower fields.

"Who is this strange looking man?" they asked.

"He is *un grande peintre*," I told them, "Though he is greatly troubled in his mind." He held a vase of sunflowers, no doubt *une nature morte*, a still life, for one of his paintings.

7. "He's the image of the man hit me in the head with a rock as a girl," Harriet said. "Make him leave. He reminds me of slavers." But he was not about to be moved. Like one of the sunflowers, he appeared to be growing out of the ground. Sojourner wept into the stitches of her quilting for the loss of her thirteen children mostly all sold into slavery.





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8. One of Sojourner's children, a girl, was sold to a Dutch slave in the West Indies who then took her to Holland. "Was that something this Dutch man might know something about? He should pay for all pain his people have given us. I am concerned about you, Willia Marie. Is this a natural setting for a black woman?" Sojourner asked.
9. "I came to France to seek opportunity," I said. "It is not possible for me to be an artist in the States."
- "We are all artists. Piecing is our art. We brought it straight from Africa," they said. "That was what we did after a hard day's work in the fields to keep our sanity and our beds warm and bring beauty into our lives. That was not being an artist. That was being alive."
10. When the sun went down and it was time for us to leave, the tormented little man just settled inside himself and took on the look of the sunflowers in the field as if he were one of them. The women were finished piecing now.
- "We need to stop and smell the flowers sometimes," they said. "Now we can do our real quilting, our real art: making this world piece up right."
11. "I got to get back to that railroad," Harriet said. "Ain't all us free yet, no matter how many them laws they pass. Sojourner fighting for women's rights. Fannie for voter registration. Ella and Rosa working on civil rights. Ida looking out for mens getting lynched. Mary Bethune getting our young-uns education, and Madame making money fixing hair and giving us jobs. Lord, we is sure busy."
12. "I am so thankful to my Aunt Melissa for sending you wonderful women to me," I said. "Art can never change anything the way you have. But it can make a picture so everyone can see and know our true history and culture, from the art. Someday I will make you women proud of me, too. Just wait, you'll see."

"We see, Willia Marie," they said. "We see."

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**Matisse's Model: The French Collection Part I, #5, 1991**

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Baltimore Museum of Art. Frederick R. Weisman Contemporary  
Art Acquisitions Endowment

1. Every little girl wants to be *une danseuse*. I still do. Matisse's paintings always make me think of dancing, beauty and love. They make me want to strip off my clothes and join hands with a circle of friends to dance till both my body and my soul are so tired I fall asleep on a beautiful chaise lounge and say Ahhhhhh. Matisse's *La Danse* did that.
2. I have always wanted to be beautiful, not like an anonymous beautiful woman but like *une belle peinture*, beautiful painting. Something that pleases not only the eye but the soul. Here in Matisse's studio I am that beauty. I can't be sure of what HE thinks, but I have known for a long time that woman has to think for herself. And a black woman has to be sure.
3. When I was growing up in Atlanta there was a boy living in the next house to ours who used to call me Smokey. He was referring to my skin color which he thought looked like smoke. He was very dark himself but somehow he felt that his color was indelible. I never could figure out why, but now I know. It was because he was a man, or would be one day.
4. And when he did, he would not be "courting or marrying no smoke," black as he was. Even though men commonly do the choosing I knew when I got married, black as I was, I wasn't going to marry no fool. Some girls liked fools, not saying that favoring light skin and being a fool go together, but sometime they did. To the contrary, there were light skinned boys who didn't waste no time on no light girl.
5. And there were boys like Preston Wilson, *noir comme le charbon*, coal black, who used to say, "All a yaller woman could do for me is show me where that little black beauty went." But still, dark skinned girls at school knew we were not the top priority. So we looked for the Preston Wilsons, 'cause most boys favored peaches-and-cream over smoke. That was a natural fact.
6. Maybe in another life I was white with blonde hair and blue eyes, thin nose and lips; in this life I am black with all that entails. That was hard to accept sometimes when I realized that the Negro man would like me a lot better if I looked more like the *master's woman*. I would have thought the rape of our mothers during slavery would color his thinking.
7. Men are so competitive. They always want what other men have. That is why they have so many wars. They believe they should take what they want. I wonder what men think when they are thinking of women. How can they betray them with deception about loving them? They know that many women live *pour l'amour*. Without love some women are only half a person, that half which hates itself for being alone.
8. Do they despise that is us? Or do they just simply use it to their own advantage? We fall in and



out of love. Then we watch our daughters and our daughters' daughters, knowing there's no way to share anything to dull the pain. We watch our sons' sons play the same love games with women. *Et personne n'apprend rien d'amour*, nobody learns a thing about love.

9. Right now I feel as strong as all the women who have ever lived, reclining as I am on the women's bed evoking all kinds of illusions. But this is a job: modelling for money. Though I do it to see the magic I bring to the artist's art. Here is a certain power I keep in the translation of my image from me to canvas. I enjoy seeing that in the finished work.
10. I love playing the beautiful woman, knowing that I am steeped in painting history, Ingres's *The 'grande odalisque'*, Manet's *Olympia*, and the Egyptian goddess Cleopatra before that. It is an extremely thought-provoking position to be in. I ask the question. Why am I here posing like this, and what would HE think if I took out my glasses and started to read a first edition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or Richard Wright's *Black Boy*?
11. There is no special couch made for only proper or improper women to lie on. All of us at one time or another have lain on a chaise longue. It may not be so fancy as the ones in Ingres's *The 'grande odalisque'* or in Matisse's many pictures of reclining nudes, though it may be. I think men see these things with dreamy eyes. They see beauty in *la vulnérabilité, la passivité, et la soumission*.
12. It wouldn't inspire fantasy to see a woman tired—too tired to be waiting for love? We don't have to have a man lay us out on the couch to accommodate his special love fantasy. We can just lie down there ourselves to just rest after a hard day's work. *Ça c'est belle aussi*. That is beautiful, too.

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**Matisse's Chapel: The French Collection Part I, #6, 1991**

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Private collection

1. Dear Aunt Melissa,

I had a dream last night that the dead members of our family had a gathering in Henri Matisse's chapel in Vence. All dress in black and white, they made a striking contrast to Matisse's blue, green and white patterns. The old folks up front: Grandma and Grandpa on either side of Great-grandma Betsy and Great-great-grandma Susie.

2. Behind them on their left sat my sister, Barbara, and baby brother Ralph, like *l'enfant* Jesus in Mama's lap, and Daddy next to her, and brother Andrew, looking handsome as a Green God next to Daddy. All my uncles and aunts and cousins were seating in the back of the chapel with Daddy's Mama and Papa standing off to themselves.
3. As I arrived at the chapel, Granma Betsy was telling a story. Her voice filled the chapel like music bouncing off the windows and walls to our ears. "There was a story Mama Susie told us as young-uns 'bout slavery. I never will forget. She ain' never talk much 'bout slavery, so when this white man ask her how she feel 'bout being descendent from slaves? She come back at him—
4. How you feel descendent from *slavers*? He turnt beet red, tell her this story: His grandma and grandpa was on a ocean liner come from Europe. They was slavers in South Carolina. A slave ship was having trouble and signal they vessel to help. As the ship approach they could smell the stink and see the shackled bodies of men, women and children packed together on the deck of the slave ship.
5. The prissy white ladies on the ocean line, with they white clothes and faces and they little children all scrubbed clean and perfect, stood on the deck glaring at the human cargo from Africa. Well, this is a God somewhere. A sudden strong wind swept all that stink from the slave ship spraying the ocean liner like a madam sprays perfume, only the scent was pure shit.
6. Them white folks was throwing up all over they fine clothes and stampeding each together to get away from the stench, and the sight of all them stinking slaves shackled together. And the slaves was waving and smiling, some of them was even singing and laughing.
7. The ocean liner caught fire below. The trapped smoke and the stench was unbearable in low parts of the ship and was even worse of the aft side so that the only breath of air bearable was on the deck, facing the stinking, waving niggers bound for America to be free labor on the white folks' planation.
8. Even the ocean liner's food was seasoned with the stench of human excrement. The white



man was near tears telling this story. "I can actually see and smell those bodies just from the story my grandfather told me. Even now as I talk to you," the white man said, "I smell myself stinking."

9. Whenever I think about the slave ship my grandfather saw, I start to see shit on my own hands and all over my body, too. And I have to go change my clothes and wash myself. But I just never come clean. No matter how much I bathe, I still smell. That is what being the descendant of slave owners did to me.
10. "Well mister," Mama Susie said, "My Ma and Pa was on that slave ship your grandpa told you that story 'bout. They survive that hellish voyage to work free on your grandpa's plantation and to raise me up to hear that story 'bout your funky hands. I hopes you gets them clean real soon. You is right. They do smell bad. And ain't just you smells them either."
11. Mama Susie knew just what she thought about everything and everybody. But what he expect her to say 'bout that story? No, they can't wash away the shit smell of slavery. They can scrub till they raw cause it's they own shit they smell from they own stinkin' ass. Some folks think they can spread they shit so think it don't stink or put it off on somebody else and say it's their shit."
12. "God don't love ugly. That white man got to live his own story and we got to live ours." Everyone applauded Grandma Betsy's story, and Great-grandma Susie, looking strong at 110, just sat there being real proud of Grandma Betsy, her storyteller daughter and her grand-daughter, Ida, and her great-grand-daughter, which is me.

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**Picasso's Studio: The French Collection Part I, #7, 1991**

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Charlotte  
E.W. Buffington Fund

1. Dear Aunt Melissa,

I really think modeling is boring. Standing, sitting or laying down. *Peu importe!* Doesn't matter. You may know what to do with your hands, your feet, the look on your face. But what do you do with your mind, with your misplaced or mistaken *identité*? What do you do with time? *Et l'artiste*, what do you feel about him?

2. I started hearing voices from the masks and paintings in Picasso's studio but your voice, Aunt Melissa, was the clearest. "You was an artist's model years before you was ever born, thousands of miles from here in Africa somewhere. Only you'all wasn't called artist and model. It was natural that your beauty would be reproduced on walls and plates and sculptures made of your beautiful black face and body."
3. "Europeans discovered your image as art at the time they discovered Africa's potential for slavery and colonization. They dug up centuries of our civilizations, and then called us savages and made us slaves. First they take the body, then the soul. Or maybe it is the soul, then the body. The sequence doesn't matter, when one goes the other usually follows close behind."
4. You asked me once why I wanted to become an artist and I said I didn't know. Well I know now. It is because it's the only way I know of feeling free. My art is my freedom to say what I please. *N'importe* what color you are, you can do what you want *avec ton* art. They may not like it, or buy it, or even let you know it; but they can't stop you from doing it.
5. Picasso's first cubist painting was called barbaric, *la mort*, the death of art! But that didn't stop him. In fact, it started *le mouvement modern du art*. The European artists took a look at us and changed the way they saw themselves. Aunt Melissa, you made me aware of that. "Go to Paris, Willia Marie," you told me, "and soak up some that Africana they using in those cube paintings."
6. It's the African mask straight from African faces that I look at in Picasso's studio and in his art. He has the power to deny what he doesn't want to acknowledge. But art is the truth, not the artist. Doesn't matter what he says about where it comes from. We see where, every time we look in the mirror.
7. The masks on Picasso's walls told me, "Do not be disturbed by the power of the artist. He doesn't know any more than you what will happen in the next 5 seconds—in your life or his. The power he has is available to you. But you must give up the power you have as a woman. No one can have it all. What do you want, Willia Marie? When you decide that, you can have it," the masks said.



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8. *Le Demoiselles d'Avignon*, with their tortured twisted faces Europeanized in Picasso's brothel theme, made a *contre-attaque* on the wisdom of the African masks. "You go ahead, girl, and try this art thing," they whispered to me in a women-of-the-world voice straight from the evening. "We don't want HIM to hear us talking, but we just want to let you know you have to give up nothing."
  9. "And if they throw your art back at you, *tefais pas de bile*. Don't worry, 'cause you got something else you can sell. You was born with it, just in case. Every woman knows that. Some women will ask a high price and some men will pay it, all depends on the deal. Their wives don't have to know anything about it. That's been going on since Adam and Eve," the ladies of the painting said.
  10. I can hear you now, Aunt Melissa. "Willia Marie, modelling ain't so-o boring you have to talk to masks and paintings. The only thing you have to do is create art of importance to YOU. Show us a new way to look at life."
- "You betta listen to Aunt Melissa, girl," the ladies from Avignon whispered. "The only one making any sense."

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***On the Beach at St. Tropez: The French Collection Part I, #8, 1991***  
 Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
 Collection Ed Bradley and Patricia Blanchet

1. The beach is where I go to look at men. I like to see my men's faces on other men's bodies. *J'aime l'amour*, Pierrot. The beach is my place to go over that in my life. But you, my son, are *mon amour de la vérité*. You and your sister are my flesh and blood, my life. These men are just my fantasy, *ma fragilité*.
2. Love, like a hand on a hot stove, may burn. I was very close to a man I met on the ship coming over here. He took care of me when I was homesick for my mother. I would have married him instead of your father, but he deserted me. *Il m'aime complètement*. Maybe because it was only for a minute.
3. Almost anything short-lived can be good. He knew that, I didn't. Pierrot, my son, you are a man now with a family of your own. Try to understand me. I grew up knowing I was destined to live in service to others, in the kitchen, in the bed. Suddenly, at age 16 I was an artist living in Paris.
4. I escaped the cotton fields of Georgia and the side streets of Harlem to live as *une artiste* in Paris. I had a life more full than I could have ever imagined. The French said I was beautiful, Pierrot. They called me Mademoiselle Précieuse. In America I would be just another black bitch with a broom and a house full of nappy headed kids.
5. Sometime I actually forget who I am and where I came from here. To the French I may be a beautiful black princess or an exotic Queen of the Nile, but they want me to remember that I am not French. I am not white; in fact, I am very black. And very different. In America, they may hate me for that. In France it is enough to point me out and name me *différente*.
6. Being different stands for a lot in France where everyone descends from Louis XIV *ou* XVI, or whoever the aristocratic royalty is most grand et royal. But I escaped the Jim Crow clutches of America. So I smile when they call me black princess, remembering my former name is black bitch.
7. When I arrived in Paris in 1920, I was 16 years old, Pierrot. There were a lot of Negro artists here when I arrived, painters and writers and musicians all seeking opportunity. Some came broke with only \$5.00 to their names. But I had \$500.00, a lot of money in 1920. My Aunt Melissa gave it to me.
8. "Go to Paris and prove to me that it is worth giving you every dime that I have for you to be an artist," she said. She was lying, you know. Aunt Melissa always has more where that came from. Auntie would be proud to see my pictures. I know she would be proud that they let me be an artist here, though I can scarcely say they have made me one.



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9. I fought hard for what I have as an artist. There is no one here giving out careers. I arrived in Paris without friends, an ignorant child. I met Pierre, Sr., your father on the ship, too. Pierre, Sr. was American born, but both his mother and father were French. He liked me immediately, and, in spite of the fact that I did not love him, he refused to let me go.
  10. You are such a beautiful boy, my son, and if you want to judge me it is your choice to do so. But it will only make us both sad. I cannot change my past or yours. I abhor criticism. It is so useless to be judged in your later years, when you have no time to change. We must learn to change all that is *amer à doux*, bitter to sweet.
  11. People may want you to blame yourself as much as they blame you. But never let them convince you that you are worthy of blame. No matter how many mistakes you make. If you are trying to do something the mistakes are not your fault, though you should be man enough to pay for them.
  12. “Should anything happen to me, do your art,” your father said just before he died. “You can do it, Willia Marie, my Queen. I love you and my children. Be sure you tell them that. You will ask Aunt Melissa to help you raise our children. She will come to France to live.”
  13. “But you will not go back to America. That would destroy you and the children and everything I want for you.” When Pierre died everything was all tied up with lawyers, French *bureaucratie et paperasse*, red tape. I needed time to find myself. To grieve properly. Aunt Melissa never wanted to live abroad. She came and took you and Marlana back to America to live with her. And I let you go.
  14. It was all I could do, my son. Is that so hard to understand? I know you are not asking the question. But I am, *Est-ce que tu m’aime? Je t’aime*, I love you and Marlana intensely.

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***Dinner at Gertrude Stein's: The French Collection Part II, #9, 1991***

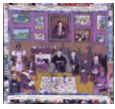
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Collection Stanley and Muriel Weithorn

1. Dear Aunt Melissa,

Last night I had dinner at Gertrude Stein's. She is a genius, Auntie, not just because she said she is, or because she wrote "A rose is a rose is a rose" or "There is no there, there" about Oakland, California or "Pigeons on the grass, Alas." She is a genius because she has us all repeating her words and wondering—Is it is, or is it art?

2. There were 10 of us for dinner at Gertrude Stein's. Six were being men and four were being women. One of the four women being Gertrude another being Alice. Both living and being women, though one (Gertrude) smokes a cigar, and has wife being Alice. Alice was always living and working for Gertrude and cooking and typing "the daily miracle" which being what Gertrude calls her daily unedited manuscript.
3. Of the six men being and talking with Gertrude, three of them (Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes) were being colored, and three of them were not. The three colored men were all being and knowing they were great writers and poets who were geniuses and thinking of great thoughts about being and living and dying as colored men in America.
4. Of the three men who were not colored (Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway and Leo Stein) one was a great painter, one was a great writer and journalist but not quite as a great as the great painter who was a great genius as well. The other one was being a brother of the genius who was living and being Gertrude Stein.
5. Two of the four women were colored (Zora Neale Hurston and myself, Willia Marie Simone) and two were not. Of the two colored women one was a great writer and genius was being colored and the other was listening and learning. The other two women (Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas) were always being together. One was always knowing and being an American but living and being in Paris. The other one was just being listening and quiet.
6. The colored writers read from their books and challenged each other's points of view on issues concerning race and politics. The others were being quiet and sometimes saying a word or two but mostly being listening and not saying. I was being listening and quiet and standing so that I would not miss anything from being sitting. I was living in deep thoughts and being listening and silent.
7. One of the colored men was being and reading an essay he wrote about the other one. In it he describes the other one as living and being a "Mississippi pickaninny." A pickaninny that was being so threatening that no one could see that he was really living and being "a fantastic jewel buried in high grass."





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8. I wanted to speaking and explaining what was being a pickaninny. But I was more listening than speaking. So I just thought about that a pickaninny from Mississippi or any other place is a very sad but young colored person who no one loves enough to comb their “picky” hair or feed them. So they are always being needing loving and caring and feeling hungry for nursing their mama’s “tittie.”
  9. The pickaninny was being “a fantastic jewel buried in high grass” in Mississippi was now being a pickaninny who was being in Paris out of the grass and wanting and being angry enough to be doing what a pickaninny can do so well to the other one who was really very small. It was then that dinner was served and the men went to being in separate corners of the room.
  10. My favorite event of the evening was Zora Neale Hurston reading from her comedic play, *Mule Bone*. Zora is being and making a classic of the black folk culture and language we are always being so ashamed of. It is the way we be being talking when there are no white people being around. W.E.B. Du Bois said, “Zora’s *Mule Bone* speaks in a...lyrical language that is as far removed from minstrelsy as a *margaux* is from ripple.”
  11. Zora was being and telling the story of the “bama Nigger” who struck his rival with the hock bone of an ole yaller mule. De man was arrested. De case went to trial in de Macademia Baptist Church. De argument was “Can a mule bone be a criminal weapon? If so de man is guilty if not innocent. De donkey is de father of a mule. Samson slew 3000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Now what kin be more dangerous dan uh mule bone?”
  12. There was being no time that evening that I was not being there. Not speaking and liking and then wanting to speak but not speaking. Then speaking to myself only saying “I leave here with this thinking—a bama Nigger is a Mississippi, is a jewel, is a hick none, is an ole yaller mule—and a man is a man is a woman, and there is no there, here!”

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**Jo Baker's Birthday: The French Collection Part II, #10, 1993**

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
 Saint Louis Art Museum. Museum Minority Artists Purchase  
 Fund; the Honorable Carol E. Jackson; Casually Off-Grain Quilters  
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 Goldstein in memory of Chip Goldstein; The Links, Inc.; Gateway  
 Chapter; the Honorable and Mrs. Charles A. Shaw; Donald M.  
 Suggs; the Thimble & Thread Quilt Guild; and funds given in honor  
 of Cuesta Benberry

1. Dear Aunt Melissa,

Today I began a portrait of Joséphine Baker. In it her beautiful body is lying *à la six-quatre-deux* on her chaise lounge. It is her birthday, so she is resting before the party. They say she is 25, however, she looks more like 16. And although she was born in poverty thousands of miles away in another country she has become a great French lady, and a brilliant performer of *le music-hall Français*.

2. How did she become *une grande dame Française*? I don't know how, but I do know why—she had no other choice she could live with. Coming from the poorest of the poor with only her *pieds dansants*, her dancing feet to make her feel alive she had to keep moving. Today it is natural to see her at home reclining like the woman in Matisse's recent painting (1923 or 1924) *Odalisque with Magnolias*. Joséphine herself could have modeled for that one.
3. And it is natural to hear the shuffle of maid's feet preparing for her party. But my mind sees Matisse's *Harmony in Red*. The maid is arranging fruit and flowers on a table covered with a red cloth. Behind is a red wall, its splashy bouquets of blue flowers spilling onto the tablecloth. Joséphine would love it. She should own this great painting. *Ça coule de source*, it is natural for me.
4. Oh! This is all so French, I could die. I've always wanted to paint a beautiful woman reclining like a Matisse model. Unlike the artist I pose for I want to see her beauty not as a kind of vulnerability, but *une force*. And she is very strong, *aussi forte que belle*. I feel honored to paint her picture, but just to be in the same room with her would have been enough.
5. I saw Joséphine for the time at folies Bergère. She come on stage carried by a big black giant of a man. She wore no clothes, only a huge feather. The audience was speechless. The giant was tremendous and very black. *Est-elle un oiseau ou une femme?* Is she a bird or a woman? *Est-il un humain ou une bête?* Is he a human or a beast? *Ca, c'est réel ou c'est l'illusion?* Is this real or an illusion? It was a beautiful dream. No one wanted to wake up.
6. But reality is—Joséphine is Colored, a Negro, as Joséphine calls herself—And they would never have let her seek fame and fortune in the States. There her talent would be no talent at all. Her dance would be no dance at all. Her greatness would be no greatness at all. *Sa vie ne serait pas une vie—sa beauté*. Her life would be no life—no beauty.
7. Beauty is wonderful, but it does not keep. It is the bloom the we are all wanting to see, not the wilt. Beauty has to be recognized while it is still a bid. And though it is a pleasure to experience great beauty, the physical kind is often shallow to the touch. But Joséphine is deeper than that.



She had the kind of beauty that does last. *Sa beauté est la liberté*. Her beauty is freedom. And freedom lasts, but not without a struggle.

8. In America Joséphine isn't a great singer like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. They have to sing like no one else can. They have to be the best. And no wants to see them nude. They are not exotic. There are too many black women in America for any one of them to be rare. *Il n'ya que rares femmes noires à l'Europe*. There are only a few black women in Europe. So Europe wants to see Joséphine nude. It is as if they never saw a black woman before.
9. *Tout le monde aime Joséphine en Paris*. All the world loves Joséphine. But people are so fickle. One day Paris may decide to forget her. *Tous les hommes aiment Joséphine*. The men love her. But the men's love is fickle too. They may decide to leave her. Like beauty, love rarely keeps. Will they love her when she is no longer rich and beautiful, when her body is stooped and her waist no longer tiny and her voice no longer sweet?
10. "Joséphine," I want to ask her, "is life worth living when the reality of being old and alone sets in? How can a woman be sure of everlasting love?" *Alors, j'ai la solution*, I know the answer. *Les enfants*, children. That is the answer. That is what we are all trying to do, to find a way to be loved today and tomorrow, too. We want to be sure that we will never be alone.
11. There is something magical about the woman and child. No matter how desolate the land, no matter how little food and water there is, there are always women and children. And when they have hated us in our jet black poverty and despair, as they did little Joséphine Freda from Gratiot Street in St. Louis, Missouri, we cling to the one thing that will love us no matter what. *La chair de nos chair*, our own flesh and blood—Our unique creation—*Nos enfants*, our children.
12. What will be the result of the racism Joséphine suffered? Can she ever feel completely loved? Will this phenomenal woman tie her hands with an apron string, and shroud her mind and body with motherhood? *Viellant et se fatiguant*, growing old and tired by the kitchen table? Will the beautiful Madame Joséphine, the elegant Countess Joséphine survive and find true love, or will she forever chase love and never catch it? "Will you have children Joséphine?" I wanted to ask her. But didn't dare.

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**Le Café des Artistes: The French Collection Part II, #11, 1994**  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Private collection

Front row, left to right: William H. Johnson, Archibald Motley, Willia Marie Simone, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Edmonia Lewis, Faith Ringgold

Middle row, left to right: Sargent Johnson, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Henry O. Tanner, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Augusta Savage

Back row, left to right: Ed Clark, Raymond Saunders, Jacob Lawrence, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Maurice Utrillo

1. Dear Aunt Melissa,

Pierre left me as the owner of a Paris café, Le Café des Artistes, *le rendezvous des arts et des lettres*. It is located on the Boulevard des Saint Germain des Prés across from church in the heart of the artist's quartier.

2. I am here every day now. We are a very popular café. Every Saturday nite we have le dancing *le plus gai et le plus curieux de Paris*. Today the tables are humming with the usual clientele of artists and writers nursing a café crème and making art history right before our eyes.
3. Pierre would be proud of my associations with the artists and writers. But still I have mixed feelings. Sometimes I feel as though I am one of them; at other times I feel like "The Spook That Sat By the Door." I feel that now I have words to say that simply will not wait.
4. Today I will issue the colored woman's manifesto of Art and Politics. What would Pierre have to say about that? His timid wife all of 20 years old and addressing the greatest artists and writers of the century. I doubt that I would be doing this if Pierre were alive. But he is not and I am.
5. *Madames and monsieurs*, I said, may I have your attention? This is a momentous time in the history of modern art, and I am excited to be in Paris, the center of cultural change and exchange. "It is a pleasure to have one so beautiful among us Madame Willia Marie. *Bonne chère noire*."
6. Like the Symbolists, Dadaists, Surrealists, and Cubists, I have a proclamation to make for which I beg your indulgence. It is the Colored Woman's Manifesto of Art and Politics. "Women should stay home and make children not art." "*Soulard, alcoolique*. You should go home!" "Silence! *Taisez-vous!*"
7. I am an international colored woman. My African ancestry dates back to the beginnings of human origins, 9 million years ago in Ethiopia. The art and culture of Africa has been stolen by



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Western Europeans and my people have been colonized, enslaved, and forgotten.

8. What is very old has become new. And what was black has become white. “We wear the mask” but it has a new use as cubist art. “But you are influenced by the French Impressionists.” “No the German Expressionists.” Modern art is not yours or mine. It is ours.
9. There is as much of the African masks of my ancestors as there is of the Greek statuary of yours in the art of modern times. “No it is the Fauve that has influenced you Madame Willia Marie.” And who made the first art... a doll maybe for an unborn child? A woman of course.
10. “You are a primitive but very pretty.” Paris artists are shaping the culture of the world with their ideas. But modern art is much bigger than Western Europe or Paris. I am here, (in Paris). I am there (in Africa) too. That is why I am issuing a Colored Woman’s Manifesto of Art and Politics.
11. “You should learn French cooking, it will help you to blend your couleurs.” “No she is a natural with couleur. Very primitive.” I will call a Congress of African American Women artists to Paris to propose that two issues be discussed. What is the image of the Colored Woman in art? And what is our purpose as modern artists?
12. No important change of a modernist nature can go on without the colored woman. “Her palette is too harsh, she needs to develop a subtle range of greys.” Today I became a woman with ideas of my own. Ideas are my freedom. And freedom is why I became an artist.
13. The important thing for the colored woman to remember is we must speak, or our ideas and ourselves will remain unheard and unknown. The café is my *académie*, my gallery, my home. The artists and writers are my teachers, and my friends. But Africa is my art, my classical form and inspiration.
14. “You will come to my studio Madame Willia Marie. I will show you how to make a rich palette of couleurs and teach you to paint like a master.” “But next you will model for me my African maiden. Earth Mama! Queen of the Nile!” *C’est la vie* Auntie. The price I pay for being an artist.

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***Moroccan Holiday: The French Collection Part II, #12, 1997***  
Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed pieced fabric, and ink  
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida. Purchase, the  
R. H. Norton Trust, 98.765

1. Being here with you Marlana, my darling daughter, is a true Moroccan holiday. I have just completed these paintings of four great men in our history. A gift to you, my love, to celebrate our women's courage. Had I been born a man I would have been just like them. It is their courage that will not allow me to be a victim, Marlana. Never be a victim, Marlana. Never never, Marlana.
2. When your father died I knew it would be too hard to keep you and Pierrot in Paris and pursue my art. Given a chance, I would secure a good life for all of us. The world doesn't need another black mother alone with her children. Still it was a great sacrifice to send you and Pierrot to live with Aunt Melissa in the States. "So are you saying, Mama, that you did with your life you did with me and Pierrot?"
3. Yes, Marlana. A mother can never forget her duty. It doesn't matter where you are, or who you are with, your heart is always with your children. "Mama, please do not go over the mother-daughter-Aunt Melissa argument again. I have heard it all my life and there is no resolution to it." But, Marlana, since you have never understood how I feel as a mother, how can I help but explain it to you again and again?
4. "Mama, like the men, you put your art first. None of them have anything on you. Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., these are men who devoted their lives to our freedom. It is as if we are the children. You have done the same as an artist. I am your daughter, an artist, the beneficiary of your success. And so how can I blame you for not being there as a mother too?"
5. Marlana, do you know what the world would be like if women could do exactly as they please the way men do?  
  
"Mama, is there something you wanted to do with your life that you did not do?" Yes, my darling Marlana, I would have had children become a celebrated artist but never married. "Yet you were married for only a few years before Papa died." Yes, but still had such a sense of duty.
6. "It's as if you were never married, Mama. Papa died and Aunt Melissa raised us. Where was your duty?" Admit it, Marlana, you blame me for not being a bitter old woman who never got her chance. "Aunt Melissa is not a bitter old woman. On the contrary she is a powerful woman who took care of us and has her own catering business too and we have never had a problem with this." Yes, but that is only because Aunt Melissa is your aunt and I am your mother.
7. "You are a mother because you carried Pierrot and I in your belly for nine months? Was that your duty Mama? Is there a way for you to live in this world without guilt?" Yes, Marlana, I could



have sacrificed my art for motherhood and had anger instead of guilt. But who wants to be an old angry woman?

8. Marlana I want you to know there is a heavy price to pay for being a black woman. For one thing no one ever expects you to know anything, to have anything or to be anything. So you must focus on your dreams and never, never let go. On the other hand there are white people whose feet never touch the ground. Do you sometimes wonder what it is like to have their good fortune, freedom, success, happiness and a sense of duty too?
9. “No Mama. I find it difficult to fathom the lives of white people, especially those whose feet don’t touch the ground. I only know I really want to be an artist, but if I marry and have children I will try hard also to be a wife and mother. And if I do it wrong, I’ll face up to it. No matter what I do, I hope I won’t feel guilt and spend my life in denial.”

10. What’s a mother to do, Marlana?

“Face the facts and move on, Mama.”

A mother is forever, Marlana, so there is no place for me to go.

“What’s a daughter to do, Mama?”

You are the future, Marlana, *you move on* and try not to repeat the past.

“None of us wants to be like our mothers, Mama, yet many of us probably will be.”

11. The world wants daughter to surpass mother, but why must we compete, Marlana? Why must we make a winner of daughter and a loser of mother? Can’t we have a team, a sisterhood maybe? Motherhood should be a noble cause not thankless duty. But we know if it is done right, it is wrong, and if it is done wrong that is wrong too. Motherhood is too often a trap, an excuse women have for giving up their lives to others.
12. Fatherhood *is a noble cause* because men are leaders and therefore can father the world, not just their brood. We need to we write the book of life to make men the mothers and women the fathers. That alone would end our mother-daughter debate. We would be too busy solving problems of war, world hunger, disease and ignorance to continue this futile women’s war.
13. “You not only feel guilt but angry too, Mama. You are guilty because you gave up motherhood for art, and you are angry because despite the fact that you have lived your life exactly as you pleased, you still can’t have the power of men. You want it all, Mama, and what’s more you deserve it. Pierrot and I are proud of you, Mama. We love you and we know you love us.”
14. “In your way you have nurtured and protected us and given us the best kind of life. And you have not only shown me how to be a woman but an artist as well. It is wonderful to be with you for my first Moroccan holiday. However it is not just Douglass, Garvey, Malcolm and Martin who should be here with us, but Aunt Melissa also. She is our courage too, Mama. She is up there with you and these men.”



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Click on a quilt to read  
the full transcript.

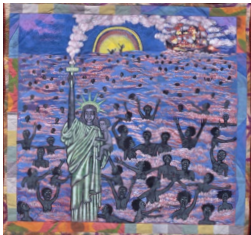
Floor 3



***Born in a Cotton Field:  
The American Collection  
#3***



***Coming to Jones Road Part  
2: Harriet Tubman Tanka #1:  
Escape to Freedom***



***We Came to America:  
The American Collection  
#1***



***The Bitter Nest, Part III: Lovers  
in Paris***



***Coming to Jones Road  
Part 2: Martin Luther  
King Jr. Tanka #3: I Have  
a Dream***



***The Bitter Nest, Part IV: The  
Letter***



***Coming to Jones Road  
Part 2: Sojourner Truth  
Tanka #2: Ain't I A  
Woman?***



***Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar  
Beach***



***Born in a Cotton Field: The American Collection  
#3, 1997***

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
Private collection

Dear Mama,

When Pierrot and I were children I used to make up spooky nighttime stories to scare him. One night he cried uncontrollably and said he hated my ugly stories. So I made up a fairytale about a brave prince who was the savior of his people. Pierrot loved that story and he'd beg me to tell it to him over and over again. Hearing that story made Pierrot feel like a prince. I've always wanted to feel like a princess so I have written a story about a beautiful black princess who is the savior of her people, and I want you to be the first to read it.

1. Long ago in the tiny Village of Visible way down in the deep, deep South there lived two slaves named Mama and Papa Love. They were called that because of the great love they shared for children, though they never had any children of their own for fear that Captain Pepper, the mean old slave master, would sell their child, and destroy their loving family.
2. One day the Great Lady of Peace came to tell Mama Love that in spite of all her fears she was soon to have a baby girl who would be so beautiful that she would be the envy of all who saw her. She promised that this little girl would grow up to be a princess who would bring peace, freedom and love to the slaves' Village of Visible. Mama Love was very happy but she was frightened too, for if Captain Pepper got wind of this he would want to make the baby princess a slave.
3. On the morning the baby was to be born the sun shone brightly and the flowers blossomed and the bird sang sweetly, and the bees swarmed and buzzed in chorus, and everyone in the tiny slaves' Village of Visible could feel a strange sense of peace and love that they never felt before.
4. As the beautiful baby princess came into the world, the Prince of Night appeared and spread his great black cloak across the sky, turning day into the blackest night. The sudden darkness spread swiftly across the sky and woke the Terrible Storm King, who flew into a thunderous rage, releasing tumultuous rains and hurricane winds on the tiny slaves' Village of Visible. It was during the Terrible Storm that the Prince of Night wrenched the beautiful new-born baby from Mama Love's arms and her tiny body vanished into the stormy night.
5. Ever since that day Mama Love, Papa Love and all the slaves in the tiny Village of Visible mourned the loss of the beautiful baby princess. They made a secret shrine in the cotton fields in her memory. They went there each day to remember the promise of the Great Lady of Peace.
6. Captain Pepper's plantation was known as the richest and most beautiful plantation in the South. Although there were white and black people there, all the black people were slaves who





worked from sun up till sundown for no pay and lived in broken-down shacks, wore rags, and had only discarded scraps of food from the slave master's table to eat.

On the other hand all the white people wore splendidly tailored clothes, ate fine foods and lived in the beautiful houses. They sent their children to school, while the slave children worked all the day in the cotton fields and were forbidden to read or write.

7. One day, Patience, Captain Pepper's blind daughter, was playing in the cotton fields and she saw a little girl her own age, and it made her so surprised and happy that she could see her that she ran home and told her father about the beautiful little girl she had seen in the cotton field.

"Patience, my little blossom, you cannot see," said Captain Pepper.

"But Father," said Patience, "I can see *her*."

"What does she look like?" asked Captain Pepper.

"She has nutbrown skin, shiny brown eyes, long black curls and the most beautiful smile," said Patience. "Everything around her glows. I know she must be a princess. Don't you believe me, Father?"

"No," growled the mean old slave master, "I have never seen a beautiful slave, and neither have you. You must promise me never to go to the cotton fields again."

"But why, Father?" asked Patience.

"Your mother was struck by lightning in those cotton fields during the Terrible Storm," roared Captain Pepper.

"But why was mother there?" asked Patience.

"She said she went to see a miracle," responded Captain Pepper.

"Mother went to see the beautiful princess who was born in the cotton fields, didn't she, Father?" asked Patience.

"No!" screamed the Captain. "Enough about this Invisible Princess."

"Yes, Father," thought Patience, "that is just who she is, not a slave but an Invisible Princess."

8. Captain Pepper didn't want Patience to know it, but he had heard about the beautiful baby who had been born in the cotton fields, and now he was beginning to believe it. "But could there really be a beautiful slave, an Invisible Princess? Well, if there is, that slave is mine," shouted Captain Pepper. "And I will find her."

Captain Pepper summoned his overseers to search the cotton fields, the slaves' shacks and all the surrounding woods to find the Invisible Princess. But she was nowhere to be found.



Captain Pepper was convinced that the slaves were hiding the princess from him. He vowed to punish them by selling Mama Love and Paper Love to different plantations very far away so that they would never see each other or their beautiful Invisible Princess again.

9. Patience, hearing her father's vow, went to warn the Invisible Princess that her parents were in danger. "I can see you," whispered Patience, "you are the beautiful princess who was born in the cotton fields. My mother came to see the miracle of your birth, but she was struck by lightning during the Terrible Storm and later died. Some people think you died too. But I know you are alive because I can see you, even though I am blind. And now my father, Captain Pepper, knows too and he is trying to find you. He has threatened to sell Mama and Papa Love so that they will never see you again."
10. The Invisible Princess realized she had to warn her parents. She found Mama and Papa Love praying at the shrine. "I have come out of hiding to help you," she began. "The Great Lady of Peace saved me just as you asked her to, Mama. I am invisible but you can hear me and I want you to know that I am alive and well, but now you and Papa are in danger," she said. "Captain Pepper has threatened to sell you to a plantation far away," she went on, tugging at her mama's apron.

"Oh my beloved daughter, we have prayed for this day. Tell us, what happened to you?" pleaded Mama Love.

"On the day I was born the Prince of Night appeared and hid me in his great black cloak of darkness, and during the Terrible Storm he carried me away so that no one saw me leave. I was afraid, Mama, but the Prince of Night is very gentle and he quickly replaced my fears with restful sleep."

"But who is the Prince of Night and where did he come from, daughter?" asked Papa Love.

"He escaped from a slave ship by turning day into night. He is cold black and very handsome, Mama—and he is rich too. His great black cloak is studded with diamonds that sparkle like stars. If Captain Pepper could see him, he would try to make him a slave. But no one can ever see the Prince of Night."

"But you were just a newborn baby when we lost you. Where have you been and how did you become invisible, my child?" asked Papa Love.

"The Great Powers of Nature take care of me, Papa. The Giant of the Trees made me a beautiful castle high up in his branches. And the Dream Queen visits me each night and brings me sweet, sweet dreams of freedom, Papa, that one day will come true."

11. "And the Sun Goddess wakes me each morning with fresh fruits and vegetables and keeps my days warm and beautiful. And the Sea Queen brings me fresh water to drink and bathes me in the mountain springs."
12. "And the Great Lady of Peace teaches me to be loving, strong, and wise. But it is the Queen of Bees who brings me fresh baked honey cakes made with her special money that keeps me"



invisible.

13. “I am not afraid of Captain Pepper because his power to destroy is no match against the creative powers of the Prince of Night, the Giant of the Tress, the Dream Queen, the Sun Goddess, the Sea Queen, the Great Lady of Peace, the Queen of Bees and all the other wonderful and treacherous powers of nature who have to help us,” said the Invisible Princess.

At that, the Great Powers of Nature made themselves heard. “Hear, hear!” chorused the Great Powers of Nature. “No one will harm any of you ever again. And from this day on, all the slaves of the Village of the Visible will be free.”

14. “But Captain Pepper is a very mean and powerful slave master. How can we ever be free of him?” asked Mama and Papa Love.

“I will personally make a batch of fresh baked honey cakes with my special honey that is bittersweet,” said the Queen of Bees. “And anyone who is stung by my bees and then eats my fresh baked honey cakes will be invisible.”

“And I will spread my great black cloak and make the day into the blackest night,” said the Prince of Night. “And the slaves’ Village of Visible will disappear.”

“And the Invisible Village of Peace, Freedom and Love will be born,” said the Great Lady of Peace.

15. The next morning in the slaves’ Village of Visible, great bowls of fresh baked honey cake were left at the doors of all the slave shacks. A mighty army of bees led by the Queen herself swarmed the cotton fields and stung the slaves, who then fled to their shacks and, seeing the bowls of fresh baked honey cakes, ate the cakes and became invisible.

Then Captain Pepper discovered that not only was there no one working in the cotton fields or in the planation houses, but Patience, his beloved daughter, was gone too.

“Patience, Patience,” roared Captain Pepper, “where are you? I command you to come to me at once.”

But Patience had been in the cotton fields and had been stung and had eaten the fresh baked honey cakes and was now in the Invisible Village of Peace, Freedom and Love. There, she could see the sun in the sky and the flowers in the field s and the tress in the forests and the people everywhere and she was happier than had ever been before. Captain Pepper went every day to the deserted cotton field in search of his beloved Patience. But all he could find were bowls of slave honey cakes with bees swarming everywhere. Captain Pepper could not hold back his tears as he cried out in grief for the loss of his only child and in repentance for all the cruelty and pain he had brought to the lives of his slaves. Now that they were free of him, what would he do?

16. The Great Lady of Peace, hearing Captain Pepper’s cries of remorse, came to his aid. “Patience, the Invisible Princess, all your former slaves have a new life in the Invisible Village of Peace,



Freedom and Love, where everyone is free and lives in peace. To go there you must be stung by the bees and eat the fresh baked honey cakes, and you too will be carried to the Invisible Village of Peace, Freedom and Love. There you will lose all desire to enslave and inflict misery on others. You have only a few minutes to decide,” said the Great Lady of Peace.

17. “Oh please, Great Lady, let the bees sting me,” cried Captain Pepper. “I am ready to go and live in peace.” Captain Pepper was stung by the bees and gobbled up the fresh baked honey cakes. And the Prince of Night appeared and spread his great black cloak turning day into the darkest night. As the Terrible Storm circled the village, there were loud cracking sounds and the heavens split, and the Giant of the Trees bowed his head and lifted Captain Pepper up, up, up above the jet black clouds of night into the Invisible Village of Peace, Freedom and Love.
18. Patience was there with the Invisible Princess, Mama Love and Papa Love, and all the men, women and children who had been slaves in the cotton fields in the plantation house and were now free. There was music and dancing and storytelling, and everyone was happy forever after.

Whenever you hear the buzzing of bees and you smell the fresh baked honey cakes and then suddenly day becomes the darkest night and a Terrible Storm circles a village, you can be sure that an Invisible Village of Peace, Freedom and Love has been born and that the Invisible Princess lives there. There are many such villages all over the world. And if you listen very carefully you can hear the people of the villages singing.

*We live in a peaceful village  
of freedom and love  
In harmony with our brothers and sisters  
by all the stars above  
We live in a beautiful village  
full of happiness and joy  
Dedicated to the freedom of  
Every man and woman  
and every girl and boy.*

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***We Came to America: The American Collection  
#1, 1997***

Acrylic on canvas with painted and pieced fabric  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,  
Philadelphia. Art by Women Collection, Gift of  
Linda Lee Alter

Dear Mama,

I have just awoken from a hellified dream and I can't wait to tell you about it. So exhausted was I from our last whirlwind night in Paris, that I decided to take a nap before dinner. Pierrot had a date with a white girl named Morgan he met on the deck. She had actually dropped by his cabin to invite him to meet her folks. I heard her ask him, "Who's the pretty colored woman waving to you from the pier?"

"That's my Mama," said Pierrot proudly.

"That lady is your Mammy. Wanta see *my* Mammy?" she asked as she fumbled in her bag for a picture.

When I heard Pierrot say, "Nope! Don't wanta see no Mammies. Just show me your mind baby."

"You mean...that colored lady is your *Mother*?" the white girl stammered in disbelief.

"Yes, the lady's name is Willia Marie Simone, the celebrated expatriate artist," answered Pierrot. "And I am Pierrot Frederick Douglass Simone, her son. And my sister, Marlena Truth Simon, is sailing with me back to America and is in the next cabin."

"Oh my god!" gasped the white girl.

"God? Oh yeah. He's colored too!" chuckled Pierrot.

And that's all I remember before I dropped off to sleep smiling.

My dream began with a knock on my cabin door. It was the ship's captain. He had come to invite me to a deck party. "We are all waiting for you," he said.

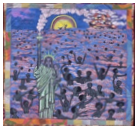
"Me?" I gushed.

"Yes, my beautiful princess," said the handsome captain. "You!"

I got dressed in my pretty red and white French frock you bought me, freshened up my makeup, brushed my hair, and stepped out on the deck.

"You look radiant," whispered the captain and he disappeared.





True enough, the passengers were waiting for me on the deck. Pierrot and Morgan stood in the center of the crowd. I couldn't see anyone's face, but Morgan was pointing her finger at me and calling me names in another language. The passengers roared with laughter and applauded her hostile remarks. Pierrot rushed to the side of the deck and threw up. The passengers were not screaming in that language I did not understand and waving their fists and rush towards me. I turned to run back to my cabin when the captain's voice came over the loudspeaker:

"Princess Marlena Truth Simone," he bellowed. "We are waiting for you on the slaves deck."

"Slaves deck?" I shuddered in surprise.

"Yes slaves deck! Slaves deck! Slaves deck!" chanted the jeering band of passengers and in one ferocious body charged straight for me.

Pierrot reached out to me, but when I took his hand it was a cold dead fish. I dropped the fish and ran right into a crowd of slaves all shackled together.

I was now in nightmare-hell, aimlessly meandering between the sickening sweet smell of "Miss Ann's" perfume, and the slaves' funk of human excrement and unwashed bodies; that awesome sting of the passengers' hateful screams, an unrelenting whiplash, and the clanging and banging of the slaves' chains as they tried to free me from the bondage of slavery.

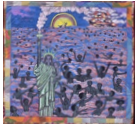
There were times when I could feel my head being cradled against a bare black chest. It was heady, heart-rendering, and smelly but sweet. I wanted to kiss my saviors in struggle, but this was no time to love.

I still couldn't see anyone's face, but I knew I was engaged in a God-awful exchange between black and white and my very freedom was at stake. I recalled Great-Grandma Susie's slave story in your painting *Matisse's Chapel* and I cried, "Oh God let me go free!"

The ship tipped and dipped as great gusts of ocean water rushed on deck and mercifully carried us overboard. It was like being on a massive hurricane ride at an amusement park, only it was not amusing. Our shackles and our clothes were ripped off our bodies but, thank God: we landed on our feet and walked on the water like Christ at Galilee—one mass of ecstatic black bodies, shining like diamonds in the murky sea.

I knew neither my name nor the language I spoke. All around me I could hear ear-splitting laughter and shrieks of joy. We were off that terrible ship and in clear sight of a black Statue of Liberty. "The Lady" held a black baby high up in her great arms. We swam through blood but no one was wounded. A rainbow lit the sky and the white heat from The Lady's torch ignited the ship. We laughed and cried and prayed as the burning slave ship sailed away from us.

The captain was now a handsome black man. "You look radiant, my beautiful princess," he whispered as he took me in his arms and kissed me. And as fate would have it—damn it—I woke up. But, Mama, I was in the most peculiar pose: my left arm was holding my pillow, like The Lady held the baby, and my right arm was straight up in the air like it was holding a torch. I must have looked awful silly but I felt great, though tears were streaming down my face.



Pierrot was standing over me with the customary drink in his hand.

“What’s tickling you Sis? You know I love ya,” he said jokingly. “Wake up and meet Miss Morgan Lou Ann Van Camp. She’s got enough scratch to sink this ship. Now why don’t we just sell her that bad dream you just had.”

I rolled over on my stomach and pressed my tear-drenched face into the pillow. Pierrot would never understand what I’ve been through and neither would Ms. Morgan Lou Ann Van Camp.

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***Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Martin Luther King Jr. Tanka #3: I Have a Dream, 2010***

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

Martin Luther King I have a dream speech Aug 28, 1963

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice...

I have a dream that my four little children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character...

I have a dream today...

Martin Luther King 1929–1968, Atlanta, Georgia

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***Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Sojourner Truth***

**Tanka #2: *Ain't I A Woman?*, 2010**

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

Ain't I a woman? Sojourner Truth 1851 Akron, Ohio

... That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my Mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?... Then that man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

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***Coming to Jones Road Part 2: Harriet Tubman***

***Tanka #1: Escape to Freedom, 2010***

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

**Harriet Tubman**

In 1849 I set out with my two brothers on my first escape to freedom. We had only the North Star to guide us. My two brothers became frightened and turned back, but I continued on and reached Philadelphia. There I found work as a household servant and saved my money so I could return to help others escape to freedom. I brought more than 300 slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad in nineteen trips and never lost a passenger. There was one of two things I had a right to Liberty or Death. If I could not have one, I would have the other, for no man should take me alive.

Harriet Tubman 1820–1913 Auburn, New York

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***The Bitter Nest, Part III: Lovers in Paris, 1988***

Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

1. *The Bitter Nest: Part III. Lovers in Paris.* Celia's life was devoted to her father, whom she saw as an unfortunate figure, a giant of a man, imprisoned in the house of a mad woman—her mother. She wanted to free him from her. She tried to interest him in activities that would exclude Cee Cee, like lectures and musical concerts. But the doctor loved Cee Cee and would go nowhere without her.
2. She even tried to interest him in a romantic tryst with a beautiful friend of hers, an ex-chorus line dancer named Mavis Lewis. But the dentist used the introduction to ask Mavis to give Celia a party to introduce her to some eligible young men in the hopes that she might find one to marry and have a family of her own.
3. Celia met several young men who were charming and eligible for marriage but compared to her father, they were shallow and uninteresting. Except for Victor Bell, a young attorney from Washington, DC. Celia fell in love with Victor at a party. They danced and talked as if they had known each other for years. It was really love at first sight.
4. They walked home in the early morning holding hands and laughing and promising one day to spend the rest of their lives together. It was the most fun Celia had ever had. He told her that he lived with his invalid mother in Washington, D.C., and that she was very demanding of his time. So, between her and his law practice, it might be several months before he could return to New York to see her.
5. He mentioned a summer vacation in Paris he was planning and invited her to come along. He had some artist friends who lived in Paris. She could stay at their flat and his friend would show them both around Paris. If she felt uncomfortable about going to Paris with a man, she could take Mavis along as a companion.
6. At the last minute, Victor's plans changed. He would not go over on the ocean liner with Mavis and Celia. Instead, he would meet them in Paris a week or so later. He had urgent business to attend to in the States before he could leave for Paris. They should go on and he would be there as soon as he could.
7. He sent the address of his friend's flat and directions on how to get there when they arrived in Paris. Celia and Mavis arrived at Victor's friend's flat and were greeted by a Frenchman. He let them in and told them Victor's friends were on holiday in the south of France and that he would show them around until Victor got there.
8. While Celia unpacked, the French man took Mavis on a tour of the Left Bank shops and cafes.



Once alone in the apartment, Celia undressed standing in front of a large full-length mirror. While admiring her well-shaped body, she noticed the appearance of a man in the doorway of the adjoining room. It was Victor. He was wearing only a beret.

9. “*Parlez-vous français, mademoiselle?*” he said. At once shocked, frightened, embarrassed and delighted, Celia stood glued to the spot.

“How did you get here?” she finally managed to stammer, “I thought you were in the States.”

“But I am here with you,” he said, taking her in his arms. “But I don’t understand,” said Celia.

10. “You will my love,” Victor whispered in her ear as he slid her down on the large bed. “Did I ever tell you how much I love you? You were what I need to make my life complete. I will not let you get away from me this time. Celia, will you marry me?” Before she could respond, he was on top of her. This was the first time Celia had ever made love to a man.
11. It was wonderful. Now she knew what she felt for him the first time she met him at that party many months ago was real. She did love him, and he loved her, and he wanted to marry her. It was alright if they slept together. They were too much in love not to. Now everything was perfect, like all her life—except Cee Cee.
12. How could she think about Cee Cee at a time like this? But what about his mother? She was an invalid. She was dependent on him. Well, she would just have to get used to the idea that Victor has an invalid mother. After all, wouldn’t he have to get used to Cee Cee? Mavis and the Frenchman stayed out of their way for the next couple of weeks.
13. The Frenchman lived in the next flat, so Mavis stayed there with him. Things could not have been better if they had been planned. Suddenly, one morning, Victor was gone as he arrived, without warning. On his pillow was a note: *Dear Celia my love, I couldn’t bear to tell you, but Mother’s condition has taken a turn for the worse. I must go to her. I am so afraid that she may not be with me much longer.*
14. *I love you so much, I cannot wait to see you again in the States. These weeks with you in Paris have been the happiest days of my life. ’Til we meet again my beloved Celia. My wife. Lovingly yours, Victor.* But Celia never saw Victor again.

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***The Bitter Nest, Part IV: The Letter, 1988***

Acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

Though she never married, Celia had a child—which was not at all acceptable for unmarried women in those days. The dentist was heartbroken.

“It ain’t decent to have a baby and no husband, Celia,” he told her. “What would folks say?” Cee Cee prepared a nursery on the second floor next to Celia’s room and decorated it with quilts and baby things made special in multi-colors pieced together in her inimitable style.

But the dentist put his foot down. There would be no baby in the house. And Celia would have to go away as soon as she started to show and stay away until the baby was born. He arranged for one of his patients to adopt the baby. However, Mavis agreed, at Celia’s request, to take the baby and bring it up as her own with financial help from her family as long as she needed it. She didn’t care if people talked—they always talked about Mavis anyway. And, after all, she felt responsible for Celia getting pregnant. She should have warned Celia that Victor was a married man with three children and that his mother had been dead for many years before Celia met him. He had been lying to Celia. Everything he told her was a lie. He only wanted a conquest. To get Dr. Celia all the way to Paris just to go to bed with him. He had a bet on it. The Frenchman held the money. Victor won several hundred dollars from his crewmen on that bet. Victor was a merchant seaman. The Frenchman and Victor were chefs on the same ocean liner. But Mavis spared Celia the details of her Paris rendezvous. Better she should just believe, as she did, that he would one day return to her and they would sail for Paris and take up where they had left off. True love would prevail.

Celia’s baby was a boy. She named him after her father, Percel Trombone Lewis. Lewis was Mavis’ last name. Mavis brought young Percel up to believe that she was his natural mother and that his father was a sailor who died at sea. Mavis and young Percel moved to Atlanta, Georgia. She had family there and, through Celia, she got a job as a doctor’s receptionist. Young Percel grew up to be quite a fine young man in Atlanta, graduated from Atlanta University and went on to Meharry to study medicine. Later, he changed to dentistry.

As fate would have it, young Percel, while rummaging in the attic in Mavis’s old trunks, came across a neatly tied bundle of letters all written many years before to a man named Victor.

*July 2, 1934*

*Dear Victor,*

*Paris was wonderful. I cannot decide whether you are a scoundrel or an angel, but I love you. I want you more now than ever. You are the first man I have ever loved, other than my father. You do remind me of my father in many ways. You are tall and handsome and gentle and kind. And I love you as much as I love him.*

*In Paris they stared at us, we were so in love. Two Negroes in Paris, kissing on the banks of the*



*River Seine. Remember they tried to take our picture? You got angry. How can I live without you?*

*Were you serious when you asked me to marry you that first night in Paris? I don't mind waiting, my darling. But for how long? I want you more and more each day. All the best to your mother. I hope she is well.*

*Your love,  
Celia*

*August 18, 1934*

*Dear Victor,  
I am still waiting for you, my darling. Those beautiful weeks of love we shared in Paris fill me with joy. I have not heard from you since you left me that night in Paris. I do hope your mother is well. Please give her my best regards for a speedy recovery.*

*Please write to me soon. I have something very important to tell you, my darling. My love cannot wait much longer.*

*Your Love,  
Celia*

*September 1, 1934*

*Dear Victor,  
I must tell you, my darling; I am having your baby. If you still love me, as I know you do, please come to me. My father said you used me, but I know your sweet love was real. He is very disappointed in me. Please prove to him that you love me and that you were sincere when you asked me to marry you.*

*I have so much to offer you, much more than my love. I can help you with your law practice. Daddy just bought a house on Seventh Avenue. It is perfect for us. We can have our offices there and we can live there with our baby. Everything could be so perfect for us, my love.*

*If you still love me, please come to me, and give your baby a name. Mavis assures me that you are receiving these letters. Why don't you answer me, my love? Please write to me. How can you forget our sweet love in Paris? My love burns inside of me. Please put out my fire.*

*Your Love,  
Celia*

*December 18, 1934*

*Dear Victor,  
I fear that you have strayed from my love. Was it not enough to keep you warm? Where did I go wrong? I still love you so, my darling. I am so grief stricken to think you will never answer my letters, that I may never see you again and kiss your sweet lips as I did in Paris. I feel like such a fool. But I still love you. I will always love you. Please say that you love me too. I will understand if you explain why you have not written me. Is there another in your heart? How could you betray our love? Victor, I am a doctor. I don't believe that you would treat me like this. Please write me at*



*least once, so that we can say goodbye.*

*I am having your child. Surely that must mean something to you. Please, darling, write to me. I love you so much.*

*Your Love,  
Celia*

*March 22, 1935*

*Dear Victor,  
Our baby boy was born today. He looks just like you. I love him very much, but I cannot keep him. It would destroy my father's reputation and bring disgrace on my family. Mavis is moving to Atlanta. She will bring up our baby as her own. I will never stop loving you or believing that you will one day be mine.*

*Your Love,  
Celia*

"Mavis! Mavis! Where are you?!?" screamed young Percel over the stair banister. "Get up here!" Mavis ran up the stairs to the attic. As soon as she entered the room, she knew what had happened. Why had she kept those letters all these years? What sense had it made to be a go-between to Celia and Victor? All she had to do was tell Celia about Victor years ago.

But Celia would never give him up, no matter what. She would go to her grave loving a faded memory of two weeks of love in a Paris flat. Victor didn't want to hear from Celia and if Mavis pressured him with those letters, he wouldn't want to hear from her either. And she needed Victor. After all, he was Percel's father. He should be allowed to see his son. But Celia was another matter. That was over. There was never anything, anyway. But Mavis wanted to hold on to both of them—Celia and Victor—and that was her way to do it. Now she had to face her son. What could she say to him?

Young Percel spoke first. "Celia is my mother? And Victor—the one who comes here to see you when he's in port, the merchant seaman—he's my father? And the dentist, Celia's father, is my grandfather? The old man who talked me into becoming a dentist?!" Mavis stood there with tears rolling down her cheeks, nodding "yes" to Percel's questions. "But Mavis, why did you do it this way—lies and deceit? Wouldn't it have been easier to just stay out of it?" he asked her.

"No, I couldn't. I needed all of them. You know I have my problems, and Celia was always so condescending towards me. She always controlled me. Funny, she never took anything but she could always get it from her father's drug cabinet for me."

"And what about Victor? What did you really need him for?"

"He was my boyfriend before Celia, but he was married and had three children. It was useless. He would never leave his wife. He came to see us because I told him you were his son."

"Why does Celia think he's a lawyer?"





“He told her that. He went to law school but he could never get a job as a lawyer. He tried—you know how hard it is for us colored people. He had to make a living, so he told Celia what she wanted to hear. Everybody felt threatened by Celia and her family. Only Cee Cee was bearable in that house. She was the only one who was real and she’s nuts.”

“What is it you’re on, Mavis?”

“It’s morphine, a mild dose.”

“Does Victor bring it to you?”

“No, he only brings me cocaine when he goes to Turkey or South America.”

“How much of this does Celia know?”

“She doesn’t know anything about Victor. She still loves him. She believes he’ll come back to her one day.”

“And the dentist and Cee Cee? Do they know?”

“Yes. The dentist went to see Victor when he found out Celia was pregnant and planning to have the baby, and threatened to kill him if he ever came near his daughter again. He also threatened his job on the ship. He has connections.”

“So, what do we do now, Mavis? Whom do I call ‘Mother’?”

“You just leave everything as it is. They are all very proud of you—now that I have raised you and you are a dentist. You’re like them. They want you now, but I don’t want you to leave me. I am your mother. I have no one but you. Remember that.”

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***Woman on a Bridge #1 of 5: Tar Beach, 1988***

Acrylic paint, canvas, printed fabric, ink, and thread

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Gift, Mr. and Mrs. Gus and Judith Leiber, 88.3620

I will always remember when the stars fell down around me and lifted me up above the George Washington Bridge. I could see our tiny rooftop with Mommy and Daddy and Mr. and Mrs. Honey, our next door neighbors, still playing cards as if nothing was going on. BeBe, my baby brother was laying real still on the mattress just like I told him to, his eyes like huge floodlights tracking me through the sky.

Sleeping on Tar Beach was magical. Laying on the roof in the night with stars and skyscraper buildings all around me made me feel rich, like I owned all that I could see. The bridge was my most prized possession. Daddy said the George Washington Bridge was the longest and most beautiful bridge in the world and that it opened in 1931 on the very day I was born. Daddy worked on that bridge hoisting cables. Since then, I've wanted that bridge to be mine.

Now I have claimed it. All I had to do was fly over it for it to be mine forever. I can wear it like a giant diamond necklace, or just fly above it and marvel at its sparkling beauty. I can fly, yes fly. Me, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, only eight years old and in the third grade and I can fly. That means I am free to go wherever I want to for the rest of my life.

Daddy took me to see the new union building he is working on. He can walk on steel girders high up in the sky and not fall. They call him The Cat. But still he can't join the union because Grandpa wasn't a member. Well, Daddy is going to own that building 'cause I'm gonna fly over it and give it to him. Then it won't matter that he's not in their ole union or whether he's colored or a half-breed Indian like they say. He'll be rich and won't have to stand on 24-story high girders and look down. He can look up at his building going up. And Mommy won't cry all winter when Daddy goes to look for work and doesn't come home. And Mommy can laugh and sleep late like Mrs. Honey and I can have ice cream every night for dessert. Next I'm going to fly over the ice cream factory just to make sure we do.

Tonight we're going up to Tar Beach. Mommy is roasting peanuts and frying chicken and Daddy will bring home a watermelon. Mr. and Mrs. Honey will bring the beer and their old green card table. And then the stars will fall around me and I will fly to the Union building. I'll take BeBe with me. He has threatened to tell Mommy and Daddy if I leave him behind.

I have told him it's very easy, anyone can fly. All you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other way. The next thing you know, you're flying among the stars.

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Click on a quilt to read  
the full transcript.

Floor 2



***Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100  
Pounds Weight Loss Performance Story  
Quilt***



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



***Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pounds Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt, 1988***

Photoetching on silk and cotton with printed and pieced fabric

Courtesy the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

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 have written on this quilt are a part of the *Change 2* performance. I can't sing or dance and 30 pounds might as well be 300, but I'm still trying. That's what it takes to change.

**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  
 Livin 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 in between  
 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 the 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  
 Just Keep Tryin, And you'll do it.  
 (Repeat)

**1930s**

My mother brought us up to eat three square meals a day, without eating between meals. When I got old enough to run my own kitchen I ate three square meals a day. And then three more at night. My Mama made me do it.

**Mama Made Me Do It**

Mama made me do it (Repeat 2x's)  
 Told me clean my plate (Repeat 2x's)  
 That's how I gained this weight

Mama made me do it (Repeat 2x's)  
 Told me eat to grow strong (Repeat 2x's)





My mother was never wrong  
Mama made me do it (Repeat 2x's)  
Said there were children starving (Repeat 2x's)  
As she just went on carving  
Mama made me do it (Repeat 2x's)  
Piled my plate up high (Repeat 2x's)  
Right up to my eye

Mama made me do it (Repeat 2x's)  
Mama taught me to be good (Repeat 2x's)  
Said shut-up girl and eat your food  
Mama made me do it (Repeat 3x's)  
Yea

### **1940s**

We walked everywhere when we were kids so we could spend our carfare on chocolate candy bars and ice cream cones. They were both 5 cents then and bigger than the ones you pay a dollar for today. Though I no longer spend my carfare on candy bars, I still love to eat but I hate to exercise.

#### **I Hate To Exercise**

I hate to exercise (Repeat 2x's)  
Sometime I fall from grace  
Fast foodin all over the place  
Weighty gains on hips and thighs  
Trays of Danish flash before my eyes  
Listen to what I say  
I struggle every day

I really hate to exercise (Repeat 2x's)  
It doesn't matter how big my size  
I just hate to exercise (Repeat 2x's)  
Can't do it  
Can't stand it  
Early to bed and late to rise  
Makes a woman unhealthy and over size

Oh baby, I hate to exercise (Repeat 3x's)  
Yea

### **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 75 cents and were better than steak. That was romance in the 1950s—greasy food.

#### **Greasy Food**

Greasy food. Tastes good?





## ***Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt, 1988***

transcript, continued

Floor 2

Make you big like a pig.  
All fat like that  
Starts a crave. An early grave.

Greasy food. Tastes good?  
Creamy dips. Pad your hips.  
Burgers and fries. Line your thighs.  
Sweet treats. Fatty meats.  
Are unkind behind.  
Make your belly shake like jelly.

Greasy food. (Repeat 3x's)  
Tastes good?

### **1960s**

The 1960s was a fabulous decade. I discovered French wine and cheese in Paris and learned to be an activist in the streets of New York. At home my teenaged daughters drove me to eat wine with pork chops, and bread and cheese with my ribs and trouble.

#### **Trouble**

Trouble will make you eat (Repeat 2x's)  
Run out in the street  
Lookin for a treat

Trouble will make you eat (Repeat 2x's)  
Run out in the street  
Lookin for a treat  
A treat to eat, to eat a treat (Repeat 2x's)

Trouble (Repeat 6x's)  
A treat to eat  
Trouble (Repeat 3x's)

### **1970s**

In the 1970s, food was a feminist issue and I was a fat feminist. Always looking for a quasi politically correct excuse to eat. In the 1960s it was being a wife and mother, the rejection of being a black artist and other oppressions. In the 1970s it was all that and being a woman too. The 1970s kept me wondering when I'd get enough pain.

#### **Pain**

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



**Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance  
Story Quilt, 1988**  
transcript, continued

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Floor 2

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 chocolate eclairs

Will this end?  
Yes  
When?  
Now  
How?

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 3x's)  
Oh yea

**1980s**

By the 1980s there was no diet I hadn't tried. I gained weight on all of them. I didn't know you couldn't, so I'd combine them. If one worked well, two or three should work better. I finally broke the scale at 258. God knows what I weighed after that. Tomorrow, I'll change.

**Tomorrow**

Tomorrow (Repeat 2x's)  
I'll lose it tomorrow  
Tomorrow I'll lose it  
I'll lose it tomorrow  
Tomorrow (Repeat 3x's)

No Today!

I can change I can do it  
Just keep on tryin and you'll do it

Now!

The worst part about being fat was squeezing through the subway turnstile sideways; hobbling down the stairs panting and blowing while some bewildered passenger holds the door for me. And then to have two people get up to give me one seat. I just got to change.



***Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance  
Story Quilt, 1988***

Floor 2

transcript, continued

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**I Just Got To Change**

I just got to change (Repeat 2x's)  
I can't stand the pain  
It's like a fire in my brain  
Everyday it's the same  
Never mind who's to blame

It's me that's got to change  
Eatin all that food is so insane  
I just got to change (Repeat 2x's)

Repeat **The Change Song**

Finale

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***Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt, 1991***

Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric

Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

1. 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.
2. 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 I want to know: who am I talking to?
3. At my party everyone invited is me, and knows me, so there is no need to posture or pretend. Even our disagreements and rejections are stimulating and enlightening.
4. The extreme manifestations of me showed up at the party uninvited and were snubbed. One was eating a fried porkchop sandwich from a greasy bag. When she left, in a huff, she got stuck in the door.
5. But can you imagine a party such as the one I suggested: with only me there—or you there; in every possible expression of myself or rather of yourself? Would you find that intriguing?
6. Would you want to be surrounded by yourself: the you who are your repressed dreams and fantasies; your second helpings, midnight binges and lack-luster lazy, cookie-monster demons?
7. Can you imagine what you would look like, be like, in every color, shape, form and combination of your being? You could get some answers to some very pertinent questions like: "Why do you eat so much?"
8. 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.
9. I am so demanding. I want everything I fantasize to be real and true. If it turns bad, I will try to change it, if not I may deny it. But who can deny weight?
10. All of my guests came nude. They 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. They were.
11. A best friend, though we have fallen out lately, who eats only one low-fat meal a day. She caught me eating her lunch once, when she came late for a lunch date.
12. This woman exercises and works out, has facials and dress fittings and is very together. I love being around her. But she is sometimes compulsive and rigid about food. I have not seen her lately.



13. 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 fond of her, though I rarely see her.
14. 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.
15. 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.
16. I have made it quite clear, though she is basically a nice person, that I find her presence very threatening. She is simply not my type. But still she sticks to me like glue.
17. 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.
18. So I invited her to go to Paris with me. 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—or to go.
19. There is one woman who is my greatest fantasy, though she will never be invited again. I identify with her too closely. She eats nonstop and never gains weight.
20. There are two very large women who have eaten three trays of hors d’oeuvres each before dinner. They have invited me to an after dinner party for coffee, cake, and ice cream. Really!

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