


1998

Weaving Memories of Self-Identity: The Narratives of Christa Wolf and the Chilean Arpilleristas

Kirsten C. Olson
University of Redlands

Follow this and additional works at: <https://inspire.redlands.edu/proudian>

 Part of the [Latin American Studies Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Personality and Social Contexts Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Olson, K. C. (1998). *Weaving Memories of Self-Identity: The Narratives of Christa Wolf and the Chilean Arpilleristas* (Undergraduate honors thesis, University of Redlands). Retrieved from <https://inspire.redlands.edu/proudian/35>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Honors Projects at InSPIRE @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vahe Proudian Interdisciplinary Honors Program, Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of InSPIRE @ Redlands. For more information, please contact inspire@redlands.edu.

Weaving Memories of Self-Identity:

*The Narratives of Christa Wolf
and the Chilean Arpilleristas*

Kirsten C. Olson

*A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the
Vahe Proudian Interdisciplinary Program*

*Committee:
Bill McDonald
Pat Wasielewski
Tracy Fitzsimmons*

Living under dictatorship is inexpressible, part of a story that to me seems interminable...but writing and thinking in the midst of that situation was a form of self-rescue... I lived in a territory where history mingled with hysteria, crime coupled with sales. The signs of negative power fell mercilessly on Chilean bodies, producing disappearances, illegalities, indignities. I wrote in that environment, almost, you could say, obsessively, not because I believed that what I was doing contributed materially to anything at all, but because it was the only way I could save -- to put it somehow -- my own honor. When my freedom -- I don't mean freedom in the literal sense, but in its whole symbolic range -- was threatened, then I took the liberty of writing freely.

*Diamela Eltit
Santiago de Chile*

As I begin a process of remembering scenes from my past, a child's encounter with a myriad of faces and expeditions, the quiet moments of serene stability, and the emotional outbursts, I find my present self constructing stories out of those memories. I find, in fact, that I cannot remember without these stories that I create. My memory depends on this ability to narrate my own experiences. As much as these stories might be fanciful and colored by my present perspective, as well as defined within cultural boundaries, they are grounded in my own reality. Explaining my existence to others and to myself necessitates such a narration, for otherwise my self could not be told. Without this narration then, I could not attempt to understand my self. These stories are the only way I can transport my present self to the self that I was, and connect the two into one being. Indeed, they are the only way I can define that self, and the "I" that characterizes it. The narration of my self develops out of larger cultural contexts, limiting to a certain extent how I might describe my self. Yet this appropriation of self through narratives allows me also to construct my self.

Our self-identity emerges out of these narratives that are both controlled by pre-existing social definitions of human bodies, and are our own domain. From this, I understand the self as what has been termed within sociological and literary circles as a "narrative construct."¹ In order to understand our experiences as they have influenced our self, we must explain them with explicit narration. "It is only in this creative appropriation of ourselves at the level of interpretation that the meaning of our lives is consciously constituted" (Kerby, p. 242). The narratives that we create ourselves and share with others allow us to develop a voice of self-

¹ I came to this understanding partly through an introduction to one journal article on philosophy and literature (Kerby, Anthony Paul.: "The Adequacy of Self-Narration: A Hermeneutical Approach.") It is a perspective that makes sense to me as a student of sociology, particularly of symbolic interactionism, yet it is one that crosses disciplinary boundaries.

expression. Through them, we create our own reality within everyday life, and perhaps most explicitly, within creative processes as in both text and art. This communication of ourselves to others, and how it allows us to redefine the world about us and our own self-identity, forms a significant part of this project.

We begin with our memories. Our preliminary memories mark a place in which we begin as human beings capable of self-reflection. In our self-development that begins in childhood but continues long after, we learn to remember at the same time as we learn to create stories that place our self as a central character. In our memories, we are our own protagonists. Through remembering details of our past, we come to a realization that we have a history to our person. As we learn to express the experiences of our lives through the medium of symbolic language, we find a subject that we can call our self. The consistency of our being becomes clearer in our beginning process of invoking memory, even as we note the dramatic changes that appear like a whirlwind around us. Later, through recollections of our previous self, we find that the metamorphoses also lie within ourselves, changes we will come to both fear and cherish. Through our capacity for memory, we evolve into beings with a consciousness of our self as a subject. I find this consciousness important in affirming both our individuality and our connection to others. Molding our memories into stories, we find ways to make our biographies significant. We develop knowledge of a personal biography that is of our own, but one also that profoundly, and necessarily, interconnects with the life stories of others.

Our memory gropes down into our past and stumbles across a young child whom we recognize as our self. It continues along to pick up imagery of the experiences of our self-biography, drawing points of our past into our present reality. In understanding myself, I must connect with my past, whether it be to the child I

was long ago, or the person I was yesterday, and the capacity to do so lies in my recapture of memories. I must constantly construct my own ways into my past. From these memories, we gather a sense of our self, who we have been, and who we are today. That "we would suffer continuous estrangement from ourselves if it weren't for our memory of the things we have done, of the things that have happened to us," in the words of Christa Wolf (1980, p. 4), indicates our need for a way to reconstruct our past within our imagination. Our memory, as a key to our past, is a significant aspect of our self. From our memories, we gather a sense of our self, who we have been, and who we are today. Through them, we come to understand ourselves as historical beings. It is by this that I mean we each create our memory, and in so doing, construct our self.

In understanding the connections between memory and narrative, I implicitly become the subject of my own thinking. My memories find their way into my mind through various kinds of stimuli. Talking with my sister brings back shared childhood experiences such as the regular visits to our friends' house; photographs take me once again to my English hometown; an odor in the air reminds me of my time spent in Chile. Sensory experiences often allow me to associate present reality with what happened in the past. Many times, I do not know the cause of a memory that springs suddenly to mind; other times I struggle to create a path leading back to moments of my past. Attempting to construct my own biography, I work within my memories. Yet much of this has already been done for me, and my conception of self rests on what I have been told about myself as much as what I have told myself about myself. Stories I know that contribute to my understanding of myself and of my place in social life do not necessarily come from my own remembering. My mother has told me the story of my birth that gives me a sense of my beginnings in relation to the family in which I was to become a part. My father tells me of my early childhood days so many times that I feel I must

remember. My experiences as an infant and as a child reflect upon my present self most succinctly as I am told of them.

It often strikes me that only relatively rare moments of my past are sharp in my imagination. I cannot remember every moment of my life that I have lived as hard as I have tried before. However, I can recall parts of the routines I followed throughout many years, that for their regularity seem to have stuck in my mind. I remember waiting every school morning for the bus at the generally windy, usually cold bus stop at the top of my street, just as I know in the years before I walked to the junior school passing the newspaper agent, the grimy flats, and the tempting sweets shop. As I write these words, I become aware of my attempt in reconciling with my past to avoid the American language with which I am now familiar. Instead, I redeem the particularly English phrases that I once used.

Memory is more than remembering action; it is a process that engages our emotional and psychological experience. My past is not merely a chronology of events that have happened to me, but rather a source for my entire self-understanding. The ways in which I orient myself to my present life develop out of the experiences of my past history, and this is bridged by remembering. In living, I constantly remind myself of my past, and in remembering, I develop into the complex, subjective self I am today.

The narratives that we create to explain ourselves resound in our imagination and find voice as we share them with others. We constantly engage in an act of self-construction through a process of communication of our self to an audience, one that involves the others around us as well as our own perceptions of their judgments. This interaction with others allows us to develop as individuals capable of engaging in social life, and of developing a concept of ourselves. The process of coming to know oneself begins at the point of making one's way into

symbolic language. We sink into the words, images, and metaphors of our cultural world and find paths toward a personal reflection. We construct our anecdotes then, the stuff of our memory, from within the linguistic and cultural systems that we know. Our self-conception becomes a reflection of our culture, and of our social proscriptions for our identity that is shared with others through, for example, gender, ethnicity, or home community. Yet we, as products of this social context, yet constantly redefine and challenge those descriptions that are imposed upon us as much as we embrace them.

These narratives often reflect the reality that we have experienced, yet they make no such attempt as to mirror it exactly. In remembering our life through these narratives, it is neither possible to replicate life exactly as it happened, nor would that need be an objective. They reflect as much our present subjectivity and its orientation toward our memory of the past and our expectations for a future. Through the stories of our memory, we thus create an authentic fiction out of our reality.

As a sociology major throughout almost four years of university, I have developed different ideas regarding the self and its relation to a larger entity of society. Though certainly influenced by various sociological perspectives, I draw most generally on a contemporary social theory calling itself symbolic interactionism. Its claim is that the self of the individual develops out of interaction with others, and is capable of interpreting social life. In fact, I tend to attribute my own and others' conceptions of the self to sociology, likely akin to an ethnocentric agenda. My academic background is focused in this discipline, yet I have also enjoyed somewhat of a more interdisciplinary approach, and it is in this vein that I have written this project. I have found that the latter reveal the fragility of the boundaries separating disciplines.

Throughout my preliminary research for this project on the creative construction of self-identity, I discovered many similarities, among the differences certainly, between disciplinary writings on issues of the self. While contemporary sociologists were asserting particular perspectives on the self and its inextricable relationship to social interaction and to culture, literary critics were likewise questioning traditional definitions of the self as an autonomous being. Much of what I read that either discussed the autobiographical or did the autobiographical² assumed that self-identity emerged in part through the process of writing and of remembering. I began to see how the act of writing that is self-observant also necessitates reflection, and redefinition, of one's outside reality. What became of increasing interest to me was how this creative writing, more than remaining at a personal level, could become a political act. For this project, I am somewhat accountable to various disciplines and especially to the ways in which they come together; those that emerge in this paper include particularly, though not exclusively, the genres of sociology, literature, and politics.

From our beginnings, we learn previously established typifications, generalities that should describe the various identities of our self as well as those around us. We soon begin to recognize the social groups to which we already belong -- our family, our nationality, our gender -- and we find distinct categories of our self to become more or less significant at different times. In conceiving our individual identity, we must traverse through a mire of self-definitions that posit

² I began my research by reading several autobiographies written by women, including Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her first of several autobiographical works that together encompass much of her life, Isabel Allende's *Paula*, a narrative written as an attempt to tell her life story to her dying daughter who bears the title name, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Of the three, this latter book resists the most the autobiographical genre, asserting itself as a set of memoirs. The subject of Kingston's text is only ambiguously her self; she speaks through her mother's voice, and a fantastical self of her childhood imagination. Although these books have no direct place in my project, they offered me a base in beginning to understand not only the autobiography genre but the connections between it and fiction.

ourselves in relation to a group of similar others. Our personal identity, our personality even, that we might consider unique and, to a certain degree, autonomous, is wrapped up in social identities that explain how we are alike, not distinct. Growing up within a community, we come to identify with other individuals. As we begin to understand our individual self reflected in the selves of others, we learn the significance of relationship. We develop interactions in which “self” and “other” meet and often cross any apparent boundaries between them. Despite such an understanding of the self as a composite of social identities, the personal self emerges not simply in the categories we assign each other, but in the self-seeking stories that we tell. These typifications reflect but a foundation of the narratives we create out of our life experiences. Such narratives, constructed within our self-definitions, and formed out of our communication with others, describe more succinctly our whole, self-reflective subjectivity.

This communication of self become most evident in the creative, artistic processes that we employ to both represent our self and to dis-cover our self. All art necessarily draws from the artist’s personal biography and cultural identity, an identity developed out of one’s memory. Writing or making art that engages as its subject one’s self-identity is but an extension of what we already do within our lives. However, the process becomes more clearly defined in its quest toward forming a careful and edited product of one’s life. Making symbolic marks on a page or shapes out of cloth creates a product in search of an audience, making the action a public assertion of a previously private self. This process leads to a powerful act of personal creation. The creative appropriation of one’s existence into an art allows the author a voice for which she may or may not have found expression in other avenues of public life. Through writing one’s self, one can be the inventor of that self, the creator more than the created, the subject more than the object.

Such an act of self-expression then, can become a significant form of liberation. It can be a movement out of the confines of objectification, a psychological and aesthetic root of oppression. For those marked within a culture as secondary objects, this may be an especially important tool. Finding one's self trapped in a social identity of limiting characteristics defined by others, we can find strength in creating our personal narratives out of our lives. Such narratives certainly embody those aspects of self-identity with which we struggle, yet they make them our own through assertion of our own voice to others. Rather than being only objects of others' perspectives, a creative appropriation of our lives allows us to define ourselves as subjects. Writing and creating art that is autobiographical demands that we provide a space for ourselves. In the sense that this action resists and challenges certain parts of society, it is a political one.

When East German writer Christa Wolf asks herself the question, "To what extent is there really such a thing as 'women's writing'?" (Wolf 1983, p. 259), she must answer, a disapproving tone in her authorial voice: "To the extent that they are objects of objects, second-degree objects, frequently the objects of men who are themselves objects." An object belongs to another, making no claim of its own. The women's writing of which Wolf speaks -- her own -- can move women from being only man-made characters to becoming subjects capable of self-expression. For Wolf, writing was to become one path out of such objectification, as she sought to claim a voice of her own subjectivity. Her style of narrative strikes me as intensely personal, reflecting her intrinsic connection to the characters she creates, yet universal in its commentary on the plight of modern humanity and, particularly, of women. For my interpretation as a reader of her translated text, she appears explicitly aware of a process of writing her self, its history and its present, into a new

existence through fiction. As a writer bridging a possibly artificial gap between fictional and real memory, she constitutes part of my project.

Her textual narratives understood as autobiographical, I reconstruct from these a part of her biography, some of it reiterated in her own essays and articles written by others. Rather than attempt a full understanding of her life, I am concerned with her presentation of self as a writer. Born in the eastern part of Germany, she grew up in what she perceived as an ordinary household of mother, father and younger brother, surrounded by some extended family, living in an ordinary village. Certainly anything appears to be normal to us, especially as children, with no other definition to challenge it. Yet around her raged the horrors of the second World War, and the ideology of Hitler's Nazi regime, steeped in national fascism and racial superiority. This politics pervaded every aspect of her hometown's existence to such a degree that only later could she reflect on its influence. However, as Germany lost the war during her teenage years, her nationality once constructed around this fascist state crumbled. Fleeing west, her family had to now forge a new national identity within the emerging socialist state of East Germany. Most of her adult life was spent in this country, divided from the West by a wall imagined in the heads of politicians. In the context of a national politics that at once stifled and energized her, she began to write, emerging as a moral voice for her fellow citizens. In recent years, she has seen the reunification of Germany, and must now struggle with new forms of political identity. She develops as a theme in her writing a broader conception of politics, such as it relates to issue of power within everyday life.

Throughout her essays, Wolf admits a constant fascination of the literary world she encountered. She became a literary critic before plunging herself in the world of fiction, well known for both her short stories and several novels. The central characters of her texts most often claim the "I" of personal narration, their

voices infused with her own. They appear to be her self. Yet she continues to resist the autobiographical genre, pointing to the inevitable fiction in all writing, even remembering. Recreating the experiences of her self, and of others whose lives become figuratively entwined with her own, she demonstrates a power in re-writing history.

On another side of the world, a group of women, many barely literate and with few resources, come together to create a collective history of their truths through needlework. Under a repressive dictatorship led by General Pinochet, these urban women living in the shantytowns of Santiago, Chile found their private lives suddenly invaded by a dirty politics. Their husbands, brothers, and children were detained by the military following a bloody coup in 1973, and were often never seen again. These men and women came to be known as *los desaparecidos*, or the disappeared ones, for no-one knew of their whereabouts. Amid this suffering, exacerbated by an increased poverty and hunger, women began to create co-operatives to help each other survive. At first, these community based efforts formed primarily around economic issues, but increasingly became more politicized in spite of, even because of, the effects of repression. Sewing co-operatives particularly became a significant means of income for women who knew only skills traditionally cast as feminine. Within such an environment, marked by a heavy silence that governed the nation, the first *arpillera* workshops began. The *arpilleras* are tapestries of embroidery that, through their visual images, convey a sense of a personal and collective reality. Sewn out of colorful scraps of cloth, they depict a scene of the artist's recent memory, what has happened to her life, and what she has done to protest. They were often made in the company of the other women in the workshops, in which many women found strength among each other, claimed in both textual testimonial narratives and more implicitly through the tapestries

themselves. For this, the *arpilleras* become most powerful when understood collectively.

Reacting against horrors committed against their families and against themselves, the *arpilleristas*, as the women came to call themselves for their art, spoke out in a country immersed in guilty silence. They acted specifically from a platform as mothers and female heads of familial life. Telling their stories to each other and later to a greater audience they would never meet, they uncovered a truth of the military dictatorship. For this simple beginning act, they became engaged in subversive activity. This process of creating their art together allowed these women to gain a new political awareness, such that they had been sheltered from before. They began a new understanding of self-identity, and a greater self-definition of themselves as women.

Because any understanding of their work relies so significantly on their visual work, I have included six images of tapestries, five of them of the *arpilleristas*, in an appendix at the end of this project. Together, they represent something of a progression of the art from its beginnings to its more contemporary situation, demonstrating a history of the political symbolism employed by these women.

I use these two, an individual European women writer growing up within the ideology of Hitler's Third Reich, and the individuals within a collective struggle of South American women, victims of political repression, as the primary subjects of this paper. By making these my choices, my project concerns the plight of women who struggle against pervasive objectification. Both, as expressed by their own art, have lived under a warring politics that aims for complicity and silence among its people and a society that demands quiet of its female population. They each become conscious of their art's capacity to provide a way through memory and self-reflection. Immense differences certainly appear to exist between these two topics:

the two forms of art expressed in the written and the visual; the cultural and political contexts in which the women were situated; and the identities shaped through distinct means of creating their art. One is an individual, almost secluded, narration, and the other, a collective effort in telling a national story. Despite these distinctions however, that often led myself to doubt this juxtaposition, they are more significantly connected by a similar process of creating narratives, one that is only highlighted by their apparent differences. In both cases, the women posit as their subjects themselves, and create an art of their personal subjectivity. Through their narratives, they employ personal memories, intrinsically linked to the life stories of others around them, in an attempt to redefine their world and their self-identity.

• • •

My claim here is that the artistic endeavors of both the Chilean women and Christa Wolf relate to each other in the process of creating a personal narration. Wolf's work perhaps appears more explicitly narrative, for its linguistic language of telling a complete story. Though her writing resists traditional categorization, her manner of writing as an individual conforms to our expectations of a narrative. Her writing, as with that of any author, represents the totality of her narrative, though in understanding it fully we may often look to her biography or to a third person's analysis of her text. Yet the *arpilleristas* too, despite the singular scene each tapestry represents, mean to offer a narration as they attempt to tell their personal stories. The message of their art conveys itself through a language of visual imagery. Rather than only seen as individual pieces of art, being able to comprehend the *arpilleras* as a series of artwork, as one could from a book of photographs or from viewing a collection of them, expresses more succinctly a

narrative of the women's reality. It is important to regard their art in a collective sense, and not only in the individual pieces, especially to reflect their own creative process. Like Wolf, these women have created an art that is meant to represent in itself their political and subjective messages. However, as an audience, we recognize its emotional power only with an understanding of the stories that accompany its making. My own introduction to the *arpilleras* emerged first from an outside narrative of their creation before I was to see photographic images of them. While I would become charmed by their art, it was the stories behind them that first caught my attention. On the other hand, all I knew of Christa Wolf lay in the text she had created as I came to appreciate her work.

Their work makes itself explicitly aware of its potential audience, as readers who share in the sentiment of remembering a forgotten and apparently distant past, and as buyers who create an emotional, perhaps political, connection to the lives of women stripped of their husbands, sons, and brothers. Both struggle to authentically represent their realities, of the past and of the present, to an imagined group of others. In doing so, they create an art of communication that yet compels them to constantly redefine their perception of that reality, and then of their own identities. The process itself, of writing words or of sewing pieces of cloth, becomes a means to reflect upon their self-identities as emerging out of the situations and personal experiences they describe. Their appeal to an audience, in a sincere effort to convey a personal reality, explains their work as strategies of self-narration.

Rather than simply representing reality, both Wolf and the *arpilleristas* engage in a construction of their personal reality. As with the constant self-narration we do to remember and to understand ourselves, the act of recording the events of our life can never mirror reality exactly. Any form of representation necessitates, for example, a process of editing. It would be an impossible task to

record everything of even the smallest sliver of the reality we live, the details of which are endless. As I write my perception of reality, I continue to live within that reality. It cannot be suddenly stopped for ease of understanding it in greater detail; indeed, if that were to happen, we would not exist to continue writing.

We each live and breathe a complicated set of interactions, of situations, that together comprise what we come to know as reality. Yet such a reality only exists through its acknowledgment of the humans that act it out. Rather than being a space and time that we observe objectively from a position above, we each participate in constructing reality through our actions and our narration of it, every one of us playing an integral part in it. Reality exists not as a separate entity from our social interaction, but is rather composed of humans' memory of it. Thus it can only ever be described from the perception of those who also create it. Both the writer and the weavers position themselves as necessarily subjective, yet definitively authentic authors of their own realities. This subjectivity does not strive for an "objective" presentation of reality, but instead recognizes the accuracy of their own perceptions that they see as intrically related to their self-identities. This position appears evidently in Wolf's work, as she places the issues of struggling to describe a forgotten reality at the forefront of her narration, her concerns of trying to remember a past and reconnect with her own childhood self seeming to haunt her at every turn of the page. However, the *arpilleristas* also come to terms with their efforts to convey subjective experience, though they do so with less direct articulation of that fact. This is highlighted in their realization that theirs is a voice that, while claiming to speak for a country, belongs specifically to women.

• • •

If you want to know more about us '*arpilleristas*,' just look at our *arpilleras*. That is where our life story is told. There you will find our homes, our children, our neighborhoods and shanty towns, our poverty, our grass-roots organizations, and above all our struggles.

Member of the *arpilleristas*.

In the basement of a church in a shantytown neighborhood of Santiago, Chile, a group of women sit around a table weaving their personal stories into brilliant, colorful tapestries. The buzz of talk fills the small room as they share the images they are creating in the comforting presence of the fifteen or twenty other women. A basket of limited materials sits in the center of the table and the women reach to take what they need to finish another tapestry. Needles flit rapidly through the cloth in expert hands. Scissors, thread, and pieces of cloth are passed around the room. Some women who are more experienced at this particular craft help others, teaching them new stitches or how to make the dolls to place on the appliquéd setting. One woman takes from her purse a swab of material, cut from the shirt of her son who - she is loath to admit it -- may never return to wear it. With scissors borrowed from the Vicariate, she carefully shapes the cloth to fit a doll that will occupy a place on the scene of her tapestry. Another woman cuts a lock of her own hair to complete a character in her story.

They call them *arpilleras* in Spanish. Translated, *arpillera* means burlap or sackcloth, words that suggest only the beginning of what the women are to create. Starting with a rectangular piece cut from a burlap sack, the women appliquéd layers of cloth, often bright with color. This setting marks the background of the scene, often of churches, houses, and the mountain peaks of the Andes range that characterize the landscape of Chile. Details and lettering are stitched in. The women then make doll-like figures for the characters of the scenes. According to one observer of the women, a Chilean woman returning from exile, this is the

"most interesting moment in the creative process...because, in that instant, the women exploded with emotion, anxious about how to express what they wanted the world to know" (Sepúlveda 1996, p. 29). At first, the dolls they made were flat and somewhat lifeless, but the women devised different techniques to make them come alive. Fabric scrunched up into a ball begins the head, and facial features are embroidered onto it. Yarn often supplies the doll with hair. With the bodies and clothes added, the women stitch the dolls onto the scene, and the *arpillera* comes to life.

Outside, the military government invades their most private lives. It is ruled by General Pinochet, a man who has declared himself "supreme leader," of the country. The painful effects of this dictatorship are what unite these women: increased poverty, a pervading fear, and most of all the loss of arrested family members, men and women who will come to be known as "*los desaparecidos*," or the disappeared ones, as they never return from their detention. Silence governs the outside as a vast majority of a nation learns to avoid words that might hint subversion. With this impending fear of being constantly watched, citizens learn to become skeptical of those they once trusted and find security in isolation from others. A people becomes a nation of strangers. Inside the walls of this church basement, the women share their tragic stories among each other. When one woman speaks of her experiences, her words encourage other voices to emerge as each realizes she is not alone in her new pain. Slowly realizing through their discourse the political of their private lives, they must find innovative ways to react to their present situations, protesting in a society that demands apathetic silence of its people, and that expects little more of its women. The women talk to each other in stronger voices and plan for a more promising future. Through the art of needlework, they together create a collective memory, each one adding her personal account.

Finding a voice of self-expression through their art, the women of these workshops came to call themselves *arpilleristas* for the work they did. Beginning soon after the rise of the military dictatorship and continuing to this day, though with less participation, their legacy demonstrates the significance of the personal, emotional testimony within an objective politics. As in a community, they supported each other in their universal quest for the disappeared and for a life they felt they had lost. In the words of Marjorie Agosín, an exiled Chilean writer who has worked extensively with this group of women, the *arpilleristas* “were there with their lives, memories, and families, all braided together and united through a scrap of cloth” (Agosín 1996, p. 93). Together, they have articulated a life lived in fear, and in defiance, of the regime that ruled their nation. Each woman sewed her personal life into a story of cloth whose message spoke not only for herself but for the lives of many. Interweaving their stories, the women developed a set of narratives drawing from their realities by which they created a collective memory. By asserting their own truths, they thus challenged the official narrative offered by the singular voice of the dictatorship. Its origins in a craft familiar to them all, their art began to communicate not only the horrors of their lives, but more importantly, the ways in which they could overcome them. Through such a creative appropriation of living memory, these women made claim to the worth of their existences. In the simple act of telling their stories through tapestries, they proved subversive to a regime that attempted to squelch any challenge to its own historical narrative. They now understood themselves as victims of nation-wide repression and, later, particularly as women under a government that highlighted the patriarchy of their culture. Such a realization propelled them into a new form of political action that recognized various layers of oppression. So it was that the *arpilleristas* began to assume an active political aspect to their identity through their imagery.

I have always been caught by images more than by words. Probably that is strange, and incompatible with my vocation. The last thing in my life will be a picture not a word. Words die before pictures.

(Wolf 1983, *Cassandra*, p. 21)

Ironically, this quote, spoken through a character living centuries ago in the famed city of Troy, comes from the text of Christa Wolf. The power of the visual image for a writer, and for the character whose spoken words represent the future, seems at first paradoxical for those who rely on language. Yet images inspire words, as much as our communicative language feeds meaning into visual objects. Reading a text conjures up images, allowing us to relate to the fictional reality depicted; looking at an art form, we think of narrative stories to explain the visual. What bridges the written text and the embroidered shapes then are the ordinary connections between linguistics and imagery.

On the other side of the globe of the *arpilleristas*, Christa Wolf begins to write her autobiographical novel. A child she calls Nelly constitutes her primary subject, a child apparently constructed from both personal memory and fictional imagination, who grows up under the authoritarian regime of Adolf Hitler. It is the story of an adult's perspective on a child's experiences, and a story of a nation. Wolf entitles her book *Kindheitsmuster*, or *Patterns of Childhood*, as if to allude not to her individual life, but to the lives of many. Through her writing, she makes her way through memories of childhood, her country compelled to adhere to a single ideology and to ignore the Holocaust that quietly surrounded her community. For the German children of the 1930's, the patriotic songs and the shouts of adoration for the Führer replaced hushes of silence among the adults. Several months into her writing, the year is 1973. Finding her way into a memory filled with hate, war and silence, she remarks on the plight of another country: "Chile. The recorded voice of a murdered president. The picture of the poet, lying in state in the ruins of

his devastated house" (Wolf 1980, p. 163). The president is Salvador Allende, dead a few moments after he gives his last speech to the Chilean people over the radio, final words as the siege continues on the governmental palace. Wolf writes too of Pablo Neruda, Chile's celebrated poet and generally less prolific politician of communist ideology, who dies twelve days after the coup. After his death, the soldiers ransack his home, destroying many of his treasures from overseas travel. Almost as if it were a metaphor for the political silence of the country, one of Chile's greatest literary voices is now gone. With these brief words, the East German woman mourns death in a foreign country as she travels back through her own remembrances of the war: the war she knew and the war she was hidden from.

As the *arpilleristas* create a collective, national memory, weaving together their personal stories, Christa Wolf writes a personal narrative of memory that speaks to the experience of a nation of individuals. Through her writing, Christa Wolf explores the journey of memory to rediscover a past self. She describes memory as "a crab's walk, a painful backward motion, like falling into a time shaft (Wolf 1976, p. 5). Other metaphors for memory pop up in the lines of her book. In describing such a concept as memory, we often find that we must use metaphor, the symbolism of language to convey what our understanding of it. For her, remembering is a difficult yet necessary journey that begins in the creation of language. It becomes an especially arduous task within a national culture she has assumed that has taught forgetfulness, the past a guilty slate.

Her quest to understand the connections between a past and a present, both within an individual and for an entire culture, becomes a theme apparent in several of her works. The past of each of us and our connection to a social history is embedded in our being through personal and historical memory, and the stories we know that contribute to our self-conception. That our personal memory allows each of us to conceive of ourself as an individual is yet entwined in our cultural history.

Wolf begins *Patterns of Childhood* with a reminder: "What is past is not dead; it is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it; we pretend to be strangers" (Wolf 1983, p. 3). Such a statement is a cool acknowledgment of her relationship to a frightening past, one to be reconjured in the narrative that proceeds from this starting point. It finds its place as an epitaph to one of Marjorie Agosín's books that describes the work of the Chilean *arpilleristas* (Agosín 1993, p. 1), serving to recognize their creation of a collective, national memory. Without an attempt to understand or to evaluate the past we claim as our own, we become disjointed. Wolf's writing conveys that we cannot afford to lose perception of the past, but instead must learn from its legacy in order to ensure a future.

This question of our connections between the past and the present emerges particularly out of two of Wolf's principal works, *Patterns of Childhood* and *Cassandra* (*Kassandra*). The first novel follows her personal narrative out of which a voice might speak for a people immersed in guilty silence. The second recreates an antique feminine archetype into a character whose lonely yet assertive voice echoes the author's own and those of women across a temporal and global space. *Patterns of Childhood* takes as its source the autobiographical reality of the author yet acknowledges the apparent unreliability of her memory to exact prior circumstances, while *Cassandra* recreates an established character through a fictional account that nevertheless smacks of a significant reality for many. Both works make apparent Wolf's process -- though itself edited -- of writing toward an understanding of her subject: the first has it incorporated within the narrative; and the second in the four corresponding essays or transcribed lectures, the *Voraussetzungen*, that preceded her writing of the novel.

Throughout *Patterns of Childhood*, Christa Wolf writes deliberately of her difficulty in constructing a solid narrative of her youth as part of an ordinary Nazi family. In struggling to remember again the self of her childhood, and attempting to

overcome a cultural proclivity toward forgetfulness and silence, Wolf poses questions to herself of how one remembers and how one subsequently understands oneself. Her memory triggered by a weekend trip with her family to her hometown, she begins a self-proclaimed difficult pathway into her own past and that of her fellow people. Unlike a typical autobiographical method of recording events chronologically, Wolf explicitly places her present self into her narrative. In attempting to reconcile with her past, she emerges with three ambiguously autobiographical subjects, only one of which claims the subjective "I." She forms a bridge between herself and the distanced child subject by naming her Nelly, yet she is never able to integrate the two selves, and Nelly fades from the end pages of the book. Wolf further separates herself from this past by placing another character between, whom she addresses in the second person. It is not Wolf the author who pulls on the strings of the child character to make her act out the reality of her past, but her own character that represents her self of a more recent past. Finishing the book, I am left to consider the narrator's struggle to remember a past she could easily forget, and how this has become a necessary exercise of self-exploration.

Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays recreates a character introduced through Greek tragic drama, and particularly through Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* of the *Oresteia* trilogy. Instead of connecting with her personal past, Wolf now develops a present consciousness of another's past. It is ironic that while she struggles to identify with her own childhood self of some thirty years previous, she slips with relative ease into asserting a voice for a personage of antiquity. Cassandra's character has been mythologized as the woman who received from the god Apollo the gift of prophecy, who foresaw the defeat of her war torn city of Troy, and who met her own end with slaughter in a foreign land. The tragedy of her character however, is most realized in her inability to communicate her truths to others, a condition placed on her by Apollo. Wolf characterizes his violent approach to her,

in which upon her refusal to sleep with him, “transformed himself into a wolf surrounded by mice and spat furiously into [her] mouth,” so that she awoke with “an unspeakably loathsome taste on [her] tongue” (Wolf 1983, p. 15). The imagery of her dream seeps into her reality. That her prophetic voice is now unconvincing leaves her essentially without a voice. This female subject, born of tales long ago, might represent contemporary women who every day struggle to see the worth of their voice and then express it. It appears, as many other than Wolf herself have maintained, a feminist proposition. Wolf manipulates the intrinsic connection between our shared historical past -- whether it be directly or through the literature and mythology that continue to define a part of our culture -- and our present by allowing this character a voice through her first person narration.

We live within an ephemeral present, the current moment gone precisely as we speak of it. The past lives within each of us, yet it can only be constructed again through present experience. Wolf’s writing emphasizes that the past is not simply a concrete slab of reality, a stolid source out of which we must understand the history leading up to our present. While we cannot necessarily change events of the past that haunt us still, its legacy is channeled through narratives that allow for interpretation and that can possibly promote future change.

...

The *arpilleristas* had to define for themselves the past and present political situation that raged around them. They interpreted a reality, once quite foreign, in terms of their personal and familial experiences with it. Their perspective on politics thus emerged as entirely subjective, grounded in their lives as mothers and caretakers of the family. They provided their own narrative of the national situation through their testimonies, one that was incorporated into the visual

messages of their tapestries, and another through written testimony often recorded, and translated into a more fluid form and often into different languages, by outsiders. All evidence of history, despite any claims of objectivity or lack of bias, has an author whose perspective inevitably colors their narrative. My own discussion of the political story of Chile develops out of others' perspectives that I have gleaned from books and personal conversations alike.

On a September morning of 1973, the world was to witness the military takeover of state power in the long and thin country of Chile that stretches across the western coast of the South American continent. Chile has been described as a nation of extremes due to its geographical qualities ranging from the sandy and dry desert of the north through the urban metropolis of Santiago to the remote Antarctica at its most southern point, all the land somewhat isolated by the Andes mountains. Its politics too embrace a wide variety of ideologies manifested in political parties from the far left to the far right. Despite its not quite stable past, much of the Chilean populace had prided itself on a thriving, democratic heritage -- it was second only to the United States to establish modern democracy -- particularly in relation to other Latin American states. One fine morning in early spring of the southern hemisphere, the domestic military forces launched an attack on the Presidential Palace, against the president Salvador Allende Gossens. Backed by the Nixon government of the United States, who practiced their usual policy of squashing anything resembling Communism, the Navy prepared and executed a bloody coup with the full force of all branches of the military. They bombed the palace, and as the surviving employees and government officials came streaming out into the vicious hands of the military, they stormed the building to reach the president who was waiting for them. He had just delivered a diplomatic and optimistic message over the radio for the Chilean people. In her autobiography, Isabel Allende, the president's niece, writes, "The official version is that Allende

placed the barrel of the rifle beneath his chin, pulled the trigger, and blew off his head" (Allende 1994, p. 195). The official version, she says. And she subtly offers us a reminder that all history emerges only out of narrative. During the next seventeen years of authoritarian rule, the official version came through a single channel.

The years leading up to the coup had been times of euphoria for some, grief for others, and a general sense of chaos for almost everyone. Successfully elected four years before his death, in his fourth attempt for the office, President Allende had facilitated a socialist experiment throughout the country. The radical policies of his political party, Unidad Popular (U.P.) or the Popular Unity, that included land reform and the nationalization of major companies were cheered from one side and angrily protested by another. They split the country into two camps, most generally though not exclusively by way of economic class; Salvador Allende was the revolutionary leader of the poor. During the three years of his presidency, many Chileans became active in governmental programs. One party youth leader, Estela Ortiz, volunteering in education programs said of her U.P. support, "We were the generation that thought we had the world in our hands; we were building a new country" (Constable 1991, p. 24). While university campuses buzzed with U.P. activity, big businesses complained bitterly of the new man in charge. The agricultural land reforms allowed the workers, once servants of the oligarchs, land of their own. Farm owners, however, perceived the process as a grand theft: "The U.P. took away all my land, and they left me with nothing" (Constable, p. 25). The nation became a divided one.

Few people today can argue against the existence of great flaws in the U.P., including party rivalries and economic pitfalls. The government made severe mistakes financially and politically. The benefits of wage increases were accompanied by an almost mysterious occurrence of food shortages as store owners

closed shop or claimed they had nothing to sell. According to an advisor of mine Rocío Reyes, whose family fled Chile in exile when she was a child, the shops were suddenly fully stocked come September 11, probably an unlikely coincidence. Through the halls of the Navy buildings, plans for a military takeover were being discussed long before Allende's presidency, and it seems reasonable that public support would need to be won. Suspicions of conspiracies sprang up from both sides of the political spectrum. Of those who did disapprove of the new Socialist government, many feared that it would become a leftist dictatorship, believing it to be a threat to the nation's integrity.

One avid supporter of President Allende explained the nation's contradicting sentiments:

"People believed paradise was around the corner. There was an explosion of passion, a drunken binge of ideas, and a constant demand for political definitions... But there was also a sense of violence, a feeling that it would all come crashing down. We suffered the calamitous impact of a utopian time"

(Constable, p. 25).

And come crashing down it did. The pitfalls of the socialist government were met with the military takeover and an immediate establishment of the *junta*, a committee of four men who represented the four branches of the military. One man soon asserted his leadership over the *junta*, pronouncing himself the new president of Chile, though his totalitarian tactics and his tenacity to the position resembled that of a dictator more than an elected president. Like Allende, this commander of the Army became a figure around which the entire nation pivoted. The name of General Augusto Pinochet became a name filled with meaning for all Chileans; some thought him a savior, some hated him, but no person was ambiguous toward his leadership.

Wary of its precarious position as a military dictatorship, the new government set out to abolish any form of "subversion" within the country,

claiming that to have been the root of the previous problems. It determined a broad meaning for forms of subversion or political resistance, and many became an opportune target for its repression. Former supporters of Allende's government, labor union leaders, professors of history and political science, and the residents of poor shanty towns -- all were considered suspect. The dictatorship made a countless number of arrests, many of which occurred in the black of the night, an unmarked vehicle making its way toward a house. Other times, a mother would come home to find her husband, or her son, or her daughter gone with little or no trace. The women of the *arpillerista* workshops are among those who provide narratives of the disappearances that in total reveal the enormous manner of repression by the state. In the months following the coup, thousands fled the country in an exile that some chose for their safety and the military decided for others.

A watchdog of the moves of every citizen, Pinochet's regime created a narrative of fear and silence within the nation. Each person spoken to became suspect, each action cautiously executed for fear of being watched. The spontaneity of a people was now gone, and instead, "the vast majority went about their everyday business, tied to routine, like sleepwalkers" (Timerman 1987, p. 18). Where once Chileans enthusiastically debated the heated topics of a political world, silence now reigned. It was in this stifled environment that had replaced the discourse -- political, philosophical, and most generally male -- in which women such as the *arpilleristas* found a voice they needed to use.

As an outsider from England and the United States, I cannot claim an understanding of the politics of Chile that comes with experience³. However, there

³Of the politics of East Germany, or of the reunified Germany, I claim even less of a personal understanding. Although my family traveled to West Germany twice during my childhood, my memories of it include our outings to cities and to villages, seeing the landscape of Germany, but having little contact with the people. What I know of Germany, I know most generally through an average understanding of its history -- and through the texts of Christa Wolf.

is a point at which my autobiography converges with an immersion into the Chilean culture. In the fall of 1996, during my third year of university, I spent a semester studying in various parts of this South American country. Although I studied little explicitly on the *arpilleras* while I was there, we did speak a lot of the impacts of the coup, and the legacy of the military rule that had officially ended eight years ago. My conversations with Chileans demonstrated to me the continuing political division that runs deep between the people.

Despite the country's return to a democratic government, September 11, the anniversary of the takeover, is still celebrated as a national holiday. On one side of Santiago, Pinochet makes a speech to a crowd of enthusiastic supporters. Through the streets of another, thousands of citizens maintain a tradition of a march protesting the evils of the dictatorship and now the present government's silence about it. In the southern hemisphere's spring, I joined these marchers along with a group of fellow bewildered North Americans and a few Chilean guides. Various organizations, including feminist groups, political parties, and collections of people participated walking down a pre-determined path. Lining the streets and patrolling the hilltops stood *carabineros*, the police who serve with the armed forces, docked out in riot gear, machine guns at their sides, tanks of sewage water and tear gas ready to be sprayed. Always, the march ends for speeches at the capital's cemetery, now the official site of President Allende's grave, a relatively closed in space that leaves those inside vulnerable to the tear gas. I myself saw it from the top of another street. Heading the march were family members holding black and white signs with someone's picture and a caption that read, "¿Dónde están?" or "Where are they?" Walking around in a fear that was imbued with fascination, as I observed the throngs of people supporting the march, it were these people, mostly women and some men, that caught most my emotional attention. They conveyed the personal tragedies of a past that continues to haunt their present.

The impact of that day on my education was enormous and remains for me a significant personal memory. As I write of the *arpilleristas'* experiences approximately a year and a half later, I think of myself connected to them in a certain way. I certainly may never understand through subjective experience the exact events of their lives. However, I feel as if I can relate a small part of myself to their efforts to address the politics of their country. Drawn in both by my time spent in Chile and by threads of similarity in some human experience, the personal politics of their art appeals to me.

•••

Wolf's narratives delve into a journey into many pasts. This metaphorical journey emerges from physical journeys to places simultaneously foreign and familiar. A return to a place where our memory lives, or our travels to a place where an imagined world becomes real, provides an opportunity of constructing a self-reflective narration. Attempting to reconstruct the past, that of her personal existence and of a more universal one (though this is certainly limited to the cultural context of the Western world), permeates her writing.

The impetus of her remembering in *Patterns of Childhood* emerges from a weekend trip, a crucial part of her fiction, to her hometown. This place that she would have rather forgot is now in Poland with a different name, only a few buildings remaining from the images of her memory. The visit postponed for almost a week, her procrastination on the identification papers, Wolf cannot find a certain answer as to why she would want to return back in the summer of 1971. Nostalgia does not serve for a place that reminds her of a Nazi past, and seeing the sights in one's old hometown seems somehow ludicrous. She goes to remember, to

take a test on her memory, and does not realize the importance of writing this experience of remembering until she begins more than a year later.

She travels with three close members of the family, one of whom shares some fuzzy memories of a distant past, her younger brother Lutz. Her husband, to whom she refers nothing more than a cold H., might recall his own past under the fascist regime, but it is separate from the child's world of Christa and Lutz. Also accompanying her is her fifteen year old daughter Lenka, younger of the two children she has, whose memories do not lie within the guilty legacy of the others. Throughout the trip, Lenka in her innocence poses questions of her mother, seeking an understanding of a lifestyle she cannot quite grasp, requiring on Wolf's part a more profound look into the past. The mother-daughter relationship between Wolf and Lenka that unfolds in the narrative remembering the trip provides a point of reference for that between the child subject and her own mother Charlotte Jordan. This latter relationship plays out both maternal love, often a child's primary encounter with a subjective other, and a sense of cool distance as Charlotte struggles with self-understanding through the Nazi regime, highlighted in her abandonment of her children.

Wolf's narrative in *Patterns* passes three different periods of times, and the characters that take a central role, distinct aspects of her self. Assuming the role of an impersonal narrator, Wolf writes through her memory of her return trip to her hometown to reach the memory of her childhood. Wolf the writer maintains a distance from her autobiographical subject, her childhood self. In so doing, she disrupts a traditional sense of continuity of self through years of change and a process, both natural and deliberate, of forgetting. Despite what might be considered of the autobiographical project to recapture one's historical self as a precursory person to our present self, she instead severs herself from her childhood. Her code of reference toward the different aspects of her self encompasses, as I have said

earlier, various pronouns. The child she (re-)christens as Nelly, presumably a name she never knew as a child, thus creating a new character. The woman of the trip she addresses as "you." Only the writer, who expresses the entire story, can claim the "I" of the first person.

Wolf the narrator's relationship to her childhood self is never fully reconciled into one self. Instead, Nelly remains separated from the author that has created her through this work of autobiography. As she laments in the ending pages of her book:

The child who was hidden in me -- has she come forth? Or has she been scared into looking for a deeper, more inaccessible hiding place? Has memory done its duty? Or has it proven -- by the act of misleading -- that it's impossible to escape the mortal sin of our time: the desire not to come to grips with herself?

(Wolf 1980, p. 406)

Wolf presents her frightening realization through this characterization of her own past as a stubborn child: that we cannot fully come to terms with our past, that is, we cannot fully remember. Our memory is no benign object. Through Wolf's writing comes a realization that it lacks almost necessarily so that we might protect ourselves from our own past.

Almost a decade after this visit, Christa Wolf embarks on another trip, again unsure of her motivation other than great opportunity, that will provide a powerful framework for more writing. This time she travels for the first time to Greece. Again, she is unsure of leaving the comfort of her home culture: "[I] simulated, rather than felt a pleasurable anticipation; kept an altogether ironic attitude" (Wolf 1983, p. 143). While there however, she becomes captivated by its ancient past that is displayed in the stone ruins she sightsees and that comes alive through the literature she picks up and reads. The Cassandra character of the Aeschylus trilogy, despite a brief entrance and a morbid exit, particularly grabs her attention as a feminine figure in need of an identifying voice. While Wolf as an adult writer took

over the narration of her childhood self in *Patterns*, she will allow this character a “chance” to narrate her own story, one that coincides with Wolf’s own.

Wolf writes herself into the text of *Cassandra*, manipulating her juxtaposition of Cassandra’s narrative and of her own narrative, the distinctions between the two created characters notably ambiguous. Each is an integral part of the other’s character: Cassandra’s voice relies on the words of Wolf, and the author’s remembered experience of her voyage to Greece is channeled through the lessons Cassandra must learn. The form of Wolf’s narration offers a transparent look into the simultaneous separation and melding together of author and character, as she writes a fiction of her autobiography.

As the war of Troy rages on, the character Cassandra questions her identification with the world of which she had once been a part. She becomes more confused about where she belongs, with which group she identifies. As she distances herself from her fellow Trojans, she finds frightening traits of herself or her people in others, her supposed enemies. Cassandra must grapple with the idea of a deceptive enemy and a possible nonexistent solidarity. In her own reflections, she speaks:

Vacillating and fragile and amorphous was the “we” I used, went on using as long as possibly could... The “we” that I clung to grew transparent, feeble, more and more unprepossessing, and consequently I was more and more out of touch with my “I.”

(Wolf 1983, p. 94)

Her words demonstrates Wolf’s perception of the inseparable connection between Cassandra’s social self-identity, her “we,” and her personal self-identity, her “I.” When her conception of who is in her community, or whether she is now included in her formerly established community, is shattered, her ideas of her own self are also broken. Within both parts of the single book, Wolf reveals a relationship

between the character that she creates with her words and the character who refers to herself as the writer of the text.

• • •

Because of our desperation came the idea of making the *arpilleras*. We remembered the activities of the needleworkers of Macul and the works of Violeta Parra,⁴ 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 country.

(Sepúlveda 1996, p. 84)

Mostly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the *arpilleristas* found each other often during an exhausting and futile search for beloved family members. Their husbands, brothers, or children had been arrested by the Pinochet dictatorship beginning in September 1973. They never returned. Those who were left behind knew that to be arrested could mean torture, forced surrender of others' names, imprisonment in hidden military camps, and often death. Yet they rarely discovered the plight of their own loved one. The women found themselves in a horrifying position: to have loved ones disappeared for days, then months, then years. To trust in their return was frustrating at best, and to mourn for their death meant abandoning all hope. Certainly each member of the family mourned for the *desaparecidos* they had known. As women however, the pain was all the more intense as their emotional outlook grew out of lives almost wholly centered about

⁴ Violeta Parra was a symbol of folklore in Chile. Her main work was in the recording and singing of folkloric songs of the country, particularly of her beloved south. In standing up for the rights of marginalized groups such as the indigenous and the poor, her work became political, and she was an integral part of a New Song movement, of the political left, that swept the nation in the 1960s.

their identity as the cornerstone of the family. With this gendered identification, the well being of others in their family consumed their daily existence.

The beginning of their political action against the military dictatorship assumed typical attributes of a feminine role in society. Previously playing little more than a supportive role to the male half of citizenship, women now found themselves having to confront politics as it disrupted their everyday lives. With soaring unemployment and nothing to eat, they could hardly do less than demand food. When their husband, brother, or child suddenly disappeared one day and the police did nothing to help, what else could they do but demand to know their whereabouts? As a form of protest against the horrors of the dictatorship, the women turned to an activity they already knew: needlework. A typically feminine and apparently benign activity driven by the emotional pleas of a gendered identity, this creative process yet propelled them into a powerful practice of political life.

During the beginning years of the Pinochet dictatorship, members of poor communities sought assistance from each other, coming together to efficiently share the resources they did have. Many of the men were either detained, or unemployed and often discontented for their inability to assume a traditional role as material caretaker of the family. The women began to take some of the leadership positions of organizing community life. In an effort to eke out survival together, the shantytowns⁵ of Santiago and other cities established *ollas comunes* (communal pots), or community soup kitchens. Other communal efforts involved the creation of *lavanderías*, places in which women came together to do laundry for themselves and for others, and workshops on topics such as health and reproduction. These communal places not only allowed a means to survive, but provided a space in

⁵ I use the term shantytown here as a translation from the Spanish word of *barrio*. However, this is not precisely accurate. In this country, shantytown tends to identify somewhat temporary communities, while in Chile, a *barrio* means a permanent community, alive with its own history and culture.

which people realized their potential as whole communities rather than only individuals. This process became an integral way for the poor community of Santiago and other cities to assert their rights as a neighborhood of Chilean citizens. Such efforts also represented a means for women especially to come together, allowing them to redefine their roles from caretakers only of the family to becoming an important part of the larger, increasingly politicized community.

Impoverished and often without one or more breadwinners in the home, many women concerned themselves with finding a means to gain income. Sewing cooperatives that made clothes to sell became one answer for women who were not expected to leave their matters in the home for an outside job. These cooperatives formed the beginnings of the *arpillera* workshops. This idea evolved out of the alliance of some women with the *Vicaría de Solidaridad*, or the Vicariate of Solidarity, an organization of the Catholic Church dedicated to aiding family members of the detained. The *Vicaría*, in a commitment to providing work opportunities for the nation's newly indigent, established handicraft workshops throughout the country. From these emerged the idea for the *arpillera* workshops comprised almost exclusively of women battling both economic hardship and the loss of a loved one.

All apparently new art forms begin with an imitation, then a redefinition, of older forms that have helped to characterize aspects of a culture. The women of the first *arpillera* workshops created an art out of a craft already popular in certain parts of Chile, employing a skill they often knew well: sewing. Many of them sewed and knitted clothes, a skill that enabled them to survive through poverty and material scarcity, one that became almost exclusively associated with women, as in many cultures across the globe. The craft of the *arpillera* based itself on a Chilean feminine tradition of embroidery, especially practiced by women living in rural

areas. One particularly celebrated group of embroiderers comes from the relatively quiet and beautiful seaside town of Isla Negra, a place a little south of Santiago. Isla Negra is most noted for its home to Chile's adored poet Pablo Neruda, who fell in love with the tapestries, promoting them around the world. Formed a few years before the rise of Pinochet, in 1969, this group of women also came together to work toward earning some money through the skills they already knew. They were informed to create their tapestries out of the idyllic themes of folklore, proclaiming a nostalgic perspective on a more perfect past. The result is a beautiful collection of craftwork in which the women have evidently taken much time and effort to complete, every detail of the tapestries carefully stitched to create a texture akin to weaving. The livelihoods of these women thrive on the industry of a tourism appreciative of pretty, regional handicrafts. The *arpillera* workshops continue this heritage of needlework art, of creating a picture, as a snapshot of a scene. However, they offer a striking contrast. The similarly bright and colorful images of the *arpilleras* present an ironic tone in their depiction of the somber themes experienced by the urban embroiderers. Instead of characterizing a past, they uncover the brutality of their present, and demonstrate the ways in which they have sought to overcome together part of the grief and state repression. While the *arpillera* workshops emerged out of an effort to gain an income through the sale of the tapestries, the women sought also to visually express their voice against a regime that was hurting them. Thus, they assumed a political identity.

Though the written testimonies of the *arpilleristas* -- another facet of their stories -- most of which have been created quite recently with the help of an academic, the women have remembered the political significance of their work. Their reasons for beginning the workshops, and those of other women who later joined, are likely multifarious, embracing economic necessity, a psychological need to work against reluctant bereavement, and a means to create a community out of

those with similar experiences. Another is the sense of political activism or protest against the government, stimulated almost ironically by the severe repression. Yet it is an impossible task to gauge at precisely what point this became a significant factor for the women. Their testimonies demonstrate their memories, inevitably colored by the meanings they today attribute to their work, and possibly aware of their audience, hoping to pass on the political significance of what they do.

The *arpilleristas* were not to become great cultural heroes of the nation such as the internationally celebrated poets Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, beloved names of the Chilean household. In telling their stories, most of the women could not spin out great literary works; many were barely literate. Their work has rarely even been considered to be "art." Rather, it assumes its rightful (and feminine, I might add) place as a sort of craft-work, with its bright colors and an almost childlike quality. While not disavowing the genre of crafts, I myself would never venture to speak of the *arpilleras* as anything less than art. Any definition of art is perpetually hazy and only ever subject to the judgment of an audience. As I have before mentioned, I see art as a creative appropriation of a person's interpretation of cultural and social reality. It is quite simply an extension of living. Some handle it with apparently more quality and engage in producing it more definitively; yet we all participate in an artistic endeavor to understand our lives through language and imagery, even if it rarely leaves the privacy of our imaginations and the constructs of our social conversations. However, the vocabulary of art in our society tends to have a somewhat snobbish appeal, and often wishes to exclude a variety of artistic forms. To call the *arpilleras* "art," then, is to claim a certain validity for the women's creative efforts. Art as an interchange of meaning between its creator and its audience demands a significant response from those who witness its product. Much of their beauty lies in their message, and I admire the tapestries for their content, equipped with my knowledge of what these women went through. Yet I

personally find many of the tapestries striking and incredibly powerful simply in their visual quality.

Each woman generally made her own *arpillera*, but the process of creating the tapestries within a group of supporting women became an important facet of the art. The images often depicted a personal story but were meant to reflect the experiences of all the women. When the artist represented herself as a character within the tapestry, she often accompanied herself with others -- her memory of the family member she had lost, and the women with whom she engaged in protest against the dictatorship. In fact, the *arpilleras* rarely show any presentation of the individual author as a character among the others. The women of the tapestries were general, the emphasis on their collective leadership; the examples of their disappeared ones often specific. As the *arpilleras* came to narrate the struggles and political action of the women artists, the process of art became more reflective of changes within the women's self-identity and her relationship to a public politics.

Despite the differences in the *arpilleras*, many strains of similarity run throughout them all -- mostly because of this process of working together. All rectangular and of similar proportions, trimmed with a threaded border, almost all of the tapestries are bright with color. Looking through examples of the *arpilleras*, an archetypal theme emerges: it is outside, the sun shining with just a few clouds in the sky, and the Andes peaks marking the background of a Chilean scene. Often set in a neighborhood of colorful homes and trees, the doll-like characters are working together. Amid the horrors that these women experienced, they yet portray a light sense of their world. The women employ metaphors as part of their symbolic, visual language. While steeped in their South American culture, they also borrow much from Christian religion which most Chileans embrace in some form. Doves carrying olive branches represent an image of peace, and crosses of churches dot the landscape. Walls become barriers to a better life, characterized by political

democracy, and flowers depict that promise. Clearly, a common metaphorical language came to predominate among the sub-culture of the *arpilleristas*. It changes somewhat through the years, becoming more sophisticated in its content and form, particularly among those who have been making the tapestries for a long time.

No individual stands out among the group of women to claim a superior quality of work than their peers. In fact, the tapestries were rarely signed on the front with anything other than the word, Chile, expressing a general anonymity desired for the work. Often, they added a scrap of paper, with details of the particular history depicted, enclosed in a pocket attached to the back. Names were necessarily omitted for fear of the dictatorship. The creator of the piece thus conceals her individual self among the group, preferring not to regard herself as an artist needy of recognition, but rather one of many storytellers. This demonstrates their insistence that the work, though intensely personal in its efforts, represents many lives of a nation. The strength of their testimonies, then, rests not on the single tapestry, but on the set of narratives together. The voice of the *arpilleristas* is a collective voice.

...

Wolf's works present an individual character, expressed by the voice of the "I," who, like the *arpilleristas*, attempts to overcome the sentiments of isolation generated by a history of harmful politics, particularly targeted against women. Her "concern is the sinister effects of alienation in aesthetics, in art, as well as elsewhere" (Wolf 1983, p. 142). Unlike the *arpilleristas* however, she works alone, accompanied only by her memories and the literary world with which she is familiar. The central characters of Wolf's texts, whose narration inevitably struggles in maintaining a

voice of self-assertion, resemble both the self and the other within the author. She positions herself in ambiguous connection to the characters she creates as she writes her self through her apparently fictional characters and makes a stranger out of her own autobiographical subject. The protagonist of her works generally claims a voice through the "I" of the first person, a word indicating the personal self. This character is often a woman grappling with issues of identity in a chaotic world that provides contradictory sources of identification.

In her manner of meshing the selves of character and author, Wolf blends the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, acknowledging an inevitable fiction in all writing in spite of its claim to truthful sources. In her novel that appears most autobiographical, *Patterns of Childhood*, she challenges the reader searching for something of an objective truth:

All characters in this book are the invention of the narrator. None is identical with any person living or dead. Neither do any of the described episodes coincide with actual events.

Anyone believing that he detects a similarity between a character in the narrative and either himself or anyone else should consider the strange lack of individuality in the behavior of many contemporaries. Generally recognizable behavior patterns should be blamed on circumstances.

Such a pre-text of fictionalization, a similar disclaimer beginning several of her works that appear to mirror her own life, conveys with a sense of irony the fiction of the autobiographical project, disrupting traditional expectations for the genre. Tongue in cheek, she takes a jab at the reader who might expect any written account, to repeat exactly a particular experience, and one's complete sentiments at the time. To attempt to do so would certainly be an impossible endeavor. Instead, she must make room to create a fiction of her stories.

Some are quick to assume that one knows one's self the best, understanding a simple authenticity in the exercise of self-writing. However, the autobiographical subject may present the most difficult task to a writer precisely because of its

connection to a reality outside of narrative. The invention of character, though possibly limited to structures of plot, historical references, and previously constructed archetypes, precipitates a certain freedom in determining its characteristics. While a created character emerges out of one's interactive experiences with humanity, its individual life has no basis other than all that which is exposed on the pages of a book. In all forms of telling a story, whether perceived to have a basis in the memory or in the imagination, one must create characters. Writing that is self-referential, however, transgresses the usual boundaries of literature as the author and the subject must occupy the same figurative space. In autobiographical writing then, one must make a character out of one's self, in effect displacing through language that individual self.

• • •

Both Wolf and the Chilean *arpilleristas* attempt an art that depicts their particularly subjective experience of a reality, much of which preliminarily appears as beyond their immediate control or manipulation. Through their art, they try to grasp more firmly the meanings of their experiences, and begin an affirmation of their personal perspective. Their narratives enable them to assert their voices on both past and present worlds. By engaging in a recreation of their realities, that which exists both outside and inside of them, they hold a certain authority within their own contexts, one that implicitly and explicitly challenges social norms. In this sense, the heart of their creative process, in its interchange with an outside audience, is political. In her analysis of literary texts, including that of Christa Wolf, Bella Brodzki states that:

It is the point at which rhetorical strategies and political practice converge wherein lies the greatest potential for transformation of the dominant structure.

(Brodzki 1988, p. 245)

While she continues to caution her own claim to suggest the possibility of co-optation within that structure, I embrace this assertion as it points to the connections between art and the political. I would argue that rhetorical strategies not only refer to the written language of the text but also to the metaphorical images of the visual. In order to change anything of the social world in which we live, we must demonstrate new ways of seeing, and new languages.

Any movement must tap into our cultural rhetoric to challenge assumptions and norms grounded in our society. Through feminist and other movements, women around the world and from various strata of society have struggled to work within a cultural language whose base is essentially patriarchal. The *arpillerista* movement evidently incorporated the political into their creative process, though it was a realization born after the process had begun. As one woman exclaimed of her making the tapestries, "I believe I learned how to see!" (Agosín 1994, p. 23).

Engaging in their art allowed the women to redefine the social reality with which they were confronted, and reflect upon their identities as political entities, and particularly as women. Christa Wolf too attempts to resist the norms of her society, the objectification of women, the silence imposed on her people not only during but since the Nazi years, and she does this in a manner of resisting categorical genres. While Wolf appears somewhat more self-aware of this process of connecting to the political, the *arpilleristas* manage to more successfully make their way into political life through working together.

The artistic processes of both Wolf and the *arpilleristas*, while yet so different in their form and their origins, delve into the imaginations of their memories to create their art. For both, it is an art distinctly personal, and yet it inevitably speaks

Afterword

My project has focused on women who lived beneath a warring politics of which they were not directly a part, until their art allowed them to create paths into that world. These women, oppressed by virtue of their gender for centuries within their respective cultures, found ways to see into those pervasive structures of power, particularly once they were exacerbated within dictatorship. Yet in many ways they remained on the outskirts of politics: the *arpilleristas* of Chile who fought hard to establish a political legitimacy, repressed once again as a process of redemocratization took place; and Christa Wolf who addressed the subject of alienation, particularly as it refers to women.

During the dictatorship of Chile and in many other Latin American countries during the 1970s and 1980s, a massive number of individuals were detained, facing imprisonment, torture, and often death. While this group was perhaps overwhelmingly male -- as men had undertaken political leadership in years before, and the new government perceived only men as a threat -- a significant number of detainees were indeed women. While imprisoned, some found a creative outlet in writing. The art that these women and men created was produced out of a more overtly direct oppression. The outside shared sentiments -- of being constantly watched; of censoring one's self-expression; of living under a threatening violence -- were precisely realized within the confines of a prisoner's cell.

Toward the end of the Pinochet regime, Bruno Serrano compiled a book of poetry written by five women prisoners, *Poesía Prisionera* (1988). I leave you with one poem of this collection, written by a young woman named Viviana Herrera. In it, she imagines her escape. She writes an representation of freedom, from imprisonment and from other forms of oppression -- and I think it does well to serve next to the struggles of both the *arpilleristas* and Christa Wolf as they dream

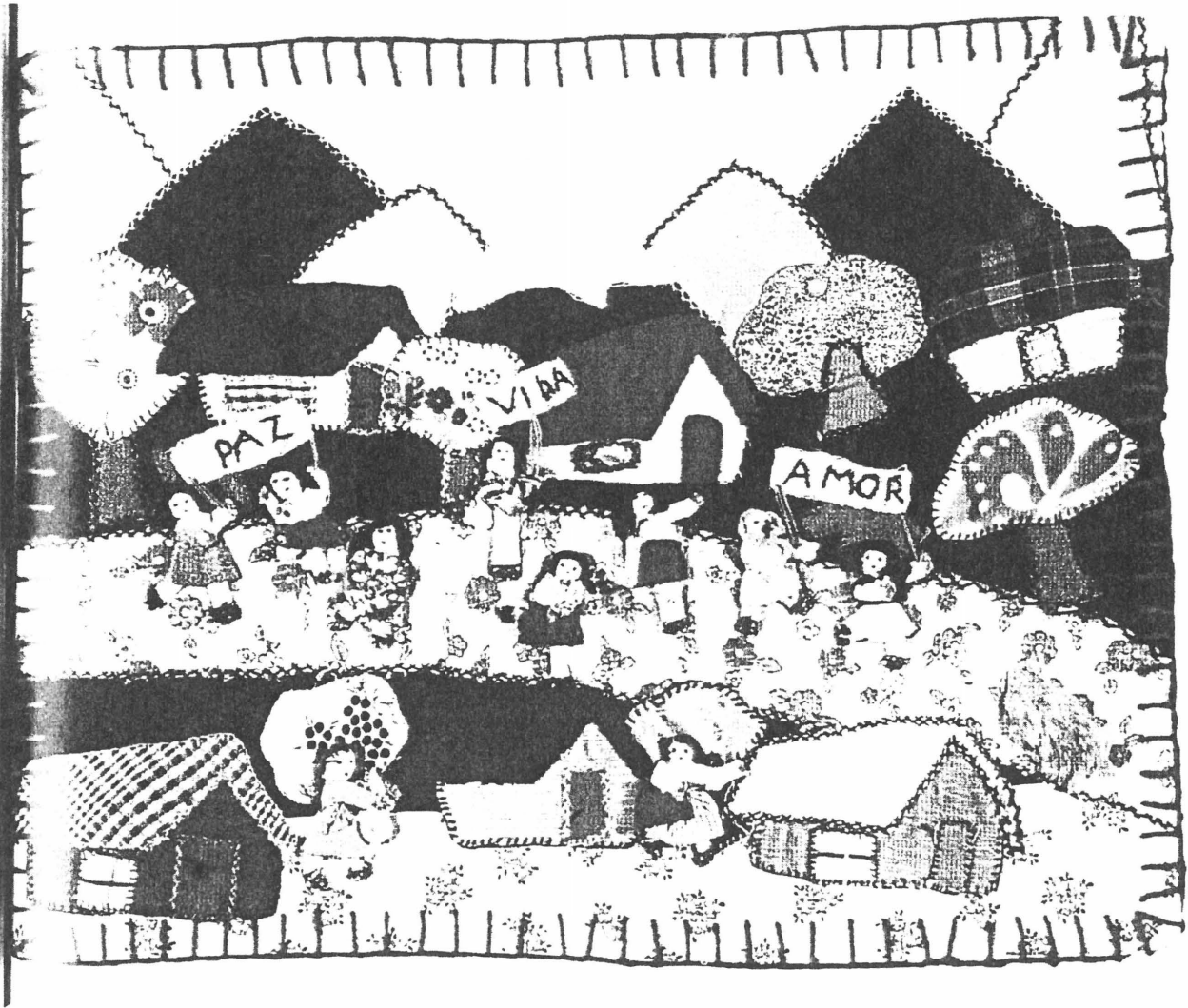
for the possibility of such liberation, however they may define that. The poem bears no title.

*Ayer te vi reír
y los barrotes se quebraron
el sol entró en mis ojos
y me recorrió entera
 la primavera se paseó por los pasillos
rompiendo puertas
y en tus carcajadas
los muros se hicieron polvo
y los candados se cambiaron por campanas
que cantaron
el nacimiento de la libertad
sobre los escombros carcelarios.*

(Yesterday I saw you laughing
and the thick bars broke
the sun entered in my eyes
and crossed over me whole
 the spring passed through the halls
breaking doors
and in your laughter
the walls crumbled into dust
and the padlocks transformed into bells
that sang
the birth of liberty
over the prison rubble.) *

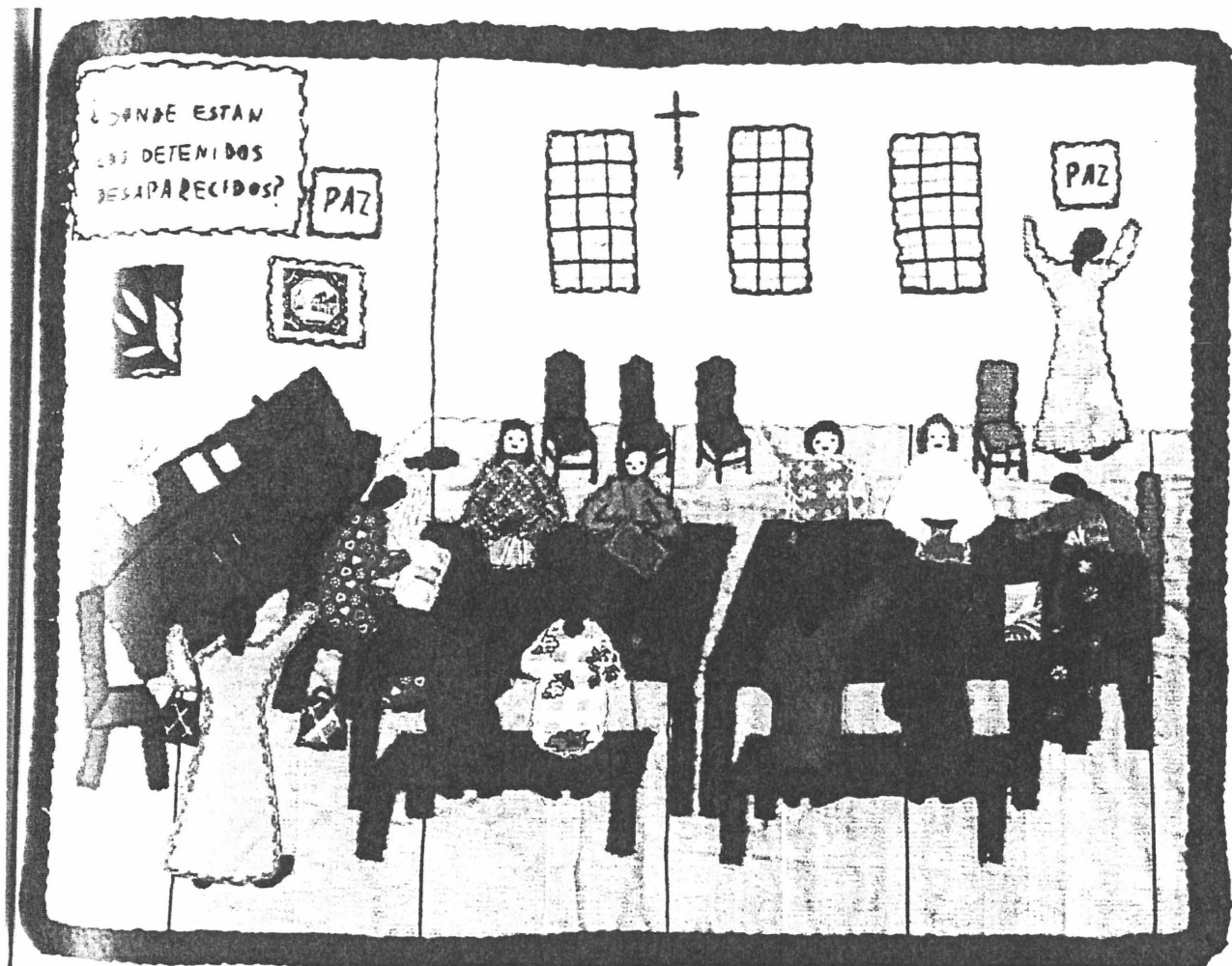
*Translation my own.

APPENDIX

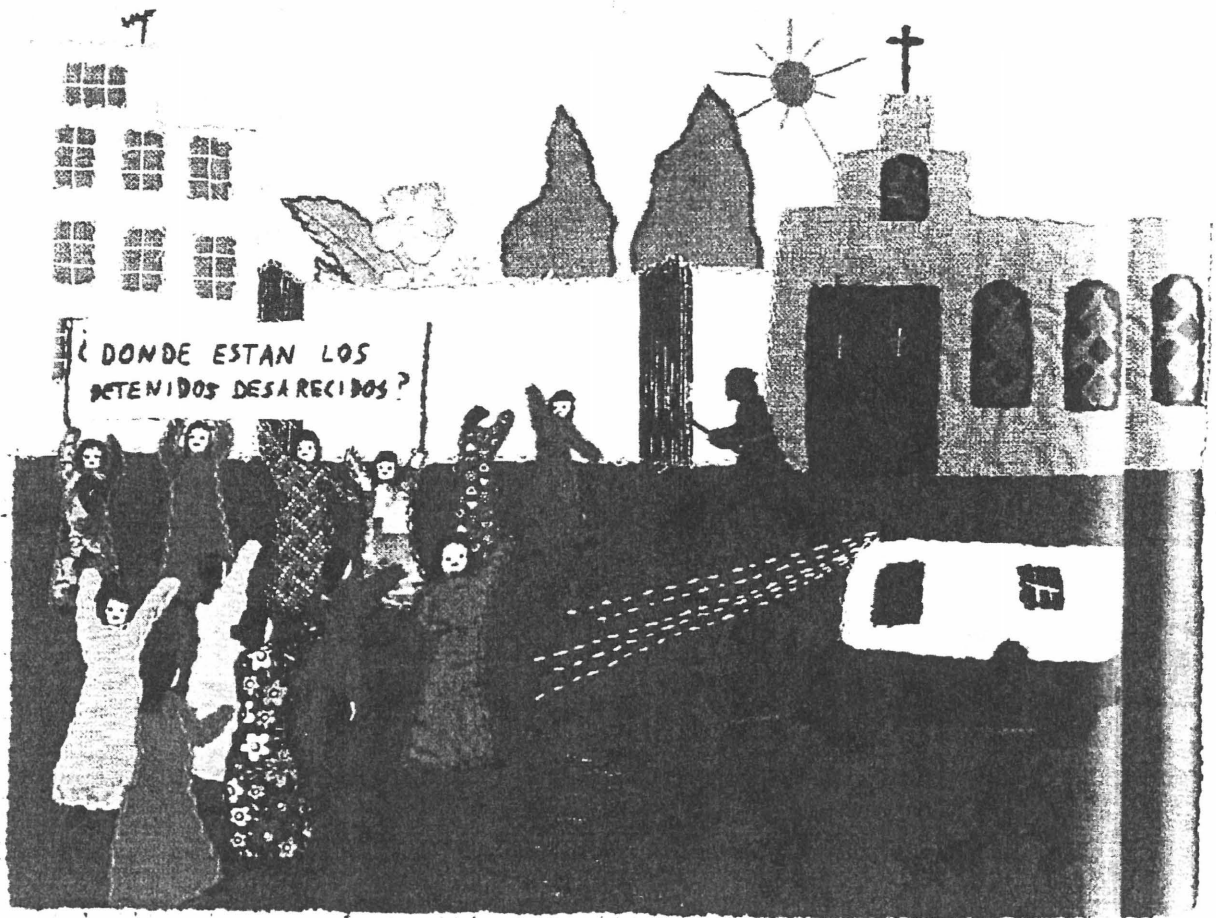


This is one of the first arpilleras made, dated about 1974, less than one year after the beginning of the dictatorship. It addresses basic human rights for the community; the signs protest on behalf of Peace, Life, and Love.

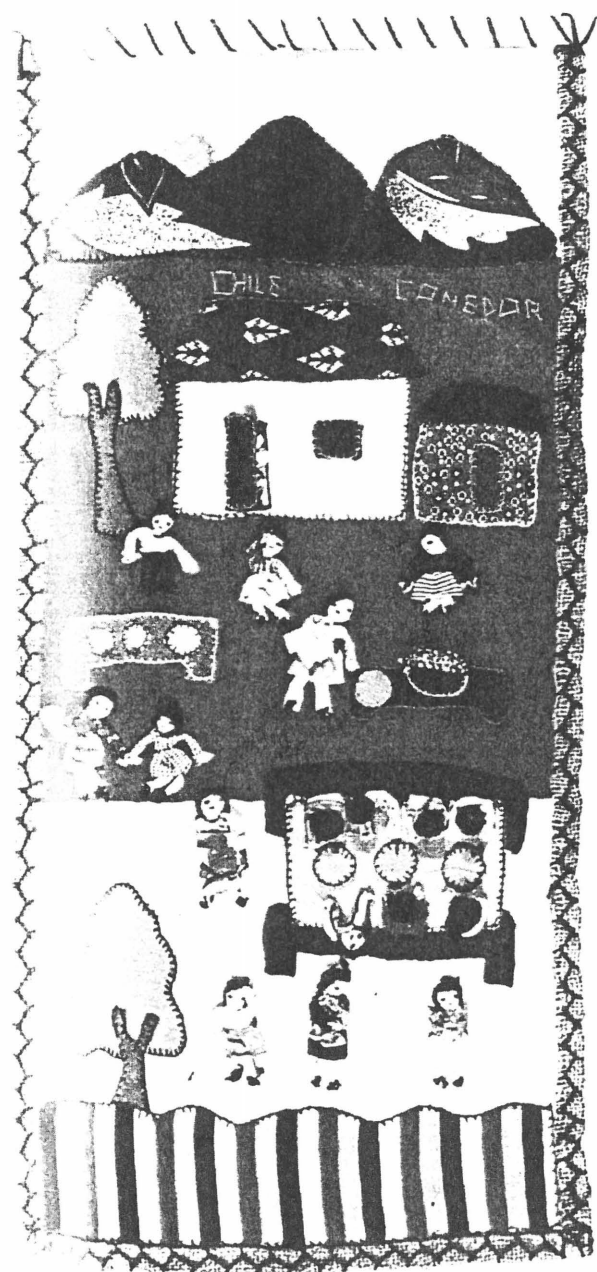
This scene of the barrio neighborhood, the mountains and sun providing a backdrop, will continue to predominate in later arpilleras. However, several differences prevail. The colors are dark, and the shapes flat, presenting a sense of melancholy. The stitching of the border is also simple in comparison to the tighter stitching of later tapestries.



This tapestry depicts a scene of the creation of the arpilleras, the art reflecting its own process. This arpillera workshop is typically set in a church basement, the Christian cross at center. On the walls are signs that read, "Where are the Detained-Disappeared?" a slogan of human rights groups across Chile and Latin America, and simply, "Peace." This arpillera demonstrates the women working together on their individual pieces.



Often the women's political action outside of the workshops became a theme in the tapestries. Completed in 1984, this one shows the changes in both the imagery and the themes of the arpilleras since their beginnings. The aesthetics of this scene are arguably more sophisticated than those of the first example, the images simple and focused. While the women are dressed in bright colors, their arms outstretched in protest, and standing together, the carabineros (policemen) are anonymous in their dark uniforms. The church is ever-present as a theme of Christian faith within a highly Catholic society, and almost as if in an ironic gesture stands behind the armed police.



This tapestry is made not by the arpilleristas but by the women of the Mother's Center, an organization sponsored by Luisa Pinochet, and implicitly her husband the dictator.

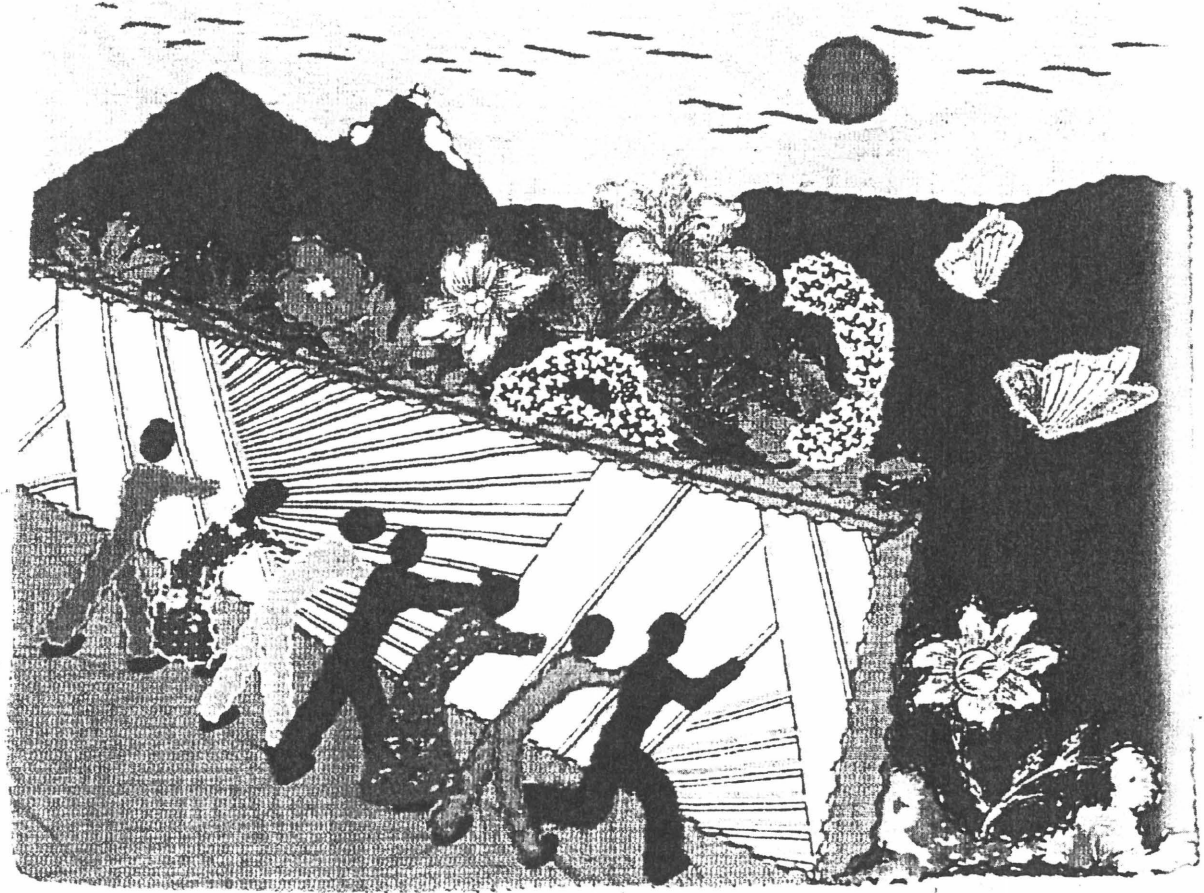
I include it here to demonstrate not only the prevailing craft of needlework of women across the country, but particularly the apparent threat the arpilleristas posed in creating their political stories.

The shape is distinct, and the materials used are likely bought rather than borrowed from clothing. Yet many of the symbols employed by the arpilleristas have been subverted by the artist of this tapestry.

It reveals a peaceful world, without the social protest depicted in many of the arpilleras.



Despite the archetypal scenes that appear to have predominated in the evolution of the arpilleristas' work, some tapestries present new images that resound political needs. This arpillera was made during the 1988 plebiscite, in which just a little over half of the Chilean populace would vote "No," against Pinochet remaining in office. The shadows represent disappeared political leaders -- Newton Morales is the brother of the artist, Violeta Morales -- and the women stand in vibrant colors between them. The words on the silhouettes give the name and then, "Did you forget me? Yes - No," a reminder of what becomes important when voting. This tapestry demonstrates how the politics of these women has continued to be practiced since their beginnings. The women entered the political scene on behalf of others, mostly men, and though they have made many changes in their self-identity, they remain driven by this need to work for a cause that is somehow outside of themselves.



This is one of my favorite arpilleras, made in 1989 as the Pinochet dictatorship was about to leave power. Marjorie Agosín explains in her caption that the image foreshadows democracy. The wall represents a barrier to this more fulfilling political life, that is characterized on the other side by blooming flowers. The movement toward democracy is presented as an effort born of the people. As with the previous tapestry, the images have become based more on metaphor than on a photographic scene.

All photographed arpilleras from:
Agosín, Marjorie. "Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile, 1974 - 1994."
Photographs by Emma Sepúlveda and Ted Polunbaum. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

Bibliography

- Aeschylus I. *Agamemnon of Oresteia*. (C. 458 BC) Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947.
- Agosín, Marjorie. *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile, 1974-1994*. Trans. Celeste Kostopulos-Cooperman. Photographs by Emma Sepúlveda and Ted Polunin. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Allende, Isabel. *Paula*. Trans. Margaret Sayers Peden. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.
- Angelou, Maya. *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Bantam Books, 1970.
- Beeler, Karin E. "Re-creating Cassandra and Anna Karenina: Unheard Voices in Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* and Aritha van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere*." *Critique*. Vol. XXXVI, No. 4, Summer 1995.
- Boyle, Catherine M. "Touching the Air: The Cultural Force of Women in Chile". in *'Viva': Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*. ed. Radcliffe, Sarah A. and Westwood, Sallie. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Ed. Brodzki, Bella and Schenck, Celeste. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiographies*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Brodzki, Bella. "Mothers, Displacement, and Language in the Autobiographies of Nathalie Sarraute and Christa Wolf."
- Sommer, Doris. "Not Just a Personal Story: Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self."
- Ed. Castro-Klarén, Sara, Sylvia Molloy, and Beatriz Sarlo. *Women's Writing in Latin America: An Anthology*. San Francisco: Westview Press, 1991.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. [no more information]
- Constable, Pamela and Valenzuela, Arturo. *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991.
- Gitlin, Todd. "'I Did Not Imagine That I Lived in Truth.'" *The New York Times Book Review*. April 4, 1993.
- Ed. Gluck, Sherna Berger and Patai, Daphne. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

- Hafner, Katie. "A Nation of Readers Dumps its Writers." *The New York Times Magazine*. January 10, 1993.
- Hong Kingston, Maxine. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: A Division of Random House, 1976.
- Kerby, Anthony Paul. "The Adequacy of Self-Narration: A Hermeneutical Approach." [no more information]
- LaDuke, Betty. "Embroideries of Life and Death: *Chile. Compañeras: Women, Art, and Social Change in Latin America*. San Francisco: City Light Books, 1985.
- Loach, Barbara. *Power and Women's Writing in Chile*. Madrid: Editorial Pliegos.
- McDonald, W.E. "Who's Afraid of Wolf's Cassandra -- or Cassandra's Wolf?: Male Tradition and Women's Knowledge in Cassandra." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*. Volume 20, Number 3, Fall 1990.
- Oppenheim, Lois Hecht. *Politics in Chile: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and the Search for Development*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.
- Ed. Personal Narrative Group. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Frieden, Sandra. "Transformative Subjectivity in the Writings of Christa Wolf."
- Ed. Smith, Sidonie and Watson, Julia. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Kaplan, Caren. "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects."
- Quinby, Lee. "The Subject of Memoirs: *The Woman Warrior's* Technology of Ideographic Selfhood."
- Beverley, John. "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)."
- Uribe, Armando. *The Black Book of American Intervention in Chile*. Trans. Cassart, Jonathan. Boston: Beacon Press, 1974.
- Wolf, Christa. *Patterns of Childhood* (formerly *A Model Childhood*). Trans. Ursule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.
- _____. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. Trans. Jan van Heurck. New York: The Noonday Press; Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, c. 1983 (Trans. 1984).

- _____. "What Remains." June-July 1979/November 1989. *What Remains and Other Stories*. Trans. Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1993
- _____. *The Author's Dimension: Selected Essays*. Ed. Alexander Stephan. Introduction by Grace Paley. Trans. Jan van Heurck. New York: The Noonday Press; Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1993.
- "A Few Notes about My Work as a Writer."
 - "Interview with Myself."
 - "Reading and Writing."
 - "A Conversation with Grace Paley."
- _____. *Accident*. Trans. Jan van Heurck.