

Jacqueline C. Nanfito

### **Threads of Hope: Chilean *arpilleras*<sup>1</sup>**

In recent years I have come to the conviction that there is another, alternative mode to envisioning this profession, much along the lines of Professor Marjorie Agosín life's work, in which scholarship and political activism fuse harmoniously. Over time and in time I have come to the realization that, as a female academic, while it is paramount to be able to write in accordance with the conventions of traditional literary discourse objective, impersonal, often adversarial and publish in refereed scholarly journals, which I have succeeded in doing, as a literary and cultural studies critic I need not abandon the spaces of total engagement and emotional involvement. Like many of my sisters to the south, I have found it far more challenging yet comforting to take up residency in the borderlands, where the boundaries become blurred between the personal and the professional, the personal and the theoretical. Without diminishing the significance or seriousness of my work as a teacher or writer of scholarly criticism, I refuse to stay within the confines of the official histories of epic gestures of Latin American cultural production, seeking out those spaces which are not seamless and fixed, those more fluid, feminine spaces in which figure the unofficial herstories woven with fabrics of the quotidian, the oneiric, and the ontological.

The greatest inspiration for my life's work has been that of the courageous Latin American women of this century who, through their literary and visual art forms, have played an instrumental role in raising the conscience of the world at large with respect to the political, social and economic injustices suffered daily by millions of Latin Americans, women of valor who with peace and perseverance, in the face of adversity, have contributed to bringing about the restoration of democracy in their respective countries. In shifting the locus of political activity away from the workplace, to the home and the neighborhood, these literary and visual artists have empowered women to forge for themselves new identities not inscribed within the official paradigms of patriarchal social and political discourse. I have found it fascinating that, within the last few decades, at times when the dictatorial regimes obstructed virtually all channels of communication, women, who traditionally had been silenced and sentenced to invisibility within the private sphere of the domestic, found new means of "making politics", of bringing a subtly forceful presence to bear in public life, from which they have been traditionally absent.

Among the most inspirational are the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who have been poignantly represented in Luis Puenzo's Oscar winning film (Best Foreign Film, 1985) *The Official Story*, in their peaceful determination to make a public issue of their pain and to demand that their disappeared children be produced alive by the Junta. In the early 90's, I saw a documentary film entitled

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Dance of Hope, which was to have a profound impact on my life, both professionally and personally. Following the film, I had the opportunity to speak with the director, Deborah Schaffer, a professor of anthropology from Bucknell University, who enlightened me more on the *arpillerista* movement in Chile, both as an art form and as a means of resistance and political protest. Traditionally sewn in cooperatives by women whose family members had disappeared under Augusto Pinochet, the dictator who in 1973 seized power from the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in a bloody coup and installed a regime of terror that would last for nearly 17 years. In the name of economic progress, the military denounced democracy, which they regarded as a "foreign ideology", and imposed a doctrine of "law and order": the law pertaining to the stalwart and the order of the garrison. The vast majority of the victims of this new regime were the poor women of the shantytowns, many of whom suddenly became the main or sole providers for their families, as their husbands, fathers and sons either had disappeared or roamed the country in search of menial jobs. Their families were destroyed by repression and paralyzed by the extreme conditions of poverty in which they were forced to exist. Condemned to silence by terror, many of these women found the courage to break the code of silence and articulate the unspeakable social injustices and human rights violations of the regime. With swatches of cloth and simple stitches they sewed onto burlap the repeated stories of torture and disappearances, their sorrowful losses of family, their daily struggles for survival, and their uncompromising strength and faith in love.

### **Arpillera exhibition**

#### 1. Paz, Vida, Amor

This is a very early *arpillera* that speaks about basic human rights: bread, justice and food. Dating from 1974, it was one of the first *arpilleras* made. The shape is a bit odd, and the size a bit smaller than the later ones. Despite the presence of vivid colors and sunshine, a sense of gloom and darkness surround the piece, emanating from the blackened, virtually inanimate landscape. The demands expressed in this one continue to be the most pressing ones even today, a dozen years after the dictatorship.

#### 2. El umbral

This *arpillera* poses one of the most repeated of questions during Pinochet's reign of terror: Where are they? Dead or Alive? A particularly striking feature of this piece is the somber framing in black and gray of the individuals identified merely with interrogatives, and the sophisticated play of space, with their steps leading toward a diminished perspective.

#### 3. Estadio nacional 1973

Women and men being blindfolded and executed in the National Stadium in 1973. This is perhaps the *one arpillera* that most graphically depicts the brutal horrors of detention and torture. After the dictatorship was over, the *arpilleristas* came

here to dance the cueca sola, reappropriating this space as a site for life and not death.

#### 4. Woman dreaming

In this *arpillera* a woman is dreaming and wondering about her missing son while she sleeps.

*While I'm washing or doing housework I'm thinking about what I'm going to put in my 'arpillera'. Sometimes I embroider my own chores and other times I put in something important I heard on the radio. I wait until nighttime, after the kids go to sleep, and I prepare the little scraps of cloth. Sometimes I don't have any light, but I've gotten used to working by candlelight.*

#### 5. Demonstration in the streets

Women of the shantytowns take to the street to demonstrate. Here in the *arpilleras* the life story of these women is told: one finds their homes, their children, their neighborhoods and shantytowns, their poverty, their grass-roots organizations, and above all their struggles.

As they marched often they would be sprayed with contaminated water from nearby trucks; many of the women would become very sick, and some even blinded for a few days.

#### 6. Demonstration – Where are the detained-disappeared?

Women demonstrating during International Women's Day. As they marched often they would be sprayed with contaminated water from nearby trucks; many of the women would become very sick, and some even blinded for a few days.

#### 7. Demonstration - Freedom

Women during a street demonstration, collectively demanding freedom (Las mujeres exijimos libertad: We women demand freedom). Again you can clearly see the water trucks that would spray contaminated water at their faces.

#### 8. Unmarked graves and dove

This *arpillera* commemorates the Chilean disappeared buried in unmarked graves in the Chilean countryside. NN means No names; NN is also the name given to the generation of the disappeared who were born in the 1950's and 1960's.

The dove is a constant image of peace that appears repeatedly in these textiles.

#### 9. Encadenamiento

This *arpillera* has become one of the most symbolic ones; that so few *arpilleras* were made on this subject make it all the more special. It is called *encadenamiento*: The Chaining. Every month the women staged protests in the former tribunal of justice in Santiago, demanding truth and justice. The chains symbolize the anguish of all their searching years. The women used to stage weekly demonstrations with chains around their bodies. The police had to come and unlock them and in the

moment of unlocking, the women gave flowers to the police. This *encadenamiento* lasted for almost two years until it was completely forbidden.

#### 10. Olla común

Women gathering at the soup kitchens organized by the church. The soup kitchen became an important nongovernmental organization that supported families, especially during the early years. (Americas video series, the 10<sup>th</sup> in the series, vividly portrays this poignant social/economic reality in the film dedicated to the women of Chile.)

*In the 'arpilleras' we talk about everything that happens. For example, in my workshop many of us also belong to the soup kitchens because there isn't enough money to cook a meal at home each day.*

#### 11. Arpillera workshop (church)

Women in the *arpillera* workshop in the basement of a church in one of Santiago's poor neighborhoods. In the back are detained-disappeared.

We are 18 women in our workshop. We help each other and criticize one another when things aren't done right. We want to get better every day, to make prettier *arpilleras*, because we need people to enjoy them and buy them. When sales drop we get nervous and don't know what to do. But in the end, we never lose hope...

*We have an organization called 'Buying Together'. The day we get paid, the president of the workshop and the treasurer go to the wholesale shops together and buy a basket of food for each of us. We buy flour, tea, sugar, noodles, rice, and detergent. We look around all morning until we find the lowest prices. All these shared tasks have made us very united; we are all good friends in the workshop...*

#### 12 Arpillera workshop (patio)

Women working collectively on an *arpillera*. It is summertime and women are performing other chores. There is a spirit of cooperation, joy, life and renewal.

"With the money from the *arpilleras* I pay the light and water bills, and buy the notebooks and pencils the children need for school. Sometimes there's something for food, too."

*In my house I do all the work: the cleaning, baking the bread, washing the clothes, the sewing, the ironing, fixing up the place. I learned little by little to make a timetable in my daily chores at home so I could go to the workshop and the meetings. It grieves me when I have to miss the workshop. It feels like they've taken away a piece of my life...*

#### 13. Cueca sola (Mather Gallery exhibit invitation)

Women dancing the *cueca sola*.

#### 14. Cueca sola (black, white and blue)

Another more somber representation of the *cueca sola*.

#### 15. Burning of Carmen Gloria Quintana and Rodrigo Rojas

The commemoration of the burning of these two youths in a demonstration in Santiago. Rojas died and Quintana became disfigured. She has traveled to many

parts of the world to tell her story. The mother of Rodrigo Rojas, Veronica de Negri, was imprisoned in Chile by the DINA (secret police). She now lives in Washington, D.C. and is a well-known human rights activist.

#### 16. Woman and Shadows

This *arpillera* was made during the Chilean plebiscite, and it commemorates political figures like Newton Morales and Orlando Letelier, victims of the dictatorship. There are spaces in the shadows that say "Did you forget? If you have no memory you will vote again for Pinochet."

Most of the *arpilleras* made in the 1980's move beyond the initial question mark of the disappeared to universal issues of human rights, demanding better laws for health care, education and work.

#### 17. Letters to the wind

In this *arpillera* Doris Meniconi a woman throws a letter to the wind asking for an answer as to the whereabouts of a missing son (1976). Every time she received a letter from her exiled children she would write a poem and put it in the letter to the wind.

#### 18. Democracy behind the wall

This *arpillera* was produced at the end of the dictatorship in 1989, foreshadowing the beginning of democracy.

*While I'm making my 'arpilleras' I forget all my grudges because when I get to putting in the sun and the flowers, it's like I myself am living in this scene full of color. I own the world! I make the sky really blue and the streets full of trees, just the way I want it.*

#### Afterwords

In the Foreword to *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994*, Isabel Allende, niece of the deposed president, affirms that all women are natural weavers of stories, not only those who have the good fortune to be published, but all those who perpetuate the oral tradition mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers who share their secrets while stirring soup, sowing fields, or mending fishing-nets. They record the truths of history, not the struggles for power or the vanity of emperors, but the pains and hopes of everyday life. Born into dark and somber period in Chilean culture, the *arpilleras* are textured testimonials that bear witness to the human rights violations committed by the Pinochet regime, and with wordless eloquence, tell the story of the tenacity and faith of the women who collectively endeavored to reconstruct their shattered lives by stitching swatches of cloth with the colors of hope and the language of love.

Like that of many women writers, most particularly autobiographers, the basic feminine view of this very feminine folk art form is founded upon the notions of identification, interdependence and community. For me, this is the *modus operandi* par excellence, and the one that continually sustains me in my personal and professional endeavors.