

THE FABRIC OF HER NAME

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Abstract: The women of Pamplona Alta, Peru have escaped poverty and dehumanization in the slums surrounding Lima by organizing themselves into collectives that make colorful fabric art. The paper uses a hermeneutic of transformation to examine the ways this form of art helps transform this community.

The *cuadros*—embroidered and appliquéd fabric wall hangings—produced by collectives of women in the shantytowns that surround the capital city of Lima, Peru present vividly colored expressions of the work of transformation being undertaken in communities like Pamplona Alta, Peru. (see the examples in the Appendix) Barbara Cervenka, who first encountered the effects of the *cuadros* during a visit to Pamplona Alta in 1989, describes cuadros as “a wonderful combination of collaboration, creativity, and an ingenious use of simple materials to respond to difficult and harsh life situations.” (Lane Hall Gallery, 2003)¹ Cervenka created an exhibit entitled “Cuadros of Pamplona Alta: Textile Pictures by Women of Peru” that gave access to these art works in gallery settings in the United States.

Similarly, Rebecca Berru Davis developed an exhibit she called “Picturing Paradise: Cuadros by the Peruvian Women of Pamplona Alta as Visions of Hope” that was shown recently on the campus of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Religion in Berkeley, California. This exhibit featured the work of two of the cooperatives—Compacto Humano and Manos

Ancashinas—that place “emphasis on the women as artists and the way their art reflects a profound sense of resilience, spirituality, and hope despite the harsh conditions of their lives.” (An Interfaith Project, 2009)² Davis was the recipient of a 2006 Luce Grant from the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies and presented the results of her work in Peru to the society’s meeting in San Diego in November 2007.

Both exhibits, along with others at galleries of the Princeton Theological Seminary, Wesley Theological Seminary, and other academic institutions in the U.S., have brought renewed attention to what the United Nations has declared a “human disaster area.” (The Pamplona Alta Cuadro 2008, 1)³ The development of the collectives that produce *cuadros* has begun to give the women of this ring of slums that surround Lima an income where little existed before. But, even more importantly, these textile products have begun to give the women who produce them a voice and a name where little identity existed before.

“A Human Disaster Area”

Pamplona Alta is one of several *pueblos jovenes* (“young towns”) that have sprung up as a result of what has been called an “invasion” of persons displaced from the countryside of Peru and the homeless from the capital city of Lima since 1970. In stark contrast to the well-watered coastline, complete with skyscrapers and sufficient infrastructure, the *pueblos jovenes* were settled quickly on dry, rocky, dusty land that had been abandoned by absentee landlords or ignored by the government. (see the Appendix) “You would drop a spoon and it would be swallowed up by the sand,” said Hilda Quintana. (Meyer and Smith, 1985, 2)⁴ The terrain is

absolutely barren; as Simone Francis states, “there isn’t one blade of grass to be seen.” (Francis, 2008 1)⁵

Taking advantage of a general lack of police presence on the weekends and during holidays, entire communities of squatters literally “invade” a selected plot of land as a single unit and hastily erect huts made of *esteras* (a rough, woven straw mat material) and pieces of cardboard, plastic, and corrugated metal scavenged from nearby garbage dumps. (Dietz 1998, 77-78)⁶ Since many of the “invasions” have occurred on civic and religious holidays, these “young towns” are frequently named in honor of the saint’s day close to the day the invasion begins or for a political leader from the nation’s past associated with that date. (An Invasion, 2008)⁷ It is estimated that nearly one-half of Lima’s six million-plus residents (which comprises roughly 30% of Peru’s total population) live in one of these shantytowns. Pamplona Alta alone is home to, by some estimations, up to 300,000 persons. (Stewart 2009, 1)⁸

Pamplona Alta has virtually no electricity, no water supply, and no sewers. Trucks from the city bring water to fill large barrels from which families draw water for their needs. (Med to One 2009, 1)⁹ Unemployment in the town is as high as 80%. The residents of Pamplona Alta would be among the 50% of Peru’s population that live in poverty and would certainly be among the 25% of that population that earn \$1 a day or less on average. (Med to One 2009, 1)¹⁰ Not surprisingly, street gangs have developed quickly in such a setting, bringing with them the expected issues of crime, drugs, and violence. (Crabtree 2002, 59-60)¹¹ Volunteers who have brought much-needed medical care to the area report “loads of street gangs that use football (soccer) as an excuse to start fights. Many boys in gangs here... some with guns, are only 15 or

16 years old, and will attack others just because they are on a different football team.” (Francis 2009, 1)¹²

The squatters, or “invaders”, who created Pamplona Alta around 1970, came as a part of an identifiable migration pattern characteristic of Peru over the past few decades. A high percentage of these persons originated in either Peru’s *selva* (the Amazonian jungle region of the country) or the highlands of the Andes (known as the *altaplano*.) Both of these locales are featured prominently in the *cuadros*. Some left their homelands because of the disappearance of adequate farm land , others because of lack of employment options. Some were driven away by the increasing violence spawned by battles between the leftist guerilla group the “Shining Path” (*Sendero Luminoso*) and the right-wing military. Others have gravitated to Lima in hopes of economic improvement.

The end-result has been the displacement of entire towns and villages all over Peru and their resettlement in *pueblos jovenes*. (Lima and the Patterns of Migration 2009, 1)¹³

Sociologists note that a unique feature of the “invasions” has been that the inhabitants rarely moved to the new towns as individuals. Rather, groups of migrants left their villages together and moved *en masse* into the new territories as collective units—creating a sense of regional identity that is bilingual and bicultural-- a marked difference from the relative homogeneity characteristic of the cities. Rather than settlement by numerous “lost souls”, these invasions consisted of groups of people with contacts, social roles, and strong cultural and family ties. (Lima and the Patterns of Migration, 2) Pamplona Alta is home to persons who speak Quechua or Aymara languages rather than the Spanish that dominates the city of Lima.

Once a village identity was established in towns like Pamplona Alta, subsequent migrants from those same villages made their way to where their *paisanos* had set up their huts. Henry Dietz has commented on the characteristic of these culturally similar groups to gather themselves into social and political organizations that can advocate for empowerment for persons who are otherwise denied a base in the political system of the capital city. (Dietz, 78)¹⁴ This emerging organization has, over the years resulted in many of the residents being given title to their land, allowing them to gain credit. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 75)¹⁵

Marginalization in Pamplona Alta

The people who live in Pamplona Alta and their sister “new towns” are clearly marginalized by the crushing effects of poverty and the lack of any significant infrastructure. But there are additional factors that make this marginalization more acute.

Since colonial times, the city of Lima has been the central “primate city” of Peru. (Lima and the Patterns of Migration, 1)¹⁶ According to sociologists, the centrality of Lima was

so significant that persons committing crimes were often punished by exiling them from the capital for various periods of time; the farther away, the worse the penalty. This notion still underlies much of the cultural concept of social value in Peru today. Everyone living outside of greater Lima is automatically a provincial (*provinciano*), a person defined as being disadvantaged and, perhaps, not quite as civilized as a *limeño*. (Lima and the Patterns of Migration, 2)¹⁷

Thus, those who settled Pamplona Alta and similar “new towns”—who came to the “center” of Peru from the rural areas of the country—have been considered *provincianos* even after moving to the outskirts of Lima. The stereotyping of those from the “provinces” as persons of

lower intelligence, sophistication, education level, and social value in the megalopolis has deep roots in Peru's colonial past.

The relative isolation of Pamplona Alta from nearby Lima (whose skyscrapers can be seen through the urban haze from the slum's high elevation) has led to cultural solidarity within Pamplona Alta itself. Families that were neighbors in the *selva* built their huts as neighbors when they moved to the "new town." The rather homogeneous communities within Pamplona Alta still communicate with one another in Quechua and Aymara. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 80)¹⁸ Many residents of the town never learn Spanish, which is the language of commerce, social roles, and political influence in Lima. The tendency toward cultural identity in these towns extends to dress, which still favors the fabrics, colors, and designs characteristic of the *selva* and the *altaplano*. These factors tend to further isolate the residents from access to power and acceptance.

The women of Pamplona Alta face a cultural struggle common in traditional cultures around the world: patriarchy. In a way not uncommon in many Latin American cultures, the work of these women has been devalued in Peruvian society. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 75) Simone Francis claims, "Most mothers share one room with their (*sic*) children, and cook and eat all in the same room. Some even have seven children, and must share the same bed. A lot of young women (15-16 years old), have children to their male family members. An example of this is perhaps an uncle getting so drunk that he forgets his relation to his niece, and rapes her. He may not even remember what he did when the morning comes." (Francis 2008, 2)¹⁹ Barbara Cervenka states that

women often shoulder both the burdens and responsibilities of the society. Their homes are usually without plumbing, water, or electricity and provide little protection against the cold, wind, or damp. Most of the day is spent providing for basic necessities, cooking, washing, child care. Their constant battle against hunger and illness consumes much of life. (Cervenka 2003, 1)²⁰

When the men do find work (with an 80% unemployment rate, this is rare) it is the women who are left to defend the neighborhoods when the police arrive to try to evict the squatters. The women make most of the trails through the newly expanding town as they carry water from central barrels, scavenge for food, and gather firewood from among the refuse that litters the slums. (The Vaso de Leche Cuadro 2008, 1)²¹ Roads develop from these trails, streets from the roads, and, as new huts are hastily assembled on the streets, new trails, roads, and streets appear.

Spousal abuse is common. Skin diseases, stomach problems, chest, throat, and lung infections, and tuberculosis are common medical complaints. It is rare to see a woman in Pamplona Alta without the presence of multiple children, regardless the nature of the specific task in which she is engaged.

Cuadros as Transformative Work

The *cuadros* produced by the women of Pamplona Alta are similar in form to the *arpilleras* that “originated in Chile, where women political prisoners who were held during the Pinochet regime used them to camouflage notes sent to helpers outside.” (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 75)²² Because the Chilean authorities considered these colorful fabric weavings to be nothing but “women’s work,” the banned messages hidden inside them were never discovered.

There are significant distinctions between *cuadros* and *arpilleras*. First, the word *arpillera* is a literal reference to burlap or jute, a coarse loosely-woven material that is used as the backing for the fabric art itself. Most *cuadros* are backed by a simple cotton fabric. Both use a variety of salvaged scraps of fabric that are appliquéd to this simple backing. (Patchwork Art 2009, 1)²³ However, the *arpilleras* from Chile, which began appearing in 1974/1975 shortly after the beginning of Augusto Pinochet's brutal repression, took their "scraps" from the clothing left behind by those who had been kidnapped and murdered: the *desaparecidos*. (Agosín 2008, 33)²⁴ The two art forms have become almost synonymous; most frequently, *cuadros* is a term that is used interchangeably with *arpilleras*, especially when discussing the products coming from Peru.

More importantly, Chilean *arpilleras* have been intentionally political and ideological, depicting scenes of resistance, guerilla warfare, and demonstrations against the Pinochet regime. The women who are responsible for the Chilean products were known as *las madres de los desaparecidos* ("Mothers of the Disappeared"); their fabric work was a form of protest and a cry for justice. Isabel Allende describes the work of the *arpilleristas*:

In these hard circumstances, a unique form of protest was born: the *arpilleras*, small pieces of cloth sewn together, like primitive quilts. Each one of these modest tapestries narrated something about the misery and oppression that the women endured during that time. With leftovers of fabric and simple stitches, the women embroidered what could not be told in words, and thus the *arpilleras* became powerful forms of political resistance. (Allende, 2008)²⁵

By contrast, most of the Peruvian *cuadros* present more nostalgic themes: romanticizing their previous lives in the *selva* or the *altaplano*, illustrating the joys of village life, expressing the colors and energy of the market place, sharing the solemnity of a religious festival. As Michael

Meyer and Michael Smith suggest, these wall hangings are “perhaps a subliminal compensation for the day-to-day scarcity of the shantytowns.” (Meyer and Smith 1985, 2)²⁶ Indeed, the first two entries in the Appendix show a photograph of the barren, littered landscape of the village juxtaposed with a verdant, multi-colored *cuadro* of the same landscape.

The Peruvian textiles are romantic, but they are not politically or socially silent; they depict the “social problems facing their community as well as the ways in which women have been struggling to improve their communities.” (University of Detroit Mercy 2007, 2)²⁷ Barbara Cervenka calls these works of art “heroic texts of courage, solidarity, and survival” that serve as a “collective voice for those who...work to create a future for themselves and their children.” (Cervenka 2003, 1)²⁸

With the daunting effect of unemployment in Pamplona Alta, many women in the town have banded together in “Mother’s Clubs”: collectives called *tallers*. Many of the clubs are named after the dates of the “invasions” that began the villages. Some have been named for heroes from Peru’s history—especially those who led the country toward its independence from Spain. One such “Mother’s Club” is the fifty-member “Michaela Bastidas” group named for a Peruvian woman who led a rebellion against the Spanish in 1781. (Meyer and Smith 1985, 1)²⁹

The “Mother’s Clubs” in Pamplona Alta began when Chilean *arpilleras* were introduced to several women of the pueblo by a German artist. (Patchwork Art 2009, 1)³⁰ The production of *cuadros* has given the women a way of contributing financially to the needs of their families. Luzinda Florindez, a member of the “Michaela Bastidas” group, says, “We wanted to do

something to help ourselves. We couldn't afford to sit around with our arms crossed." (Meyer and Smith 1985, 1)³¹

The *taller* is a multi-purpose organization. On the one hand, a *taller* serves as a workshop for the women of Peru to create the *cuadros* themselves. For the majority of the years these textiles have been made, the fabric used has been found by scavenging for discarded scraps of material, some from the ubiquitous garbage dumps and, more frequently, from the volumes of litter in the slums (now that the marketing of these products has become more successful, the women are able to buy new material.) Just as the huts in which the women live have been assembled from trash found on the streets and in the dumps, the stuff from which the *cuadros* have been made has been the detritus of the populace. A major part of the work of the *taller* is gathering material, sorting it by color and texture, sharing the simple cotton backing material, providing sewing tips and artistic suggestions, and providing needles and thread for the work of assembling the textiles. All of the women share in this community work.

While each *cuadro* is the work of a single woman and is unique and hand-made, the design ideas are the collective work of the Mother's Club. (Dalton 2007, 1)³² The design process begins with the women discussing their lives and the challenges of poverty and oppression. As the women engage in a dialogue of memory, images of meaningful experiences shared in their native villages emerge. Sometimes, the chatter of the collective results in visions of hope for the future. Other times, the conversation centers on their own shared experiences as poor women living in the slums. There are certainly repeated artistic images in the *cuadros* and these

wall hangings as a whole have become somewhat stylized as they have become more commercial. But, when a woman begins work in a *taller*, commercial appeal is not the primary focus of her work. Rather, the design of the *cuadro* emerges from the work of dialogue within the community of the Mother's Club. Barbara Cervenka claims:

The cuadros depict life as it was and as it has become. They are texts which reveal, beneath their brilliant colors and playful exterior, both the intensity and darkness of life in Third World Peru. From religious festivals and processions, harvests and history, the cuadros celebrate traditions and connections to a rich past. But they also present life as the women experience it: strikes and marches, common kitchens and domestic violence, building huts and planting gardens in the desert. (Cervenka 2003, 1)³³

The more experienced artists among the group offer suggestions for stitching, for folding the material so it can be stuffed with batting to make it three-dimensional (one of the identifying features of both *cuadros* and *arpilleras*), choice of fabric that better matches the texture being sought, and for layout of the design itself. There is constant chatter within the *taller* directed toward helping each woman succeed in her work. As Rita Serapión says: "The more we work, the more creativity we find in ourselves. The fact that (the *cuadros*) are exported is a big compensation: it animates us. We all have a little art in our minds and in our hands; we will leave something as a legacy for society. It will stay behind us, in another place, in another time." (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 83)³⁴

As a collective organization, the *taller* also serves other community needs besides artistic ones. The women of the Mother's Clubs are almost universally mothers, thus one feature of the *taller* is community child care. The women take turns looking after the needs of each other's children when not working on their own art works, freeing others to focus on their textile work and their dialogue within the community. This sense of the shared work of the

community is also reflected in the common noon-time meals that are prepared on behalf of the workers—both artists and child care workers. This “community table” provides a majority of the meals many families in Pamplona Alta enjoy each day. Three traditional “works” of women—child care, cooking, and sewing—have been transformed from oppressive duties to shared work. Marjorie Agosín states:

We should try not to see the *arpilleras* as artifacts narrating a history, but as works of art describing historical circumstances illustrated in fabric, in the care of the stitching, and in the making of the personal tokens that have created a space for the disappeared. We should also see the way this work utilizes the feminine by articulating the most intimate gestures, such as the long hours of dedication to manual work in order to create textiles that, from the universal and feminine perspectives, tell a story of the war, horror, and violence created by men. (Agosín 2008, 19)³⁵

The women of the Mother’s Clubs have become a community that engages in collective work for the betterment of each worker in the common cause of the *taller*. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 80)³⁶

At the same time, other forms of self-improvement are being offered within the *taller*. Women like Juliana Quijano teach the women of the collective who are generally illiterate in their cultural languages to read and write Spanish, thus giving them a voice in the language of commerce in Peru and internationally. Becoming bilingual allows the women to become proficient as marketers of their own work while also helping them escape the discrimination they had previously experienced as those who only spoke their native Quechua and Aymara languages. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 80)³⁷ Such competence empowers the women of the Mother’s Clubs.

The *taller* has become a safe space within a dangerous, bleak world. Rebecca Davis

claims:

In the process of negotiating safe public space, women have sought out each other as a means of support. Many women's groups that were initially created as a means of support and to share basic resources later evolved into associations that fostered consciousness-raising and empowerment. Here is where group identity was often shaped and a sense of common purpose was formed. (Davis 2008, 1)³⁸

The *cuadros* produced by these women have become "heroic texts of courage, solidarity, and survival." (Cervenka 2003, 1)³⁹ The wall hangings are more than commercial products for an international market; they reflect the stories, the identities, and the voices of the individual women who create them.

Mother's Clubs as "Communities of Truth"

Parker Palmer has called for education to be engaged within a "community of truth" that empowers partners in dialogue to listen carefully to the "other's" "claim to truth." The kind of dialogical community of which Palmer speaks is characterized by focusing on the practice of truth, rather than on a theoretical construct of the *concept* of truth. The work of this kind of community is to "clear a space where the community of truth can be practiced." (Palmer 1998, 90)⁴⁰ The Mother's Clubs of Pamplona Alta have become such "communities of truth."

A "Horizontal" Community

The work on *cuadros* within the "Mother's Club" cooperatives has been collaborative. Rather than a team of international "experts" coming from outside Peru to "save" the "backward" *provincianos*, the workshops have operated with a sense of shared leadership and partnership. The flow of knowledge and of power within the *taller* is a "horizontal" one, rather

than a top-down, hierarchical, “vertical” one; this is similar to the “critical consciousness” discussed by Paulo Freire. (Freire 1987, 45)⁴¹ Even though each *cuadro* or *arpillera* is sewn by a single woman, the work of the cooperative is engaged within a community of women who share their scraps of cloth, give artistic and design tips, watch one another’s children, discuss their individual lives and living conditions, take turns preparing food at the *comedores populares*, and take their goods together to the markets for sale. When the “Mother’s Clubs” work (and not all are successful), it is because the women within the clubs consider one another partners and equals. There is an egalitarian feel to the work of the cooperative that is based on mutual respect and a willingness to regard the “other” as a fellow subject. It is rare to have a member of the workshop take the role of “boss.” A sense of partnership is far more common an experience in the *taller* than a hierarchy of power.

The learning that occurs within the communities is what Freire called education for “critical consciousness.”

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire 1987, 67)⁴²

Because the women listen to one another and to the claims to truth being made by the other they regard one another as persons of worth. For a community of persons who have been marginalized by poverty, displacement, language, culture, and gender the gentle laughter, chatter, and exchange of goods within the group humanizes ones for whom de-humanization has been a way of life. The discussion within the cooperatives is more than idle “chit-chat.”

When the women begin to regard each person as a subject, their discussion can become dialogue.

Dialogue moves horizontally among the community, not vertically from ones with the “truth” to passive recipients—what Freire called the “banking model” of education. (Freire 1987, 57-74)⁴³ As Hans-Georg Gadamer claimed, dialogue begins when each person engaged in conversation regards the other as a subject with something significant to say about the “subject matter” under discussion. Meaning and truth emerge from the dialogue when one subject listens to the truth claims of the other subject and opens herself or himself to the voice of the other partner. The “truth” that emerges from a true dialogue is always a new truth that emerges as the two separate horizons of the dialogue partners are fused to create what is true, there and then. (Stover 1975, 35)⁴⁴

A “De-Centered” Community

One major characteristic of what Jean François Lyotard described as the “postmodern condition” is that the institutions and powers that dominated the modern era—Church, State, “proletariat”—no longer function as the center of meaning-making. (Lyotard 1984)⁴⁵ The hegemony of the 1950s was decidedly Western, white, male, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant and virtually all of the mechanisms of power in (mostly) Western culture rested in the hands of a homogeneous group of those in “charge.”

But the center no longer holds. Feminists, liberation theologians, Third World leaders, Eastern cultures, those living alternative life-styles have emerged to positions of leadership on the world stage. Economists, scientists, educators, and politicians are now listening to voices

from what had always been regarded as the “margins” in the modern world. The voice of the “other” has become as important as the voice of the “self” in dialogue. Jessica Kulynych, commenting upon Michel Foucault’s discussion of the role of power in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (Foucault 1984)⁴⁶ and elsewhere says:

Power can no longer be understood primarily as a repressive mechanism that acts upon subjects from above, stifling their activities and limiting their options. Instead, modern power is primarily productive. It is no longer above us but within us. Such power works through the production of knowledge and the emergence of techniques of surveillance, examination, and classification. (Kulynych 1998, 144-45)⁴⁷

The women of Pamplona Alta have been the “other” and at the “margins” for generations. They have been part of a larger group that has become alienated—if not exiled—from their home regions and villages by poverty, political violence, and agricultural challenges. As *provincianos*, the native communities they represent were regarded as backward, naïve, and of lower social status than those in the cities (especially Lima) who hold the reins of power and money. (Peru-Lima and the Patterns of Migration 2009, 2)⁴⁸ Many, if not most, of the women in Pamplona Alta continue to dress in the regional “costume” of their home regions; virtually all of them continue to converse with one another primarily in their native Quechua and Aymara languages, which further alienates them from a recognizable “voice” within Peru.

The status of their *pueblo* as the product of a squatter’s invasion has placed Pamplona Alta and the other *pueblos juvenes* at the margins of legality. The police and military of the metropolitan area of Lima have not gone out of their way to halt the almost spontaneous process of creating these “new towns,” but they have also been uncomfortable with this flaunting of legal community development. The quick appearance of gang activity and its inevitable consequences has had the police on “high alert,” ready to react to any hint of trouble

in these communities. Thus, all the residents of Pamplona Alta have been “painted with the same brush” as those who are engaged in criminal activity.

As communities with questionable legal standing, the *pueblos* receive virtually no infrastructure assistance from their metropolitan center. Pamplona Alta has no dependable source of water, no sewer system, and few paved roads. Electricity is rarely available in the huts that have been hastily assembled. One volunteer from the United States has called attention to the irony that the women of Pamplona Alta must carry heavy jars of water from the few barrels of water trucked into the village while the arid village itself is in clear view of the “Magical Fountain” in downtown Lima, “where the government proudly advertises its ability to expend precious resources on luxury activities, synchronizing bursts of water with different colors, like the Bellagio in Las Vegas.” (Yaworski 2009, 3)⁴⁹

The level of poverty in Pamplona Alta further marginalizes the community as a whole. The average of \$1.50 per day a member of a Mother’s Club may earn making *cuadros* is frequently the only income available to the entire extended family. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 83)⁵⁰

As women in these conditions of poverty and isolation, the textile artists are further marginalized by a culture that still exhibits a male-centered world-view. Rebecca Davis claims the workshops “that were initially created as a means of support and to share basic resources later evolved into associations that fostered consciousness-raising and empowerment. Here is where group identity was often shaped and a sense of common purpose was formed.” (Davis

2008, 1)⁵¹ Marjorie Agosín states, “Women have historically been the ones who guard memory, and the same women have been placed in minor roles throughout history.” (Agosín 2008, 25)⁵²

The work of producing *cuadros* has begun to move the women of Pamplona Alta from a condition of powerlessness and poverty to voice and identity. They rise at 6:00 A.M., fetch water from one of the available sites, wake the children and get them ready for school, make eggs for breakfast and prepare a dinner to be served in their absence, clean their houses, go to the bakery, and engage in other “domestic” work. Then, they go to the *taller*, where they spend three hours discussing their lives, remembering their stories, and sharing their pain and disappointment. After breaking for a shared lunch in one of the *comedores populares*, the women return to the *taller* to resume their shared work, often sewing together until 8:00-9:00 in the evening. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 79)⁵³

The *cuadros* they make in this time are not pre-planned or based on a production model. They emerge from the dialogue of the women in the cooperative sharing their lives, their stories, and their experiences. There are few persons in the world more marginalized than these women; yet, the regular dialogue that exists among the women who work alongside one another on a daily basis serves to empower them to name their oppression and to claim their voices to transform their local situations.

“Women’s Work”

Marjorie Agosín has called attention to the significance of the use of fabric and sewing as a means of artistic self-expression and a tool of memory. The Chilean *arpilleras* emerged out

of the rage and grief experienced by women whose loved ones were kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by Augusto Pinochet's brutal regime. She claims the *arpillera*:

[B]elongs to a category of objects that remember, and sometimes it has the ability to recall the loved possessions of the missing. They are objects similar to the ones belonging to Holocaust survivors, such as eyeglasses, tokens, clothing, and luggage, but at the same time they have a unique component.... The women making an *arpillera* are working among the rituals of memory, but while they are creating *arpilleras*, they are also re-creating life. Each stitch and figure reconnects the history of a truncated life.... But, above all, the *arpilleras* are sent into the world, outside of the personal body of the creator, so the recipient receives and can feel history. When I look at *arpilleras*, I feel as though I am part of someone's truncated life. (Agosin 2008, 24)⁵⁴

Because these textile wall hangings were considered mere "women's work" by the military *junta*, they were not considered a political threat and were allowed to be distributed freely.

(Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 75)⁵⁵ Yet, this act of discounting these seemingly innocent works of folk art allowed subversive banned messages to be passed to others among the resistance movement that eventually led to Pinochet's downfall. (Arpilleras 2008, 1)⁵⁶

Robin Jensen reminds us that "Art's purpose is not to imitate life. Art's true function is to externalize, shape, and present a particular view of life and thus to achieve its own reality." (Jensen 2004, 14)⁵⁷ While the *cuadros* from places like Pamplona Alta are not as intentionally subversive and political as the Chilean *arpilleras*, they also reflect the "dangerous memory" of those whose marginalization and oppression has dehumanized them. Agosin reminds us that, "even the domesticity of fabric takes us back to the ancient history of women weaving in order to tell a history, such as in the myth of Filomena when she tells her story through fabric after being raped by her nephew and having her tongue cut off." (Agosin 2008, 25)⁵⁸ In the "women's work" of sewing, using discarded scraps scavenged from litter, filth, and horror, each woman's story becomes externalized and shared with the world. While the stories found in the

cuadros are sometimes more “safe” politically and socially than their predecessors from Chile, (some find them both hopelessly romantic, if not purely commercial) they still represent a memory that looks backward, but also becomes an expression of hope for a future of humanization and freedom.

The variety of textures and the three-dimensional character of *caudros* and *arpilleras* invite persons to touch the piece. There is something visceral about the experience of touching a textile piece that is unique. Like quilts from the American experience, it is the warmth of the fabric, the commitment of the persons who stitched them, and the stories behind the fabric scraps used to make the *cuadro* that engages one. Agosín states this powerfully:

The fabric of the *arpillera* is meant to be touched. Many times, it is found in a bag of donated clothing brought by the Vicariate of Solidarity. These remnants allude to a domestic space valuing homemade works of art and the slow, careful attention the work demands, which helps us recognize the intimacy of particular lives brought to us by globalization and the world market. (Agosín 2008, 26)⁵⁹

In a world too dominated by the verbal, the very tactile richness of the *cuadro* calls upon a form of memory that is centered within the home. In an art form that has been associated with women in a limiting, almost derogatory way, the very act of working with fabric, color, texture, layout, design, and careful, painstakingly exacting stitching brings the stories of the women who make them powerfully to the fore.

Our Story, Not the Story

One unmistakable characteristic of postmodernism is its challenge to the “metanarrative.” Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, and others have described the current intellectual condition as one which no longer shares a single, monolithic “grand narrative;” rather, we live

in a world in which there are multiple “narratives” that exist and operate alongside one another. Walter Brueggemann summarized the differences between the prevailing “modern” world-view and the emergence of the “postmodern imagination” to include attention to the centrality of “local” narratives, rather than “universal narratives.” (Brueggemann 1993, 10-11)⁶⁰ Similarly, Robert Schreiter has claimed that this postmodern approach is also characteristic of Latin American “liberation theologies,” which are always “contextual” and “local.” (Schreiter 1985)⁶¹

The women of Pamplona Alta work with one another in the task of naming their own experience. Each *cuadro* tells the story of the particular woman who makes it from the fabric provided by the collective. The *cuadro* I own pictures a market in the village. In the background are the Andes, with their hillsides bursting with fruited vegetation, a brightly smiling sun, and rainfall coming from a single cloud, watering the productive mountains. The market itself is filled with *provincianos* with native dress, Peruvian pipe flutes, and smiling faces. Llamas wander among woven baskets, strawberries, carrots, cabbages, grapes, potatoes, radishes, and other produce. Among the fruits and vegetables there are bags of *tela* (fabric) and large bolts of whole cloth. Prominent in the right center of the wall hanging, is the red tile roof of the village church. Such a scene is reflective of the world in which its artist lives. This is her story. Its artist is not attempting to describe a universal human experience; she is sharing her experience. The scene could be from Pamplona Alta and her present world; it could also be a memory from her village in the Andean foothills and a life she lost, but still loves.

Cuadros are stylized and have repeated themes and artistic features. The faces of the people will be of a similar design, regardless which particular artist sews them. But each is also unique because the story behind the *cuadro* does not belong to the collective experience as much as the experience of the woman who makes it. There are clearly “universal” themes that may be found in the *cuadros* as a whole, but each *cuadro* is reflective of the *particular* experience of that woman. Common themes include the market, religious festivals (“The Day of the Dead” is a recurring religious theme), life in the jungles (the *selva*) or villages in the Andean mountains, significant historical events in the history of Peru or scenes from the life of historical figures revered by a particular community, and *fútbol* matches in the streets. (Dalton 2007, 1)⁶² Some reflect an idealized portrait of current villages like Pamplona Alta that envisions what life could become (see the “Pamplona Alta Cuadro”.) Others are romantic memories of the idyllic world of their villages of origin. These women are not putting into stitching a universal claim about absolutes like justice, truth, or freedom; they are crying to be treated justly, to be allowed their own claims to truth, and to be free to survive in a harsh world. The figures they stitch on their *cuadros* are their own voices being shared with the world and their claims to truth reflect their experiences as well as their artistry.

Douglas Wingeier illustrated Freire’s “conscientization” by analyzing the “generative words” that humanize those who have been de-humanized by poverty and oppression. (Wingeier 1980, 564)⁶³ For Freire, “generative words” refer to the words persons in a community use to name their world and make sense of their experience. “Generative words” express one’s sense of loss, of being poor and hungry, of being powerless and without a voice. When persons in these conditions are listened to, are given respect as persons, are treated as

subjects, rather than objects, their voices are restored. The women of Pamplona Alta, through their work in “Mother’s Clubs,” have been “heard into speech” and, through their own restored voices have begun to not only break down the myths of their objectification but have begun to re-mythologize their worlds and participate in transforming their experience. (Wingeier 1980, 575)⁶⁴ The dialogue among the women whose tangible work was the *cuadros* also engaged in the meaningful work of empowerment and consciousness-raising.

Becoming Persons of “Substance,” Rather Than Subsistence

The women of the Mother’s Clubs had little money in their communities of origin; they had even less in Pamplona Alta. The poverty rate in the scattered *pueblos juvenes* is staggering, as has been attested in numerous studies. Over 25% of Peru’s residents live on less than \$1 (USD) per day. The unemployment rate in Pamplona Alta is nearly 80%. Many of the men of the *pueblo* have become so discouraged by the poor economic situation that they have given up hope for finding gainful employment. At the same time, as products of their culture, these same men expect their women to limit themselves to domestic work and devotion to their families.

A woman working in one of the many cooperatives known, collectively, as “Mother’s Clubs” works on every aspect of her *cuadro*. She chooses the story to be shared, selects the fabrics to be used, folds the pieces the way she has been taught, stitches the items by religious missionary groups, the Peruvian government, and the United Nations. Volunteers from the United States and elsewhere have provided material aid, medical services, and marketing assistance.

Over the past several years, a growing international trade in *cuadros* has developed. Organizations like “10,000 Villages” have marketed the “free trade” goods through a variety of church and other religious organizations world-wide. One of the largest display areas in the July 2009 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Indianapolis, Indiana was by this organization and *cuadros* from Peru were among the items sold there. *Cuadros* and *arpilleras* are marketed online through companies like crossroadstrade.com.

The growth of this “cottage industry” has afforded the women who work in the workshops a better economic status than their contemporaries in the shantytowns. Each completed *cuadro* earns its artisan approximately \$1.50, and a skilled *arpillerista* is capable of producing several completed wall hangings, numerous eyeglass cases, or a handful of embroidered scarves or jackets each day. With the average income of their fellow residents at approximately \$1 per day, the women who participate in the “Mother’s Clubs” have been able to provide a significant contribution to the lifestyle of their families. It is not uncommon for the few dollars a woman earns at her craft to be the only income received by the family.

All is not rosy on the economic front. A *caudro* that will earn the artist \$1.50 will be sold to a wholesaler for \$15 and subsequently retailed in the United States for \$60. (Gianturco and Tuttle 2000, 83)⁶⁵ One can find large *cuadros and arpilleras* listed online for between \$200 and \$500. (Crossroads Trade)⁶⁶ There are always questions about the marketers of Third World products taking advantage of those not accustomed to international business.

The women who make these products are not wealthy by Western standards. However, they are generally able to escape subsistence levels of income for their families with the money

clean clothes, have fewer problems with hunger and nutrition issues, and have more access to regular medical care than their neighbors who have not participated in the workshops.

The international recognition that has come to Pamplona Alta and other similar *pueblos* surrounding Lima has brought attention to the plight of these shantytowns and their residents. Through the sharing of their stories and the experiences behind them, Pamplona Alta has become a popular destination for relief work through churches and international volunteer groups. College “alternative Spring Break” programs from the United States, youth group “mission trips,” medical volunteers—such as “Med to One,” and similar organizations.

The work of persons like Rebecca Davis and Barbara Cervenka as well as religious orders like the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word has brought these extraordinary wall hangings to the United States for major art shows. Princeton Theological Seminary, Wesley Theological Seminary, the University of Detroit-Mercy, the University of Michigan, and the Pacific School of Religion/ Graduate Theological Seminary have all presented major art shows featuring *cuadros* from Pamplona Alta and its neighboring *pueblos juvenes*.

The “Women’s Clubs” have made a strong witness to what happens when a group of women use the arts as a form of resistance that leads to their own transformation and that of their communities. These communities are an example of what Roman Catholic theologian Paul Lakeland calls “faithful sociality,” in which each community develops its own narrative, expresses its own values, and its own way of regulating power. The power of society as a whole, and especially of religious communities, is that of the kind of intersubjective dialogue discussed by Gadamer, Freire, and many others. (Lakeland 1997, 63)⁶⁷

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¹² Francis, 1.

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¹⁸ Gianturco and Tuttle, 80.

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²⁰ Cervenka, 1.

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⁵³ Gianturco and Tuttle, 79.

⁵⁴ Agosín, 24.

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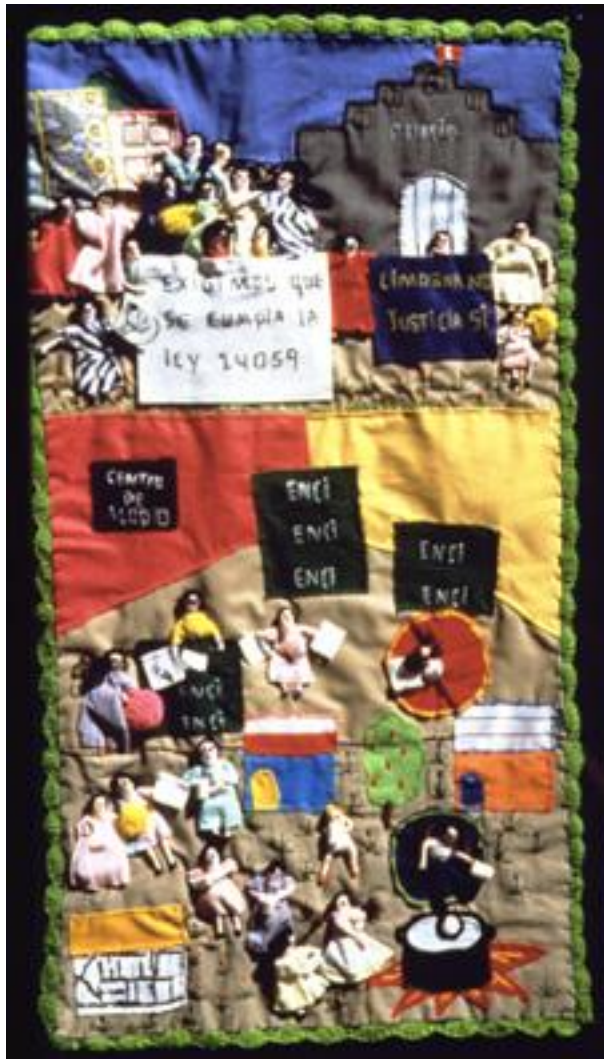




MERCADO



MILAGROS



VASO DE LECHE



SELVA
