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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Weaving Authenticity: Artesanías or the Art of the Textile in Chiapas Mexico

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My feet slip and slide along the cobblestone streets through the city of San Cristobal. I cross the *andedor* and glance at a group of Chamulan women in their black wooly skirts carrying piles of handspun, hand-woven scarves. But I have to keep walking if I'm going to make it to Zinacantán on time. I enter into the neighborhood near the market. On the corner I see two women selling carders and wool, and then I descend the rocky stairs into the market. I walk past a blue jeans vendor and maneuver my way through the rows of clothing, galoshes, and fruit. Shouts in Tzotzil and Spanish zip between stalls. I cross one of the few two-way streets to the Zinacantán terminal, get on the *combi*, and wait for the bus to fill up. Once we depart, we wind through the hills of the mountain much faster than I imagine. I see a billboard with a picture of an old woman weaving reminding viewers to vote for *partido verde* to protect the culture. We turn the corner for Zinacantán and below the cliff-side the rows of greenhouses stretch across the valley and crawl up the mountains. An *artesanías* shop full of brightly embroidered table runners with flowers and jungle animals sits before the giant "Bienvenidos a Zinacantán" sign. I ask to get off at the three green crosses before a steep hillside street, and I am the last person dropped off. I climb up the treacherous hill, and enter into Doña Magdalena's kitchen to begin my day at work.

During my six months in Chiapas, I worked for the weaving cooperative Mujeres Sembrando la Vida (MSV), a partner organization to Natik. Natik works with grassroots organizations in Mexico and Guatemala with a focus on economic development and education. MSV is a cooperative of sixty women weaving from the municipality of Zinacantán¹ founded by Doña Magdalena and currently run by her two daughters Yoli and Xunka. Zinacantán is a Tzotzil Mayan village in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. Chiapas has the highest population of indigenous people and is also the poorest state in Mexico with a poverty rate of 75.7 percent.² There are seven different Mayan languages spoken throughout the state, though in the highlands, the most common spoken language is Tzotzil. Because of the high poverty rates, Chiapas is facing a migration crisis of mainly single men moving to larger cities or the United States.³ The increase of men's migration has lead more women to take on other economic activities, such as craft cooperatives. These economic projects are often supported by government programs⁴ or organizations in the resistance movement, which includes the famous Zapatistas.⁵ In both cases women become the shock absorbers to new economic realities.

Today, this artisan craft industry has become a central part of the economy for indigenous municipalities. Textiles are made for consumption within the community as well as for a tourist

¹ Maria Yolanda Hernández, Personal Interview, interview by Addison Nace, December 3, 2016.

² Katherine O'Donnell, *Weaving Transnational Solidarity: From the Catskills to Chiapas and Beyond* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012), 15.

³ Christine Eber, "'That They Be in the Middle Lord': Women, Weaving and Cultural Survival in Highland Chiapas, Mexico," in *Artisans and Cooperatives: Developing Alternative Trade for the Global Economy*, ed. Kimberly M. Grimes and B. Lynne Milgram (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 89–90.

⁴ Néstor García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico*, trans. Lidia Lozano, Translations from Latin America Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 8.

⁵ Eber, "'That They Be in the Middle Lord': Women, Weaving and Cultural Survival in Highland Chiapas, Mexico"; O'Donnell, *Weaving Transnational Solidarity*.

market. The dual markets for textiles created a need for greater classification, splitting this artistic practice into different classes of production.

Language replicates the tiers of production and creates a hierarchical rhetoric around textiles. They are classified into categories between art and commodity. Firstly, textiles may be *artesanías*, which loosely translates to “handicrafts.” *Artesanías* as handicrafts are seen as commodities to be sold to tourists and other outsiders, rather than forms of dress used by the community. In contrast to the commodity of *artesanías*, nearly all indigenous women wear *traje* or their traditional dress. The style of *traje* across Chiapas has similar qualities, but differs depending on the municipality. Often *traje* may fall into the second category of *arte popular* or folk art. Textiles rarely fall into a language of an artistic practice—unless in reference to the use by a high-end fashion designer.

Museums and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play the role of determining the authenticity of textiles on this hierarchical scale. This category of *artesanías* is associated with the realm of commodities, particularly, in the Marxist sense of commodity fetishism, in that the social history of an object remains hidden to consumers.⁶ By obscuring the production process, Mayan textiles are often viewed as commodities not only because the production process is invisible, but also because the weaver’s social reality is veiled. Folk art definitions in the Western sense have gone two routes. First, folk arts were defined by their functionality, if people made and used such objects. Later, folk art began to be defined as an art of the people and produced communally rather than individually.⁷ I intend to explore the ways in which these outside definitions have affected the lives of weavers and their practice of weaving. In this exploration, I will highlight that textiles made by indigenous women in Chiapas may be viewed as art rather than *artesanías*. Outsiders to indigenous communities often do not fully understand the technical complexity, artistic-ability, and social structures involved with making textiles. The social context of the object is central to understanding the art object.

In order to think about textiles as art, I conducted six months of fieldwork within Chiapas. During my time there, I did six interviews with weavers across five different municipalities. I also had the opportunity to interview a Mexican design student, who has shifted her work to be in collaboration with textiles artists from Chiapas and Oaxaca. My participant observation is based on my work with the weaving MSV cooperative. I spent time in weavers’ homes working on photo and video projects as well as listening to various meetings. Because I was living in San Cristobal de las Casas, I also learned about the city from a tourist’s perspective. I spent time in the artisan market and volunteered at Centro Textiles del Mundo Maya (CTMM). My participant observation included learning how to weave on the backstrap loom in the styles of San Juan Cancuc and Zinacantán. Unraveling the idea of authenticity is an act of breaking from perceptions of indigenous peoples as living relics of the past, and weaving again this story to explain indigenous lives as part of the contemporary world.

Indigenous textiles are often wrapped up into a narrative of authenticity, associated with the identity of indigenous weavers. This perception is influenced by the fact that living weavers

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Volume 1 (London ; New York, NY: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990).

⁷ Marta Turok, *Cómo Acercarse a La Artesanía*, 1. ed, Colección Cómo Acercarse a (México, DF: Plaza y Valdés Editores, 1988), 10.

continue to use ancient techniques. The connection back to ancient civilization perpetuates stereotypical views of indigenous people as remnants of the past, turning lived experience into artifacts. The rhetoric of authenticity keeps weavers and their work as part of the past, rather than practicing artists in a contemporary reality. Authenticity is not an explicit phenomenon, but one that is part of the underlying ideology of art.

Walter Benjamin's ideas around art's ability to *survive history* and *art with a ritualistic nature*⁸ are part of the underpinnings of the construction of authenticity. In the case of Mayan textiles, this means that it is only authentic with connections back to an imagined tradition. The textile becomes a simulacrum for an indigenous identity of the past. To Jean Baudrillard, simulacra are not representations of the truth, but rather the truth construed through a false reality.⁹ That is a textile only become authentic if they can represent the tradition of backstrap weaving that dates back to practices of the ancient Maya. In the case of Benjamin's definition of authenticity, this is a reference back to the original author.

For the Maya, the original authors are the gods. The idea of human creation is not an omniscient act as seen in the Christian tradition, but rather, like making a craft, it is a process of trial and error and reworking.¹⁰ Weaving becomes an art form that is continuously adaptable. It is an art passed down through generations, but may take on new aspects as generations change. Taking textiles as adaptable through change will begin to unravel the construction of authenticity. Spaces of tourist consumption uphold the textile as an item of the past, and that contemporary objects are authenticated not by an original author, but by being as similar to the past as possible. Authenticity rhetoric emphasizes the preservation of the object as static, rather the adaptability and resistance of the people carrying their culture through the hardship of colonization.

Weavers assign these spiritual or communal meanings to place their work in a cultural context. For example, my weaving teacher Eustaquia described to me the diamond style, unique to her village of San Andres Larrainza, represents the universe and the four points in the diamond signify the cardinal directions.¹¹ Another teacher of mine, Vicky, told me that the neckline of her dress represents the path of the jaguar.¹² Anthropologist Walter Morris attributes the style of Cancuc to be reflection of Mayan numerology, with the geometric pattern in the huipil reflecting Mayan numerology seen within the Mayan calendar. He cites one young weaver girl who explained to him that the dark and light rectangles represent day and night.¹³ By focusing on symbolic representations that connect to Mayan cosmology, the textile becomes authentic for its connection back to the past in the references to the original creators or the gods.

These symbols in the dress have underlying implications, particularly that the reference to the

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1993), 514.

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166–84.

¹⁰ June Nash, ed., *Crafts in the World Market: The Impact of Global Exchange on Middle American Artisans*, SUNY Series in the Anthropology of Work (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 4.

¹¹ Eustaquia Ruiz Gomez, Personal Interview, December 6, 2016.

¹² Vicky Hernández Gomez, Personal Interview, December 8, 2016.

¹³ Walter F. Morris and Carol Karasik, *Maya Threads: A Woven History of Chiapas* (Loveland Colorado: Thrums LLC, 2015), 94.

original harkens back to the past and invokes the idea that indigenous culture isn't contemporary, but part of a tradition. This view ignores the contemporary experience of weavers—often fetishizing a peasant, subsistence lifestyle. The fetishization of signs thus makes the construction of simulacra more important than people's lived experiences. Rather than viewing textile production as a process of change through history it is seen as a form of cultural preservation to uphold larger ideological projects.

The hierarchies of art and artistic authenticity also coincide with the creation of a national identity for Mexico. This national identity is continually authenticated through the museum space, which in turn influences tourist perceptions of textiles sold through cooperatives. After Mexico's independence, the leaders of the revolution began to create a national identity for Mexico. They selected textiles and other folk arts as a representation of indigenous culture that should be elevated and incorporated into a new, mixed culture. This process of forming a *cultura popular* (folk culture, popular culture, culture of the people) is one of unequal appropriation of economic and cultural property of indigenous ethnic groups and reproduced through symbolic understanding.¹⁴ To complete this project, the government sponsored the construction of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, and they enlisted the help from artisans to create the ethnographic sections. They hoped that the museum would be seen as a larger form to create a Mexican national heritage among its citizens; to foster a sense of appreciation around indigenous art by non-indigenous Mexicans; and place Mexico's national identity in the eye of the foreign tourist for an economic market.¹⁵ By promoting crafts, and other aspects of indigenous cultures such as dances associated with festivals, the leaders of the Mexican revolution were able to use a set of symbols to create a national ideology and identity. In 1940 at the first official *indigenista* congress meeting in Lázaro Cárdenas, the government approved the recommendation "protecting Indian popular arts through national organizations."¹⁶ These initiatives have increased, especially with government support to regional museums as well as the formation of the National Fund for the Promotion of Arts and Crafts (FONART).¹⁷

What museums choose to preserve or authenticate may not necessarily be meaningful to the communities that produce the work. While I was in San Cirstóbal, CTMM was undergoing a project to revive the use of the Zinacantec wedding huipil. The traditional wedding huipil has fallen out of use within this community, which the museum claimed was because the technique had been lost. I was told this on the first day of a weaving class at CTMM, where none of the class participants were Zinacantec community members.¹⁸ The class focused on the feathered brocade technique that is commonly used in the Zinacantec wedding huipil. Archaeologists date

¹⁴ García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity*, 21.

¹⁵ García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity*; Flora S. Kaplan, "Mexican Museums in the Creation of a National Image in World Tourism," in *Crafts in the World Market: The Impact of Global Exchange on Middle American Artisans*, ed. June Nash, SUNY Series in the Anthropology of Work (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 103–25; Pavel Shlossberg, *Crafting Identity: Transnational Indian Arts and the Politics of Race in Central Mexico* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2015).

¹⁶ García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity*, 44.

¹⁷ García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity*.

¹⁸ Centro Textiles del Mundo Maya created this course called K'uk'um: Tejido Emplumado de Zinacantán (K'uk'um: Feathered Weaving of Zinacantán). The class occurred on Tuesdays and Thursdays from September 27–December 1, 2016. Master-weaver, Maria Santiago González, taught it.

this technique to trace back to times when the Aztecs and Mayans traded.¹⁹ It was one of few practices of feathers used in textiles that have continued to the present-day. According to CTMM, the decline in use is caused by the fact that there are only four weavers left who know how to do this technique.

When I asked Yoli, the coordinator of MSV, she said that it wasn't true and that anyone who knows how to do the brocade technique also knows how to weave. To Yoli this tradition is not one that is endangered:

“Yes you can see how many changes we are seeing, but I think that the feathered *huipil* is not going to disappear because there are people that want to use it, maybe not everyone. There are times they [the museum] think this force will hurt tradition, [but] sometimes this doesn't benefit us so much... Well I feel that we're always going to see people that get married with this *huipil* because it's very beautiful and now few people marry with this *huipil* because it's a big expense. It's a lot of work and very costly so I think that for that it is diminished a lot.”²⁰

Doña Magdalena (the founder of MSV) shows her wedding huipil made in the 1970s. This took her about a month to make. Photo by Karren Brito.

Yoli's description explains how the museum may not include communities on decisions of authentication. Perhaps these decisions do not always support the wishes of communities. Because Yoli emphasizes the high expense of the textile, what may be more important to weavers is not the preservation of tradition, but rather the contemporary social situation, deeply embedded in the economic realities. Yoli, as someone who works towards greater education and new economic opportunities in her community, her concern is more centered on dreaming of new realities for Zinacantán. The wedding huipil becomes a simulacrum of the community, but denies rights to contemporary lived experiences.

Economic realities are a big part of the Mayan experience in Chiapas. Women rely heavily on the sale of handmade products to tourists in order to take care of their families. The government's creation of a museum also opened up a simulation of authentic Mexican identity for tourists to view and consume. The simulation of the museum is a space through which simulacra are continuously constructed to be real, but may not be a representation for lived realities.²¹ Tourists may visit the museum, learn about the importance of cultural simulacra, the sign of the textile replacing lived experience for example, to then later become a place of

¹⁹ Patricia Marks Greenfield, *Weaving Generations Together: Evolving Creativity in the Maya of Chiapas* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2004), 90–91.

²⁰ Hernández, Personal Interview.

²¹ Budrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” 4.

consumption of artesanías.²² Government support of the construction of these simulations is necessary to attract visitors.

The construction of the weaving cooperative was central to creating spaces for the sale of textiles to tourists. It was not until the 1950s that the possibility of a textile-tourist market could exist in Chiapas. During this era, the Pan-American Highway was built, allowing tourists, other outsiders, and even people of different indigenous municipalities to interact more easily.²³ Between the 1950s and 1960s, the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI) or the National Indigenous Institute founded the first cooperatives when the Mexican government recognized indigenous arts as an important cultural signifier and an easy entry into tourist markets.²⁴

Weaving and other craft production for sale are integral parts of rural economies in Chiapas.²⁵ The dependence on *artesanías* as a source of income is supported by governmental programs and other nongovernmental projects. Cooperatives are hoped to reduce migration by providing additional income to indigenous families.²⁶ In Chiapas, many living weavers can still remember the commoditization of *huipiles*.²⁷ In such a case, the commoditization was the process of the handmade quality becoming fetishized for consumers.²⁸ Rather than commodity fetishization through hiding production, fetishization is emphasized by the fact that objects are handmade, with emphasis on authenticity of tradition.

While cooperatives are working to market to tourists, corporations also invest themselves as supporters of museums, in order to be seen as altruistic supporters of national heritage. By funding art institutions, banks and other sponsors appear to be participating in this scheme of providing opportunities for marginalized peoples. Corporate involvement with the museum space is evident at Centro Textiles del Mundo Maya . CTMM is partially funded by the government, with support from FONART, but mainly funded through Banamex, which is now Citibanamex. Following the 1982 economic crisis, during the 1990s, President Carlos Salinas began to re-privatize Mexico's banking system. Mexico continued to participate in neoliberal reforms thanks to the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, which led to the collapse of the peso, forcing banks to seek a government bailout of \$3.5 billion.²⁹ To save the Banamex from future crises, Citigroup bought the company.³⁰ Banamex had already established a significant collection of folk art and to secure their public image as a supporter of Mexican national heritage, Citigroup maintained

²² Kaplan, "Mexican Museums."

²³ Morris and Karasik, *Maya Threads*, 129.

²⁴ Christine Eber and Brenda Rosenbaum, "'That We May Serve Beneath Your Hands and Feet': Women Weavers in Highland Chiapas, Mexico," in *Crafts in the World Market: The Impact of Global Exchange on Middle American Artisans*, ed. June (ed.) Nash, SUNY Series in the Anthropology of Work (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 166.

²⁵ Kimberly M. Grimes and B. Lynne Milgram, eds., *Artisans and Cooperatives: Developing Alternative Trade for the Global Economy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

²⁶ García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity*, 8.

²⁷ Nash, *Crafts in the World Market*, 13.

²⁸ Scott Cook, "Craft Commodity Production, Market Diversity and Differential Rewards in Mexican Capitalism Today," in *Crafts in the World Market: The Impact of Global Exchange on Middle American Artisans*, ed. June Nash, SUNY Series in the Anthropology of Work (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 61.

²⁹ Mary K. Coffey, "Banking on Folk Art: Banamex-Citigroup and Transnational Cultural Citizenship," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 29, no. 3 (July 2010): 297.

³⁰ Coffey, 297–98.

Banamex's collections through a foundation called Formento Cultural Banamex (Banamex Cultural Foundation).³¹ The collection at CTMM consists of objects from the collections of Formaento Cultural Banamex and Italian anthropologist, Francisco Pellizzi.

The cooperative may also be seen as a space that upholds such neoliberal ideologies. Mexico became one of many developing countries to take out loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in order to establish financial stability.³² In 1982, Mexico was the first country that could not meet its payments to the IMF, putting the country in economic crisis.³³ During the 1980s, there was a significant increase in artisan crafts as a way to earn additional income. In this way weaving cooperatives become a response to economic domination by Mexicans of Spanish descent or *ladinos*.³⁴

The debt crisis forced indigenous men to work in other sectors. During this time Mayans in Chiapas were unable to gain land titles promised to them, forcing changes into subsistence farming practices.³⁵ Throughout the twentieth century, many indigenous people survived as subsistence farmers mainly through the cultivation of corn. The advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a threat to subsistence farming because there was no way for small farmers to compete with the heavily subsidized corn industry of the United States.³⁶ Women's increase in weaving production may be directly related to that of men's decrease in earning capacity that is driven by loss of land, falling wages, declining crop prices, rising costs of living, and male migration.³⁷ Originally cooperatives were formed to support a tourist market; there are not enough tourists to really support families whose income relies on weaving production. In order for weaving to be a viable way to make a living, artists must begin to make the transition from local markets to sell on a globalized scale.³⁸ Yet by working to move into a global marketplace, weavers must interact with intermediaries.

Such intermediaries include anthropologists, NGOs, and even designers. This work is often thought of as an act of solidarity between intermediaries in order to create a more just economic system against previous global economic schemes, particularly in the relationships with anthropologists and NGOs.³⁹ Yet, these partnerships are also a participation in economies

³¹ Coffey, 300.

³² Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization*, Rev. and updated ed (Oxford: New Internationalist Publ, 2010), 48.

³³ Ellwood, 57.

³⁴ Eber and Rosenbaum, "That We May Serve," 167.

³⁵ June Nash, "Postscript: To Market To Market," in *Artisans and Cooperatives: Developing Alternative Trade for the Global Economy*, ed. Kimberly M. Grimes and B. Lynne Milgram (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 177.

³⁶ Elaine Katzenberger, ed., *First World, Ha Ha Ha!: The Zapatista Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1995).

³⁷ Katherine O'Donnell, "Can You Do More than Take Photos?: Solidarity, Efficacy, and Marketing with Jolom Mayaetik, Mayan Women's Weaving Cooperative, Chiapas, Mexico," in *Artisans and Advocacy in the Global Market: Walking the Heart Path*, ed. Jeanne M. Simonelli, Katherine O'Donnell, and June C. Nash, First edition, School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2015), 103.

³⁸ Eber, "'That They Be in the Middle Lord': Women, Weaving and Cultural Survival in Highland Chiapas, Mexico."

³⁹ Grimes and Milgram, *Artisans and Cooperatives*; Nash, *Crafts in the World Market*; O'Donnell, *Weaving Transnational Solidarity*; O'Donnell, Nash, and Simonelli, eds., *Artisans and Advocacy in the Global Market*.

between the global north and global south. The production of textiles aims to provide economic justice to women weavers, but does not radically differ from traditional capitalist structures. Craft production fits into the larger scheme of capitalism because capitalism encourages the production of difference for consumption, or that consumers may always desire new and exotic items.⁴⁰

The system of selling/creating markets in the US, for example, is highly dependent on the networks with privileged anthropologists and students, who may move between the two countries.⁴¹ Oftentimes, these outsiders may lack experience in marketing artisan products.⁴² This means that spaces in which textiles are sold may be limited. For example, MSV sells their products through an Etsy website, which limits the products to easily-sold bright tapestries—rather than some of the finer products MSV makes.

While cooperatives may partner with connections to the global market, they are not always dependent on them.

Mujeres Sembrando la Vida is one example of a grassroots cooperative. MSV was started by Doña Magdalena, but now is managed by her daughters, Yoli and Xunka. There are sixty women within the cooperative, all from the municipality of Zinacantán. Both Xunka and Yoli had the opportunity to attend university, and they studied business and languages respectively. Their educational status allows them to access markets without much intervention from intermediaries, at least for production in Mexico. Below is the story of MSV according to Yoli:

Well, Mujeres Sembrando La Vida began to work in 2001, with a foundation of credit and savings and then in 2008 is when we began to work more with *artesanías*. And the role I play is with color research with brocades and embroidery that they haven't made recently, so I more play the part of reading or looking to find what they can try and what are the things we can make with the loom and what are the things we can't... The major part that I do is with designs and I am the controller of the threads. I buy all of the thread, and [the women] work. So there are days that I go to communities but there are days when [the women] come [to my home] and leave their products.⁴³

Weavers of Mujeres Sembrando la Vida discuss new designs. August 1, 2016. Photo by author.

⁴⁰ Cook, "Craft Commodity Production."

⁴¹ Christine Eber, "Weaving Cooperatives and the Resistance Movement in Highland Chiapas, Mexico: Pass Well over the Earth," in *Artisans and Advocacy in the Global Market: Walking the Heart Path*, ed. Jeanne M. Simonelli, Katherine O'Donnell, and June C. Nash, First edition, School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School for Advanced Research Press, 2015), 52.

⁴² Eber and Rosenbaum, "That We May Serve," 170.

⁴³ Hernández, Personal Interview.

What Yoli has described is the way in which her cooperative is organized. There is no central place for the weaving cooperative. Instead of meeting regularly, Yoli plans out the designs, sometimes with a designer she has met previously, but often she does this work alone. When the designs are complete, she goes to purchase threads in San Cristobal. Yoli then travels to the homes of weavers where they will meet to discuss designs, exchanges completed pieces for thread, and pays weavers for their work. The labor for each piece varies on what is being made, and in the cooperative, women have their specialties (weaving *huipiles*, doing machine embroidery, doing hand embroidery with worsted threads, etc.).

The organization of MSV is set up so that it is not dependent on relationships with US volunteers. This is largely because Natic is still growing as an organization and is working to organize volunteers in the US to grow MSV's consumer basis. MSV's most successful business relationships have been through large-scale production for mainly Mexican designers. Such relationships between weavers and designers have many benefits, but also present cross-cultural challenges.

In the case of a positive relationship that is based on collaboration, I met a young designer and artisan team. This is the case between Andrea, a designer, and Carmela, an embroidery artist. They are both in their 20s, and so their relationship is already a bit equalized. Andrea is from Guadalajara and went to university to study design. Carmela is from the village of Huixtán. Like many textile artists Carmela did not have the opportunity to continue her education after primary school, and instead went to work in *artesanías*. Andrea is currently working to start her own organization that not only sells textiles at a fair price, but also one that shows partnerships in design work.

Carmela works with other designers besides Andrea, and sometimes these relationships are not always fair. Recently Andrea retold a story to me about an exploitative relationship Carmela has with another design company. Within her work, Carmela is expected to first travel to San Cristobal, buy the supplies (fabric, thread, needles, etc.), produce the item, travel back to San Cristobal, and finally pay for shipping of the goods to a store in Los Angeles that purchases from the company.⁴⁴ She also does the work of organizing other artists within Huixtán. What she is paid for the pieces does not add up to the amount of money she has spent on transportation, supplies, and shipping, as well as the cost of her labor. In Chiapas, the situation of poverty puts many women in similar situations. Designers use the structural inequalities to their economic advantage by paying much lower wages. Such structural inequalities include many weavers' lack of formal education and language barriers that are created through the system of poverty.

Often the relationship between designers and weavers is a challenging one. Yoli told me that many relationships with designers is difficult because they do not know the details about weaving. Those who do know about weaving techniques are much easier to work with.⁴⁵ Many of MSV's partnerships depend on designers, and often it is put on Yoli's family to pay women for work designers do not accept, such as when errors in communication occur. Because designers are able to exploit weavers based on language barriers and educational differences, the weaving cooperative becomes a participant in capitalist exploitation, especially when a

⁴⁴ Andrea Garcia-Flores, Personal Conversation, April 3, 2017.

⁴⁵ Hernández, Personal Interview.

designer's work is more highly valued by institutions and consumers.

Institutions have had a profound role in shaping consumers' views of indigenous women and their work as cheap commodities rather than art. Weavers who are active in making new work are also active in selling it, and though institutions may hope to create a rhetoric that gives outsiders a greater understanding of textiles, they also fail in many regards. According to Eustaquia, a long-time employee of CTMM, the museum is the only space where outsiders may understand the production process and how tedious it can be. She describes the museum as a bridge between foreigners and weavers.⁴⁶ But this space has failed to open up the world of *artesanías* as an art. The ideological project of the government to create a national identity has failed weavers because they see that outsiders do not value their work. Below, Yoli describes the situation:

I think that Mexicans.... there are times that they don't appreciate like the price of the products because they say, "It's that it's so expensive" but they never see how it is the hard work of the artisans. And yes, there are Mexicans that are more conscious, but very few. And also in regards to foreigners, there are times that they come to Mexico and it's that they say, "Everything is cheap! *Artesanías* are cheap." And they don't think about getting to know more about textiles like about the work, how much time is dedicated by each women to *artesanías*. So it's that *artesanías* aren't so valued. And also, I think that the process to decorate the textiles [isn't valued either].⁴⁷

Despite efforts of the museum, outsiders still see contemporary work of weavers as an easy and cheap commodity. Understanding the artistic process of making the object as well as its underlying history is central. This view contributes to the exploitation of outside designers for not only the labor of weavers but also their designs. Eustaquia quite eloquently describes how she sees the situation with designers:

Well, one part is good because sometimes when we make [things] to sell, and we sometimes have success. Other times, there are some [designers] who only come to see nothing more than the designs or something like that to take the designs. *They take [the designs] but never are going to do them the same way we do because they make everything with a machine. They copy it with the machine I don't know much except that the culture lives in the people.*⁴⁸ Or that [the foreigners] still make it over there even though we start to change the colors in the same work, right? It's that we want also, to output the pieces we make in order to have a—a life. Also [we make the textiles so that] the artisans do not have to move and so that they can continue making their pieces, right?⁴⁹

Eustaquia's insistence that culture lives within the people, I interpret this as designers seeing the object of the textile as a representation of the culture, but what is more important is the people who create the culture. In the museum space, the textile is something of past practices. In the

⁴⁶ Ruiz Gomez, Personal Interview.

⁴⁷ Hernández, Personal Interview.

⁴⁸ Emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Ruiz Gomez, Personal Interview.

cooperative or as *artesanía*, the textile is a commodity, only valued for authenticity that is created for foreigners around the handmade and traditional.

Foreigners, as accustomed consumers, search for exotic and varying goods. Craft commodities then hold a unique place among the ideology of consumers. Because consumers are searching for “natural,” “unique” and “exotic” items, they often are blind to processes that create inequality.⁵⁰ Outsiders often assume that cooperatives are autonomous spaces for women, without interferences from other economic systems. In the case of intermediaries with co-operatives, there are positive and negative aspects. Outsiders may partner with cooperatives to increase sales opportunities; such is the case with Natic and MSV. Sometimes designers may create relationships of inequality. When designers use indigenous labor for their products and refuse to pay a fair wage, they perpetuate stereotypes of indigenous art as being lesser as well as the stereotype of indigenous people living in a pre-capitalist past. When designers come to villages or study designs in the museum setting, they often take the images, change the colors, and use a mechanical processes to undermine collective creativity of weavers. By taking designs, even when weavers are doing the work of changing colors for foreign tastes, they are denying weavers’ economic opportunities and the rights to their own art. To break this cycle of exploitation, ideological art categories must be unraveled to change consumers’ perceptions of indigenous weavers and their art.

To break with the structural hierarchies of *artesanías*, folk art, and art, I propose that we must begin to think *artesanías* not through the means of production and consumption that make them into commodities, nor as relics of the past that only have artistic value through the ability to still be appreciated over time in a museum, but rather through visual *affect*. Affect may include changes in technologies and technique, but more importantly the deep phenomenological qualities. The affect of art allows it to perform a specific role within milieu in which it exists.⁵¹ Textile production more often holds roots that have responded to change rather than tradition.⁵² Indigenous social justice and resistance has happened for the last 500 years because indigenous peoples did not accept Spanish ideology, technologies, and materials without creatively combining them with their own ideas.⁵³

While Westerners may think of art and artistic expression as an individual experience, weavers see their work as a binding force for communities. Designs, style, and materials used in weavings also are distinct to specific townships and their *traditions*.⁵⁴ Designs that are woven in cloth represent ideas about serving one’s community with the guidance of the gods.⁵⁵ Each community has its own style of dress with distinct designs that the great majority of indigenous women continue to wear daily despite discrimination.

I asked every weaver that I interviewed why they continue to wear the traditional dress, and I got varying answers, but they frequently said because of tradition. The connection back to tradition

⁵⁰ Cook, “Craft Commodity”; García Canclini, *Transforming Modernity*.

⁵¹ Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation,” *Angelaki* 6, no. 3 (December 1, 2001): 129–30.

⁵² Grimes and Milgram, *Artisans and Cooperatives*, 9.

⁵³ Eber, “Weaving Cooperatives and the Resistance Movement.”

⁵⁴ Eber and Rosenbaum, “That We May Serve,” 158.

⁵⁵ Eber and Rosenbaum, 155.

for weavers, is not the authentic tradition as constructed by museums to market to tourists. The tradition that weavers talk about is part of their habitus. Habitus, defined by Bourdieu, is a system of “transposable dispositions, structured structures...principles, which generate and organize practices and representations.”⁵⁶ Wearing *traje* becomes an everyday practice for a long history, embedded within indigenous identity. Part of continuing to wear the traditional dress is also to be a part of the community. This certainly does not mean that every person wears the dress the same way. There is always room for individual creativity. Yoli describes how she may be creative with her clothing while also participating in the habitus of her community:

Here in Zinacantán, yes there are always markets on Sundays, there is a community where they work only making the clothing of Zinacantán and well, I don't go to buy from outside...and in the cooperative as well there are women that will weave and so some women weave what I want and there are others who will embroider the drawings of flowers I do and that I want for my dress and like that they also will embroider them.⁵⁷

Other weavers described their reasons as part of their “*usos y costumbres*”⁵⁸ or customs (*usos*) and traditions (*costumbres*). The key word here is *usos* in understanding how we might change the definition of art of textiles because central to this art form is the ability for it to be worn. Wearing traditional clothing is central to the habitus of an indigenous community. Habitus is the embodied experience of culture through systems of transposable dispositions.⁵⁹ The ability for clothing to be worn is part of the affective quality of art, rather than alienating art as a representation of culture, but placing it within the social milieu gives it aesthetic importance.

In the production and consumption of *artesanías*, it is important to take into account how clothing has changed internally. Without learning about historical changes within the community, textiles remain tied to racialized ideologies of indigenous people belonging to the past. Furthermore, if innovation is only seen through *artesanías*, then credit is given to the designers rather than weaver-artists being the authors of their own work. The museum perpetuates innovation of designers in deciding whose art is exhibited, such as featuring contemporary work of designers.

The changes that have taken place in Zinacantán include the addition of machine embroidery and sparkly threads. Indigenous people are often viewed living in more spaces more connected to the earth, so institutions (museums, NGOs, designers) tend to promote the use of natural dyes, fibers, etc. Instead Zinacantecs are innovative, modern, and fashionable. They enjoy wearing bright flowers over a shimmering purple background—both men and women.

Zinacantán is not the only town that has gone through changes in color and technique. In Huixtán, they no longer weave, and instead focus on delicate floral embroidery. In Chenalhó, women's clothing has also gone through a color transition. What I was able to observe, from looking at a weavers collection of huipils, was a change from orange in the 1980-1990s, to red in the 1990-2000s, and then to the present day colors of deep purples and black. Each place has

⁵⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Reprinted (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008), 53.

⁵⁷ Hernández, Personal Interview.

⁵⁸ Maria Lucia Hernandez Ruiz, Personal Interview, November 16, 2016.

⁵⁹ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53.

continued to use textiles as a creative medium, taking it into their social reality through dual production processes of internal (within the community) and external (for tourists) textiles.

If art must be seen as authentic in order to be real, such authenticity must be determined internally. Weavers often refer to their work as being part of a community; they talk about styles in municipalities rather than individual taste for example. Yet this reference to a communal style does not mean variation does not occur. Slight variations may only be obvious to weavers, such as slight changes in the warp stripe.⁶⁰ If authenticity is connected to the originality of an artwork, such that there can only ever be one original rather than multiple copies, authenticity must be redefined to include communal styles. If the affect of the art piece is at the center of understanding the art, social realities as well as tactile, aesthetic qualities must begin to overlook ideologies of indigeneity.

Authenticity has been structured through the spaces of the museums as well as organizations that are forced to participate in capitalism. This authenticity views indigenous textiles on a hierarchical spectrum from artesanías to art. Artesanías are seen as poorer quality, until they are innovated by changing colors to make them more Westernized. This change is not issued internally, but rather allows cooperatives or designers to better market to a tourist eye. Artesanías lie in the realm of commodities. Textiles may be considered folk art, when it is art of the people and serves a functional purpose. In the museum space, the preservation of folk art does not relate to the lived experience and the art being made for communities today. Art may thus include the work of designers that appropriate styles or work in partnership with groups of weavers and yet do not give authorship to the weavers.

The construction of the museum and the cooperative was first created in support of governmental projects for the creation of a national Mexican identity. Government and corporate involvement within the museum space, may keep the museum as a power of authentication, and as an institution that upholds neoliberal and racist ideologies. Textiles in the museum space, become simulacra for lived experience, and this false representation continually places indigenous people out of the contemporary world.

In the cooperative space, weavers must navigate the global market through partnerships with anthropologists, NGOs, and designers. These relationships are positive and negative, and often may be work with greater collaboration or through exploitation. Designers sometimes utilize the labor of weavers to promote the “handmade” aspects of textiles being participation with an ancient tradition. The textile in this case is seen to represent the “primitive” and “close to nature” ideas often associated with indigenous peoples.

Lastly, by not acknowledging change internally, we ignore the creative practices of weavers that come into play every day. The continued use through adaptation of indigenous clothing by communities makes it significant to the lived experience of women. Rather than acting as a representation for the culture, clothing is activated as a living art tied to cultural identity. To see such textiles as art, authenticity in its connection to individually authored work must be abandoned.

⁶⁰ Morris and Karasik, *Maya Threads*.

I conclude here with further questions and proposals. Firstly, if intermediaries are necessary for the participation in global markets, all partnerships must be done through collaboration. Secondly, the museum space must create exhibitions of collaboration that highlight the important changes made to textiles within communities, rather than holding onto the idea of preservation of the past through daily use. And lastly, we must support the intellectual property rights of communities. When designs are protected legally, all partners in this structural system on national and international levels will take weavers seriously. If textiles are protected legally as property of the communities, then this will begin to unravel the system of art categorization. The affect of the textile, as being central to the social habitus of weavers should be at the center of this protection. When such hierarchical systems are flattened, we will begin to see changes and greater respect for indigenous art and the people who make it.

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