

*Textiles & Politics*, the Textile Society of America's 13th Biennial Symposium.  
Washington D.C. September 18-21, 2012.  
Clara Román-Odio  
Kenyon College

**Colonial Legacies and the Politics of Weaving in  
Consuelo Jiménez Underwood's Fiber Art.**

Consuelo Jiménez Underwood, a contemporary Chicana fiber artist from San José, California chronicles with hallucinatory imagery the colonial legacies of the Americas: brutal domination of the land and the indigenous cultures, marginalization of the vanquished, tarnished environment and poverty, cultural and spiritual *mestizaje*, and maximum exploitation of human capital and natural resources for gold to benefit those in power. The daughter of migrant workers—a Chicana mother and a father of Huichol Indian descent—Jiménez Underwood combines traditional textile materials with those not commonly used (barbed wire, plastic-coated wire, safety pins, among others) to challenge the contemporary distinction between art and craft and to engage the viewer in a political reflection about national territories and asymmetries of power in the Americas. As Laura Pérez states, her choice of materials and methods is not at all gratuitous, given that, “her multimedia, loom-based art work powerfully undermines contemporary gendered and racialized distinctions between art and craft that demote weaving to a ‘feminine’ or ‘third-world’ artistically undeveloped ‘craft’” (2007, 163). In this way, Jiménez Underwood legitimizes fiber art as a decolonial art form. In this presentation, I will examine imagery mainly from her 2011 exhibition, *Undocumented Border Flowers*, held in Fresno State University, California, to illustrate ways in which the artist combines textile and politics to compel the viewer to reflect about what Walter Mignolo refers to as “the global designs of coloniality” (2000).

Regarding Jiménez Underwood's critique of colonial presence in the U.S.-México borderlands, Constance Cortéz argues that the artist sets up "an oppositional reading of Western historicism." She explains:

Jiménez Underwood charts the geographic, historic, and spiritual realm marked by the "1,950 mile-long open wound," the U.S.-Mexico border. She employs both barbed wire and silk in her art, weaving topographies that recreate conflicts and contradictions born of historic circumstances. In her works, the border becomes a conceptual field in which she lays bare questions regarding colonialism as well as the nature of an externally imposed border, a tangible symbol of the ongoing colonial presence. (2007, 51)

As a child who crossed the border many times with her mother and undocumented father, Jiménez Underwood is deeply familiar with the dangers and political implications of the crossing. In *Undocumented Border Flowers*, she forcefully depicts colonial presence by confronting the viewer with the clash of colonization, national boundaries, and cultural encounters along the border. In particular, the mural format installation presents the ten pairs of sister cities that lie next to each other on opposite sides of the border, using textiles, wires, and nails to capture three-dimensionally the intricate, painful connections that tensely join their disparate realities. An unpainted strip representing a "dead zone," the devastation of the environment, frames the dynamic interplay of this cross-border humanity.

Regarding the symbolism of the flowers and the unpainted area, the artist states:

The flowers are the state flowers from the four Border States. I am sure the Earth is concerned with the new dead zone that we are constructing across the North American continent. The California poppy, the AZ Saguaro, the NM Yucca, and

the TX Bluebonnet are all *wildflowers* that have no documentation and are forbidden to cross the “wall” simply by the nature of the beast. Of course wildflowers are a metaphor for our young folk, and also refer to the natural flora and fauna of the great Southwestern area that borders Mexico and U.S.A.<sup>1</sup>

As a contrast to this element of divisive human boundaries, the artist presents us with multiple iterations of the simple tortilla, as a symbol of the pervasiveness of indigenous cultures, and of the immemorial eating habits they shared. In the artist’s statement, she explains: “My intent is to create powerful culture-altering artistic statements that celebrate the survival and tenacity of the indigenous American spirit. The work contains historical references to land and politics that are re-interpreted with traditional fiber art methods.”<sup>2</sup> She employs the tortilla masterfully, as a ubiquitous transnational symbol to engage the viewer in a reflection about the cultural and political layers of the borderland: a territory plunged in pain and disavowal but evoked by the artist as endowed with a special beauty born of her indigenous heritage.

As art historian Ann Marie Leimer shows, Jiménez Underwood shares the use of the so-called “needle arts” (weaving, embroidery, crochet, knitting, and quilting) with artists such as Faith Ringgold, Mónica Landeros, Orly Cogan, and Diane Gamboa “to question limiting gender roles, to produce new forms of knowledge, and to generate new sites of education, struggle, and survival” (2011, 2). Like many Chicana visual artists, her aesthetics is informed by what Amalia Mesa-Bains named “Domesticana,” or the “Sensibility of the Chicana Rasquachismo” (1996, 156-63). Tomás Ybarra-Frausto had defined Rasquachismo as “a pervasive attitude or taste,” which originates in a particular social location, the viewpoint from *los de abajo* (those from below). This attitude, taste,

and perspective arise from making due with what was at hand (1991, 133-34). Building on Ybarra-Frausto's theory of "Rasquache," Mesa-Bains coins the notion of "Domesticana," a Chicana feminist art theory that situates Chicana art production in the domestic sphere. Like Ybarra-Frausto, Mesa-Bains sees this artwork as "the product of resistance to the majority culture" (1991, 132) and as an "aesthetics of survival" (2003, 298). The use of the domestic—Mesa-Bains argues—serves paradoxically as both affirmation and a powerful critique of this social sphere. By engaging with materials from the domestic realm, Chicana artists not only legitimize textile art as fine art, but also weave visual narratives that speak for social justice.

The theme of social justice in the lives of border crossers is represented by multiple iterations of the sign CAUTION. This sign was used along the border freeways in the late 1980s by the Department of Transportation of San Diego to warn drivers of the deadly risk posed by border crossers (Leimer 2011, 4). The original sign depicts a silhouette of a mother, father, and a little girl, running across a stark yellow background, an image that is close to the artist's heart. She recalls:

We had two homes, one in Calexico, the other in Mexicali. We lived in both congruently, thus we would cross the border two or three times a day. Because my father was undocumented, the political nature of his existence was compromised. The paranoia of deportation was incredible. Many times my father would be accosted by the officials while we were working in the fields, and would be taken away to Mexico. As a result, even I, as a little girl, would be involved in smuggling him across, back to California. It was these experiences that made me aware of the political history of our land.<sup>3</sup>

By relentlessly recasting the sign CAUTION, the artist compels the viewer to reflect about the living conditions of border crossers; in particular, the ways in which they are not only used but also criminalized by a global system of nation-states.<sup>4</sup>

By shifting the focus from local and national to larger narratives of colonial expansion, Jiménez Underwood's textile art also refers to the continental experience in the Americas. In *Vestido de América / Tepin*, the artist takes a panoramic view through the metaphor of a red velvet dress, representing the land, Mother Earth. The theme of territorialism and national boundaries is symbolized by golden threads, which through fine embroidery cover the skirt of the dress. Within gold-threaded rectangles, the artist imprints icons of the Lady of Guadalupe, the Aztec goddess *Coatlicue* (mother of all creation and the gods), and a map of North, Central and South America. Some rectangles are blank and several encase an X. Stitching barbed wire through the uppermost part of the dress, the artist scrunches the material together.

*Vestido de América / Tepin* refers to the experiences of violent colonization, miscegenation, and transculturation that began in the sixteenth century, which placed the indigenous people of the Americas in an "in-between" cultural situation. The venerated Mother *Coatlicue*-Guadalupe, representing cultural and spiritual *mestizaje*, facilitates crossing through *nepantla*, "the land in the middle." In Jiménez Underwood's words:

The intent was to depict the physical rape of the Americas, with the ancient deities watching. The dress/land was embroidered, silkscreened, and stitched with barbed wire. It seems the first thing a conqueror/colonist would do was to grid and divide up the land. The "slicing" up was stitched in gold thread to reflect the gold that was taken from this land to decorate and empower a Church, castle, Pope/Queen, King, etc. The grid is covering the entire skirt of the dress. There is a

miniscule amount of land in the Americas that is still autonomous (American-Indigenous-controlled). The "x" symbolizes the dual nature of the Christian Catholics who followed the *Virgen de Guadalupe* icon, on the one hand (they love Her), but on the other they are also quick to own and rape (develop) Her. I tried to match the red color to the *chile tepin*, one of my favorite American spices, which still grows wild in some parts of Mexico. The barbed wire represents the colonial domination of the continent. It is a horrific modern contribution to our land. The damage it has done to the eco system of our continent is unimaginable.<sup>5</sup>

As the artist suggests, *Vestido de America* visually depicts what Walter Mignolo (2000) refers to as “border thinking, an intense cultural battlefield,” which she uses to dismantle the colonial legacies of the Americas.<sup>6</sup> By acknowledging these cultural, economical, and environmental borders, Jiménez Underwood evidences not only forced colonial expansion (marked by the barbed wire) but also how first/third world and north/south divides are the result of colonial legacies. The blank golden rectangles and those encasing an X can be interpreted as territories (and experiences) that have been written out of history; and the grid as the connections between Western thought and its globalizing experiments, patriarchal Christianity, and environmental destruction.

As *Vestido de América* illustrates, Jiménez Underwood’s south-north cartography destabilizes both the idea of culture as monolithic and static and the margin-periphery model of analysis. She resists stasis and the dominant north-south, western-eastern perspective by highlighting spirituality as a form of cultural resistance. Hence, she juxtaposes the Virgin of Guadalupe with *Coatlicue* in both Americas, staging her artwork within the larger context of the continent and its layered histories. She also deploys

tactics that resist conflating the local and the national. By embracing the spiritual and material elements that have dignified and nurtured Indo-Hispanic cultures for over five hundred years, she celebrates the local (the chili of Tepin, *Coalitcue*, and the *Virgen*). Yet, she does it, not with nostalgia, but with a clear awareness of the global present that fantasizes with a homogenous mass of Western, white, first-world citizens. In so doing, Jiménez Underwood turns her affirmation of the local into a strategy to dismantle the master narratives of the global, which tend to render invisible the legacies of colonialism in the Americas.

In this presentation I have shown that Jiménez Underwood's fiber art is a political strategy to dismantle colonial legacies in the U.S.-Mexico borderland and the Americas. Jiménez Underwood's artwork seeks to create oppositional agency that can lead to social justice. As the artist states: "Art can shower the nation with power and grace. Art can liberate society from old modes of perceptions."<sup>7</sup> Her fiber art emerges from an anticolonial struggle against cultural and intellectual domination, serving as a strategy for "decolonizing the imagination"—to use Emma Pérez's term—and for liberating spiritual energies, which the artist accesses by shifting the frame of reference or by creating new contexts to view the familiar. Jiménez Underwood's artwork validates an ancestral memory, where "beauty, grace and flowers sooth the quiet rage that has permeated the Americas for more than five hundred years."<sup>8</sup> A site of struggle and spiritual survival, her fiber art celebrates the crossing over the borderlands since this crossing makes possible re-thinking identity and history. As such, the U.S.-Mexico border becomes a space for symbolic productions that transgress material relations of power and privilege. Hence, in response to Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Jiménez

Underwood offers a politics of weaving that undeniably puts “the cultural battlefield” of the Americas back on the political agenda; and in doing so, it forcefully answers that the Subaltern not only can but, even more, should and will speak.

#### Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Jiménez Underwood. Communication with the artist, March 15, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Jiménez Underwood’s statement. *Undocumented Borderlands* exhibition, September 2011. Brochure. Center for Creativity and the Arts, California State University, Fresno, California.

<sup>3</sup> Jiménez Underwood. Communication with the artist, March 15, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the connection between globalization and neocolonialism in Chicana visual art see my article “Transnational Feminism, Globalization and the Politics of Representation in Chicana Visual Art.”

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with the author, March 21, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> According to Mignolo, this gnosis is “conceived at the conflictive intersection of the knowledge produced from the perspective of modern colonialisms (rhetoric, philosophy, science) and knowledge produced from the perspective of the colonial modernities in Asia, Africa, and the Americas/Caribbean” (2000, 11).

<sup>7</sup> Artist statement *Consuelo Jiménez Underwood: Undocumented Borderlands* exhibition, California State University, Fresno, September 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Jiménez Underwood’s statement. *Undocumented Borderlands* exhibition.

#### Works Cited



- 
- Cortéz, Constance. 2007. "History/Whose-Story? Postcoloniality and Contemporary Chicana Art." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 6 (2): 22-54.
- Gayatri, Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 271-313.
- Mesa-Bains, Amalia. 2003. "Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquachismo." *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*. Ed. G. F. Arredondo, A. Hurtado, N. Klahn, O. Nájera-Ramírez and P. Zavella. Durham: Duke University Press. 298-315.
- Mignolo, Walter. 2000. *Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking: Local Histories/Global Designs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Perez, Emma. 1999. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pérez, Laura. 2007. *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Román-Odio, Clara. 2011. "Transnational Feminism, Globalization and the Politics of Representation in Chicana Visual Art. *Transnational Borderlands in Women's Global Networks: The Making of Cultural Resistance*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
- Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás. 1988. *Rasquache: A Chicano Sensibility*. Phoenix: MARS Artspace.

---

\_\_\_\_\_. 1991. "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility." *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*. Ed. R. Griswold del Castillo, T. McKenna and Y. Yarbrow-Bejarano. Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery and the University of California Press. 155-62.