

***Embroiderers of Ninhue: Stitching Chilean Rural Life.* Carmen Benavente.  
Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2010. 225 pp.\***

Reviewed by Joseph P. Feldman

Carmen Benavente's *Embroiderers of Ninhue* presents an engaging account of rural Chilean women who have taken up crewel embroidery as a means of cultural expression and economic empowerment. Benavente tells this story from the perspective of an "outsider within," as the expatriate Chilean author played a key role in the development and subsequent promotion of this non-traditional art form in a village where she has family ties.

It was during a return visit from the United States in 1971 that Benavente had the "utterly ridiculous" (26) idea to start a community-based embroidery project in Ninhue. The "ridiculousness," or apparent untimeliness, of Benavente's proposition had much to do with the social and political context out of which Ninhue embroidery emerged, a topic that is detailed nicely in the book's opening chapters. Benavente's fateful visit took place as her father's and brothers' nearby farms were on the verge of expropriation as part of the agrarian reform implemented by the democratically-elected socialist government of Salvador Allende. The political climate of the Allende years—made especially divisive by U.S. intervention to destabilize the government—was expressed locally in resentment toward the Benavente family. A "Muera Benavente" ("Death to Benavente") sign and graffiti inciting violence were on public display in Ninhue during the author's trip. Having trouble reconciling these sights with her childhood memories of the village, Benavente felt powerless to effect change in a time of political unrest. "In this feverish state," Benavente recounts, "I sought a path that would cut through the problems and bypass politics" (26). An accomplished practitioner and teacher of crewel embroidery, Benavente hoped to introduce the craft to Ninhue as a means of easing tensions and providing new opportunities for women in the village.

Despite opposition from her family and Benavente's own uncertainty as to how her plans would be received in the community, her initial efforts were met with success. Going door-to-door (including to houses with Che Guevara posters emblazoned on their walls and to those of known opponents of her brothers), Benavente recruited a cohort of 43 women of all ages to participate in the project. Funds for supplies came from embroidery workshops taught by Benavente in the capital city of Santiago; readers learn that some of her students there used these newly-acquired skills to make tapestries commemorating their expropriated estates (38). The local church in Ninhue, whose new leadership was exploring ways to address women's issues, also played a facilitating role. From the outset, Benavente's classes in Ninhue focused almost exclusively on the technical aspects of embroidery (e.g., types of stitches) and participants were encouraged to pursue their own creative visions rather than use patterns.

Thus, a theme that emerges throughout *Embroiderers of Ninhue* is how local artists have taken up the craft in ways that express, and respond to, their social realities. The works themselves

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make up much of the book and they are striking. Ninhue embroiderers commonly depict scenes of rural life (laboring in picturesque fields, mud crab digging, village soccer matches) and local history (the arrival of the village's first television set, the life of Ninhue's nineteenth-century war hero). The artists typically make time for their craft between attending to domestic chores, stitching in the early afternoon as they watch television and prepare *maté* (a South American tea). Benavente's expertise enables her to comment on the technical features of individual pieces and the Ninhue style in general. A specialist will learn, for example, that the Romanian stitch is popular while others have not made it into the local repertoire (49). Another feature of Ninhue embroidery the book addresses is an overall lack of political themes. Here, the local style stands in stark contrast to Chilean *arpilleras*—the protest art that emerged following the 1973 coup and became popular internationally as a vehicle for raising awareness about the Pinochet regime's atrocities. The closest thing one finds to an arpillera-like engagement with state violence comes in Adela Parra's *Police Station*, which could be read as a critique of the Pinochet coup, but this interpretation is apparently rejected by the artist (147). Juana Parra's *Headache*, depicting a woman's frustration with her husband's alcoholism, stands out for its commentary on gender politics.

While one can speak of a "Ninhue look" characterized by certain themes and motifs (99), the book remains attentive to individual creativity and life stories. I found Chapter 7, which presents artist profiles accompanied by examples of the individuals' works, to be particularly effective in giving a sense of what embroidery means to the Ninhue women who practice it. Although, on the whole, the book's presentation of the artwork comes with too many captions (even for this context-loving anthropologist), Benavente is sensitive to the difficulties of interpreting the art of her colleagues and friends and allows for a degree of multivocality. For instance, Adela Parra's *Dove Sampler* appears alongside a caption stating: "I [Benavente] asked her if it [the dove] was a symbol of love or peace. 'No,' she said, 'since the sampler sold so quickly, I quickly adopted it for good luck'" (64).

Benavente gives ample attention to these more practical motivations among Ninhue artists. The marketing of Ninhue embroidery began shortly after the craft's introduction to the village in 1971, with works being displayed in Chilean galleries that same year. Chapters 8 and 9 document the promotion of Ninhue embroidery to international audiences. Benavente and other international partners have doubtless played a key role in helping Ninhue embroidery reach foreign markets, but the leadership and innovation of local artists is also highlighted. For instance, as Ninhue crafts began to face competition from Chilean arpilleras and other Latin American art forms in the global market, artists started to produce embroidered three-dimensional figures and elaborate rugs. Achieving recognition abroad (including exhibits at the International Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe and the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.) has done much to improve the financial status of some artists. Women have used income from embroidery to purchase livestock, tools, and household items. Lina Andrade, whose work *Sowing* adorns the book's cover, was quick to point out to Benavente that, "[embroidery] meant a great deal to me because I liked it and because it was useful economically. I bought myself dentures, a dining room set with six chairs, a bed, kitchen appliances, and so on" (108).

While Benavente should be commended for incorporating these perspectives into her narrative, the book's discussion of the political economy of Ninhue embroidery leaves something to be

desired. A reader knowledgeable of feminist literatures on development and microenterprise, for instance, might have appreciated more information about how, and to what extent, artists' participation in the embroidery project has affected household dynamics and gender roles. Readers are told in several places that men do not feel threatened by this new source of income and we are presented with cases in which women's husbands and sons have assisted them with their embroidery projects (70, 86, 131). Surely these are not the only potential outcomes, however. In addition, topics such as competition among Ninhue embroiderers (and the class dimensions thereof) or the long-term sustainability of the craft as a development strategy are not addressed in a meaningful way.

Yet, as Benavente states clearly in the opening pages, the book is meant as much to "inspire readers to action if they imagine such projects of their own" (5) as it is to share the Ninhue case with scholars and practitioners of art and community development. In meeting this goal, the book certainly succeeds. One hopes that Benavente's contribution finds a readership among embroiderers in the global North, who would likely enjoy learning about how the craft they practice has been taken up in a social setting that differs from their own. For anthropologists, *Embroiderers of Ninhue* might serve as an affecting reminder of the important role that non-traditional art forms can play in the lives of artists and in the livelihoods of communities.

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