

A Carrier Bag Theory of More than Listening

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ABSTRACT

In this Conversation we invite thinking about those artifacts that hold together collaboration and participation. We take as a starting point our experience as anthropologists in a participatory design project in which a digitally-enhanced carrier bag was designed and used to connect communities including women belonging to different memory sewing circles in Colombia and researchers/designers from different locations and disciplines. The connections were made through the sharing of stories, through effortful listening, and through the fostering of new relations which together nourished different forms of engagement and careful witnessing in the comprehension of conflict and reconciliation in Colombia. In the proposed format of the Conversation we ask participants to engage in listening to stories of the carrier bag, and responding with their own stories of effortful listening related to their design practices. The Conversation aims to become a carrier bag that holds together stories of more-than-listening as integral to participatory design practices.

Author Keywords

Carrier bag; Listening; Participation; Witnessing.

INTRODUCTION

‘we’ve all heard all about all the sticks spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story.’ (Le Guin, 1989)

In ‘The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,’ [3] feminist science fiction author Ursula Le Guin calls for a shift away from ‘man the hunter’ narratives that naturalise making’s origins in aggression, towards a new story focused on the centrality of collecting and carrying in the making of sustainable life worlds. For PDC 2020, we propose a Conversation to explore how this call can be applied to thinking about co-design as a mode of listening that bridges distance and difference and makes new relations. The proposed Conversation will encourage a form of ‘more than listening,’ where we understand listening not as a passive state but rather as careful witnessing of another’s stories. The Conversation will be seeded by stories from the project *Mending the New*, devoted to the participatory designing of testimonial digital textiles in the transition to post-conflict rural Colombia.

As anthropologists engaged in design worlds, we take the multiplicity of anthropologies/designs as our starting place [6]. We understand participatory design as a process of relationship building, along multiple dimensions (social and material), through the co-creation of prototypes. In this Conversation we complicate this idea in ways that recognise the differences within and among those who participate. In the case of the project, *Mending the New*, it has become particularly clear that prototyping is not a singular process of coming together to make something, but a much more complex, ongoing series of interchanges, where the things that are made are multiple and partially connected. Various participants participate differently, and the project is to bring their different locations, resources and practices into a generative relation with one another.

Mending the New aims to understand how groups of women based in Bojayá, Quibdó, Mampuján and Sonsón have documented conflict and reconciliation

in Colombia using various textile narratives. For this the research team, composed of scholars from different regions and disciplines, has invited the local communities to engage with a series of artifacts-to-think-with about their stories of life in the middle of war, and in doing so it has brought them together. The thinking, caring and making of these artifacts has also brought together scholars who had not previously worked in Colombia or in topics related to conflict and war. Thus, *Mending the New* is an interesting case to bring to light how distances and differences are negotiated in design practices, as ways to engage and to be affected by troubles that, at first sight, do not belong to us.

LA ENCOMIENDA AS A CARRIER BAG

One particular artifact that was designed/used to think with communities about conflict and reconciliation was a carrier bag called *La Encomienda*, a textile package that carried gifts from one community to another, and which had some embedded digital components that informed the sender community when their gifts were received via a text message. *La Encomienda* allowed women to share their textile craft, other crafts related to it, such as cooking and sowing, and with it the stories that sustain those practices. In playing the role of mail-researchers we were able to witness the material messages sent back and forth by these collectives and the ways that they embodied reconciliation. But we were also witnesses to how those sharing practices contributed to a community-building process between communities that had not understood and felt themselves as together before *La Encomienda* arrived, calling their attention to those connections. This community building process also affected researchers who started to see themselves as active and responsible agents in the generation of communal practices [2].

The digital components of *La Encomienda* were central in this process of creating a community of people over distance. On one side, the receiving of text messages announcing that *La Encomienda* was being opened created enthusiasm and expectations about when the artifact was going to be received back. But the material components of this processes (cables, lights and batteries) were also perceived as dangerous and, at the beginning, communities feared to interact with the bag (they thought it looked like a bomb, see figure 1). This implied that researchers had to work on generating trust around the artifact, which was only possible through listening to the fear. The digital components

also required care on behalf of the research team; gifts put inside of the bag could not interfere with the electrical and electronic mechanisms that allowed the sending of the digital messages, for example by unplugging or wetting them, which was a problem considering that some of the gifts could rot or tangle. Thus, *La Encomienda*, as a digital textile carrier bag of material messages, held together stories and relationalities between different people, but it was also an artifact that needed to be held together as well, by different people (textile makers, digital crafters, fieldworkers).

THREE STORIES CARRIED BY LA ENCOMIENDA AND THE LISTENING THEY OPENED

In this section we present moments of the travels of *La Encomienda*, in which this artifact contributed to sharing stories and created effortful listening on behalf of the receivers (and the carriers). This was a central part of the coming together of differences that this artifact allowed, and contributes to thinking of design as an ongoing series of interchanges, where the things that are made are multiple and partially connected, always asking us to question who we are and how we relate to each other. As we will show after presenting these stories, they play a central role in the Conversation that is being proposed for PDC2020.



Figure 1. *La Encomienda* closed with the electrical-electronic digital components; the artifact works through a circuit done with conductive thread that activates the sending of the message once the bag is unbuttoned.

Stories of Encountering

La Encomienda was initially received and sent to travel by the collective in Mampuján, “*Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz*” (Weaving Dreams and Flavours of Peace). This first encounter was difficult because the women did not know what to send, since they did not know the other collectives. In Colombia *encomiendas* are sent to people one knows and cares for, so it seemed a little forced to send gifts to strangers. This resistance to engage with those at a distance was worked with by the researchers in the field, who started to give ideas for gifts to the women. Given that the collective in Mampujan works not only with textile craft, but also with food preparation, researchers suggested that they send recipes and seeds, and so the women did. This initial suggestion created a thread that was then followed by other women who planted the seeds and cooked the recipes and sent new seeds almost always related to staple foods; however not all those seeds were to be sown and eaten. The *Tejedoras por la Memoria de Sonsón* (Weavers for Memory of Sonsón), for example, sent a pine seed with a message to be read and listened to:

Compañeras, we shared this pine seed that we collected in a place in our municipality called *La Pinera* (the pinery). On June 15, 2002, there was a massacre of young people who were recruited by the AUC (paramilitary groups). Today, the University of Antioquia is located there. These seeds represent the challenge of reconciliation, a path that we see as difficult.

The Guayacán Women in Bojayá, who suffered a massacre in May 2002, received the pine seed and the message in silence, they just listened to the story and felt connected in sorrow and resilience with it [1]. After that, they sent a song to all the collectives “*We walk up and down, in search of happiness, to see if this president leaves us the peace process. With what heart shall we do it?*”

As if reading Le Guin’s story, this sharing of seeds and messages of support, struggle and hope made *La Encomienda* into a medicine bundle in which both sorrow and power to transform it can be recognized as effects of togetherness. Here, the effortful listening that each collective devoted to the stories sent to them started to erase that sense of strangeness with which this artifact was initially opened. As a woman from Sonsón said at the end of the trip of this carrier bag:

People ask me how can you be part of a project in which you do now know the other sewing circles? And

I tell them about the bag (*La Encomienda*), yes, they are far, but we do not feel far, they send us gifts, we are now united.

Stories of Invisible Care and Labor

Before *La Encomienda* was taken to Mampuján and in between its travels to Bojayá, Quibdo and Sonsón to visit each memory sewing circle, it was thoughtfully created, re-created and cared for in Bogotá. The artifact was born out of the idea of a digital-textile materiality that could bring people together while at a distance. For this we thought the textile bag could carry material messages, but also send some digital ones in the moment in which it was opened. As we have said, this was central for the community building that the project cultivated.

The electric circuit that was embedded into the textile bag was carefully stitched with conductive thread and it was linked to a series of metal buttons than when opened were recognised by an arduino that was connected to a mobile phone and a GPS antenna (both tasks that require a lot of hand labour and time). This allowed *La Encomienda* to identify where it was located when opened and informed the SMS that was sent to the memory sewing circles that had previously sent their gifts.

The conductive thread used for this very central gesture of holding things together inside *La Encomienda* and informing about its opening was very sensitive, particularly considering that the bag was opened many times and had to travel to many places, and even more to carry different types of things inside of it. So the design team had to sew more than one thread in order for the system to function. On a couple of occasions the thread had also to be carefully unstitched to be stitched again because the circuit was not working, or because the whole bag had to be unstitched and washed, because the seeds had started to rot inside of it. This process required the participation and labour of the hands of researchers (female researchers, especially) who did not know much about circuits but had knowledge about textile craft; it allowed them to understand the system through the textile making in itself. But it was also an opportunity for them to highlight to all of us that *La Encomienda* was a material artifact that needed to be cared for and that care was sometimes smelly and dirty, that their labour implied engaging with the material messages sent in *La Encomienda*, as each gift had to be taken out of the bag, and its small package had to be aired, watered, dried and wrapped again.

All this was another way to listen carefully to what *La Encomienda* was creating, but also to its needs, to the narrative of life it held inside and that held it alive. This labour of care is central to understanding how this artifact also brought researchers together and made them feel close to the communities [4]. Thus, *La Encomienda* not only created a sense of community between memory sewing circles, it also made researchers become witnesses of that process and be affected by it, even while at a distance from the fieldwork.

Stories of Listening across Distant Connection

The project included a Digital Minga, held at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, and oriented to teaching/affecting the thinking and practice of students from several universities. *La Encomienda* was present in the design space along with textiles and images from the communities, the reading of stories from the communities, and the presence of two researchers with deep and longstanding relations with the sewing collectives. The event included as well, unexpectedly, a visit from two members of the Bojayá collective. Their visit made clear their care for the project team, as well as the wider extent of their networks. Their words called on participants to listen with care to the collectives, rather than to engage in acts of revictimization; what we are calling here a mode of effortful more-than- listening.

This Digital Minga was an opportunity to rethink *La Encomienda* and the role it had in bringing people together. One new prototype that emerged comprised speakers made by embroidering a spiral stitched with conductive thread into fabric attached to an embroidery ring, along with a small amplifying magnet. Through these speakers, what we came to name the *Parlantes*, sounds from the communities could be heard but only softly, requiring you to hold the ‘amplifier’ to your ear and listen very closely. The prototype used a soundscape of running water, recorded alongside the Atrato river, were Bojayá is located.

After this creative process the *Parlantes* were taken as a gift from the research team to the communities, inside *La Encomienda*. In this new round of fieldwork women were asked to embroider a speaker to listen to a message we had sent with a short poem. It took at least two hours to embroider the small spiral and listen to the poem, during which women talked about listening, about the sounds that they missed from the lands they were displaced from, and also the sounds of war and conflict they did not want to hear ever again. They

also talked about how much they have said regarding the horrors they have lived, and how little they have been heard.

Effortful listening here was a call to think of listening not as a passive act, but as an embodied experience that can be enabled through embroidery. Listening involves labor, care and dedication. The *Parlantes* are now being incorporated into larger tapices, testimonial embroideries created jointly between the collectives and the project designers/researchers.

PROPOSED FORMAT FOR THE CONVERSATION

We propose to create a circle of conversations in which participants can share stories of effortful listening that they have lived in their design practice and that connect and amplify the stories of *La Encomienda*; the three stories that open this proposal will seed this exercise.

In the first part of the conversation (30 minutes) participants will be introduced to the ideas of a carrier bag theory of more than listening, and given an opportunity to explore their materialisation in *La Encomienda* and in their own ‘carrier bags.’ Participants will be asked to sit in a circle, in the middle of which *La Encomienda* will be placed. Connected to it there will be threads with fragments of the stories that it has carried, as well as some of the objects (or pictures of them) that concretize the relationship building that it has generated. Following an introduction by the organisers, participants will be given time to explore *La Encomienda* installation and its stories. Each story will be connected to the bag by a coloured thread that indicates the type of story that it exemplifies.

Participants will then be asked to look into their own ‘carrier bags’; that is, whatever mochilas, purses, backpacks, etc. they have brought with them. They will be asked to think creatively about the stories that their own bag carries in relation to their histories and design practices. They will be asked to choose an object within their bag, or the bag itself, to tell the story they have thought of in relation to stories of encountering, care and labour, and listening across distant connections.

The second part of the circle of conversation (30 minutes) will be dedicated to sharing stories and to finding the partial connections between them. Participants will be asked to number themselves and in the first round those with even numbers, one by one, will share their story in relation to the object/bag they have chosen. The person to the right of the storyteller (with

an odd number) will then be asked to respond briefly. The round will proceed through all of the even numbered participants. Then, those with the odd numbers will be invited to tell their story, again with a response offered by the person to their right. These responses can be given in different formats (drawings, gestures, anecdotes, etc.). Throughout these rounds each participant in the circle will be given a ball of yarn to hold and will be invited to offer the thread of their ball to the storyteller whenever they hear a connection to their own stories. In this way the process itself will create a material interweaving of story threads.

The exercise does not assume that listening runs smoothly; stories of troubles or breakdowns can be equally generative. During the process one author of this proposal will be taking careful notes of the partial connections made, while the others will be part of the circles, contributing to the stories and facilitating the material interweaving of the connections. After the circles of speaking and co-listening are completed, the whole group will gather for an open reflection about the exercise (30 minutes), sharing what was learned in relation to our experiences, and thinking together about how effortful, more-than-listening could be cultivated as design practice.

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