Literariness with a Purpose: Testimonio and Alicia Partnoy’s The Little School

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This paper considers John Beverley’s definition of ‘testimonio’ as well as terms commonly associated with testimony such as mourning, melancholy and the unsayable, to explore Alicia Partnoy’s contribution to a public process of confronting the terror of Argentina’s Dirty War. I argue that Partnoy’s The Little School reflects many characteristics of Beverley’s non-fictional ‘testimonio’, however, she accomplishes these through the use of literary devices typically attributed to fiction. Therefore, this is a brief study of Partnoy’s intricate weaving of fact and fiction to represent a traumatic lived experience.

Key Words: Alicia Partnoy/ Testimonio/ The unsayable

1. Introduction

In Latin American countries that have endured military regimes, the official end of those regimes signals a beginning for those who survived. After years of not knowing the fate of family, friends and nation, the beginning consists of fitting together disparate pieces of history and memory. In Argentina only two years after the collapse of the dictatorship, a compilation of testimonies and information about the death and torture camps entitled Nunca más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission was dispersed throughout the country. This set of denunciatory documents became a best seller (Taylor 1997,
reflecting a collective call for the ‘truth’ about the disappeared, dead, and those who survived Alicia Partnoy was disappeared over a span of four and a half years during Argentina’s Dirty War and her testimony appears in *Nunca más*. However, she also wrote a fictional testimony entitled *The Little School*. In this autobiographical novel we are exposed to life inside a torture camp, euphemistically called “the Little School”, through stories told from the perspective of Alicia Partnoy and other detainees. While the autobiographical elements of the text coincide with her testimony in *Nunca más*, the use of literary devices most commonly associated with fiction (inter-textuality, ellipsis, metaphor, multiple points of view) calls into question the usefulness of ‘fiction’ or literariness when approaching topics such as torture and trauma that seem to implore ‘truth.’ In other words, what do fiction and literary language offer in the process of remembering following a traumatic event? In John Beverley’s definition of ‘testimonio’, the genre that emerged out of Latin American post-military regimes, the ‘truth-claim’ within the text, that is, the reader’s obliged sensitivity toward the witness’ truth, distinguishes testimonio from other genres. In this paper, I will show that while Partnoy’s text reflects Beverley’s definition of testimonio, specifically the sense of urgency and the collective nature of the struggle represented\(^1\), her novel strays from his definition because it is ‘literary.’ Through a reflection on the concepts of ‘testimony’, ‘mourning’ and ‘melancholy’, now commonly associated with testimony, I will show how Partnoy’s fictionalized testimony aptly reflects concepts we tend to associate with ‘truth.’ My purpose, then, is to

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\(^1\) John Beverley gives a general definition of testimonio: “Narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself” (Beverley 2004, 32). He adds, “Testimonios concerned not so much with the life of a ‘problematic hero’ […] as with a problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives” (Beverley 2004, 33).