Derry Dolls: A Return to Textiles… with a Twist

Kyra Reynolds, 10th May 2021

When Roberta Bacic of Conflict Textiles asked me to create a textile doll during the first lockdown, I didn't realise what a powerful journey I had embarked upon. I had seen the 'Embracing Human Rights: Conflict Textiles' Journey' exhibition at Roe Valley Arts and Cultural Centre in Limavady advertised online (The exhibition is available here), which consisted of textile works depicting human rights abuses all over the world in regions of conflict. Most intriguing was that the pieces were created by the victims from those countries. I work for the Bogside and Brandywell Initiative in Derry as an International Fund for Ireland-funded Peace Barriers Programme Worker. Our aim is to improve cross-community relations and trust to a point where physical segregation barriers can be removed in the Bishop Street-Fountain area.At the time, I was trying to find something different from the routine activities we do with our residents: fun days, trips- (you know, the usual stuff). I arranged for my group of women to attend an arpillera-making workshop with Roberta. I thought that it would be nice for them to create a piece that showed the peacebuilding journey they have been on with each other for a number of years. Lockdown quashed those plans. But Roberta had another idea. She posted the instructions online for people to make textile dolls relating to the exhibition piece that resonated with them most (the entire exhibition had been put online in response to Covid). Struggling to find anything that I could do with my group that wasn't face-to-face, I decided,'that's what we'll do, we'll make dolls!'

The Start of My Own Textile Journey

I wasn't expecting Roberta to inform me that I had to make a doll myself first, as a precursor to asking the ladies from the interface area to do it. As a PhD-holding academic, who specialises in conflict and peacebuilding, the nerves and fear that filled my body left me a little surprised. It couldn't be that hard I thought, all I have to do is piece together a few bits of fabric……. Right?!?

Wrong!!

I was struck most by a piece from the exhibition that depicted drought and starvation in Zimbabwe(Figure 1 Below).

Figure 1: Starvation in Zimbabwe
Zimbabwean arpillera, Lakheli Nyanthi, 2016; Photo Ukuthula Trust, © Conflict Textiles.

I began thinking back to my uni days, how I learnt about the connection between famine and social unrest. I aced that exam.

I began collecting materials for my starving doll (Figure 2). Everything I used made his legs and arms too plump. The only thing that fitted was stick reeds from an air diffuser. As I pieced this little character together, I was reminded that I was moulding this material to reflect a real-life circumstance- this is actually happening- there are people out there with arms like sticks. The oversize of his head in comparison to his stick limbs was harrowing. Clothing this little 'skeleton' in the tiniest piece of an old pillowcase compounded the point. I began to put myself in those shoes: in Zimbabwe with scorched, infertile earth and no food. I proceeded to stitch a frown upon his little face and carefully draw eyes that reflected the desperation I felt when I imagined myself there. The aced exam on the causes of poverty and resulting unrest suddenly lost all relevance; I was ashamed by my initial shallowness and placed a lit candle next to my doll for all those living this nightmare.

Figure 2: My doll relating to the drought and starvation in Zimbabwe.

Roberta asked me to make a second doll, this one in my area of research (Figure 3). For my PhD, I studied conflict and peacebuilding in Israel-Palestine, focusing particularly on the West Bank Separation Barrier. I'd never been forced to 'feel' the conflict before, to emotionally connect with it. In fact, in the academic world, my supposed detachment and neutrality was often highlighted as an advantage.I

Figure 3: My doll relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

parachuted into the region, gathered evidence, identified fitting theories, claimed I knew the conflict like the back of my hand, published the results in journals and moved on to the next study. Once again, the power of the sewing process and constructing my doll transported me mentally back to the region. Instead of seeing myself sitting interviewing my 'subjects', I was now paying extra attention to the little boy I spotted reaching through the bars of the checkpoint in Bethlehem, the jolly grandfather that was entertaining everyone on the bus despite the tense situation, the line of Palestinians forced off the bus to have their passes checked whilst Israelis and tourists remained comfortably inside, and the man who told me he dreamed he could fly so he could transgress the military barriers to see the beach and the seaside. I welled up and cried. So did my doll.

The Women from Derry and the Triax Dolls Exhibition

Next, I would attempt to get the women from Derry to make their own dolls (the Triax Dolls exhibition displaying all of the created doll can be found here). They looked at me like I had five heads when I told them the activity via Zoom. However, after introducing them to my two dolls, they at least agreed to humour me and come up with a doll relating to the human rights exhibition piece which resonated with them. I gave them a week. I wondered if they would find it as powerful and emotive as I had. The results were amazing.

A piece from the original exhibition documenting the marching of wives, sisters and daughters for improved working conditions in Peru mines threw one Derry women into reminiscence. She explained:

> **"I picked '*March of the miners' wives*' because of the struggle they went through for better conditions for their husbands. It made me think on my father; he wasn't a miner, but he worked in trains that used the coals that the miners worked hard to bring up from the mine".**

Another, inspired by the same piece, said:

> **"My father was a miner, but he didn't have to work in bad conditions like those in Peru. Their human rights were denied, and they had no freedom of expression. My doll Andrea marched with her mother and sisters to protest against these working conditions in the miners' camps; they marched for days".**

Some women were reminded about the mirroring of the situations to those of their own family during The Troubles. The '*My Daughter's Wedding'* arpillera by Fàtima Mansouri from the original exhibition mirrored a family situation during The Troubles for one of the Derry women. She explained:

> **"This story touched me, as the mother couldn't attend her daughter's wedding because she lost her residence while she was looking after her very sick mother. It got me thinking about my cousin Patricia, who didn't have her mum at her wedding as she was murdered during the Troubles in our country. I could not imagine what Patricia was feeling like on her very special day".**

Another woman was triggered by the piece about land mines. She wrote:

> **"I picked the 'Land Mines' by Heidi Drahota. My uncle lost his leg in a car bomb. My doll is a young girl who was in the mountains to gather firewood when she stood on a mine and lost her leg".**

As well as encouraging the processing of personal memories, the activity also made the women connect to the humans in the various human rights abuse situations. Notably, the dolls were given names as well as their own(often detailed) narrative, that was obviously 'seen' by the women as they sewed the dolls together. For example, one woman told the story of her doll who was struck by a landmine:

> **"My wee boy went out to play and found a toy plane. He thought- 'great, a toy to play with', so he lifted the plane and… BANG!... up went the plane and the wee boy's hands, arm, and leg with it. The poor wee boy was left maimed and with life changing consequences".**

Another's doll relating to landmines was carefully thought through and detailed, an indication that the maker was really connecting with the people in this terrible situation:

> **"Here's my doll (Lindiwe). She was out collecting wood to sell with her brother (Tocalosh) when she lifted a strange bit of metal; it blew up and she lost an eye, arm and leg. Now she has to heal fully while she waits on prosthetic limbs, if she's lucky. A lot of the time they will be second hand. She has no mouth because children's voices aren't heard".**

In my work, we are always trying to think of ways to get local residents into dialogue about difficult topics pertaining to the Troubles and segregation, but until this experiment with Conflict Textiles, this proved elusive. This project made them open up, process memories, and put themselves in the shoes of others. Since then, we have been able to do direct conversational programmes about difficult issues with the women, all thanks to the processing they underwent with a needle and thread.

Bringing back the needle and thread: repairing wounds

Textiles have always been a medium with which to record thoughts and experiences. Physically, yes, they are a communication tool and their value in this regard has been relatively well documented and celebrated. Yet, sewing as a *process* also allows the sewer to work through their emotions. The 'mindful' label has been attributed to the activity in more recent times, recognising its ability to direct our attention towards our thoughts and feelings. French sculpture, Louise Bourgeois, once said that "The act of sewing is a process of emotional repair". If we think about what happened in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, we can see the applicability of much textile language to the societal situation: the unravelling of peace, the tearing of communities and families, and the resultant "patchwork quilt", as many commentators have called it, in reference to the segregated geographies of Catholic and Protestant areas. Perhaps it can also allow us to process the conflict as we attempt to move towards healing. I hope to do more textiles work with the women to untap these bottled-up memories and emotions that must be processed for healing to occur. Ironically, the city of Derry/Londonderry itself was built on the shirt industry which remained the mainstay of the economy for more than a century. Initially, home-based workstations with men doing the weaving and women doing the sewing were the norm. However, the 1850s saw the advent of the factory system, which was even more mechanised with the birth of the sewing machine in 1853. Some of the women in my cross-community group were 'Factory Girls'.Thanks to Conflict Textiles, we are now taking back the process of sewing to the human hand, dropping the rigid stencils and imposed product design, and using the freedom of the process to work through our inner unhealed trauma and share our stories. In doing so, we hope we can help others do the same.

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the International fund for Ireland (IFI) and the aim of the work is to improve community relations across the Triax area, and in particular, across the interface between Bishop Street and the Fountain. The ultimate aim is towards a future without physical barriers dividing communities. Kyra is also an academic, having completed her PhD in 2017 focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.