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Revised Arpillera Analysis

Chilean arpilleras are much more than handwoven tapestries that tell stories. They represent the specific timeline from 1973-1989, when Augusto Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende in a military coup that lasted 17 years. These textiles demonstrate perseverance throughout a military dictatorship, protest as a form of resistance, women's roles in social movements, and grief faced by women whose families were "disappeared." Not only were arpilleras visual testimonies of violence, hunger, unemployment and military repression, but they were also economic lifelines, as selling arpilleras helped families of the disappeared survive (Agosin, 1987, p. 93).

The arpillera I analyzed (pictured below) has many aspects that display the social and geographical context of Chile during the 1973-1990 Pinochet dictatorship. The most obvious feature is the bright colors of fabric used to make the houses in the arpillera. These sewn fabrics had symbolic and emotional meaning, as they belonged to the disappeared or deceased loved ones. Another characteristic of this arpillera is the Andes Mountains and sun in the background. This is sewn into almost every textile we analyzed in the CVC. Arpilleras tend to recreate landscapes controlled by Pinochet, emphasizing details like neighborhood raids, street protests, public squares, and rural landscapes. These areas depicted in the tapestries are not neutral, but rather a representation of political spaces tied to poverty, displacement, or military disturbance (Bacic, 2010, p. 393-394).

A specific place in the arpillera is a giant graveyard that reads “Patio 29.” It refers to a memorial site in Santiago where murdered Chileans were buried during the dictatorship. It became an important site for truth-seeking when the country was recovering from Pinochet’s rule and heading toward democracy (Devisser et al., 2014, p. 216). Patio 29 was considered a national symbol for public memory that embodies the fight for truth. It was places like Patio 29 that had impacts on the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which worked with limited power to investigate human rights violations after the dictatorship under President Alwyn starting in 1990 (Devisser et al., 2014, p. 222).

In March of 1974, the first arpillera workshops were formed across church basements in Santiago and sponsored by the Vicariate of Solidarity, a human-rights organization created by the Catholic Church (Agosin, 1996, p. 11-12). Here, women were not only able to unite by their grief, but demonstrate collective resistance by coming together in sisterhood to negate the masculine authoritarian oppression and exploitation caused by the Pinochet regime.

An overall theme in this arpillera and most others is women as political activists. Many were not politically affiliated prior to Pinochet’s abuse of power, and their lives revolved around the home (Agosin, 1996, p. 10). Mothers of the disappeared used their domestic skills, like sewing and embroidery, to their advantage to create a safer method of protesting that was difficult to track down (Bacic, 2010, p. 394). In the chosen arpillera, we can see women holding objects that are most likely made of plastic. These represent “cacerolazos”, the banging of pots and pans to protest both Allende and Pinochet. This method is still used in Chile today, and is a prime example of maternal activism.

During the dictatorship, arpilleras were smuggled out of Chile and sold internationally, which linked Chilean women to various churches, NGOs, and human rights groups (Bacic, 2010, p. 405). The globalization of arpilleras helped spread awareness about the effects of the dictatorship, especially to parts of Europe. It also provided a source of income for women who

were struggling financially during the disappearance of their sons and husbands (Bacic, 2010, p. 396).

To conclude, Chilean arpilleras transitioned from individual to collective activism, when women came together to weave textiles as a form of protest and grief during the 17 year dictatorship. The landscapes that are depicted in the arpilleras are geographically important to the time period and are all real events that occurred on the streets of Santiago, such as “cacerolazos” and Patio 29. The arpilleras not only tell stories, but represent much deeper emotions associated with a unique way to protest: through art.

Works Cited

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