



The Testimonies of ICE Resistance Stories Quilt - Contextual Underpinning

Note: This quilt follows an open, improvisational structure, where each panel stands as its own testimony and the whole becomes a shared record of lived experience.

Overview

The **Testimonies of ICE Resistance** Quilt documents the lived impact of *Operation Metro Surge*, a government policing initiative that has reshaped daily life across Minnesota, and beyond. This project invites individuals, families, and communities to create quilt panels that speak to their experiences, perspectives, and stories.

Drawing on the legacy of the **AIDS Memorial Quilt** and other traditions of **textile-based testimony**, this quilt uses fabric as a democratic medium — accessible, personal, and deeply symbolic — to hold what official narratives often erase. Textile historians have long argued that fabric operates as more than decoration. **Rozsika Parker** identifies embroidery and quilt work as historically coded feminine practices that nevertheless carried dissent, memory, and political meaning. More recently, **Julia Bryan-Wilson** and **Kirsty Robertson** position textile activism within an expanded field of contemporary art, where labor, collectivity, and materiality resist systems that abstract or erase lived experience.

This project situates itself within that expanded field. It positions the quilt not as ornament, but as civic document and collective act of witness.

Concept & Symbolism

The quilt's design reflects both documented and unseen acts of care across Minnesota. Local businesses, churches, and individuals have offered aid to families in hiding and built quiet support networks that operate out of sight. This project extends that work into a public, visible form; it is stitched from grief, defiance, and hope — continuing a long tradition of textile-based testimony.

Unlike official archives, which are structured by institutional priorities, quilts accumulate memory relationally. They gather fragments, names, and traces into forms shaped by those directly affected. Archives are never neutral repositories; **they shape what can be remembered and what can be forgotten**. Activist quilts intervene in this structure by asserting that lived testimony belongs to the public record. In this sense, the project aligns with **Ann Cvetkovich's notion of 'archives of feeling'**, in which cultural production preserves affective histories excluded from official documentation.

Roots of Quilted Resistance

Throughout history, quilts have been functional objects—but also powerful **vessels for political expression, collective mourning, and community resistance**. Improvisational quilts have carried

memory across generations. They have preserved family histories, marked migration and loss, and recorded the everyday lives of people whose stories rarely appear in official archives.

When official channels have failed to record the experiences of marginalized people, textile work has stepped in to fill the archival void. **Abolitionist signature quilts** sold at anti-slavery fairs from the 1830s through the 1850s raised funds for **publications, speakers, and direct aid** to freedom seekers. Suffrage quilts such as the **1893 California Women's Quilt** rallied support through embroidered state symbols.

In African American traditions, including the **Gee's Bend Quilting Collective**, improvisational quilting became a form of **quiet defiance against erasure**. Building on this 19th-century legacy, quilting became a powerful medium for public testimony in the twentieth century.

Building on this 19th-century legacy, quilting became a powerful medium for public testimony in the twentieth century. The **AIDS Memorial Quilt**, launched in 1987 by Cleve Jones, transformed private grief into a monumental collective act of remembrance. Each 3x6-foot panel honored a life lost, but together, the more than 50,000 sections commemorating over 110,000 people demanded national attention for a crisis that had been ignored, covering the National Mall and influencing HIV policy.

In recent years, communities have turned to quilting to document the human impact of war, migration, environmental injustice, and public health emergencies. COVID-era memorial quilts such as the **Hope Quilt**, anti-violence projects like the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (**MMIW**) **Sisters in Spirit Traveling Quilt**, anti-war initiatives like **Quilts for Ukraine**, and **refugee story quilts** all continue this lineage, using fabric to hold stories that might otherwise be silenced or dispersed.

Across these histories, quilting has offered:

- **A decentralized structure**, allowing many hands to contribute without gatekeeping.
- **An accessible medium**, open to people of all ages, skill levels, and backgrounds.
- **A tactile archive**, preserving memory in a form that resists erasure.
- **A public platform**, transforming private experience into collective witness through large-scale displays and museum exhibitions.

Activist quilts endure because they bridge the personal and the political.

They make visible the lives and losses that institutions overlook, and they insist that care, especially in times of crisis, is itself a form of resistance.

Fabric as Representation

The quilt's design reflects both documented and unseen acts of care across Minnesota. Local businesses, churches, and individuals have offered aid to families in hiding and built quiet support networks that operate out of sight. This project extends that work into a public, visible form; it is stitched from grief, defiance, and hope.

Participants from across Minnesota, and beyond, are invited to take part. This includes Minnesotans living far from home, watching from 4,000 miles away and wanting to help even when distance makes that feel impossible, as well as people with no direct connection to Minnesota who choose to stand in solidarity. Whether directly affected or standing alongside, each contribution becomes part of a collective record of resistance.

The **Testimonies of ICE Resistance** Quilt continues this lineage. It gathers individual accounts of life under *Operation Metro Surge* and binds them into a shared, public record. Like the activist quilts before it, this project asserts that lived experience matters, that community testimony has power, and that collective making can hold truths too heavy for any one person to carry alone.

Structure

This quilt follows an open, improvisational structure within a unified block format. Each panel stands as its own testimony; together, they form a collective record of lived experience.

Improvisation here is not merely aesthetic. It resists rigid hierarchy and centralized authority. Each block retains autonomy while contributing to a shared framework, mirroring decentralized movements that rely on distributed participation rather than singular control. The structure therefore performs the politics it represents. In this respect, the project resonates with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's conception of civic witnessing, in which spectatorship becomes an ethical relation rather than passive observation.

Improvisational quilting has long served as a method of storytelling, care, and resistance. They are a way for communities to document what they have endured and what they refuse to forget. This project extends that lineage into the present moment, offering a public, visible form built from many hands.

Global Relevance

Whilst rooted in the specific context of *Operation Metro Surge*, the themes of this quilt extend far beyond Minnesota. Policing, surveillance, and community resilience are global concerns, shaped by shifts in political climate that have seen the rise of far-right populist movements in many countries. These movements often normalize state overreach, erode civil liberties, and frame targeted communities as threats — patterns documented by international research bodies such as the **V-Dem Institute**. Even where democratic structures remain formally intact, gradual erosion can weaken accountability and make expanded state power easier to justify, particularly when people assume it **'can't happen here.'**

Across the United States, similar operations have unfolded under names that trivialize or dehumanize the communities they target — **"Operation Catch of the Day"** in Maine, **"Operation Midway Blitz"** in Illinois, and **"Operation Swamp Sweep"** in Louisiana.

These naming conventions are not incidental. They frame human beings as prey, spectacle, or contamination, softening public resistance and making coercive power easier to defend. Minnesota

is not an isolated front, but one node within a national enforcement apparatus that uses branding and spectacle to normalize its reach.

Human Impact & Urgency

Operation Metro Surge has unfolded within a climate of intensified policing, fear, and mistrust. Communities have experienced detentions, disappearances, and, in some cases, **serious harm or death at the hands of federal agents**. These are not abstract events; they reshape daily life, influence how people move through their neighborhoods, and deepen the anxiety families carry for one another.

State power often operates through abstraction: statistics, case numbers, enforcement metrics. Achille Mbembe's **analysis of necropolitics** describes how sovereignty manifests through the administrative regulation of life and death. Testimony disrupts that abstraction by restoring narrative, specificity, and embodiment. Through fabric, the **Patchwork of Resistance** projects insist that policy is not an abstract mechanism, but something that is lived in bodies and in homes.

By creating space for testimony through fabric, the quilt acknowledges these lived realities and honors those whose lives have been disrupted or lost. Quilting becomes a collective act of remembrance and resistance: **a refusal to look away**.

Community Response

Across Minnesota, even small acts of gathering have taken on new weight. In recent months, federal immigration enforcement activities, including *Operation Metro Surge*, and related encounters between federal agents and local residents, have **intensified fear, mistrust, and anxiety in daily life**. Minneapolis and its surrounding communities have seen widespread protests and public outcry after incidents in which federal agents shot and killed local residents, triggering deep grief, fear for public safety, and ongoing debate about accountability and transparency.

Some residents have met quietly, sometimes with someone keeping watch, simply to feel safe whilst discussing concerns about state power and community well-being. These are ordinary people — teachers, parents, neighbors — adapting to an atmosphere where speaking openly can feel risky.

The **Testimonies of ICE Resistance** quilt offers a creative, collective space for expression in a moment when public space can feel increasingly dangerous or surveilled. Through fabric, voices that are often marginalized can be brought together in a shared act of remembrance, resilience, and reflection.

Given these pressures on public expression, the form of the quilt carries particular significance: it becomes a portable, intimate forum for bearing witness, honoring lives affected, and building community understanding. Together, this work acknowledges that what happens in one place ripples far beyond its immediate setting, calling on us all to pay attention and respond with care.

Why a Quilt?

Quilts allow for decentralized contribution, welcoming participants of all skill levels, and preserve individuality within a shared framework. They transform personal experience into collective memory, giving shape to feelings that might otherwise remain private. Improvisational quilting, in particular, makes room for honesty, complexity, and the full range of human response — grief, anger, hope, solidarity, and everything in between.

Through quilting, each person's story becomes part of a larger tapestry, creating a visible record of community experience and resilience.

Project Overview

- **The Testimonies of ICE Resistance Quilt** is a collaborative quilt composed of individual 10" × 10" panels (25.4 × 25.4 cm).
- Each panel represents a personal response to *Operation Metro Surge* and its impact on individuals, families, and communities.
- Contributors are invited to create one or more quilt blocks following the specifications below.
- Approved blocks will be assembled into one or more quilts for future public exhibition.

References

- Anon., 2016. *Quilts for the 21st Century: Activism in the Expanded Field of Quilting*. [Online]
Available at: <https://kirstymairirobertson.com/2016/05/06/quilts-for-the-21st-century-activism-in-the-expanded-field-of-quilting/>
[Accessed 07 Feb 2026].
- Anon., 2025. *Democracy Report 2025 - 25 Years of Autocratization - Democracy Trumped?*. [Online]
Available at: https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf
[Accessed 08 Feb 2026].
- Anon., 2025. *ICE Data Reveals What Happened to 1,600 People Arrested During Chicago's Blitz*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2025/12/18/ice-chicago-immigration-blitz-data>
[Accessed 17 01 2026].
- Anon., n.d. *A History of Gee's Bend*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.geesbend.org/history-of-gees-bend>
[Accessed 05 Feb 2026].
- Anon., n.d. *Corona Quilt*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.artrefuge.org.uk/coronaquilt-gallery>
[Accessed 07 Feb 2026].
- Anon., n.d. *Fabric of Life: The enduring legacy of the AIDS Memorial Quilt*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/stories/fabric-of-life>
[Accessed 07 Feb 2026].
- Anon., n.d. *The History of the Quilt*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>
[Accessed 06 Feb 2026].
- Associated Press, 2026. *Woman killed by ICE agent in Minneapolis was a mother of 3, poet and new to the city*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2026/01/08/renee-good-woman-killed-by-ice-agent-in-minneapolis-was->

[a-mother-poet-and-new-to-the-city](#)

[Accessed 8 Jan 2026].

Azoulay, A., 2008. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. [Accessed at <https://jpgenrgb.blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ariella-azoulay-the-civil-contract-of-photography.pdf>] ed. New York: Zone Books.

Barajas, J., 2026. *Shooting deaths climb in Trump's mass deportation effort*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/a-look-at-shootings-by-federal-immigration-officers> [Accessed 29 Jan 2026].

Bryan-Wilson, J., 2017. *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. Accessed at [<https://archive.org/details/fray-art-and-textile-politics>] ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cvetkovich, A., 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. [Accessed at Archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/an-archive-of-feelings-trauma-sexuality-and-lesbian-public-cultures>] ed. Durham: Duke University Press.

Evangelista, M., 2025. It Can Happen Here. *Daedalus*, 154(4), pp. 312-327.

Ferrero, P., 1987. *Hearts and hands: the influence of women & quilts on American society*. San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press [Accessed at Archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/heartshandsin00ferr>].

Foucault, M. & Smith (translation), A. M., 1972 (english translation). *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Griffith, J., 2026. *At Least 32 People Died in ICE Custody Last Year, as Fatal Shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti Spur National Outrage*. [Online] Available at: <https://people.com/deaths-ice-custody-last-year-as-fatal-shootings-spur-outrage-11890261> [Accessed 29 Jan 2026].

HopeQuilt.org, n.d. *The Quilt*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.hopequilt.org/quilt-gallery> [Accessed 07 Feb 2026].

International Quilt Museum - University of Nebraska-Lincoln, n.d. *Abolition*. [Online] Available at: <https://worldquilts.quiltstudy.org/americanstory/engagement/abolition> [Accessed 07 Feb 2026].

International Quilt Museum - University of Nebraska-Lincoln, n.d. *Awareness and Activism*. [Online] Available at: <https://worldquilts.quiltstudy.org/americanstory/engagement/awareness-activism> [Accessed 13 Feb 2026].

Mbembe, A., 2003. Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), pp. 11-40.

Native Women's Association of Canada, 2008. Sisters in Spirit Traveling Quilt. *Canadian Woman Studies Les Cahiers De La Femme*, 26(3 [Retrieved from <https://cws3.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/22120>]).

Oneto, C., n.d. *The Art of Improvisational Quilting*. [Online] Available at: <https://carolinaoneto.com/the-art-of-improvisational-quilting/> [Accessed 06 Feb 2026].

Parker, R., 1984. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. [Accessed at archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/subversivestitch00park>] ed. London: Women's Press.

PBS: Public Broadcasting Service, 2026. *'We're being terrorized.' What Mainers are seeing as ICE launches operation in the state*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/were-being-terrorized-what-mainers-are-seeing-as-ice-launches-operation-in-the-state> [Accessed 25 Jan 2026].

Power Coalition for Equality and Justice, n.d. *What is Operation Swamp Sweep?*. [Online] Available at: <https://powercoalition.org/information/> [Accessed 06 Feb 2026].

Quilts For Ukraine, n.d. *Quilts For Ukraine*. [Online]

Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250330145355/https://quiltsforukraine.com/>

[Accessed 07 Feb 2026].

Robertson, K. M., 2016. Quilts for the Twenty-first Century. In: J. Jeffries, D. Wood Conroy & H. Clark, eds. *The Handbook of Textile Culture*. London: Bloomsbury, p. 197-210.

Ryan Hunter, M., n.d. *Quilting for Freedom: A History of Black Quilting*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.threadsmagazine.com/2025/06/17/quilting-for-freedom-a-history-of-black-quilting>

[Accessed 05 Feb 2026].

Walker, R. & Oliveira, E., 2020. A Creative Storytelling Project with Women Migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa (Dispatch). *Studies in Social Justice*, 14(1), pp. 188-209 [https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v2020i14.2218].

We R Native, n.d. *What is the MMIW Movement?*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.wernative.org/articles/what-is-the-mmiw-movement>

[Accessed 07 Feb 2026].

Wikipedia, 2013. *Quilts of Gee's Bend*. [Online]

Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quilts_of_Gee%27s_Bend

[Accessed 07 Feb 2026].

Wikipedia, 2026. *Killing of Alex Pretti*. [Online]

Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Alex_Pretti

[Accessed 24 January 2026].