

Review / Reseña

López, María Pía. *Travesía. Jugar con maldón*. La Plata: *Estructura Mental a las Estrellas*, 2023. 124 pp.

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What I first needed to do when I finished *Travesía. Jugar con maldón* was to start it all over again.¹ I could not help wishing the journey had not yet ended, like that feeling that absorbs many at the end of a good trip. Another journey of mine was also over at that time; I was back home in Connecticut, again away from Argentina, my homeland. It tends to happen when you return to a familiar place after being gone; the space seems different. Most likely, we are the ones who have changed, and our surroundings not so much. It feels the same when I close Pía's book; everything tastes different. Since I found the book, I felt the need to take it with me whenever I went—to the supermarket, to my kids' school, to the bus, to the beach, to the airport, to my bedside table. Not because it does not require a significant amount of attention, but because it asks to be read on the go, in its atmosphere of the world happening.

Pía's *Travesía* is a quest made through a recollection of voices and stories. *Travesía* embodies a feminist language, which Natalia Brizuela and Leticia Sabsay have described as a *plural-singular voice* (vii). In the opening section, exposing the difficulty

¹ If, following María Pía López, a feminist telling must be possible when building supportive nets to remain afloat, this text has much to thank for enthusiastic, professional, and affective readings by brilliant *compañeras* I am honored to have: Cecilia Chiacchio, Michelle Farrell, and Natalia Defiel.

of finding a beginning but also assuring that “telling must be possible” [“contar tiene que ser posible”] (*Travesía* 9),² the author searches for her voice and finds it sheltered by the voices of others. “Words of others stay overnight in my insomnia [...], a stockpile of seeds [...], a writing of what we do not want to lose because we think it may be worthwhile for others or to ourselves” [“Palabras de otra gente pernoctan en mi insomnio [...] un acopio de semillas [...], una escritura de lo que no queremos perder porque intuimos que a otrxs les servirá. O a nosotras mismas”] (*Travesía* 9). The writing I do not want to lose is in this *Travesía*, so I am reviewing what I think is probably valuable to you, and definitely valuable to me.

Far from the intellectual tone of academia and its old-fashioned attribution systems, Pia pays tribute to others’ works differently and closely by sharing something else besides quotations. She offers her real or imagined conversations with those thinkers, letting us into a warmer and more collaborative knowledge space. In another essay, available in English and intended for an audience unfamiliar with Argentina’s context,³ Pia explicitly pushes the boundaries of academic writing, posing a central question regarding her site of enunciation. “Can a person write as an activist and as a theorist and critic at the same time?” (*Not One Less* 3). The question works best as a description of her uniquely well-crafted and entangled voice(s). From what I can tell, *Travesía* is indeed located in such an imagined enunciative borderless space where writing works as another form of quotidian feminist activism, successfully triggering theoretical and critical thinking. Among several intellectual credentials (sociologist, professor, essayist, novelist, chronicler), María Pia López is a public activist “who began to identify as a feminist on the streets only in 2015 [...] as member of the feminist collective that shares a name with the greatest mobilization of women in the history of Argentina: Not One Less” (*Not One Less* 4). Eight years later, in *Travesía* (2023), we still witness the festive sounds from different public gatherings interrupting hegemonic narratives.

Several of Pia’s writings trust the first-person narrative, reassuring the power of memories and experiences, aiming for the interconnection of words and body. *Travesía. Jugar con maldón*, which from time to time takes the form of a personal diary, is no exception. The short texts that compose the book seem autonomous, but they

² All quotations from *Travesía* are my translations.

³ My hope is that this review encourages horizons of translations to make visible in the Global North knots of thinking coined by feminist movements from the Global South, tending bridges, and valuing their territoriality and emancipatory proposals, aiming for “a long overdue acknowledgment of their contributions” (Brizuela and Sabsay vii).

are not. They sound like a conversation made of conversations, where we, as interlocutors, are not invited to listen to the recording but to actively join in. The writing has the rhythm of walking through actual streets with people inhabiting them, like the opening sequence of Pia's television program about popular feminist movements produced by the channel Encuentro in 2023 (Image 1). Walking has to do with leaving one's comfort zone and daring to ask about what others are doing: "Walking is synonymous with chatting, gossiping, recognizing, letting curiosity lead you to find other geographies or a modified landscape" ["Caminar como sinónimo de conversar, chusmear, reconocer, dejarse llevar por la curiosidad, para encontrar otras geografías o un paisaje modificado"] (*Travesía* 63). Walking, talking, and writing are proposed as the opposite of thinking alone in quietness. Telling is associated here always with action and movement. "Telling is a political labor" ["Narrar es una labor política"] (*Travesía* 61); "swimming is telling" ["nadar es narrar"] (*Travesía* 53). Becoming a teller involves first occupying the patient and active place of a listener. Telling is building supportive and vital nets to hold while also being held: "having a net is less a personal possession than an inclusion, a participation, a knotting with other persons" ["tener red es menos una posesión personal que una inclusión, una participación, un anudar con otras personas"] (*Travesía* 10).



Image 1: From the documentary television show *Desobediencias. Feminismos populares*.

Telling also means being taken into account. One of the stories Pia shares is the fight for the continuity of a popular education center in Buenos Aires (the Centro Educativo Isauro Arancibia), located within feet of a demolished building used as a clandestine detention, torture, and extermination center during Argentina's last dictatorship. The school was not destroyed and remains thanks to street activism and solidarity. Isauro's students say they can still hear the mourning voices of the disappeared at night. They decided to tell that story by explaining that the yelling not only points to the suffering of the disappeared in the past but also to their own bearing

of injustice in the present. “Telling to make all lives matter” [“Contar, para que todas las vidas cuenten”] (*Travesía* 37) tells us Pia.

Throughout the book, Pia shares her desire to learn to swim, an intimate wish that surfaces in conversation with a neighbor. And not in a swimming pool, as one would typically start this practice, but in open waters, directly immersed in the ocean where, when the tide becomes dangerous, one can also search for ways of support to remain afloat. We may see that ocean on the front cover if we are willing to play with *maldón*.

Entangling the private with the public, *Travesía. Jugar con maldón* is also a collective genealogy of the feminist movement in Argentina. It goes back to the foundational figure of the captive women during the conquest, in whose skin the dictum of the race and gender was printed (*Travesía* 13). The essay’s name made its own journey through time. *Maldón* names different concepts. *Maldonada* is the name of a captive whose character refuses victimization (*Travesía* 14). She challenged men’s boundaries, choosing to live through unexpected friendships. Her figure is summoned to trace a mythology of the feminist movement, a popular movement that does not limit its scope to the gender agenda. *The feminism of the maldonadas*: “Those feminisms overflow everything, recreating everything, overpassing any boundary” [“Esos feminismos que todo lo desbordan, que todo lo recrean, que inundan cualquier frontera”] (*Travesía* 15). The Maldonado is also the name of a raging creek in Buenos Aires that causes floods in the surrounding neighborhoods. Likewise, the same name is a source of pain in our days because it is the last name of a young man killed for defending the Mapuche cause in 2017. Moreover, *maldón* is a ruse in a card game where a player can ask for a new shuffle. However, “life prescind of that maneuver [...] Playing with *maldón* is what many lives are about. What is left is cleverness, creation, the ruses, the story, the cards of others, the alliances” [“la vida prescinde de ese artilugio [...] Jugar con maldón, de eso se tratan muchas vidas. Lo que queda es la astucia, la creación, las tretas, el cuento, las cartas de las otras, las alianzas”] (*Travesía* 16). Pia invites the readers to play like *maldonadas*, building nets of friendships even when the shuffle of life has left many with a hand that does not allow them to enter the game.

I heard of the book in another feminist conversation. At the literature conference *Orbis Tertius* (La Plata, April 2024), Nora Domínguez shared one passage from Pia’s book. It was a reflection on time and the possibilities of its interruption. Nora invited the audience to think about the interruption of the narrative as a feminist

strategy. I fell in love with the proposal. It caused a twist in my presentation on the disobedient writing of Analía Kalinec, the daughter of a genocidal father. Analía tells her choral autobiography incorporating her father's voice, which we read interrupted. "To interrupt the rationale of cruelty" ["Interrumpir la lógica de la crueldad"] (*Travesía* 99)—that claim seems to rule every piece of Pia's work, where we hear the voice of another daughter who decided to interrupt the filial bond with her genocidal father.

In *Travesía*, all the stories we are trusted with are those of people whose works interrupted cruelty—in different ways, contexts, and times. For Pia, interrupting means twisting a destiny or a commandment (*Travesía* 44). "Do not do what is expected in the order of things; do not follow the path traced by a rationale of power that feeds violence in order not to stop exercising it" ["No hacer lo que está previsto en el curso de las cosas, no seguir la huella trazada por una lógica de poder que alimenta la violencia para no dejar de ejercerla"] (*Travesía* 42). A form of interruption goes back to the cruelest space of the ESMA and the stories of women who lived through that hell, finding forms of resistance that are not always valued, such as friendship and laughing (*Travesía* 92). Playful forms of resistance that take us from the dedication in Pilar Calveiro's *Poder y desaparición* to Josefina Ludmer in her article "Las tretas del débil". We also hear laughter when walking today's streets with Pia, where popular activism is performed. This laughter also occurs among mates in a game when they act as if they were playing with the most potent cards but only have *maldón* (*Travesía* 93). Another aesthetic and political form of interrupting cruelty is presented in the visual image of a women's assembly held during a *piquete*—a roadblock demonstration practice in which people interrupt the traffic to make their claims visible. "Interruption from within interruption" ["Interrupción dentro de la interrupción"] (*Travesía* 58).

Travesía runs through a strong overflow creek, always projecting to become an ocean, the ocean Pia dreams of swimming in without realizing she is already sailing it in her writing. The water stream makes us travel from the time of the conquest, recreating the mythic image of the captive woman with the story of La Maldonada, a woman who disturbed men's boundaries and resisted safeguarding herself by unpredicted bonds of friendship. Similar forms of resistance take us to the times of State terrorism and the stories of people who found playful and unforeseen ways of interrupting cruelty in the most hostile spaces. A cruelty that does not stop being committed with the return of democracy, a cruelty we recalled with the image of Santiago Maldonado—the perseverance of injustice and other forms of violence

perpetuated by neoliberal governments. Against all odds, we may not sink if we are willing to find ways of confronting the contemporary spread of cruelty by hearing and walking with each other, laughing, and playing in open waters even when we do not know how to swim and have *maldón* in our hands. Such is the powerful flow of the feminism of the *maldonadas* that overflows everything, like Pia's book and its world-changing flavor.

Works Cited

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