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Textile Art as a Locus of Colonization and Globalization: 
The Tapestry Project

EunKyung Jeong, MFA, Ph.D.

Tapestry Project was a 3+ year effort to plan, fund, design, create, and exhibit a 7’ x 14’ work of collaborative fiber art in a small rural community in Western Oklahoma. This project was remarkable for the ways it exhibited the historical concepts of colonization and globalization. From its inception, the project featured aspects of colonization, since the project’s formally trained founder envisioned herself sharing her knowledge and experience with interested but untrained local amateurs both for nobler purposes but also in order to help ensure her own tenure and promotion. While the “colonial oppressor” eventually succeeded in this quest, she did only after the “oppressed” demanded and grasped a degree of control of the project that the oppressor had not originally planned to give them. In addition to historical aspects of colonization, The Tapestry Project was marked by two different patterns of globalization that were surprises to all of the participants. First, while the early stages of the project attracted dozens of participants, and while a majority of these were local Western Oklahoma residents, the members began to thin as the project demanded more commitment. As the actual weaving got underway, there were seven members in the core group, only two had been raised in Oklahoma, and these had seen the world. Of the others, one was from Italy, one from China, one from Korea, and one from Minnesota, and one from Illinois. The other aspect of globalization in the project is perhaps more remarkable: as the project neared completion, the members began to search for comparable projects, and they found two that were similar in terms of patterns colonization and globalization, one in England and one in Canada.
“Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another.”  
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

As a general concept, Colonization is an ongoing process by which a central system of power dominates the surrounding land and its people. In The Tapestry Project, a central system of power, a professor with academic training in art, sought to dominate her local amateur art community through art exhibitions, workshops, and lectures.

**Where:** Weatherford, Oklahoma, where artistic institutions are sparse compared to other parts of United States.

**Who:**
1. **Central system of power** (the colonizer): A professional artist and art educator, Dr. EunKyung Jeong, who works for a local university. Jeong was educated in New York and intended to dominate the new location, rural Western Oklahoma by sharing/teaching high arts and sophisticated culture.
2. **Local residents** (the colonized): Community members with an interest in art, but with no professional training.

**What:** The planned project was a formal long-term art project, a European-style tapestry weaving project using optical color-blending techniques with an underlying concept to challenge the existing concept and practice of public art.

**Why:** Dr. Jeong’s earlier community outreach attempts in rural Western Oklahoma with more sophisticated and institutionally recognized high art were parts of The Visiting Artist Program, which consisted of art exhibitions, workshops, and lectures. Though of high quality, these programs were not receiving positive responses from community members. The feedback from people showed that they wanted more involvement in the program through hands-on learning opportunities.

**How:** With a professional as a director and others as trainees in a collaborative art-making project.

“Culture is not static, it is dynamic. Culture changes in time and circumstance and from age to age.”  
Dons Eze

**Kibitz**
- to talk to someone in a friendly and informal way;
- to watch other people and make unwanted comments about what they are doing

http://www.merriam-webster.com
Shortly before I arrived at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, the University had undergone a national accreditation report. One of the findings was that SWOSU hires too many of its own graduates for faculty positions and should actively seek racial minorities for future faculty and especially administrative openings.

When I started teaching art in Oklahoma, some colleagues and members of the community went out of their way to welcome me. This was kibitzing in the best sense. Others made plain in their opinions that I did not belong, two of whom came right out and said that I, like other outsiders before me, would stay only one or two years and then move on. This was another sort of kibitzing.

Early on, I undertook a service-learning project with some students to decorate a wall at the YMCA, which at the time was the only public exercise facility in town. The students agreed on a design called Pangaea, a still theoretical prehistoric landmass in which all of the continents were united before continental drift begin to separate them. The design was approved by the YMCA administration, and the students begin to work on it.

While the project was still under construction, but after it was clear what the finished product would look like, the students would come to the site to find that the work repeatedly taped over or covered by other obstacles. The students would remove the obstacles and continue their work until one day when the YMCA manager announced, without explanation, that he had changed his mind and that he would prefer that the wall not be decorated.

Over a year later, when I had joined the local branch of Rotary International – the club whose members include Weatherford's leading citizens – I overheard a discussion of the YMCA wall project, including a criticism of the fact that Pangaea seemed to make North Africa the center of the world and place America off in one corner. This sort of kibitzing inspired me to imagine projects that allowed local people to consider Weatherford as part of the world.

I advertised the project in free publications, in libraries, in churches, on Facebook and such. More than 50 would-be artists responded, though the group was never larger than 20 at any given moment. Some stopped in for a moment, others for a week, or a month, or a year. Five committed volunteers stayed with the project for its 3+ year run and two more for most of that period.

I taught weaving techniques. I undertook the impossible task of encouraging communal vision. I ordered supplies. I guided my flock in their labors, deigning often enough to join in them. I settled disputes. I bid farewell to departing members and welcomed new ones. I watched with pride as the huge tapestry crept slowly up its 7’ x 14’ frame toward completion, and my grateful children thanked me after each session.

My original vision for The Tapestry Project concerned of the artistic needs of the local western Oklahoma population, and over 80% of the total participants were local residents. This group practiced weaving on looms, debated potential designs for the tapestry, and argued about scheduling. More than anything else, they kibitzed. With only two exceptions, though, lifelong
western Oklahomans were limited in the parts they could play due to family and/or work commitments or insufficient interest. The two locals among the committed volunteers were a well-to-do rancher who had dabbled in a variety of artistic media and a retired academic, a scientist, who had returned to Oklahoma to care for aging parents after a career in California and the Congo. The others were a native Minnesotan who had married in Oklahoma and established herself as an active charitable volunteer, an immigrant from Bologna, Italy who had married a local and raised three children, and a high-ranking official in the Chinese education bureaucracy who had come to Oklahoma to experience the infancy of her first grandchild. The committed volunteers did some serious kibitzing. In some ways, this group was the antithesis of the group I had envisioned myself leading, and this reality likely played large part in my overthrow as the unquestioned leader of the group.

“‘To be an artist and to direct a community tapestry project is like being intimately involved with a river—a fast flowing river. It takes a lot of energy and gives a lot of energy and it's always moving. It is a very profound experience . . .”’ Thoma Ewen

In the summer of 2009, I was called away for a residency for my PhD program. I presented the tapestry group—the five committed volunteers and two others at the time—with the possibility of putting the project on hold for two months. They would have none of that. Two of the committed volunteers had begun reading books on tapestry and visiting websites. They made decisions in my absence that I would not have made, making the project as much theirs as mine by the time I returned.

The Tapestry Project had an unforeseen side effect that was aided by the personal and professional networks that each member had built over the years, including through social media. Greetings and good wishes for the project came in from four continents. The group was invited by an international workshop in Canada, and three of the members planned to attend. While two of the three had to withdraw at the last minute, the whole group and its project were represented. The community tapestry project, Sun on Earth, was documented by the Chinese government officer and presented to the Chinese Department of Education as a possible school and outreach project. The participating members as well as visitors shared the project’s progress with their friends and families in Chicago, New York, Korea, Italy, California, Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, Minnesota, Canada, and China. Not merely by accident, but perhaps against my will, The Tapestry Project became a global phenomenon. The kibitzing became worldwide.

When the project was finished, we took the completed tapestry, Sun on Earth, on an exhibition tour, and I wasn’t quite the leader of the tour. When the tour was over, I arranged for visits to the university from some of the world’s foremost tapestry artists—Archie Brennan, Susan Maffei, Thoma Ewen, and others—and the committed volunteers peppered them with questions and were shocked that the so-called experts were unfamiliar with the tapestry terminologies dropped into books and onto websites by far less authoritative voices. But, these were the sources that that committed volunteers had found on their own.
Resentment of authority, for its own sake, is a common quality of cultures in recovery from colonization, one from which most eventually recover.

Following the exhibition tour, the committed volunteers continued to meet weekly, each working on a smaller-scale solo tapestry that expressed her own vision. When these were completed, they were exhibited, together with *Sun on Earth*, in the SWOSU gallery as part of the university’s Visiting Artist Program, an event that permitted the volunteers to tutor members of the community – including some of the more casual members of the Tapestry Group they’d worked with earlier – on the weaving techniques they had come to master.

By the time this event had come to an end, one of the committed volunteers had returned to China and another (whose timing it had always been impeccable) decided that four years was enough and that it was time for her to move on to new artistic endeavors.

For the previous two years, I have been interim chair of the art department, and it had been easy to schedule studio space for the group. It was announced at the time of this visiting artist workshop, though, that the art department would be blended with the department of communication and theatre. Space in the art building was suddenly at a premium, and I told the three remaining volunteers that I couldn’t assure them studio space unless they enrolled in an independent study course. Offended that they might be considered art students, the volunteers declined the offer. One of them arranged for space in her church, and they began meeting there. They asked me to join them, but my schedule did not permit me to accept the offer.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world…

William Butler Yeats, The Second Coming