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Book Review: Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile

Margaret D. Stetz

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Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The *Arpillera* Movement in Chile, Second Edition. Marjorie Agosin. 2008. Foreword by Isabel Allende. Introduction by Peter Kornbluh. Afterword by Peter Winn. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 240 pp. (includes illustrations, foreword, acknowledgments, and chronology). \$65.00 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Margaret D. Stetz¹

In his Introduction to *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love*, Peter Kornbluh likens Marjorie Agosin's work on the collages first woven by Chilean women during the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet to the very projects that she documents, saying that "this book is nothing less than a literary *arpillera*" (10). Kornbluh draws this analogy as a compliment to Agosin, but it also proves an accurate assessment. Among the many motives behind the needlework done by *arpilleristas* has been the desire to produce a lasting tribute to something dearly loved, whether the relatives who were "disappeared" by Pinochet's regime or the ideals of democracy, peace, and human rights that were destroyed by the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende's constitutional government. At the same time that they have been the recorders of both individual and collective memory, the creators of the tapestries have also been political dissidents, using fabric as their medium for protest. Through the simple but dynamic designs of their cloth squares, they have called for long-sought answers about the fates of the "disappeared," for legal prosecution of those who tortured and murdered them, and for the establishment of a new Chile that would extend justice and economic opportunity to all, though especially to the poor and to women.

Marjorie Agosin has followed their lead, combining in her study of the *arpilleristas*' work the dual roles of memorial-maker and of activist that they themselves have performed, even as she plays the more conventional part of a feminist historian. Unlike theirs, her chosen medium of communication is not primarily visual; in place of their bright-hued cloth and threads, she has, with the assistance of Jennifer Rowell as her English translator, imagistic and often lyrical language at her disposal. Nevertheless, there is a strong visual component to this volume, thanks to its nearly forty pages of color photographs (most of them by John Wiggins) of *arpilleras* and *arpilleristas* in the center section, as well as the numerous black-and-white views of people and of relevant Chilean sites—ranging from workshops in churches to the cemeteries that house graves of executed political prisoners—interspersed throughout the text. Just as the *arpilleras* have often been collaborative works of art, involving groups of women who share their grief and anger while laboring together, so *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love* is an assemblage of sections contributed by a variety of participants: it comprises not only Agosin's reflections on the *arpillera* movement, but a chronology of Chilean history since the 1940s compiled by Christian Opazo; twelve *testimonios* of different generations of *arpilleristas* that Agosin collected from the 1970s through 2006; and a variety of framing commentaries—an Introduction, a Foreword, an Afterword, and an Epilogue—by several different writers (the shortest of these by the distinguished novelist, Isabel Allende).

¹ Margaret D. Stetz is the Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware

But Agosin's book is also related to the *arpilleras* in another way, for it shares with them an aesthetic, as well as political, commitment to the idea of reusing and revisiting past "material," whether of a literal or figurative sort. Often, the narratives in needlework, sewn by women who dared not speak out in any other way about their country's dire situation, were pieced together from scraps of old clothing that had belonged to the missing. Returning to those memory-laden garments, incorporating them into a new variation on story-quilts, and preserving the histories of lost loved ones through them proved an important feature of the construction of *arpilleras*. It made the tapestries significant for the individual weavers, for the Chilean nation, and for the international human rights organizations that supported the *arpilleristas* from abroad by buying and displaying their efforts. Agosin herself is recycling and recasting material in this second edition of *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love*. Although she explicitly acknowledges the work she has done in her study by the same title, issued by the University of New Mexico Press in 1996, an even earlier incarnation also underlies this project: Agosin's *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras*, published by the Red Sea Press in 1987. Thus, this is the third time in twenty years that she has returned to this subject, seemingly driven to keep reporting on the quest for justice of the *arpilleristas*, many of whom are elderly and some of whom are now dying.

To any reader, it will be clear that Agosin is deeply invested in keeping alive and in the foreground these women's accomplishments, which include not merely the art objects that they fashioned, but their successes in altering Chile's political climate and in helping to ensure the end of militarism and repression, through their function as conscience to the nation. For any reviewer of this second edition, however, the chief question must be, what does this new version of the book contribute? One could point, of course, to the additional "material" that history itself has now provided. The various commentators who introduce and end the volume all emphasize the events after 1997, when the wheels of international justice finally turned: Pinochet was first detained in London on charges of genocide and later indicted in Chile. Although the former dictator escaped prosecution and trial on medical grounds, the story of his later years does serve as a crucial frame to the narrative of the *arpilleras*—one that Agosin could not yet offer in the earlier edition—and as further proof of their continuing moral influence.

Undeniably, though, from a feminist perspective, the most valuable additions are the five new sections of *testimonios* by surviving *arpilleristas*. In these firsthand recollections, gathered in Santiago by Agosin in 2005–2006, we hear an increased frankness about the circumstances under which the women began their needlework in the 1970s. With age and distance in time (and with the deaths of some of the original participants involved), the *arpillera*-makers have been freed to tell stories about gendered brutality at home that sometimes mirrored, on a small scale, the brutality of the military regime. Among the most chilling is the testimony of Maria Madariaga:

Many of the women began rebelling against their husbands and defending their participation in the workshops, which gave us life. Some of the other women had husbands that would hit them, sometimes breaking their teeth. Sometimes we saw Maria with a small towel in her mouth and her face was all purple. Her husband didn't want her to make *arpilleras*—or to leave the house for that matter.

But we had to leave the house and go to our meetings! We had to be together!
(141).

With these new accounts of domestic violence and resistance, the heroism of the *arpilleristas* becomes doubly clear, for some of them were fighting on two fronts at once. Marjorie Agosin's *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love* is a heartfelt tribute to, as much as a historical record of, the power of women's art to effect political change. The new edition allows us to appreciate more fully the personal cost of that activism and even to measure it in women's bruises, teeth, and blood.