



Faith Ringgold began her artistic career more than thirty-five years ago as a painter. Today, she is best known for her painted story quilts—art that combines painting, quilted fabric, and storytelling. She has exhibited in major museums in the United States, Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. She is in the permanent collection of many museums including the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Museum of Modern Art.

*Her first book, *Tar Beach*, was a Caldecott Honor Book and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration, among numerous other honors. She has written and illustrated eleven children's books. She has received more than seventy-five awards, fellowships, citations, and honors, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Fellowship for painting, two National Endowment for the Arts Awards, and seventeen honorary doctorates, one of which is from her alma mater, The City College of New York.*

Feminist Studies 33, no. 2 (Summer 2007). © 2007 by Faith Ringgold.

Coming to Jones Road

Faith Ringgold

INTRODUCTION

I moved to Jones Road in Englewood, New Jersey, on November 23, 1992, with the dream of constructing a studio and creating a garden.

Soon after I came to live on Jones Road and began to pursue my dream, I discovered that I was surrounded by hostile neighbors, who saw my presence on Jones Road as a threat to the “quality” of their lives. My dream of a studio and garden was to them no more than a rooming house with transient occupants. For more than six years I struggled with the town board to obtain the permits

necessary to override my neighbors’ opposition and build my studio.

Having traveled the world but never having lived anywhere but Harlem, this was an extremely traumatic experience for me. But art is a healer and the sheer beauty of living in a garden amidst trees, plants, and flowers has inspired me to look away from my neighbors’ unfounded animosity toward me and focus my attention on the stalwart tradition of black people who had come to New Jersey centuries before me. In *Coming to Jones Road*, I have tried to couple the beauty of the place and the harsh realities of its racist history to create a freedom series that turns all the ugliness of spirit, past and present, into something livable. I am also trying, which is the hardest part of all, to speak in the voice of my grandmothers and fathers who made it possible for me in the twenty-first century to walk free and tell their story.

DEDICATION

This book and series is dedicated to my devoted husband, Burdette Ringgold, without whom there would have been no Coming to Jones Road; and to my father, Andrew Louis Jones Sr., who always made me feel special from the day I was born. "We tore up the pattern for that one," he used to say about me.

Thanks to my great grandmother, Betsy Bingham, and all of the grandmas and grandpas who had the courage, intelligence, and resourcefulness to bring us this far. They were truly legends in their time.

COMING TO JONES ROAD #1
COMING TO JONES ROAD



The first picture in the *Coming to Jones Road* series was painted in 1999 while the idea and the story were still unfolding. In fact, all I had was a sepia photograph of my great grandmother, Betsy Bingham, who was a tower of strength and beauty in our family according to every one who knew her. Grandma Betsy's photograph inspired me to create the image

and character of Aunt Emmy long before Barn Door, his wife Precious (also the narrator), and Baby Freedom were fully realized. In fact in the beginning all I had to work with was a trail of shadowy figures under a moonlit sky stealing through the landscape in pursuit of freedom at Aunt Emmy's little white house on Jones Road.

COMING TO JONES ROAD #2

SUNDAY EVENING

Somehow I needed to see the shadowy figures in a more positive view early on and to know that they would reach Jones Road and be all right. So I envisioned them coming from church on a Sunday afternoon. I needed to create a sense of community in their new home on Jones Road. Then I could go back and tell you the story of how they had Come to Jones Road in the first place.

40 X 56, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
QUILTED, 1999.



AUNT EMMY



67.5 IN X 38.5 IN, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, QUILTED, 1999.

Ever since that night Aunt Emmy left the plantation me and Barn Door been achin to follow. You see, Aunt Emmy used to come to Barn Door in his dreams and she would say: "I'm comin back to get you boy." Same thing she said the night she left there. Then one day, Barn Door was already in the fields choppin cotton when he felt a shakin and heard a rumblin, and then Aunt Emmy's voice came from deep in the earth.

The voice said, "Barn Door, the time has come to walk to freedom. Nobody gonna stop you now. Wait till nightfall then go, and don't leave nobody behind. Keep a comin till you reach the Palisades. Then turn onto Jones Road. Look for an old white farmhouse with your dead Mama's star quilt on the roof. We be waiting for you. God be on your side. You as good as free!"

COMING TO JONES ROAD #4

UNDER A BLOOD-RED SKY



The sun went down early that night. The cotton fields turned black in no time. All us steppin quiet to the shacks. “You’ll come on. Just follow me,” Barn Door whispered. “We goin North to freedom tonight.”

There was 28 of us and one newborn baby girl on that long hard sojourn through the woods and swamps. We named the baby Freedom because she was born almost free.

By day, we prayed for the black of night to come to cover us. By night, we crept softly to muffle our steps. We moved along as if in one body hardly knowing where we was goin, our way lit only by a chalk-white moon in a blood-red sky.

78.5 IN X 56 IN,
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
QUILTED, 1999.

Our worse night was when we followed the river deep into the swamps. We was all weary from runnin from dogs and fightin snakes, and we was so hungry and there was nothin to eat. Just before daybreak we reached a clearing in the woods where some white folks had gone away and left a banquet of food untouched. Lord, did we had a party in them woods? We ate and drank real good for the first time since we could remember.

Somebody said maybe the food and wine was left there to poison us. But Barn Door said “hope they be leavin some more cause ain’ no more here. And if it poisoned we sure die happy with a full stomach. We laughed out loud and no body heard us. After that our nights was not so long and lonely.

76 IN X 52.5 IN,
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
QUILTED, 1999.

COMING TO JONES ROAD #5

A LONG AND LONELY NIGHT





COMING TO JONES ROAD #6

BABY FREEDOM
CAME ONE NIGHT

They say Aunt Emmy had the power to be in two places at the same time. Well one day I felt her pressin on my belly and I stop walkin and look down and I see Aunt Emmy's hand and then I see her face right there in front of me. "Now Precious," that's what she called me, "You be strong now. Barn Door is a good

man, and you is a good woman, and this here baby is a freedom chile," she went on pressing my belly even harder. "You don't fret none. This baby be here for day in the mornin, sure as there's a God in heaven." Now how she know I was that way? I ain even tell Barn Door. I ain't tell nobody. Nobody but Jesus.

Well sure enough, Baby Freedom come that night, and we all jus cry and Barn Door hold Baby Freedom and pray she don't make no noise—and she don't. And then everybody say "she our baby too," cause we all know she was born to be free.

83 IN X 56 IN,
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
QUILTED, 2000.

Day by day we walked with little rest and hardly any food. Folks say they don't know how we made it, but the truth is we put one foot front the other and jus keep a comin till we got here.



We arrived at the Palisades before daybreak, dog-tired, aching from head to toe. But the sky was as blue as ever a sky could be and the birds were singing a strong sweet song of freedom.

Lord, let this don't be no dream and we wake up choppin cotton. Well we was here cuz we see Aunt Emmy standin proud and pretty in the risin sun, and the ole white farm house with Barn Door's dead Moma's quilt on the roof and now we can't walk no more. Just fall on our knees makin a river of tears right there on the ground...

COMING TO JONES ROAD #7

WE JUS KEEP
A COMIN

78 IN X 55.5 IN,
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
QUILTED, 2000.



COMING TO JONES ROAD #8

ONLY THE CHILDREN

Tired as can be, the children commenced to run and play, their sweet voices ringing through the trees like bells of joy:

“We free! We free! Aunt Emmy got us now! We free! We free now!
Ain gonna be sold no more
Ain gonna be whooped no more
Ain gonna cry cry cry no more
Ain gonna chop chop chop
In the hot sun For no one!

We free! We free now!
Go to school Act a fool

Free to play. All day
Run in the sun Have us some fun
Like anyone

We free! We free!
Aunt Emmy got us now.”

God be my witness that’s how we come to Jones Road on November the twenty-third, in the year of our Lord, seventeen hundred and ninety-two.

79 IN X 56.5 IN, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
QUILTED, 2000.