Embroidery *to* Repair Life: Body-Territory Mapping *and* Collective Embroidery

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In Latin America, textile traditions such as embroidery are integral to the community and personal well-being, representing the experiences and resistance of women in both domestic and public spheres. From a feminist lens, this article explores the role of collective embroidery and body-territory mapping as resistance tools within conflict zones. This analysis focuses on the project 'Memories of Our Body-Territory. Testimonies about Structural Violence and Daily Life of Women Weavers in the Municipality of Magdalenas, Chiapas'. This region has faced political and territorial disputes impacting women's lives and textile practices. Collective mapping and embroidery foster safe spaces for dialogue, reflection, and connection, promoting self-knowledge and well-being. The embroidered pieces transmit the memory of the body-territory, repairing the individual and collective and solidifying mutual support networks among women affected by the armed conflict.

Keywords
embroidery
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support networks

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Colectiva Malacate— Autonomous and Self-managed Women's Collective based in Chiapas, Mexico, dedicated to research, reactivation, and dissemination of textile art. Co-authors of 'Sjalel Lekil Kuxlejal: Mayan Weaving and Zapatismo in Design Research' (with D. Albarrán González, in *Pivot Conference Proceedings 2021: Dismantling/Reassembling*).

Embroidery to Repair Life: Body-Territory Mapping and Collective Embroidery

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INTRODUCTION: THE LANGUAGE OF EMBROIDERED THREADS

Embroidery is a textile practice that adapts, transforms, and takes on new meanings across different periods and territories. In both domestic and public environments, women have used embroidery as a means of expression and creation, utilizing the 'language of threads' (González, 2002, p. 105) as a form of communication, turning it into a space of enunciation.

This article interweaves our experiences as women passionate about embroidery, both in academic and personal realms, profoundly impacting our lives, individually and collectively. This narrative intertwines our threads into an indivisible fabric that embraces affectivity over a purely rational approach. For those who have used embroidery to repair their lives within our territories and from the diaspora (Albarrán González, 2020), this text serves as a space to share the project 'Memories of Our Body-Territory. Testimonies about Structural Violence and Daily Life of Women Weavers in the Municipality of Magdalenas, Chiapas'[1] as members and allies of the Colectiva Malacate.

Colectiva Malacate, an autonomous and self-managed collective, brings together 100 women from diverse Mayan communities in the Altos de Chiapas region, in addition to anthropologist Karla Pérez Cánovas. Since 2007, our focus has been on revitalizing, preserving, protecting, and promoting the textile work of our communities (Colectiva Malacate, 2018). We create textile pieces for a dignified life under the *lekil kuxlejal*,[2] where commercialization, while useful, is not the priority. We value collective work, the exchange of knowledge, and mutual support. This prompted the creation of the project (Figure 1) where we embroider together to transmit the memory of the body-territory, heal individually and collectively, and weave support networks, in harmony with *lekil kuxlejal* or *buen vivir* (good living).[3]

1 *Memorias de nuestro cuerpo-territorio. Testimonios sobre las violencias estructurales y vida cotidiana de las mujeres tejedoras en el municipio de Magdalenas, Chiapas.*

2 *Lekil kuxlejal* is a concept similar to *buen vivir* (good living), a way to achieve a dignified and fair life aligned with our worldview. In Tsotsil (*batsi k'op*), *lekil* means good and *kuxlejal* means life.

3 *Buen vivir* or 'life in fullness' (Territorio Autónomo de la Nación Originaria del Pueblo Kichwa de Sarayaku "Tayjasaruta", 2003, p. 10) stands as a political concept within the broader discourse of the indigenous movement. We want to acknowledge the role of the Sarayaku indigenous community, who introduced the concept of *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir*, related to plurinationality and interculturality, along with a detailed proposal in a system of autonomies (Rodrigues Teixeira, 2020).

Figure 1: Embroiderers and weavers. The image depicts women from the Magdalenas Aldama community, Chiapas, who are members of the Colectiva Malacate, during a visit by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to learn about our work. Source: Personal archive of the author of the image, Karla Pérez Cánovas, 2022.

EMBROIDERY AS A PLACE OF ENUNCIATION: FEMINISMS, RESISTANCE, AND MEMORY

Embroidery, an ancestral textile practice in the Mesoamerican territory (Terán, 2021), has evolved over time, adapting to various materials and spaces. In both domestic and public spheres, women have employed embroidery as a means of expression, subsistence, and even subversion (Parker, 2010), as explained by Alcaraz Frasquet:

> Embroidery is no longer an instrument of subordination because its use and meaning no longer represent the traditional values associated with women. Artists do not stitch for others for domestic purposes. They sew as a means of expression, as a protest, and above all, they sew for themselves. (2016, p. 26)

In this sense, embroidery is integrated into different feminist movements (Alcaraz Frasquet, 2016; Chamorro Marabolí & Rifà Valls, 2022) as an act of protest and resistance (Eliçabe, 2020) and as a form of textile activism that denounces the patriarchal order (Tapia De la Fuente, 2021).

In Latin America, notable examples of textile activism include the arpilleras in Chile, the 'Costureros de la Memoria' (Sewing for Memory) in Colombia, and the 'Bordamos por la Paz' (We Embroider for Peace) collectives in

Mexico (Gargallo Celentani, 2014; Olalde Rico, 2019). The *arpilleras* embroidered textile chronicles, safeguarding and denouncing individual and collective memories of the Chilean military dictatorship (Rosentreter Villarroel, 2022). Meanwhile, the 'Tejedoras por la Memoria de Sonsón' (Sonson's Weavers for Memory) use embroidered fabric, cushions, and rag dolls to make visible the victims of the Colombian armed conflict (Pérez Bustos & Chocontá Piraquive, 2018; Rivera García, 2017). In 2016, we shared embroideries with them, aware of addressing the conflict with dignity, connecting memories and the devastation of our body-territories (Quiceno Toro, 2021).

In Mexico, public demonstrations such as 'Una víctima, un pañuelo'[4] (One Victim, one Handkerchief) use public spaces to embroider names of victims of the war against drug trafficking, promoting peace and bringing hidden realities to light (Gargallo Celentani, 2014; Olalde Rico, 2019). In this way, individual and collective memory is preserved through the language of threads.

Within these contexts of protest and memory preservation, embroidery emerges as a powerful site of enunciation. Citing Benveniste, Eliçabe defines enunciation as an "individual and historical act of active appropriation of language to produce a discourse" (2020, p. 145), a concept that is applied in the project 'Memories of Our Body-Territory. Testimonies about Structural Violence and Daily Life of Women Weavers in the Municipality of Magdalenas, Chiapas'.

4 Collectives 'Bordados por la Paz' (Embroidered for Peace), 'Bordamos por la Paz' (We Embroider for Peace), 'Bordando por la Paz' (Embroidering for Peace), and 'Fuentes Rojas' (Red Fonts).

MEMORIES OF OUR BODY-TERRITORY: THE IMPACTS OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN MAGDALENAS ALDAMA, CHIAPAS

The Chiapas Highlands have experienced historical conflicts marked by disputes, violence, and displacements, leading to territorial reconfigurations among indigenous communities. These disputes have resulted in community ruptures that have affected social ties in Mayan communities, impacting norms of coexistence, systems of communal political authority, and elements of cultural identity (Martínez Velasco, 2005). Acts of violence and armed attacks have been responsible for these changes, as illustrated in the notorious conflict between the communities of Magdalenas Aldama and Santa Marta Chenalhó, both of Maya Tsotsil origin.

This conflict arises from the dispute over 60 hectares that both communities have been claiming for more than 40 years. In March 2020, the Mexican National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) expressed concern about armed attacks in the border area between Magdalenas Aldama and Santa Marta Chenalhó, posing a threat to the lives, integrity, and security of local indigenous communities (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2020). These attacks, ongoing since 2015 and escalating since 2018, have impacted daily life in Aldama, including agricultural and textile activities: "From January 1 to the last days of April 2022, 1,095 attacks with firearms on roads, *milpas*, and houses have

been reported, resulting in 3 people dead and 5 wounded, including a girl" (Mariscal et al., 2022, para. 9).

Despite the signing of peace agreements mediated by the government, violence has not ceased in the region. While the original explanation for the conflict points to a territorial dispute, many suspicions remain among the population and human rights organizations, as high-caliber weapons are used, with ammunition exceeding the value of the disputed land. Military patrols have proven ineffective in stopping the violence.

Chiapas serves as the Southern border gateway for organized crime to Mexico, facilitating the transportation of goods, migrants, weapons, and drugs toward the United States. This conflict affects the inhabitants of the region and our fellow embroiderers and weavers from the collective, resulting in the loss of loved ones and livelihoods due to work in the fields. Their ability to generate income from weaving and embroidery is affected by displacement and fear of attacks.

Giving voice to what happens in our body-territories is essential, as in the memory of our bodies and emotions lies the greatest suffering. Despite the difficulties, we still preserve memories of times of peace:

> Communication with the neighboring town of Santa Marta was good because we exchanged our food with what they produced: sugar cane, bananas, oranges, pumpkins, peaches, and apples; while we produced chilacayote, corn, beans, chickpeas, fava beans, and mandarines. The women of Aldama were free, they were not afraid to wear traditional attire and engage in their daily activities such as collecting firewood, cleaning the cornfield, or taking their animals (horses, donkeys, and sheep) to the forest. They took advantage of the opportunity to work at the *milpa* or engage in embroidery or weaving by tying themselves to the trees of the place. During the patron saint festivities, the inhabitants of Santa Marta and their patron saint were invited to visit our virgin, the Virgin of Magdalena, in our church. We also welcomed residents from San Andrés Larrainzar and Santiago el Pinar. We spoke with different people, sharing food and words. (M. Gómez Pérez, personal communication, January 23, 2019; and D. M. Pérez Pérez Pérez, personal communication, February 15, 2023)

These memories, reflecting actions and nourishment, emphasize the importance of the body as a means to understand our territory, where feeling and experiencing the place we inhabit are crucial for our survival (Cruz Hernández & Bayón Jiménez, 2020).

THE METHODOLOGICAL THREADS: BODY-TERRITORY MAPPING AND COLLECTIVE EMBROIDERY

In this project, we have employed body-territory mapping and collective embroidery as methodological frameworks to "reflect and make visible the impact of the conflict and constant violence in our municipality of Magdalenas on our Body/Territory" (Colectiva Malacate, 2022, para. 2) and restore our community fabric, aligned with the indigenous heritage and cosmovision that emphasizes harmony among spirituality, the physical body, the community, Mother Earth, and the universe (Mariscal et al., 2022, para. 15).

Following this perspective, we employ body-territory mapping and collective embroidery as feminist practices that align with the concept of *continuum*, which acknowledges forms of feminism that intertwine our everyday activities with more formal political actions (Pentney, 2008). This *continuum* encompasses three goals through textile activities: building community, supporting social causes by way of fundraising, and engaging in political actions such as protests or public denunciations.

Our project consists of three phases: the impact on the body-territory as a result of the conflict; the collective embroidery of the body-territory printed on cloth bags as an act of memory against oblivion; and the creation of support networks and fundraising with people in solidarity with the embroiderers and their body-territories (Figure 2). In this context, our project aligns with the three objectives of the *continuum* by serving to build community, repair the social fabric, seek solidarity support through the commercialization of the bags, and act as a political statement for denouncing and transmitting memory.

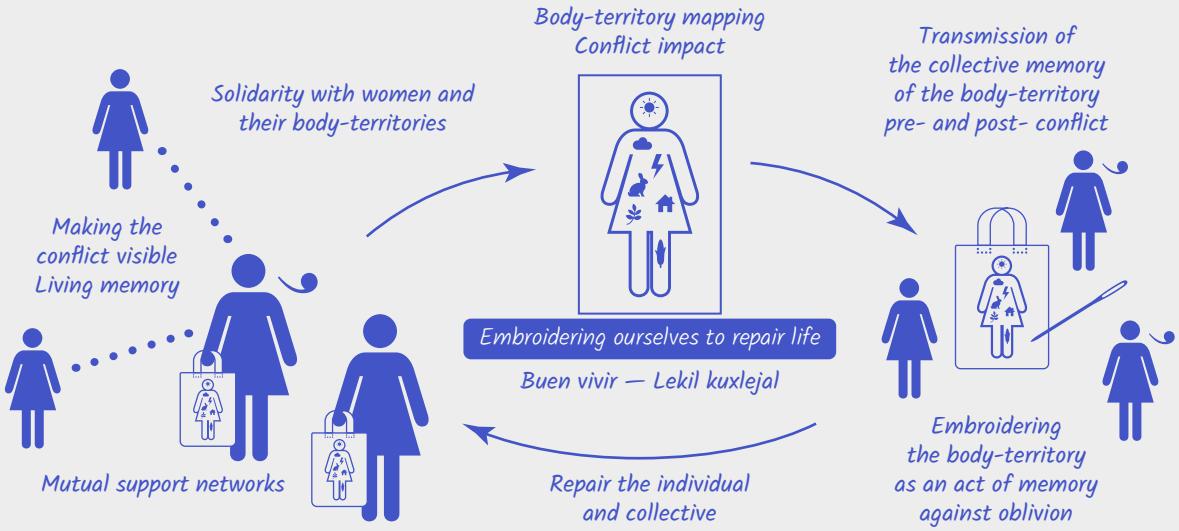

Figure 2: Embroidering ourselves to repair life. Diagram of the stages of the project 'Memories of Our Body-Territory. Testimonies about Structural Violence and Daily Life of Women Weavers in the Municipality of Magdalenas, Chiapas'. Source: Author's own elaboration, redrawn.

MAPPING THE BODY-TERRITORY: PRE- AND POST-CONFLICT MEMORIES

In Latin America, various feminist currents—such as decolonial and communal feminisms, feminist liberation theologies, and feminist geographies—have explored the conception of the body as territory (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017). From the feminist decolonial perspective, the body is recognized as a "territory with its own memory and geography, the first place of enunciation and emancipation" (Tapia De la Fuente, 2021, p. 64). Although each current has particularities, they all share the idea of connecting the body with contexts, places, and territories to reclaim its sovereignty, turning the body-territory into a space of resistance, recovery, inspiration, and liberation.

Visual representations of the body, such as corporal cartographies, become maps of our bodies that reflect the aggressions suffered by our territories and their impact on our bodies. They also highlight the importance of defending our territory:[5]

> The methodological and conceptual commitment to the body-territory allows us to create maps to identify violence against our bodies and make visible its connection with territorial invasions and selective repression, aimed at undermining the sovereignty of bodies and territories. We discover that the similarities in each territorial or bodily experience stem from the interwoven nature of the struggles, and recognizing this leads us to establish new strategies for resisting together. (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017, p. 42)

From this perspective, body-territory mapping has helped us to reflect on how "our lives as weavers have been transformed and how our culture and freedom have been profoundly affected" (Colectiva Malacate, 2022, para. 3). The initial maps were created by Dolores María Pérez Pérez, who, through traces and drawings, captured the testimonies of the women weavers and embroiderers of Aldama from our Colectiva Malacate. These maps narrate what our life was like in our municipality before the conflict (Figure 3).

The second mapping narrates how the armed conflict with the neighboring town of Santa Marta (Figure 4) transformed our lives in the municipality. After the initial armed attacks, many families were evacuated and forced to seek refuge in the mountains near the border with Santiago el Pinar. This crisis resulted in food shortages and employment loss, aggravating the situation, especially due to the pandemic. It also had an impact on our traditional attire.

> Women were prohibited from wearing their traditional clothing; the reason was to avoid being attacked from a distance. Women who needed to go out

5 In this discussion we acknowledge the work that various organizations and collectives have carried out in response to debates on the defense of territory and the collective rights of communities. In this context, we highlight the work of the Colectivo de Geografía Crítica de Ecuador (Critical Geography Collective of Ecuador), which was formed with the purpose of addressing the process of global capitalist accumulation and supporting indigenous and peasant struggles (see Colectivo Geografía Crítica de Ecuador, 2017).

to neighboring towns or the economic center of San Cristóbal de las Casas had to wear industrial clothing or attires from other towns to avoid identification. Neither women nor men could go to the fields to work, to the rivers, or springs. In our municipality, we are coffee producers. During the coffee harvest in the time of conflict, the inhabitants of Aldama had to travel all night to avoid being attacked, with lights turned off. While harvesting, some people kept watch, and others quickly illuminated the coffee beans to be able to pick the ripe ones. The harvest had to be done quickly to return at dawn to avoid interception on the way. (S. E. Pérez Jiménez, personal communication, January 2, 2019; D. M. Pérez Pérez Pérez, personal communication, February 15, 2023)

Figure 3: Body-territory mapping using the traditional attire of Magdalenas Aldama. In the image, Dolores María Pérez Pérez describes what life was like before the conflict. Source: Personal archive of the author of the image, Karla Pérez Cánovas, 2022.

This testimony clearly highlights the interconnectedness between body and territory and how both have been profoundly affected by the conflict.

These maps of our body-territory were used to share how the conflict transformed our lives and our bodies. For example, we presented them at the seminar 'Problematizing the Violence of Order: Research on Gender Inequalities from Structural Violence'[6] in January 2020. Sharing them with diverse social actors created a listening network to express our experiences. Subsequently, we came up with the idea of creating embroidered bags with maps using local techniques to make visible what was happening in our municipality, dignifying the resistance of women weavers and embroiderers, in addition to generating income for the women weavers of Aldama affected by the conflict and the pandemic.

6 *Problematizar la violencia del orden: Investigaciones sobre desigualdades de género desde la violencia estructural.*

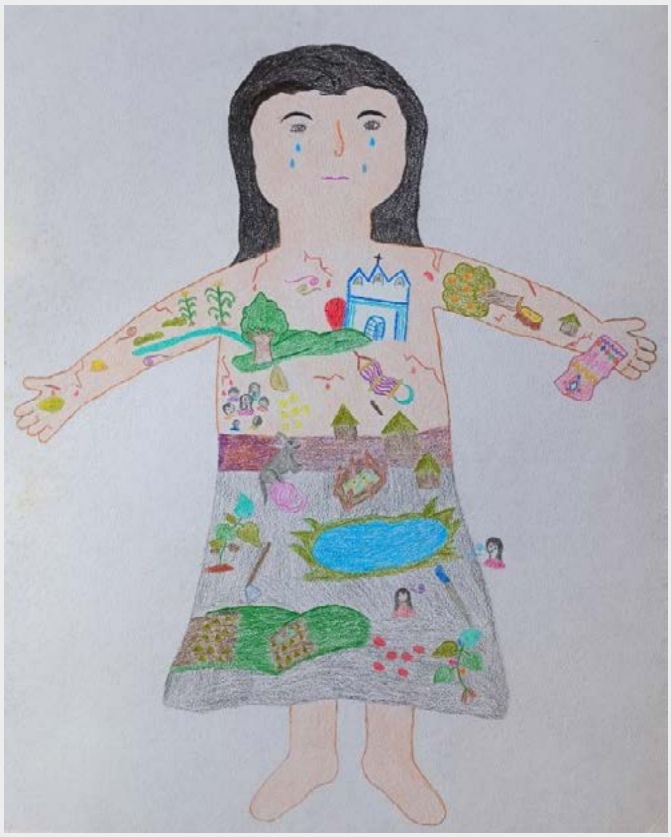

Figure 4: Impacts on the body-territory mapped after the armed conflict. A collective mapping on how the armed conflict transformed and affected the daily life, bodies, and territory of the residents and women of the municipality of Aldama is presented. Drawing made by Dolores María Pérez Pérez, 2022. Source: Personal archive of Karla Pérez Cánovas.

EMBROIDERING COLLECTIVELY TO REPAIR THE MEMORY OF THE BODY-TERRITORY

> When many people embroider together, they occupy space similarly, positioning themselves concentrically to share stitches, looks, and conversations; to place the body. Embroidery is a story told with the body, and it is this body from which we know, it is the place from where the being is expressed and where the subject is installed. The plural, collective body is not the sum of individual bodies, it is the mixture, the entanglement, it is the articulation—the embodiment of a community. (Tapia De la Fuente, 2021, p. 2)

Collective embroidery creates affective bonds and transitions from the 'I' to the 'we', moving from the individual body-territory to the collective. In the second phase, we use collective embroidery to narrate our reality. As Tapia De la Fuente emphasizes, "embroidery becomes a means of communication, a way of inhabiting the body-territory, and a practice of community production" (2021, p. ii).

The bags were primarily embroidered by *compañeras* from Magdalenas Aldama and women from Nachig, Zinacantán, using the body-territory maps. Each woman chose which parts of her body-territory to embroider, weaving her story. Each thread in the embroidery adds texture, remembering, making public, and reviving what was lost (Figure 5). By acknowledging the loss, we confront lived processes, repairing and reclaiming our lives and dignities affected by violence. The threads weave a political and material imagination, along with encounters between bodies and dialogues among women (Quiceno Toro, 2021). In this way, we accompany each other, support each other, and move towards the repair and reconstruction of our lives.

Figure 5: Bag models, embroidering the memory of the body-territory. The photograph shows the body-territory mapping printed on cotton bags embroidered by women weavers from the municipality of Aldama and the community of Nachig, municipality of Zinacatán. Source: Personal archive of the author of the image, Karla Pérez Cánovas, 2022.

The encounters of collective embroidery and loving listening weave the women's stories into a unique narrative, even in painful contexts. This is reflected in the concept of 'self-absorption', defined as "an individual experience in embroidery and a transition to collective practice" (Cuellar Barona & Caicedo Giraldo, 2023, p. 146). Collective embroidery allows for a connection with one's own experiences and emotions by listening to the stories of other women, becoming a form of self-care. Thus, support networks and self-care become an "ethical-political tool to rethink how we take care of ourselves in different dimensions: social, emotional, and spiritual" (Martínez Ortiz & Estrada Medina, 2018, p. 5). The sale of the embroidered bags in the collective raises funds to support *compañeras* affected by the conflict and expands support networks beyond our collective.

EMBROIDERED MEMORIES: MAKING THE CONFLICT VISIBLE THROUGH SUPPORT NETWORKS

Creating memories through weaving strengthens bonds of unity and sociability; by trusting the stitches, one's own knowledge is infused as if a griev-

> ing process were being crafted with each movement of the needle; thus, a part of personal memory remains in the textile. (Sossa Londoño & Vergara Arias, 2019, p. 208)

Embroidery as a manifestation of memory emerges in response to violence experienced by women, such as armed conflicts and disappearances (Gargallo Celentani, 2014; Olalde Rico, 2019). Embroideries are "creative, quotidian, simple forms of expressing those memories, of marking the places where violent actions were witnessed" (Arenas Grisales, 2012, p. 175). Bags with embroidered body-territories encourage conversations about their origin and the embroidered images, expanding support networks.

Using embroidery as an expression and tool for memory, our work inspires other women in the region to speak about the conflict as the weavers of Magdalenas Aldama do. Additionally, it provides us with opportunities to share our story in seminars and organizations that support human rights victims, creating networks of supportive solidarity.

Embroidery as a denouncement of the conflict in our territory brings visibility to women weavers and embroiderers, making us aware of how the conflict transforms our bodies and our territory, threatening our textile memory. As Quiceno Toro mentions, "Collective work helps to confront grief, imagine paths and life projects, dignify daily life and existence" (2021, p. 81). The collective embroidery of our body-territory maps conveys memory collectively, repairing both the individual and the collective, forging a path towards the repair and reconstruction of our lives.

THE FINAL THREADS OF EMBROIDERY

Through the project 'Memories of Our Body-Territory. Testimonies about Structural Violence and Daily Life of Women Weavers in the Municipality of Magdalenas, Chiapas', we have gained insights that have allowed us to weave our stories and voices together, in the pursuit of vindication, repair, and reconnection. As women who have experienced the multiple benefits of embroidery in various dimensions, we have seen how body-territory mapping and collective embroidery, as feminist methodological guides, have empowered us to understand the relationship between our bodies and territories, as well as to recognize the impacts of armed conflicts, such as the one between Magdalenas Aldama and Santa Marta Chenalhó.

Body-territory mapping and the identification of the effects of violence have provided us with the starting point for the acknowledgment and repair of life, as well as for documenting and transmitting memory through embroidery. The act of embroidery, rooted in lived experience, facilitates the connection

with the individual body and contributes to forming a collective body that keeps individual and collective memory alive. These spaces, created through collective embroidery, offer a sense of being wrapped up in listening, dialogue, reflection, and connection between women seeking to repair their lives.

The results of these embroidery exercises, in the form of embroidered bags documenting the losses and impacts on our body-territory, become a means to document and transmit collective memory, creating listening and support networks that allow others to show solidarity with our experiences. We leave this text—as an embroidery—without the finishing touch of its threads, inviting readers to reflect on their own stories and the impacts on their body-territory, and to embroider collectively to repair their lives. **D**

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