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Threads of Feeling: Embroidering Craftivism to Protest the Disappearances and Deaths in the “War on Drugs” in Mexico

Maureen Daly Goggin

*What ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing, spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the establishment of facts, but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony.*¹

--Dori Laub

*We embroider, perhaps, because a few hands can transform things and we need to transform them into beautiful things because so many hands are already doing appalling, unmentionable, incomprehensible things.*²

--Teresa Sordo

Living through and with trauma, regardless of its origin, demands a way to cope with it. Speaking and writing the trauma helps victims both to bear witness to and to grapple with the devastation that is the residual of suffering.³ As Dori Laub points out in the epigraph, it is the bipartite “experience” of “living through the testimony” and “of giving testimony” that is central to the ameliorating effects of verbalizing what happened. In this paper, I argue for understanding stitching as a discursive practice, a way to speak and write the world and, in the case of trauma, to bear eyewitness to and cope with pain and damage of trauma. Specifically, I examine one group’s efforts, *Bordados por la Paz* (Embroidering for Peace), for giving voice to those who have suffered untold violence in the Mexican-American War on Drugs. On large white handkerchiefs, embroiderers—parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, and colleagues—come together in public spaces to stitch in red thread information about a victim’s death or disappearance. In this paper, I analyze this movement as a two-pronged endeavor: first, as one of a growing number of contemporary heteroglossic⁴ strategies of activism that involves textiles—craftivism. Second, I examine the practice of *making* the embroidered handkerchiefs to show how this material praxis is saturated with conflicting traumatic emotions: anger, frustration, protest, discomfort, uncertainty, love, desire, and relief.⁵ In short, this paper demonstrates the robust emotional investment and release that embroidering manifests as well as the vigorous power of it in acts of protest.

¹ Dori Laub, “An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 75-92, 85.

² Daniela Pastrana, “A Memorial of White Scarves Protests Calderón’s Legacy,” *Inter Press Service*, November 29, 2012, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/11/a-memorial-of-white-scarves-protests-calderons-legacy/>.

³ For a discussion on the complex relationship between trauma and writing, see Peter N. Goggin and Maureen Daly Goggin, “Presence in Absence: Discourses and Teaching (In, On and about) Trauma,” in *National Trauma and the Teaching of Writing*, ed. Shane Borrowman, 29-51 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 36. See also Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁴ For Mikhail Bakhtin, *heteroglossia* is a convergence of world views and beliefs through language that creates a hybrid of utterances. Thus, Bakhtin argued that language at any moment is “heteroglot representing the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions of both present and past...” (*Dialogic*, 291). Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

⁵ On the role of needlework, emotions, and trauma, see Maureen Daly Goggin, “Stitching (for) His Life: Morris Williams Larkin’s Prisoner of War Sampler,” *Journal of Modern Craft* 5.4 (2013): 147-63.

Background

On December 11, 2006, just a few days after he stepped into office, Mexican President Felipe Calderón sent 6,500 Mexican Army soldiers to Michoacán in South-Western Mexico in the first large scale retaliation against the drug cartel violence in Mexico. While violence among cartel members had been going on for at least three decades at that point, the Mexican government had been generally passive—not interfering with the Cartels. That all changed with the Operation Michoacán mission in which more than 60 Mexican soldiers and over 100 police officers died along with 500 cartel gunmen. Throughout his Presidency, Calderón escalated his anti-drug campaign till it reached over 45,000 troops along with federal and state police forces. During this war increasingly more and more innocent citizens—children, women, and men—have been disappearing and others killed.

As of September 2014, over 130,000 Mexicans had been killed, at least another 27,000 had disappeared, and over a million had fled their villages and cities. The violence is affecting all “socio-economic levels [who are being] plagued by kidnapping, extortion and murder.”⁶ The violence continues today averaging 56 killings per day since 2006. Recently Amnesty International has termed the numbers of missing in Mexico a “Human Rights Crises.” Mothers, fathers, other relatives and concerned neighbors of those who have gone missing in the fight against drug cartels and even of those who are in organized crime are demanding that authorities solve the murders and locate their missing loved ones as only about 10% of the cases are taken up by Mexican police and only 5% of those are solved. Frustrated with the lack of progress, interest, and action, activists in Mexico have been putting together a number of demonstrations since 2011.

One of the groups making powerful demands for answers about the never-ending violence in the ongoing war on drugs is *Fuentes Rojas* (Red Fountains), an activist group of artists who came together in Mexico City in January 2011 to “raise the visibility for the victims of the US-Mexico Drug War.”⁷ They dyed the waters in number of fountains throughout Mexico red and encouraged folks to do as they were doing, posting a recipe and directions on a YouTube video titled “Fuentes Rojas Manual.” (Red Fountains Manual)⁸ Later that year, a group from *Fuentes Rojas*, founded and named themselves *Bordados por la Paz* (which means Embroidering for Peace); the group was organized by Margarita Sierra and its original intent was to create an ephemeral farewell memorial to then President Felipe Calderón who was stepping down at the end of November 2012.

In August 2011, *Bordados por la Paz* held their first collective sewing session in the Zócalo, Mexico City’s central square. They brought together parents, siblings, friends, and colleagues who had suffered the trauma of the war to stitch in red thread information about the victim’s death or disappearance on large white handkerchiefs. From this public space in Mexico City, the idea of *Bordados por la Paz* sped across cities in Mexico as groups formed and came together in

⁶ Molly Molloy, “The Mexican Undead: Toward a New History of the ‘Drug War’ Killing Fields.” *Small Wars Journal* (21 August 2013), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-undead-toward-a-new-history-of-the-%E2%80%9Cdrug-war%E2%80%9D-killing-fields>.

⁷ “Fuentes Rojas/Bordando por la Paz de San Felipe,” *StPhilipNews*, August 26, 2013, <http://storiesfromstphilips.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/fuentes-rojas-bordando-por-la-paz-de-san-felipe/>.

⁸ “Fuente Rojas Manual,” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoHZr6T39O4>.

other city squares, parks, and outdoor spaces throughout the country. Soon, those in Nuevo León began to use green thread to represent the disappeared; green represents hope for their return alive. Red was retained for the dead. The goal of the groups then broadened. Elia Andrade Olea—one of the founders of *Red Fountain*—explains that today their goal is to create an embroidered memorial handkerchief for *every victim* of drug war violence—that is well over 150,000 pieces and the number is growing daily. This movement has now spread around the world to Latin America, Europe, Asia, and the US and groups are still going strong. This is a collaborative effort of great proportions.



Figure 1: Stitcher in Zocaola de Puebla in Puebla, Mexico. August 17, 2014. Photo: Bordados por la paz Puebla Facebook.



Figure 2: Words and Images in Zocaola de Puebla in Puebla, Mexico. June 26, 2013. Photo: Bordados por la paz Puebla Facebook.

While some embroider words only that describe the details of their loved one, often with narratives of what happened to them, others stitch pictures along with the words. (See Fig. 2.)

Focusing on the *Hand Making of the Handmade*

Rather than do a textual analysis of these extraordinary pieces, I am primarily interested in the *practice of making* these samplers—that is, the ways in which needle workers conceptualize, produce, circulate, use, and exchange pieces of embroidering. That is to say, I am interested in examining the rhetoricity of the *act of stitching* these memorial handkerchiefs. I'm curious about the following questions: What does this practice achieve for those who stitch these pieces? How did this needle art task get picked up by so many folks around the world, so many who are engaging fully in it? What is the relationship between stitching and psychological/ physical trouble and easement?

The very name of the activist group *Bordando por la Paz* (Embroidering for Peace) can be read as a double entendre. On the one hand, as a rhetorical trope the name calls attention to embroidering as an *activist act* and deliberative argument for peace, for the end of war; on the other hand, it calls attention to embroidering as a *therapeutic act* for peace against the trauma of what is happening because of the war. In this latter case, needlework serves as catharsis. I grapple with both meanings as I address my research questions.

Activist Stitching for Peace: Stitching for public protest is not new. First-wave feminists in the US and in Britain used needlework in their demonstrations and public protest lectures during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Needlework and other handcrafts, however, slipped in interest among women throughout the twentieth century, with second-wave feminists arguing against the oppression of the needle. However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a steep resurgence in the making of hand crafts. Jack Z Bratich and Heidi M. Brush refer to this revival of interest “fabriculture”—a fascination with “a whole range of practices usually defined as the ‘domestic arts’: knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making.”⁹ Fabriculture is turning around the domesticity and feminization of these and other practices to construct a radical new paradigm. By engaging in practices that have been gendered in the past, women and men seek to reclaim, redefine, and repurpose these “traditionally (mis)feminized” activities, and many are turning to crafting, especially needlework, as an activist strategy. In *Knitting for Good*, feminist Betsy Greer makes this point strongly when she proclaims, “I think every act of *making* is an act of revolution.”¹⁰

Greer has termed this socio-political strategy “craftivism.”¹¹ Craftwork as described by Greer is formidable and compelling. In this way, her description draws attention to the term “craft” in German—where *kraft* is spelled with a “k” and where it means *power*. Power in this space does not signal hierarchy, domination, or hegemony rather it is more like a force, a strength, and an

⁹ Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush, “Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender,” *Utopian Studies* 22.2 (2011): 234.

¹⁰ Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* (Boston; Trumpton, 2008), 144.

¹¹ Betsy Greer, “Craftivism,” *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 402.

ability. In a phrase I have introduced elsewhere, craft is “soft power.”¹² This oxymoron challenges the connotation of “soft” as flimsy, weak, and stereotypically feminine and the connotation of “power” as brute force, strong, and stereotypically masculine. Both words are turned inside out in many current activist movements where: Soft is strong and power is nonaggressive. Soft is physical and power is cerebral. Soft is durable and power is creative. In other words, craft is a creative, innovative, and compelling force that resides in the *doing* of craftwork.

In a similar vein, Anthony McCann, a social philosopher and independent scholar, promotes what he calls “crafting gentleness;” he explains that his “life is dedicated to the exploration of gentleness as a powerful form of politics, that is, as a powerful response to the worst that we can imagine, and as a powerful catalyst for helpful and transformative culture change in everyday life.”¹³ He terms this a “critical vernacular ecology” through which he seeks “everyday ethics” in institutional practices and social life. Crafting is a practice that he points to as a vital part of the “critical vernacular ecology.” Crafting, in other words, is political. Elsewhere McCann explicates “crafting gentleness” by saying that “by sculpting, shaping, moulding, guiding, building, and by listening and responding as we go, we can become more aware of how we make a difference. Crafting can be a reclamation of the power of life.”¹⁴ This reclamation opens up a space for socio-political action that can be best understood, as I have explained, as “soft power.” The embroiderers in the *Bordando por la Paz* movement embrace and operate within this space, making powerful citizen-framed arguments.

These powerful deliberative arguments—variations on “stop the war”—rely on the *design* of the stitched handkerchief, with each one individually designed by the embroiderer. Design today can be thought of as another word for “revolution” as Bruno Latour has argued. In his words, “the new ‘revolutionary’ energy [is now] taken from the set of attitudes that are hard to come by in revolutionary movements: modesty, care, precautions, skills, crafts, meanings, attention to details, careful conservations, redesign, artificiality, and ever shifting transitory fashion.”¹⁵ He thus contends that the expansion of the term design indicates “what could be called a post Promethean theory of action,”¹⁶ especially in its insistence on attention to detail and to remixing. Design is always already redesign according to Latour because it works with materials already in place. “To design,” he points out, “is never to create *ex nihilo*. . . . There is always something that exists first as a given, as an issue, as a problem.”¹⁷ For the *Bordando por la Paz* embroiders this issue is the devastating repercussions of the War on Drugs. In stitching, people enter into the discourses on the war with their needle in hand to experience what Latour notes about designing. “Designing is the antidote to founding, colonizing, establishing, or breaking with the past. It is an antidote to hubris and to the search for absolute certainty, absolute beginnings, and radical

¹² Maureen Daly Goggin, “Yarn Bombing: Claiming Rhetorical Citizenship in Public Spaces,” *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship: Purposes, Practices, and Perspectives*, ed. Christian Kock and Lisa S. Villadsen (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2014), 93-116.

¹³ Anthony McCann, About. *Anthony McCann, PhD*. 2014, <http://www.anthonymccann.com/#!anthonymccann/c1r5t>.

¹⁴ Anthony McCann, “Crafting Gentleness,” 2010, <http://www.anthonymccann.com/#!anthonymccann/c1r5t>.

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, “A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design,” *Networks of Design: Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of Design History Society*, ed. Fiona Hackney, Jonathan Glynne, and Viv Minton, (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2009): 2-10, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

departures.”¹⁸ In this sense, design is a post Promethean theory of action because “in addition to modesty, there is a sense of skillfulness, craftsmanship and an obsessive attention to detail that makes up a key connotation of design”¹⁹ in the embroidered handkerchiefs. Finally, Latour rightfully claims “design lends itself to interpretation; it is made to be interpreted in the language of signs.”²⁰ Stitching in red or green thread on white handkerchiefs demands interpretation of both the message and the messenger.

Education scholar Martin López Calva describes the *Bordando por la Paz* embroiderers as “thoughtful, committed citizens.”²¹ This description is a fitting interpretation of the messengers given the relationship between rhetoric and citizenship. Communication scholar Robert Danisch calls attention to the “importance of communication practices in grounding habits of citizenship.”²² He fittingly observes that:

Contemporary conceptions of citizenship have been qualified in a number of different ways: social citizenship, multicultural citizenship, citizen-soldiers, or citizen-workers are just a few examples. Although these are useful elaborations of the concept of citizenship, they fail to recognize the importance of communication practices in grounding habits of citizenship. The earliest Ancient Greek model of citizen was so closely tied to speech acts that the word ‘rhetor’ could be used as a place holder for citizen.²³

This important co-constructive connection between rhetoric and citizenship remains with us today, a significant connection that rhetoric scholars Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen termed “rhetorical citizenship.” They expound on the construct in *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation* as “a way of conceptualizing the discursive, processual, participatory aspects of civic life.”²⁴

Activism is one way to lay claim to rhetorical citizenship in public spaces by advocating for decision and judgment. The deliberative rhetoric generated during activist movements calls for co-active participation from both those creating/circulating protest agendas and those consuming/debating such agendas. Such a view of rhetorical citizenship recognizes publics (with an “s”) as practices not as abstractions, as fluid not as stable, as active in practical judgment not as passive recipients, and as operating in the here and now and not in some imagined future. Clearly, one of the major functions of the *Bordando por la Paz* movement is the expression of rhetorical citizenship through the handkerchiefs activists stitch.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 3.

²⁰ Ibid, 4.

²¹ Martin Lopez Calva, “Mexico: Embroidering for Peace and Citizen Education,” *Jenny’s Journal: Mexican Culture Online Magazine for the Culturally Curious*, trans. by Jane Brundage (2012), <http://jennymexico.blogspot.com/2012/09/mexico-embroidering-for-peace-and.html>.

²² Robert Danisch, “Jane Addams, Pragmatism, and Rhetorical Citizenship in Multicultural Democracies,” *Citizens of the World: Pluralism, Migration and Practices of Citizenship*, ed. Robert Danisch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 37-59, 38.

²³ Ibid, 37-38.

²⁴ Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen, “Introduction,” *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation*, eds. Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012), 1-10, 5. Also see Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen, “Rhetorical Citizenship as a Conceptual Frame in Academe: What We Talk About When We Talk about Rhetorical Citizenship,” *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship: Purposes, Practices, and Perspectives*, eds. Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2014): 1-14.

In stitching the activist memorial sampler for every victim, the embroiderers are stitching against the normalization of violence that has taken over during the last half a dozen years in Mexico. Through both sewn words and images, these embroidering activists seek to denormalize violence and argue for peace by giving a “face” to each victim who would otherwise remain anonymous. They seek deliberation about the horrific outcomes of the war. They also seek to give dignity and respect to those having suffered a dehumanizing fate. In the words of Rosa Borrás, a member *Bordando por la Paz* based in the central city of Puebla, “Embroidering is a reflective action in which every time you go back over the name you’re sewing you make it your own and identify with it. It’s an action that humanizes the victim.”²⁵ What Borrás does not say is that this action gives dignity and humanity to the stitchers as well. In part, this may help explain why the stitching continues.

Calva writes: “Sunday after Sunday [in Plaza of Democracy in central Puebla] a community of Embroiderers for Peace is being built of thoughtful, committed citizens who want to provide symbols that make visible what we all hide. A solidarity is being created that extends via the social networks across the miles, holding together other groups of the same movement in distant cities.”²⁶ Rosa Borrás puts it this way, “We know the act of embroidering and demonstrating is not going to change government structures or policies, but it has helped us to forge a lot of ties among ourselves, among citizens. It’s succeeded in rebuilding the social fabric.”²⁷ Rebuilding the social fabric is a crucial step toward initiating an end to the war. It is the sign of a strong activism. Yet it is not the only outcome of the stitching. Stitching for peace also works as a therapeutic act against the horrors of war as the next section explains.

Therapeutic Stitching in Trauma: What does the *doing* of embroidery accomplish beyond the finished product? Why are so many people—young and old, male and female, Mexican and other nationalities—coming together to complete this monumental project? Week after week people are gathering in parks, city centers, and other spaces across Mexico and across the world to stitch. As Calva explains, for hours, stitchers “sit together with other young people and adults from different parts of the city—people with different occupations, ideologies and beliefs—to embroider white handkerchiefs with the names and stories of the thousands of people who have died or are missing in recent years in the so-called ‘war on drugs’.”²⁸

What brings these people together, connecting them to one another and to other groups far away? Part of the answer lies in the craft of sewing itself. Media and communications scholar David Gauntlett demonstrates how *making is connecting*, how the things we make form social connections on several different levels. For one, making involves a social dimension at various points in the process that connects us with other people—getting the materials, relying on the patterns and/or teachings of others, having questions answered, learning where to display one’s work and so on. Second, making is connecting because “through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connections with our social and physical

²⁵ “Mexicans Denounce Calderon’s Presidency with Scarf Protest,” *Fox News*, November 30, 2012, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2012/11/30/mexicans-denounce-calderon-presidency-with-scarf-protest/>.

²⁶ Calva.

²⁷ “Mexicans Denounce.”

²⁸ Calva.

environment.”²⁹ In the case of the *Bordando por la Paz* stitchers, they connect with other embroiderers as they work on their pieces and with those who come to view their work or who notice it as they pass by on their way to somewhere else. These social connections speak to the rebuilding of the social fabric to which Rosa Borrás called attention.

Another explanation for why so many people are coming together may be found in Teresa Brennan’s theory on the “transmission of affect,” a term she coined to describe a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect. She argues that “language functions by giving us a place in relation to others, so enabling us to overcome the subject-centered illusion that plague each of us, and it also gives a voice to the affective blocks and feelings that otherwise stand in the way of rejoining enough of the flow of life to survive.”³⁰ In other words, affect is transmitted and shared both biologically and socially. In this way, people are drawn together by discoursing about their traumas with red and green thread on white cloth. Clearly, understanding the stitching of these handkerchiefs as a rhetorical act, we see them serving the language function theorized by Brennan. Stitching is a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect, and as we will see, embroidery heals people psychologically and biologically—stitching serves as a transformative act.

Yet another part of the answer lies in the exigency of the rhetorical task itself. The embroiderers stitch to cope with trauma and post-traumatic stress, both near and far, caused by the War on Drugs. In this, they hold “secondary” victim status. “Secondary” victims include, as Roger Luckhurst points out, “witnesses, bystanders, rescue workers, relatives caught up in the immediate aftermath, a proximity now extended to include receiving news of the death or injury of a relative.”³¹ Post-traumatic stress can be as debilitating for a secondary victim as for a first. As literary scholar Cathy Caruth observes, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not* known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”³² How does one deal with the haunting of the unspeakable act? *Trauma* can only be dealt with discursively, for it is not made present until it is spoken or written about. Leslie Hill draws attention to the complex interdependent relation between discourse and a traumatic event. Writing is both a challenge and an extreme exigency—that is, it is both called forth by and constitutes the trauma.³³ For historian Dominick LaCapra, *writing about trauma* “involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic ‘experiences’.”³⁴ Most common among the genres of trauma writing is testimony.

²⁹ David Gauntlet, *Making is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 12. Also see Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle, and Helen Felcey, *Collaboration through Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

³⁰ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 143.

³¹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

³² Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4. Also see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

³³ Leslie Hill, “Introduction,” *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. C. Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1996), 1-20.

³⁴ LaCapra, 186.

However, the testimony is not stable. There is no one referent but only multiple stories told by the one and the many who were there as first- or secondary-witnesses. It is always already heteroglossic. As such, a traumatic event—as both exigency for and object/subject of writing—poses powerful problems for the rhetor, for it is by its very nature both beyond language and yet can only be constituted by language. Yet, the power of speaking/writing about the trauma cannot be overstated. The ability to generate rhetoric about the trauma can be therapeutic and restorative. Psychiatrist Dori Laub found in his clinical work with survivors of the Holocaust that they “not only need[ed] to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive.”³⁵ As Peter Goggin and I elsewhere point out, rhetoric in this instance “creates *presence* in *absence*.”³⁶ All the needleworkers in the *Bordando por la Paz* movement have experienced the trauma to one degree or another: of losing a loved one, or of knowing someone who has gone missing or was killed, or of knowing that the war has taken many. In the absence of their loved ones, embroiderers in the *Bordando por la Paz* movement spin narratives of the missing lives. In the act of stitching, these embroiderers transform their own deep feelings of angst, fear, pain, and uncertainty into harmony and love for their family, friends, or others. For many of the embroiderers, this transformation is exactly what they express when they speak of this task.



**Figure 3: Leticia Hidalgo Rea’s handkerchief for her son Roy Rivera Hidalgo.
Photo: Bordados por la Paz Puebla Facebook.**

One of the *Bordando por la Paz* embroiderers, Leticia Hidalgo Rea, says that “Each stitch is to be with my child; it is to love him; it is to feel him.”³⁷ (See fig. 3.) Her 18 year old son Roy Rivera Hidalgo, a student in Philosophy and Letters at the Autonomous University of Nuevo León, was kidnapped on January 11, 2011, when a group of hooded men carrying large guns and

³⁵ Laub, 78.

³⁶ Goggin and Goggin, 35.

³⁷ Qtd. in Sanjuana Martinez, “Mexico: Mothers of Drug War Victims Embroider Handkerchiefs to Protest and Ease Sorrow,” *Mexico Voices*, September 9, 2012, <http://mexicovoices.blogspot.com/2012/09/mexico-mothers-of-drug-war-victims.html>.

wearing police vests emblazoned with the name Escobedo broke into the family home at dawn to rob them. To get their son back, the family paid 750,000 pesos (close to US \$58,000 or €42,300) in ransom; however, the kidnappers have not returned their son. She stitches in green to keep hope alive that someday he will return. Rea goes on: “When I embroider, I say that I love him, that soon we will see each other again. I do not know when, but I live for the day.”³⁸

Embroidering helps each person—young and old—female and male—expert and novice—deal with the trauma they have directly or indirectly experienced because of the war on drugs. As Calva puts it, embroiderers “want to provide symbols that make visible what we all hide. A solidarity is being created that extends via the social networks across the miles, holding together other groups of the same movement in distant cities.” Solidarity is crucial in the process, for it is through mending the social fabric that healing can take place. Crafting is the source.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the material praxis of embroidering each handkerchief is saturated with a number of conflicting traumatic emotions: anger, frustration, protest, discomfort, uncertainty, love, desire, and relief experienced during the act of stitching. In short, there is a robust and rich emotional investment and release that works through craftivism, and in this case, embroidering. Everyone, thus, stitches *for peace* ---peace of heart and mind as well as peace from war--for themselves and for others. Through process of making a craft, craft artists, like those in the Embroidering for Peace movement, become active agents rather than passive subjects, engaging themselves in a powerful, innovative, creative, and compelling practice. As Betsy Greer reminds us, they make their “own creativity a force to be reckoned with.”³⁹

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³⁹ Greer, *Knitting*, 144.

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