

Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs

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On December 10, 2006, just a few days after taking office, Mexican President Felipe Calderón's security cabinet announced the commencement of Operativo Conjunto Michoacán (Joint Operation Michoacán). The next day, members of the military, the navy, and the federal police were sent to the state of Michoacán to fight the drug cartels in coordination with local authorities. This operation was the first step of the federal security strategy—popularly known as the Mexican war on drugs—that Calderón would maintain until the end of his term. Ever since Operativo Conjunto Michoacán began, the inhabitants of numerous regions across the country have been exposed or subjected to acts of violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. By the end of Calderón's tenure, his security strategy was responsible for an estimated 120,000 deaths and 20,000 disappearances. Although the current president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, declared the war on drugs was officially over on January 30, 2019, the current situation as of January 2021 has not significantly improved.

In this article, I examine the collaboration schemes that were established within the framework of the *Iniciativa Bordando por la Paz y la Memoria: una Víctima, un Pañuelo* (Embroidering for Peace and Memory Initiative: One Victim, One Handkerchief, hereafter EPI). EPI was a participatory project established during the summer of 2011 that by the end of Calderón's presidential term had connected volunteers around the world. Participants were to perform an intervention in public space on December 1, 2012—the same day Calderón handed over office to his successor Enrique Peña Nieto. This intervention was conceptualized as a *memorial ciudadano* (citizen memorial),¹ and consisted of a display of numerous embroidered handkerchiefs

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1 In the context of mobilization against Calderón's security strategy, the term *memorial ciudadano* was used to refer to a bottom-up form of memory-making that opposed the Mexican's state discourse

hung from clotheslines across Mexico City's main square (popularly known as the Zócalo). As the EPI's subtitle indicates, each of these handkerchiefs was designed to commemorate a single person who had disappeared or been killed. All handkerchiefs followed the same design, which evoked the plaques found at the memorial sites for victims of genocide, terrorist attacks, or armed conflicts.² The stitching consisted of written transcriptions of newspaper reports of the murder cases.³ Neither the crime scenes nor the victims were visually depicted on these embroidered handkerchiefs. Rather, the handkerchiefs usually reported how the person had been killed or described how the body was discovered without further commentary on surrounding events. Volunteer participants stitched the majority of these handkerchiefs in temporary workshops set up in parks and public squares. The organizers of these embroidery sessions provided all necessary materials and a list of murder cases so that interested passersby could spontaneously join the project for however long they wished. The purpose of this citizen memorial was to bring an estimate of the human cost of Calderón's security strategy into tangible, physical space. The memorial that would be performed on December 1, 2012 would take time to traverse and would thereby encourage participants and passersby to realize the human cost of the war on drugs in a more concrete sense than is possible from reports alone.

A significant proportion of those affected by violence in Mexico are from groups or regions that have historically been subjected to structural violence and marginalized by the construction of the Mexican modern state. The cultural activists who developed the EPI in Mexico City, the hegemonic center of the country, were aware of the connection between economic disparity and increased vulnerability. That is, to put it in Judith Butler's terms, EPI

on the fight against organized crime. Furthermore, *memorial ciudadano* is how EPI's developers presented this collective action in their call to the protest that took place on December 1, 2012. Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), "1 de diciembre. Presentación de los pañuelos realizados por todxs, en el corazón de México," Facebook, last modified October 10, 2012, 07:01, accessed November 1, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/notes/fuen-tes-rojas/1%C2%BAde-diciembre-presentaci%C3%B3n-de-los-pan%C3%B1ue-los-realizados-por-todxs-en-el-coraz%C3%B3n-d/361873670567877>.

2 The connection between these embroidered handkerchiefs and plaques is developed further in Katia Olalde, *Una víctima, un pañuelo: Bordado y acción colectiva contra la violencia en México* (Mexico City: RED Mexicana de Estudios de los Movimientos Sociales, 2019), 169–173.

3 When the EPI was launched, the group used a list of murder cases collected from the press during a civilian body count that began in 2010 and was called Menos Días Aquí (Fewer Days Here). See *Menos Días Aquí* (blog), <http://menosdiasaqui.blogspot.com/>. It is worth noting that this same list was used in another protest, which took place in April and May 2011 and was called Action#2 Enveloppe vide (Empty Envelope). Here, protesters sent letters to President Calderón on behalf of murder victims. See Ciudadanos por la paz en México, "Action #2 Enveloppe vide," *Ciudadanos por la paz en México*, n.d., <https://ciudadanosxlapaz.wordpress.com/accion-sobre-vacio/>.

activists were aware of the “differential allocation of precarity.”⁴ Activists therefore sought to align their support for relatives of the victims of the war on drugs with “the social forces that remain mobilized across the country defending their rights,”⁵ and with “all the citizens who, not belonging to any organization, fight day after day to maintain a dignified life, within a system that imposes corruption, greed, inequality, lack of democracy, and the loss of rights in every field.”⁶

Drawing on a transcultural approach, by which I mean a focus on multi-sited interactions, objects, and practices,⁷ I argue that the EPI’s developers’ expectation of promoting an ethics of nonviolence by means of hand embroidery is intertwined with the *longue durée* history of westernization that began in the late fifteenth century when the Spanish and Portuguese empires began to expand overseas.⁸ Together, the transcultural and *longue durée* approaches will allow me to demonstrate that the ethico-political stance that the EPI’s embroideries convey finds some of its roots in the *mestizaje* (miscegenation) and the subalternation of indigenous peoples that followed the arrival of the Spanish colonizers.

The foundations of my argument are, first, that what we do and the way we do it reflect the principles upon which we act, and, second, that the things we preserve for the future show the younger generations who we were (or who we meant to be).⁹ I will therefore look into a set of collectively stitched handkerchiefs that I consider to be the most eloquent and tangible manifestation of the ethico-political stance from which the EPI emerged. I will suggest that this set of handkerchiefs—commemorating murder victims and worked on in a

4 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 3.

5 “Las fuerzas sociales que permanecen movilizadas a lo largo y ancho del país, en defensa de sus derechos.” Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), “Paremos las balas, pintemos las fuentes: Manifiesto público,” Facebook, last modified April 29, 2011, 06:51, last accessed October 15, 2013, <http://www.facebook.com/notes/fuentes-rojas/paremos-las-balas-pintemos-las-fuentes-manifiesto-p%C3%BAblico/105052549583325>. One of the social forces mentioned in this manifesto is the Zapatista uprising.

6 “Todos los ciudadanos sin organización que luchan día a día por mantener una vida digna, en medio de un sistema que impone la corrupción, la avaricia, la desigualdad, la falta de democracia y la pérdida de derechos en todos los ámbitos.” Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), “Manifiesto.”

7 Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna, “Understanding Transculturalism. Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in Conversation,” in *Transcultural Modernisms*, ed. Model House Research Group (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 22–33, 29.

8 Serge Gruzinski, *What Time is it There? America and Islam at the Dawn of Modern Times*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 16. See also Serge Gruzinski, *Las cuatro partes del mundo: Historia de una mundialización* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010), 86–87.

9 Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (Spring–Summer 1995): 125–133.

relay scheme involving members of the public—is a material consolidation of an attempt to put into practice the democratic principles of liberty and equality for all. I will also suggest that the way in which the EPI's developers conceived of collaboration was based on indigenous, communal forms of organization. This set of handkerchiefs was embroidered and displayed throughout 2011–2013 during the activities organized by the EPI's developers, and later by the Fuentes Rojas Collective (Red Fountains Collective), a group that remained engaged with the EPI after a breakaway section left the initiative between August and September 2011 in order to establish the Plataforma de Arte y Cultura (the Platform of Art and Culture) within the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, MPJD). As I will explain in the following section, the MPJD was a social movement for victims' relatives that emerged in early May 2011.

In addition to this set of handkerchiefs, I will pay attention to a second group of primary materials: the public statements and calls for action issued by developers of the EPI. I draw on these documents to argue that participation in the EPI was envisioned as a means to promote the critical exercise of citizenship. These statements were at first issued exclusively in newspapers and later posted on the Facebook profile page “Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las Balas).”¹⁰ As one can glean from the EPI's open call for participation,¹¹ embroidering handkerchiefs to commemorate the victims of the war on drugs was envisioned as a means to urge needleworkers and passersby to reflect critically about the humanitarian crisis precipitated by Calderón's security strategy and to consider what they as citizens could collectively do to address the situation. As the Fuentes Rojas collective states: “Our aim is to strengthen citizenry as a collective through co-responsibility and encounters between people.”¹² In light of this assertion, and given that the December 1 protest was conceived as a *memorial ciudadano*, I will argue that the EPI was not only envisioned as a way to raise awareness but also as a call for the critical exercise of citizenship.

Furthermore, I will make the case that the EPI's understanding of citizenship evolved during the course of the project. During the earliest phase of the EPI, the critical exercise of citizenship meant taking part in the political struggle against the federal government's security strategy. In other words, the EPI's idea of citizenship during this earliest phase involved fighting for

10 Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las Balas), accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/fuentes.rojas.5>.

11 Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), “1 de diciembre.”

12 “Nuestro fin es fortalecer la ciudadanía como colectivo a través de la corresponsabilidad y el encuentro entre personas.” Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), “1 de diciembre.” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author's.

the possibility to effectively exercise the democratic rights vested in national citizenry. During subsequent phases of the EPI, however, encouraging critical citizenship mostly involved raising awareness of the humanitarian crisis in Mexico and fostering a sense of sympathy and compassion for the victims. Here, the idea of citizenship became more diffuse and closer to the concept of global citizenship, a notion that is informed by the “cosmopolitan ideal of equal concern for all human beings” and the general principles of interconnectedness and interdependence.¹³ I refer to this second meaning of citizenship as more diffuse because global citizenship is not a legally binding concept but rather an aspirational ethical framework developed to face the challenges posed by cultural and religious diversity in many of the *émigré* societies in Europe, the USA, and Australia.¹⁴

I will claim that in the earliest stage of the EPI, the call for the critical exercise of citizenship was informed most prominently by indigenous communities and community resistance movements against accumulation by dispossession¹⁵ in Latin America. In the EPI’s subsequent stages, however, this call was nurtured by the historical connection between hand embroidery and an ideal of femininity grounded in Christian moral virtue. By inquiring into the meaning of the concept of community in the Latin American context, I will posit that while Mexico is well-known for its traditional garments and colorful textile handicrafts, the imprint of indigenous knowledge and experience does not manifest within the framework of the EPI in the form of textile designs and schemas associated with cultural identities or folklore but rather emerges in the implementation of a relay collaboration scheme inspired by communal polities. Furthermore, whilst the connection between embroidery, an idealized femininity, and a religious moral virtue grounded in Christianity might at first sound too Western to be applied to the Mexican

13 Cristina Lafont, *Global Governance and Human Rights* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2012), 51.

14 Fethi Mansouri, Amelia Johns, and Vince Marotta, “Critical Global Citizenship: Contextualizing Citizenship and Globalisation,” *Journal of Citizenship and Globalisation Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–9; 2–3.

15 David Harvey states that “the processes that Marx, following Adam Smith, referred to as ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ accumulation” persist to this day. “Since it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ ... [Harvey] substitute[s] these terms by the concept of ‘accumulation by dispossession.’” The forms in which accumulation by dispossession takes place nowadays “include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade and usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system as radical means of primitive accumulation.” David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 143–145.

context, examining the transcultural history of hand embroidery will allow me to show that needlework instruction, envisioned as a way to foster moral virtue among women, has played a role in gender differentiation in Latin America since the colonial period.

“We” and “they” during Calderón’s presidency

Calderón’s security strategy shared certain components with other wars on drugs, such as a communication campaign that criminalized victims of violence while presenting the exercise of force as a legitimate state endeavor aimed at securing the wellbeing of families. One of the slogans the Mexican public became accustomed to hearing during this period was “Para que la droga no llegue a tus hijos” (so that drugs do not reach your children).¹⁶ Fear of social stigma, together with the threat of reprisal and a lack of trust in the justice system, prevented a significant number of relatives of victims from disclosing their experiences, reporting their cases to authorities, or following up on cases even when a report had been made.

Although some civilian organizations and groups of relatives of victims were already advancing proposals to address the harm caused by killings and disappearances as early as 2008, it was not until April 2011 that the issue gained importance within public debates. This was prompted, in part, by the murder of the son of prominent poet and journalist Javier Sicilia. Unlike the majority of relatives of victims, Sicilia’s public status allowed him to uphold his son’s innocence and brought him the social support necessary to publicly condemn the federal government’s disregard of the harm that this so-called war inflicted on civilians. Sicilia organized public protests and peaceful walks in the weeks following the discovery of his son’s body, opening a space where the voices of relatives of victims could be heard both by government officials and by Mexican society at large. Furthermore, these public gatherings offered relatives of victims the opportunity to meet, express their outrage, and grieve together. The gatherings encouraged participants to join forces and organize themselves; they did so under the name *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, hereafter MPJD).¹⁷

From 2007 onwards, Mexico descended into a humanitarian crisis. The intensity of the resulting violence varied significantly across regions. Mexico City was not among the most affected areas, and as a resident of the capital myself at the time I would say that many people in the megalopolis in 2011

16 See M. A. Bastenier, “La guerra de Felipe Calderón,” *El País*, March 24, 2010, accessed February 17, 2021, https://elpais.com/diario/2010/03/24/internacional/1269385204_850215.html.

17 See Kristin Bricker, “Mexico’s Drug War Victims Find Their Voice in Massive Silent March,” *Upside Down World*, May 10, 2011, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://upside-downworld.org/archives/mexico/mexicos-drug-war-victims-find-their-voice-in-massive-silent-march/>.

felt the war on drugs was taking place in a foreign country. It was in this context that a group of artists and civilians, though not relatives of victims themselves, decided to develop forms of creative protest to support the MPJD. The group's first intervention saw them pour red ink in a number of fountains located in parks and public squares in Mexico City as a way to symbolize blood seeping into clandestine graves. At this time, the group signed their calls for participation and public statements as *Iniciativa Paremos las Balas, Pintemos las Fuentes* (Stop the Bullets, Paint the Fountains Initiative, hereafter SBI). Their second project was embroidering handkerchiefs to commemorate the victims of the war on drugs.¹⁸

Although some members of the SBI began to embroider handkerchiefs and to display their work in public protests in June 2011, the establishment of periodical temporary workshops in open spaces did not begin in earnest until August of that year. The first such workshop was a weekly embroidery session in the Jardín Centenario (Centenary Garden) in Coyoacán, Mexico City.¹⁹ Throughout 2012, calls on social media to participate in EPI's December 1 protest were highly successful. Consequently, many more embroidery sessions were organized in several cities throughout Mexico and abroad. Ever since, dozens of handkerchiefs commemorating victims of the war on drugs in Mexico have been stitched in different regions of the world, have traveled across borders to be displayed on clotheslines at public protests, and have been presented in exhibitions and at cultural events organized before and after the December 1 protest.²⁰

Alongside the MPJD, the EPI's developers aimed to attract the attention of Mexican society and to encourage everyone to listen to the stories told by relatives of the victims. I would suggest that the target audience of this group of cultural producers were sections of the Mexican population who believed that the war on drugs only targeted criminals and they as law-abiding citizens need not be concerned. This split between a "we," who should be relatively safe, and a "they," who were supposedly experiencing the consequences

18 Although there is continuity from the SBI to the EPI, not all of the people involved in the first initiative took part in the second. I therefore use the term "EPI's developers" to refer to the members of the SBI who took part in the EPI's early phase and the new participants who join the group when the embroidery sessions started.

19 Public protests include rallies, hunger strikes, and public gatherings where the embroidered handkerchiefs are displayed, usually hanging from clotheslines. Embroidery sessions refer to the ephemeral workshops where the handkerchiefs are embroidered.

20 I use the acronym EPI as an umbrella term to refer to all the groups and individuals who have embroidered handkerchiefs commemorating the victims of the war on drugs in Mexico throughout the last decade. When I refer to the EPI's developers, I therefore only mean the people who were involved in the EPI's first stage. As I mentioned earlier, only some of the EPI's developers were also part of the SBI.

of their own unlawful actions, prevented the acknowledgement of murders and disappearances as matters of public interest. Blurring this distinction between “we” and “they,” a distinction that could also be considered in terms of “grievable” and “ungrievable” lives,²¹ was one of the MPJD’s key endeavors and a goal that the EPI wished to support. Sicilia used the phrase “reconstructing the social fabric” to refer to this key task.²² This metaphor was a perfect fit at the time when the EPI was launched, something that becomes apparent in the following excerpt of one of the EPI’s calls for participation:

In Mexico, civil society is immersed in a state of national emergency and it is necessary to build diverse mechanisms, through actions and projects, aimed at mending the social fabric. We know that THESE TYPES OF ACTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH to TRANSFORM the government or the criminals. Still, we are interested in sharing with citizens at large, thereby generating change, and new relations grounded on a view of collectivity. A gesture to build together with the other(s).²³

Press articles, blogs, and social media posts about the EPI repeatedly made use of the metaphor “mending the social fabric,” though without much further elaboration. Meanwhile, academic literature has assumed rather than

21 Butler, *Frames of War*, 22; Katia Olalde “Marcos de duelo en la guerra contra el narcotráfico,” *Política y Cultura* 44 (2015): 57–78; Olalde, *Una víctima*, 267–344.

22 In his “Open Letter to Politicians and Criminals,” which he published a few days after the killing of his son, Sicilia wrote: “Estamos hasta la madre de ustedes, políticos ..., porque en sus luchas por el poder han desgarrado el tejido de la nación.” (We are fed up with you, politicians ... because in your struggles for power you have torn the fabric of the nation.) Javier Sicilia, “Estamos hasta la madre... (Carta abierta a políticos y criminales),” *Proceso*, April 2, 2011, accessed October 19, 2013, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=266990>. A month later, during the Walk-Rally for Peace with Justice and Dignity (Caminata-Marcha por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad) from Cuernavaca, Morelos, to Mexico City on May 5, 2011, Sicilia asserted that the MPJD was “in favor of a citizen pact to begin the reconstruction of the social fabric that has been broken by violence.” (Original: Estamos ... por un pacto ciudadano para iniciar la reconstrucción del tejido social, que se ha roto por la violencia.) Rubicela Morelos and Alfonso Urrutia, “No queremos derribar al gobierno, sino reconstruir el tejido social: Sicilia,” *La Jornada*, May 6, 2011, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2011/05/06/politica/002n1pol>.

23 “En México la sociedad civil se encuentra inmersa en un estado de emergencia nacional y es necesario construir mecanismos diversos a través de acciones y proyectos para resarcir el tejido social. Sabemos que NO BASTA ESTE TIPO DE ACCIONES PARA CAMBIAR el gobierno o la delincuencia, sin embargo, lo que nos interesa es compartir con la ciudadanía y ahí sí generar un cambio, nuevas relaciones a partir de una visión de colectividad. Un gesto de construir junto con el otro(s).” Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), “Bordando por la paz y la memoria. Una víctima, un pañuelo,” Facebook, last modified September 10, 2012, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://www.facebook.com/notes/fuentes-rojas/bordando-por-la-paz-y-la-memoria-una-v%C3%ADctima-un-pa%C3%B1uelo/350825251672719>.

questioned the idea that embroidery draws people closer.²⁴ This suggests to me that the image of “mending the social fabric” has generally been considered an accurate description of the relationships established among embroiderers and of the expected effects these interactions may have in the context of the war on drugs. Based on my research, I would say that EPI developers envisioned stitching in the open air together with people that one does not necessarily know as a means to encourage participants to be friendly to one another and to develop compassion for the people most affected by the war on drugs, who in this case are often seen as distant strangers. From this perspective, the metaphor of “mending the social fabric” resonates in concrete terms with the group’s hope that embroidery would help participants counteract the selfishness and indifference many people develop in a social reality that is marked by violence and, more importantly, that it would encourage the embroiderers to rediscover a shared common ground temporarily concealed by insecurity, impunity, and mistrust.

However, as the *long durée* approach demonstrates, the construction of the modern Mexican nation state was marked by social inequalities, racialization, and classism. It would therefore be overly simplistic to suggest that Calderón’s militarization was the single cause of the upsurge of violence that the country has seen over the last fourteen years. While the metaphor of “mending the social fabric” resonates with a general yearning for a lost sense of unity, I wonder: at which moment in the history of the country we might find the “social fabric” that we as Mexicans would seek to restore? The downside of this metaphor is that it encourages us to overlook the historical conditions leading to Calderón’s decision to prioritize the fight against drug cartels, and to disregard the longstanding process within which some groups have been celebrated as assets to Mexican society and other groups construed as liabilities. According to this distinction, the former group deserve attention and care from the state and Mexican society, whereas the latter are disregarded and dismissed. I therefore argue that we should move away from the metaphor “mending the social fabric” and the essentialism it invokes. To move away from this presents us with the opportunity to question the anchors of our sense of belonging and shared responsibility and, even more importantly, to examine the way these anchors inform the struggles of the citizenry to effectively exercise their democratic rights. More broadly, such a non-essentialist approach allows me to

24 See for instance Francesca Gargallo Celentani, *Bordados de paz, memoria y justicia: Un proceso de visibilización* (Guadalajara: Grafisma, 2014); Francesca Gargallo Celentani, “Historia, estética y resistencia. Cultura y arte de cara al terror de estado,” *Visualidades* 12, no. 1 (2014): 9–25; 19; Maureen Daly, “Threads of Feeling: Embroidering Craftivism to Protest the Disappearances and Deaths in the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico,” (14th Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium: New Directions, Examining the Past, Creating the Future, Los Angeles, September 10–14, 2014), <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/937>.

examine the role these anchors play in the fight against human rights violations on the global scale.

Community and communal polities in Latin America

While there was a culture of community in the Americas that preceded the arrival of the colonizers in the late fifteenth century,²⁵ Héctor Díaz-Polanco notes that the term *comunidad india* (Indian community) was created by colonizers in order to bring the plurality of subordinated groups together under a single denomination that differed from the names by which these groups identified themselves.²⁶ In this same vein, Armando Bartra remarks that the category *indio americano* was imposed by the Spanish crown for tributary, moral, and political purposes.²⁷ As a homogenous term indicating a subordinate position, *comunidad india* was a useful tool of social, political, and economic control.

With respect to the contemporary meaning of the term *comunidad india*, I would like to make three important remarks. First, at least in Mexico, the word *indígena* (indigenous) is generally preferred over *indio* or *india* (Indian). Second, the word *comunidad* when used on its own usually refers to or implies a connection with indigenous ways of organizing social life and indigenous connections to the land and natural resources.²⁸ Finally, a number of terms are used almost interchangeably in daily life, which means that, depending on the context, one might encounter any of the following: *comunidad indígena* (indigenous community), *pueblo indígena* (indigenous people), *comunidades originarias* (original communities), or *pueblos originarios* (original peoples).

According to Carlos Zolla and Emiliano Zolla Márquez, debates around the definition of the word *comunidad* continue due to differences between the ways in which the concept has been understood by scholars, mostly from the fields of anthropology and sociology, or has been used for political purposes, or defined juridically in national as well as international contexts. In the view of Zolla and Zolla Márquez, these different understandings and uses of the concept of *comunidad* explain the polysemous nature of the term and the fact

25 Armando Bartra, "Campesindios, aproximaciones a los campesinos de un continente colonizado," *Boletín de antropología americana* 44 (2008): 5–24; 21.

26 Héctor Díaz-Polanco, "Autonomía, territorialidad y comunidad indígena. La nueva legislación agraria en México," in *Pueblos indígenas ante el derecho*, ed. Victoria Chenaut and María Teresa Sierra (Mexico City: CEMCA-CIESAS, 1995), 236–237; Carlos Zolla and Emiliano Zolla Márquez, "2.- ¿Qué se entiende por comunidad indígena?" in *Los pueblos indígenas de México, 100 preguntas* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2004), www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/100preguntas/pregunta.php?num_pre=2.

27 Bartra, "Campesindios," 21.

28 See Gabriel Liceaga, "El concepto de *comunidad* en las ciencias sociales latinoamericanas: apuntes para su comprensión," *Cuadernos Americanos: Nueva Época* 3, no. 145 (2013): 57–85; 67.

that it might be used as a synonym for “localidad” (locality), “pueblo” (town), “paraje” (place), and even “población indígena” (indigenous population).²⁹

Regarding the juridical status of indigenous communities in Mexico, it is worth noting that after the constitutional reform of 2001 and the amendments made in 2006 and 2011, article two of the constitution established that “the Nation has a multicultural composition.”³⁰ Furthermore, the constitution states that the nation “recognizes and guarantees the right of indigenous peoples and communities to self-determination.”³¹ Nonetheless, to this day there are persistent and significant discrepancies between law and reality. In order to begin to understand these discrepancies, it is necessary to examine the history of Mexico, in particular the modernization processes that have been ongoing since the nineteenth century. Modernization was premised on the construct of a *mestizo* national identity that excluded groups who spoke any language other than Spanish.³² In addition to this language-based exclusion, these groups organized their social life and otherwise existed in ways that were construed as hindrances to economic development and therefore as obstacles to the social mobility that economic growth was supposed to encourage.³³

Returning to contemporary meanings of the concept of community, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has been strongly critical of using the term *comunidad indígena* as a synonym for a demographic-territorial unity. For example, within

29 “Parte de la ambigüedad o de la polisemia de la expresión proviene también del hecho de que frecuentemente ‘comunidad’ ha sido usada como sinónimo de ‘localidad’ (como unidad demográfico-territorial), ‘pueblo,’ ‘paraje’ e incluso de ‘población indígena.’ En no pocos textos del indigenismo se habla frecuentemente de la ‘comunidad indígena’ y la ‘comunidad nacional’ mestiza.” Zolla and Zolla Márquez, “2.- ¿Qué se entiende por comunidad indígena?” 17.

30 “The Nation has a multicultural composition stemming from its indigenous peoples, who are those descended from the populations who inhabited the current territory of the country at the beginning of colonization and who retain their own social, economic, cultural, and political institutions or part of them.” (Original: La Nación tiene una composición pluricultural sustentada originalmente en sus pueblos indígenas que son aquellos que descienden de poblaciones que habitaban en el territorio actual del país al iniciarse la colonización y que conservan sus propias instituciones sociales, económicas, culturales y políticas, o parte de ellas.) Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, *Constitución política de los estados unidos mexicanos*, 2020, art. II, para. I, accessed February 17, 2021, http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/1_241220.pdf, 2.

31 “Esta Constitución reconoce y garantiza el derecho de los pueblos y las comunidades indígenas a la libre determinación.” Cámara de Diputados, *Constitución política*, art. 2, subsection A, 2.

32 On the idea of *mestizaje* as the anchor of the modern Mexican state, see José Vasconcelos’ renowned essay: José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race / La Raza Cósmica*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1925]). Vasconcelos wrote this during his time as head of the Ministry of Public Education (1921–1924).

33 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *El proceso de aculturación* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1957), 22, 33; Luca Citarella, “Capítulo I. México,” in *La educación indígena en América Latina México-Guatemala-Ecuador-Perú-Bolivia Tomo I*, comp. Francesco Chiodi (Quito: ABYA-YALA, 1990), 15. In order to further investigate the public policies applied to indigenous people, an inquiry into the trajectory of the *indigenismo* in Mexico would be required. See, for instance, Beltrán, *El proceso de aculturación*, 126–127.

the *salas etnográficas* (ethnographical rooms) of the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City, indigenous peoples are presented as part of the living cultural heritage of the country.³⁴ According to Cusicanqui, confining indigenous groups to their community's lands of origin perpetuates hegemonic essentialist and orientalist views of the “marginalized other.” These views in turn become part of the multicultural adornments of neoliberalism.³⁵ Therefore, instead of picturing indigenous people as “living fossils,”³⁶ Cusicanqui argues for an indigenous modernity that not only considers decolonization but, more importantly, accomplishes it.³⁷

With regard to communal polities, Gladys Tzul remarks that “in communally organized indigenous societies, there are extended networks that organize everyday life, defend the territory, and recover the concrete means of which they have been dispossessed.”³⁸ Communal polities are characterized by network collaboration and non-hierarchical decision making. In communal polities authority, work, and service are conceived of as voluntary and unpaid contributions to the community. They are driven by the ethical imperative that privileges the group over individual interests. Finally, in communal polities the relation to the land and natural resources is conceived of in terms of use rather than property,³⁹ which means that members of the community can only claim to “own” a piece of land as long as and insofar as they cultivate it.⁴⁰ In sum, the features of communal polities disrupt capitalist rationality.⁴¹

34 See “Sala Etnografía—Museo Nacional de Antropología,” INAH TV, uploaded April 29, 2009, accessed February 16, 2021, YouTube video, 1:50, <https://youtu.be/2itRcVQ4JJM>.

35 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2010), 59.

36 The term has been borrowed from Monica Juneja, who used it in the context of German-language world art histories of the late nineteenth century. Monica Juneja, “‘A Very Civil Idea ...’ Art History, Transculturation, and World-Making—With and Beyond the Nation,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 81, no. 4 (2018): 461–485; 473.

37 Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 55.

38 “En las sociedades indígenas organizadas comunitariamente se dan redes ampliadas que organizan la vida cotidiana, defienden el territorio y recuperan los medios concretos de los que han sido despojadas.” Gladys Tzul in Julia Riesco Frías and Marta López, “‘Preservar la autonomía es algo fundamental.’ Entrevista: Gladys Tzul, Activista,” *Periódico Diagonal*, March 14, 2015, accessed May 29, 2017, <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/movimientos/25949-preservar-la-autonomia-es-algo-fundamental.html>.

39 Oswaldo J. Hernández, “Entrevista con Gladys Tzul: La estrategia de poner límites al Estado,” *ALICE News*, January 29, 2014, accessed May 29, 2017, <https://alice.ces.uc.pt/news-old/?p=3013>.

40 Katia Olalde, “Facing the Challenges of Studying Transdisciplinary Forms of Cultural Activism against Violence,” in *Nomadic Inquiry: European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Proceedings 2018*, ed. Karin Hannes, Bernadette Dierckx de Casterlé, Ann Heylighen, and Frederik Truyen (Leuven: KU Leuven, 2018), 196–208; 199.

41 An exploration of how “community” resonates within the framework of the EPI was further developed in Katia Olalde, “Bordar por la paz y la memoria en México: desfasar de la racionalidad

In Latin America, the groups that abide by the principles of communal politics have been excluded from modernization processes. Many of these historically subalternized groups have, however, persistently proved their capacity to endure and to resist the advancement of neoliberalism.⁴² This would, therefore, explain the conclusion Gabriel Liceaga arrives at in his essay on the concept of community in the Latin American social sciences: “The territorial socio-environmental struggles (characterized as fights against accumulation by dispossession) ... summon the theoretical and political awakening of the concept of community.”⁴³

We may then ask: in which sense could embroidering for peace and remembrance in Mexico be a way to put communal forms of organization into practice, thereby dislocating the logic of productivity, competitiveness, and profit?



Fig. 1. Embroideries completed by several hands (in process). Fuentes Rojas, 2012–2013. Photo: Katia Olalde.

capitalista sin establecer (cabalmente) modos de organización comunitaria,” in *Cartografías Críticas*, comp. Ileana Diéguez (Los Angeles: Karpa Journal, California State University Los Angeles, 2008), <https://www.calstatela.edu/al/karpa/k-olalde>. See also Olalde, *Una víctima*, 179–192.

42 Regarding the consequences of the advancement of neoliberalism throughout the last three decades, David Harvey notes: The “displacement of peasant populations and the formation of a landless proletariat has accelerated in countries such as Mexico and India in the last three decades, many formerly common property resources, such as water, have been privatized (often at World Bank insistence) and brought within the capitalist logic of accumulation, alternative (indigenous and even, in the case of the United States, petty commodity) forms of production and consumption have been suppressed. Nationalized industries have been privatized. Family farming has been taken over by agribusiness. And slavery has not disappeared (particularly in the sex trade).” Harvey, *New Imperialism*, 145–146.

43 “Las luchas territoriales socioambientales (caracterizadas como luchas contra la acumulación por desposesión) ... convocan al despertar teórico y político del concepto de comunidad.” Liceaga, “Concepto de comunidad,” 76.

A collaboration scheme that disrupts capitalist rationality

During the embroidery sessions organized by the EPI's developers and later by a section of the initial group that identified itself as Fuentes Rojas,⁴⁴ participants did not embroider a single handkerchief from beginning to end (see Fig. 1). Rather, a number of volunteers worked on many embroideries in relays. Volunteers were free to pick from different tones of colored thread and use whatever stitches they liked (see Fig. 2). Most participants signed the handkerchiefs with only their first names, thereby displacing the emphasis from individual authorship to the collective work of a group of embroiderers (see Fig. 3). One did not need to master needlework techniques to participate, and numerous handkerchiefs illustrate the efforts of amateur embroiderers (see Fig. 4). Furthermore, participation did not involve becoming the owner of the handkerchief.⁴⁵ The members of Fuentes Rojas therefore rejected the notions of commodity and private property and conceived of these collectively stitched embroideries as “belonging to everyone and to no one at the same time.”⁴⁶

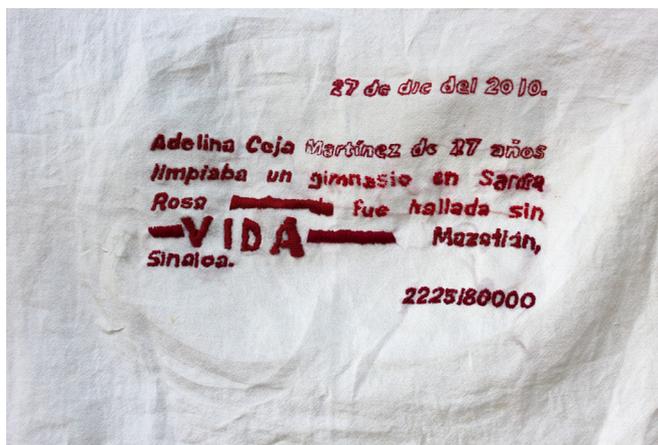


Fig. 2. Embroidery completed by several hands (detail). Fuentes Rojas, 2012–2013. Photo: Katia Olalde.

44 Although most of the original members withdrew from Fuentes Rojas collective after the December 1 protest, the remaining members continued to hold the weekly embroidery sessions without interruption in the Centenary Gardens in Coyoacán until the Covid-19 pandemic forced them to stop in March 2020.

45 Olalde, “Racionalidad capitalista,” 81; Olalde, *Una víctima*, 111.

46 “Cuando decimos que pertenece al procomún todo cuanto es de todos y de nadie a mismo tiempo estamos pensando en un bien sacado del mercado y que, en consecuencia, no se rige por sus reglas.” Antonio Lafuente, “Los cuatro entornos del procomún,” *Archipiélago: cuadernos de crítica de la cultura* 77–78: 15–22 (2007), 1-9; 1, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://digital.csic.es/handle/10261/2746>.

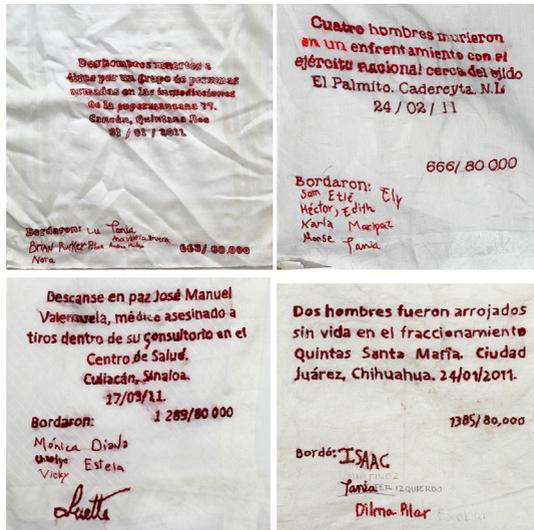


Fig. 3. Embroideries completed by several hands (details). Fuentes Rojas, 2012–2013. Photos: Katia Olalde.



Fig. 4. Embroidery completed by several hands. Fuentes Rojas, 2012–2013. Photo: Katia Olalde.⁴⁷

47 The stitched text reads: “Librado Acosta de la Rocha, 38 años, hallado muerto con múltiples heridas de arma de fuego en un lugar conocido como El Barro. Chihuahua, Chihuahua. 30 de enero de 2011.” Translated, it reads: “Librado Acosta de la Rocha, 38 years, found dead with multiple gunshots

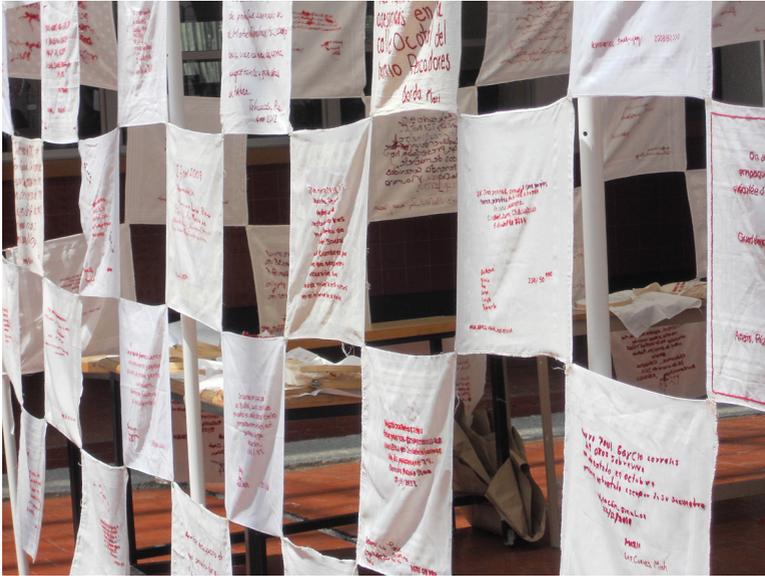


Fig. 5. Embroideries completed by several hands, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City, September 30, 2013. Fuentes Rojas, 2012–2013. Photo: Katia Olalde.

As discussed above, the central feature of these handkerchiefs are texts that report how the person was killed or describe how the body was found. The use of only one color, the lack of design or depictions of the victim, and the prominence of the white background all direct attention toward the texts. With some exceptions, the profession or activities of the deceased are excluded from the handkerchiefs. The neutrality of the text is intended to highlight the importance of the loss of human life without making a distinction between innocents and criminals.⁴⁸ The design remained consistent, which prevented any favoring of one style above others. I am inclined to associate the consistency of the design and the neutrality of the texts with the democratic principle of equality. Moreover, I connect the ambiguity granted by the use of only the first names of embroiderers with an ethical imperative that privileges

in a place known as El Barro. 30 January, 2011.” Below this text on the left side, it reads: “Bordaron [embroidered by]: Celia, Oscar, Cati Burns New York USA, Marcela Reed, Tatiana, Claudia, Jacqueline, William Avalos ‘Guatemala,’ Javier, Lanny, Elia.” Below this text on the right side reads 612 / 80,000, which indicates the number of this murder case among the total death toll at the time that this handkerchief was embroidered. It is worth noting that the total number increased over time.

48 This intention was formulated in a previous creative protest called *Envelope vide* (Empty Envelope), which was one of the sources of inspiration for the developers of the EPI. See Olalde, *Una víctima*, 16–17, 215.

the group over individual interests, insofar as it prevents the handkerchief from being attributed to an individual author (see Fig. 5). The principle of freedom seems to have materialized in the flexibility of the relay scheme, which, in addition to giving participants the opportunity to do their best regardless of their technical skills, allowed them to stitch multiple excerpts from multiple different handkerchiefs and made it possible for the kind of thread or stitch used to be changed (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).⁴⁹ In sum, I conceive of the collectively stitched handkerchiefs as the material result of a relay collaboration scheme that dislocates the logic of productivity, competitiveness, and profit to put the democratic principles of liberty and equality for all into practice on the basis of indigenous communal polities. Furthermore, when one reads the EPI's statements and pays attention to the meanings infused into the "communitarian character" of the initiative, what comes to the fore is the concept of community envisioned as a utopian ideal that resonates with the hope for a better future.⁵⁰

Throughout my research, I have noticed a tendency among participants of the EPI to overlook the potential for conflict that is ever-present in social interactions.⁵¹ Such a tendency persists to this day and seems to explain, at least partially, why the EPI's developers refused to speak about the 2011 reconfiguration of the Stop the Bullets Initiative, which occurred before the Fuentes Rojas collective was created—a reconfiguration I referred to at the beginning of this article, when I mentioned the breakaway group that established the Platform of Art and Culture within the MPJD. Likewise, participants of the EPI do not openly discuss the serious disagreements

49 A comparison between the way in which Fuentes Rojas and another large group called Bordamos por la Paz Guadalajara (We Embroider for Peace Guadalajara) sought to put the democratic principles of "liberty and equality for all" into practice is developed further in Katia Olalde, "Bordando por la paz y la memoria en México: feminidad sin sumisión y aspiraciones democráticas," *Debate Feminista* 58 (2019): 1–30.

50 Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), "1 de diciembre"; Olalde, *Una víctima*, 79–92.

51 The "radical democracy" approach advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe can be summarized as follows: 1. The political domain entails the discursive construction of a difference between a "we" and a "they"; 2. This difference is neither based on any fundamental essence nor is it definitely closed; 3. The meaning infused into the democratic principles liberty and equality for all is always subject to debate; 4. Antagonism—understood as the expression of conflicts for which there is no rational solution—is a perennial possibility; 5. Consensus is always the result of contingent and precarious articulation practices: "Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities." Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, "Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in the Public Space," *Open!*, January 1, 2007, <https://www.onlineopen.org/art-and-democracy>. The way the EPI's citizen memorials embody this contingent and precarious articulation practices was further developed in Olalde, "Capítulo 3. Mundos communes inestables y potencialmente conflictivos," in *Una víctima*, 193–266.

that emerged before the intervention they performed in downtown Mexico City on December 1, 2012. These disagreements eventually resulted in the definitive dissolution of some of the embroidery groups and the fraying of the global network that these groups had woven together.⁵² This tendency to disregard conflict suggests that the EPI's participants were not free from a romantic view of the communal polity. I would therefore argue that the expectation of smoothly mending (and reshaping) the social fabric in a way reminiscent of indigenous communities shows the way some activists from the centers have imagined forms of social organization by historically marginalized peripheries, and the way these activists have projected the methods of counteracting the evils of modern westernized societies—to which these activists themselves belong—onto marginalized groups. Still, I would like to stress that within the framework of the EPI and of the Platform of Art and Culture communal polities were not understood as archaic social structures irremediably confined to a distant pre-modern past.⁵³ Rather, they were perceived as actual and living alternative means of conceiving relationships to one another and to the world.

Embroidery, femininity, and virtue

Roszika Parker examines how the corporeality of embroidery—the stillness of the body, bent over the work with downcast eyes—together with the patience, concentration, and persistence that this corporeality fosters proved compatible with seventeenth century Protestant morality. As a result, embroidery became a way to inculcate Christian moral values. She further examines how, over the next two centuries, embroidery became associated with the feminine qualities expected of aristocratic women: namely chastity, modesty, self-containment, submission, obedience, love of home, and devoted care for others.⁵⁴ According to Parker, this connection was gradually naturalized up to the point that by the nineteenth century it was believed that “women embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered.”⁵⁵ Consequently, embroidered works came to be seen as proof that their crafter had what it took to be a worthy wife and mother.⁵⁶

52 Olalde, “Feminidad sin sumisión”; Olalde, *Una víctima*, 224–262.

53 The Platform of Art and Culture was created by some of the EPI's developers after they left the Stop the Bullets Initiative to join the MPJD.

54 Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010 [1984]), 82–88.

55 Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 12.

56 Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 11.

In New Spain, needlework was prominent in the clerical model of feminine education as imparted at schools associated with Catholic convents during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁷ Within the framework of this clerical model, the character traits cultivated by young women while embroidering resembled the virtues of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁸ The masterful embroidery samplers (*dechados magistrales*) proudly displayed by families in their houses thus attested not only to the technical mastery of their crafters, but also to their moral virtuosity.⁵⁹ These embroidery samplers included elements from Mesoamerican and Mediterranean textile legacies alongside design schemes originating in the Islamic and Jewish fabric arts,⁶⁰ meaning that these embroidery samplers are the tangible result of intertwining processes of transculturation that occurred before and after the Spanish invasion of Mexico during the early sixteenth century. Further, and as Serge Gruzinski has remarked, converting people to Christianity was at the core of Iberian globalization.⁶¹ I would therefore argue that the connections between hand embroidery, femininity, and a Christian moral virtue—connections that still resonate in Mexico to this day—can be understood as an expression of the westernizing project of Iberian globalization. In particular, these connections can be understood as an expression of miscegenation (*el mestizaje*),⁶² conceived of in this context as a painful and complex process of transculturation marked by violence, uprooting, racialization, relations of

57 Katia Olalde, “Stitching the Social Fabric against Violence and Impunity: The Embroidering for Peace Initiative Revisited through the Lens of Caring Democracy,” *Artelegie* 15 (2020): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.4000/artelegie.4526>. See also Oresta López Pérez, “Currículum sexuado y poder: miradas a la educación liberal diferenciada para hombres y mujeres durante la segunda mitad del siglo XIX en México,” *Relaciones* 113 (Winter 2008): 33–68; 38; Pilar Gonzalbo, “Virreinato y nuevo orden,” in *Historia mínima de la educación en México*, ed. Dorothy Tanck de Estrada (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 2010), 36–66; 64.

58 See Mayela Flores Enríquez, “Dechado mexicano | Mexikanisches Stickmuster,” *Miradas* 1 (2014): 146–150; 147; Ana Rita Valero de García Lascuráin and Nora Deveaux Cabrera, “Vizcaínas: un proyecto de conservación, desarrollo social y cultural mexicano con 280 años de historia,” *Corpus* 3, no. 2 (2013): 1–10; 3–4; Pérez, “Currículum sexuado y poder,” 33–68.

59 See Flores Enríquez, “Dechado mexicano,” 147; Mayela Flores Enríquez, “Panorama de los estudios sobre dechados en México,” *Sztuka Ameryki Łacińskiej* 5 (2015): 127–146; 142.

60 This is revealed, for instance, by the use of the Assisi stitch that emerged in the region Umbria and whose history stretches back to the Middle Ages. For more information on the confluence of diverse textile traditions, see Alejandro de Ávila, “Los textiles como memoria,” *Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca (FAHHO)* (blog), April 6, 2016, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://fahho.mx/blog/2015/12/29/in-octacatl-in-machiyotl-dechados-de-virtud-y-entereza/>; and Flores Enríquez, “Dechado mexicano,” 147.

61 Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (London: Routledge, 2002), 56–57.

62 Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, 21, 33; Gruzinski, *Las cuatro partes*, 38–39.

domination, and power imbalances that nevertheless resulted in the creation of new cultural phenomena.⁶³

As one can read in the call for participation in the December 1 protest within the framework of the EPI, the meticulous and time-consuming activity of hand embroidery was construed as an activity consistent with nonviolence:⁶⁴

The embroideries are made in public spaces such as squares and parks where passersby can approach and take part in the stitching, thereby creating a space where the encounter with the other is vital, where not only stories, silences and tears are shared, but also reflections about the political situation of our country. A space to pose questions and where we, as citizens, can face this situation. It is a project in which the action of embroidering itself fosters the introspection, the attention and the stillness that open the necessary space to share and reflect with “the other.”⁶⁵

The interconnections between hand embroidery, femininity, and moral virtue are present in all of the developments and variants of the EPI. However, while the masterful embroidery samplers discussed above evoked a religiously framed moral virtuosity grounded in Christianity, the poorly crafted and collectively stitched handkerchiefs manifested an ethics of nonviolence that arose through the time and dedication invested by amateur embroiderers. In light of the imprint of indigenous communal polities on the relay scheme, I am also encouraged to suggest that this ethics of nonviolence involved counteracting the logic of productivity, private property, and profit. Given that the civilian and self-sponsored character of the EPI was strongly defended, despite—or even precisely because of—the presence of some professional artists among the initiative’s developers, I would also argue that, in addition to remaining estranged from capitalist

63 Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar* (Caracas: Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1987), 96; Bronisław Malinowski, “Introducción,” in Ortiz, *Contrapunteo*, 5; Stefan Krause, “Transculturation,” Universität Rostock, April 25, 2016, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.iaa.uni-rostock.de/forschung/laufende-forschungsprojekte/american-antiquities-prof-mackenthun/project/theories/transculturation/>.

64 This idea was further developed in Olalde, “Feminidad sin sumisión.”

65 “Los bordados se llevan a cabo en espacios públicos como plazas y parques, donde la gente de a pie pueda acercarse y participar en el bordado, logrando generar un espacio en el que el encuentro con el otro es vital, donde se comparten historias, silencios, lágrimas además de reflexiones en torno a la situación política de nuestro país. Un espacio para cuestionar y donde nosotros como ciudadanos hacemos frente a esta situación. Es un proyecto en donde la propia acción de bordar potencia [sic] la introspección, atención y calma que abren el espacio necesario para compartir y reflexionar con ‘el otro.’” Fuentes Rojas, “Bordando por la paz.”

rationality, the ethico-political stance of the EPI implied a separation from the fine arts system.⁶⁶

The EPI took one of the so-called *artes mujeriles* (womanly arts) to the streets, invited people of any gender to participate in the embroidery, and displaced the emphasis from technical skill to the time and effort devoted to the stitching. In so doing, the EPI turned a “technology of gender,” something that had served as an instrument to exercise control over women’s bodies and defined the role of motherhood in the construction of the modern Mexican *mestizo* nation,⁶⁷ into a tool whereby participants could imagine the kind of country in which they would wish to live.

Exercising citizenship with local and global resonances

On April 28, 2011, the Zapatistas issued a call for civilians to mobilize and expressed their support for Sicilia’s first Walk-Rally for Peace with Justice and Dignity (Caminata-Marcha por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad), which departed from Cuernavaca, Morelos on May 5, 2011 and finished on May 8 in Mexico City’s Zócalo.⁶⁸ The call reads as follows:

The psychotic military campaign of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, who has converted the struggle against crime into a totalitarian argument to purposefully generalize fear throughout the country,

66 According to Larry Shiner, the fine arts system as we know it today developed from the 1680s to the 1830s. Shiner conceives of this system as “an integrated complex of ideas, practices, [and] institutions.” Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 17. The notions of talent, artistic genius, individual creation, and originality are part of this social system. See also Chris Mansour, “Art, a Modern Phenomenon: An Interview with Larry Shiner,” *The Platypus Review*, 2014, *The Charnel-House*, June 1, 2014, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/06/21/art-a-modern-phenomenon-an-interview-with-larry-shiner/>. The way in which the EPI distanced itself from the fine art system was further developed in Olalde, “Facing the Challenges”; Olalde, *Una víctima*, 190.

67 Mayela Flores Enríquez, “‘Artes mujeriles’ y estereotipos de género en el México del siglo xix: presencias en la prensa femenina,” *H-ART* 7 (2020): 17–29; 19. One of the cornerstones of the *mestizo* national identity in Mexico is La Malinche (Náhuatl: *Malitzin*), who was the interpreter of Hernán Cortes. In the national narrative, this couple is construed as the origin of the *mestizo* lineage. Stacie G. Widdifield, “La nación mestiza: una unión engendrada,” in *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, ed. Inda Sáenz and Karen Cordero (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2007), 229–248; 229.

68 “Drug war victims finally made themselves heard in Mexico in the most unlikely way: a nationwide silent March for Peace with Justice and Dignity. Over 100,000 Mexicans took to the streets over the weekend to protest the war on drugs, impunity, corruption, and violence. The largest march lasted four days and covered nearly 100 kilometers from Cuernavaca, Morelos, to Mexico City. On Thursday, May 5, about 500 protesters began marching in Cuernavaca. Along the way, more contingents joined the march, while other marches set out from different states to join the protest in Mexico City. By the time the marches met in Mexico City’s main square on May 8, an estimated 100,000 people were gathered to protest the war.” Bricker, “Mexico’s Drug War Victims Find Their Voice.”

is now confronted with the dignified and organized voices of the families of the victims of this war.

These voices, coming from different corners of our country, call on us to mobilize and protest the organized and unorganized madness that is taking innocent lives, lives that are taken when they are classified, in crude government discourse, as hired guns or collateral damage.

In response to this call that is born with the pain of *compañero* poet Javier Sicilia, among others, the EZLN states: First: EZLN support bases will march in silence in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, the 7th of May, 2011, to salute and support this dignified voice demanding justice.

...

Second: In response to the convocation for a National March for Justice and Against Impunity, we call upon our *compañer@s* in the Other Campaign in Mexico and around the world—the individuals, groups, collectives, organizations, movements, and originary peoples who are adherents of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle—to, in accordance with their abilities and possibilities, join the just demand of this national march, whether that be accompanying the principal march in Mexico City on the 8th of May, 2011, or carrying out in their own locations, between the 5th and 8th of May, 2011, silent marches with banners, signs, rallies, and cultural programs, with the following slogans:

END CALDERÓN'S WAR!

NO MORE BLOOD!

WE'RE FED UP WITH...!⁶⁹

(where everyone finishes the phrase with their own demands).⁷⁰

Shortly after the May 8 National March, the SBI issued a call for a “Primer encuentro organizativo” (first organizational meeting) to take place on May 18, 2011. Alongside the Zapatistas, the SBI encouraged people to use the phrase “estamos hasta la madre” [we are fed up] as a place holder for stating [what they now called] the rages of each individual or collective.”⁷¹ In this way, the SBI sought

69 The slogan “Estamos hasta la madre” (We are fed up) was taken from the letter Sicilia had published on April 2. See Javier Sicilia, *Estamos Hasta La Madre* (Mexico City: Temas De Hoy, 2011).

70 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, “Comunicué from the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee–General Command of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation,” *Enlace Zapatista* (blog), April 28, 2011, accessed January 28, 2021, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2011/04/28/comuniqué-from-the-indigenous-revolutionary-clandestine-committee-general-command-of-the-zapatista-army-for-national-liberation/>.

71 “Siguiendo la propuesta zapatista de completar la frase ‘Estamos hasta la madre’ con las rabias de cada individuo o colectivo, echemos a andar nuestra creatividad e imaginación para impulsar el

to encourage collectives—including social, political, and artistic organizations—and civil society at large to creatively endorse the Propuesta de Pacto Nacional (National Pact Proposal) that the MPJD was advancing at the time.⁷² Whereas an emphasis on feelings as a means to mobilize civilians was consistent throughout the EPI's trajectory, it is worth noting the shift from the rage earlier encouraged by the SBI to the nonviolence that Fuentes Rojas stressed thereafter. Likewise, the meaning of Fuentes Rojas's aim of "strengthening citizenry as a collective"⁷³ shows significant differences, which I will now highlight.

The SBI published their "Manifiesto Público" one month after the death of Sicilia's son. Within this manifesto, the still incipient group communicated their intention to connect with other initiatives with whom they shared the objective to fight against violence and impunity. Let me revisit an excerpt I quoted at the beginning of this article in order to illustrate how the SBI envisioned the emergence of a larger social actor of which they aimed to become a part:

We recognize ourselves as a small initiative among all the ones that have emerged with the same objectives, and we aim to connect with each and every one of them. We also aim for the collective actor who will take shape in order to fight against violence and impunity to include the social forces that remain mobilized across the country defending their rights: those who fight against the mega-projects and defend their cultures, their territories, and their natural resources; the Zapatist's communities who build and exercise their autonomy; ... and, of course, all the citizens who, not belonging to any organization, fight day after day to maintain a dignified life, within a system that imposes corruption, greed, inequality, lack of democracy, and the loss of rights in every field.⁷⁴

contenido y los alcances del pacto." Iniciativa Paremos las Balas Pintemos las Fuentes, "Propuesta de Día de Acción por la Paz rumbo al Pacto Nacional," *Paermos las balas pintemos las fuentes* (blog), May 18, 2011, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://paremosbalaspintemosfuentes.wordpress.com/2011/05/18/propuesta-de-dia-de-accion-por-la-paz-rumbo-al-pacto-nacional/>.

72 "On May 8 in front of about 100,000 people, Olga Reyes, who has lost six family members in the drug war, and Patricia Duarte, whose son Andrés died in a fire at the ABC Daycare due to government negligence, read the proposal for a National Pact for Peace, a citizens initiative to reduce violence, corruption, and impunity in Mexico. The pact has six central demands: 1. truth and justice, 2. an end to the war in favor of a focus on citizen security, 3. combat corruption, 4. combat crime's economic roots and profits, 5. emergency attention for youths and effective actions to rebuild the social fabric, 6. participative democracy, better representative democracy, and democratization of the media. The proposal will be finalized and signed during a public event on June 10 in Ciudad Juarez, the deadliest city in the world." Bricker, "Mexico's Drug War Victims Find Their Voice."

73 Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), "1 de diciembre."

74 "Nos reconocemos como una pequeña iniciativa dentro de todas las que han surgido con estos mismos objetivos y aspiramos a vincularnos con todas ellas. Aspiramos también a que el actor colectivo que se vaya conformando para luchar en contra de la violencia y la impunidad, incluya a las

According to my research—and as I mentioned in the introductory section of this article—the members of the SBI who upheld the political ideas stated in this first “Manifiesto Público” left the initiative during the summer of 2011 to join the MPJD and create the Plataforma de Arte y Cultura por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (the MPJD’s Platform of Art and Culture). This means that they became directly involved in the MPJD’s mission to create the juridical framework necessary to acknowledge the victim status of the persons who had been murdered or subjected to enforced disappearance in the context of the war on drugs and to generate the public policies required to provide relatives of victims with access to reparations. This reconfiguration saw the remaining members rename themselves the Fuentes Rojas collective and explains why public statements issued after September 2011 frame the EPI as a nonviolent group endowed with a strong affective component, rather than as an active first step in engaging in the fight against violence and impunity in Mexico.

Let me quote an excerpt of the SBI “Manifiesto Público” issued in April 2011 in order to shed light on this difference:

We think that the only way to revert this situation is to generate initiatives that encourage the articulation of society from within society itself so that it [the society] can organize to exercise of its rights as an actor of change in a democratic and libertarian sense.⁷⁵

At this point in time, encouraging the critical exercise of citizenship basically involved calling for people to fight for the effective exercise of the rights granted by national citizenry in order to change the Mexican federal government’s course of action. This call for action contrasts with the intention that Fuentes Rojas and other groups that joined the EPI would emphasize thereafter; namely, their intention to create a space conducive to reflection and introspection. In light of the ethics of nonviolence hand embroidery has been associated with and the connections the groups that joined the EPI have established with other textile memory projects involving survivors (mostly women) of armed conflicts and authoritarian regimes,⁷⁶ I would argue that

fuerzas sociales que permanecen movilizadas a lo largo y ancho del país, en defensa de sus derechos: a quienes luchan contra los megaproyectos y defienden sus culturas, sus territorios y sus recursos naturales; a las comunidades zapatistas que ejercen y construyen su autonomía; ... y, por su puesto, que incluya a todos los ciudadanos sin organización que luchan día a día por mantener una vida digna, en medio de un sistema que impone la corrupción, la avaricia, la desigualdad, la falta de democracia y la pérdida de derechos en todos los ámbitos.” Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), “Manifiesto.”

75 “Pesamos que la única manera de revertir esta situación es generar iniciativas que propicien la articulación de la sociedad, desde la sociedad misma. Que se auto organice en ejercicio de sus derechos y se constituya como actor de cambio, en sentido democrático y libertario.” Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), “Manifiesto.”

76 Olalde, “Stitching,” 4–5.

in the subsequent stages of the EPI encouraging the critical exercise of citizenship has meant above all using the practice of embroidery to settle the minds of participants and to awaken feelings of sympathy and compassion. Embroidery has thus been a means to foster a sense of connectedness with a common humanity.

During the EPI's earliest stage, then, bridging the gap between "we" and "they" involved blurring the boundaries that separated "us," law-abiding citizens who had nothing to fear, from "them," those suffering the consequences of their own unlawful actions. In its subsequent stages, bridging the gap between "us" and "them" involved developing a sense of belonging to and responsibility towards a common humanity. Therefore, I would argue that when the EPI's intention of "strengthening citizenry as a collective through co-responsibility and encounters between people"⁷⁷ is read from the perspective of the EPI's subsequent stages, the statement resonates with the cosmopolitan worldview of the Global Citizenship Education (GCED) approach advanced by UNESCO in recent years.⁷⁸

As with the metaphor "mending the social fabric," my concern with this cosmopolitan approach is that it does not address the issue of how and under which specific conditions the distinction between "grievable" and "ungrievable" lives was constructed in Mexico.⁷⁹ Nor does the cosmopolitan approach allow us to inquire into larger questions such as what role this distinction has played in the shaping of the modern Mexican state or which sectors of the population have directly or indirectly benefited from these distinctions. Considering that Calderón's communication campaign suggested that those who were killed in the war on drugs were outside the citizenry that included the families his security strategy was protecting, the question as to how this distinction between "grievable" and "ungrievable" lives was shaped in the first place and how this distinction is connected to the effective exercise of citizenry proves crucial to reflect critically upon, not only in terms of what human dignity means in contemporary Mexico but, moreover, regarding what it means to feel like a citizen entitled to rights in this country and what it means to be able to actually exercise those rights in specific situations.

The domestic and transnational scales within which the EPI's call to critically exercise citizenship reverberates mobilize the tensions between

77 "Nuestro fin es fortalecer la ciudadanía como colectivo a través de la corresponsabilidad y el encuentro entre personas" Fuentes Rojas (Paremos las balas), "1 de diciembre."

78 The Global Citizenship Education (GCED) approach was introduced in order to prevent the radicalization between a "we" and a "they" grounded in cultural, ethnic, and religious differences, particularly after 9/11. UNESCO, *Preparing Teachers for Global Citizenship Education: A Template* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), v; Mansouri et al., "Critical Global Citizenship," 7.

79 Butler, *Frames of War*, 22.

culture and national identities. Furthermore, these scales highlight the ambivalence of the demarcations established by the Westphalian frame—that is, bounded territory, national economy, national media, national citizenry, a single language, and a shared social imaginary.⁸⁰ The global audience of embroiderers that engaged with this project raise the issue of the political efficacy of such affiliations because they do not constitute a legitimate public, in the sense that this group is not composed of people in whom the sovereign power of one single nation resides.⁸¹ This issue is of major relevance because these transnational and transcultural affiliations stem from the participants' twofold wish: firstly to support the fight against state violence, impunity, and human rights violations in Mexico locally, and secondly to find a global resonance with every past and present fight against these forms of violence. While it is true that the Westphalian frame is continuously disrupted, it is difficult to deny the determining role that national citizenry plays in the effective exercise of rights. Likewise, it would be difficult to argue against the assertion that the principle of inviolable state sovereignty represents a major challenge when pursuing accountability. In light of these considerations, this article could be understood as a query into the prescient question posed by Monica Juneja: “how does art history negotiate the tension between national identity and such relationships that break out of national frames and inform memories and visions of so much of artistic and literary production?”⁸²

Conclusion

By tracing the *longue durée* history of Mexican society and activist movements, I have revealed the transcultural intertwinement that underlies the EPI's ethico-political stance. I have also woven together diachronic connections that allowed me to view the various meanings ascribed to the call to critically exercise citizenship on a national and global scale. I therefore hope to have presented the reader with an opportunity to inquire further into “the issue of subjectivity and self-positioning.”⁸³ I also hope to have motivated a self-reflective exercise that involves asking oneself about the grounds of one's sense of belonging; the driving forces behind one's expressions of solidarity; and how this relates to the way in which each one of us conceives of principles such as liberty, equality, secularism, social justice, and human

80 Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” in *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Kate Nash (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 7–30; 24–25.

81 Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere,” 28.

82 Juneja, “‘A Very Civil Idea ...’,” 462.

83 Juneja, “‘A Very Civil Idea ...’,” 476.

dignity. I consider these questions relevant because we understand democracy, the effective exercise of citizenship, and a respect for human rights through the meanings we infuse into these principles, and we react against or remain indifferent to the state of things based on these understandings.

As Atreyee Gupta remarks, “notions of ‘center/peripheries’ belong in part to a geography of the mind, a mental map that demarcates certain places as more distant from others.”⁸⁴ If this is so, then a critical look into the romantic view held by EPI’s participants towards communal polities—a view that resonates with the metaphor of “mending the social fabric”—would allow us to inquire into the way the relationships between West/non-West, dominant/oppressed, and colonizer/acculturated have been imagined from some of the hegemonic centers of the so-called Global South. Moreover, a critical look into the romantic view held by EPI’s participants towards communal polities encourages us to explore the ways these conceptions of power relationships shape notions of citizenship and social organization that posit alternative forms of democracy wherein relationships between people and governmental institutions would be reformulated, and the effects of human actions on other living creatures and the environment would be seriously considered and addressed.

⁸⁴ Atreyee Gupta, “Art History and the Global Challenge: A Critical Perspective,” *Artl@s Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (2017): 20–25; 24.