PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

HILOS/THREADS: APPROPRIATING THE PUBLIC SPACE THROUGH COLLECTIVE WEAVING AND GRIEVING IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINICIDE IN MEXICO

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Introduction

Feminist historian Aurora Levin Morales reminds us that bodies are sites where "history is inscribed" (2013). What histories of resistance are being inscribed on the bodies of those who experience gender violence in Mexico? Can artistic interventions give account of these histories? To understand feminicide, which is the killing of women because of their gender, this work takes decolonial feminist philosopher Maria Lugones' (2008) understanding of race and gender as categories involved in the destruction of these bodies as a colonial legacy.

Historically, there has been a disregard for women's artistic interventions whether these occur within or outside institutions (Lopez 2017; Gunta 2017). Curator Miguel López (2017) has written about the need to "steal history" from those who have been writing it, whilst considering how their omissions have also reproduced dominant narratives and sustained the status quo. Breaking those dominant narratives has been an act of resistance (Ibid.). Indeed, Levins Morales (2019) reiterates, those who control the narrative have the power to silence those who do not.

Professor of Feminist Latin American Art Andrea Gunta points out that artistic representations by women artists make up 30% of the art displayed within institutions like museums and galleries.

PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY VOL 9, NO 2 (2024):100–113
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2024.92475
ISSN 2057-7176

For this reason, she speaks of a "systematic" form of censorship (Gunta 2017), whereby Latin American feminist artistic practices have been greatly ignored even within other feminist artistic exhibitions, publications, documentation, and research (Antivilo Peña 2015), making it relevant and urgent to add to the works centering on these practices from different fields/perspectives like cultural studies, feminist theory, Latin American Studies, etc. It is through feminist artistic interventions that the canon has been questioned and the body in its multiplicity has been explored, narrated, recreated, deconstructed through a non-dominant gaze (Gunta 2017).

Many countries within Latin America share a history of dictatorships and governmental regimes where forced disappearance became a policy of state violence (López 2017). López recounts artistic subversive practices that provide an account of the horrors of those times. These practices became interventions that made visible what state policy denied, and what more privileged sectors of society tried not to see. Such artistic interventions have also made memory, as to not forget the atrocities and the victims of those forms of violence. López refers to those systematic forms of violence as "geographies of horror" that imply the normalization of torture, forced disappearance, mass graves, etc. (López 2017, 141). A consequence of this is an interruption in Latin American feminist artistic practices in the context of repression where many were politically persecuted and chose exile (Gunta 2018).

I argue that looking into feminicide as a form of symbolic and material embodied erasure (Trejo Méndez 2019) allows us to contextualize the political relevance of current feminist artistic interventions and to understand these as forms of resistance to such erasure. I am interested in practices that disrupt dominant narratives, make visible gender violence, and ultimately re-appropriate the body and the public space within the context of extreme forms of violence. Particularly the artistic practices that seek to repair and contribute to collective grieving, making memory and healing as essential parts of the process.

In Mexico ten women are murdered a day (García 2021). Since the war on drugs started in 2006, 2000 mass graves have been found and more than 61 thousand people have disappeared (Rea Gomez 2020, 25). These atrocities speak of current "geographies of horror" to use López's term. Looking into feminist artistic practices implies unlearning the silences as well as understanding the tools, approaches and strategies used within these forms of embodied-enfleshed resistance (Trejo Méndez 2019).

For this purpose of unlearning, I explore the work of Colectiva Hilos ("threads collective"), a Mexican feminist collective that weaves in public spaces and displays their red textiles along important monuments and spaces. This collective weaving happens through a social media call for anyone to participate (no prior skills needed). The members of the collective seek to repair the social fabric through collective weaving while using this long red textile to make visible the absences of the victims of disappearance and feminicide in Mexico. This artistic project and protest is called *Sangre de mi sangre* ("blood of my blood").

The collective's social media account has been an important way for me to gain access to their work and visual documentation. I have also used newspapers and magazines reports of these

artistic interventions. I have attended an event where Claudia Rodríguez and Alejandra Ruíz Rincón (two members of the collective) presented *Sangre de mi sangre* at the Centro Cultural Casa del Lago in Mexico City. I participated in a collective weaving session at *la Alameda* in downtown Mexico City on the 5th of March 2023. This session was organized by *"Ah que las hilachas,"* a feminist center, to learn textile techniques that responded to the invitation of Colectiva Hilos to organize this art protest in other cities. This has also happened in cities like Queretaro, Toluca, Zacatecas and after March 2023 in other Latin American countries: Chile, Argentina, Perú and Venezuela. Finally, I organized a weaving session in Germany and invited the Latin American diaspora on July 8th, 2023, and also organized a colloquium in the University of Bonn where I invited the artists who have taken *Sangre de mi sangre* across Latin America to share how they resignify the artistic protest within their own sociopolitical context.

Weaving is also part of the methodological approach of this work where personal poetic narrative is stitched throughout the text. This form of doing research is taken from previous work (Trejo Méndez 2019) where weaving allowed "bringing together different epistemologies, political positionalities, literature, critical embodied reflections, enfleshed histories, conversations, emotions, ideas, insights, encounters and performance into the research process and analysis" (Trejo Méndez 2019, 25). This "feminist tool" is wielded in Latin American feminisms that consider epistemic and political pluralities in order "to cross boundaries and categories" as well as to include what is often overlooked through dominant epistemologies: the senses (Ibid.). Weaving here implies "acknowledging the colonial difference and locating it within the geopolitics of knowledge from concrete incarnated experiences" (Trejo Méndez 2019, 25). In this case, my own.

Figure 1: Documentation of Sangre de mi sangre *by Colectiva Hilos. Image shared with the author by the artists.*

Colectiva Hilos

> Show me that there is hope in coming together
> That we can repair our wounds under the sunlight
> That it can be different
> That you can teach me how to stitch hope
> I dreamt that a tapestry made of belonging covered the streets
> People letting their hearts melt under the fabric
> My feet could feel their heartbeat.

Colectiva Hilos is an interdisciplinary feminist collective that originated in 2018 in Guadalajara, one of the three biggest cities of Mexico (Oyarvide 2020). This collective has more than ten members who are mostly based in the same city. On 7 of March 2020, after two months of collective weaving in public spaces like Parque rojo (Red park) where about 150 people participated, they placed the woven red fabric under the statue of *"la madre patria"* (mother nation). The size of the fabric resembling a net is of 240m^2. They also carried it in a procession towards the roundabout of "the disappeared ones" (Oyarvide 2020).

This roundabout has become an important (public) space for making memory. Also, for demanding the return of those who have been disappeared. The official name is the roundabout of *"niños heroes"* which are national historical figures.[1] In 2018 the relatives of victims of disappearance together with activists took to the monument located in that roundabout to place pictures of their missing loved ones and demand their return. Since then, it was renamed "roundabout of the disappeared ones" (El Informador 2018).

In recent years in Mexico, activists, families of victims of feminicide and forced disappearance have taken several monuments and renamed them as a form of protest creating "anti-monuments." "Anti-monuments apart from being a visual alarm in a public space appropriated by citizens are a political claim" (Hijar 2021). An example of this is the previously known roundabout of Christopher Columbus in the street of *Reforma* in Mexico City. Since 2019 it has become an anti-monument. At the center of the roundabout stands the figure of a woman holding her fist high. It is now known as the roundabout of women who fight. Posing as a reminder that impunity is part of the need to make collective memory, but a kind of memory that is "alive" (Ibid.).

Researcher Laura Angélica Moya from the field of geographies of memory that looks into the traces of memory in public space, writes about anti-monuments mentioning their "symbolic and political effects in the dispute for public space" (Moya López 2021, 2). Moya López (2021) mentions there are "tensions" between the cultural historical official forms of memory found in monuments and those that come from "unresolved social causes and that rise up in the face of oblivion". Stating that:

> These surprising manifestations of living memory are what give rise to anti-monuments, as ephemeral materializations of protest and representative samples of subaltern memories. (Moya López 2021, 2)

Figure 2: Documentation of a protest at the Roundabout of the Disappeared Ones. Fragments of the red net created in Sangre de mi sangre *can be seen on the left side of the photograph. Image taken from Colectiva Hilos Instagram account.*

Those "subaltern memories" are constantly denied through official dominant narratives. In one of the performances organized during March 2023 by Colectiva Hilos in Guadalajara, the knitters covered the statues in the roundabout of "illustrious men" with their woven nets and placed the names of "illustrious women," those women who look for their disappeared loved ones. The signs were placed on top of each net. This action included reading the testimonies of women that fight for justice in Mexico (Franco 2023). This act of disruption of dominant narratives re-signifies who is culturally and socially worthy of being recognized as "illustrious" and publicly celebrated.

In *Sangre de mi sangre*, red is the chosen color to weave. It symbolizes the blood spilled first in that city and then in the rest of Mexico. In an interview for *Ah magazine* (Oyarvide 2020) members of

Colectiva Hilos stated, “threads have allowed us to move from the beginning. The threads are a conducting bridge that expands and unites us” (Ibid.). When speaking about the project *Sangre de mi sangre* during March 2020, they added that it became “a ritual of collective healing and accompaniment to the families of murdered women and victims of disappearance” (Oyarvide 2020).

Since 2022, *Sangre de mi sangre* has been reproduced in different cities in Mexico and outside the country. This means people and feminist collectives have come together to continue weaving and adding to the art protest that is also a giant net. In Chile for example, collective weaving happened in places where survivors were tortured during the Pinochet military regime in an intergenerational act of memory-making to mark the 50th anniversary of the coup, collectively re-signifying these locations.

This fabric has been on display at the base of important monuments in Mexico City, or in plazas in Guadalajara and in museums like the *Centro Cultural España*. The weaving continues as well as the need for healing the wounds that mark peoples in different ways, wounds that are painful experiences and marks of fragmentation. An anonymous letter sent to the members of Colectiva Hilos by someone related to a disappeared person read: “if you stop weaving, we stop searching,” thus revealing the importance of the act of coming together to weave for those who are struggling against despair. The families and friends who grieve while searching for their loved ones, these are the people that might be reminded through this weaving that they are not alone.

Figure 3: Documentation of the performance at the Roundabout of illustrious men by Colectiva Hilos that took place in March 2023. Images taken from the online news platform Zonadocs, accessed on 25 April 2023.

Fragmentation and healing

How to mend our wounds?
Thread by thread
Blood is everywhere
Like the presence of their absence
It hurts.

Social fragmentation happens through both direct violence like that described above (feminicide, forced disappearance, etc.) and also more subtle forms that are no less harmful like those imposed through dominant logics, narratives and categorial thinking (Lugones 2003). When considering the coloniality of gender it is possible to unpack how these forms of violence are all related since the bodies of those who have been racialized-feminized and gendered continue to be destroyed by the systematic dehumanization implied by this violence. "The curandera path" (2021) is my approach to healing as a praxis that centers life, as a form of healing that also encompass a "transformation of our understanding and experience of the world" (Vazquez 2020, xvi). In previous work, I have argued that fragmentation consequence of violence needs to become visible and named "for any healing to take place" (Trejo Méndez 2021, 2). How can we heal what cannot be seen, named, acknowledged?

The systems of oppression like patriarchy and capitalism (both embedded within modernity/coloniality), [2] need such fragmentation to thrive. This is because the hierarchical classifications that dehumanize some and objectify life are grounded in such dominant logics (Quijano 2008; Maria Lugones 2008). A decolonial take on healing asks to sense our wounds, those that are collective, but also experienced in our bodies and that cannot be separated from the sociopolitical context and enfleshed histories. It also means to be able to sense that which is not pain, but love, care and everything that has nourished us as people individually and collectively. For healing to happen it is necessary to sense/feel this (Trejo Méndez 2021).

Philosopher Ivan Illich (1975) pointed out many decades ago the need for healing beyond medicalized and medicalizing institutions due to the dependency these institutions had created and how that dependency had negatively affected the capacity of our societies to deal with suffering. I find that *Sangre de mi sangre* provides a way to deal collectively with a type of suffering that weighs heavily on a society that continues to look for their missing loved ones. A society that needs to find ways for coping with violence while refusing to become numb or indifferent. Weaving together is not only a metaphor. There is a need to repair, to connect and relate with each other differently, to connect from a place of care and empathy. Perhaps learning how to deal with suffering collectively is a way to start healing such fracture.

During a 2012 festival in Madrid, Mexican feminist performance artist Lorena Wolffer shared her performance about feminicides in Juárez (Bustamante Mouriño 2012). That is the name of the city in Mexico that became infamous for these crimes in the late 1990s when Wolffer's work began to raise awareness of these forms of violence. Since then, there has been a resurgence of feminist movements across Latin America. An example is the Green Tide that has been fighting for abortion

rights for everyone from Argentina to Mexico (Peker 2019). It is in this context of feminist movements and demonstrations against gender violence like *"Ni una menos"* (not one woman less), Purple tide, 25N protests and 8M marches where other feminist artistic interventions and activism against gender violence should be located. Works like that of *Lana Desastre* collective that invite people to look at that which they typically ignore through "yarnbombing" or "yarnfitti" (Revista Mira 2016).

On the question of how and if feminist artistic interventions transform the social context, feminist artist Miriam Mabel Martínez, a member of *Lana Desastre* reflected:

> I don't know if we have transformed something. What I do know—because I have seen it and sensed it in the multiple knit and crochet sessions that we've held—is that the simple act of being together, listening to each other, and accompanying each other is a transformation in itself. (Mabel Martínez, 2023)

Colectiva Hilos emerges in this context of feminist activism and artistic interventions that, through weaving collectively, are not only making protest art, but are also producing space for the transformation that Mabel Martínez mentions. In an interview, Colectiva Hilos shared:

> The actions of the Collective allow us to unweave ourselves to reweave ourselves in a different way. We believe that we repair by seeing each other, sharing, trusting, and making ourselves visible. We are sure that only a linked and communitarian world can resist the violence and objectification of society. (Oyarvide 2020)

Such "objectification" has meant that some people have been constructed as disposable, dehumanized. In this way they are treated like "trash," and Elizabeth Spelman (2019) reminds us that this is telling of what "the trash-proclaimer" understands to be valuable and who/what is not. This quotation also shows that the awareness of collectivity is necessary for "unweaving" what is, and for creating something different, creating a reality where such objectification is no longer possible. I understand this as a political act of resistance that escapes the imagination, like those described by scholars Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013), where the focus is on creating something (weaving) instead of contesting power. Oppression and resistance, as Lugones reminds us (2003), happen simultaneously. Constructing some merely as oppressed may obscure that (Ibid). The dominant lens/logics/conceptualizations often fail to see enfleshed/embodied forms of resistance within oppressed communities (Trejo Méndez 2019).

Feminism, weaving and textile art

> I seek the hands that wove me
> The dreams that crafted my path
> Where are the artists that shaped this life?
> Their dark hair, their tears, and their laugh.

The use of textile art by feminist artists has been well documented. Embroidery, weaving and other techniques like appliqué or soft sculpture have been used to bring awareness to specific experiences of oppression (patriarchal, racist, gendered, class, etc.) (Henderson 2021). This medium has also been used to tell stories forged at the margins of dominant narratives and institutions. There has been a historical devaluation of these forms of art as well as an imposed distinction between what is considered "craft" or "high art" particularly when it comes to objects deemed functional (Gipson 2022). This distinction has also been part of how the work and medium primarily associated with women or thought of as "feminine" is often perceived as less valuable (Parker 1984; Gipson 2022).

What is valuable is related to who is/has been constructed as worthy. "Aesthetics," explains decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez, is understood as "the field in which coloniality comes to light as the power to exclude from experience" (Vázquez 2020, 23). Historically, women are those whose subjectivity, "worlds of meaning," epistemologies, and life experiences are excluded/devalued, erased (Ibid.). The racialized-gendered-feminine is outside the modern field of representation, outside the possibility of intelligibility within this (Vazquez 2020; Motta 2018); in other words, outside the canon. Vázquez describes "the coloniality of modern aesthetics" as a form of "exclusion" from "world-historical-reality" (Vázquez 2020, 16). When such reality has been crafted by the gaze of the western white man (Ibid.).

Art historian Ferren Gipson reminds us that around the world, historically, women have engaged in practices like weaving, spinning, sewing and ceramics, which is also why these media have been called "women's work" (Gipson 2022). This is also why it has been difficult for many artists using these media to be taken seriously within contemporary art (Ibid.). From a decolonial perspective, the contemporary implies violence. Vázquez mentions that the contemporary "has been a field of power that has been excluding and exoticizing others, putting them and keeping them locked in the past" (Vázquez 2018, 23). One can think of the ways in which the artistic contributions of peoples from outside the west are described as "primitive looking," "authentic," "traditional", etc. These are also made to fit a linear historical narrative of western artistic movements that ignore the influences outside its own historical references and context.

For feminist artists, the use of media that have been devalued like textiles or embroidery, has been a conscious move to vindicate these media and claim space as artists (Parker 1984). The hierarchical divisions between what has historically been considered art or craft has not only been related to unequal gender relations but also to social class. In the same vein, in particular relation to embroidery, art historian Rozsika Parker mentions:

> The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of *where* they are made and *who* makes them. (Parker 1984, 5)

Parker adds that art with a needle was primarily done by women in the domestic sphere, whereas painting belonged to the public sphere, where it could be sold. What is the role of the marketplace

in shaping who is valuable and who is not within a capitalist society? Embroidery became associated with the working class therefore, not seen as an artistic skill, but rather as a craft's job. This also contributed to its devaluation (Parker 1984, 5).

There is a need to stress the subversive use of knitting in public space by Colectiva Hilos that appropriates the streets though their work. The understanding of "subversive" I use here links to Moten and Harney's (2013) ideas on being present "in the world" with others to make something new beyond the structures and systems of oppression and beyond the pain these cause. It is in the streets where many forms of violence take place, where women who left their homes for work never made it back or where a loved one was seen for the last time. Claiming the space collectively through knitting means creating space for being together with strangers that nevertheless share the collective anger, frustration and pain caused by the violence and impunity that permeates. Can one learn to stand together in solidarity with those who have experienced violence firsthand? Can one learn to be with each other to weave together despite the hurt, despite our differences? These questions become subversive possibilities against indifference and fragmentation of the social fabric and are present in *Sangre de mi sangre*.

A decolonial take on making memory and grieving

> Amnesia is to forget that we are connected, that we need each other
> There is pain in unraveling the logics that hold this broken world
> A world that shatters our senses to avoid feeling the loss
> How are we to carve the path back to liberation if we refuse to see where we are at?

What does it imply to have to repair the social fabric? In a society that continues to deal with forms of violence and destruction that are, in my understanding, inseparable from the violence of the colonial gender system (Lugones 2008), there is a pressing need for collective acts of repair. Since the dominant system imposed through colonization has resulted in the racialization and gendering of peoples who were dehumanized through this imposition (Ibid), and since this dehumanization has been normalized and institutionalized for centuries, these acts of repair are essential. Could such acts weave together a fragmented society? How can these make space for collective mourning, and challenge hierarchies of being that make some people and expressions less worthy of existing than others?

The "geographies of horror" we see today, are not de-linked from the history of colonial violence. Violence fractures relations. This is a painful, daily experience. Where there is pain, there is loss and the need for grieving. Grieving is a journey that can manifest in many ways. Healing and grieving are not the same, but without the possibility for grieving, healing cannot take place. For decolonial thinker Rolando Vázquez (2018) there is a type of healing that has to do with: "Recovering the possibility of remembering who we are. When I say, 'who we are' I'm speaking of who we are beyond the individualized self". He adds that healing is also:

> Crossing the fear of recognizing what have we become. When we can remember who we are, we are also forced into understanding 'what have we become', which is something difficult to behold. (Vázquez 2018, 46)

In that possibility of recognizing "who we are," our relationality, (weaving together) and "what we have become" (witnesses of loss and suffering) socially, I see the power of repair in the work of Colectiva Hilos. This artistic intervention that appropriates the public space also offers a way towards collective grieving. When considering the context and history of forced disappearance in Mexico,[3] this is extremely relevant. There are wounds that have been caused by all these forms of violence, a painful history in Latin America which López reflects on:

> The decision to make not only people disappear, but also their corpses, was part of the extermination policies implemented by military regimes. Not handing over the corpses was to determine for these bodies the condition of twice dead: the life taken away was also erased in its marks, dispossessed of the ability to be named and of the social possibility of generating spaces for mourning. (2017, 146)

Considering this, making space for collective mourning is not only necessary, but subversive, a coming together against the historical and systematic denial of that possibility. What is being fractured when mourning is not allowed or when it is interrupted? What forms of memory making are needed when official narratives and institutions downplay, ignore, or deny the pain and violence experienced? Or when these are complicit in the forging of the geographies of horror. In their manifesto, Colectiva Hilos mentioned "fabric is also a form of memory, which leaves a record of what we live and suffer, of our concerns and aspirations, of the ways in which we weave, narrate and inhabit new worlds" (Colectiva Hilos n.d.). Decoloniality implies moving away from systems of domination towards new worlds of becoming (Vázquez 2018). Worlds where collective healing is at the center.

Conclusion and final reflections

> I have come seeking answers to a pain that is collective and is mine
> I have searched in the hands that know about grieving
> I have searched in the archives of the stories left aside
> I have searched in a history that has not been ours to claim or trace
> From a feminism that understands dehumanization and its own limitations
> From a need to heal my own relations
> *Tantenado* like María Lugones
> *Buscando* (searching) a way to come home

Latin America is plural and so are the feminist and antipatriarchal movements coming from these territories. These do not necessarily agree in the ways they conceptualize gender or patriarchy and have different vindications and struggles depending on where actors are located. Such locations are not only geographical, but epistemic and political. Indigenous feminisms continue to struggle against antipatriarchal, anti-racist oppression and for the autonomy of their bodies-territories.[4] Urban cities across Latin America continue to be shaken by feminists' protests. Feminist

Argentinian journalist Luciana Peker (2019) mentions how these are "plural revolutions" that belong to the streets and that are taking the space, deconstructing dominant narratives, but also embracing, learning and rejecting imposed roles and "social mandates." These happen in contexts where violence and impunity give rise to different forms of collective resistance. This resistance uncovers what has been rendered invisible through dominant logics, systems of oppression and regimes by centering healing, collectivity, and the gesture of "unweaving" the violent realities that exist so as to make space for weaving something different.

Notes

[1] The heroic children, or *"niños heroes,"* were teens that were enrolled in the army and fought against a foreign invasion in the Castle of Chapultepec, Mexico City.

[2] Maria Lugones's "coloniality of gender" (2008) builds upon sociologist Anibal Quijano's "coloniality of power" (2000) that recognizes modernity and coloniality as co-constitutive. Lugones also conceptualized the coloniality of gender considering the works of other women of color that included an analysis of race in their feminist's theoretical contributions around gender.

[3] An example is the student massacre in Mexico City in 1968 by the military. There has not been an official recognition or apology to the families of victims who were killed and disappeared.

[4] "Body-territory" is a term coming from Communitarian Feminism which is an indigenous feminism with Aymara roots, that is also plural and present in Maya regions like Guatemala with feminists like Lorena Cabnal. Cabnal speaks of defending the "body-territory-earth" from patriarchal, colonial and racist oppression (Cabnal 2019).

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Biography

Dr. Paulina Trejo Méndez is an independent researcher and artist with a PhD in development studies from Erasmus University Rotterdam, with a specialization in perinatal mental health and in expressive arts for social intervention. Their work crosses disciplinary boundaries and focuses on the politics of knowledge, healing, forms of resistance to the violence of coloniality, Latin American feminisms, epistemic justice, social justice, feminicide, and chronic pain from a decolonial feminist lens. They currently work for the Social Justice and Diversity in the Arts research lectorate at the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK). They have taught about Latin American feminisms and Latin American feminist art at the University of Bonn in Germany, where they are based. Their art and research projects bring together art, Latin American feminisms, decoloniality, healing, medical gaze, endometriosis, spirituality, and politics. They have worked and written for the self-managed publishing house Cooperativa Editorial Retos that brings together works by rebellious WOC, trans, indigenous, and black activists, academics, and artists; and for feminist magazines like *Volcánicas*, *Hysteria* and *Proyecto Kahlo*. Their blogs/projects are decolonize, La Catártica, Comalli Collective, Morar (to Inhabit). The latter is a virtual space for Latin American immigrants living in Germany that supports the emotional aspects of migration, like migration grieving, through art and a social justice approach. Paulina is a member of the Borregas Moradas Collective, a Latinx migrant feminist collective that centers migrant experiences. The collective seeks to build community and spaces of joy.