

Reshaping Ideas of Power and Womanhood: Space Creation and Community

Maintenance through the Lens of Women Artists and Artworks

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Our patriarchal world would have us believe in the inherent supremacy of man, with a way of seeing power as a male trait. Terminology, laws, and ways of seeing women all work together to uphold this system of male domination. In order to delineate “women's work” our systems must mark down those roles in importance, undervaluing women’s labor. Major revolutions and movements seem to be predominantly male, leaving out the women who fought, fed, maintained and birthed them. The structure of our society has been built to deny women access to equal resources and to deny their expansive work in building communities and movements. The art world reflects these patriarchal and colonial values, limiting women and the way that women are acknowledged in the mainstream. Women artists such as Elizabeth Catlett and Wakeah Jhane break this patriarchal and colonial visualization, depicting women as movement starters, maintaining revolutions and their communities. Sister Karen and the African American Quilters of Los Angeles boldly demonstrate how community created spaces can work in a way that institutions have not. Rather than uphold a framework of understanding of what power is, these artists reshape how we view women and their labor, and our definition of power. These artists represent ideas of power as being defined by community, maintenance, and egalitarian structure, which is seen in different woman-led and created spaces and movements.

Marxist Feminist theoretician and activist Silvia Federici discusses the active hiding of women’s work by assigning the character of the housewife.¹ In *Wages Against Housework*, Federici rejects the model position of the housewife (an all encompassing labor of motherhood, housework and sex work) as it is framed in patriarchy as a “labor of love.”² She proposes that the term denies women the right to be viewed as “workers in a struggle” and instead pushes

¹ Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Falling Wall Press, 1975), 1.

² Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, 2.

women into roles where their identity and labor can be erased.³ She writes, “It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time invisible.”⁴ In The Industry’s opera, *Sweet Land*, Makwa starts as a valued spiritual leader of her indigenous community.⁵ After colonial domination, she wakes up to an unfamiliar world that is no longer structured to value her, and instead relies on a patriarchal and colonial view of power. Her colonizers prod her to the center of a table with forks and knives, singing “dear, dear, right there is where you’ll stand,”⁶ deciding her position in this cold landscape for her. As they have destroyed Makwa’s home, they will also mindlessly feast on her identity and her labor.⁷ In a similar manner to Federici’s view on housework and the “housewife” archetype being at the expense of women, Makwa is pushed into this position that denies her alternative framework of power. When forcibly prodded into being the wife of Jimmy Gin, her oppressor, she is stripped of her community and any reflection of her values and culture, and effectively erased from history.⁸ Artworks “I have given the World my Songs”⁹ and “Grandmother’s Prayer”¹⁰ and “Alfabetización (Literacy),”¹¹ undermine this invisibility, making their place, rather than being forced into where they will stand.

³ Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, 3.

⁴ Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, 4.

⁵ The Industry, “Sweet Land,” Opera. March 2020, Feast 2 <http://stream.sweetlandopera.com/>

⁶ The Industry, “Sweet Land,” Feast 2.

⁷ The Industry, “Sweet Land,” Feast 2.

⁸ The Industry, “Sweet Land,” Feast 2.

⁹ Elizabeth Catlett, *I have given the world my songs*, 1947, Linoleum Cut, Sheet: 10 1/16 x 7 1/4 in.

¹⁰ Wakeah Jhane, *Grandmother's Prayer: Arising From The Ashes*, 2021, Gouache, watercolor, acrylic, graphite pencil and ink on found paper, Sheet: 19 x 15 3/8 in.

¹¹ Elizabeth Catlett, *Alfabetización (Literacy)*, 1953, print, Library of Congress

In *Tracing the legacy of la Maestra's Fugitive Pedagogy in Mexico*, J.V. Decemvirale investigates Elizabeth Catlett's experience navigating different spaces and establishing herself across borders. As a Black American woman, Catlett's artistic, teaching, and political practice was revolutionary and pushed beyond the limits placed on her.¹² Catlett's teaching was a type of fugitivity, as she wove between spaces and boundaries to be a resource to her students, and her community.¹³ Author Decemvirale describes Maestras, or women teachers, saying,

“Maestras repeatedly bore the hardships of Mexico's politically turbulent twentieth century and almost always worked without resources to create alternative learning spaces—creating learning communities with their voices, bodies, books, and the textiles they wore.”¹⁴

Elizabeth Catlett was an important Maestra, who taught and explored her artistry beyond the bounds of gender, race, and country of origin. As a Maestra, Catlett acknowledged the power of language and communication.

In her print *Alfabetización (Literacy)*, Catlett shows the power of communication and mutual support in mobilization. In the lithograph, Catlett depicts an indigenous woman reading to two other indigenous women. Engaged and seated on the floor, the women demonstrate how literacy and sharing knowledge is a form of power. In the patriarchal gaze, a woman teaching other women would be overlooked and not seen as important. But I see women communing with their peers in a format with no hierarchies, as they are all seated on the ground, and dressed in the same indigenous clothing. The lithograph supports a different way of thinking about power that is communal and women centered.

¹² J.V. Decemvirale “La Maestra's Fugitive Pedagogy In Mexico” In *Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies*, ed. Dalila Scruggs. (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

¹³ Decemvirale “La Maestra's Fugitive Pedagogy In Mexico” 147

¹⁴ Decemvirale “La Maestra's Fugitive Pedagogy In Mexico,” 147.

Contrasting the very male, hierarchal view of power, women have been and continue to be the backbone of different movements and histories. The Latin American revolutions appear at face value to be male driven,¹⁵ yet, women fought in, fed, and supported the revolutions, often as educators and literacy advocates. In my own communities, I have experienced a different deployment of power, where there is less focus on hierarchy, and more focus on maintaining communities where everyone is supported and informed. These spaces are led by women, showing how a woman's construction of power is driven by mutual learning and healing each other. My experience of powerful pillars of community mirrors Catlett and her work as a Maestra.

Elizabeth Catlett's "I have given the World my Songs"¹⁶ gives us another way of viewing women (particularly black women) and their labor. The work depicts a seated female musician playing the guitar. The figure in the middle doesn't have much shading especially in the arms and legs but the use of black ink reflects the subject of the piece and the title of the body of work "I am the Negro Woman." The figure in black is expressive in both her facial expression and body language. The legs and arms are engaged and look like they either could have been moving or might move, full of emotion. The expression of the woman is neither sorrowful or joyful, but reflective. Surrounding and rising from her is her "song" within the design in blue ink, which represents the melody and lyrics of a "blues" song. To me the blue represents the sorrows and pain of the Black American experience and history. Within the blue is a cloaked clan member about to strike a black man. Below is a cross engulfed in flames, recalling intimidation tactics used to terrorize Black American citizens, a reminder of their unsafe position, even in their homes. The blues arose as a way to both reflect on painful experiences and realities, but also

¹⁵ David Craven. *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910–1990*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.)

¹⁶Elizabeth Catlett, *I have given the world my songs*, 1947, Linoleum Cut, Sheet: 10 1/16 x 7 1/4 in.

provided catharsis. Seeing the storyteller/musician in black with a blues song around her reminds me of how music is a facet for healing and processing histories. Similarly to how Icaros, or healing songs, purge emotional and physical traumas held in the body, music and songs are cross culturally used for healing. I grew up listening to my own grandmomma's stories of the communal healing properties of music. Born in rural Alabama in the 1930's, my Grandmomma experienced segregation and racism. After long days of farm work, her sisters and friends would sneak out at night to a barn and dance to live blues musicians. Her "barnyard boogie" nights were essential for collectively healing traumas as a group of young black men and women. Here, Catlett shows a woman musician acting as an oral historian and a healer for herself and her people. Catlett's artwork places this role as important, but also calls out how it has been overlooked and appropriated by the general public. Through the title "I have given the world my Songs" Catlett calls out that this labor has been made invisible, going uncredited. Pushing against this, Catlett frames her subject as someone who is maintaining her community throughout struggles.

"Grandmother's Prayer. Arising From the Ashes" by Wakeah Jhane¹⁷ is a reminder of women being the source of life. In this artwork, the Grandmother figure pours life into her female descendants, a reminder of the labor of women, who literally birth everything. The women are dressed in colorful textiles that they likely made. The artist connects culture, attire, ancestry, and motherhood to life, placing the mothers and women in a powerful light. The central woman holds her fist in the air, connecting her womanhood to resistance and to power. I would see the women in this portrait as revered and in connection with each other. The text connected to the artwork reads

¹⁷ Wakeah Jhane, *Grandmother's Prayer: Arising From The Ashes*, 2021, Gouache, watercolor, acrylic, graphite pencil and ink on found paper, Sheet: 19 × 15 3/8in

“ Long before she ever knew she would become a mother and a grandmother - she prayed hard for the future generations to come. She planted a seed in each of us. Praying that we would never suffer the harsh realities that this world carries, as she did. *Praying for our strength and resiliency to overcome it all if we did.* Praying for the wombs and the babies. Her prayers are the very roots of us. It flows through the blood in our bodies so gently and intently like water. Creating new and better paths. She prays that her prayers radiate and reach as far as those who come in contact with her relations. Our matriarchs are celebrated every day by us simply being and carrying on their legacies.”¹⁸

The work acknowledges the struggle of women, and dreams of creating new ways of existing that move past this limiting structure. The work places importance on women’s labor, despite the structural disadvantage against those who are giving birth. The print recognizes women as givers of life and therefore as progress makers. Wakeah Jhane represents matriarchy and motherhood as a continuation of legacy that will move us beyond oppressive systems. Following this woman directed idea of power, Wakeah Jhane breathes life into global communities of women through the imagery of her print, telling us that women’s labor as mothers can change our realities and heal our communities.

¹⁸ Wakeah Jhane, *Grandmother's Prayer: Arising From The Ashes*, 2021.
<http://www.wakeahjhane.com/shop/grandmotherprayers>

Community Maintenance and Placemaking

Known for establishing the Chicano tradition of Dia de los Muertos in Los Angeles and their mobile art studio van, Self Help Graphics shaped a way of working as an art community that follows this idea of connectedness and maintenance.¹⁹ Dr. JV Decemvirale explains in *Dibujando El Camino* the history of Sister Karen, and how she took her experience as a Franciscan nun into the art world, envisioning a new form of placemaking that moved beyond the institution.

Decemvirale explains, “This model of nonproprietary support for all manner of cultural-political projects was an uncommon model within a cultural sector that values distinction and gatekeeping. For Sister Karen, it was part of her cultural political project to make art (and its institution) pro human.”²⁰ Alongside artists Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibanez, Sister Karen carried the religious concept of accompaniment, or serving the poor, to support marginalized neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The Dia de los Muertos celebration reconnected Los Angeles Chicano’s to Mexican culture, and established new traditions unique to their interaction with their roots living outside of Mexico. Self Help Graphics resurfaced what had been lost, and promoted global curiosity about Mexican and Chicano life. Sister Karen’s work helped make what had been erased visible by supporting this community and creating space for them. In a similar manner Elizabeth Catlett knew the importance of creating spaces for herself and others who were left out of the art institutions. One of Catlett’s students and printmakers, Silvia Tinoco explains how her Maestra inspired her as an artist who was also a mother and wife. She explains that Elizabeth Catlett showed her a kind of feminism that empowered her to create her own space, rather than accept an artworld that would not necessarily include or benefit her.²¹ As the

¹⁹ J.V. Decemvirale, “DIBUJANDO EL CAMINO: Ibañez y Bueno and the Chicano-Mexican Public Art Tradition.” In *Self Help Graphics at Fifty: A Cornerstone of Latinx Art and Collaborative Artmaking*, ed. Tatiana Reinoza and Karen Mary Davalos, 1st ed., 35–56. (University of California Press, 2023.)

²⁰ J.V. Decemvirale, “DIBUJANDO EL CAMINO: Ibañez y Bueno and the Chicano-Mexican Public Art Tradition,” 20.

²¹ Decemvirale “La Maestra’s Fugitive Pedagogy In Mexico”

text in Wakeah Jhane's Grandmother's prayer reads, we must focus on "Creating new and better paths,"²² perhaps through creating these spaces.

I have had the immense honor to see firsthand this unique woman centered power through the African American Quilters of Los Angeles. The group of quilters started in 1986 with the mission of celebrating the talents, stories, and contributions of African American Quilters in Los Angeles, and welcome members of all skill levels.²³ These quilters demonstrate all of the messages sent forth by Catlett, Sister Karen, and Wakeah Jhane. In a similar manner to her participation in the Taller de Grafica Popular and Catlett's visual of a circle of women working towards a shared goal of literacy, these women value critique and collaboration, holding up their quilts every month to receive advice and celebration. They discuss the messages of their quilts, finding that work without strong symbolism falls flat. Many of their quilts focus on African American History and current political issues. They freely share and reallocate resources and pass techniques and knowledge amongst each other, leaving no one behind. For example, group members bring fabrics from their collections, passing the material from member to member, each taking what they need to complete their projects and sharing the rest with their peers. After individuals have assembled their front and back panels, members who own long arm sewing machines will often lend their machines or help complete the final steps by quilting (stitching front and back fabric panels and center batting together), literally stitching collaboration into every square inch of the quilts. The guild shares, "For generations, quilting has been more than just an art form for us. It's a way of expressing our history, creativity, and shared experiences. From intricately pieced quilts that tell stories of struggle and triumph, to vibrant patterns that celebrate our unity and individuality, quilting has provided us with a means to

²² Wakeah Jhane, *Grandmother's Prayer: Arising From The Ashes*, 2021.
<http://www.wakeahjhane.com/shop/grandmotherprayers>

²³ "Welcome" African American Quilter's Guild. Accessed December 14, 2025 <https://aaqla.org/>

celebrate our heritage and preserve our stories for future generations.”²⁴ The group is actively working to achieve the message visualized in “Grandmother’s Prayer” by channeling knowledge and ideas of progress to flow through each other, carrying on their legacies. They have created a space that values women (particularly black women), and continually find new ways of maintaining community and their quilting practice.

Artists Elisabeth Catlett, Wakeah Jhane, visualize our framework of power through the lens of women and women led spaces. Women centered ideas of power are shaped by community, maintenance, and sharing of resources and knowledge. In a way that moves beyond the mainstream art institutions, Elizabeth Catlett, Sister Karen, Wakeah Jhane, and the African American Quilters of Los Angeles show us that we must create spaces for ourselves, and move beyond systems that do not benefit us all. The selected works call out labor that has been done but gone ignored. The success of the TGP, SHG, and AAQLA as collectives demonstrate this alternate idea of power in community and how it can improve our world. Seeing these representations of women in the woman centered structure of power influences how we engage with the world, and move to create spaces that celebrate us.

²⁴ “History & Mission” African American Quilter’s Guild. Accessed December 14, 2025
<https://aaqla.org/history-mission/>

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