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TITLE: “Tenues límites entre la historia y las historias:” Reading Alicia Partnoy’s Textual and Visual Testimony, *La Escuelita*

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ABSTRACT: Alicia Partnoy’s literary testimony, *The Little School. Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina*, was first published in English translation in 1986. The focus of this study is the original Spanish manuscript revised by the author and published twenty years later in Argentina under the title *La Escuelita. Relatos testimoniales*. I address two aspects of said work that have not yet received due critical attention: the reinforcement of the testimonial function of the Spanish literary text due to its acceptance as legal evidence in the truth trials of 1999, and the role that the visual representations made by Raquel Partnoy, the author’s mother, play within the testimonial narrative. Departing from these images, I analyze the original ways in which *La Escuelita* attests to the transgressive use of fiction made by victims during captivity. I argue that rather than be opposed to referential testimony, fiction becomes here the lens through which victims relate to and make sense of the world. In a final reflection, I examine the distancing and identification effects that mark testimonial narrative, inserting that narrative in a broader discourse of solidarity and social justice which opens *La Escuelita* to the real.

KEYWORDS: Argentinian literature, contemporary Latin American literature, *La Escuelita*; Partnoy, Alicia; Testimony and Fiction, Text and Image

RESUMEN: El testimonio literario de Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School. Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* (1986), apareció originalmente en traducción inglesa. El centro de este estudio es el manuscrito original español que la autora revisó y publicó en Argentina dos décadas después, bajo el título *La Escuelita. Relatos testimoniales*. Exploro dos aspectos que aún no han recibido la debida atención crítica: el refuerzo de la función testimonial del texto literario español después de que fuera aceptado como evidencia en los juicios de la verdad de 1999, y el papel que las representaciones visuales hechas por Raquel Partnoy, la madre de la autora, desempeñan dentro de esta narrativa testimonial. Partiendo de dichas imágenes, analizo los modos originales en que *La Escuelita* representa el uso transgresivo de la ficción hecho por las víctimas durante su cautiverio. Propongo que lejos de ser contraria al testimonio referencial, la ficción deviene aquí el prisma a través del cual las víctimas se relacionan con la realidad que buscan comprender. En una reflexión final, examino los efectos de distanciamiento e identificación que constituyen la narrativa testimonial, insertándola en un discurso más amplio de solidaridad y justicia social que abre *La Escuelita* a lo real.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura argentina, Literatura latinoamericana contemporánea, *La Escuelita*, Partnoy, Alicia; Testimonio y Ficción, Texto e imagen

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“Tenues límites entre la historia y las historias:” Reading Alicia Partnoy’s Textual and Visual Testimony, *La Escuelita*^{1*}

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En las Escuelitas están los desaparecidos, a quienes secuestran de la vida. Una mañana, una tarde o una noche cualquiera los amordazan y les vendan los ojos.

—Alicia Partnoy, *La Escuelita*

In Diana Taylor’s seminal study *Disappearing Acts* (1997), Alicia Partnoy’s *The Little School. Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* (1986) is placed in the category of literature produced by *reaparecidos* who were victims of forced disappearance during the Argentine military regime. According to Taylor, such works, “unlike the evidence given by these same people before human rights commissions, are literary representations, necessarily removed from the events that took place in the past” (141, emphasis added). Further on, Taylor identifies a tension between Partnoy’s “testimonial” gesture of recording the disappearance of a group of individuals, and her “literary” attempt to restore life to these individuals for the reader (165). Following the same line of thought, in subsequent studies on *The Little School*, Louise A. Detwiler has described the paradox inherent in the genre known as “testimonial novel,” where the reader of fictional writing is expected to believe the truth of the narrated events (“The Blindfolded (Eye)Witness” 61–62), and Amy Kaminsky has referred to the “uncomfortable marriage of two modes,” the fictional and the nonfictional (53, emphasis added).

Focusing on the text revised by the author and published only twenty years later in Argentina under the title *La Escuelita. Relatos testimoniales* (2006), this study proposes that Partnoy’s poignant narrative has overcome the tension that was initially identified between testimony, understood as referential

discourse, and literariness, understood as fictional space inevitably detached from the events which actually occurred.²

Entering *La Escuelita*

Con la carne de la poesía anestesiada no se puede construir versos...

—Alicia Partnoy, *La Escuelita*

The incisive image of anesthetized flesh, chosen to evoke paralysis or suspension of literary writing, is a recurring theme in Partnoy’s work.³ In a recent interview, recalling the day she received pen and paper while in the Villa Floresta prison, after her traumatic stay in the concentration camp called *La Escuelita*, Partnoy employs the term “anestesiada” once more to describe her temporary incapability of creating literature. Partnoy’s symbolic retreat from this paralysis, we learn upon further reading, was the rewriting of each and every one of the poems that she had written before her abduction:

“El día en que terminé de recordarlos me avisaron de que... ya no estaría desaparecida. Creo que fue una casualidad muy significativa: había recuperado mi historia como creadora y volvía a la vida.” (in Collette 122–23)

Since then, Partnoy has continued exploring the limits of the unspeakable that becomes speakable through literature.

The main body of *La Escuelita*, which is undoubtedly Alicia Partnoy's work with the greatest artistic and political impact to date, consists of twenty short stories and a series of visual representations made by Raquel Partnoy, the author's mother.⁴ The textual and visual narrative seeks to return a voice to a "we" composed of dissipated singularities which now can and must, ethically and politically, be imagined. Carefully crafted diegetic micro-universes unfold, each one complete within itself. Due to the at times uncertain identity of characters, a referential ambiguity emerges that has been interpreted as a recreation for the reader of the sense of disorientation experienced by the blindfolded prisoners (Detwiler 62).⁵ The intermittent indeterminacy of narrative identity that characterizes *La Escuelita* may also mirror here the confusion created by the renaming of prisoners, a common practice both among the soldiers who were responsible for disappearances and among Partnoy and her fellow activists, with the objective of not being recognized.⁶ In addition, more broadly, I posit that the malleable narrative voice in *La Escuelita* is the result of a solidary "democratizing" movement through which every victim is able to either express herself from the "I" perspective, or to be expressed from the third person.

It is revealing that Partnoy did *not* choose to write her literary testimony from a unireferential first-person point of view which would have pursued the expression of only her personal experience during captivity, and that she did not opt either for an absolute plural which would blur the singularity of each victim within the collective. Instead, as these stories unfold we see a chameleonic narrator take shape whose implicit function is to recreate and weave together the voices of the *desaparecidos*, including that of Partnoy herself. A heterogeneous plurality of imagined victim subjects reconstruct their agency either by directly recounting part of their own biographical experience or becoming protagonists of the short episode being narrated. The contrasting narrative pieces, of

between two and five pages in length, serve to illuminate the ordinary within the extraordinary, the quotidian within horror, within a markedly fragmentary narrative.⁷

This polyphonic literary testimony has also been received as a clear response to the official univocal discourse which covertly supported the systematic disappearance of citizens during the Argentinian military dictatorship (Pinet 89-108). Indeed, defiantly, Partnoy's literary *testimonio* opens with an excerpt of an official statement, "Fragmento del Documento Final de la Junta Militar sobre la Guerra contra la Subversión y el Terrorismo," which reads, "Se habla [así mismo] de personas 'desaparecidas' que se encontrarían detenidas por el gobierno argentino en los ignotos lugares del país. Todo esto no es sino una falsedad utilizada con fines políticos" (17).⁸

As we learn upon reading the author's introduction, at the beginning of 1977 Alicia Partnoy, a victim of state terrorism, was secretly abducted and transported to a clandestine detainment center located on the outskirts of her hometown, Bahía Blanca. When she was released at the end of 1979, after several months in the concentration camp and two years in various "legal" prisons, the government forced her to leave the country. Partnoy took refuge in the United States, where she still resides.⁹ Since then, her defense of human rights has not only unfolded in the literary field but also in the political and social arena. Partnoy has testified before organizations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International and the Argentine Human Rights Commission, as well as in the truth trials of Bahía Blanca.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the limits between Partnoy's literary work, supposedly detached from the events that have occurred, and her activism for the cause of the *desaparecidos* have been overtly demarcated (Taylor 141). The idea that literature is an autonomous field removed from the real may follow here from the understanding that language is a medium of symbolic

construction. Because literature is *par excellence* made in language, the argument goes, it always fictionalizes. For thinkers like Paul de Man, even the autobiographical, conventionally charged with referentiality, becomes a fictional form: the performative metaphor through which language substitutes the referred reality or through which, one could also suggest, language itself becomes the referred event.¹⁰ Hence the denial by rigorous Latin Americanists such as Roberto González Echevarría of testimonialists' claims of authenticity.¹¹

Notably, within the context of Latin American literature the questioning of authenticity and authority inevitably leads back to the scandal unleashed by anthropologist David Stoll.¹² In his widely discussed book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, Stoll has argued that Menchú's literary *testimonio* presents inconsistencies with respect to what really happened. This controversy brings us back to the blurry notion of "fiction," which can also mean invention, imagination. Whether or not Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1998) is a work of fiction understood in the latter sense of the term, the question posed here is a more general one, which simply put would read: Is it legitimate that testimonial narrative, in the name of its literariness, includes invented aspects? Partnoy's own creative work clearly outlines this friction between "straight testimony," to use Kaminski's expression (52), and literature.¹³ Cited below are revealing stanzas from the poem "Testimony," collected in Partnoy's book *The Revenge of the Apple/Venganza de la manzana*:¹⁴

Dicen que en estas cosas
no debe quedar ningún espacio
librado
a la imaginación o a la duda.
Saco
el informe de Amnistía
y hablo por esa tinta.
Digo: "Lean."
.....
Enarboló la acción como receta,
la información como antídoto infalible

y, una vez desatado cada nudo,
digo mis versos.
Resistí. Voy entera. (97, 99, emphasis added)

These lines trace the path of Partnoy's divided voices earlier evoked by Taylor, one relating to her literary work and the other to her work as a human rights activist. According to the poetic voice, imagination is by convention supposed to be excluded from testimony; imagination, the argument would follow, should be confined to the realm of literary fiction. Generally, *La Escuelita* is regarded as fiction in the sense that it is the result of an aesthetically refined work on language, and that it is at least partly based on imagination and even invention. Indeed, in her rigorous critical study on Partnoy's literary testimony, "Re-enacting Memory," Eburne Portela has referred to the "problematic paradox" that Detwiler detected when analyzing the subtitle of the English edition of the book, *Tales of Disappearance & Survival in Argentina* (55). Strictly, Detwiler's assertion that the term "tales" "pronounces an element of invention which many critics in the field would contend is in direct opposition with testimonial writing" ("The Blindfolded (Eye)Witness" 63) is still applicable to the Spanish term "relatos," which may mean "cuentos," in *La Escuelita. Relatos testimoniales*.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as made evident by the explicit use of the word "testimoniales" in the new subtitle, the testimonial function of Partnoy's literary text is significantly strengthened in the Argentine edition.

Published in 2006, the Spanish text sheds light on the determining fact that *La Escuelita* was included as legal evidence at the truth trials of Bahía Blanca. Under the principle of free evaluation of court evidence, the original manuscript formed, along with other evidence presented at the truth trials of 1999, the factual base on which the case regarding the concentration camp La Escuelita was ruled. In the appendix that closes the Argentine publication, "Anexo 5," Partnoy openly describes the history of the original manuscript, its subsequent translation and publication in English, and its publication in Spanish after the text had served as legal proof. The

author then adds, “Hoy, a veinte años de su publicación en inglés... estas páginas rompen con los últimos restos de su exilio para llegar a tus manos” (123). In addition, more generally, the linguistic register employed in the author’s introduction and the peritextual annexes that frame the stories of *La Escuelita* is informative and at times juridical, by contrast with the rest of the book.¹⁶ I propose that the inclusion in the Argentine publication of three additional appendices of this kind, and the short narrative “Había una vez una Escuelita...” analyzed below, further reinforces the testimonial function of Partnoy’s literary text.¹⁷

Partnoy prolongs her literary testimony through returning the text to its Spanish original language: *La Escuelita* is a repetition with variations of *The Little School*. In the final note referred to earlier, “Anexo 5,” absent in the English version, and thus exclusively addressed to the Spanish-speaking reader, the *testimonialista* also evokes the moment in which the court authorized her to read two of the stories from the original manuscript. It is in Partnoy’s unique performance of reading before the jury, which we will later return to, that I perceive the ultimate symbiosis of her two formerly divided voices, the political and legal voice with the literary.

Fiction as Resistance in *La Escuelita*

...En los espacios irreales
de vendas que trascienden
los pensamientos vedados
y las palabras prohibidas,
en los rincones poblados
por desaparecidos que están
y sombras que fueron,
las manos vencidas resisten.
—Raquel Partnoy, “Las manos resisten”

Through an effect of *mise en abîme*, the two poles of the binomial “testimony and fiction,” whereby fiction is now understood

as imagination and invention, are also intimately articulated within the textual and visual narrative of *La Escuelita*. The images by Raquel Partnoy included in the book capture the reader’s gaze, figuratively representing, in turn, the introspective gaze of victims who were unable to see. These intriguing black and white drawings are the indirect, aestheticized form of visual testimony that Raquel Partnoy provides about the experience of her daughter and other disappeared persons in concentration camps. In recent statements, the artist explained that she created the images before the original manuscript of *La Escuelita* was written (“Dibujos en *La Escuelita*”). By working together with the verbal language, not bound by it, these drawings contribute to the narrative construction of a visual and textual *testimonio* which revolves around vision, or lack thereof.



Fig. 1. Raquel Partnoy, *Las manos resisten*, in *La Escuelita*.¹⁸

The images display the prisoners’ eyes, which are visible from behind the blindfold: to borrow the narrator’s expression in *The Little School*, we may refer to them as the “mind’s eye” (42). Using Raquel Partnoy’s visual representations in dialogue with the verbal language of testimony as a point of departure, I will propose that the introspective gaze opens the victim to a transgressive space of fictionalization. It is from within this space of creative resistance, I claim, that the captives seek

to understand and navigate their world, as well as establish a sense of solidarity amongst themselves.

Upon reading the first pages of the Argentinean edition, we learn that the prisoners in *La Escuelita* were “obligados a permanecer tirados en colchones o en el piso, sin hablar, sin ver, manos atadas, estómago vacío, sopor-tando golpes, insultos y la incertidumbre de la bala final” (20, emphasis added). In the next story, the narrator describes how the new prisoner, understood to be Alicia Partnoy, realizes that during the first night one of the guards had adjusted her blindfold (22). The repressive gesture of adjusting the blindfold in order to guarantee that the captives cannot recognize one another nor their captors is in fact constant.¹⁹ As a consequence, the detainees end up internalizing the basic code that maintains the order of the camp, to the extent that one of the prisoners in the story “Fórmula de tratamiento” requests to have his blindfold replaced, fearing that the guard would discover it was loose and accuse him of not telling (85). In effect, those imprisoned in *La Escuelita* do not see but are seen, closely watched over by the military guards and torturers.²⁰ These lines found in Raquel Partnoy’s poem “Las Manos Resisten,” written to comment on the drawing of the same title, explicitly propose that the prisoners sense “las imágenes escondidas / de los represores asomados / a imaginarios telones” (no pag). What tactics are employed before the omnipresent gaze of the enemy, internalized by the captives? My point of focus will shift from the lurking external gaze of the soldiers to the introspective, liberating gaze of the victims earlier described.

In one of her studies of *The Little School*, Detwiler mentions that “these eye-witnesses undoubtedly manage to ‘see’ the referent through a combination of sensory input from sources other than the visual mode” (“The Blindfolded (Eye)Witness” 62, emphasis added). It becomes clear upon reading Partnoy’s literary testimony that the witnesses

who base their interpretation of the world on sensorial perceptions such as hearing, touch, smell and, on occasion, very limited sight, must rely on the imaginative action of the “mind’s eye” in order to apprehend the real. As implied in the Spanish version of the story “Benja’s First Night,” “La primera noche del ‘Benja,’” the perceptual signals that the victim needs in order to interpret her surroundings may come from fellow prisoners with whom communication is very rarely possible. In *La Escuelita*, Alicia Partnoy’s fellow activist and friend, Benja, who has just arrived to the camp, tells himself, “¡Mirá vos dónde vine a encontrármela a ‘la Rosa’ [Alicia Partnoy]! Esta venda me aprieta demasiado los ojos. Esto no sería nada... si pudiera sentarme... ‘Rosa’ no me habla, no se debe poder hablar. Sólo me avisó que estaba allí, justo en la cucheta de arriba, la cucheta a la que estoy atado” (37).²¹ Again, these lines are absent in the English narrative. While *The Little School* only records the point of view that we understand to be Partnoy’s own, in *La Escuelita* the narrative alternates between typographically different fragments, each one corresponding to the stream of consciousness of a captive. Despite the fact that in this story dialogue between the prisoners never actually occurs, these two parallel monologues included in the Spanish text attest to a process of solitary identification between victims that helps alleviate the lack of communication.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to being a lens through which the victim subject grasps reality, imagination, and sometimes invention, provide a means of coping with this oppressive reality. In the Spanish version of the testimony, we learn that in the concentration camp, *La Escuelita*, the torturers constantly try to convince each detainee that she does not exist, “de que ha desaparecido del mundo, de las guías telefónicas, de su puesto en la historia, del pulso de sus seres queridos” (19). In this context of extreme dehumanization, the character of the story entitled “Telepatía” (re)acts by deploying strategies

leading to the humanization of the self, which relate to the memory of her place in her family history. With the objective in mind of recreating an encounter with her family, the victim describes her preparations for mentally abandoning the space of reclusion:

me desperté sobresaltada tratando de acordarme dónde había dejado a mi hija aquel mediodía, para abrir los ojos a una venda que me los tapaba hacía ya veinte mediodías. Ese sobresalto me dio una idea... Querer es poder. Si yo quiero, puedo controlar mi pensamiento, hacerlo viajar, huir. SALIR ¡Te lo ordeno! A mí me dan tantas órdenes: “¡Sentarse!;Acostarse!;Boca abajo! Apurarse.” Por eso yo le exigí a mi pensamiento: “¡Vamos! Rajá. Rápido, Salí.” (43)

After various failed attempts, the prisoner is able to imaginarily abandon the space of reclusion and “see” her family members. Similarly, through the strategic use of imagination, another character in “Conversación bajo la lluvia” invisibly reconstructs her own agency. Following the information included in the peritextual sections, in these two pieces the reader is prompted to associate the main character with Alicia Partnoy. However, “Conversación bajo la lluvia,” like the piece “Chanquetas con una sola flor,” is written in third person. In these two stories, the third-person narration might in fact be the narrative trace that marks the symbolic distance Partnoy takes with the narrated world, a distance which makes the unspeakable speakable, as suggested earlier.²² “Conversación bajo la lluvia” revolves around the moment in which the guards interrupt the dialogue between the main character and María Elena, another victim. After separating the two women, the soldiers ask one of them to undress herself. We are then presented with the character’s pervasive efforts to consciously fictionalize reality in order to escape or cope with that oppressive reality. The mechanism of self-empowerment at play becomes even

more obvious when the omniscient narrator explains, “El desprecio se sumó al odio mientras se quitaba el resto de la ropa como si ellos no existieran, como si fueran gusanos que podía borrar de su mente con sólo pensar en cosas más agradables”(60).²³

The combative use of imagination by victim subjects in *La Escuelita* is, as demonstrated above, inseparable from the conditions of mental and physical repression in which the captives found themselves. Amply, while Partnoy’s prose is overtly rooted in fiction, the understanding of fiction suggested here is far from being opposed to that of truth and referential testimony. As I will point out shortly, *La Escuelita* brings to mind the category of contemporary works evoked by Josefina Ludmer in her essay “Literaturas post-autónomas,” works in which the real “incluye el acontecimiento pero también lo virtual, lo potencial, lo mágico y lo fantasmático.”²⁴ Indeed, not only does Partnoy’s textual and visual testimony pertain to the ambiguous territory of literary fiction, but also, it attests to the emancipatory power which fictionalizing had during the traumatic experience of captivity.

In conclusion: Building a Discourse of Solidarity



Fig. 2. Raquel Partnoy, *Sin título*, in *La Escuelita*.

Words and images intermix in *La Escuelita*, creating a unique and articulate piece of testimonial literature. In the textual and visual narrative first-hand testimony given by Alicia Partnoy, the victim, and second-hand testimony given in the form of drawings by the victim's mother, Raquel Partnoy, are woven together. The skeptical testimonial reader may momentarily question the truth-value of these visual representations, following the general assumption referred to by Portela, "the one who survives is the closest to the truth of what happened than the ones who did not" (47). Nevertheless, the ontological distinction between direct and indirect testimony is of no interest to this critical analysis. Partnoy's assertion considering the aim of her own scholarly work on testimony is here quite illuminating, "Testimonio is not about truth. Rather, the form serves as a tool for building a discourse of solidarity with victims of state terrorism" ("On Being Shorter" 175).²⁵ Raquel Partnoy's drawings, like the one reproduced above, not only symbolically show the solidarity among the female prisoners therein represented, but also, they also show the artist's solidarity with the *desaparecidas*.²⁶

In addition to ascertaining that *La Escuelita* de facto brings us closer to the truth of the events that have occurred, it becomes imperative at this point to underline the necessary inclusion of this *testimonio* in a web of discourses of solidarity and social justice that transcends both the limits of direct and indirect testimony, along with those of the case denounced here by the Partnoys.²⁷ When *La Escuelita* was finally published in Spanish in 2006, the Argentinian government had declared the unconstitutionality of the pardons of state terrorism-related crimes, 959 criminal cases were being reopened, and a new disappearance had recently occurred, that of witness Jorge López, who has not yet reappeared. The publication of works like *La Escuelita* was, and remains, particularly urgent.

As argued in the first section of this study, at least since its recognition as legal

proof in the truth trials of Bahía Blanca, *La Escuelita* can be perceived as the ultimate symbiosis between the fictional and the testimonial. Amply, this articulation of fiction and testimony in Partnoy's narrative calls into question the categories of "literary" and "non-literary." On an intratextual level, this confusion becomes particularly evident when examining the short hybrid text added to the Argentinian edition of the book, "Había una vez una Escuelita..." ("Había una vez"), which has yet to receive due critical attention.²⁸ The Spanish index includes this text, whose title suggests the beginning of an imaginary story, as the first of the short stories composing the book's "literary body." However, as will be shown below, "Había una vez" can and must also be read as a prolonged introduction from the author specifically directed at the Latin American reader.

Unlike "Había una vez," the two short stories from the Spanish manuscript that Partnoy chose to read aloud during the truth trials recount precise episodes depicting life in the camp. The image of Alicia Partnoy sharing these fragments with the jury illustrates the articulation of fiction and testimony, as suggested earlier, and presents, without doubt, the most powerful example of the incursion of literature in the realm of the "non-literary." In an unparalleled and unique literary performance, which became legally binding, Partnoy chose not to read any of the texts in which the "I" recalls her own personal experience as a survivor. Instead, through the reading of "Natividad" and "Graciela: Alrededor de la mesa," Partnoy sought to give her voice to Graciela Romero de Metz, her friend and fellow activist who was abducted and brought to La Escuelita while pregnant.²⁹

In "Anexo 5," Partnoy affirms "seleccioné estas lecturas [durante los juicios de la verdad] porque el único resquicio para la justicia... era la situación de los niños nacidos en cautiverio" (123). When Partnoy wrote these lines, in 1999, the truth trials established the irrefutable existence of webs of appropriation

and trafficking of newborns whose mothers were executed during the military dictatorship.³⁰ The cases of Graciela Romero de Metz, her husband, Raúl Eugenio Metz, who was also murdered during his time in La Escuelita, and their baby are recorded in “Anexo 1” (105–06). Graciela’s son, whose biological identity has yet to be established, was taken by the very military that executed her shortly after she gave birth. In the last story of the series, “Natividad,” Partnoy rewrites in literary language the scene of new life announcing death. The final line of the piece consists of a rhetorical question followed by an ellipsis only in Spanish, “¿Cuántos niños por día nacen prisioneros en /La Escuelita?...” (104). By presenting the case of Graciela’s son, who still awaits justice, and ending with an open question through which testimonial reader may feel interpellated, this text both symbolically and literally leaves the literary testimony without conclusion. Additionally, the allusion to the unknown still to be revealed, as well as the open-ended quality of the testimony, are further reinforced in the Argentinian edition through the insertion of a typographical void between “en” and “La Escuelita,” which are purposely separated into two different lines.

The second short story that Partnoy read aloud during the truth trials, “Graciela: Alrededor de la mesa,” is another poignant piece, located around the middle of the book, in which the expectant mother imaginarily speaks with her unborn child. Together, these texts illuminate the malleable narrative identity that permeates Partnoy’s literary testimony. When analyzing these two stories, Portela refers to psychiatrist Jay Lifton, who has described the survivor’s process of identification with other victims as “[the survivor’s] tendency to incorporate within himself an image of the dead, and then to think, feel and act as he imagines they would” (496).³¹ Hence, Partnoy’s adoption of Graciela’s voice constitutes here “an attempt at identification

with her friend’s suffering and death” (Portela 62). Building upon this observation, I see in the changing narrative voices that mark Partnoy’s literary testimony the textual trace of the identification process through which the *testimonialista* seeks to identify with fictionally recreated singularities. Broadly, an impulse of solidary identification among victims is at the origin of forms of testimonial writing like *La Escuelita*. However, we, as readers, are in turn excluded from such identification processes, since “readers in testimonios are asked not to identify but to act as witness to the events” (Taylor 165).³² With less of an ontological than ethical and political scope, the mechanisms of identification and distancing at play in *La Escuelita*, I propose, are inseparable from the text’s inclusion in a broad discourse of solidarity and social justice that singularizes literary testimony with respect to other modes of literature.

In Partnoy’s *La Escuelita*, the distancing effect I describe and which serves as counterpoint to the process through which the testimonialist identifies herself with other victims, is not only produced by the constant oblique evocation of horror. The linear reading that would generally allow for literary immersion and narrative identification with literary characters becomes here unviable for a number of reasons. First, as shown by Detwiler in her analysis of Raquel Partnoy’s visual works, the images included in *The Little School* demand a high degree of interpretative activity on the part of the reader (“Strategic Silences” 38). I thus propose that in *La Escuelita*, a fragmentary work that is composed of words *and* images, the reader experiences an intermittent perceptual shift that momentarily suspends her reading, allowing her to oscillate between the verbal and the visual. Additionally, the stories themselves, many of which are introduced by fragments of activist poetry, transition from one to the next through abrupt shifts of voice and varying

narrative focus, as the previous pages have highlighted.³³ Moreover, as Detwiler has also pointed out, due to the feeling of confusion created by sporadic unidentified narrative voices in Partnoy's testimonial literature, the reader is also likely to pause in order to consult the annexed documents in search of additional information, interrupting the flow of the stories (Detwiler, "The Blindfolded (Eye) Witness" 111). Lastly, I posit that narrative identification with characters is here disrupted, and the distancing effect with the narrated events is strengthened, when the testimonial reader feels that she is being addressed by the narrative voice.³⁴

I claim that from these interpellations to the testimonial reader emerges the only character with whom we are expected to identify: the intratextual figure of the reader. In *La Escuelita* there are notable instances when the narrative voice addresses the reader explicitly in the plural form, as in "hoy les abro la puerta [a La Escuelita]," "más tarde les cuento porqué," and "entonces pasó lo que les decía" (19, 95, 98, emphasis added). Thus, *La Escuelita* does not generally imply an intimate act of reading, but rather, a presence of collective *listening* that takes us back to the act of tale-telling suggested by the title of the text alluded to earlier, "Había una vez." Blurring the lines between the "literary" and the "non-literary," this short piece added to the Spanish edition, and presented as the first of stories, can also be read as the author's prolonged introduction to the stories to come. Within its first lines lies a possible clue to understanding the intended scope of Partnoy's testimonial narrative:

Tratemos de aflojarnos la venda que nos han puesto sobre los ojos, *espíemos* por el resquicio cómo transcurre la vida en La Escuelita. Por la sangre de los que conocieron las aulas del terror antes de que los fusilaran, por el dolor de los que están en este momento soportando las diversas clases de la infamia, sumémos a la

fuerza para borrar de la faz del continente todas las Escuelitas. (20, emphasis added)

This fragment, absent in the English version, illustrates Partnoy's urge to insert her testimonial writing in a wider web of Latin American discourses of social justice and solidarity. Inviting action for a Latin American collective cause that goes beyond the specific case denounced here, the lines above break down narrative levels through the invocation of an inclusive Us: "let us attempt," "let us spy," "let us gather the strength." The reader of testimonial literature, recalls Taylor, is supposed to "act as witness to the events" (165). I propose that the distancing effect created in part through interpellating the testimonial reader, as described earlier, is precisely the one that allows us to de facto become self-aware readers prone to act as second-hand witnesses.³⁵

In *La Escuelita*, the reader is constantly reminded of her exclusion from the escapist immersion that helps the victim characters navigate and grasp their world, as shown above. While the first-hand testimonialist seeks to identify with other *desaparecidos* to whom she gives a voice through literary writing, the testimonial reader is, instead, expected to spy from a distance.

In a game of mirrors, from her own spy-position, the critical reader seeks in turn to rethink testimony through literature and, conversely, literature through testimony. As mentioned earlier, Ludmer has shed light on certain contemporary texts which, in spite of allowing literary readings, "son y no son literatura al mismo tiempo, son ficción y realidad." I believe Partnoy's hybrid writing points in the direction signaled by Ludmer. Moreover, *La Escuelita* appears to confirm Yúdice's intuition, "Testimonial writing [thus] fits into and contributes to the ongoing challenge of the literary, which is no longer understood simply as an autonomous cultural activity conditioned by social and political factors" (20). Indeed, Partnoy's literary testimony, received as both fictional writing and legal

evidence, does not solely constitute a cultural manifestation determined by its socio-political context. When it finally reached its originally intended reader, two decades after the publication of the English translation, the text became both an aesthetic and a political intervention in post-dictatorial Argentina. Oscillating between words and images, between the distancing effect and the imagination of the *testimonialista's* identification with the voiceless, the critical reader unequivocally apprehends Partnoy's textual and visual narrative as an exemplary piece of testimonial literature. Without falling into relativisms, Partnoy's sage warning in her introduction to *La Escuelita* seems, after all, well justified: "Les pido que se mantengan alerta: en esas Escuelitas, los límites entre la historia y las historias son tan tenues que ni yo misma los puedo detectar" (15).

Notes

¹ I am immensely grateful to Alicia and Raquel Partnoy, and Nicole Caso, who have been generous with their knowledge and suggestions throughout the process of preparing this article.

² In this study, I exclusively refer to the first edition of the *The Little School* and *La Escuelita* in the U.S. and Argentina respectively, both included in "Works Cited."

³ The impossibility of writing when there exists a lack of distance from horror is also evoked in *Revenge of the Apple/Venganza de la manzana* (10), a collection of Partnoy's poems of imprisonment to which I will later refer.

⁴ Both *The Little School* and *La Escuelita* consist of twenty short stories. However, as I will soon discuss, the text presented as the first story in Spanish, "Había una vez una escuelita..." as well as other peritextual texts that frame the stories, is absent in the English version. In the revised Spanish version, on the other hand, the story "Bread" does not appear.

⁵ In her influential study, *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, Kimberly Nance includes Partnoy's *The Little School* in the category of "deliberative" testimonial discourses which are marked by ambiguity. Building on James Murphy's analysis of

classical rhetoric, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric* (1983), Nance distinguishes between "forensic," "epideictic," and "deliberative" *testimonios* (19–47). Forensic discourse is a juridical form of address that seeks to establish whether actions in the past were just or unjust. Epideictic *testimonios*, she explains, accord praise or blame. Lastly, deliberative or persuasive *testimonios* such as Partnoy's *The Little School* incite the reader to act, as I will propose in the final section of this article.

⁶ To read more about the practice of renaming among militants and the military personnel, see the short story "Nombre" and the section titled "Personal represivo" included in "Anexo 2" of *La Escuelita* (Nance 19–47).

⁷ Marta Bermúdez-Gallegos and Edurne Portela have interpreted narrative fragmentation in *The Little School* as symptomatic of the trauma of torture on the language of the testimonialist, and Detwiler has related it to the limited vision of the blindfolded victim. In the last section of this study, I argue that narrative fragmentation is also a key element in the distancing effect upon the testimonial reader, an effect which is not devoid of ethical significance.

⁸ The "Documento Final de la Junta Militar sobre la Guerra contra la Subversión y el Terrorismo" was made public by the Argentinian government in 1983, only three years before the first edition of *The Little School* was published in the United States.

⁹ Additionally, as a scholar, Partnoy has focused her work on testimonial literature. She also edited the book (1998), whose mission was to make the voices of thirty-five Latin American women in exile heard.

¹⁰ By contrast with De Man's thinking of the autobiographical in "Autobiography as De-Facement," John Paul Eakin has claimed that rather than being language itself, the subject is constituted within language. Building on this observation, I assume that it is through the *autobiographical* act of bearing witness that the testimonial subject constructs herself in language. Thus I differ with the idea that autobiography is a genre of "extraordinary individuals" (Sommer 12). Instead, and without neglecting the specificities of *testimonio*, I place Partnoy's *La Escuelita* within Leonor Arfuch's broad category of "espacio autobiográfico," a territory wherein converge hybrid textualities such as interview, testimony and conventional autobiography. It is precisely on this horizon of

intelligibility described by Arfuch that genre and discourse intersect, and plays out the construction of subjectivities inherently marked by plurality, polyphony and fragmentation.

¹¹For a detailed reflection on the parallels and insurmountable differences existing between post-modern thought and the literary production of Latin American testimony, see George Yúdice's essay, "Testimonio and Postmodernism."

¹²In addition to González Echevarría, mentioned above, other critics interested in testimonial truth within the field of Latin American literature include Joanna R. Bartow, Miguel Barnet, Gustavo A. García, Kimberly Nance, and Nora Strejilevich. For the European context, see Barbara Foley and Javier Zapatero Sánchez.

¹³More generally, the complexities regarding the textual genre of *The Little School/La Escuelita* are made evident by the variety of categories employed to describe the work, such as "testimonial novel" (Detwiler, "The Blindfolded (Eye)Witness"), "prison memoir" (Treacy), "testimonial" (Franco), and "prison narrative" (Portela).

¹⁴Like *The Little School*, *The Revenge of the Apple* was translated by Partnoy along with other translators. Unlike *The Little School*, *The Revenge of the Apple/Venganza de la manzana* is a bilingual publication.

¹⁵In her thorough analysis of the subtitles in *The Little School/La Escuelita*, Portela seems to suggest that the Spanish word "relatos" resolves the "problematic paradox" that the term "tales" introduces in English, as was previously noted by Detwiler. However, according to the Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española, "relato" can mean "conocimiento que se da, generalmente detallado, de un hecho" as well as "narración, cuento" (emphasis added). I emphasize here the ambiguity of the term "relato" because fiction understood as invention and imagination is not opposed to referential testimony in Partnoy's *La Escuelita*, as will soon be shown.

¹⁶Partnoy took this juridical and informative register to the extreme in her testimony included in *Nunca Más*, the report published in 1986 by the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP). As a counterpoint to *La Escuelita*, wherein the emphasis is on the human connection between the victims, Partnoy's testimony in *Nunca Más* contains detailed descriptions of moments of explicit violence.

¹⁷The original U.S. publication of *The Little School* contains "Annex 1: Fragments of Alicia

Partnoy's Testimony about "The Little School of Bahía Blanca," which without a doubt affirms the referential value of this literary testimony. The annexes that complete the Argentine edition published twenty years later are "Descripción de La Escuelita," where the reader will find a floor plan of the concentration camp today destroyed; "Testimonio y Juicio," where the obstacles that Partnoy faced to testify at the truth trials are described; and "Lista elaborada durante la dictadura," where the names of victims who passed through La Escuelita are listed.

¹⁸Alicia Partnoy is identified in this drawing, "Las manos resisten," by wearing slippers with only one flower, subject of the first story in English, second in Spanish. See "The One-Flower Slippers" (*Little School* 25–27), and "Chanquetas con una sola flor" (*Escuelita* 21–24).

¹⁹For instance, further on the narration changes to the first person, and reads: "Me ata la venda medio floja. Ahora me ata las manos y salgo del baño. Puerta, pasillo, reja..." (*Escuelita* 100).

²⁰Portela's study, one of the few critical works to reflect on the visual representations included in *La Escuelita*, also sheds light on the enemy's panoptic gaze, drawing our attention to the four figures that monitor the captives from an elevated position: "the importance of these eyes is that they observe, control, and restrain the two women – without being seen" (75).

²¹"Rosa" was the name adopted by Alicia Partnoy shortly before she was abducted. As mentioned earlier, name changing was a common practice among activists.

²²The story entitled "Chanquetas de una sola flor," which is thus also written in third person, tells the history of Alicia Partnoy's abduction, along with the brutal separation from her eighteen-month old daughter, Ruth, and the subsequent fear that Ruth could have been captured and appropriated by the military regime. By contrast, Partnoy's literary testimony is written in first person when giving voice to the disappeared Graciela Metz in "Graciela: alrededor de la mesa" and "Natividad," analyzed below, along with an anonymous male narrator in the short piece titled "El sapito Glo-glo-glo." The narrator's identity, which remains anonymous in the Spanish version of "El sapito Glo-glo-glo," is revealed in the English translation of the story's title, "Ruth's Father."

²³The way "Una conversación bajo la lluvia" is constructed also serves to illustrate the extent to which the unsaid highlights horror in *La Escuelita*.

As the torturers are imaginarily struck down by the victim, the narrative follows the victim's introspective stream of thoughts, until we read: "Una media hora después le desataron las manos. ¡Vestite!" (61).

²⁴With the idea of literature's post-autonomy, Ludmer announces a paradigmatic shift in the notion of the literary that has also been touched upon by contemporary Latin American critics such as Florencia Garramuño, Tamara Kamenszain and George Yúdice. According to this paradigm literature cannot be encapsulated by that which is conventionally considered "literary," but rather, extends to a realm of non-distinction between the literary and not literary.

²⁵According to recent statements by Raquel Partnoy, referring to her production as a visual artist at large, after her daughter's disappearance in 1977 she began to include small figures in her drawings of Bahía Blanca. Raquel now interprets these figures as the disappeared; since that time, she has continued painting in the same style "para mantener viva la memoria" ("Dibujos en La Escuelita").

²⁶In her study of Raquel Partnoy's visual representations in *The Little School*, Detwiler proposes that the drawings "narrate more fully what in the written text at times appears as gendered silences" ("Strategic Silences" 42). About *testimonio*, gender and feminism in Partnoy's *Little School*, see also Nance 176.

²⁷Other more recent cultural manifestations also participate in the web of solidarity whose center this study situates in Partnoy's literary testimony, *La Escuelita*. Rodrigo Caprotti's fictionalized documentary series, *La Escuelita, historias del terrorismo de Estado en Bahía Blanca* was aired in Argentina on *Televisión Digital Abierta* in March 2014. The documentary alternates between displaying actors recreating the described events, and serving as an archive of evidential truth. It includes interviews from Adriana Metz and Alicia Partnoy, among others, and dedicates the last episode to Partnoy's fight for justice.

²⁸Of the aforementioned studies, the chapter included in Portela's book *Displaced memories*, published in 2009, is the only work that mentions the inclusion of a short text between the introduction and the first story, "a new fragment that emphasizes the political project of Partnoy's generation" (87).

²⁹In the author's introduction, Partnoy declares, "las voces de los compañeros resuenan con fuerza en mi memoria. Publico estos relatos para que esas voces no sean silenciadas" (14). I consciously use the expression "give her voice to Graciela" instead of "appropriate Graciela's voice" because my focus will be here the testimonialist's *solidary* urge to recreate voices of the disappeared, rather than the testimonialist's hypothetical will to impose her own voice over the dissipated voices of the disappeared. This solidary impulse is inseparable here from the "democratizing" movement that marks Partnoy's testimonial literature, a movement to which I referred in the first section of this essay, through which every character is able to either express herself from the "I" perspective, or to be expressed from the third person.

³⁰Twenty-two years before, in public defiance of the government's state terrorism intended to silence all opposition, the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo began its silent weekly protests in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace. Today, this world-renowned association of Argentine mothers whose children were "disappeared" during the military dictatorship remains fully engaged in the struggle for human, political, and civil rights.

³¹In *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, Jay Lifton analyzes the survivor's process of identification with the deceased victims, and establishes its origin in the survivor's sense of guilt before those who did not survive (495-98). Although the subjects of Lifton's study are survivors of Hiroshima, he argues that his thesis is also applicable to the case of concentration camps. I am not interested here in the survivor's hypothetical sense of guilt described by Lifton, but in the material trace of this process of identification, which in the case of Partnoy is realized through literary writing, with the clear solidary objective of intervening in the execution of justice and civil activism. To read more about testimonial writing and trauma in *The Little School*, see especially Taylor, Treacy and Portela.

³²About the expected role of the reader of testimonial literature, see also Sommer 108 and Nance 19-47.

³³*La Escuelita* contains eight poetic quotes introducing various stories. These quotes are from renowned names in Spanish and Latin American activist poetry, such as Blas de Otero and Leonel

Rigama, along with *desaparecidos* that Partnoy knew personally, such as Luis Paredes, “el Chino,” and Zulma Izurieta.

³⁴In her study on the autobiographical genre, Helène Jaccopard has shown that these intratextual interpellations serve to remind the empirical reader that she is a reader, therefore resulting in a lesser level of immersion in the story being told (9).

³⁵By contrast with my emphasis on the distancing effect that makes the testimonial reader prone to become a second-hand witness, Nance focuses on the reader’s momentary identification with the witness. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of reading, Nance proposes that the reader of *testimonios* first identifies with the witness, and then returns to her own place in the world in order to assess the ways in which that position might enable her to help others (62-64).

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