

The Visual Essay



The Needle and the Map:

(Re)thinking Quito through Embroidery with Indigenous Youth

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Abstract

Our visual essay explores how young Kichwa people who migrated from rural territories to Quito, and whose lives are structured by Ecuador's racialized social hierarchies, imagine the city's future. We developed a methodology grounded in critical, feminist, and decolonial geographies. Through embroidery, a culturally significant practice in Indigenous Andean communities, we created with students from the Intercultural Bilingual Educational Unit 'Jatari Unancha' a collective countermap to explore their current emotional relationships to the city and their visions for its future. The process revealed that participants' aspirations for a greener, more playful, and inclusive Quito are shaped by actual experiences of insecurity and exclusion while drawing on memories of their territories of origin. We discuss the strengths and replicability of our methodology and further examine how the knowledge generated through such engaged participatory processes can be mobilized to influence policymaking and urban planning toward more just urban transformations.

“Embroidery is also central to Jatari’s ‘Diseño de Modas’ [translation: ‘Clothing Design’] program, showing the importance to preserve it as a core element of students’ Andean culture.”



Introduction

This essay foregrounds young Kichwa people's visual representations of how they perceive and desire the future of Quito, Ecuador's capital (Object 1). The country is constitutionally recognized as an intercultural and plurinational state, comprising fourteen Indigenous nationalities of which the Kichwa are the largest, with nearly 800,000 people (IWGIA 2026). Inhabiting both Andean and Amazonian territories, Kichwa communities sustain diverse territorial, linguistic, and cultural practices while actively resisting ongoing forms of colonial and extractive violence (Pomboza-Tamaquiza et al. 2014; Teixeira 2020). Colonial legacies nevertheless persist in Ecuador, perpetuating ethno-cultural discriminations that associate Indigenous peoples with rural 'backwardness' in contrast to urban 'White progress' (Hollenstein 2009; Rahier 1998).

Quito's metropolitan area, home to over 2.8 million inhabitants, has been shaped by rapid and largely uncontrolled growth, alongside the internal migration of Indigenous populations seeking improved living conditions (Ríos-Mantilla 2022; Anangonó Espinosa 2022). Upon arrival, many encounter the city's racialized topography, which relegates them to the peripheries with fewer resources and opportunities, thereby deepening their exclusion (Hinojosa Barahona 2018; Santillán Cornejo 2019).



Object 1. Melyss situates her embroideries on a printed textile map of Quito, indicating what and where urban transformations are urgent by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 3 (previous page). Some of the project's participants, students at the 'Jatari Unancha' Intercultural Bilingual Educational Unit by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Within this context, the Intercultural Bilingual Educational Unit 'Jatari Unancha' in Quito, hereafter 'Jatari', part of the Indigenous Schools System of Cotopaxi which supports rural Indigenous communities development, constitutes a place of technical and culturally appropriated education for young Kichwa people who migrated to the city to work in its informal sectors (Rodríguez Cruz 2018; Rodríguez Brochado 2020; Sánchez-Parga 2002). The school is located in 'La Lucha de los Pobres' [translation: '*The Fight of the Poor*'], a southeastern neighborhood (Object 2) marked by limited infrastructure and weak urban connectivity (Ríos-Mantilla 2022). The students with whom we collaborated are mostly around 15 years old and live in Quito's southern peripheries (Object 3).



Object 2 (above). View looking south over Quito from the 'La Lucha de los Pobres' neighborhood [translation: '*The fight of the Poor*'], 2026. Photography by Vanesa Guerrero.

The project is grounded in critical, feminist, and decolonial geographies (e.g. Castree 2000; Zaragocin 2020; Longhurst 2002; Radcliffe 2017). These approaches share commitments to socio-spatial justice through the production of counter-narratives of territory grounded in lived and intimate experiences, while moving beyond binaries such as urban/rural (e.g. Longhurst 2002; Hughes 2023). Moreover, they draw on critical and transformative pedagogical methodologies (e.g. Freire 2005; hooks 1994; 2024), which challenge conventional modes of learning and knowledge production by fostering dialogical spaces for reflecting on power relations through collective, creative, and embodied playful practices (e.g. Lange 2023; Heras & Tàbara 2014).

We begin by outlining our methodology of collective embroidery-based counter-mapping, followed by its main findings. We then reflect on its strengths, offer recommendations for replication, and discuss its remaining challenges. Pictures taken by the facilitation team illustrate this essay. All participants' names have been changed.

1. Collective Embroidery-based Counter-mapping: Elaborating a Methodology

a. Countermapping

Geography is historically entangled with coloniality, and its key tools, maps, have facilitated European colonial spatial and epistemic appropriations. Often framed as objective and produced by a restricted range of 'experts', mainly military and academic (Montoya Arango 2007; Risler & Ares 2013), maps usually classify territories, peoples and resources according to dominant worldviews (Gandolfo 2025; Oslender 2021).

We instead draw on an understanding of territory as dynamic and socially constructed (Lefebvre 1968) and rely on *collective* counter-mapping methods used in critical geography. They prioritize process over the final visual output: what matters is the collective creation of situated knowledge and meaningful exchanges between participants (e.g. Kollektiv Orangatango+ 2018; Oslender 2021). We especially mobilized social cartography, rooted in militant action research that, since the 1990s in Latin America, supports struggles for the right to the city and land rights while defying inequalities in mapping participation by involving marginalized groups (Sosa & Diez-Tetamanti 2024). Besides, social cartography seeks to render visible the social, cultural, and affective dimensions of territory(ies), often omitted by conventional maps (Montoya Arango 2007; Diez-Tetamanti 2018). Thus, we aimed that 'Jatari' students counter-mapped emotionally their daily urban activities.



Object 4. Embroidered clothing worn by a representative of the 'Puruhá' Indigenous population in Ecuador by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). June 2025. Property of Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio).

b. Embroidery Technique

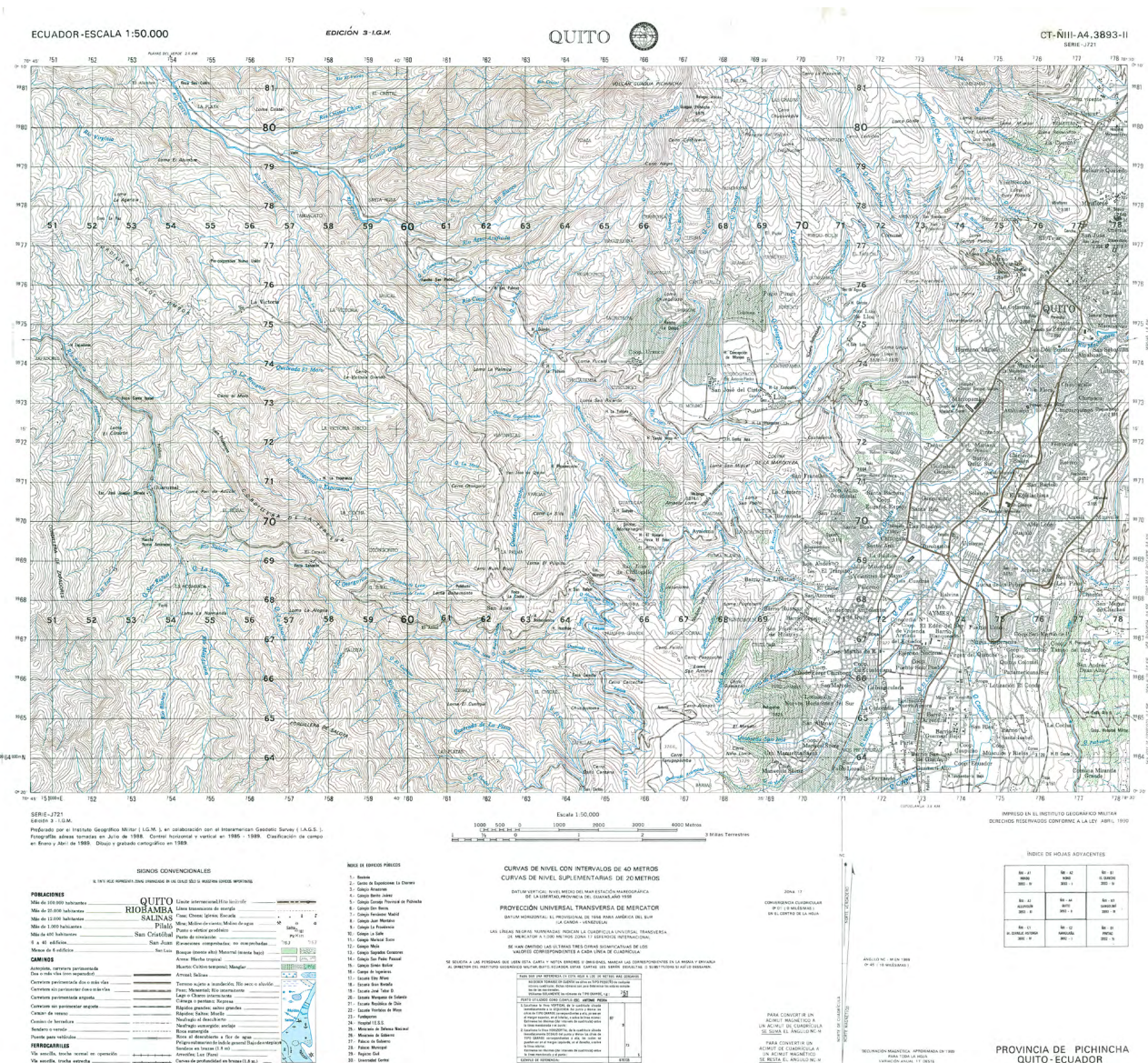
Embroidery, stitching threads into textile surfaces to create forms and textures (Tapia de la Fuente 2022; Blanca 2014), is grounded in touch and in the relationality between body(ies) and materials (Pérez-Bustos & Márquez-Gutiérrez 2015). It long exists across Global North and South countries as a domestic, feminized practice (Sánchez Ángeles & Armenta Hurtarte 2025). Often reduced to a pastime or decorative craft (Gouveia Fernandes & Pouchain Ramos 2019), it has been largely marginalized within dominant narratives of cultural and aesthetic production (Springgay et al. 2011).

In Latin America, embroidery predated colonization and progressively became a source of livelihood for Indigenous rural communities (Tenesaca Bravo 2012). Today, in Ecuador, it remains closely tied to Indigenous women, as among 'Saraguro', 'Otavalo', and 'Puruhá' communities (e.g. Mena et al., forthcoming; Núñez Pavón 2021; Jiménez Sagnay 2025; Object 4). Embroidery is also central to Jatari's 'Diseño de Modas' [translation: *Clothing Design*] program, showing the importance to preserve it as a core element of students' Andean culture. Chilean women producing '*arpilleras*', textiles narratives, during Pinochet's dictatorship underpinned the re-signification of embroidery as a political practice. The apparition of collectives such as 'Bordar la ternura' [translation: *Embroidering tenderness*] in Quito, where women stitch in public to denounce injustices and document violences, sustain collective embroidery as a form of *feminist textile activism* (e.g. Sánchez-Aldana et al. 2019; Pacheco Ballén 2018). It echoes '*knitivism*' (e.g. Springgay 2010), similar women resistances performed in English-speaking countries. Across contexts, embroidery is thus increasingly reclaimed as a practice of women's self-organized space-making that fosters collective care and healing via the visual translation of personal, but common, experiences (Pacheco Ballén 2018; Springgay et al. 2011).

We sought to explore, through the needle, how "*emotions intertwine with ways of inhabiting the city*" (Pérez & Gregorio Gil 2020, 15). Embroidery was chosen for its cultural significance in Ecuador and to expand situated, visual, and participatory approaches that embrace transdisciplinarity (e.g. Seppälä et al. 2021; Knowles & Cole 2007), a key dimension of critical geographies. Besides, when used pedagogically, embroidery requires neither expensive nor numerous materials and inherently involves a slow pace, anchoring the method to a 'degrowth' agenda (e.g. Trantas 2021).

c. What Did We Do?

In February 2026, our team, consisting of an art educator, an activist, a photographer, a researcher and the director the 'Iatari' in Quito, organized a series of workshops with one of the classes. We conducted three workshops to interrogate students' daily itineraries, uses, emotions, and imagined futures of the city. In the first session, participants identified their homes on individual printed paper maps. We then worked collectively on a large textile map of the urban area (Object 5) where students cut into the fabric to mark perceived fractures between spaces where they felt belonging or not (Object 6).





Object 6. Mishell makes a cut across Avenida Occidental, which crosses the city from north to south, as a representation of the urban socio-spatial fractures in Quito by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

The second session focused on questions such as “How do I feel when I leave my neighborhood?” and “Why do we inhabit certain areas?”, stitching answers and located them onto the textile map. The final workshop centered on envisioning the future, as students embroidered what they wished to see improve, disappear, or emerge in thirty years. Music accompanied the sessions. Results were analyzed through Rose’ visual framework (2016) and qualitative narrative analysis of transcribed workshops, based on grounded theory (e.g. Charmaz 2006; Konecki 2011)

2. A Fragmented and Insecure Urban Territory, Dreamt to Be Safer, Biodiverse and Playful

a. What Counter-mapping of the Present City Tells

After slitting the map along the north–south and urban–rural divides, students embroidered on red fabric shapes of the emotions they experience in the city (Object 7).



Object 7. David and Wilmer embroider the emotions that shape their experiences of living in Quito by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Fear emerged as the predominant personal and collective emotion, and participants shared stories illustrating how rising crimes and its resulting insecurity (e.g. Rocchio et al. 2024) shape and constrain their movements, particularly in southern areas of the city. Efrain explained, *"The gang Los Lobos controls two blocks from my neighborhood, so you can't go out after 6 p.m."* Nataly added, *"I don't go beyond Chillogallo because I'm afraid."* Inhabiting Quito is thus synonym of restricted mobility and perceived dangers.

At the same time, 'Jatari' students emphasized their connections to rural Indigenous territories, where they were born and where their relatives mostly still live. Their narratives evoked sensory impressions of these places, as Blanca described: *"In the countryside you breathe clean air; you can see the stars. My body feels different there."* These accounts conveyed a sense of nostalgia for their rural territories and suggest that bodies' sensations vary across different spatial environments.

Given the importance of emotional bonds with the countryside, we sought to symbolically (re)introduce it onto the map through a red thread linking students embodied rural memories to urban places where they experience similar sensations, as the public park 'La Carolina'. This thread marked the rural-urban continuum (e.g. Berardo 2019) and rendered visible Indigenous students' identities made of multiple worlds (Objects 8, 9 & 10).



Object 10. The map shows how emotions (red circle) and memories of the countryside (red thread) intertwine in shaping the urban living experiences of the 'Jatari' students by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 8 (next page). The red thread represents the students' connections between their rural territories of origin and the city by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

“Affective transformations withing the daily urban life was at the core of their imagined futures, as Evelyn declared: “I drew a heart so happiness can finally grow in Quito.”





b. Insights From Embroidering the Urban Future

For the final workshop, we invited students to project themselves into what it might feel like to live in Quito in thirty years. The map gradually filled with clouds, triangles, and squares, representing what they wish to see emerge, hope would improve, and want to disappear by 2056 (Objects 11, 12 & 13).



Object 11. Using a visual system of clouds, triangles, and squares to structure a reflection on the city's future, students embroidered their hopes by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 9 (previous page). By stitching the red thread, Angela shows where the sensations she experiences in her rural place of origin might also be felt into the urban territory by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

“Yet a challenge remains: how can these ideas, voiced here by marginalized Indigenous youth, be heard within existing racial power structures in Ecuador?”

Object 12 (next page): *Fernanda and Blanca*
embroider on cloud figures their hopes for Quito in
2056 by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026.
Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.







Object 13 (above). Square, triangle, and cloud figures represent and situate spatially what each student considers as necessary urban transformations for the future by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 14 (previous page). Franklin talks about his desire for guns not to exist in Quito in the future by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

The triangles embroidered made it clear: by 2056, Quito has “more trees” (Object 15), and “more birds, because I only see pigeons” and it is possible “to see more stars”, expressing students’ strong environmental affectivity (e.g. Giraldo & Toro 2020). They positioned themselves as guardians of nature, proposing actions as reforestation and hoping for the disappearance of “factories that produce pollution.” Affective transformations within the daily urban life was at the core of their imagined futures, as Evelyn declared: “I drew a heart so happiness can finally grow in Quito” (Object 16).





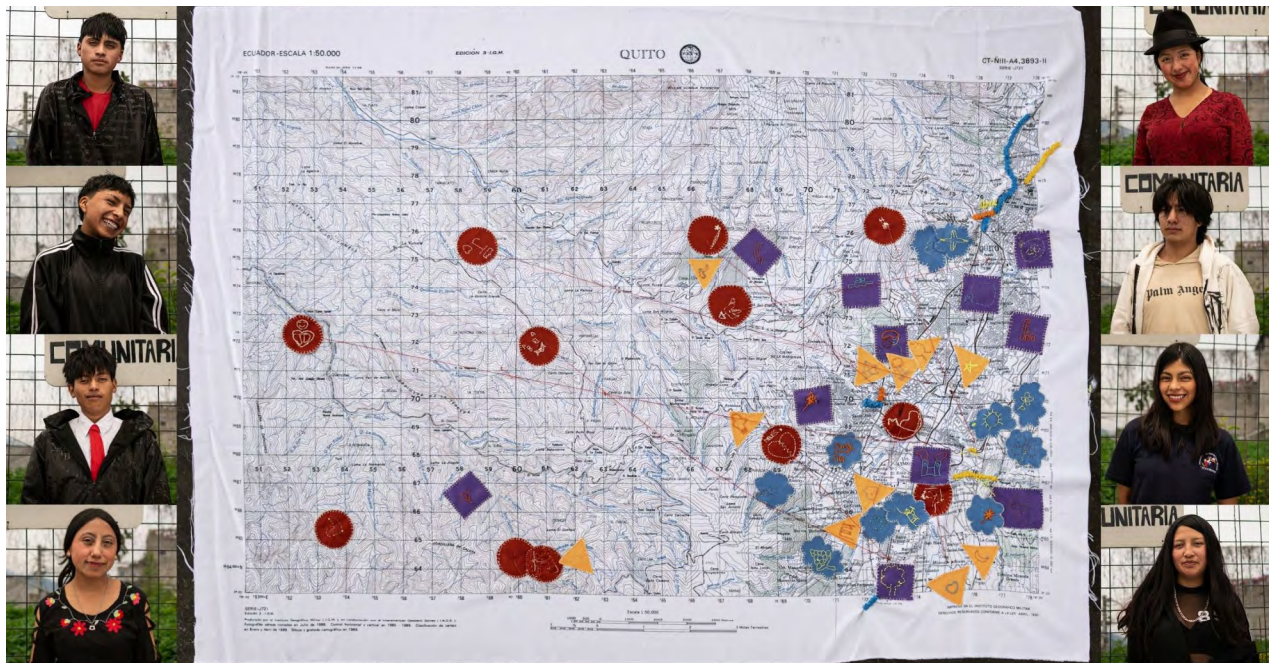
Object 15 (previous page, above). Carolina, from the facilitation team, places a triangle in the sector of the 'mercado mayorista' [translation: 'wholesale market'], where a student expressed his wish to see more trees by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 16 (previous page, below). Melyss embroidered a heart within the triangle to express her longing for a more joyful experience of the city in thirty years by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 17 (above). Jairo explains wishing that in thirty years Quito has a motocross track because it is his favorite sport by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Students also imagined accessing concrete recreational spaces, being able to go to “a motocross track” or “a boxing gym” (Object 17), thereby asserting their right to enjoy what the city offers. Such desires echo ongoing socio-spatial segregation that hinders their access to such spaces. Participants also envisioned cultural spaces to practice their traditional music and dance without discrimination.

The final counter-map (Object 18) revealed thus students’ multidirectional aspirations: it projects nostalgic rural sensations onto imagined urban futures while seeking access to recreational spaces, ultimately expressing a desire to belong fully within Quito’s urban life.



Object 18. *The final embroidered collective map with the portraits of most of the 'Jatari' participants by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.*

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3. Reflections on the Collective Embroidery-based Counter-mapping Methodology

a. Strengths of the Process

Students expressed that time seemed to dissolve while stitching, suggesting deep focus and enjoyment during the activity (Objects 19 & 20). Many even asked to repeat the sessions. Since experiencing joy is political (Macleod & De Marinis 2018), and as 'Jatari' students have little time for leisure because they work during the week and attend classes on weekends, this is a key effect of our methodology. This latter also offers valuable practice in speaking publicly, as participants were asked to articulate their stitched symbols to their peers.



Object 19. Students focus on the embroidery while listening to music, favorizing introspection by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.



Object 20. David, Jairo and Wilmer next to the fabric map spread out on the table, attentive and laughing by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

We consider that our counter-mapping process created *relational aesthetics* (e.g. Bourriaud 2006), crafting a temporary space of engagement between Indigenous Kichwa culture, contemporary art, and research (Objects 21 & 22). By returning three times to the school to reflect together on the ways we experience the city, we gradually built trust and a sense of community between students and us, non-Indigenous facilitators. This is a powerful repercussion, as community-making is not given (Springgay 2010), especially within a racialized social system such as that of Ecuador. While wellbeing within a group largely depends on human encounters, collective embroidery proved to be a powerful means of representing subjective realities and a transformative pedagogical method that facilitates horizontal exchanges, affective connections, and collective learning (e.g. Pérez-Bustos 2019; Sánchez Ángeles & Armenta Hurtarte 2025; Vaughan 2005). Here, embracing embroidery had positive effects on the youth's self-representations, as their traditional Kichwa visual language was used.



“While wellbeing within a group largely depends on human encounters, collective embroidery proved to be a powerful means of representing subjective realities and a transformative pedagogical method...”

Object 21. *Carolina from the facilitation team supports participants with cutting the thread to embroider* by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 22. *‘Jatari’ students and facilitation team after completing the first stages of the collective embroidery-based countermapping process* by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

b. Recommendations for Replication

Our embroidery-based counter-mapping process is therefore transformative and, while particularly culturally suited to the 'Jatari' students, worth adapting to other socio-cultural contexts and groups.

When planning to rely on embroidery to create narratives, we recommend assessing participants' familiarity with the practice beforehand and to be prepared to help and share basic stitches (Object 23), even though no advanced skills are required. In our case, all participants, including boys, were already skilled, having learned from their Indigenous community members. No gender barriers emerged, though this may vary and could become a noteworthy point of collective reflection.



Object 21. Our embroidery-based counter-mapping process generated affective bounding between the participants and the facilitation team by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 24. In the foreground, Ivan is trying to locate on a printed paper map the parish where he lives and to represent his daily trajectories in the city by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Object 25. Flor locates on the map where she lives and moves within the city by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.





Object 26. Flor and Franklin are thinking together on where to locate their wishes for the future on the map by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

Besides, we recommend repeating that the process is more important than the final creation (Oslender 2021). ‘Jatari’ students felt initially intimidated by the project and concerned about making it “look good”, which disappeared over time. Finally, trusting participants’ creativity is crucial, and there is no need to worry about a lack of ideas. Our participants, for example, translated their experiences of insecurity into symbols of weapons without prompts. We believe that a relaxed atmosphere supports the emergence of such creative agency; playing music and allowing breaks facilitated, in our case, the flow of visual and verbal narratives. Such processes would be further enhanced by ensuring comfortable material conditions, like sufficient space to sit and move and adequate lighting.

c. Remaining Challenges

Analyzing the results of the counter-mapping process is complex, as it draws on both visual materials and transcribed workshop testimonies, requiring navigation across different forms of data. The main difficulty, however, lies for us in the dissemination of its conclusions.

At 'Jatari', participants proposed urban transformations that could meaningfully improve their living conditions in Quito. For instance, expanded access to sports and cultural spaces is recognized as fostering socialization, enhancing feelings of safety, and thus helping prevent violence (Jáuregui 2021). Yet a challenge remains: how can these ideas, voiced here by marginalized Indigenous youth, be heard within existing racial power structures in Ecuador? This raises broader questions about the afterlife of counter-maps: what can be done with their political meanings? How can they avoid remaining archives and instead contribute to transforming spatial dynamics into tangible ways?



Object 27. Estefania is stitching in front of a text in Kichwa, prompting us to also reflect on the language in which the results should be disseminated, and thus, to whom by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.

For us, these questions remain open. We consider it crucial to share young people's perceptions of the city and to communicate our collective counter-mapping methodology, yet we are still exploring how to do so. Translating the results into Kichwa (Object 27) or exhibiting the map at the Center of Contemporary Art may not be appropriate, given that Kichwa is primarily an oral language and the museum's perceived inaccessibility, although carefully curated public exhibitions could still make these stories visible. For our process insights to trigger concrete changes, they likely need to reach decision-makers, which may require translating them into formats that are understandable for policymakers, such as policy briefs.



Object 28. *Beyond the counter-map, our process suggests that building friendship and trust between people from different socio-cultural backgrounds can be facilitated by collective embroidery. Here you can see the faces of (almost) all the participants by Etsa (Carol Cortez Osorio). February 2026. Property of Quito Center of Contemporary Art.*

“How can they
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Conclusion

In the context of Quito, and with Kichwa youth, embroidery-based counter-mapping proved to be a transformative pedagogical methodology, foremost because it resisted their confinement to sidewalks, corners, and margins imposed by a racialized social system.

Participants could articulate both their present realities and their imaginaries of what Quito could become in thirty years. Embroidery functioned as a powerful means of expression, enabling the creation of personal graphic representations alongside verbal narratives, ultimately forming a patchwork of collective sensitive experiences of the city. Students' reflections revealed strong links between present conditions and desired futures, marked by a wish to eliminate insecurity and to create and enjoy a greener, more recreational city.

Furthermore, as a method, embroidery enhanced students' concentration and reflection while creating playful moments that enacted Kichwa youth's right to joy. The workshop sessions fostered a sense of community between the participants and us as facilitators, bridging differences in age, socio-cultural, and racial backgrounds (Object 28).

Despite ongoing challenges in translating our results into tangible urban transformations, stitching our counter-map with the 'Jatari' students was political: through thread, needle, and fabric, these youth could (re)imagine imposed fractures of the city they live in and sustain hopes for reshaping it.

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“Embroidery functioned as a powerful means of expression, enabling the creation of personal graphic representations alongside verbal narratives, ultimately forming a patchwork of collective sensitive experiences of the city.”