

LESSONS FROM THE LITTLE SCHOOL: ONE WOMAN'S
UNOFFICIAL HISTORY OF ARGENTINA'S DIRTY WAR

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A young woman blindfolded and held captive in a repurposed local school awaits her fate. She does not know her location and has no idea about her husband and baby. She does know, however, why the military detained her on the afternoon of 12 January 1977. She was guilty of providing information on the conditions affecting Argentinian citizens. She is not the only disappeared in this facility, nor will she be the last. Long days and nights of harsh treatment encompass sights, sounds, smells, and other memories of experiences interacting with personnel and other captives. Her own memory blends into shared memories of what she endured and witnessed. The day the Army personnel took her from her home in Bahia Blanca, Argentina, would be her last day of contact with the outside world. Yet, unlike many of her fellow prisoners of the state, her experiences would later fuel her testimony. When released from capture, her collective memories became her own tool to liberate Argentina and the world from their blindfolds exposing the world to the secrets of Argentina's Dirty War.

Alicia Partnoy's *La Escuelita*, exposes the experience of state prisoners and military violence during Argentina's Dirty War, crossing the genres of literature and history to provide a valuable primary historical source and artifact. As is the case with many primary sources in Latin American women's history, the testimonial novel is a genre that is especially open to challenges of veracity and historiographic validity. *La Escuelita* is a quintessential example of this debate due to the dual nature of the testimonio: a story and history of one individual's imprisonment and torture during Argentina's Dirty War. *La Escuelita* serves as an invaluable means of transmitting not only the story of Partnoy as a historical figure, but also the collective memory of the disappeared, whose experiences and memories went unrecorded. *La Escuelita* is a valuable historical source and artifact that testifies to the cultural history of Argentina following the 1976 military coup.

The testimonial novel is a hybrid of autobiography and literature, containing a mixture of artistic devices as well as historical facts that provides an introspective view of an established history. Testimonios as literary novels engage readers in the world of the narrator (i.e. the story teller) through accounts of every day life that is commonly tied to some form of torture, oppression, violence, and/or captivity. John R. Beverley, a literary and cultural critic, defines testimonio as a narrative told in the first person by a real protagonist or witness to the events discussed.¹ While Beverley provides a broad definition of this genre, scholar Marc Zimmerman argues that testimonio becomes a work intertwining literary and social considerations.² Beverley

¹ John Beverley, *Against Literature*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 71.

² Marc Zimmerman, *Literature and Resistance in Guatemala: Textual Modes and Cultural Politics from El Señor Presidente to Rigoberta Menchú*. Volume Two: Testimonio and Cultural Politics, (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1995), 11.

identifies three basic groupings of testimonios: pseudo testimonies, which are fictional; novels that are written much in the style of Boom narratives, but incorporate historical testimonial voices; and narratives located between testimony and the authorial/auto-biographical novel.³ Latin American literature is rich in examples of literary works that fall into these categories, offering stories of events and the discourse of witnesses who lived through tumultuous periods of change.

New historiographic approaches to the researching and writing of modern Latin American history allowed for further analysis of the multifaceted concept of agency through scholarship of alternative sources. Beverley places the origins of testimonio in the colonial period. Nonfictional narratives chronicling first encounters between Europeans and natives, military campaigns, and every day life in the colonies became a key genre in understanding how Latin America developed. These narratives illustrated social and cultural experiences in addition to more traditional considerations, such as political and economic concerns.⁴

Testimonio is therefore a historical artifact that has influenced Latin American culture, society, and history for centuries. With the postmodern trend incorporating cultural history and considering sociological concepts, testimonio gained a foothold in the burgeoning fields of women's history and state violence. Linda J. Craft traces the origins of testimonios to the Cuban revolution. The Revolution gave credibility to testimonial writing; such politicized witnessing legitimized such a discursive practice, lending a sense of academic and cultural sanction. The Havana publishing company, Casa de las Americas, created a literary award in

³John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 178.

⁴Beverley, *Against Literature*, 71-72.

the field of testimonial narrative, sparking future generations to embrace this genre.⁵

Beginning in the 1960s and through to the 1980s, testimonios flourished as a form of social and political critique during the political and social upheaval throughout Latin America. Stories of witnessing state violence in countries, such as Argentina, pushed the exploration of distinctions between history, reality, fiction, truth, autobiography, and agency. A product of state violence, the testimonial writing of Alicia Partnoy played a significant role in bringing oral evidence into the public domain of the clandestine disappearance of a generation of student activists in Argentina following the military coup of 1976. Partnoy's *La Escuelita* (published originally as *La Escuelita* in Spanish and subsequently translated to English as *The Little School*, among several other languages) contributes to the historiography of Argentine history during the Dirty War.

Argentina's Dirty War became a defining point in the history of Argentina and its people, despite the secret nature of the government's actions and its efforts to erase the events from official national history. For historians, the Dirty War started roughly in 1974, as a result of the power vacuum left after the death of Juan D. Perron. However, Argentina had undergone a long series of governmental instability in the second half of the twentieth century following the overthrow of Juan D. Perron's presidency in 1954.⁶ More importantly, state sponsored violence and persecution among members of various political parties had its roots in these struggles for power. Argentines were no strangers to government oppression by March 1976 when the military coup succeeded. Some historians argue that many sectors

⁵ Linda J. Craft, *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 16.

⁶ Thomas C. Wright, *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile Argentina, and International Human Rights*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 96-97.

of the Argentine population, already accustomed to political instability and repression, welcomed this military coup as a hopeful change to improve the economy. The government sought to control any dissenting opinions in its efforts to consolidate and maintain power, The Argentine military government established a repressive system of terror, that a Tucumán provincial investigative commission described as “the mass diffusion of terror in order to paralyze any attempt at opposition.”⁷

The Dirty War operated on surreptitious activities to neutralize perceived threats to the military government’s power by targeting citizens and silencing any source of dissent. Under the justification of national security doctrine and counterinsurgency warfare, the Dirty War sought to protect the country from possible guerilla violence. In reality, the government was not just targeting guerilla militants, but any ordinary people deemed by the government to be collaborators and suspected subversives. These average citizens, many of whom were students, professors, and community activists began disappearing following questioning by military officials. Historians argue that many average citizens were not aware of these actions until disappearances increased between 1976 and 1977.⁸ Government official decrees and favorable press coverage hid the true nature of the disappearances, but the sheer volume of missing persons raised public awareness. Family members demanded explanations since there were no official police arrest records to match the detainments or corpses to confirm deaths.⁹ Famously, the mothers of many disappeared formed the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo and marched to demand accountability from the government and emblemizing the growing human rights wave in Argen-

⁷ Wright, 100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

tine society. By the 1980s, international awareness of state violence and repression rose leading to international solidarity movements. When this regime lost power in 1983, the Dirty War was no longer a secret counterinsurgency project.

While in power the Argentine government hid its actions and destroyed most traces of the Dirty War in official histories. Disappearances allowed the regime to claim plausible deniability during their rule. By destroying government and military records, the Argentine government ensured the continuity of the disappeared in a timeless void. "Blood pacts of silence," between officers also contributed to the general climate of secrets. Yet, some survivors reappeared and provided stories of their captivity, using their testimony about their horrific experiences against state violence. The testimonies of survivors and Argentine citizens, fueled the campaign for accountability that was crucial for human rights activism. The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*), an investigative commission, collected testimonies from survivors and the few repentant former military members for the trials of former government and military officials implicated. Publications such as the famous *Nunca más* report containing the research of the National Commission.¹⁰ Publications such as *Nunca Mas*, offered a compilation of statistics and stories that provided an anatomy of the Dirty War and disappearances. Though informative, these accounts do not completely convey the level of state terror. Nor can reports properly tell the story of the collective memory of a nation and the psychological trauma such as the historic events that continued to have on the culture and experience of Argentines for decades thereafter.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109

Blurring the lines between art and history, Alicia Partnoy's work vividly illustrates the disappeared experiences, while conveying the emotions of historical traumas living through moments of terror and torture. Through the literary lens, *La Escuelita* provides readers with the engaging and often convoluted story of a blindfolded eyewitness at the concentration camp of *La Escuelita*. The tradition of testimonio within fiction allows for a negotiation between boundaries of autobiographical memoir and an almost magical realism approach, which is characterized by recounting the stories of the suffering and state violence endured by the author in her own reality. Craft's discussion of variations in terms of the writing format provides an explanation of how the genre allows for such artistic liberties.¹¹ Partnoy's work fits particularly well within the genre of magical realism.

Magical realism is a literary genre that takes magical or unreal elements within an otherwise realistic environment that attributes supernatural qualities to often-mundane events in order to reveal significance to readers.¹² *La Escuelita* touches on several of these forms. Partnoy primarily uses a blindfolded narrator to provide readers with a powerful glimpse into the seen and unseen of daily life in this concentration camp. The descriptions and interactions not only speak to the experience of the narrator, but also the experiences of the other individuals present in the same time and space. Interactions with guards, repetition of children's rhymes, and the symbolism of retaining a tooth that had been knocked out by a guard all provide a vivid set of disturbing images for readers. Interspersed within the prose are poems expressing the guttural experiences and anguish faced during captivity. In her introduction to *La*

¹¹ Craft, 22.

¹² Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 5.

Escuelita, Julia Alvarez contextualizes Partnoy's disjointed and artistic approach to retelling historical events, "[t]hese are not short stories in the genre of fiction—they are not fanciful and crated, erudite and inventive—but in the genre of survival tales."¹³ Partnoy used her skills and ability as a poet to recreate an experience and a historical place that readers and scholars cannot visit or experience within the contemporary era.

For all of the artistic liberties employed in this memoir, the events and experiences have a firm historical foundation within the real life experience of a political prisoner of the Argentine state. In her introduction to *La Escuelita*, Partnoy provides a brief overview of the events that led to her imprisonment within the broader national context. She was born in Argentina in 1955 and lived in Bahia Blanca, Argentina until the time of her imprisonment. She witnessed the many incarnations of Peronism, along with the power struggles that ensued. Partnoy became involved in student activism while studying at the university in Bahia Blanca, seeing first hand how the government eventually attacked the youth movement as a threat to the security of the nation. This instability culminated in the March 1976 military coup.

The new military junta of 1976 launched increasing hostile measures to control youth and workers through censoring and manipulating the media against youth activists and guerillas. Historian David Sheinin details the government's heavy-handed efforts to control citizenry. The military gained significant control over media, both print and television. As a result, media became a significant distributor of propaganda. This control also isolated the national population from knowledge of state sponsored terror. In fact, the national press mislead Argentines with coverage

¹³ Julia Alvarez, Introduction to *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*, (San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 1998), 9.

focused on positive examples of how the military reestablished order and peace after the March coup d'état.¹⁴ Argentina had a long tradition of military oppression, but somehow this regime expanded beyond fighting guerillas and identified any individual as a possible subversive or a cohort of revolutionaries. As a student, Partnoy witnessed the hazardous conditions encountered by students,

I had to pass between two soldiers who were sitting with machine guns at the entrance of the building. A highly ranked officer would request my I.D., check it against a list of "wanted" activists and search my belongings. I did not know when my name was going to appear on that list.¹⁵

The regime tightened its grip on the country, enacting increasingly active measures against students. Disappearance, the kidnapping of an individual, a disappeared, followed by torture and secret detention became a widely known occurrence. Citizens developed great awareness of disappearances, its threat engendering a state of fear and caution in quotidian life. The government officials refused to acknowledge the abduction and imprisonment of individuals as prisoners of the state.¹⁶

¹⁴ David M.K. Sheinin, *Consent of the Damned: Ordinary Argentineans in The Dirty War*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 11.

¹⁵ Partnoy, *The Little School*, 13.

¹⁶ Sheinin discusses the history of the term "desaparecidos" and its own cultural origins, "Many have credited police and military officers in the mid-1970s, for example, with having first used the gruesomely anonymous term "disappeared" for those whose family members suspected had been illicitly detained or killed by the military or by the paramilitary right. In fact, Argentines would have recognized that term from popular gossip magazines such as *Ahora* and other sources that date as far back as the 1950s. In 1962, after an anonymous assassin killed sixteen-year old Norma Mirta Penjerek, police couched their initial response for a rapt public in language designed to raise doubts about whether a crime had even been committed. Before Penjerek's body was found one morning in Lavallol, the police offered the hypothesis that many adolescent women were "disappearing" in Buenos Aires to live "the easy life" (prostitution)." See also Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexi-*

On 12 January 1977, Alicia Partnoy became a disappeared. She transitioned from the role of a citizen of the country, to a character in the history of Argentina's clandestine torture and state violence known as the Dirty War.¹⁷ By the time of her abduction, Argentina was well into the Dirty War, a national, government sanctioned fighting against subversion within its citizenry. Partnoy's kidnapping and detainment was a common story,

I was detained by uniformed Army personnel at my home, [...] minutes later the same military personnel detained my husband at his place of work. I was taken to the headquarters of the 5th Army Corps and from there to a concentration camp, which the military ironically named the Little School (*La Escuela*) [...] From that moment on, for the next five months, my husband and I became two more names on the endless list of disappeared people.¹⁸

Her account of the initial kidnapping process coincides with several narratives of other disappeared, which appeared in *Nunca Más*, the published report created from the work of a special commission appointed by President Alfonsín. *Nunca Mas* details the system of licensed state vio-

con of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59; Miguel Bonasso, "De los 'desaparecidos' a los 'chicos de la guerra,'" *Nueva Sociedad* 76 (1985): 52-61; "Norma Mirta Penjerek, un asesinato que quedó impune, *Clarín*, 29 August 1999; "Penjerek: la desaparecida," *La Nación*, 26 February 2006.

¹⁷ Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 171-172. Robben points out that the term itself is subject to interpretation within cultural history of this era, "Whether the period is described with the term antirevolutionary war, civil war, or state terror is important because each designation implies a different moral and historical judgment turning patriots into oppressors, victims into ideologues, and heroes into subversives."

¹⁸ Partnoy, *The Little School*, 14.

lence from 1976 to 1979 through the use of case studies, interviews, and statistics collected during this investigation. Statistics from this report show that 62% of the disappeared were abducted within their own homes, while 7% were detained at work. Testimonial accounts from the survivors and families of the disappeared contained in this report corroborate Partnoy's story of a sudden military home invasion leading to detention. One interview regarding the disappearance of Juan di Bernardo (File No. 4500) demonstrates the government's zeal to capture suspected subversives, even taking individuals from hospital beds.¹⁹

The military transported Partnoy to La Escuelita, a detention camp, where she endured deplorable conditions and experienced relentless torture for the majority of her imprisonment. Logistically, the old house of La Escuelita was located behind the headquarters of the 5th Army Corps. However, the description of the location and the details remembered in her work provide readers with a more vivid experience. Partnoy's fictionalized account of captivity begins at this stage, when she becomes a blindfolded prisoner at La Escuelita. She arrived at her concentration camp blindfolded. While Partnoy used the blindfold in her narrative as a literary device to create "metonymic and metaphorical links throughout the text," the reality of her actual blindfolded state throughout her imprisonment echoes the reality of many other prisoners. Blindfolding occurred in most cases when prisoners were abducted. Once again, *Nunca Mas* is filled with testimonials corroborating Partnoy's experience of blindfolded captivity, situating this artistic choice as based on historical fact.²⁰

After years of captivity, the state eventually released Partnoy from her prison. She became one of a few

¹⁹ Farrar Straus Giroux, *Nunca Mas: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared*, (London: Index on Censorship, 1986), 10-19.

²⁰ Giroux, 19.

individuals to reappear and receive political asylum as a result of the international outcry of human rights justice. After months of torture, in June of 1977, Partnoy reappeared, when her family gained knowledge of her whereabouts. Partnoy remained in custody without formal charges for several months after reappearing. Finally, in 1979, after the Organization of American States sent a fact-finding mission to Argentina, the government suddenly and without explanation, released and exiled Partnoy. She credits her release to the international solidarity movement, “[t]he reason I was released from jail was because of the pressure from inside and outside the country—international pressure. The role of human rights groups in Argentina was very important.”²¹

Once released, Partnoy was immediately placed on a flight to the United States where she joined her husband and daughter. After arriving in the United States, she began work to help those less fortunate prisoners who were left behind in Argentina. In exile, she undertook the task of writing her eyewitness account, that would not only denounce the human rights violations in Argentina, but would serve to combat the efforts of the regime to eradicate knowledge of their exploits. As Kimberly Nance correctly identifies *testimonio* as a means to question accepted “official histories.”²² Partnoy admittedly retained this intent when she wrote and published *La Escuelita* in 1986, in the wake of human rights trials and lawsuits against the government by the survivors and their families, as well as government efforts to erase or minimize evidence of their atrocities. Partnoy discusses her return to Argentina after the fall of the regime. Several survivors filed suit against

²¹ June Thomas and Alicia Partnoy, “Interview: Argentina: A Survivor’s Story,” *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (March 87), 3.

²² Kimberly A. Nance, *Can Literature Promote Justice?: Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 31.

the government requesting monetary compensation for their time in captivity. Citizens groups, including the famed Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo demanded information about the disappeared that reappeared and accountability for the acts of the Argentine government. Thousands of bodies were discovered in unmarked mass burial sites. Partnoy goes on to say that the government had leveled La Escuelita to the ground, but the ruins and traces of the location remained etched her in mind as a survivor.²³

One of the major criticisms about testimonios pertains to the political intent underlying these works. Beverley and Zimmerman discuss Nicaraguan critic Ileana Rodríguez's analysis of this issue. Rodríguez believes testimonio takes on a political, cultural practice. Testimonio can be representative of motivations permeating resistance movements on more personal levels.²⁴ This analysis lends itself to the critique that testimonios can be subject to a false memory of events in an effort to use it to promote a social cause. Alicia Partnoy is a self-identified activist, "I grew up loving my country and its people and hating injustice," with a long history of political activism prior to her imprisonment.²⁵ Within the international realm, she is a human rights activist who has testified about human rights violations to the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and human rights organizations in Argentina, as well as spending time traveling throughout the United States speaking on behalf of Amnesty International.²⁶

Under traditional historiography and scholarly scrutiny, Partnoy's role as an activist weighs heavily in determining the value of Partnoy's narrative. The debate becomes whether or not there is veracity in events and stories depicted in *La Escuelita*, or if this is purely a fictionalized

²³ Partnoy, *The Little School*, 121.

²⁴ Zimmerman and Beverley, 172.

²⁵ Partnoy, *The Little School*, 11-12.

²⁶ Partnoy, "About the Author" in *The Little School*; Thomas, 3.

documentary meant to exaggerate and manipulate a reality. Literary scholar, Barbara Harlow criticizes the underlying motive of the author in writing such a text. Harlow argues that the very nature of such narratives as associated with resistance movements overstate agency or manipulate experiences to create a favorable historical record that can be distorted to suit activism.²⁷ Thus, Partnoy's active work in human rights organizations post-imprisonment undermines her credibility as an unbiased narrator of historical fact. Partnoy's activism is scrutinized and treated by historians and social scientists as a possible distortion of the truth.

The concern with validity and veracity become principle points of contention as to whether testimonio should be considered a historical source of academic value. Anthropologist David Stoll's highly vocal and controversial critique of Rigoberta Menchú's internationally known, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, personifies this preoccupation with tearing down testimonio beyond the world of fiction. Stoll argues that scholars should not place academic value in the story told by Rigoberta Menchú as a survivor of the Guatemalan genocide due to historical inaccuracies. Stoll points to the fact that Menchú was not an eyewitness to specific events written into her testimonio as evidence to discredit the overall work. Menchú had altered the truth regarding her descriptions of her brother's death and other individuals, therefore, according to Stoll, distorting truth and making her testimony unreliable. Furthermore, Stoll criticizes academics, including Beverly, who analyzed Menchú's text through a more liberal scope, permissive of such distortions due to the overall context of the story being told. Stoll cautions cultural historians about the lack of scrutiny in the field.

²⁷ Craft, 172. Craft discusses Barbara Harlow's criticism of the underlying motive for the witness author in writing the testimonio. See also, Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, (New York: Methuen, 1987), 116.

Stoll disagrees with the promotion of testimony due to the lack of a consistent method to determine reliability of a narratives' claims.²⁸ Stoll's argument reflects the traditional approach to testimonio held by historians and other social science scholars. Without strict adherence to verifiable facts, the testimonio does not stand as an accurate study on the events it is retelling.

Menchú responded to this criticism by identifying her testimony as part of the collective experience of her community. Menchú ultimately admitted that she did take some literary liberties with her memoir in altering events or truths. In doing so, her testimonio was not fictionalized or distorted, but a product of the fusion of memories and witnessing of torture and murder as her own. Her testimony is representative of the collective memory of her people as a member of the community she spoke from and to which she belonged culturally, socially and economically—she was a victim of state violence, sharing the experiences of the genocide her community endured.

Testimonio does not have to be completely verifiable in order to provide valid insight into the reality upon which the altered truths are based. Menchú argues that where her own personal memory was vague or unclear to her, she culled from her community's testimonies that were realistic and truthful in order to properly represent her people's suffering and struggle. Where her own personal memory was not reliable, she drew on the memory of others even if that meant incorporating it into her own personal narrative as the voice of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

In the same way, *La Escuelita* shifts narrators and perspectives within its narrative. Certain portions are clearly drawn from Partnoy's experiences, while others tell the story of fellow prisoners. Partnoy writes in first person nar-

²⁸ David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 241-242.

rative the story of fellow captive, Graciela Alicia Romero's torture while pregnant and her subsequent murder. Partnoy does not contest that she underwent this torture in using the first person; rather, she tries to convey the environment and level of abuse to which prisoners were subjected. Romero, as well as the other characters who speak in this memoir, are real individuals who survived or perished within this historical time and space. In her Appendix, Partnoy includes factual information of prisoners, "Cases of the Disappeared at La Escuelita."²⁹ She also offers a diagram of the compound and provides descriptions of the guards.³⁰

Partnoy addresses the issue of validity directly in her article "Cuando Vienen Matando: On Prepositional Shifts and the Struggle of Testimonial Subjects for Agency," arguing that academics fail to see the overall validity of testimonios. Published in *The Modern Language Association of America*, her article addresses the important role of testimonials as a way of revisiting a history that was distorted by official documents and statements with the contemporary time frame. Where official records and archival sources are absent or overtly destroyed, testimonios endow both scholars and average individuals with the ability to learn a more comprehensive truth of the past. Partnoy criticizes academics for their narrow-minded rejection of testimonios,

The debate appeals to journalists and scholars in the humanities alike. Both professions stake much on the search for the truth. The difficulties of understanding what testimonial texts and producers try to accomplish and their *modus operandi* stem from academia's excessive preoccupation with truth.³¹

Testimonios challenge the traditional structure of academic trust for historians by offering traces of real hu-

²⁹ Partnoy, *The Little School*, 123-131.

³⁰ Partnoy, *The Little School*, 132-136

³¹ Partnoy, "Cuando Vienen Matando," 1665.

man experience through a casual and artistic narrative, “more than an interpretation of reality [...], the testimonio is a ‘trace of the Real, of that history which, as such, is inexpressible.’”³² Moreover, Partnoy believes that the significance of testimonios lies within the construction of a discourse of solidarity, “that empowers victims by moving others to act to stop genocides and achieve justice[...]”³³ The discourse contained within a testimonio and the one created by the work demonstrates a shared memory of a culture.

Recent discussion advocating a compromise in historiographic approaches to analyzing testimonios such as *La Escuelita*, suggest a transition toward a more multifaceted methodology that considers not only the written word, but also the significance of the work’s existence as a mirror of a historical epoch. Beverley advocates a new methodological approach, a hybrid between the skepticism of Stoll and the absolute validation of the testimony at face value. To completely denounce the use of testimonies would deprive historians and scholars of the ability to engage readers beyond literary considerations. Beverley believes testimonies create a historiographical discourse that encourages a broadening of academically sanctioned sources.³⁴

The stories told within testimonios affect a readership in various ways. The reception of a testimonio reflects the society into which it is introduced. *La Escuelita* first published in 1986, garnered attention from an international community. Its reception was demonstrative of the transnational solidarity movement demanding protection of human rights in Argentina, throughout Latin America, and globally. In Argentina, this book echoed the efforts of citizens, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, to call for an end

³² John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 40.

³³ Partnoy, “Cuando Vienen Matando,” 1665.

³⁴ Beverley, *Testimonio*, 40.

to state violence and accountability for the fates of the disappeared.

This book was a story of survival, discourse, and agency, mirroring Argentina's struggle and transition toward democracy and a quest toward justice for the victims. Partnoy's memoirs served to educate the world about the horrors of the Dirty War and the importance of giving a voice to silenced historical actors. Partnoy's story contributed to combating the historical amnesia that often follows the end of such an oppressive regime. Beverley argues that just as social scientists give credibility to oral histories, the testimonio should be examined in the same manner because they hold, essentially, the same intent to tell an experience with a historical event, "In oral history it is the intentionality of the recorder—usually a social scientist or journalist—that is paramount; in testimonio, by contrast, it is the intentionality of the narrator."³⁵ In such a manner, her memoir is not just an autobiography or a novel, but a reflection of the way in which a culture chooses to remember significant historical events and their impact on that society.

La Escuelita contributes to the historiography of this tumultuous period in Argentina's history by providing a history from below, rather than through declassified government documents, internal military memoranda, and human rights organization reports. Although the use of testimony as a historical source under traditional methodology is contentious, the memoir does not lose its merits as a source based solely on any literary interpretation of factual events. Alicia Partnoy's memoir is one of many key works that embody the collective memory of a movement, an era, and the consciousness of Argentine society. *La Escuelita* provides valuable insight into the cultural significance of "the disappeared," whose perspectives have otherwise been

³⁵ Beverley, *Against Literature*, 73.

silenced and stricken from official record, but continue to live in the modern self-image of the country.