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Community, Transformation, and Hope: An Analysis of Chilean Arpilleras

Arpilleras, such as the one shown above, were originally made by women in Chile as a means of depicting both individual and collective experiences under the Pinochet dictatorship (Bacic, 2015). For women who had suffered the trauma of their loved ones disappearing under Pinochet, arpilleras became a way to both process grief and denounce the activities of the military regime (Agosin, 1996). In turn, as the influence of arpilleras grew and even began to span trans-nationally, exchanging arpilleras became a way to not only raise awareness surrounding the dictatorship, but also support oneself and one's family financially (Agosin, 1996). With expanded responsibility placed on women after the disappearance of husbands and fathers, arpilleras additionally symbolize the changing gender roles within Chile and the broader Latin American context (Agosin, 1996).

In the arpillera shown above, a primary theme is community and its transformative power in the changing roles of women. In the "TALLER DE ARPILLERAS" building, women are shown creating arpilleras together. For many women, this may have been their first time feeling community outside of their direct family, a community for learning and empathizing. Through both the art created in each arpillera and the conversations had at workshops, these women were given a space to share in grief (Agosin, 1996) and reflect on their experiences (Bacic, 2015). Additionally, women shown both in the arpillera workshop and on the streets showcase the sense of purpose women worked towards cultivating. Rather than solely being homemakers, women

are coming together in this arpillera to make their voices heard. In particular, one could interpret the women marching on the street, arpilleras and materials in hand, as walking towards a formal, contested space, using artistic expression to challenge preconceived notions (Bacic, 2015).

In both the depiction of community and the more minor details of this arpillera, an additional theme of hope emerges. The bright colors of the homes, rising sun, and flowers serve as signs of hope and growth in a country coming out of a period of darkness. Like many arpilleras, this one is set with a backdrop of the Andes Mountains, a range which spans the length of Chile. The sun shining in the center of the Andes seems to communicate that, despite the brutal history of the dictatorship, this region is for *all* people (Bacic, 2015). Even still, the stroller being pushed by the woman on the right is empty, an artistic choice that is likely no mistake. In an arpillera centered around hope, the harsh reality that many children had disappeared under the dictatorship is still communicated.

Just as there are layers to the cloth on which an arpillera is made, each arpillera has many layers of meaning. In post-dictatorship Chilean society, arpilleras served as a way of building community, offering an outlet for shared traumatic experiences, and generating income for women. Each arpillera shares an individual experience that is equally applicable to the collective trauma of women who watched their lives change under Pinochet. Arpilleras serve as a crucial way to both remember the impact of Pinochet and look towards a stronger, more unified future.

Works Cited

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- Bacic, R. (2015). Arpilleras in Contested Spaces. *Die Subversive Kraft Der Menschenrechte: Rainer Huhle Zum Radikalen Jubiläu*, 391–411.