

## Removing the Silencer from the Gun: Women Creating a Collective Voice against the Pinochet Dictatorship

By Julie Hector

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*In this essay, I propose to explore several ways in which women spoke out against the dictatorship. This subject has been the focus of films and literature. First, I will examine it from a North American woman's point of view, as Beth Horman struggles to find out the truth about her missing husband in the film *Missing*. Then I will explore how Isabel Allende raised consciousness through her novel *Of Love and Shadows*. This book incorporates an actual event that occurred in Chile on November 30, 1978, when the remains of fifteen bodies were discovered in what had formerly been kilns in the countryside outside of Santiago in the village of Lonquén. Next, I will discuss the role of Ariel Dorfman's controversial play *Death and the Maiden*, who contributed a voice for many through his female protagonist, Paulina. Then I will take to the streets and meet the arpilleristas, who through their traditional tapestries, or arpilleras, have elevated consciousness throughout the world renouncing the crimes committed by the Pinochet dictatorship.*

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Thus the presences and absences embodied in sources (artifacts and bodies that turn an event into fact) or archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral or natural. They are created. As such, they are not mere presences and absences, but mentions of silences of various kinds and degrees. By silence, I mean an active and transitive process: one "silences" a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun... (Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 48)<sup>1</sup>

On September 11, 1973, Augusto Pinochet, the commander in chief of the Chilean army, led a military coup that was backed by the U.S. government and overthrew the democratic government of President Salvador Allende. A military junta appointed Pinochet as the new president, and for the following seventeen years he was the ruler of the country. During his dictatorship, hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Mass: Beacon P, 1995.

thousands of people were arrested, and several thousand simply disappeared, or were killed. In the first year alone, 180,000 people were detained, and ninety percent of them were tortured. Although Pinochet was forced out of his presidency in 1990, he remained the commander in chief of the military. He held this post until 1998, when he egotistically appointed himself “senator for life”. On September 22, 1998, only eleven days after the twenty-fifth anniversary of the infamous coup, Pinochet traveled to the U.K. for back surgery. British authorities arrested him as he was recovering from his surgery on October 16 of the same year.<sup>2</sup> This incident brought to light over twenty-five years of evasion of human rights offenses that he should have been held accountable for since the beginning of the coup. However, long before this fateful day, there were many courageous people who broke through the labyrinth of deceit surrounding the dictatorship and its crimes, and risked everything in order to uncover the truth. Many of these individuals were women. These were very courageous acts, considering that many times women had the most to lose when confronting the wrongs of the regime. Most female prisoners were raped as well as tortured, and some even witnessed their own children being tortured. Instead of being silenced by fear, they had the valor to raise their voices in objection to the atrocities that were occurring, so much so that they were heard on an international level and Pinochet had to decelerate his strategies of terror long before his ultimate arrest.

In this essay, I will explore several ways in which women spoke out against the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and had the courage to come face to face with the tragic truth. I will examine it from a North American woman’s point of view as Beth Horman struggles with the web of lies surrounding the death of her husband and the stubborn resistance of her father in law, Ed Horman, to see the reality of the United States’ government’s involvement in the Chilean coup of 1973. I will analyze how Isabel Allende did this through her novel *Of Love and Shadows* and in her own life as well. Next, I will discuss the role of Ariel Dorfman’s controversial play *La muerte y la doncella*, who also contributed a voice for many through his female

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Dorfman, Ariel. “Exorcising Pinochet”. *The Threepenny Review*, 91. (2002): 34-5

protagonist, Paulina, and her unique way of bringing the facts of the crimes of the dictatorship to light. Then I will take to the streets and meet the *arpilleristas* in their search for their loved ones.

In the film *Missing*, Beth Horman is a North American woman living in Chile at the time of the military takeover. When her husband, Charles Horman, disappears during the first few days of the *coup*, the responsibility of the search for him is on her shoulders, because she is the only family member of Charles who lives in Chile. At this moment the country is in a complete state of chaos, and Beth must go through mazes of bureaucracy to be able to speak to anyone who might have any information about Charlie, and once she reaches these officials, the lies are woven tightly around her in the attempt to keep her from raising her voice in protest. In the film, Beth does not speak Spanish well, so one can imagine the difficulty she encountered when trying to find out anything about her husband. However, by the time Ed Horman, Charlie's father, arrives, she has already been searching for two weeks, and has already been through the same runaround several times that she and Ed are about to embark on together.

Before Ed Horman even left for Chile, Beth had already spoken to the press and had protested about the frivolous way that the U.S. government officials were handling the situation. At the state department, before leaving for Chile, Ed questioned about the alleged release of a friend of Beth and Charles. Although the state department affirmed his release to the United States, no one in his family, or any of his close friends had heard anything from him. The friend in question later became another well-known U.S. victim who was killed in the same manner as Charles, during the first days of the dictatorship, Frank Teruggi.<sup>3</sup> At the time of Ed Horman's inquiry, however, the state department was actively denying his murder. The official's response to Ed's inquiry that implied a possibility of false information delivered to the press was, "That's what your daughter-in-law told the press. She's been pestering those embassy people, so they told me." He said this between

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<sup>3</sup> Roht-Arriaza, Naomi. *The Pinochet Effect: Transnational Justice in the Age of Human Rights*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2005.

chuckles, as if to nonverbally communicate to Ed that what she said should not be taken seriously, being that she is a woman.

When Ed finally arrives in Chile, he also attempts to silence Beth on several occasions. When she suggests that Charlie may already be dead or tortured, and that she already has given up on most of her hope of finding Charlie, Ed tells her, "I don't want to hear any of your anti-establishment paranoia." During the meetings with the U.S. embassy in Chile, the embassy officials barely acknowledge her, and appear to be only speaking to Ed. Despite all of this, Beth is not afraid to question them. When they say, "He must be in hiding," she says, "From what? Our whole neighborhood saw him picked up by a squad". This is one way that Beth breaks the silence that is imposed on her. She knows a lot of people. She was a friend and a support to many in her neighborhood, and even the children in the neighborhood would come over to their home to visit her and Charlie, although they did not have kids of their own. Through her networking, the path to discovering the truth about Charlie's disappearance was cleared significantly. The U.S. embassy reacts by trying to cover up these facts, so Beth must fight to make her voice heard.

At one point in the film, following another futile meeting with embassy officials, Ed says to Beth, "Why were you so rude? Why aren't you cooperating?" Beth's answer is, "I've been cooperating for two weeks, Ed." Beth not only has to deal with the embassy dismissing her as a hysterical woman, but with Ed doing the same thing. Beth later confronts Ed's condescending attitude towards her voicing her opinions by asking him, "Damn, whose side are you on?" However, as the hopes of ever finding Charlie alive appear more and more bleak, Ed surrenders to seeing the truth, and acknowledges that Beth is confronting her greatest fear head-on, which was something that he had failed to do. Towards the end of the film, Ed says to Beth, "I owe you an apology. For a long time I've sold you short, I don't really know why...Beth, for what it's worth I think you are one of the most courageous people I have ever met." Once the two of them stopped fighting amongst themselves,

real change was able to take place, and the truth, although still quite obscure, was revealed.<sup>4</sup>

Although her name was changed to Beth in the film in an attempt to protect her, the real life Joyce Horman has not stopped in her struggle to find out the truth about her late husband. Upon returning home from Chile, she and Charles' parents filed a lawsuit for wrongful-death against the U. S. government and Henry Kissinger. Sadly, it was set aside in 1978 due to "lack of evidence". She was a key player in making Charles' murder public by telling her story in the book The Execution of Charles Horman, by Thomas Hauser, and the 1982 film that was previously discussed. Although she has tried to pursue a normal life, she never remarried, and remained very close to the parents of Charles. As they grew older, she was there to provide care for them, which was very meaningful, considering that they had lost their only son. She made her living by working for the United Nations as a computer consultant. However, the burning necessity to know the truth about Charles' disappearance never left her. Following the deaths of both of her in-laws, Joyce was given new motivation in her crusade to know the truth when Pinochet was arrested in 1998. She once again raised her voice and called for the U.S. government to release files related to Charles' death, and in 2000, this was finally carried out.

Unfortunately, not enough evidence was again the excuse used to prevent that further action be taken against Pinochet and his dictatorship. Then Joyce decided to once again take the matter into her own hands. With support from the Ford Foundation, she traveled throughout the United States, and then to France, Switzerland, Sweden, and Chile. In the aforementioned countries, she did what she had done so well almost three decades prior in Chile. She spoke to people, specifically to those who had been victims of the Pinochet dictatorship. In doing so, she was able to gather enough evidence to file a criminal complaint against Pinochet and his fellow warmongers in 2000. Although Pinochet lived to see very little of the

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<sup>4</sup> Missing. Dir. Costa-Gavras. 1982. Videocassette. MCA Universal Home Video, 2001

justice that was due to him, Joyce Horman's work in the arena of social justice is impossible to ignore. She founded the Charles Horman Project to develop more awareness throughout the world of the human rights abuses that have taken place and are taking place in the name of the United States of America, and has spoken out against this throughout the world. Regarding this issue, Joyce said, "The American military and the American government have an incredible amount of power and the abuse of that power was typified by the Chilean *coup*. For Americans to be bumping off Americans in foreign lands is not what American citizens want their government to be doing."<sup>5</sup> Joyce Horman is a courageous example of a human rights activist who refuses to be silenced. By taking the matter of her husband's disappearance into her own hands rather than depending on corrupt government officials to do so for her, she has raised awareness on a global level of the role of the United States government in the military takeover, one that was so lustful for power that it was willing to irreversibly harm its own citizens. The subject of irreversible harm and what it constitutes as is a question that replays itself in Ariel Dorfman's drama, *Death and the Maiden*.

Ariel Dorfman's play, *Death and the Maiden*, portrays a woman who, like Beth, decides to take matters of justice into her own hands rather than expect a male dominated post-dictatorship society to do it for her. Although the drama is fictional, key elements in the story are based on actual events that were occurring within Chile after Pinochet was ousted from his role as dictator in 1990 and Patricio Aylwin was democratically voted into power. With Pinochet still having a significant amount of influence in the country as commander and chief of the armed forces, there was a limited amount of change that the new president could instigate. While he appointed a commission to investigate the crimes of the dictatorship, these investigations were limited only to cases of death or disappearance.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the

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<sup>5</sup> Gee, Marcus. "Is Henry Kissinger a War Criminal?" *Globe and Mail* 11 June, 2002.  
<<http://www.globalpolicy.org/intljustice/wanted/2002/0611criminal.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> Kim, Euisik. *Una reconstrucción alternativa del pretérito: Una aproximación psicoanalítica a la obra de Ariel Dorfman*. New Orleans: U P of the South, 2003.

problem of how to define irreparable damage was presented. The fact that our protagonist, Paulina, is a woman, holds great significance to the plot, because women who were detained at the hands of the regime were normally tortured as well as raped. As a result, along with the torture cases, the sexual assaults that took place were ignored as Chileans grappled to come to terms with the tragedy that had occurred, and continued to surface at a muted level, within their nation. Furthermore, it meant that the murderers, rapists, and torturers of the regime were walking around freely in Chilean society, and that there would most likely be no consequences for the latter two.

This play was not well received by the Chilean public, principally for the reason that it made people very uncomfortable. Many people wanted simply to forget about the crimes committed by the regime and move on, but these people were often Pinochet supporters or those who had not been directly affected by the dictatorship. Gerardo, Paulina's husband, fits loosely into the second category. Although Paulina, who was his girlfriend at the time of her arrest, had been captured, raped, and tortured primarily to get information about Gerardo, Paulina never released his name to her torturers. On the other hand, while Paulina was being victimized, Gerardo was having an affair with another woman. The abyss of misunderstanding between Gerardo and Paulina is massive. Paulina is completely aware of this, and for that reason she decides to tie Roberto up at gunpoint and not seek the permission of her husband. In the plot, Roberto is a "good Samaritan" who helps Gerardo when he encounters car trouble, and to reward him for his kindness Gerardo invites him back to the house. Paulina recognizes Roberto immediately by his voice, his smell, and some of the peculiar idioms he uses. In a way that resembles Ed Horman's treatment of Beth, Gerardo is horrified by the action that Paulina has committed and rather than believe her, suspects that she is insane. She is conscious of the fact that her actions could be putting her husband's job as a commission appointee in jeopardy, but she also knows that in order for any justice to be granted

in her case, she must reclaim the power that was stolen from her during the time that she was detained.

Although Paulina is a very isolated character without the support of others who had suffered in the same way she had, she represents a collective voice for the female victims of the Pinochet dictatorship. Although this drama caused uneasiness in a society where many would prefer to forget, a voice from a woman's perspective needed to be heard, as well as the voice of a survivor. Paulina expresses this sentiment in the following monologue:

But the members of the Commission only deal with the dead, with those who can't speak. And I can speak- it's been years since I've murmured even a word, I haven't opened my mouth to even whisper a breath of what I'm thinking, years living in terror of my own...but I'm not dead, I thought I was but I'm not and I can speak, damn it-so for God's sake let me have my say and you go ahead with your Commission and believe me when I tell you that none of this is going to be made public (37) <sup>7</sup>.

In the same way that Paulina insists on being heard, a live performance is an incredibly effective way to generate awareness among many individuals on a single occasion. In this setting voices are raised and demand the attention of the audience. By taking Roberto prisoner, her character is expressing to the Chilean public and to the world that the stance that the new government is taking is not enough. By trying to be democratic and not cause further violence within the country, they are ignoring a huge sector of victims who may not have died or disappeared, but who will carry the scars of the abuses they were subjected to for their entire lives, and to try to silence these voices in order to heal a broken society is unacceptable, as well as unhealthy for a nation as a whole. Gerardo, as stated previously, represents the part of Chilean society that would rather forget the painfulness of the past,

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<sup>7</sup> Dorfman, Ariel. Death and the Maiden. New York:Penguin Books, 1992.

especially those cases that are not going to be addressed by the commission. When he advises Paulina to stop thinking about the acts of violence that occurred to her, she responds,

And why does it always have to be people like me who have to sacrifice, why are we always the ones who have to make concessions when someone has to be conceded, why always me who has to bite her tongue, why?(66).<sup>8</sup>

Paulina's character is expressing the necessity that the voices of victims be heard in order for the society to be restored, and she is demanding that more be done to bring justice to all of the regime's victims. She boldly speaks out, knowing that it is essential that the voices of the victims be heard and not stifled in order to make any real progress, and to ensure that these wrongs do not repeat themselves.

Irene Beltran, the protagonist in *Of Love and Shadows*, by Isabel Allende, embodies that side of Chilean society that lives in blissful ignorance when we first meet her in the novel. Irene is a rebellious yet naïve young woman of the upper class who works as a journalist in Chile five years after the coup. She lives with her mother, along with a group of convalescent boarders, and is engaged to her cousin, a captain in the military. She lives a harmonious existence collecting stories for the magazine she works for, accompanied by her faithful sidekick photographer, Francisco. The first part of the book depicts the two of them working on an article for the magazine about a supposed saint that lives on the countryside on the outskirts of the city where Irene and Francisco live. Her name is Evangelina Ranquileo, and she is known for going into trances and being capable of performing miracles. The day that Irene and Francisco visit, the home is invaded by Chilean military police. This action is reportedly taken at the request of her brother, Pradelio Ranquileo, to scare Evangelina out of her seizures. However, the novel later reveals that this was not his intent, although Pradelio is among the policemen who

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<sup>8</sup> Dorfman, Ariel. *Death and the Maiden*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.

take part in the raid. When Pradelio Ranquileo's superior, Lieutenant Ramirez, attempts to grab the girl by the arm, she hits him with a force so intense that he falls to the ground. This incident concludes the first part of the book. However, the reader is left with a sense that the insulted *machismo* of the Lieutenant will not be tolerated, and that something very ominous is about to occur.

The second part of the book, "Shadows", portrays the defining moment when Irene begins to transform dramatically and leave her childhood illusions behind. Irene and Francisco return to the Ranquileo home a week later to partake in a hog roasting there. Later on in the day, Irene realizes that she has not seen Evangelina at all that day. When she inquires about her, Digna, her mother, explains desolately that she was picked up in the middle of the night by a group of military police led by Lieutenant Ramirez, and has not been heard from since. The news of Evangelina's disappearance is the first spark that ignites Irene's transformation. She promises Digna that evening that she would help her with her search and she holds fast to her words.

Before the incident with Evangelina occurred, Irene was able to ignore the violence in her country and pretend that it could not affect her. However, the fact that the victim of this atrocity was someone that she knew, and a young woman like herself, moves Irene to step outside of her own privileged life and picture herself in the same position as Evangelina. This rude awakening from a fantasy world into real life horror creates a catechistic change in Irene. Although deeply disturbed by what she saw, an internal force aimed for truth and justice pushes her onward. Irene's initiation into the world of shadows begins with a visit to the morgue. Although Francisco tries to prevent her from entering, by doing so the stupor that previously controlled her lifts from her mind, and she refuses to see the nightmare in which she was entrenched as anything other than what it is. Instead of allowing the horror of the morgue to paralyze her with fear, Irene becomes more and more active, all the time knowing that her life could be cut off at any moment. She uses her feminine charms (as well as his weakness for alcohol) to acquire information from Sergeant Faustino Rivera, knowing all the while that she is exposing herself to great risk by tape recording their conversations. However, these tapes will provide concrete

proof of the government's involvement in Evangelina's death, and as a result they give a voice to the world for those who had been murdered by the dictatorship and let them be heard on an international level.

Despite this remarkable achievement, Irene's valiant acts come at a high cost. As soon as the government becomes aware of her actions, agents of the dictatorship shoot her with the intention to kill her outside of her office. Irene nearly dies from the attack, and her recovery is slow and painful. Allende's descriptions of her agony are painful to read, and it appears that her body may never fully recover to its prior state of health and vitality. When the military police realize that they had not killed her, she is under constant surveillance by them, as they wait for the opportune moment to shoot her again upon her release from the hospital. When Francisco reluctantly informs her of this, he is taken aback when he sees that she is not the least bit surprised by what she hears, and it was actually what she had expected. At this point the reader can see the true extent of Irene's evolution. As Beth Horman did in *Missing*, she faces her greatest fears head-on, and still decides to fight. With some help from a beautician friend of theirs, Irene is able to escape the hospital under the scrutiny of the police, and from there, she has to escape her country in order to save her own life. This is an immense sacrifice for a woman who wants to fight to save her country from the cancerous dictatorship that had forced itself on her people. She leaves not knowing if, or when, she will ever return.

She thought of the magnitude of her loss. She would never again walk the streets of her childhood, or hear her language spoken as she loved it, she would not see the outline of her sweet land's mountains at dusk, she would not be lulled by the song of its rivers, gone would be aroma of sweet basil in her kitchen, of rain evaporating from her roof tiles. She was not only losing Rosa, her mother, her friends, and her past. She was losing her homeland.

"My country, my country..." she sobbed (288)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Allende, Isabel. *Of Love and Shadows*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

In a way that resembles Irene's work in the novel, Isabel Allende gave a voice to the countless that had been silenced during the Pinochet regime. She felt that she had a moral responsibility to articulate for those who had been silenced because of their socioeconomic level and the hierarchies that existed in Chilean society. Allende remarks on the state of advantage that she was born into, and how it shaped her destiny as an advocate.

I belong to a privileged social class; I have never been hungry or lacked basic needs. I have had access to education, travel, culture, and health. That gives me a double responsibility. I am placed right smack in the middle of this reality, of the poverty of our people...I cannot hide behind a wall to forget the responsibility that befalls me in a time of great changes. On the contrary, by being privileged, my duty is greater than others...<sup>10</sup>

John Rodden, *Conversations with Isabel Allende* (59).

*Of Love and Shadows* is her second book, and it was written in Venezuela. Allende saw its theme as something that spoke to her, rather than an idea that she had to seek out. She read about the victims at Lonquén when the news was released to the world by the Catholic Church in Chile. In the same manner that was done in the novel, the church set their plan in motion before the Chilean authorities had a chance to silence them. On November 30, 1978, the remains of fifteen bodies were discovered in what had formerly been kilns in the countryside outside of Santiago in the village of Lonquén. When Allende read the news, she was living in Venezuela, where she had relocated due to the climate of terror that had developed in Chile. Like Irene Beltran, Allende had been a journalist in Chile and was well aware of the human rights abuses that were occurring in her homeland. As a result, the young writer's emotional and physical health suffered as she was living and breathing fear.

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<sup>10</sup> Rodden, John. "The Responsibility to Tell You." *Conversations with Isabel Allende*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2004. 101-14

She knew that the best way for her to speak out for justice in her country and not be killed for doing so was by speaking from the outside, even though in Venezuela she faced difficult economic times and discrimination for not being a native Venezuelan.

The author was in Venezuela in 1978, when she read the news about Lonquén. She had not yet begun writing her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, when she clipped the article out of the newspaper long before she had considered a career in writing fiction. These newspapers served her well when she wrote the novel five years later. In interviews, Allende claims that she felt that the families affected by the tragedy were speaking to her, urging her to give a voice to those affected by a tragedy that, like so many other news stories, would soon be forgotten to make room for new disasters. *Of Love and Shadows* gives timelessness to these events, so that these voices uncovered in the mines have not been silenced. Allende accredits most of the background information that she obtained about the unearthing at Lonquén to a book by Máximo Pacheco Gómez, a lawyer involved in the investigation. He later wrote a book entitled *Lonquén*, where the reader can find the legal complaint made by the families of the victims, most of whom were women who had not only been tortured emotionally by the disappearance of their loved ones, but economically, as a result of losing the family breadwinners. The complaint reads as follows:

Rechazamos con el mayor vigor e indignación la suposición de que las muertes de nuestros familiares deban ser de algún modo, imputadas, 'al costo' necesario para derrotar la Guerra civil, y nos duele que desde algunos sectores se alcen voces para enterrar todo lo pasado en el silencio (7)<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the greatest among the scores of tragedies at Lonquén was that of the Maureira family. Isabel Allende based Senora Flores on the real life mother and wife of the family, Purísima Muñoz de Maureira, whose four sons and husband had

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<sup>11</sup> Pacheco G., Máximo. *Lonquén*. Santiago: Editorial Aconcagua, 1983.

disappeared and whose bodies were later found in the kilns of Lonquén. Senora Flores' daughter, Evangelina Flores, is based on the real life Maureira daughter who spoke out in Geneva at the Commission on Human Rights in an effort to be granted some form of justice for the atrocities that had torn her family from her. The spirit of these women, who lived on the margins of society, but still managed to make their voices heard, is exemplary in its demonstration of the capacity of courage that human beings are capable of.

Just as the Maureira women empowered themselves and gave themselves a voice, the *arpilleristas* did the same. The real life documentary *Threads of Hope* presents three women whose lives were forever changed shortly after Pinochet seized power. The documentary was made twenty years after the coup took place, and the women portrayed in the film have all been searching desperately for their loved ones for approximately that same amount of time. We become acquainted with each woman's nightmare, all of them unique yet bound together by the same agony that shattered all that they saw as normal and replaced it with a constant anxiety coupled with a dark abyss of questions that never ceased. The film portrays the lives of three women two decades after their loved ones have disappeared. Two women are missing their sons, and another is missing her brother. The women portrayed in *Threads of Hope* had been living in this limbo of uncertainty for over twenty years by the time that this documentary was released. None of them have been provided with any true information about the whereabouts of their loved ones. All that they have had to work with for all of these years are a few clues given to them by former prisoners or people who claim to have seen their loved one in prison camps. On top of the devastation of the disappearance of a member of one's family, many women had to deal with the logistic reality of losing the family's main source of income. Consequently, not only did many women have to take the time out of their countless other duties to search the government offices, the jails, the hospitals, the morgues and so forth for those that had vanished. They also had to pay for the bus fare to get to these places and find low-paying jobs in a society where woman's work was not considered to hold the value of a reasonable wage. One of the first *arpilleristas* explains in the film the roots of their movement, "One

day, talking it over, we asked ourselves, ‘How can we protest this situation without money?’ We didn’t even have money for the bus. So the idea of making *arpilleras* was born.”

An *arpillera* is a tapestry constructed with a piece of burlap as a foundation and decorated with pieces of cloth that are cut out to represent people, places, and ideas. Each *arpillera* tells a story, and in contrast to the brightness of the bits of cloth, the stories are very dark. An *arpillerista* is the artist who creates the *arpillera*. This documentary focuses on the individual stories of three *arpilleristas*.

Doris Menaconi, whose twenty three year old son disappeared, explains the *arpillera* quite eloquently. “Para mi la arpillera es un grito del alma. Es una forma de rebeldía, de gritar la ausencia de de mi hijo y...la búsqueda.”<sup>12</sup> From these words, one can sense the extent of the oppression one experienced living beneath the Pinochet dictatorship. Since raising one’s physical voice could result in being killed, the women had to find other means of making their voices heard. Another *arpillerista* explains, “En esos años tener una arpillera fue lo misma que tener una arma en su casa.” The fact that a tapestry lamenting the loss of a loved one could be considered so subversive by the regime demonstrates the climate of fear that Chilean society was subjected to. These women were literally risking their lives in order to protest against their oppressors.

The *arpillerista* movement has inspired writers as well. Marjorie Agosín, an ex patriot Chilean poet, wrote a book depicting the movement called *Straps of Life*. In an interview that is included in the documentary, she speaks about the courage of the *arpilleristas*. “...the best way the military has to defeat you is for you to be silent, and these women refuse to be silent...” In her article, “*Arpilleras: Chilean Culture of Resistance*”, Eliana Moya-Raggio explains how their artwork transformed them from the role of victims of a corrupt regime to that of activists for human rights.

...as an arpillerista, she is not participating in an alienating job; on the contrary, she is creating a form of resistance...housebound and isolated in the past because she was poor and female, she now

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<sup>12</sup> Sutherland, Donald, Andrew Johnson, and Les Harris. *Threads of Hope*. Princeton, NJ:Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1996.

moves from passive observer to active participant in a process of collective work that... changes her life radically, giving her a clear goal.<sup>13</sup> (278).

The *arpillera* speaks for these women, and for the thousands upon thousands of victims of terror during the Pinochet dictatorship. What began as a small workshop grew to be recognized internationally, and these women played a significant part in raising awareness of the situation in Chile worldwide, which forced the regime to reduce its crimes against humanity. However, this outcome was not easily obtained. The first *arpilleristas* would have to completely cover their windows at night in order to sew their tapestries, because there was a curfew imposed by the dictatorship, and any activity performed during these hours could be considered to be anti-government, resulting in immediate arrest. When they were not working on their *arpilleras*, the women would hide them within the seams of their bedspreads so that they would not be discovered in the case of a police raid. Once the women finished their tapestries, they would smuggle them beneath their coats to the Catholic Church, where they would be hidden until they were shipped to different destinations throughout the world. The *arpilleristas* did all of this, knowing that any careless slipup could place them in very real danger. In this way, what began as a small workshop became a movement that was recognized throughout the world.

Creating the *arpilleristas* gave these women a sense of solidarity and strength that they did not know that they had. They soon took to the streets and demonstrated against the dictatorship, demanded to know the whereabouts of their loved ones. One of the women portrayed had the bravery to confront Pinochet himself, on a day that he was cutting a ribbon to open a new street in Santiago. There, in front of the press and everyone who was watching, she hollered a request

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<sup>13</sup> Moya-Raggio, Eliana. "Arpilleras: Chilean Culture of Resistance". *Feminist Studies* 10.2 (1984): 270-90.

to Pinochet. This request was that he give her a gift for Easter, that he let her know the whereabouts of her son. She was promptly dragged off to jail for this.

The *arpillerista* movement has become a healing practice for those suffering from the anguish of the disappearance of their loved ones. Instead of doing what the government wanted, and being terrified into silence, they raised their needles and protested in a very innovative way. In this fashion, instead of being isolated in their sorrow, they found a collective voice that gave them the strength to continue living.

This essay has explored several ways that women have protested against the Pinochet dictatorship. One woman was from the United States upper class, others were fictional characters, others were writers, and others were among Chile's most underprivileged classes. Although all of these women have their individual stories of loss, what unifies them is their courage to raise their voices against one of history's most oppressive dictatorships. In this way, they have formed a collective voice that can be heard throughout the world. The criminal's silencer has been confiscated from his gun, and the voices of the victims are not forgotten. The remarkable courage of these women demonstrates that there is a potential for great change within each and every one of us. They show us that a world without dictators or torture or human rights abuses is possible, if everyone could follow their example and try to make this a better world for ourselves, for those oppressed in other nations, and for future generations. All that we must do is raise our voice, whether it is their physical voice, our pen or word processor, or our sewing needle. By using weapons of peace, great transformation can take place within our societies, and throughout the world.

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