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ALICIA PARTNOY AND THE LITERARY PROJECT OF TRANSCONTEXTUAL MEMORY MAKING

Abstract:

Alicia Partnoy reconfigures the experience of trauma, as a disappeared Jewish woman detainee during the Dirty War in Argentina, into an alternative heroic survivor narrative, titled *The Little School* (1986). The author recently published *¡Escuchá!: Cuentos y versitos para los más chiquitos* (2016) letters and poems she had sent her daughter from prison, returning again to the time of her capture and invoking personal memories in the service of a decades-long commitment to international memory-making. In her writing, Partnoy's struggles are set against a backdrop of surging neo-Fascism ideology, interpreted by historian Federico Finchelstein as a transcontextualization of Holocaust practices on the South American continent manifested in the atrocities committed during the Dirty War. Partnoy's work indicates the repressive violence of her captivity, and she refers to symbolic acts of anti-Semitism directed at her and other disappeared people as victims, yet the focus of her narrative is instead a tale of resistance and survival. This study identifies in Partnoy's work a transcontextual literary rendering of the experience of trauma.

Keywords:

Dirty War, *The Little School*, Alicia Partnoy, Federico Finchelstein, transcontextual, trauma

Alicia Partnoy and the Literary Project of Transcontextual Memory Making

During the Dirty War, Alicia Partnoy survived kidnapping, disappearance, and torture by the military *junta* ruling Argentina. She was offered exile to the United States and subsequently published autobiographical reflections in *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (1986). Her work takes the form of intimate reflections expressed in loosely connected vignettes from daily life in “La Escuelita” (The Little School) detention center. Partnoy elaborates on the atrocities of the Videla regime and bears witness to what will later be referred to by some as “The Argentine Holocaust.”¹ Partnoy’s remembrances were included in an official capacity in *Nunca Más: The Work of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared* (1986). With her testimony in both *Nunca Más* and *The Little School*, Partnoy achieves restorative justice by reclaiming narrative agency; she then levies her recollections as a counter-history in the political realm. Partnoy effectively transcontextualizes² personal memories and her experience as a victim, a disappeared Jewish woman detainee, into the literary realm, creating an alternative heroic survivor narrative as a project of memory-making or more appropriately, not forgetting.

The prologue to *Nunca Más* states the mission for its production, “Únicamente así podremos estar seguros de que NUNCA MÁS en nuestra patria se repetirán hechos que nos han hecho trágicamente famosos en el mundo civilizado” (CONADEP, 1986, p. 11). Memorials and memory projects alike communicate traumatic events and invite reflection on causes and missed opportunities to restrain or derail inhumane violence. They educate and issue warnings to future generations. Partnoy’s testimonial account both honors the dead and disappeared, and remembers them, inscribing them on a projected future of societal change. From this distant, imagined future, forty years after her capture, Partnoy produced a collection of poems and letters she had sent her daughter, Ruth, during the years of her imprisonment. The material forms a retrospective collage and was published as a children’s book in Argentina, *¡Escuchá!: Cuentos y versitos para los más chiquitos* (2016). Partnoy’s daughter, Ruth Irupé Sanabria, is not only the recipient of the original missives featured in the work, she also fabricated for the book a letter, “Pienso en vos” [“I Think of You”] from the perspective of a child whose mother had disappeared (Economía Hoy, 2016). Mother and daughter both curated content and crafted an emotional connection with children around a complex societal issue. Ruth followed in the tradition of her grandmother, Raquel Partnoy, who provided the illustrations for *The Little School*; her drawings represent the suffering of the Disappeared, but also the solidarity they forged during their captivity. *The Little School* and *¡Escuchá!* humanize the victims of the Dirty War, an effective means to draw and hold the reader’s attention when the subject matter would incline one to look away. Raquel Partnoy has maintained an active international presence as an artist, and her exhibitions often focus on human rights and the struggles and displacement of Jewish diasporic families. Raquel Partnoy and Agrícola de Cologne co-sponsor W: Moria/Women: Memory of Repression in Argentina, a site dedicated to purposeful remembering of the trauma experienced

¹ This paper includes a reference to Raquel Partnoy’s web site on women and the Argentine Disappeared. The use of the term “Argentine Holocaust” appears in many accounts of the era, including the work of literary scholar, David William Foster.

² The term “transcontextual” is introduced by Federico Finchelstein, in his article: “From Holocaust Trauma to the Dirty War.” Finchelstein’s use of the term and its theoretical underpinnings will be discussed later in this paper.

by women with the goal of never repeating history. The *W: Moria* project details its provenance and purpose:

The project is referring to the thirty thousands of persons who disappeared during the military dictatorships of the 20th century in Argentina, a war of the military against their own population, a genocide, which is also called “Argentine Holocaust” ... If the project would like to give one message, then this: What happened in Argentina must not happen again, not in this country nor at any other place on the globe. (Raquel Partnoy and Agrícola de Cologne, 2020)

Remembrance in Alicia Partnoy’s text and in her mother’s artwork begins as resistance during the struggle, and later becomes a cautionary tale for future generations.

The Little School serves as a witness account of political upheaval and the societal sins of Argentine rulers, but Partnoy also highlights in her text specific abuses suffered by Jewish prisoners. Her work draws parallels between the Dirty War human rights violations and the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. In one section of her narrative, she quotes the guard, Chiche, “I heard you’re a Jew, Is that right? Yes, sir. Okay. If you don’t behave, we’re going to make soap out of you, understand?” (1986, p. 61) Jewish “dissidents” were disproportionately targeted by the military *junta*. According to Federico Finchelstein, the anti-Semitism was not casual, but rather causal; the guards’ references to Nazi ideology and practices during the Holocaust was nothing less than a manifestation of a global fascism rendered current and relevant on a new continent. Finchelstein explains:

The camps were the sites of one of the most radical realizations of fascism, racism, and political violence during the Cold War period in Latin America and beyond, but they also transcended their own context... Argentine perpetrators constantly reminded their victims that torturing and killing them continued the global war of fascism (2015, p. 48).

Argentina’s military ranks were replete with anti-Semitism, much of it traced back to Nazi war criminals that fled Germany and established themselves in the Southern Cone. According to a report by COSOFAM: “Nazi ideology permeated the military and security forces during the country’s dictatorship. Recordings of Hitler’s speeches were played during torture sessions” (Go-i, 1999). There’s a sense in official reports, and in Partnoy’s narrated scenes, that the guards and prisoners were caught in performances of reiterative racism. Finchelstein specifies that the transference of fascism during the Argentine Dirty War mandated these exchanges to underscore the ideological roots of Nazism in Europe:

In the camps neofascism took the form of a fascist spectacle of traumatic reenactment... Fascist ideology was thus made tangible... through a ritualized practice of torture and extermination... rooted in the transcontextual memory of fascist violence (2015, p. 48).

The anachronistic reference to making soap from the body of a prisoner rings hollow and non-threatening as an admonishment to a prisoner in Bahía Blanca, Argentina in the year 1977. The use of this reference becomes charged with meaning, however, when it is admitted to the pantheon of techniques that continually reinforced the Nazi perpetrator and Holocaust victim relationship.

The Buenos Aires rabbi, Daniel Goldman, also commented on Nazi ideology in the Dirty War, saying there wasn't a plan to murder Jewish citizens, but they certainly were "...singled out for special punishment" (Og-i, 1999). Although Jewish citizens accounted for less than 1% of the population in Argentina, they were an estimated 10-12% of the disappeared. The military *junta* assimilated the Nazi belief that there could be an entire group of people framed as Other and abused accordingly. According to the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations. "... just as in the Nazi concentration camps, political prisoners in Argentina were assigned numbers, stripped of their names and humiliated, and after that they were killed, their bodies were hidden. Jewish political prisoners were also subjected to 'added suffering,'" (Valente, 2007). Partnoy survives secret detention and torture and articulates memories of trauma for a political end; in her narrative, she clearly occupies the space of a political dissident. She writes primarily as a political prisoner while providing glimpses of the especially cruel treatment of Jewish detainees like herself. *The Little School* links the actions by the Videla government and its officials to the Holocaust and the Nazi ideology that arrived in Argentina in the 1940's and waited underground for its moment to reignite within a new political context. As Finchelstein details:

In this context, transcontextual memories of violence, remembered and performed by Argentine perpetrators, explicitly elicited the repetition of trauma for the victims: the traumatic memories of the Holocaust were vehicles for the enactment of a new violent present. (2015, p. 50)

Partnoy connects her life events to the Holocaust, and she refers to her experiences as a Jewish woman political prisoner. However, Partnoy takes the memories of her captivity and torture and transcontextualizes personal trauma within a narrative of her choosing. Partnoy displays for the reader the rhythm of life in the Little School, and she allows glimpses into the pain and suffering there, but she focuses her interwoven recollections on moments that will testify for readers to her strength as a resistor, and her ability to maintain humanity throughout her struggle. Partnoy frames the narrator of her story, the character of herself, as a stoic and subversive survivor with the authentic experiences of trauma etched in her memory, yet re-inscribed through their communication to others. The body of a first-person narrator in Latin American testimonial narrative often is presented as an elusive site of inarticulacy. The authentic physical space is unforgettably marked with moments of torture and survival that inspire a written testimony, while the failure of language to contend with trauma renders the body an intriguing yet inaccessible referent for the text. The incomplete expression of trauma forms a rich subtext of gaps and silences that expose the body itself as the site of enunciation for a meaningful counter-history. Elaine Scarry introduces in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) the notion of the failure of language to capture the bodily experience of pain: "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (1985, p. 4). What Scarry perceives as language failure could be interpreted instead as a movement of language into the realm of subtext, formed by missing statements and intuitive reading. There is urgency to testimonial narrative that will ultimately result in new discursive strategies. The story needs to find its way past the inexpressibility of trauma, encounter new modes of communication, and reach its audience to effect social change. John Beverly defines testimonio on the basis of an urgent need to communicate a collective experience through the personal recollections of a first-person narrator. This first-person narrator must contend with language as a liminal form of communication and toy with the absence of

language as the answer for authentic self-expression. The tortured body of a woman prisoner appears in the text elusively and is displaced onto a third person point of view: "She took off the rest of her clothes. She felt as if the guards did not exist, as if they were just repulsive worms that she could erase from her mind by thinking of pleasant things..." (Partnoy, 1986, p. 72). The audience is provided evidence of the torture that is about to take place, and a follow up reference to the prisoner's body, "... in spite of the blows and restraints" (Partnoy, 1986, p. 73), but the story escapes the confines of a horrific recollection of pain and humiliation. Partnoy displays the body of the prisoner within a reconfiguration of the narrative of torture, using the captors' terms "worms" against them and shining the spotlight on the inhumanity of their actions, rather than the suffering inflicted by them. The "victim" is now the narrator, the person who determines which character in the story exercises power, and which one may be faded into the background of the scene.

With their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explore the challenges of retelling trauma as a painful, critical form of witness. An author who conveys a personal trauma bears witness to a moment in a greater collective struggle, often while implicating the reading public and guiding them to solidarity. When Latin American writers transcribe corporeal experiences into language, they in fact witness the torture of women guerrillas or political activists, and the writers thus transform the narrators, or, more accurately, the fictive version of themselves, into primary historical texts. Testimonio is an act of resistance, a counter-history that undermines the grand narratives a nation tells its people and sells to the world. The bodies and memories of women political prisoners provide an alternative archive of primary historical texts. To fully understand these sources, we must first recognize the things language does not allow and the constraints of the body in pain. For retelling a story to have an impact on the consciousness of its audience, the authors are required to relive the trauma they experienced; bearing witness is an action that takes place in the present. The newly "presence-d" experiences of torture have the potential to recreate powerlessness and subjectivity for the women who tell their stories. Somehow, though, a solution is provided through the failure of language. Because of the inarticulacy of the experience of personal trauma, women writers have developed resistive non-verbal strategies. While they offer testimony of their own experiences of torture, and thus relive them, an artful projection of a new reality becomes possible in the act of retelling through writing.

One would expect that the witnessing of trauma and the presentation of the prisoner's body as historical artifact would leave intact the torturer-victim narrative. So, our empathy for the narrator would come from our participation in the narrative of dominance and subordination. Instead, Partnoy invokes her tortured body while refusing to participate in a patriarchal reproduction of the torture narrative. Partnoy's retelling of memories presents the torturer-victim dichotomy as instead a warrior-guard negotiation for power. According to Che Guevara, the creator of the archetypal *guerrillero*, a woman can fight alongside the male *guerrilleros*, with some limitations: "... she can fight; she is weaker, but no less resistant than he" (1960, p. 86). Patichoti, a fellow prisoner in the Little School, tells Alicia, "They think they'll break us" (Partnoy, 1986, p. 36). Nonetheless, she resists and survives, "... every day, when I wake up, I say to myself that I, Alicia Partnoy, am still alive" (Partnoy, 1986, p. 43). The key to success as a *guerrillera* derives from resistance; Partnoy must not only remain alive, but also maintain steadfast, rigorous silence; a guerrilla fighter shows discretion and loyalty to her cause. As Guevara states, "To the stoicism imposed by the difficult conditions of warfare should be added an austerity born of rigid self-

control that will prevent a single excess, a single slip, whatever the circumstances" (1960, p. 33). Partnoy admires Graciela for her adherence to the guerilla code, "...Graciela has been heavily tortured. But she did not speak" (Partnoy, 1986, p. 42). Partnoy adopts guerrilla precepts and incorporates both acts of resistance and defiance in her narrative. Partnoy details an almost comical encounter with the guard she names "Abuelo". The prisoner boldly claims, "I bet I can arm wrestle with you and win" (1986, p. 47). She and the guard are both shocked by her success: "I've won! And this dude can't believe it either" (1986, p. 47). The light tone and humor convey a shift in the text; Partnoy seems surprised to so successfully inhabit an overtly masculine space of physical competition based on strength. Guevara conceives of woman warriors as stoic and helpful in combat, yet he fails to envision their triumph in a test of force. In this scene, Partnoy writes herself as a guerrilla fighter, with no distinction made based on her sex. She does not resist and challenge the guards as a woman in these exchanges with them, she confronts them as a guerilla. For Partnoy, soaring above her circumstances comes from the playfulness of small acts of kindness and solidarity between herself and other prisoners. The cries from those who are tortured, and references to beatings compete in the text with flashes of defiance that turn the spotlight on themselves. Partnoy also upstages the torturers and crafts from her prison memories a story of hope and camaraderie.

One of the stories in the collection focuses on the very young and weakened prisoner, Benja. "Another punch. I wish this coward was beating me instead... Something must be done... I have to think of something to stop this" (Partnoy, 1986, pp. 46-7). The remainder of the story details the successful attempts by the narrator and Patichoti to distract the guard so he has less time to intermittently beat Benja. The juxtaposition of the reference to Benja's beating and the inventiveness of the techniques for distracting the guard allows the story to reader to hover between righteous anger over the torture and celebration of the prisoners' strength and cleverness. Ultimately, the story belongs to the narrator and the reader is carried along on a path to victory. The tortured body is visible to us and we are invited in to witness the scene, but the result is unexpected. Instead of seeing a victim succumb to the guards, we observe the failure of the guard to defeat the human spirit, "...a new day has just begun at The Little School" (Partnoy, 1986, p. 48). Partnoy invites the reader into her fractured memories and refers to bodily experiences of imprisonment and torture an authentic, personal referent to a collective experience of social injustice. The author, however, makes an unexpected divergence from what the audience might expect, that is, a manipulative narrative that guides the reader to overt sympathy for political causes. Instead, by bearing witness to suffering as a mere backdrop for her triumph as defiant hero, the author transforms the grand history that portrays political imprisonment and torture as acts by the ruling elite to subordinate the unruly masses to their will. Barbara Harlow highlights how Latin American prison memoirs appropriate the framing of their own life story within a context they choose:

The prison experience, as necessitated by circumstance, figures in crucially structural ways in the written autobiographical or testimonial narrations of those lives. The determining impact of detention on the political vision of the detainee is integrated into the plotted construction of the guerrilla's textual account of her/his struggle (1992, p. 46).

The narrative re-visioning of the experience of torture makes the referent of the prisoner's body a concrete real-world entity with unstable signs in discourse. Words like "powerless," "weak," and

"victim" reflect only one semiotic pathway to the tortured body. Resistance discourse allows the use of the signs, "resistive," "defiant," and "triumphant," among others. For Partnoy, the inexpressible nature of her bodily experiences clears the way for a deliberate rewriting. She is, as narrator, once again the agent in and author of her own life story.

In the volume of essays, *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*, Deirdre Lashgari describes the political potential for women speaking out and the possible embodiment of another's story: "At its most powerful, their work often impels us to incorporate the pain of violation, to take it into our own bodies where it can force us to respond. It implicates us... in the struggle to give voice to the horror and the determination to end it" (1995, 2). Partnoy relocates the field of combat from re-enactments of Nazi ideology in state-sponsored, precise operations of kidnapping and killing, to a more intimate day-to-day battle for control, dignity, and humanity. She resists and reframes the circumstances of her imprisonment in order to narrate a story of survival and solidarity. Samanta Casareto underscores the need to educate Argentine students about the past, "... the experience of genocide and mass violence is very much intertwined with our national history. This is why it is very important to teach about it and to understand the drivers behind mass violence and why genocides happen" (UNESCO, 2019). *The Little School* educates the reader by implicating them in the literary rendering of Partnoy's personal memories of trauma; the Dirty War remains present and its new generations of witnesses receive a collective call to action.

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