‘Domesticating’ or ‘foreignizing’? Which approach to translation is more appropriate to any one foreign-language book or author you have read?

Anders Hei

Las Malas is a Spanish-language novel by Argentine author Camila Sosa Villada, first published in 2019, with an English translation by Kit Maude released in 2022. Set in the city of Córdoba, Argentina and based on Sosa Villada’s own life, the book revolves around a group of street prostitutes who identify as *travesti,* a gender identity specific to Latin America that goes beyond the gender binary. Sosa Villada deals with themes such as transgender youth, sex work, violence against *travesti* and the fight for trans rights in an Argentina where *travesti* like her are largely persecuted. Owing to the unique sociolinguistic culture of the *travesties* which the novel is embedded in, it is more appropriate to adopt foreignization as the primary approach to its translation, only choosing domestication when necessary.

We must first understand that the practice of translation is not simply about changing one language into another, but also introducing one culture into another (Zhang, Baohong, 2001). Domestication and foreignization are two major strategies in which this can be achieved, first formulated by translation theorist Lawrence Venuti. Domestication, defined as “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home” (Venuti, 1995), modifies foreign conventions into familiar ones to make the translated text more fluent in the target language. By contrast, foreignization is defined as “an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (Venuti, 1995). The “foreignness” of the original text is retained, most notably culture-specific terms like cuisine, slang, and historical figures. Both strategies come with advantages and disadvantages. While domesticated translations can be easier to understand, they can also obscure more specific aspects of cultures, nations, and peoples, distorting the original text. Foreignization, on the other hand, stays faithful to the original and gives prominence its cultural background, but poses the risk of being incomprehensible to the reader and failing to effectively communicate the culture of the source language.

The principal concern that comes with translating “Las Malas” is how to approach the word *“travesti”*. At first, a translator may be inclined to domesticate this term, with an English translator choosing to use the widely accepted, literal translation “transvestite” as given by the Cambridge Dictionary, or other umbrella terms for the groups of people who do not identify with sex assigned at birth, such as “transsexual” and “transgender”. Readers in the target language who identify under these terms would be able to relate more with the book, for example the feeling of gender dysphoria, while those outside the community may have a better understanding of the struggles the characters face, especially when comparing experiences in the novel to those in their respective countries. This is important when we consider the role of transgender people in our society and the hardships they continue to face, for example the rise of anti-trans laws in the USA.

However, the term “*travesti*” itself is politically charged, and as mentioned before unique to Latin America. Defined as "persons who, having been assigned the masculine gender at birth, identify themselves in different versions of femininity, and who may or may not surgically or hormonally modify their bodies”(Cabral and Viturro, 2006), the term *travesti* acts more as a “third-gender”, as some may not necessarily identify as female. They have a had a long and violent history of oppression and marginalisation within Argentine society, having existed in the region before the use

of “transgender” (Ferreira, 2018). LGBTQ+ members of the Western world may not necessarily understand the specificities of the travesti movement in Latin America. As Sosa Villada writes,

> *“We’re like a country too, in the merciless damage done to the bodies of travestis. The marks left on certain bodies, unfairly, capriciously, avoidably, the mark of hatred.”* [1]

Placing the *travesti* body in the centre of a national narrative, Sosa Villada conveys the brutal history of *travesti*, from stories of persecution under the Argentine dictatorship, to mistreatment by police through repeated imprisonment as “sex offenders” (Clarín.com, 2019), or perhaps the fact that 74.6% of trans women and *travestis* in Buenos Aires have suffered some type of violence, with 70.4% earning their living from prostitution (Incerti, 2018). Therefore, to translate “*travesti*” as “transvestite” or “transgender” does not reflect and in fact diminishes the experiences which the author and all *travesti* have gone through, and the application of such categories by Anglo-American academics over *travesti* identities can be considered colonizing and westernizing in nature (Brown and Browne, 2016). Thus, it is more appropriate to foreignize this word, leaving it untranslated, so that the activism present in the book is conveyed with the same force as the original, and that a level of respect is paid towards the author and the *travesti* community.

Sosa Villada presents a variety of ideas and experiences specific to the *travesti* community, including detailed and vivid accounts of the violence they receive, and foreign concepts which readers may find hard to grasp. One of such concepts mentioned are the *“tetas rellenas de aceite de avión”,* which deals with the concept of using of aircraft oil as an alternative to silicone injections, a popular measure amongst the poorer *travesti* sex-workers. This is an idea which may be strange to the majority of non-Argentine readers, and translators may choose to find alternative, more common practices which exist in other countries. But finding an equivalent replaces the real-life experiences of *travesti,* with something which is not representative of their economic, political, and social struggles. A literal, foreignized translation, though shocking to some, conveys their situation without sugar-coating the violent truth: that *travesti* are willing to put themselves and such risk in order shape their bodies in line the “hierarchy between the bodies”, one that fits with the feminine ideal (Alvarez, 2017).

In one section of the novel, she presents a monologue on the colourful, yet vicious insults received by the *travestis*, writing,

> *“El resto de la gente ignora nuestros nombres, usa el mismo para todas: putos. Somos los manija, los sobabultos, los chupavergas, los bombacha con olor a huevo, los travesaños, los trabucos, los calefones, los Osvaldos cuando mucho, los Raúles cuando menos, los sidosos, los enfermos, eso somos.”*

Here, the reader is shown a mixture of insults, some of which may not be typically used in the target language of the translation. Readers may not understand their full meaning or be able to correctly interpret the ridicule conveyed. Therefore, translators may be inclined to use domestication, choosing to find equivalents to such insults. For example, in the English version “los manija” is translated as “third legs” instead of the literal “handle”, while “travesaños” is translated as “perverts” instead of “crossbars”. However, one must also consider the fact that these insults are specific to the *travesti* experience. They cannot be used in any other context or against any other social group, with Sosa Villada deliberately using such stigmatizing language to critique the verbal abuse against *travesti* subjects. Thus, words like “chupavergas”, meaning “cocksuckers”, or

[1] Excerpts from the test used to show a narrative point are given in English for clarity, while excerpts used to show linguistic points are given in Spanish.

"trabucos", meaning "blunderbusses" are translated literally, reminding the audience that they are reading about the experiences of a foreign, marginalised group, yet still retaining the impact of such name-calling. Here, a balance between foreignization and domestication must be found so that the violence within the language is not eliminated.

Finally, translators are faced with the task of conveying several ideas specific to Argentinian culture. For example, slang, such as "chongo", is virtually untranslatable. Versions of this word exist throughout the Spanish speaking world, such as in Mexico and Peru, where it refers to a bun-like hairstyle. In Argentina, there is a unique definition, used by a woman to convey a relationship with someone who is neither her boyfriend nor something casual (Clarín.com, 2015). Equivalents in other languages will fall short of conveying the culture behind the term, notably the sexual liberation of the female, thus translators should foreignize slang like this by leaving them untranslated.

Similarly, famous figures, such as Cris Miró, and religious figures such as the Difunta Correa should be left untranslated, owing to their specificity within Argentinian culture. Translators may attempt to convey such terms by finding similar figures in the target language but doing so causes them to lose their cultural context. Cris Miró, widely considered to be the first *travesti* celebrity in Argentina, is regarded as a cultural symbol who paved the way for trans women and *travesti* in Argentina (*"Cris Miró les abrió las puertas a todas las que siguieron"*, 2017). Having died of AIDS in 1999, her impact is undeniable, with Sosa Villada writing,

> *Just then the TV announced that the iconic drag queen Cris Miró had died and we all gulped and fell silent.*

Thus, using an alternative would disregard her legacy and influence, devaluing the impact of her death amongst the *travesti* community in the novel. La Difunta Correa, literally meaning the "deceased Correa", is a folk saint revered amongst the Argentinian working-class. According to popular legend, she died attempting to reach her ill husband, but her baby was found feeding on her ever-full breast. Within the novel, she is worshiped by the *travesti,* with Sosa Villada writing

> *Oh Difunta Correa with aircraft oil tits, saintly patron of all those of us who found you in our ceaseless search for a mother, to find a mother to console us on our nights of regret, a mother to teach us not to suffer.*

To the *travesti*, she is a symbol of motherhood, of femininity, and of miracles. Using an equivalent saint or figure would mitigate the symbolic meaning of the Difunta Correa towards the *travesti,* as described in the novel. Given this context, the names of most figures mentioned should be left in Spanish, with a footnote added to explain their stories and their significance within the *travesti* community.

As we have seen, Sosa Villada's novel is rooted deeply in Argentinian history and politics, thus when translating "Las Malas", translators should aim to foreignize as opposed to domesticate. The realities of *travestis* are often unknown, overlooked, and often mixed with those of transgenderism, even though there are distinct differences between the two. The worldwide influence of Eurocentric LGBTQ politics leaves little room for alternatives like *travestis,* therefore it is all the more important the translation supports these overlooked narratives of Latin American gender and sexuality. While a foreignized translation may not be the most fluent or understandable, a domesticated version which conforms to the Western canon only undermines the socio-political activism and defiance behind the novel. In the author's note in the English edition of Las Malas, Sosa Villada declares *"I reclaim the stonings and spittings, I reclaim the scorn",* and this is exactly what a translation should help her to

do: change attitudes towards *travestis*, help them find a voice, and allow them to reclaim their identities.

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