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The Chilean *Arpilleristas*: Changing National Politics Through Tapestry Work

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In 1974 Chile the *arpilleristas*, women tapestry creators, began as a group of thirteen women brought together by common grievances. State-sponsored confusion had led to chaos as society was forcibly kept ignorant of the intentions and actions of the military that had recently taken over the country. Fear kept the women, like many of the country's citizens, silenced. Although there was much to discuss, much to be protested, the disappeared to be found, people to be held accountable, memories to be remembered...fear held them in basements and clandestine workshops to consider these issues alone. "Nothing happened here" the military told them. Those who had experienced first-handedly the deplorable violence in their shantytowns knew that this was not true. A great deal had happened to oppress and violate them and their loved ones. Without a voiced expression, these courageous women called on a traditional craft in order to stitch their memories into a fixed history. The women desired only to reestablish familial alliances disrupted by the Pinochet dictatorship that had begun one year earlier. Their art would eventually give rise to broader political missions such as the denouncement of authoritarianism and the fight for democracy.

The *arpillera* movement demonstrates how Chilean women became politically active as a result of experiencing persecution and of being forced from an informal into a formal political arena through the Pinochet dictatorship. Driven by their collective memory, the *arpilleristas* seemingly broke from traditional gender roles by publicly protesting the human rights violations they remembered so vividly and were determined not to forget. However, the women were not fully acting outside of their societal norms, only the location as to where they dealt with domestic issues was relocated. They were able to act politically because their normally informal politics were catapulted into the formal arena during the dictatorship.¹ This essay aims to trace how the upheaval of the political, economic, and social spheres of Chilean life allowed for a collective memory framework to catalyze women's, especially the *arpilleristas*' political mobility that was not only reactive but creative. As the women realized the venue of their politics had changed, it will become evident that they took full advantage of this alteration in an effort to be heard nationally and internationally. To illustrate how the Chilean women progressed from being traditional mothers and wives to radical instigators of a political movement, I will analyze specific *arpilleras*. In doing so, I will show how their collective memory was motivation to become politically active in an arena that allowed for women's issues to be considered political. In examining the textiles, it will also become apparent that the *arpillera* movement influenced other women's protest movements in Latin America. At stake is a better understanding of how gender, politics and societal forces interact when a nation is in strife and how artforms can be tools of substantial change.

To locate the women's movement in history, it is important here to discuss the political climate of Chile during the early 1970's. Before the commencement of Pinochet's regime on September 11, 1973, many lower to middleclass families were hopeful for an end to their poverty for which President Salvador Allende's economic programs were thought to be responsible. Allende's socialist agenda attempted to

¹ Susan Franceshet, *Women and Politics in Chile*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2008), 7.

nationalize and redistribute land seized from the elite class. Throughout Allende's three-year term from 1970-1973, racial tensions between the poor descendants of indigenous people who supported the socialist program and the elite, landowning class increased. Inflation, decline in export income, and strikes damaged the economy in such a way that the *coup d'état* in 1973 by Augusto Pinochet, commander-in-chief of the Chilean army, was welcomed.

By 1975 Pinochet had set forth an economy of free-market reform. The policy's objectives were economic liberalization, privatization of state owned companies, and stabilization of inflation. This program was successful in recovering economic growth and became known as "the economic miracle." Despite these advances in the economic realm, however, the political and social spheres descended into turmoil. Immediately following the coup of 1973, the recently established junta exercised both executive and legislative functions of the government. The junta enforced strict censorship and curfew and banned leftist parties. The dictatorship's violence was not only directed at dissidents but towards their families as well. Thousands of civilians were kidnapped and disappeared, tortured or assassinated until Chile returned to democratic rule in 1989.² According to Pinochet, these operations were necessary to extract communism from Chile.

Thus, Pinochet's Chile in 1974 was a violent and frightening place for the women of the lower-middle class. In an effort to obtain straightforward information on the whereabouts of their disappeared loved ones, the women became regular visitors to the morgues, hospitals, and torture centers. Day after day these women would see one another, recognizing the look of hope on each other's faces. They quickly realized that their stories were similar; their loved ones had been detained and/or disappeared.³ Motivated by the desire to reunite their families and to generate some income as their husbands were detained, disappeared or in hiding, the mostly middle-aged women banded together in the Santiago shantytowns to create patchwork tapestries, or *arpilleras*, depicting the human rights violations they were experiencing. Despite the prevailing gender norms which did not permit women to work outside of the home, the women set up clandestine workshops in homes or in the basements of the Vicariate of Solidarity, an organization established to defend against the violation of human rights.⁴ The cover of the Vicariate from 1974 to 1989 allowed the *arpilleristas* to meet weekly to embroider their painful stories. Here they were free to not only translate their experiences onto cloth but also find comfort in relating to the group of women. *Arpillerista* Violeta Morales discusses the significance of the group meetings in Marjorie Agosin's text *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*: "There I found other people who were suffering from the same thing and trying to help them sometimes helped me with my own tragedy."⁵ The *arpilleras* were surreptitiously sold by the Vicariate of Solidarity and even shipped abroad to extend the *arpilleristas'* message world-wide.

Through the power of human connection and denouncement, the women were able to generate stronger, confident senses of self which aided in political awareness. *Arpilleristas* began, then, to recognize themselves as political entities. They were out on the streets of Santiago organizing other workshops and soup kitchens, searching for loved ones by day and tirelessly stitching their *arpilleras* by night. In her testimony, recorded by Agosin, Violeta Morales recalls how she and other *arpilleristas* "started

² Ibid., 15.

³ Marjorie Agosin, "Patchwork of Memory." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 27, no. 6 (1994): 11.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 88.

training sessions to teach the women about solidarity and their role in...other group activities.”⁶ Partaking in the creation of communal kitchens and educational groups helped the *arpilleristas* to confront fear, feed their families and become politically active against authoritarianism. According to Agosín, through these different groups the *arpilleristas* were able to attain a profound knowledge of politics. “By means of the tapestries, they undertook a collective dialogue grounded in social justice and the commitment to transform an authoritarian culture into a democratic and cooperative one.”⁷ The work of the *arpilleristas* had a vast influence on the fight for democracy. The *arpilleristas*’ voices essentially helped to bring international awareness to the political condition of Chile during the seventies and eighties. The movement also changed the way that women participated in Chilean politics and society, seemingly breaking tradition to battle social and gender norms to realign familial normalcy and return to a traditional way of life.

The *arpilleristas* were entering a realm of politics that typically women had never penetrated. In Chilean politics, women’s marginalization originated in the gendered patterns of citizenship.⁸ Scholar Susan Franceschet argues that before the dictatorship women were involved in informal politics if they were at all. In the informal arena, women were concerned with issues centered on gender roles and were motivated by personal and domestic affairs as opposed to formal politics that were addressed by parties.⁹ However, during the dictatorship, the issues of the informal arena were considered formal for two reasons. Firstly, with the violence against families and the effects on the economy, these social and community issues were politicized.¹⁰ Secondly, the formal arena was closed by the junta during the dictatorship, thus, activism in the informal area was viewed as formal.¹¹ Franceschet argues that this activism by women is an “expression of citizenship...when informal activities are perceived as political.”¹² Seen in this way, the *arpillera* movement was able to make more of a resounding impact because of the classification of it as possessing a formal political agenda. The women, by acting in a typical, civil and domestic sphere were transferred into one more politicized as defined by the militarization of the nation’s government. Thus, although the *arpilleristas* were not at first intentionally political in their agenda, they were able to act within an arena previously not open to them, an arena in which their voices, through their poignant needlework were heard clearly and internationally like never before.

Aside from resisting a violent authoritarian regime, the *arpilleristas* were also, in a sense, struggling against oblivion within themselves and their nation. The embroidery of personal fabrics denouncing the human rights violations kept the memory of the disappeared alive. By stitching the intimacies of their lives, the *arpilleristas* allowed each *arpillera* to evoke a human life, thus memorializing him by the receivers. Whereas scholars like Lessie Jo Frazier believe that Chilean memory is a condition of remembering versus forgetting,¹³ scholar Steve Stern argues that the dichotomy of memory versus forgetting is too narrow of a categorization process for what occurred to Chilean memories after the military takeover of 1973. Stern describes four emblematic memories as competing selective

⁶ Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope*, 90.

⁷ Agosín, “Patchwork of Memory,” 12.

⁸ Susan Franceschet, *Women and Politics in Chile* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2005), 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Lessie Jo Frazier. *Salt in the Sand: Memory, Violence, and the Nation-State in Chile, 1890 to the Present* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 8.

remembrances.¹⁴ He states that because social actors are selective when making sense of collective trauma, the four frameworks are indispensable when investigating memory.

Stern categorize remembrances into “memory as salvation,” “memory as unresolved rupture,” “indifferent memory,” and “as persecution and awakening.”¹⁵ This final memory introduced by Stern “memory as persecution and awakening” includes those who experienced both self-discovery and repression during the military dictatorship. Stern states that “the violent persecution of dissidents, the collapse of democratic rights, the staying power of the dictatorship, these tested one’s deepest values and social commitments, and thereby provoked...a process of awakening.”¹⁶ In an effort to cope with the trauma brought about by the military reign this remembrance gave rise to an intensification of nonconformity as well as self-knowledge and values. This memory entraps an individual between the pain caused by violence and the hope that the repression will bring about social and political change.

I argue that the *arpillera* movement belongs to memory as persecution and awakening. Although her research views memory as functioning within a much smaller framework than Stern believes, Frazier’s study of memory in the context of nation-state formation contains parallels to Stern’s work. In her book *Salt in the Sand: Memory, Violence, and the Nation-State in Chile, 1890 to the Present*, Frazier states that memory “produces emotion to bring people on board with particular political projects in particular ways.”¹⁷ This emotion Frazier describes results from persecution and, therefore, causes individuals to awaken politically and join projects and movements. Both scholars theorize that memory causes emotion, which then acts as motivation for individuals to become more politically active.

The *arpilleristas* experienced the violence first-handedly when their husbands, fathers, siblings, and/or children were detained, disappeared, and killed. They battled sleep, sometimes for days, so that they might complete an *arpillera* to sell in order to provide sustenance for their families. They organized themselves, founding workshops in which to practice their covert craft. According to Agosín, “the workshops transformed into centers of solidarity for innumerable activities as forms of social and political subsistence.”¹⁸ Here began a political movement denouncing not only the kidnapping of loved ones, but also unemployment, lack of food, and the right to a job. This was the foundation for a political transformation to happen in 1989 in which authoritarianism was finally defeated by democracy.

To further demonstrate how the memory of the *arpilleristas* uses memory as persecution and awakening I will examine a few examples of *arpilleras* produced during the 1970’s and 1980’s. First it is important to understand the delicate manner in which the women crafted their artwork. The process of creating the tapestries began with fabric from loved ones’ clothing or donated clothing. The *arpilleristas* cut shapes and combined scenes by stitching with brightly colored thread. The background of the decided theme was made first, typically joining together elements like the Andes Mountains, clouds, the sun, or treetops. These scenes of nature represent the existence of hope in spite of the pain.¹⁹ Once the stage was set, the *arpillerista* added other figures for action and drama. The finished product was usually no larger than eighteen by fifteen inches.

¹⁴ Stern, *Remembering*, xxvii.

¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹⁶ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷ Frazier, *Salt in the Sand*, 4.

¹⁸ Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope*, 27.

¹⁹ Agosín, “Patchwork,” 12.

Piece by piece the dolls were carefully made. Now and then the *arpillerista* would even use her own hair to cover the doll's tiny head.²⁰ The *arpillerista* breathed life into the tapestry and through her tender diligence made the scene come to life. The dolls and other three-dimensional elements of the first *arpillera* indicate a sense of urgency and connection between the art and the life being depicted (Figure 1). The tapestry shows the police seeming to at random take citizens off the street. The confusion of the scene is evident in the halting of daily activity by those witnessing the act. The suddenness with which this could occur is apparent in the choice of setting; mid-day and on a busy street. Agosín remarks that in her collection of *arpilleristas'* testimonies, one theme is always at the forefront of their minds. "I never met one *arpillerista* who did not recount [the story of the arrest of their loved ones] to me. The details were retold, relived, and repeated obsessively."²¹ The *arpilleristas* felt that information of how and where their relatives were arrested was fundamental in their creation of the tapestries. They could not and would not forget the facts of the event which changed their lives forever.



Figure 1. Violeta Morales, Unknown title, ca. 1980. Fabric, thread, 14 ¾" x 18 ¼". Reproduced from Marjorie Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), plate 2.

The second *arpillera* was made by Violeta Morales (Figure 2). Her identity is known because her brother, Newton Morales' photo was superimposed on the tapestry. Most *arpilleras* were not signed. According to Agosín, "this anonymity celebrates the collective power of this art form."²² This design characterizes the early *arpillera* productions. The inclusion of a face expresses the tapestry's identity and humanity in a scene depicting a protest against the disappearance of Chileans. The sequential order

²⁰ Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope*, 53.

²¹ Ibid., 47.

²² Ibid., 15.

of these two *arpilleras* shows how the *arpilleristas* were motivated by the vanishing of loved ones to mobilize and become more politicized. The feeling of hopelessness within the first *arpillera* is not so much present in the second. This is because the second tapestry was created at a time when the *arpillera* workshops encouraged a sense of solidarity within the community. The organization of group activities and construction of *arpilleras* instilled in the women a sense of empowerment and confidence, feelings which when left simmering began to translate into feelings of political entitlement.



Figure 2 Violeta Morales, *Verdad y Justicia (Truth and Justice)*, ca. 1989. Fabric, thread, photograph, 14 7/8" x 18 3/4". Private collection of Marjorie Agosin. Reproduced from Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), plate 25.

Social disobedience was an important aspect of the *arpillera* movement. The next *arpillera* depicts protestors chained to the gates of Congress (Figure 3). Agosin notes that "all the [*arpilleristas*] I spoke to [in 1994] had taken part in hunger strikes and had chained themselves to fences in strategic locations in downtown Santiago [during the mid-eighties]."²³ This was done to disrupt the course of daily life in an effort to call attention to the military regime's systematic disappearance and torture of Chileans. Throughout the late seventies and eighties women regularly partook in demonstrations against the dictatorship and insisted that men stay at home to avoid arrest, torture, or exile.²⁴ Women felt that their gender protected them from these outcomes since the junta encouraged traditional society and the roles of women as mothers. Because the women, acting as mothers, were trying to reassemble their families and care for their loved ones, the junta could only denounce the women as liars rather than appearing as hypocritical. In an effort to use this advantage within civil space, the women would march every Thursday to the Supreme Court Building with photos of missing relatives attached to their clothing.²⁵ These visual reminders are reminiscent of the protests of the *madres* of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, who also wore photos of their missing loved ones. The similarities between the

²³ Ibid., 51.

²⁴ Ibid., 50.

²⁵ Ibid.

demonstrations of the Chilean and Argentinean women are indicative of the *arpillera* movement inspiring and joining with a larger international framework of protest. The influence of the *arpilleristas* on the later *madres*’ movement will be discussed in detail shortly.



Figure 3 Mireya Rodriguez, *El Encadenamiento (The Chaining)*, ca. 1989. Fabric, thread, 14 ¼" x 18 3/8". Private collection of Marjorie Agosin. Reproduced from Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), plate 13.

In 1983 the *arpilleristas* formed a folkloric group attempting to spread their message through song and dance. *Arpillerista*, Violeta Morales recalls, “We not only wanted to embroider and cry out our grief, but we also wished to sing our message of protest.”²⁶ The group’s most memorable performance was the dancing of *la cueca sola*. It is interesting to note here that performances of *la cueca sola* caught the attention of the international network of solidarity. In 1988 the musician Sting toured, under the banner of Amnesty International, for the Human Rights Now! Tour where he performed the single entitled “They Dance Alone.” This song described the plight of Chilean mothers and their dance of protest, *la cueca sola*. This final *arpillera* depicts women performing *la cueca sola* (Figure 4). With their missing loved one’s photo pinned to white and black uniforms, the women danced the Chilean national dance, a courtship routine usually performed in male/female pairs. According to Agosin, “Through *la cueca sola*, the dancers tell a story with their solitary feet, the story of the mutilated body of a loved one. Through their movements and the guitar music, the women also recreate the pleasure of dancing with the missing person.”²⁷ This variation of the dance transforms it from a pleasurable experience to one full of pain and memory. Author Alexander Wilde believes that the televised *la cueca sola* performed at the inauguration of democratically elected President Aylwin in 1990 particularly moved the audience. In his article “Irruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile’s Transition to Democracy,” Wilde

²⁶ Ibid., 92.

²⁷ Ibid., 62.

claims that irruptions of memory caused by performances like *la cueca sola* forces Chileans to “contemplate the deeply divided memories of their conflictive past.”²⁸ Wilde’s study demonstrates that the *arpilleristas*’ message was distributed as intended. The women dancing *la cueca sola* recall the past, the company of a partner, pleasure, desire. Witnessing this poignant display compels the country to remember also. The existence of the *arpilleristas* in a world dependent on mediatized images aided them in their cause. Without the far-reaching influence of television and radio, the objectives of the *arpillerista* movement may not have dispersed as widely as desired.



Figure 4 Violeta Morales, *La Cueva Sola (They Dance Alone)*, ca. 1989. Fabric, thread, 141/4" x 18 7/8". Reproduced from Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), plate 23.

It can be said that the solidarity and subsequent movement of the *arpilleristas* generated a model for mothers and wives in other Latin American countries oppressed by dictatorships. Similar to the forming of the *arpilleristas*, groups of women banded together during Argentina’s Dirty War from 1976-1983. Like the *arpilleristas* of Chile, Argentinean mothers and wives began encountering one another in the government offices, prisons, and courts while searching for disappeared loved ones.²⁹ By 1977 these “*madres*” were marching and protesting each week to the Plaza de Mayo, the political, financial, and symbolic center of Buenos Aires, where they were sure to attract attention. Scholar Diana Taylor theorizes that the *madres*’ resistance “was very much a performance designed to focus national and international attention on the junta’s violation of human rights.”³⁰ The *madres* used their identity as traditional Argentinean women to become noticed. The protests illustrated how they were forced to

²⁸ Alexander Wilde, “Irruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile’s Transition to Democracy,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 31, (1999): 485.

²⁹ Diana Taylor. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 186.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

enter a public domain, an unconventional act for women, in order to render care to their missing family members, an aspect of the traditional woman's role. Taylor states that "unlike the military, [the *madres*] showed their wounds rather than their instruments."³¹ Taylor argues that the *madres*' use of political performance and identity politics was a way to combat the junta's own performance. Taylor's reasoning can be applied to the *arpilleristas*' movement in Chile. The creation of *arpilleras* and the ensuing social disobedience acts can be said to be political performances meant to confront those of the Chilean junta. Although the *madres* of Argentina were just developing their performances in 1977, the *arpilleristas* of Chile had formed their resistance mechanisms three years earlier. The connections between the *arpilleristas* and the *madres* and the influence of the former movement on the latter lend understanding to the rise and evolution of women's political movements in Latin American.

The *arpilleras* examined in this essay demonstrate how the *arpilleristas* became more politicized by way of deplorable experiences. They were responding to crises within society though they were more than just reacting since they critiqued the regime in power and offered a different cultural vision.³² Although the *arpilleristas* began working in a time where many did not dare to voice objection to authoritarianism, their powerful *arpilleras* loudly voiced their messages for them. As the years wore on and the missing were still not found, the women realized that informing the international community of the human rights violations would not give them the answers they desired. Creating *arpilleras* helped these women to acquire the confidence and facility to discover the avenues through which to protest effectively, and gain citizenship by participating in politics made formal by the circumstances. Their memories of persecution pushed them into an individual and collective awakening which began with fixing these awful memories in history with their weavings.³³ This awakening effectively traversed Latin America and found its way to the *madres* of Argentina who in 1977 experienced similar plights to those of the Chilean *arpilleristas*. The *arpillera* movement acted as an exemplary model that generated an opening for the *madres* to become more politicized and create political performances to give influence to their agenda during their struggle in the Dirty War. One important, lasting contribution is that Chilean women and other Latin American women are now seen in a new light, as actors and citizens with individual rights.³⁴

Today there is still much for the new generation of *arpilleristas* to protest. While democracy has been achieved, at present, Chilean society struggles with inequality between social classes and the inadequacy of the judicial system, which has not as of yet uncovered the truth behind the past violence or prosecuted those responsible.³⁵ What has changed for the *arpilleristas* of today is that they no longer battle a losing conflict alone. Chilean history and memory are at the forefront of society's mind and a new generation of institutions has taken responsibility for implementing change. The concept of the *arpilleras* of the seventies and eighties can be reflected upon to relate to current issues in Chile. Agosin believes that "the *arpillera* inspires us to live in the past, but also allows us to restructure the ethic of our future."³⁶

³¹ Ibid., 198.

³² Annie G. Dandavati, *The Women's Movement and the Transition to Democracy in Chile*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1996), 8.

³³ Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope*, 19.

³⁴ Dandavati, *The Women's Movement*, 14.

³⁵ Peter Winn in Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 168.

³⁶ Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope*, 35.

Although more than thirty years has passed, the significance of the *arpillera* is as relevant today as it was yesterday. As a model for political change, the *arpillera* survives and reminds the Chilean and international communities that overcoming strife is a laborious and challenging endeavor which can succeed over the most disheartening circumstances even when art is its most prominent tool.

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