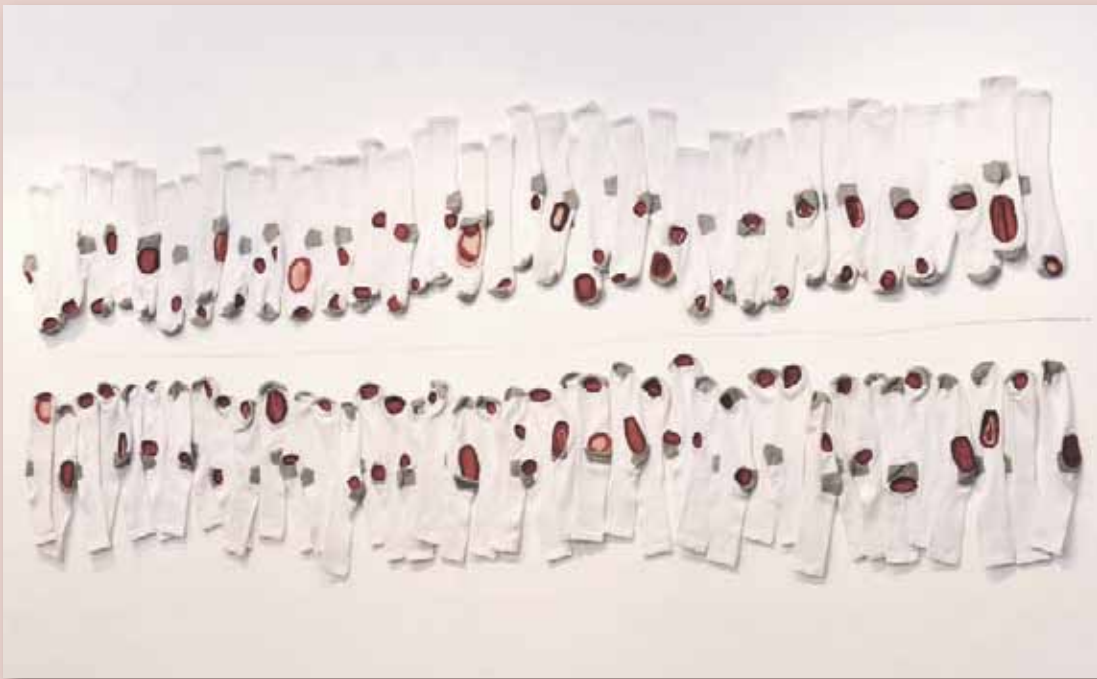


Migration and Art in *San Francisco Tanivet*

Adriana Fournier Uriegas*



“I’m going to go; I’m going to go to the United States. To see my aunts and uncles and cousins, to see what it’s like, to travel; to work, to earn dollars. It’s, like, here you can’t earn much money because people don’t pay enough. That’s why.”

“Yes, I want to go to the United States when I turn 16 to help out my parents with money.”

These are children from San Francisco Tanivet speaking in a documentary produced by Ángel Jara Taboada and Marietta Bernstroff about the community’s history. Tanivet, as the locals call it, is 40 minutes from the city of Oaxaca and is part of the Tlacolula de Matamoros district.

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Photos courtesy of Marietta Bernstroff.

Migration has been a constant for San Francisco Tanivet inhabitants. This age-old process, as complex as society itself, is understood as the spatial displacement of the population. A migrant is a person who changes his or her habitual residence crossing geographical and political-administrative boundaries. However, this does not give a picture of the undoubted difficulty of the whole process. In today's world, the reasons behind the mobility of human beings have changed. In the past, individuals or groups migrated to expand trade or colonize new territories. Now, the main reason is to satisfy basic and employment needs. From the beginning of the last century, Mexico has been one of the world's biggest exporters of migrants, who have impacted the culture and life of their destinations, mainly the United States.

The lack of prospects for the future, the few well-paying job opportunities, the deficient educational system, and the idea that nothing good could come to Tanivet pushed the community's young people to leave. Spurred by hope and the aspiration of overcoming the dissatisfaction that affects their personal lives and the town's collective existence, it is mostly young men who have



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left their homes to venture out on the risky migratory road that would take them to the U.S. Most of those who leave the community opt for California. The dangers of crossing our country's northern border are well known. Migrants have to cross the desert and find a way to achieve the "American Dream." The crossings their parents have taken, whether through Tijuana or El Paso, are repeated by their children. The dissatisfaction that migrating has brought their fathers, mothers, and children is a social obstacle for the families' economic and personal development in the community. That is why the women of Tanivet saw no possibility of growing in the future.

In the past, San Francisco Tanivet was a hacienda where people brought in from other towns in Oaxaca and the rest of the country worked. They mainly grew corn and garbanzo beans or chick peas, but they could not support their families on the pay. So, the men began to emigrate to the North, leaving the women to worry, without enough mon-

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ey or job opportunities. They have lived this way for several decades. This community, in contrast with many others in Oaxaca, does not have any particular tradition or popular festivities or craft that makes them stand out. Some of the inhabitants say, “The whole community has family in the United States, and, if they don’t, they would like to.” Many of those who leave cannot come back to Mexico because they do not have the necessary documents to go and come freely. The ones who return to Tanivet will probably never be able to go back to the United States again. One of the women interviewed for the documentary mentioned above talks about how the town has changed since the young people started leaving: “Before, the town looked sadder, with houses made out of cane and reeds, out of cardboard sheeting.” Undoubtedly, remittances help a community with high migration economically, but the issue of the morale of the people who live there cannot be ignored. The departure of husbands and children creates anxiety due to the prolonged silence, the uncertainty about where they are, and the fear about the enormous risks they run. None of these are feelings that remittances can easily remedy.

In 2010, the inhabitants of San Francisco Tanivet began an art project lead by curator Marietta Bernstroff, a project that would not only raise family incomes, but also people’s spirits. After several talks with the women of Tanivet, it was decided that by using patchwork, embroidery, and the liberating exercise of creating art, the community could start to develop and then begin to prosper. They had no financial support from the government; but, a network of artists and educators was assembled who began to visit the community to share their skills with the women. The artists Bernstroff brought in alternated to avoid possible biases about how the community should represent their stories, which they wanted to be expressed through the eyes and memory of each woman, regardless of the guest artists’ preconceived ideas. The project also receives donations from women in the city of Oaxaca and the United States. From the start, this initiative has aimed to help the residents use art as therapy to explore skills and forms of expression, in addition to the fact that the embroidery they produced could be sold on the market. The project underlines the importance of the community’s history; it reinforces its identity and renews its spirits. Creating

a space for recreation in the community, Marietta Bernstroff and the women agree that it is important to have a place to come back to, where there are both income and better opportunities. They agree that a space must be created that offers skills that will be useful in Mexico or, if necessary, abroad.

The families, husbands, and the “Embroidery Ants” themselves, as Tanivet’s women embroiderers are called, now have to deal with feelings of pride, surprise, and valuing themselves both artistically and personally. They use a patchwork technique, piecing together remnants of cloth, and appliqué, which consists of placing figures made of different pieces of cloth on another piece of cloth or object. They make long paintings whose colors are made of recycled cloth. They discovered talent where they thought there was none and numerous ways forward through art.

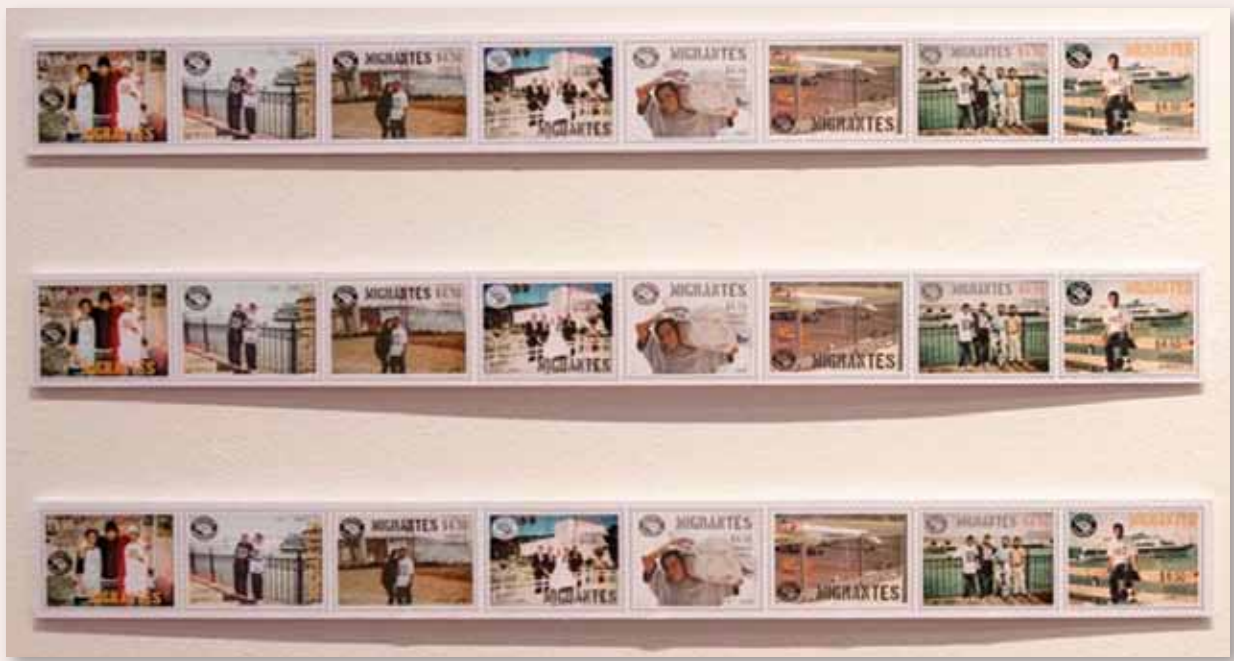
In February of this year, Mexico City’s Folk Art Museum inaugurated the exhibit “New Codex: Oaxaca, Migration and Cultural Memory,” with the participation of 43 artists together with the San Francisco Tanivet community and others that have

also experienced migration. The exhibition included textiles, photographs, knitting, engravings, and letters that could all be used to reconstruct and interpret the experience of migration that communities like Tanivet have had. Together with the Oaxacan artists, works were shown that had used different techniques like textiles, painting, gourds, videos, and stenciling. Among the pieces are *Traces*, by Jannis Huerta, socks embroidered with red patches representing the exhausting road the migrants travel; *Routes of Absence*, by Ana Hernández, an embroidered map that shows the Tehuantepec Isthmus with the routes traveled and the connecting points between departures and destinations; and *American Dream* by José Cruz, an engraving on a gourd from Pinotepa de Don Luis, that involves a failed experience of migrating to the United States. The artists’ memory is what allows them to understand and take pride in their cultural memory, achieved through contemporary artistic language.

Today, the same exhibition is on display at the Social and Public Art Resource Center in Los Angeles, California.¹ The “New Codex” exhibition chal-

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lenged political limits, not only because it shares local work internationally, but also because it meant getting visas for two Tanivet embroiderers, Juana and Leo, who had not seen their children for about 10 years. So, an emotional reunion was held where happiness was the predominant note. The exhibition has been so well received that it may be extended for several more months; meanwhile, the women embroiderers are preparing another exhibition where they will present a mural for Oaxaca's Textile Museum.

Marietta Bernstroff has been working with the women from Tanivet through embroidery for a little over six years. In 2006, she also founded with them MAMAZ, the abbreviation from the Spanish for Women Artists and Corn, where they worked with participants from Mexico, Cuba, and the United States. This project began after the multinational company Monsanto brought in its genetically modified seeds. The project represents women's relationship to the countryside through embroidery, using materials accessible to them, like corn or flour sacks and sheets. With "New Codex: Oaxaca, Mi-

gration and Cultural Memory," these women have reconstructed their history with needles and have woven their experience into cloth.

The Tanivet embroiderers now have skills that they had not known about before, with a strength that allows them to produce and express themselves; they are disposed to create and make art. The women of Tanivet represent in their embroidery the difficulties they have had to undergo as their family members leave; they portray a life of memories, absence, and desolation.

Marietta Bernstroff's project is contemporary and conceptual, but with a social approach. She tells us that, from this experience she has learned the importance of "doing art for art's sake, of people telling their stories, and that art is not merely conceptual." She also notes that we must understand the arts in their different forms. For her, it is very important that there be no dividing line between art and crafts, that the value of art be understood whether it comes from indigenous communities or urban artists. The issue is not whether this is



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contemporary art or not, but the lack of opportunities to explore. Many communities like Tanivet do not have art workshops or support to improve their schools. They have to make utilitarian art that they can sell to the tourists, and, if that does not work, then they migrate to pursue the “American Dream.” Bernstroff says about the contemporary art she works with that it is an expression of the moment, the day, but with another language: “If history is understood through art, through these women, these artists, then you can understand the problem of migration.”

Using these principles, she maintains the idea of letting the embroiderers explore all the artistic possibilities. She knows they do not consider themselves artisans because they do not have that ancient cultural tradition, and the women of Tanivet have become the artists they are today by exploring the use of fabric and colors in their cloth canvases. For Marietta, “to speak of contemporary visual artistic language is to speak of the Embroidery Ants of Tanivet.”

The works of the women of Tanivet go beyond the beauty of artistic expression. Their work transcends borders, literally and metaphorically; not only has their art crossed to the United States, but it has also crossed over the line of hopelessness to find a reason for pride reflected in each of their embroideries. San Francisco Tanivet has gone through the process of migration and, prompted by it, the community, together with Marietta Bernstroff, has lifted itself up, reminding us of the importance of cultural identity. Tanivet’s “ants” emanate dignity and leave in their wake a transcendent lesson charged with beauty, motivation, and effort. **MM**

EDITOR'S NOTE

English composer and pianist Michael Nyman participates in the exhibit with a documentary and a series of letters from his personal collection written by an immigrant and his family between 1917 and 1943, which reflect the day-to-day difficulties experienced in the migratory process.