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Simonetto, P and Kunin, J (2021) Mariela Muñoz: Citizenship, motherhood, and transsexual politics in Argentina (1943-2017). *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 8 (4). pp. 516-531. ISSN: 2328-9252

<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9311102>

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Mariela Muñoz. Citizenship, motherhood and transsexual politics in Argentina (1943-2017)

It's August 1993. Outside a police station, fifty people wait in support of their friend and neighbour. It's been a month since Mariela Muñoz was imprisoned, accused of child abduction and forgery. She is the mother of seventeen foster children that adopted her as their mother.¹ Suddenly, Mariela leaves the building and joins the crowd. A cameraman pushes through them to get a clear shot of the first well-known Argentine transsexual mother. Mariela hugs one of her elder daughters and her grandson, and presents them to the TV cameras: "here is my family." Mariela is covered in tears, she can not stop crying. The journalist asks her how it feels to be free, and she replies "I am happy because I am a lady, a mother and a grandmother. I am thankful for everyone who supports me."²

Mariela Muñoz became the first transsexual widely socially recognized as a mother in Argentina.³ She emerged as a national leading figure in her struggle to recover legal ward of three of her children that had been previously annulled by a judge. Moreover, in 1997 she became the first transsexual recognized as woman by the State.

This text analyzes the making of Mariela Muñoz' motherhood repertoires to redefine political, social, and intimate citizenship.⁴ By stabilising connections with maternal discourses and practices as a key axis of female citizenship in Argentina, we show how her maternal politics challenged the cis-straight-male neoliberal project creating paths for social recognition for transsexual people.

We argue that as local and regionally specific accounts of mothering and maternity in Argentina have been very strong symbolically, Mariela's maternal politics socially legitimised her as a *transsexual* citizen on a broad scale. Her politics were paradoxical. On

¹In 1993 Mariela had 17 children, but she raised 23 in total until her death.

² SIGLA Archive, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcr3eBHARrY>

³ Mariela Muñoz defined herself as a transsexual woman. Beyond its use as a medical concept since 1949, the terminology transsexual was used in Argentina to define people that accessed bio-technological procedures to affirm their gender beyond the one assigned to them after birth. During the 1990s, transsexual became a political identity that by arguing that they suffered a medical condition and that they were trapped in the "wrong body" articulated a wider demand for state recognition and for access to gender affirmation surgeries that were banned in Argentina. Transsexuals distinguished themselves from travestis, a political and social identity that designated a wider group of people that didn't adjust themselves to the binary men-women, and usually did not perform genital gender-affirmation surgeries. Mariela Muñoz defined herself as a transsexual or/and a woman.

⁴ Here we address the notion of "intimate citizenship" to examine rights, obligations, recognitions and respect around those most intimate spheres of life (Plummer 2011).

the one hand, she appealed to traditional meanings of being a woman such as fulfillment through motherhood and the duty of care for others. On the other hand, these uses of key cultural symbols displaced the imagined margins for transsexuals, and helped her enjoy popular support. By placing herself in the cultural core of womanhood, Mariela conquered rights such as social recognition as a mother and a woman. Her politicisation of care was also a criticism of the neoliberal patriarchal project by claiming protection for children abandoned by the state. However, these uses also may have echoed with conservative discourses that relied on the rejection of abortion and the social sanctioning of biological "bad mothers."

This article dialogues with the literature on kinship, politics and cis-heteronormativity. It remarks how trans* kinship challenges the relationships between nature and social roles (Fernández Romero 2020; Platero Méndez y Ortega Arjonilla 2017). Recent literature has studied gay and lesbian homo-parenting (Biblarz y Savci 2010); trans-parenting* and queer mothering practices (Manning et al. 2015); and multi-parent families (Gibson 2014). Although still scarce, studies on trans-parenting* focus on -usually technologically assisted-reproduction as the main route to the study of trans-parenting*(James-Abra et al. 2015; Israel 2005). This emphasis on biological reproduction can be explained by the greater access to these procedures in the global north, in contrast to the long history of circulation of children outside the nuclear family in Latin America (Fonseca 2002), and to the community-based maternal practices of the *travesti* and transsexual community in Argentina (Wayar 2020). Mariela Muñoz's story contributes to rethinking this field by looking into repertoires of kinship production and into trans-parenting* cultural meanings beyond biological reproduction.

The study of Muñoz's struggle also helps to reconceptualize feminist perspectives. It challenges the limits of cis-gendered and anti-maternal feminisms, by showing how initially considered conservative agendas could lead to social transformation. It demonstrates that even guided by traditional repertoires and without a long-scale political scheme, wide visible intimate politics in specific times have shifted normative boundaries. Moreover, this political struggle highlights how a central cultural meaning such as motherhood, can be appropriated by unexpected social agents as transsexuals and could create potent identifications to try to break through the cis-heterosexual regime.

This article is organized in three sections. Firstly, a brief biography of Mariela Muñoz is introduced. Secondly, we analyze the symbolic power of motherhood as a driving force for women's agency in Argentina as a hallmark to Mariela's politics. Thirdly, it describes Muñoz's maternal political repertoires in the remaking of citizenship.

A brief biography of Mariela Muñoz

Mariela Muñoz was born in Lules (Tucumán) in 1943.⁵ She grew up in a rural poor working-class family who worked in the sugarcane harvest. Like many others, her family migrated to work in the emerging industries. They moved to Quilmes, a southern industrial town in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires Province, where her father became a cook in a textile factory.

In 1958, she renamed herself as Mariela. In the beginning, her parents tried to "correct" her manhood by taking her to doctors and brothels. Nonetheless, after several attempts, her father decided to raise her as Mariela.

As a teenager, she was responsible for taking care of her six siblings and worked as a babysitter. When she was sixteen, she became a fortune teller by reading tarot cards. Some years later, she founded an informal social shelter for children and single mothers. She created an extended family of 23 children and several grandchildren, many of whom came, like her, from Argentina's poor northern provinces in quest for a better life and ended up living in the poor suburban neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.

In 1981, as other transsexuals that tried to avoid the Argentine legal prohibition of genitalia-related-surgeries, she travelled to Chile to have a gender-affirmation surgery performed. There she had her ID forged, although she later discovered it did not have legal value in her home country. She also got married with her partner Jorge, a bricklayer.

Mariela was legally recognized as a male citizen, consequently she was unable to legally adopt.⁶ To achieve her desire to become a mother with Jorge, she made an arrangement with two poor women who were pregnant. She promised them that if they did not have an abortion she would take care of raising their children. Both the mother of twins and, some time later, the mother of a little girl registered themselves at the hospital with Mariela's forged documents, which made Mariela their legal mother. In 1993, the mother of the girl accused her of abduction and document forgery. The judge Pedro Entío ordered the imprisonment of Mariela and her husband, their children were taken from them and their birth certificate was annulled. Mariela was sentenced to one year in prison. She started a long struggle with which she reached international recognition. In 1993, she appeared before the International Tribunal

⁵ Lules is a town in northwestern Argentina that in 1947 registered 12000 citizens.

⁶ Argentina has allowed children adoption without reference to the requestor's sexual orientation or gender identity since 2010, after the sanction of the equal marriage law.

on Human Rights Violations Against Sexual Minorities in New York where she stated: “[the little girl's] mother started to blackmail me. First she demanded money. Then a lot and a house. She threatened to abuse me. When I bought a car for the kids, she demanded it in exchange for the girl. When I refused, she reported me to the police (...)I was arrested and taken to the police station (...) the next morning, the police took away Maira and the two twins.” Although Mariela won social popularity, she could never raise those three children again.

However, Mariela never gave up and kept fighting other battles. In 1997, after years of legal struggle, a judge ordered to rectify Mariela's birth certificate, recognizing her gender as female. That same year Mariela announced her participation in the primary election of the Justicialist Party.⁷ Nonetheless, after her house was attacked by gun fire, she gave up the idea of being a candidate. Mariela continued participating in politics and in the media. She was an advisor of the National Institute Against Discrimination. She passed her last days in the home of one of her sons. After several strokes, she died in 2017.

Motherhood and Citizenship in Argentina

There were many historical moments where the agency of Argentine women was focused in maternalist repertoires which placed them as leading actors that did not necessarily aspire for the subversion of gender norms. Thanks to strategic maternalisms, women gained politicity, visibility and certain degrees of legitimacy, like Mariela.

In Argentina since the nineteenth century cis-women were challenged to exercise patriotic motherhood, providing virtuous citizens to the nation (Di Liscia 2008). Although this figure has been linked to female subordination, maternity was politicized and used as a central argument in the demand for women's rights. At the turn of the twentieth century, Argentine feminists appealed to a supposed "feminine nature" to demand that the obligation to reproduce the species should have as a counterpart the recognition of rights. They reformulated femininity and motherhood within the ideology of their complementarity and equivalence (or superiority) with respect to men (Nari 2004).. Moreover, they claimed that cis-women-mothers would radically transform politics and society by introducing maternal thought and morality that made them superior to men. Both self-sacrifice, that implied care for others mainly "those most in need" such as the elderly, children, cis-women, and workers;

⁷ The *Partido Justicialista* (PJ) is an Argentine political party, which was referred to in the governments of Juan Domingo Perón (1945-1951; 1951-1955; 1973-1976).

and also the ethics of responsibility, which had been previously classified only as "private" moral premises were extended to the public arena (Biernat y Ramacciotti 2013).

Argentina's history has several examples where female agency and a conservative sexual division of labor can be seen. During Peronism, María Eva Duarte de Perón (Evita) exalted female participation by forging an impressive mobilization of cis-women to rally support for her husband's government. Cis-women's suffrage, so strongly sought by socialist feminists, was conquered by Peronism in 1947. The government promoted women's domestic paid work as an option to contribute to the family's economy, without neglecting their supposed maternal and conjugal responsibilities (Barrancos 2010).

The state terrorism imposed between 1976-1983 meant the forced disappearance of thousands of militants, torture, prison, sexual abuse, forced exile, and childre apropiation. In this context, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo questioned the government about the whereabouts of their children and other family members and became an extraordinary civil force (D'Antonio 2018). Appealing to blood ties as a principle of collective adhesion, they have struggled for the recognition of their demands during and after the last Argentine military dictatorship. Even if their collective action was born from the sexual division of labor (caring for their children), their actions broke that same division: they left the domestic sphere and confronted the de facto rulers. They took back the maternal values that the state urged them to practice in their private lives and brought them into into the political one (Zarco 2011).

Motherhood politics and contentious actions deployed by the relatives of the victims were consolidated as key cultural symbols of social movements in post-dictatorial democracy. While policymakers imagined the mother-child bond as the target of scarce social policies , mothers emerged as public figures of street protests and civil society (Adair 2019). Repertoires of motherhood have legitimized cis-women's voices and demands for food assistance, subsidies and housing. It has also become a platform for protest and for making cis-women's needs visible in relation to their situation of material poverty. However, this voice usually becomes legitimate only when it is compatible with the forms of femininity accepted by state social programs.

Between the neoliberal heyday of the 1990s and its consequential crisis in the early 2000s, mothers became public actors of social movements such as those in the workers' takenovered factories and the unemployed-workers movement (*piqueteros*). Their political discourse was

articulated around the need to defend the factories and their families "since taking care of the factory is taking care of their children" (Álvarez y Partenio 2010)

Since the 1980s, the gay, lesbian, feminist and travesti movements participated in the reshaping of post-dictatorship citizenship. These movements struggled against the legal codes that since the 1930s empowered policemen to deploy violent practices against sexual dissidents during both civil and military governments. In the 1990s, gay movements as the Argentine Homosexual Community (CHA) and Gays for Civil Rights (GDC, 1991-1996) employed familiaristic language to face the material consequences of HIV/AIDS by proposing a civil union bill (Bellucci 2010).

Family-oriented and maternal discourses were not only an important source of public power, but also of community care practices. "Travestis motherhood" was an extended practice in northern Argentina. It involved an alternative construction of bonds and kinship to achieve shelter and care that was initially neglected by *travestis'* nuclear families (Wayar 2020). They bonded through shared experiences such as migration, rejection, police violence, poverty and sex work (Berkins et al. 2015). Travesti/trans* kinship has been conceptualized as a project of care that contrasted with cis-heterosexual violence (Wayar, 2020). However, even if new conceptualizations of *travesti* motherhood emerged in the last decades, the efficacy of Mariela's discourse survived. In 2013, Florencia de la V, a famous trans* Tv-actress and host, answered the critics of a conservative journalist that accused her of not being a woman, holding her ID and breaking into tears while she presented herself as a "proud Argentine woman and mother."⁸ Just like Mariela two decades before.

Mariela Muñoz's Repertoires of Motherhood and the Remaking of Citizenship

The court's involvement forced Mariela Muñoz to begin a public struggle as a mother in a difficult scenario for *travestis* and transsexuals. They have suffered from long-term violence such as police persecution and social exclusion. Still today their life expectancy is only 35 years (Berkins et al. 2015). Their daily life was tough, they could be stopped by a police officer while out for groceries and be accused of being scandalous in the street, or just for being dressed in clothes "contrary to their sex.", which was described by one of the most important leaders of the travesti/trans movement in Argentina, Lohana Berkins (2003, 65) as a "daily stage of siege".

⁸ Telefe. 2013. "El descargo de Flor de la V". Youtube, Nov. 18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNyYLY7OQgc>

Within this context, Mariela deployed a public political maternalism that inscribed her transsexual experience in the discourse of familiarism. On T.V. Mariela presented herself as a “symbol of Argentine mothers” creating a link with social and political discourses that highly appreciated motherhood.

Even if Mariela lost ward of the children, she was able to win an unprecedented grassroots support in times of conservative neoliberal politics. As a TV journalist expressed in 1993: “Mariela has won the support of the majority of society. It is not clear if these displays of affection come because there is more respect for the transsexuals or if it is Mariela's maternal instinct. The truth is that she is popular, her neighbours gave her their support and they even composed a song for her.”⁹ Mariela articulated the paradoxical meanings of motherhood to inscribe herself in social valorised notions of womanhood related to caregiving. If the maternalisation of cis-women was initially deployed by the Argentine state to prevent the circulation of children by reinforcing the mother caring role (Pérez 2020), Mariela took advantage of those ideas to get support for a different type of family, not based in biological ties. She sutured her condition as a mother with her woman embodiment pushing beyond what it was considered the biological limits of gender and kinship.

We could recognize seven principal elements of her maternal repertoire: (a) pointing out the care of her foster children; (b) shading her sexuality; (c) marking her desired motherhood, (d) emotional agencing; (e) to mother as a condition for being a woman; (f) taking motherhood beyond feminist, lesbian and gay agenda; and finally (g) transforming motherhood in a metaphor of social policies as a critique to the neoliberal project.

Firstly, her primary source was highlighting the care she provided to her children. Mariela referred to care as an innate duty of women and mothers that she would express throughout her life. “My children are my best lawyers” - Mariela would repeat as to exalt her parenting skills - “I had been a good mother: they turned out to be good and honest men and women.”¹⁰ Mercedes, who lived with Mariela since she was four years old until she was eighteen, said: “She is a great mother, she treats us so well, she gave us all she could, she forced us to study, she has taught us to respect and to be respected.”¹¹ In 1997 she said on TV “ I am proud to have been raised by Mariela. I also have my biological mother, but I have a better

⁹ ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. “DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transsexual (1993)”. Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

¹⁰ The International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations Against Sexual Minorities, Tuesday, October 17, 1995 New York City, USA. <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/188-1.pdf>

¹¹ ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. “DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transsexual (1993)”. Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

relationship with Mariela.”¹² Enrique Sanchez was born in the province of Chaco, he worked in a brick factory since he was nine years old. He migrated to Buenos Aires to escape poverty, and was raised by Mariela said: “I see Mariela as a woman, and I will continue seeing her like that, as a mother.”¹³

It is difficult to find stories that deny that Mariela was what was considered a "good mother." A police report states that “the children were raised excellently and there are several proofs that the couple loved them.”¹⁴ The social approval was due to the confluence between parenting practices related to education and moral norms: the fact that her children were straight, employed-worker-class people and had their own families helped to legitimize her motherhood. While Mariela was pushing the norm of motherhood beyond biology, she was at the same time affirming its conservative dimensions, as the price she had to pay to be recognized as a woman and a mother.

Secondly, Mariela shaded her sexuality to embody what it was expected for a mother. In several interviews she repeated "When I had to choose between my children and a man, I chose my children",¹⁵ as a mechanism to distinguish herself from the press's sexualization of transsexuals' bodies. In contrast with the exultant figures of travestis, Mariela's modest clothes erased the erotism from her body by covering breasts and legs that converged with what the public expected from a mother.

This distinction allowed her to break down the narratives that mocked transsexuals and create narratives far from sex work, revues, and police stations. Her performance allowed her to be recognised as a female; an infrequent fact for many transsexuals.¹⁶ Mariela questioned the press for calling her a “*travesti* mother” and for accusing her of being involved in children international trafficking. She stated: “The Argentinean public was not fooled, I received empathy from everyone. I became the symbol of Argentinean motherhood.”¹⁷

Mariela refused to reduce her life to her sexuality: she embodied the figure of the mother as a non-sexual subject. When asked by journalists about her life before the gender-affirmation surgery, she defined herself as a virgin: “I did not know how I could have pleasure. I have

¹² Archivo Sigla. 2017. “1997- Fte a fte - Mariela Muñoz concejala”. Youtube, March 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSjni-kDIok>

¹³ ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. “DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transexual (1993)”. Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

¹⁴ Intelligence Police Department of Buenos Aires Province (DIPBA), Mesa DS, n°35333

¹⁵ The International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations Against Sexual Minorities, Tuesday, October 17, 1995 New York City, USA. <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/188-1.pdf>

¹⁶ Audras, M. 2017. *Amor a paso gigante*.

¹⁷ The International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations Against Sexual Minorities, Tuesday, October 17, 1995 New York City, USA. <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/188-1.pdf>

never had sex before. My husband was my first man."¹⁸ Mariela's use of the idea of her virginal body constituted a reappropriation of the possibility of mothering without a sexual encounter present in the catholic tradition. Her virginal body interacted with cultural traditions as for example the figure of the virgin of Lujan, a key icon of Argentine nationhood that gathers crowds. It was also linked to other maternal figures with no mediation of biological reproduction, such as Evita whose rhetoric elevated her as the mother of the workers and of those in need.

Thirdly, Mariela distinguished herself from the biological mothers of her children by emphasising her maternal desire. Her explanation about the arrangement with their biological mothers pointed out that she helped them to avoid an abortion. She said "I met a woman who was pregnant and did not want children. I asked her not to have an abortion. She in turn asked me to take care of her baby after birth. Another pregnant woman who did not want children allowed me to adopt her twin babies. She gave birth in a hospital where she was registered under my name."¹⁹

Abortion has been restricted in Argentina until 2020. It is estimated that 450,000 abortions were performed in Argentina in clandestine clinics or by people with no medical training causing hundreds of deaths.²⁰ Several testimonies show how people considered Mariela's parenting a better option than abortion, as one of her neighbours declared : "I questioned myself, if it was better to have these children aborted before birth or to have Mariela raised them."²¹ Even if Mariela never expressed to be against abortion, her use of the social rejection to it reached a wide range popular support. In 1993, a journalist noticed that even if some priests spoke in public against Mariela Muñoz, a lot of Catholics valued positively her duty as a mother.²² By performing a "good mother", Mariela created a strong identification with a wider public; however, this performance was supported by -an unwanted though effective- demonisation of her children's biological mothers -portraying them as "bad mothers"- and by her *heroic* avoidance of abortions. This may have been a reason why she

¹⁸ ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. "DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transsexual (1993)". Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

¹⁹ The International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations Against Sexual Minorities, Tuesday, October 17, 1995 New York City, USA. <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/188-1.pdf>

²⁰ Amnesty International Argentina, "LOS MÉTODOS DE ESTIMACIÓN DEL ABORTO INDUCIDO EN ARGENTINA: CÓMO SE LLEGÓ A LA CIFRA DE 450 MIL". 2020. <https://amnistia.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2016/09/Medici%C3%B3n-de-abortos-Clandestinos.pdf>

²¹ ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. "DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transexual (1993)". Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

²² ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. "DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transexual (1993)". Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

was not especially supported by Argentine feminists. Moreover, the complete absence of the media's discourses about biological fathers highlights the naturalization of the maternal "duty" of women to raise their children. In 1993, Mariela was invited to the famous TV-talk-show *Almorzando con Mirtha Legrand*, an icon of the Argentine neoliberal and conservative era. Mirtha Legrand openly supported her: "She always surprises me, because when you think of gays, travestis [you think of] people with irregular lives. [But] this woman has dedicated herself to take care of children, to educate them, to feed them, and it is admirable".²³ In contrast with narratives focused on transsexual sexuality, some journalists and a wider public expressed empathy for Mariela's maternal calling.²⁴ The same year on TV, a psychologist stated that Mariela was a mother because "She adopted her children, it is not enough to give birth, you have to choose them."²⁵

Fourthly, Muñoz performed emotionally charged motherhood repertoires. In 1993, Mariela left the police station breaking into tears, and a journalist asked her: "The cry of a mother?"²⁶ Mariela cried a lot in public, every time she spoke about them she would become visibly overwhelmed. Rafael Fredda, former president of SIGLA (Society of the Integration of Gays and Lesbians in Argentina) remembers that at the beginning he thought it was a strategy with which she expected to be respected as a mother. However, when he became a friend, he noticed that there was the expression of a "true feeling."²⁷ Even if crying was a valuable strategy, it was the symptom of her suffering expressed by an expected body-language to be performed in public by women. In the negotiation of Mariela's motherhood, crying was understood as a way of showing her real love for the children."²⁸

In contrast with the allegedly male rationality, women's complaints have been represented as emotional and inevitable actions guided by "maternal love." In 1993, Mariela wrote a letter from jail: "I want to express my anguish because they have taken my children away from my arms, knowing that I can't provide them with the love they need. I want you to understand my feelings as a woman and a mother."²⁹ By highlighting sadness, love, pain and crying, she

²³ Sigla Archive. 2005. "1993 - Mirtha Legrand - Mariela Muñoz". Youtube, February 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ker3eBHARrY>

²⁴ Giberti, Eva. 1997. "Mariela Muñoz, el derecho a la diferencia". *Clarín*, May 27

²⁵ Archivo Sigla. 2017. "1997- Fte a fte - Mariela Muñoz concejala". Youtube, March 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSjni-kDIok>

²⁶ Sigla Archive. 2015. "Mariela Muñoz sale en libertad 1993. July 22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQgiypIJnFs>

²⁷ Fredda, Rafael (pers. comm., July 27, 2020).

²⁸ ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. "DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transexual (1993)". Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

²⁹ *El popular*. 1993. "Madre transexual ". May 24.

publicly reaffirmed her bond with her children. Moreover, the metaphor of the theft from her arms activated the image of children appropriations denounced by the Mothers of *Plaza de Mayo*.

Fifthly, she created a chain of meanings in which being a woman was expressed by becoming a mother. In fact, Muñoz was the first transsexual to get legal recognition of her self-perceived gender. When Mariela visited Legrand's TV Show, the host held Mariela's National Identity Document and said: "This is amazing, it is a revolution. Congratulations, here you have the document where it says that you are a lady."³⁰ Mariela's recognition on national TV as a lady by the national icon of the traditional upper-class conservative femininity was a hinge, a starting point to imagine a potential new citizenship that could integrate transsexual experience under normative rules.

Mariela had a long path affirming her gender. In 1958, fourteen year old Mariela renamed herself. Even if her parents tried to treat what was considered a "deviation" by taking her to the doctor, her father later searched for information about the costs of possible surgeries and thought of selling the house to afford it.³¹ In 1981, Mariela travelled to Chile to perform a gender-affirmation surgery, a practice that was forbidden in Argentina.³² However, coming back after the change was difficult. Several attempts to get her identity documents to reflect her gender-affirmation surgery were denied. Mariela presented herself as a woman and downplayed her transsexual identity. When she described her relationship with her husband and children, she insisted on the fact that she did not tell them about being a transsexual before pursuing the surgery. Mariela popularized the theory of the "incorrect body", a mainstream narrative in the 1990s and early 2000s with which some transsexuals legitimated their demands for gender-affirmation treatments (Wayar 2020). As one of her neighbours declared: "She is a woman in the body of a man. A small piece of meat does not define her sex."³³

In 1997, a court ordered to rectify Mariela's birth certificate recognizing her gender as female by considering that the state could not violate the constitutional principle that banned discrimination. Mariela's petition was part of a wider strategy of transsexuals and *travestis*

³⁰ Sigla Archive, 2015. "2000 - Mirtha Legrand - Mariela Muñoz". July 5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09kKzlivSdY>

³¹ Audras, M. Amor a paso gigante. 2017.

³² In 1944, the decree n°6216 prohibited any intervention that led to women sterilization without considering any treatment to conserve reproductive organs. The second law in 1967, explicit stated that it was forbidden to practices any surgery that modified the "sick's sex, except ones allowed by a justice authorization" (Farji Neer 2017).

³³ ArchivoDiChiara. 2015. "DiFilm - Mariela Muñoz - transexual (1993)". Youtube, January 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4>

such as organising demonstrations and presenting lawsuits demanding access to surgery and modification of legal documents. Mariela Muñoz, as others activists, cleared the way for the long struggle of the Argentine trans* movement that in 2012 achieved the enacting of the Gender Identity Law which recognizes self-perceived gender and mandates private and public health systems to provide free gender-affirmation treatments (Theumer 2020).

Sixthly, Mariela's motherhood model created tensions with part of the feminist, lesbian and gay agenda. On the one hand, Mariela's case was at odds with the denaturalisation of women's role as caregivers, as promoted by lesbian and feminist movements. On the other hand, Mariela's story was closer to the gay movement's familiarist rhetoric in its quest for civil union recognition (Vespucci 2014). In one way or another, and in contrast to traditional press, lesbian, gay and feminist publications gave scarce visibility to Mariela's struggle.³⁴ Fredda highlighted that some of the leaders felt uncomfortable with her discourse and insisted that she should change it.³⁵ Maria Luisa Peralta, who participated in *Lesbianas a la vista* (Visible lesbians) since 1996, remembers: "In the 1990s, motherhood was not a popular topic among feminist groups. Lesbians had an agenda for those who had sons and daughters of their previous straight marriages, they were at risk of losing their children for being lesbians.. But the topic of lesbian motherhood [that also implied non-gestational mothers like Mariela] did not emerge until the end of the decade."³⁶

Travestis and transsexuals had several difficulties to be included in lesbian & gay politics, as some of the latter believed that their presence could delegitimise their seek for inclusion. Lohana Berkins described how they had to fight for their visibility. Although the *travestis* and transsexuals contributed with money for demonstrations, some refused to name them on pamphlets and banners (Berkins 2003).³⁷

In 1996, SIGLAS's newspaper highlighted the difficulties to work with Mariela considering the "debates between *travestis*, transsexuals and feminists."³⁸ As Berkins (2003) expressed, some cisgender feminists refused to recognize the travesti movement and forbade their participation in the National Women's Meeting. Moreover, Peralta remembers that Mariela did not have such a feminist perspective about gender roles; she was considered "quite

³⁴ Gays for Civil Rights (GAYDC) and the Society for Lesbian and Gay Integration in Argentina (SIGLA) gave explicit support in their magazines. See: Confidencial (Julio) 1993, p. 3. CEDINCI Archive.

³⁵ Fredda, Rafael (pers. comm., July 27, 2020).

³⁶ Maria Luisa Peralta (pers. comm., August 20)

³⁷ In 1995, after three demonstrations, the pride changed its name to "Gay, Lesbian, Travesti, transsexual and Bisexual" recognizing their participation (Alvarez 2019).

³⁸ Fredda, Rafael, and Fotografía Alejandro Correo. "Organizaciones." NX, no. 31, 1996, p. 28+. Archives of Sexuality and Gender,

traditional for publicly advocating for women's fulfilment through motherhood."³⁹ Even if some lesbians supported her, Mariela's agenda was felt as a menace to their quest for the right to access legal abortions.

Finally, Mariela's participation in traditional party politics canalised her struggle to perform motherhood as a metaphor for social justice and as a criticism to the neoliberal project. In 1997 she became the first transsexual candidate to run a democratic election by participating in the peronist primaries as a contender of the official list headed by Hilda Beatriz González "Chiche " Duhalde, a conservative peronist woman who created a system of social policies based on women's participation during the 1990s.

Mariela challenged the Peronist establishment in a context in which the party led the neoliberal project. After two administrations, the Peronist Carlos Menem deeply transformed Argentina: he disarticulated the social state, promoted the dismantling of the industries, privatized state-owned companies and created macroeconomic policies that tied Argentina's currency to the US dollar. Under the USA's influence, the government became a global example of neoliberalism by reaching economic uprising and promoting financial stability. However, the collateral effects of these politics created an arising crisis: in 1995 unemployment was 18% and poverty increased quickly racing to 50% of the country's population (Masson 2004).

Mariela stated that " I only agree with stability, but there are several social inequalities."⁴⁰ She appropriated Peronist narratives by highlighting that she wanted to "continue with the example of Eva Perón, my idol. I want to do something for the people that need me. I have always been supportive, I have raised seventeen children and that too is social policy."⁴¹ Her reference to Evita as an icon of social justice was again in line with her paradigm of women's responsibilities for the care of those most in need; in this case as the "female face" of the State. Mariela performed her motherhood as the symbol of the failures of the male economic regime: taking care of abandoned children and mothers without any social protection (Biernat y Ramacciotti 2013). After several criticisms of the irregular conditions in which the primaries were taking place, her house was attacked by gun fire. She then decided to give up her candidacy.⁴² She continued participating in politics, as she ran again as a candidate for parliament in the 2000s, but never succeeded. Even if we cannot consider her participation as the main factor for the transformation of citizenship, Mariela's transsexual politics, and her

³⁹ Maria Luisa Peralta (pers. comm., August 20) 27, 2020), 20/8/2020

⁴⁰ *Crónica*. 1997. "Mariela Muñoz candidata". June 24.

⁴¹ *Crónica*. 1997. "Mariela Muñoz candidata". June 29.

⁴² *Crónica*. 1997. "Mariela Muñoz se retira de la elección". July 25.

uses of maternity and caregiving in the frame of the neoliberal regime's crisis, helped to pave the way for the future emergence of *travesti* and transsexual rights.

Mariela Muñoz's struggle for social recognition as a mother and woman faced the daily marginalization of poverty and cissexism. By deploying a wide maternal political repertoire, giving political value to care and amplifying the margins for transsexual social recognition, she participated in redefining intimate citizenship. Mariela's maternal citizenship combined paradoxical senses as traditional notions of womanhood -such as fulfillment through motherhood- with the expansion of socially accepted boundaries for *travestis* and transsexuals. Her agenda blended -though not always intentionally- the criticism of the male-dominated neoliberal project through the valorisation of care as social politics while channeling the popular-rejection of abortion.

Her trajectory defied the limits of cis-gendered and anti-maternal feminisms, and showed how demands that could be initially considered conservative can lead to unexpected public support and legitimation of a marginalised community. Mariela was not then necessarily the victim of patriarchal rule, but a political subject with agency that fought for her rights. She struggled to create a new horizon in the frame of a very conservative society where transphobia and discrimination were, and still are, prevalent.

In Mariela's story, unlike many studies of care, it is evidenced that caring or mothering does not only hinder women's possibilities. Mariela's maternalist and caregiving repertoires are alternatives within the local symbolic limits of what is intelligible and possible. Those repertoires have political validity and force: not because the feminization of care or maternalism in any of its forms are natural, but precisely because that is how they are perceived. Therein lies their power. Their agency cannot be noticed unless it is based on situated knowledge and in non-metropolitan-centric views or academic or political desires of Northern feminisms.

Acknowledgments

We are thankful with the contributions of Thomas Shalloe, Maria Audras, María Luisa Peralta and Rafael Fredda. This research is funded by the MSCA project 886496.

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