The Craftivist Classroom: Embodied Approaches to CESL with Bordeamos por la Paz

El aula craftivista: Enfoques encarnados al CESL con Bordeamos por la Paz

As aulas de craftivismo: aproximações corpóreas ao CESL com Bordeamos por la paz

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on the potential of craftivist pedagogies to disrupt the neoliberal university model and work towards building international solidarity networks. It offers a case study centered on the incorporation of the craftivist collective Bordeamos por la Paz into two distinct US-based classrooms and disciplines: Art History and Latin American Studies. Part of a nationwide, yet grassroots movement in Mexico, Bordeamos works to memorialize victims of disappearance and violence through the collective creation of hand embroidered panels. Reflecting on the shared experience of crafting a community-engaged service-learning (CESL) curriculum with Bordeamos, we advocate for the ways these courses enabled a space of civic responsibility rooted in embodied knowledge and “being with” in order to resist replicating problematic power dynamics.

Keywords:
Craftivism, Community-engaged service-learning (CESL), Pedagogy.

Cite this:
Resumen
Este artículo es una reflexión sobre el potencial de las pedagogías craftivistas para interrumpir el modelo universitario neoliberal y empezar a construir redes de solidaridad internacionales. Propone un estudio de caso centrado en la incorporación del colectivo craftivista Bordeamos por la Paz en dos aulas estadounidenses y dos disciplinas distintas: Historia del Arte y Estudios Latinoamericanos. Como parte de un movimiento nacional y popular en México, Bordeamos procura recordar a las víctimas de desaparición y violencia a través de la creación colectiva de pañuelos bordados a mano. Reflexionando sobre la experiencia en común de elaborar junto con Bordeamos un plan de estudios de aprendizaje-servicio social comprometido con la comunidad (CESL por sus siglas en inglés), abogamos por las formas en que estos cursos se resistieron a la replicación de dinámicas de poder problemáticas e hicieron posibles ciertos espacios de responsabilidad cívica arraigados en formas de conocimiento encarnado y en la idea de “hacer compañía.”

Palabras claves:
Craftivismo, comunidad-comprometida aprendizaje-servicio, pedagogía.

Resumo
Este artigo é uma reflexção do potencial das pedagogias do craftivismo para desfazer o modelo neoliberal das universidades e trabalhar para construir redes solidárias internacionais. Oferece um estudo de caso centrado na incorporação do coletivo craftivista Bordeamos por la paz em dois aulas e disciplinas nos Estados Unidos: a história da arte e os estudos latino-americanos. Parte de um movimento nacional e, ao mesmo tempo, local de México, Bordeamos trabalha para fazer memoriais das vítimas de desaparições e da violência através da criação coletiva de paneis tecidos à mão. Refletimos sobre a experiência compartida com Bordeamos na invenção de um currículo community-engaged service-learning (CESL), advogamos pelas maneiras nas que estes cursos ofereceram alguns encontros com a responsabilidade cívica arraigada em conhecimento corporificado e o “estar com”, para assim resistir a replicação de dinâmicas de poder problemáticas.

Palavras chave:
Craftivismo, community-engaged service-learning (CESL), pedagogia.
The Craftivist Classroom: Embodied Approaches to CESL with Bordeamos por la Paz

“What does it mean to imagine the sewing needle as a dangerous tool and to envision female collective textile making as a process that might upend conventions, threaten state structures, or wreak political havok?”

–Julia Bryan-Wilson¹

Women artists and activists have continually turned to soft forms of making such as knitting, embroidery, and textile production as a powerful method to intervene in public space and work towards generating political change on a mass scale. Turning traditional constructions of the so-called “decorative” and “feminine” arts on their head, collective craftivist projects since the latter decades of the twentieth-century have proven to be effective in challenging the brutality and violence associated with certain political structures and institutions. Often the varied problematics that these forms of collective craftivism seek to address have been tied to, or exacerbated by, the implementation of neoliberal economic models during this period. Neoliberal ideologies have permeated social, political, and cultural spheres worldwide, and have profoundly affected the organization and dissemination of knowledge. Colleges and universities, especially, are under fire for supporting and promoting these neoliberal economic models, which define students as consumers and education as a product. Can the sewing needle still be a “dangerous tool” when it is wielded in the realm of the neoliberal institutions? What challenges might craftivist pedagogies provide to neoliberal academic models? How do craftivist projects offer students a participatory understanding of creative and social histories, and how might students better assist in these activist projects?

This paper is a reflection on the incorporation of craftivism in the classroom and its potential to make a soft intervention in the neoliberal university model. Community-engaged service-learning (CESL) courses and their projects are inherently caught within a system of unequal power relations. Since they involve students from within an institution providing a service to an outside community, they risk replicating hegemonic hierarchies rooted in the notion of a privileged few from the “center” assisting those on the “periphery.” If educational experiences are defined as products for student-consumers, CESL courses within the neoliberal model further reduce the community partner to the problematic status of “Other.” Here we offer a case study centered on craftivism as an effective method of building international solidarity networks rooted in forms

of embodied knowledge and “being with” a community partner. We detail the incorporation of the craftivist collective Bordeamos por la Paz, based in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, into two distinct classrooms and disciplines: Art History and Latin American Studies. Part of a nationwide, yet grassroots movement in Mexico, this collective memorializes victims of disappearance and violence through the creation of hand-embroidered panels, one for each victim. After outlining the specifics of Bordeamos’s project, we offer practical strategies for constructing a craftivist course in ways that avoid replicating problematic power dynamics inherent to neoliberal approaches to educational experiences. Reflecting on our shared experiences incorporating Bordeamos into our curriculum, we advocate for the ways in which these projects provide ethical encounters that build a sense of civic responsibility that students can take with them beyond the classroom, as well as solidarity with underrecognized social justice and creative initiatives.

**Bordeamos por la Paz**

As a female-directed creative and political project, Bordeamos operates within the disciplines of Art History and Latin American Studies, but also embodies a long history that traverses those disciplinary boundaries. In the realm of formal art history, a persistent hierarchical distinction has existed between practices designated as either “craft” or “fine art.” The production of textiles and embroidery, defined as craft, have historically been dismissed as less intellectually and artistically rigorous than media such as painting or sculpture, which constitute traditionally defined fine art. Second-wave feminist art historians were the first to call attention to the problematic gendering of these divisions, arguing that “the historical and hierarchical division of the arts into fine arts and craft” was at the heart of women’s marginalization from the art world. Despite producing works of creativity throughout human history, women’s artistic output has been consistently omitted from the categorization and academic study of art history until very recently. The active erasure of women’s creativity from art history has been structural, in terms of their varied and limited sociopolitical access to the art world and the denigration of their productions within the gendering of genres. Often operating outside of formal art institutions, many women turned to the creation of textiles and embroidery as a preferred and accessible medium. Due to craft’s associations with traditional constructs of femininity, “women’s work” executed in the domestic sphere by hobbyists rather than artists, these practices were relegated to the sidelines of art history.

As feminist art historians troubled the biased narratives of art history during the 1970s, they also looked to the ways in which women artists had utilized craft as a subversive and political tool. During the nineteenth-century in

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2. Here we draw from the work of scholars on community based learning and performative pedagogies, such as Joan Clifford, Mia Perry, and Carmen Medina.

the United States, abolitionists wove secret symbols into story quilts to guide enslaved people to freedom. In the 1920s, suffragettes in the US and United Kingdom used their needlework skills to create protest banners. For many artists during the 1970s and 80s, the production of textiles and embroidery provided an artistic medium that spoke even more directly to the second-wave slogan “the personal is political.” Artists such as Judy Chicago, Harmony Hammond, and Miriam Schapiro strategically deployed craft mediums in their efforts to make hidden women’s histories visible and challenge traditional canons. Women activists at Greenham Common staged knit-ins as a part of their peaceful occupation of a nuclear missile site in the United Kingdom during the 1980s. In recent decades, women have mounted collective craft protest projects that everyday citizens can participate in, such as Marianne Jorgensen’s Tank-Cozy protest of Denmark’s involvement in the Iraq war in 2007, Government Free VJJ mailing hand-knitted wombs to politicians to advocate for women’s reproductive freedoms in 2012, or 2017’s “pussy hat” knitting project visible in over 600 Women’s Marches around the globe.

These later manifestations which directly combine craft and activism are now known as “craftivism,” a term coined by Betsy Greer in 2003, and recent scholarship has explored the tensions involved in the production and historicization of craftivist projects. Craftivism has a history of use, primarily by women, as a form of political protest against violence in many parts of the world. The South African Amazwi Abesifazane project creates a living archive of women’s experiences of apartheid through the sewing of “memory cloths” that depict personal traumatic events. After the Soviet invasion, Afghani artisans began to produce “war rugs,” incorporating motifs such as weapons and tanks into traditional rug designs. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent military action in Afghanistan, weavers also began to use images such as the Twin Towers, American drones, and F-16s. Textile arts have also meaningfully intertwined with political protest in many Latin American countries. During the Pinochet regime in Chile, for example, women sewed small squares known as arpilleras, using material scraps in an applique style, that depicted scenes of disappearances and torture. In Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo protest their children’s disappearance as they silently march with embroidered cloth diapers over their hair. More than simply a decorative art, these international political histories of craft showcase its subversive potential, which has endured to the present day.

In Mexico, the roots of Bordeamos por la Paz’s political embroidery project are generally traced to the organization Fuentes Rojas in Mexico City, a civic group that originally formed to dye public fountains red as a protest against violence. In time, some of the women in the group began creating embroidered

6. In addition to a purely political function, many groups have used craftivism as an economic tool as well, selling their work to outsiders as a way of raising money for their cause.
handkerchiefs as protest, an initiative they dubbed “Embroidering For Peace” or, in some formulations, “Embroidering for Peace and Memory.” In 2011, this group began embroidering factual accounts of homicide, generally taken from newspaper stories, using red thread on a white handkerchief. Each handkerchief typically represents one victim. From Mexico City, the embroidery-as-protest project spread to other cities suffering high rates of violence, with various independent groups adopting the process. The visual iconography of the project expanded to include not only victims of murder and violence, but also the many disappeared people, who were represented with green thread.

Corrie Boudreaux originally met Hazel and Magda, the two founders of Ciudad Juárez’s “chapter” of Bordeamos, in 2014 while conducting research for her PhD dissertation. Hazel had recently lived in Guadalajara, where she had become involved with the embroidery movement, and she had brought the idea to Juárez in early 2014. Hazel named her group Bordeamos as a play on the Spanish words bordar (to embroider) and bordar (to border), in recognition of the border geography that is an important factor in Juárez’s own story of violence. Bordeamos in Juárez followed a process similar to that of the original Mexico City collective: on Sundays, Hazel and Magda would display finished handkerchiefs on the fence that surrounds a statue of Benito Juárez in the Plaza del Monumento, near downtown Juárez (Img. 1). At the same time, they would sit with their unfinished work and embroider while in this public space.

From its beginning, the concept of solidarity has been essential to the embroidery project. There is, of course, solidarity with the victims of violence (discussed in more detail below), but the project also lends itself to solidarity across geographic boundaries, as referenced in the title of the collective project. Hazel and Magda are examples of the way that embroidery has spread across Mexico—and they in turn have continued to “pay it forward” to other locations. Magda, a more recent arrival in Juárez, asked friends from her native state to help her embroider. Many of them agreed, but one questioned why she embroidered for victims in Juárez when her hometown had so many of its own victims. Through Magda’s influence, women in that state began their own local version of activist embroidery.

The solidarity among those willing to pick up a handkerchief and embroider one story at a time has spread beyond Mexico’s borders. The craft is a way for people worldwide to express their empathy and their “being with” victims of violence. Often, international volunteers receive the stories from Mexico, embroider them on handkerchiefs, and then ship these back to be displayed in a Mexican city. Sometimes, however, particular stories are deliberately kept out of their local context. Hazel says that for reasons of security, or to protect the identities of families, some stories containing sensitive details are sent to be embroidered by

collaborators elsewhere. These handkerchiefs are not returned to Juárez, but are displayed in that other location.

Two key ideas behind the embroidery project are the value of the quiet occupation of public space and the value of committing periods of stillness and quiet to “being with” the victims. First, the public or collective nature of not just the display of the finished products, but the embodied and durational process of embroidery itself, is a vital part of the project’s overall meaning. Enacting the process of making through the occupation of public space becomes deeply significant. In times of insecurity and violence within communities, the use of social space is often restricted. Members of a community isolate themselves from both the social contact of conversation with neighbors and strangers and the physical occupation of spaces outside the private realms where they feel secure. In Juárez and throughout Mexico, high levels of violence have had severe consequences for the public social life of major cities. Thus, the simple act of being in public space visibly challenges the status quo, making a soft intervention into these politicized realms.

This process of embroidering in public is also intended to invite conversation and questions from passers-by. This form of craftivism is not a “loud” protest—there are no marches that block streets and intersections; there are no megaphones; there are not even any explanatory posters. There are simply handkerchiefs bearing the names of the dead and missing, and the individuals who are embroidering yet more names on yet more handkerchiefs. The lack of “active” activism, and the lack of explicit explanation, is what will prompt the curious to stop and speak with the embroiderers. Hazel recounts an example of how curiosity “opens a point of reflection” for people who encounter the work:

11. Corinne Boudreaux, “The City Framed: A Photographic Examination of Space and Violence in Ciudad Juárez” (PhD dissertation, Tulane University, 2015), 131-134. In Juárez, the phrase “the violence” typically refers to the period of 2008-2011. In 2012, the homicide rate in Juárez began to fall and gradually people began to spend time in public and go out after dark again. In 2019, Juárez saw new spikes in violence, with over 700 murders (about 4 per day) as of mid-June.
I was waiting for a friend [in a store], and the owner of the store asked ‘What are you doing?’ I began to explain that it was the case of someone’s son, who had been disappeared for five years [...] Then the woman began to read and say ‘Five years? And his mother does not know if he is dead or alive? And no one has helped her in five years?’ And this is how this process begins to generate sensitivity, empathy with the pain of another person.12

The simple act of conversation about death, violence, and disappearance counteracts indifference from community members and challenges the official or dominant narratives regarding the problem. This visual disruption caused by the panels and their makers seek to name the problem, and signal a connection to and solidarity with larger nationwide and international collective movements.

Second, the embroidery process emphasizes stillness and quiet reflection. Embroidery, for the expert and the novice alike, is a slow process. The length of time that the embroiderer must be with the victim’s name and story provides a period for contemplation and symbolic knowing. As Magda describes it: “When I take up the handkerchief, I feel that I am embracing these people [...]. For me, embroidering is simply an act of love, and the thread is the union between the living and the dead [...]. And I want others [who embroider] to see embroidery as an act of love, a humble work, detailed, and, in silence, [something] that invites you to reflect.”13 One goal of this act of love is to create a personal, though fictitious, relationship with the victim. “When you are embroidering, you start to have empathy with the family even without knowing them,” Magda says, “and when you are embroidering [the case of ] Alexis who is disappeared, you ask [yourself], ‘Alexis, where are you? Where could you be?’” Such a personal relationship “recuperates” the victim by giving back some of the humanity that was stolen, certainly at the time of the act of violence, but in many cases also in the ensuing reactions of a society that tends to dismiss victims of violence as people who “were involved in something.”14

This critical experiential element of Bordeamos’s project, as both a physical and cognitive practice, correlates to conceptions of embodied knowledge emphasized in performative approaches to pedagogy. Rather than simply reading texts, listening to a lecture, or discussing material with an instructor or peers, performative pedagogies consider the body to be another “place of learning.”15

The physical experience of the students as they engage with a concept or project that requires action allows space for deeply rooted and embodied knowledge(s) to emerge and grow. Within this methodology, the physical experience of creating panels encourages a durational and embodied connection between students and the missing bodies of the dead and the disappeared. Writing about the metaphorical qualities of cloth as an artistic medium, Joan Livingstone and John

12. Interview with Corrie Boudreaux, 2014.
13. Interview with Corrie Boudreaux, 2014.
Ploof argue that “the physical and intimate qualities of fabric allow it to embody memory and sensation and become a quintessential metaphor for the human condition.” The material and actions associated with this project call to mind certain care-related qualities associated with fabric, which provides warmth and comfort, and embroidered stitching as an action of mending and repair. The slow and meticulous process of embroidering is an inversion of the usual educational experience because it occupies the body while leaving the mind free. This inversion creates a mental stillness that encourages reflection and empathy, inviting a deeper level of understanding that remains connected to the maker’s body. The political solidarity formed through this embodied action runs counter to politics through aggression, and instead provides an experience of political embodiment informed by listening and “being with.”

While embroidery requires training, it is a skill that many people, often women, utilize in their daily lives. The act of embroidery itself, as connected to the domestic sphere, is associated with notions of care or repair. In the durational process of making these panels, participants symbolically care for these missing and murdered individuals. Furthermore, as a craft, rather than a “fine art” practice, embroidery disrupts social and class-based hierarchies. Although it may be located philosophically and creatively within histories of art, in the past Bordeamos has avoided the identification of their project as an artwork. Hazel has said: “[O]ur work is a political statement. We prefer not to call it art [...] [B]y calling it art, we’d be closing off our protest to elitist spaces.” By distancing their work from the fine arts, the organizers allow wider access for individuals to participate in and feel ownership of the project.

Another important premise of the project is that participants should not discriminate in the creation of panels based on the assumed moral status of the victim or missing person. Local authorities often use victim-blaming tactics to rationalize disappearance and avoid investigations, often presuming missing persons to be sex workers or affiliated with gangs. For the collective it is critical that there are no “good” or “bad” deaths, but rather each human life has value. “I believe there is a social responsibility that is much broader [than determining if someone is good or bad],” Hazel says. “We are all part of the same system, and despite the fact that you may have been a sicario, your life was ended in a very violent way [...] and it is not my place to judge it. The only thing that we do is give testimony, leave evidence of what is happening.” This act of reflection is meant to stimulate thought and further action for social change. Hazel says that she has received criticism for “just” embroidering: “We have been criticized about what we are doing this for, [people say] ‘You are not supporting the rebuilding of the city, it’s necessary to generate more positive proposals.’ Well, if you are thinking about all of that, then for me, the work is accomplished.”

18. Interview with Corrie Boudreaux, 2014.
19. Interview with Corrie Boudreaux, 2014.
TRANSFORMING APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY-ENGAGED SERVICE-LEARNING (CESL)

Active learning strategies have the ability to transform the college classroom into a student-centered learning environment, creating varied scenarios that allow students to engage with course material in collaborative, conceptual, and often physical ways. Rather than expecting students to simply read, memorize, and regurgitate, active learning strategies ask students to demonstrate, analyze, and apply concepts in real-world situations. They also differentiate application of content in the classroom in ways that help stimulate a wider range of learning styles and promote higher-order thinking.

As a facet of active learning, community-engaged service-learning (CESL) has become a buzz-word in educational settings, especially in the United States and Canada. Institutions of higher education are increasingly offering courses that place students in direct contact with communities off-campus, locally and internationally, to assist in service-based projects. As pedagogical scholars Patti Clayton and Robert Bringle define them, these courses are centered around a community partnership and work to integrate “academic material, relevant service activities, and critical reflection in a reciprocal [co-created] partnership that engages students, faculty/staff, and community members to achieve academic, civic, and personal learning objectives as well as to advance public purposes.”

When done well, CESL can achieve real objectives with a community partner, while at the same time encouraging a deeper understanding of course material and the application of critical and creative thinking skills in students.

A central feature of the neoliberal university is its turn from public to private funding. Declining public funding, and increased emphasis on devoting what budget does exist to administrative and research functions (the “entrepreneurial” side of the university), have made many universities invest more resources into attracting students/customers who will contribute to the institution’s bottom line. Part of such marketing strategies is the opportunity to participate in CESL curricula. In their analysis of CESL in relation to neo-liberal university policies, Raddon and Harrison state:

Community engagement is introduced in a top-down fashion as a type of corporate brand. Service-learning lends a positive public image to the post-secondary sector as a whole and helps institutions compete in appealing to funders and in attracting and retaining students. To put it simply, as universities increasingly reveal their corporate face, service-learning allows them to present a kinder face.


22. Raddon and Harrison, "Is Service-Learning the Kind Face," 140.
The neoliberal outlook tends to emphasize production, which means that in the university setting “knowledge is being transformed into a commodity and [...] being judged by its exchange value in the market.”23 That is, the process of learning is no longer valued for its own sake, but rather for the skills and employability that will make students into workers.24 Subsequently, when in the classroom, educators often find themselves having to justify the merits of CESL courses, which are frequently “sold” to students on the basis that the service will translate to a line on their CV and assist in obtaining employment.

In a more positive light, CESL courses are billed as having the ability to increase student retention of material, develop their emotional empathy, and instill a sense of global civic engagement. Nevertheless, this perspective frames CESL primarily around the potential benefits to students, again reducing the project to an end product, and leaving the community partner out of the equation. At its worst, work in a CESL project may result in passive students who are solely focused on ticking boxes and getting their required hours in rather than collaborating with a community partner and striving towards meaningful relationship-building. In this regard, CESL has also come under critique for replicating colonial gestures, with students temporarily leaving the privileged space of the ivory tower to “fix” a problem in a marginalized community. Within this model, students may wrongly conceive of themselves as “experts” charged with improving the lives of the less fortunate. Reliant on colonialist logics, this action perpetuates “white savior” power dynamics and risks reaffirming deep divisions in local and international communities based on race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, access to education, and other inequalities and differences.25

Pedagogical scholars have pushed critical thinking about CESL in order to address these problematics. Randy Stoecker and Mary Beckman suggest shifting the model of CESL towards a “community development approach that is fundamentally about relationships.”26 In order to disrupt the power dynamics that may manifest within CESL work, this approach defines the collaborating organization as a full-fledged community partner. The project undertaken by students should be rooted in the community partners’ direct needs, goals, and pre-existing structure, rather than in solutions dictated by the university and its affiliates. Joan Clifford has called for a transformation in CESL pedagogy that emphasizes the “constructs of process and solidarity, instead of products and reciprocity.”27 If they are able to shift student focus away from an end product, educators can prioritize the building of relationships and solidarity as an end goal.

Bordeamos by no means purports to solve the problem of violence in Mexico. Rather, as Magda stated, embroidering is an act of love and a symbolic embrace with the victim who is dead. There is no saving that victim. There

23. Victoria Sit, “The Erosion of the University as a Public Sphere.” Education Canada 48, no. 4 (2008), 32.
is no “happy ending” as in other service projects. There is simply acknowledgement and even helplessness in the face of an apparently unsolvable problem. Consequently, Bordeamos challenges the problematic aspects of CESL and the neoliberal model in several ways.

First, this project counters the neoliberal logic of maximizing efficiency in producing an end product. Embroidery is slow, and it is even slower for students who are just learning how to do it. However, the duration of each work—what under neoliberal standards would be termed its “inefficiency”—contributes deeply to the meaning of the activity. Thus, Bordeamos emphasizes the process over the product. Magda has said that the finished handkerchiefs are not meant to be “an exhibition of talent or beauty or anything like that.”28 Much like the pre-neoliberal conception of learning as valuable for its own sake, rather than for the “end” of producing marketable workers, embroidery is an act done for its own sake rather than for the product that will result. At the same time, a product (handkerchief) does result as an artifact of the process. As we detail below, this emphasis on process over product becomes clear when comparing the work of inexperienced students to that of skilled embroiderers like Magda.

Second, a defining characteristic of neoliberalism is the element and rhetoric of competition as inherent to political structures and human relations.29 The emphasis on competition associated with neoliberalism has resulted in a denigration of the collective, manifesting in anti-union sentiment and the increased privatization and marketization of social institutions, from healthcare to education. Within colleges and universities, these values are visible in policies such as a frequent preference for increased tuition combined with financial aid, which defines education as a private good and puts students in competition with each other for access.30 In examining social problems, adherents of neoliberalism often place blame solely on individuals and downplay or deny the role that social and economic structures play in framing their choices and opportunities. There is a certain “looking out for Number One” attitude associated with the individualism and competition of neoliberalism. A CESL project that takes on Bordeamos as a partner would fundamentally be about counter-acting individualist and competitive tendencies through a collective act of solidarity and a participatory sharing in the suffering of others, even when that suffering is construed to be “their fault.” Embroidering encourages a physical experience with collective activism, which creates a form of embodied knowledge. The physical process of making is a primary method of obtaining knowledge in the classroom.

We have found approaches that shift away from the neoliberal and more explicitly align CESL projects with social justice-oriented projects, like those initiated by Bordeamos. Below, we offer practical details regarding how we implemented these projects; reflect on their positive outcomes for Bordeamos,
students, and our curriculum; and consider how they might be improved in the future.

**Bordeamos por la Paz in Boudreaux’s Latin American Studies Classroom (Corrie Boudreaux)**

As a doctoral student in 2014, I was assigned to teach an introductory Latin American Studies course with a service learning component. Since this was my second CESL class, I was determined to improve upon the experience with lessons learned from my previous class. I wanted the interdisciplinary course, which had four core themes, to reflect on ideas of structural violence and the rehumanization of others throughout our semester. I had met Hazel and Magda in Juárez during my fieldwork the previous summer, which inspired me to create an international CESL project partnered with Bordeamos.

In class, we began with a conversation with Magda via Skype. She explained the project to the students, including its background, goals, and motivations. The students had the opportunity to ask questions. Hazel emailed a group of stories to me in Spanish, and I translated each story to English for the students. The students were assigned stories to embroider. They received the original Spanish story and the English translation, but the actual embroidery was completed in Spanish.

Most of the students did not know how to embroider, and we spent the first days learning the techniques. Throughout the semester, we worked together one hour per week. During these sessions, everyone embroidered together while we viewed documentaries on Ciudad Juárez (Img. 2). The students also completed some of the embroidery individually on their own time.
The students were required to submit four guided reflection essays during the semester. These four essays reflected the course themes of encounter, identity, nation, and welfare (these themes were set by departmental standards for the course). The guided reflection asked a series of open-ended questions about the embroidery project, the victims of violence, and the students’ own role in the process in relation to these themes. For “Encounter,” I introduced discussion in class on the Santino’s performative and commemorative aspects of spontaneous shrines (also termed makeshift memorials), and we discussed how some deaths are public by nature of their circumstances or causes. Students reflected on the idea of “encountering” victims in spontaneous shrines such as embroidered handkerchiefs, but also in roadside memorials, graffiti art, and the makeshift memorials that typically are created for public tragedies such as mass shootings. For “Identity,” our class readings and discussions focused on recuperating the personhood of victims of violence. The identities of the murdered and the disappeared are often reduced to their status as victims. At the same time, the identity of “victim” carries stigmatized connotations of criminality and blame. Students considered the relationship between identity and memorialization. I used Anderson’s “imagined communities” as the basis for our discussion of “Nation,” where students considered their commonalities with others across international boundaries. Finally, we discussed “Welfare” in terms of existing practices of social exclusion and structural violence that detract from the well-being of fellow members of our communities.

At the end of the semester, I shipped the finished handkerchiefs back to Magda, and she photographed them for inclusion in the photographic record of Bordeamos. The handkerchiefs were also included in public displays in Juárez.

The students’ work showed a range of technical and artistic skills (Figs. 3 and 4). Some of the embroidery used large stitches in block letters with no embellishment, while other students became more adept at producing aesthetically-pleasing work. Some students signed their work with their names or initials, as is often the custom among Mexican embroiderers. Others included decorative embellishments. Nevertheless, I stressed to students that the process of creating the handkerchief and spending that time in quiet reflection dedicated to the victim was far more important than the technical quality of the finished product. On average, each student produced three finished handkerchiefs during the semester. This number is a function of the overall service learning requirement of twenty hours, set by the university, and the time it took (as inexperienced embroiderers) to create each handkerchief.

Overall, the students’ response to the project was positive. The main disadvantage that students mentioned in evaluations was that they had expected...
their service learning activities to involve more face-to-face interaction with a local community. In a subsequent class, I attempted to address this concern by including a component that partnered with a local anti-violence group. Unfortunately, this partnership attempt did not pan out due to scheduling conflicts.

Bordeamos por la Paz in McCutcheon’s Art History Classroom (Erin L. McCutcheon)

A major catalyst for the creation of works of art during the contemporary period in art history has been issues of social justice. As an art historian who focuses on activist artists and works, I was interested in orbiting my 2018 Contemporary Art course around the ways in which art has been used not only to question systems of power, but also to foster change and develop resilience for and within communities. As CESL is rooted in these issues of community activism and development, it seemed that a project following those parameters would fit within these course-wide questions quite easily.

My first experience with CESL was during my first year teaching Introduction to Latin American Studies as a doctoral student in 2013. I was assigned a CESL project that had my students serve as conversation partners for students at an ESL school in the community. When working on this project, I encountered similar problems to the ones that Corrie described. The majority of my students lacked the appropriate language skills to properly engage with students at the ESL school, I found it difficult to incorporate the activity into my curriculum during the semester, and my students felt forced into an uncomfortable
power dynamic that asked them to study people as objects. Eager to not repeat this experience, the following semester I paired my Latin American Studies students with a community program centered on teaching Brazilian dance, music, and culture to local children. This more positive experience not only enhanced my students’ understanding of our course material and sense of community, but also provided meaningful support to a valued community partner.

Although CESL can be adapted to any discipline, it was somewhat difficult to find examples to use in art history courses outside of community mural or oral history projects. I wanted to explore the possibilities for a wider range of manifestations of CESL that would still function well at a small, Southern, liberal arts college with limited resources. As many of my students were first-generation college students, I was also particularly interested in the potential for a CESL project that would give them the experience of forming an international partnership without the prohibitive expense of leaving the country. After speaking with Corrie about her experience incorporating Bordeamos into her Latin American Studies course, we discussed ways in which I could adapt the project to my Art History classroom. Corrie introduced me to Hazel, who put me in touch with Libni, the current coordinator of Bordeamos, and together we discussed where my students could be most helpful to the collective.

At that point in time, the collective was focused mainly on a new project titled Adopta a unx Desaparecidx (“Adopt a Disappeared Person”). This project centered on victims of disappearance in Juárez who all happened to be female, although they importantly opt to use the gender-neutral term “desaparecidx” (Img. 5). Libni explained that the collective was working directly with the parents of these people to raise awareness of their disappearances in order to keep them visible in the public sphere and hopefully work towards locating them. To counteract the inaction of the local authorities, who often opt to assume the disappeared person is deceased rather than undertaking the task of locating them, the collective operates under the presumption that anyone who is missing is still alive. This notion had gained even more national and international recognition after the 2014 disappearances of students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College and the ensuing protest chant and virtual hashtag campaign Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos (“they were taken alive, we want them back alive” (Img. 6). The collective symbolizes this concept through the use of green thread as a symbol of life to commemorate the names and details of the disappeared persons, rather than red thread, which is used to mark a death. The project has manifested in two key politicized spaces: on the ground in protest marches, public installations, and workshops, as well as virtually in Facebook posts by the collective that publicize international actions of solidarity.
Image 5. A finished panel. Photo: Erin L. McCutcheon.

Libni brought the idea for the CESL project to other members of the collective, and they allowed me to access the informational materials and posters that they had created for each disappeared person. I assigned each student one person to “live with” for the duration of our course and provided them with their details. Throughout the semester, students engaged in the laborious process of embroidering two panels that represented this person, one in English and one in Spanish (Img. 7). As a whole, working on the project provided students with direct insight into the practical dimensions of art making, a vital aspect of the artistic process that is so often lost in the classroom environment. Instead of taking them into the studio for a one-off demonstration of a technique, the students had to actively work on a project that would inherently take them a number of hours to physically complete. This allowed them to make more insightful connections between process, material, and meaning that led to a more well-rounded understanding of the choices artists make when executing a work. I held a series of collective “making days,” where we embroidered together in the classroom. After spending time teaching students simple embroidery techniques, I centered the series of making days around a specific reading or film that we held group discussions around as we embroidered together. I chose material that focused on building student knowledge of the complexities of the project from a contextual and artistic perspective, and worked with the loose structure of the units for the course.

The first readings and films focused on providing background information regarding the politics of femicide and its connection to Mexico early in the semester. I always begin my art history courses by calling attention to the deep connections between sociopolitical contexts and artworks and trends. As an example, we undertook an in-depth international study of 1968 and its relation to shifts in artmaking towards more experimental practices. This grounding provided the platform to then focus on the contextual specifics of the project that they would be engaged in during the semester. My course moved through key thematics that paired well in the classroom with various aspects of the project throughout the semester. We discussed the ongoing feminist art movement, which connected to the revaluing of craft and questioning certain assumptions about “women’s work.” We considered the reclamation of public space and the existence of artmaking as a form of protest in a variety of contexts and forms. We reflected on postmodern memorial works and the specific contribution of Bordemos’s project within those histories. We also considered the visual aesthetics of the project, not only in terms of craft, but also through notions of the multiple, in relation to a variety of artists throughout the contemporary period.

Students were given a deadline to complete their panels in time to allow for their installation in a student-curated exhibition on campus (Img. 8). The decision to make this final exhibition entirely student-directed was initially suggested to me by a colleague simply as a way to alleviate my own workload, however, it also gave the students a sense of ownership over their final project and its visibility, something that they would not have obtained had I dictated its
parameters. The class broke up into small teams of twos and threes, and students sourced a location, implemented an installation plan, created a list of materials, wrote, designed, and printed wall texts, created informational hand-outs and promotional materials, and held an opening event with a companion activity to go along with it. For this opening activity, they invited members of the campus community to contribute to a collective embroidered tapestry that was on view in the student center for the duration of the installation (Img. 9). Students also completed a final research paper that asked them to make a case for the inclusion of Bordeamos’s project within a conceptual, thematic, or formal framework of the contemporary period of art history. Many chose to reflect on the project as it related to artworks we discussed throughout the semester that dealt with issues of memorial, trauma, craft, artistic activism, installation, and public art. I had intended this to be an opportunity for students to experience a sense of agency and make their own intervention into the art historical canon, however, it was ultimately based on an inclusion model that I was not satisfied with overall.

Although the concept of the “artist” (rather than “craftsman”) is a modern phenomenon, the history of craft, and of craftivism for that matter, is still not well represented in mainstream narratives of contemporary art. Despite the variety of practices and producers around the world named at the start of this article, Judy Chicago was one of the only craftivists included in our course textbook. Furthermore, though the situation of violence and disappearance was referenced in the text, the only artists named as addressing the issue were Teresa Margolles and Doris Salcedo. While I supplemented these exclusions with additional readings, the invisibility of craftivism and artistic projects not sanctified by museums and institutions motivated a cornerstone conversation that was woven through the semester and linked to other main objectives of the course. My goal was to have students come away with an ability to question the narratives they encounter as constructed texts, whether they are in written form, physically in museum spaces, or shaped within the classroom. This allows them to not only question the information they are given, but also to think beyond those narratives to locate what has been left out of the conversation and why. The project provided the space for me to ground underrepresented social justice initiatives and material in ways that centered on the voices of women producers outside of Europe and the United States throughout the semester.

**Collaborative Reflections and Potential Improvements**

As a craftivist project built on the tenets of process, reciprocity, and embodied knowledge, Bordeamos offered an opportunity to implement a CESL project that resisted the common pitfalls of these courses. The project was framed as durational, collaborative, and process-based, with reminders built into the semester that it was conceived as an action of international solidarity with our community partner. Bordeamos was in control of the structure and design of the project from the beginning. The students were not going into a community to tell them how to fix their own problems, but instead were introduced to the collective’s ongoing work and offered an opportunity to collaborate with them.

Our past experiences with CESL courses in Latin American Studies assumed, to some degree, the notion that our students, and we educators, come from a place of privilege and therefore have desirable skills and knowledge that could be passed down to the communities we intended to serve. In the case of these two embroidery projects, in contrast, students began in a position of disadvantage vis-à-vis the founders of Bordeamos. They were required to work together to educate themselves on the project’s context, implications, and materials. Most students could not read or understand the stories they embroidered without translation assistance. Even more importantly, most of the students did
not know how to embroider. They had to learn this new skill in order to participate in the service project.

Many students compared their work unfavorably to that of their peers or to the handkerchiefs that Bordeamos had sewn. They experienced some vulnerability in displaying work that they felt was not “good enough.” This process—learning an unknown skill, feeling discomfort and vulnerability in their work—reverses the typical service learning experience. More than anything, students began to see that they were not “saviors,” coming to offer something to Bordeamos that it did not already have. Instead, they were unskilled participants, whose value to the collective came not through material advantages or technical expertise, but through a willingness to spend time in solidarity with the Bordeamos community. In other words, this project contrasts with other projects that place emphasis on the student volunteers arriving to do for the community partner. Rather, the partnership with Bordeamos places the emphasis on students’ showing up to be with the collective of embroiderers and with the victims to whom they dedicated their work.

As Teju Cole memorably wrote in a critique of journalist Nicholas Kristof: “All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need.” Critical service learning requires that students not only learn about helping others in need, but also that they begin to question the underlying structures that create inequality. Bordeamos is critical in this sense, because the stark truth is that many homicide victims in Mexico were involved in some criminal activity. The critical intervention occurs when we see that criminal activity, especially the levels of organized crime present in Mexico and elsewhere, does not occur in a vacuum. The judgment that “this person was a gang member/a prostitute/a dealer/a hitman/a deviant” attempts to do at least two things. First, these statements insulate the rest of “us” from violence. If this victim died because of what he was, or where she was, then I am safe from violence because I can avoid being that, or going there. Second, these statements insulate us from social responsibility. He chose to join a gang; she chose to go to that club and dress that way. What happened to them is unfortunate but only they themselves are to blame. We do not need to change anything.

Bordeamos and its sister collectives—including our CESL classrooms—disrupt this view of violence and its victims. Even in the US cities where these service learning activities took place, the same rhetorical tendencies place victims of violence outside of “normal” society. It was a bad neighborhood; she was drunk; they were gangsters. The critical intervention of the embroidery process is to “be with” these victims regardless of whatever personal choices may have factored into their deaths or disappearances, while also making the connection between personal choices and the social, political, and economic environments.
that structure those choices. Such a shift in worldview challenges the neoliberal outlook that essentially privatizes social ills by placing blame and punishment solely on the individual without considering the broader social and economic causes and consequences. This fact was especially relevant for students in a US-based classroom in 2018, where in the midst of rampant shootings and killings of unarmed Black men and women, many people chose to vilify individual Black youth rather than critically examine the structural conditions and cultures that contributed to the shootings. Active participation in and reflection on the embroidery project teaches us to look at rather than away from; violence is our problem and these victims are our victims. Violence tears the social fabric and the hole that remains belongs to all of us.

The implementation of the service learning project in US classrooms helped relieve some of Bordeamos’s workload. The collective’s goal is to embroider one handkerchief for each victim, a monumental and, unfortunately, never-ending task. In 2014, we embroidered stories of deaths that occurred four to six years earlier, and yet more victims were and are being added to Juárez’s death toll daily. Although the Adopta a unx Desaparacidx project was more focused on individual cases, the project’s goal had an international focus, and Bordeamos had already welcomed participation from groups in the United States, Japan, France, and the Netherlands. Our own participation added to this growing international visibility, and they were able to promote the project on virtual platforms without taking time and resources away from their ongoing work, which was vital as Bordeamos is entirely volunteer based.

It is always difficult to gauge the true effectiveness of CESL projects from a student perspective. Students completed reflection papers in which they expressed sentiments of solidarity and empathy; however, there were also unanticipated outcomes. As previously stated, many of Erin L. McCutcheon’s students were the first in their families to attend college, and the majority had never left the state of Mississippi. One student stated the project gave her an international experience she felt she might never have due to her economic situation. Another student who had previously completed a religious-based service trip to Central America came to recognize the problematic power dynamics inherent in that experience, where he felt he was “doing for” rather than “being with” the community he was placed in. Student-athletes reported working on their embroideries during long bus rides to away games. Many said this experience fostered conversations surrounding traditional gender roles, namely in the completion of “women’s work” by male athletes, with their team-mates. It seems fair to suspect that these conversations would not have taken place without the durational aspect of the project. Another student made connections between the embroidery project and her own studio art practice. She wrote in a reflection
on the project a year later: “because we were allowed to stitch in class, I ended up discovering that (as a student with ADHD and dyslexia) having something to do with my hands allowed me to focus on content better, [...] so much so that I began to embroider in a number of my classes.”

The following semester, she worked to combine meditation exercises with stitching as a therapeutic and embodied performative practice in her senior thesis.

Of course, the projects were not without their faults. As discussed above, the act of embroidering in public spaces is an essential characteristic of the various embroidery groups throughout Mexico. In retrospect, we believe the service learning intervention could have had additional impact if we had more intentionally imitated the practice of embroidering in public. For example, Boudreaux’s classes met weekly outside of regular class time to embroider together, but this meeting took place within a closed classroom. At an individual level, some student embroiderers reported they had engaged in conversation about the project and the victims with people who observed them embroidering. There could be additional power, though, in arranging embroidery sessions in the public spaces of the university campus. Although McCutcheon’s class executed a final public installation of their works, embroidering in public spaces would have generated a greater amount of visibility for the project as well as accessed this key component of its creation. There may be a benefit in selecting strategic locations that will access a variety of populations on and off campus (for example, not only embroidering in the library, cafeteria, or gym spaces, but also in spaces downtown), or, conversely, in choosing one select location and time to generate visibility and a reputation for the repeated weekly practice of embroidering that other people might join in on. Appearing in public would likely attract curious onlookers, and the students would have more opportunities to engage in outreach and consciousness-raising while answering questions about their work. Embroidering in public would also better match the spirit and practices of the original collectives in Mexico.

In course evaluations, several students commented on their feelings of distance from the situation. One simple correction would have been to offer more opportunities for individual connections with our contact Bordeamos throughout the semester via virtual platforms. While in general students found that the project did contribute to the humanization and personalization of victims, even across international boundaries, some of them still expressed a desire for more face-to-face interaction with a local community. We believe that this issue is ripe for improvement in future classes. From its inception in Mexico City, the embroidery project as a whole has lent itself to word-of-mouth growth, borrowing, and local adaptation. This branching-out combined with local adaptation was seen, for example, in the way that Hazel brought the project from Guadalajara to

35. Quotations and anecdotes drawn from private communication between Erin L. McCutcheon and students, 2019.
Juárez, and then Magda spread the idea to her friends in Zacatecas. A possibility, then, is for teachers and students to develop a localized version of the embroidery project. Many cities in the US have their own victims of both interpersonal and structural violence. Boudreaux first implemented the embroidery project in New Orleans, and during her second semester of service learning with Bordeamos she attempted to introduce a local component and even discussed preliminary plans for students to create embroidered memorials for New Orleans homicide victims with a local anti-violence organization. Unfortunately, these plans ultimately did not work out for that semester, but the potential exists for adapting the concept of embroidery as reflection, protest, intervention, and “being with” to students’ local community contexts.

Conclusions

We cannot overstate the importance and impact of recuperating the humanity and individuality of victims of interpersonal and structural violence. We have seen examples of the ways that one individual story changed hearts and changed history. A 2015 photograph of drowned Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi provided the impetus to change policies and save lives, although we had already heard multiple reports about the desperation of refugees escaping conditions in Syria. At this writing, a new photograph from the US-Mexican border, showing the bodies of Oscar Martinez Ramirez and his young daughter facedown in the Rio Grande, is stimulating new action to address the plight of immigrants.36 Our compassion, often deadened in the face of mass tragedy and atrocity, is awakened when we come face to face with a single, named individual.37

The need to continue building networks of compassion and solidarity between Latin America and the United States is particularly relevant at this moment. Latin American cities and countries continue to top the world homicide rate rankings. Thousands of people are dying every year from criminal violence and structural inequalities throughout the region, one of the major push factors contributing to the arrival of immigrants at the US border. It is easy to dismiss this as a Latin American problem, as an “other” problem. It is easy to look away.

Embroidery as a soft and accessible intervention invites students to look at. Embroidery as embodied by the practices of craftivist collectives such as Bordeamos is a slow process that requires the students to be with the names and stories of victims for an extended time. Embroidery occupies the hands, leaving the mind free to imagine: Who were you? Who mourns you now? Embroidery invites an individual encounter with a single death. This encounter is the heart, and the potential, of the Bordeamos mission: to embrace, one by one, without

judgment, the victims of the social and political circumstances of which we are a part.

This process of obtaining embodied knowledge, of “being with,” requires meaningful engagement beyond what is typically possible in the classroom. “Being with” requires students to simultaneously accept two opposing realities: First, sometimes there is nothing to do in the face of suffering except be in solidarity with victims—but the power of such an act of solidarity should not be underestimated. Second, our recognition of the humanity of others can be uncomfortable, and it is this discomfort that, like a needle, pricks our consciousness into action. These outcomes would not be possible without the work of craftivist collectives such as Bordeamos por la Paz. While their practices are often relegated to the margins of social and creative histories, these initiatives wield their needles as “dangerous tools” with the subversive potential to hold truth to power, construct alternative spaces for communication, and assist in creating politically active and civicly engaged students.

Bibliography


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