# "Sing Me a Lullaby": Tenderness and Trans Mothers in the Work of Camila Sosa Villada.[i]

## Introduction

Camila Sosa Villada's *Las malas* (2019), a tale of *travesti* sex workers in Córdoba, Argentina, was something of a publishing phenomenon, and its author (b. La Falda, Córdoba Province, 1982) has become perhaps the most recognised trans writer in Argentina. A notable feature of her writing is its portrayal of trans or *travesti* mothers,[ii] in particular in *Las malas*, an extended prose novel-cum-memoir, but also the more recent collection of shorter and equally genre-defying pieces, *Soy una tonta por quererte* (2022).[iii] One specific feature of this portrayal is the reiterated presence of tenderness, *ternura*, and related affective and emotional terms. The mother-child relationship is the one place where we should expect to find tenderness, though, as we see in the work of Gabriela Mistral, for example, this is far from straightforward: *ternura* is many things and the term may possess multiple meanings. Tenderness incorporates the mental and the physical, emotional love and bodily vulnerability. As Corominas (1973: 567) reminds us, *ternura* in Spanish has its Latin roots in *tĕner* (soft, delicate, tender), and has links to meat and animals – *ternero*, calf, veal; *ternilla*, cartilage – as well as human emotions. Multiple forms of tenderness, emotional, physical, and often hard to describe, appear in Sosa's work, connected with *travesti* and other mothers. Tenderness can appear alongside sexual desire and intimacy, but also against a backdrop of, or even resulting from, violence and vulnerability. Furthermore, as shall be argued, certain formal features of Sosa's writing turn the works themselves tender: porous, vulnerable, and, with the inclusion of fantastical elements, generically unstable. This essay addresses tenderness in Sosa's work in the context of questions about the politics of motherhood and trans rights in contemporary Argentina.

In her pioneering study, *De donde vienen los niños* Nora Domínguez assesses the at times paradoxical position of mothers in Argentine literature: while mothers traditionally occupied a "lugar marginal" (2007: 15), "el relato de la maternidad acompaña, sostiene y atraviesa la cultura argentina", in which "los hijos representan; las madres son representadas" (16). Recent Argentine fiction offers us many images of motherhood, layered, complex, and quite a few of which demonstrate a far from tender view of maternity. As Elsa Drucaroff puts it, "En la mirada machista de la modernidad psicoanalizada, la madre era sobre todo fuente de culpa y castración. Sin idealizarla, las nuevas sensibilidades de género postmodernas, narran otra veta: la potencia creadora de la madre, su enorme capacidad de curar" (Drucaroff 2012: 231). But other aspects of

maternity, apart from creation and curing, are also very much present in contemporary narrative. In Gloria Peirano's study of a mother-daughter relationship, a novel deeply rooted in the politics of maternity in the wake of Peronist politics in Argentina, *La ruta de los hospitales*, motherhood appears as an illness, either benign or malign (2019: 105). Young writers such as Leila Sucari have explored non-idealised, contradictory experiences of motherhood. Sucari's *Fugaz* (2019) depicts the estranged relationship of a mother and her infant son. The novel begins with a brutal sentence, "La primera vez que lo vi me dio asco" (15), that destabilises, from the outset, any naïve myths about motherhood. Lucila Grossman's humorous novella *Mapas terminales* (2017) takes the estrangement between mother and child even further. Partly a diary of a female drug addict, partly conspiracy novel and "trash science fiction", as defined by María Moreno, it tells the story of a woman who gives birth to a sort of alien with whom she communicates only through her computer.

A particularly disturbing portrayal of motherhood can be found in Rafael Pinedo's *Plop*, in which the titular character in a post-apocalyptic fantasy is named after the noise he makes on birth, falling into the mud below; in Beckettian fashion, it is downhill from there. Similarly shocking is Agustina Bazterrica's *Cadáver exquisito* (2018) which depicts the exploitation of maternity on a mass and individual scale and in which, in its dystopian near future in which as a result of a mysterious virus infecting all animals, the production, sale and consumption of human meat has been developed worldwide, tenderness is found either in moments that are harshly fleeting or in descriptions of the higher quality – and often still living – *viands* on offer. Marina Yuszczuk, meanwhile, whose poetry collection *Madre soltera* (2014) offered at once a stark insight into pregnancy and maternal labour and a witty, self-deflating critique of the lyric confession, returned to motherhood in a variety of forms through the lens of the vampire novel in *La sed* (2021); here it is again the flesh that is tender. Even in what might be called more mainstream fiction, albeit intellectually ambitious and socially engaged, the crime novels of Claudia Piñeiro have recently battled with the uncomfortable side of motherhood: ageing and illness in *Elena sabe* (2019); and clandestine abortion and religious fanaticism in *Catedrales* (2020). All this within a wider literary context in which various forms of non-traditional maternity are explored and celebrated, as in, for example, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) and the work of Jacqueline Rose (see below).[iv]

Hinted at in Grossman's or Bazterrica's writing is maternity's relationship both to contemporary politics and to thinking about the relationship between the human and its others; in Laura Briggs's words, "the politics of reproduction are key to understanding our shared political life […]". Briggs is describing the situation in the US (and to an extent the UK); but there is much that resonates with these Argentine works. She writes, "Reproductive politics are everywhere" and especially in "demonized figures" (2018: 210).[v] As Cynthia Francica puts it, contemporary trends in activism,

politics, and academia, "[open] space to think through the physical and affective dimensions of motherhood in connection to the non-human" (Francica 2021: 129). She writes in the same piece, with reference to the fictions of Samanta Schweblin, of the "complex links between the affective and material dimensions of motherhood and the embodied biological functions that sustain life" (Francica 2021: 144). Francica explores too the links between motherhood and the monstrous in Schweblin's writing, but equally pertinent might be works by those authors cited above.[vi]

In her study of motherhood, Jacqueline Rose argues that it is, "the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human" (2019: 1). Contemporary society, she states, "make[s] mothers the objects of licensed cruelty, [and] we blind ourselves to the world's iniquities and shut down the portals of the heart" (2). As we see in Sosa Villada's work, this is never more true that when trans motherhood is involved; Rose writes of "the sadism that mothers provoke" (Rose 2019: 24), and Sosa's fiction highlights this in compelling and moving fashion. As Rose later adds, "motherhood can, and should, be one of the central means through which a historical moment reckons with itself" (17). One can argue that in spite of, or perhaps because of, the obviously fantastical elements in Sosa's writing, this is even more the case. The socio-political aspect is at the forefront of Rose's concerns; "Mothers, we might say, are the original subversives" (18). Towards the end of her study, she examines the writings of Susan Stryker, "trans activist and writer", and a case of trans birth, "the ritual of transforming consciousness that heralded this new birth" (203). Rose, in a sense, is optimistic, although acknowledging the particular prejudices and violence faced by trans mothers: "it is only the radical disorientation of transgender that makes such an exuberant and painful crossing possible" (204).

In this context, an exploration of trans maternity becomes yet more pressing, and in particular the mothering carried out by the figure of the *travesti* in Argentina.[vii] Sosa's work warrants detailed study for its literary qualities alone – without doubt *Las malas* is a compelling read. Sosa Villada's writing has been compared to that of Carson McCullers and Lucia Berlin, but it is at the same time closely affiliated with trans/*travesti* activists such as Lohana Berkins, Naty Menstrual, Marlene Wayar and Susy Shock (the latter two provide part of the back-cover blurb for the 2019 Tusquets edition of *Las malas*), all of them part of an ever-growing corpus of so-called *travesti* or trans Argentine literature (Gigena 2020). Sosa, though, is also something of a phenomenon: in 2019 alone, *Las malas* ran to four printings, and by the time of *Soy una tonta*'s release had been translated into ten languages. And she is a very visible literary figure, perhaps the most well recognised *travesti* writer in Argentina, although in interviews she has shied away from adopting a spokesperson or "vocera" role for this community. As Tamara Tenembaum states, Sosa "va enhebrando la relación entre palabra e identidad, verdad y cuerpo, escritura y conciencia de sí" (2020: 253). For Farneda,

Sosa "se ha convertido en los últimos años en una de las artistas más reconocidas en la escena travesti-trans y se ha posicionado en el mundo literario y teatro argentino" (2020: 439).[viii]

This is, no doubt, a complex and difficult moment for trans and *travesti* rights in Argentina (and neighbouring countries). On the one hand, powerful campaigns for *travesti* rights, and other campaigns (#NiUnaMenos, against femicides; or the "Green Handkerchief" campaign for safe legal voluntary termination of pregnancy) in which *travestis* have taken full part, and progressive governments that have passed, for example, gender recognition and equal marriage legislation; on the other, increasingly vocal conservative sectors, often backed by the Catholic Church or Evangelical groups, critical of so-called "Gender Ideology", as well as a small but growing number of "RadFem" groups critical of trans inclusion into women's struggles (Santoro 2020). All of this takes places against a backdrop in which "el odio" occupies a prominent place in politics and public discourse, as studied by Giorgi and Kiffer (2020), with particular vehemence reserved for, amongst others, "*negros, travestis, [y] putas*" (2020: 62).[ix]

Nor can one overlook the longstanding doubts from trans or *travesti* activists themselves over their relationship with the state. As Joseph Pierce observes, "In the precise moment when the state begins to offer new agency via stable-because recognized gender categories, these artists have turned to the tactile embodiment of the monster to articulate their disavowal of normative categorization" (2020: 306).[x] Pierce cites the Chilean *travesti* artist and activist Claudia Rodríguez, who affirms that, "Para las travestis reales el estado no puede existir" (306). This clashes with the role of the state and society in maternity, as Domínguez puts it: "El niño, cuando es expulsado del cuerpo materno, es recibido por un sistema de prácticas que arman un relato" (Domínguez 2007: 40). In Sosa's work we see that the benevolent state does not exist for its *trans* and many other characters. The state's representatives at best ignore, at worst extort, mock and brutalise Sosa and her companions; indeed the narrator – explicitly Sosa – has their first adult sexual experience as a result of coercion – in effect, rape – by the police. Pierce notes the importance of knowledge about and through the body in *travesti* resistance: "This is knowledge accumulated through violence, joy, humour, desire, danger, the body as proliferation of ontological possibilities, orientations, even those reflections of oneself in the mirror, in different mirrors" (Pierce 2020: 316). These different mirrors appear throughout Sosa's work; and tenderness, *ternura*, is central.

## *Bad Girls*, or, *The Queens of Sarmiento Park*

*Las malas* is, as the title might suggest, many things at once. Large sections offer something close to a memoir of Sosa's life: tough childhood, departure from home, interrupted studies, sex work, and an early career in theatre. That Sosa tells this in non-chronological fashion is an early hint, though, that this is not a traditional memoir. Other sections offer a realistic portrait of the lives of *travesti*, and other, street sex workers in the city of Córdoba in the early 2000s. At the centre of this is a tale of trans motherhood – the *de facto* and eventually *de jure* adoption by the unofficial leader of the group, an older *travesti,* La Tía Encarna, of an abandoned child, El Brillo de los Ojos. It offers a story with some very precise spatiotemporal coordinates: the town of Mina Clavero; Córdoba city; the year in which Cris Miró (the "Evita de las travestis") first appeared on Argentine television; the fall of president Fernando de la Rúa; and evidently autobiographical marks of the author (the narrator is called Camila and she is from Córdoba province).

*Las malas* is far from a purely autobiographical or even realist text, however. For a start, the book is peppered with fantastical and magical feats and characters: a wolf-woman; a mute *travesti* who turns into a bird; the ghostly "headless men" ("Los Hombres Sin Cabeza", sub-Saharan African migrants to Argentina[xi]); and moments in which the figurative turns literal, of seeming hyperbole or wild exaggeration, that would not be out of place in a Gabriel García Márquez or Isabel Allende novel. Sosa Villada's writing constantly frustrates the expectations of the reader by placing the characters in a world of myth and fable. The members of this gang seem like distant descendants of Romulus and Remus, orphans more comfortable around forest creatures than humans. There are also echoes of indigenous myth (La Difunta Correa), the fairy tale (La Tía Encarna as the Good Fairy) and even of the body-horror genre (María la Muda's transformation). Furthermore, the novel is highly literary, both in its distinctive, often very moving, prose style, and in its multiple references to other literary texts, including Mistral, García Lorca, as well as the Bible.

What is more, *Las malas* contains a series of references to itself – its genesis, its composition, Sosa's own writing – that put the reader on an unstable footing. This is connected to and compounded by perhaps the strangest feature of the work: Sosa herself as narrator and author seems unsure about the status of *Las malas*: a blog that was deleted but then archived by a fan and returned to the author, revised for publication in what would quickly become an international hit. But even in its finished form, *Las malas* feels at once like a unified, coherent whole, but also as if something is missing – a novel that is somehow strange to itself. In short, if *Las malas* is a book in which tenderness appears in its various forms – in the vulnerability of the body; in the maternal relationship between a trans mother and her child; or between a trans sex worker and her "chongo" (tough guy, macho) boyfriend – it is a book whose own generic instability might also be regarded as a form of tenderness in its own right. I shall examine some examples to illustrate these points.

## Trans Maternity

Much of *Las malas* details Sosa's life, starting from the prologue by Juan Forn; Form retells an early experience of paternal cruelty when the young Camila, aged four, then known as Cristian Omar, refuses to urinate standing up, much to the fury of Cristian's father. But already Sosa's career as a writer, and the status of the book, is hinted at: Cristian refuses the paternal demand, but can already write their full name (Forn 2019: 7). To be *travesti*, the novel claims, is to be literary; Forn cites a talk by Sosa, in which she stated, "Mi primer acto oficial de travestismo fue escribir, antes de salir a la calle vestida de mujer" (2019: 10). So readers should be wary, as this is a text deeply rooted in a particular socio-political context and life story, but fully engaged with the possibilities of literary creativity.

Sosa's depiction of trans motherhood in *Las malas* is at once believable and fantastic. Motherhood is foregrounded the book, from the epigraph from Gabriela Mistral through to the appearance, on the opening page, of a pregnant woman, "la única nacida mujer entre todas" (17), later identified as Laura (49); or the mention of Sosa's own birth, and her mother's two days of labour, early on (26). Nora Domínguez writes of a "pasión materna" at the centre of the book (2020: 564). At the heart of *Las malas* is an unconventional portrayal of motherhood centred on the figure of the *travesti* mother – embodied here by the character Tía Encarna. Encarna enters the work early on, as the group's "aunt" but as much a surrogate mother figure – older, wiser, with a welcoming house, and soon, with the discovery and adoption of her son, El Brillo de los Ojos, abandoned in the park, a practicing mother. She and her friends are contrasted, in a moment of free indirect style that captures a certain popular prejudice, with "la mala madre que lo [i.e. El Brillo] abandona en el Parque" (23).

*Las malas* is marked by its grasp of the nuances and contradictions that surround trans maternity. Motherhood is desired by all the *travestis*: "Todas queríamos ser madres, era curioso hasta qué punto todas queríamos lo mismo" (64). We read of the collective care-giving of the *travesti* group, sharing the various aspects of child rearing, but also that the act of taking a child, of adopting an abandoned baby, is a form of "delirio" (23). Importantly, Sosa sets this in a socio-legal context in which trans motherhood is taboo and forbidden: police, media, and society are always ready to subject the *travesti* to violence; they are "siempre dispuest[os] al linchamiento" (24). For society, "La infancia y las travestis son incompatibles", an incompatibility that has religious overtones, as a form of "pecado" (24). Unknowability is important here – the threat perceived by a society that does not

know what the trans mother is; but also the response of Encarna, "que no sabe qué es lo que está haciendo", when asked by a friend about her adoption and mothering (26). And this, too, is tied up in forms of madness, and in purely bodily responses, of "una hembra que obedece a su cuerpo" (26). Nevertheless, the group persist with the "delirio" of their collective childcare. Despite the social stigma, the trans community that mothers El Brillo is marked by its capacity for "afecto", and that in that house, as opposed to others, the boy "era amado" (30).

Trans motherhood is a powerful agent of change in the book, in physical and emotional terms. The de facto adoption is the opportunity for the creation of new family links, "de adjudicarse parentescos" (25). La Tía Encarna breast "feeds" her son (although Sosa makes it clear that there is no actual milk on offer from a predominantly silicone breast) (25). As the narrator states, there is an emotional aspect at work here: "Nadie en este mundo ha dormido nunca realmente si una travesti no le ha cantado una canción de cuna" (25). Encarna's role is also flexible (as might be expected), alternativing between aunt and mother, "como una madre, como una tía" (33) and later, "nuestra madre adoptiva" (40). She is also – echoing Pierce's work on Shock and Rodríguez – "madre de todos los monstruos" (47).[xii] At the same time, they too need nurses ("nodrizas", or wet nurses, is the word chosen by Sosa Villada, with all its echoes of fairy tales) who take care of them and help them sleep.

Also present in the novel are various forms of labour, but especially parturition. We see this in the character of Laura (a pregnant sex worker in the group and eventually a biological mother) and the work of her partner Nadina, "que era enfermero de día, [y] sabía todo acerca de un parto porque se había criado en el medio del monte y había ayudado a su madre a traer a varios hermanos al mundo, así como a cabras, a terneros y perros atravesados" (51). Nadina takes on a composite m/paternal role with Laura. Furthmore, as in Rose's example from Stryker (see above), La Tía Encarna speaks of her own parturition: "'Yo también te [i.e. El Brillo] parí […] pero por un camino de ramas y de sangre […] Y yo no soy menos tu madre por no tener entre las piernas una herida abierta" (53). Later in the work, for legal and social reasons, Encarna disguises herself as a man, beard and all, for the purposes of her son's documentation and schooling. Outside, on the street, at the school gates, Encarna appears as Antonio Ruiz; behind closed doors, she is Encarna again. For El Brillo, "Ella es mi mamá y mi papá" (186).

## Tenderness: Writing the Body

Tenderness features prominently in *Las malas*, from Forn's prologue onward, though, as one might envisage, often in unexpected ways. The young Camila, in her first approach to the sex workers of Parque Sarmiento, Córdoda, is taken in by the more experienced *travestis* "que la vieron tan tiernita y vulnerable" (Forn 2019: 8). Tenderness too can be found in its most brutal, physical form: the

vulnerability of the body to violence, as it is treated like a piece of meat. We read of La Tía Encarna's many beatings: "botines de policías y de clientes han jugado al fútbol con su cabeza y también con sus riñones" (19); later we read of the cuts from her time in jail, from self-wounding and fights (28). Tía Encarna bears within her "[una] pena […] muy honda" (34), from disappointments in love but, importantly, repeated beatings and other acts of violence. Later, we read advice from La Tía to her younger, less experienced colleagues, about where best to let oneself be hit, in particular to avoid lasting kidney damage (80). Neither, she adds, should a *travesti* expect much sympathy from the medical profession.

The body, then, is ever-present in the book, vulnerable, but also adaptable, out of necessity, at once flexible and hard, as the narrator puts it: "Es como un líquido capaz de adaptarse a cualquier forma […] El blindaje es total" (75). To be "una prostituta" requires "una anestesia total" (75). The most extreme example of this is the dead body, of which there are, tragically, several in the volume. One appears, that of "una compañera muerta", in the same wasteland from which El Brillo is rescued (110). The political context is described – the group are on the run from the police, who regard murders such as this one with indifference or mockery. The body is found as Sosa and colleagues hide in the ditch, with a telling simile: "nos quedamos inmóviles como cadáveres" (110).[xiii] As well as the physical proximity to death, in this case a corpse hidden in a black plastic bag and dumped in the park, trans life is never far in other ways from death: the threat of violence, risk of HIV/AIDS, and the wear and tear on the body that Sosa suggests makes *travestis* age seven times faster than the rest of the populace. Care of the dying, too, is a reality for the group: either members of their own, stripped of family or social support in their final days; professionally (as healthcare workers); or in moments of crisis, exemplified best by La Machi, a recurring character in Sosa, healer-cum-paramedic-cum-shaman, who in *Las malas* tends a badly beaten and moribund *travesti* who is brought to her home (125).[xiv]

This political context is important; later in the novel Sosa shares a list of the horrific crimes committed against *trans* folk (and in *Soy una tonta* this reaches dystopian proportions). Two terms should catch our eyes here: "Hay cada vez más *desapariciones*. Hay un *monstruo* ahí afuera" (214, emphasis added). The use of the term disappearance, almost synonymous with the crimes of the most recent civic-military dictatorship, foregrounds a violence against sexual minorities that transcends politico-historical watersheds.[xv] At the same time, we have come to associate "monstrosity" with the trans characters in the novel, as a positive alternative to normality and "decent" civil society. But the monster can also be a source of cruelty and violence, feeding on the vulnerable.

Synonyms of tenderness and variants thereon appear, such as “dulzura”, with reference to the welcoming atmosphere of Encarna’s home, with its adoptive, adaptive family; “afecto”, too, is mentioned directly (26). Perhaps the saddest sequence in the work, before its tragic ending, is when Encarna hits her son, in part a result of stress brought on by a campaign of transphobic abuse from neighbours. But this inspires a reaction from Sosa’s narrator: hugging El Brillo, she writes of “el más puro ejercicio de la maternidad, eso que comparten todas las hembras del mundo: abrazar algo pequeño, darle afecto, aplacar el temor” (203). The description of the act of maternal caregiving is striking, as is Sosa’s description of herself demonstrating this “maternal exercise”. And yet, once again we see the ambiguity that characterises Sosa’s technique: the choice of a third person plural to write of “hembras”, excluding herself from the mass of females just as she includes herself in their actions.

One of the most notable examples of *ternura* in *Las malas* comes in the shape of La Tía Encarna’s lover/boyfriend, a sub-Saharan African refugee, and one of the “Hombres Sin Cabeza” who appear in both *Las malas* and *Soy una tonta por quererte*.[xvi] These men are refugees from conflict, notable for “su ternura, su sensibilidad y su disposición al juego” (37); at the same time, fleeing war and other forms of violence, like La Tía Encarna and her circle of protegées, “Habían sufrido muchas penurias en la guerra, casi las mismas que las travestis en la calle”. The phrase, “headless man”, is a way of referring to trauma, and how the men, wanting to forget past lives, “sólo recordaban las cosas que habían sentido con la piel” (37); as a result they combine intense companionship and vulnerability in their relationships to La Tía Encarna and the gang. They are models of tenderness in its multiple meanings, and in positive and negative senses.

As well as being pregnant and the only “born woman” in the group (to use Sosa’s words), and later the only strictly biological mother, Laura is known for her “ternura brutal”, in particular the habit of grabbing and squeezing *travesti* penises. After the “locura del parto” (55), Laura and Nadina form perhaps the most unlikely couple in the book, both abandoning sex work and going to live together in the countryside. It is not quite as simple as Nadina “abandoning” her trans identity; the relationship is a complex one, based on love and multiple roles: “Laura se había enamorado del enfermero, pero también de la compañera de ruta, que venía en el mismo cuerpo” (55). Their love is marked by “suavidad” and “ternura” but also by an unknowability: Sosa confesses to the “mareo” and “escalofrío” that she and the other *travestis* feel when picturing the couple’s lovemaking, and that “no teníamos palabras para su historia” (56). Again, motherhood, tenderness and the unknowable all rub shoulders.

This sense of tenderness is also found in the hard to define, but also more positively marked experiences Sosa recounts from her sex work. One of the stranger examples features in the relationship that Sosa recounts with a particular client, a man with a mobility impairment who pays only to sniff between her buttocks. This fetish aside, or perhaps included, "[sus] ojos […] gritaban ternura", while Sosa describes his simultaneous physical difference and beauty. He is "dulce y amargo" (102), with a "dulzura" the impregnates all around it, changing the air, and turning oxygen, in Sosa's works, into "vectores de ternura" (102). In a rare sexual encounter, professional or otherwise, not marked by obvious violence, we see a moment of intense world-altering tenderness. Another happily-remembered lover is also noted for his *ternura* – the zookeeper/hunter who pays the agreed fee and never causes her trouble: "un animal amable y viril […] te acariciaba con ternura" (155-56). This is worthy of note, for elsewhere Sosa observes that "los hombres no sólo mezquinan su ternura sino también el dinero que gastan en placer" (204). This character is different. Although one of the most realist and realistic sequences in the book, a certain animality marks their encounters: the corpulent figure of the zookeeper; the presence of various animals, notably a "pobre camello" obliged to watch the couple having sex; and Camila herself, "una perra caliente" (157).

What makes the sequence more plausible yet while connecting it to the novel's more fantastical streak, is that it is followed immediately by another stage in the "transformación" (159) of María la Muda into a bird. Humans turn into animals in a variety of ways – metaphorical, actual – in *Las malas.* If an aspect of tenderness is the crossing or vulnerability of boundaries, between bodies, for example, *trans* identity has already traced one crossing. In *Las malas*, Sosa goes even further, beyond gender or identity, or even the living and the dead: *trans* existence is linked to the ability to turn *transparent*: "La velocidad de la caminata era consecuencia de nuestro afán por ser transparentes" (143). A "solid" or visible *travesti* inspires insults and violence (144). Sosa's comments again blur the limits between the implausible or fantastical, and practical reality – the need to avoid prying eyes or public violence.

## Magic and Metafiction

Throughout *Las malas*, we read of fantastical, magical and, more broadly, implausible incidents and characters. Most striking is the figure of María la Muda, who begins, quite early in the work, for no clear reason, to sprout feathers. She despairs, communicating with her friends via notes: "KOMO BOY ATRABAJAR" (86, *sic*) and, notably, "SOI UN MOSTRO" (87, *sic*). The narrator refers to her "destino de pájaro" (87), describing an eventual complete transformation as the book progresses; later she is referred to as "flaca, negra, con los brazos cubiertos de esos canutillos de plumas […] una

escena de pesadilla" (107). The transformation is told with the same tone as the memoir or *crónica* sections, once again calling into question the genre, indeed the status, of the work itself, in which there is little stylistic distinction between literary modes. By the end of the book, María is described, quite matter-of-factly, as "la pajarita enjaulada" (215). The sequence calls to mind ideas of "shared forms" explored in Gabriel Giorgi's work on animality and biopower (2014), or what Pierce calls, with reference to Giorgi, "the unstable boundary between the human and the animal, the human and the machine, and the human and the monster" (Pierce 2020: 307). Pierce finds another example in the work of the Argentine trans activist, Susy Shock, "who describes their [*sic*] gender as not human but 'colibrí' (hummingbird)" (Pierce 2020: 313). Monsters are polyvalent in Sosa's work, not innately sources of optimism (see above), and clearly a fount of despair for María. But, as Pierce puts it, "'monstering' […] has become a crucial form of […] resistance to neoliberal politics of inclusion and recognition in Latin America and of opening up new possibilities of imagining collective belonging" (2020: 305). Sosa's literary trope is to tell this story with a (mostly) straight face in a work often marked by its compelling realism.

A further source of verisimilitude is Sosa's tracing of a socio-political context. Also from well within the realms of the supernatural is the character Natalí; "era la séptima hija varón [*sic*] en su familia y las noches de luna llena se convertía en lobizona" (Sosa 2019: 103). The werewolf in Spanish is more commonly a "hombre- (or mujer-)lobo/a"; *lobisón* is another term, but the *lobizón* recalls a figure in Guaraní mythology, also found more widely in popular beliefs in Argentina and Paraguay. Natalí, the narrator notes, becomes a *lobizona* (feminine). This is set against a historical reality: that seventh sons were made the godchildren of the President, an unofficial custom that became more regular under Juan Domingo Perón, and continues today.[xvii] Alfonsín was a *Radical* party president, the first to be democratically elected after the civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983); the specific detail lends credibility to the unbelievable fantasy – a typical technique of the magical realist novel. Trans history, Argentine politics, and literary imagination are inseparable here.

At the same time, some of these fantasies are marked by a note of doubt from the narrator. The songs of the Hombre Sin Cabeza, accompanied by La Tía Encarna, summon "pájaros muy oscuros" to listen, perched on walls and balconies. In itself, this is perfectly plausible; later, though, their songs cause a suspected or possible "milagro" as a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe appears to cry. Sosa vacillates between interpretations: "Nunca supimos si fue la humedad de aquel día o la manifestación de la divinidad lo que obró el milagro, lo cierto es que fue apabullante y nos estrujó el corazón de belleza" (42). Cultivated uncertainty, ambiguity and unknowability all feature throughout the novel, particularly at its moments of most heightened emotion. A related technical feature, again shared with certain works of magical realist fiction, is its blurring of the limits between the

literal and the figurative: readers are left unsure whether to read metaphors as metaphors or as events in a fantastical world. Faced with the threat of violence during one encounter, Sosa states: "Abro las branquias, erizo la pelambre y saco las uñas" (168). Humans do not have gills, but our hairs can stand on end, and we can partially hide our claws, or nails (in a fist). Do we read this metaphorically in whole or part (or not at all)? Again, the socially and physically plausible rubs shoulders with the imaginative, the literal with the metaphorical. Later, La Tía Encarca is described as lactating. After a particularly humiliating encounter, Sosa goes to see her. In a strange act of therapy, Encarna slaps Sosa and then bares a breast which, when squeezed, releases "un hilo de leche […] como una lágrima entre sus dedos" (134). The tears mirror Sosa's own (early she describes herself as "un mar de lágrimas") and remind us of La Difunta Correa (the popular saint who, it is said, continued to provide milk to her infant child despite having died). Encarna then invites her to spend Christmas with this new, alternative family. At this stage, there is little we can do but accept as fact what we have read, but quickly a prose flourish suggests otherwise: "Oh, nodriza Encarna. Oh, milagro de tus pechos. Oh, Difunta Correa de tetas de aceite de avión" (134). The use of various non-medical substances (industrial silicone, aviation oil) for bodily modification is a repeated feature of this work (and other trans memoirs – witness several sequences in the Chilean Pedro Lemebel's *Loco afán*); at the same time, the reference to miracles and popular saints adds a further note of ambiguity, and places the incident in an uncertain space between memoir and fantasy.

Towards the end of the book, it is even suggested to us that the whole story is in fact the product of a child's imagination:

> Cuando logramos entrar vemos al niño tallando en madera los animales que hemos sido: mujeres pájaros, mujeres lobos, mujeres tristes, mujeres valientes, toda nuestra mitología tallada en esas estatuillas que el niño crea en su reclusión. (208)

This leads us to another important point: the eminently artistic, indeed *literary* nature of *Las malas*. *Las malas* echoes and refashions many literary genres, including Latin American transvestite chronicles (for example Lemebel's writing), fairy tales, the horror story and also "narratives of motherhood", or "la serie de las madres", as Domínguez (2017) calls a series of fictions and writings with a long tradition in Argentine history, from Esteban Echeverría's *La cautiva* (1837) to stories about the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and tales of Eva Perón as the mother of the Nation. *Las malas* begins with a literary quotation drawn, precisely, from Gabriela Mistral, "*Todas íbamos a ser reinas*" (Sosa Villada 2019: 16). Mistral, whose own queer life and poetics has been the subject of a number of revisionist studies in recent years, foremost Fiol Matta (2002), was for decades regarded as an icon of literary motherhood. Sosa introduces an ambiguity in what is already a poem full of layers

and nuance: “reina” is at once the literal queen whom the girls in Mistral’s poem aspire to be, and a (multilingual) slang term for queer or trans. Mistral reappears later, too: Encarna (in one of the versions of her life that she tells) had learnt her poems by heart as a youth (29). One of the novel’s central incidents, the discovery of the baby, offers further opportunity for a literary reference, to Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1985), as the child who will be El Brillo is taken away in “la cartera” (21) – or a handbag. This is at once a plausible and realist detail, and yet too close to the well-known quip from a famous bisexual author to be overlooked as a literary intertext. Federico Lorca is another recurring presence; “para La Tía Encarna todas las travestis éramos Yerma” (54), a reference to his “rural tragedy” and its title character. Later Sosa cites *Doña Rosita la Soltera* (130). Central to this aspect of the work is the very literary nature of the *travesti,* as Sosa herself puts it, “¿Pensaron alguna vez que la poesía podía tener una forma tan concreta?” (Forn 2019: 11).

As Juan Forn notes in his prologue, the genesis of *Las malas* was somewhat atypical. It began life as a handwritten diary, which the young Camila then typed up at a local cybercafé, during her university days in the early 2000s. When she began her acting career, she deleted the blog (Form 2019: 8). Luckily, one might say, a fan downloaded or copied all the posts, and with Sosa’s star as a stage and screen actress on the rise, sent her the copy – the origin of *Las malas*, and another example, for Forn, of the “alchemy” at work in its pages (Forn 2019: 9).[xviii] Sections of the novel, for example Sosa’s reflections on her time at university, have the tone of a standard literary memoir (127-130). And this links to the position or status of the *travesti* in Sosa’s work: “algo muy difícil de explicar,” she writes (169). There are incidents, too, that exist between the original blog and the text we can read today. Sosa tells of an encounter with a once much-loved *cuarteto* singer and popular entertainer; afterwards, she writes, “me hice un té y me senté a escribir, algo que hacía a menudo al finalizar mis noches de ronda. Pero no alcancé a escribir una página” (177).[xix] She was, we discover, interrupted by another client. Where then does this incident fit in terms of the composition of the work? The details – left vague, one imagines, for legal and other reasons – the inclusion of memories from further back in time of happy family parties and dances, and the question of *when* this section was composed: all this remains nebulous or unanswered.

As in Marina Yuszczuk’s *Madre soltera*,[xx] self-negation or disavowal is another feature of *Las malas* that undermines its position as an orthodox memoir or *crónica*. Sosa writes of sunbathing one summer’s day, lying on the grass and using Coca-Cola as tanning lotion. In the next paragraph, this is contradicted: “No. En realidad somos nocturnas, para qué negarlo. No salimos de día. Los rayos del sol nos debilitan” (117). While the passage flirts with fantasy and the gothic – the vampire novel, in particular – Sosa goes on to explain that the sun reveals scars and imperfections, better hidden at night. At the same time, we are presented with an incident told straight-faced but which we almost

immediately have to discount. Later, on the same page, however, Sosa states that they do go sunbathing. While the incident may seem trivial, it is part of the innate literariness of the work, and of a characteristic of trans life as a whole, as written by Sosa: "Estamos ahí para ser escritas. Para ser eternas" (118). Lives sketched as fleeting, vulnerable, contradictory and brief – at times barely *liveable* – achieve some permanence as a literary creation.[xxi] The last act of the novel is for the "Bad Girls" to disappear: "Nosotras, las olvidadas, ya no tenemos nombre. Es como si nunca hubiéramos estado ahí" (220). Readers may hear an echo of Luis Buñuel's cinema; they may also see this as underscoring the innately literary, and so at once permanent and fleeting, nature of Sosa's characters, including even herself, as portrayed in *Las malas*.

In *Las malas* we witness an example of narrative tenderness: the porosity between this and works by Sosa and others; the uncertain shifting between genres and forms; and the description of tenderness in all its forms, from affective contact that blurs the boundary between self and other, to the violence that threatens the integrity of the body and the subject that inhabits and exceeds it. Camila Sosa Villada not only inaugurates a new way of writing about trans characters, fed in turn by a strong tradition of *literatura travesti*. She also proposes a conception of literature based on a trans ethic: "Mi primer acto oficial de travestismo fue escribir" (2019: 10). For Sosa Villada, all writing is a form of transvestism, and all transvestism is, in turn, a form of nudity and vulnerability. *Las malas* foregrounds this with its vivid and moving depiction of the tenderness at the heart of trans maternity.

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## Notes

i I first wrote about Sosa Villada in collaboration with Jordana Blejmar in a book chapter, yet to be published. I am grateful to Jordana for her intellectual companionship and insight over the years in this and other projects.

ii There is a wealth of material on the use of these terms in a Latin American and specifically Argentine context; Pierce (2020) is an excellent place to start. Very roughly, *travesti* would occupy (and potentially exceed) the space on a Venn diagram where the English terms transsexual and transvestite overlap. There are multiple reasons – cultural, political, medical – for the inaccurate match, for which reason the term *travesti* needs maintaining when writing about Sosa's work.

iii For reasons of space, this essay focusses on *Las malas*, but both *Soy una tonta* and the earlier, similarly hybrid volume *La novia de Sandro* (2015) are worthy of further and more detailed study.

iv See also the review essays by France in the *TLS* and Henneberg the *NYRB*.

v See the collection edited by Davey, in particular her editor's introduction (Davey 2001) and the essay by Rich; see also the essays by Pollock (2009) and Sandford (2011).

vi See also Roggero's contribution on maternity to the *Historia feminista de la literatura argentina* (2020).

vii See the pioneering study by Sifuentes-Jáuregui (2002) and later work by Lewis (2010). Many of these issues were being explored in the 1970s and 80s by Néstor Perlongher, as can be seen in the essays collected in *Prosa plebeya* (1997); for a more contemporary reading, see Testa (2018).

viii Farneda also sketches the history of Sosa's blog and the success of *Las malas* (2020: 440-42).

ix See also Giorgi (2020: 107-10).

x See Briggs on "queer and trans families and households [and how] their right to even be considered a family was explicitly challenged in the rhetoric of 'family values'" (2018: 16-17). Briggs argues that, "As a reproductive politics issue, same-sex marriage facilitated the privatization of dependency in both a queerly affirming and profoundly conservative way" (187).

xi Although the presence of recent African immigrants in Argentina, and specifically Córdoba, is a fact, their portrayal as phantasmal figures goes beyond a sociological or anthropological observation. See e.g. Gattari (2016) or Chevalier-Beaumel and Morales (2012).

xii See also Domínguez (2007: 432) on the depiction of monsters, mutations and mothers in Argentine fiction in the 1980s.

xiii It is tempting to see a reference to Néstor Perlongher's most famous poem, "Cadáveres", which, in part, reflects on the risks facing trans and other sexual dissidents during the last civic-military dictatorship, albeit in a highly coded or stylised fashion.

xiv La Machi reappears in "Seis tetas" (from *Soy una tonta*) as the superpowered protector of the vulnerable community of runaways.

xv On the "new disappearances," see the collection of articles edited by Gatti and Casado-Neira (2020).

xvi It is also hard not to hear and echo of Lucrecia Martel's 2008 film, *La mujer sin cabeza*.

xvii See e.g. "Alberto Fernández será padrino de un séptimo hijo varón," *La Nación*, 16 July 2022, https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/alberto-fernandez-sera-padrino-de-un-septimo-hijo-varon-nid16072022/. The law in question is number 20,843, passed in 1974: https://www.argentina.gob.ar/normativa/nacional/ley-20843-158477.

xviii Sosa is referred to as an *actriz* in most biographies; although it has become common practice to use the gender-neutral term "actor" in English to refer to performers of all genders, its echoes of the term *actor* in Spanish would have the unfortunate effect of mismatching with Sosa's own gender identity.

xix *Cuarteto* is a popular style of energetic big-band dance music in Córdoba and other provinces of the interior; its most famous exponent is the singer Juan Carlos Jiménez Rufino, better known as "La Mona Giménez".

xx See Bollig (2016: 213-24).

xxi On "livable" trans lives, see Lennon (2006).