In her early twenties, Alicia Partnoy was involved in a student movement against the “National Reorganization Process” and nascent neoliberal practices of the Argentine government in the early 1970s. This movement was aligned with the global activism of the late 60s and 70s. Partnoy became one of 30,000 citizens “disappeared” by the U.S-backed Argentine military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. She spent two years imprisoned in one of over 500 torture centers that the military sardonically called escuelitas –Little Schools. Upon her release, she was sent into exile in the U.S.; the Argentine government had hoped that the language gap would prevent her from communicating her story. But Partnoy learned English and published The Little School with Cleis Press in 1986. The text is composed of narrative and poetic vignettes by a variety of first and third-person narrators, primarily told from the voice of Alicia. Partnoy would later read selections from The Little School as testimonial evidence at the trials of the military commanders and for the Argentine Human Rights Commission, among other human rights organizations.

Today I’ll discuss how the literary testimony of The Little School intervenes in the misogynist pedagogy that propelled the violence of the dictatorship. Partnoy mobilizes the metaphor of the Little School not only to teach about the structural and personal violence of the dictatorship, but to encourage us to grapple with how to be resistant learners within violent instructional frameworks of classroom, public, and cultural pedagogy. In addition to thinking through Partnoy’s own status as a woman of color intellectual within the United States, my
analysis today works with Sara Ahmed’s comments on willful feminist subjects, which have helped me identify the learning figure advanced by Partnoy’s text. I’ll begin by discussing the ways in which The Little School depicts practices of resilient and resistant learning within the misogynist and masochist instruction of the dictatorship. I’ll then discuss how that willful literary learner maps onto the figure of the audience, creating a risky but generative relationship between readers and the exigency of her testimony. Testimonio is itself a willful genre, and The Little School, unlike its namesake, wants its readers, its learners, to stay willful.

I. Feminist Voices and the Dictatorship in Argentina

The so-called “instruction” of the prisoners in these Schools was built on gender violence, torture, and humiliation. The military’s politics were founded upon the idealization of a particular version of femininity and the feminization of all undesirable social groups. For the junta, national well-being was, as Diana Taylor puts it, “built by blows to the female/feminized body, both literally and rhetorically” (12). María Sonderéguer observes that “violence against women in the dictatorship had a disciplinary function” (2012). Tornay and Alvarez (2012) have discussed how women’s narrations of the gender violence they suffered during the dictatorship were silenced in part because of the nature of the post-dictatorship reconciliation laws, and are only now being more attended to (this speaks to why Partnoy’s own narrative was not published in Argentina until 2011). Among the most horrific acts of public silencing and instruction via the female body was the abduction of prisoners’ newborns. The babies of women who gave birth at the detention centers were stolen and given to military families, to be raised under their new order and erase the counter-histories of these so-called enemies of the state (a state whose power was predicated on the existence of such enemies). Partnoy’s text depicts these and other forms of the dictatorship’s reliance on gendered violence and its ongoing effects.
The history and aftermath of the dictatorship have demonstrated that feminist forms of resistance have been vital to Argentina’s recovery. The most renowned example is the human rights activism of the Madres and Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, who, to this day, march every Thursday in front of the presidential residence to demand an account of their disappeared children and stolen grandchildren. These women brought their private anguish and mourning into the patriarchal public sphere and brought global attention to the crisis in Argentina. One of the forms of feminist resistance that Partnoy highlights through The Little School is the reclamation of learning away from the passivity and embodied silence demanded by the public instruction of the dictatorship. Partnoy declares herself “una mala alumna,” a “bad student” of the school’s instruction, and her poetic testimonial work performs alternative modes of knowledge-building within that violent instruction. The “bad student” of The Little School registers on two levels: the first is an acknowledgement of the military’s view of her – coding her as a “bad” student activist who merits imprisonment and reconditioning into passivity. The second codes her as a “bad,” or failed prisoner, a “bad learner,” who resists the School’s instruction; this version is a badge of honor – to be a “bad student,” a “willful learner,” is to build resilient forms of self and community within the space of the structural and personal violence of the School where, as Partnoy writes, “professors use the lessons of torture and humiliation to teach us to lose the memories of ourselves” (18).

II. Being a “Bad Student” in the School

Within the literary space of her testimony, Alicia forges her pedagogy through the risky terrain of this generative tension of meanings. In the vignette “Latrine,” a first-person Alicia tells of how male guards would escort women to the School’s bathroom, and while there humiliating and abusing them. On one such trip to the latrine, a guard forces Alicia to bump into a male
prisoner, then makes a show of scolding him. “‘Slap his face. He’s got bad manners. Make him pay for his bad manners,’ said Loro, placing my still untied hand on the other prisoner’s cheek. I caressed his face” (Partnoy 31). “Bad manners” translates to “maleducado” in Spanish, or, literally “badly educated.” The text bridges the role of “bad student” placed on her friend with Alicia’s willful interpretation of the guard’s intended instruction. The guard responds, “If you don’t hit him, I’ll hit you!” I gently patted my friend’s face. Loro slapped me twelve times. It almost didn’t hurt. I remembered that Hugo had been tortured more than I had…I wasn’t going to hurt a pal. (31-32) Alicia disrupts and disturbs the guard’s misogynist masochism, which echoes that of the military junta, who felt that women and those they feminized both required and enjoyed the hand that beats them (Taylor 6). In shifting the affect of the gesture from a slap to a caress, she suppresses the pain in view (though not completely) and draws out the camaraderie and solidarity that has, like these prisoners, been disappeared by the junta. With this gesture, she tilts the disobedience and “bad learning” of maleducada into an assertion of her and Hugo’s selfhood and humanity.

Survivors have written that play and simulation were strategies of resistance for prisoners (Calveiro 116); they are also important elements of self-directed learning. Partnoy brings these scenarios together in The Little School within Alicia’s resistant pedagogy. In the vignette, “A Conversation Under the Rain,” the reader witnesses a dialogue between Alicia and her imprisoned friend. Under the cover of the rain falling against the broken window, the women simulate a “social visit” within the prison walls, trading ideas about yoga to soothe their bodies and news about their loved ones (69-71). When they are discovered by the guards, the liberating, protective raindrops transform into a violent deluge of Chinese water torture. A distanced, third person voice, indicative of the trauma of the event, describes how that same skill of playfully
simulating a social visit while in prison helps her shield herself from some of the torture’s intentions. She says, “Chinese torture under a roof leak! Black humor made her shield thicker and more protective. Drops of water sliding down her hair dampened the blindfold on her eyes. Threats and insults sliding down her shield shattered into pieces on the kitchen floor” (Partnoy 72). Alicia’s willful response again frustrates the guard’s sadism and the gendered violence of the public instruction of the military (they literally break apart in the military’s feminized domestic space of the kitchen). “She thought he was mad because she had neither cried nor pleaded for mercy, because she had not even trembled. She thought he was upset because in spite of the blows and restraints, in spite of the filth and torture, both women had had that long and warm conversation under the rain” (Partnoy 73). These final lines link the valances of Alicia’s formation as a “bad student:” that of her disruption of the school’s misogynist instruction aimed at eliciting a particular kind of feminized response, and that of her reclamation of the feminist “learning” that is possible within the school.

While working through the generative tension of “bad student,” The Little School also alerts us that these acts of resilient learning demand a radical kind of risk that can go terribly wrong. Partnoy chooses to highlight this, no less, in a vignette that directly addresses aesthetics, called “Poetry.” While sitting with a group of new prisoners, Alicia recites a poem she wrote about a beloved stream that was filled in near her house – a dirge for a lost “compañero.” The text interlaces Alicia reciting this poem with the torture of her husband; the guards take that poem as evidence of Alicia’s knowledge of other subversives and want the name of this “compañero.” At the end of her recital, Alicia witnesses the guards beating one of the new prisoners whose blindfold is loose. “When I hear the muffled moan,” Alicia concludes, “I feel guilty. Instead of reciting poems I should have explained to the new prisoners…I should have
told them that at the Little School we are beaten whenever our blindfolds are loose” (106).

Throughout the text, the loose blindfold is a subversive yet dangerous space of possibility for Alicia and the prisoners that both enables and curtails their vision, and with it their critical and imaginative faculties; the erratic window into La escuelita it provides is echoed in the fractured and varied focalizations of the vignettes. Alicia blames herself as a “bad student” of her own knowledge of the blindfold’s role in the instruction of the school. In doing so, she links the liberation of the loose blindfold and of her poetry to their potential usages as tools for violence.

We might read this scene as Partnoy’s declaration that poetry is impossible in the School – it is too willful – but I would argue that the scene warns us that it is impossible to detach aesthetic creation from its political and pedagogical power. The scene connects the precarity of the blindfold to the self-determination and collectivity of creative, poetic expression. This connection demonstrates the stakes of resistant learning in the Little School, while evincing the risk demanded by it. The blindfold is a frame for what Judith Butler calls “grievability” within a consistent state of violence and oppression; Partnoy links that claim to grievability to her insistence on willful learning. For her, aesthetic space is testimonial, and is also a space of teaching and learning that can foreground the tensions, gaps, and contradictions of surviving and finding resilience.

III. The Lessons of Willful Learning

Partnoy’s later poetic and pedagogical work suggest that she continues to regard safeguarding willful learning as the shared responsibility of aesthetic and classroom space. One powerful example of this is a poem from her 2005 bilingual collection, Volando bajito, or, Little Low-Flying, titled “Clases de español / Spanish Lessons.” The poem alternates between the formulaic structure of a Spanish language classroom and the fragmented, free-flowing narration
of the survivor’s testimony. Partnoy alternates between different tenses and conjugations of ser (to be) as a way of imagining a scenario in which her generation had not been ravaged by death and trauma, ending with: “if my demand: / ‘that justice be’ / had been heard… / it wouldn’t have been / necessary, my students, / to disturb you with these couple of classes / impregnated with the stench of death” (Partnoy 2005 24). In the absence of systemic justice, the aesthetic space of poetic testimony safeguards the willful learning that works toward justice. The students of her class and readers of her poem become one figure. Similarly, The Little School allows its readers to learn to be “bad students” - not empty vessels to be filled with instruction, but actors within a pedagogical space, attentive to its essential fragments and elisions.

But Partnoy’s invitation to embrace readers as willful learners presents a challenge to scholars invested in amplifying the voices of testimonial literature. The potential willfulness of a reader may come into conflict with the exigency of testimonial literature to be believed as evidence. The critical work on The Little School reflects a broader tendency for scholars to manage this risk by positioning readers as either fully passive recipients of a text and inhabitants of the speaker’s experience, or as disobedient learners against whom Partnoy’s text, to quote one scholar, “preemptively strikes” (Detwiler 62). The former strategy overlooks the experiences readers bring to the text, while also erases the incommensurability of prisoners’ experiences; the latter bizarrely echoes the authoritarian pedagogies Partnoy depicts. The question of how we engage these issues in our classrooms with our students is closely related to how we position the role of the witness to violence and atrocity in our research. When Diana Taylor reflects on the deployment of “witness” as a term for the audience of a text, she asks, “Why, I wonder, do we not have a word that adequately reflects the position of the active, yet all too human, see-er?” (25). Partnoy offers us an alternative word, and framework, through her exploration of
maleducada in the *The Little School*: “learner.” Learning makes space for many modalities, for varied embodied styles and prior knowledges, for that knowledge to be deployed in unanticipated ways by readers not likely to be passively obedient to the author’s intentions, while allowing that mistakes and missteps in understanding will be made. These allowances are crucial when turning to literature to galvanize audiences for human rights and social justice. Partnoy’s text reminds us that the way we establish what learning looks like is a critical part of how pedagogical spaces can support or disrupt hierarchies of hetero-normative power.

Partnoy’s “bad student” offers us a timely lesson as we work to protect the “willful learning” of students in institutions built on white supremacy, while we also face the risk of that work being hijacked into protecting the violence of hate speech as free speech. But Partnoy’s willful learners are not rebels without a cause. Sara Ahmed reminds us that the mandate of safeguarding willfulness is hope, “hope that those who wander away from the paths they are supposed to follow leave their footprints behind.” The capacity of such learners to wander away is what enables them to work against the status quo of their inheritance and politics against public welfare. This learning is vital within hegemonic institutions that, as Roderick Ferguson has discussed, discipline difference through a seeming regard for it. The Little School teaches us that safeguarding willful learning, and the potential of our “bad students,” is a necessary, ethical risk in the face of structural violence.


