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Stitching the Social Fabric against Violence and Oblivion. The Embroidering for Peace and Memory Initiative Revisited through the Lens of Caring Democracy.

Suturar la trama social de cara a la violencia y el olvido. La Iniciativa Bordando por la Paz y la Memoria reconsiderada desde el enfoque de la Democracia del Cuidado.

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Stitching the Social Fabric against Violence and Oblivion. The Embroidering for Peace and Memory Initiative Revisited through the Lens of Caring Democracy.

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Needlework femininity and states of mind

- 1 In *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Roszika Parker argues that it was not until the Renaissance that handmade embroidery began to be construed as a leisure activity performed by women in the intimacy of the domestic sphere (PARKER, 2010: 64). Ever since, the ladies' upbringing played a determinant role in naturalizing the connection between embroidering skills and an ideal of domestic femininity which, throughout the seventeenth century, proved to be consistent with Protestant morality in Europe and England (PARKER, 2010: 11, 82). Yet, this connection was far from being constrained to the 'old continent'. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the prominence of needlework was also noteworthy in the

“clerical model of feminine education” (LÓPEZ, 2008: 38) imparted at schools associated to Catholic convents in New Spain (GONZALBO, 2010: 64). Similarly, cultivating needlework skills became part of the objectives of the Home Economics courses developed in the United States and England in the early twentieth century. The same applies to the gendered curriculum implemented during this period at public schools in Mexico (LÓPEZ, 2008: 3; TORRES-SEPTIÉN, 2001).

- 2 The relevance of introducing girls to handmade sewing and embroidery from an early age stemmed from the belief that the temporality and posture entailed by these activities—namely the body stillness and bending over the work with downcast eyes—fostered a set of character traits and dispositional states that ladies were expected to show, for instance, “docility, obedience, love of home”, modesty, self-containment, or gentle delicacy (PARKER, 2010: 11, 63). However, the controversies about the effect of needlework on women’s behaviour and mental state can be traced back as early as the eighteenth century. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Chapter XII. On National Education, Mary Wollstonecraft condemned needlework instruction arguing that “confining girls to their needle, and shutting them out from all political and civil employments; (...) [narrowed] their minds (...) [and] rendered [them] unfit to fulfil the peculiar duties which nature ha[d] assigned them” (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1792: par. 52). Similarly, Mexican women writers and teachers who, alongside Wollstonecraft, strived for gender equality in education throughout the nineteenth century found ways to spread their proposals to reform gender bias in the public schools’ curriculum (LÓPEZ, 2008: 63).
- 3 A few decades later, yet from a different perspective, Elizabeth C. Jenkins expressed her doubts about the relevance of needlework in the College Course in Home Economics offered in the United States. In her 1917 assessment of course curricula, she contended that, far from teaching women how “to bring reason and proportion into the life of emotions’ [a balance that was necessary for an efficient household management]. Skill of hand may but multiply our cushions and doilies” (JENKINS, 1917: 314).
- 4 With regard to women’s ability for self-control, Freud argued “that constant needlework was one of the factors that ‘rendered women particularly prone to hysteria’ because day dreaming over embroidery induced ‘dispositional hypnoid states’.” (PARKER, 2010: 11-12). Conversely, Jacqueline Enthoven would later claim that “the joyful use of colors, in the handing of threads and fabrics [...] would help [...] young mothers who fe[lt] restless and ‘trapped’ at home with small children [...] to relax and unwind”, thereby allowing them to find “a path to peace and serenity” (HOLLAND, 1965: 732). Furthermore, Enthoven maintained that children would “find it easier to confide [...] when mother’s hands are busy, [and] the eyes are down on the work [instead of] looking directly at them” (HOLLAND, 1965: 732; ENTHOVEN, 1964: 22).
- 5 More recently, a study conducted with women quilters from a local group in Glasgow showed that the way in which participants described their creative process was analogous to the state Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has conceptualized as ‘flow’ (BURT & ATKINSON, 2011: 58; CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 1996: 110), namely an optimal or deeply joyful state that occurs when “a person’s body and mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something that is difficult or worthwhile” (CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 2008: 3). As this author remarks,

[...] in that state of deep concentration consciousness is unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings, and all the senses are focused on the same goal.

Experience is in harmony. And when the flow episode is over, one feels more “together” than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general. (CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 2008: 41)

- 6 For the Glasgow quilters, “[m]easuring dimensions, designing patterns and incorporating shapes” proved to be a demanding task, even for the most experienced ones. Thus “[m]astering new techniques and overcoming challenges led to feelings of satisfaction and boosted self-esteem” (BURT & ATKINSON, 2011: 56). This identity-enhancement was also nurtured by the sense of achievement they experienced as a result of having managed to create tangible and durable textile artworks that could be useful for other people or given as a gift to relatives and friends (BURT & ATKINSON, 2011: 56; JOHNSON & WILSON, 2005: 123).
- 7 In the same vein, the studies conducted by Frances Reynolds with women “coping with long-term physical health problems” (REYNOLDS, 2002: 99) have shown that by stimulating the participants’ minds (HUOTILAINEN, RANKANEN, GROTH, SEITAMAA-HAKKARAINEN & MÄKELÄ, 2011: 4-5) and allowing them to achieve feasible goals at their own speed (REYNOLDS, 2002: 101), needlework has offered some women, particularly those “whose body is experienced as out of control by virtue of the disease or impairment process” (REYNOLDS, 2002: 99), the opportunity to restore “feelings of power and mastery over the impact that the illness was having on their lives” (REYNOLDS, 2002: 12; CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 2008: 6, 49).
- 8 Moreover, Reynolds has observed that the enhancement of the “quality of life in the present” that some participants experienced as a result of their needlework practice motivated them, in particular those suffering a life-threatening illness, to “believe [...] at least [in] the-short term future” (REYNOLDS, 2002:102). Conversely, other participants reported to have experienced “feelings of transcendence during needlecrafts, in that they felt connected to the larger world, to the spiritual world, to nature or to human history” (REYNOLDS, 2002: 103).
- 9 In the light of these different approaches, needlework appears to be in tension between private and public, confinement and openness, daydreaming and clarity of mind, fancy handy craft and self-care practice.

Creating and mending with needle and thread

- 10 In terms of its materiality, needlework’s constructive character is reflected on “the creation of textiles and garments by stitching together pieces of fabric as in quilting, appliqué, patchwork, fashion sewing, and heirloom sewing” (STANSBERRY, AMOROSO and JENNINGS-RENTENAAR, 2009: 33). Similarly, the seams used for strengthening or binding slits reflect restorative qualities (de DILLMONT, 1890: 13), as do the stitches used to “repair the wear and tear of use or accident” (de DILLMONT, 1890: 15-16). Furthermore, seams can assist the body’s healing process when used to stitch wounds.
- 11 As can be read in the headline of a press release announcing the opening of an exhibition at the United Nations headquarters in 2012, “Women are the Fabric, Quilts Reflect their Strength”, needlework’s constructive/healing quality might also resonate with the metaphor of the social fabric, which, just as cloth, can be darned and mended.
- 12 When textile creations are seen in the light of the social fabric metaphor, they can: symbolize affective bonds, as in the friendship handkerchiefs embroidered by Hutterite

young women in Canada “as a token of serious affection” for their boyfriends (TEXTILE MUSEUM OF CANADA; OLALDE, 2018c, OLALDE, 2019a); strengthen communitarian ties, as can be seen in “the collaborative sewing of a large patchwork quilt” done by women from the Cook Islands in the South Pacific Ocean (KÜCHLER, 2014: 112); help preserve kinship and generational bonds, as in the case of the quilters’ lineages in the United States (JOHNSON & WILSON, 2005: 121); and finally, contribute to the defense of cultural identity, as can be seen in the shawal dresses crafted, during the first Intifada (1987-1991), by women inhabitants of Hebron, in the so-called occupied territories, using the Palestinian flag colours and the national symbols that were banned by the Israelies (TAMARI, 2012: 86). Drawing on this last example, I would like to observe that, besides weaving and mending the social fabric, textile creations might serve as a means of political expression and resistance against repression, violence and oblivion (DEACON, 2014; OLALDE, 2019b).

Connecting threads and stories of survival and resistance

- 13 In recent years, a number of textiles crafted by survivors —mostly women— of violence inflicted by both state and non-state actors in armed conflicts and under authoritarian regimes have been displayed together in exhibitions where the stories of suffering, survival and resistance conjured up by these fabrics connect and converse, much as the patches of a quilt.
- 14 In 2005, Ariel Zeitlin Cooke, Marsha MacDowell, and Steve Zeitlin curated the exhibition *Weavings of War. Fabrics of Memory*,¹ presenting a selection of rugs, wall hangings, patchwork tapestries and quilts —which they conceptualized as ‘war textiles’— crafted by survivors of the two Afghan wars, the South Africa’s apartheid regime, the Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, the internal armed conflict in Peru, and the Laotian communities who were persecuted after the Vietnam war ended.
- 15 In 2016 and 2017, another two exhibitions of fabrics depicting survivor stories were organized: the first one, *La vida que se teje*,² at the Museo Casa de la Memoria in Antioquía, Colombia; the second one, *Stitched Voices*,³ at the Aberystwyth Arts Centre in Wales. Both exhibits were complemented with panel discussions and workshops intended to foster interactions and dialogues between the survivors present at the venue, visitors and organizers of the event.
- 16 A gathering thread connecting the last two exhibitions was the display of some Chilean *arpilleras* —or patchwork tapestries— from Roberta Bacic’s *Conflict Textile* collection,⁴ and of embroidered handkerchiefs commemorating the victims of murder and (enforced)⁵ disappearance during the ‘war on drugs’ in Mexico. The peculiarity of these handkerchiefs was that the vast majority of them had not been stitched by survivors seeking to provide their testimonies with a tangible and material shape, as the *arpilleras* did (AGOSÍN, 2008: 45); instead, they were embroidered by solidary participants based on the information collected from the press by other volunteers before them (OLALDE, 2015b: 60-61; OLALDE, 2019a).
- 17 Considering that most of the participants who embroidered these handkerchiefs were not themselves survivors coping with traumatic experiences (COHEN 2013: 164; GARLOCK, 2016: 61), but rather people sufficiently concerned by the increasing number

of murders and (enforced) disappearances in Mexico as to take part in a symbolic action aimed at supporting the victims' relatives' calls for justice, I argue that in the case of the Embroidering for Peace and Memory Initiative: One Handkerchief, One victim (EPI) —namely the project that summoned people to embroider the abovementioned handkerchiefs—, the participation of people who had not been directly affected by violence makes the constructive/healing aspect of these 'embroideries for peace' different from that of textile testimonies crafted by survivors. Thus, my purpose in this paper is to discern what makes these handkerchiefs distinctive in this respect and to explore the implications thereof.

Embroidering for Peace and Memory in Mexico: One victim, one handkerchief

- 18 The EPI was developed in Mexico City during the summer of 2011 by a group of civilians and cultural producers who, alongside the *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* / Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD), were seeking to raise awareness of the humanitarian crisis hitting several regions of the country ever since the former president Felipe Calderón decided “to move toward militarization” (SOTOMAYOR, 2013: 42) to fight drug cartels, thereby initiating what has come to be known as the Mexican ‘war on drugs’.
- 19 Briefly speaking, the EPI consisted of people embroidering together in the open air to catch the eye of passersby, but also to invite them to join for as long as they wished. The periodical setting up of these ephemeral workshops included the temporary display of the embroidered handkerchiefs in clotheslines that protesters would often carry during marches and hunger strikes (fig.1).

Figure 1. Embroidery day organized by Fuentes Rojas. Coyoacán, Mexico City. Photo: Courtesy of Fuentes Rojas.

- 20 The initial purpose of the EPI's developers —who eventually assumed the name of *Fuentes Rojas* / Red Fountains collective— was to perform a public space intervention that would consist of displaying as many handkerchiefs as possible across Mexico City's main square (the Zócalo) on December 1st, 2012. By means of this collective action — conceptualized as a 'citizen memorial'— the number of victims would acquire a spatial quality, thereby denouncing the failure of Calderon's military strategy on the same day his mandate would end.
- 21 Shortly after its release, the call to participate in the December 1st protest rapidly spread in social media. As a result, at least forty embroidery groups were organized both locally and abroad throughout 2012. Ever since, a significant number of handkerchiefs have been embroidered in several countries and travelled around the world to 'meet their fellows' in embroidery sessions and public protests which have included, but have not been limited to, the one in Mexico City's Zócalo on December 2012 (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Handkerchief embroidered in France and sent to Mexico in 2012. Photo Katia Olalde, November 3, 2015.

- 22 This article focuses mainly on the activities of the *Fuentes Rojas* collective and, more concretely, on the analysis of the clotheslines used as a display device for the handkerchiefs. There are three reasons for this choice: first, the emergence of the EPI is intertwined with the creation of the *Fuentes Rojas* collective (OLALDE 2018b); second, to this day, this group's weekly embroidery sessions have continued uninterruptedly; and third, *Fuentes Rojas* has been actively involved in the transnational collaboration networks established throughout the years by a number of needlework memory projects such as *Conflict Textiles* and the Colombian *costureras* (sewing workshops), together with social workers, researchers, and human rights advocates. A material expression of these global solidarity networks is, for instance, the traveling wall

hanging that many of these groups have been stitching together under a relay scheme since 2015 (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Banner embroidered by several collectives around the world. Photo: Katia Olalde, November 19, 2017.

A hands-on protest against violence and impunity

- 23 As I mentioned earlier, the target audience of *Fuentes Rojas* consisted mostly of people who had not experienced violence personally. This relates to the fact that in Mexico City, where the EPI was born, the ‘war on drugs’ has not been nearly as intense or rough as in other regions. Furthermore, a significant number of participants did not know each other before joining the embroidery sessions. In this respect, participants in Mexico City differed from needleworkers involved in other memory projects, in that the latter were survivors who already shared communitarian ties before engaging in their needlearts groups. This is the case of the women from the associations *Kuyanaku* in Peru and *Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz de Mampuján* in Colombia (BACIC and SANFELIU, 2011; URIBE 2009: 44-45), whose communities were forcefully displaced. Similarly, EPI’s participants were distinct from the Chilean *arpilleristas* —or quilt makers— who, under Pinochet’s regime, made acquaintance at the *Vicariate of Solidarity* after their husbands and sons were subjected to enforced disappearance. Unlike these groups, proximity and common ground were not the starting point of the EPI, but rather one of the expected outcomes of the participative process itself (OLALDE, 2018b; 2019a). The first step in Mexico City was encouraging strangers to get together; hence the idea of the open embroidery sessions.
- 24 Embroidery’s technical features —the same attributes that allowed women “coping with long-term physical health problems” to complete their needlework at their own speed (REYNOLDS, 2002:101)— allowed participants to meet the challenges entailed by a

peaceful protest of this type. Unlike pottery or painting, stitchery does not get the hands dirty, nor does it involve time specific tasks such as drying or firing in a kiln. In addition, needlework materials are small and light, and therefore easily transportable (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 2005: 48); furthermore, stitchery “is easy to pick up at any point” (BARBER, 1994: 30). In sum, embroidery is a clean, portable, and flexible art.

- 25 As I mentioned earlier, during the sessions organized by *Fuentes Rojas*, people were invited to embroider for as long as they wished. As a result, numerous handkerchiefs were worked on in relays and completed by several hands. Needleworkers were asked to sign the handkerchiefs before leaving the site of this collective action, but the task of stitching their names was usually left to future participants. Consequently, many embroiderers devoted their eyes and hands not only to giving an account of the murder or the (enforced) disappearance of someone unknown to them, but also to recording the work done by previous participants, whom they most likely were never going to meet. In this way, the outrage shared by a plurality of people materialized in tangible objects —namely, handkerchiefs— which occupy their own space and carry the imprints of the hands that transformed them. As I have posed elsewhere, these collective embroideries can be seen as addressing their audience by saying something like: “These persons were killed or subjected to (enforced) disappearance. We, who embroidered these handkerchiefs, do not (necessarily) know each other but we do share our concern for the violence inflicted on these people whom we did not know either” (OLALDE, 2018b; 2018c; 2019a).
- 26 In order to display the embroidered items publicly, *Fuentes Rojas* joined the handkerchiefs together with safety pins and stitches at the corners, creating banner-like assemblages that usually alternate a cloth and an empty space. This is the way the handkerchiefs have been presented in rallies and embroidery sessions. However, due to the lack of a background support —which would allow the cloths to remain flat—, these banner-like ensembles are hard to manipulate. During marches, the protesters carrying the clothesline must keep their hands at the same height and walk at the same speed, for otherwise the ensemble would not be properly displayed (**fig. 4**). This means that, for these assemblages to resemble banners, people carrying them must move in a coordinated manner. Once the ropes come loose, the handkerchiefs get wrinkled and what a moment before appeared as a coherent ensemble turns into a puzzle, which must be handled carefully in order to prevent the ropes and handkerchiefs from getting tangled up (**fig. 5**). In other words, these banner-like ensembles have a performative quality (OLALDE 2018c, 2019a).

Figure 4. Fuentes Rojas et al. Marching along Paseo de la Reforma on the first anniversary of the enforced disappearance of 43 teaching students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. Photo: Katia Olalde, Mexico City, September 26, 2015.

Figure 5. Fuentes Rojas banner-like ensembles in Coyoacán, Mexico City. Photo: Katia Olalde November 19, 2017.

Moving handkerchiefs

- 27 In her analysis of the Palestinian testimonies included in the American Edition of the Goldstone Report, Rosanne Kennedy remarks that: “Both meanings of [the word] ‘moving’ – as travel and affect – are relevant to [her] analysis” (Kennedy, 2014: 54).

Following Kennedy's approach, I have elsewhere argued that "in a country where public display of dismembered bodies and severed limbs had become a common practice" (OLALDE 2018a: 198; DIÉGUEZ 2013: 29) and where fear and distrust discouraged interactions between strangers (MBEMBE in KODJO-GRANDVAUX, 2013; CALVEIRO, 2017: 137), embroidery proved to be a suitable way to peacefully protest against violence because of its ability to move in both senses of the term (OLALDE, 2015a: 83-84; OLALDE, 2015b: 75-76; OLALDE, 2019a, OLALDE, 2019b). Furthermore, I have posed the idea that embroidering for peace in Mexico may be understood as an expression of the nonviolent 'comforting' action —*la acción noviolenta del consuelo*—, which was coined by the MPJD from the standpoint of 'spirituality in resistance' —*la espiritualidad en resistencia*— and practiced by MPJD's members on a regular basis (AMEGLIO, 2013: 32-33; SÁNCHEZ SUÁREZ, 2013: 72; OLALDE, 2018c). Now I would like to pursue these ideas further from the perspective of the ethics of care.

- 28 The handkerchiefs are small, light, and flexible, but also fragile: they get wet and dirty, they get wrinkled and torn. On December 1st, 2012, the EPI's citizen memorial was abruptly interrupted by riots followed by police intervention. Participants were forced to run away in order to protect themselves. Although they did their best to safeguard the handkerchiefs, "many embroideries were lost by the end of the day"; others "were plucked, trampled, spattered, and stained" (OLALDE, 2018a: 204).
- 29 Just as embroidery, the activities involved in the conservation and public display of the EPI's handkerchiefs —hanging up, folding, and patching up clothes— have been historically associated with the feminine realm and the caring practices that take place in the intimacy of the domestic sphere. In 1990, Fisher and Tronto posited a comprehensive definition of care, which they understood:

On the most general level, [...] as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (TRONTO, 2013: 19; FISHER and TRONTO, 1990: 40)
- 30 Given that the world we live in includes the objects and narratives of memory that we create and inherit to future generations (OLALDE, 2019a), and considering that maintaining or repairing our 'world' involves keeping 'exemplary memories' alive in order to prevent the recurrence of atrocious acts of violence (TODOROV, 1993), I am encouraged to conceive of the activities involved in the EPI —that is, stitching and keeping the handkerchiefs safe and clean; organizing the open embroidery sessions; assembling, displaying and folding the banner-like ensembles— as caring practices at the most general level, that is, as practices aimed at "maintaining or repairing our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (TRONTO, 2013: 19; FISHER and TRONTO, 1990: 40).
- 31 Now, whereas "the necessary connection between care ethics and femininity has been subject to rigorous challenge" (SANDER-STAUDT; TRONTO, 2013: 13), the EPI's developers were less concerned with questioning this historical, yet naturalized connection, than with viewing femininity through the lens of political resistance. In this respect, the EPI was in tune with those suffragettes who saw in needlearts an opportunity to transform ideas about women and femininity (PARKER, 2010: 197). However, whereas the suffragettes resorted to their needlework skills to conjure up a "femininity represented as a source of strength, [and] not as evidence of women's

weakness" (PARKER, 2010: 175-76), the EPI made use of embroidery's technical specificity, temporality, and bodily posture to evoke femininity seen as a source of warmth, solidarity, and openness (FUENTES ROJAS, in GARCÍA, 2014: 83; GARGALLO, 2014a: 53, 97; GARGALLO, 2014b: 19; OLALDE, 2019b). In other words, far from questioning how the differentiation between sexes and genders has been historically and culturally construed and re-enacted, or contesting how caring practices have been differentially assigned (TRONTO, 2013: 32-33), the EPI emphasised the socio-historical connection between femininity and nonviolence (FUENTES ROJAS, 2014: par.8), thereby implicitly downplaying femininity's long-established association with submission and compliance.

- 32 I therefore claim that, just as "*Fuentes Rojas* did not conceive their handkerchiefs as objects of disinterested aesthetic contemplation", but rather as tools for political expression (OLALDE, 2018a: 200; OLALDE, 2018b; OLALDE, 2019a), the groups who joined the EPI saw embroidery not as fancywork (JOHNSON and WILSON, 2005: 115) — performed by women who were "granted a 'pass' out of [...] most daily domestic duties" (TRONTO, 2013: 58), thereby enjoying what Tronto has conceptualized as 'privileged irresponsibility' (TRONTO, 1993: 121; TRONTO 2013: 158)—, but rather as a way to participate in the endeavour of construing the victims' claims as a matter of public interest on the national level (OLALDE, 2015a: 87) and as cases of human rights abuse in the international arena (OLALDE, 2015b: 75-77; OLALDE, 2019a).

Showing that you care

- 33 Whilst the ethics of care approach is characterized —among other things— by its view of people as relational and interdependent (Held, 2006: 156; MCLEOD and SHERWING 2000: 259-60; JAGGAR, 2000: 456; TRONTO 2013: 32;), the extent to which face-to-face interactions are necessary for caring to be actually achieved remains open to discussion (BUBECK 1995: 129; BOWDEN, 1997: 1; SLOTE, 2001: ix; NODDINGS, 2002: 3; NODDINGS, 2005: 116; TRONTO 2013: 6; HELD, 2006: 32-34). Nonetheless, the idea that caring entails relations tends to be generally accepted (NODDINGS, 2005: 111, 117; RUDDICK, 1998: 13-14; SEVENHUIJSEN, 1998: 82; HELD, 2006: 42).
- 34 Whereas it is true that the activities carried out by the EPI did not necessarily involve or foster face-to-face interactions with the victims' relatives —whom a significant part of Mexican society perceives as 'distant' strangers (NODDINGS, 2002: 3)—, participation in the embroidery sessions did entail visual and tactile contact with the handkerchiefs dedicated to those who were killed or subjected to (enforced) disappearance.
- 35 Considering the haptic quality of embroidery and the visual attentiveness it requires, I would like to posit the idea that holding the handkerchiefs, heedfully reading the murder and disappearance cases, and taking the time to manually complete the needlework stitch by stitch without feeling obliged to display any technical skills (OLALDE 2018b), might have offered the EPI's participants the opportunity to experience a state analogous to 'flow', just as the Glasgow quilters who participated in Burt and Atkinson's study (BURT & ATKINSON, 2011: 58).
- 36 In his lecture "Breaking the Chain. Thoughts on Trauma and Transference", Jan Verwoert maintained that the eyes and hands are the vehicles of empathy, for it is

through our gaze and manual gestures that we can connect with other people (VERWOERT, 2012: min. 03:40) and shape our emotions (SHOUSE, 2005).

- 37 Given that the clarity of goals, the absence of worry about failure, and the combination of action and awareness, all of which characterize ‘flow’ (CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 1996: 111-12), make people feel “more ‘together’ [...], not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general” (CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 2008: 41), and considering that embroidery is a hands-on activity, just as care often is (TRONTO, 2013: 139), and that needlework, like care, demands time and attention (TRONTO, 2013: 166; NODDINGS, 2005: 114; KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 2005: 50), I would like to draw on Verwoert’s idea to suggest that the state of ‘flow’ might have offered the EPI’s participants who experienced it the opportunity to develop their capacity (NODDINGS, 2005:114; HELD, 2006: 42, 125) to ‘care about’ the harm and loss endured by so many people in Mexico throughout the last twelve years (FISHER and TRONTO, 1990: 40; TRONTO, 2013: 22, NODDINGS, 2002: 3).
- 38 On these grounds, I would also maintain that the EPI might be seen as a vindication of the benefits of needlework insofar as participation in the embroidery sessions was intended to have a positive impact on the participants’ mind-set and behaviour —a rather pedagogical function the EPI’s developers associated with the promotion of democratic citizenship (FUENTES ROJAS, 2012: par. 2)—. Furthermore, I would claim that taking care of the handkerchiefs entails not only preserving “the fabrication of human hands” (ARENDT, 1998: 95), but most importantly, nurturing “the fabric of human relationships and affairs” (ARENDT, 1998: 95) involved in the creation and public display of the embroideries (OLALDE, 2015a: 86-87; OLALDE, 2019a).
- 39 In sum, I would argue that in a country where social inequality and racism has resulted in the differential exposure of people to abuse, impunity and neglect, the EPI resorted to needlework’s technical specificities, bodily posture and constructive/healing character to urge passersby to develop their capacity to care about (TRONTO, 2013: 148) those ‘distant’ strangers who have directly experienced violence and even to encourage participants to move on to the subsequent phases of the caring process —namely, ‘care for’, ‘caregiving’, and ‘care receiving’ (FISHER and TRONTO, 1990: 40)—⁶.
- 40 I am, moreover, encouraged to suggest that the EPI’s aspiration to promote democratic citizenship (FUENTES ROJAS, 2012: par.2, OLALDE 2018b; 2019a) entails inspiring participants to engage in the practice of democratic caring or ‘care with’ (TRONTO, 2013: 148)⁷ which, according to Tronto:
- 41 requires [...] citizens [...] to accept that they bear the political burden of caring for the future. That future is not only about economic production but also about caring for the values of freedom, equality, and justice. That future is not only about oneself and one’s family and friends, but also about those with whom one disagrees, as well as the natural world and one’s place in it. That future requires that we think honestly about the past and accept some burdens and responsibilities that have been deflected or ignored, realizing that if all such responsibilities are reconsidered, democracy will function more justly. (TRONTO, 2013: xii)
- 42 Finally, I would like to conclude by suggesting that, in the framework of the current humanitarian crisis, the practice of democratic caring (TRONTO, 2013: 23) entails —among other things— undermining the tendency of private individuals living in neoliberal societies to care only for themselves and those closest or dearest to them, a tendency that is leading a considerable sector of Mexican civil society and several

politicians to keep trying to exclude the claims for truth and justice from the national agenda.

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ENDNOTES

1. See <http://citylore.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/wow/index.html>
2. See <http://www.acantioquia.org/es/la-vida-que-se-teje.html>
3. See <https://stitchedvoices.wordpress.com>
4. See <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>
5. I write 'enforced' in round brackets because the Mexican General Law on Enforced Disappearance and Disappearance by Individuals, that was sanctioned by the Mexican Congress in November 2017 defines two legal concepts: 'enforced disappearance' and 'disappearance committed by private individuals' (*desaparición por particulares*).
6. Fisher and Tronto "identified four steps in the processes of care: 1. *Caring about*. At this first phase of care, someone or some group notices unmet caring needs.
2. *Caring for*. Once needs are identified, someone or some group has to take responsibility to make certain that these needs are met.
3. *Care-giving*. The third phase of caring requires that the actual care-giving work be done.
4. *Care-receiving*. Once care work is done, there will be a response from the person, thing, group, animal, plant, or environment that has been cared for. Observing that response and making judgments about it (for example, was the care given sufficient? successful? complete?) is the fourth phase of care." (TRONTO, 2013:22)
7. "In order to think about democratic care, which is not on this level of generalization but a more particular kind of care, [Tronto latter identified] a fifth phase of [...] *Caring with* [which] requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all." (TRONTO, 2013: 23)

ABSTRACTS

Since the summer of 2011, solidary people from around the world have gathered in the open air to embroider handkerchiefs commemorating the victims of the war on drugs in Mexico and to welcome willing passersby to join in the activity for as long as they wish. In this article I draw on the Ethics of Care approach to argue that this collaborative project resorted to the technical specificities and constructive/healing character of handmade embroidery, as well as to the bodily

posture and the temporality entailed by this activity in order to urge passersby to care about the humanitarian crisis in Mexico. Furthermore, I pose the possibility that these embroidery sessions create favourable conditions prompting participants to engage in democratic caring practices.

Desde el verano de 2011, personas solidarias alrededor del mundo se han reunido al aire libre para bordar pañuelos en memoria de las víctimas de la “guerra contra el narcotráfico” en México e invitar a los transeúntes que así lo deseen a sumarse a la actividad por el tiempo que quieran. En este artículo recupero las discusiones llevadas a cabo en el ámbito de la ética del cuidado para argumentar que este proyecto colaborativo recurrió a la especificidad técnica y al carácter constructivo/sanador del bordado a mano, así como a la temporalidad y a la postura corporal que esta actividad conlleva, con el propósito de urgir a los transeúntes a interesarse por la crisis humanitaria que se vive en México. Sumado a esto, planteo la posibilidad de que estas sesiones de bordado generen condiciones favorables para que los participantes se motiven a involucrarse en prácticas democráticas de cuidado.

INDEX

Palabras claves: guerra contra el narcotráfico, no violencia, feminidad, ética del cuidado, arpilleras.

Keywords: war on drugs, nonviolence, femininity, ethics of care, arpilleras.

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