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Textile Language for Difficult Conversations: Reflecting on the Conflict Textiles Collection

Brandon Hamber and Roberta Bacic

Introduction

When first looking at an *arpillera*, appliqué patchwork picture textile made from scraps of material, originating in Chile during the Pinochet regime (1973–1990), it is easy to be misled by their often domestic and idyllic rural depictions. However, on closer inspection, many reveal stories of poverty and unemployment (e.g. waiting in queues for food, using soup kitchens, lack of services or water), but also brutal political violence, including murder, assault, disappearance, torture and acts of destruction (e.g. burning of homes) (see Figure 1, an *arpillera* on the theme of disappearance).

Arpilleras are also deeply personal. Images often include the clothes, photos, or fragments of material – from husbands, sons, and children who have been disappeared or killed – embedded in the pieces. Sometimes, the makers even use their hair on dolls stitched to the fabric.

The *arpillera* movement began through a network of clandestine workshops organised by *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* or Vicarate of Solidarity, affiliated with the Catholic Archdiocese of Santiago (see Agosín, 2008, Nickell, 2015 as well the work of Adams 2000, 2002, 2005, for a longer discussion on this process). This was a political movement, and so were the *arpilleras*. They are a form of subversive, predominantly women's protest art, yet shrouded in domesticity and ordinary life. Clare Hunter notes 'the most cheerful of fabrics, bright colours and pretty fabrics belying the stories of fear and desolation' (Hunter, 2019, p179). The domesticity of sewing provides 'a significant contrast to the

brutality of the repression' (Agosín, 2008, p56). The juxtaposition between the colourful materials and people, and sometimes cityscapes or countryside scenes, with political messaging and scenes of social injustice, is the hallmark of *arpilleras*. This is the essence of their power as an art form. Although the creation of dissonance between domesticity and the subject of war is not uncommon in textile work on conflict (Zeitlin



Figure 1. Cinco sitios de desaparición colectiva / Five sites of collective disappearance. Chilean *arpillera*, Irma Müller (1988). Photograph Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles. Conflict Textiles Collection: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=452>

Cooke, 2005), it was the 'perceived naivety' (and appealing aesthetic) of the *arpilleras* (Doolan, 2019, p1) that originally allowed their popularity to grow globally.

Arpilleras created in hidden workshops were initially allowed to be exported internationally from Chile despite the censorship of political art by the Pinochet regime (Doolan, 2019). As Adams (2000) notes, a border guard 'at the airport might at first glance assume they were innocent handicrafts' (Adams, 2002, p.46). Textiles sold abroad (although this became

more difficult over time, discussed below) were used to tell the story of repression outside the country, enhance solidarity and fund the women's activities in Chile during the dictatorship. Exhibitions outside the country took place, and groups such as Amnesty International published greeting cards and calendars featuring *arpilleras* (Hunter, 2019), all raising awareness of the repressive political context.

The purpose of *arpilleras*

Everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life and a secret life" (Gabriel García Márquez, in Martin, 2010, p271)

Arpilleras, particularly during the Pinochet dictatorship, served three main purposes. Firstly, they offered a form of income to the *arpilleristas*, who had often lost their husbands and children due to enforced political disappearance or were destitute due to economic inequalities prevailing in Chile at the time. Buying *arpilleras* became a way of expressing solidarity during the Pinochet dictatorship for those impacted by repression in Chile (Adams, 2000). The process of production and sale expanded significantly, with, at times, as many as 200 *arpillera* groups across Santiago (Adams, 2002).

Secondly, working in groups while making textiles offered a form of deeply intimate emotional support (Agosín, 2008). The sewing groups became safe spaces to share problems and end the isolation of victims of political violence (Adams, 2000). This psychological support function was never wholly divorced from processes of political solidarity, and the groups offered political education and socialisation. Talks accompanied sewing to educate women about the political, social, and economic context, as well as human rights and women's rights (Adams, 2000, 2002).

Finally, *arpilleras* served as a unique political language of protest. This built not only on the specific politics of Chile at the time, but the extensive way textiles have been used across history for political reasons (Bryan-Wilson,

2017). Marjorie Agosín argues that *arpilleras* are anything but 'an innocent art' but rather 'an art denouncing' through a 'cloth of resistance' (Agosín, 2008, p.55). Likewise, others have spoken of the textiles as the production of the 'denunciatory' (Adams, 2000). In an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) museum in 2014–2015, the *arpilleras* displayed, loaned by Conflict Textiles (discussed below), were described as 'disobedient objects' (Compton, 2014; Conflict Textiles, 2014) (see Figure 2, featuring women chaining themselves to the Parliament Gates in protest).



Figure 2. Encadenamiento / Women Chained to Parliament Gates. Chilean *arpillera*, Anonymous (c1988). Photograph Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles. Conflict Textiles Collection: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=222>

Textiles and the narratives of conflict

Arpilleras follow a long tradition of textiles as narratives (Agosín, 2008). Bryan-Wilson (2017) outlines how textiles have been used throughout history to pacify and radicalise. There are numerous examples of how 'women's work' in textiles has been used as a form of anticolonial politics, but also in situations of war, such as Afghan war rugs and Hmong embroidered story cloths (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, Zeitlin Cooke, 2005). From a different political perspective, sewing and quilting have been used for pro-war nationalism, such as US propaganda work around World War II (Bryan-Wilson, 2017). Bryan-Wilson argues that the *arpilleras*, like

other war textiles, speak a double language; that is, the grammar of the naive (for example, using doll-like figures), and at the same time, is a demand for justice and accountability expressed in a different tone (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p.148).

The political nature of *arpilleras* is evidenced by how the Pinochet regime reacted to them. Although initially *arpilleras* were exported with ease, as their stories of repression spread and their popularity grew, the Pinochet regime became 'incensed' by their existence (Hunter, 2019, p.180). Some women were followed, had their houses raided and red crosses painted on sewing workshops (Hunter, 2019). *Arpilleras* rapidly became subversive and illegal forms of speech (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p.162). They were forbidden to be displayed. In newspapers at the time, *arpilleras* were referred to as anti-government propaganda and branded 'tapestries of defamation' (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p.151) and 'tapestries of infamy' (Bacic, 2011; Hunter, 2019).

However, despite the repression, or arguably because of it, the *arpilleras* movement continued to expand and inspire other women. Similar textiles were created in Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. European countries have also developed similar textiles, notably in Northern Ireland, Germany, Kazakhstan, Catalonia (Figure 3), Syria (Figure 4) as well as in Africa, including Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria and Chad.

The most extensive global collection of *arpilleras* and conflict-related textiles is housed with Conflict Textiles curated by author Bacic. At the heart of Conflict Textiles, which began in 2008, are nearly 400 conflict textiles. The majority of these are *arpilleras* and Conflict Textiles is the primary resource on *arpilleras* internationally. The physical collection is complemented by a matching online repository, setup in 2015 and hosted by the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) at Ulster University. This fully database-driven website includes photos and documentation on each textile and relevant events, as well as its origin and where it will or has been displayed, making the collection globally accessible (see <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>).

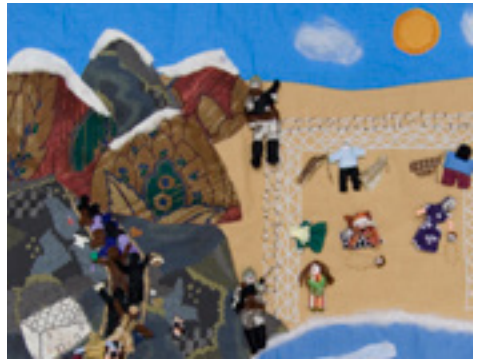


Figure 3. Exilio de los Republicanos cruzando los Pirineos/ Exile of the Republicans crossing the Pyrenees. Catalan *arpillera*, *Arpilleristas* Fundació Ateneu Sant Roc (2012). Photograph Roser Corbera, © Conflict Textiles. Fundació Ateneu Sant Roc collection: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/sea>

The Conflict Textiles physical and digital collection not only provides space for survivors of conflict to tell their stories through textiles at exhibitions and events but also allows users to learn more about conflicts transnationally in Chile, Northern Ireland, and many other countries. Conflict Textiles is proactive in its outreach and engagement. It stimulates and motivates academics, museums, textile artists, activists and civil society organisations to become involved with *arpilleras* and use the collection for comparative research and educational purposes.



Figure 4. The word that caused the outbreak of war – 'Freedom' Syrian *arpillera*, Sabah Obido (2020). Photograph Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles. Conflict Textiles Collection: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=439>



Figure 5. Exhibition 'Textile Accounts of Conflicts' as part of their International Conference 'Accounts of the Conflict: Digitally Archiving Stories for Peacebuilding', Hosted by INCORE (Ulster University).

Conflict Textiles has developed a large network of textile artists, activists, researchers and writers worldwide and has organised or contributed to over 250 events to date, ranging from dozens of local exhibitions, conferences (Figure 5) and maker workshops to high-profile exhibitions. Exhibitions have taken place at Ulster Museum, V&A, Tate Modern, Galerie der Volkshochschule (Freiburg), Museo de la Educación Gabriela Mistral (Santiago de Chile), Museo Nacional de las Culturas (Mexico), Oshima Hakkō Museum (Japan), Memorial da América Latina (São Paulo, Brasil), Museo de Arte Popular José Hernández (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and the Gernika Museum in the Basque Country, among many others.

Permanent rotating exhibitions have also been established at Ulster University's Magee campus Library in collaboration with the Hume O'Neill Chair in 2020, and in 2021 at the Queen's University Belfast library. There are also permanent displays at Fundació Ateneu Sant Roc in Catalonia, and at the Ulster Museum as part of The Troubles and Beyond Exhibition (2018).

Reflections: The language of textiles

It is not possible, within the limited space of this article, to fully outline the breadth and depth of the Conflict Textiles process. Likewise, it is only possible to discuss some of the implications of the collection and what each exhibition or workshop has meant. Below three implications are considered; the rapid spread and comparative nature of the process of textile-making, its gendered nature, how the language of textiles has evolved and the meaning of this for the future.

The expansion of the process of textile-making

'The facts are always less than what really happened' (Nadine Gordimer 1976, in Bragg 1990, p76)

The first known textile to travel to Northern Ireland was not from Chile but Peru. The Peruvian textile, titled 'Asociación Kuyanakuy, Ayer – Hoy' was brought to Northern Ireland in 2008 by author Bacic and transported by Hamber, for an art exhibition entitled 'Art of Survival: International and Irish Quilts' (see <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fullevent1/?id=70>). The exhibition was hosted by The Derry City Council Heritage and Museum Services in the Tower Museum and eight other venues in the City of Derry. The Peruvian piece, made by displaced Indigenous women, embodied the idea of textiles as a political language. It was used as 'testimony' by a group of women to the Truth Commission in Peru.



Figure 6. Who is down the mine shaft? Bhalagwe 1984. Zimbabwean arpillera, Enyandeni Women's Textile Art Group (2019). Photograph Shari Eppel, © Conflict Textiles. Enyandeni Peace Centre collection: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=427>

The publicity generated by the event, and the subsequent website of the conference, invigorated interest in Chilean and other textiles, building on the experience of Bacic, a native of Chile who worked on its *Corporación Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación*. The questions of whether similar works could be

produced in Northern Ireland was raised, along with requests from various countries for workshops and sharing. New works were also made reflecting contemporary and past conflicts (Figure 6 highlighting disappearances in Zimbabwe in 1984). The remarkable part of the Conflict Textile process is how the interest in textiles grew exponentially. Collectors of textiles emerged, and donations were made to the collection.



Figure 7. La Cueca Sola / Dancing Cueca alone. Chilean arpillera, Violeta Morales (1989). Photograph Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles. Conflict Textiles Collection: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=414>

Conflict Textiles struggles to deal with the demand for exhibitions, events, workshops and loan requests. Displaying textiles from different contexts side-by-side is now commonplace. At the same time, considering how the textiles ‘speak’ to one another is challenging. As Young has noted, there is a risk that comparing or displaying conflicts next to each other can result in dehistoricising and homogenising different contexts. For Conflict Textiles, this often means a deeply reflective process is necessary when asked to display textiles from different countries in the same exhibition (Young cited in Nickell, 2015). How Conflict Textiles should develop into the future, and if it should continue to grow within the confines of a small team remains an open question (see <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/contact-us/> for team members).

The gendered nature of textiles

‘Each day hands make the world, fire joins steel, the linen, fabric, and cotton cloth arrive from the combat of the laundries, and a dove is born out of the light: chastity returns from the foam.’ (Neruda 2003, p.626)

The vast majority of those engaging in textile work are women. Cloth, generally, is a highly symbolic and gendered material (Nickell, 2015). Marjorie Agosín argues that the *arpilleras* were a response to a ‘usurped maternity’ and the *arpilleristas* were a sisterhood that sought to negate masculine authoritarian power, oppression, and exploitation (Agosín, 2008). Others have noted that *arpilleristas* enacted their dissent within the realm of the typically feminine domestic handicrafts (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p.164).

Representations of women in *arpilleras*, unlike other representations of women in war which typically represent women as needing protection or rescuing, are typically active. Women represented in the *arpilleras* are typically actively working, involved in domestic activities, and participating in protest. This represents the realities of the time when women in the *arpillera* movement were not only involved in sewing but took part in protest activities such as hunger strikes, street protests, cultural protests (such as the Cueca Sola dance where women dance alone with photographs of their disappeared loved ones, see Figure 7) and chaining themselves to government offices (Agosín, 2008, see Figure 2). Of course, this is also a challenge, as overly masculine violence means it is difficult not to see women as vulnerable victims in some pieces.

Much research is still to be done on ‘craftivism’ in protest (Doolan, 2019), and also why the *arpilleras* and similar textile works retain public interest. Despite the passage of time and change in gender politics globally, the gendered nature and visual representations of largely masculine violence against the backdrop of colourful textiles with a domestic



Figure 8. Irene, Marta, Hilda, Patricia: Ahora y Siempre Presentes / Irene, Marta, Hilda, Patricia: Now and Always Present. Argentinian arpillera, Students from Escuela de Cerámica (2013). Photograph Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles. Conflict Textiles Collection: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=273>

aesthetic maintain appeal. At the same time, although the process was and is a highly gendered form of protest, ‘there is no easy or set answer to the question of how *arpilleras* function as protest – much less as feminist protest’ (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p.165).

Textiles and unfolding language

‘Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man’ (Levi, 2013, p.32).

The notion of language and textiles is integrally linked. Agosin talks about *arpilleras* as a visual living language of emotion through which the dead speak, connecting the dead and the living (Agosin, 2008). The language of cloth, says Karen Nickell, gives us a way to talk about the fabric of society (Nickell, 2015). Others too use textiles to find new ‘words’ to speak about conflict. Clark has used textile making with her students as a way of better understanding social issues (Clark, 2022). Engaging in textile art ‘encourages the student to develop a new language as they process and communicate their understanding of the text and their interaction with core elements of the stories we read and discuss in class’ (Clark, 2022, p6).

However, this new language is still developing and always unfolding despite the rapid growth of the Conflict Textiles collection. As Grabska and Horst (2022) note, ‘artistic expressions offer both a commentary on the past and the present, as well as acting and projecting change for the future’.

This is particularly true in times of uncertainty (Grabska and Horst, 2022, p184). Agosin (2008) adds that the dialogues that *arpilleras* create between the creations of the women and the living and the dead is continuous. For Conflict Textiles, the experience to date is similar; that is, the dialogue the textiles provoke about difficult political contexts is an unremitting one that seems to have no specific endpoint (Figure 8, a piece entitled ‘Now and Always Present’ made by students in 2013 to remember four young female students disappeared in 1977 in Argentina). Since the Pinochet regime in Chile, different governments have followed, from the repressive to the more progressive, yet at each stage, the stories of the *arpilleras* remain, arguably evolving with the language around them changing as the context evolves.

Likewise, the language spoken by textiles has also changed in Northern Ireland. Arguably how one interprets Irene MacWilliam’s ‘Peace Quilt–Common Loss’ from 1996 continues to change as the context shifts (Figure 9). The quilt depicting the more than 3000 dead in Northern Ireland is represented by red fabric sent to MacWilliam from Northern Ireland, Japan, the USA and England. The quilt in 1996 more than likely spoke to the importance of the need to establish peace, yet in 2022, two decades after the signing of the agreement in 1998, the piece now has to tell a new story – possibly one of the ongoing legacy of the conflict and unresolved legacy, truth and justice issues of the past.



Figure 9. Peace Quilt - Common Loss. Irene MacWilliam (1996, Northern Ireland). Image: Martin Melaugh. © Conflict Textiles. Ulster Museum History Collection. More: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=1>

Agosin (2008) talks of *arpilleras* as converting personal pain into historical pain, which adds to collective memory; ‘the *arpillera* is sent into the world, outside of the personal body of the creator, so the recipient receives and can feel history’ (Agosin, 2008, p54). At the same time, however, it is unlikely that even the creators of the artwork could fully anticipate their longevity or the contexts the works might ultimately speak to or in (e.g. Chilean *arpilleras* speaking with Northern Ireland victims of the conflict, survivors of massacres in Zimbabwe in the 1980s and Syrian refugees in the 2000s).

For the Chilean *arpilleras* their textile practice was probably at the time ‘a way of life’ as they came to terms with the conflict around them (Grabska and Horst, 2022, p187). The textiles were a consciously chosen language to tell their stories. The works essentially framed a specific political struggle at a specific moment to conscientise the makers and sensitise the wider world to the repression in Chile at the time (Adams, 2002). However, the ongoing interest of the *arpilleras* and Conflict Textiles more broadly, suggests this framing of a specific moment in history is highly malleable and transportable, and its endpoint and true social value unknown.

Conclusion

‘War textiles are both a window and mirror’
(Zeitlin Cooke, 2005, p.26).

There is a growing recognition of the new spaces art and the visual bring to fields such as transitional justice (Kurze and Lamont, 2019). However, as alluded to above, the outcome of the creative and political works during times of conflict is unknown, specifically over the long arc of history. Creative practice can open the door for processing the memories of artists and audiences, leading to social change, but it can also re-erect borders between people (Grabska and Horst, 2022). Even today, despite the truths told in the *arpilleras*, Chile is spoken about as a society where political schisms between left and right politics remain deep (Vergara, 2022). The outcome of putting political works into a public space is highly uncertain, and as such, what art can do during political strife should not be romanticised (Grabska and Horst, 2022). There is also a risk that as conflict artworks are sold, or displayed in new and different contexts, they ‘lose’ their ‘denunciatory sting’ (Adams, 2005, p.539).

Yet, despite this uncertainty, the growth of Conflict Textiles, their use in so many diverse spaces, and the ongoing voices embodied in the *arpilleras* and other conflict textile art remain alive and vocal decades after their creation. This has partly been because the ethos of Conflict Textiles has always been to open difficult conversations through the textiles rather than close them down. Although there is no doubt the textiles in the Conflict Textiles speak to real historical and contemporary injustices, their display and cataloguing do not seek one unified narrative.

Cultural domains are ideally situated to provide inclusive spaces or open thinking, argues Karen Nickell, and textiles can play a role in this provision (Nickell, 2015). Likewise, drawing on Hufstadter, others have concluded that the open-endedness of works rather than definitive narratives is the most important lesson we can learn in conflict societies

(Armstrong et al, 2019). This requires a reflexive process when displaying works in the Conflict Textiles collection. One cannot fully presuppose what each textile is saying about the past and present, or how they are read at different moments and contexts.

Through the gradual acquisition of textiles, exhibitions largely free from commentary, and the creation of online spaces, accessible to the public allowing for interaction, the textiles are hopefully given space to speak for themselves. To this end, to draw on Rancière's (2010) words, Conflict Textiles as a collection is arguably a form of 'critical art' in so far as it 'refuses to anticipate its own effects' (Ranciere, 2010, p.149). The Conflict Textiles collection and allied activities' outcomes are never immediately apparent. The process expands through relationships and personal connections, growing and finding new venues within the limits of a small team and budget, while expanding its narrative footprint continuously. As a result, although the *arpilleras* were born out of a specific political context (as were other conflict textiles) and they cannot be completely divorced from these origins, over time they have increasingly become 'irreducible to the spatio-temporal horizons of a given factual community' (Corcoran, 2010, p.2); that is, the women who first gave life to them in some cases nearly fifty years ago.

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