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FEATURE ESSAY

Zapatista Embroidery as Speech Act in *Zapantera Negra*

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On January 1, 1994, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN or Zapatista Army of National Liberation) declared war on the Mexican government. Indigenous fighters engaged in a guerrilla attack and seized nearby cities, towns, and ranches and occupied the colonial capital of Chiapas, San Cristóbal de las Casas. Though an eventual ceasefire was called, Zapatistas still maintain communities throughout Chiapas today, where they function autonomously without Mexican government assistance or leadership.[1] Zapatistas are a left-wing revolutionary political and militant group made up of mostly rural indigenous people from the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, Mexico.[2] They are opposed to neoliberalism and economic globalization, which they perceive as threats to indigenous communities that have been dispossessed over a 500-year period of colonial and imperialist struggles. They demand "work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace" for all.[3] To these ends, the Zapatista movement calls for the re-conceptualizing of political institutions and world systems.

My paper addresses how Zapatistas employ art as a means of furthering, or engaging with, their political goals. Specifically, I look at a Zapatista embroidery that was created for *Zapantera Negra*, a crowd-funded exhibition that was the result of Emory Douglas's artist-in-residency at EDELO in San Cristóbal de las Casas.[4] Founded by American artists Caleb Duerte and Mia Eve Rollow, EDELO was an artist collective and public space where community members could congregate and engage with politically

[1] Autonomous Zapatista communities have built participatory democracies (sometimes referred to as bottom-up democracies) for themselves which involve the equal input of all members in decision-making processes.

[2] There are some Zapatista supporters who live in urban areas and internationally.

[3] General Command of the EZLN, "First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle," December 31, 1993, accessed March 20, 2017, http://www.schoolsforchiapas.org/library/declaration-lacandona-jungle-2/.

[4] *Zapantera Negra* was primarily funded through Kickstarter, an online fundraising website. Much of EDELO's fundraising efforts attempted to help Zapatista communities by providing funds for community construction projects and electrical grids. It must be stated that EDELO did not function in a fully autonomous manner and received some money through grants and fundraising. The brick and mortar EDELO space operated for four years before closing due to lack of capital.

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www.bu.edu/sequitur

and community driven art.[5] I argue embroidery, which is produced exclusively by women embroidery collectives, provides an autonomous space for Zapatista women to embrace indigenous values and imagine new futures. To these ends, the embroidery, which is a re-appropriation of a Douglas image, functions as a speech act that works towards the dismantling of oppressive systems.

Embroidery is a local trade that Zapatista women use to subsidize their communities and maintain economic independence. As a form of protest and political propaganda, Zapatista embroidery typically employs symbols or sayings related to their political goals, including the emblematic Zapatista star or balaclava-clad figures.[6] From the onset, the Zapatista movement has been dedicated to the equal rights of women in their communities. Issued alongside their call to arms, *The First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle*, the Zapatistas released the *Women's Revolutionary Law* that declares a woman's right to partake in the revolution in any way she sees fit, to work and receive fair wages, to bear as many children as she chooses, to access education, to be free of violence, and to occupy leadership positions and hold military rank.[7]

To create the embroideries, women gather in cooperatives to support each other's craftsmanship and to ensure fair costs.[8] The collectives are autonomous spaces where women provide support to one another and discuss both the personal and the political.[9] In her dissertation on Zapatista autonomy, anthropologist Mariana Mora speaks to the bio-politics of female work in Zapatista communities. She emphasizes that the collectives blend the economic, political, and personal, blurring the line between the public and the private, between politics and life itself.[10] Mora states further, that it is from the material work that the "process of collective self-reflection" emerges. It is this process that provides a space for thinking through the micro-politics of everyday life, which in turn generates new forms of knowledge to address local

[5] Founded upon the principles of community outreach and artistic freedom, EDELO aimed to be a space where alternatives to current oppressive systems could be imagined. Duerte and Rollow invited academics, artists, activist, community members, children, writers, poets, musicians, and performers to participate in projects at the EDELO headquarters, as well as with autonomous Zapatista communities throughout Chiapas. EDELO facilitated multiple art and community projects throughout the four years that they were in operation. This included mural paintings, occupations, hunger strikes, installations, and video performances that focused on water rights, autonomy, child labor, and disability.

[6] Balaclava's provide anonymity but they are also an icon to denote the struggle of the "invisible" and "forgotten" indigenous while emphasizing inclusivity, unity, and community.

[7] EZLN, "Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law," *El Despertador Mexicano*, January 1, 1994.

[8] Sirena Pellarolo, "Zapatista Women: A Revolutionary Process Within a Revolution," (keynote address for the International Women's Day event organized by the California State University, Los Angeles, California, March 8, 2006), accessed March 20, 2017, http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/auto/sp_zw.html.

[9] Mariana Mora, "Decolonizing Politics: Zapatista Indigenous Autonomy in an Era of Neoliberal Governance and Low Intensity Warfare" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 186.

[10] Ibid., 186.

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www.bu.edu/sequitur

inequalities.[11] Embroidery collectives are gendered spaces where women cooperate to produce works that have the potential to reflect upon and project their political goals. I consider the collectives and the products they produce as gendered in that both create space, physically and visually, for women to autonomously assert their public positionality as political participants in a manner that empowers women, (trans)forms political consciousness, emboldens the Zapatista cause (as they see fit), and questions the way domestic labor has been rendered invisible. Though embroidery is traditionally devalued in its classification as a domestic chore, Zapatista embroidery revalues domestic labor and imbues it with political and personal significance that attests to female subjectivity.

The Zapatista reworking of Emory Douglas's illustration was created by two embroidery collectives for the *Zapantera Negra* exhibition (Figure 1).[12] In the original image, Douglas, who was the Black Panther's Minister of Culture, is formed in a thick black outline, with a brown face, and dressed in a white shirt. The background is red. He carries a stylized machine gun, emblematic of the Black Panthers who carried them in protest. The image reads "Our people's army should be built up into a revolutionary force equipped with indefatigable spirit of fighting through thick and thin for the party and the people into an iron army each member of which is a match for one hundred enemies…"[13] These words are all in red, capital letters, emblazoned on the left side of the figure's shirt. The style is bold, graphic, and legible as the image was meant to be mass-produced in a newspaper.

In the Zapatista embroidery, the outline and features of the figure remain unchanged but there are important differences (Figure 2). The text has been removed, the figure's skin is unembroidered and is thus the white color of the cloth, and his shirt is now yellow. Most notably the figure's gun has been replaced with two ears of corn rendered in Mexican *artesanía* hand-embroidery—large yellow circles with brown centers stand against bold colors that are exposed from inside green husks (Figure 3). Ancient Mayan beliefs figure strongly in Zapatista ideology as seen in the representation of maize, recognized by Mayan beliefs as a staple crop and life force. As part of their movement, Zapatistas claim that they, as a primarily indigenous group, have been dispossessed; their land and local resources stripped from them by the government to perpetuate neoliberal agendas. This not only kills Mother Earth but divorces indigenous people from vital crops, such as corn. As an insurgency, Zapatista democratic interventions involve the occupation and tending of land as well as attempts to function as autonomous communities. The corn is thus not only a visual cue connecting the Zapatistas to their land and indigenous heritage, but also a reference to the way in which they occupy the land as a weapon against the government. This point is made clear in the accompanying text. Embroidered above the image is the phrase: "hay que limpiar los caminos para que entre la paz," which translates to "the roads must be cleansed so that peace can enter."

[11] Ibid., 187.

[12] In none of my reading on *Zapantera Negra* did I find specifics about the embroidery collectives who completed the work, only that there were two, one focused on hand embroidery and the other machine embroidery.

[13] Emory Douglas, *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, August 18, 1970.

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I consider the embroidery a speech act. A speech act is an utterance that is considered an action of intention in effect, or purpose. The speech act may be illocutionary, producing an effect, or perlocutionary, in that it initiates consequences.[14] In this case, it is a visual "utterance" that hopes to be perlocutionary, to incite political consequences, convince viewers, and be a catalyst for imagining new futures that will have lasting implications. It is within this framework that Judith Butler claims that speech acts opposing oppressive systems "position the performative at the center of a politics of hegemony, one that offers an unanticipated political future for deconstructive thinking."[15] In the communal act of producing the embroidery, the women perform a politically driven labor that reconsiders their position within the community while creating a material object that offers a way to de-think neoliberal globalism. The embroidery, while an appropriation of Douglas's image, may also be considered a productive *re-appropriation* that acts, according to Butler, to establish an unknown future. Re-appropriation allows the performer to draw from established histories and call attention to the failures of an idea or movement but more importantly open it to the possibility of success, greater inclusion, and new interests.[16]

Zapantera Negra was initially born out of the similarities Duerte saw between the ideology and goals of the Zapatistas and Black Panthers, specifically the fight for justice, peace, and importantly, self-determination.[17] The legibility of Douglas's iconic image not only recalls the radical work and legacy of the Black Panthers, but establishes a point of departure for new Zapatista futures. The re-appropriated image includes indigenous people and attempts to determine what means and demands will produce a more successful anti-neoliberal, pro-sovereignty outcome. In the image, the women have visually stripped Douglas's figure of his weapon and reclaimed that space with their own emblem for peace, the Maya corn, which symbolizes unity between the land and people and calls for a contemporary reunion of the two. They have similarly stripped the figure of one component of his voice, Douglas's text, and replaced it with the Spanish voice of the women's collective who congregate to work, talk, and act politics, who fight against their marginalized position as women, and who are dedicated to furthering the Zapatista cause. It is an oppositional, liberated voice, which allows the subject to challenge the hegemony and to demand others think critically.[18]

First shown in San Cristóbal, *Zapantera Negra* was, and remains in its many traveling iterations, "a project that demonstrates how contemporary art can sidestep conventional political and conceptual performance practices by working in communities of struggle from the ground-up."[19] As a public, traveling exhibition *Zapantera Negra* is a venue for speech acts and a space where visions for alternative futures are formed. As a re-appropriation of Douglas's image that includes Maya motifs and Spanish text, the

[14] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 161.

[15] Ibid., 161.

[16] Ibid., 160-161.

[17] Marc James Léger and David Tomas, ed., *Zapantera Negra: An Artistic Encounter Between Black Panthers and Zapatistas* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2017), 3, 21.

[18] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 95-96.

[19] Léger and Tomas, ed., *Zapantera Negra*, 3.

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embroidery not only expresses hope for future peace but a way to get there: through the dismantling of oppressive systems (cleansing the road) and the reterritorialization of indigenous peoples and their land (arming the people with corn).

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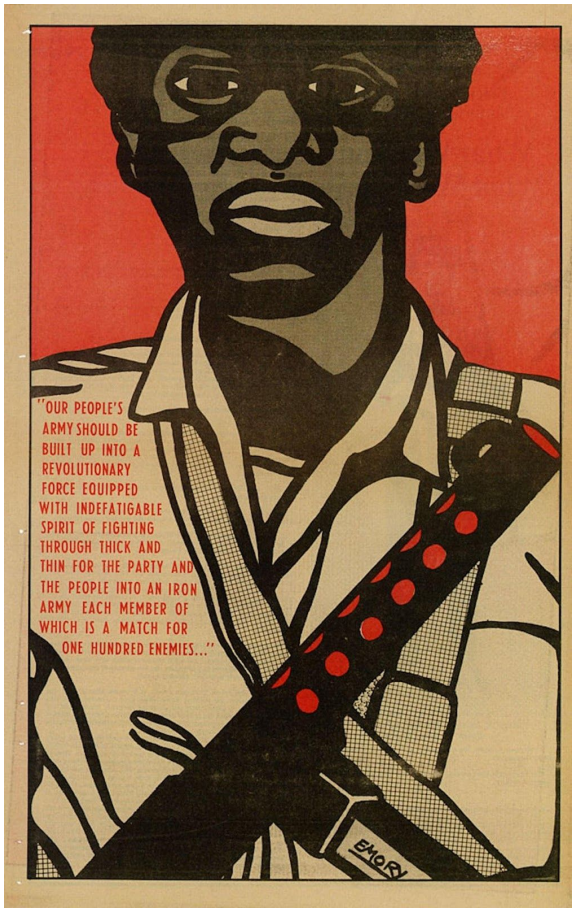

Figure 1. Emory Douglas, *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, August 18, 1970. Newspaper print.

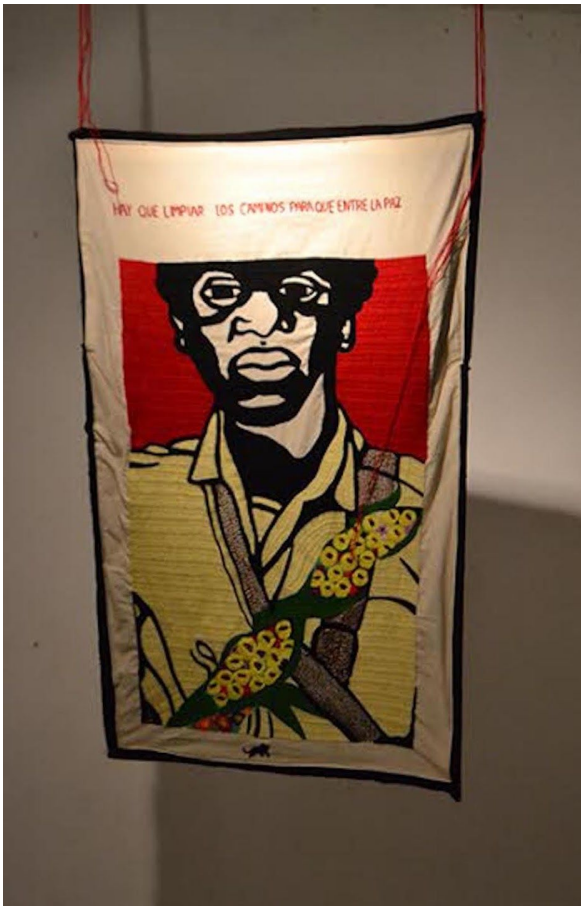

Figure 2. Zapatista women's embroidery collective interpretation of Emory Douglas illustration, 2012. Embroidery.

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Figure 3. Detail of Figure 2: Zapatista women's embroidery collective interpretation of Emory Douglas illustration, 2012. Embroidery.