

Weaving resistance: Feminist embroidery as a political, affective, and artistic practice within the struggle against femicides in Mexico City

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ABSTRACT

In Mexico, an average of 11 women are murdered every day as victims of femicide, making gender-based violence an urgent and pervasive crisis. In response to this extreme context of violence, feminist activists have developed creative, embodied forms of resistance and collective healing. One such practice is *el bordado* (embroidery), which holds a long tradition in feminist protest across Latin America. In this article, I explore the multiple and layered meanings of *bordado* in feminist activism, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork – including participant observation, field notes and group interviews – with two collectives in Mexico City: Las Siemprevivas and Fuentes Rojas. The results show that embroidery can become a form of emotional solidarity and collective healing, providing a way to express the “unspeakable”, and share experiences of injustice and loss. Embroidery fosters the establishment of meaningful connections, “affective communities” and “de-privatising” the pain. *Bordado* also serves as a form of (counter-)memory work – dignifying and humanising the victims of femicide while creating a “textile archive” against forgetting. The embroidery circles (*juntanzas*) offer spaces of mutual support, practices of care, and empowerment. Furthermore, as a political act of resistance and denunciation, activists carry the *bordados* to demonstrations, exhibit them in museums and public spaces across Mexico and globally. By occupying sidewalks and plazas, activists reclaim public space and transform urban landscapes into sites of counter-memory and feminist resistance. In doing so, they fight the normalisation of violence,

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oppose victim-blaming, and sensitise the public. In short, *bordar* (to embroider) is a political, affective, and artistic practice that challenges gender-based violence and enacts collective feminist resistance in Mexico.

Keywords: *Artivism/Artivismo*, embroidery, gender-based violence, feminicides, feminist movements, Mexico, autoethnography.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of feminicides¹ in Mexico has increased by approximately 93% (Institute for Economics and Peace 2025:24). According to the Mexican organisation Impunidad Cero (2022:4), around ten women are murdered every day, with some activist groups estimating the number to be as high as thirteen per day (field notes 2023). Other forms of gender-based violence are also alarming: cases of domestic violence have doubled since 2015, reaching 836,000 in 2024 (Juárez, Zermeño & Zermeño 2025:3). 402,000 cases of sexual violence were registered the same year – and about 50% of women aged 15 and older report having experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives (Juárez *et al* 2025:3). However, the actual numbers are likely much higher, as approximately 93% of cases of gender-based violence go unreported or are not investigated (Juárez *et al* 2025:4). Furthermore, NGOs and scholars have highlighted the phenomenon of *transfeminicide* – the murder of trans women and people from the LGBTQI+ community, which exposes how queer-hostile and anti-trans discrimination intersects with patriarchal violence (Guerrero McManus, Fenella & Muñoz Contreras 2018; Burgueño & Sánchez 2023).

Against this background, feminist movements in Mexico have placed the issue of gender-based violence at the centre of their political mobilisations and activists have developed a wide range of creative and collective practices as a form of political expression and social engagement: from demonstrations and public rituals to protest camps, exhibitions, performances, and embroidery circles (see González Hernández 2017; Sánchez-Cardona 2021; Tapia de la Fuente 2021b; Ramos 2022; Roldán 2022; Lagarde 2023). These practices – often situated at the intersection of art, feminism and activism – reflect not only political resistance but also collective strategies of coping and remembrance (see Figure 1). Their public resonance underscores the urgency of addressing gender-based violence and its arts-activist counterstrategies, not only academically, but as a political imperative.

As a social psychologist in the field of gender studies, I spent six months in Mexico in 2023 as part of a research fellowship. During this time, I accompanied two feminist collectives – Las Siemprevivas and Fuentes Rojas – in their everyday practices and

Approaching *bordar* as a feminist epistemology

I approach *bordar* (to embroider) not merely as an artistic or symbolic act, but as a feminist epistemology – rooted in embodied experience, collective resistance, and feminist practice. Feminist scholar Maria Belen Tapia de la Fuente (2021b:65) describes embroidery as a form of ‘speaking without words’, engaging with pre-verbal, affective, and relational dimensions of experience. *Bordado* renders emotional, intuitive, and embodied knowledge accessible, functioning as a feminist method of storytelling and situated meaning-making (Pérez-Bustos 2021; Tapia de la Fuente 2021b). *Bordado* thus becomes not only an aesthetic gesture, but also an epistemic counter-practice – one that challenges binary distinctions between mind and body, reason and emotion, and enacts a mode of ‘senti-pensar’ (Fals Borda 2009) – a way of feeling-thinking that interweaves different forms of knowledge. Participating in the *juntanzas* (embroidery circles) as a researcher constitutes a decolonial form of knowledge production, one that disrupts hegemonic, linear, and rationalised academic formats (Tapia de la Fuente 2021b). Collective embroidery emerges as a method for generating affective, situated, embodied, and communal knowledge – it is a form of ‘epistemic rebellion’ (González-Arango, Cuéllar-Barona, Pérez-Bustos, Rivera & Siman 2022:10). Isabel Cristina González-Arango *et al* (2022:10) coined the term ‘prácticas textimoniales’ – a neologism that weaves together text, textile, testimony, and texture – to emphasise the potential of textile practices to generate situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). Such knowledge emerges from specific social, political, and embodied positions, interlacing affect, embodied memory, and collective action into epistemologies grounded in lived experience.

Researching feminicidal violence: A (methodological) challenge

Femicide is – because of its emotional, political, and ethical gravity – one of the most devastating and sensitive topics feminist researchers must confront when engaging with gender-based violence (Radford 2023:42). One of the central challenges when researching feminicidal violence is the notion of absence. When a woman is murdered, no one remains to recount the experience of a violent death. Unlike in groups for survivors of violence – where sharing experiences can become a foundation for solidarity, strength, and healing – the pain caused by femicide often leads to silence among the bereaved (Radford 2023:41-42). In my fieldwork, I spoke with those left behind who actively resist this violence. What has been shared are stories of loss, grief, rage, and resistance – told by mothers, sisters, friends, activists, and NGO workers who fight for justice despite often facing threats, intimidation, and violence themselves.

Femicide produces a void of the unthinkable – its brutal unpredictability resists language, images, and comprehension. How can we engage with and write about such violence without reducing its incomprehensibility – the very element that marks it as uniquely traumatic for those affected? This question shaped my methodological approach, my emotional experience, and my positionality as a researcher in the field. Living and researching in Mexico meant being embedded in a context marked by structural impunity and omnipresent violence. While I did not face the same risks as the women I worked with, I could not remain untouched by the constant atmosphere of fear, injustice, and mourning. Listening to stories of sexual violence, enforced disappearances, and femicides left emotional traces and a deep sense of existential disorientation – this is not just a cultural shock but an existential one. These experiences forced me to confront the ethical and political dilemmas of conducting research from a position of relative privilege and safety.

Against this backdrop, I came to understand the role of a politically engaged researcher not as a choice but as a necessity. I see it as my responsibility to conduct research in a way that aligns with the struggles of my research partners and serves their needs. Building trustful relationships with activists and the families of victims was essential, as was practising trauma-sensitive research, ethical accountability, and methodological flexibility. This commitment required rethinking research as more than academic knowledge production – it became a process of unlearning, of resisting dominant epistemologies, of co-creating knowledge in solidarity, and of using academic tools to support struggles for gender justice. I unlearned the assumption that objectivity and distance are prerequisites for credible research. Instead, I challenged epistemologies that separate knowledge from lived experience and privilege detached observation over situated engagement.

Through autoethnography, I further came to understand my own subjectivity as a tool of knowledge, questioning the privileging of rationality over emotion. By foregrounding how these struggles personally affected me, I aimed to function as a bridge – bringing these issues into my own context, sensitising people to the violence, and visibilising the struggle against it. In this way, I sought to support women's struggles for gender justice and to highlight that this is a global issue. In my own context of Germany, femicide is not even recognised as a legal category, which contributes to its invisibility in law and public discourse. This absence forced me to critically reflect on the silence surrounding gender-based violence in seemingly progressive contexts. At the same time, I engaged in activist practices in Berlin, such as participating in the collective embroidery project *Sangre de mi sangre* (*Blood of my blood*) to make femicides in Germany visible, an initiative inspired by my research partners in Mexico.

Methodological framework

My fieldwork in Mexico was grounded in participant observation, multisensory documentation, and reflexive writing. Drawing on Clifford Geertz (1973:6), I understood myself as an ‘embedded observer’ who both affects and is affected by the field. This required a careful balance between immersion and analytical distance – a particularly demanding task, given the emotional intensity of my research topic and the deep relational ties I developed with research partners. During field interactions, I attempted to listen, understand, empathise and resonate with the experiences of my research partners from Las Siemprevivas and Fuentes Rojas. Furthermore I made notes on my impressions, emotional responses and contextual details, which I then expanded into ‘thick descriptions’, enriching them with interpretive associations (Geertz 1973:5). Alongside fieldnotes, informal conversations and interviews played an important role in closing observational gaps and reflecting on my interpretations. Informal dialogues often emerged organically in moments of shared practice – during demonstrations or embroidery sessions – while formal, semi-structured interviews were conducted in later stages of the fieldwork.

In line with Geertz (1973), I aimed to generate layered, situated interpretations that connect empirical observations with social psychological theoretical frameworks, my research partners’ voices, and reflections on my own position and pre-assumptions. Through iterative coding and memo writing, I identified emerging themes and meaning structures, which I discussed with my research partners from Las Siemprevivas and Fuentes Rojas in the sense of a semi-critical-participatory approach to research (Torre & Fine 2019).

Additionally, I turned to autoethnography as a means of making sense of my own role and emotional responses, using my feelings as a tool to generate knowledge. This introspective method allows me to uncover patterns and dynamics that may be overlooked by conventional research methods, providing a deeper understanding that can resonate with others (Falola 2022). Furthermore, I intend my autoethnography as a feminist and decolonial approach to challenge hegemonic academic traditions that emphasise positivism and demand objectivity and neutrality from research and researchers. These epistemological orientations, while especially influential in many institutions shaped by Euro-American traditions, are not universal and have been increasingly problematised from diverse scholarly perspectives (for example, feminist, decolonial, and critical approaches) (see Haraway 1988; Falola 2022).

Textile activism in Mexico – contextualising violence and *artivismo*

The roots of *artivismo*² (arts-activism) – creative practices as a form of political expression and social engagement – in Mexico trace back to the twentieth century, with the year 1968 marking a pivotal moment. During the student and labour protests, the so-called Gráfica del 68 emerged: artists, students, and teachers from Mexico City's art schools produced prints and posters with direct political messages (Sánchez-Cardona 2021). These works, shaped by a resistant aesthetic, confronted state repression and especially responded to the 2 October massacre at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, where hundreds of peaceful protesters were killed by military and police forces (Sánchez-Cardona 2021).

But art was not only a means of protest in the country's major cities, in Chiapas in the 1990s the uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN; the Zapatistas)³ further transformed the meaning of art and activism. To this day the Zapatistas integrate art – murals, embroidery, performances like *Marcha del silencio* (*Silent march*) and festivals such as *Comparte por la humanidad* (*Share for humanity*) – as an essential expression of resistance rooted in their indigenous cosmovision⁴ (Zagato & Arcos 2017). For the Zapatistas, textiles function as archives of knowledge, whereby the embroidery process itself is understood as an epistemic practice that interweaves body, memory and political positioning (Cuéllar-Barona & Buchely 2022).

Since 2006, Mexico has witnessed over 120,000 enforced disappearances, with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights comparing the situation to a war (Sánchez-Cardona 2021). In this context of structural violence, feminicide, and near-total impunity, artistic interventions have emerged as powerful tools of protest, mourning, and creating collective memory. A central figure in this transformation was poet Javier Sicilia, whose personal loss led to the formation of the *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (*Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity*) and inspired protest campaigns like *No + sangre* (*No more blood*) and *Paremos las balas, pintemos las fuentes* (*Let's stop the bullets, let's paint the fountains*), which symbolically painted public fountains red to denounce state violence. The embroidery collective Fuentes Rojas, one of my research partners, emerged in 2011 from these movements. Their project *Bordando por la paz y la memoria: Una víctima, un pañuelo* (*Embroidering for peace and memory: One victim, one handkerchief*) involves the public embroidery of *pañuelos* (handkerchiefs) – with green thread for victims of enforced disappearance who remain missing, red for those found dead, and purple for victims of feminicide. Names, dates, and messages are stitched with care, turning each *pañuelo* into a textile monument (Gargallo Celentani 2014). For over a decade, the collective has gathered weekly in public squares in Mexico City, transforming them into sites of civic

resistance, community healing, memory work, and solidarity. The disappearance of forty-three students from *Ayotzinapa* in 2014 became another defining moment. Their faces, widely reproduced in artistic interventions, have become iconic symbols of resistance (González Hernández 2017). In response to widespread impunity, the *Movimiento por nuestros desaparecidos* (*Movement for our disappeared*) with over sixty search brigades – mostly led by mothers – has emerged across the country to search for missing loved ones. One symbolic art project born from this context is *Huellas de la memoria* (*Traces of memory*). The project uses donated shoes belonging to disappeared persons as symbolic carriers of memory. Volunteers engrave the personal stories of the missing on the shoes, which are then made into coloured prints and exhibited in galleries and museums (González Hernández 2017).

Feminicides have been part of Mexico's violent landscape for more than 30 years. Time and again, female activists, journalists, and human rights defenders have been murdered. In 2017, Lesvy Berlín Rivera Osorio, a 22-year-old student, was found dead on the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM; National Autonomous University of Mexico). Initially dismissed as suicide, it was framed by authorities as her own fault, as they publicly exposed her personal life in an attempt to blame her for taking her own life – a defamation campaign that sparked widespread protest. It was in the wake of Lesvy's death that the group known as *Las Siemprevivas* came into being. I was present with them during the course of my fieldwork. Under the slogan “It wasn't suicide, it was femicide”, her family, students from the UNAM, and feminist activists demanded justice – eventually succeeding in having her ex-partner convicted and the case reclassified as femicide. The group began organising *juntanzas* – gatherings where women embroider, share stories about the lives of femicide victims, and support each other in the aftermath of violence. The textiles are then carried to protests and shown in exhibitions around the world. Today, Lesvy's case is regarded as one of the most emblematic feminicides in Mexico.

State of the art: Textile as a practice of healing and resistance in Mexico

Fabrics and threads envelop our lives permanently. With them we have spun and spun memories, woven worldviews, mended economies and knowledge, encrypted texts and sewn affections for centuries and centuries (González-Arango *et al* 2022:9).

In the quote, González-Arango *et al* (2022) describe the pervasive presence of textiles in our lives, emphasising both the material and symbolic dimensions: from birth to death,

fabrics physically touch our bodies, while also carrying affective, cultural, and inter-generational meanings. Within feminist movements, collective embroidery is increasingly recognised as a form of public mourning (Olalde 2018; Mérat 2020; Iliná 2022). Katia Olalde (2018) describes this practice as a form of affective subversion, rendering grief visible and political by shifting it from the private into the public sphere. Similarly, Agès Mérat (2020) interprets embroidery as an intimate act of resistance that breaks the boundary between private pain and public denunciation, transforming memory into embodied protest. Multiple scholars further understand embroidery as a feminist act of resistance against gender-based violence and as a political intervention (Parker 1984; Gargallo Celentani 2014; Olalde 2019; Pérez-Bustos *et al* 2019; Tapia de la Fuente 2021b; Estrada 2022; Iliná 2022). The embroidered *pañuelos* become political objects that both dignify lives lost to violence and expose the structural conditions behind those deaths. In doing so, they challenge hegemonic narratives – such as the state’s depersonalising discourse of statistics and silence – and create counter-publics grounded in collective care and political memory (Tapia de la Fuente 2021a). Each embroidered *pañuelo* serves as a textile archive and act of doing-memory through challenging dominant histories and amplifying marginalised voices (Mérat 2020; Colectiva Bordamos por la Paz Córdoba 2022; Estrada 2022).

Auto-ethnographic reflections on embroidery with Fuentes Rojas and Las Siemprevivas

In this autoethnographic reflection, I provide an insight into four textile situations in which I accompanied Fuentes Rojas and/or Las Siemprevivas: 1) the embroidery circles at Coyoacán Square in Mexico City; 2) the demonstration on Mother's Day; 3) the Latin American Embroiderers' Meeting (*Encuentro Latinoamericano de Bordadorxs*); and 4) the vigil for the anniversary of Vero's femicide.

Embroidering with Fuentes Rojas: Trauma, embodiment, stitching

25 April 2023. I'm sitting in the central square of Coyoacán, in Mexico City. The sun filters through the canopy of leaves, and spots of light dance across our knees. It is warm, but under the trees the air remains still and cool. The *pañuelos* hang between the branches (see Figure 2). Next to me sit Alma, Erika, and Maria, members of the collective Fuentes Rojas.⁵ Each of us holds a needle and thread. The movements are small, focused; our hands guide the thread through the fabric like breaths. Red thread on white cloth. Purple

on white. A name. A date. A stitch. Another one. *Bordar* has a meditative, almost ritual quality. In a world often defined by acceleration, interruption, and violence, its slowness and rhythmic repetition create a counter-temporality – a form of embodied resistance that allows space to reconnect with one’s body and emotions (Gargallo Celentani 2014; Mérat 2020; Iliná 2022). ‘Because it’s a slow and very repetitive activity, it helps those who don’t have a strong connection to verbal expression begin to process their pain’, explains Maria (Hernández 2023). An elderly woman sits in silence next to Maria, her shoulders raised, tense. Her hands begin to explore the fabric. The thread moves before the words come. The hands speak – slowly, steadily. Maria recalls,

Not everyone finds it easy to talk about what they feel. And so, in our embroidery collective, it has happened that, when we ask the women to introduce themselves, they start crying, right? And it’s very difficult for them to speak. And yet, they begin to embroider, to focus – and then they slowly start talking to the other women. Almost always, by the end, the quietest ones say: “It really helped me.” It’s like another way of processing feelings through the body (Hernández 2023).

Maria describes how embroidery becomes a form of *memoria corporal* – embodied memory – allowing pain to be processed physically when verbal articulation is inaccessible or overwhelming (see also Olalde 2019; Pérez-Bustos 2021). Especially in cases of trauma, grief, or extreme suffering – which may render speech impossible (Scarry 1985; Hermann 1993) – artistic, material practices like *bordado* can enable witnessing without requiring full verbalisation (Olalde 2019; Pérez-Bustos 2021). Arts-based approaches to trauma have long highlighted the reparative potential of material and sensory processes in healing and witnessing (see Laub & Podell 1995; Bennett 2005; Ettinger 2006). As Dori Laub and Daniel Podell (1995) argue, such expression does not aim to “represent” trauma but to make it felt. According to Jill Bennett (2005), artistic practise – such as *bordar* – can not only bear witness but also contribute to communication about violence and loss. But in contrast to institutional settings, such as courts or government offices – where survivors are compelled to recount their stories repeatedly, often in hostile environments (Herrmann 1993; Sippel, Gawlista & Mlodoch 2025) – embroidery offers a space without interrogation, without pressure. Maria highlights: ‘It feels violent to insist: “Tell me, what happened? How did your daughter disappear?”’ (Hernández 2023). Instead, the *juntanzas* create a gentle, self-determined space of emotional expression through embodied practice, thus *bordar* becomes a bridge: between the individual and the collective, between silence and articulation. The *juntanzas* are spaces where *cuidado colectivo* (collective care) arises – not through questioning or explanation, but through shared movement, attention, and gesture (Estrada 2022). The stitching itself becomes a medium of mutual recognition, of affective solidarity, of a silent language of grief that resonates across bodies (Olalde 2019; Mérat 2020).

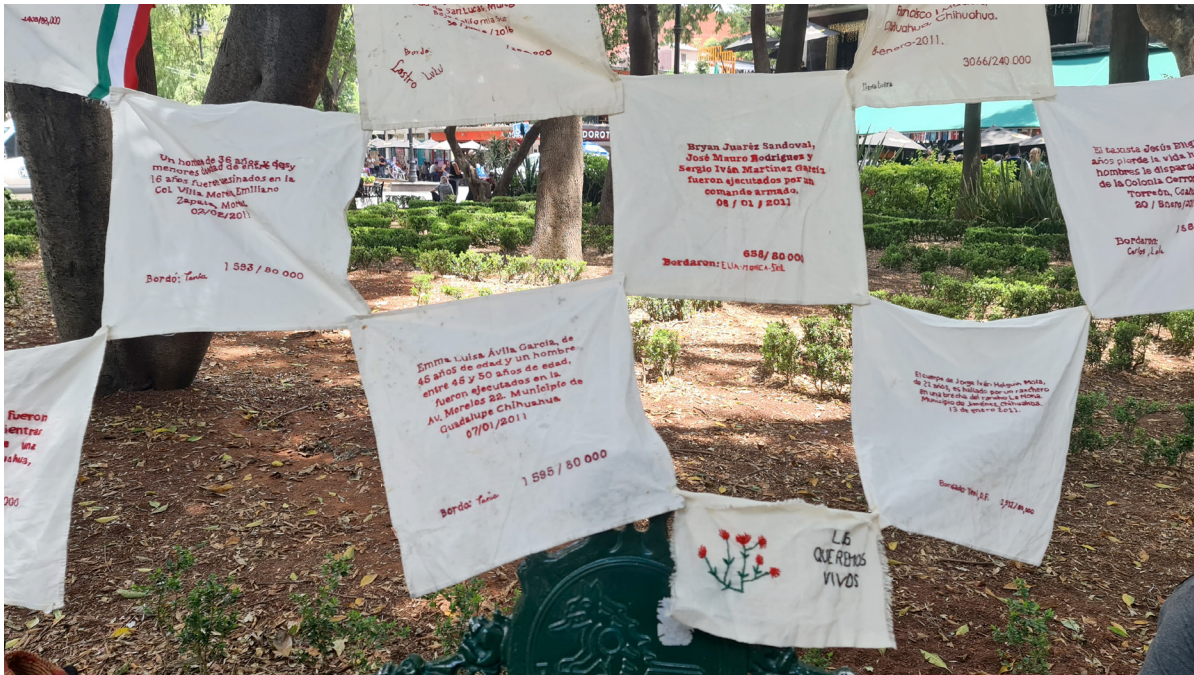


FIGURE **Nº 2**



Fuentes Rojas, 2023. *Intervention de bordar in Coyoacán, Bordados*. Mexico City. Photograph by Charlotta Sippel. Courtesy of Charlotta Sippel.

Becoming loud, becoming visible – on the streets with Fuentes Rojas and Las Siemprevivas

10 May 2023 – Mother’s Day in Mexico. We are walking. Shoulder to shoulder. Step by step. The mothers walk in front, carrying photos before them – framed faces, faded by the sun. Their children. Their disappeared. In Mexico, it is often the mothers who lead the search for the disappeared or fight for justice for their murdered daughters – turning their grief into a powerful form of resistance (Estrada 2022; Iliná 2022). “¿Dónde están?” (Where are they?) a woman calls out through a megaphone. We respond, “¡Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos!” (Alive they took them, alive we want them!) Fabric banners flutter above our heads, embroidered with names, dates, and wounds. The *pañuelos* hang from our shoulders – some tied around necks, others across backs. On one cloth I read, “Ni Una Más” (Not One Woman More). The *pañuelos* make the violence visible; they give names and faces to the disappeared and murdered women (see figure 3). They are an expression of the relentless search for truth and justice – while simultaneously denouncing the state’s complicity in these crimes (see Parker 1984; Gargallo Celentani 2014; Pérez-Bustos *et al* 2019; Olalde 2019; Tapia de la Fuente 2021b; Estrada 2022; Iliná 2022).



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Las Siemprevivas, 2023. *Demonstration, Bordados*. Mexico City. Photograph by Charlotta Sippel. Courtesy of Charlotta Sippel.

In this way, *bordar* becomes a public intervention – not aimed at reconciliation, but at rupture: rupture with impunity, with silence, with injustice (field notes 2023). This rebellious dimension is echoed in the phrase, “Los hilos no olvidan y las agujas no perdonan” (Threads do not forget and needles do not forgive) that I hear through the loudspeaker. Every embroidery is a claim to justice – not only for the victim, but also as a demand addressed to society at large, explains Karina, a member of Fuentes Rojas, to me:

I cry out for memory, truth, and justice. That the state and society do not forget who they were. That they do not forget they were young, that they were doing so much good for this country – and still, they were killed (Arellano 2023).

A woman beside me has tears streaming down, but she keeps walking, holding her daughter’s portrait tightly in front of her. This demonstration is a refusal to forget. It is a living memory. A collective body that demands truth – with fabric and with voice (field notes 2023).

Drums begin to beat – slowly, dully, like a pounding heart. Then faster. The rhythm carries us through the streets. It is like a breath that connects us. We occupy public space – we are present. Right in the midst of everyday life: in the heart of the neighbourhood, where

tourists visit the city's attractions, where children play, and people go about their shopping. This is a fundamental aspect of embroidering: reclaiming plazas, sidewalks, and streets as spaces for collective stitching and demands for justice (Gargallo Celentani 2014; Tapia de la Fuente 2021b). Each *bordado* carries the story of a person – a victim of femicide or forced disappearance – brought into the centre of public life to make them visible and to share the labour of grief, memory, and resistance. As Doreen Massey (1994) reminds us, space is never neutral – it is shaped by power, and who belongs in it is always contested. Some vendors stepped out of their shops and tried to push us away, claiming we were scaring off the tourists. Also, the police have tried to interfere. However, collectives such as Las Siemprevivas and Fuentes Rojas remain steadfast in their commitment to taking *bordados* to the streets on dates such as Mothers' Day, 10 May; International Women's Day, 8 March; or the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August; and many more throughout the year.

Encuentro Latinoamericano de Bordadorxs: Counter-aesthetics and textile testimonies

17 May 2023. The Encuentro Latinoamericano de Bordadorxs (Latin American Gathering of Embroiderers) is taking place at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) and collectives from across Latin America – among them Las Siemprevivas and Fuentes Rojas – have come together to embroider, to tell stories, to make visible the violence that is too often forgotten, silenced, or denied (see Figure 4). I look at the *bordados*. Many have travelled from afar – from El Salvador, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina. Each one tells a story. Lilian, a member of Fuentes Rojas, highlights that their *pañuelos* are not displayed as aesthetic objects in the MUAC:

There's an intense debate about whether the embroideries are artworks, artistic pieces, or even crafts, right? From the perspective of our collective, we propose that they can be considered politicised or politicising objects – more about citizen construction than about art (Correa 2023).

This notion of citizen construction is intimately linked to the political dimension of embroidery. Like visual art, *bordado* carries an emotional force – yet, distinct from narrative or linguistic forms, its power lies in its immediate, embodied, and sensory impact. It fosters what Bennett (2005:7) refers to as an 'empathic vision' – a space of feeling and understanding beyond cognitive comprehension. In this sense the *bordados* not only bear witness to violence and loss, but also cultivate forms of political articulation rooted in affective connection and collective responsibility (Bennett 2005). This shared responsibility extends into the realm of memory, raising questions about who is

remembered, whose lives are deemed grievable, and who is worthy to be mourned in public (see Butler 2004). Drawing on Michelle Foucault's (1977) concept of counter-memory, I understand the *bordados* as textile testimonies that disrupt dominant narratives of violence and victimhood, centering silenced experiences and affective traces (see Gargallo Celentani 2014; Colectiva Bordamos por la Paz Córdoba 2022). Through stitching pain into fabric, marginalised groups – especially women – politicise intimate memory and refuse official histories that erase their perspectives (Mérat 2020; Estrada 2022). As such, the exhibition becomes a feminist counter-archive: grief and resistance are woven into tactile memory, reclaiming what is sayable, visible, and knowable.

Embroidery is not only the subject of the exhibition, it is also a central practice of the gathering itself. In a context of extreme violence, social precarity, and state absence, it becomes a radical act of dissent: a gesture of political care and aesthetic refiguration that makes violence visible across the Americas, resists its normalisation, and invites shared mourning and solidarity. The event is more than a meeting – it is a “*Punto de Cruce*”: a crossing point, a moment where threads intersect, stories meet, and movements connect. Together we laugh and cry. The voices of the mothers, the searchers, the disappeared, the murdered – they are all here. In the fabric. In the room. In us.



FIGURE N° 4



Los 43, 2023. Exhibition of *bordados* at MUAC. Mexico City. Photograph by Charlotta Sippel. Courtesy of Charlotta Sippel.

Humanising the victims of feminicide with Las Siemprevivas: Vigil for Vero

24 May 2023. The sun is setting, and the park slowly begins to fill. Some bring blankets, others thermoses of coffee. A few carefully laid embroidered *pañuelos* on the ground – one bears Vero's name, stitched in purple. In the centre: a small altar. Photos of Vero and other victims of feminicide, flowers, candles, corn, fruit. A woman lights a fire; it crackles softly. We are here to hold a vigil and *juntanza* on the anniversary of Vero's death – a collective act of remembrance organised by her family, loved ones, and feminist activists, who gathered to mourn, honour, and demand justice together. And we embroider. Quietly. Each of us with our fabric, our needle, our thread. One embroidery piece, created by the family of the murdered Vero – members of Las Siemprevivas – bears the following words (see Figure 5):

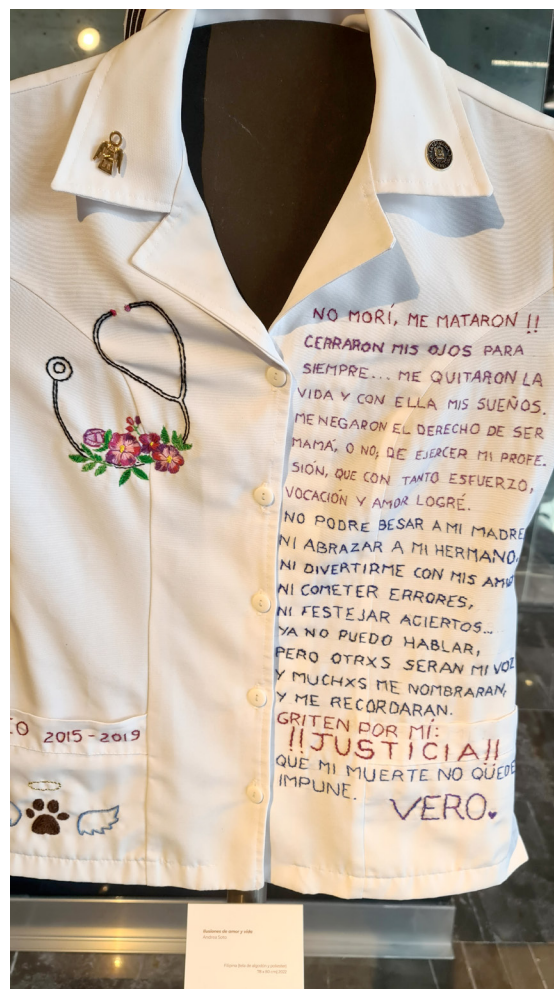


FIGURE **Nº 5**



Las Siemprevivas, 2023. *Bordado Vero, Bordado*. Mexico City. Photograph by Charlotta Sippel. Courtesy of Charlotta Sippel.

I didn't die, they killed me!!! They closed my eyes forever ... They took my life and with it my dreams. They denied me the right to be a mother or not. To practice my profession, to which I dedicated myself with so much effort, vocation, and love. I can no longer kiss my mother. I can no longer hug my brother. No more having fun with my friends. No more making mistakes or celebrating successes ... I can no longer speak, but others will be my voice, and many will call me by name and remember me. Shout for me: Justice!!! May my death not go unpunished. – Vero

This powerful embroidered text articulates what was lost – not only a life, but also the possibility of a future: a profession, relationships, everyday joys, human presence. Through its vivid and personal language, the embroidery resists the dehumanising logic of institutional narratives that often reduce victims to case numbers, forensic files, or nameless statistics. Unlike official discourse or media coverage – which often sensationalises or implicitly blames the victim – this piece reclaims agency and voice. Vero is not portrayed as passive or abstract, but as a woman with desires, connections, and dreams. Her words insist on dignity, on remembrance, on justice. In this way, the embroidery performs an act of dignification – a refusal to allow her life to be defined solely by the violence that ended it.

Sitting around the flames and remembering together carries healing qualities: one friend recalls how Vero used to dance, another shares a quiet memory that made them laugh. We pass around food: sweet bread, coffee, tea, how someone always brings fruit, someone else flowers or a candle. Sometimes we sing. Sometimes we fall into silence that feels full rather than empty. We share warmth – not only physical, but emotional. These are not moments of sorrow alone – they are also spaces of connection, of care, of resistance shaped by tenderness. What we create together is more than embroidering, more than a ritual of mourning – it is a living practice of collective care, a form of what Sara Ahmed (2004:119) might call 'affective proximity' or 'affective community': being alongside one another, not to act, but to accompany. Sofía, a member of Las Siemprevivas says, 'It may seem like we're just embroidering – but we bring food, we celebrate birthdays, we talk about our week. It's about being present' (Vargas 2023:128). Julia, another member of Las Siemprevivas, even describes the *juntanzas* as 'celebrations of life', where body, hands, and mind become tools to resist violence through creating, connecting, and sharing; 'Despite everything, our slogan is: go through the pain, organise our anger, and defend our joy' (López 2023:131). She adds, 'What we are asking for are spaces – where we can come together, see each other, hug, laugh, cry, and celebrate life' (López 2023:51). The *juntanzas* embody a feminist practice of care – grounded in attentiveness, mutual responsibility, and relational connection. In these circles, healing does not follow a linear path but unfolds through shared vulnerability, through the strength of being together in fragility – a form of what Laura Berlant (2011:96) refers to as 'slow intimacy' that nourishes and sustains. In the morning, when the light returns, the *pañuelos* are still there, lying on

the ground. The smoke clings to our hair. The voices echo in our heads. And Vero – she has not come back. But she was here. All night long.

Conclusion

As a manual, collective, embodied, and artistic practice, embroidery becomes a powerful medium for articulating “the unspeakable”, enabling the expression of experiences of loss and trauma and facilitating shared mourning. The slow, repetitive rhythm of stitching supports emotional processing when words are inaccessible or overwhelming. In this way, embroidery builds affective communities and opens up spaces of empathy – fostering connection, mutual care, solidarity, and understanding beyond cognitive comprehension. Practised in plazas and exhibited in museums, embroidery becomes a feminist intervention



FIGURE **Nº 9**



Las Siemprevivas, 2023. *Abii Vive*, *Bordado*. Mexico City. Photograph by Charlotta Sippel. Courtesy of Charlotta Sippel.

that transforms public spaces into landscapes of resistance and remembrance. It counters the erasure of victims of feminicide and disappearance and creates conditions where personal grief is rendered collective testimony. Each piece contributes to a textile archive that honours victims' lives – reclaiming their dignity and humanity in the face of dehumanising state logics and media narratives that reduce them to case numbers or blame them for their own deaths (see Figure 6). In sum, *bordar* is a deeply political, affective, and artistic practice. It politicises the private, materialises and centres marginalised voices, creates spaces of participation and (counter-)memory, and subverts dominant epistemic and narrative orders in creative, resistant ways (Parker 1984; Olalde 2019; Pérez-Bustos *et al* 2019; Tapia de la Fuente 2021b; González-Arango *et al* 2022). In this sense, embroidery does not resolve but rather embraces the central challenge of engaging with feminicidal and disappearance-related violence: how can we write about and represent such violence without reducing its incomprehensibility – the very element that makes it uniquely traumatic for those affected? By turning silence into thread, grief into collective testimony, and memory into shared material practice, *bordar* opens one path toward addressing this dilemma.

Notes

1. Following Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos (2023), I use the term femicide to refer not only to the killing of women because of their gender, but also to the structural dimension of such violence, which includes state responsibility through impunity, neglect, or failure to protect women.
2. Key figures that have shaped feminist *artivismo* in Mexico are Mónica Mayer, Lorena Wolffer and Cerrucha, among others. Mónica Mayer, a pioneer of feminist art since the 1970s, has explored gender roles, violence, and social inequality through participatory and collaborative art (Sánchez-Cardona 2021). Since the 1990s, Lorena Wolffer has used performance art to denounce gender-based violence and question dominant social narratives. Since the 2000s, Cerrucha (2025), through collaborative art projects with survivors, activists, and professionals, addresses the intersection of gendered violence and structural injustice, using art to create spaces for connection and collective resistance.
3. The Zapatistas (EZLN – Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) are an indigenous liberation movement in Mexico that, since the 1990s, has been active in the southern state of Chiapas, advocating for Indigenous rights, social justice, autonomy, and anti-capitalist alternatives to the state.
4. Cosmovision refers to indigenous worldviews that integrate spiritual, ecological, social, and ancestral dimensions of existence and shape how communities understand their relationship to the earth, to others, and to the cosmos.
5. All names of research partners have been pseudonymised.

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