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"I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas, anymore:" Cross-Cultural Design in Peruvian Connection's Textiles

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Peruvian Connection is a high-end clothing, mail-order catalog company that has built its reputation on clothes made from finely crafted textiles in luxury fibers. The company appropriates elements from various textile practices and fuses them with Western fashion. The company simultaneously stresses distance and connection, colonization and celebration. We cannot simply locate the company in the rural Kansas town in which the corporate headquarters are based. Rather, this company straddles multiple geographic, temporal, and cultural locations, while simultaneously trying to ground its products in Peru. But we're not in Kansas anymore, and we're not in Peru, either.

I have chosen to look at Peruvian Connection's textiles designs because they manifest both positive and negative aspects of cross-cultural appropriation in textile designs. I discuss how Peruvian Connection is an engaging case study because the company self-consciously markets the ways their products distort the textile designs, objects, and cultures of a colonized region that they also claim to celebrate and keep alive.

In my analysis, I use information gathered from the company's promotional material as well as other scholarly research on the company. Several studies have addressed the export of products of indigenous peoples. These provide a larger context in which to situate Peruvian Connection's textiles.[1] One particularly insightful essay, "Representations of Tradition in Latin American Boundary Textile Art," analyzed how Peruvian Connection and Maya Traditions construct public perception of traditional textile practices.[2]

I analyze several key elements that Peruvian Connection manipulates to fashion their cross-cultural image: they use luxury fibers native to Peru, employ indigenous women in Peru who use "traditional" textile techniques, sell handcrafted collectible art knits, and design garments inspired by pre-Columbian and other cultures' textiles. I will discuss how their glossy, full color, fifty-six page catalogs and content-rich website reinforce the tension manifested in their cross-cultural designs.

Using luxury cotton and alpaca fibers is a primary method through which Peruvian Connection markets its connection to Peru. The company labels its products according to

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[1] Elayne Zorn, *Weaving a Future: Tourism, Cloth, & Culture on an Andean Island* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2004); Kimberly M. Grimes and B. Lynne Milgram, ed. *Artisans and Cooperatives: Developing Alternative Trade for the Global Economy* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2000); Carol Hendrickson, "Selling Guatemala: Maya Export Products in US Mail-Order Catalogues," in *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*, ed. David Howes (London: Routledge, 1996), 106-121.

[2] Elyse Demaray, Melody Keim-Shenk, and Mary A. Littrell, "Representations of Tradition in Latin American Boundary Textile Art," in *The Latin American Fashion Reader*, ed. Regina A. Root, (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 142-159.

the fibers used, such as the "Baby Alpaca Royale Slip Dress" or "Pima Cotton Wrap Top." Their website extensively describes the fibers' luxurious qualities.[3] Alpaca fiber is a unique commodity of the Andean region; alpacas are native to Peru and thrive in the arid Andean plateaus. Despite the increase of alpaca farms in Australia and the United States, alpaca fiber continues to be harvested mainly in Peru and maintains its association with the area.[4] The company identifies itself through a logo of a llama or alpaca, seen on catalogs and clothing products; the image connects the company to Peru's geography and cultural heritage.

Pima cotton is another luxury fiber used to market products. Even though indigenous people of the Andes domesticated cotton native to the area, there are now many cotton varieties with long histories of selective development. Pima cotton, a luxury fiber in US and European markets, is now identified by where it is grown—such as Egyptian pima or Peruvian pima.[5] Peruvian Connection's choice to acquire its cotton from an area of cotton's origin seemingly grounds the company in Peru, but the fiber is not simply a native product of Peru; it has literally been transplanted and re-inscribed with scientific developments, colonial exchanges, and cultural meanings. The company deliberately exploits seemingly "natural" fibers as symbols for rich cultural histories that sustain the high-end clothing retail market's desire for luxury or exotic fibers.

Peruvian Connection prides itself on having indigenous women in Peru make products using their "traditional" textile techniques. The company honors the women's fine craftsmanship and conscientious execution. The more Peruvian Connection exalts the knitters, the more value their products will have for the consumer. The website claims that knitters "like their mothers and grandmothers before them, are immersed in an ancient Andean textile tradition."[6] Even though these representations of Andean women textile artisans seem positive, their descriptions mask a series of cross-cultural, colonial exchanges. For example, the website overtly associates the "craft of art knitting" with women's "ancient textile traditions," but women's textile practices have often centered around weaving, and not necessarily knitting. Weavings are a primary mode of communication and expression for indigenous peoples in Peru.[7] In pre-Columbian cultures in the Andean area, cloth itself was sacred, woven for specific purposes, and not cut. Embodied in the weaving process and the patterns produced were cosmological

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[3] "More Info: About Our Fibers," http://www.peruvianconnection.com/product/id/123049/MoreInfo.do?tab=MoreInfo (accessed September 2008).

[4] Janet Page-Reeves, "Alpaca Sweater Design and Marketing: Problems and Prospects for Cooperative Knitting Organizations in Bolivia," *Human Organization* (57:1) Spring 1998, [database online]; available from ProQuest Research Library; Helen Hamann, *Andean Inspired Knits: Designs in Luxurious Alpaca* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 2006), 31, 115.

[5] "History of Pima and ELS Cotton," *Supima World's Finest Cottons*, http://www.supimacotton.org/About/content.cfm?ItemNumber=593&snItemNumber=538 (accessed December 2006).

[6] "The Craft of Art Knitting: an Elaborate and Beautiful Process," Peruvian Connection, http://www.peruvianconnection.com/category/id/100102.do (accessed September 2008).

[7] Margot Blum Schevill, "Introduction: The Communicative Power of Cloth and its Creation," in *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: an Anthology*, ed. Margot Blum Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo, and Edward B. Dwyer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 9, 11.

beliefs.[8] Peruvian Connection fails to acknowledge this sacred aspect of Andean textile practices. Instead, the company treats the relationship the indigenous peoples have with cloth as raw material to create an aesthetic image for an international market. Even though weaving has great historic and contemporary importance in Andean textile traditions, Peruvian Connection sells few woven products. Instead, the company's designers translate motifs and patterns into knitted goods.[9]

Knitting is also not an ancient "traditional" practice. Men primarily appropriated the craft of knitting after the Spanish introduction of it in the 16th century, and they integrated it into the production of functional and communicative dress. While there are regional differences in knitting practices, men continue to knit in Andean communities.[10] Peruvian Connection obscures these nuanced local practices and colonial histories.

The simplified presentation of women's knitting allows the company to sell the feeling that customers are supporting women and their "traditional" textile practices.[11] Peruvian Connection also advertises their philanthropic donations to women's rights agencies. The company celebrates the transcultural experience of knitters who are earning money for basic family needs.[12] This employment has real effects on Peruvian women's lives. The company pays substantial wages and has opened day-care facilities. Women earn much-needed income and benefits, gain business or managerial skills, and apply textile skills in new ways.[13]

Peruvian Connection characterizes many of their textile products as fine art, placing them under the website category "Art Knits and Collectibles." They describe garments as "color studies," "textural," "sculptural," and with "complex patterning." One description reads: "Violets melt into an impressionistic canvas on this art-knit pullover of cloud-soft, brushed alpaca. Knit by hand in glorious hues… [the] cardigan is framed in navy crochet."[14] Not only does the description compare the design to impressionism, but the

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[8] Mary Frame, "Beyond the Image: The Dimensions of Pattern in Ancient Andean Textiles," *Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm* (Bruxelles: Société des expositions du Palais des beax arts de Bruxelles, 2001), 115-121,124-127; Vanessa Drake Maraga. "Geometry as Metaphor: Ancient Andean Textiles," *Ancient Peruvian Textiles: The Fifi White Collection*, (Overland Park, KS: Johnson County Community College, Gallery of Art, 2005), 13; Rebecca Stone-Miller. "To Weave for the Sun: An Introduction to the Fiber Arts of the Ancient Andes," *To Weave for the Sun: Andean Textiles in the Museum of Fine Arts*, ed. Rebecca Stone-Miller (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1992), 11-17.

[9] Peruvian Connection's emphasis and sale of primarily knitted goods reflects American and European values of comfort, ease, and form-fitted garments. More research into the value of knitted dress in American European dress would add further dimension to the analysis of Peruvian Connection's products as transcultural.

[10] Cynthia Gravelle LeCount, *Andean Folk Knitting: Traditions and Techniques from Peru and Bolivia* (St. Paul, MN: Dos Tejedoras Fiber Arts Publications, 1990), 26-27, 37-39.

[11] Further research could continue Demaray, Keim-Shenk, and Littrell's essay to draw parallels and contrasts between Peruvian Connection's marketing techniques and fair trade organizations and companies.

[12] Shirley Brady and Pam Grout, "A Daughter's Yarn," *People Weekly* 53:12 (27 March 2000), 102.

[13] Demaray, Keim-Shenk, and Littrell, 154-157; Page-Reeves, 83-92; Paula Durbin, "Manos del Uruguay: The Bottom Line," *Grass Roots Development*: *Journal of the Inter-American Foundation* 26:1 (January 2005): 18-25.

[14] "Impressionist Violet Cardigan," *Holiday 2006 Catalog* (Tonganoxie, Kansas: Peruvian Connection, 2006), 21.

sweater itself becomes a painting. The sweater is a "canvas" with a "frame;" the brushed alpaca is the brushstroke of a painting.

The company represents the design process as a dynamic, cross-cultural exchange between American designers and Andean knitters.[15] Catalogs and website promotional materials describe the relationship as an interdependent and mutually beneficial arrangement.[16] "Our designers' creative energy seems boundless in combination with the skilled Andean artisans who bring our designs to life half a world away."[17] However, the authors of "Representations of Tradition in Latin American Boundary Textile Art" explain that Peruvian Connection carefully controls the entire product development cycle, so that the Andean knitters only suggest knitting stitches for the designs.[18] The American designers dictate the conception and visual design, while the Andean knitters provide input on the construction and technical execution.

Peruvian Connection's descriptions skim over the complex aesthetic values and creative abilities found in Andean communities. Andean artisans creatively negotiate traditional motifs, community identity, and individual creativity in their own intricate textiles.[19] Solving the difficult design problems presented by Peruvian Connection is an inventive and imaginative endeavor; though not one that conventionally carries the association with "Western" conceptions of fine art and individual artists. Peruvian Connection situates itself as a company that transgresses categories of fine art and knitting, while simultaneously reinforcing the separation of knitters from designers.

The company markets its connection to Peru through the use of pre-Columbian textile motifs. For example, "pattern striping from a Cuzco region manta lends its soft colors and flowing lines to this fine gauge shawl-collared wrap. A knit interpretation of a traditional woven textile."[20] This description explicitly outlines the elements, origin, and form of the textile from which the company appropriated the design. Often, the name of a culture or area functions as a decontextualized adjective, such as "Inca Textile Top" or "Huari Steps Pima Cotton Pullover." Names exoticize Peruvian Connection's products. Descriptions and visual characteristics link the textile products to extraordinary pasts and distant places. Peruvian Connection brings these foreign elements through the form of textiles onto the American and European consumer's body.

Peruvian Connection does not limit its design sources to those from the Andean region. Instead, they range across time and space: from the Aztec, Inca, Huari, and Paracas textiles of pre-Colombian cultures to Mayan huipils and South American colonial textiles to embroidered Suzani, Nigerian Kente cloth, 17th century Persian rugs, Turkmen carpets, Chinese ethnic textiles, Japanese kimono, and Indian henna tattoos. The designs also

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[15] "The Craft of Art Knitting: an Elaborate and Beautiful Process," Peruvian Connection, http://www.peruvianconnection.com/category/id/100102.do (accessed September 2008).
[16] For analysis of weaving cooperatives struggles to gain footing in the international market see Durbin; Page-Reeves; Grimes and Milgram; and Zorn.
[17] Peruvian Connection, *Fall 2006 Catalog* (Tonganoxie, Kansas: Peruvian Connection, 2006), 3.
[18] Demaray, Keim-Shenk, and Littrell, 154-157.
[19] LeCount, 39.
[20] *Fall 2006 Catalog*, 7.

include European art or textile styles: Art Nouveau motifs, Arts and Crafts leaded glass, Empire silhouettes, 19th century fancywork, Victorian corseting, and Irish Aran sweaters.[21] The company casually intermeshes diverse time periods and geographic regions. Despite the celebratory tone, Peruvian Connection presents a narrow, limited, and carefully controlled concept of the various appropriated cultures. Some may consider the fusion of designs a careless, disrespectful appropriation of these sacred textile practices and objects; others may consider this an idealized vision of global inspiration. However, their marketing places them in a contradictory and problematic position.

Peruvian Connection acknowledges its own role in this continuing process of exchange. One catalog reads: "Argentina... A place of vibrant cultural mix between native cultures once a part of the Inca Empire and waves of European settlers…cultures have come together there, and inspired each other for centuries. Cross-cultural inspiration has likewise been a wellspring of Peruvian Connection."[22] This excerpt demonstrates both how Peruvian Connection recognizes rich histories and ongoing changes, yet ignores violent oppression, conflict, and poverty. Even though they suggest that textile practices are not simple historical narratives of European conquest, they remain silent on the conditions that caused "cultures to come together there" and how the cross-cultural contact was enforced, suppressed, resisted, or appropriated. They portray their own work as an organic progression that respects and values these histories. "Wellspring" suggests an innocuous, natural water cycle and roots the company in a figurative, utopian landscape.

The company also states that they are "dedicated to the preservation and perpetuation of luxurious textile designs from all over the world."[23] The company characterizes past and contemporary cultures as distant and removed from the consumer's daily life, while their garments are an exception to this separation. But do Peruvian Connection's appropriations, manipulations, and adaptations perpetuate indigenous textiles, if woven patterns are translated into knitting charts? Rug motifs appear on jackets. Decontextualized iconography decorates shirts. Designs of uncut woven cloths are tailored to the body. Rather than preserving designs and histories, the textiles manifest continuing cross-cultural processes of American-European companies engaging with historic and global textile practices. The textiles straddle multiple cultures, histories, and peoples. Their layered meanings and nuanced references move across, beyond, and through these constructed categories, to create new cross-cultural expressions.

The mail-order catalogs create fantasy worlds around the textiles, in which the consumer is aligned with a colonial power. The consumer enters an exotic, colonial landscape where models engage in leisurely pursuits wearing sumptuous garments. Readers can imagine themselves as explorers of a city designed for their gaze. The catalog makes

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[21] *Peruvian Connection*, http://www.peruvianconnection.com/category/id/201.do (accessed September 2008). The company's marketing of Irish Aran sweaters alongside manifestations of upper class British culture introduces another complex colonial history between the United Kingdom and Ireland.
[22] *Holiday 2005 Catalog* (Tonganoxie, Kansas: Peruvian Connection, 2006), 3.
[23] "About PC," *Peruvian Connection*, http://www.peruvianconnection.com/category/id/201.do (accessed September 2008).

readily consumable the cultures of indigenous peoples—according to American and European tastes. There is little information immediately presented in the object descriptions about the many global textile practices (though the website does have a section with additional information). Rich cultural histories are reduced to neatly packaged products for consumers to purchase, control, and display on their bodies. Peruvian Connection encourages their consumers to collect art knits, and by extension to collect the represented cultures. One can imagine a customer's wardrobe as a trophy case in which to demonstrate their cultural knowledge and acquisition prowess. The consumers' purchase of clothing parallels the colonizing countries possession of territories.

On the other hand, the catalogs and textiles can offer positive experiences. Catalogs are a sensual feast of images, words, colors, and stylized displays. By looking at the catalog and wearing the textiles, consumers can transform themselves, and transcend physical or temporal limitations. Studies have demonstrated the importance of aesthetics, playfulness, escapism, and enjoyment in the experiential value of catalog shopping. Consumers can embark on intellectual and aesthetic discoveries through their own appropriation of the textiles sold by Peruvian Connection.[24]

We must question how these fantasies intersect with the Andean knitters. Does having economic value of their skills in the international market empower them in their local realities? In depth ethnographic studies on Peruvian Connection, their consumers, and makers would help us understand the ripples emanating from Peruvian Connection's practices.[25]

As a case study of how cultures intertwine through textiles—on the body, through dress, and in everyday practice—Peruvian Connection offers academics and consumers opportunities to tap into textiles' complex stories. Through the complex trajectory of textile designs, the company, consumers, and makers negotiate unstable categories, positions, and experiences. They create a multi-dimensional, multi-directional network of exchange. The many players move through hardship and affluence, creativity and control, to produce dynamic cross-cultural realities and fantasies. Although this paper is not able to fully explore all the implications of Peruvian Connection's practice, I believe that Peruvian Connection acts as a liminal place where cultures collide. As "contact zones,"[26] Peruvian Connection's products offer diverse perspectives on the transformation and cross-cultural dimensions of textile practices that challenge us to confront our own relationship with these practices and objects.

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[24] Charla Mathwick, Naresh Malhotra, and Edward Rigdon, "Experiential Value: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Application in the Catalog and Internet Shopping Environment," *Journal of Retailing* 77:1 (Spring 2001): 39:56; James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 140-1.

[25] Although there have been several studies on various weaving or knitting cooperative groups, more research explicitly on Peruvian Connection's contract work with women would provide concrete data and feedback about their economic and political agency, as well as personal attitudes and responses. See Page-Reeves, 83-92; Durbin, 18-25; Zorn; Grimes and Milgram; and Schevill.

[26] Mary Louise Pratt, "Introduction: Criticism in the Contact Zone," in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6-7.

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