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WOMEN WHO WEAVE TOGETHER MEMORIES AND RESISTANCE

- *Chilean arpilleras* •

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Arpilleras are works of art handcrafted by women who work together to embroider illustrations on colourful pieces of cloth. This technique was widely used to resist and denounce the military dictatorship in Chile (1973-1990). It spread throughout Latin America as a form of expression, especially in situations of oppression where public demonstrations were prohibited or repressed.

These tapestries come in various shapes and sizes and different materials are used to represent people and elements of daily life. In 1964, this artistic expression of resistance became known worldwide thanks to the work of Chilean artist Violeta Parra and her exhibition at the Louvre in France.¹ Other Chilean artists have brought arpillera workshops to other countries to contribute to various local struggles.

Arpilleras have thus become a symbol of not only resistance, but also emotional memories; they involve the art of telling stories and weaving bonds of solidarity in social and political contexts fraught with serious rights violations.

In Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and other countries in the region, women's groups have created their own ways of embroidering their struggles and telling their stories to show that the beauty and power inherent in every specific situation can be imprinted on fabric through the use of this technique. The convergence among them lies in the fact that the creative process is almost always based on shared experiences and pain and seeks to exorcise and denounce them in order to survive.

In the case of Chile, references to the coup d'état of September 11, 1973 and the years of the military dictatorship are frequent in the narratives of the women arpillerista artists we spoke with for this edition of the Sur Journal. Even though they discussed and showed their more recent works and activities, it is clear that the common thread in their work is their shared past. The women expressed their explicit (and very conscious) need to keep their own memories alive and to collectively redefine their significance in the present context through their embroidery. This is especially important now because of the numerous similarities between recent political events Chile and the context of repression and violence during the period of the dictatorship.

Chilean “arpilleristas” are women of different ages and backgrounds who have adopted embroidering – which culturally is the task of women – as a language and strategy of feminist resistance. By politically appropriating this traditional trade as their own, they turned it into a struggle for rights and a space for mutual support and healing among women.

We present below the brief stories of two Chilean embroidery groups based in different cities who are weaving their paths of resistance, memory and solidarity.

The embroiderers from Coyhaique, a city in the Aysén region (known as one of the gateways to remote areas of the Patagonian region) identified their geographic location as one of their challenges. This is because normally, the country's capital or other large cities are the ones to take the lead in denouncing rights violations and in giving visibility to different struggles. For Gloria and Rocío, two embroiderers who were kind enough to share part of their story with us, one of the main motives for doing what they do is to show what goes on in their region and to recover local memories. “No one knew the names of the disappeared from here”, they told us.

They are both part of the *Biblioteca Trinchera Utopía* – a people's library in Coyhaique where activities such as literary exchanges, conversation circles and other forms of cultural coexistence and communal living take place. They have invited other women (and men too) to come to the space to make arpilleras in a process where “you denounce the violence and impunity and announce resistance at the same time”. Through the simple, small things, in their everyday lives and with little stitches, they have been “intertwining their lives, the sorrows of the community and their own bodies”.

Gloria and Rocío's words reveal the experience of two adult women who survived the dictatorship and bear its marks and the wisdom of those who face today's struggles with courage and caution. They continue embroidering their arpilleras images representing the disappeared, inequalities, social unrest, femicide – and there is no shortage of reasons. “As long as we have the strength to do so, we'll continue”, they affirmed.

Based in Santiago, Bordadoras en resistencia (Embroiderers in resistance) have mobilised on social media and by following an agenda of feminist meetings. The group we spoke with

(Inés, Hilda, Nuri, Berta, Cyntia and Ana Maria) met while embroidering or by responding to a call to embroider. For them, it is not about knowing how to embroider, but rather a matter of taking the tools – thread, scissors and needle – and piecing together a message. They mentioned the social uprising of 2019² and the feminist protests in Chile, especially the performance by Las Tesis,³ as important moments in their organising.

The members of Bordadoras en Resistencia – all with different backgrounds, ages and experience in embroidery – reaffirm their desire to come together and make women’s rights visible. “Textile activism allows us to take over public spaces”, they explained. And that is what they have done: they have come together to embroider in symbolic places in the city, such as the GAM cultural centre (Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral). On March 8 of this year, for example, they marched with a large banner called “Women’s resistance”, which had been embroidered in arpillera workshops. The workshops were held after massive calls for participation had been launched in the city.

In their accounts, embroidering always appears as a collective process; an opportunity to connect, share and listen to other women. Every arpillera tells a story, or many stories, and there are different ways of illustrating a situation that they have in common. “Weaving history and sewing our scars has helped us heal, recover memories”, they affirm.

The arpillera technique – and the multiple ways that Chilean women have employed it over the years in their struggle to break the silence and end repression and the dominance of the sole voice of power – is a powerful tool of resistance. The stories they narrate and the names and images found on the numerous arpilleras that they have embroidered, individually or collectively, are a record or a way of recording history. They prevent the suffering from falling into oblivion and, at the same time, they demonstrate the strength and creativity of “the people who, despite everything, are still standing”.

During the interviews held via Zoom, from their places in Coyhaique and Santiago, the women were happy and proud to show the work done with their own hands. Even though their messages are generally ones of pain or denunciations, they reflect the resilience and beauty of hope kept alive by a technique that never gets old, as it brings together women of all ages.

How did the art of embroidery, sewing and putting together thread and pieces of fabric become a struggle for human rights? The Chilean embroiderers answered this question – implicit in the dialogue that allowed us to document a bit of their history here – with their facial expressions, their stories and their arpilleras.

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NOTES

1 • Daniela Fugellie, "Les Tapisseries Chiliennes de Violeta Parra: Perspectivas sobre una Exposición Realizada en el Museo de Artes Decorativas del Palacio del Louvre en 1964". *Artelogie*, 2019, accessed August 11, 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/artelogie/3153>.

2 • See: "Nº 2 - Urgente: Chile y Sus Demandas. Derechos Humanos y Una Nueva Constitución,"

Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2019, accessed August 11, 2020, https://www.uahurtado.cl/wpimages/uploads/2019/12/dossierN2_urgente_chile_y_sus_demandas.pdf.

3 • The feminist collective Las Tesis, from Valparaíso, Chile, led a participatory protest performance called "Un violador en tu camino" (The rapist on your path), which had impacts all over the world in 2019.



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