

# *Knowing through needlework: curating the difficult knowledge of conflict textiles*

Article

Accepted Version

Andrä, C., Bliesemann de Guevara, B., Cole, L. and House, D. (2019) Knowing through needlework: curating the difficult knowledge of conflict textiles. *Critical Military Studies*, 6 (3-4). pp. 341-359. ISSN 2333-7494 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2019.1692566> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/87762/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2019.1692566>

Publisher: Informa UK Limited

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# Knowing Through Needlework: Curating the Difficult Knowledge of Conflict Textiles

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## Abstract

Drawing on our experience of commissioning and co-curating an exhibition of international conflict textiles—appliquéd wall-hangings (*arpilleras*), quilts, embroidered handkerchiefs, banners, ribbons, and mixed-media art addressing topics such as forced disappearances, military dictatorship, and drone warfare—this article introduces these textiles as bearers of knowledge for the study of war and militarised violence, and curating as a methodology to care for the unsettling, difficult knowledge they carry. Firstly, we explain how conflict textiles as object witnesses voice difficult knowledge in documentary, visual and sensory registers, some of which are specific to their textile material quality. Secondly, we explore curating conflict textiles as a methodology of ‘caring for’ this knowledge. We suggest that the conflict textiles in our exhibition brought about an affective force in many of its visitors, resulting in some cases in a transformation of thought.

## Graphical abstract



‘Cacerolazo/Women banging their pots’, by Felicia, Chile, 1988. Conflict Textiles collection.

Provenance Oshima Hakko Museum collection, Japan. Photo: Martin Melaugh.

**Keywords:** conflict textiles, curating, war, political violence, knowledge, methodology

## Introduction

A group of women bang cooking pots with wooden spoons: *cazerolazos* such as the one depicted in this article's graphical abstract<sup>1</sup> were a form of protest Chileans practiced against the Pinochet dictatorship of 1973–1990. Another form of protest was the making of *arpilleras*: appliquéd and embroidered textile pictures that document the violence of the dictatorship—killings, abductions, torture, and economic deprivation—and the resistance against it. Coming together in the intimacy of homes and church groups, women made *arpilleras* to denounce the forced disappearance of their relatives by the regime's security apparatuses, and to record their experiences of living under the violence of the military dictatorship. Smuggled out of the country and sold by international solidarity groups, *arpilleras* became one way through which audiences around the world learned about what was happening in Chile (Agosin 2008, 19). Later, the practice of making *arpilleras* was taken up by people in other countries to tell their stories of conflict, oppression, resistance and survival (Bacic 2015). Yet despite their important role in protesting the Pinochet regime and other violences, *arpilleras* have received little attention in the study of war and militarized violence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=340> (5 June 2019).

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms militarized violence and political violence interchangeably to refer to the spectrum of violences depicted in conflict textiles. Not limited to violence committed by state militaries, the terms encompass violence perpetrated by other armed groups, police, and security forces.

In 2017 we commissioned and co-curated *Stitched Voices*, an exhibition of conflict textiles at Aberystwyth Arts Centre.<sup>3</sup> Alongside *arpilleras*, *Stitched Voices* displayed quilts, protest banners, embroidered handkerchiefs, panels of a peace ribbon, and textile and mixed-media artworks that shared experiences of, spoke to, or reflected on political murder, forced disappearances, torture, landmines, nuclear arms, drone warfare, civil war, and displacement. The textiles came from a broad range of contexts including Catalonia, Chile, Colombia, England, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland, the United States and Wales. The majority of the textiles were loaned from the *Conflict Textiles* collection, collected and curated by Roberta Bacic.<sup>4</sup> Others were sourced and loaned from activists and artists in Wales, London and Mexico and from the Ceredigion Museum in Aberystwyth. In this article, we use the term ‘conflict textiles’ in a broad sense to refer to all kinds of textiles addressing political violence.<sup>5</sup> *Stitched Voices* was accompanied by an extensive events programme, spanning from textile workshops and poetry readings to academic roundtables and a specially programmed selection of films as part of the annual Wales One World Film Festival.

Drawing on this experience of commissioning and co-curating *Stitched Voices*, in this article we argue that needlework and its curation introduce forms of knowledge and ways of knowing that have the potential to unsettle prevalent of approaching and understandings of war and militarized violence. Conflict textiles have this potential because they are bearers of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fullevent/?id=157> (5 June 2019). In addition to this article, we reflect on our curation experience in a series of blog posts and podcasts published on the *Stitched Voices* website: <https://stitchedvoices.wordpress.com> (5 June 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The *Conflict Textiles* collection’s website contains a searchable archive of the collection and of past, current and planned exhibitions: <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/> (5 June 2019). Throughout the article, whenever a specific textile is mentioned, a footnote provides a link to its entry including a photo in the online archive.

<sup>5</sup> Our use of the term ‘conflict textiles’ is in agreement with the *Conflict Textiles* collection, yet extends both beyond the range of textiles it contains and beyond the range of textiles shown in *Stitched Voices*.

what Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton (2011, 8), in their research on the role of museums and curation in post-violence politics of memory, call ‘difficult knowledge’—knowledge which,

[...] induces a breakdown in experience, forcing us to confront the possibility that the conditions of our lives and the boundaries of our collective selves may be quite different from how we normally, reassuringly think of them. Such knowledge points to more challenging, nuanced aspects of history and identity, potentially leading us to re-conceive our relationships with those traditionally defined as “other” (Lehrer and Milton, 2011, 8; cf. Britzman 1998).

We make our argument about the unsettling potential of conflict textiles in two steps. First, we think about them through Eyal Weizman’s (2010) notion of ‘object witnesses’ which carry difficult knowledge in different—documentary, visual and sensory—registers. In this regard, we add to international politics interventions which, in recent years, have drawn attention to the importance of aesthetic, emotional, visual and material approaches in analyzing global politics (e.g. Aradau 2010; Bleiker 2015, 2018; Hutchinson 2016). Specifically, art (Danchev 2009), comics (Redwood and Wedderburn 2019), film (Shapiro 2009), performance (Charrett 2019), memoirs (Dyvik 2016a), and music (Hast 2016) have all been employed to reflect on and rethink ways of knowing war and militarized violence. These approaches explore the ways in which political violences are felt, sensed and embodied through locating their multiple ‘entanglements’ (Dyvik 2016b, 63).

Their insights are valuable; however, many of these forms of knowing still privilege high or fine art and arts institutions, abstract artistic expressions, and ‘masculinized’ creative

forms. Conflict textiles provide a different way of knowing war. They contribute to critical and feminist literatures that employ aesthetic, experiential, and/or sensorial methods to the study of war and militarized violence<sup>6</sup> (e.g. Sylvester 2006, 2013; Parashar 2013), but do so through the oft-overlooked medium and practice of needlework. Complementing Joanna Tidy's (2019) focus on craft and material production, conflict textiles bring 'missing makers' to the fore of accounts of war and militarized violence (221). As object witnesses speaking in documentary, visual, and sensory registers, conflict textiles raise questions about the ideal sites, sources, data, methods and analytical aims of research on political violence, and about which objects related to war we consider 'worthy' of being engaged and analyzed academically.

In a second step, we argue that curating can be a way of 'caring for' the difficult, unsettling knowledge that conflict textiles carry (Lehrer and Milton 2011, 4). In our experience with the *Stitched Voices* exhibition, the careful curation of conflict textiles meant working against the idea that the main purpose of social-scientific methods is to arrive at a singular, coherent, and parsimonious account of political violence. Instead, curating allows for revealing and sustaining the patchiness of a social reality made up of multiple, overlapping and sometimes incongruent meanings (Särmä 2016; Sylvester 2013). As such, curating conflict textiles has the potential to expose and counter what has been described as 'epistemic injustice' or 'epistemic violence' (Mihai 2018; Fricker 2007; Dotson 2011),

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<sup>6</sup> We reflect our affinities with critical and feminist methodology through a curiosity toward 'the subjective, the particular, the ignored perspective[s]' explored here through the many-faceted politics of conflict textiles and their curation (Åhäll, 2018, 42). More remains to be unpacked regarding the relationship between conflict textiles, gender and feminism, and resistance to political violence. See: Anonymized. (forthcoming) 'Caring, curating, responding, resisting: The art of global conflict textiles', conference paper presented at the BISA Annual Conference 2019, London.



specifically the silencing or marginalizing effects of official interpretations and memorializations of war and militarized violence (Edkins 2003). Moreover, the process of curating conflict textiles enabled an embodied, affective form of knowing—among us and the exhibition’s visitors.<sup>7</sup> In the curatorial judgements involved in producing *Stitched Voices* we sought to care for the emotional meaning the textiles have to their makers. We also took care to recognize what Roger Simon, in his work on the critical pedagogy of cultural memory, describes as ‘the indeterminacy of response’ that difficult knowledge can trigger and weighed how the specific qualities of the conflict textiles as bearers of unsettling knowledge about war and militarized violence shaped the ‘relation between affect and thought’ among exhibition visitors (Simon 2011, 197). In these ways, the careful curation of conflict textiles can unsettle entrenched regimes of sensibilities, challenging what is legible, visible, sensible, knowable as experiences of war and militarized violence and enabling the unstitching and restitching of political imaginations.

This second part of the article builds on critical military studies literature which approaches war as it is experienced (Sylvester, 2013) and as it is curated (Dyvik and Welland, 2018; Sylvester, 2018). Though such interventions provide fruitful insights for this article, we add nuance by accounting for the multiplicity of how ‘[e]veryday people are involved in the social institution of war in straightforward as well as complicated and often unnoted ways’, not only as ‘combatants...but also as mourners, protestors ..., artists, ...[and] refugees’ (Sylvester, 2013, 4; also Sylvester 2019). *Stitched Voices* aimed to open space<sup>8</sup> for the textiles and their makers to speak of war in different registers. As makers stressed the

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<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging the multiple formulations of affect that have infused international politics (Hemmings 2005; Massumi 2002), we align ourselves with readings that highlight the inherent interrelations between emotion and affect (Åhäll 2018; Reeves 2018a).

<sup>8</sup> We consciously refrain from the problematic idea of ‘giving voice’ to others (Moon 2012).

human side of war, depicting its familial and intergenerational impacts, its dehumanizing effects, and the ways in which the impacts of war are contested and resisted, the resulting exhibition centred loss, solidarity, resistance, and activism in response to war and militarized violence.

### **Object witnesses: conflict textiles as bearers of difficult knowledge in different registers**

The knowledge that conflict textiles carry and convey is difficult knowledge in the above-defined sense—‘knowledge that does not fit’ and is not ‘easily assimilable’ (Lehrer and Milton 2011, 8). Conflict textiles unsettle mainstream Western academic notions of epistemic authority in matters of war and militarized violence, they challenge what knowledge of these matters is about, and they invite us to reflect on how we come to know war and militarized violence. While feminist and critical military studies interventions have made important contributions to interrogating the reproduction of nation, state and war through everyday militarized objects (Basham 2016; Enloe 2000) and through art and in museums (Sylvester 2016; Reeves 2018a), these interventions have often centred on the military and military bodies as sites of war knowledge, and on high art and elite museums as sites of this reproduction. Conflict textiles sit uncomfortably here. Spanning categories of the everyday and art, their makers respond to militarized and political violence from a slightly different vantage point. As people who are both directly and indirectly touched by war, makers of conflict textiles are connected (albeit through complex relations of power) by the choice to respond to and resist the manifold violences of nation, state, and war through stitch. Functioning as response, critique, and resistance to the objects of critical military studies’

inquiry, it is useful to ask: what do conflict textiles and their makers tell us about war and militarized violence?

In addressing this question, we propose to think of conflict textiles as ‘object witnesses’ (Weizman 2010) whose stitched voices speak in different registers. Taking a forensic approach to architecture in the investigation of human rights violations, Weizman (2010, 27) proposes the concept of the object witness to make sense of the increasing dissolution between the categories of ‘evidence’ (objects) and ‘witness’ (human testimony). He suggests that object witnesses are capable of a kind of speech and as such can be questioned and cross-examined. There is a precedent of a conflict textile becoming an object witness in this narrow, quasi-legal sense of the term: during the proceedings of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a group of indigenous women provided their testimony through an *arpillera* (Doolan 2016, 12).<sup>9</sup> Here, however, we make the case for understanding conflict textiles as object witnesses more generally.

In this broader sense of the term, we argue that conflict textiles as object witnesses speak of war and violence in documentary, visual, and sensory registers, some of which owe to their textile material form. Outlining the registers through which we can listen to—read, see, and feel—the stitched voices of conflict textiles, we position ourselves in conversation with those who draw ‘attention to the range of affective registers that war experiences work across’ (Welland 2018, 439; cf. Parashar 2013; Sylvester 2013). To introduce conflict textiles to this conversation, we highlight the multiplicities of the forms of (military) violence they depict, their geographical locations, and their different positionalities—both proximate and more distant—vis-à-vis war and militarized violence. Similar to Tidy’s (2019) inroads in drawing practices of stitch to the fore—in her case as martial craft labour—we draw attention

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<sup>9</sup> <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=198> (5 June 2019).

to the ways in which needlework and textile are used to represent, speak of, and resist war and militarized violence. The accounts of events that conflict textiles present us with do not add up to a single or coherent truth or experience, but instead produce, as Tomoko Sakai (2018) describes in relation to an exhibition of Chilean *arpilleras* in Japan, ‘multi-layered and often conflicting sentiments’. Analytically differentiating between conflict textiles’ different registers helps to unpack this multi-layeredness.

### *The documentary register of conflict textiles*

In their documentary register, conflict textiles are not unlike other kinds of archival records or primary sources: they are created to record ongoing and historical events (Agosín 2014, x), in particular everyday and personal experiences of violence that might otherwise go undocumented. The Pinochet regime initially underestimated and belittled *arpillera*-making as a feminine, domestic, and hence apolitical activity. Precisely because of this, *arpilleras* became ‘a way to document and denounce oppression when all other forms of documentation and denunciation [had been] censored or banned’ (Agosín 1987, 38; cf. Doolan 2016, 10; Strauss 2015, 13).<sup>10</sup> Or as a Chilean *arpillerista* expressed the documentary intention of textile making: ‘You would do an *arpillera*, and in it you would show what was happening here. The repression, the protests, when the police arrived and began hitting people, shooting. We would sew all that’ (quoted in Adams 2013, 2).

Source criticism—asking ‘*who* said *what* to *whom* under *what circumstances* and with *what purpose*’ (George 1973, 37-44, emphasis in original), and probing the authenticity of a source, its temporal and spatial distance to the event it documents, and the ‘number of

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<sup>10</sup> In later dictatorship years, *arpilleras* became prohibited, too.

intermediaries' between its original author and the researcher (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000, 79)—enables the documentary register of conflict textiles to be understood and can help correct the one-sidedness of official accounts and state-produced records of the violence (cf. Agosín 2014, x). While *arpilleras* were initially made by groups of women from economically deprived areas of Santiago de Chile, *arpillera*-making was later taken up by women and men in other parts of Chile and abroad. *Arpilleras* were made for varying purposes: to document and denounce the violence of the regime, but also for economic motives (as *arpilleras* were sold abroad and helped generate a modest income for their makers) and to facilitate the expression of emotions and the creation of solidarity (Adams 2013, 9ff.; Adams 2012, 444f.; Agosín 2008; Dillon 2018). *Arpilleras* were made at varying degrees of distance to the events they document—both during and after the Pinochet dictatorship, by victim-survivors, relatives, solidarity movements, and artists—and in response to varying problems such as economic hardship, state-sponsored violence, forced disappearances, political imprisonment, and exile (Adams 2013; Agosín 2008).

The documentary register is also central to many other conflict textiles shown in the *Stitched Voices* exhibition. This is particularly so for the handkerchiefs of the *Bordando por la Paz y la Memoria* project. In a context of state denial, the makers of these conflict textiles embroider a handkerchief for each person killed in Mexico's so-called 'war on drugs' to register and count these death (House 2018). The handkerchiefs also document—as much as possible—details of the person who was killed and of their death: their name and age, how they were killed, where, when, on what occasion, and by whom. Handkerchiefs made for someone known by the maker furthermore tend to include information about what was valuable and enjoyable for that person in their life before they were disappeared or killed. In this way, the project is creating a textile archive.

## *The visual register of conflict textiles*

In their visual register, conflict textiles as object witnesses contain and constitute images. Discussing the role of *arpilleras* in protests against the Pinochet dictatorship, Jacqueline Adams (2013, viii; cf. Harrison 2018a) describes them as ‘a picture in cloth’. *Conflict Textiles* curator Roberta Bacic suggests thinking of the pieces in the collection as ‘textile photographs’, hinting at the fact that in *arpilleras* each textile doll usually represents an actual person who experienced the event that the *arpillera* records. Artist Eileen Harrison’s works resemble oil paintings in stitch (see also Harrison 2019), and textile maker Irene MacWilliam reflects on themes such as forced disappearances through abstract pieces.<sup>11</sup> Roland Bleiker (2018, 11) argues that the visual ‘[works] differently from words’, that images necessitate their own analytical methods (Bleiker 2015, 875; cf. Berger 1972). Drawing on the work of sociologist Gillian Rose (2016; cf. Bleiker 2015, 877), we suggest that to appreciate conflict textiles’ visual register we need to analyse how they are composed as images, what this composition tells us about the social contexts in which they were made and the political messages they carry<sup>12</sup>, and to combine this with an analysis of conflict textiles’ symbolic dimensions.

Compositional analysis (Rose 2016, 60) constitutes a way of going beyond the initial impression of the textiles as ‘lovely’ or ‘decorative’ (Rea 2017), to focus on content, colour, spatial organization and symbolism. There is no single way to make sense of conflict textiles’

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., Disappeared, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=337> (5 June 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Rose distinguishes between four sites at which an image could be studied and furthermore between three principal modalities of these sites. We here keep the focus intentionally narrow.

visuality. Content-wise, many conflict textiles depict experiences of violence and trauma, from torture to bombings and from military raids to drone strikes. Some conflict textiles feature perpetrators, but the majority concentrate on the victims of violence. Others show quotidian, communal scenes or depict acts of resilience and resistance, and yet others feature symbolic representations or are relatively abstract (Adams 2013, 2).

Conflict textiles' visuality works partly through colour. Chilean *arpilleras* are generally made in strikingly vivid hues, referencing their origin in traditional (non-political) decorative textiles depicting rural scenes. The palette of Northern Irish *arpilleras* such as *Pub Bombing, Waterford, Cushendall*<sup>13</sup> tends to be of more subdued tones.<sup>14</sup> These tendencies cannot be generalized, however; *Sala de Torturas*<sup>15</sup> and *Centro de Torturas Cuatro Alamos*<sup>16</sup>—two Chilean *arpilleras* depicting torture scenes—are also pale, drained of colour. Sometimes, the use of specific colours also serves to underline the particular emotional experiences a textile is giving an account of. In the mixed-media artwork *Continuum*<sup>17</sup>, for example, bright yellow and orange stitches recount the artist's personal experience of a bomb blast and convey the shock of finding herself still alive (cf. Harrison 2019).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflictextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=302> (5 June 2019).

<sup>14</sup> David Batchelor (2000) problematizes that brighter colours are often seen to indicate an (orientalized, feminized, pathologized or other kind of subordinated) other. This is not what we wish to suggest in our comparison of the palettes of Chilean and Northern Irish *arpilleras*. Rather, we note their differences without ascribing differential value to them.

<sup>15</sup> <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflictextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=16> (5 June 2019).

<sup>16</sup> <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflictextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=362> (5 June 2019).

<sup>17</sup> <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflictextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=371> (5 June 2019).

<sup>18</sup> We first met Eileen Harrison in her studio at Aberystwyth University's School of Art. In this meeting, we discussed Eileen's experiences as an artist and former nurse living in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, and she spoke to us about some of the artistic choices made in her pieces.

The spatial organization of conflict textiles' visuality varies between the geometrical patterns of *Hilvanando la Busqueda*<sup>19</sup>, the birds-eye view of *Digital Death*<sup>20</sup> and the *Anti-Apartheid Banner*<sup>21</sup>, and the overlapping images collaged in *Continuum*. The characteristic style of many *arpilleras* constructs a viewing position outside the image, simultaneously placing the onlooker at a distance from the depicted scene and drawing them in. By contrast, Irene MacWilliams' textile artwork *Disappeared*<sup>22</sup>, consisting of a black panel of fabric into which apertures have been cut hanging in front of a red panel of fabric covered in stitched words, makes it intentionally impossible for the onlooker to assume a stable position or to catch a full view of what the piece depicts.

Combining a compositional analysis of conflict textiles with an inquiry into their social and cultural contexts helps us to make further sense of the meaning of their visual register's different elements (Rose 2016, 60) and is particularly important when deciphering the use of symbolism in conveying political messages, provoking affective responses, and rendering people present in contexts of war and militarized violence. Conflict textiles' symbols include the sun rising over the Andean mountains, featured on many *arpilleras* as a political call for equality (Doolan 2016, 3), and the environmentalist, pacifist, and feminist symbols appearing on British protest banners from the 1980s onwards (Parker 2010, 210). Conflict textiles' spatial organization also sometimes has a symbolic significance. For Nicole Drouilly, the maker of *Hilvanando la busqueda*, the quilt's "geometrical designs ... give order to chaos" in the search for her forcefully disappeared sister and brother in law.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=358> (5 June 2019).

<sup>20</sup> <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=279> (5 June 2019).

<sup>21</sup> <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=381> (5 June 2019).

<sup>22</sup> <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=337> (5 June 2019).

<sup>23</sup> <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=358> (5 June 2019).



The colours in conflict textiles are often symbolic, too (cf. Andersen, Vuori, Guillaume 2015). In the Mexican handkerchiefs, red thread is used for someone who was murdered, green thread represents the hope that a forcefully disappeared person might still be found alive, and purple and pink threads record victims of femicide and gender violence (House 2018). Other examples include banners from the Greenham Common protests citing the Suffragette colours purple, white and green (Parker 2010, 211), and *arpilleras* which depict members of the secret police in grey (Adams 2012, 442). The use of red in *Continuum* signifies ‘the red of blood from so many who lost their lives; the red of fire of a city at night, burning’ (Harrisson 2018b; see also Harrisson 2019).

With an eye to the power relations contained within and reproduced by visual regimes of war, Tidy (2017, 96) emphasizes how “war subjects and the experiences that constitute them [...] are variously written into or out of accounts of war.” Attending to the visual register of conflict textiles provides a way to complicate and contest dominant images of militarized and political violence. Exploring the conflict textiles’ visual content, their spatial organization and their use of symbols and colour, and situating these choices in a wider social and political context, tells us about the particular kinds of violence they protest and about the deeply personal and political projects and strategies they engage in.

*The sensory register of conflict textiles*

The sensory<sup>24</sup> register of conflict textiles, which is closely tied but not limited to its material quality,<sup>25</sup> gives us further insight into political violences. War and militarized violence are ‘experienced across sensory registers’ (Tidy 2017, 101; cf. Parashar 2013, 624), and in many ways conflict textiles are, too. Their materials arouse our sense of touch and shape our feelings towards them, from the light delicate cotton of the Mexican handkerchiefs (House 2018) to the second-hand materials from which *arpilleras* are constructed and the rough hessian repurposed from potato and flour sacks used for *arpilleras*’ backing (Dillon 2018). There is also distinctive smell to textile fibers (Malkki 2015, 135), and as Eileen Harrisson (2019) explains, textiles can even stimulate our sense of hearing, as the amplified sound of needle and thread being pulled through fabric resembles her memory of the sound of a bomb blast during the Northern Irish Troubles.

With regard to their material qualities, we suggest to examine conflict textiles through the notion of a ‘social life of things’ (Appadurai 1986), thus looking at the context in which they were made, produced, and given social meaning, and in turn, how this meaning changes as they travel the world as objects. The methods through which conflict textiles are made, such as embroidery, appliqué, crochet, and quilting, are shaped by the textiles’ materials and by their social contexts. The Chilean *arpilleras*, for instance, used appliqué because it was

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<sup>24</sup> As Jennifer Mason and Katherine Davies (2009, 589) write, the term “sensory” often tends to mean “senses other than sight/vision.” This is also how we use it in the limited context of this article, acknowledging that an analysis of the sensory would ideally not ‘divide the “sensorium” into different elements and investigate them with [...] “matched” methods’, but rather find ‘open and creative ways of investigating this complexity and entanglement’ (Mason and Davies 2009, 600-601; cf. Drozdowski, de Nardi, Waterton 2016, 451f.).

<sup>25</sup> We draw the material and the sensory together for the purpose of this article. While we recognise there is a wider literature on the material culture of textile (e.g. Bryan-Wilson 2017) and the ‘material turn’ within and beyond international relations (cf. Miller 2005; Coole and Frost 2010; Connolly 2013; Lundborg and Vaughn-Williams 2015), for reasons of space we do not focus further on this aspect.

easier to learn than other textile-making techniques, hence providing a useful documentary medium for members of marginalized communities who felt an urgent need to capture and express their experiences (Doolan 2016, 3; Adams 2012, 439). These makers often used scraps of old clothes and other second-hand materials which they had at home, sometimes also including scraps of disappeared loved ones' clothing, thus imbuing the *arpilleras'* materials and the act of making with additional emotional and affective meaning. Moreover, *arpilleristas* used blanket stitch in wool or crochet to create a frame and indicate that their textiles were not artefacts for everyday practical use, but pictures to be hung and displayed (Bacic 2015, 394).

In spite of these material indications and political messages, once solidarity movements sold *arpilleras* to other countries, these textiles were sometimes made into mere decorative objects in British children's bedrooms or fell into oblivion in dusty attics. Later still, some of them were rediscovered and donated to the *Conflict Textiles* collection.<sup>26</sup> The idea and techniques of making *arpilleras* also travelled, inspiring new generations of activists in Chile and abroad as well as decorative textile makers to address political themes. These specific material and knowledge trajectories of conflict textiles are furthermore embedded in a global political history of needlework, which authors such as Clare Hunter (2019) and Julia Bryan-Wilson (2017) have started tracing. While this global historical context is beyond the scope of this article, we want to highlight that tracing the social life of conflict textiles offers a rich and so far little-explored inroad into the study of war and militarized violence.

In sum, conceptualizing conflict textiles as objects witnesses allows us to listen to the documentary, visual and sensory registers in which their stitched voices can speak to and

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<sup>26</sup> This was discussed in a conversation with Roberta Bacic about how the textiles travel and become part of the *Conflict Textile* collection during a *Stitched Voices* planning meeting in Aberystwyth.

inform research into war and violence. Given the tactile and powerfully affective manner in which conflict textiles convey the difficult and unsettling knowledge they bear, however, it is hard for writing alone to do justice to their messages. Therefore, we suggest the curation of conflict textiles as a richer methodology to appreciate conflict textiles in all their registers and hence as an alternative way of knowing about war and militarized violence. Or as art historian Jás Elsner (2018, 339) puts it in a reflection on his first experience of curation: ‘I think an exhibition is a form of knowledge much closer to a literary text or work of art than it is to an academic argument or an essay. It is something capable of being explored in many ways, too rich for a single proposition.’

### **Curating conflict textiles as a methodology of caring for difficult knowledge**

In the context of difficult, unsettling knowledge, Lehrer and Milton (2011, 4) suggest understanding the process of curating as a form of ‘caring for’. Engaging with this idea from the perspective of critical museum education, Roger Simon suggests that, in applied form, caring for unsettling knowledge necessitates careful, responsible curatorial practice, which involves ‘a very broad set of judgments that set the framing for the presentation of combinations of images, objects, text, and sound within a particular *mise-en-scène*’ (Simon 2011, 207).<sup>27</sup> Such curatorial practice is aware that ‘it cannot be a neutral enterprise’ (199). Decisions have to be taken as to what will be exhibited, where, and how the exhibits will be made public, what narrative will accompany them, and which possibilities for interaction, if

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, by far not all displays of war- and violence-related knowledge share the aim of unsettling (see e.g. Sylvester 2018).

any, will be offered to visitors (cf. Rose 2016, 50). These decisions influence how an exhibition offering difficult knowledge is perceived intellectually and affectively by its visitors and whether, by evoking processes of embodied or affective knowing, it can ‘serve a *transitive* function that could open up an indeterminate consideration of the force of history in social life’ (Simon 2011, 208).

A first major curatorial decision to be taken in exhibiting difficult knowledge concerns the question of what is to be shown, and relatedly, whose stories are to be told. As critical scholars, the rationale behind our decision to exhibit conflict textiles was to create space for victims and survivors of war and militarized violence and for the bereaved relatives and civil society activists—in their majority but not exclusively women—to share their experiences. Taking the works of *arpilleristas*, embroiderers, banner-makers and textile artists as a starting point of engagement enabled three important shifts in ways of knowing war and militarized violence. First, it shifted the focus from the (top-down/distant) knowledge of public authorities, academics, or experts to the (bottom-up/close) perspective of those experiencing the effects of political violences in their everyday lives. Second, bringing together in one exhibition the works of many different textile makers—of activists and artists, of survivors, relatives and allies, of people from the Global South and North—tore apart the thick fabric of dominant narratives, which distribute roles of victims and perpetrators, heroes and villains, and attribute honour and blame, agency and passivity (Stone 2000, 157-168). Finally, and intimately interlaced with the previous point, telling the stories of militarised and political violence through the stitched voices of textile makers allowed us to unstitch the explanatory coherence spawned by academic socialization and position, to give way to the patchiness of the multiple meanings that constitute social reality.

These points were visible, for example, in a roundtable that was part of our programme of events and brought together, in the Main Hall of Aberystwyth's Department of International Politics, a banner-maker from South Wales, an activist from the Mexican *Bordando por la Paz y la Memoria* movement and a scholar of the gendered history of embroidery in Britain to discuss how the making of textiles is linked to the creation of spaces of resistance, communication, and discussion for women. As banner-maker Thalia Campbell remarked, this was not the kind of concept-driven conversation that this space usually sees, yet it went to the heart of manifold issues of international politics, including nuclear arms, violent conflict, global inequality, and gender and politics.

A second important curatorial decision concerns the way in which individual pieces are exhibited, including the exhibition space and the exhibits' placement within it. *Stitched Voices* was displayed in Aberystwyth Arts Centre's Gallery 1, a large, light, white space with high ceilings and movable partition walls, which provided a blank canvas for our exhibition. The Arts Centre is located on Aberystwyth University's campus. Situated in a rural location, it has strong ties to the local community and functions as a hub for staff, students, members of the community and other visitors. The changing exhibition programme is made up of a mixture of local artists' work, community group projects, and touring and commissioned exhibitions. Taking a side step from interventions that focus on the role of elite institutions in curating conflict (Reeves 2018b; Sylvester 2006), we argue for an additional focus on hybrid institutions such as Aberystwyth Arts Centre. Located at a distance from, though not outside, state and elite centres of power, Aberystwyth Arts Centre provided the opportunity to curate conflict in a manner that better acknowledges the complexities of narratives of war and militarized violence. The Art Centre's curator chose to set up three partition walls, to create corners to provide a more intimate atmosphere, which suited the personal stories the textiles

tell. Meanwhile, we decided (and were encouraged by the Arts Centre's curator) to place a large table and chairs in the centre of the gallery to facilitate workshops among the textiles, and to invite interaction and textile-making more generally.

Our central curatorial questions were how to hang the textiles, in which groupings, in which parts of the gallery, and according to which logic. Museums and exhibitions dealing with political issues often group exhibits chronologically, thereby giving an exhibition a beginning, a middle and an ending. Contrary to this, our team together with the *Conflict Textiles* curator sought to refrain from telling an overarching story with an overall chronological or thematic logic. Rather, textiles were hung in loose clusters of affinity. For instance, one corner contained both the Mexican handkerchiefs documenting the victims of the 'war on drugs', a growing installation of solidarity handkerchiefs embroidered in the course of the exhibition, and a protest *arpillera* referencing not only forced disappearances in Mexico, but also the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the long political struggle of the indigenous Zapatistas movement, made collectively by several solidarity groups in London.<sup>28</sup>

With regard to the textual environment inscribing the exhibition space and its role in guiding the visitor's interpretation and understanding, our team took a layered approach that allowed visitors to choose the intensity of guidance. Labels next to the textiles provided a piece's name, maker, year, and place of origin (in English and Welsh). Background information was available via brochures, books, and films on display in the gallery. Further textual materials included the translations of the Spanish text on the quilt *Hilvanando la Busqueda* and the Mexican handkerchiefs, and a poem written by Northern Irish writer Damian Gorman about the exhibition pieces and their makers. The exhibition title itself was 'textilized' in the form of a large quilt in red, brown and purple colours made by local textile

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<sup>28</sup> *We are seeds*, <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=374> (5 June 2019).

artist Becky Knight, which brought the title display into a close material relationship with the exhibits.

A last set of curatorial decisions concerned the programming organized to engage visitors with the exhibition, our team and one another. To do justice to the different aspects of conflict textiles, we opted for a broad range of activities of varying formats. While some revolved around making, participating and the multi-sensoriness of experience (textile workshops, music, dance, poetry, film), others provided the chance for a more intellectual engagement with the textiles (lectures, roundtables, academic workshops). Many of these events took place in the gallery, which not only brought the gallery space to life, but also sought to create an environment that would be closer to (albeit, of course, being unable to recreate) the everyday contexts in which our exhibits had been collectively crafted—a Chilean church group, a Mexican *plaza* on a Sunday afternoon, or the home of a textile artist.

All curatorial decisions that went into *Stitched Voices* aimed to care for the highly emotional meanings that the textiles have to their makers (cf. Adams 2012, 451f.; Agosín 2014). For Nicole Drouilly, the maker of *Hilvanando la Busqueda*, her quilt provides solace for those who have for decades been searching for their disappeared loved ones: ‘a labyrinth ends in a wall...mandalas...guide my actions and infinite journeys.’<sup>29</sup> Activists, too, describe how an emotional bond with their textiles emerges in the process of making: ‘[O]ur own connection with the work grew and made it hard to let it go—not least when we were asked whether “*We are seeds*” could be part of the *Stitched Voices* exhibition’ (Pardo 2017). Curating as caring meant for us that in taking care of the pieces lent to us, we also had to respect and care for the emotional relationship the makers have to their pieces and the new relationships we were creating between the makers, *Stitched Voices* and us. This meant to

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<sup>29</sup> <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=358> (5 June 2019).



establish trustful relationships with the makers, to respect the time they took to decide whether to lend us pieces, to continuously communicate with them about the exhibition, and to involve them in events.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to our responsibility vis-à-vis the makers of conflict textiles, we also needed to care for the affective reactions of the exhibition visitors. In their seeming colourful and crafted innocence, conflict textiles confront visitors with the horrors of war and militarized violence. But they also offer them multiple perspectives and facilitate dialogue, connection and action as a way forward from these confrontations. As one of the *Stitched Voices* tour guides recounts, '[...] my groups started off politely interested in the *arpilleras*, but by the end they all seemed very moved by the exhibition and usually expressed a desire to go through it again and bring others' (Young 2017). What this suggests is that the exhibition did more than create a space for multiple narratives—it also aroused emotions in its visitors.<sup>31</sup> Simon (2011) contends that it is through giving rise to a range of emotions in visitors, and how they reflect on the provenance of these emotions, that exhibitions of unsettling knowledge such as *Stitched Voices* affect visitors' thinking and even acting. Since bearers of difficult knowledge such as conflict textiles have a strong 'affective force' (195), curating difficult knowledge entails a specific responsibility.

To understand what potential breakdowns in visitors' preconceived ideas and beliefs this responsibility may entail, it is helpful to employ political theorist Mihaela Mihai's (2018, 4-7) account of how affect, in the case of her research sparked through certain literary works,

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<sup>30</sup> This close connection was not possible in all cases, however, as especially some of the Chilean *arpilleras* are anonymous. In some of these cases, *Conflict Textiles* curator Roberta Bacic can trace where the textile comes from through a process of talking to those who donate the textiles, research in books, and exhibiting the textiles in different contexts. This information is then fed back to the descriptions on the *Conflict Textiles* website.

<sup>31</sup> On the challenges of researching emotions see e.g. Crawford (2000), Bleiker (2015), Hutchinson (2016).

may challenge and alter thought and action by means of three epistemic frictions that works of art can create. ‘Ideational epistemic frictions’ expose and put into question our conceptual-hermeneutical frameworks made up of commonly held ideas, beliefs and meanings; ‘moral epistemic frictions’ unsettle the moral-political foundations of our sense of justice; and ‘experiential epistemic frictions’, finally, extend the emotional-sensorial capacity to approach others’ lived experiences.

From exhibition visitors’ blogs, evaluation forms and guest book entries, we know that *Stitched Voices* created such epistemic frictions and therefore had unsettling effects on many visitors.<sup>32</sup> For the purpose of illustration, in the following we concentrate on the reactions of two visitors who reflected on *Stitched Voices* in online blogs—one a student of fine art, the other an art critic. Both approached the exhibition with strong preconceptions:

‘In the changeover week, where the gallery is closed while the new exhibition goes up, I had a quick look at some pictures of the pieces that would be displayed [in the *Stitched Voices* exhibition]. Ashamedly I immediately wrote of[f] these arts-and-crafts-like textiles in bold, garish colours as being uninteresting and unrelated to myself and my own abstract painting work’ (Rea 2017).

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<sup>32</sup> Asked in what ways *Stitched Voices* had changed their perspective, visitors responded, e.g.: ‘It’s made me realise how the simple act of sewing here reflects the courage and bravery of grieving women all over the world, who have lost sons/fathers/husbands in terrible circumstances’, and that, ‘I did not know that these types of arts could be so powerful and inspiring.’ One visitor reflected that ‘women’s voices have historically been undervalued and this powerful expression of their anger communicated through textile—a “women’s work” medium—is even more powerful because of this.’ Asked whether *Stitched Voices* had inspired them to raise their own voice, visitors commented, e.g., that, ‘[the exhibition] did open my eyes to show me that [there] are many forms of fighting for what you deserve/want’, and that, ‘I see how sewing can be a form of remembrance, resistance, activism. And I’m moved by the revelation.’

‘There is a long tradition of protest and human struggle being expressed by means of textile hangings and banners, however I am uncomfortable with the idea that there may necessarily be an artistic dimension to works of this nature. I have this same feeling about war art, so I approached this exhibition with some misgivings’ (Tomlinson 2017).

Both quotes exemplify the conceptual-hermeneutical framework dominant in the art world, which differentiates between the colourful craft of the textile and the distinguished world of fine art. In addition, the second quote raises moral-political concerns of conflating war and art. The way that *Stitched Voices* unsettled these preconceptions concerned an emotional-experiential understanding that was brought about by two aspects of the conflict textiles and the way in which they were curated. On the one hand, it was the choice of conflict *textiles* (rather than photographs or other artistic media) with their different registers that caused affective understanding and, in extension, disruption and change of thought. As the art student wrote:

‘The use of textiles is so moving because it is such a personal medium; textiles appear homely because they are used to adorn the home and would traditionally be made by families for the family [...]. However these textiles demonstrate how these families and communities have been torn apart by violence and many of them mourn the loss of those who have disappeared or been killed. [...] The textiles are not twee decorations for a home but efforts to stitch back together homes and communities that

have been ripped apart. Through needle and stitch, these women have fought, grieved and articulated their stories to a public who needed to hear' (Rea 2017).

The other way in which epistemic friction became possible was through embodied knowing, an understanding inspired through the sensory act of making itself. The exhibition included a corner with two armchairs placed close to the Mexican handkerchiefs of *Bordando por la Paz y la Memoria*, inviting visitors to pick up a handkerchief and embroider a few lines themselves.<sup>33</sup> The art critic's reaction to this set-up illustrates how the process and sensoriness of textile making and its embodied and affective forms of knowing can affect change of thought:

'Hung out like washing above one corner of the gallery are handkerchiefs, embroidered with messages remembering the dead and disappeared of Mexico. Visitors are encouraged to contribute to this work by doing simple running stitch along already-marked handkerchiefs in the two sewing chairs below. It is an immersive process, more so for the writing, which suggests stories that are almost too awful to contemplate [...]. I am soon lost in a task that is only a few letters long. How much more then must this act of devotion, of willful remembrance, mean to the people who have experienced the appalling violence, bereavements and unknowingness?' (Tomlinson 2017)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For photos of the embroidery corner in the *Stitched Voices* exhibition, see <https://stitchedvoices.wordpress.com/2018/06/10/following-the-threads-to-mexico/> (5 June 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Feedback by other visitors echoed these impressions and thoughts: 'I sewed some letters on one of the Mexican handkerchiefs—an emotional and powerful moment'; 'I helped embroider part of one of the handkerchiefs. A surprisingly powerful experience'; 'I stitched a bit and felt connected.'

The quote illustrates how the meaning of the handkerchiefs is understood and experienced not only intellectually, by contemplating the stories stitched onto the fabric (documentary register) or their composition (visual register), but more importantly through the multi-sensory act of stitching. In this sense, curating textiles as a way of knowing war and militarized violence is more than just a different intellectual engagement ‘in search of thinking space’ (Bleiker 2017). Understood as caring for difficult, unsettling knowledge, curating an exhibition of conflict textiles enabled affective and embodied knowing among many of our visitors and thereby contributed to a transformative experience.

## **Conclusion**

Taking up the thread of the *Stitched Voices* exhibition, this article has spun two arguments about conflict textiles and their curation. On the one hand, conflict textiles as object witnesses carry and convey difficult knowledge. In their documentary, visual, and sensory registers, they speak of war and militarized violence across form, colour and tone. Locating analysis in the exploration of these multiple registers, conflict textiles invite reflection on how we come to know war and its subjects. Incorporating conflict textiles into our ways of knowing about militarized and political violence opens up readings and perspectives which are less often considered in our analyses—not only relating to whose lives and voices are considered, but also which media count in doing so.

On the other hand, we have suggested curating—in the sense of caring for—conflict textiles as an appropriate methodology to convey the unsettling knowledge contained in

conflict textiles. Careful curating allows us to recreate the patchiness of life, experience and narrative, and enables embodied and affectual ways of experiencing and knowing. This is where conflict textiles speak to critical military studies, even as their knowledge unsettles some of its frames and assumptions. In exploring the multiple registers of conflict textiles and carefully curating their difficult knowledge, we have proposed a process of understanding militarized and political violence that attends to the ways in which individuals and communities live through and resist these violences.

The multiple affective registers of conflict textiles are difficult to capture through writing alone. Yet, having situated understandings of the unsettling knowledge that these pieces carry through their careful curation, it is useful to reflect on how we attend to their complexities in academic praxis. In a think piece on academic writing practice, Katie Collins (2016) notes that social science scholars often think about writing and research through metaphors of buildings and construction sites, giving ‘a comforting sense of control and progress’ in theories and arguments. Needlecraft metaphors, by contrast, allow thinking about researching and writing, and ‘about how we write in relation to particular knowledge claims and communities’, in a way that ‘is more about piecing together fragments of things of varying source and quality’ and that ‘wouldn’t necessarily fit together seamlessly’ in a collective and social activity (Collins 2016). Adding to critical military studies and international relations work which has sought to represent and untangle the patchiness of war and political violence, *Stitched Voices* brings stitch to the fore. A collective and social activity, our academic practice and thinking has become interwoven with intellectual, embodied and affectual experiences of working with and learning from the textiles, their makers, and their making.

It is not only academic research and writing activities, however, that researchers can think about through needlework metaphors. As Donna Haraway (1988, 586) argues, researchers themselves do not fit together seamlessly as knowledgeable subjects: ‘The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.’ Acknowledging and engaging with needlework such as conflict textiles, and with their rich possibilities of approaching and caring for difficult knowledge, can open different imaginations of the political and of academics’ role and responsibility as crafters of knowledge in and about militarized and political violence. Conflict textiles implore us to disrupt, challenge, and resist simplistic narratives of war and conflict, and instead engage our creativity and criticality to craft new stories.

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