

**“We Wanted to Sew Our History”  
The Arpillera Movement, Motherhood, and Political Mobilization in Chile**

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## Introduction

*“We wanted something made by hand that would denounce what we and our country were experiencing. We wanted to tell people, with pieces of our very clothing, about our personal experiences. We wanted to sew our history, the hard and sad history of our ruined country.”<sup>1</sup>*

One moment mothers and wives and the next, the widows of a nation, the arpilleristas, woven together by tragedy, expressed their grief and hope by weaving colorful tapestries to document the lives of their loved ones for the world. Suffering from grief and an economic depression, desperate when all of the official channels failed them, they found their voices in scraps and thread. Their tattered and torn lives were pieced together as they pieced together these tapestries from the 1970s through the early 1990s.

On September 11, 1973, the political polarization in Chile had reached a breaking point and a military dictatorship instituted a period of brutal repression unknown to a country with a long history of democratic rule. A new term emerged, *desaparecido* or disappeared one, to describe the thousands of people rounded up by the government and either imprisoned or killed, their fate unknown to their families. From this culture of fear and silence emerged an art form and political protest, the *arpillera*. Directly translated from Spanish as burlap, it has come to mean “cloth of resistance.”<sup>2</sup> These tapestries either told a story about or asked a question of the sociopolitical situation in Chile. They first appeared in March 1974, under the protection of the Catholic Church. The artists, poor women previously united while searching for their disappeared loved ones, filled with grief and despair, often barely able to feed their children, gathered together to tell their stories on cloth. They testified of death and tragedy, and in so doing, resisted the culture of death that surrounded them. The creation of the arpilleras served as

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Sepúlveda ed., *We, Chile: Personal Testimonies of Chilean Arpilleristas* (Falls Church: Azul Editions, 1996), 49.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 10.

a therapy and a denunciation of the “official story.” Through participating in the arpillera movement the arpilleristas experienced a transformation from women with no experience in political activity to radical protestors. The creation of the arpilleras also transformed Chilean society; the arpilleristas staged the first public protests and initiated an environment of dissidence that pressured the military to hold elections. Additionally, the Catholic Church sold the arpilleras to groups in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, which resulted in international pressure to end the dictatorship.

These mothers and grandmothers were never politically active until the secret police entered their homes and abducted their loved ones. The government was the first to violate the boundary between the private and public spheres by invading the home to disappear a family member. In response, these women took a typically private chore - weaving - and made it a public denunciation of human rights violations. Chilean society traditionally assigned women the role of mothers, protectors of the home and children. The arpilleristas took this role and expanded it. They protected their children, but in order to do so, they had to leave the home to search for the missing. While previously economically involved in the public sphere, protesting with the arpilleristas initiated their political entry. The protests were effective because they used women’s traditional roles to legitimate their fight against the government.

The arpilleristas used the repressive political environment to create strategies that constructed an alternative space for political activity. Ignored as a political force, these women used their identities as mothers to create a political network to aid in the search for their missing loved ones. Motherhood became their principal political weapon. The arpilleristas organized themselves not as a political party, but first as wives and mothers of the disappeared, and then political citizens. The fact that women formed a successful protest against the dictatorship when

men could not is significant because it suggests that times of repression can be opportunities for activism among women.

This essay provides a thorough analysis of the arpillera movement using both testimonials and tapestries as a means to examine gender and class, political space under repression, and revolutionary motherhood. I argue that the arpilleras were mobilized by the combination of gender and class, as opposed to either gender or class independently. Typically employed as domestic workers or dispersed throughout the city in lower level positions, the arpilleras held no power at the workplace and could not protest there. Rather, they protested a government that they felt constructed a system that promoted economic inequalities. Although the primary mobilization focused around the idea of motherhood, the arpilleras incorporated economic repression within their definition of human rights violations. Repression provided an opportunity for women to become politically active. Because men were the traditional political actors, political repression was focused on them. By organizing under the apolitical identity of motherhood, the arpilleras forged a creative political space in which to successfully protest against the government. By bringing symbols of maternity and domesticity into the public, the arpilleras blurred the lines between public and private spheres. In making motherhood political, they rejected the view that motherhood is an apolitical role or that by identifying as a mother one supports a patriarchal and repressive social structure. They radicalized motherhood and conventional symbols, thus challenging our notions of radical activism and asking us to reconsider our ideas about art, political activity, and motherhood.

Two main categories of primary sources are available: the testimonials and the arpilleras themselves. The two principal scholars in the field, Marjorie Agosín and Emma Sepúlveda,

traveled to Chile to document the testimonials of the arpilleristas.<sup>3</sup> Agosín traveled to Chile in December of 1993 and Sepúlveda in 1994 to document the testimonials at the end of the movement. Agosín provides a historical account and then includes the primary materials of pictures of over fifty full color tapestries and seven short testimonials. Guy Brett also includes in his text almost forty pictures of tapestries. Sepúlveda, mentored by Agosín, provides a text of eight detailed testimonials, each about twenty pages long, with no secondary analysis. Both scholars include copies of song lyrics written by the women for the *cueca sola*, a rendition of Chile's national dance performed alone to symbolize the absence of the disappeared loved one. The detailed testimonials and numerous arpilleras fall naturally into several thematic categories. The themes are grouped and examined together as representative of the themes evident in the complete body of source material.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of the arpillera as political art had a cultural precedent: Violeta Parra, an important singer and artist in the 1950s emphasized the importance of popular and folk art. Arpilleristas wanted to take the work of Violeta Parra a step further, by not only celebrating folk art but giving it political voice. An arpillerista commented,

“We remembered the activities of the needleworkers of Macul and the works of Violeta Parra, but we wanted to do something different. We didn't want to make something that was only decorative – we wanted something made by hand that would denounce what we and our country were experiencing. We wanted to tell people, with pieces of our very clothing, about our personal experiences. We wanted to sew our history, the hard and sad history of our ruined country.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), Emma Sepúlveda ed., *We, Chile: Personal Testimonies of Chilean Arpilleristas* (Falls Church: Azul Editions, 1996), and Guy Brett, *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History* (Philadelphia: New Society Pub, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> When citing primary sources in Agosín, Sepúlveda, or Brett, I use the phrase, “Cited in author's name and page number.” When referring to their secondary analysis I simply cite the author in the standard manner. The decision not to cite each individual arpilleristas when referring to her testimony is indicative of the deindividualized and communal nature of the testimonies. Additionally, the themes chosen were present in numerous testimonies and the example given is one of many of the same kind of statements.

<sup>5</sup> Sepúlveda, 49.

It is significant that the choice of medium base was folk art. The arpilleristas chose a medium with cultural significance. They did not adapt a medium of the upper class, such as essay writing or public speaking. Rather, the use of tapestries reaffirms their identity as Chileans and members of a folk and popular culture. The act of weaving provides a metaphor for the weaving of unity among these women brought together from different parts of Chilean society.

There is also a critical significance in the contribution of testimonials, a discourse that offers an alternative model for women's writing. Scholar Lynda Martin describes the testimonial as a writing from the margins about a system that oppresses such speech. By emphasizing that her experiences are particular but not unique and expressing that the Latin American woman's story is the story of her people, the testimonial is a rejection of the Western obsession with individuality. These women use simple language and innocent observations to consistently disrupt the system and claim their own authority. The testimonial discourse constructs a working model of subversion, resistance, and survival: it can be seen as a reality check on a political discourse that has often lost all grounding in the everyday lives of the individuals it examines.<sup>6</sup>

The arpilleristas welcomed the opportunity to leave oral testimonials in addition to their art. The addition of the testimony to the art immortalized the lives of their missing loved ones and the cause to which they dedicated their lives.

We have to leave testimonies, a historical memory of the violence and dictatorship that changed our individual and national destinies forever. We have to leave that behind, like the house of Anne Frank, the silent example of brutality committed against mankind. The arpilleras we made remain as a huge panel that will tell our individual histories along with the photos and stories of the disappeared for all the generations that come after us.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lynda Martin, "Speaking Out Together: Testimonials of Latin American Women," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 18 Issue 3 (Summer 1991): 52-58.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 131.



This arpillerista again makes the connection that while the stories are unique they are connected to a greater atmosphere of repression. Marjorie Agosín, a scholar who interviewed the arpilleristas, found that as they testified as a group their sense of community was evident, from that community emerged a source of power. She noted that as she recorded the testimonials, while in the group they appeared powerful, upon being interviewed as individuals they seemed vulnerable.<sup>8</sup>

Both the tapestries and testimonials recreate history and politically evaluate it by producing an alternate narrative, one that the state attempted to forget or silence. The stated purpose of these testimonials is to conserve the national memory and prevent a collective amnesia that would allow the same atrocities to reoccur. In speaking of the mothers of the dead, scholar Nancy Sternbach finds that,

Denied the traditional mourning process, a ritual of grieving including burial, here there is an *un*burial, an unearthing of the truth which translates into an invasion of the space occupied by the official history, necessary for future generation of children who need to know this buried, silenced, and forgotten chapter of history.<sup>9</sup>

Sternbach claims that the text of a testimonial becomes a symbol of motherly love, “ultimately, the act of remembering is really an act of birthing and re-birthing: the offspring is the woman’s testimonial.”<sup>10</sup>

From both the tapestries and testimonials, a sense of the arpilleristas, their situation, cause, and personal transformation becomes apparent. Due to the repressive climate in Chile the international scholarly community lacked access to the stories of the arpilleristas; hence, few scholars have studied the arpillerista movement. Only one scholar, Marjorie Agosín, has published

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<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Agosín, *Scraps of Life, Chilean Arpilleristas* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Sternbach, “Re-membering the Dead: Latin American Women’s “Testimonial” Discourse,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 18 Issue 3 (Summer 1991): 94.

<sup>10</sup> Sternbach, 98.

monographs dedicated to the arpillera movement.<sup>11</sup> Although there are scattered articles referring to or explaining the movement, additional comprehensive analysis is nonexistent.<sup>12</sup>

Marjorie Agosín, the primary scholar on the arpilleras, provides a general overview of the political history of Chile and the history of the arpillera movement. She features the arpilleras' emotional struggles in a principally chronological study. Her primary contribution is providing a general overview of the arpilleras detailing their basic experiences and facts of the movement, as well as bringing them to the attention of a larger audience.<sup>13</sup> Agosín's research functions as the foundation for my study of the arpilleras to which I contribute a further examination of community, "political space," and personal political awakening.

Guy Brett makes an important contribution in a text focusing on popular art and modern history. He argues that the spontaneous production of art as a means for coping with historical events can provide a deeper insight into the world than well-established forms of art or mass media. Brett shows that although the arpillera may appear crude to Western eyes, it is an important contribution to both art and history. Often artists use "naïve" art as a political statement that rejects western conceptions of art. The arpillera's combination of facts and feelings and its blurring of the roles of observer and participant challenge our preconceived perceptions of the way in which art is created and viewed. Although Brett also provides a

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<sup>11</sup> Author of works such as Marjorie Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) and Marjorie Agosín, *Scraps of Life. Chilean Arpilleras* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> The following articles give a cursory description of the arpillera movement: Eliana Maya-Raggio, "Arpilleras: Chilean Culture of Resistance," in *Feminist Studies*, 1984 10(2) 277-290 and Patricia M. Chuchryk, "Subversive Mothers: The women's opposition to the Military Regime in Chile" in Sue Ellen M. Charlton, Jana Everett, and Kathleen Staudt, eds., *Women, the State, and Development*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Marjorie Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 27.

history of the political situation in Chile and the evolution of the arpillera movement, his main contribution is that he delves more deeply into the artistic meaning of the arpilleras.<sup>14</sup>

Theoretical feminist scholarship addresses the issues involved in the arpillera movement without placing the discourse in a specific time and place. This essay attempts to introduce the discussions in theoretical feminism as a lens with which to view the arpillera movement. Scholarship on Latin American women and their contribution to democratization remains highly contentious. Scholars divide social movements into those that concern practical gender interests economic and human rights concerns, and those that can be categorized as strategic gender interests pursuing feminists' objectives such as equal representation in government.<sup>15</sup> For example, the arpillera movement focuses on practical issues and NOW concentrates on strategic gender interests.

Feminist scholars such as Georgina Waylen evaluate the success or failure of Latin American women's movements under repression in terms of their incorporation into the democratic system.<sup>16</sup> Waylen finds that feminist groups of upper- and middle-class women more successfully incorporate and promote their issues in the democratic government. Since gender interests remain at the forefront of Chilean politics, these scholars also see the politicalization of gender as successful. Although Chilean politicians pay lip service to gender equality, any significant incorporation of women into politics is minimal. Their main concern is

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<sup>14</sup> Guy Brett, *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History* (Philadelphia: New Society Pub, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization Without Emancipation? Women's Interests, State, and Revolution," in *Transitions and Development: Problems of Third World Socialism.*, edited by R Fagen, C.D. Deere, and J.L. Corragio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> The following authors have written on the transition to democracy: Annie Dandavati, *The Women's Movement and Transition to Democracy in Chile* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1996), Haleh Afshar, *Women and Politics in the Third World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), Jane Jaquette, *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), Carole Pateman *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), Jane Jaquette and Sharon Wolchik, *Women and Democracy, Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), and Manuel Garretón Merino, *Popular Mobilization and the*

an obvious lack of female electoral representation and females in top government positions. Waylen finds that after the return to democracy, the new government increasingly marginalizes practical interest groups. While popular practical gender interest movements play an important role in the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, political democratization leaves a minimal impact on gender relations.<sup>17</sup>

The opposing argument made by feminist scholars such as Safa, who contends that by retaining their traditional image and simultaneously participating in political action, women have blurred the line between private and public spheres. Safa counters that even as group activity reinforces traditional gender roles, it also results in changing them. Women use the role of the mother to strengthen and legitimize their claims for change. By becoming politically active, groups such as the *arpilleristas* dismiss the social construct that women should be obedient and passive. Safa finds that although these movements began as practical gender interests and did not directly challenge gender subordination, they led to a greater consciousness of such subordination and became strategic gender interests. Women's participation in these social movements is in itself indicative of their changing roles in society. Safa argues. Once politically active, the change in each woman's self-image will give her confidence to continue to press for greater women's rights.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to democratization, gender and class are areas of intense scholarly attention. Safa challenges the traditional Marxist view of class as the primary means of mobilization and argues instead that gender functions as the mobilizing factor demonstrated by the political

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*Military Regime: The Complexities of the Invisible Transition* (Notre Dame: Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Georgina Waylen, "Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics," *World Politics*, Vol 46 Issue 3 (April 1994): 34-342.

<sup>18</sup> Helen Safa, "Women's Social Movements in Latin America," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Special Issue: Women and Development in the Third World (Sep., 1990), 362-366 and Philip Oxhorn, *Organizing Civil Society*:

confrontation targeting the state, not the workplace. The prevalent situation of women as supplementary workers accounts for their low level of consciousness as workers. Even working women primarily identify themselves as wives and mothers. This maternal identification separates these popular women's movements from their counterparts in upper-class Chile and the United States where women strive for gender-neutral roles. In Latin America, women seek to reaffirm their identity as women and gain political power through this identity.<sup>19</sup>

In reinforcing their identity as mothers, the *arpilleristas* experienced revolutionary motherhood. In the *arpillera* movement, the women crossed economic and political divisions as mothers to unite and fight human rights violations. Motherhood, important in the construction of female identity, is a topic of discourse among feminist scholars. Sara Ruddick produces theories of feminist maternal peace politics, where she attributes to those who care for children, usually but not exclusively women, certain cognitive skills that resist and exceed Western rational man's militaristic mode of "survival." Ruddick accounts for a mother's concern for protecting and nurturing children by attempting to show that these acts involve higher philosophical thought, not instinct. The focus on preserving life is a result of "doing mothering," that is, maternal practice. She posits the woman's body at the center of the thought process, claiming that a mother knows the history and cost of the human flesh through the childbirth experience. Therefore, those Latin American women, who have lost loved ones and children they cared for in the struggle for survival, know the cost of human life. They thus bring their bodies into the fight against the institutionalized violence of the state. Ruddick uses the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, a similar group of mothers who protest in Argentina during the same period, as an example and

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*The Popular Sectors and the Struggle for Democracy in Chile* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Safa, 355-360.

centers her discussion on the concepts of the primacy of bodily life and the connectedness of the self to others.<sup>20</sup>

Critics attack these theories as originating from the Ruddick's narrow social and class-based experience. Evelyn Glenn argues that in Ruddick's attempt "to build a general or 'universal' theory, the author's focus remains centered on a single, normative pattern, with variation relegated to the margins."<sup>21</sup> Glenn argues that instead of constructing a universal model, the social base of mothering exists in the variation. She notes that women scholars of color produce the most serious challenges to universalistic theory as these communities constructed mothering in ways that diverge from the universal model. For example, Bonnie Thornton Dill argues that historically African American, Latina, and Asian American women's inclusion in the work force excluded them from the cult of domesticity. Glenn notes that society viewed these women primarily as cheap labor, especially as domestic workers, not mothers. Mothering is both gendered and racialized, noting that historically, privileged white women give tasks to working-class white women or women of color, such as wet-nursing and infant and child care. Often the women who perform these services are mothers themselves but they are forced to neglect their own children and families to take care of other women's children. Poor women experienced no separation between the private and public spheres, constantly oscillating back and forth. Consequently, mothering was collective, shared with other family members or women in the community. A deindividualized perception of mothering and open boundaries of domestic cooperation constructed a more expansive notion of mothering than the typical idea of

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<sup>20</sup> Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 187-225.

<sup>21</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, Glenn, Chang, and Forcey, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

the private household. Shared mothering, single parenthood, and extended family relationships are some of the many ways that mothers diverge from the traditional model.<sup>22</sup>

Patricia Hill notes that feminist theorizing on motherhood projects a white, middle-class woman's concerns as universal, ignoring diversity in mothering.<sup>23</sup> She identifies two problematic assumptions based on the white middle-class experience. First, much of this theory assumes that mothers and children benefit from a degree of economic security. Second, it presumes that women have the luxury of seeing themselves as individuals searching for personal autonomy instead of members of a community struggling for survival.<sup>24</sup> These are both assumptions that fail when looking at the *arpilleristas* as most of these women struggle to maintain subsistence level survival and to do so see themselves as a member of a community struggling for both political and economic justice.

Those scholars who include race and class usually do so only in the context of the United States and assume a political environment free of repression. Additionally, motherhood as a political reaction to repression needs more examination. These theories call for concrete experiences to ground them into the reality of lives about which they hypothesize. This essay will attempt to construct a realistic vision of the situation in Chile in which the *arpilleristas* worked, examine motherhood as a source of political mobilization, and ground the theories just discussed in the *arpilleristas*' experience.

To do this, this essay divides into three main chapters. Chapter One provides background on the history of Chilean politics, the Catholic Church, and the emergence of the *arpillera* movement. Chapter Two discusses the construction of a community and the development of the

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<sup>22</sup> Glenn, 5-7.

<sup>23</sup> Patricia Hill, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, Glenn, Chang, and Forcey, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

movement's structure. Chapter Three focuses on the artistic and oral expressions of the arpilleristas' experiences as mothers through the primary sources. The art and testimonials yield certain themes predominately: the "disappeared," the military regime, protest activity, socioeconomic issues, reclaiming history, the need for burial and protests against amnesty, and hopes and fear about the future.

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<sup>24</sup> Glenn, 6.



## CHAPTER I: Radicalized Politics, Repression, & the Birth of the Arpillera Movement

### *Political History*

Chileans, for much of their history, considered themselves citizens of an exceptional Latin American country, diverse in geography, sparsely populated, and renowned for a long history of democratic rule. Chile began as an oligarchy, became one of South America's most democratic countries, elected the first socialist president in the Americas, Salvador Allende, and experienced a violent coup with over twenty years of military dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet. The transition back to democracy proved long and difficult as the military retained a degree of control over democratic administrations.

Chile in the twentieth century experienced industrialization, the growth of a middle class, the expansion of public education, and the diversification of its land owning elite. Improvements in transportation and mass media flooded Chile with American and European entertainment and cultural influences. Foreign influence, modernization, and the increasing power of media escalated Chileans' expectations for their standard of living. To meet these rising expectations, many rural families migrated to Santiago and other cities, and transformed Chile into a predominantly urban nation. The increase in population and the shift of the population's concentration from the countryside to the cities led to the formation of shantytowns, creating a "poverty belt" which surrounded the capital.<sup>25</sup> The changing demographics and expectations increased difficulties when politicians attempted to solve problems of slow economic growth and social inequality.

Politically, the 1960s signified a period of radicalization as rhetoric became revolutionary and the political system polarized. By the 1960s more citizens than ever joined the political

process and social unrest emerged when hopes for the redistribution of resources and political power fell short. The late sixties brought an increase in strikes, demonstrations, urban guerilla violence, and subsequent repression. In 1970 electoral alliances shifted again and under the *Unidad Popular* (Popular Unity/UP) coalition, a combination of the Communist, Socialist, and Radical Parties, Salvador Allende emerged as the victor in the presidential election.<sup>26</sup>

Allende's election, as the first democratically-elected socialist in the Western Hemisphere, caused immediate uncertainty within the Chilean economy, exemplified by the fall of the stock market and an unprecedented run on the banks. In Chile's multi-party system, it was common that a candidate, in this case Allende, would win an election without a majority. With numerous candidates, the vote usually split, hence the necessity for political parties to form coalitions. While the coalitions changed at almost every election, they constituted an attempt by the parties to combine their supporters with enough others to gather sufficient votes to win the election. The radical nature of the UP coalition made the lack of a majority more problematic. Without an absolute majority, Congress was required by the Constitution to confirm Allende's election. It demanded that Allende sign a "statute of democratic guarantees," a clarification of constitutional rights to confirm his presidential authority. Some Conservatives acted radically, and assassinated the Chief General of the army in an attempted coup that backfired when the shocked nation rallied behind Allende. Chile held true to its strong tradition of democracy and Salvador Allende became the first Marxist in the Western Hemisphere to hold, by democratic election, the office of president.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Simon Collier and William Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 292.

<sup>26</sup> Collier and Sater, 328.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Angell, "Chile Since 1958," in *Chile Since Independence*, ed Leslie Bethell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 157.

The Allende administration ran on a platform of radical social change. As Allende stated, “The central policy objective of the Unidad Popular forces will be the search for a replacement of the present economic structure, doing away with the power of foreign and national monopoly capital and of the latifundio [large estate] in order to initiate the construction of socialism.”<sup>28</sup> To do this, the UP greatly increased social spending in a concerted effort to redistribute wealth and resources. The government sponsored increases in health care, minimum wages, and other social and cultural programs. Congress approved the universally popular total nationalization of copper mines. While the nation was united over the nationalization of the copper mines, the nationalization of over 150 other industries by 1970 was much more controversial.<sup>29</sup> Also highly contested was the program of land reform Allende initiated, in which the government expropriated large landholdings and redistributed them among the working classes. The extremist change Allende proposed and the polarized state of the political system created a volatile situation.

The major obstacle Allende faced was that the majority of Chileans had not voted for him; in fact, two out of three voters had voted against him. Although it was not unusual for the president to be elected by such a narrow margin, the radical nature of Allende’s reforms aroused considerable opposition. Allende faced opposition from the Chilean elite, the United States, and members of his own coalition. After the UP’s 1967 congress in which the coalition declared that “revolutionary violence is inevitable and necessary,” important contingents of the party supported the *via insurreccional* [insurrection path] over the *via pacifica* [peaceful path].<sup>30</sup> The role of Allende as a mediator between the demands of militants from within the administration

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<sup>28</sup> Angell, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Smith, *The Church and Politics in Chile* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 185.

<sup>30</sup> Angell, 159.

and the economically and politically powerful Right within Congress provoked numerous dilemmas and contributed to the development of uncertainty and, at times, contradictory policies.

As Allende struggled to mitigate militant voices from within his coalition and administration, the Chilean Right united with the U.S. to destabilize the administration, to demonstrate that socialism was not a viable option in Latin America. There was a strong antigovernment campaign within the Chilean elite, angered by their displacement from political and economic power by agrarian reform and industrial nationalization. The United States government, caught up in the Cold War and embarrassed by the Cuban Revolution, opposed the UP government from the start. Chile was economically dependent on the United States.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the U.S. applied economic pressure by cutting off and blocking loans from the World Bank, and constructing an "invisible" blockade of Chilean products.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the U.S. used military means to destabilize the government.<sup>33</sup> Together this economic and military action formed a critical contribution to the economic and political crisis. As both the Left and Right entrenched their attitudes and became unwilling to negotiate, the polarization of politics in Chile reached a breaking point.

The political crises boiled over on the morning of September 11, 1973 as tanks surrounded the presidential palace. By that afternoon the palace was bombed, the president dead, and the country controlled by a military junta. Head of the army, General Augusto Pinochet, quickly dominated the junta, which initially consisted of the head of each branch of the military. The coup initiated Pinochet's reign as the longest ruling leader in Chilean history.

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<sup>31</sup> The United States was the provider of almost 40 percent of Chilean imports, the leader in foreign investment, loans, aid, and Chile's main international public creditor, accounting for 50 percent of the public debt in 1970 (Angell, 135).

<sup>32</sup> The idea of an invisible blockade and an analysis of primary sources concerning US intervention in Chile is available in Mark Falcoff's *Modern Chile 1970-1989* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989).

The takeover of Chile was quick and brutal. Citizens began disappearing immediately as the military opened and filled detention, interrogation, and torture centers. A new category of person emerged, the *desaparecido* or disappeared, often called the detained-disappeared, to describe the thousands of people rounded up by the government and either imprisoned or killed. The regime targeted members of the Allende government and other leftist political parties, labor or grassroots organizers, Mapuche Indians involved in land reform, university students and intellectuals, and (mostly poor) sympathizers with no political affiliation.<sup>34</sup> Pinochet declared martial law, giving immense power to the military. He banned all left-wing parties, suspended all other political parties and halted union activity. The regime took control of the universities, instituted a curfew and strict censorship, and required police approval for all meetings and assemblies. To assume total control Pinochet dissolved Congress and the Constitutional Tribunal, declared election lists to be null and void, and fired government employees at all levels. The military's control reached every level of society as they dismantled neighborhood organizations and inserted their own leaders into positions of power. Repression was particularly severe in the shantytowns, where Allende held most of his popular support. Pinochet's long-term goal was to, "destroy the left...and restrict political and cultural thinking that could challenge the government."<sup>35</sup>

Chileans never before had experienced the brutal repression that had characterized much of Latin American history in other countries. The result of Chile's long history of democracy was that civilians did not know what to expect or how to react to the military regime and readily

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<sup>33</sup> The U.S. Congress allotted eight million dollars to the CIA to conduct covert military operations in Chile undermining the Allende administration; given the black market price of dollars this was close to worth \$40 million (Angell, 167).

<sup>34</sup> *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Schneider, 80.

trusted the government. As one arpillerista reported that her son turned himself into the officials saying "I haven't done anything. I'm not afraid."<sup>36</sup> Another soon-to-be-desaparecido said, "I am not going into exile. Someone who has not done anything shouldn't be afraid." His mother later recounted, "He never thought that in his country, where even the worst criminals have the right to a hearing, he would end up without justice. He was sure that if someday they arrested him, he would have the right to a trial and they would see that he was innocent."<sup>37</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the inability of the population to believe that democracy was gone inhibited any real formation of resistance.

In 1974, Pinochet created the Directorate of National Intelligence (DINA), an elaborate secret police network that together with the military institutionalized civilian disappearances and torture. Methods of torture were diverse: some victims suffered violent blows, excessive light, solitary confinement, deprivation of food and water, or constant nudity. Others were submerged in excrement, hung by their wrists, sexually violated, burned with cigarettes or boiling water, or run over by vehicles. Certain torture chambers, such as La Vende Sexy, specialized in sexual torture including not only rape, but rape with animals or in front of the victim's family.<sup>38</sup>

Economically, Pinochet instituted a policy of monetarism and unrestricted laissez-faire economics, the neoliberal reforms favored by the so-called "Chicago Boys." The government abolished price controls, cut social services, devalued the Chilean currency, the escudo, and privatized industry. These "shock treatments," as economist Milton Friedman referred to them, led to soaring inflation and a severe economic recession that doubled unemployment in the first

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 48.

<sup>38</sup> *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, 33-36.

three months.<sup>39</sup> By 1975, the average income of a poor family was forty-six percent of the 1973 level.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, many Chileans suffered a double repression, political and economic.

General Augusto Pinochet headed a military dictatorship characterized by repression and terror from 1973-1989. Finally, under international pressure, Pinochet held a plebiscite to pass the 1980 Constitution. The proposed constitution was an authoritarian document that called for a strong eight-year term presidency, a congress of limited powers, and institutional mechanisms that entrenched military control. The constitution sought to control any future civilian governments by granting Pinochet and the political Right disproportionate representation in Congress under the governments of the "protected democracy." Furthermore, it called for an additional decade of military rule after which, in 1988, a plebiscite would confirm or reject the military candidate (Pinochet) for a second term. Since the government conducted the plebiscite without democratic safeguards such as voter registration lists or political parties in a climate of fear and intimidation, suspicions of widespread fraud were prevalent both domestically and internationally.<sup>41</sup>

In 1988, the regime called the planned plebiscite in which General Pinochet proposed the continuation of his government and leadership. In a surprise to both Chileans and spectators abroad, Pinochet lost the plebiscite. After the vote, he called presidential elections and Patricio Aylwin, a Christian Democrat, won the election and took office on March 11, 1990, initiating the transition to democracy. The repercussions of the previous two decades of human rights violations became one of the greatest conflicts the new democratic government had to confront.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Schneider, 82.

<sup>41</sup> Angell, 187.

<sup>42</sup> Collier and Sater, 380.

There proved to be severe limitations to the prosecution of human rights violations. A decade before the transition to democracy the military regime essentially pardoned itself for any wrongdoing by instituting the Amnesty Law of April 18, 1978, which granted amnesty to all those in the military who had perpetrated human rights violations. The Decree Law No. 2191 was issued on the "ethical imperative to make all efforts conducive to strengthening the bonds uniting the Chilean nation, leaving behind all hatreds that are meaningless today, and encouraging all those initiatives that might solidify the reunification of Chile."<sup>43</sup> Thus, the government granted amnesty to all those who committed or assisted criminal actions during the state of siege. To this end, all cases were dismissed and evidence destroyed. As a result, the new administration lacked both the evidence and the power to prosecute human rights offenders. The entrenchment of the military and Right into the political system made legal actions virtually impossible.

The new democratic government was fragile and not yet politically autonomous: the military left its mark not only in the case of amnesty but also in political control. On March 11, 1990, the National Congress in Valparaiso swore in the former military dictator not only as senator, but as lifetime senator, *senador vitalicio*. Pinochet claimed his permanent seat in the same democratic institution he closed down years before, alongside not only his supporters but also some of the very political leaders whose exile and persecution he had ordered.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 89.

<sup>44</sup> Angell, 199.



### *The Catholic Church, Liberation Theology, and the Emergence of the Arpillera Movement*

While the Catholic Church and the military traditionally valued order, stability, social harmony, tradition, discipline, and hierarchical control, they also conventionally occupied marginal roles in the Chilean political system. In the mid-sixties, each organization assumed a more active role in Chilean politics. They fought, however, on opposite sides. In the 1970s, under the Pinochet dictatorship, the Catholic Church became one of the few safe places for political dissidents and emerged as a voice of opposition in a time of political silence. It was here, under the Church's protection that the arpillera movement developed.

The increasingly active role of the Church directly correlated to the development and implementation of a reform movement within the Church: liberation theology. This reforming ideology developed in response to increasing secularization, the steady rise of working-class movements, the appeal of Marxism among intellectuals and students, and the resulting tendency toward authoritarianism.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to the traditional approach of the Church to the poor, assuring them equality in an eternal afterlife, liberation theologians began to stress the secular sphere as an arena for the realization of biblical principles. Priests emphasized Jesus' concern for the wellbeing of the poor and marginalized and they promoted the human struggle against oppression as a means of union with God.<sup>46</sup> The Catholic Church shifted from defending the status quo to promoting justice, human rights, freedom, equality, the realization of biblical values on Earth.

The change of attitude and activity in the Church was possible only because of a sweeping change in its leadership. In Chile between 1955 and 1964, fourteen of the twenty-eight

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Fleet and Brian Smith, *The Catholic Church and Democracy in Chile and Peru* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>46</sup> Helen Stanton, Ed., *Mary and Human Liberation* (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1997), 46.

bishops died or retired, and their socially progressive replacements developed new roles and structures in the Church corresponding to the changes in society. In 1961, Pope John XXIII appointed Raúl Silva Henríquez, well known for his commitment to the poor through social welfare programs, to the position of archbishop. The shift of leadership coincided with a strengthening of the Church's presence in working class districts and the initiation of numerous new social programs.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, when repression struck under the military regime, the Church was in a unique position to sponsor programs to deal with the economic and political repression. When the economic crisis became acute, and unemployment high, even those with jobs could sometimes not work for lack of clothes, shoes, or eye glasses. In response, the Church began collecting and distributing these items as well as running soup kitchens in neighborhoods especially affected by unemployment or disappearances.<sup>48</sup>

In 1974, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez led an ecumenical group of religious leaders who created the Pro-Paz (For Peace) Committee to support individuals that suffered human rights violations and to determine the location of the detained-disappeared. The creators did not know how integral this organization would become as a refuge to victims and their families. In this environment, the Catholic Church began to collect testimonies and compile the first statistics on the disappeared. After two years, the junta closed down Pro-Paz and Cardinal Henríquez immediately formed a new institution exclusively under the control of the Catholic Church: the Vicariate of Solidarity. Within the protective bounds of the Church, the Vicariate retained a certain degree of political freedom and became the only organization that could denounce human

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<sup>47</sup> Fleet and Smith, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Agosin, 7.

rights violations and protect those seeking political freedom. This became the birthplace of the arpillera movement.<sup>49</sup>

The Vicariate of Solidarity established twenty regional offices to cope with the crisis in health care, legal matters, and unemployment. The need was great and under the newly opened vicariate more than 700,000 people were aided in the first months.<sup>50</sup> It was under this program, as part of the handicraft workshops of the Vicariate, that in March 1974 the first arpillera workshops formed. Fourteen women who previously united while searching for their disappeared relatives gathered together under the protection of the Vicariate. Given remnants of clothing by Valentina Bonne, a church official, these women began to tell their stories with cloth.<sup>51</sup>

The women formed a networking system. They met each other through their searches, political activities, or the church. Since their work was dangerous, the movement grew, as information was passed verbally throughout the network of women. Initially, there was no long-term plan for the creation and spread of the arpillera movement.<sup>52</sup> It evolved and spread naturally as more family members disappeared and the women met each other in the search. Later in the movement, the arpilleristas went into other neighborhoods and taught other women the how to weave the arpilleras. The demand was not only from the women wishing to create the tapestries, there was also a demand generated by foreigners. The Catholic Church sold the arpilleras abroad in hope that other countries would put political pressure on the Chilean dictatorship. "We channeled the arpilleras through the Vicariate for export to other countries,

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<sup>49</sup> Agosin, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Agosin (1987), 75.

<sup>51</sup> Agosin, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Agosin (1987), 37.

especially Canada, France, and the United States."<sup>53</sup> There was apprehension, however, that this exportation would lead to commercialization. Since the arpillera movement was a grassroots, community-based movement there was considerable concern that it would become commercialized and great effort was exerted to ensure that did not occur.

Although there was considerable variation, most of the arpilleristas shared certain characteristics. While the typical arpillerista was a poor middle-aged mother whose son had disappeared, the movement contained women of all ages, classes, and relations to the disappeared loved ones. Most arpilleristas lacked political experience and served as primary caretakers at home. Though primarily mothers, women whose husbands, sons, or brothers had disappeared also participated in the arpillera movement. Members of the movement ranged in age from 20-70; however, they were mainly women in midlife, old enough to have grown children.<sup>54</sup> Principally poor women, the movement also included middle class women who had family members disappeared. All of these women sought legal or economic help and protection from the church. What they found was much more, a community of other mothers with whom they began a journey of intense personal growth and political activism.

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<sup>53</sup> Sepúlveda, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Agosin (1987), 6.

## CHAPTER II: Community and Movement Construction

### *The Building of a Community of Activists in the Arpillera Movement*

*“There, for the first time, I met other people who knew my pain and weren’t afraid to listen to me. I talked with other women who were in the same situation as me and it gave me a feeling of solidarity, I realized I wasn’t all alone in the fight. I found out then that all the other mothers, just like me, had given up their traditional roles and became workers so their children could eat, as well as fighters struggling for social justice to bring their husbands back.”<sup>55</sup>*

The arpilleras formed a group that consisted entirely of women, most of whom previously met in jails, courthouses, and hospitals, looking for their disappeared family members.<sup>56</sup> Women entered the vicariate desperate from the search for their missing loved ones. Their families were fragmented as their husbands and sons were often in hiding, exile, or disappeared. “I didn’t know anything about money or anything outside of being a housewife. He was my husband, my companion, my protector. I didn’t know how to do anything if he didn’t help me. The tragedy of his arrest and disappearance changed me in a lot of ways.” one arpillera later testified.<sup>57</sup> The arpilleras experienced a great transformation that led to independence and politicalization, facilitated by the creation of a tight community which supported each individual.

The arpilleras came from a climate of fear and silence and for the first time, under the protection of the church, they found others to comfort them. “In 1974 everyone was afraid to talk, they were afraid of being detained, tortured, and interrogated. No one wanted to help me and no one trusted relatives of the detained or disappeared.”<sup>58</sup> There was no security within families or friendships established before the dictatorship. “Friends denounced friends, relatives

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<sup>55</sup> Sepúlveda, 144.

<sup>56</sup> Agosin (1987), 4.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 142.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 143.

turned in relative, and no one trusted anybody else but themselves.”<sup>59</sup> The creation of a community was highly attractive and important; the realization each woman did not have to struggle alone was a central theme in each testimony. “When I arrived at the Vicariate and met the rest of the women who fought to have their petitions of protection approved, I realized that I was not alone. I decided immediately to become a member of the group, the group made up of relatives of the desaparecidos.”<sup>60</sup> The women were haunted by the loss of their families and the creation of the arpilleras served as a therapy in addition to economic assistance. “The arpilleras were a source of income for those who had to leave their jobs and, at the same time, it was a way to calm ourselves spiritually so we could keep going.”<sup>61</sup>

In the vicariate the arpilleristas found security and a community, which they referred to as a family. “We had never met before, yet now we are sisters, inseparable. The pain has united us forever.”<sup>62</sup> The creation of this new family helped offset the pain of loss of a biological family. “The women of the Association replaced my family, especially my sisters and brothers who abandoned me after the coup.”<sup>63</sup> No arpillerista mentioned remarrying, having more children, or even raising the rest of their own. In fact, most women regretted that they either did not have or were not there for their biological families. Instead, they dedicated themselves to the arpilleristas and the constant search for the disappeared. The creation of the new family was as powerful as the loss of the old and an important enabler in the survival of the arpilleristas. “I realized that even though, perhaps, I had lost my father, these women would be part of my family for the rest of my life.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 153.

<sup>61</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 70.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 179.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 113.

The arpillera community presented the chance to communicate with other mothers and the rest of the world. The creation of the arpilleras was a form of communication of both politics and emotions, blurred together, since in their eyes these two ideas were inseparable. "We wanted to shout our outrage to the world about horrible offences to humanity and the crimes being committed every day against the basic rights of the individual."<sup>65</sup> Art became a powerful means of expression. "I don't understand anything about art, for me the arpilleras are a form of communication with the world. If I knew how to say it in words I'd write it down. If I could paint, I'd paint it."<sup>66</sup> The creation of the arpilleras was an expression of sorrow, a denunciation, and a call to action. "With this sadness and hopelessness in my life, the arpilleras were a special way to interpret my pain and at the same time to communicate it to others. My communication also had to be a denouncement, so people who saw my arpilleras would help free my country for my countrymen and husband."<sup>67</sup> The creation of the arpilleras was a nonviolent protest, which set the precedent for nonviolent street protest later. The protests were based on raw emotions and the intensity of their emotions gave them power. "I never believed in violence, and because of that my protest through the arpilleras has been silent, strong, desperate, full of unending tears. I can't count the long nights I spent making arpilleras and soaked the cloth because I was crying so much."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 54.

<sup>66</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 145.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

### *Chilean Women's History & the Arpilleristas' Organizational Structure*

The tactics chosen by the arpilleristas were influenced by their experience as poor women with the Chilean women's movement. After watching the women's movement the arpilleristas chose alternative tactics and structures. Seeing the longstanding fragmentation of the Chilean women's movement, the arpilleristas decided not to join traditional political parties or include men in their organization or protests. Experiencing a lifetime of class divisions, the arpilleristas emphasized integration of different social classes and the construction of a nonhierarchical structure in which individuals did not seek personal political power.

Chilean women entered the political system in 1949 when they won their suffrage.<sup>69</sup> The women's movement consisted of and catered to predominantly middle and upper class women. Ultimately, it did not prove highly effective, but remained weak due to factionalism.<sup>70</sup> After women gained suffrage, active members of the women's movement became absorbed into the traditional male political system, losing their power and autonomy. According to Chilean sociologist Julieta Kirkwood, the women's movement's lack of success was due to its failure to incorporate poor and working-class women.<sup>71</sup> Although Kirkwood maintains that women's political participation increased during the 1950s and 1960s as individual women began to vote regularly and join political parties, women failed to unite beyond class divisions and did not pursue coordinated action. The only contact between wealthy and poor women was in the context of charity or domestic service. It was not until the 1960s that any significant number of women began to run for or hold office. Even the Allende administration, which espoused

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<sup>69</sup> Collier and Sater, 287.

<sup>70</sup> In 1948, the Feminist Party emerged, but its existence was short-lived and it dissolved in 1951 due to internal tension and divisions.

<sup>71</sup> Julieta Kirkwood, *Ser política en Chile: las feministas y los partidos* (Santiago: FLASCO, 1986).



equality and socialist ideals. did not appoint a single woman until after its second year in office, and that position was in a traditionally female arena. the Social Development Agency.<sup>72</sup>

The struggle for women's suffrage and incorporation into the political system occurred during the lifetime of the arpilleristas. If an arpillerista was forty years old at the time of the coup then she would have been sixteen years old when suffrage was granted to women. After living through the women's movement, the arpilleristas constructed a movement that operated in a manner that diverged from the typical organizational structure. The construction of the arpillerista movement was non-hierarchical, appointing no permanent directors, but rotating all decision-making. In general, the group chose the themes to weave in the tapestries and made all other decisions collectively.<sup>73</sup> One arpillerista commented, "We took turns directing the organization so that we all had a chance to learn and gain experience on how to look for help for our cause."<sup>74</sup> In this way, arpilleristas did not dominate one another and thus rejected the forms of control against which they fought.

The arpilleristas decided not to join traditional political parties but rather to keep their strength as a movement autonomous of party affiliation or non-members. The goals of the arpilleristas, at times, seemed unbelievable to the rest of the country. "It was hard for them to believe that we were a group of women united only by the pain and desperation of having lost our loved ones. We weren't a political organization, nor foreigners, nor did we have violent goals. We wanted an answer to something simple, to the question that we have been asking for years: Where are they? Nothing else."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Sandra Deutsch, "Gender and Sociopolitical Change in Twentieth-Century Latin America," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol 71, Issue 2 (May 1991): 297.

<sup>73</sup> Agosin, 18.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 110.

The arpillera movement focused on the double repression of poor women, both gender and economic discrimination. Along the same lines the arpilleristas were inclusive, not limiting their group to any one economic class. Though principally composed of poor women, the arpillera movement involved members of all classes. Agosin notes that eighty percent of arpilleristas came from poor working-class families with husbands unemployed or missing, and twenty percent came from the upper middle class, who joined because a family member had disappeared.<sup>76</sup> Whatever the woman's economic class, they all identified with the repression involved in poverty. The middle class women retained the same agenda as the rest of the arpilleristas; therefore, class was an inclusive not divisive element.

The membership of the arpillera movement consisted of solely women. The arpilleristas recognized the machismo that prevailed within Chilean society and knew that they would not be welcome to fight with the men. "For us the women of Chile who were involved in the fight, it was all the more difficult because we realized that our men were so macho...instead of helping us during those years they shoved us down." At times, men threatened the movement more than they assisted. "Some women's husbands didn't let them attend meetings or help in the instruction or the solidarity work. Back then a man never said, 'Compañera, let's go fight together and change the situation of our country.' It was the woman who fought, the woman who was raped and beaten, and never received help from her family."<sup>77</sup> Fearing subordination and increased repression, the arpilleristas created an all-female organization. In this way, they escaped increased repression from the regime as well as traditional power dynamics that would have subordinated them within their own movement.

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<sup>76</sup> Agosin, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 54.

The arpilleristas also felt that only women could make the commitment to non-violence: "...but not like us women: for him the only alternative was to respond to the brutal assaults and torture with violence. We women tried to follow a path of peace..."<sup>78</sup> The dedication to nonviolence, however, took strength and this strength bred self-confidence. One arpillerista claimed, "we women are like the wool: the more you mistreat it the taller it stands."<sup>79</sup> This strength became a key aspect of the arpilleristas' identity.

It was the females, the compañeras, who managed to stop the military nightmare in our country – the women has the strength the man never has, or if he ever had, lost. The woman, who always took care of the house, roused herself and didn't bow down again until she had returned liberty to her country and her people. It must be remembered that it was us who organized the first protests.<sup>80</sup>

The selection of tactics and structure chosen by the arpilleristas reflects their experience with the Chilean women's movement and Chilean men. The arpilleristas used an almost universally supported concept, motherhood, to unite them. Within this unified front, they incorporated members of different classes while focusing on the specific marginalization of poor Chilean women within the context of brutal political repression. The arpilleristas' decision to remain unaffiliated with traditional political parties and exclude men from their organization, their emphasis on integration of social classes, and their construction of a non-hierarchical structure all demonstrate a divergence from traditional women's political tactics. These different structures were critical to the development, successes, and failures of the arpilleristas.

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<sup>78</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 115

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 28.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 55.

### Chapter III: The Artistic and Oral Expressions of the Revolutionary Mothers' Experience

In a time of significant historical upheaval, "ordinary" women chose art as a means to express their grief and fear to the world. As Brett describes, "Art becomes the means to retain one's humanity when that humanity is threatened."<sup>81</sup> Retaining their humanity with art was not without danger. The military regime characterized arpilleras as subversive material and they were cause for police detention. From the inception of the arpillera movement in 1974, the identities of the arpilleristas remained anonymous, to protect the artists from arrest. Only some of the women wrote their initials on the reverse side of the fabric, so it is virtually impossible to track the artistic progression of any one arpillerista. Therefore, the review of the arpilleras occurs in a thematic and roughly chronological order.<sup>82</sup> Although themes of all kinds emerged throughout the movement, the general progression was from the personal to the public. The arpilleristas continually made arpilleras dedicated to their loved ones, but as the movement progressed, they began to focus more on social and economic dilemmas. Consequently, the examination begins with a study of revolutionary motherhood and then the arpilleras that are a direct tribute to the disappeared person or an account of his arrest. It then moves to the manner in which arpilleristas portrayed the government, their own protests, and the social and economic issues that motivated them. The analysis ends with the reclaiming of history, the need for burial and protests against amnesty, and then finally their hopes for the future. The examination of each theme is the study of the arpilleristas' expression of the experience of revolutionary motherhood.

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<sup>81</sup> Brett, 11.

<sup>82</sup> The chronology was determined through the use of Agosin's analysis, those primary sources that are dated, and indications in the testimonials.

Each of these themes emerged throughout both the art and the testimonials as representative of the experience of revolutionary motherhood. Each theme played an integral role in the formation of each woman's identity and the experience of community and solidarity within the group. Through participating in the arpillera movement the arpilleristas experienced a transformation from women with no experience in political activity to radical protestors. Their identity, struggles, and experiences, focused around motherhood. They spoke and weaved of the loss of their children and their fight against the state to create a society, free of repression, which values life above all else. The arpilleristas sought to have their principles of life, freedom, and caring respected and enforced by the government. To do this, they created artwork that challenged the prevalent system of thought not only in the values it espoused, but in the style in which it was executed.

These tapestries challenge many Western assumptions of art such as the separation between facts and emotions and the line between observer and participant. The arpilleras are important for both artistic and political reasons: they create a touching artistic work, give a voice to the marginalized, and call into question common perceptions of what is political.<sup>83</sup> The materials used to create the arpilleras were bits of yarn and scraps of cloth. In the beginning, arpilleristas used a blanket stitch, which later was used only for the edging as the cross-stitch became popular for sewing the main art of the composition. One interpretation for the use of the blanket stitch is that it permanently roots the disappeared into history, making it impossible to remove them from the scene.<sup>84</sup> The use of the cross-stitch coincided with a change of style as it created a smooth and more realistic depiction.<sup>85</sup> The arpilleras not only depict their creators' thoughts and emotions, but also often incorporate the arpillerista's or the disappeared person's

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<sup>83</sup> Brett, 1-25.

<sup>84</sup> Leonard Folgarait of Vanderbilt University, interview by author, Nashville, TN, November 2002.

own hair and clothing, making them uniquely personal. Despite the horrors that are the focus of many of the tapestries, the arpilleras are generally bright and cheerful. The use of colors speaks of the hope and empowerment that arises from the atmosphere of the workshops and the artists' refusal to be defeated by the same force that took their loved ones. In some rare instances, arpilleras even carry a written message or poem in a small pocket sewn to the cloth.<sup>86</sup> This gives these arpilleras a second voice, a narration in addition to the art. In each arpillera an implied narration is apparent: they each tell a story about the artist and Chile.

### *Revolutionary Mothers*

*"My mother's intuition told me my son was suffering and I had to rescue him as soon as possible."<sup>87</sup>*

The experience of having their loved ones taken from them turned the arpilleristas into revolutionary mothers. In their search for their children or relatives, the arpilleristas found other mothers who were also ready to engage in a battle against the government for their children. Together, the arpilleristas created a community and an organizational structure that facilitated two decades of political activism. The references to motherhood are most obvious in the testimonials. While certain tapestries show women in mothering actions, most picture the disappeared children.<sup>88</sup> The creation of the arpilleras was a means of connection with their children, an act of mothering in itself. "I reflected on my moments of sadness when I was with my son and moments of loneliness when they took him away from me, and these things I put in images in the arpilleras."<sup>89</sup> Overall, the tapestries are more of a reflection of the experience of

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<sup>85</sup> Compare the stitching on the hands and signs in Figure 1 with Figure 3 to understand the style differences.

<sup>86</sup> Agosin, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 63.

<sup>88</sup> See Figures 8 and 13.

<sup>89</sup> Cited in Agosin, 121.

revolutionary motherhood, of longing for the missing, protesting, and the issues for which they spent their lives fighting.

Throughout each testimonial it is evident that each woman's identity as a mother drove her to political action. The defining moment was having her family member stolen away; after that, it is the story of her experience as a revolutionary mother. "I never thought that I – a loving mother and homemaker...would end up in street protests, arrested and in jail, beaten, chained to buildings, in hunger strikes, or so many other things that I've done these last few years because they carried my son out of my life."<sup>90</sup>

Ultimately, it was the role and conscience of a mother that drove them to take political action. "My sleep is troubled by sorrow, but there is peace in my soul because I followed the path shown me by God and my conscience as a mother."<sup>91</sup> In justifying their search, they referred to their roles as mothers. When confronting a guard one arpillerista asked, "where was the love of a father to consider that the children didn't always need a mother. I spoke to him of the pain of the Virgin Mary in seeing her son crucified."<sup>92</sup> Even those arpilleristas who lost husbands or sons still identified as mothers. "When terrible things happen, women were always the ones that have acted. Maybe it's because we give life to our children. And what would a mother not do to defend the life of a son? Sometimes your children are not the only ones you defend. In my case, I defended my brother."<sup>93</sup>

Arpilleristas often described their political experiences in terms of motherhood. The experience of childbirth made them aware of the cost of life and they refer to childbirth in the context of political struggle. When a mother was trying to defend her son from being taken she

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<sup>90</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 69.

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 178.

<sup>92</sup> Cited in Agosin, 125.

<sup>93</sup> Cited in Agosin, 136.

was beaten and described the experience. "I didn't really feel physical pain just a tearing in my womb like when my son was being born. I felt a mother's pain and desperation, the feeling that they were taking a piece of my life with them."<sup>94</sup> Arpilleristas also referenced a mother's intuition, emphasizing that the connection between the mother and child is not only physical, but also emotional and spiritual.<sup>95</sup> Some arpilleristas discussed a feeling of connection after their child was disappeared. "Many times I have felt when I was sleeping that he was saying Mommy, Mommy. I say to him my dearest son, may God Bless you, protect you, be with you."<sup>96</sup> In a cueca sola dated May 1982 and entitled "If You Knew," one arpillerista tried to communicate with her son.

*I would like you to know son  
That your name runs  
Through the beads of my rosary  
to think that they made you disappear  
just after you reached your 22nd year.  
If you knew son  
how I search for you from dawn to dusk,  
I know that your ideal was just  
for your people, now their rights  
are trampled on.<sup>97</sup>*

The arpilleristas wanted her son to know that she searches for him, that he was not forgotten. The arpilleristas discussed both the physical connection to their children through childbirth and the emotional and spiritual connection. This connection brought them into the activities with the other arpilleristas. Then the constant search and the creation of the arpilleras and cueca solas maintained the connection the arpilleristas felt to their missing loved ones. The arpilleristas created a political role for the values of love and the nurturing associated with motherhood. They protested to promote a society that reflects the maternal values, a love of life, truth, and peace.

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<sup>94</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 62.

<sup>95</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 63.

<sup>96</sup> Cited in Agosín, 122.



### *Where are the Disappeared?*

*“No one, no mother, father, or child, will ever be able to rest in peace without an answer to that persistent question: Where are they?”<sup>98</sup>*

The most prevalent theme in the arpilleras and testimonials is “¿Dónde Están?” or “Where are they?” This question addresses not only the military regime, but also the whole of Chilean society and the international community. It is an attempt by these women to force the country to recognize the loss of their loved ones. The women want to know the location of their loved ones, dead or alive. Frequently, arpilleras depict the disappeared in black, as a shadow, not recognized by the society as a whole. Alternatively, to defy the attempt to erase the lives of their loved ones, some arpilleras often incorporate a representation of the body of the missing child, such as a scrap of clothing belonging to the disappeared or a photograph stitched onto the arpillera.

Within the theme of the disappeared is that of each woman’s search for their missing loved ones and each testimonial begins with an account of the arrest and the subsequent search. After the return to democracy, the discoveries of the mass graves and the granting of amnesty to the military fuelled the women’s desire to bury their loved ones. Therefore, many arpilleras illustrated the constant search for bones. The tapestries focusing on the disappeared, though constant, were most common in the earliest part of the movement. Because they dealt with the direct loss of a loved one, they were often the most emotional and the most difficult to create. In their testimonials, many women claimed that it took them a long time to create such arpilleras because so much grieving went into the process. Following is a thematic analysis of the representation of the disappeared in testimony and tapestry. The three tapestries are

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<sup>98</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 169.

representative samples from the theme of the disappeared: the first the most typical, second an arpillerista using a photograph, and finally one of the last arpilleras created.

Arpilleristas introduced each testimonial by stating their names, their relationship to the disappeared, and the day of the disappearance. They defined themselves by their relatives' disappearance, their relation to them, and the crises which began their political activity. The testimonials begin with the story of the arrest of the loved one, the search for the disappeared, then their denunciation of the regime and protest activities with the arpilleristas. The testimonials generally end in a more general and philosophical manner with their rejection of amnesty, the feminist movement, and their hopes for the future.

In depicting the search for their loved ones, the arpilleristas emphasized how unprepared they were for such work, their lack of experience in the public sphere. They discussed their trips to jails, cemeteries, morgues, police stations, and courts, places where they never dreamed of venturing. The initial account expressed the panic felt, the hopelessness and confusion. "...that was the incredible tragedy, to see myself so little prepared, not knowing what to do or where to go." Through the creation of the network of arpilleristas each searching individual became stronger. The arpilleristas described how their activities gave them strength to persevere in the search for their loved ones. One arpillerista stated, "in union we found the strength to fight."<sup>99</sup> Many women experienced deep depression and claimed that they stayed alive because of the support of the arpilleristas. "I owe my life to these women who taught me that the most precious thing we have is life and that we have to respect it, defend it, and love it more than anything else."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 69.

<sup>100</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 113.

This sense of community sustained the women as they faced intimidation by members of the military regime. The government used numerous means to terrorize the arpilleristas away from looking for the disappeared. One arpillerista told of her attempt in the Christmas 1974 to visit her brother. The guard held a machine gun to her baby's head and told her that if she did not leave he would shoot the baby.<sup>101</sup> In other instances, the guards used less overt tactics assuming that exhaustion would eventually tire the mother.

The guards would ask us for things to give our imprisoned family members. Later, the guards would give us back the torn bags – they themselves would eat the food we left. Sometimes they would tell us that visiting hours were 7:00 in the morning and, when we got to the prison, they would tell us the hours had been changed to 5:00 in the afternoon. We'd go back in the afternoon and they would tell us that visiting hours were yesterday – they constantly made fun of us.<sup>102</sup>

The search for the disappeared consumed the lives of the arpilleristas and the increasing tenacity of their search initiated growing repression. Members of the regime constantly demeaned, beat, or postponed the arpilleristas, who used their sense of community to withstand and resist.

In tapestries as well as testimonials the disappeared constituted the majority of the subject matter. Figure 1 contains an early and very representative tapestry. The arpillera depicts hands holding signs, each with a loved one's picture and a caption that reads "¿Dónde Están?" Although the majority of the missing faces are those of men, the arpillerista also portrays one woman and two children as missing. This is unusual since most of the desaparecidos were adult men. Representing the leftist affiliation of the disappeared, one of the men has a beard reminiscent of the style worn by many Chilean socialist youth. From the wide blanket stitching it appears that the arpillera dates from the beginning of the movement in the 1970s. It is a typical example of the themes and techniques used by the early arpilleristas. The plain stark quality of

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<sup>101</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 47.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 46.

the coloring represents the desperation of the arpilleristas. Additionally, while each figure is given an individual identity they are shown as one of many abducted by the government.

Figure 1<sup>103</sup>



Another early arpillera, Figure 2, is one of the few in which the artist is identified. Violeta Morales, the sister of Newton Morales, a desaparecido, sewed this arpillera. It is one of the first arpilleras made in the early 1970s, as is evident by the style and early stitching method.<sup>104</sup> Giving a face to the disappeared, this arpillerista sewed a picture of her brother into the tapestry. The background is dark and dismal; the arpillerista fills the foreground of the composition with figures joined together holding hands, representing the solidarity. In the center, two women hold a banner that reads, “Verdad y Justicia Para Los Detenidos Desaparecidos,” or “Truth and Justice for the Detained Disappeared.” The photograph and text constitute a demand for the recognition of her brother’s life and the truth about his whereabouts. By adding his picture to the tapestry, she gives a face to the suffering and personalizes the art.

<sup>103</sup> Cited in Agosin. 13.

<sup>104</sup> Agosin, 43.

The scene is an imagined protest, set before Chileans took to the streets, with both men and women. This idealistic representation shows no repression, no presence of the government at all. In reality, when protesting began, only women participated and repression did occur. It is interesting, however, to see how this arpillerista illustrated the ideal political protests, consisting of both men and women and free from government repression.

Figure 2<sup>105</sup>



Throughout the twenty years of the arpillera movement the representation of the disappeared and the manner in which the tapestries were woven changed considerably. Although focused on the same theme, the arpillera in Figure 3 is more recent, created in 1992.<sup>106</sup> It has the polished and artistic quality indicative of a practiced artist. Two dark figures stand surrounded by darkness, representing uncertainty, facing down a pathway leading to a bright yellow light. The caption at top reads, “The Threshold, Where Are They?” and the bottom reads, “Dead or Alive?” The missing persons, portrayed as black shadows with question marks, are shadows that haunt the arpilleristas. These lack of specific identity makes the figures representative of all the

<sup>105</sup> Cited in Agosin, 43.

<sup>106</sup> Agosin, 82.

disappeared. The bright yellow seems to be an end, an answer to the questions and the suffering of the artist. By 1992, the disappeared had been missing for about twenty years; this arpillera holds the frustration and pain of that long search.

Figure 3<sup>107</sup>



Other arpilleras still focus on the disappeared while not directly representing them in the picture. The arpilleristas combine the subjects of the disappeared with their own activities in the depictions of the arpillera workshops. The arpillera in Figure 4 pictures two tables of women actively working on arpilleras in the center of the composition. In the upper left-hand corner, like a cloud hovering above them, reads an inscription, “Where are the disappeared detained?” In the back, open seats remain reserved for the detained-disappeared, making real the absence of their loved ones.<sup>108</sup> On the walls hang a cross, two signs that read “Peace,” and a picture of a home. These are all meaningful symbols which the arpilleristas hope their work will bring. The colors are light and bright showing the happiness in the workshops and the resistance to death

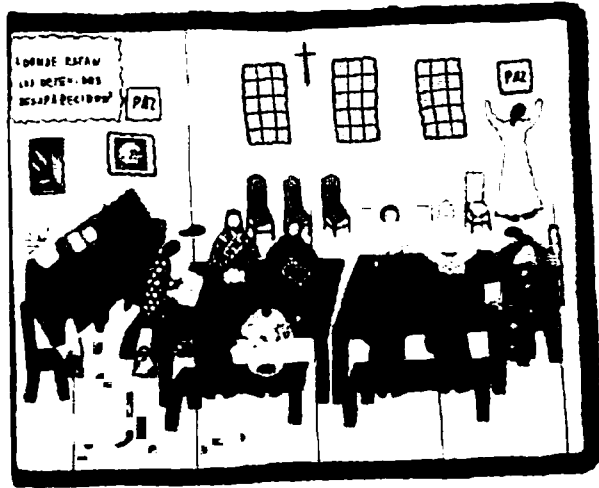
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<sup>107</sup> Cited in Agosin, 82.

<sup>108</sup> Agosin, 51.

and depression. This arpillera represents solidarity and the shared experience from which the arpilleristas drew their strength. The change of subject to the workshops represents the change in focus from the disappeared to the arpilleristas themselves and their activities as political entities.

Figure 4<sup>109</sup>



<sup>109</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 51.

### *Portrayal of the Government*

*“They treated us like criminals because we asked about our disappeared family members. They had no respect for our pain, they even physically attacked us.”<sup>110</sup>*

The military government played a critical role in the lives of the arpilleristas; it took their loved ones and became the focus of their denunciations. To understand the arpilleristas, the testimonials and artwork must be examined for the images of the regime and secret police. A significant number of the arpilleras depict the government in some manner either at the arrest of a disappeared person or repressing a protest. The testimonials refer to the military as “they” or by the acronyms, CNI and DINA. It is important that the typical portrayal of the members of the government is an anonymous dark figure or members of an unidentified secret police organization.

When discussing the government and secret police, a central image arpilleristas commonly discussed was their experience with surveillance. Each member of the family was watched and photographed. “They watched our house day and night. We had to get used to being observed – it was like living in an aquarium...Our lives changed forever.”<sup>111</sup> Other arpilleristas frequently had their houses searched for revolutionary material or arpilleras. The constant surveillance was a theme found in almost every testimonial and was seen as one of the life altering experiences that forced the women to protest.

The other main representation of the government in the testimonials was that of repressor. Each arpillerista described the torture inflicted either on her loved one, herself, or other desaparecidos. One woman described the first detainment of her brother and his torture. “They hung him from his hands and feet, doubled over for hours, without anything to eat or drink.

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<sup>110</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 69.

<sup>111</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 101.



They applied electrodes to his genitals and different parts of his body."<sup>112</sup> One arpillerista told of a compañera who was burnt with a blowtorch, had her wrists dislocated, and was thrown from a helicopter into the ocean. The authorities claimed the murder was a crime of passion.<sup>113</sup>

An early arpillera depicts the detainment and execution of political prisoners at the National Stadium in 1973, immediately following the military coup [See Figure 5]. Many never returned from Chile's main soccer stadium, which became a makeshift detention center where the military rounded up, interrogated, tortured, and killed political dissidents. This arpillera expressed the uncertainty and fear that seized the Chilean people during the coup. In the center of the composition, a man kneels blindfolded and tied up. To the right, a blindfolded woman hangs from some unidentifiable object above the tapestry. Facing the two figures are four military men, shown from the back, carrying guns. The men are black shadows; lacking any identification, they represent the brutal hands of the army. It seems to be the moment before an execution, with the man kneeling before the soldiers and us, the audience, begging for help. The incorporation of the viewer into the arpillera is an example of the blurring of traditional artistic lines; the audience is not an innocent observer. Rather the viewer is targeted and requested to take action to stop this atrocity.

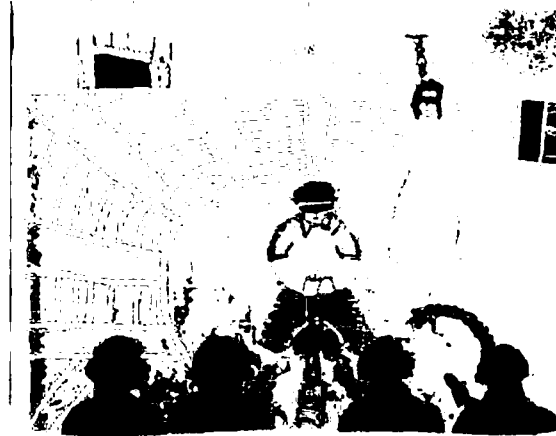
This is a particularly shocking arpillera from the bleak content and style. The stadium, gray and white with the soldiers in black, provides a striking contrast to the central figures in red. In the background, typical of arpilleristas work, lie a blue sky and a mountain range, showing that this scene is set in Chile and is part of a larger system of corruption. The anonymity of the executioners intensifies the sense of fear in the arpillera. It also depicts the lack of responsibility taken for the disappearances, as the perpetrators have no faces they cannot be held accountable.

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<sup>112</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 115.

<sup>113</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 124.

Figure 5<sup>114</sup>



### *Protest Activities*

*“We women in the association organized a lot of protests and strikes so public opinion would help us, so the whole country would be aware of the desaparecidos and help us get the government to give us the information we needed.”<sup>115</sup>*

The arpilleras that focused on the disappearances changed over time. While many remained on the theme of the disappeared, others began depicting women protesting. The purpose of this was twofold: first, to advertise the subversive activities of the arpilleristas and show that there was indeed opposition to the military regime, and second, to continue to bring the disappearances to the attention of Chilean society. The transition of the arpilleristas from focusing solely on the disappeared to becoming concentrated on their own political experiences is evident here. The women became engaged as political actors rather than commentators. These protests mobilized around the identity of motherhood and they therefore brought symbols of motherhood such as grocery shopping or dancing into the political protests.

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<sup>114</sup> Cited in Agosin, 47.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Sepulveda, 144.

Among themselves the arpilleristas note the change in attitude as a result of their experience with public protest. "I don't know if I'm not afraid anymore, like a lot of my compañeras, but I can say now that I'm able to go out in the street and protest, and I can face police a lot better than I could've done twenty years ago."<sup>116</sup> Protest became part of a daily experience not only through the creation of the arpilleras but also by taking to the streets and bringing their case to the Chile people.

Many of the different forms of resistance used by the arpilleristas focused on the activities typically relegated to mothers, such as grocery shopping. One arpillerista recalled a group going to a grocery store, filling a basket with food, allowing the cashier to ring up all the food and then claiming loudly, "there is not money to buy food in this country." Another form of resistance was banging on pots. At predetermined times an entire neighborhood would erupt in a chorus of banging to demonstrate that they had no food to give their families.

The arpilleristas participated in hunger strikes; for example, on December 29, 1977, they took part in the "50 Hour Strike." Sitting in a center square in Santiago, they "sat down and asked for information from the government about the detained and disappeared people."<sup>117</sup> There were no answers and the government broke up the protest; however, no violence is mentioned. This indicates that, as the arpilleristas have claimed, while the government initially did not see them as a threat as they gained power the government met them with physical force.

As the government struggled with the return to democracy and the question of amnesty in the 1990s, the protests of the arpilleristas became more frequent. When Pinochet declared the law of "Presumed Death" for all the disappeared in which all the disappeared would be claimed dead and their cases closed to investigation, the arpilleristas took to the streets. "I remember

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 108.

there were about 250 women determined to stop them closing the cases of the disappeared.” Such action, however, was not without repercussion. “We went to downtown Santiago to walk as a group, and the police came and beat us brutally with their nightsticks until they were exhausted. They pulled my hair and hit me on the back and in my stomach.” At this point the women were not protected from repression. “That time they arrested 80 women. But the law of ‘Presumed Death’ wasn’t passed. The pain wasn’t for nothing.”<sup>118</sup> The experiences of defeating the dictatorship and preventing the law from passing promoted more acts of protest.

In 1979 there was the “Encadenamiento” or the “Chaining,” where arpilleristas chained themselves to the former National Congress building with photos of the disappeared pinned to their blouses.<sup>119</sup> This form of protest became popular and was repeated on several occasions. As it became symbolic of protest activity it was frequently depicted as a subject in arpilleras. In the arpillera in Figure 6, mothers of the disappeared portray one of the many times they chained themselves to symbolic building in Santiago. The purpose of this chaining was to demand a full enquiry and punishment for the disappearances. The use of bright colors for the background and women’s clothing contrasts with the black of the bars of the gate and the chains across their bodies. The women affixed small sketches representing the pictures of their relatives that they wore over their hearts. The photographs, once again the arpillerista gave the disappeared faces but showed that they were not alone, but part of a widespread phenomena.

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<sup>118</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 145.

<sup>119</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 108.

Figure 6<sup>120</sup>



Within the arpillera movement, another art form and political protest emerged as the folkloric group created the cueca sola. The folkloric group began with fifteen women and performed the first cueca sola on International Women's Day March 8, 1978. When *The Folkloric Group of Families of Disappeared Prisoners* started, the cueca was a subversive activity and during the first performance CNI agents and soldiers armed with machine guns waited in the wings. The folkloric group consisted of only family members of the disappeared, the same group as the arpilleristas. In the cueca sola the members of the folkloric group attempted to sing the more indigenous rhythms of the national folkloric tradition.<sup>121</sup> The dancing of *La Cueca Sola* became another major form of public protest, an important metaphor for fight against repression and human rights violations,

[The folkloric group] kept our spirits up and confirmed us to our people by expressing our pain through traditional songs and dances. We sang our sadness and our agonizing search. We also danced, but each of us danced alone to show people that our partners were not with us, that the regime had stolen them from our sides.<sup>122</sup>

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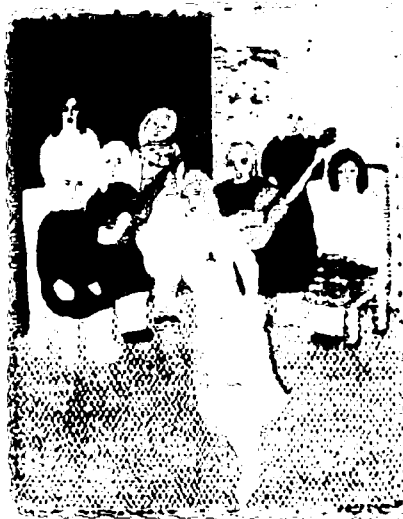
<sup>120</sup> Cited in Agosín, 53.

<sup>121</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 56.

<sup>122</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 89.

Like other protest activities, the cueca sola became the subject of numerous arpilleras such as in Figure 7. This particular arpillera was one of the first to feature the dance, evident as it was before the folkloric group dressed in uniform.<sup>123</sup> The dance represents the loss of the missing person; as the woman begins the dance, she calls out to the missing and performs a dance of life for them. By dancing the national dance of Chile alone, the arpilleristas implicitly hold the government responsible for the disappeared. The arpillera depicts the woman dancing the cueca sola, surrounded by only other women who sit, clap, and play guitar. The dancer holds a handkerchief which represents the shroud that covers a dead body and wears a photograph of the disappeared, thus honoring the memory of the dead in numerous visual ways. An unusual component of this arpillera is the illustration of racial unification. The artist also showed women uniting beyond racial boundaries. The cueca sola was a reinterpretation of the national dance, showing a discontinuity in professed beliefs in equality and democracy and the reality in Chile.

Figure 7<sup>124</sup>



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<sup>123</sup> Agosín, 74.

<sup>124</sup> Cited in Agosín, 74.

In each case of resistance, the women mobilized as a community, driven to action as mothers resisting repression. As the protesting became a greater component of the arpilleristas' identity it also gained more attention as a subject matter for the arpilleras. As the arpilleristas focused more on their political activities, the next natural step was to address other social and economic problems now incorporated into their view of repression.

### *Economic Issues*

*“We realized how poverty gave us the ideology and hope to seek social justice through political changes so that we could live in a society where everyone had the same opportunities, where we would all have the same rights.”<sup>125</sup>*

As women protested human rights violations, they also began to protest issues of economic disparity and other social problems. For women living in poverty, one of the motivating forces for the creation of arpilleras was the financial compensation. By providing economic means for the family’s survival, through the sale of arpilleras, a transformation occurred in the woman’s role to the “head of the household.”<sup>126</sup> Although very little, in a time of intense economic repression, this money helped arpilleristas and their families survive. Economically repressed and socially marginalized, the arpilleristas denounced extreme poverty and the huge economic gap between classes. They created tapestries focusing on economic and social problems that condemned capitalist greed, depicted children searching the trash for food, and showed unemployment. Arpilleristas also denounced the military decrees undoing land reform, leaving the Mapuche Indians with nothing.

Neoliberal reforms had a drastic effect on the middle-class and poor, sending “shock waves” through the economy. Families lost employment and social programs simultaneously. One arpillerista commented about her brother, the family breadwinner, that “after the coup he lost everything, the pension and two factory jobs. Before, we always had food in the cupboards and never lacked for something to eat.”<sup>127</sup> Soon after her brother was disappeared, leaving the family helpless, and the creation of arpilleras helped the family survive. The experience in the arpillera movement also brought one arpillerista to the realization that “living on your knees isn’t

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<sup>125</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 176.

<sup>126</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 28.

<sup>127</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 43.



being human."<sup>128</sup> The arpilleristas comment on the dual assistance of creating arpilleras. "[they] were a source of income for those of us who had to leave our jobs and, at the same time, it was a way to calm ourselves spiritually so we could keep on going."<sup>129</sup> As arpilleristas became more politically aware, they saw the creation of the arpilleras as not only a way that they could personally survive economically but denounce the extreme poverty that characterized Chile during the military rule.

We wanted to shout our outrage to the world about horrible offences to humanity and the crimes being committed every day against the basic rights of the individual. Our country had never seen more prostitution than in those years when the poor woman didn't have work or a means of supporting her family, and went out in the streets with her daughters to work as a prostitute. We didn't have any help, we were very alone at that time. It seemed, sometimes, that the whole world had turned its back on us.<sup>130</sup>

The depiction of economic repression as human rights violation, and the focus on prostitution, the act of selling one's body to have enough money to feed her family signifies a change in the language and focus of the arpilleristas. They now include economic subsistence in the basic rights of the individual. The lack of government programming or concern for the poor created a feeling of alienation, making the collective nature of the arpillera groups important.

The theme of economic repression and the suffering it caused is central in both the testimonials and tapestries. For example, the arpillera in Figure 8 depicts life in the shantytown: electricity is "borrowed" from overhead street light cables and flies swarm around an outhouse situated directly next to the water source. A woman in the center of the scene faints, conveying hunger and desperation. Each of the houses and the outhouse has pockets where one can open them and look inside. Only one house has furniture, a luxury in shantytown life. The men sit

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 70.

<sup>130</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 54.

around without work, illustrating the severe unemployment.<sup>131</sup> The tapestry is an attempt to force Chileans and those abroad to see what they usually ignore, bleak poverty and desperate conditions. The arpillerista employs irony by contrasting a sweet-looking tapestry to the horrible conditions it illustrates.

Figure 8<sup>132</sup>



Other tapestries focus on materialism or greed as the cause for economic inequality. For instance, the arpillerera in Figure 9, focusing on consumerism, was created during the return to democracy. It was actually authored and dated, possible because at the end of the movement anonymity became less important. Created in 1995, this arpillerista depicts increasing materialism in modern Chile.<sup>133</sup> Stitched into the upper right hand corner is the author's title, "Consumismo" or consumerism. Unlike earlier arpilleras the stitching is smooth and the figures are well proportioned, signs of an experienced arpillerista. Each figure has an appliance over his or her head or body; hence, the physical body is consumed by the desired goods. The products block the identities and actions of the figures. Unlike most other arpilleristas, all the cloth used is solid colors; this gives it a more uniform and professional appearance and is evidence of the greater selection of material available in the 1990s. The use of the colors of purple and red

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<sup>131</sup> Brett, 33.

<sup>132</sup> Cited in Brett, 33.

<sup>133</sup> Agosin, 83.

throughout the composition tie it together. In the lower right hand corner just entering the scene is a figure identified as Chile, the figure is not completely progressed to the level of the other characters, but seems to be transforming in that direction. The appearance of the work is surrealistic, atypical compared to most arpilleras in subject matter and execution. The arpillera rejects the rampant materialism and questions the new direction of the country. Grappling with economic disparity was a fact of life. Adding economic repression as a qualification for human rights and finding issues such materialism at fault for economic inequality represents the greater trend of the arpilleristas to become political commentators on issues other than the disappearance of their loved ones.

Figure 9<sup>134</sup>



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<sup>134</sup> Cited in Agosin, 83.

### *Reassertion of History*

*“We have to ensure that people are aware of the truth so that this horror doesn’t ever happen again in Chile or in any other country in the world.”<sup>135</sup>*

In addition to commemorating the lives of the disappeared and the protest of the arpilleristas, another important function of the arpilleras was an opportunity to deny the government’s official history and reassert the arpilleristas’ version. Through the arpilleras and testimonials, arpilleristas established an alternative story such as the discovery of bodies in mass graves at Lonquén. The arpilleristas participated in the formation of national culture; they were both witnesses and accusers, who rescued the dead by saving their memory.

Many arpilleristas discussed the discovery of the ovens at Lonquén in 1978. The arpilleristas teamed with foreign anthropologists to discover the burned remains of fifteen desaparecidos. Three of the victims were burned alive and the others suffered physical torture such as gunshot wounds. The anthropologists established the date of death as October 7, 1973, and identified the bodies by bits of paper and clothing.<sup>136</sup> While amnesty laws prevented prosecution, the discovery and discussion of these atrocities was important for the arpilleristas. Through their testimonials and tapestries they recovered a history silenced by the dictatorship. The regime did not recognize the ovens or permit publication of such stories, but through untraditional media, the arpilleristas documented this alternative history.

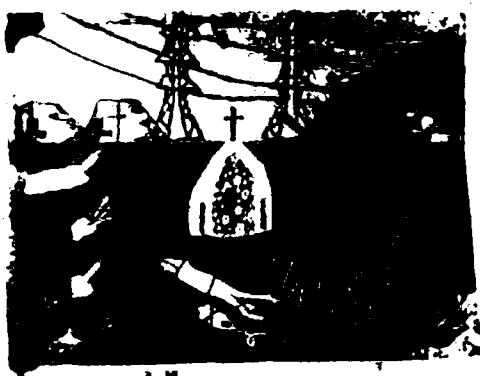
Documenting another such event is the dark arpillera of Figure 10, which exposes a brutal crime committed by the secret police (CNI) in May 1984. The military claimed that a young woman, Maria Loreta Castillo, died while planting a bomb underneath electric pylons. The arpillera reveals the later discovered truth that the secret police arrested her, beat her with an iron bar, and blew up her body with dynamite. In this tapestry the mixture of facts and feelings

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<sup>135</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 162.

is potent.<sup>137</sup> The center of the composition is a church with burning candles, symbolizing a hope of resurrection and justice through the reassertion of history. The secret police, depicted in black, provide a contrast to the young woman in white, representing good and evil. Against the dark colors, the only brightness comes from arms extending flowers from the edge of the composition and the church and hills in the background.

Figure 10<sup>138</sup>



Another example of an establishment of truth is the arpillerita in Figure 11, which commemorates the burning of two youths, Carmen Gloria Quintana and Rodrigo Rojas, during a demonstration in Santiago. The incident left Rojas dead and Quintana disfigured.<sup>139</sup> At the top of the composition is an inscription reading, “Rodrigo and Carmen Burned Alive – Chile.” The arpillerista depicts Rodrigo already dead on the ground as a soldier pours gasoline over him. Carmen still stands struggling, showing that she will survive. The soldiers are faceless figures in green, a camouflage uniform. While we can clearly see the identity of the victims, the soldiers are menacing in their anonymity. In the windows are faces, watching the scene, showing that both they and we as viewers by simply watching allow this action to continue. Presiding over

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<sup>137</sup> Brett, 43.

<sup>138</sup> Cited in Brett, 43.

<sup>139</sup> Sepúlveda, 64.

the scene is a large cross and birds that traditionally symbolize hope and peace. Although they seem ironic in the scene, they represent the hope that by revealing the truth in Chile human rights violations will cease.

Figure 11<sup>140</sup>



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<sup>140</sup> Cited in Agosin, 64.

### *Need for Burial and Protests Against Amnesty*

*"I have the right as a mother to know what they did with my son's body. I'd go dig up my child's bones with my bare hands, I'd hold them near my heart and then, again with my own hands, I'd bury them and ask my daughters to let my body always rest next to his remains."*<sup>141</sup>

In the 1990s as the women neared death, their testimonials and artwork depicted an urgent need for the remains of their loved ones. The arpilleristas claimed that granting amnesty to Pinochet and the military and denying the truth of the disappearances and torture was in fact denying the existence of their loved ones. A protest against amnesty and the demand for the bones of their children became a prevalent theme later in both the art and testimonials. The arpilleras and testimonies show the arpilleristas acceptance of death - their children's and their own - as well as their relation to the new democratic government.

Some arpilleristas hoped that the transition to democracy would take effect as quickly as the takeover of the military regime. "I had a lot of illusions when I was voting in the new elections for the return of a democratic government. I thought that we'd go back to walking in a free country and there would be justice for all those who had suffered this interminable persecution." The new democratic government was in a delicate situation and made many compromises with the military. Politicians sacrificed immediate justice for the long-term stability of the democratic government. This disillusioned the arpilleristas to the reality of the new democracy. "But reality is different. Now I feel worse because I can't look to the future with any optimism. All our suffering, all our struggles seem to have been in vain." While political parties, congress, and the courts returned they did not take action against the military. "The return of political parties to our country, the opening of the National Congress, and the return of the courts of justice with their judges haven't changed anything in Chile." Instead, the politicians decided that they needed to establish themselves and wait out the period of instability.

“The political parties and the new leaders have dedicated themselves to fighting over political positions and to winning elections, but no one wants to talk about the violations of human rights.” The arpilleristas find the new democracy guilty as well. “Everything is covered up by a silence of complicity. The guilty walk free through the streets of our country, the dead stay quietly buried, and the desaparecidos are absent forever.”<sup>142</sup> It was this quiet burial the arpilleristas protest. Ultimately, many arpilleristas felt as though they had failed. They sacrificed their lives and happiness so that the deaths of their loved ones would have meaning. Instead, at the end of their lives all their goals seemed unrealized. The transition to democracy was not the goal of the arpillerista movement; rather they assumed that a democratic government would fulfill the justice that they pursued.

After such hard work to promote the return to democracy the arpilleristas were upset when they discovered that the democratic government failed to hold the supposed promises, “We still continue with our work, we forgotten people, for no one even talks about the desaparecidos now. The silence is calming the rage the dictatorship caused, and they’re inventing solutions like the Final Point Law.” The Final Point Law was a proposed law that sought to compensate families of the disappeared. In essence, the government wanted to pay the family members for their silence and an end to the prosecution of officials and digging for bones.

A ‘final point’...for whom? For the guilty? How can we have a final point if we don’t find the guilty and know what really happened in Chile during the years of the dictatorship? So many women have died without knowing what happened to their sons, fathers, brothers, and husbands. There is no final point for them. They died without knowing the truth, without ever again trusting the justice system of their own country.<sup>143</sup>

These women wanted to know that there was justice on earth, that democracy was a valid system of government and that the deaths of their loved ones would be recorded in history.

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<sup>142</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 78.

<sup>143</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 71.



The offer of money to silence them and compensate them for the loss of their loved ones insulted the arpilleristas. “We will not accept the final point law or any other law that puts a price on our disappeared sons, husbands, or brothers,” they write.<sup>144</sup> After years of repression, facing death, money is not what the arpilleristas requested. Instead they wanted to die in peace, something they felt would only be possible if they could bury their loved ones, be guaranteed that those responsible would be held accountable, and that the world would know of the atrocities that occurred in Chile.

After years of protesting and activism, constant appeals to the government and international community, the women made eloquent pleas, “Now I ask for my son’s body, his bones. I don’t want them to deny my last and only wish. Why don’t they give us mothers our last wish by telling us what was the fate of our children? Let us die in peace.” The arpilleristas used their death to create urgency in the situation. The use of the phrase “last wish” implies that they are about to die. By comparing themselves to those on the brink of execution, they ask why the mothers of the disappeared should not receive last wishes. “They’ve already taken everything. Now, at the end of our days, after having unjustly taken our sons alive, after beating us, jailing and persecuting us, give us a single satisfaction: the destroyed bodies of our beloved children.”<sup>145</sup>

The ritual of burial was critical to the emotional peace of the arpilleristas. The mothers asserted that their position as mother gave them certain rights for the knowledge of the death of their sons. “I have the right as a mother to know what they did with my son’s body. I’d go dig up my child’s bones with my bare hands, I’d hold them near my heart and then, again with my own hands, I’d bury them and ask my daughters to let my body always rest next to his

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<sup>144</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 57.

<sup>145</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 74.

remains.”<sup>146</sup> The desire for joint burial preserves the idea that through life and death the mother can protect her son. In this way, the arpilleristas still used the rationale that as mothers and protectors, they needed political power and recognition to heal the injustices committed against them and their families.

Arpilleras also depicted the failures of the new democratic government. One arpillera equated the democratic government to a circus show [See Figure 12]. The sign reads, “Great Show Today, Truth and Justice” satirizing the disparity between the espoused ideals of the government and its failure to prosecute human rights violations. The choice of a circus, a show, represents that the democracy was just a farce and that the same men and principles that led the dictatorship remain in control. Balloons that float away, unable to be contained, represent the unfulfilled laws. Complete with all the apparatus of a circus, ticket booth and entrance, the bright colors and excitement lack any substantive change. Black shadows watch on from the outskirts, representing the disappeared, still in shadow form because the show of truth and justice is not a reality. Apart from the disappointing reality, arpilleristas continue to express their hopes and fears for the future.

Figure 12<sup>147</sup>



<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Cited in Agosin, 79.

### *The Future: Hope and Hopelessness*

“We women, more than anyone in the country, want the wound to close. But we want it to close and heal because of the truth, and from then on we’ll look to the future with what we learned from our experiences, what we lived in the past.”<sup>148</sup>

Surrounded by a culture of death, arpilleristas spoke of and created art emphasizing the need to “live again,” and to discover “the truth of their lives,” as well as that of the missing. The word life is a constant theme throughout the testimonials and they constantly expressed their willingness to give “life for life” or the hope “to find them alive.”<sup>149</sup> Especially in the later years of the movement, arpilleristas expressed their desire for an ordinary, normal life. To illustrate this, arpilleristas created pictures of children representing hope for the future. At times the children were the next generation, other times they were disappeared children playing when they were little. The arpilleristas spoke not only about their own children but also about the future generations that they believed must know the truth of what happened in their country. When they addressed their personal futures they were quite bleak, most of them spoke as though they were already dead. When they talked of the future of the country they showed more hope.

The arpilleristas knew that they would spend the rest of their days searching for their loved ones. “I don’t know exactly how much longer I’ll live, but every day I have I will keep fighting to learn the truth about the desaparecidos.”<sup>150</sup> Besides that, they did not see much certainty or hope for their own futures. “My future doesn’t hold much promise, either. I will never have retirement pay or any type of social benefits, because for 20 years I dedicated my life to being a volunteer in solidarity work—I gave my life to others, and to fight against the

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<sup>148</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 133.

<sup>149</sup> Agosin, 14.

<sup>150</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 92.

dictatorship to defend our human rights.”<sup>151</sup> Many of them said that they had sacrificed their lives for their country and for freedom. However, the time for their personal happiness passed. “I’ll never smile again nor experience the joy of life’s simple pleasures. I don’t have happy memories.”<sup>152</sup>

Nevertheless, when they discuss the future of the nation, it was with more hope. “If it isn’t our generation it will be others – perhaps our children’s children or their children – who’ll find the answers that all of us searched so hard for.” They are certain that there will be a better life awaiting Chileans and the rest of the world.

You can’t leave an open wound, but it won’t close while it still oozes the blood of anguish of so many innocent people who were punished, whose only crime was having dreamed of a better future for all citizens of their own country. No one has or will ever have the right to kill another human being for having a political idea different from the rest. Sooner or later we have to realize that you can kill people but ideas never die.<sup>153</sup>

The arpillera in Figure 13 represents the bright future for coming generations. It is very unusual, depicting a mother and her young daughter.<sup>154</sup> Mothers were usually portrayed with other mothers, male children, or alone. The mother wears a black and white photograph of a disappeared man on her chest, representing her life spent fighting against the dictatorship. The warm red colors of the entire work contrast the child’s face and dress. The reds could symbolize life, blood, and political struggle while the whiteness of the child’s face, unexposed to brutality, shows innocence. Her pale and flowery garment contrasts her to the composition, bringing her image further forward in the composition, making her seem pure yet vulnerable. The presence of the young child represents the future and regeneration. The daughter is a second image of her mother, whom the arpillera hopes will have an easier life with more opportunities than her

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<sup>151</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 57.

<sup>152</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 183.

<sup>153</sup> Cited in Sepúlveda, 133.

<sup>154</sup> Agosín, 50.

own. The ability to hope for the future of Chile and freedom everywhere was a defeat of the culture of repression these women fought. While they personally saw little individual hope they were sustained by the hope for their country and the world.

Figure 13<sup>155</sup>



Each of these themes, from the disappeared to the future, is an integral component of each testimonial and the arpillera. Throughout all the testimonials, there is reference to the basis for their actions lying in their community and identities as mothers. That identity led them to the arpillera movement and onto the streets. The examination of the events surrounding the arpilleristas and the themes that emerged from their testimonies and art helps us to understand the revolutionary motherhood, protest under repression, art as a political tool.

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<sup>155</sup> Cited in Agosin, 50.

## **CHAPTER IV: Conclusions**

### **The Arpilleristas, Motherhood, & Political Mobilization in Chile**

The previous sections provide a background to the arpillerera movement and a discussion of the experience of revolutionary motherhood through an analysis of the themes that emerged most frequently from both the testimonials and the art. From the arpilleristas certain subjects are evident, such as an emergence of a community or family between them, a dedication to the search for their loved ones, a concern for all human rights issues, and a vigorous protest against repression and amnesty. The role of mother served as the basis for the arpilleristas entrance into protesting and was a key aspect of identity within their community.

The experience of childbirth connected the arpilleristas to their children and made them aware of the cost of life. The mothers felt a relentless connection between their lives and the lives of their children, when one was threatened so was the other. Arpilleristas also referenced a mother's intuition, emphasizing that the connection between the mother and child is not only physical, but emotional and spiritual as well. Ruddick believes philosophical thought, not instinct, accounts for a mother's nurturance and protection of her children. The arpilleristas argued that instinct and an emotional connection to their children facilitated their desire to protect their children and society from repression. Additionally, Ruddick discounts the idea of "survival," thinking of it only in terms of violent survival. In contrast, the arpilleristas participated in peace politics to ensure the survival of themselves, their children, and their society. The arpilleristas struggled to maintain themselves as members of a community striving for survival and political and economic justice.

The arpilleristas drew on traditional symbolism to generate a moral authority that translated into power. Feminist critics who have criticized groups like the arpilleristas for

clinging to maternal images have failed to understand their roles as revolutionary women. Some commentators have charged groups such as the arpilleristas, who use a mothering identity, with supporting patriarchal authority. Instead of attempting to preserve patriarchy, they hoped to transform the state so that it reflects maternal values. Rather than eliminating maternity as gender identification, the arpilleristas, sought to create a political role for the values of love and the nurturing work associated with motherhood. By making motherhood political, they rejected traditional views espoused by both conservatives and feminists that motherhood is an apolitical role. They radicalized traditional symbols and motherhood, calling into question our preconceived notions of what is revolutionary. The arpilleristas view of revolutionizing maternity demands that the state mirror the values of motherhood and promote: justice, equality, health, education, work, and shelter for each citizen. They valued motherhood and saw it as a form of political participation rather than as a passive role. The arpilleristas proved that the work of mothering is vigorous, politically active, and at times, dangerous.<sup>156</sup>

Love constitutes an important part of the arpilleristas' maternal vision. While critics claim that they perpetuate the concept of the self-sacrificing woman, rather, they are engaging in loving that stems from a position of strength and self-confidence rather than denial of self. Caring is considered an essential trait of the new political activism and they see no inconsistency between their identities as mothers and their identities as politically activists. The revolution they are seeking to wage is a humanistic one; they attempt to infuse their political work with love and respect for the individual and community.

Their experience solidified their identities as mothers and their dedication to their community and their nation. In the vicariate, the arpilleristas found security and a community,

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<sup>156</sup> Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo*, (Wilmington: Latin American Silhouettes, Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1994), 192.

which became a family. The formation of the new family enabled the arpilleristas to persevere for over twenty years. Within their organization, they recreated a more idealistic family structure, which lacked hierarchic structure. The arpilleristas universalized mothering, saying that all mothers should mother communally, an assault on one child should be an assault on each mother.

The arpillera community presented the chance to communicate with other mothers and the rest of the world. Art became a powerful means of expression of sorrow, a denunciation, and a call to action. The creation of the arpilleras was a nonviolent protest, which set the precedent for nonviolent street protest later. The creation of the arpilleras served as a catalyst which propelled the women into the streets. As the first to openly protest in Chile, the arpilleristas helped to create an environment where the legitimacy of the regime was so damaged that they were forced to hold elections.

In the creation of the tapestries, the arpilleristas attempt to force the country to recognize the loss of their loved ones. Towards the end of their lives, the women's desire to bury their loved ones became intense and they illustrated the constant search for bones. The arpilleristas lived in a society in which surveillance and torture was an established reality. They described the feeling of being watched and the torture inflicted either on their loved ones or themselves. Through the arpilleras and testimonials, arpilleristas established an alternative history and participated in the formation of national culture. Their use of the arpilleras as an avenue to their political voice is symbolic of the marriage of the traditionally divergent roles as mothers and political activists.

Women's movements involve issues of not only gender, but often class, race, or sexuality. The arpilleristas were primarily concerned with both gender and class in their goals



and identity. The arpilleristas identified not as workers but as women, supporting Safa's theory that many Latin American women mobilize by gender not class. I argue, however, that the mobilization occurred due to combination of both gender and class. The arpilleristas had a low consciousness as workers demonstrated by the rejection of traditional male routes of class protest such as worker's unions and strikes. Therefore, the arpilleristas focused their economic concerns around the idea of economic disparity. I disagree with Safa's assertion that mobilization occurred purely on the basis of gender; rather, it is the incorporation of both class and gender that mobilized the arpilleristas. While gender was a defining aspect of their identity, they rejected the feminist movement as classist. The arpilleristas saw the feminist movement a creation by and for upper- and middle-class women. Further proof of the dual influence of gender and class is evident in the arpilleristas' view of economic repression as a form of human rights repression. In response to which they protested the government because they felt it constructed and supported a system that promoted economic inequalities.

Mobilized as politically and economically repressed mothers, the effectiveness of the arpilleristas protests involved the incorporation of women's traditional roles as the basis of their credibility to fight the government. The maternal identity increased the political space in which the arpilleristas operated because it was seen as a passive and subordinate role. Women took advantage of an increased "political space" because the regime saw them as less of a threat. The arpilleristas operated outside the conventional political arena, they were not mobilized as members of political parties or labor unions. Instead, they mobilized on a grassroots level and formed community-based groups. These community-based entities mobilized more easily during times of repression because they were not seen as stepping outside of the female sphere. The success of the women in public protest against the dictatorship suggests that times of repression

for men can be opportunities for activism among women. Conversely, the reverse must be answered, does the return to democracy signify an end to women's success as political activists.

The transition to democracy in Chile brought many challenges and the question of the arpilleristas success within the democratic system is complex. While Pinochet ultimately escaped prosecution for human rights violations, the issue became international, and the women won the trial of international public opinion. Additionally, human rights remain a critical area of concern for Chileans. Inside Chile, the trappings of democracy returned, and with it women's exceptional political space available under repression, vanished. The arpilleristas preferred to remain outside traditional politics, claiming that by remaining undivided by the traditional splits, they retained their political power. The traditionally male dominated system co-opted many women's groups, and while some women held office, the groups from which they emerged lacked cohesion. Although Waylen would claim that the arpilleristas were ultimately unsuccessful in their goals since they did not hold power under the democratic government, it was important to recognize that this government, even with the incorporation of some women, is not an active advocate for poor women. I question Waylen's definition of success and find that the arpilleristas would define success as the promotion of a concern for the eradication of repression, violence and human rights violations.

The key difference between Waylen's assessment of practical gender interest groups and mine is a focus on the government versus the individual. While Waylen evaluates the success of women after democratization by the number of women in congress or registered voters, I, like Safa, am concerned with internal transformation of women into political actors. The arpilleristas were untraditional political actors, practicing politics by weaving, hunger strikes, and dancing. Therefore, it is not surprising not to see them in Congress. They are still, however, actors in the

political system. In fact, by forcing us to question what actions are considered political they blur the public and private spheres and increase their legitimacy and power. Though the group activity reinforced traditional gender roles, they resulted in changing them. By becoming politically active, the arpilleristas dismissed the social construct that women should be obedient and passive. While the arpilleristas did not directly challenge gender subordination, they developed a greater consciousness of all such subordination and became strong political actors.<sup>157</sup>

What was undeniably successful is the politicalization of the arpilleristas. The arpilleristas did not begin as political thinkers; rather, they began their journey within what Vaclav Havel called "the hidden sphere." This is the private self reexamining of a new reality and responding to it.<sup>158</sup> In coping with their new reality, the arpilleristas felt that they must propel themselves into a struggle for justice. The arpilleristas political action made them aware of the necessity to become political actors. Participation in the arpillera movement facilitated a political awakening of injustices throughout Chilean society; inactivity no longer remained a possibility.

The arpilleristas left many important legacies to the world. One of the most compelling is a new model for human-rights activity, their organization was based upon equality and the formation of a community. Their formation of bonds based on love defied a system based on force.<sup>159</sup> Additionally, the creation of alternative discourse in art and testimonials was an important precedent set by the arpillera movement. The arpilleristas focused not on individuality in their art and testimonies, but on a communal story. The testimonials and arpilleras conserved the national memory and prevented a collective amnesia in an attempt to prevent a reoccurrence

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<sup>157</sup> Safa, 362-366.

<sup>158</sup> Victor Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, (London : Hutchinson, 1985), 58-61.

<sup>159</sup> Bouvard, 219.

of the same repression. The arpilleristas through their testimonials and art altered history and then produced an untold version, protesting the attempt by the government to promote forgetting and silence. However, arpilleras form a contribution to the art world, an accomplishment in itself. Arpilleras now sit in museums and galleries, recognized not only as a form of political discourse but also as valuable works of art. Arpilleristas challenged the way we look at art, the value placed on traditional forms. By blatantly mixing together facts and emotions, arpilleras call into question anything that claims to stand solely for one or the other. Both of these untraditional discourses ultimately left a legacy for activism within their own country but also for activism in Latin America and Africa. Arpillera movements emerged in Latin America and Africa, inspired by the combination of traditional folk art and political denouncement.

The work of the arpilleristas becomes a prism through which we examine their experience in Chilean society and the dichotomies of repression and protest, death and the embracement of life, censorship and art, and the struggle to confront a bloodied national history while promoting a just and peaceful future. The study of the arpillera movement incorporates the examination of Chilean culture through folk art. As a voice from the margins, the arpilleristas challenge our notions of radical activism, art, and motherhood. Moreover, it is a study of activism under repression and the identity of revolutionary mothers. Through all of this a vision of a revolutionary emerges in a place most would never expect, a middle-aged woman, a mother in the shantytowns, propelled into radical protesting by the death of a loved one. As the arpilleristas reacted to the crises around them, they created, as well as documented, twenty years of Chilean history. In their colorful tapestries the arpilleristas weaved their grief and hope. As they healed emotionally, the arpilleristas became woven together as a group, mothers struck by tragedy who became revolutionary in their love of life, justice, and peace.

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