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**COLCHA EMBROIDERY AS CARTOGRAPHY:
MAPPING LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY AND PASSAGE**

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Stitching is one of the oldest forms or technologies of textile craft – if we regard technology in its elemental sense as artistry, process, invention or method. My paper explores the notion of embroidered maps of areas in Colorado’s San Luis Valley as creations of a cartographic visionary imagination. In terms of the Symposium’s theme promoting new links between traditional textile-based concepts and contemporary digital processes, these *cartographic* embroideries are viewed as compositions of space-time in which landscapes are rendered as illusions of three dimensions (space) with an implied fourth dimension (time - as expressed in movement and travel). In these pictorial narratives, time also melds with memory in order to transcend the physical division and apportionment of space/place. Regarding the expansiveness of narrative, the storehouse of memory, Michel de Certeau observed, “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (de Certeau 1988: 129).

Tiva Trujillo and Josephine Lobato are two embroiderers from the San Luis Valley, who both use maps as devices to impart their visual narratives. Their embroideries and iconography are compared and contextualized in terms of a biographic and cultural sense of time and space. Each of these artists employs variations on cartographic templates as a way to literally or figuratively arrange their compositions. Their embroideries depict a specific region of the West rendered through an intimacy with local geography and culture, and conditioned by a unique aesthetic and sense of place. For Trujillo and Lobato, the map genre as a mode of “native” artistic expression, is an ideal form to effectively convey embroiderers’ deeply rooted sense of place as mediated by the creative use of an art form extant since southern Colorado was part of the early nineteenth century Spanish frontier. Thus, imaginatively, iconographically, and technically, these art works embody in a very real sense, what it means to be located in a certain place and time with all the attendant factors of history, culture and personal experience. Above all, these artists transcend their own medium of embroidery to channel artistic expression and individual response to a culture saturated place.

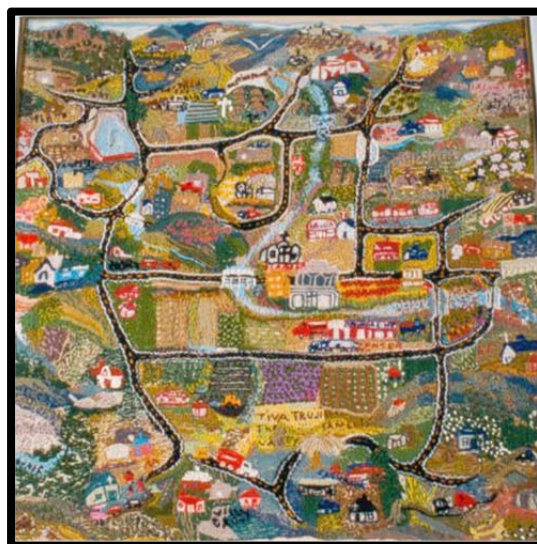


Figure 1. Tiva Trujillo. *Embroidered Map of the San Luis Valley*, 1979 (40”x29”).
Colorado Historical Society acc. no.79.198.

The *Embroidered Map of the San Luis Valley* (Fig. 1) was one quite outstanding piece Tiva Trujillo created in 1979, the year before she died. Her composition is a *tour de force* of impressive virtuosity,

skill, and vision. She has meticulously stitched a map of Colorado's San Luis Valley as a composite of multiple perspectives in which time and space assume a biographically narrative role. This is apparent when Mrs. Trujillo nostalgically refers to the concept for this piece as originating in an idyllic "Once Upon a Time..." era of her childhood.

Over a decade later Josephine Lobato from the town of San Luis also created a series of map-like compositions, which combine visual and textual toponyms marking significant places around which cultural enactments and ritual scenes unfold, for example, *Las Misiones* created in 1993 (see Fig. 3). Her embroideries use the artifice of continuous narration as a mode in which all progressive actions occur simultaneously within one frame. Both artists create basically static cartographic landscapes enlivened by the imagined dimension of space/time conflating past, present and future.

Tiva Trujillo's embroidered map exemplifies the aesthetic fusion of delight in color and texture with her unifying concept of story-telling memories of a life spent in the Valley. Even the primacy of the cardinal directions are subordinate to the importance of the artist's memory as indicated by Trujillo placing north at the bottom of the map looking south (upward) to the snow clad Sangre de Cristo mountain range marking the southern extension of the San Luis Valley. When she created this map in 1979, Tiva Trujillo was living in Sagauche, a small village located in the north of the Valley. During this time she also stitched narrative embroideries depicting scenes from her childhood against the backdrop of another village, Old San Acacio, located in the south central region of the Valley. In the *Map of the San Luis Valley*, Trujillo's perspective, which reverses the usual cartographic arrangement oriented toward north, expresses an artistic and biographical 'truth' as she emphasizes and affirms her position in the present moment on the map's lower edge with a view looking south toward the horizon and her birthplace. Instead of being merely limited to inscribing or apportioning space, here latitude and longitude implicitly mark the coordinates of Trujillo's life trajectories demarcating the intersections of biographical emplacement and memory.

By jumbling coordinates and reversing cardinal directions, Tiva Trujillo optimizes local knowledge and artistic license to reveal the personal truth of her vision and life experience. Through her mode of creative decision-making, she assumes a degree of cartographic power endowed with the legitimacy of scientific pursuit (map-making) transmuted into art. Thus by the very act of creating a map-like composition, Trujillo has appropriated a similar documentary authority to one that cartographers have commanded since antiquity. However, from the complementary perspective of cartographic leniency, she has also translated the physical imprint of her life story and various local connections into something concrete and, by association "objective."

Despite persistent historical attitudes toward the authority of cartographic science, maps remain value-laden images. Writing about the discourse of maps, J. B. Harley's thoughts also apply to Trujillo's map, "Maps cease to be understood primarily as inert records... or passive reflections of the world of objects, but are regarded as refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world" (Harley 1988:278). We can further extend this to mean a 'culturally' constructed world relative to Trujillo's map with its geo-symbols of mountain landmarks and fields transforming geographic space into a cultural place of edenic agrarian display, village networks, and meandering roads – the archetypal image of Hispano village life and community in the Valley.

The composition of Tiva Trujillo's embroidered map recalls maps in medieval manuscripts characterized by a "birds-eye" perspective or view of the visual field studded with landmarks tilting vertically toward an open horizon. Unlike the majority of maps with framed boundaries and well-defined outer borders (e.g., road maps), these 'scenic' maps suggest unlimited expansion beyond horizon lines. The mountains along the top of Tiva Trujillo's map appear to project into the distance to where the Valley terminates in northern New Mexico. This could also imply local perceptions of the social and cultural continuity of this region regardless of state boundary lines. Many Valley residents on either side of state lines– whether in

Colorado or New Mexico - have family members and friends living in one state or the other. They have traditionally disregarded what they consider to be the artificiality of state borders for generations - a cultural attitude persisting from the time of the original sixteenth century Spanish Land Grant, which encompassed the entire area and was considered spatially and culturally indivisible by the people living there.

Road maps as well as Trujillo's map evoke a visually kinetic journey (i.e., by two-dimensionally marking routes of travel). A commercial map is entirely devoid of cultural and social space and is the outcome of necessity and commerce while the embroidery is populated with the material traces of human social and cultural life as manifest in Trujillo's visualization of a pastoral life style and heritage of collective stewardship over land and environment. From an economic and phenomenological perspective, Trujillo's map exemplifies a landscape, which could be viewed as a 'taskscape', i.e., displaying the fruits of hard labor inextricably "bound up with the lives and values of those who work in and off the land in which [social and cultural] identities are constituted through particular forms of activity (Edmonds cited in Tilley 2006:26).

Artistically there is a profound feeling of bodily and sensory engagement with this place – not only visual but also in the clarity and brilliance of the air, the tactility and texture of the unfolding landscape, roads known and walked as well as the sonic landscape of rushing water and animal sounds, church bells, and the grinding gears of trucks. Furthermore, through Trujillo's appropriation of *cartographic power* she has transmuted the geographic isolation into an Edenic vision of industry and reward symbolically separate from the realities of virtual ethnic and social isolation from the rest of Colorado.



Figure 2. Detail. Embroidered map of San Luis Valley.

Despite the reality of her life (ill health and economic worries), Trujillo regarded her embroideries as depicting an idyllic time of joy and innocence. Consonant with this particular spatiotemporal construct of "time out of time" which supersedes biographical time, she utilizes the map format of zones and boundaries, to not only emphasize the cultural and geographic uniqueness of the Valley but also to reinforce its separation from the world beyond the frame (Fig. 2). Tiva Trujillo interprets the Valley landscape as a socially interdependent place with collective grazing lands and the sharing of natural resources like water and timber – all bequeathed to the local Hispano population through the inherited rights of the original Spanish Land Grant. In Trujillo's artistic vision the concept of individual land ownership is subsumed under traditional collective cultural practices. According to Emerson, the "landscape has no owner except the poet who can integrate its parts" (as quoted in Mitchell 1994:29). In Trujillo's map, it is the poet as artist, who integrates.

Las Misiones (Fig. 3) is an intricately conceived composition made up of an entire field of embroidery featuring historic and locally significant figures and symbols. Although this map is not objectively or scientifically conceived, Josephine Lobato perceived it as such. She imagined she was creating a stitchery dense with cultural and historical overlay where the experience of time (historical epochs plus the present era) blends with space to come together in place. *Las Misiones* derives its title from the circuit of small mission churches, which are connected to the San Luis *Sangre de Cristo* parish church located in the center of Josie Lobato's embroidery. When Josie learned to embroider pictorial narratives in the early 1990s, she began an ambitious project of creating one colcha embroidery for each of her eight adult children. The inspiration for this piece came from her son, Emilio's request to "...make me a map."¹ In response to her question about what kind of map, Emilio wanted a map of Costilla County the site of San Luis and where the *Sangre de Cristo* parish network is located.

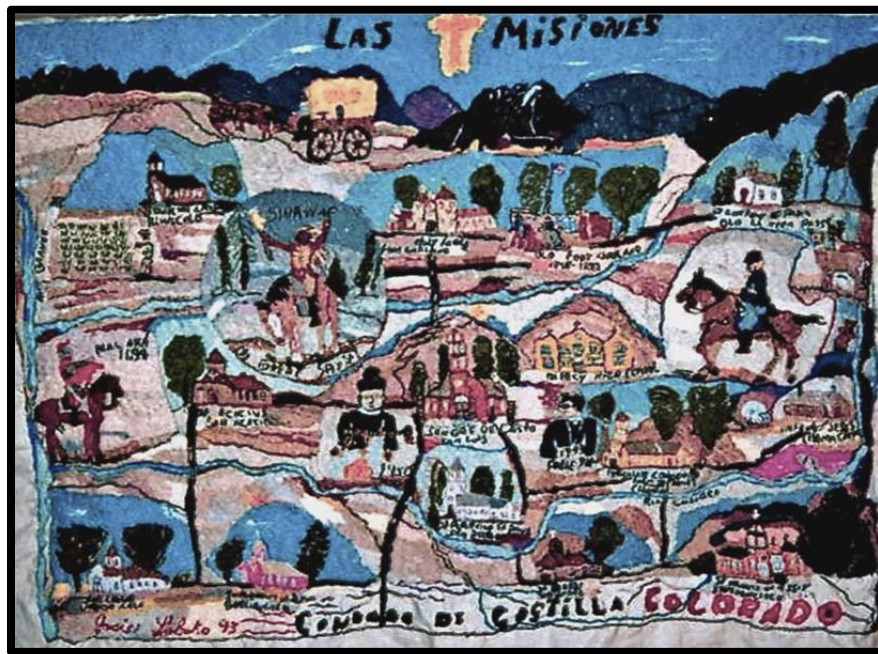


Figure 3: Josephine Lobato. *Las Misiones*. Colcha embroidery (21"x26"), 1993. Image by author.

Similar to Tiva Trujillo's conception and use of cartographic space in her map of the Valley, Lobato also apportions and divides up her composition into various artistic and iconographical zones. These relate to an iconology or set of symbols denoting the Native American indigenous presence amidst images of a 17th century Spanish conquistador, a cowboy, settlers, and the present day network of Hispanic village churches and revered priests. Both artists compartmentalize their compositions into imagistic zones in order to create a visual framework to better define and configure multiple yet simultaneous pictorial illusions of topographic geosymbols, rural life styles, and, particularly in Lobato's case, ecclesiastical power. The overriding goal in Lobato's work is to privilege specific cultural references to religious icons and to register different waves of occupation and settlement in the Valley whether tribal, Hispanic or Anglo.

In addition to the constellation of churches in *Las Misiones*, she felt compelled to add historical references, "I had to put in historical figures, pioneering settlers, Native Americans, former priests, etc. They were in every corner. They were part of a past. I do history in all of them [colchas]. Anyway, Emilio wanted it to be a sort of map with landmarks in Costilla County. These landmarks are either historical or

¹ Josephine Lobato, telephone conversation with author, Denver, Colorado 11 September 2010.

religious. Villages are landmarks. Landmarks connect churches to each other and connect one little village to another.”²

When Emilio Lobato commissioned *Las Misiones* from his mother, he was stationed in Germany about to be deployed to join troops in the Gulf War. Given the imminence of combat, which possibly triggered his nostalgia for a time in his family’s history when it was safe and more stable, it is understandable that Emilio was attracted by the power and legacy of a familiar place and wanted a timeless image in which he could conjure up memories of an idealized past in the midst of current danger and an unpredictable future. Facing such cataclysmic change while in a foreign country, Emilio sought a kind of symbolic affirmation of the worth of his own cultural background and Hispano identity thus evoking many remembered sensations of place and locale. The following statement by Christopher Tilley can also characterize Emilio’s choice, “A symbolic return to the past often acts as a retreat from the uncertainties of the present” (Tilley 2006:14).

Although Josephine Lobato inserted historical references into her composition, the matrix of her conceptual “map” is fundamentally the arterial religious connections linking satellite churches. Each time these linkages are reaffirmed through celebrating mass and performing different rituals the ecclesiastical power of the local Catholic network increases exponentially. Josie’s title, *Las Misiones*, reifies and further underscores the importance of the relationship of the San Luis parish church to its auxiliary members, the village churches.

In addition, the relationship of the various formal parts to the whole compositional arrangement metaphorically reflects the actual alliance between the *Sangre de Cristo* parish church and the mission churches where the illusionistic meandering borders in the embroidery mirror the routes or trajectories of religious identity and affiliation. The map-like elements in Lobato’s composition are the rivers and roads (seen from a bird’s eye view, i.e. looking down) while figures, objects and landscape elements are positioned at right angles to the picture plane as if the viewer were looking at them head-on. Narrative about place and history is much more evident here than in Tiva Trujillo’s map of the Valley.

Due to all the separate elements, i.e., the figural medallions, the miniature church scenes, and the landscape features, Lobato’s composition could easily disintegrate into separate components and lose its semblance of cohesion. Unity is partially achieved through technique by Josie’s use of the colcha embroidery stitch (a type of couching stitch) to cover the entire ground fabric repeating the same stitch over and over in a thick accretion of stitches until *Las Misiones* resembles a weaving more than an embroidery – hence the common description ‘tapestry.’ The visible texture and tactility of the stitchery also activates a genuine feeling for the sensate experience of this landscape in terms of the earth’s roughness and dryness, the clear air expressed through the clarity of color, temperature as revealed in a palette of ‘warm’ browns and blues, the subliminal feel of geologic time, and aesthetic perceptions of the human environment. Thus, the embodied sensations of place are evoked through (and embedded in) the layered construction of the embroidery process. Lobato’s creative expression of Costilla County topography and religiosity encompasses the “relation of sensation to emplacement” and aesthetically demonstrates through an art work, the “experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, remembered, contested and struggled over” including the way place metaphorically links to cultural and social identity (Feld and Basso 1996:11).

Relying on artistic selectivity, Lobato uses a religious framework upon which to place allegorical and real figures from the history and culture of the San Luis Valley, therefore producing a type of “moral” map of the county. As mentioned, the most visible and binding factor is the church network exemplifying the supremacy of the Catholic faith in this society. Lobato’s depiction of the built environment of parish and village churches provides the symbolic socio-religious justification for representing Catholicism as

² Conversation, 11 September 2010.

dominant in this part of the Valley. In addition to all the church images, Lobato has added figural portraits of the parish priest from her childhood, Father Mortarell to the left of center, and Father Patricio Valdez to the right (Fig. 4). Father Pat was the San Luis priest at the time when she made *Las Misiones*. He often functioned as muse and mentor for Josie – mostly cheering her on and offering suggestions when she was stuck on an idea. By including past and present figures associated with specific dates stitched into the design field, Josie fixes her composition in time and place thus negating the impression of an eternal present. Such a breadth of eras, personalities and allegorical symbols (e.g., the Spanish conquistador as a harbinger of colonialism, the spiritual Native American presence juxtaposed with the free-wheeling cowboy image: both figures individually framed in separate but prominent medallions), attest to the visibly concrete passing of time and reveal the inevitability of change in this region. Ultimately, Lobato creates an inventive pastiche of powerfully symbolic images akin to what Reyes Garcia refers to as “organic symbols” which figuratively transforms this geographical region into a “place of the heart” (Garcia 1998:111).



Figure 4. Detail of *Las Misiones*.

The main tropes of ethnicity rooted in the legacy of Spanish descent, and the perpetuation of a Hispano Catholic heritage, express the ‘proclaimed’ ethos of San Luis and are also echoed in the main themes of Josie’s embroidery. Despite the existence of other denominations in San Luis – e.g., a Presbyterian congregation, a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and a recently erected Mormon Church – Father Pat believes that regardless of religious affiliation, everyone in town essentially shares Catholic roots. “The whole culture, I think, is so Catholic anyway ... whether they’ve converted to other religions or not. They’re still basically Catholic. It’s kind of hard to change. We’re brought up with what we learned as children ... so, the whole place is Catholic.”³ From her perspective as a resident and parishioner, Mary Jo Manzanares personalizes Father Pat’s pronouncement by echoing the belief that faith, hope, and communal solidarity are intertwined and inseparable: “For me, I can’t separate what it means to live here and what it means to be a Catholic. The faith and culture are all mixed up in my heart” (MacAulay 2000:10).

³ Father Patricio Valdez, taped interview with author, San Luis, Colorado 18 January 1991.

Josie Lobato uses her authority as artist, mapmaker and cultural commentator to visually represent this common perceptual attitude toward the ubiquity and strength of regional Catholicism in the southern part of the San Luis Valley. She even extends this belief to encompass a larger concept of the innate spirituality of place by visualizing a symbol of an indigenous Ute Indian mounted on his pony with arms upraised invoking the supernatural power of the “Great Spirit.” The position of the Ute figure (albeit somewhat stereotyped) in the midst of a strongly Catholic iconography accentuates Lobato’s notion of an intertwined reverence for the spirit of nature and the divine forces of established religion. Ironically, it was the advent of Catholic proselytizing in this region that decimated much of the native population through disease and relocation. However, regarding the prevalence of Catholic inspired imagery in Lobato’s pictorial narrative measured against the words of Father Pat and Mrs. Manzanares, the Catholic Church could be considered a visual metonym for Hispanic society in this part of the San Luis Valley. The Church is not only a “landmark” in Josie Lobato’s sense of the word, but its local symbolic value is such a strong concept that it might be considered a representative descriptor or substitute for the Hispanic sector as a population of faith – in particular, Catholic faith.

A close scrutiny of the real symbolic dimensions of Josie’s vision and the general belief in Catholic dominance, however, reveals distinct fracture lines. The diversity of religious practices in San Luis as mentioned by Father Pat already belies the shared sense of Catholic supremacy reigning throughout this region. For example, on the one hand because of alcoholic recovery programs and other socially driven initiatives implemented by a few of the Protestant church groups, not everyone in town subscribes to the “*Somos todos Catolicos*” (we are all Catholics) belief in the pervasiveness and efficacy of Catholic practice. On the other hand, as others have noted “perceived cultural *similarities* [i.e., all Hispanics are Catholics], as opposed to differences, may assume an important role in the maintenance of ethnic differences” (Tilley 2006:15). By differentiating themselves as practicing Catholics from the rest of local Anglo society in San Luis, Hispanos can claim another fundamental distinction that sets them ethnically apart yet reifies the moral charter underscoring their spiritual belief system – their inheritance from generations of Spanish ancestors. Another view, moreover, is to associate the lingering presence of Hispanic Catholicism with vestigial Spanish colonialism despite the fact that a virtual colonial system supposedly vanished at the end of the Mexican War in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In this way, the church could be viewed as the historic colonizer of people and place with Lobato’s pictorial conception articulating the mission church network as evidence of a colonizing and colonized landscape.

By her own design, Lobato’s paramount focus is the local visibility of the Church and its network of satellite congregations. This arrangement visually replicates a circuit of deepening connections, which is frequently and periodically strengthened through performances of weekly mass and ritual. Through the quality of repetition of practice and ritual, a place begins to accrue strata of experience, i.e., it “gathers experience” (refer to Casey 1996:42). In this manner, Josie’s depiction of the San Luis cultural and religious landscape and all its elements denotes a gathering place where power is concentrated and intensified over time. As a genre with its own history and origin, her colcha embroidery becomes an agent of place where the sacred and genealogical environment of San Luis’s spiritual observances and aesthetic practice extends to the realm of lived experience with all its variables and contradictions.

As artists and the creators of their own pictorial biographies, Tiva Trujillo and Josephine Lobato would personally agree with Clifford Geertz’s observation that, “no one lives in the world in general” (quoted in Feld and Basso 1996: 262). Artistic creation renders the material world of experience of body and mind comprehensible so that one may know what it means to live in a particular place and time. The choice of map templates offers a structure, a schema, upon which to array visual and emotional experiences of landscape. Space and time coming together in place add a pulse to cartographic lines so that the heartbeat of landscape is attuned to human presence and sensation. Art engages both the mind and body in the translation of the spirit of place based on deeply and aesthetically knowing the land and its history.

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