Thread 1. Reflections on curating, exhibiting and making

Reflections on *Threads, war and conflict: arpilleras* in Chile and in International Relations

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Abstract

This article explores both individual and collective critical reflections on our involvement in the *Threads, war and conflict* project at the University of St Andrews. The article includes a collaborative section, followed by the authors' personal experiences of engaging with arpilleras and creating our own textiles on the themes of "family" and "home". The collaborative segment argues that arpilleras provided a voice for women in Chile to express their opposition to the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Touching on the concepts of women, textiles and the notion of "voice" in International Relations, we demonstrate how voice should be taken seriously in the field, and how creative media can challenge traditional expressions of voice.

Introduction

Arpilleras became popular in Chile during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990, as a means to highlight the suffering caused by political repression and economic insecurity. *Arpilleras* were constructed in workshops run by women, known as *arpilleristas*, and presented an opportunity for these women to voice their opposition to the dictatorship. The *arpilleras* were simple textiles that were usually made from thick hessian canvases, adorned with colourful fabric to create flat images; three-dimensional figures, such as dolls, were occasionally attached to the canvases to represent unique personalities (LaDuke, 1983, p. 34). The materials were accessible to most women, in both financial and practical terms, which was important as many of the *arpilleristas* were of lower social class and dependent upon the income which was collected by selling the *arpilleras* (Adams, 2005, p. 546).

While *arpilleristas* spoke through a means which was traditionally considered feminine, the *arpilleras* became a testimony for the collective suffering of people in Chile (Moya-Raggio, 1984, p. 279). The Chilean *arpilleras* have been displayed all over the world as a documentary archive of human rights abuses, and have inspired works of art in other countries, such as Northern Ireland, Peru and Zimbabwe (Ulster University, 2012). By spreading the textiles across borders, the women gained global attention for their situation, 'making it impossible [for the outside world] to deny the regime's horrors and the lives it claimed' (The Museum of Latin American Art, 2019).

In this article, we analyse the connections between *arpilleras* and the concepts of women, textiles and "voice" in International Relations. We argue that *arpilleras* and arpillera workshops provided women in Chile a means to express their voices in opposition to the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, and we demonstrate how *arpilleras* disrupt traditional notions of voice as being limited to the spoken word. We then explore our personal reflections on our experiences from the *Threads, war and conflict* project at the University of St Andrews, each highlighting key themes which emerged during the workshops.

Reflections on textiles, women and voice

Becoming visible

Since the late 1980s, considerable progress has been made to incorporate the voices of women into the field of International Relations (IR). Critical Feminist scholars, such as Ann Tickner, Christine Sylvester and Cynthia Enloe, have demonstrated the complexities and importance of studying women in IR (Enloe, 1990; Tickner, 1992; Sylvester, 1994). These scholars have critiqued concepts traditionally used in the study of IR, uncovered new empirical knowledge using gender-based perspectives, and highlighted new or neglected subjects in the field (Lobasz and Sjoberg, 2012, p. 573). Scholars, however, have questioned whether the voices of women have been successfully represented, whether Feminist scholars are just 'talking to

themselves', or else have highlighted a tendency to under- or mis-represent the experiences of women in the non-Western world (D'Costa and Lee-Koo, 2013, p. 451; Shepherd, 2013, p. 438). Despite the progress that has been made in making women visible in IR, they continue to be under-acknowledged, and are frequently viewed as being passive or submissive, often limiting their authority and their agency within the political arena (Matthews, 2002, p. 214). *Arpilleras* helped to make women in Chile more visible in politics by providing a means through which they could assert their voices.

"Voice" is naturally understood as an expression of agency and the sharing of one's perspective. Traditionally, the recognition of one's "voice" and the ability to share personal experiences has centred on the spoken word (Guillaume, 2013, p. 12). More broadly, "voice" has been defined in connection with concepts of participation and empowerment, and has been deemed 'essential in the constitution of social and political boundaries, identities and communities' (Guillaume, 2018, p. 476; Prouska and Psychogios, 2018, p. 885). Limiting an understanding of "voice" to the narrow definition of the spoken word is, therefore, deeply problematic, as it is silencing the visibility, participation and agency of women within IR.

Overcoming this problem, however, is not as simple as "adding" women into the study of IR; it requires a fundamental reworking of IR as a discipline to listen to the experiences and voices of women. In other words, 'agency needs to be rethought', redefined and broadened from simply denoting the spoken word (Parpart, 2010, p. 15). Archival records can play a fundamental role in this. Female voices are often excluded from archival records due to the patriarchal nature of many record-creating systems (Doolan, 2016, p. 10); this means that the archives contain 'archival silences', which leads to the symbolic annihilation of certain groups from them (Caswell, 2014, p. 36). By choosing what to store, what to discard, what to classify and how to classify it, as well as choosing what to make accessible and to whom, archives are political institutions and 'sites of power' (Jimerson, 2009, p. 2; Tesar, 2015, p. 102).

As researchers in the field, we ought to be aware of this. When conducting research, we should make an effort to report on the historical and political context in which a document was created (Subotic, 2020, p. 11). We should also think creatively about alternative archival sources other than official state archives, in order to illustrate a more nuanced view of people's lives and livelihoods (Subotic, 2020, p. 8). By including more "voices", and especially women's voices that have been 'silenced', we can achieve a more rounded sense of identity, which can have significant benefits for the study of IR (Cook, 2011, p. 185). An inclusion of *arpilleras* in archival collections would help fill the gendered silence within those traditional record-keeping practices.

From survival mechanism to political movement

Arpilleras served a dual purpose for *arpilleristas* in Chile; producing the textiles presented an opportunity for extra income, and provided a way for the women to tell stories in protest against the Pinochet regime. The Pinochet regime created such an environment that lower-class women had to act in order to provide for their families. The *arpilleras*, therefore, came into existence out of necessity (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2008; McCracken, 2011). Whilst making *arpilleras* together at workshops, the women found themselves able to talk freely about political and social issues. This feeling of liberation helped stir the women into the direction of a political movement via their *arpilleras*. For the Chilean women, the *arpilleras* became a form of resistance and protest. It gave them the opportunity to depict scenes which denounced the human rights violations of the Pinochet regime (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2008).

The textiles became a way for the women to tell their stories and share them with the world. Kept silent by the Pinochet regime, the Chilean women were 'denied the occasion, ability or tools to record their stories in any other way' (Doolan, 2016, p. 11). The arpillera workshops enabled women to become public actors, as they formed their own participation in the political process of democratisation (Boldt and White, 2011, pp. 34-35). *Arpilleristas* would not only use the *arpilleras* to express their emotions, but to document the violence they witnessed, as well as the unemployment, poverty and repression they experienced (Adams, 2013, p. ix; Bacic, 2015, p. 395). The textiles became a representation of a collective voice of female suffering, documenting part of the wider human rights movement in Chile (Moya-Raggio, 1984, pp. 278-279; Strauss, 2015, p. 381).

The power that these textiles harnessed was demonstrated by the fact that the Chilean authorities sought to punish those who created *arpilleras* (Bacic, 2015). The Pinochet regime felt threatened by the *arpilleras* and the women's voices represented in the textiles. These textiles provided an opportunity for expression and reclaiming of agency and voice for the women responsible for their creation. Whereas the voices of women have typically been understood in broad brushstrokes, omitting contextual backgrounds and individual circumstances (Mohanty, 1984, p. 344), the *arpilleras* demonstrate that agency can indeed be redefined, and the voices of individuals can be uniquely articulated, and evidently powerfully "heard", through these textiles.

A visualisation of voice

Whether depicting a single scene from a memory or framing a loved one's piece of clothing, *arpilleras* demonstrate the ability to share a piece of an individual's engagement with the world. Furthermore, each piece aims to tell a story and has a visual intention: to promote its creator's experiences and prevent them from happening to others. *Arpilleras* also work as a coping mechanism for trauma or to document a significant moment in the *arpilleristas'* lives. By this very nature, therefore, it is impossible to overlook the element of "voice" within the

textiles. The *arpilleras* present the visualisation of "voice", which breaks beyond singular, contextual understandings and language barriers to share the experiences and lives of actual people. As Andrä et al. summarise, 'there is no single way to make sense of conflict textiles' visuality' (Andrä et al., 2020, p. 346).

With this understanding, an arpillera can no longer be viewed as a singular, stagnant piece but rather as an interactive one, in which a multitude of conversations can occur depending on the onlooker's interpretations and contextual background. Exhibiting *arpilleras* in collections further enhances this notion of the pieces being able to speak. While each piece has its own individual story to tell, exhibiting them together naturally places them in conversation with each other. They present multiple perspectives and experiences of displacement, migration and war, and 'facilitate dialogue, connection and action as a way forward from these confrontations' (Andrä et al., 2020, p. 351). The common exhibition of these pieces places stronger emphasis on and awareness of those voices, unifying them so they speak louder and have a more expansive impact on audiences. The collection highlights the ability of the textiles to speak collectively together and to one another, whether that be through common themes and narratives, or similarities in layout, style and materials adopted. The exhibition places a common thread through the collection of textiles, which fundamentally unifies many voices to convey collectively a wider response to subordination and political repression. In other words, 'each voice is a thread […] many voices not one, cut from the same cloth or different' (Collins, 2016).

Threads, war and conflict project

In April 2019, a selection of *arpilleras* from the Conflict Textiles collection were exhibited at the University of St Andrews as part of a project entitled *Threads, war and conflict*. The project hosted a programme of events including textile workshops, in which the three authors of this paper participated together with five other women. During the workshops, we collectively engaged with and analysed the *arpilleras* in the exhibition. The *arpilleras* told the stories of the *arpilleristas*, their suffering, broken homes and lost families. In response to their stories, we created our own *arpilleras* on the themes of "family" and "home". Doing so, gave us a greater understanding of voice and agency, and how one's voice can be expressed through other channels than the spoken word. Here are our personal accounts of the project, in an effort to highlight how our voices were woven into our textiles.

A sensory journey

Seamlessly blending aesthetic beauty and emotive raw experiences to explore the personalities and life experiences the textiles shared was something I found breathtakingly powerful: a collection of silent and poignant beauty giving voice to life experiences through vibrant displays of creativity.

Inspired by the exhibition, I wanted to explore the concept of a sensory experience within my own textile (see *Image 1*). Taking time to experience physically how fabrics felt, I considered colours, patterns, materials and shapes acknowledging how they made me feel and what they represented visually. I further composed and stitched a short piece of music to the back of my textile to incorporate an audible expression. This awareness of a sensory experience allowed me to acknowledge and explore my own voice within the arpillera.

Rachel

Image 1 – Rachel Beattie

Expressions of emotion

During the workshops, I was struck by the level of emotion which was expressed through the *arpilleras*. The *arpilleras* gave voices to feelings of anger, grief and hope during times of conflict and displacement. The *arpilleristas*' emotions regarding their families and homes were reflected in the *arpilleras* through depictions of their livelihoods and relationships being under threat from political repression and violence.

I tried to incorporate that expression of emotion into my own textile (see *Image 2*), which was inspired by a trip I took to Namibia when I was a teenager. The trip highlighted how much

I valued being close to my family, and producing the textile gave me a chance to give voice to the experience of missing family, which enabled a deeper reflection on the *arpilleras'* narratives of loss.
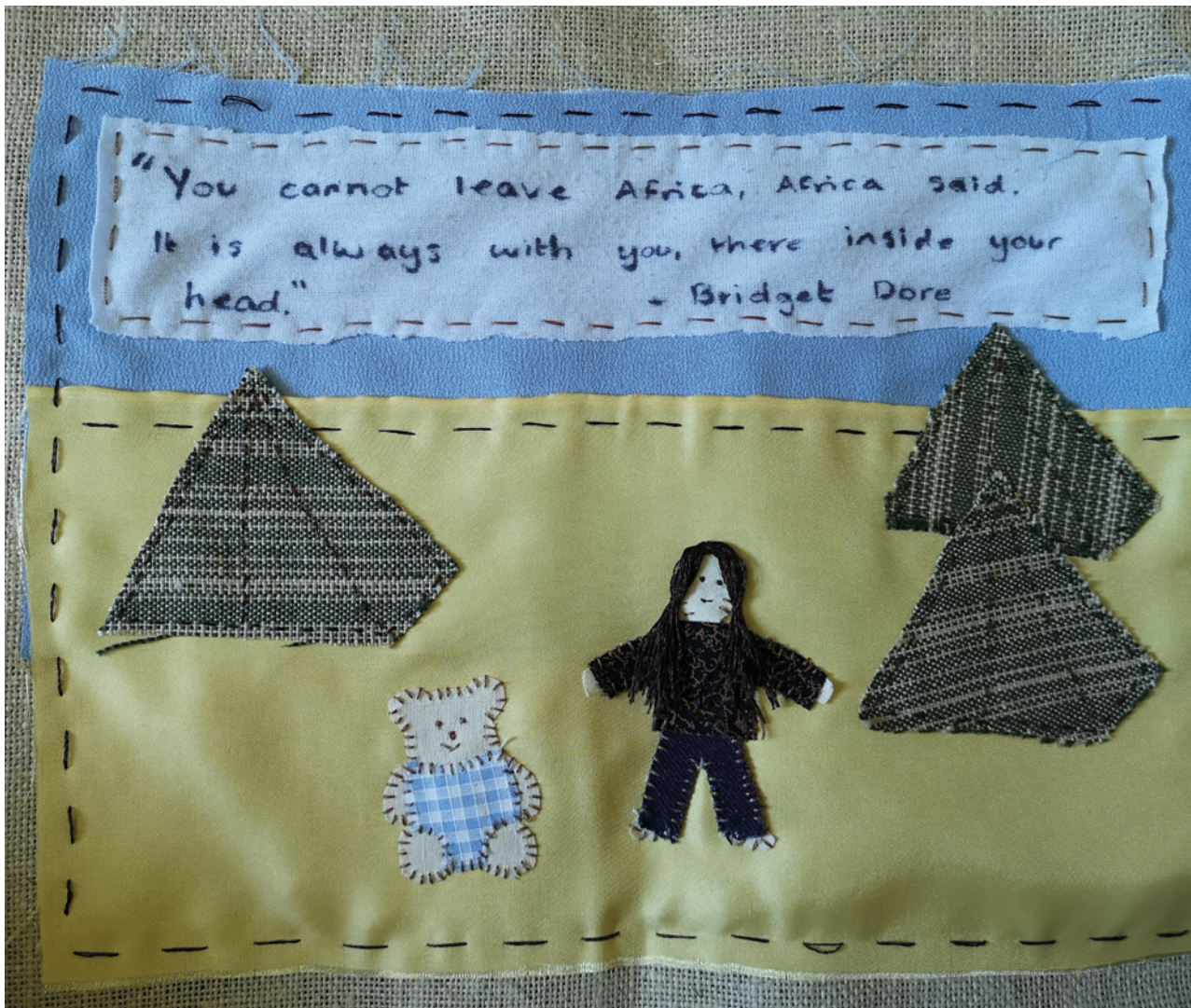
Frankie

Image 2 – Frankie Copp

In stark contrast

As bright and colourful as the textiles are, so intense and heavy are the stories to which they give voice. Taking in the *arpilleras*, I got to experience part of the *arpilleristas'* lives. It made me realise how different their lives were from mine, and how fortunate I was as a little girl growing up in a safe and secure environment.

I wanted to give voice to that feeling of "protection" and security in my textile by depicting myself as a little girl with three "protectors": the family house, my mother and my father (see *Image 3*). This was my way of letting a voice be heard in reaction to the *arpilleras*, and sharing my wish that the *arpilleristas* could experience the security I felt as a child.

Schoutje

Image 3 – Schoutje Schouten

Shared experiences

For all three of us, the project provided an opportunity for reflection. The creation of the textiles asked us to go inward in silence, and to find our voices in response to the *arpilleras* and the stories behind them.

What does this mean for the study of IR?

In conclusion, the *arpilleras* provide an opportunity to rethink the passivity and relative invisibility of women within the study of IR. Using the *arpilleras* as their voices, the *arpilleristas* in Chile, as a group that had traditionally been overlooked and oppressed, resisted traditional gendered roles to reposition themselves as political agents. Conceptualising the *arpilleras* as the "voices" of women, creates a platform for reimagining and reclaiming the agency of women and subsequently a way of breaking gendered silences. It further creates a space to redefine "voice" beyond traditional understandings of the spoken word. This ultimately broadens the scope of voice to include a more multidimensional approach in which we can hear voices that would have previously been silenced. Thus, acknowledging the magnitude of power that the *arpilleras* contain has a wealth of potential for inspiring alternative methods for listening to the voices of those who have been traditionally oppressed or omitted from narratives.

The *arpilleras* provide physical evidence of a "voice" to those who have been silenced. The process of creating a textile is, from our experience, highly personal and one which falls within the daily activities of many women around the world regarding sewing and working with fabrics. The ability for such an everyday activity to become a communicative tool of voice for the *arpilleristas* demonstrates the need for IR to diversify its understanding of how voice can be conveyed. The *arpilleras* highlight how "voice" cannot be singularly tied to notions of the spoken word, and challenges IR to broaden understandings of who can speak and how they speak. The creation and exhibition of *arpilleras*, such as in the *Threads, war and conflict* project, champion the empowerment of those who have been silenced and demands that the study of IR creatively reconsiders the agency, visibility and voices of women.

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