

Textile expressions of personal commitments to peace and reconciliation processes

A conversation between Roberta Bacic, Breege Doherty and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara

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On the occasion of the virtual textile exhibition "[\(Un-\) Stitching Gazes / \(Des\) Tejiendo Miradas](#)", Roberta Bacic (Conflict Textiles curator), Breege Doherty (Conflict Textiles assistant curator) and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (principal investigator, Aberystwyth University) engaged in a conversation to reflect on textile narratives of personal commitment to peace and reconciliation processes. As experiences from around the world show, such processes are always difficult, often suffer from setbacks, and not everyone is convinced by them. The conversation focused on a particular experience from Northern Ireland narrated with needle and thread by Sonia Copeland in her arpillera '[No Going Back](#)' and on the chapter 'Commitment' of the illustrated book "[\(Un-\) Stitching Gazes: Spinning, embroidering, and mending reconciliation in Colombia](#)", which displays pieces related to this topic, embroidered by peace signatories and other civilians in Colombia as part of the research.

At the outset of the conversation, Roberta Bacic cautioned her conversation partners that the different situations in Northern Ireland and Colombia regarding the contexts of the violence make a direct comparison difficult, and that individual textile pieces such as the one made by Sonia Copeland do not allow for a wider analysis or interpretation of the Troubles and the peace process in Northern Ireland, since the arpillera speaks from the personal experience of a single person from one side of the community divide, reflecting her beliefs and her experiences.

'No Going Back' brought out interesting discussion points regarding the beliefs surrounding the roles of individuals in the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. The piece was initially conceived during preparatory textile workshops for the exhibition 'The Art of Survival: International and Irish Quilts', which took place across different locations in Derry in 2007/2008. A small number of workshops were run for Northern-Irish participants, and it was here that Copeland was introduced to the Chilean arpillera '[Where are the "disappeared"?](#)' by Irma Müller. The piece from the 1980s shows protesters in front of the Courts of Justice, demanding information about their forcibly disappeared relatives and friends. From the right side, where an armoured police vehicle is parked, the silhouettes of two policemen are approaching the protesters with weapons. The piece moved Copeland deeply: as a former police officer herself, she was particularly struck by the oppressing role that was played by police officers in this piece, and she reflected that had she been in Chile, she herself would have been in this role.

Her arpillera 'No Going Back' was triggered by the 2009 killings of Constable Stephen Carroll and Sappers Mark Quinsy and Patrick Asimkar in Northern Ireland and the cross-community protests in support of the peace process which followed. In her piece, Sonia Copeland depicts the cross-community protests; her broad spectrum of colour acknowledges the emergence of a more diverse society in Northern Ireland and goes beyond the colours of the Republicans and Loyalists. They are also patched together to make one, providing a sense of togetherness in their shared wish not to go back to the times of violence, but to move forward with the peace process. Copeland said of her resolve for peace, 'it seemed to me that the peace that was won with so much pain and suffering

was once again to be snatched away. I resolved that nothing and no one would steal from my children the right to a peaceful life, which was stolen from me and my generation' (source: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflictextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=5>).

This quote resonates closely with one of the embroideries in the textile book 'Commitment', made by Colombian project participants (Arias et al. 2020, pp. 93-102). The final piece of 'Commitment' is by an elderly lady, Gilma, who has lived for a long time in the formerly war-torn area that now hosts some of the peace signatories, ex-combatants of the guerrilla group FARC. Her work is entitled 'For our Children' and brings us full circle to Copeland's piece on Northern Ireland, and the fear for children and grandchildren in the peace process. Gilma has lived this war and hopes 'peace will last, and our children and grandchildren won't have to go through what we had to live through. I hope this peace will last because we had a different story, these embroideries tell how we now live in peace, and it can also be a reality for our children' (Arias et al. 2020, p. 102). These women have not hardened despite everything they have been through; they have remained who they are: mothers, grandmothers, caring human beings.

A lot of the discussion on the Colombian project embroideries focussed on Jhonatan's work '[A heart like everyone else](#)', which depicts a human heart, accompanied by the words, 'The FARC, we are beings that love and feel like everyone else' (Arias et al 2020, p. 93). The discussion brought out that guerrillas are often thought of as not human; as Jhonatan himself says, they are portrayed as monsters. With his embroidery, Jhonatan is reassuring us that he has a heart, just like we do, and that he has the right to feel, the right to simply be. This piece also affirms that peace signatories/former fighters do not give up on who they are; they only give up on their methods of acting within society when they lay down their weapons and commit to peace. The embroidery is signed as 'Edwin, ex-combatant'. Jhonatan here combines his birth name (Edwin) with his past in the guerrilla group (war name Jhonatan), bringing together the different experiences that make him who he is and have led him to be in this place at this time.

For Roberta Bacic, Jhonatan's piece also resonated closely with the simple, beautiful embroidery by Yolanda, which depicts in red thread the word 'FARC' underneath a rose, the symbol of the former guerrilla group and now political party FARC. 'The rose is what still remains', is her reflection (Arias et al. 2020, p. 100). For Bacic this resonates as a resolve to move forward in different ways and not to go back. While the rest has fallen apart, the rose is the heart of what remains and what keeps us human. There is no shame in being a former FARC member, and as a peace signatory Yolanda is not ashamed of who she is.

Three Colombian pieces drew on common peace symbolism to express commitment to the peace process. The piece by Rosa, the wife of one of the peace signatories but not herself an ex-combatant, is entitled 'Reconciliation' and shows a dove flying up from hands and the rose symbol of the FARC (Arias et al. 2020, p. 97). We do not see from Rosa's piece how she proposes to be part of the peace process, suggests Bacic, but we can see from her textile that she is committed to this. There is a commitment to reconciliation and inclusivity through the FARC laying down its arms. However, whilst this piece resonates with those who have committed to the peace process, it is unlikely to sit well with members who have retaken arms, or who did not want to lay them down in the first place. It would be interesting to see what other FARC groups think of this piece.

Another piece that also depicts doves entitled 'Declaration' is by Dayirley, a FARC peace signatory (Arias et al 2020, p. 98). Two doves indicate peace, whilst a sun at the centre and a flower are depicted as central to the peace process. The elements are held together by two blue shapes arranged in a circular form, which could indicate the community or the wider world, whilst the blue

and the green may represent the land – the rivers and the bush, in particular, in which the guerrillas lived for so long. The piece ‘Being at Peace with Oneself’ by Maria Piedad, a member of the community where some peace signatories settled, also uses a range of common peace symbols (Arias et al. 2020, p. 101). Yet while the piece may look more sophisticated, it seems less personal.

The last embroidery in this section, ‘Peace, a non-violent struggle’, is by Berit, the project’s UK-based principal investigator (Arias et al. 2020, p. 99). Through an open spiral, it indicates the unfinished nature of peace, with a thread (and formerly a needle at its end) hanging from the top right corner, ‘allowing people to keep stitching peace’, she says. This piece was made as part of the hands-on reflective process of the project team, which asked the team members what they were stitching and unstitching in the research project, by talking about and embroidering their reflections. Different languages are depicted in the piece, and the conversation moved towards thinking about how we translate language – literally or with the meaning of the word – for example, when we choose language such as ‘fighting for peace’, rather than say we are struggling for it. Fighting invokes weapons and a possible return to war, rather than a commitment to peace as an ongoing struggle.

In conclusion, Roberta Bacic observed that none of the Colombian pieces in the ‘Commitment’ chapter actually say how their makers will act in society today, none provides an indication of how they will implement the peace process, or how they want to work on it. But it is clear from the embroideries that their makers are committed to peace. Commitment to peace holds this section together, it allows for coherence, and it achieves it.

References:

- Beatriz Arias López, Berit Bliesemann de Guevara & Laura Coral Velasquez: *Spinning, embroidering, and mending reconciliation in Colombia*, Medellín: Periferia Editorial, 2020. Please [click here](#) to order a free digital copy.
- Conflict Textiles web archive <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflictextiles/>