

No Soy una Mujer Tambien ? Elizabeth Catlett's Aesthetics of Transnational Racial and Ethnic Solidarity in Praxis, 1946-1971

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Abstract

Artist Elizabeth Catlett to Mexico in 1947 and was subjected to harassment by the U.S. government. In the 1950s the U.S. government partnered with Mexican authorities to arrest and deport members of the Left in Mexico. While residing in Mexico Catlett identified social and institutional inequality in the United States and in Mexico. These socially charged observations were frequently the subject of Catlett's artwork, and this, along with her affiliation with the Taller de Gráfica Popular, which led to surveillance of Catlett's activities and travel restrictions imposed by the U.S. government. While Catlett's art reflects her observation of unbridled systematic oppression across national boundaries, her experience with FBI harassment demonstrates the unyielding authority of the U.S. government to police citizens abroad. Catlett's exposure to McCarthy era oppression culminated with her arrest in 1959. Catlett was held for several days and labeled a "foreign agitator." To avoid further harassment and deportation, Catlett renounced her U.S. citizenship becoming a Mexican citizen in 1962. The U.S. government responded by labeling Catlett an "undesirable alien" and denying the American-born artist entry to the United States until 1971.

Keywords:

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In a U.S. dominated hemisphere it is easy to lose sight of Mexico as a critical node in the United States' self-representation of a conceptual national whole. However, the United States carved its geographical boundaries through empire and set upon reframing conquest in the nineteenth

century. For example, the removal of Native Americans from their ancestral homes to reservations was a mechanism to corroborate a settler colonial creation myth that denied the genocide of Native Americans. Similarly, Jim Crow segregation and the Chinese Exclusion Act served as convenient methods to obscure the exploitation of racial and ethnic bodies that labored to build the infrastructure and cultivate the products that fed the nation's coffers. Rather than acknowledging that Manifest Destiny was an orchestration of empire, the United States doubled down, imposing the Monroe Doctrine's "imperial anti-colonialism"¹ and instigating the U.S.-Mexican War. Wielding the Monroe Doctrine, the United States used the policy as a weapon of hegemonic control over the Western Hemisphere with impunity. Despite the United States' bid for unilateral control in the Americas, during the antebellum era, the issue of slavery became a point of contention between the United States and Mexico, as the United States was powerless to stop thousands of enslaved African Americans from crossing the Rio Grande and leading themselves to freedom. In 1946, Elizabeth Catlett, like countless others expatriated to Mexico, and re-established her life despite U.S. government harassment. Catlett's story is one of struggle, and her crucible led her to Mexico and international acclaim.

In 1970 *Ebony* magazine published an article profiling Elizabeth Catlett. It was the first time the African American artist living in Mexico had been featured in a mainstream outlet in the United States. The pull quote on the spread's cover page reads: "My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples." The oft-cited title of the interview was a statement that would become attached to Catlett's art,

¹ Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth Century America*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).

activism, and legacy. Beneath the attention-grabbing declaration, in a narrow column of text, Catlett addresses her audience, proclaiming:

I am inspired by black people and Mexican people, my two peoples. Neither the masses of black people nor Mexican people have the time or money to develop formal aesthetic appreciation. [...] I try to reach them intuitively because they have an intuitive appreciation and thus help, if I can, their aesthetic development. I'm certainly not going to do calendar art. But if in sculpture I can give a subject that is clear and at the same time a sculpture of a form which they will understand intuitively, then I feel I have accomplished something.²

The focal point of the page, a black and white photograph of Catlett at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, is framed by the artist's statements. In the foreground of the image is Catlett standing before her sculpture, *Homage of My Young Black Sisters*, carved from a single piece of dark mahogany. The curved torso is arched upward, drawing viewers' eye to the figure's outstretched arm and a clenched fist, raised in defiance, crowns the sculpture's towering limb. The image of Catlett gazing with satisfaction upon the statue dominates the page. Catlett's statue re-casts the androcentric revolutionary fist, acknowledging black women's dedication to the struggle for U.S. civil rights and crafting the rhetoric of revolution in a female form. In 1948, as a member of the Taller Gráfica Popular, an artist guild in Mexico City, Catlett along with fellow members, produced a print of a black fist, the popular symbol of labor solidarity. Years later, in 1989, Catlett spoke about the personal inspiration for the sculpture. According to her biographer

² Elizabeth Catlett, interviewed by Marc Crawford, "My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples." *Ebony*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1970.

Melanie Herzog, she “made the piece because she felt removed from what was going on in the United States as she watched from Mexico, and she wanted to express in Mexico what the Black Liberation movement meant to her.”³

This article will consider the unique set of circumstances that resulted in Catlett’s renouncement of her U.S. citizenship. Of particular interest is the Cold War context of the FBI’s surveillance and harassment of Catlett and her family. Despite government harassment, arrest, and illegal detainment, Catlett’s politically charged art entered the United States when she, a U.S. citizen, was prohibited from entering the country. Furthermore, this article will examine the power of the U.S. police state beyond its national borders and the subversion of systematic political and racial oppression in the life and art of Elizabeth Catlett, focusing on her transnational stylistic vocabulary articulated, most notably, in her carved prints. Catlett’s linoleum cuts, which combined bold angular printed images with precise, textured lines, narrative titles, detailed spatial perspective and spatial dislocation. The compositional unity of her prints reflects the cross-border dynamics that inspired the syncretic aesthetics of her art. Finally, in this article I argue that Mexico transformed Catlett’s work, drawing inspiration from early twentieth century Mexican muralists and the Taller’s revolutionary and anti-fascist printmaking, while also expressing her concerns for African Americans.

As a visual artist, Catlett’s subjects, appearing in sculptures, linocuts, and woodprints, evoke pride in African American history, celebrating famous figures such as Phyllis Wheatley and

³ Melanie Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: American Artist in Mexico*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000),143.

Frederick Douglass. However, Catlett's art also portrays the race and class-based oppression confronted by everyday African Americans and leaders of the Black Liberation movement, such as Angela Davis and Malcolm X. An antecedent to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Catlett undertook the process of acknowledging multiple forms of oppression. In particular, African American women were the subject of much of her art, extending her analysis of race and class-based oppression to the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression. Although Catlett's work gestures toward the social and systemic roots of physical, psychological, and economic violence that African American women faced, beginning in the late 1940s, poor indigenous Mexican women joined African American women as the primary subject depicted in her art or the "[un]intentionally produced...consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with the preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment."⁴ Unlike many mainstream American artists at the time, Catlett laid bare the systematic race, class, and gender-based assaults on the corporeality of black and brown women, creating poignant parallels between the conditions of class-based institutionalized racial, ethnic discrimination in the United States and Mexico.

While Herzog characterizes Catlett's art as being "grounded in the terrain of womanhood, both black and Mexican," artist Floyd Coleman asserts Catlett's innovative style "raises complex issues of tradition, identity and social change; race, ethnicity, and culture; art and ideology; art

⁴Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and the Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* Vol. 43, no 6 (Jul., 1991): 1249.

and politics.”⁵ Catlett’s artwork, in particular her prints, blend African American and Mexican visual culture with social criticism, resulting in groundbreaking transnational art. Evoking images of her matrilineal African American birthright and her adoption of the Taller de Gráfica Popular’s politically conscious aesthetic and material accessibility, Catlett’s visual rhetoric uses an array of media to articulate a trans-historical, polyvocal, cross-border matrix.

In *Art on My Mind*, bell hooks asserts “the way race, gender, and class shapes art practices (who makes art, how it sells, who values it, who writes about it” as determining factors that can reinforce creative pursuits or cause would-be artists or audiences to reject visual imagery.⁶ She goes on to explain that for many years the African American community looked at art with suspicion and disdain.

Art (both the product and the process of creation) may be so devalued—not just in underclass communities, but in diverse black contexts, and, to some extent, our society as a whole—we may deem art irrelevant even if it is in our midst. That possibility aside, the point is that most black folks do not believe in the presence of art in our lives as essential to our collective well-being...the production of art and the creation of politics of the visual that would not only affirm artists but also see the development of an aesthetic of viewing as central to claiming subjectivity have been consistently devalued.⁷

⁵ Floyd Coleman, “A Courtyard Apart: The Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Francisco Mora,” in *A Courtyard Apart: The Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Francisco Mora*, eds. John Arledge and Alissa W. Terry, (Biloxi, MS: Mississippi Museum of Art, 1990), 12.

⁶ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, (New York: The New Press, 1995), xii.

⁷ hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 3.

Catlett approached printmaking as a tool to represent people of color, in particular women, in art and to criticize the exploitation of black and brown communities in Mexico and the U.S. “Representation,” hooks writes, “is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed peoples asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind.” With a sensitivity to race and class consciousness foregrounding her outlook, Catlett acknowledged her own class privilege, particularly her access to artistic training, access to materials, tools, and feeling comfortable—both financially and emotionally—to pursue art.

Upon graduation from high school, in 1931 Catlett enrolled in Howard University after being denied admittance to the all-white Carnegie Mellon University. Howard University, on the other hand, was a historically black college that “was central to the teaching and exhibition of African American art,” and is where Catlett gained exposure to “not only the work of important black artist but to [international] modern art.”⁸ Although *Mexican Arts*, an exhibition of modern Mexican art, toured the United States in 1930 “and encouraged American artists to travel to Mexico,” Catlett first observed modern Mexican art while a student at Howard University.⁹ Catlett studied with James Porter and James Wells, professors of painting and printmaking. Porter introduced Catlett to Diego Rivera’s murals, and Wells secured Catlett a position with the Public

⁸ Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 15.

⁹ Lyle W. Williams, “Evolution of a Revolution: A Brief History of Printmaking in Mexico.” *Mexico and Modern Printmaking: A Revolution in the Graphic Arts, 1920 to 1950*, edited by John Ittmann. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 15.

Works of Art Project. Catlett's only project with the PWAP was a mural of Miguel Covarrubia's *Caricatures of Harlem*.¹⁰

In 1945 while teaching at the George Washington Carver School in New York City, Catlett was awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. Although the award was a significant professional accomplishment, she continued teaching; the exposure Catlett gained as an instructor proved to be beneficial, "open[ing] her eyes to the real-life hardships experienced by working class and poor people, especially poor African Americans." At Carver School Catlett observed students eager to participate in the creation and discussion of art. Catlett was moved by her students at the Carver School and conceptualized her Rosenwald project *The Negro Woman* in their image.

The New York art scene provided little support for black artists, and upon renewal of the Rosenwald Fellowship in 1946, Catlett resigned from her position at the Carver School, relocating to Mexico City. Catlett opined "back then the black artists couldn't exhibit anywhere outside of some little group shows like at the Downtown Gallery."¹¹ Post-war migration and expatriation "offered black women a form of resistance to the exploitative conditions of domestic labor;" however, "for the majority of black female migrants, [...] the North was a disappointment in this respect. 'Jane Crow' followed them to Chicago, Detroit, and New York."¹² Feeling confined by the lack of opportunities for black artists, especially black female artist, Catlett left the U.S.

¹⁰ Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 16.

¹¹ "Elizabeth Catlett Interviewed by Robert Berlind," *Art Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 1 Art and Old Age, (Spring, 1994): 29.

¹² Erin Royston Battat, *Ain't Got No Home: American's Great Migration and the Making of an Interracial Left*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 106.

Leading Mexico's social art movement was the Sindicato de ObrerosTécnicos y Plásticos (Revolutionary Union of Technical Workers, Painters, Sculptors, and Allied Trades), established by artists committed to bringing about social change through public art in 1922. The same year, one of the Sindicato's original founders, Diego Rivera, was commissioned in by José Vasconcelos to paint his first government sponsored mural. Appointed as the Minister of Public Education by President Obregón in the period of nascent peace, Vasconcelos turned to public muralists to promote national unity. In 1910, at the start of the war, 81 percent of Mexico's population, approximately twelve of the country's fifteen million citizens, was illiterate.¹³ Realizing all Mexicans, even the country's massive illiterate population, could understand the message of national pride and unity in visual images that celebrated Aztec culture and the heroes of the revolution, Vasconcelos pressed artists like Rivera to create large-scale public art projects in which pre-Hispanic and revolution era imagery were combined.

Led by "Los Tres Grandes," Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orzoco, and David Alfaro Sisqueros, muralism became a distinctly Mexican art form and a tool for the government to disseminate nationalist propaganda. Vasconcelos' government-backed mural program promoted national reunification through a medium that sought to educate the nation's illiterate population, which was disproportionately composed of the indigenous and/or peasant farmers, engendering an inclusive national atmosphere. However, in tandem with the mural program, Vasconcelos' education and literacy programs operated under colonial paradigms, forcing language conversion

¹³ Lee Stacey, ed. *Mexico and the United States*, (Tarrytown: Marshall Cavendish, 2003), 466.

and re-instituting racial hierarchies in an effort to assimilate and thus subdue Mexico's subaltern population.

At the same time, improvements to infrastructure, such as "international communication systems that connected Mexico and the United States...and transportation made travel less an adventure and more of an everyday matter," drawing increasing numbers of U.S. citizens to Mexico.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Mexican government's "deployment of the techniques of hospitality...seemed to have a special talent for capturing and retaining the sympathies of travelers to the left of ideological center."¹⁵ By 1934 "Mexico experience a substantial increase in visitors from the United States" due in part to the Mexican government's enterprising tourism campaign initiated in 1929.¹⁶ American tourists followed guidebooks and the government travel literature, directing sightseers to the nation's pantheon of anthropological treasures and sprawling public art in Mexico City, and Mexico continued to attract adventure-seeking tourists from the United States throughout the 1930s.

Catlett, like other "socially engaged artist in the United States during the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s were well aware of the precedent set by the Mexican public art movement...they especially admired Mexican muralists;" however, "the public art movement engendered as well a strong renaissance in Mexican graphic arts, beginning with the woodblock prints."¹⁷ Catlett was "[d]rawn to the socialist art for which the Mexican muralists were recognized," and developed a

¹⁴ John A. Britton, *Revolution and Ideology: Images of the Mexican Revolution in the United States*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 129.

¹⁵ Britton, *Revolution and Ideology*, 129.

¹⁶ Britton, *Revolution and Ideology*, 176.

¹⁷ Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 50.

formidable interest in the Mexican school's graphic arts. In 1940 Catlett attended an exhibition of Taller members José Chavez Morado, Luis Arenal, and Igancio Aguirre's prints. Introduction to the artists and their prints reinforced the portability of lithographs and linocuts, emphasizing the practical ability to produce an image and disseminate a message in public spaces.

In the fall of 1946 Catlett became a member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular. The Taller, founded in 1937 by Pablo O'Higgins, Leopoldo Méndez, and Luis Arenal, specialized in printmaking, a medium that provided immediacy and a degree of accessibility unavailable to traditional artist. The Taller de Gráfica Popular's Declaration of Principles underscores the group's focus on the collective art-making process and their determination that artists in the collective "benefit by its works the progressive and democratic interest of the Mexican people, especially in the fight against fascist reaction."¹⁸ Furthermore, a leading principle of the Taller was to facilitate an environment in which members "can also realize that art is a career and a social activity that is useful, and not the idle pastime that the bourgeois philosophers pretend it is."¹⁹ The Taller encouraged collaboration, and with the support of its members, Catlett completed *The Negro Woman* series in 1947, embracing the collective's social justice framework and the accessibility of their medium to working class viewers.

While the Taller de Gráfica Popular did not make murals and did not exhibit photography, photographs of revolutionary leaders were often adapted for prints based on the image's iconic lingua franca. The members of the collective, many of whom were poor and came from

¹⁸ Williams, "Evolution of a Revolution," 16.

¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

indigenous communities, created art for dispossessed peasant laborers and urban working-class Mexicans. The majority of the collective were Marxists or members of the Mexican Communist Party, and the art conveyed their leftist ideology in theory and in praxis. Art was made using manual presses, for instance, and the prints were commonly pasted to public structures, inviting the poor and working class to join in the conversation, not hidden from them behind gallery or museum walls. The collective celebrated the people and their heroes Ernesto Zapata and Pancho Villa who fought the Mexican government after the fall of dictator Porfirio Díaz.

Elizabeth Catlett was among numerous African American artists who left the U.S. in the 1940s, drawn to Mexico's international reputation as a political sanctuary. This distinction, as well as the geographical proximity of Mexico to the United States, ushered in an exodus of artists, writers, and activists, many of whom were affiliated with leftist political organizations, from the U.S. to Mexico. Among the first to leave was a coterie of African American cultural producers, who under the constant threat of racial violence and police harassment, re-established themselves in Mexico City. Bill Muller, author of *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics* describes Mexico City in the 1940s as "a haven and refuge for African American artists seeking an alternative to the repressive political environment at home."²⁰

When Catlett joined the Taller in 1946, the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and World War II still clung to the air like stale smoke. That year Catlett published an article, "Tribute to the Negro People," a fog signal alerting readers to threats that lay ahead: "the war that has just been fought

²⁰ Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 191.

and won did not eliminate fascist thinking and fascist activity. It still exists in America, the fountain-head of democracy.”²¹ Catlett’s foreboding statements anticipate the Truman Doctrine (1947) and the ascension of the States’ Rights Democratic Party (1948).²² Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue World War II initiated social movements for racial justice in the U.S. “led by the black movement...irreversibly expanded the terrain of political conflict...refiguring race [and] refiguring the experience itself as a political matter, a matter of identity and self-conscious activity.”²³ Catlett explains she went to Mexico because “it was the nearest place [to the United States] without racism and segregation.”²⁴ Mexico and the Taller represented to Catlett a space to negotiate art and activism while avoiding the purges of anti-communism in the aftermath of World War II.

Catlett joined the Taller at the tail end of post-war anti-fascist resistance and productivity as the collective began to turn its attention back to the creation of portraits of Mexican revolutionaries and everyday heroes. *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana* (1947) prints, for instance, not only celebrated Mexico’s history; the subtext of the prints was an indictment of ever-increasing U.S. imperialism in Mexico. Catlett derived inspiration from the Taller’s celebration of the Mexican

²¹ Elizabeth Catlett, “A Tribute to the Negro People,” *American Contemporary Art* (Winter 1946): 17.

²² John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 12-13.
Joe Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 143-144.

²³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 161.

²⁴ Elizabeth Catlett, interviewed by Rebecca M. Schreiber, Cuernavaca, Mexico, June 8, 1999. Quoted in Schreiber, *Cold War Exiles*, 3.

urban working and agrarian peasant-classes as well as its condemnation post-war U.S. imperialism. The Taller's print making techniques and culture of critical resistance, though shifting, provided Catlett with a creative and ideological home, forming the basis of transnational art and activities that serve as the aesthetic and ideological crux of her work.

Estampas de la Revolución demonstrated a means for Catlett to "envision her epic celebration of the historic opposition, resistance, and survival of African American women."²⁵ The collective's emphasis on artistic collaboration provided Catlett constructive criticism and community membership. Owing to the Taller's political and aesthetic philosophies, Catlett, a newcomer to the collective and the country, in her pursuit to "illuminate [the] darkness [and] blaze roads through the vast forest" had the emotional and practical support of the Taller, an overlooked but critical aspect to her professional development.²⁶ *The Negro Woman* series is an early example of Catlett adoption of the collective's graphic language. The Taller's signature compositional devices, narrative titles, use of photographic source materials, and politically conscious art for the people exemplified in the *Estampas de la Revolución* are visible in *The Negro Woman* print series and is an early example of the influence Mexican modernism on Catlett's series that articulated of the corporeal reality of blackness using the Taller's graphic language.

The Negro Woman is an African American picto-historical biography told through a series linoleum cuts comprised of fifteen prints. Like the Taller's *Estampas de la Revolución*, which

²⁵ Ibid., 58-59.

²⁶ James Baldwin, "The Creative Process," *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, (New York: Library of America, 1998), 669.

“treats an epic historical narrative of the struggles, achievements, and tragedies of the Mexican Revolution, from the point of view of those engage in the struggle,” Catlett presents the forbearers of abolition and emancipation along with contemporary African American women who have assumed the struggle for liberation.²⁷ These women, who by virtue of the white racist paradigm’s negative differentiation casts black women in the role of black so as to create the role of white, become the understudies of a racial act, and are thus demanded to simultaneously appear hypervisibility and invisibility in art as in society. Nicole Fleetwood identifies racial-spatial dislocation in art, explaining “black women have had to operate as menial laborers in the public sphere and in the domestic setting of white families, while simultaneously remaining invisible as subjects in these spaces.”²⁸ This visual strategy dismisses the notion of progress and democracy touted by the purveyors of U.S. racial spectatorship’s structures of domination. Similarly, Catlett’s prints announce the artifice of the American shadow play; her subjects step away from the white racial frame into the racially and spatially dislocated critical Mexican framework.

The visual testimonies of heroines of African American history, Sojourner Truth, Phyllis Wheatley, and Harriet Tubman, join a chorus of ordinary African American women claiming visibility through self-defined knowledge in *The Negro Woman* series. Modeled after the *Estampas de la Revolución*, “Catlett’s series claimed for black women’s lives the historical

²⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁸ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Blackness: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 191.

importance accorded to the Mexican Revolution.”²⁹ Catlett set about liberating the image of African American women from the symbolic violence of hypervisible-invisible spectral citizenship using her “outsider within status” to articulate the “American Assumption” through Mexican modernist aesthetics and printmaking techniques.³⁰ This stratagem of subversion is telling in and of itself. The reality that Catlett lacked sufficient social capital to gain access to show her work in the U.S. despite her talent, training, and profile, addresses Michelle Wallace’s argument concerning the trouble black artists have gaining acceptance. Within Wallace’s negotiations of the apparatus of raced bodies’ vanishing presence, her reading of the adverbial structures of optic racial codes supply a matrix to engage with Catlett’s visual and personal, geographic re-articulation of power:

How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one’s existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky curly hair, are visual. However, *not* being seen by those who don’t want to see you because they are racists, what Ralph Ellison called “invisibility,” often leads racists to the interpretation that *you are unable* to see.³¹

Wallace calculates the cultural and economic politics of “the relationships of corporeality to the visual,” which not only impacts individual artists but effects all non-white passing individuals,

²⁹Ibid., 69.

³⁰ WEB DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³¹ Michelle Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 40.

raising the stakes of representation for Black cultural artists.³² Catlett interrogates racial misrecognition through her conviction to represent the racial oppression of African American women while she also grappled with the multi-tiered framework of racial oppression, “fill[ing] the void and is the void” between the “authoring subject” and “multiple viewing positions.”³³ The Taller facilitated public spaces in which Catlett’s social and creative entanglements registered her matrilineal blackness and yielded a “black life that is intelligible and valued” as a lived process and product.³⁴ Catlett adapted the Taller’s compositional techniques, narrative titles, and photographic source material, harnessing the collective’s aesthetics to fit her rhetorical stance on black women’s self-affirmation.

The Negro Woman Series contains compositional devices, such as aggressive reliefs shaped by intricate, textured cuts and angular blocks of color, that correspond with “the precisely rendered detail, spatial perspective, and use of fully realized setting...consistent with the approach taken by many of the Taller artists to such historically specific subjects.”³⁵ The Taller frequently used well-known photographs of leaders of the Mexican Revolution to encourage a largely illiterate audience to engage with Mexican history. Adopted this technique, Catlett worked “from frequently reproduced engravings and photographs of African American heroines familiar to her intended audience.”³⁶ Catlett’s application of photograph source texts, the compositional

³² Catherine Soussloff and Mark Franko, “Visual and Performance Studies A New History of Interdisciplinarity,” *Social Text* Vol. 20, no. 4 (Winter, 2002): 37.

³³ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Blackness*, 6, 198.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

technique, visual vernacular, and narrative framing are within the vein of the Taller's stylistic and rhetorical iconography.

Catlett's textured, stylized cuts expose her subject's corporeal-historic field. The repetition and texture of the cuts supply the settings with dramatic impressions of ink in contrast to the papel chino background, a light pastel paper, commonly used by Taller members. The cuts structure the depth and dimension to prints and reinforce compositional unity and emotional tone. Catlett juxtaposes her subjects' abject vulnerability, gestured by the narrow lines that detail their form, with their resolve to survive and be to seen, evident in the presence of the ink's dominant structuring of their embodied forms. Catlett's rejection of "aberrant representations of the black female subject in dominant visual culture" pervades the episodic visual text. The repetition of the personal pronoun "I" and the ocular eye are verbal-visual representations of testimony and bearing witness that occur simultaneously within the prints and from the perspective of the viewer, yet another set of "I"-eyes.

Throughout the collection deep set eyes emerge as a motif that acknowledges and challenges asymmetrical power systems. Enacting an "oppositional gaze," Catlett's subjects "look back...and at one another" from the prints.³⁷ Fine lines across the body weave a discursive tautology of "visible seams" and invisible wounds. "Visible seams," as Fleetwood explains, "works through the subtly of the stitch that sutures but leaves visible the wound it mends."³⁸ Fine lines represent invisible trauma that renders their corporeal form and expresses unspoken

³⁷ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

³⁸ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Blackness*, 9.

historical scars. These fine rhythmic cuts deliver in contrast bold swaths of ink suspended in relief. The blocks of color draw strength from the literal and figurative negative space, and in doing so, announce the women's on-going presence in U.S. history, introducing them as fully-formed people and citizens—not silent spectacles for consumption or subjugation.

The prints' visual rhetoric is translated into title narratives that re-phrase the subject's authorial identity in a new language set. Guided by the "second sight" of subjects' "outsider within" status to communicate the vanishing point of racial and gender oppression, each pictorial inscription redresses the "veil" of racist misrecognition through the convergence of the title narrative below the frame. For example, in the first print of the series the face dominates the frame, while the negative space around the subject's eyes force an eye to eye confrontation between subject and audience. The image forces a conversation between subject-author and spectator-reader. The title, "I am the Negro Woman," is an introduction and an invitation to engage with the print verbally.

Caption titles tell its viewer a story:

I have always worked hard in America. In the fields. In other folks' homes. I have given the world my songs. In Sojourner Truth I fought for women as well as negroes. In Harriet Tubman I helped hundreds to freedom. In Phyllis Wheatley I proved intellectual equality in the midst of slavery. My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized. I have studied in ever increasing numbers. My reward has been bars between me and the rest of the land. I have

special reservations. Special Houses. And a special fear for my loved ones. My right is a future of equality with other Americans.³⁹

The prints announce the individual contributions of the subjects to the United States through its visual and verbal medium. Each 10” by 16” linoleum cuts are captioned-titled and script the sequence viewers move through the text. The relatively small size of the prints and narrative-caption titles also encourage the audience to move toward the prints, narrowing the physical distance between the spectator and subject, while also welcoming reader-viewers to participate in call and response.

The utterance of the “I” by the reader-viewer-speaker dislocates the space between the subject and the audience, rendering the spectator in the place of the subject. The repetition of the “I” creates a rhythm and an emotional intensity suggestive of anaphora. Given the widespread use of anaphora in psalms, the narrative titles create an additional layer of familiarity for the subjects of her prints and African American audiences. What’s more, Catlett’s use of narrative title as the identifier, the descriptor, and the claimant is an upheaval of the “natural” order of white Euro-American consumption of colonial spaces and bodies and responds to Wallace’s apt criticism regarding the “unilateral unwillingness of Euro-American culture to admit and acknowledge its debt, or even more its relationship, to African and Afro-American culture.”⁴⁰ Disturbing the logic of the gaze through utterance makes a poignant suggestion about the relationship of the viewer-speaker and the subject-author. The diminished space between image and language, speaker and

³⁹ Elizabeth Catlett, *In the Image of the People*, exhibition catalogue, The Art Institute of Chicago, ed., Melanie Herzog, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Modernism, Postmodernism*, 43.

reader, calls into question the inability to “see” African American women outside of the U.S. metanarrative of racial pathology.

Taken together, the prints and narrative titles divulge a concealed history of African American achievement in the United States set amid contemporary characters still grappling with systematic racial discrimination. *The Negro Woman* series is a graphic-historical biography. The individual vignettes serve as visual memoirs of everyday resistance. The first-person title narratives and the collection’s title, *The Negro Woman*, proclaim the centrality of the African American women historically and in the post-war era. *The Negro Woman* was the first major work Catlett completed at the Taller and is an introduction to Catlett’s visual politics, which continued to evolve as the political circumstances in the United States and Mexico converged in the 1950s and 1960s, altering the trajectory of Catlett’s life and career.

In the early 1950s, members of the collective were eager to participate in collaboration conceived by Catlett to aid her and fellow African American members of the workshop to create depictions of the African American experience in the United States. Collaboration of Mexican and African American artists, including friend and founding member of the South Side Community Art Center, Margaret Burroughs, resulted in a print series of well-known African American historical figures called *Against Discrimination in the United States* in 1953. The aim of the collection was to “challenge dominant accounts of U.S. history that diminished or erased the key contributions of African Americans.”⁴¹ Catlett’s included two African American activists, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois, individuals that railed against the global color line and incurred FBI censorship

⁴¹ Schreiber, *Cold War Exiles in Mexico*, 50.

and harassment.⁴²The collection of prints released from 1953 to 1954, coupled with Catlett's association with Communist Party members in the U.S. and Mexico resulted in a twenty year campaign of government harassment.

In addition to creating prints condemning systematic, institutionalized racial discrimination in the U.S., at the Taller Catlett also helped to design and produce prints critical of the Mexican government's policies. The significance of the Taller's artistic rhetoric cannot be understated. After the Cárdenas administration, subsequent administrations initiated "industrialization under international capital," including the United States. "Workers and peasants protested this divergence from Mexico's earlier revolutionary course. Despite such drastic changes in policy, the well-established Mexican muralists continued to receive major government commissions; this gave the appearance that government continued to support the ideological aims of the Revolution."⁴³ In 1955 the Taller joined the protest, producing incendiary posters indicting the actions of the government.⁴⁴ The same year, Mexico City instituted municipal regulations banning the "gluing of posters to the buildings in the [city] center" thus eliminating "one of the means by which the Taller was able to reach a mass audience."⁴⁵The work of the Taller incited critical opposition by the United States and Mexican governments.

The same year Catlett was summoned to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City to write an affidavit concerning her political beliefs and activities. Catlett never wrote the affidavit and her refusal to

⁴² Ibid., 50.

⁴³ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁴ Karl M. Schmidt, *Communism in Mexico: A Study in Political Frustration*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

⁴⁵ Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 78.

provide an affidavit initially resulted in agents' threat to interrogate her young sons and later in Catlett's unlawful imprisonment as a "foreign agitator" in 1959.^{46 47} Nevertheless, Catlett continued her collaboration with the Taller, and in spite of being labeled as a traveler on the "Red Underground Railroad" in the United States press, in 1959 Catlett was hired as an art professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Although Catlett was not employed by a U.S. owned business or school and became the first woman to teach sculpture at UNAM, her solidarity with the striking workers in Mexico between 1956 and 1958 is another likely of cause of her arrest in 1959.

From 1947 until 1960 Catlett produced prints addressing both Mexican and African American audiences. During this time Catlett's planted her artistic roots in Mexico, grounding her aesthetics in Mexican cultural vernacular and the socially conscious design principals of the Taller. Herzog interprets Catlett's art during this period as "informed...by visual politics that gave primacy to representing what had not been represented...a space to think about identity more broadly. Her residence in Mexico gave a vantage point from which to examine and articulate her African American identity."⁴⁸ Catlett's lived experience as an African American mother of Afro-Mexican children provoked her to envisage a hybrid subjecthood for both her sons and herself. This syncretic aesthetic appears in her prints in the 1960s, owing to the personal and political events that shape her life.

⁴⁶ Schreiber, *Cold War Exiles in Mexico*, 267n3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 267.

⁴⁸ Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 75.

While Catlett could have applied for Mexican citizenship in 1947 upon her marriage to Mexican artist and fellow Taller member Francisco Mora, she maintained her U.S. citizenship for nearly two decades. Incidents of harassment in the 1950s, culminating in her unlawful arrest and imprisonment in 1959, weighed heavily on Catlett. In 1961 Catlett traveled to the United States to deliver the keynote speech at the National Conference for Negro Artists conference. Yet, the tide had already turned: Catlett, though talented, was an artist to watch—from a distance. Close friends from New York and Washington D.C. kept a wide berth from Catlett during her visit. Catlett was granted a visa to attend the conference in 1961, but months later when her mother suddenly fell ill, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City denied her request for a visa. Catlett considered crossing in to the U.S. illegally, using the voter registration card of an American friend living in Mexico, but at the urging of her husband, decided against it. According to Catlett's sister, INS agents had visited the hospital looking for Catlett and appeared at the home of her sister and aunt hoping to catch Catlett in a trap. Catlett renounced her U.S. citizenship to avoid future threats of deportation, becoming a Mexican citizen in 1962.⁴⁹ In response, the United States government labeled Catlett an “undesirable alien” and barred her from returning to the country of her birth indefinitely. Subsequently, Catlett's visit in 1961 was the last time she was permitted to enter the United States for ten years.

⁴⁹*Kent v. Dulles*, 357 U.S. 116, 126 (1958).

The Supreme Court ruled the freedom to travel is a right of American citizens. The court found the denial of passports--to suspected Communists—without due process of law a violation of the Fifth Amendment.

Though unable to return to the nation of her birth, Catlett was determined to advance her career and continued to teach at UNAM and produce linocut and lithograph prints with the Taller. Despite Taller members' dedication to collective art, in the early 1960s the members had grown apart and the collective was on the verge of self-destruction. 1963 marked the beginning of the end and Catlett left the Taller in 1966 amid factionalism in the collective. Even though Catlett was no longer a member of the Taller and could not enter the United States, throughout the 1960s she continued to create protest art that reflected her political subjectivity as an African American-Mexican woman and mother of African American-Mexican teenage sons coming of age during the height of Mexico's own dirty war.⁵⁰ After living in Mexico for twenty years, Catlett identified as African American-Mexican, and in these years, it became even more essential "that her art speak clearly to her intended audiences. But she did not choose to speak in one visual language to one audience, and in another to the other audience. These were no more separable than were the ethnicities of her children...crossovers in style and subject attest to the fusion of identifications and the complex sense of identities that informed her work."⁵¹

From 1968 until 1970 Catlett produced linocuts in support of African American activism, honoring the leaders of the movement and African Americans engaged in the everyday struggle for survival. Catlett established the Comité Mexicano Provisional Popular, an advocacy group dedicated to the liberation of Angela Davis. As the committee's leader, Catlett designed and produced all of the pamphlets, leaflets, and posters in support of Davis. In addition to graphic

⁵⁰ Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵¹ Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 101.

activism, Catlett initiated conversations in public forums regarding racism in the U.S. Free from the threat of deportation, Catlett leveled charges at the United States. She spoke publicly, explaining that “the impact of racism in the United States on the lives of African Americans,” adding, “that Angela Davis’s imprisonment as not unique.”⁵² The posters Catlett made for the Angela Davis freedom campaign, as well as *Malcolm X Speaks for Us* (1969), and *Negro es bello* (1968) maintains compositional unity with the prints Catlett produced with the Taller.

While residing in Mexico, Catlett identified social and institutional inequality in the United States and in Mexico. These socially charged observations were frequently the subject of Catlett’s artwork, and this, along with her affiliation with leftist organization and the Taller de Gráfica Popular, led to her surveillance and travel restrictions imposed by the U.S. government. As she had in *The Negro Woman Series*, Catlett worked from a well-known photograph of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Black Power iconography to develop audience’s familiarity with her subjects. Catlett applied the compositional techniques she honed with the Taller to introduce Civil Rights leaders and discourse in the late 1960s. For example, in *Freedom for Angela Davis*, Davis’s face—and to a lesser extent her eyes—emerges as the focal point of the print through Catlett’s application of fine features in her hair and face, giving Davis a youthful spirit that is at once confident and stoic. In the space below Davis’s face multilingual texts demand the activist’s freedom—in French, English, German, and Spanish. The words rise up the rectangular space, offering visual and verbal support to her cause. Each call for freedom builds from the former,

⁵² Ibid., 136.

creating a ladder of demands that rise up to meet Davis's upturned face, smiling proudly at her people, Mexican and African American.

In 1971 Catlett was permitted to enter the United States for the exhibition of her work at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was the first time she was able to exhibit her work in the United States since 1948, a bittersweet reunion with the nation and artistic community that left her behind more than two decades before. Catlett's art reflects her observation of unbridled systematic oppression across national boundaries, and her experience with U.S. governmental harassment demonstrates the unyielding authority of the U.S. government to police citizens abroad. Catlett, like artists who also sought to produce art of resistance and empowerment outside of the United States during the Cold War, discovered that the systematic oppression of the U.S. police state extends well beyond its borders. Catlett's graphic observation of unbridled systematic oppression across national boundaries demonstrates an African American-Mexican aesthetic hybridity cultivated from her expatriation-exile in Mexico, renunciation of her United States Citizenship, collaboration with the Taller de Gráfica Popular, and the invocation of transnational racial and ethnic solidarity in theory and in praxis.

My work continues to analyze the 20th century expatriation to Mexico by Black cultural influencers such as Langston Hughes, Elizabeth Catlett, Willard Motley, Audre Lorde, and many more. Hughes, Catlett, Motley, and Lorde sought refuge from the United States' white supremacist policies, socio-economic instability, and political persecution. Not only did this cohort find refuge in Mexico, Mexico played a pivotal role in each of their careers that is seldom,

if ever, acknowledged—save for the case of Elizabeth Catlett. Mexico’s influence on the African American canon has garnered, at best, a passing glance in African American literary or cultural studies; the focus remains on France. Similarly, the gaze of border studies is fixed along the Rio Grande and Anglo-Mexican relations, while hundreds of thousands of African Americans have crossed the U.S.-Mexican border for centuries as escaped slaves, disillusioned army veterans, railroad workers, and disaffected writers and artists. My objective is to expand the lens through which African American literature and art is traditionally viewed and offer a transnational, Border studies perspective. The *Época Mexicana* of Langston Hughes, Elizabeth Catlett, Willard Motley, and Audre Lorde is a geographic and cultural study that travels across oceans and through centuries, not to alter the past or create a mythological place, but to present an alternate image of African American studies with Mexico as the background. The fact is, migration and expatriation are interstitial exercises; both migration and expatriation require one to simultaneously make themselves at home without wearing out their welcome. Navigating this in-betweenness, in terms of space, place, and culture—not to mention language—requires forming relationships with the local community while maintaining a network of intermediaries in the native country. The physical distance from the U.S. border becomes a vantage point to observe the trajectory of oppression that stretches back to European colonization, and points to genocide and slavery as the firmament of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The examination of a hostile domicile from a safe distance provided this cohort with a critical, creative freedom. Heretofore, analysis of Mexico’s place in the work of Hughes, Lorde, Motley, and Catlett is underdeveloped. My research seeks not to fill the void so much as to invite others to also engage African American

studies through a border studies lens. My scholarship will continue to demonstrate the impact Mexico had on this cohort of cultural producers, relying heavily on primary texts, archival research, and historical secondary sources in an effort to give a more complete picture to the subjects and to Mexico as well and prioritizes the depth of the relationships each subject had with their adopted Mexican community.

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