

# Embroiderers of Memories, Tearing down Walls of Oblivion

Carlos Henriquez Consalvi  
Museum of the Word and the Image  
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We appreciate the invitation to participate in this Digital Frontiers conference, convened with the suggestive invitation to tear down the walls. What better historical moment than this to tear down the walls of oblivion, among other undesirable walls.

I am here on behalf of the Museum of the Word and the Image, an initiative dedicated to the study, collection, preservation, and dissemination of El Salvador's historical and cultural heritage.



To understand the origins of the Museum, we must go back to the 1980s in the midst of El Salvador's Civil War, when we participated in the foundation of Radio Venceremos ["We Will Overcome"]--an insurgent radio station--that during eleven years (January 1981 to January 1992) clandestinely transmitted from the mountains of Morazán.

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At that time, we started the task of preserving contemporary written and audiovisual documentation, primarily focusing on documentation related to human rights violations.



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After the signing of the 1992 Peace Accords, civilian efforts started to rescue and preserve archives that had been dispersed. Patiently, we began to rescue films, videos, photographs, manuscripts, and publications. These first collections were the seed of what would later become the Historical Archive of the Museum of the Word and the Image.



We just turned 23 as an initiative that emerged from civil society to preserve records and that is committed to its educational, civic, and social role and mobilizer of critical thinking. We have integrated ourselves as another agent in the dynamic and contradictory field of collective memory, proposing alternative models of cultural programming.





It has been 23 years of weaving memories, strengthening knowledge and values in new generations, and treasuring the traces of the past in the construction and representation of the future we want for El Salvador.



For several years, MUPI and LLILAS Benson at the University of Texas have been developing processes for collection preservation and digitization with the aim to put them online and further research.



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The first project began in 2013 with the cataloging, description, digitization, and creation of a publicly-accessible digital collection of clandestine broadcasts from Radio Venceremos that covered a period of eleven years.





This collection, which comprised audio cassettes, was converted into digital formats, and can now be consulted online. This audio collection is a valuable historiographic source for researchers and journalists where one can find important information about this troubled period.



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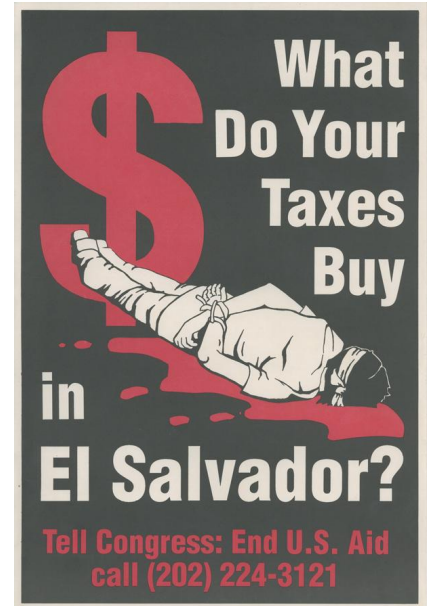
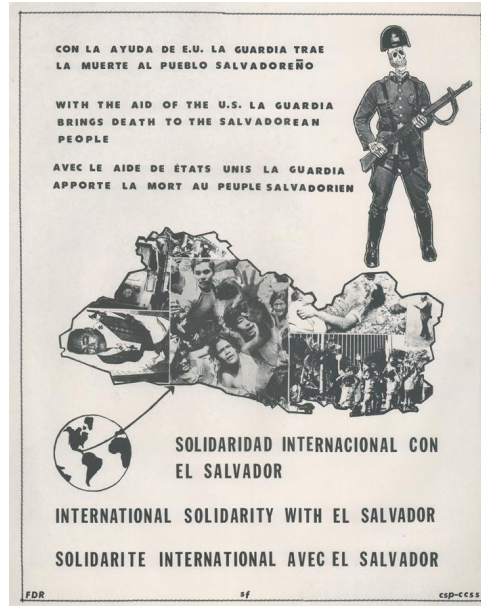




Through them, one can hear the political underpinnings of the insurgency and the voices of historical figures, such as President Ronald Reagan leading the United States intervention in Central America.



In the second project, part of the Museum's periodical library was digitized. This included publications, documents, and posters related to the civil war in El Salvador dating 1981-1992. The collection is currently available through the LLILAS Benson's Latin American Digital Initiatives portal at UT-Austin.





Today, we want to share a new initiative that we have developed this year with LLILAS Benson: the digitization of the "Embroiderers of Memories" Collection preserved at the Museum of the Word and the Image. The collection comprises embroidery produced by refugee women in United Nations camps during the armed conflict in El Salvador.



Starting in 1980, the Salvadoran Armed Forces launched military operations in rural areas, trying to dismantle groups of organized peasants in the guerrillas. In that context, there are several massacres against the civilian population.



After the guerrilla offensive in January of 1981, violence spreads through much of El Salvador and insurgent-controlled areas are established in the mountainous regions.





In December of that same year, an army battalion carried out the massacre of a thousand peasants, including 400 children, in the department of Morazán--becoming one of the greatest war crimes committed against civilians in Latin America.







Needing to express the reality they were living, and with the intent to show to the world the human rights violations they were suffering, these women started to draw and embroider on canvas scenes that showed the airstrikes bombing their homes and depictions of massacres against the people, telling the world the human drama they were experiencing.

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What they could not express with words, they expressed with colored threads and the treasured scenes in their traumatic memories. In that sense, this collective artisan work was constituted as a memory exercise with healing and restorative content. Embroidery allowed them to symbolically mend those parts of their lives that were broken or torn by violence.

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These embroidered pieces were sent to countries around the world with the purpose of promoting international solidarity. Every foreigner who visited the shelters returned to their country with one of these testimonial textiles. The Museum of the Word and the Image took on the task of rescuing these pieces and return them to El Salvador.





To that end, we led a campaign through Facebook and Twitter to locate them. The campaign has been successful with many of them being repatriated from different countries.



In an attempt to collect the oral histories of the women who made these embroideries in the 80s, MUPI developed a workshop with a group of elderly survivors who shared their experiences and memories about this artisanal work.

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According to these testimonies, a democratic organization was developed in the refugee camps that established a communal way of life. They developed cultural and educational programs for adults and children to end illiteracy; developed a team of public educators; and promoted awareness to improve health and nutrition.

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They created a technical school with vocational training programs to produce almost all the goods they needed. Subsequently, the women organized in 1982 embroidery workshops where boys and girls participated. Through this folk art, they represented the lived experience during those days of war and exile.





This past June, a team from LLILAS Benson comprising Jennifer Isasi and Albert A. Palacios traveled to El Salvador to train the Museum's staff in the preservation and digitization of these textiles.

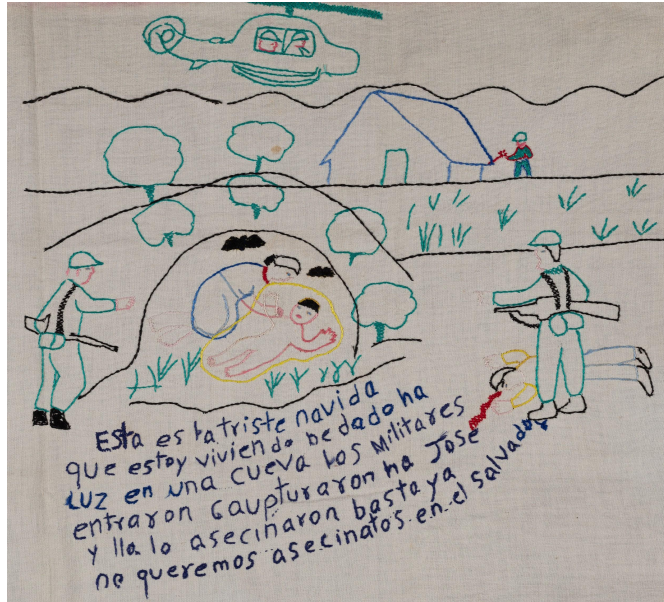


This training has allowed us to advance the digitization of this collection with the goal that [the digital collection] it will support the educational programs that the Museum develops with students, teachers, and rural indigenous communities throughout El Salvador. The collection will soon be available to through the Latin American Digital Initiatives portal.





The digitization of the collection has also enabled the Museum to produce a traveling version of the “Embroiderers of Memories” exhibition, which has started traveling throughout El Salvador. In November, it will be at Boston University, and then it will be part of a collection highlight at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid.



We would like to thank Theresa Polk, Albert A. Palacios, Jennifer Isasi, Joshua Ortiz Baco, David Bliss, Itza Carbajal--the entire LLILAS Benson staff for their professionalism, solidarity, and commitment to the preservation of Mesoamerica's historical and cultural heritage.

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I thank you for allowing MUPI to participate in this conference, which calls us to tear down walls.

For those of us who rescue and preserve archives, we know that there is no better tool than the collective memory of the people in the dismantling of the walls of racism, xenophobia, exclusion, and oblivion.

--Carlos "Santiago" Henríquez Consalvi

