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Communion: Notes on Feminist Study, Radical Friendship, and the Art of Elizabeth Catlett

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This paper argues that feminist world-building—in women of color friendships and across the academy—depends on scaffolding difference. Drawing on Audre Lorde's 1977 work, we develop a theory of friendship that centers difference within feminist epistemology and racial struggle, following Lisa Tillman-Healy's (2003) notion of friendship as method. We analyze two prints by Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012), whose transnational practice bridges Black and Mexican liberation struggles. Using hundred-word poem exercises (Berlant and Stewart 2019), we reflect on the exhibition, Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary and All That It Implies*, and on our friendship throughout the piece. We propose that difference is not a barrier but a source of communion—a method of feminist knowledge production across race and discipline.*

> But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.
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> —Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Action" (1984, 41).

In late 2024, we attended *Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies* at the Brooklyn Museum. An African American art historian at Fordham University and a Mexican American sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin wandered through the galleries as best friends, feminist scholars, and interlocutors. For more than a decade, we have studied feminism side by side; yet in the presence of Catlett's radical prints, we felt a return to the early wonder of critical inquiry and consciousness-raising that cemented our inseparable bond when we met as women's, gender, and sexuality studies majors and student-activists at Brandeis University in 2014. As our professional lives have splintered our collective knowledge, we resist institutional disciplinary boundaries by bridging our differences as friends. We remain bound, too, by the shared experience of growing up in working-class families and by the faith traditions that first taught us how care and collectivity can take form. Both of us were raised Catholic, and the word communion, once tethered to ritual, has become, for us, a way to describe the intellectual and affective practice of feminist friendship itself. Theorizing together is where we articulated our shared freedom dreams (Kelley 2022).

Witnessing the archive of Catlett's legacy come to life as a monumental exhibition, we recognized how our own deep and abiding friendship resonated with the very themes her prints made visible. Our reflections on solidarity and communion, difference and feminist study, and interdisciplinarity and collaborative method gravitate around two of Catlett's prints: *I have*

studied in ever increasing numbers (1947) and *Alfabetización* (ca. 1953). Both depict women engaged in collective acts of learning. We were struck by how steadfastly Catlett positioned women's intellectual labor within a broader visual grammar of struggle, alongside her portrayals of anti-racism, labor rights, collective action, and imperial resistance. Her prints remind us that art, like feminist study, is made by loving and laboring hands: hands that carve and press, but also hands that hold, write, and reach across difference.

Feminist Study and Radical Friendship as Method

Audre Lorde tells feminists that the need for women to desire and nurture other women is not pathological; rather, it is redemptive (1984, 111). Lorde's extensive work and commitment to Black lesbian feminisms articulates a knowledge that both of us hold true in our epistemological gazes: Contact with other women, through the examination of difference, both constructs solidarities and also reveals sources of power. In Lorde's speech, "The Transformation of Silence into Language," she speaks to the terror of speaking up, though reassures that silence will not protect you. As marginalized women in the academy, we walk a tight rope. There are consequences to staying silent, and there are consequences to speaking up. This goes for particular institutions, our disciplines of study, and the national academic context at large.

Through silence, we curtail both ourselves and the expansive potential of our knowledge production. She asks, "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" (Lorde 1984, 41). We must reflect on these questions as academic workers. We both work on the margins of our disciplines, and we come from backgrounds that are not common in American academia. What does it mean for us to play a rigged game? How do we benefit from not speaking up if we are not told the rules in the first place?

In the discipline of sociology, some scholars employ ethnography as their method to understand the social world. Contrary to misconceptions, ethnography is not merely a report on facts that the researcher accumulates during fieldwork. Rather, this method hinges on "ruminating about the meanings to be derived from the experience" (Wolcott 2008, 13). We experience the volatility and precarity of academic life. And through it all, we have built our friendship. When one of us encounters an academic problem, we deduce the relational forces through which this problem was made (Ahmed 2017). Our fieldwork, so to speak, is not confirmation bias. Often, through our differences—institutional, disciplinary, and racial—we develop insights that might not be explicitly visible to the other.

What does it mean to hold a standpoint? How was it born, how did I begin to form my own perspective? Dorothy Smith (1986) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) write about standpoints of (Black) women, but how are these standpoints formulated? What must assemble to build a standpoint? What seeds must be planted and watered and cared for to produce a standpoint? I question my own standpoint all the time. I have to remind myself that this analytic is everchanging. With interracial friendship, our standpoints confluence by and against one another. You teach me, I teach you. Together, we address the world.

Scholarship on friendship is not particularly mainstream, but some have suggested that friendships *confirm* more than *contest* conceptions of self. Friendships are seen as especially homophilic relationships, for like romantic relationships, we are "prone to befriend those who are similar to ourselves, those more 'self' than 'other'" (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 731). Friendship of this ilk is more likely to reproduce social dynamics rather than challenge them.

However, when friendships do develop across those of us who come from vastly different backgrounds, bonds take on political dimensions (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 731). Our friendship was political not only because of how we chose to take action from a feminist standpoint, but also because of what we chose to turn our analytical eye towards.

We aim to interpret the social world with a feminist lens that cleaves apart patriarchal, white supremacist, neoliberal structures of academic thought. We do not seek control but to interpret these "webs of significance" through mutual understanding, of which our analytic starting point is one another (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 731; see Geertz 1973). Lisa Tillmann-Healy, an ethnographer, writes that friendship can be understood as a method. She suggests that friendship as a method is multivoiced and emotionally rich; it also demands "the practices, pace, contexts, and ethics of friendship" (2003, 734).

When we first met, our friendship grew quickly. Over a decade later, we share visits, phone calls, text messages, letters, memes, and drafts. We dutifully report to each other. Our conversations rely heavily on feminist ethics, understanding oneself through the notes and observations of the other. This fertile theoretical foundation serves us in three ways. First, it allows us to see beyond our particular standpoints (Harding 1986). Second, we can surrender in trust and learn from each other. Finally, we can turn these interpretations into salient critiques and language. This is tremendously helpful in our own academic work. But most importantly, it keeps us accountable to something beyond the logic of academic achievement: the concrete bonds that constitute us. Once we speak, we not only recognize the other's struggle, but we recognize our own. Silence robs us of "ourselves and each other" (Lorde 1984, 44). Without one another, this work would not be possible. Speaking through difference, through building radical friendship, is the only avenue through which our critical gaze could be nurtured and foregrounded.

We were instructed to teach to transgress, how can I learn to transgress? Observe to transgress? And–perhaps most importantly–speak to transgress? I wonder if these modes of relation are best done outside of the classroom. How to transgress the classroom? At the Brooklyn Museum, after a long time of holding myself back, I grew with my friend. To be with one another is to learn from one another; we fill the gaps of what the other did not know, provided context that has been taken from us. Is this the only type of emancipatory education? That which bridges the gap?

Elizabeth Catlett's Communion

Born in Washington, D.C. in 1915, Catlett came of age during the Harlem Renaissance and trained at Howard University and the University of Iowa. Deeply shaped by the Black freedom struggle in the United States, she brought to her art a commitment to depicting the overlooked and exploited labor of Black people, especially Black women. After moving to Mexico in 1946, Catlett made her life and work within the artistic and political community of Mexico City, where she joined the Taller de Gráfica (The People's Graphic Workshop). The workshop was a collective of Marxist and anti-imperialist printmakers—Mexican, Indigenous, and international—who utilized art to make political struggle visible and accessible to the masses. Working collectively, Catlett found in the Taller both an artistic home and a political language: the print as a truly democratic medium, capable of transgressing borders and circulating revolutionary ideals. Her prints from this period often represented the entangled struggles of Black Americans with those of Mexicans, prioritizing a shared fight against racism, poverty, and imperialism. She began

depicting campesinos (rural farmers) and Indigenous women laborers, workers whose struggles against exploitation and state violence resonated with the brutal experiences of Black sharecroppers and domestic workers in the Jim Crow South. Catlett's work materializes what we might call a revolutionary Black feminist aesthetic that locates power in solidarity and insists that liberation must be imagined and enacted in communion with one another.

In this sense, communion is a method and an ethic. It is a relational form of feminism through which our differences become the conditions for solidarity. Catlett's printmaking practice, grounded in reproducibility and accessibility, extended her revolutionary commitments beyond the gallery. Through the portable, distributable medium of the print, she transformed silence and the seemingly disparate experiences of African American and Mexican life into a visual language of collective action.

Taking Catlett's transnational vision into the academy, we consider how her revolutionary commitments offer a relational ethic for feminist scholars. We believe that feminist world-building, in our friendship and across the academy, would be impossible without the acknowledgment and scaffolding of difference. To do so, we turn to Audre Lorde (1984) to articulate a theory of friendship that locates difference at the center of feminist epistemology and the struggle for racial justice. Lorde implores us to seek out the wisdom of women whose lives do not exactly mirror our own. Breaking the silence is not only the telling of one's story but the act of making space for another's. In that ethical call, friendship becomes a site of mutual recognition and transformation.

Through struggle, we argue, friendship flourishes. Our friendship allows feminist knowledge production to build bridges across race and discipline. Taking inspiration from Lorde and Catlett, we turn to journalistic poems, akin to the "field notes" of our collaborative study, as both a method and a record—an accessible form that makes possible the difficult yet joyous work of writing together. The hundred-word experiences we compose in response to Catlett's prints give shape to the fragments, feelings, and flashes of thought that often remain unspeakable in strict academic prose. This practice, rooted in the experimental tradition of Black feminist study, lets us continue the work of co-authorship through close attention to one another's words and the repetition of phrases that feel pertinent, and we care for one another's labors of love.

The hundred-word poems are meant to generatively organize and share the intimacy and rigor of our collaborative method, which has unfolded over hundreds of hours of conversations about these themes. The task of writing "hundreds" in response to two of Catlett's prints borrows from an iconic friendship: Kathleen Stewart and the late Lauren Berlant (2019), whose *The Hundreds* emerged from years of correspondence and shared study: a practice of "writing with" that tethers friendship to feminist scholarship. Some of the most generative academic work is co-authored by friends: Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2000) *Empire*, Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2007) *Who Sings the Nation-State?* Within feminist-of-color lineages, *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), is an early model of friendship and feminist coalition-building across difference. The anthology emerged from the editors' own relationship and their commitment to centering the voices of women of color. We are inspired by these prominent examples of "writing with" as radical knowledge production.

Moreover, as María Lugones and Pat Alake Rosezelle (1995) argue, friendship offers a feminist alternative to the ideal of unconditional love by foregrounding difference and accountability. "Friendship," they write, "is practical and wholly individuated love that is not unconditional [...] a political vision [that] points to a very different understanding of human

organization," one that takes plurality and power dynamics into account. Such a model insists that solidarity across racial and class lines must be "worked for rather than discovered or found," requiring a "profound transformation of one's self" (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995, 142–143). In this vein, we do not claim that friendship is inherently progressive: Feminists know that where there is intimacy, there can also be harm. In interracial friendship, anti-Blackness can be especially antagonistic to the very notion of radical communion. We take heed of Frank Wilderson III's warning that "the ruse of analogy" can obscure anti-Black suffering (2020, 100).

Anti-Blackness often seeps into the supposedly utopian women-of-color spaces. Complicit in the everywhereness of anti-Blackness, where we are all supposed to feel belonging. Black women are vulnerable to erasure, being misunderstood and dismissed, to the myth of solidarity. In my best friend, a non-Black Mexican American woman shaped by Black feminist wisdom who understands anti-Blackness in communities of color, I find safety and an open invite to always share my Black feminist anxieties and complaints without censorship. We refuse the anti-Black subterfuge that breeds complicity in a world undergirded by anti-Black hatred. In this friendship, we insist on naming it plainly.

If, as Afropessimism often contends, Blackness is structurally excluded from social relations, then friendship itself cannot be presumed—it must be made and remade under pressure. The work we describe, and seek to embody, is the work of communion—a practice that refuses analogy while insisting on relation. Catlett's transnational prints do not resolve these impasses; they stage them, asking what forms of study and care can persist in an anti-Black world where feminists of color nonetheless labor to make friendship, art, and writing into provisional acts of freedom.

All of this leads us back to the Brooklyn Museum. We rode the elevator upstairs and were greeted by over 200 of Catlett's works. We were appreciative of being there with one another: Gwen for Aly's expertise in Black feminist art and Aly for Gwen's astute sociological insight into labor and social movements. It is perhaps even nicer to saunter alongside a friend, pausing every few steps to marvel, to interpret, to feel. Together we admired the vast range of Catlett's techniques, each urging its audience to imagine collective struggle in the face of American imperialism. As we walked, our conversation deepened: what did it mean for Catlett, a Black American woman who made her life in Mexico, to turn experience into action and art into movement-building? Her prints reveal that the category of revolutionary artist required a transnational alliance, linking the struggles of Black Americans with those of Mexicans and Indigenous peoples through a medium built for circulation. Prints could transform silence, or seemingly disparate experiences, into action.

These reflections became the ground for our own experiment in form—composing the hundreds to hold the intensity of what we had seen together. In Berlant and Stewart's own words, *The Hundreds* was a project built from a 100-word poetics exercise learned from Circe Sturm by way of Emily Bernard. Berlant and Stewart adopted this writing schema in their text, through which their poems "are exercises in following out the impact of things (words, thoughts, people, objects, ideas, worlds) in hundred-word units or units of hundred multiples" (Berlant and Stewart 2019, ix). The writing is precise but playful. We observe through the hundreds to help one another situate our perspective. This form felt right for us: precise but playful, rigorous but relational.

Our Hundreds on Catlett's Work

Together they study in ever-increasing numbers. I think about how Catlett was invigorated by study, as a Black woman at Howard, among her kin. Later, in Mexico, studying must have taken on a new cosmic force: dialogue across languages, across struggles. What did her relationships with Mexican feminists feel like? Did they trade books marked with notes in the margins, debating ideas late into the night? Did they argue fiercely, finding strength in dissent? Did they cry together as revolution felt more imminent than ever? I wonder. Study, for them, and for us, was a collective act of liberatory worldmaking.

In her loving and laboring hands, ink and grain teach us to read the world anew. Labor is made visible, politics embodied. We learn that reading together is a form of work, and work can be a form of love. Catlett reminds us that knowledge is collective, and it is born from loving and laboring hands. Sociology studies the structures, while art feels their weight. Together, they teach us how beauty and struggle cohere. To learn, write, laugh, and feel beside you … to read feminist theory in shared curiosity … is an intellectual gift beyond measure. Thank you, my friend.

The Combahee River Collective (2000) spent three years defining and clarifying their politics, all the while travailing in political work, before they put out their statement in 1977. Some feminists have suggested that consciousness-raising is not a method, but rather a result. Catlett's linoleum print graciously shows us women in a classroom; books spread across laps. In my imagination, women have trickled in slowly, week by week. Women outside the classroom help them spend an afternoon in the schoolroom each week. Picking up chores, looking after children. Women take turns—attending class, perhaps, but also in roles of student and teacher.

I am my most free when I read with other women. I shuck the thought of man's possession of word. At my most vulnerable, I question my mind. I question my reasoning and my convictions. To see Catlett's Mexican women reading, dressed in their rebozos, I am reminded of all the women before me who did not get the opportunity to master the written word. My knowledge is no more special than the knowledge they possessed, of course. But these women concentrate so beautifully. Maybe they did want to learn it, just to know. And here I am—basking in pity.

And we study together, still. Boston to New York to Austin to New Haven to Mexico to Senegal—to the clinic, to the classroom, to the museum, the telephone call for six hours followed by the texts that we could have kept talking forever. The archive of our friendship is bound by work, by want, by the stubborn will to understand one another. This is the lesson Catlett imparts: that to befriend is to study, and to study is to love. We read, we argue, we write, we know that every act of learning is also an act of care.

Conclusion

Our visit to the Brooklyn Museum left us with a deep desire to break silences across our disciplines. Sociology and Art History both require interdisciplinarity to thrive, as can be seen through the evolution of both academic disciplines. We propose that through feminist study, radical friendship can be used as a method. We were drawn to the works of Elizabeth Catlett because she represented transnational struggle. Her art was fiercely political, and partially, this

political representation was understood through images of women studying together. Like Audre Lorde, Catlett invites us to study with one another, to build a worthwhile struggle.

We write this essay in the second half of 2025, watching bereft as significant political changes are made to American academic institutions and scholarship. These changes impact our lives, they impact the lives of our colleagues, and they impact knowledge at large. The neoliberal academy has morphed into a machine that is seemingly sidelining the collaborative nature of knowledge production. As we write this, we hope that you join us in pursuing feminist friendship as a method of analysis. We could all gain something from speaking with one another, through studying with the other, in building communion.

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