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### Revised Arpillera Analysis

A woman's physical weakness is something exploited and used against her in many societies. Many a woman will be forced to submit to the strength and will of men out of fear for their life, their livelihood, their families, or simply due to the culture she was born into. But women have an innate strength within them that is not extinguished by brute force. That strength manifests itself in a variety of ways— her resilience, her ability to hold and pass on generations of knowledge, her balancing act of managing a home and holding a family together, the endurance it requires to go on through the mental and physical toll of menses, the ability to bear the enormous, complicated pain that it takes to grow and birth a child. And on top of this, she has a powerful and beautiful ability to *feel*, to inspire, to gather, to hold a community together, to stoke the flames of justice and passion even in the background, restricted to the quiet domestic world. This valuable ability is a part of what the Chilean *arpilleristas* used to combat the oppressive Pinochet regime, a decades long period of injustice and cruelty that tested their strength in many ways as it piled on the pain a woman already bears.

Women face a unique position in the political world, particularly in many parts of Latin America where notions of *machismo* and patriarchal dominance had restricted women to the domestic realm. The Pinochet regime positioned men as the main target of the authoritarian regime, believing men were the only ones who could threaten their authority. This focus is what allowed the *arpilleristas* their freedom. Chilean women and some men organized in the background, attending workshops hosted by the Catholic Church's Vicariate of Solidarity that supported them through times of economic difficulty. Over time, these workshops became progressively more radical— the notion of an *arpillera* appeared, with women spearheading the idea. They were pieces of burlap (the literal translation of *arpillera*) with mixed media layers such as fabric appliques, plastic, and clothing, with people often represented as small, simple dolls. They depicted scenes of their life, their pain, their missing loved ones, what they had seen, and sold them to the Catholic Church every two weeks, providing a modest income for their families, and spreading their truth throughout the western world. Their art was unique and a message of resistance and strength, but because sewing was women's work, it was overlooked by Pinochet's lackeys.

Their art began modest and hesitant, developing over many renditions and meetings with fellow *arpilleristas*. After reading Agosin's *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love*, especially the section on "Operation, Staffing, and Training of the Workshops", I developed a much greater appreciation for the hard work and development of skills that Chilean *arpilleristas* cultivated. The *arpilleristas* used these skills as a way to protest, tell their stories, and support themselves. While the *arpilleras*, on the surface, are very simplistic mixed media scenes, the knowledge of the constraints placed upon the *arpilleristas* made me appreciate the *arpilleras* much, much more. These women dealt with difficulties in their production from scarcity of material, to limited work time, to their other commitments at home, such as raising families, cooking, cleaning, *and* providing while the men were unable to leave due to fears of

disappearance— those who had been unlucky had already been disappeared under the cruel dictatorship, and became the *desaparecidos*.

The way that the women spoke of their arpilleras over time, from ugly, plain dolls, to more advanced, cross-stitched canvases, to animated, dynamic scenes of their reality, allowed me to more deeply understand the hard work at play here; literally, their blood, sweat, tears, clothes, and hair were stitched into the arpilleras. The way that many women spoke of finding community and a voice proved to me the strength these women possessed, especially the woman in the reading who faced beatings at home on top of the oppressive regime that continued to tear her home and community apart. One quote remains particularly significant; “they speak a “women’s language” of loyalty, love and outrage; but they speak with a public anger in a public place in ways they were never meant to do” (30, Agosín). Despite the difficulties of being born female in a world where one is restricted to the world of domesticity, powerful and important movements can manifest from the more “feminine” emotions and way of living.



The particular arpillera that I chose to analyze is the scene of bodies being tossed into the river. It caught my attention at first due to the horror and pain it elicited in me, but it also showed how Agosín’s writing proved true; women could always tell the stories of the days their family members disappeared or were arrested very clearly. To see the memory and reality of the events illustrated in this way, it made it much more real to me and made me feel the shock, disgust and fear at what they witnessed. The way the arpillera nestled the dead, bloodied men and women inside of the light blue fabric she used to represent their bodies in the river, as if she was tucking them into bed one last time, similarly touched me and made me understand her sorrow, her grief, and her horror.

The technical methods used remind me of the hardship that the arpillera worked with in her depictions of the disappeared. She works with limited materials— pieces of fabric, perhaps from clothing, perhaps from scraps. She uses white thread to depict the movement of the water carrying the bodies west, green thread to show the prison-like interior of the military van. Thick red thread is used to represent the blood of the women, pouring out and pooling in a

way that makes it unmistakable and impossible to miss. In the background there is the common motif of the Andean mountains, though rather than a bright sun such as in other arpilleras, there is a red sun of dusk and the sky blanketed in blue. There are small embroidered stars visible in the sky, watching, but even they appear to be distancing themselves away in fear. Under this cover of night, men in thick green uniforms took pleasure in their activity. The tiny embroidered smile on one of the military men's faces as he dangled a woman upside down from her feet over the river, looking down her skirt, made me understand the sadistic cruelty at play here. The man to his left leaned over the woman he also held over the river, but with blood flowing from between her legs. It was more than the military men *following orders*. The underpinnings of sexism, through depictions of rape and cruelty, were present in the small details that the arpillerista took care in adding. It was, *is*, harrowing.

But in the end we must remember the strength, the integrity, the courage it took this arpillerista to show this event. Despite the trauma and fear she must have felt, she pushed through, slowly creating this art work, thinking and deciding how to construct every element, weaving everything she felt and thought and loved and hated into the fabric. She is not a victim, but a survivor, and she is the embodiment of women everywhere.