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## Stitches of War: Women's Commentaries on Conflict in Latin America

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## Stitches of War: Women's Commentaries on Conflict in Latin America

Deborah A. Deacon

Traditionally warfare has been seen as a gendered activity, affecting the men who fought but allowing women to escape unscathed. For generations men have left their homes and families to fight and die for their country and its principles while their wives, mothers, and daughters have remained safely at home, seemingly unaffected by war and violence. This paper will show that this in fact is not true – women are impacted by war – by the loss of loved ones, the economic instability that results from war, and fear for their personal safety and freedom. While some women have expressed this impact through literature and song, many have expressed the impacts of war on their lives through their traditional art forms – the creation of textiles through weaving, sewing, and embroidery.

Textile production has long been seen as the mundane work of women, part of the domestic sphere of hearth and home. Yet textiles have played key roles in human civilization, especially in the development of farming and the move into permanent settlements.<sup>1</sup> They have been important in the formation of national identity of numerous cultures throughout history and textiles created by women have played important roles in support of warfare as well as in opposition to it. They have been used to document events which occurred in war and to commemorate military heroes as well as those lost in battle.

This is true in numerous regions of Latin America, beginning with Mesoamerican groups such as the Paracas culture (300 BCE-200 CE) and Lambayeque culture (1000-1476 CE) whose women created elaborately embroidered vicuña wool mantles and loincloths whose borders featured colorful images of fierce gods and warriors, frequently depicted clutching large knives and severed heads.<sup>2</sup> Aztec and Inca women were responsible for creating the luxury feather cloaks and garments worn by rulers and warriors in battle and to celebrate military victories. These textiles served as symbols of national pride and military prowess.

Textile production and apparel in Latin America changed after the Spanish conquest. In Peru, Inca men wore Spanish-style dress, reserving the traditional *uncu*, worn over trousers rather than loincloths, for special occasions. Most textiles were woven by men in workshops which produced Spanish-style clothing while women wove domestic textiles for use in the home. Embroidery traditions were also relegated to the domestic sphere in many areas. Over time, machine made textiles became prevalent throughout Latin America, although many women wove for domestic use.

In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new forms of women's textiles began appearing throughout Latin America. The techniques used to produce these textiles were not indigenous to the region in which they were used, yet they were readily adopted as forms of self-expression of the horrors and sorrows the women experienced as the result of warfare in the region.

In the 1970s, Chileans experienced first hand the agony of having family members tortured, killed, or "disappeared" at the hands of government troops under the regime of General Augusto Pinochet.<sup>3</sup> Most

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Stone-Miller, *To Weave for the Sun* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Kreft, "Art and Artifacts of the Paracas," [http://www.lindakreft.com/pdf/paracas\\_art.pdf](http://www.lindakreft.com/pdf/paracas_art.pdf) (accessed July 7, 2012) and "Textiles of the Paracas Culture," [http://agutie.homestead.com/files/geometric\\_art/paracas\\_fabric\\_textile\\_1.html](http://agutie.homestead.com/files/geometric_art/paracas_fabric_textile_1.html) (accessed July 7, 2012) and Stone-Miller, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kornbluth, *Identity, Nation, Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), pp. 2-7. In the first three weeks of Pinochet's regime, fifteen hundred people were killed or disappeared. In the seventeen years of Pinochet's regime, more than

of the “disappeareds” were men and students who actively opposed the right-wing dictator, leaving wives and mothers to cope with the uncertainty of their fate. The women also had to cope with the economic and emotional uncertainty that resulted from their losses. In Chile, women have historically been seen as a major social force, governing home and family.<sup>4</sup> Their role in public life revolves around feminine concerns such as schools, day care, family and income. In school, girls are educated in “feminine” subjects, such as needlework, music, art and household operations, skills required to be considered a good wife. These same skills helped Chilean women survive during the adversity they faced during the war.

In the mid-1970s, Chilean artist and singer Violeta Parra Sandoval introduced *arpillera*- making to women living in the shantytowns around Santiago as a means of helping the women cope with their losses.<sup>5</sup> *Arpilleras* are small fabric wall hangings with burlap backings that use embroidery and applique to create scenes of daily life, including the arrest and disappearance of loved ones, scenes of prison camps and police brutality inflicted on an innocent population. The *arpillera* tradition is not native to the Santiago region, however it is an ancient folk textile tradition in the Isla Negra region of Chile. Those produced in Isla Negra before 1973 used embroidery and applique on burlap to depict animals and daily life in the countryside. People were rarely included in the colorful scenes.

In Santiago, the tradition was modified by the women who formed the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared, which worked under the protection of Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez’s Vicariate of Solidarity, which worked to help the poor living in the shantytowns around Santiago. Those living in these areas were constantly subjected to raids by the military, water and electricity outages, and the round up of family members. The Vicariate, whose staff was composed of middle class professionals who had lost their jobs in the Allende government or in local universities as a result of Pinochet’s military coup, established secret workshops in churches throughout the city, bringing together women to share their experiences and find ways to support themselves.<sup>6</sup> This support ultimately came from the creation of *arpilleras*.

Each group was typically composed of approximately twenty women, and had an official treasurer who distributed sales income to the participants. Reviewers finished each piece and insured that each one represented a significant theme and realistic situation. A member of the Vicariate staff picked up the *arpilleras* from the workshops and took them to distribution sites once a month. Since there were few buyers of *arpilleras* in Chile except for the occasional tourist who visited the Vicariate, they were exported by non-governmental agencies, expatriates and church charities to Europe, Australia and other countries that opposed the Pinochet regime, who smuggled them through customs as sympathetic agents

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280,000 people were tortured or imprisoned. Throughout Pinochet’s reign of terror, the United States supported his efforts to “oppress communism” in the region. In 1990, popular and international opposition to Pinochet succeeded in isolating and condemning Pinochet, forcing him from office and allowing for the reestablishment of civilian rule in Chile. Pinochet died in exile on December 19, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Elsa Chaney, *Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 34-35.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah McCracken, “Arpilleras: A Visual History of the Poor Under Pinochet,” *Prospect: Journal of International Affairs at University of California San Diego*, p. 3, <http://prospectjournal.ucsd.edu/index-php/2011/08/arpilleras-a-visual-history-of-the-poor-under-pinochet.html> (accessed June 18, 2012). In 1967, Parra introduced new themes to the *arpillera* tradition, depicting people and human experienced to her *arpilleras*. She and Chilean poet Pablo Neruda promoted *arpilleras* as important conveyors of Chilean history and folklore.

<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Adams, “Art in Social Movements: Shantytown Women’s Protest in Pinochet’s Chile,” *Sociological Forum* 17(March 2002): pp. 30-31. Despite church protection, the workshops did experience difficulties. They were seen as subversive and were subjected to bad press, the women harassed as they left the churches.

looked the other way, in order to raise money for the women who made them.<sup>7</sup> Scholar Marjorie Agosin, who saw the women of Santiago as “valiant citizens who dared to speak against the silence and the shadow, who created life and dignity,” brought them to the attention of liberal Americans.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately *arpillera*-making was outlawed by the Chilean government as being subversive, but their creation and export continued.

*Arpilleras* are stage-like scenes that tell stories through their flat appliqued scenes and figured. They are sketches done with fabric and embroidery that resemble a naïve painting, using no sense of perspective or proportion to depict people, buildings and vehicles. At first glance, an *arpillera* appears to be an innocent depiction, however upon further inspection, its child-like images actually reveal scenes of repression, loss and violence. A form of folk art, *arpilleras* tell a personal story as well as serving as a tale of the tribe, telling a complex story, complete with heroes and villains, trials and tribulations, and courage and struggle. Their use of human hair, clothing scraps, skewed perspective, misspellings and child-like lettering showed the women’s lack of education and sophistication, as well as their sincerity about their cause.<sup>9</sup>

Created in marginalized spaces by anonymous women, *arpilleras* gave a voice to women who had no power, making them forceful, effective expressions of resistance and their creators’ active participants in the struggle for freedom. Originally created for private purposes to express what was in each woman’s heart and soul, the sorrow that was too painful to say aloud, they reveal absences, losses and silences. This feminine form of political action helped the women who made them stay whole and human, served as dialogues with the missing and as a means of keeping their memories alive, giving the women the opportunity to talk about the events they had experienced.<sup>10</sup> The making of *arpilleras* became both an occupation and a preoccupation, a private form that became public art as their creators told their stories, informing the world of events in Chile.

The *arpillera* tradition was recognized as a powerful tool and was soon exported to Peru where it was used as a form of political protest against the atrocities committed by the military government and members of the *Sendero Luminoso*, or Shining Path, the Communist Party of Peru, which carried out a program of violence against the peasants, trade union members, and elected officials who opposed them. Like their sisters in arms in Chile, the poor Peruvian women living in shantytowns around Lima were soon organized into workshops, supported by the Episcopal Diocese of Peru, where they began to create *cuadros* that portrayed the violence, trauma and repression to which they were subjected.<sup>11</sup> *Cuadros* differ from Chilean *arpilleras* in several ways. While *arpilleras* tended to be flat, somber works with some slight padding and a few three dimensional pieces, the images on *cuadros* are rendered in bright colors, with three dimensional objects attached to the surface. Small pieces of wood and faux leather were often used to portray guns and boots while small dolls were used to depict people. The imagery differed as well; *cuadros* tended to depict more explicit violence, often showing massacres and the rounding up of individuals. In creating the small, colorful wall-hangings the women were able to

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<sup>7</sup> Eliana Moya-Raggio, “Arpilleras: Chilean Culture of Resistance,” *Feminist Studies* 10(Summer 1984), p. 280. The term *arpillera*, which means burlap, comes from the fact that burlap was used as the backing material for these textiles.

<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 200), p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Adams, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Agosin, p. 58. *Arpilleras* are anonymous creations. Some contain the embroidered initials of their creator, while others contain handwritten messages tucked into a pocket on the piece’s reverse, but almost none are signed.

<sup>11</sup> “Background to the Arpillera Project,” <http://www.family-roberts-homecall.co.uk/arpillera/background.htm> (accessed July 7, 2012). The term *cuadro* means “scene” in Spanish.

express difficult feelings that cannot be easily expressed in words. Like *arpilleras*, *cuadros* also served as a means of economic support for their families.

At this same time, civil war also raged in El Salvador. As in Chile and Peru, *arpillera* workshops were set up in San Salvador, sponsored by the United Methodist Church. Women created *arpilleras* that depicted the violence they encountered, often in graphic terms, as can be seen in figure 1. It features a helicopter bombing a house, as green-uniformed government troops watch. A dead body lies on the path while the white clad friar in front of a church protects a boy and girl. Four black clad guerrillas approach from the bottom of the piece. The site of this particular event is noted, marking it as a depiction of an actual event. On the back of the *arpillera*, a small piece of off-white cloth contains the embroidered first names of the women who created it.<sup>12</sup>



*Figure 1. Arpillera, El Salvador, late twentieth century. Cotton, wool and embroidery flow. 27 ½ in. by 25 ¼ in. Permission and photograph by the author.*

In 1971, Chilean expatriate Carmen Benavente returned to her family's *finca* in the Itata region to visit her ailing father, only to discover that most of the family's farmland, and that of other wealthy landowners in the region, had been appropriated by their former tenant farmers. As she viewed the unrest, poverty, and violence in the region, she longed to help bring peace and prosperity to the people, and ultimately devised a plan – to bring the women of one small town, Ninhue, together in an embroidery workshop, the output of which she believed would help them financially and emotionally.<sup>13</sup> She taught the women crewel embroidery, which is not a native tradition, and helped them find a market for their works, but the women were responsible for designing and creating the textiles to be sold. Under Benavente's guidance, the women created tapestries that contained images of their lives – homes

<sup>12</sup> The names are Elva, Ofrelia, Sandra, Evelia, Dora, Edis, Vilma, Sonia, Ana, Julia, Lidia, Fidelina, Blanca, MOREna, and Florinda.

<sup>13</sup> Carmen Benavente, *Embroiderers of Ninhue* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2010), pp. 27-28. Benavente's family was the subject of numerous death treats and violence during the political upheaval in the region; however, many of the tensions were eased as a result of her needlework workshop.



and town buildings, landscapes, animals, trees and people – all rendered in bright colors according to the creator’s imagination. Several women created pieces that addressed the warfare and politics of the time. Fifteen year old Patricia Medena’s patriotic tapestry *Naval Battle* features Agustin Arturo Prat Chacon, Ninhue’s naval hero who commanded an attack against the Peruvian armored ship *Huascar* after it had rammed his ship, the *Esmeralda*, during the 1879 Battle of Iquique. The tapestry shows Prat’s twin masted ship, a Chilean flag atop each mast, and Prat standing on the choppy waves.

Adela Parra’s piece, *Police Station*, protests the terror inflicted by members of the Pinochet government. A Chilean flag flies outside a generic police station; despite the cheerful flowers in the building’s garden and the subdued colors of the building, the uniformed policeman and his large dog give the piece a somber, almost menacing, feeling. She embroidered her name, the town’s name and the numerals 197 in red across the top of the piece. The numeral three, which completes the date, is embroidered in black, a possible reference to the year of Pinochet’s coup.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mayan women began producing embroidered textiles that told stories of poverty, fear and disrupted lives resulting from their thirty year long civil war, providing them with the means of exorcizing the horrors of war and earning money to support their families. Mayan women have a rich history of weaving, done primarily on a backstrap loom using a brocade technique to create *huipils*, long blouses worn over an ankle-length skirt. Maya textiles are village specific in terms of the weave, color and motifs used, so village members can easily be identified by their clothing.<sup>14</sup> The custom of wearing traditional dress lost popularity during the Guatemalan Civil War (1978-1986), an ethnic cleansing designed to eliminate the Maya culture, as women tried to avoid being identified as ethnic Maya. During the war, approximately 200,000 civilians were killed by military death squads and four hundred Maya villages were destroyed, displacing one million people. Ethnic Mayas were subjected to abductions, beatings and violent deaths.<sup>15</sup> After the war ended, many Maya moved to the cities, rejecting their native dress, however eventually those in rural villages again wore traditional dress as symbols of ethnic pride, solidarity and survival, returning to the use of traditional imagery, colors and patterns.

In 1988, American Ramelle Gonzales visited a Maya village where she saw first hand the result of the thirty-year long civil war – poverty, fear, disrupted lives. She established the Foundation for Education, a non-profit organization aimed at improving education for Maya children. She also worked with a number of Maya women living in Ixil whose lives had been impacted by the violence of the civil war. She suggested that the women participate in an embroidery project to help supplement their income. Most of the women were weavers, but they enthusiastically learned to embroider. She noted:

The original idea was to have the women make embroideries that reflected their daily lives- fetching firewood, bringing water from the river, caring for children, and perhaps making tortillas. While I expected to see their first batch of embroideries depict ordinary daily activities, what I received instead were scenes of bombs falling from helicopters and soldiers killing people.<sup>16</sup>

She was overwhelmed by the emotion the works evoked, as they expressed the women’s personal experiences and feelings, reflecting their personal suffering and resilience.

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<sup>14</sup> Ann Hecht, *Guatemalan Textiles in the British Museum* (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Carol Hendrickson, *Weaving Identities: Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Guatemala Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ramelle Gonzales, *Threads Breaking the Silence (Guatemala: Foundation for Education, 2005)*, p. 106.

The embroideries measure approximately nineteen inches square. Images of helicopters, people, houses, and landscape are embroidered onto white or black backgrounds using brightly colored floss. The fabric edges are finished using a blanket stitch. Most of the pieces contained an embroidered narrative describing the scene depicted. Done in a naïve style using primarily chain and satin stitches, the pieces can be difficult to look at. Some show helicopters shooting at houses in a village; others show mass graves or people being rounded up by government troops. Figure 2 shows a soldier holding an infant upside down by the ankle as another soldier guards a prisoner whose arms are tied behind his back. All of these initial embroideries tell the story of the hunger, fear, and death the women witnessed. They served as a means for the women to express their feelings of fear and loss and discuss the ways in which they were impacted by the violence that they experienced.



*Figure 2. Embroidery, Guatemala, 20<sup>th</sup> century. Embroidery floss on cotton fabric. 19 in. by 18 ½ in. Image courtesy of Ramelle Gonzales.*

A dozen years later, Ramelle began working with women from the village of San Andres Semetabaj, as she expanded her educational program in the region. Once again her students taught the local women embroidery techniques. The embroideries produced by these women have a much different appearance and feel from the ones produced in Ixil. Rather than depicting simple scenes of violence against individuals or small numbers of people, these embroideries capture the destruction of entire villages and the murder of large numbers of individuals in graphic detail. Their bright colors and naïve simplicity belie the seriousness of the scenes that they depict. In figure 3, a group of nine men in green camouflage uniforms hold a group of villagers at gunpoint. Many of the women are dressed in traditional Maya attire. One soldier restrains a boy who is trying to run to his mother, who kneels over the bloody body of a man. Three other families lie prone at the feet of two soldiers. Most stand with their backs to the violence, gazing in horror at the burning buildings in the background, yellow-orange flames blazing from the roofs and surrounding ground. These new pieces, done on backgrounds of royal blue, red or black, exhibit a *horror vacui*, with green grasses, symbolic of the lush grasslands that surround the village, interspersed among the figures and buildings. Trees and farmland are shown at the top of the

embroidery, which is framed by a row of butterflies, symbols of rebirth and love. Again, the pieces allow the women to express the fears and anger they experienced as the result of the violence they witnessed first hand.



*Figure 3. Embroidery, Guatemala, early twenty-first century. Yarn on cotton fabric. 18 1/2 in. by 18 in. Permission and photograph by the author.*

All of these Latin American pieces can be seen as therapeutic, cultural manifestations, sites where people meet face to face with others who carry the same discomfort, the same uncertainty. Shouting in unison, laughing or mourning, without shame or restraint because the person next to them is capable of understanding, they become a means of expressing and overcoming the pain and suffering the women endured and survived.

The tradition of Latin American women commenting on war began with the textiles women produced for the warfare-centered cultures of the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican cultures. Women participated in these warrior cultures by producing both high status textiles that depicted images of warriors as well as the garments worn by those warriors as they went into battle. During the social upheaval that occurred throughout the region during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, women used textile products as symbols of pride and resistance, telling the world of the torture, kidnappings and murders of thousands who opposed the violent regimes in their countries and to support their families in times of social and economic upheaval. These textiles and their creators became part of larger resistance movements, creating platforms for memory and justice. They commemorate the dead, document historical events, provide economic assistance, give a voice to the invisible, and remind us that, despite the pain brought by war, it is important to remember those who were lost.

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