

(Re)Building a community through Collective Art



Jimena Pardo, ximenapardo@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the themes of exile, memory, and how a community can heal through collective art-making. Since 2018 the project, *Bordando por la Memoria* (Embroidering Memory), has been working on textiles that memorialize the lives of the men, women, and children killed in the Chilean dictatorship. It is a patchwork of personal testimonies and gives historical context to the use of making textiles in Chile as a way of collective resistance. Written from the perspective of a second-generation Chilean it fills the gap of always being the subject and not the expert. It aims to discuss the importance of making art for people collectively whilst speaking to the needs of a group as well as the need to keep memory alive.

Keywords: Collective art, community building, diaspora, exile, textiles, trauma recovery

CRedit (Contributor Roles Taxonomy)

Jimena Pardo

Conceptualization: Writing - original Draft

Sohail Jannesari

Writing - review and editing (mentor)

Parise Carmichael-Murphy

Writing - reviewing and editing (peer reviewed)

Introduction

I am a second-generation Chilean, teacher, community artist, and facilitator of the embroidery group *Bordando por la Memoria* (Embroidering Memory). This year will mark 50 years since the military coup in Chile and our group is working towards commemorating this with a series of events throughout the year. Within the ‘Embroidering Memory’ group are survivors of the dictatorship who went through imprisonment, torture, searching for loved ones, and exile. Like myself, there are also second-generation exiles who arrived as children and who grew up struggling to find belonging and carve out an identity in their new surroundings.

This article uses oral testimonies from the group members as well as my own. I include personal experiences of my family’s first years in exile to give a historical context to the project *Bordando por la Memoria*. The article is not linear but more of a patchwork of references to highlight how knowledge of struggles and resistance can be passed on through collective making and how stitching can facilitate a sense of belonging and well-being within a group.

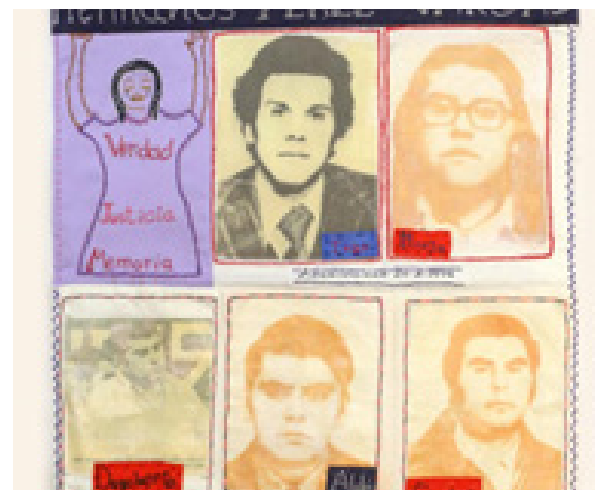


Banner-making during the social uprising in Chile, 2019 at, Unite the Union, Eddie Romero

Bordando por la Memoria – Embroidering Memory

In 2018 a group of first and second-generation Chilean exiles began meeting up and stitching together testimonies of comrades lost to the Chilean dictatorship. This group became ‘*Bordando por la Memoria*’, a textile and memory project which began in London. *Bordando por la Memoria* paved the way for us to remember complex and tragic events and has also brought us closer as a community. We created, held, and interrogated knowledge about the dictatorship through textiles. Through the making of these textiles, we have stitched together a collective memory of the men, women, and children who were disappeared and murdered during the dictatorship, numbers have become names and statistics have become personal testimony. In the workshops, our elders have been able to pass on lived experiences through oral stories that the second generation knew as factual events, memorized early on in our childhoods but now they are engraved in our minds.

The first embroideries we made were photo embroideries, with names and dates of when they were detained and disappeared like this piece made to remember the Perez Vargas family.



Hermanos Perez Vargas by Nelsa Silva, photo: Diana More

The Perez Vargas family’s only survivors were Osvaldo Pérez and Otilia Vargas and their youngest daughter Patricia. Pictured in this textile are four brothers and one sister who were forcibly detained, killed, and disappeared by the secret police in Chile. Nelsa, the maker of this piece, decided to embroider the mother to represent her never-ending search, adding the words in Spanish, Truth, Justice, and Memory. This family had a strong personal relevance to the group as one of our Chilean comrades had been responsible for keeping the youngest daughter safe and had remained in close contact with the surviving family members over many years even through exile.

Exile - Seeking refuge in the UK

Over 3,000 Chileans who arrived in the UK between 1973 and the 1990s were fleeing a violent military coup, especially those with strong political connections to the social movements in Chile. Many refugees like my parents were political exiles and had experienced detention and torture and leaving Chile was a matter of life and death. But when faced with the need to adapt and assimilate there was little mention of trauma or sadness. Daily life was about learning to navigate a new language and society, leaving behind your family, and raising awareness of what was happening back in Chile.



Cristina and Jimena leaving Chile, 1976

When I arrived in 1976 with my mother, a student, and ex-political prisoner, I had just turned two and I had no memory of Chile, yet growing up I felt a mix of rootlessness whilst deeply longing to return to Chile. My early years were filled with marches, solidarity events, and taking part in refugee and migrant cultural groups that supported each other. The international solidarity building including expressions of art, food, music, and culture still impacts me to this date.

Part of that solidarity manifested itself in Chilean refugees being adopted by trade unions, such as in my father's case who through pressure from the TUC was released from detention at Tres y Cuatro Alamos detention centre in Santiago. Human rights organisations like Amnesty International also played a crucial role in international pressure on the Chilean government to release political prisoners. On arrival to the UK, groups were in place to help Chilean refugees to adjust to a new country, one of those was The World University Service (WUS) – which worked alongside the Joint Working Group for the Resettlement of Refugees, Chile Solidarity Campaign, Chile Committee for Human Rights, and Academics for Chile. Through these organisations, my parents were able to get support in learning English, return to study, and were temporarily housed on arrival to the UK.

Arpilleras in exile



Arpillera Hilda Valenzuela Workshop: Arpillorando el exilio 2020, Eddie Romero

My connection with textiles began through solidarity art that was sent to the UK and sold to raise support for Chile. These were called 'Arpilleras' - a textile that resembled patchwork. Arpilleras were made from scraps of fabric, and they grew out of workshops held in human rights organizations in Chile. These textiles would later be labelled as subversive and would be smuggled out of Chile to be sold in countries that expressed solidarity with the Chileans fighting against the dictatorship. The arpilleras were like 'scraps of life' from events that were unfolding during the dictatorship. People were being detained and disappearing and killed for their political tendencies. There was censorship across all media and people would bury their books if they were considered subversive by the military Government. The families of the disappeared began to organise and

One of the ways they recorded what happened was through the making of the arpilleras. Today arpilleras are made to record memory and reflect on experiences related to the Chilean dictatorship.

One of the catalysts for forming the group *Bordando por la Memoria* was an exhibition of art made in detention, *Crafting Resistance: the art of Chilean political prisoners*, 'An exhibition co-curated by Jasmine Gideon, Birkbeck, University of London, and Gloria Miqueles, Chilean Ex-political prisoner. Hosted by the University of East London Archives. I ran two workshops during the exhibition, and this led me to ask my parents more questions about the time they were political prisoners in Chile. Here, art was used as an avenue to knowledge that was stored in my parent's memories. Making art in detention was not only a way to pass the time, but it also helped them build resilience, organise and show resistance in the face of extreme conditions. One of the recurring themes from the exhibit was about showing how these men and women were not just passive victims but who were actively organising to show resistance and solidarity even whilst in detention. One story I recall from my mother was about breadcrumbs and lipstick. Space was a problem and on one of the occasions that a group of women had been put into solitary confinement, one of the women had some breadcrumbs and began to roll them to form a dough, another woman said I have lipstick, and gave it to her to give it a little colour and she made a miniature rose. So even in the most terrible of situations you could create something beautiful.

Memorialising Victims of Dictatorship



Embroidery and testimony: Sara De Witt

'On the 3rd of April of 1975 Pinochet's secret police detained me in the street, they took me to a torture centre, Villa Grimaldi. Late that night I heard from the room I was, how the secret police were kicking and punching a group of teenagers, 14/15 years of age, and also how they pretended they were to shoot them. This was shocking, terrifying...

Later, they brought Cedomil Lausic who was 27 years old at the time. The secret police hanged him and proceeded to beat him using a metal chain, they hit him and hit him and hit him. This was accompanied by their verbal abuse and screaming.

The punishment to Cedomil Lausic lasted an eternity, at some point, he stopped screaming in pain and, later, he stopped moaning in pain. They took him after the beating and drove a car over him to pretend he has had a traffic accident They abandoned his body in the street. Cedomil Lausic, you are not forgotten, you are always present. We remember you by trying to build a society where everybody is respected.'

The testimonies can at times be horrific but when combined with textiles, you notice first the person, then the colours before you understand the full story. The memory does not become

less painful but by being able to remember as a collective we are bringing that person to life, just as Sara affirms in her testimony 'You are not Forgotten' and it becomes a small act of reparation.

I became interested in the Talleres Laborales - The Workshops in detention where both my parents made textiles, from weaving, stitched blouses, hammered copper pictures, carved bone sculptures, and sculptures made from dough. I wanted to create textiles that would be testimonials but also to find a way to tell the stories of our exiled community I felt it was important that we are able to tell our own stories and not through an academic lens. Although studies have been made on the Chilean exile experience, very few have been made from the point of view of the exiled community.

The visual narratives of the arpilleras form an important part of the history, testimony, and memory in Chile. Both the arpillera groups and art made in detention were using a methodology where themes are agreed on and the makers would divide out tasks according to their skills, from drawing designs to making or finishing the pieces. The arpilleras would also later become an archive and evidence of the atrocities.

Cristina Pardo Zamora, my mother, and ex-political prisoner, in the film *Crafting Resistance*, talks about the Talleres Laborales - Workshops, how they would organise as a group utilizing their strengths but also as a means to support each other. "The women undertook different roles. Some created designs, others cut the garments, and others did the sewing. I was one of those who embroidered the blouses.The blouses were sold abroad, mostly in Europe, via different organisations of solidarity with the Chilean people. The income was distributed according to need."

I was interested in how the Embroidering Memory workshops could take inspiration from the 'Talleres Laborales' formed in detention as a methodology for working collectively. Having studied Art for society and painting, most of my inspiration came from themes of identity, exile, and my parents' detention. But also from a social context, it made sense to work together to rebuild as a community and as we began to work collectively It became clear how textiles could be used to activate dialogue especially when centred around themes of conflict, trauma, and social upheaval.

When we arrived in the UK in 1976 some of my earliest memories were of the textiles my father had made, he set up a weaving loom in our flat in Birmingham, he would teach me how to make belts and small woven bags. This moment in my childhood was pivotal in that my father was transferring his experience to me through weaving, creating this imprint of knowledge that I would later revisit. This practical experience as a child allowed me not just to learn but to live and dwell in an experience that my father had. We would make small leather purses and sell them, my mum would hand-make everything from my clothes to cushions and curtains. She made dolls that we also sold in market stalls. While in detention my dad had made bedspreads, bags, and belts that were woven with the colours of the Andes and more subdued and natural colours that are typical of Mapuche weavings.

My parent's textiles would become the subject of my paintings later as a student. But it took me many years to ask my parents to tell me about their time in detention as I was afraid to hear what my parents had experienced. I was afraid of acknowledging they could have been subjected to torture like so many of their comrades. As a young child, I could sense the importance of these artefacts, they held the pain of separation and loss of freedom, and they held secret messages of hope, love, and longing. They were gifts amongst friends and loved ones and now they hold the testimonies of a whole generation.

Our mixture of workshop and textile testimonies has been reproduced in Chile and other parts of Latin America since we began in 2018. We have made more than 300 textiles, and we have connected with other exiled Chileans in Canada, Spain, Germany, Chile, Mexico, and across different parts of the UK. The expression of loss and memory through textiles occurs in so many parts of Latin America, especially where forced disappearances, the systematic killing of activists and indigenous communities, and femicides are commonplace. In Colombia, communities have used stitching as part of reconciliation projects between the FARC, their relatives, and communities impacted by decades of armed conflict. And in Brazil, the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), have made their own arpilleras telling of the environmental and social impacts of development on the lives of women in small communities. In all cases, the survivors become the authors and narrators of their stories through the visual language of textiles.

The act of embroidering as a group is multi-layered, revealing knowledge and memory on an individual, and collective level. We are not only held together by a collective trauma caused by the dictatorship and displacement but some of the participants who are survivors of torture and detention face their own vivid memories. These women who I have seen fiercely defend others' rights have for many years been their own advocates of justice. In our 'utopia' of collective work, you can hear a mixture of laughter and tears, some reliving their search for a loved one. Someone recounting the death of a brother, remembering a teacher who went missing or a fellow student who was detained. Women talk loudly over each other and share food that they have brought to share. We work together to recreate moments of lived solidarity, and together we share our outrage at injustices still happening around the world. The act of remembering is an act of resistance as they face their own issues of mortality and ageing in exile. Repairing loss

In the process of making and working collectively, I have seen first-hand the impact of shared testimony from lived experience. From working with relatives in Chile and also with exiled Chileans. The failings of the Chilean justice system to bring justice to those responsible for the deaths and disappearances means that the survivors and their families are constantly in search of truth, and justice and to hold the memory of their loved ones.

Can stitching help us reconcile loss and physical pain? Just as a needle punctures through the cloth and we cut pieces of fabric, we can restitch, repair, and add details to our textile narrative. This construction is also a construction of ourselves. A mending of our collective story. A physical act of memory so we do not forget the names of the disappeared. The tactile and gendered nature of stitching lends a softness to the very hard edges of painful and traumatic events.

The physicality of making a memorial embroidery is painful not only because of its story but also because many of the participants of our group live with physical pain as well. Many women in the group have autoimmune conditions, and so often with illness, pain becomes a barrier to making things. But the value of making and being together can be greater than the pain and ultimately can help us overcome difficult moments such as isolation, illness, and collective trauma in the context of a wider societal trauma caused by a major event such as a Dictatorship.

The relationship to each piece of work is slow and thoughtful and the time spent making each piece takes on extra meaning. Roberta Bacic, curator of conflict textiles describes stitching as a bank of time and it is the time we take making each piece that adds to the importance of the work we do. Although there is an agency that is driving us to create the work, It is exactly because of the time spent on each embroidery that enables us to honour the memory of our fallen comrades.

Summary

In creating a textile memorial together as a community we have been able to deal with a deep trauma that is intergenerational and still feels present in Chilean society today even though

50 years have passed since September 11, 1973. Chilean society has never reconciled the weight of injustice and the pacts of silence from those responsible. The embroidery group holds a space for healing and sharing, peeling back the layers of exile, the longing to return, and loss.

Many of the participants can share and process with other people who have shared the same experience and by using stitching and scraps of fabric we are not only honouring the Chilean ‘arpilleras’ who told their stories in textiles testimonies during the dictatorship, we are also honouring our collective stories, and our healing as survivors, not as passive victims. This embroidery group tells only a small part of our story, of the men, women, and children who arrived as refugees in the mid-70s, who were resisting and opposing a dictatorship, searching for loved ones, and who had survived detention and being torn away from their families.

Today our parents still hold the same spark of resistance and agency as when they first arrived in the UK, organising through unions, and solidarity groups in the diaspora. Bordando por la Memoria will continue as a group to stitch and unravel these stories so they can be passed down to the next generation or until the cry of ‘Nunca Mas’ (Never Again) becomes a reality.

References

[The first workshop held at East London University Workshop: Embroidering Memory and Resistance](https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/crafting-resistance-living-exhibition/crafting-resistance-workshops/) which later became Bordando por la Memoria, 2018: <https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/crafting-resistance-living-exhibition/crafting-resistance-workshops/>

[Crafting Resistance film](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_OMDxP-conA&ab_channel=JasmineGideon) *Crafting Resistance: The Art of Chilean Political Prisoners*, directed by Carmen Luz Parot and ex-political prisoner, Gloria Miqueles and produced by Dr. Jasmine Gideon, 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_OMDxP-conA&ab_channel=JasmineGideon

[Sewing to protest in a Chilean prison camp](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p08qjwb3) BBC Outlook, Presented by Grace Livingstone
Produced by Mariana Des Forges, 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p08qjwb3>

[Conflict Textiles](https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/) - Conflict Textiles is home to a large collection of international textiles, exhibitions, and associated events, all of which focus on elements of conflict and human rights abuses. Conflict Textiles is an ‘Associated Site’ of CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet) at Ulster University, Northern Ireland: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>