

Here, and  
No Further:  
Material  
Rhetoric in  
*Loom with  
Textile*

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KIRA DOMINGUEZ HULTGREN

In *Loom with Textile*, Juanita (Asdzáá Tł'ogi, Navajo, 1845–1910) pledges her protest to the flag (fig. 1).<sup>1.2.3.4</sup> Woven with the loom bars and yarn bundles still in place, this U.S. flag is in the midst of construction.

Yet it is also a finished flag unnecessarily under construction; the upper half of the weaving features thirteen red and white alternating stripes with a completed canton. By leaving the flag on the loom, Juanita exposes how the symbol of the U.S. nation is more than an image. As a loom, the flag becomes a construction tied to a machine that operates to bury the nations and people with whom it comes in contact.

Yet in *Loom with Textile*, Juanita is its operator. Weaving in the midst of the signing of the Bosque Redondo treaty in 1868, and a newly created Navajo reservation, Juanita (de)constructs the U.S. flag and her role as a Navajo weaver. Is she complicit in or compelled to move through this construction of U.S. nation building and colonialism? A pair of horizontal sticks, cleaving the unwoven warp below the flag, act to visually divide this work (fig. 2). As tools used to weave *Loom with Textile*, they show Juanita's movement through the machine of the weaving. Termed a shed rod and heddle rod, these tools reveal how the warp strands opened and closed, how Juanita chose to weave, and when she chose to stop. Leaving loose yarn bundles embedded in the warp below these rods, Juanita arrests the motion of weaving in the midst of weaving. Through these tools that transform the U.S. flag into a loom, Juanita operates the sign and machine of nation building, even as she refuses them; "I weave here and no further."

In this essay, I read Juanita's operation of the loom as a material rhetorical strategy that ruptures paradigms of ongoing U.S.



**Figure 1:** Juanita (Asdzáá Tł'ogí), Diné (Navajo), *Loom with Textile*, 1874. Wool yarn, wooden rods, 35.5 × 17.8 in. Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, E16494-0.

Woven with the loom bars on either end, the heddle and shed rods in the middle, and yarn bundles still in place, this U.S. flag is in the midst of construction.



**Figure 2:** Juanita (Asdzáá Tʼogí), Diné (Navajo), *Loom with Textile* (detail), 1874. Wool yarn, wooden rods, 35.5 × 17.8 in. Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, E16494-0.

The heddle and shed rods cleave through the loose warp. From their orientation, we know this side faced away from Juanita as she wove.

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colonialism and racism. I begin with an explanation of material rhetoric and my methodology. Next, I analyze an 1875 photograph of Juanita and *Loom with Textile* in order to set up an argument that, through this work, Juanita not only operationalizes the U.S. flag, but also her performance of a Navajo weaver. Finally, I turn to *Loom with Textile* to read in Juanita's actions at the loom a narrative of and counter-narrative to U.S. colonialism.

This methodology for analyzing textiles—which sees Juanita's action of weaving, and her body's movement through the loom, as material rhetorical strategies that disrupt the visual image woven on the surface of the textile—is one that I term *material rhetorical analysis*, a process theoretically grounded in *textility*. Coined by textile scholar and researcher Victoria Mitchell, *textility* investigates the ways in which textiles work within and move against visually

- 1 Juanita is also known as Asdzáá Tʼogí, meaning “Lady Weaver.” Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 5. I take my direction from Denetdale and use the name Juanita rather than Asdzáá Tʼogí.
- 2 I title Juanita's work in the Smithsonian's terms, since Juanita's work is a response to constructed narratives. “Loom with Textile,” National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian, last modified July 31, 2018, [https://www.si.edu/object/nmnhanthropology\\_8345504](https://www.si.edu/object/nmnhanthropology_8345504). My visual analysis is conducted through photographic documentation from the Smithsonian's online archive as well as a condition report: “Condition report, E16494-0,” Smithso-

nian National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology: Anthropology Conservation Laboratory, July 14, 2017.

- 3 “Navajo,” in lieu of “Diné,” is still the identity construction used by an English-speaking audience. My use of “Navajo” both positions me as external to the tribe and aligns me with the audience whom Juanita addressed in *Loom with Textile*.
- 4 *Loom with Textile* recently rose again to national attention, thanks to the work of Indigenous studies scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale. In February 2018, it was installed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC.

based knowledge systems (e.g., image and text).<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the Latin root *texere* (to weave), Mitchell investigates how texts are constructed through the motions associated with textile production, such as the weaving, joining, and stitching of available words or conceptual materials. Reading a text or a textile, therefore, necessitates looking through the visible sign (the words on the page, the image on the textile's surface) to the motions used to create the sign.

However, through Indigenous studies, with work being done by scholars Malea Powell, Kimberly Wieser, and Qwo-Li Driskill, among others, I read these motions of textile production as rhetoric. I follow Juanita's motions of weaving in *Loom with Textile* through my own embodied knowledge of weaving, kinesthetically passed to me through Mapuche-Argentine weaver Mary Coronado (as well as many other practitioners of material knowledge with whom I have had a relationship over the years). In other words, I am familiar in my body with the motion of weaving and use this familiarity to anticipate and trace Juanita's movement.<sup>6</sup> In Indigenous studies, performed embodied knowledges can be understood as material rhetoric, as a communication through the body moving with material. This kind of rhetoric is not neutral.

Indigenous studies scholar Qwo-Li Driskill argues in their writing that narratives produced through embodied material practice disrupt oppressive systems.<sup>7</sup> In Driskill's analysis of the making of doubleweave Cherokee baskets, knowledge is both gained and passed through the body. To engage rhetorically with another is to value another's body and the knowledge their body holds. To speak materially, then, is to address a body with value and affirm one's own material knowledge as valuable.<sup>8</sup> It is also to speak against

5 Victoria Mitchell, "Textiles, Text, and Techne," *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (New York: Berg Publishers, 2012), 5–13.

6 Textile curator and historian Jean-Paul LeClercq claims that textiles reveal themselves in the traces of their construction. Jean-Paul LeClercq and Rémi Labrusse, "Interview with Jean-Paul LeClercq by Rémi Labrusse," *Perspective*, 1 (June 2016): 61–74. Online version accessed: <http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/6674>; DOI: 10.4000/perspective.6674.

7 Qwo-Li Driskill, "Decolonial Skillshares: Indigenous Rhetorics as Radical Practice," *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics*, eds. Lisa King, Rose Cubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2014), 76.

8 *Ibid.*, 74–75.

9 Qwo-Li Driskill, *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and*

*Two-Spirit Memory* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 5.

10 Jennifer Nez Denetdale, "Remembering Our Grandmothers: Navajo Women and the Power of Oral Tradition," *Indigenous Peoples' Wisdom and Power: Affirming Our Knowledge through Narratives*, eds. Julian E. Kunnie and Nomalungelo I. Goduka (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 78–94.

11 Arny is described as the worst Indian Agent the Navajo encountered. Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*, 95.

12 Manderfield and Tucker, "An Invoice for the Centennial Exhibition," *The Daily New Mexican*, November 18, 1874, 1. From this newspaper article, it appears that *Loom with Textile* was a commissioned work for the centennial exhibition. Arny donated it to the Smithsonian when the delegation arrived in DC. Accession date: January 12, 1875. Smithsonian, "Loom with Textile."



**Figure 3:** Photo attributed to Charles M. Bell. *Portrait of Juanita in Native Dress; Blankets, Weaving Implements and Governor Army Nearby 1874.* National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. NAA INV 06396900.

Juanita, pictured left, performs the role of Navajo weaver. Loom with Textile appears to her left.

epistemologies that would assign value only by what is visibly signified.<sup>9</sup> Through a material rhetorical analysis, *Loom with Textile* is read as an address to a U.S. audience, in which Juanita both enacts and counters visual constructions of representation (the U.S. flag and her role as a Navajo weaver).

Serving as an English translator for the Navajo delegation, which includes her husband, Navajo leader Manuelito, Juanita goes to Washington, DC, in 1874 to affirm Navajo land rights.<sup>10</sup> Yet, from photographs, her role as translator is ambiguous. Rather, she is pictured performing the role of Navajo weaver set for her by federal government official W.F.M. Army (fig. 3). Army sought to inscribe the Navajo not as warriors to be feared, but as weavers of rugs and blankets, and as an economic boon of the American territories.<sup>11</sup> As such, the Department of the Interior organized a touring exhibition for the 1876 centennial celebrations, in which both Juanita and *Loom with Textile* were used to construct a narrative of patriotism.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 4:** Juanita (Asdzáá Tł'ogi), Diné (Navajo), *Loom with Textile* (detail), 1874. Wool yarn, wooden rods, 35.5 × 17.8 in. Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, E16494-0.

In the row of woven stars closest to the upper loom bar, Juanita transforms stars into crosses. Three white crosses and one blue cross sit outside of the canton.

This photograph continues to be reprinted today in histories and exhibitions about Navajo weaving and Navajo-woven U.S. flags.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Juanita became and is still used metonymically for the Navajo weaver broadly.

In front of a cloudy sky, Juanita and Army sit angled toward one another, surrounded by fake boulders, grass, straw, and Navajo rugs. Juanita wears a *biil*, a Navajo dress that she is credited as having woven, while Army wears a three-piece suit.<sup>14</sup> Their bodies frame *Loom with Textile*, which appears just behind them. Juanita is posed with a weaving implement, ironically called a sword, that rests across her lap.

Everything about this photograph is staged; the constructed narrative casts doubt on what is real and what is imagined. Like the fake boulders or landscape backdrop, Juanita is also made into a representation or sign of “Indian.”<sup>15</sup> She enacts the Navajo warrior with sword in hand, now turned into a weaver.<sup>16</sup> Yet it is through this performance of weaver that Juanita subverts the constructed narrative. It is her weaving, after all, that is the focal point of the photograph. Through *Loom with Textile*, Juanita is given the stage to tell the story

of what is taking place—not just on the set of the photograph, but on the stage of U.S. westward colonialism.

Because of its display, stretched taut vertically, *Loom with Textile* does not act like other textiles in the photograph. Juanita wears her *biil*; Army wears his suit; the rugs hang heavy, draped next to and below Army and Juanita. In short, every other textile in the photograph is animated through its encounter with the human body. *Loom with Textile* stands on its own, independent of any need for the human. So while the camera may be focused on it, and Juanita and Army are focused on each other, *Loom with Textile* addresses itself to us. This is Juanita's voice, a rhetorical strategy spoken in wool to be heard.

Faced with Army and the Department of the Interior's desire to turn her into a conquered weaver, Juanita gave them a weaving with the appearance of acquiescence, while at the same time weaving a counter-narrative into it. In the upper half of *Loom with Textile*, Juanita transforms the stars of the U.S. flag into crosses (fig. 4). Not only is this a refusal of one of the key symbols of the U.S. flag and nation, one that disrupts the constructed patriotism imposed on her, but through the image of the cross, Juanita also visualizes weaving as a construction made from crosses, or intersections of warp and weft. She directs her audience to see other points of intersection—how the image of the U.S. flag is built on top of an intersecting, colorful, and yet buried warp.

*Loom with Textile* is an example of Navajo tapestry weaving, which is a weft-faced weave that conceals the warp. Because of this concealment, most mid-19th century Navajo weaving was done on a natural, undyed wool warp. But Juanita draws attention to what tapestry weaving hides. According to anthropologist Ann Hedlund, there are few Navajo weavings on record with a color warp, and none

13 Richard A. Pohrt, *The American Indian: The American Flag* (Flint: MI: Flint Institute of Arts, 1975), 133; Tyrone D. Campbell and Joel and Kate Kopp, *Navajo Pictorial Weaving, 1880-1950: Folk Art Images of Native Americans* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1991), 76; Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp, *The Flag in American Indian Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Cooperstown: New York State Historical Association, 1993), 107; Kate Peck Kent, *Navajo Weaving: Three Centuries of Change* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2002, c1985), 60; Suzan Shown Harjo, ed., *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States & American Indian Nations* (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian in association with Smithsonian Books, 2014), 129.

14 Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*, 3; Anthropologist Ann Hedlund, email correspondence, February 25, 2018. Hedlund questions if it can be substantiated that Juanita actually wove *Loom with Textile* and her *biil*.

15 Manderfield and Tucker, "An Invoice for the Centennial Exhibition," 1.

16 The Navajo weaver is closely aligned with masculine symbols in representations of the American West and the Indian. Thomas Patin and Jennifer McLerran, "Navajo Weavings in John Ford Westerns: The Visual Rhetoric of Presenting Savagery and Civilization," *International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric*, vol. 2, no. 1 (January–June 2018): 73–90.



**Figure 5:** Juanita (Asdzáá Tł'ogí), Diné (Navajo), *Loom with Textile* (detail), 1874. Wool yarn, wooden rods, 35.5 × 17.8 in. Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, E16494-0.

The woven vertical zigzag columns mirror the loose warp in both shape and color. In the midst of the green warp block, a red warp strand is visible.



**Figure 6:** Juanita (Asdzáá Tł'ogí), Diné (Navajo), *Loom with Textile* (detail), 1874. Wool yarn, wooden rods, 35.5 × 17.8 in. Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, E16494-0.

Visually, this work is constructed through alternating stripes both vertically and horizontally, including the vertical zigzag stripes, the loom bars, and heddle and shed rod.

with a warp blocked into multiple color fields.<sup>17</sup> Yet through the use of a color warp, which she leaves unwoven in the middle of the textile, Juanita is able to embed a visible counter-narrative that runs the entire length of the work.

There is a lone red warp strand in the midst of a section of green warp (fig. 5). Through this strand, Juanita materializes her refusal to blend in or perform a role given to her. Despite being woven over and covered in places, as Juanita constructs an image of the U.S. flag, this red warp strand resists burial, visually defying the sign and outworking of colonialism.

Yet it is not just through the structure of weaving that Juanita operationalizes the flag to her own rhetorical purpose. She also uses the imagery of the flag, such as the stars turned into crosses. Three white crosses are visible outside of the blue canton (fig. 4). These crosses create a division or distinction between those grouped within the canton and those outside of it. As markers for U.S. states, the crosses outside of the canton might be read as places that will never be granted statehood, people who will not be counted. Or are these sovereign places, places that the U.S. sees as existing within its borders, whether they want to be counted as part of the U.S. or not?

Like the crosses, the thirteen red and white horizontal stripes in the upper half of the weaving also transgress their boundaries to form what could be read as a second flag below. Everything in the weaving becomes oriented in relation to the stripes: the horizontal loom bars on either side of the weaving, the heddle and shed rods in the middle of the unwoven warp, even the vertical zigzag-columned stripes that alternate a red stripe after every multicolored stripe (fig. 6). It is as though the textile is giving warning that to come near or encounter this flag is to be transformed into another stripe in its encompassing field.

Through weaving, Juanita enacts the erasure that came with the creation of the U.S. flag. The single blue star functions in a similar way to the loose warp strands in the middle of the weaving (fig. 4). It shows what lies beneath. For every cross that is woven in, Juanita must leave out that much blue yarn from the weaving. This material gesture performs the conceptual addition of states onto the flag.

17 Ann Hedlund, email correspondence, February 25, 2018.

For every state added to the U.S., something or someone is excluded or extracted. To add a star, to draw a reservation boundary, to put Navajo land in relationship to the U.S., is to bury or erase an alternative set of relationships to the land that existed before colonialism. Juanita both enacts and refuses this erasure by weaving back in the blue yarn that was extracted.

While prompting the audience to acknowledge those who are lost at the intersections of nation building, *Loom with Textile* also narrates the compromises made by Juanita and her husband, Manuelito, in order for the Navajo nation to survive. The treaty of Bosque Redondo in 1868 allowed the Navajos to return to their land after five years of U.S.-determined imprisonment, which the U.S. called “the federal Indian assimilation policy,” but which Indigenous studies scholar and historian Jennifer Nez Denetdale describes as a systematic “ethnic cleansing.”<sup>18</sup> To sign the treaty meant that the Navajo gave up most of their original homeland, as well as “tribal autonomy and freedom.”<sup>19</sup> The treaty made the Navajo dependent on the U.S. for both the determination of the physical borders of their land and for their day-to-day survival. After five years of imprisonment, their food and livestock were nearly gone. The Navajo depended on U.S. annuities for ten years to enable restoration.<sup>20</sup> But there was no alternative. Denetdale writes, “They did what they had to do in an impossible situation to allow their people to have a future.”<sup>21</sup>

Juanita’s loom enacts this impossible negotiation between dependency and sovereignty—or, as Denetdale claims, in weaving *Loom with Textile*, Juanita shows a “critical consciousness about the politics” of her situation.<sup>22</sup> In weaving a U.S. flag and in submitting to the performance of self shown in the Charles Bell photograph, Juanita acquiesces to the role given to her in this domestic-dependent relationship. Yet, through *Loom with Textile*, Juanita also embeds resistance strategies into this sign of nation building, constructing a counter-narrative of sovereignty.

Consider the loose warp strands in the middle of the weaving (fig. 7). These warp strands run the entire length of the loom. Any weaving done is made dependent on them. They are more than just a bridge between two sections of weaving. Rather, they are the web

18 Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Naal Tsoos Sani,” *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States & American Indian Nations*, ed. Suzan Shown Harjo (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian in association with Smithsonian Books, 2014), 122.

19 Ibid, 126.

20 Ibid, 127.

21 Ibid, 126.

22 Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History*, 100.



**Figure 7:** Juanita (Asdzáá Tł'ogi), Diné (Navajo), *Loom with Textile* (detail), 1874. Wool yarn, wooden rods, 35.5 × 17.8 in. Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, E16494-0.

The loose warp strands, seen between the upper and lower sections of weaving, run the entire length of the work.

within which neither section can disengage. As a way to speak about treaties, this weaving enacts a mutual dependency between nations. There are two ways to think rhetorically about this: kinship and engagement. First, the common web shows how the two sides are related to one another. They share something essential: the same warp. Indigenous studies scholar Kimberly Wieser classifies rhetoric

that appeals to commonality or relationship as a kinship model of discourse, or a rhetoric of relatedness. This kind of rhetoric marked intertribal and later extratribal interaction.<sup>23</sup> Wieser claims, “Allies were conceived of in terms of familial relationships,” and supports this claim by looking to the work of Daniel Justice (Cherokee), who analyzes Cherokee discourses in the late 18th century with their repetitive uses of the word “Brother” and “friend.”<sup>24</sup>

The loose warp may be materially enacting this kind of rhetoric of relatedness. Certainly, if Juanita sought to affirm the terms of the treaty, appealing to the U.S. to stand by those terms, it would make sense for her to create a work that brought to the fore how the U.S. and the Navajo nation were now in a relationship, one to the other. Rather than weaving the two sections together, leaving the loose warp visible ensures that the relatedness of two now mutually dependent nations is acknowledged.

However, the loose warp could also be seen as a rhetoric of engagement: two sides brought together, tied in such a way that neither can leave the engagement. The loose warp acts as an index to a maker who has brought two sides into tension with one another. Compare this to Seneca leader Red Jacket’s speeches from the 1790s. In his essay “Red Jacket’s Rhetoric,” Indigenous studies scholar Matthew Dennis argues that Red Jacket used a rhetoric of engagement to pit the British against the American powers in their claim to sovereignty over the U.S. colonies. While at first maintaining a middle ground between these two powers, in the end Red Jacket excused the Seneca from allying with either.<sup>25</sup>

Read this way, Juanita’s loose warp becomes a site of agency where she, after keeping the two sides of weaving in literal physical tension with one another, decides that maintaining this tension is more than she is willing to hold. *Loom with Textile* is woven from both sides of the warp toward the middle. As Juanita wove, the opening through the warp strands (the shed) got smaller. The warp would have slowly begun to press in on her hands as she moved closer to the middle. She was literally trapped by this weaving. Rather than finding

23 Kimberly G. Wieser, *Back to the Blanket: Recovered Rhetorics and Literacies in American Indian Studies*, American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series 70 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 164.

24 Ibid.

25 Matthew Dennis, “Red Jacket’s Rhetoric,” *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word*

*Magic*, ed. Ernest Stromberg (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 28.

26 Malea Powell, “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing,” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 53, no. 3 (February 2002): 400.

27 Ibid, 399–400.

a way for the two halves to meet, she excuses herself from entrapment by leaving the warp unwoven. Through the unwoven warp, Juanita refuses to be bound to either the symbol of the U.S. flag or the role of conquered Navajo weaver. She weaves here, and no further.

In her article “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing,” Indigenous studies scholar Malea Powell terms as *survivance* discourse that intersects or weaves survival together with resistance.<sup>26</sup> Working through the writing of Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), Powell explains how “the Indian” is a simulated representation, and that to act within the term is to do so ironically.<sup>27</sup> One resists even as one enacts, since the representation is an image or expectation imposed by the colonizer. “The Indian” is so removed from any one person’s story that when a person occupies the role, this occupation both ruins and falsifies the representation. The person renders “the Indian” amiss, and absurd, exposing the logic upon which the representation is constructed. Through the loose warp, Juanita gives the representation of Navajo weaver back to the colonizer. She simulates the visible expectations or signs of the U.S. flag, on the one hand, and the Navajo weaver on the other, and leaves both in ruins.

Through *Loom with Textile*, Juanita shows not just how the U.S. flag is operationalized, but how that operation can be disrupted. In using her own body at the loom, she appeals not to the visual image of the flag as that which she and her audience have in common, but to our own bodies and material knowledge. We may not all be weavers, but we know the motions of layering material on top of another (weft over warp), of removing material that does not fit into an allotted space (the blue star), and being squeezed in diminishing spaces (the loose warp in the middle). To analyze Juanita’s weaving through material rhetorical analysis is to follow her woven actions as tactics for visual disruption. It is to recognize her presence as a material, performative counter-narrative, and as an invitation to embed our own counter-narratives into signs used to bury us. Decolonization is at hand. It began with Juanita.