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## **Crafting Ecologies of Existence: More Than Human Community Making in Colombian Textile Craftivism**

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### **Accepted Version**

### **Abstract**

Based on ethnographic work with several women's textile making collectives in Colombia, this paper approaches their crafting practices as everyday doings of socio-ecological reparation, in the midst of social and environmental devastation caused by the armed conflict. Rather than focusing on the relevance of their activities for political activism and historical memory, an ecological perspective allows us to emphasise their work as a mundane, more than social process of communal regeneration. We discuss how women in these collectives, after painful and violent displacements, craft new ecologies of existence: new relations and interdependencies within more than human worlds that cultivate new modes of care and attention, values and sensibilities in precarious living spaces. Ecological reparation is an everyday, vital, ongoing practice essential for communal resurgence and for re-establishing collectivities that sustain liveable worlds.

### **Key Words**

Crafting and Making, Reparation, Community, Ecologies, Care

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## Preamble

There is a striking colourful mural on the facade of a large derelict building in Mampuján Viejo, a rural village of Afro descendants in the Montes de Maria region of Colombia left abandoned for years after a paramilitary forced displacement (figure 1, end of this document). Painted by the Colombian street artist Guache in collaboration with local residents, it represents a patchwork of mountains, rivers, traditional crop fields, villages, as well as farmers, fishermen, peasants, plants and animals – representing a landscape before the intensification of paramilitary presence and violence amid the Colombian Armed Conflict coupled with the surge of big agribusinesses of palm oil and teak monocultures drastically changed social-environmental conditions. Depicted too within this landscape are significant moments of struggles during the conflict: armed men, houses burning on the day of the forced displacement (11th of March 2000), a community's march in Cartagena (in 2010) to demand reparation, and a scale displaying the number of the ruling of the Supreme Court in 2011, establishing the right to reparation for Mampuján victims (Corte Suprema De Justicia, 2011). Out of this intricate creative assemblage of places, human and non-human beings, activities and memories of massacres and protests, an imposing figure of an Earth-Afro-Woman emerges. Embracing two birds she has a large corn cob growing out of her breast, from which filaments stem out, some becoming roots, some threads for sewing the multi-layered fabric that she holds in her hands. This fabric wraps, and makes up at once, assemblage, mural and herself. Her earth-rooted, material and spiritual, textile-figure embodies memory of life, community and land, as well as her agency in the present re-weaving of the fabric of it all.

## Introduction – methodologies, concepts, and positionalities

War, by definition, contaminates and abruptly tears up the physical world of places, objects, human and non-human beings. It affects women in disproportionate specific ways. During the Colombian Armed Conflict (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2016), gender-based violence intensified with sexual abuse, discrimination, impoverishment, especially indigenous or afro-descendant women in rural areas (Balduino de Melo, 2015; Davies & True, 2015, pp. 501–506; Lozano Lerma, 2016; Quiceno Toro & Villamizar Gelves, 2020; Rojas Silva et al., 2012; Wirtz et al., 2014). The imposing figure of the weaver at the centre of the mural described above celebrates the struggle and resistance of the Mampuján weavers collective, *Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz* (Women Weaving Dreams and Flavours of Peace). They formed in 2006, out of a grassroot network of Afro-descendant victims of the conflict relocated in María La Baja after forced displacements, to engage in textile crafting as a way of mourning, healing, remembering and repairing the social fabric of their community – work for which they were awarded the Premio Nacional de Paz (National Peace Prize) in 2015 (Montaño, 2015). Women started weaving collective memories in primitive art into the quilts, of events and atrocities that affected them and their village.

Existing literature and institutional initiatives engaging with craft collectives in the context of the conflict have focused mainly on the role of textile craft for the reconstruction of historical memory and reconciliation, the documentation of armed conflict, or in the work of mourning (Belalcazar Valencia & Molina Valencia, 2017; Bello Tocancipá & Aranguren Romero, 2020; González Arango, 2015). This work pays close attention to *content* of stories and narrations of the textiles. While following on this body of work this article draws from contemporary ecological thought to shift focus towards more than human *processes* and *practices* that sustain textile “craftivism” (Adamson, 2013;

Bratich & Brush, 2011; Buszek & Robertson, 2011; Greer, 2014), to illuminate their role in the collective reparation of community.

Our methodological approach is an 'ethnography of practices', following relations crafted by women through textile and other everyday practices - involving activities with other beings, matter and the local social-environment context (e.g., child and animal care, food cooking and sharing, harvesting, religious or spiritual rituals as well as artistic performances) - aimed at continuing life in the midst of the hazardous and oppressive context of the armed conflict (Quiceno Toro, 2016, p. 14). From this perspective, ethnography is an encounter between knowledges, where we are affected (Favret-Saada, 1990) by the experiences, ways of doing, and forces that traverse the life of our interlocutors, and not only their discourses or testimonies. This is particularly important in contexts of violence where the complexity of survivors' experiences is often reduced to silence, fear and a constant demand to give testimony. Unlike more traditional forms of ethnography, where categories or grand narratives of memory, reconciliation, struggle or resistance are employed to interpret women's textile work, the focus of our ethnographic explorations is not only on the ways war damages but also on the "everyday craft" that enables community continuation.

The article is based on fieldwork and interviews with women in four textile making groups in Mampuján, Bellavista (Bojayá), Quibdó and Sonsón. The theoretical framework underpinning this paper emphasises the ecological dimensions of community reparation. As they turn to craftivism, women affected by the conflict make new connections and cultivate new modes of attention, values and sensibilities, with themselves and each other as well as with non-humans. Such ecological approach expands understanding of these practices beyond the limitations of predominantly anthropocentric social and political readings by privileging a "more than social" understanding of women's collective doings to materially repair their communities. From this perspective, communities and social movements are not just led and organised by human, social, political concerns and relations but by the interdependencies with nonhuman agencies that support life (Papadopoulos, 2018). We call "ecologies of existence" the complex net of more than human relations and contexts that embed social, collective, material, affective, spiritual and symbolic worlds that women inhabit and shape through their practices and are vital to continuing supporting life *amid* the conflict.

This use of the term "ecology" goes beyond (scientific) discourses of ecosystem relations to encompass the worldly connections between different beings and environments (Papadopoulos, 2021). It is closer to Felix Guattari's generalised ecology or "ecosophy" (Guattari, 1995) with a nested articulation of: environmental, socio-political, community, mental, affective and spiritual dimensions. Although ecologies of existence are part of the ecosystems they are embedded in, they are not determined by these ecosystems, nor even by place and landscapes, but they are dependent on them in generating a sense of belonging (O'Gorman, 2014) and homemaking (Tham et al., 2019). This form of ecological thinking is inherently political, entangling ecological existence with power relations, as well as with obligations of maintenance, repair and care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Ecologies shape social worlds and meanings of community and identity, as landscapes and resources co-shape organising and ways of living, as well as the possibilities of resistance and resurgence (Papadopoulos & Puig de la Bellacasa, 2020). As black geographies and decolonial environmental scholarship have shown, there is no "ecologically neutral" place to go back to (Nightingale, 2011; Wright, 2018). Contemporary ecologies are always already shaped by social, gendered, racial and colonial spatial conflicts (Ferdinand, 2019). The landscapes portrayed in the textiles we discuss in this paper are marked in all these intersectional ways but also, as we will see, for the communities they

are also hopeful in ways that, as Anna Tsing (2014, p. 92) puts it, 'an easy dichotomy between pristine and damaged' could not apply.

In what follows, we name different textile and everyday practices that four women groups engage with. Each group, as well as their communities and landscapes are specific. By re-weaving partial aspects of their experience, we do not aim to erase their differences but rather offer a window into their worlds, illuminating the importance of an ecological dimension in the understanding of their practices. Like the weaver in the Mampuján mural we described above, women in the collectives whose stories are relayed in this paper are re-weaving their ecological existences. They knit, sow, and mend the diverse, split, and injured socio-ecologies that they sustain and sustain them. And they too are woven into these community ecologies through crafting and associated practices. And so are we, partially woven too, ultimately, as researchers committed to social-ecological justice, as we re-weave their stories from the perspective of our own partial relations and attentions to their lives and practices. Despite being situated in diverse locations in the Global South and Global North we are all living far from these conflict areas where these women live. And our engagement with the collectives is also different. Quiceno Toro's long-standing trustful relationships with the participating communities have not only enabled her to engage with them, but also contributed to foster new connections between the women and the project in which the other authors are part of. Our initial framework for navigating these complex relationships is an 'ethics of entanglement' (Sundberg, 2015) that allows us to connect with these communities' struggle for a world without violence and war through our own experiences and sites of struggle for social-ecological justice.

Weaving, as non-totalising metaphor for agency, comes from a feminist tradition engaging with the tensions and contradictions of solidarity within difference<sup>1</sup>. As Leigh Star (2009, p. 336) puts it, weaving can be seen as a methodology that allows the recognition of different "genres (...) coloured threads and patterns" that are "both distinct and enmeshed; there is both artisanal skill and issues of domestic work/hobbies vs art and its markets and makings. It is both individual and collective, solitary and group oriented". Similarly, this paper re-weaves the stories of these textile making collectives without aiming to present them as a seamless harmonious fabric. To approach these multiple, complex and irreducible dimensions, we first introduce reasons for reading textile craftivism with an ecological perspective, we then describe the context of ecological displacement and dispossession. Finally, we engage with practices of reweaving ecological existences in Colombian women textile groups around three themes: emergency care, reclaiming ecological space, regenerating more than human relations and embodied reparation.

### **Textile craftivism from an ecological perspective**

Literature on craft or domestic arts – especially embroidery, knitting and sewing – in contexts of conflict has documented and celebrated the artistic value and political use of textile artworks made by groups of women to represent moments of resistance, issues of human rights, collective justice and historical memory of their communities (Agosín, 1989; Arias López, 2015; García, 2017; González Arango, 2015; Newmeyer, 2008; Nickell, 2015). In Colombia, other work has recognised the centrality of the material dimension of textile labours and how these contribute to configure feminist activisms and collectivities (Sánchez-Aldana et al., 2019). Here textile activism is not just a means of "political expression" but social processes involving more than human materials (Pérez-Bustos et al., 2016).

Latin America and Colombia in particular has been home to some pioneering uses of textile crafting as political resistance and historical memory (Arias López, 2015; González Arango, 2015)<sup>2</sup>.

One of these formed in the community of Bojayá, in the Pacific region of Chocó, an emblematic place in the development of the conflict where, in addition to selective assassinations and displacements, on 2 May 2002 they suffered one of the worst massacres, leaving 79 civilians killed and countless wounded and displaced (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2010). Established at the end of the 1990s as a community of Afro-descendant and Indigenous women around activities for religious and cultural festivities in the church of San Pablo Apóstol de Bellavista, the Guayacán group in Bojayá has engaged over the years with textile craft and prayers for cultivating historical memory and opposition to the armed conflict. After the massacre, women of Guayacán elaborated several textile panels in memory and dignity of the victims. These famously include embroidered lists of victim's names (figure 2) but also often characteristic landscape features of the region, like the Atrato river, fish, boats and flowers. Other examples of Colombian testimonial textiles (González Arango, 2019) are the Mampuján's *tapices* (quilted tapestries), some exhibited in the National Museum of Colombia in Bogotá and also abroad. Several depict the day of Mampuján's forced displacement, the 11th of March 2000, by a group of paramilitaries, known as *Desplazamiento*<sup>3</sup>. Extreme violence is represented: armed men intimidating the population, some beating up or holding victims at gunpoint, men from the community transporting a sick person in a hammock, a woman is being raped, and several other women and men run away as they carry bundles of clothes on their heads.

In 2019 together with other researchers from Colombia and the UK we took part in fieldwork visits in all of these communities for the research project 'Mending the New'<sup>4</sup>, which aimed to shed new light on the healing, restorative and constructive potential of textile making for negotiating memory and reconciliation in these and other communities severely affected by the armed conflict and where sewing groups emerged. Yet, accompanying women in their sewing meetings we realised that much happening in these crafting-spaces is not only about textile making, nor about (remembering) the conflict.

One of the first communities we visited was Mampuján, in January 2019. On our first day of fieldwork, the research team was invited to one of their sewing meetings in a community outdoor space. When we arrived, a group of women had gathered around a large quilted tapestry in the making laid on the ground (figure 4), representing the village of Mampuján, with its characteristic landscapes as well as people, the artists and other members of the community, engaged in various life sustaining activities: a man pushes a wheelbarrow, a woman carries a water tank over her head, another makes a *sancocho* (a traditional broth) with wood fire, a couple dances *bullerengue* (a regional dance), kids play football, some people buy food from a street vendor and others sail or bath in the river. As women were discussing how to complete the tapiz, others started arriving and looking for a place to sit to continue working on other pieces they brought, which struck us as very similar to the one we were just observing.

At first glance, the bright colours and overall artistic composition making up the landscape of their quilts look very similar to the testimonial textiles of the conflict, yet they represent a completely different "ecology of existence", characterized by absence of the armed actors (figures 3 and 4). What is depicted, instead, is a web of beings and doings that make the intricate socio-ecological fabric of the community. These ecologies narrated and created in the process of collective textile making, are also evident in pieces such as the embroidered Poem of *Choibá*, the name of the group of women artisans in Quibdó – named after a tree characterised by great strength and resistance. Embroidered figures accompany the poem representing riverside life, relations between people, river, the *selva* (forest) and animals that the women of the collective lost with the forced displacement.

As we reflected on these differences in Mampuján, the sewing session had already begun, and it immediately felt as if we were wrapped within one of these woven stories. During a meeting other practices unfold along textile making, indicative of women's everyday life and collective practices of care to sustain it, such as: cooking, eating, taking care of kids, talking, body massaging, singing, dancing, praying, hair styling, sharing money from the selling of their artworks, meeting with other members of the community, talking about other joint projects. In the groups we met, similar practices populate the space with differences depending on the specific social and environmental texture of their communities. We realised that not only the textiles portray relations they are trying to reconstitute in diverse ways through textile crafting practices to continue supporting life in their communities, but also how these are nested within broader ecologies that sustain them, that have also been heavily affected by the armed conflict and surge of agribusiness and extractivist industries. This first realisation is the motivation for exploring their collective diverse practices as the crafting of "ecologies of existence".

War as well as economic and environmental injustices play all a part in a context of socio-ecological disruption that overwhelms the continuous ends of institutional reparation and transitional justice measures seeking closure of the Colombian armed conflict (Mora-Gómez, 2016). Our work however emphasises that for these communities the expectation that institutional reparation could return what they lost is distant from the necessary continuation of their everyday lives. Instead women in these communities are engaged in ongoing collective practices of repairing the fabric of existence. "Reparation" in this context, is not only revealed as ecological, but also closer to the mundane meaning of the word as "repair" (Denis, 2019; Jackson, 2014). We engage with the ecological dimensions of the patchy and uneven fabric of relations underlying the emergence and consolidation of textile "craftivism" (Adamson, 2013; Bratich & Brush, 2011; Buszek & Robertson, 2011; Greer, 2014) in these Colombian women sewing groups, as not apart from, but essentially connected to other ecological practices that sustain their craft and that their craft sustains.

Drawing from this ecological framework, in the following we explore how women's textile collectives also craft alternative forms of more than human existence through everyday practices, relations and becomings among beings, doing life together in a context of ecological displacement that we first describe in the next section.

## **Ecological displacement**

Mampuján is in a municipality that suffered drastic transformations and radical reconfigurations of its ecological embeddedness. During the conflict, the village saw many armed actors due to its strategic location for travelling, kidnapping civilians and transporting weapons and drugs to sea. On the 10th of March 2000, paramilitaries arrived in Mampuján and displaced 245 families to the urban area of María La Baja. They stayed in temporary accommodations for about 3 years. During this time, the original village of Mampuján "grew old" and became "Mampuján Viejo": houses left to neglect turned into uninhabitable ruins filled with wild vegetation. Montes de María, where "Old Mampuján" is located, has suffered a longer history of violence - resulting to a great extent of conflicts between large landowners and small farmers and indigenous groups, dating back to the Civil War (1940-1960) and ultimately rooted in the colonial past of the country<sup>5</sup> -, which exacerbated in the last decades of the conflict, as forced displacement and paramilitary activities led to land grabbing (Grajales, 2013).

Historically, violence and displacements are here also ecologically consequential. Mampuján used to be an important crossroads between various communities. The main forms of sustenance

were traditional crop cultures, animal farming, hunting and fishing, intimately connected to ways of food processing, cooking, cleaning, childcare, water collecting and washing clothes in the arroyos (streams). With the surge of agribusiness, this social landscape changed. Today oil palm and teak plantations occupy the landscape with associated biodiversity loss, water and soil contamination and even desertification. In this context, violence reconfigures the space with control of resources and privatisation of common goods, turning these ecologies into landscapes of “everyday dispossession” (Ojeda et al., 2015). This involves agrobusiness privatisation of irrigation and water pollution, resulting in appropriation of routes and paths between common lands and goods, making it difficult to maintain traditional agricultural practices and crops (Delgado & Dietz, 2013; Sampedro et al., 2014). Communities become dependent primarily on working for monocultures for their livelihoods.

Low Atrato region - from which women who created the *Choibá* collective in Quibdó were forcibly displaced and never able to return - is part of the Colombian Pacific rainforest where the Atrato River flows into the Caribbean Sea. A landscape of great tension due to the advance of agro-industry with banana monocultures in the neighbouring region of Urabá as well as the emergence and intensification of human trafficking in the last decade. Despite the active reclaims of lands in the lower Atrato, many of its inhabitants have not returned after being displaced. Currently, the links between violence, racism and socio-environmental conflict are expressed in the 95% of the productive land being in the hands of owners who are not from the region (Guerrero Home et al., 2020).

In Sonsón, located in the central Andean mountains of eastern Antioquia, military war dynamics led to a “militarised pacification” (Valderrama, 2019) associated with disputes over common goods, such as water diverted for the construction of hydroelectric plants and land for urban expansion. There, the armed confrontation militarized daily life and stigmatized the peasants as guerrillas, which led to processes of forced displacement, altering peasant lifestyles.

These stories reveal the destruction of community as a more than human process: involving, in these cases, massacres, mass displacements, lands dispossession and widespread ecological degradation. Yet also, the period of the forced displacement was a time of resistance and political experimentation on the reparation of ecological existence. In the next two sections, we draw mostly from fieldwork with the Mampuján, Quibdó and Bojayá collectives to discuss the emergence of collective textile making as the crafting of ecologies of existence to survive radical transformations amid conflict: with initiatives of “emergency care” (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 156) and the reclaiming of ecological space.

## Emergency care

During the forced displacement in Maria la Baja, living conditions worsened drastically, with people suffering from hunger, lack of clean water, precarious housing, poverty as well as diseases in a context of widespread paramilitary control and violence. Women were particularly affected by increases in gender violence, including rape by armed actors. Without access to land and water, men had lost jobs as farmers, breeders, hunters or fishermen. Women’s paid and unpaid labour - associated with water recollection for food processing and clothes washing as well as work in the fields with their families for food production at the level of the households (such as the *Cultivo de Pancojer*) - was affected too. Therefore, also the traditional source of sustenance for the community was lost. In this context of ecological displacement food became a precious commodity, no longer shared as families used to, as Juana Alicia Ruiz Hernandez, one of the *lideres sociales* (community leaders, as they are known in the



case of Colombia) of Mampujan and of the sewing collective Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz, observes in her co-authored master thesis (Ruiz Hernández et al., 2018)<sup>6</sup>. The severing of the connection of the communities with their lands, plants, animals disrupted the basic provision of food, affecting modes of organisation from the home to the community as well as bodies and prompting new practices. Displaced women developed forms of “emergency care” needed after violently losing the ecologies of existence that sustained and were sustained by a community of more than human beings and relations.

Well before the formation of their sewing group, women began to gather together to ensure survival of their families and improve their economic conditions in a situation of forced displacement. One initiative was setting up small independent kitchen stands, which generated a small economic return and guarantee daily food. These were enabled by networks of mutual support and sharing basic ingredients and foods – some donated by institutions and farmers not affected by land dispossession. The initiative rapidly expanded and in 2001, Juana Alicia Ruiz Hernández, social leader of Mampuján and the Weavers’ group, acquired a large restaurant in Maria la Baja. While of little economic return, women working there earned a small salary. The food stands and the restaurant can be viewed as ‘gendered kitchenspaces’, which are vital to the reconnection with traditional forms of organization (Christie, 2006) in which cooking, and commensality were not reduced to the private or domestic spheres, but were a space of socialisation and community, broken by the war. Yet, in a context of displacement, these practices become also a way to create new relations with each other as women, as families, and with other members of the community in a new environment. This happened in co-existence and interrelation with textile crafting. At the beginning in the Mampuján sowing collective, cooking together was matter of survival, a form of “emergency care”. Women used to share the little money they had to buy basic ingredients or share any picked fruit they could find. In these culinary experiments characterized by the scarcity of raw materials, new links with food as a healing tool are explored, in the words of Juana, ‘for instance we realised that when we ate sugar, we stimulated the happiness hormone and we were improving let’s say our moods’.

Other sewing groups also started with forms of “emergency care”. The Choibá group was formed at the end of the 1990s in the city of Quibdó where four displaced women knitted and taught each other while participating in community gatherings to protest about their situation (Villamizar et al., 2019). One of the first crafts they developed were the *muñecas negras* (black dolls, figure 5), first made from any fabric they could retrieve and stuffed with recycled plastic bags in which water was distributed to the displaced. They collected, cleaned and dried them, before carefully cutting them in stripes to create filling for the dolls. Although not as finely crafted as they are today – becoming a characteristic and elaborate product of their craft – the first dolls were precious for their kids to have something to play with in dreadful circumstances. Little by little the group grew and started looking for instructors but had little means to pay them. It was with support of the textile activist and Liberation Theologist Ursula Holzapfel that they were recruited in several textile educational projects. Ursula taught them to improve their dolls and knitting clothes for them, a skill quickly transferred to make children’s clothes for their family, in a moment where they had become an expensive commodity<sup>7</sup>.

### **Reclaiming ecological space**

Beyond their development within practices of “emergency care”, textile and food making are also intertwined with resistance practices over land restitution, to which we refer to here as reclaiming of

ecological space. The weavers of Mampuján have been at the forefront of political organising, created avenues to address gender inequality, and active participants in grassroots movements' protests and legal battles for the rights of life and lands of their community emerging in this period. Some of these struggles attained the acquisition of 6 hectares at the entrance of María La Baja, which came to be known as "Rosas de Mampuján" (Roses of Mampuján), "Mampujáncito" (Little Mampuján) or "Mampuján Nuevo" (New Mampuján). Here the community expanded with people displaced from near villages. However, to this day, in spite of winning legal fights on rights over land and reparation, Mampuján *Viejo* is still in a semi-inhabited state of neglect, most of its inhabitants still fighting, while living in an overcrowded Mampuján *Nuevo*.

Material experimental practices with food and textiles allow women to win spaces of autonomy beyond dynamics of dependency promoted by the state and NGOs in official processes of institutional reparation addressed at the victims of the armed conflict. These tend to confine people in locations where previous ecologies of communality are severed and collective practices abandoned. Food provision and textile making in this context also become ways to materially craft common spaces for women. For instance, the Mampuján Weavers collective was initiated by a group who felt

'the need for women, as women, to come together to talk, coming together to do something with our hands and our minds, to heal, to do as a catharsis or something because one was at the forefront of total oppression' (Juana Alicia Ruiz Hernández).

At the beginning of their sewing collective women did not have a physical space where to meet so it was common for them to meet inside or outside their houses, in the streets. The public exposure of their collective work was initially met with discrimination and threats:

'We started with 3 women.... it was a lot of stigma back then. When we went out, people said we were crazy - "the crazy women who sewed" - that it was stupid, that it was a meaningless thing. [They] told us that they were going to chop off our hands for speaking without words - they were [talking about] the drawings we made of the rapes, the sexual abuses that we captured in this technique [of the quilt] - that we were going to die. We never gave up; we always went on' (Juana Alicia Ruiz Hernández)

Born in women's struggles to survive losses and poverty caused by war atrocities, which had disproportionately affected them, the sewing collective becomes a powerful tool for emancipation and empowerment. Connecting the everyday of providing food in collective spaces with the reclaiming of ecological space, some also started cultivating other ways of resistance to protect the land from teak and oil palm monocultures that, to use Pabla's words, 'dry the soil out and makes it impossible for growing our crops'. Pabla and her mother Julia are both members of Mampuján Weavers and Julia is one of the few people who managed to return to the semi-inhabited village of Mampuján *Viejo*, reoccupying and renovating her old house, thanks to the income from her textile work. There, she also maintains a garden with traditional crops of her lands, either sold or shared in the sewing collective for collective cooking.

For the women of Bellavista, in Bojayá, it has not been easy to maintain meeting and textile making spaces. Multiple interventions in their community from NGOs and state organisations through the "relocation" of their village in 2007, the loss of community members in the 2 May 2002 massacre and the need to attend to urgent matters such as subsistence in a new environment far from the river and the lands, made their textile work become secondary to other offers that sought to "empower" them – new jobs such as bread making and fish culture. Today, however, they insist in meeting through doing, they do so around embroidering crafts, united in the memory of the old

village and as “spiritual carers” of an emblematic mutilated Christ sculpture found in the remains of the church where the 2002 massacre took place. Maintaining these meetings allowed them to connect with a new urban ecology, separated from the river, with the possibility to create in common, and share their own standpoints on their everyday and the community.

These practices of textile collectives reclaim spaces of ecological existence by crafting new material relationships of everyday care and sustenance. These practices are experimentations of survival - from sharing food to recreating living spaces - that ‘materially modify the immediate conditions of everyday life to enable existence in altered environments’ (Papadopoulos, 2018, p. 47). Textile making has allowed women to survive, deal with pain, make clothes for their families and provide an economic return - vital matters under unbearable circumstances brought by the war. In words of Luz from the Choibá group: ‘[textile making] has helped me (...) to stop thinking about the same [the war]... I used to say this: I knit it, I sell it, and I give food to my children. With this I have enough money for anything’. At stake are material and affective dimensions of processes of reclaiming women’s ecologies of existence in precarious conditions where the fabric of their lives, communities and lands has been devastated. The next section focuses on the regeneration of more than human relations through these processes.

### **Regenerating (lost) more than human relations**

While some women have been able to materially reconnect with lost lands and homes (as in Julia’s story told in the previous section), in most cases, this is impossible, as they remain occupied by armed groups or landowners, or have been irreparably damaged and converted to other uses. The state’s interventions for reparation, through construction of new houses, streets and living areas in new locations, has also led to establishing new forms of life, distant from previous relations and forms of living (Quiceno Toro, 2016, p. 222). In all cases, this led to the unravelling of intimate relationships that women had sustained throughout their lives with lands, plants and animals. Yet in these new contexts, women also materially reorganise their space in order to improve living conditions, whilst recovering daily practices to recreate new material and affective ecologies of existence.

As noted earlier, the Choibá sewing group is made up of women peasants displaced to the urban area of Quibdó. Yet, in their new houses, women manage to maintain small domestic gardens often in the form of *azoteas*, a traditional way of cultivation in the Pacific, where edible and medicinal plants are grown usually in old wooden canoes. The maintenance of vegetable gardens and orchards activates relations between neighbours and with other rural communities nearby, where, for example they exchange *tierra de hormiga* (excess soil from ant colonies) to fertilise the *azotea*, as well as seeds and plants. Something similar happened with the women of Guayacán’s group, in Bellavista-Bojayá, after being relocated to a new village designed with different materials and sense of the urban space. While their relationship with the river and land changed, in this new village, working with gardens, patios and *azoteas* became a way to reconnect with recipes, remedies, flavours and knowledges belonging to their life in relation with the *selva* (Henríquez, 2018). In these contexts, the reclaiming of ecological space shows acutely its sense of home making) that is closely embedded in more than human interdependencies. In a context of displacement, lost ecologies are re-created in precarious, but vital, ways.

In Sonsón, women of the Knitters for Memory<sup>8</sup> have built unusual housing structures, hybrids of city dwellings, farms and vegetable gardens, where indoor and outdoor spaces are rethought through original material reconfigurations of the household that make room for non-human worlds to continue existing with, and open up, new forms of companionable multispecies living (D. Haraway,

2008). The majority of women in the Sonsón sewing groups are elderly and had before always lived in rural areas, in *fincas* (farms), where they cared for animals and cultivated traditional crops. Women remember with anger and nostalgia their past - their everyday life in the country - and the violence inflicted through the occupation of their lands, farms, homes and stealing of their crops and animals.

Alicia is one of the knitters of Sonsón, who has been relocated in this municipality after fleeing her *finca* (farmhouse) in Rio Verde, where she lived a peasant life with her husband and family in connection with the country (*campo*), in her words:

'we are *gente de campo* [people of the country]: in Rio Verde we lived in the country, we were born in the land, we were raised in the country, and without light and without anything, but we missed nothing, for the person who works in the country has everything'.

Her small house in Sonsón consists of a narrow corridor with a bedroom and a kitchen on one side. On the other side of the corridor, only an enormous plastic tarpaulin separates from the outdoor, that as Alicia explains, also serves to keep the heat in and prevent flies from entering. However, the outside feels close, and can be reached by two entrances through the plastic sheet. One leads to a small bathroom and a garden where she grows vegetables, the other to a small warehouse for gardening tools, a pantry for cobs and a small chicken coop. The partition between the indoor and the outdoor feels permeable.

Aida's house, one of the meeting points of the Sonsón knitting collective, is another, even more telling example of the integration of human habitation with its more than human embeddedness. In 2004, Aida recovered an old plot of land just outside town, on top of a hill, and together with her husband and children built a wooden structure suitable for animals. Several doors connect the house to various spaces of the farms: a chicken and duck coop, a space with an old machinery for chopping vegetables to feed the only horse that lives there, a small outdoor fenced field with a pair of goats, and finally an area where her son works the iron. In the henhouse, there is also the orchard and a garden with edible plants. A few dogs and several cats live freely together with Aida and her family in the house, but most of them live in front of the residential structure in two large outdoor fenced enclosures. These are rescued dogs and cats that Aida takes care of along with other wounded animals, such as horses and cows, through training, feeding, grooming, exercising, but also making, repairing and cleaning of their cages. When asked about whether she undertook any training to carry on this activity, she replied,

'No! Nobody taught me, you learn by living with them: since I was a child I lived with dogs, cats, wounded horses; my father was my teacher (...). Since I was five or six years old, I was with him in the mountains, everywhere. When he shored the horses, I was there, when he injected them, I was there too: I saw everything'.

Aida's animal expertise which she acquired in her everyday life in the country turns into an everyday practice of animal care, which develops along with the construction and expansion of her house. With the time, Aida's house has become a real animal sanctuary, with friends, acquaintances and local animal rights activists bringing rescued animals to her house.

Women of Sonsón tell how living with and taking care of animals has helped them coping with the loneliness of the losses brought about by the conflict. As noted, the majority are elderly women, some living alone in their houses, where they form intimacies with other species as domestic companions. As in Virgilina's case. In 2007, following a guerrilla occupation, she had to flee from her country house in El Rodeo to Sonsón, where she has been living alone in a two-rooms house on a main paved road in front of the big power substation of Sonsón. Virgilina often commented on how

she manages to survive loneliness thanks to her beloved birds, which live in a cage covered with a blanket knitted by Virgilina to keep them warm and in the dark during the night.

While textile representations of lost ecologies may initially seem distant from these urban contexts, they also reflect the efforts of re-creation of new forms of more than human co-habitation that remain vital to the women of the textile collectives and therefore, present – in ways that connect the textile to the ongoing, precarious, re-weaving of relations with ways of living with non-humans in the aftermath of devastated ecologies.

### **The embodied reparation of ecological existence**

In this last section of the paper, we come back to textile making as political craftivism through the dimension of ecology that we approached at the beginning. Through the paper we have addressed ecologies of existence as an interdependent complex web that weaves individual experiences - the social and collective - and non-human beings and entities. In other words, ecology as the relational articulation of a more than human conception of community. Keeping with a context of ecological dispossession and displacement, we approach how textile craft and the practices that sustain it and it sustains, is also politically and explicitly driven by embodied reparation of more than human community. Although connections with the physical world of places, objects, human and non-human beings have sometimes been so irreparably damaged that regeneration have seemed impossible, the daily work and the articulations between diverse groups and community actions have made possible partial rehabilitations (D. J. Haraway, 2016).

In the case of the Pacific region of Chocó, forced displacements followed by riverbank deforestations and large-scale mining have deeply affected the Atrato river's life and, in turn, that of the human and non-human beings depending upon it (Meza, 2018). Particularly in recent years, mercury pollution by gold mining in water and fish has reached critical levels. During the conflict, and in the current situation of re-escalation, the river has been used to transport weapons, drugs, and armed actors, blocking the free movement and daily activities of Afro-Colombian and indigenous inhabitants<sup>9</sup>. In 2016, the Colombian Constitutional Court awarded rights of protection, conservation, maintenance and restoration to the Atrato River and appointed 'Guardians' from riverine communities (Corte Constitucional, 2016). This ruling is the result of inter-ethnic social mobilizations that succeeded in positioning the river as a common good and subject of rights, on the ground of the interdependence between the life of the river and the life of Atrateños peoples. The context of illegal mining, pollution, conflict, poverty, and displacement has challenged the implementation of the ruling, but it has also opened up spaces for ecopolitical actions in defence of riverine life (Cagüñas et al., 2020). For instance, women of the Choibá and Guayacán sewing groups started a particular form of textile ecological activism to denounce the pollution of the river and its fish life. For some years now, women have been recycling pieces of plastic that they use as filling for brightly coloured fabric fish sewn by hand, to raise awareness of local ecological pollution. Women endorse the roles of intermediaries and representatives of non-human others their livelihoods are entangled with, by giving them voice through textile artworks. In the 2018 artisanal *Fair Justa y Solidaria* (Just and in Solidarity) in Quibdó artisans collectives of the region proposed as that year's thematic focus public discussion about the river Atrato the river starting from the materiality of textiles, foods and other craft products.

In Mampuján, in turn, one of the vital daily relationships in the community that the conflict compromised is between women and the *arroyo* (stream). Before the conflict, several daily activities

linked their everyday to the arroyo such as collecting water for cooking, washing clothes, bathing for fun and for washing themselves and their children who always accompanied them. More broadly there is a dimension of interdependent care that binds the more than human community of the river, that women were acutely aware of:

'when Mampuján was displaced, the arroyo dried up, it became bad. That is, the arroyo felt the lack of people there, but I think the arroyo mainly felt the lack of women and children who were always there' [Juana Alicia Ruiz Hernández]

For the purpose of bathing, a traditional territorial division of the Mampuján's arroyo in women and men's only areas was lost during the conflict. Yet after the relocation in Mampuján Nuevo, women started going back to the arroyo and bathing collectively, a practice that came to be known as a 'ritual of purification in the arroyo'. It was described across our interviews as a collective space of self and body awareness, relaxation and spirituality from which women emerged as renewed or empowered. During a ritual, women dived together in the water, floated, and massaged each other where they felt they had accumulated more stress and pain, such as shoulders, neck, breasts, cervical area, arms, legs and feet. They also put on relaxing music and aromatic herbs. A theme of experimentation also emerged to describe these collective baths as healing practices, in the words of Juana, leader of the group:

'We started going back to the arroyo and we realised that having a contact with water improved our mood. The rituals of purification in the arroyo were more like an *instinct* of us, rather than a theory or a method that existed.... we did it in a way... how can I say it? An *empirical* way. We realized that in the conflict we, women, were losing our self-esteem, we were not self-recognizing us, loving us, feeling valued and touched. The men were not doing it, so we decided to do it between us'.

Through the physical contact that unfolds during a ritual in the river, women rediscovered an individual and collective connection with the arroyo, theirs and other women's bodies all charged with new modes of attention, materiality and spirituality: the feeling of being touched with care and love by oneself and others, in contrast to how their bodies had been denied or violated, like the land and waters. The reclamation of the arroyo is therefore materially and simultaneously corporeal and territorial. With the loss of the traditional division of the arroyo into areas for males and females, women claimed a portion for themselves.

Like previously discussed, women's activities (like sitting to knit in public spaces) confront ongoing gendered violence and stigmatisation. A greater exposure of their bodies in this case too led to abusive looks and language by community members, and to purification rituals in the arroyo being progressively minimized. Yet, they also mention continuing the recovered connection with the arroyo and between women within their sewing group. The rituals were proved to release stress and pain, also which originated from their hard textile work, as women explain across the research interviews. And so, they implemented relaxation exercises and massages in preparation for textile making and as 'active relaxation', bringing the healing arroyo experience into transformative everyday material relations. The arroyo remains present in their textile practice in other ways too, as a representation in their tapestries, but also, as a place to gather collectively for special group meetings, remaining as a more than human relation that affects practices and ways of being in the world.

For the women of Bellavista in Bojayá in turn, a periodical return to their old village and the Bojayá marshes for recreation also became a ritual of reconnection between women, and with the river they were torn apart from, as well as the place where their relatives died. The church where the massacre happened, is today considered as a sacred site of memory. When women visit the old

village, they walk through places where their houses used to be, and pick up fruits and plants that do not grow in the new village. Sometimes they fish and organise collective walks there to make sancocho and renew community relations. These ways of reclaiming spaces of encounter and connexions with elements such as water, earth, plants, as well as the dead, involve everyday ways of taking care of life and land but also healing and repairing community ties broken by the war. These are ways of making the new life, insisting in ties that strengthen, and allow them to activate their own ways of knowing. Small precarious interstices to make and imagine a world beyond the war. A form of self, collective and environmental relation – the multidimensional spaces of reparation of ecologies.

### **The Gift**

In September 2019, some of us visited Quibdó again, for a final event of the research project Mending the New organized with representatives of all sewing collectives involved. At the event, Tacchetti received a special gift made by Rosalina, one of the Mampuján weavers: a *tapiz* (figure 6). The textile weaves in shared memories of the fieldwork visits Mampuján in January and June 2019. The figures include the artist and other Mampuján weavers as well as the visiting researchers engaging in various activities: the first meeting with the women of the group in an outdoor space of the community, the last meeting with the group in the Church of the village, a homemade meal at the artist's house and the departure of the visiting researchers in a thunderstorm.

The *tapiz* summarizes much of what we learned in accompanying women in their daily lives, which we tried to discuss in this article, but especially the productive power of textile crafting practices in re-weaving ecological relationships to nurture life in the midst of death generated by centuries of conflict in their communities. As an artistic object, it represents a material trace of emotional relationships established with the women of the community day by day and even beyond the research project. This piece is an artistic celebration of life, moments of conviviality lived together, whose strength inspired the creation of the *tapiz* itself and this article. In the *tapiz*, indeed, there is no direct representation of the themes around which our fieldwork visits revolved initially, such as sewing, conflict, memory or reconciliation, rather as this paper demonstrates, they mark and traverse the textile practice itself. Our interest has been to emphasise how these practical ways of making life together are about the crafting of a more than human ecology of existence in the midst of conflict and war that both goes beyond and sustains both the meanings of activism and of reparation. This is the gift of these collectives. What the different fabrics and the practices that sustain them and they sustain show is that the textile doing the Mampuján, Bojayá, Quibdó and Sonsón groups, is embedded in a series of practices and knowledges by which women rehabilitate their lives in connexions with plants, animals, rivers, abandoned lands, as well as houses and food. Their ways of experimentation with new material conditions, after the exile from their lands, teaches us that the reparation of devastation from conflict involves the mundane remediation of worlds that are more than human – ecologies of existence. The work of these textile collectives cannot be confined as private mourning, nor a search for institutional recognition from the state as victims, it is an everyday labour that contributes to transform the politics of death imposed by armed and social wars for all more than human ecologies.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Perez Bustos, Sanchez Aldana and Chocontá-Piraquive (2019) read textile activism and their social worlds through textile metaphors – threading, knitting and weaving – critically acknowledging the materiality of each distinct practice metaphorized and the need to situate them, to carefully seek the speculative possibilities of each material-semiotic reading.

<sup>2</sup> The *Arpillera* movement in Chile (1973–1989) is a most cited example (Agosín 1987, 2014; Agosín & Kostopoulos-Cooperman 1996). Arpilleras are textiles sewn together to remember and protest the disappeared under Pinochet's, still inspiring other strategies of protest and activism: See <https://arpilleras.wixsite.com/ofilme/ofilme>

<sup>3</sup> See González Buitrago (2017) for a selection of Mampuján's tapices available online at <https://books.openedition.org/uec/1812?lang=en>.

<sup>4</sup> Mending the New is a two-year project (2018-2020), led by research groups from Colombia and the United Kingdom (PIs are Tania Perez Bustos and Dimitris Papadopoulos) funded by Newton-Caldas Fund (Colciencias, Colombia and UKRI, UK) call for projects on sustainable peace. The project takes an interdisciplinary approach across the social sciences and digital design to show how textile craft work enables processes of reconciliation, and to understand the grammar involved in these textile narratives and the diversity of expression that they enable. Fieldwork with the communities in Bojayá, María La Baja, Sonsón and Quibdó was conducted throughout 2019. Quiceno Toro has conducted several fieldwork visits with them also prior to this project (2009-2017). This core group of four communities were selected because the research team has had long-standing established contacts with them. Different members of the research team spent extended time with participant communities at many different instances. Fieldwork activities included semi-structured individual and collective interviews, informal conversations, co-designed workshops as well as visits to community places, sewing collectives' group meetings, and participants' private households.

<sup>5</sup> Weavers of Mampuján have used textile making also to expose the struggle and resistance of their community as part of a long history, dating back to the African diaspora in the Americas (Shepard, 2019). Indeed, the first collective tapices they made represented how they imagined their African ancestors, their journey as slaves during colonialism, but also their everyday life, struggle and emancipation movement.

<sup>6</sup> For women living in areas under the direct influence of armed actors, who are also Afro-descendants (as in the case of women in Bellavista, Quibdó and Mampuján), informed consent and anonymity, when overlooked, can have fatal consequences. The same holds for community leaders, who may choose to give away their anonymity in academic or activist projects, to gain more visibility. Women participants have expressed their preference to have their original names recognised in this article as the information provided recognizes their knowledge contribution, without putting them at direct risk.

<sup>7</sup> Fabric dolls are now produced in Choibá's textile workshop in Quibdó and then sold in their own and other local shops. The dolls have been acquiring diverse characteristics associated to women's reflexions, especially against sexist and racist stereotypes and practices discriminating them as black rural women with highly sexualised bodies arriving in towns as domestic workers. The dolls are childlike and asexualized. Their *pelo quieto* - an expression referring to the hair (style) of African-descendants in different regions of Colombia and Latin America - and the colour of the fabric used for the dolls' skin resemble those of their makers. They have also made dolls associated to different occupations – teachers, nurses, scientists – to emphasise the pluralities of jobs that black women could do.

<sup>8</sup> The *Knitters for Memory* of Sonsón was formed in 2009 as an initiative of the Institute of Regional Studies of the University of Antioquia, facilitated by textile activist and anthropologist Isabel González Arango, to explore narration through artistic expression of processes of resistance, reconciliation, and violent events during the armed conflict.

<sup>9</sup> In January 2020, the rural communities of the Bojayá municipality denounced the occupation of the village of Pogue by 300 armed paramilitaries. In spite of the perseverance of peace work, these communities continue living confinement, forced recruitment, mining of their territories and threats to their social leaders - see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/1634/2020/en/>

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## Images

Figure 1: Mural of Mampuján: 'Diáspora y Retorno' (Diaspora and Return). Credit: Tacchetti, 2019



Figure 2: Telon de Bojayá. The textile panel has the following phrase embroidered at the bottom: 'By river and by jungles/ that keep the memory/of so many black towns/ that here we remember'. Credit Papadopoulos, 2019



Figure 4: Tapiz de Mampuján. Credit: Tacchetti, 2019



Figure 5: Muñecas Negras de Choibá. Credit: Papadopoulos, 2019



Figure 6: The gift. Credit: Papadopoulos, 2019

