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Resilient Threads Telling Our Stories *Hilos Resilientes Cosiendo Nuestras Historias*

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Sewing is traditionally women's work. Often characterized as homespun, even quaint, it is associated with the domestic sphere. What at first glance may appear charming belies the persuasive ways in which women work with textiles to depict apartheid in South Africa,¹ identity,² forced migration,³ grass roots activism,⁴ encoded messages,⁵ and remembrance of murdered and missing indigenous women.⁶ Perhaps that is why the powers that be are mostly unaware of its subversive potential, and thankfully so, as this potential remains under the radar "sew" to speak while galvanizing those at the margins. How might sewing bring women together in a circle of care, give them a sense of belonging to a larger community that provides hope and meaning while creating the conditions for activism and social justice? Such gatherings of women allow for precisely the confluence of belonging, healing, and resistance.

Given their origins, we believe political arpilleras are particularly compelling in this regard. Arpilleras are three-dimensional appliquéd textiles of Latin America that originated in Chile.⁷ The backing is hessian,⁸ which translates into *arpillera* in Spanish. Women stitched onto hessian their everyday lived experiences under the gruesome and oppressive dictatorship of the US-backed coup of Augusto Pinochet, which occurred on September 11, 1973, against the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende.⁹ So, too, their threads and bits of fabric from the clothing of the "disappeared" allowed them to express what could not be expressed in words.

Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*¹⁰ writes that violence against women is a form of terrorism. Women essentially navigate a kind of war zone as part of everyday life. Sexual assault, child abuse, and family violence can only be understood in a sociopolitical context. Herman argues the personal is political. She writes that recovery from interpersonal trauma

1. Voices of Women Archive, *Conversations We Do Not Have* (Province of KwaZulu-natal: Department of Arts and Culture, 2013).

2. Jessica MacLean, "Métis Culture at Textile Museum of Canada," Métis Nation of Ontario, accessed January 10, 2017, www.metisnation.org/news-media/news/m%C3%A9tis-culture-at-textile-museum-of-canada/.

3. Dia Cha, *Dia's Story Cloth: The Hmong People's Journey of Freedom* (Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History/Lee & Low, 1996).

4. Farah Yusuf, *Eutopia*, Textile Museum of Canada, February 24, 2016–May 29, 2016, <http://www.textilemuseum.ca/exhibitions/eutopia>.

5. Sarah Ives, "Did Quilts Hold Codes to the Underground Railroad?," *National Geographic News*, February 5, 2004, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/02/0205_040205_slavequilts.html.

6. Walking with Our Sisters, "A Commemorative Art Installation for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women of Canada and the United States," accessed January 10, 2017, <http://walkingwithoursisters.ca/about/>.

7. Roberta Bacic, "The Art of Resistance, Memory, and Testimony in Political Arpilleras," in *Stitching Resistance: Women, Creativity and Fiber Arts*, ed. Marjorie Agosin (Tunbridge Wells: Solis Press, 2014), 65.

8. In North America hessian is called burlap.

9. Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

10. Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

commonly develops in progressive stages, and she describes a model of recovery for women in which there are three stages. Stage one is safety and stabilization. Stage two is remembrance and mourning, and stage three is reconnection, commonality, and integration. We believe there is great value in women entering the public sphere as a collective to address violence against women systemically when recovering from gender-based violence. Recovery¹¹ is not an individual personal act achieved in isolation but rather a cooperative endeavor linked to a sea change of cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs. Women tap into their potential by evolving into agents of change. In the following, we address an arpillera group program for women survivors of violence at a violence against women organization.

We work at an agency in Toronto, Canada, called the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic. The Clinic offers legal representation, professional counseling, and multilingual interpretation to women who have experienced violence. Our diverse, skilled, and compassionate staff accompany women through personal and practical transformation, helping them to build lives free from violence. We are a center by, for, and about women. We amplify women's voices, and cultivate their skills and resilience. The counseling department runs a number of groups for women survivors of violence. One of the groups we run is a third-stage arpillera group called *Hilos Resilientes* or Resilient Threads. The group is for Spanish-speaking women who self-identify as Latina. The group program began in 1998 and is funded by the United Way of Toronto.

From the program's inception, the choice of working with the arpillera as a way to address gender-based violence was deliberate. Given its origins, the arpillera meets the criteria Herman speaks to in her conception of a third stage by combining the private and public spheres. Further, the arpillera resonates for group participants in its cultural significance. Marjorie Agosín states:

The arpilleras flourished in the midst of a silent nation, and from the inner churches and poor neighbourhoods, stories made of cloth and yarn narrated what was forbidden. The arpilleras represented the only dissident voices existing in a society obligated to silence.¹²

Agosín's words are deeply compelling, because there is a similarity between the demand to be silent, and violence against women and girls.¹³ The sexual abuse of women and children in Canada remains—despite all the work that has been done to break the silence—largely unspoken, minimized, and denied. It is predominantly marginalized, impoverished, and racialized women who are in effect denied access to justice in Canada. The courts of public opinion, the immigration and refugee system, as well as the criminal justice system harshly judge women who report sexual abuse. Women are either blamed or accused of lying. In the midst of the demand that we be silent, the courageous women of *Hilos Resilientes* speak out, whether it is with their words stitched onto the cloth or with scraps of fabric, embroidery, yarn, threads, and

11. Although we use the word *recovery*, we are concerned with its usage in helping professions in that it, “has come to define a model of mental health that has a tendency to depoliticize violence against women by focusing exclusively on the inner world of the self and personal agency.” Our thoughts in this regard are shaped by Trysh Travis, *The Language of the Heart* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 219.

12. Marjorie Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 45.

13. During the time of the Chilean dictatorship, detained women were the main recipients of horrific sexual abuse. This information is gleaned from a visit in 2016 by one of the co-authors to the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, located in Santiago, Chile.

crocheting. Significantly, the arpilleras have been submitted as testimony in Canadian immigration and refugee board hearings paralleling the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation.¹⁴

By 2010 the groups had evolved from a psychoeducational model into a more structured and closed expressive arts group led by Carolina Gana. Carolina was born in Chile during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship. In 1978 her parents fled Chile with Carolina and her brother. During the Allende years, and years prior to living in exile, her father was part of the Church Vicariate, leading civic engagement workshops in marginalized neighborhoods in Santiago, Chile. He often spoke to Carolina of the women who sewed in the church basements. Women who gathered in secrecy were wary of the military regime and secret police that roamed the streets, abruptly detaining any person showing opposition to the Pinochet government. According to Carolina, the clothing of the disappeared was meticulously stitched onto burlap. These arpilleras were then transformed into living testimonies. They testified to the violence and brutal repression taking place in Chile, making the world stand up and pay attention. Carolina understood that the arpilleras held intrinsic knowledge of the families of the disappeared:

At a very young age, with arpilleras hanging from the walls of our living room in Toronto, Canada, I learned that women's voices can be amplified by stitching into cloth narratives of resistance, resilience, and loss and that these arpilleras could travel globally to shape social change. As a Chilean exile, a Canadian, and the group facilitator of *Hilos Resilientes*, I have been shaped and moved by the arpilleras' powerful messages.¹⁵

With Carolina newly leading *Hilos Resilientes*, she entered into vital conversations with her father, mother, and other family members in Chile, as well as reading works by Marjorie Agosin and consulting with the Chilean community in Toronto. Carolina gathered essential information that helped transform the Clinic's arpillera group into becoming a therapeutic textile program for trauma survivors. Carolina notes:

What I came to realize was that when women in Chile gathered to sew their arpilleras, they were depicting narratives that were present in time, with meaningful symbols, images, and textile that captured themes of time and place. The Arpilleras created in Chile commonly depicted the Cordilleras or Andes mountain range. The Cordilleras are often referenced in Chilean identity in folklore, art, and music. When considering the arpillera group, the concept of starting arpilleras from a place of creating depictions of the present was in line with other trauma-based therapeutic interventions such as Mindfulness, which I often use to help manage the effects of trauma for survivors. The group harnessed a practice of mindful meditation, provided psychoeducation on trauma impacts, demystified dominant narratives of gender-based violence, and hosted space for Latina women living with precarious immigration status, and on the margins of Canadian

14. "Roberta Bacic was a lecturer at Universidad Austral de Chile who was sacked for political reasons under Pinochet's dictatorship. From 1993–6, she worked for the National Corporation of Reparation and Reconciliation, the successor to the Truth Commission." Roberta Bacic, "Dealing with the Past: Chile—Human Rights and Human Wrongs," *Race & Class*, 44, no. 1 (2002): 17. In conversation with Roberta Bacic, Ms. Bacic informed Lynne Jenkins that she had never heard the arpillera used as testimony outside the Chilean Truth Commission

15. Carolina Gana, interview by Lynne Jenkins, January 13, 2017. Other quoted excerpts directly from Carolina are derived from same source.

society, to have a safe place and a felt sense of belonging. Participants navigated structural and systemic oppressions that were by far just as complex as the interpersonal violence they had survived. Building upon anti-oppressive, feminist, and anti-racist work, we are breaking those imperialistic stereotypes of Latinas by stitching in cloth our diversity. The arpilleras depicted cultural shapes, colors, and symbols that honored the scope of many Latina identities. As participants collectively engaged in the group process, the arpillera became their anchor and grounding apparatus upon reflecting of the past, shaping a way forward given an unknown future while providing solace in the present.

The group program starts with Carolina meeting the women one-on-one for pre-group assessments. These meetings are an opportunity to determine group readiness. Group readiness is often a measurement of practical and emotional stability as well as available internal and external supports. The women are given a choice of themes, which help to familiarize them with new terms and common experiences of trauma, for example, flashbacks, shame, body memories, and difficulty trusting others. Women select the themes that resonate for them. Carolina then gathers all of their feedback, and based on the most popular themes, she determines the agenda for each group session; setting boundaries is a popular choice among the women. By stitching the borders of small and large images and even with their selection of colors, their understanding of boundaries is deepened. Women meet weekly for twelve weeks. The first three weeks of the group are devoted to fostering each woman's ability to connect with color, symbols, shapes, and texture as expressions of thoughts and feelings by using paper, markers, wool, and paint. Working in this way in advance of creating their arpilleras, they cultivate the ability to connect imagery to complex emotions often associated with trauma, such as shame, blame, fear, anger, helplessness, and grief. In week four the burlap is introduced to the participants. With the introduction of an empty canvas their particular reflection begins on "who am I in the here and now."

Circa 2012 Rachel Cohen contacted the Clinic expressing a passion for and an interest in our arpillera program. We entered into conversations about our mutual appreciation of story cloth, and we shared with Rachel the internal process of how we structure and run *Hilos Resilientes*. Rachel is the founder of Common Threads,¹⁶ which is "an international non-profit that provides a therapeutic training program for mental health professionals incorporating psychoeducation, sensorimotor awareness, therapeutic art, and story cloths."¹⁷

In 2014 Lynne traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, to participate in a gathering of approximately thirty women representing nineteen countries. The conference Sew to Speak: Narrative Textiles, Human Rights, and Healing was held at Webster University from September 12 to 14, 2014.¹⁸ Roberta Bacic¹⁹ curated a collection of arpilleras for the conference, and it is here that we began our collegial relationship with Roberta. The gathering of artists, activists, and clinicians

16. Common Threads, "Stitching the Unspeakable," accessed January 13, 2017, <http://www.commonthreadsproject.net/>.

17. Lisa Raye Garlock, "Stories in the Cloth: Art Therapy and Narrative Textiles," in *Art Therapy Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* 33, no. 2 (2016): 58–66, doi 10.1080/07421656.2016.1164004.

18. Common Threads, "Sew to Speak," accessed January 13, 2017, <http://www.commonthreadsproject.net/sew-to-speak>.

19. Roberta Bacic, Conflict Textiles, CAIN Associated site, 2015, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>.

consisted of diverse women from around the globe. There was a three-day exchange of ideas, expertise, techniques, and shared lessons learned.



Figure 1. *Cuando Se Rompe El Silencio/When Silence is Broken*, Canada, 2009. Cotton, wool, yarn, and embroidery (21 in. by 15.5 in.). Permission by artist and photograph by Ian Kuba.

In preparation for the conference, Lynne arranged to meet with Angélica,²⁰ a group participant from *Hilos Resilientes*, and a Spanish-speaking interpreter was booked. Lynne wanted to ask Angélica if she would consent to have her arpillera travel to Geneva as part of Sew to Speak. In the first meeting, Angélica went into details about the abuse as she guided Lynne through texture, color, shapes, and stitches that told her story over time. It was the first arpillera that Angélica created. She informed Lynne that she wanted to talk about the abuse by her grandfather, her brother, and her uncle, about the silence she had to keep, and about thinking that her mother never believed her when she was telling her to be quiet so her father would not hear anything about it. The bottom part depicts her life in her country of origin. Here Angélica describes depression. Twice she wanted to commit suicide, because she felt as if she was going crazy. The three tigers represent her father, uncle, and brother. The fence represents her early marriage. The lion represents her children's father. Angélica recalls he practically imprisoned her for years; he did not allow her to leave. Most of the time, he would have someone watch the house so no one would come close to it. The window represents her sole access to the outside

20. Angélica is a pseudonym.

world. She could not tell anyone what was happening inside. Angélica stated, “He treated me as though I was nothing.”

At times her husband would invite his friends over and they would rape her. She described the withered dry tree as her life, which she felt was getting drier and drier. The tree represents Angélica’s desire to leave there. She disclosed that she was so isolated, she began talking to herself. She became afraid of people. She did not like being touched. Prayer, her belief in God, and using her mind to escape to an imaginary world where life was different were the coping strategies that helped her survive. In an attempt to find help, Angélica went to an agency. They listened to her, but they did not help her. Angélica informed Lynne that in her country of origin, many places listen to a woman’s accounts of violence and then take her back and tell him to hit her harder. Eventually, Angélica was able to leave her country of origin with her children. She fled to Canada. She explained, “I ran away because I could not take the abuse anymore from my family or my children’s father.”

In contrast, at the top of her arpillera she depicted hope. It was her hope to have a different and better home and a better life. In this scene, there are bees and her children are with her. The flowers represent life and happiness. The house has a door through which she can go in and out. The fence is made of flowers. The tree is green. She said, “I am not in the tree. I am standing at the bottom of the tree. It says tree of life.” Angélica explained that she stitched Barbra Schliker into her arpillera because the Clinic helped her.

In these meetings between Angélica and Lynne, it became apparent that trust needed to be built slowly and gently over time. The process could not be rushed, because it was not simply about asking Angélica to sign the release of consent. In creating her arpillera, it was as though a part of her lives on, and this part of her would be traveling across the Atlantic to be with other story cloths. Angélica would be breaking her silence on a global stage. Angélica told Lynne that she wanted to consult with her children first. They agreed on a time for follow-up in order to give Angélica enough space so that the process for her did not seem rushed. Eventually, with other meetings set at her pace, Angélica agreed to have her arpillera travel to Geneva. She titled her arpillera *Cuando Se Rompe El Silencio*.²¹ Angélica’s demeanor changed over the course of these meetings. Having talked to her children, she saw their deep respect for her reflected back. They were very proud of her accomplishment, and they felt it was important for their mother’s arpillera to be part of a global gathering of human rights activists assembling the story cloths of other women who share similar experiences worldwide.

After the conference ended, Lynne and Angélica met again. In this meeting, Lynne told Angélica how participants had interacted with her arpillera and what it meant to them. When a second request came for her arpillera to travel to Northern Ireland as part of *Textile Accounts of Conflicts* in Belfast, curated by Roberta Bacic and Breege Doherty in February 2015, Angélica did not hesitate this time to give her consent. The exhibition consisted of textiles and related items in which personal stories of the impact of conflict and human rights abuses—expressed

21. In English the title translates to *When Silence is Broken*.

through needle, thread, and bits of fabric—told how women working alone or collectively, often clandestinely, laid bare to the world their experience of conflict.²²

We began to discuss how we might create possibilities for Angélica to travel with her arpilleras to conferences, rather than have us speak on her behalf. The opportunity arose closer to home in 2015, when a call for applications came for the Feminist Art Conference²³ at the Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto, Canada. The conference theme was a multidisciplinary visual art exhibition *Looking Forward Looking Back*. This time Carolina approached Angélica to invite her to consider applying. Angélica agreed. Three of her arpilleras were part of the exhibition,²⁴ and she participated on a panel. In preparing for her panel discussion, we organized a Spanish-speaking interpreter, and Angélica requested that Carolina accompany her the day of the panel discussion as a support person. The title of the panel discussion was “Fragmented Histories Assembling for the Future,” and it was held on September 27, 2015.



Figure 2. *Paloma/Dove*, Canada, 2012. Cotton, wool, yarn, and embroidery (22 in. by 24 in.).
Permission by artist and photograph by Ian Kuba.

Carolina observed that the panel consisted of academics and artists. Carolina recalled the audience became captivated with Angélica when she spoke of her story and her arpilleras:

22. The International Conflict Institute (INCORE) at the University of Ulster commissioned the exhibition for the Accounts of the Conflict International Conference that took place in Belfast in November 2014. The exhibition was held at the Linen Hall Library. Angélica's arpillera became part of the conference Accounts of the Conflict: Digitally Archiving Stories for Peacebuilding.

23. Feminist Art Conference (FAC) is a Toronto-based organization that brings together artists, academics, and activists to consider feminist issues through art and dialogue.

24. *Cuando Se Rompe El Silencio/When Silence is Broken*, *Paloma/Dove*, and *Cuando? Donde? Porque? Shh/When? Where? Why? Shh* were exhibited.

It was like, here is the real deal. Here is the lived experience. The audience asked her a lot of questions that were actually quite rooted in her resiliency. In the Q & A she really became the expert. Her children were in the audience. I had accompanied her to all of her immigration hearings, and in each of her hearings she had requested that her children be removed from the room. They did not know the full details of her story up until this moment. In the aftermath of her presentation, they expressed being proud of her and they hugged and embraced her and then she led them out of the room.



Figure 3. *Cuando? Donde? Porque? Shh/When? Where? Why? Shh*, Canada, 2012.
Cotton, wool, yarn, and embroidery (20 in. by 15.5 in.). Permission by artist and photograph by Ian Kuba

In October 2015, Carolina and Lynne traveled to Guernica (Gernika), in the Basque Country, which is a region of Spain, to present on *Hilos Resilientes* for *Cosiendo Paz: Conflicto, Arpilleras, Memoria* Conference.²⁵ Angélica's three arpilleras traveled to the conference, where a group of diverse participants shared in the unique ways in which the arpillera speaks to the lived experience within conflict zones and how the arpillera can figuratively and literally mend the impacts of such experiences in the aftermath. Once the conference was over, Lynne traveled to Badalona, a suburb outside Barcelona, to meet with colleagues from the Sew to Speak Conference, held in Geneva, who work at a community-based organization that has a long-established arpillera program for women in Catalonia.²⁶ As we continue to build bridges

25. "1ª edición de la Embarcada Artivista. Hilvanando la búsqueda," Congresos, October 8, 2015, http://www.museodelapaz.org/es/congre_desarrollo.php?idactividad=378.

26. "Lynne Jenkins visita la Fundació Ateneu Sant Roc," *Arpilleres de Catalunya* (blog), October 19, 2015, <http://forumarpilleres.blogspot.ca/2015/10/lynne-jenkins-visita-la-fundacio-ateneu.html?spref=tw>.

globally, we unite in a common cause that crosses borders and boundaries, enriching the ways in which we work with women by continuing the evolution of *Hilos Resilientes*.

From its beginnings in 1998, group participants have shared collective experiences of having fled their countries of origin due to forced migration, persecution, conflict zones, or lack of state protection. In 2012 we made the decision to openly declare the social and political roots of *Hilos Resilientes* in recruitment flyers, given the political climate in Canada at the time.²⁷ With a federal government moving further and further right of center, we began to see greater erosion of checks and balances in the immigration and refugee system. The necessity to be declarative in this regard had to do with the controversial changes that negatively impacted those seeking asylum in Canada and, in particular, women. These changes removed the possibility of a significant number of women who come to Canada to have their risk of persecution assessed at all. Given the majority of refugees worldwide are women, advocates argued in a submission to the Parliamentary committee that the lives of many women would be put at risk, and Canada's reputation as a safe haven of gender equality would be severely compromised.²⁸ Changes to Canadian immigration since 2012 have meant that anyone seeking asylum in Canada from countries designated as safe, such as Mexico, have fewer rights and face increased barriers to getting protection.²⁹ The Clinic was concerned that these changes would negatively affect women with precarious status, particularly women seeking safety from violence when in search of legal representation, and access to social services. We have noticed a significant decline of Latina women seeking counseling services at the Clinic since 2012.

In our professional opinion, and given our observations of Angélica's process as well as other *Hilos Resilientes* group participants, we suggest there is great efficacy in providing a textile-based program of this nature where body-based therapeutic practices, individual self-reflection, and personal agency coalesce to facilitate considerable transformation for group participants. Therapy is not apolitical. Supporting and advocating for women whose human rights and mental health are imperiled by gender discrimination must surely be a critical component of our work. If we do not confront gender-based violence in the public sphere as an extension of our role, then we might possibly be unwittingly colluding in perpetuating the very same attitudes and beliefs that cause the suffering we, as helpers in group rooms and counseling offices, wish to alleviate.

27. The flyer stated, "During the dictatorship of Pinochet, women in Chile stitched their stories of oppression and resistance into tapestries called arpilleras" and in Spanish, "*Durante la dictadura de Pinochet en Chile, las mujeres cosieron sus historias de opresión y resistencia en tapices llamados arpilleras.*" (Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, 2012)

28. Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, METRAC, and LEAF/FAEJ, "Submission of the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, The Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), and the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Immigration regarding the Committee's review of Bill C-31 April 24, 2012," accessed January 13, 2017, http://owjn.org/owjn_2009/images/pdfs/submission-to-parliamentary-committee-bill-c-31.pdf.

29. In conversation with immigration and refugee lawyer Rathika Vasavithasan. Rathika worked at the Clinic from 2014 to 2016 and Anahi Rama and Lizbeth Diaz, "Violence against Women 'Pandemic' in Mexico," Reuters World News, March 27, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/07/us-mexico-violence-women-idUSBREA2608F20140307>. In Mexico, violence against women has dramatically increased, a situation that has been described as a "pandemic" by Ana Gúezmes, representative to Mexico of United Nations Women, the UN entity for gender equality.

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