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Design for Dissent: Political Participation and Social Activism in the Colombian Fashion Industry

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Abstract

In recent years, Colombia has experienced a renewed interest in social, political, and humanitarian issues, within a stormy political climate marked by the signing of a peace agreement in 2016 and the polarizing presidential elections of 2018. Trying to forge alliances within a politically polarized nation, social and political movements have focused on the need to end a long-lasting internal conflict; the desire for the safe reallocation and reparation of victims of forced displacement; and the rejection of gender-based violence. Fashion, as a rightly sensitive social barometer, has taken active part in the debates around these issues. From members of the fashion elite openly supporting a certain

presidential candidate, to brands taking inspiration from social issues in their collections, it is evident that recent political happenings are central to the Colombian fashion industry. Studying a number of collections, images, and social media communications of major fashion brands of international renown, smaller, local designers, and celebrated fashionistas, this paper studies the ways in which members of the Colombian fashion industry have taken to political participation and social activism within the current political climate. It provides insight on how fashion, among other cultural processes, becomes political in times of uncertainty and transition.

KEYWORDS: Colombia, social activism, fashion design, political change

Introduction

On June 17, 2018, a majority of Colombian citizens elected Iván Duque as their new president for the period 2018–2022, after months of heated political debate that revealed a national climate divided between two seemingly opposing ideologies. This polarization had been catalyzed, partially at least, by the negotiation of a peace agreement with the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC), the longest-standing guerrilla group in an internal conflict that has lasted more than half a century. In the process, other issues inherent to the Colombian society became increasingly visible: social and economic inequality, extreme poverty, the failure of governmental agencies, corruption, and gender violence. Yet one distinguishing feature became the new point of unity among Colombian citizens: the passionate discussion of one's strong stance in the current political atmosphere of the country. Among the millions of commentators were fashion designers, bloggers, and other members of the Colombian fashion industry. On one hand, designers took an active response to the political debate of the last years, through a number of collections inspired by or dedicated to the expression and denouncing of some of the most important social issues faced by the nation. On the other, members of the Colombian fashion system took to their social media to communicate their political stances and, more importantly in some cases, to urge their followers to join them in their voting decisions. Focusing on the collections and social media communications of a group of Colombian fashion designers, bloggers, and business owners, this article illustrates how different members of the fashion industry have become politically engaged and socially active in the current political climate. The article aims to show how the fashion world can become politically engaged at times of uncertainty and transition.

In what follows, I discuss briefly the main events that have shaped the political climate in Colombia's recent history, including the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC and the presidential elections of 2018. As will be seen, the peace agreement has framed the different elements of political discourse in Colombia for more than half a decade, bringing new attention to social issues faced by Colombian society, including the persistence of gender violence and the need for reparation and—when ever possible—reallocation of millions of victims of forced displacement produced by the country's internal conflict. I continue my discussion with some examples of designers who have reacted to these prevalent social issues in the country, taking them as inspiration for their recent collections: I analyze "I Am an Individual," designed by Carlos Polite for spring–summer 2017; "Destierro," created by Andrés Restrepo and Alejandro González for their firm Alado in 2018; and "Purificación," presented by SOY Diego y Maria Luisa in *Colombiamoda* 2018. All three collections represent different reactions undertaken by fashion designers to the various social issues currently faced by the country. I then expose some examples of the calls to action in which members of the Colombian fashion system—from acclaimed designers to bloggers—engaged with in the midst of the presidential electoral campaigns of 2018; these function as examples of the outspoken and polarized political discourses present among Colombian nationals of all kinds in these uncertain times. These statements were important aspects of the political debate, particularly because of the power that members of the fashion industry enjoy as a potentially strong economic force in the country. I conclude with a short summary of the arguments presented in this paper and some ideas on the potential future of the marriage of fashion and politics in Colombia.

Fragmenting the Nation: Towards the End of 50 Years of Violence

When the presidential elections came around in 2018, Colombia was all but a united front. With 39% of the total votes (10,371,525), Iván Duque became the new president of the Colombian Republic on June 17, 2018 in a historical electoral run that also saw the strongest opposition between the two final candidates: with 25% of the votes (8,033,078) in the second round, Gustavo Petro's result marked an unexpected rise in the popularity of a self-declared leftist candidate in a generally conservative country ("Las claves" 2018). The opposing political discourses of the two presidential candidates evidenced the growing polarization between Colombian nationals, which emerged with the process towards a peace agreement with the FARC led by former president Juan Manuel Santos and which had begun more than half a decade earlier. After being elected with a conclusiveness not dissimilar to Duque's, Santos' popularity had been on the decline since the beginning of the

negotiations with the FARC. The peace process was, in fact, both the pair of wings that elevated Santos to an international hall of fame and a Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 and the bullet that triggered the demise in his popularity among a large percentage of Colombian citizens (O'Grady 2014).

However, the peace agreement—or the possibility of one—also represented the first real opportunity for the country finally to resolve a conflict that has lasted for more than half a century. The history of the FARC can be traced back to the 1960s, when it emerged as a peasant guerrilla organization, initially limited to peripheral rural areas of the country (Meacham, Farah, and Lamb 2014). The FARC has grown consistently since the mid-1980s, slowly achieving a vast territorial expansion throughout the country and gathering nearly 20,000 members (Sánchez Torres and Díaz 2005, 6). The colonization of smaller towns with little or no state presence and the use of terrorist forces, such as murdering and kidnapping, increasingly funded by illegal drug trafficking, allowed for the successful expansion of the FARC and the displacement of thousands of people from their original places of living (Meacham, Farah, and Lamb 2014). Other guerrilla groups, such as the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de liberación nacional*, ELN), emerged parallel to the growth of the FARC. More importantly, however, paramilitary forces developed, most notably the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC).

Paramilitary groups, or right-wing civilian militias, developed during the 1980s and 1990s, encouraged particularly by neoliberal institutional reforms aimed at the modernization and democratization of the country. Neoliberal policies were meant to open up Colombia to the global market economy, while promoting individual defense against narcotrafficking and the internal conflict. However, they also allowed for the emergence and development of paramilitary groups as crucial players in the fight against leftist guerrillas. Both right-wing paramilitaries and leftist guerrillas benefited from the reconfiguration of state power resulting from the privatization and outsourcing related to neoliberal politics, particularly in the generation of revenues through drug trafficking (Gill 2009). More importantly, however, the neoliberal regime in Colombia has, as anthropologist Lesley Gill explains, “severed social relationships” and eliminated the possible “social solidarities that stand in the way of the redistribution of wealth to elites and global corporations” (Gill 2009, 322). Thus, working-class citizens have become nothing more than members of an apparently free labor force within an economic system that equally fosters legal and illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, and have been left to the mercy of the “ravages of capitalism” (Gill 2009, 313). As a result, the neoliberal regime exacerbated social, economic, and territorial inequalities and the rural/urban divide that gave rise to the internal conflict in the 1950s.

The national awareness of the rural/urban divide and the increased socioeconomic and territorial inequalities reached its peak in the years prior to Duque's presidential election, in part due to the peace process with the FARC led by former president Santos. Santos announced his desire for negotiating a peace agreement with the FARC at the beginning of his second mandate, and formal peace talks to solve the internal conflict began a couple months later, in October 2012, in Oslo, Norway. They later moved to Havana, Cuba, where Santos finally met publicly with the leader of the FARC, Timoleón Jiménez [Rodrigo Londoño Echeverry], alias "Timochenko," and where the government and the FARC engaged in more than 50 rounds of negotiations between September 2015 and June 2016. The negotiations addressed a number of issues considered essential for the resolution of the conflict, including territorial redistribution, the reparation of victims of different forms of violence, and guarantees of non-repetition, justice, and truth. An initial agreement determining a ceasefire, guarantees of security, and demobilization areas was reached between the two parties in June 2016, and within a month the Colombian Constitutional Court approved a national plebiscite that would decide in favor or against the adoption of the agreement with the FARC. Surprisingly to the government, the country's democracy rejected the agreement on November 2, 2016, with the vote against the agreement winning by a margin of 54,000 votes out of 13 million ballots cast (CRS 2016; Borda and Gutiérrez 2018). Taking into consideration the arguments held by the strong opposition to the agreement, which included an apparently weak punishment of the human rights violations executed by members of the FARC and an overly generous number of guarantees for the future political role of the members of the insurgent group, the government renegotiated the initial accords with the FARC and a new agreement was signed on November 24, 2016 (CRS 2016, 28; Borda and Gutiérrez 2018, 240).

After the Colombian Congress ratified the revised agreement, the Constitutional Court approved a fast-track mechanism aimed at its implementation, allowing the Congress to advance in the creation and adoption of laws necessary to advance in the peace process. Towards the end of 2016, an amnesty law was passed with the intent of providing benefits to the lower-rank members of the FARC accused of lesser crimes—a measure that was considered essential in order to advance in the process of demobilization (CRS 2016, 29). In the final year and a half of his presidential term, Santos' push to advance in the peace process met increasingly strong opposition from some political leaders, based on the idea that the peace agreement had been an excuse to hand the country over to illegal insurgent groups. The opposition between supporters and opponents of former president Santos and his peace process came to represent the polarized political discourses that were ranged against each other in the second electoral round in 2018: the conservative right who favored a strong-handed, military-based

regaining of the country, perceived to be in the hands of the guerrillas; and the socialist left, often (wrongly) equated with the political allegiances of those guerrillas.

Beyond the divide of conservative versus liberal political debates, however, the months leading to the presidential elections revealed a number of social issues that have plagued the country for years. While most FARC rebels demobilized with the peace agreement, thousands of armed members of insurgent groups refused to put down their weapons and many of the demobilized left the reintegration areas designated by the peace process. This process is not dissimilar to the peace process with the AUC led by former president Álvaro Uribe in the 2000s, which gave way to the emergence of new types of armed groups, including “paramilitaries that did not demobilize; groups in collusion with drug cartels; and criminal gangs that have arisen to fight for a share of the drug trade” (Hanson 2008). At the same time, displaced peoples returning to their lands and peace activists, especially those in rural regions, were victims of killings and massacres (Dyer 2019; Wesche 2018).

Thus, more urgently than a peace agreement, the country needs the long-term implementation of “policies that address the lack of opportunity among demobilized fighters and the impoverished population,” which are, arguably, the only types of measure that will successfully achieve national stability (Wesche 2018). However, it is unlikely that a structural change towards the eradication of inequalities and the achievement of national stability will take place, particularly as “the peace accords did not alter the country’s neoliberal economic model, which was a key driver of the conditions that led to the 50-year conflict” (Dyer 2019). Moreover, with Duque’s right-wing government have come a violation of the terms of the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC and a revival of the neoliberal policies of the 1990s that favor private enterprises of all kinds. Already during the first months of Duque’s mandate, activist killings and forced displacement have continued to rise, while the continuing conflict has raised questions of victimhood and citizenship, of violation of human rights, and of gender violence (Dyer 2019). These issues and the questions they raise have been confronted as inspiration by a number of Colombian fashion designers. How the process of creation turns into action and a structural change for the country, however, remains to be seen.

Design to Denounce: Fashion Speaks Out on Social Issues

At the face of both the potential achievement of peace and the uncovering of persistent social issues discussed above, Colombians have come to imagine the possibility of a new social contract. However, despite the establishment of institutions aimed at guiding the country towards an era of post-conflict, justice and reconciliation still seem far from being

achieved. The inability to achieve immediate reconciliation lies, at least partly, in the hierarchical structures of knowledge that continue to define the processes of memory making and justice seeking within the peace process (Villalón 2017, 5). Yet beyond the dialogue and negotiation for power between different stakeholders, artists hold a special place, for, as Roberta Villalón has argued in her writings about memory, truth, and justice in Latin America:

Capable of generating ‘meaning and intelligibility’, artistic responses to events that abruptly break the order of being have long been among the main means for making sense of and challenging the incomprehensibility and unspeakability of violent disruptions ... In the case of Latin America, artistic media have been produced to challenge atrocities and ‘restore the humanity’ of citizens and communities, thus contributing with the broader memory, truth, and justice processes and the coping with wounded cultural backgrounds. (Villalón 2017, 6)

By challenging atrocities and restoring humanity, artistic production becomes an essential tool in fostering the reflection and discussion of post-conflict reconciliation, providing an understanding of the situations, creating the tools and objects for remembrance, and, perhaps most importantly, identifying, denouncing, and sensitizing the wider public on issues related to the violation of human rights and injustice. This article extends the ideas proposed by Villalón on artistic responses to post-conflict moments in Latin America to include the responses of designers—an essential part of the burgeoning Colombian creative industry—in order to understand the ways in which they helped create conscience about the issues faced by the country during the peace process, providing images for the remembrance of some of those most affected by the conflict, while, at the same time, fostering discussion within a heated political climate during the most recent presidential elections.

Carlos Polite’s Future as the Return to Innocence

For the spring–summer collection of 2017, Colombian designer Carlos Polite presented a collection titled “I Am an Individual” for the brand Polite. The collection, he argued, meant to symbolize the return to his roots, based on both the armed conflict that has shaped Colombian society for more than half a century and the more colorful polka dots of his Spanish inheritance (Polite 2016). The principal inspiration behind Polite’s creations was his positive outlook on the peace process that his home country was experiencing and his optimism in a strongly held belief that Colombia would finally see the end of the war. Such an important moment of Colombian history, he claimed, needed to be recorded and remembered, and he engaged in doing so through his

collection (Polite 2016). Colors and design motifs were carefully selected in order to communicate the designer's support of the peace process: camouflage patterns to recall the long-lasting war, but also hope, symbolized in the green color, and freedom, symbolized in his reworking of the pattern into shades of blue; pre-Columbian figures brought attention to the Colombian indigenous groups that have suffered so much from the armed conflict; and polka dots were used as the "festive elements ... to refer to happiness, not a print of war, a print for peace" (Polite 2016). Together with the more visual design motifs, the designer included words to communicate his message, which highlighted not the isolated individual but the importance of the union of all individuals in the shaping of a new, war-free society. The most significant of these phrases was, in fact, quoted from the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, himself a victim of violence in the Spanish Civil War: *Quiero llorar porque me da la gana* ("I want to cry because I feel like it") (Figure 1). This phrase is quoted from García Lorca's "Poema doble del lago Edem," written in 1930, which explores the loss of innocence brought about by the personal experience of human cruelty and the conscience of pain and death, and expresses the desire to return to childhood or paradise (the state before innocence was lost) and the quest for love and true identity (Bay 2004). In the context of Polite's collection, however, the phrase comes to represent an all-encompassing vision of Colombia's future, as conceived by the designer (Polite 2016). This vision of the future, like García Lorca's poem, is based on the return to a previous seemingly natural state, free of human suffering, and where the joys of freedom and peace will allow for an almost childish desire to cry, in the absence of a painful war.

In addition to his collection, Carlos Polite directed a fashion film in collaboration with Noir Tribe. Sharing the name of Polite's collection for spring-summer 2017, the film *I Am an Individual* presented five individual stories of love, friendship, empowerment, and dreams in an attempt to celebrate the "unique human identities" experienced by its creators (Noir Tribe). The film is an almost surreal creation, with multiple voices forming a confusing, fragmented narration of the multiple stories being told. The actors/models are dressed in Polite's subsequent collections for fall-winter 2017 and spring-summer 2018. The main idea of the film is much more individualizing than the original "I Am an Individual" collection. Beyond the shared title, however, the relationship between collection and film is unclear and apparently limited to the title and a new sense of nostalgia for a quiet—perhaps peaceful—and lonely rural setting.

The relationship of the clothing designed for Polite's "I Am an Individual" collection with his desired end of the internal conflict is far more evident. As mentioned above, the elements of design included symbolic references to war and the desired peace and the pieces featured creative combinations of polka dots and camouflage, at times also

Figure 1

Polite's spring–summer 2017 collection featured the famous phrase pronounced by Federico García Lorca, “Quiero llorar porque me da la gana” (I want to cry because I feel like it) as a message rejecting the decades-long war and forecasting a brighter, peaceful future for Colombia. Photo courtesy of Polite.



featuring red flowers and words. In some cases the polka dots were printed over the camouflage, which featured both shades of blue and the more traditional greens (Figure 2). While some of the pieces were more romantic and appropriate for the feminine, perhaps working woman, others were more appropriate for a more courageous fashionista. Featuring large shoulder pads, wide, round, structural sleeves, and mixed patterns and embroideries, most of Polite's garments for this collection were clearly meant to make a statement. Of particular importance was the capsule collection of “experimental couture” that accompanied “I Am an Individual” and featured garments that were even more daring and structural: belts with armor-like structures that would hang around the hips and statuesque jewels connected with chains, for example. While, in a way, the designs in the collection were likely designed for different kinds of women, the statement pieces, in



Figure 2

Polite's ensembles for spring–summer 2017 featured a mixture of design elements that alluded to the notion of peace and structural shapes. Photo courtesy of Polite.

particular, seem to have been designed more for Polite's international clientele than for the relatively few local customers of the brand. Moreover, in presenting such unique, individualizing styles, the designer's intent seemed more focused on dressing his star-like customers than to create a new, post-conflict, collective identity for his beloved Colombia. Yet the denouncing of the long-lasting conflict through his designs remains valid as an artistic response.

Finally, the designer's inclusion of pre-Columbian motifs in the collection deserves attention. The collection included two denim jackets featuring a combination of other motifs common to the language of the collection: embroidered and knitted camouflage patterns, red flowers, and small, pre-Columbian figurines. But what makes them stand apart is the inclusion of large, pre-Columbian-inspired figures. The head of an indigenous person is printed on the back of each jacket, the face covered with red painting and framed with a crown and a collar of feathers embroidered to the jacket (Figure 3). According to the designer himself,



Figure 3

Back of denim jacket with indigenous figure on the back, part of Polite's collection for spring–summer 2017. Photo courtesy of Polite.

he aimed to recognize the suffering of indigenous peoples as victims of the armed conflict by using their faces and pre-Columbian figures as design motifs. Yet it is unclear how this suffering would be recognized by the women—mostly from faraway countries—who would wear these garments. It is also unclear—and even ironic, given the name of the collection—how an exoticized and generalizing indigenous head represents all the individual people of indigenous communities that have been victims of the Colombian conflict; people who have, in many cases, also been forced to leave their lands, renounce their ancestral forms of knowledge, and even risk losing their identities because of it.

How could the designer achieve a more effective recognition of the suffering of victims of the armed conflict? More importantly, how could the designer use his international acclaim to aid these victims in more direct and substantial ways? Perhaps working closely with some of the indigenous peoples that have suffered from the conflict would have provided at least a partial solution to the problem: it could have facilitated at least a temporal job for some of these people while, at the same time,

fostering a less generalizing and more humanizing inclusion of their motifs in the collection's design. The designer's intentions in the use of such motifs were certainly noble, but it remains unclear how he, through his design and the business of his brand, could become a real actor of change in the midst of a complicated peace process. The re-establishment of peace after such a long-lasting conflict in a tremendously fragmented country is no easy feat and, to achieve it, the whole of society needs to participate in a way that allows for reconciliation and restitution of human rights, without (re-)installing unequal power dynamics that replicate the processes of colonization that have shaped Colombian society for centuries. While Polite's artistic communication of a positive attitude towards the peace process is indeed a good start, a more direct, more inclusive participation from fashion companies is still needed.

Alado's Nostalgia for the Lost Land

A more participative approach to the current social and political issues in Colombia is evidenced in the collection "Destierro" designed by Andrés Restrepo and Alejandro Gutiérrez for their firm Alado. The name of the collection is best translated as "exile;" with it, the designers attempted to address the global issues of migration and the identity that can be carried over through dress, even after migration has occurred. The designers claim not to be engaging in a political or ideological discourse through their collection; rather, their aim is to sensitize the public on an important reality of present times through their art ("Destierro"). Yet the moment in which the collection emerges and the ways in which the designers reinterpret local shapes and garments, while working with local artisans, cannot be completely disjoined from the social reality of Colombia.

The collection features a number of elements that highlight both the ideas of migrations and mobility and the potential loss of heritage faced by some of the cultures that have been victims of forced displacement as a result of the Colombian internal conflict. Perhaps the most symbolic signification of migratory movement is seen in the printed textiles designed specifically for the collection, featuring a variety of birds that, year after year, engage in their own, natural migrations. Accessories meant to be used for carrying different things are also part of the collection: they figure as "containers that accommodate to the body, sheltering, wrapping, and transforming the body, generating new a corporeality derived from portability" ("Colección Destierro" 2018)¹ (Figure 4). In their most functional sense, these containers would be used to carry one's belongings in the process of migration. In a more symbolic way, they are also carriers of the displaced identity that is at risk of disappearing, and certainly of being transformed, with migration. Also symbolic is the use of "humble" fabrics of artisanal production, many of which are produced by some of the communities that have

Figure 4

The collection “Destierro” for Alado was inspired by migratory movements worldwide and included garments inspired by the ideas of portability and mobility. Photo courtesy of Inexmoda.



been victims of violence and forced displacement around the country. In fact, the designers of Alado highlight the connection of their brand with “traditional know-how” from different regions in the country in their presentation of the collection. Once more, they invoke the problem of forced displacement in Colombia, by citing the national report on forced displacement and claiming that it has resulted in more than six million victims of forced displacement; victims who have had to migrate within the country or abroad as a result of the internal conflict (“Colección Destierro” 2018).

Overall, Alado’s collection is nostalgic, particularly as it features crafts that have become in danger of disappearing in the face of forced displacement and the idea of an identity that might be lost in the process of migration. This nostalgia is particularly highlighted in some of the editorial images for the collection, in which the models wear the designs

Figure 5

The collection “Destierro” for Alado presented a notion of nostalgia that recalled the abandonment of one’s original place of living and the loss of identity in the face of migrations. Photo courtesy of Alado.



in front of an old, abandoned, and almost disintegrated church, its floors and parts of the walls eaten up by the vegetation that surrounds it (Figure 5). The garments themselves are simple, mostly made with black, white, or blue and white striped fabrics, and only a number of them feature combinations of the colorful patterns with bird motifs. Far simpler than those designed by Polite, Alado’s garments—with the boho-chic aesthetic that the brand has come to represent—seem more appropriate for almost any kind of woman to wear. It is also worth noting that Alado’s clientele is more local, featuring women from Medellín, where their only store exists, and possibly also the large number of tourists that visit the area; their price-point is far more accessible than Polite’s. Most important, however, is the fact that Alado works with local artisans in the creation of its designs. While the real impact of this work—both economically and socially—is an important matter of discussion for a different paper, it is worth noting that this could be a potentially life-changing starting point towards a new, post-conflict

reality in Colombia and a new, collaborative, human-rights-based fashion system throughout the world.

The Cleaning of Violence Narrated in “SOY Purificación”

The collection “Purificación,” presented by SOY at Colombiamoda in 2018, provides a related and final approach to current social issues in Colombia. The brand resulted from a union between the established fashion designer María Luisa Ortiz and the art director Diego Guarnizo. They work with local artisans and every collection is framed by a story around a particular topic relevant to the Colombian reality. Purificación is a character created and used by the designers to tell the story of their homonymous collection. She is a woman who experienced long years of gender violence in her family life, until she realized the damage it was doing to her; she then left this violence to connect with nature and with her past in order to heal and establish a new, happy life. The lesson taught by the story of Purificación, according to the brand, is one against violence of any form, including the forms of violence that we—as humans—have committed against nature (“Purificación”). While this explanation is given by the designers both in their presentation of the collection and in subsequent communications (including their social media and their website), Purificación can also be considered through its metaphorical meaning. Meaning “purification,” the name of the collection might symbolize the idea of women who have been cleaned from previous violence while at the same time implying the designers’ desire to purify Colombian society from all forms suffering.

The collection was created in partnership with the *Fundación Avon para la Mujer* (Avon’s foundation for women) and is sold exclusively through mail-orders led by the exclusively female representatives of Avon. Both the Avon Foundation and the collection “Purificación” aim to raise awareness of gender violence and the different ways of identifying and avoiding it. With the income generated from purchases of the garments in the collection, SOY aimed to provide funding for educational programs and campaigns that fight violence against women. An additional and very important sponsor for the collection was Natalia Ponce de León, victim of gender violence herself in the form of an attack with acid, and ambassador of the Avon Foundation. Like Natalia, around 1000 Colombians are victims of acid attacks every year; it is estimated that 80% of the victims are women and 90% of the attackers are men (Nieves 2018). In fact, violence against women is one of the most persistent forms of violence, beyond the armed conflict, in Colombia. According to a press release by the Colombian Health Ministry, in the first nine months of 2017 more than 71,000 cases of gender violence had been reported; 76.8% of them against women. In the first trimester of 2018, at least 3014 cases of violence against women had been reported, according to the local newspaper, *El Espectador*. It is worth noting, however, that only an estimated 30% of

the cases of gender violence are reported in the country; most victims are revictimized after denouncing and suffer from increased violence, which—in addition to a highly inefficient legal system—discourages them from seeking the appropriate legal measures and protections (Redacción Nacional 2018).

This situation, precisely, was the inspiration for SOY Purificación. With garments made of printed textiles with festive motifs and featuring phrases such as “Soy mía” (I am mine) and “Soy poderosa” (I am powerful), the collection was certainly a celebration of femininity and the power of women. The fashion show that introduced the collection in June 2018 at the Colombian fashion week, *Colombiamoda*, included audiovisual aides that narrated the story of Purificación and included a number of tips on how to identify signs of abuse and prevent different forms of gender-based violence. After the show, the Avon Foundation announced the donation of 500 million Colombian pesos (over 150,000 U.S. dollars) to prevent gender violence against young women in the country. While this is certainly a beginning towards the end of gender-based violence in the country, it is worth noting that not all victims of this type of violence are young women. Moreover, whether the mediatic impact that this collection had translates into a higher awareness and lowers the number of cases of gender violence in the country is yet to be seen. When asked about the social impact of their collections, representatives of the brand argued that they had “convincing figures” to support the impact their collections have had both on women and on local artisans. When asked for concrete values, however, they seemed unable to respond (SOY Diego y Maria Luisa, Instagram messages and email exchanges with the author, July 25 and November, 2018). This leads to a number of inevitable questions: Is the brand using the social issues merely as a marketing effort to gain the attention of increasingly socially conscious consumers? Or are they really developing a deep, long-lasting change to the Colombian fashion industry? Clearly, the true impact of the initiative of SOY remains to be seen.

In any case, and as has been seen in this section, Colombian designers and fashion brands have borrowed inspiration from the hope planted by the possibility of ending the decades-long internal conflict and some of the most salient social issues faced by the country in recent history. These have provided, if not a desire for change in the industry that supports low production and local artisans and fosters conscious consumption, at least an outlet to reflect upon these issues and present them to a wide public. How the public reads them and interprets them, however, is the subject of a different study. The ways in which these creative outlets affect the wider population, particularly the victims of the armed conflict, forced displacement, and other forms of violence, remain to be seen. However, beyond borrowing inspiration from current social issues, some designers and other members of the Colombian fashion industry have taken to active calls to action, especially during the polarizing

presidential run of 2018. This will be the subject of the following section.

Fashion Calls to Action: The Presidential Campaigns of 2018

On June 15, 2018, two days before the final round of elections for the presidential campaign of 2018, Johanna Ortiz posted a photo on their brand's Instagram account in which the designer and a group of women gathered around a table, all decked in her designs and with open look-books featuring the brand's collections in front of them. One of them, however, stood out: sitting on the table, her back to the camera, she wore the Colombian national football team jersey with the number 4 and the name "Duque" printed on the back. The caption that accompanied the image read:

MY VOTE IS FOR COLOMBIA. I want to see Colombia progress, reconcile, leave behind HATE, and have young leaders. [I want 4 years] of a country in which everyone is united, where diversity is valued and respected, where new opportunities are generated for those of us who love and believe in Colombia. On Sunday we will be playing the most important game for Colombia. Always with respect and accepting the opinions and voting decisions of everyone.²

The picture and its accompanying text made clear reference to both the electoral campaign and the FIFA World Cup that was taking place at the time and which had enlivened an oxymoronic sense of unity within the country, based on the support of the national team's participation at the championship rather than on a political basis. Ortiz's post may have been one of the few to appear permanently on Instagram among the presidential campaigns, as others took to the more ephemeral stories to communicate their thoughts about politics at the time.

Despite the call for respect of opinions and political allegiances and the rejection of hatred in Ortiz's post, the comments revealed an atmosphere in which the opposite lived. While some commentators expressed their agreement with the designer in her voting choice, others rejected it with openly aggressive commentaries. Some argued that the designer was privileged and only cared about the elite consumers who purchased her products; other engaged in more subtle, passive-aggressive attacks, forgiving her for "not knowing better" or accusing her—and other members of the industry who decided to speak up about their political views—of being ignorant and blind-folded by the pointless desire of becoming part of a fake Colombian fashion "monarchy." Some of Ortiz's supporters then commented by noting that the economic benefits of creating a successful enterprise were far more important than

anything else; in this way they dismissed oppositional comments as pointless and even stupid. In general, the large number of comments and the different discourses in which they engaged reflected the different facets of the strongly divisive environment that shaped the political debates throughout the nation at the time.

A subtler approach was undertaken by Creo Consulting, the firm credited with the success of many of the Colombian fashion brands that have achieved international renown in the last decades. A post shared on June 8 featured an illustration with pink flowers on a blue background and a white rectangular sign in the center that read “let’s go out and vote.” The caption of the picture simply read “With less than 10 days to the [Colombian flag] election it is time to get political” and the only demonstration of political allegiances was the use of #duque-presidente. This post also received opposing comments: some of them expressing their grief for the ignorance of the people behind the firm, others supporting them by claiming that opposers were jealous of their business success, and others simply questioning their political allegiances and asking for further explanations of the reasoning behind their electoral choice. These comments, again, revealed some of the broader discourses present in the political discourses in Colombia at the time.

While the reasoning behind the electoral choice of fashion designers was never publicly explained in their social media communications, it might have been fueled, among others, by the prospect of increased security and economic progress in the country in Duque’s hands. During the two terms in which Santos served as the Colombian president (2010–2018), many of these brands saw increased growth, particularly in the international fashion market. It was during these years that Johanna Ortiz became the Colombian darling of global fashion; her designs sold in Barneys New York and Moda Operandi, among other giants of luxury fashion. Other designers followed suit, including Silvia Tcherassi, Leal Daccarett, and Mercedes Salazar, to name a few, and their growth was in part supported by the business of Creo Consulting, as mentioned above. Yet the textile and fashion manufacturing industry has faced economic stagnation in recent years: the exports of the industry accounted for 921 million U.S. dollars in 2017, according to the government’s agency for exports, tourism, and investment, Procolombia—less than half of the two billion estimated by Inexmoda 10 years before (Dinero 2018). Between a conservative candidate who aimed to foster the economic growth of the country and a populist one, whose main objective was increasing equality among nationals rather than promoting industrial growth, there seems to be no doubt that the first choice aligned better with the interests of the fashion industry. As Werner Sombart (1902) stated in 1902, “fashion is the favorite child of capitalism” (316), and there is no doubt that the fashion elites—in Colombia and beyond—would align with the candidate who proposes a better economic outcome for their business. It is worth noting, however,

that a more egalitarian society, with fewer people living in poverty and with a lower degree of economic disparity—only two of the potential outcomes of a more socialist political regime—could also bring an increased and perhaps more sustainable economic growth to a country like Colombia.

This, in fact, is what fueled other members of the Colombian fashion industry who, beyond posting pretty pictures on Instagram stating their political allegiances, engaged in long-standing campaigns and avid discussions with their followers on social media as part of their support for the opposite candidate, Gustavo Petro. Two of the most vocal campaigners for Petro on Twitter were the fashion bloggers Ita María (@itamaria83) and Adriana Convers (@fatpandora). With more than 10,000 followers, Convers engaged in constant communications favoring the candidate and encouraging her followers to vote for him. On the eve of the election, she tweeted: “My beautiful father ... a capitalist and businessman will vote for Petro because he does have memory and empathy.”³ The mentions of empathy and memory were clear references to the peace process, which was perceived to be endangered in Duque’s hands—and in fact is, as the process of formalizing the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (Special Jurisdiction for Peace, JEP) and other steps towards the advancement of the process were suspended on the first days of his mandate. The mention of her “capitalist and businessman” father was aimed at telling readers that voting for Petro was not necessarily harmful to the national economy.

Ita María, with 22,000 followers, engaged in a similar and more active discourse. Throughout the electoral campaigns, she insisted on her profession as an economist and her knowledge of the economic system in her arguments to favor the candidate. On May 27, for example, she tweeted: “I am an economist and the uncertainty of the country with Petro is nothing other than sad ... a lack of knowledge and laziness to read closely.”⁴ Later, on election day, she made a reference to the idea of privilege and how someone like Petro would allow for more opportunities—educational and economic, in particular—for more people throughout the country. This tweet, however, was in response to a comment from María Jimena Daza (@MariaCometa), another member of the Colombian fashion world and avid supporter of Duque. In her tweet, she suggested with irony that Ita María was a sort of hypocrite, who fights against capitalism and inequality while wearing her Calvins or making publicity for Forever21. The Twitter exchange between the two reflected the heated discussions that took place throughout the country, between friends, families, and co-workers alike; a reflection of the two opposing political discourses that were set against each other in the second electoral round.

María Jimena Daza, despite openly supporting Duque in the presidential run, is the owner of a second-hand, self-claimed sustainable fashion store in the country. While the extent to which her brand supports long-term sustainability and fights careless consumption is difficult to

evaluate, it is one of the few brands to begin working so openly towards more responsible consumption practices, and María Jimena Daza is herself an outspoken advocate for more sustainable forms of consumption. She is active and outspoken on Twitter and her tweets often spark polemic discussions. Her political discourse follows what was presented by the larger fashion brands, such as Johanna Ortiz and Creo Consulting, in the midst of the presidential campaigns, and suggests the seemingly obvious association of fashion with the candidate who would protect the capitalist economy of the country. On the other hand, the more socialist discourses of Ita María and Adriana Convers, in favor of the populist candidate Gustavo Petro, were based on ideas supporting the protection of a democracy and, more importantly, on the desire for a more egalitarian nation. Though socialism might be seen, at least at first, as a force opposing the “natural” workings of the fashion industry, Ita María, specifically, saw it as the basis for a better-functioning economy in the long run.

Both sides of the coin reveal a number of contradictions: a retailer-owner who claims to support sustainability and conscious consumption is not a typical capitalist businessperson, and fashion bloggers who earn their living from their work with fashion brands that foster endless consumption are not expected to favor a more egalitarian economy. These contradictions also reveal some of the contradictions present in a country that, while aiming to continue its path towards development and the eradication of poverty, still privileges some groups within its population over others. Yet the fact is that different members of the Colombian fashion system, coming from different backgrounds and engaging in different activities, are noticing and engaging in the debate about these topics. How they take these debates to action and positively change the reality of a fragmented and unequal country, however, is still to be seen.

Designing for Dissent

On the day after the elections, Ita María wrote on her blog some of her thoughts about fashion and politics and the role of influencers in the new, post-elections Colombia. She wrote that the passion fueled in her by the presidential campaigns made her realize how important politics were in her life—just like fashion itself. What appealed to her about fashion, she explained, was its power to communicate, its availability as a tool for expression and the diffusion of ideas, beyond its business nature and the different forms of exploitation that it creates. Both the peace process and the presidential run were the catalysts of a thought process that led her to formulate a new future for fashion, though limited to her and her blog. She wrote that:

this space will give more visibility to coherence, to the projects that really do support those causes [of human rights, feminism,

peace, equality, and the protection of the environment], to fashion and to people who are coherent in what I believe in, and, yes, when I consider it necessary, to reject those which are not, without this being a witch hunt, without meaning to do a blacklist, it is about demanding coherence with the causes they sell to us (María 2018).⁵

The future of fashion blogging, for Ita María at least, is one of activism and of creating collectively a new system that promotes a more just society. Fashion is a space to resist the new governmental regime of the country; it is a way of fighting for a better future for Colombia. Recently she proved that she stands by her words by participating, for example, in marches against the possible abolishment of abortion laws in the country, by joining other women and adopting the uniform of the green bandana to express overtly their support for abortion.

How other brands and other members of the fashion industry in the country are engaging with the political aspects of fashion after the elections and during the first months of a new presidential rule is not as clear. As has been discussed in this article, fashion designers were quick to borrow inspiration from different social issues faced in Colombia and developed them into collections intended for different sectors of the fashion market. In all cases, and perhaps without an explicit aspiration to it, fashion became political in a country in which inequality and injustice prevail at a time when change was seen as imminent and the future had become unclear. While some designers have addressed some of these problems more directly by engaging in fundraising campaigns or working with low-income artisans, the true impact of these acts remains to be seen.

A different case was provided by members of the fashion industry who actively appealed to their customers in the presidential run of 2018. Engaging in the political debates of the country, they uncovered the different discourses that shaped the presidential elections of 2018. Hot topics of discussion included the need for more sustainable forms of production and consumption and the need to create a more egalitarian economy and society. However, many of these discourses remain to be enacted by different members of the Colombian fashion system. Yet, as Ita María's writing and actions suggest, fashion does have the potential to move people and funds, and members of the fashion industry can actively work for a better future for Colombia. It is now in their hands to push for a more egalitarian country and for a more sustainable economy, beyond the artistic showcase of their inspiration and the heated, at times aggressive, debates on social media.

As Roberta Villalón argues in *Memory, Truth, and Justice in Contemporary Latin America*, artists—and, I add, designers—become essential players in processes of reconciliation, particularly as they acquire a role as interpreters of difficult realities, mediators of debate,

denouncers of violence, and creators of memory. As Colombia receives a new president, who has the task of both continuing to advance on the road towards peace, while also keeping his promise of returning to more conservative policies in the country, artistic responses through design and other forms of creation acquire a particularly important role. For they must give voices to the different people and discourses they represent, constantly negotiating between different truths and imagining different possible futures for a nation—and a government—that is still struggling to construct its own.

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Notes

1. Author's translation of the original text: "Contenedores vestimentarios que se acoplan al cuerpo, lo cobijan, lo envuelven y lo transforman, generando nuevas corporalidades derivadas del portar, cargar y llevar a cuestas."
2. Author's translation of the original caption: "MI VOTO ES POR COLOMBIA. Quiero ver a Colombia progresar, reconciliarse, dejar atrás los ODIOS y tener gobernantes juvenes. #Por4AñosDe un país que convoque a todos que valore la diversidad y la respete, que nos genere nuevas oportunidades a los que creemos y queremos a Colombia. El Domingo nos estamos jugando el partido más importante de Colombia. Siempre con respeto y aceptando la opinión y decisión de voto de cada uno..."
3. Author's translation of the original tweet: "Mi papá bello, mi viejito de 88 años, capitalista y empresario va a votar por Petro, porque el si tiene memoria y empatía."
4. Author's translation of the original tweet: "Soy economista y la incertidumbre del país con Petro no es nada más que triste y desinformación amañada en el desconocimiento y pereza de leer bien."

5. Author's translation of: "este espacio será para dar mayor visibilidad a la coherencia, a los proyectos que sí aportan realmente a esas causas, a la moda y personas que siguen siendo coherentes con eso en lo que sigo creyendo y sí, cuando lo considere necesario, a rechazar esas que no lo son, sin que esto se trate de una cacería de brujas, sin querer hacer una lista negra, se trata de exigir coherencia con las causas que nos venden."

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