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## Stitching Memories: Embroidery in Shatila

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**Tine:** My name is Tine Destrooper, and this is our second episode in a new mini-series about memory and memorialization. We will talk more about memorialization efforts from below, but also about how to understand them in light of the growing attention for memorialization and the broader domain of transitional justice, and also about how these our top down and bottom up efforts can become co-creative. With me today as co-host is Brigitte Herremans, who regular listeners know of her work in Syria. Welcome, Brigitte.

**Brigitte:** Hello, Tine. Happy to join you for another Syria related episode.

**Tine:** We won't be talking about Syria, strictly speaking, today, right, Brigitte? Because the episode today is about memorialization practices in the Shatila refugee camp. More specifically, about a very particular kind of memory work that is happening there, memory work rooted in informal, in artistic initiatives, notably in embroidery, which is not something I think a lot of people think about when they think about memorialization. So that is a good moment to introduce our guest for this episode. That's our colleague, Sofie Verclyte. Welcome, Sofie.

**Sofie:** Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here.

**Brigitte:** Sofie, you recently defended your PhD project 'On migrating heritage'. And as part of that project, you also developed a co-creative project with women in Shatila. And you explored the role of embroidery practices in the context of conflict and also displacement. But maybe before we talk about that very specific project and Shatila, I can imagine that for some of our listeners, the link between embroidery and memorialization, or even transitional justice more generally might not be that obvious. Could you elaborate?

**Sofie:** Indeed, this link might feel like something art, but in fact, when you look across the globe, you can see that there are many instances where embroidery has been used as a way to remember, as one element in a broader struggle for justice. And we see that happening actually quite often after large-scale conflicts. We can think of conflict textile Tejidos in Guatemala, Arpillera in Chile, but also weaving projects, for example, in the Philippines. And these are all examples where we can

see that people turn to this day to day textile practices like embroidery, but also like weaving appliqué, to get some sort of memorialization going. And they often do this alongside more formal efforts of memorialization. Or they may do so because no formal memorialization is happening.

**Brigitte:** And this makes something like embroidery, or really any kind of informal attempt at memorialization, particularly relevant in the Syrian context, precisely because there is a non-transition. So here we see that informal attempts at memorialization become a sort of tool of resistance against this forcible forgetting that the regime has been trying to impose, both within Syria, but also, of course, among the Syrian diaspora in the Shatila camp. So, the embroidery we will be talking about today, as such, you could see it as one sort of dimension of a very dynamic justice struggle in which both formal and informal initiatives are taken, but also maybe a more classical kind of transitional work.

**Tine:** And that's interesting to me, Brigitte. And I want to pause for a moment on that notion that you just mentioned of non-transition in the Syrian context and the importance of informal memorization initiatives in such a context, when indeed you see that because there is a non-transition, there won't, likely, be any kind of formal memorialization. And so that in a way I think makes sense to a lot of the listeners. But Sofie, I want to pick your brain a bit further about why specifically we should be looking at something like embroidery.

**Sofie:** There are a number of reasons. To be transparent, I have a background in conflict and development studies, but also in fashion design. So I think it's definitely been important for me, during my work, to engage with people based on this shared interest and skill, but also beyond that, I would say that embroidery has a long history of narrating lived experiences, and for many practitioners, typically women, embroidery really takes up a very central role in their daily lives. And embroidery can have several functions which are often influenced by conflict and displacement. And in Shatila, where I worked, for example, the practice of embroidery is deeply rooted in the region's rich textile tradition. The skill was traditionally transmitted through careful intergenerational mentorship and by watching and learning while setting together, mothers, for example, often thought their daughters embroidery also as a form of storytelling. So, embroidery is also a way to transmit knowledge, to express lived experiences, and therefore also a way to transmit memories and to prevent forgetting. But at the same time, it can also be a way to generate an income, to establish new social networks and even in some cases, to cope with trauma.

**Tine:** And maybe I am going to propose that we also listen to something that the women that you work with themselves have to say about this, because you worked in a very co-creative way. So we wanted to make sure that we also involved the women and the recording of this episode. And this is a question that we ask Boushra about this topic that you just spoke about.



**Boushra:** I consider embroidery an activity and a way to release emotions and preserve the cultural heritage passed down from our ancestors. At the same time, embroidery allows me to connect with these experiences of loss and home while imagining a better future. It reminds me of what happened to me. Additionally, embroidery provides financial benefits, despite the challenges we face living in Shatila camp, such as power outages, cramped and very damp houses. I consider all of this as a daily resilience, hope for a better future, and a sense of community and warmth among all the women, when we get together and embroider.

**Tine:** So could you say a bit more, Sofie, about the kinds of stories that are being narrated here?

**Sofie:** Well, when we're looking at this narrative function of embroidery, it is important to realize that the women whom I work with, while they live in a context in which their rights often have been or still are being violated. So clearly, a number of these stories relate to justice, to human rights and the violation thereof. To make it more concrete, they depict, for example, houses that were bombed in Syria or family members that were killed, ongoing discrimination in Lebanon, but also very beautiful memories in Syria that are scattered because of the war and also, of course, justice aspirations.

**Tine:** And this is, quite interesting because your research looked at the relation between these embroidered narratives and memory and the same projects collaborator whom we just heard, Boushra, we also asked her about the importance of embroidery for memory making.

**Boushra:** For me, embroidery is a revival of memory. It prevents me from forgetting the experiences I went through, such as war, displacement and being a refugee. Often experiences are harsh, whether due to war, displacement, or life circumstances. We found it very difficult to express these experiences through writing or speech. So I chose embroidery as a spoken language to share with others. When these experiences reach people through embroidery, they are effectively communicated.

**Tine:** So Boushra's focus on embroidery as a way of communicating is important here, I think, because often we understand communication as this spoken or written word. But, Sofie I think in the work that you did, you also wanted to show the importance of nonverbal language and of actually telling stories about harm and justice in ways that don't rely on spoken or written word, right?

**Sofie:** Quite a lot has been written on the impossibility of capturing certain experiences in nonverbal language, but also about the power relations that can be replicated. So, when using this linear or verbal language or the effects of trauma on people's potential to narrate their stories. So in that sense, not all stories can be truthfully expressed in verbal language, especially in a context of conflict and displacement, disruptive life courses can urge people to express, while this may not

be comfortable for them to do so using a verbal language. So in these cases, which other options can we imagine to convey these experiences of injustice? And there we see that in practice, many women express themselves through embroidery practices in which they feel more comfortable.

**Tine:** Thank you Sofie. And this is actually also a topic that another one of your collaborators from Shatila, Boushra commented on.

**Boushra:** Embroidery means a lot to me. Sometimes I feel upset and I can't tell anyone, but when I embroider, embroidery feels like someone is there in front of me and I am telling them what is happening with me and I feel psychologically comfortable. Embroidery is very important and one can benefit from it and at the same time gain a lot of experience. I'm proud of myself because I know how to embroider and I love embroidery. I sometimes express my innermost feelings through embroidery that I can't explain to anyone, but embroidery fills my soul with a sense of fulfillment.

**Sofie:** So, there is the potential of embroidery in terms of addressing complex topics. And there's also a number of reasons for this. So first, there's the fact that embroidery is rooted in the women's daily practice. It is an activity in which they are in control, that they have agency over both the process and the outcome. Then there is also the visual component. This is probably the most obvious and tangible difference between embroidered stories and stories that are simply told. So the visual vocabulary of embroidery includes material, technique, color, shape, and composition. And jointly, all these elements give women options to play with the direction and content of their stories, to craft it in ways that are more truthful to their experiences. And another way in which embroidery allows for a more encompassing story about the injustices to shape up is that there's a performative process. There's a rhythm of binding stitches onto the fabric, but also the time intensive nature can enable people to reflect, to engage in a form of slow memory, if you will. And then, of course, there's the social context. So, embroidery is often practiced in the proximity of family members or other women who are practicing a certain skill. And so in that sense, it is important to highlight that there's also this constant interaction between the stories that women embroider and the stories that they tell in verbal speech while doing so.

**Tine:** Thank you for that very clear overview of all the ways in which embroidery can be a meaningful way into doing, or even thinking about memory work. And actually, on that topic, we also asked another one of your collaborators in the project, Hamida, to reflect on how this embroidery, this practice interacts with maybe not just her sense of agency, but even at a very basic level, her way of coping with ongoing injustices.

**Hamida:** Embroidery helped us a lot because it allowed us to express our experiences through storytelling while also reflecting on our inner feelings with a



broader psychological conflict, and taught us valuable lessons to preserve these experiences, because they are successful and meaningful. It significantly supported us both materially and morally. Sometimes it provided psychological insights and helped us move out of states of sadness and depression, lifting us from difficult environments.

**Brigitte:** This quote makes it so clear that the activity and the role of embroidery are very closely related to the context in which they are practiced, which of course, is Shatila. And talking about memorialization of violence may feel a bit counterintuitive to some extent. So, we see there is this very complex landscape of people, on the one hand, engaging in memory work, regarding past violence, but also using these same kind of practices to express and maybe to document ongoing forms of violence in these.

**Sofie:** And what I describe has everything to do with the history and the location of the camp. Because the Shatila refugee camp is located in Beirut and was initially established in 1949 as a temporary settlement for Palestinians who were forcibly displaced as a result of the *Nakba*. And of course, the camp has known many violent conflicts since then, which in particular the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982.

**Brigitte:** And then there is also the fact, of course, that Shatila was originally established as a Palestinian refugee camp. But in practice we see it is increasingly hosting people from different nationalities.

**Sofie:** Not just more nationalities, but also more people living on the same surface, which puts pressure on already inadequate infrastructure, which people living in slum like conditions. And especially since the war in neighboring Syria, there has been an influx of a large influx of new refugees into the camp, and many of them experienced abhorrent violence and human rights violations, mostly at the hands of the Syrian regime.

**Tine:** What I also find really interesting about the both of you already hinted at that is how these different realities, these different timelines of violence also all feed into the embroidered stories about that violence. But also how they give rise to a very complex memory landscape, if you will. And I was wondering if you could speak a bit more about that.

**Sofie:** In the context of past and ongoing violence, there are a range of memorialization efforts, often of a very different nature. So we have been focusing on embroidery. But of course, there is much more happening in terms of informal efforts and memorialization and commemoration. There are, for example, several memory initiatives related to the Nakba. There is a yearly commemoration, but there is also, for example, a memory museum. And this museum located in a narrow alley. As there are many Shatila showcases our family heirlooms of Palestinian refugees brought in the aftermath of the Nakba. So there are dowry jewelry boxes, teacups,

rusted keys, and so on. And the key, which, by the way, became a widely used symbol for the Nakba, as many Palestinians kept the key homes when they were forced into exile. So, this initiative is a way to keep these memories alive, but also to resist ongoing injustices. And besides, and also the Shatila massacre resulted in several memory initiatives. And here, too, we see this interaction between more formal and informal initiatives. So on the one hand, you will see a yearly commemoration, the Martyrs Square and memorial plaques. But then there are also more spontaneous ways of remembering, for instance, in the form of street art.

**Tine:** It's interesting to me that you are underlining these various events, these very violent episodes that are being memorialized, and also the fact that there's both formal and informal attempts at memory work. And I'm thinking that while complex as that picture already is, it is only one part of the story. Right? Because all these initiatives that you just mentioned, now, they are all taking place in the public sphere. And what is interesting to me about the kind of work that you do is that you are adding this layer also of the private sphere to, let's say, that memorialization ecosystem.

**Sofie:** Yes, because embroidery is often practiced inside the houses in small circles. For centuries, women have used embroidery as a language to transfer stories. Some of these stories then enters the public sphere. For example, in the Palestinian context, it acted as a partly nonverbal form of memorializing the Nakba, countering the erasure of Palestinian narratives, claiming their identity, heritage, and maintaining a connection to the land. So there is this attempt to resist erasure. But it's true that the logic and the dynamics of actual memory work are different. The practice is so intimately rooted with the home family, the private sphere. So yes, I do believe that the stories shape up in very different ways because of that. And it's interesting to reflect more on this relationship between the public and the private sphere in memorialization initiatives.

**Tine:** I think it really is, because this private sphere, I think, has so far been left a bit underexplored in what we typically see in memorialization in the domain of transitional justice. And actually, one of your collaborators on the project, another embroidery artist, Amina. She also commented on this topic.

**Amina:** Embroidery helps me artistically and esthetically express my experiences and emotions which I cannot convey through words. For me, preserving experiences and memories is an important part of my life and a source of inspiration for the future. Certainly, embroidery helps me achieve this by creating artistic pieces with significant emotional and personal value that reminds me of those important experiences and to generate an emotion.

**Tine:** Taking these comments maybe one step further, Sofie, I also wanted to invite you to think with us about how you feel embroidery, and maybe even artistic



practices, more generally could offer new insights to memory studies, or to the subdiscipline of memorialization in the field of transitional justice, even.

**Sofie:** There are a number of interesting entry points into that question, I think one way to start answering it, is that in many of the pieces that the women created as part of this project, there is this coexistence of experiences of harm which are just justice aspirations. And then embroidery of a house, for example, can combine elements of a destroyed home in Syria with elements of an aspired home to live in the future. So, stories of harm can almost literally be overlaid with stories of how people, for example, understand redress. So, the embroidery practice allows for the simultaneity of ideas. Sometimes even on the same spot for their very intimate connection to one another. So that in itself is an interesting notion for memory studies and memorialization initiatives. I think the other thing I am thinking of is that we really try to start from a practice that was already there. And so we weren't imposing something that was alien to the context and nor where we instrumentalized what was already there. So we worked alongside each other in a context of slow making. And for me to understand these stories, it was important to learn the language of embroidery, as women used to. So through that process of slow making, of co-creation and embroidery provided me with a sense of how memories are constructed and also transmitted, which I think is very different from her instrumental mobilization of artistic practices that we sometimes see in transitional justice or in memory work today.

**Brigitte:** This is all quite relatable to the kind of work I'm doing, because we also see that Syrian writers and other artists are crucial in exposing state violence and other forms of violence, because they really want to make sure that forcible forgetting is not a given, that they can continue to resist it. And we also see that artistic endeavors to create the memory of these experiences of harm are evident in various disciplines in literature, film, and theater that address the reality of imprisonment, torture, and enforced disappearance. And I wanted maybe to zoom in on one of these practices, which is MUTE, a visual installation by Khaled Barakeh. And he installed this art piece outside of the Koblenz court, where we had the famous al-Khatib trial. And through this artwork, also containing mannequins showcasing the Syrian protesters that were killed or violently attacked by the regime, he wanted to demonstrate that of course, the revolution was killed by the regime and protesters have been violently attacked, but nevertheless they continue to protest. They continue to somehow resist these ongoing practices of harm, and thus he also, like other artists, holds on to these memories of past and ongoing violence. So in that sense, it is interesting because they create spaces for memorialization in the diaspora, because there are no spaces of memorialization within Syria itself. And in order to continue that resistance, they have to do this in very creative ways. So, the absence of spaces and the impossibility to memorialize inside Syria, gives rise to a flurry of very interesting practices where both Syrian artists and justice activists work together.

**Tine:** Thank you Brigitte, for also bringing in those examples of, indeed of what, in a very different kind of Syrian diaspora, these artistic practices can contribute to practices of memorialization from the ground up, let's say. And I think we're on that note slowly approaching the end of this episode, which, of course, we always wrap up by asking people what kind of evolutions or maybe practices you are observing that make you particularly hopeful in the work that you are doing.

**Sofie:** I think despite the challenging circumstances in Lebanon, and particularly for refugees, the embroiderers persist and hold on to hope. And this is visual in the works that were produced within the scope of this research. And I don't know if you want to call that agency or resilience or just coping with the face of ongoing injustices, but this is what embroidery is doing in this context. And the beauty of these practices is truly inspiring as an artist and a researcher, and serves as a motivation for me to also continue our creative collaborations.

**Brigitte:** And what I find so striking about your project and the collaboration with women, and more broadly, the kind of practices that I've been looking into is that they underline the realized value of artistic and creative practices. These are not just a nice to have, in which people find comfort and which are detached from reality, besides feeding the mobilization and resistance against injustices, these kind of practices also generate informal archives. And these are so important because on the one hand, they preserve unarchived and previously unrecorded memories, but on the other hand, they also allow for future documentation, future memorialization efforts. And of course, this subject of the importance of the informal archives is something that you will be looking into in the future, and we are very eager to hear more about it, because this is really where so much of the artistic and justice work is gaining traction.

**Tine:** And then I just want to wrap up by thanking all the speakers on this episode. We will be back next month with a third episode on memory and memorization. But for now, I already want to invite our listeners to go to [Justicevisions.org](http://Justicevisions.org), where you can find the show notes of this episode. And there you will also find all the links to the beautiful work of the project that Sofie has been carrying out, but also of the other textile projects that we referenced in this episode.