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Picturing Paradise: Imagination, Beauty, and Women's Lives in a Peruvian Shantytown

Rebecca Berru Davis

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She Who Imagines

Feminist Theological Aesthetics

Edited by
Laurie Cassidy
Maureen H. O'Connell

Foreword by
Elizabeth A. Johnson

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Rebecca Berru Davis

Picturing Paradise

Imagination, Beauty, and Women's Lives in a Peruvian Shantytown

La vida en Pamplona Alta es muy dura. Life in Pamplona Alta is very difficult. That is what Antonia told me as she stitched her *cuadro* with her three-year-old wiggling by her side (fig. 1). Antonia is one of many displaced Peruvian women who make and sell appliquéd and embroidered fabric pictures called *cuadros* to help support their families. She does this in Pamplona Alta, one of the poorest shantytowns located on the perimeter of Lima, the capital city of Peru. A shantytown might seem an unlikely place to encounter beauty, yet each day women like Antonia are creating imaginative and ingenious works of art. With bits of brightly colored fabric, they meticulously stitch by hand pictures reflecting distilled memories, present realities, and images of a world they would choose to shape.

Shantytowns, abundant in densely populated urban centers around the globe, are inhabited by the forgotten poor, and it is often women, like Antonia, who "get lost" and forgotten in this universe.[1] Many of those

1. This reference is taken from Jon Sobrino, "The Kingdom of God and the Theological Dimension of the Poor," in *Who Do You Say I Am?*, ed. J. Cavadini and L. Holt (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2004), 131. Sobrino states, "The poor continue to be a concrete reality that the Church and theology cannot seem to figure out how to handle adequately. To put it thus, they are understood as a part of the human universe, but they 'get lost' in this universe."

Figure 1. Antonia Quispe Carapi creating a *cuadro*. Photo courtesy of Dr. Rebecca Berru Davis.

who live in Pamplona Alta were initially dislocated from their homes in the interior during the terrorism beginning in the 1980s.[2] Caught between the militia of the right-wing government and the guerilla tactics of the left-wing Shining Path, these *desplazados* or displaced people were often witnesses to brutal violence or targets of terrorist aggression. Seeking a safe haven and in search of better economic opportunities, they made their way to Lima. Claiming small parcels of land as squatters, they created makeshift communities known as *pueblos jóvenes* (young towns). They are what Jon Sobrino names as the "victims" of economic and political instability and oppression.[3] Today they are typical of the poor majorities that continue to exist throughout Latin America, constructing temporary shelters from reed matting, plywood, or whatever materials they can find, with the hope of rebuilding their homes, *ladrillo por ladrillo* (brick-by-brick), one story at a time, with more permanent materials.

My first visit to Pamplona Alta was in 2006 as an art historian. My initial intention was to carry out a systematic study of the *cuadros*: document the process, consider the work within a tradition of textile and fabric art, and interview the women artists. Overwhelmed by the austerity of life in the *pueblos jóvenes*, particularly in contrast to the brilliant colors and picturesque scenes depicted in the women's art, the focus of my research began to take a different shape. New questions emerged. What are the sources of these images? What internal and spiritual resources are the women drawing from in order to create this work? How is it that beauty persists in such challenging conditions? With subsequent opportunities to return to Pamplona Alta, I continue to grapple with these and other questions. Motivated by a fundamental interest in exploring the role art and artistic activity plays in the lives of ordinary women I began to consider how art created by women living on the margins of society reveals religious and theological understandings. Rooted in the women's

2. The extent of the effects of this period of terrorism is still being determined. Among sources that document this period: Olga González-Casañeda, "Unveiling Secrets of War in the Peruvian Andes" (PhD diss., Teacher's College, Columbia University, 2006); Robin Kirk, *The Monkey's Paw: New Chronicles from Peru* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); David Scott Palmer, ed., *Shining Path of Peru* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); and Deborah Poole and Gerardo Rénique, *Peru: Time of Fear* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1992).

3. Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 80–81. Sobrino identifies both the economic poor as "those who live bent (*anawim*) under the weight of a burden" and the sociological poor as those marginalized and denied the minimum of dignity.

theological imagination and made explicit in their art is their vision of a just and hopeful world.

This essay draws attention to the creative work of women like Antonia, who live on the periphery of society. I introduce you, the reader, to the women and the *cuadros* they create. I consider their images as personal and collective narratives of displacement and survival but also as expressions of resilience and hope. Finally, I explore spaces where women, like Antonia, often deemed silent and invisible, are able to tell their stories and assert their visions of a paradise they envision. I present the art of these women as evidence of liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's contention that if the kingdom of God is Good News, its recipients, the poor, will fundamentally help in clarifying its content.[4]

In this essay, I employ ethnography, a methodology that serves to keep me both alert and humble as I explore questions related to art and theology in a Peruvian shantytown. I turn to ethnography because I am inspired by Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz's call for a theological method that seeks to understand the lived experiences of Latina women.[5] This method positions me as one who accompanies the women throughout their daily tasks. It keeps me attentive to generative themes that emerge in conversation and in art.[6] And in the process I become not merely observer but also "witness" in a theological sense to their struggles and joys, their wisdom and eloquence.[7] At the same time, as outsider, I am always conscious of the thorny issues related to power, subjectivity, relationship, and voice. Although ethnography is disposed to the

4. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 79.

5. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). In chapter 3, Isasi-Díaz outlines "ethnomethodology," a strategy for understanding and the procedures she employs in shaping a *mujerista* theology. Other books by Isasi-Díaz that address this methodology include *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First* Century (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), and *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

6. Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha*, 70. Isasi-Díaz explains, "The purpose in doing 'translations' for *mujerista* theology is to discover the themes that are important to the women, the ones about which they feel the strongest, which move them, which motivate them. In *mujerista* theology we refer to these themes as generative words. They emerge for the world of Hispanic Women and express the situations they have to grapple with as well as their understanding of themselves in those situations. These generative words or themes are not only those 'with existential meaning, and, therefore, with greatest emotional content, but they are also typical of the people.'"

7. I thank Dr. Joanne Doi for this insight. Doi develops this notion of "witness" in a theological sense as opposed to participant/observer in her dissertation "Bridge to Compassion: Theological Pilgrimage to Tule Lake and Manzanar" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 2007), 23–27.

complexities, confusions, and unexpected turns of human relationships, creating at times what James Clifford calls "lucid uncertainty,"[8] I find it useful in that it begins with the lived realities of these women. Through shared experiences and dialogical processes it attempts to get at meaning and bring to light the women's sensibilities, understandings, and perceptions. It assumes that their experiences and wisdom warrant attention and that knowledge is not limited solely to experts in the academy.

This project also places emphasis on art as visual language, as it attempts to expand the notion of discourse to include visual text. It honors what some might dismiss as tourist art or popular art.[9] As an artist familiar with art making, I am attentive to the women's creative use of materials and skillful techniques, evidence of their fluency with a visual language they have masterfully devised. Like many resourceful women, they give new life to recycled remnants in inventive and effectual ways. As an art historian, I have an interest in how their art is situated within a cultural and historical trajectory. Indeed, women throughout the world who experience trauma, often turn to cloth to tell their stories, as evidenced by Hmong refugees. Their *pan dau* or "Flower Cloth" became story cloth, recording the war and resettlement experiences of the Hmong people.[10] Or as in the "Memory Cloth" that documents what South African women witnessed during apartheid.[11] It was the Chilean *arpilleras*, created by women with the intention of conveying their realities and at the same time critiquing the oppressive Pinochet regime during the 1970s, that became the inspiration for the *cuadros*.[12]

For Latin American women, textiles are a traditional form of creative activity, and the making and embellishing of cloth is an avenue for demonstrating skill and communicating information.[13] Art historian Janet Catherine Berlo, in her essay "Beyond Bricolage: Women and Aesthetic Strategies in Latin American Textiles," explains that "[t]extiles are eloquent texts, encoding history, change, appropriation, oppression and endurance, as well as personal and cultural creative visions. For indigenous Latin Americans, especially women, cloth has been an alternative discourse."[14]

As a theologian, I also attend to art as artifacts or objects that can, like textual material, reveal a community's belief system or an individual's personal understanding of faith and hope. Indeed, art is the manifestation of our visual imagination at work in the world. It is the direct expression of the gift of creation we share with the divine. Thus, art's capacity to enlighten is not solely the work of the art historian to discover. For the theologian, the work of art holds potential for disclosing and discerning new understandings about God, about our relationship with God, and about each other. With this in mind, an appreciation for art understood in its broadest scope, both noted and nameless works, warrants attention.

8. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13.

9. Sources that explore the value and significance of tourist art and popular art include Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, eds., *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); H. H. Nelson Graburn, ed., *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976); Walter Morris, *Handmade Money: Latin American Artisans in the Marketplace* (Washington, DC: Organization of American States, 1996); William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).

10. See *Hmong Art: Tradition and Change* (Sheboygan, WI: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1986); and Guy Brett, *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1987).

11. See Carol Becker, "Amazwi Abesifazone (Voices of Women)" *Art Journal* 63, no. 4 (2004): 117–34; or "Create Africa South" (CAS) http://www.cas.org.za/projects/voices.htm for more information on South African Memory Cloth.

12. Key sources for the history of the Chilean *arpilleras* include Marjorie Agosín's books: *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras, Chilean Women and Pinochet Dictatorship* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1987), and *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Life: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008). Chapter 1, "All This We Have Seen," in Brett, *Through Our Own Eyes* documents the story of the Chilean *arpilleras.*

Barbara Cervenka, *Cuadros: Textile Pictures from the Pamplona Alta* (exhibit brochure), and Gaby Franger, *Arpilleras, cuadros que hablan: vida cotidaiano y organización de mujeres* (Lima, Peru: Movimiento Manuela Ramos, 1988), discuss the introduction of Chilean *arpilleras* into the shantytown of Pamplona Alta by a German schoolteacher, Roswitha Lopez, and their subsequent transformation by the Peruvian women.

13. Andrea M. Heckman, *Woven Stories: Andean Textiles and Rituals* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003); Betty La Duke, *Compañera: Women, Art, and Social Change in Latin America* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1985); Rebecca Stone-Miller, *To Weave for the Sun: Ancient Andean Textiles in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992); Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).

14. Janet Catherine Berlo, "Beyond Bricolage: Women and Aesthetic Strategies in Latin American Textiles," in *Textile Traditions of MesoAmerica and the Andes: An Anthology*, ed. Margot Blum Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo, and Edward B. Dwyer (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991), 439.

Pamplona Alta

In shantytowns like Pamplona Alta, women like Antonia often turn to other women for support and to "make do." Common kitchens are formed and art cooperatives are organized as collaborative efforts to do so make survival feasible. The two cooperatives I became acquainted with, *Compacto Humano* ("Human Compact" established in the 1980s) and the more recently formed *Manos Ancashinas* (Hands from Ancash),[15] provide steady work and dependable income to about thirty women from ages sixteen to sixty-six. The women gather together daily to stitch *cuadros* that are then sold in tourist markets either locally or abroad.

Driven by subsistence, their art is also a means of self-expression: the stitching together of meaningful narratives.[16] The *cuadros* are visual stories about the quotidian rhythms of life these women once knew. Lush landscapes include exquisite details such as specific flowers, animals, and birds that are essential features of an Andean world.[17] *Lo cotidiano* (daily life) in the marketplace and in the countryside are common themes (fig. 2). Religious events and festivals depict regional dress, dance, and food preparation and record the continuity of traditions that are still celebrated today in their home villages. Their *cuadros* also tell stories of significant events that occurred, such as the phenomenon of El Niño, the border dispute between Ecuador and Peru, and the violence and terrorism that occurred in Ayacucho.[18]

15. Ancash is a province in northern Peru where the women in this group originally came from.

16. Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 19. Sheldrake, a theologian, writes that "without stories we are trapped in the immediacy of the present" (19). Jeanette Rodriguez, *Stories We Live, Cuentos Que Vivimos: Hispanic Women's Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 6. Rodriguez, a Latina theologian, speaks about the power of stories to connect us with the past, help us to understand the present, and offer hope for the future.

17. Latin American art historian Teresa Gisbert explores pre-Hispanic Andean imagery in her book *Iconografía y mitos indígenas en el arte*, 4th ed. (La Paz, Bolivia: Editorial Gisbert y CIA, 2008), 17–73. Also see Teresa Gisbert, *El paraiso de los pájaros parrlantes: la imagen del otro en la cultura andina* (La Paz, Bolivia: Universidad Nuestra Señora de La Paz, 1999).

18. Among the estimated sixty-nine thousand victims of the terrorist activities between 1980 and 2000, twenty-three thousand are known to be from Ayacucho. Sources for these statistics were recorded from a presentation by Cecilia Tovar, staff member at the Instituto Bartolome de las Casas, in a lecture titled "Los años de violencia y sus secuelas," on June 3, 2009, Lima, Peru. For further information on the results of terrorist activity in Peru between 1980 and 2000, see *Informe Final de la Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* (Lima: Instituto de Decocracia y Derechos Humanos de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2008), 3.

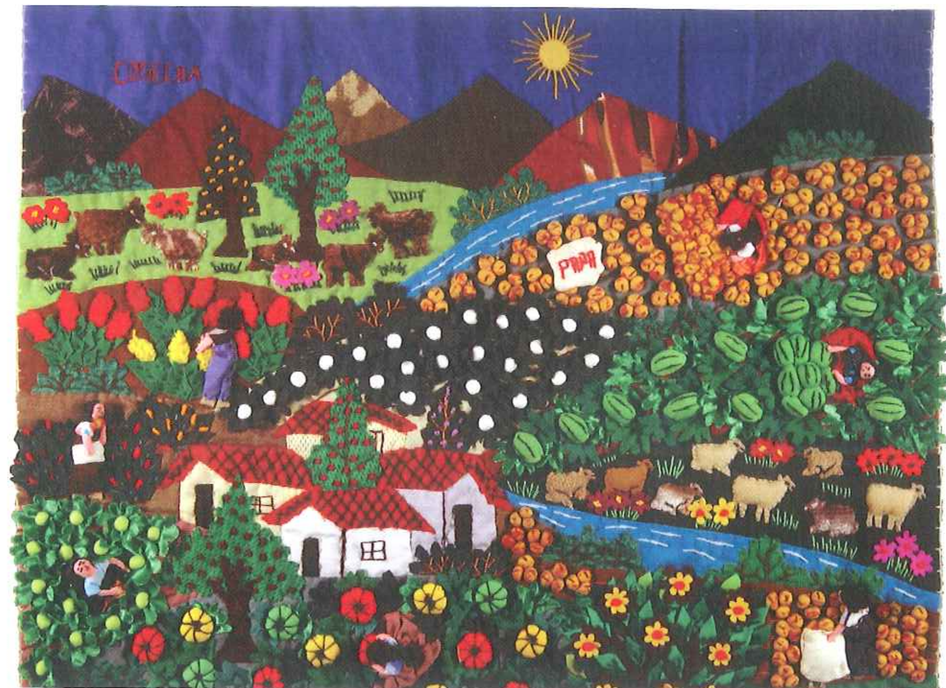

Figure 2. Betty Rojas, *Cosecha (Harvest)*, n.d., 17" x 19". Photo courtesy of Dr. Rebecca Berru Davis.

In all of these images the women depict themselves as active agents, whether leading a campaign for milk for their children, a teachers' strike, or a march for peace. Their fabric canvases assert a version of the story not always included in the "official record." In the *cuadros*, like *Violence in the Pueblo*, the whimsical quality of the little figures and the bright, cheerful palette juxtaposed against the disconcerting depictions of protest and strife create an unexpected dissonance. Indeed, the subtle strength of the *cuadros* lies in the images and themes with multivalent meanings that create complexity and gravity under the guise of simplicity and charm.[19]

Spiral of Life is an extraordinarily large *cuadro*, measuring seventy-six inches by seventy-eight inches. It was created by Noris Vásquez

19. An examination of the notion of "hidden transcripts" employed by subordinate groups and the "arts of public disguise" can be found in James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1990). In the introduction of *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1996), author Rozika Parker argues for a reexamination of the multiple meanings of women's textile traditions.

Liñares and is her story but is also representative of the stories of the many women who have migrated from the countryside to the city (fig. 3). In the center is a little house in which, seen through the window, a baby girl is born. As the young girl grows, she is depicted helping the family with household and outdoor tasks. Life in her village centers around religious festivals and growing cycles until an avalanche of rocks destroys their home and the family decides to move to Lima. Unable to find a place to live, the family constructs a makeshift hut of straw mats on claimed land. The family sells vegetables at a market and the young girl works as a maid in the house of a well-to-do family in order to make ends meet. She becomes pregnant by the son of the family and is left to look for work elsewhere. She finally finds support among women,

Figure 3. Noris Vásquez Liñares, *Spiral of Life*, 76" x 78". (Collection: Con Vida: Popular Arts of America).

working in a cooperative located in the *pueblos jóvenes*. The spiral ends with the young woman making *cuadros* together with other women.[20] The narrative told in this *cuadro* is epic in that it represents both calamities and challenges endured by many women in the shantytown.

Whether the work is large or small, individually or collaboratively carried out, the physical act of stitching these stories becomes important memory work whereby the women artists make sense of events inwardly and outwardly.[21] Thus, the making of *cuadros* provides a means for the women to stay linked to a vanished past and to help process the realities of the present.

Stitching Theology

As I witnessed this, the idea for a special project emerged. With funds from a grant I received set aside to commission some work from them, I proposed a task that I knew could be completed within a short time without disrupting the pattern of their daily operation. I asked the women to each create a small *cuadro* (ten inches by ten inches) illustrating their hopes and dreams. I purposely framed the task to be as open-ended as possible and left it to the women to visually express their ideas. The resulting *cuadros* revealed very personal wishes as well as universal aspirations.

There were dreams of permanent homes with roofs, employment opportunities for themselves or their family members. They envisioned living in a garden or traveling with their families to places they had never been before. They created sanctuaries where their children could play without fear of violence or environmental contamination.

For some women their dreams were as uniquely defined as anticipating the birth of another child. Emma explained:

> In this garden of many flowers, my husband and I are embracing as we await the arrival of our second baby. Here you can see my little

20. This description is drawn from Noris Vásquez Liñares's explanation of her work and documented in the exhibition brochure by Barbara Cervenka, *Cuadros: Textile Pictures from the Pamplona Alta*.

21. James Young, "Living with the Fabric Arts of Memory," in *The Weavings of War: The Story of War Textiles*, September 6–October 5, 1997 (New York: The Puffin Foundation, 2005), 31. See also Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds., *Memory, Identity, and Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), for a discussion of the significance of narrative (and, in this case, visual story) in preserving memory, shaping identity, and forming community.

> daughter playing with a ball. My brother Javier, who I love like a son, because I have known him since he was a baby, is swimming in the river with an inner tube. Notice the butterflies fluttering about and my well-built two-story house. This is my dream.

Mirtha's hope was for the creation of a world where all life is protected (fig. 4):

> In this *cuadro* I depict a dream that I have always hoped for. . . . In order to make the world better, we must preserve sea life so that the whales, dolphins, sea wolfs, and fish do not become extinct. We must protect and care for all the animals and plants that are running the danger of extinction.

Lucy's concern was for a place where all persons, regardless of race or social status, live together in peace:

> This *cuadro* depicts a dream that may only come true if there is a world without wars. This would be a world like Paradise. My dream is to have people of different classes and different races live together. In this *cuadro* there are people of all colors and animals of all kinds. If there weren't wars, racism, and violence we could live together with people from different countries. We would be able to live together with our animals, because animals represent everything that is beautiful in the world. The tree that I have made here represents heaven on earth. We are all together and sharing.

Julia described her dream:

> My dream is to travel—to leave my house with my husband and to help people in need. Here we are passing through Puna and entering the jungle when we encounter a group of natives. Our journey continues in a boat throughout the world.
>
> Thank you, she said, for the opportunity to share my dream even though it may seem impossible. I had never thought of sharing my dreams with anyone, because no one ever asked us about our dreams.

Always self-conscious of my position as benevolent outsider with resources to leave the shantytowns at will, Julia's unexpected words of appreciation served to allay my hesitations about intruding in the women's lives. Moreover, I realized that, for Julia, the project provided her and the others an opportunity to make manifest their hopeful visions—dreams that would otherwise remain imperceptible to others.

Figure 4. Mirtha Aliaga, *Hopes and Dreams*, 2006, 10" x 10". Photo courtesy of Hernán L. Navarette.

The women's *cuadros* were evidence of what Sobrino claims as the graced insights of the poor. They were, in fact, "focused expressions of a utopian vision where there can be life, justice, fraternity and dignity in a world in which history seems to render them impossible": a world that is good, that is both imminent and eschatological—*here* and *not yet*.[22]

In January 2007, I returned to Pamplona Alta. Again I involved the women in a project, but not without first spending time with them at their sewing tables. The idea for a new theme emerged as I learned more about their daily lives. Each day they leave their makeshift homes and make their way down to the workshop. Some of the women arrive with babies wrapped tightly onto their backs in blankets or with toddlers in tow. All of them appear with plastic sacks stuffed with partially completed *cuadros*; projects that were worked on in their spare time at home. This was their daily routine. I wondered how they persevered, so I asked them to draw from a past event or their present reality to illustrate what inspired or motivated them to carry on each day.

They *created* narratives called *La Vida Diaria* (Daily Life) or *Mi Caminar* (My Path). Their images reflected that inspiration, and motivation was found in the *compañerismo* (companionship) they experienced with their families, their friends, and the other women in the workshop. They stressed the meaning of their work as something that directly benefits their children. In this project, the women's art reflects what Latin American theologian Ivonne Gebara names as vital centers and quotidian rhythms of human existence, those places where women's theological expression always starts: family and community.[23]

Their notion of *convivencia* (social living together), highlighted in Julia's *cuadro*, includes expressing gratitude for blessings received, an imperative and generative cycle in their lives (fig. 5). Julia explains:

> In this *cuadro* I tell a very beautiful story that took place in December in my hometown village in Ancash. I prepared a *chocolatada*. The car is arriving at the village. You can see that everyone is receiving gifts. In front of the house I am making the *chocolatada*. There is a fig tree, flowers, and animals and cows. There is also a horse carrying a load to my village. My mother and brother are helping.

22. Sobrino, "The Kingdom of God and the Theological Dimension of the Poor," 120–21.

23. Ivone Gebara "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," in *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America*, ed. Elsa Tamez (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 45.

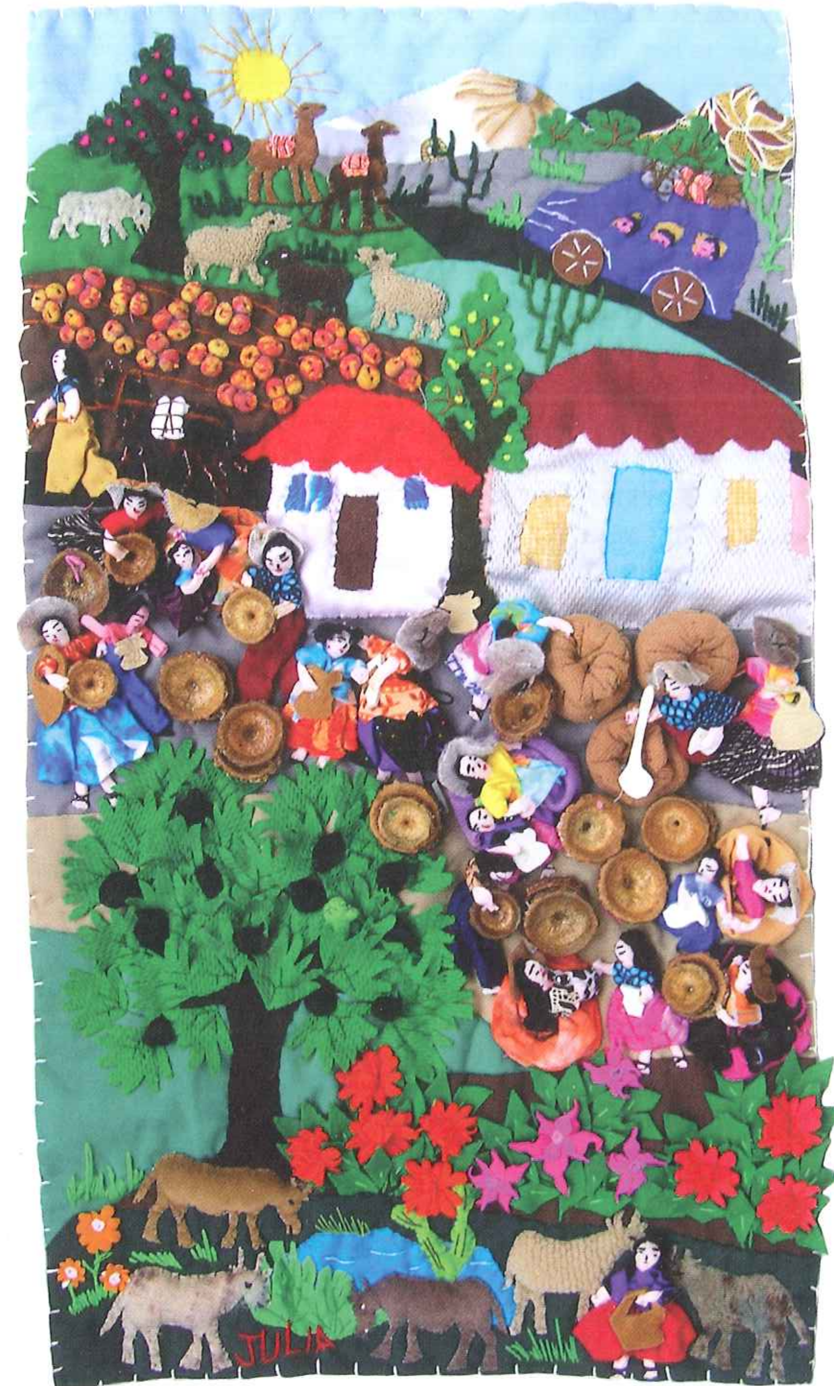

Figure 5. Juliana Liñan Retuerto, *La Chocolatada*, 2007, 10" x 18". Photo courtesy of Hernán L. Navarette.

In Julia's *cuadro*, titled *La Chocolatada*, she tells a "beautiful story" of returning to her village, and she does this annually during the Christmas season, to distribute hot chocolate and gifts to family members and friends—never forgetting her home and always seeking some way to give back to her community. In this account of her annual return to her village, a bold image of a fig tree dominates in the lower register. While I was eager to ascribe some iconographic, even biblical, interpretation to the motif, I held back and asked Julia to tell me about the tree. She explained that, as her mother told her, the fig tree is one of the few trees that survive, even under the harsh Peruvian conditions, and represents *la mujer luchando* (the fighting woman). Julia's interpretation was like visual poetry where, as Gebara asserts, one finds the deepest meaning and mystery expressed.[24]

In July 2008 I returned to Peru once more and after time spent with the women at their sewing tables, in their homes, and among parishioners at the neighborhood church, a theme emerged for their commissioned work: *"Quién soy yo?"* (*Who Am I?*). While the first project elicited the women's hopes and dreams, the second called forth their inspirations and motivations; this third project was intended to encourage them to think about themselves as individuals. The themes that surfaced challenged the paradigm of identity I was familiar with, one that highly values self-reliance, independence, and individualism. Instead, the women's *cuadros* reflect their understanding of themselves in relationship to and interconnected with one another.

Sixty-six-year-old Rosa, who depicted herself working in a *comedor* (soup kitchen), explained:

> I am a person who always saw what was needed in my home. I have also always been concerned about the needs of those persons with few economic resources. For this reason, I promised to work in a community kitchen so that I would be able to help many families. I have never regretted doing this even as I age.

Cuadros like Rosa's confirm that the women's identities are reciprocally and meaningfully linked with identities and the concerns of others (fig. 6).

For me, the art created by the women reveals the deeper meaning of joy and abundance and makes me aware of our shared utopian dreams. Their art recalls for me that our journey toward God is not as isolated individuals but as an entire community. Despite the severity of their

24. Ibid., 45.

grey and barren surroundings, these women bring forth images of the world as garden. Clearly, they are picturing paradise.

The women's experiences of displacement and survival are depicted in their *cuadros* as narratives that serve to document the past and present while their visions of a just world reveal their resilience and hope. The integrity and persistence they demonstrate in carrying out this creative activity despite the experiences they endure lends credence to their struggles for full humanity, healing, wholeness, and liberation.[25]

The content of their art and its aesthetic sensibility is informed by their understanding and experience of creation. What gives them life

25. Elizabeth Tapia as cited in Chung Hyun Kung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 100.

Figure 6. Rosa Fernandez, *¿Quien soy yo?*, 2008. 10" x 10". Photo courtesy of Dr. Rebecca Berru Davis.

and energy is apparent. Their creative work sustains them and gives them power to cope with adversity. Alejandro García-Rivera says, "Art's theological dimension has its origin in God's own art, the natural beauty of Creation. Indeed, the human participates in that natural beauty by virtue of being one of God's creatures."[26] A feminist aesthetic informed by the intimate experience of creation and creating keeps us connected with God's creative activity in the world. The women artists of Pamplona Alta invite us to look and see again. Those of us who live comfortable lives can become inured to really looking and then can fail to truly see and comprehend. The women remind us that in our capacity to imagine worlds of human flourishing, we take an important step toward justice. To conceive of such worlds, the women recognize and visually name the necessary components. We are reminded through their art that a world bound together in right relationship is a just world when we care for creation, attend to each other, choose life, and express gratitude. Indeed, their images, appreciated as visual theology, reflect their conviction that God continues to act graciously in the world and in grace-filled ways through us.

Despite the challenges they have endured, a profound optimism is evident among the women of Pamplona Alta who stitch together images of paradise in an environment that is far from idyllic. Their *cuadros* underscore the deeper meanings of joy and abundance and make us attentive to our shared utopian dreams. They remind us that we make the journey toward God not as isolated individuals but as an entire community reveling in camaraderie, creation, and color.[27]

La vida es muy dura en Pamplona Alta, but the women's articulate voices are testimony, and their creativity is evidence of the paradise they so clearly envision—and, we with them, strive for.

26. Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 5.

27. Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 72.