

Travesti Narratives: Transformed Bodies, Transformative Texts

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Abstract

This article explores literary narratives of travesti identity, in which the construction of a political subjectivity aims at disrupting socio-cultural norms through the rejection of colonial identitarian formations imposed by the nation-state in the complex context of Latin America. Focusing on the poetics of Claudia Rodríguez's work, and intersecting it with the

construction of travesti relationality in Camila Sosa Villada's novel *Las Malas* (2019), this article reads the texts through Muñoz's concepts of *queer futurity* and *brown commons*, in order to analyze processes of collectivization of individual narrative and politicization of non-fiction rooted in the transformative force of trans-formed bodies.

Introduction: Politics and Poetics

As scholar Joseph M. Pierce writes:

Travesti, in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, refers most frequently to people assigned male sex at birth and who feminize their bodies, dress, and behaviour; prefer feminine pronouns and forms of address; and often make significant bodily transformations by injecting silicone or taking hormonal treatments but do not necessarily seek sex-reassignment surgery. (306)

It is important to stress that travesti is an identity that cannot be simply associated with the transgender umbrella or to transsexuality, since it is conceptualized and embodied outside the normative western structures of gender and sex (Lewis 6-7), deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and political contexts of Latin America.

Lohana Berkins, Argentinian travesti activist, affirms that travestis propose “to eradicate the categorization of identities pre-constructed by the same system that oppresses us [...] Our very own existence breaks with the determinants of gender [...] travestismo constitutes a turn towards no-identitarianism” (136). It is not only about leaving behind the man/woman binary, but also about a critical reflection on identity and its contradictions when it comes to sexual citizenship, colonial inheritance, and class struggle. In fact, activist Marlene Wayar highlights how travesti as a positioning means resisting the increasing colonization of the transgender space and discourse established by Global North countries, claiming a space of radical autonomy (*Furia* 25).

Travestis strongly criticize sexual citizenship’s politics of inclusion that have been incorporated by Latin American governments in the twenty-first century: one example is the response to the approval of the Argentine Gender Identity Law in 2012, a law that recognizes the right to gender identity as a fundamental human right, as inseparable from the right to legal access to healthcare. However, as the travesti community points out, the document still holds up the erasure of their

identity, reifying the binary as the only framework for the identification and recognition of citizens, within a reparative effort that tries to overcome the long tradition of norms introduced by nation-states in order to paint travestismo as a threat (and hence eradicate it), but ultimately failing to account for the violence and inequality the group still faces everyday (De Mauro 224-26).¹ Travestis refuse to adapt their dissident bodies and identities to certain legal standards in order to gain respectability and rights, and instead claim for themselves a space of un-intelligibility and resistance (Márquez 450)—as Wayar writes, “we are constructions of personal substance, our own absolutely and highly personal body of laws” (De Mauro 231), embodying a *fugitivity* that allows for the elusion of the regulatory frameworks of legibility and the evasion of oppressive systems of categorization (Bey 61).

Following the illustrated coordinates, travesti subjectivity can be understood as a political and anti-identitarian project that reclaims an epistemological independence from Western processes of subjectivation: this alternative figuration of identity that refuses fixity and legibility emerges powerfully and in original ways from travesti literary texts, as well as the necessity to develop an autonomous voice that defies the liberal framework of heteronormative society. As I will go on to argue, in Claudia Rodríguez’s *Ciencia Ficción Travesti* (2023) the textual space becomes a site of emancipation and subversion of the gendered logics which govern the social order: as exemplified by Camila Sosa Villada’s novel *Las Malas* (2019) as well, this happens primarily through a wor(l)d-making rooted in the materiality of the body and the collectivization of individual narrative, as well as through the introduction of elements of magical realism and monstrosity.

Wor(l)d-making

Chilean feminist activist and travesti writer Claudia Rodríguez has since the eighties been part of grassroots movements for the rights

1 Indeed, travesti positioning, and hence travesti activism, is strictly linked to forms of marginalization that are intersectionally connected to transphobia and sexism, namely racialization, prejudices related to sex work, and poverty, intended not only in ideological or economic terms, but as the material effect of the patriarchal social norm that structures travesti lives as precarious (Gallego Cuiñas 89).

and liberation of the LGBTQ+ community. Her book *Ciencia Ficción Travesti* is a collection of short stories in which the author deems the struggle against oppression to be inseparable from the necessary reclamation of a travesti voice rooted in everyday experience—"a thought born from an intervened body," as Mariana Enríquez writes in the prologue, which allows for the formation of a new language, a production of knowledge against silencing and erasure (13, my translation).

Rodríguez introduces the short stories with what can legitimately be described as a manifesto—the language deployed is sharp and decisive, the tone is programmatic: *ciencia ficción travesti* (travesti science-fiction), she claims, is primarily the tale, the affirmation, and the vindication of the indisputable powers that every person in the travesti community possesses—the power of imagining and creating other worlds (19), which derives from bodies that envelop another dimension and from their untransferable knowledge rooted in community. The author's declaration of intent is, however, traversed by the striking vulnerability of a narrative self in constant dialogue with its past, its wounds, and its community: the political is first and foremost personal. Stemming from everyday discussions had whilst cooking, getting ready, or walking the streets, travesti science-fiction steps into a realm that goes beyond the quotidian to reclaim for travestis the role of knowledge-producers, as well as the possibility to imagine different worlds in which they don't have to accept the position they are made to hold in this society.

In *Travesti/una teoría lo suficientemente buena*, Wayar affirms that travesti theory actually "aims at being a poetic, especially focusing on art, the art of building, of believing, of empowering, of creating new paths" (29). Consequently, writing and storytelling have a fundamental role for the travesti community: the creative work begins with the self, with the construction of one's body and identity outside the cis-patriarchal paradigm, and becomes a means of knowledge production by and for a group whose voice has been silenced and experience erased. As it happens in Rodríguez's writing, closing the gap between theory and practice, as well as between poetics and politics,

is a powerful critical move of epistemic subversion, which opposes the docility of traditional authoritarian and colonial knowledge production (flores 30).

A central point in Rodríguez's project is a radical displacement, *desplazamiento* (22): it is not about imagining a different reality somewhere else in a distant future, but rather about activating the imaginative power of travesti communal knowledge to subvert and challenge the current state of affairs, here and now. It is a posture that echoes José Esteban Muñoz's step outside straight time in his queer utopian thinking (*Cruising* 26-27), in which both desire and the past play fundamental roles: Rodríguez's *ciencia ficción* is strictly linked to the systematic erasure of travesti history and thought from collective memory, as well as the necessity to "elaborate that part of history that wasn't told and that belongs to us [...] to elaborate ourselves a collectivity when our country does not consider us part of its history, part of its territory" (Wayar 30, my translation). In fact, Muñoz stresses that the world-making potentiality of remembrance and its ritualized tellings (such as writing) (*Cruising* 35), and that of holding on to memory and experience are key aspects of travesti politics/poetics. It is remembrance's revolutionary potential that ultimately invests writing with the fundamental role of claiming back a forgotten knowledge capable of building different worlds from queer desire and relationality. Indeed, in the story titled "Travesti filosofica", reflecting on her (and her friends') experience with illness, precarity and men's violence, the author reckons that her deepest necessity is "that we travestis nourish ourselves with other kinds of knowledge, with what is hidden beyond, with what we never wanted to look at, with the energies of the universe. And like bacteria, we populate the world" (Rodríguez 75, my translation). In "telling what has not been told" (27, my translation) Rodríguez sees the potentiality of shifting point of view, imagining a universe in which travestis are part of a cosmos where men do not occupy the center, and where words are invested with the almost magical power of transforming reality:

It is like being a witch or a shaman, having the power to put into words what is wordless, to put it into words and make it exist. But it is very important that such words are gentle and loving, we need them that way in order to counteract all the hateful words that have been said to us, to gently remove from our bodies the marks of violence and contempt. (31, my translation)

The act of writing functions as a bridge between the imagined, the desired, the queer, and a reality in which the experience, the feelings, the knowledge of travesti has been erased: it words all of it into existence. The elements of magical realism that the author mobilizes do not only stress the transformational role of literature for the travesti community, as explained above, but also seem to refer to a kind of knowledge capable of disrupting the normal and normative construction of society, eradicating violence and discrimination as the defining aspects of travesti experience.

As the quote above signals, travesti science-fiction is an exercise of imagination strictly linked to the corporeal, the material, as it holds significant concrete implications: “travesti science-fiction provides elements to distinguish our own gaze from the gazes that were imposed upon us, violating us” (24, my translation). Indeed, Rodríguez’s writing is deeply rooted in the materiality of the body, as the primary site of experimentation and self-construction, as well as a living memorial archive of travesti experience: *ciencia ficción travesti* is a manifestation of the knowledge of “cuerpos disobedientes” (disobedient bodies) (12) and the theoretical and political stretch of the author’s poetics must not be interpreted as an intellectual effort that feeds on abstraction. In a distant future, when travesti experience, writing, and knowledge will be considered and acknowledged, she imagines her silicone breasts to be the bearers of her community’s truth:

Like the silicone residue in my breasts—this disobedience to sexual biology—should say about us travestis, we developed tools, technologies and ways of thinking. In thousands of years, my breasts will say that we developed survival strategies, just

like we explored new limits, just like we went on journeys into the depths of ourselves. (82, my translation)

In another passage, the process of injecting silicone to enhance breasts and hips is described by the author as a ritual that connects them with ancient pre-colonial populations, governed by very different logics (69): the written text becomes a space through which travestis' freedom is renegotiated, affirming first and foremost their agency over their bodies, also through the creation of alternative genealogies, affinities, and timelines which enables them to imagine a queer futurity.

Colectficción

Colectficción (collective fiction) signals a shift from individual to collective narrative and, as I argue, has transformative and political implications in travesti literature. In relation to this, "Zona de sacrificio," the last short story in Claudia Rodríguez's book, is worthy of particular attention: in the story, the protagonist, a travesti activist named Luz Clarita, is interrogated by the police after being arrested for organizing a protest regarding the environmental emergency of arsenic contamination in the coastal territories of Valparaíso. At the police station, Luz Clarita has to endure violent acts perpetrated by the police officers, which can be seen as a synecdoche for the institutional violence the travesti community faces everyday: besides being beaten, her identity is questioned multiple times, and she is evaluated by a psychiatrist. The motive for the psychological evaluation is that the police are informed that other travestis with her exact same name and look are being arrested for protesting in other towns of the country at that very moment, as if she could be in many different places at the same time, which is, in their logic, impossible.

Luz appears untroubled, and with a condescending tone simply explains to them that she, in fact, can:

"We, the people that can empathize with the lives of other human beings, have a blessing. I reckon you don't possess this kind of knowledge. I inherited it from my mother and my

grandmother when I was born [...] when I sleep I don't sleep, I fly, I travel and I can materialize in more than one place at a time." (88, my translation)

The story ends with the proliferation of Luz Clarita appearing and being arrested in more cities, evoking a multitude that shakes the 'normal' conception of time/space and hence seems unstoppable. For the sake of this analysis, I want to highlight how Luz Clarita does not only defy normative gender markers, but ultimately has the power to challenge the linearity of the space/time continuum as well as the hegemonic conception of identity as fixed, coherent, and legible. The door that, in the text, seems to open up this possibility is when Luz is asked if she's a man: she answers "[n]o, soy trans" (no, I am trans) (86), reclaiming for herself a space that falls outside of the man/woman binary, a space that alters the perimeter of what is real and what is possible.

Luz's affirmation is connected with the trajectories of queer and gender-based movements in Chile and Argentina, which historically have been (and are) considerably different from liberal North American mainstream LGBTQ+ demands for justice and recognition, and have been focusing on the opposition between the creative experience of sexuality and the repressive regulatory practices of the state (Figari 622). Specifically, travesti thought appears to distance itself both from the more normalizing or assimilationist branch of trans studies, exemplified by the *politics of home* articulated by Jay Prosser (204), which calls for the acceptance of trans people within the man/woman paradigm, and from that queer theory which rejects any categorization and often results in a radical disembodied fluidity, rooted in subsequent reworkings of Butler's performativity.² In fact, in travesti narratives, the writing of the self becomes a space of dissidence, in which the marginalized subject breaks the social contract rather than claiming a space in it, opening up to a collective form of subjectivation that de-ontologizes the univocality and individuality of legible

2 See Aizura, "Of Borders and Homes: The Imaginary Community of (Trans)Sexual Citizenship," and Keegan, "Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans*."

and classifiable identity (Gallego-Cuiñas 84), but is always corporeal, always situated.

The quite literal dissemination of individuality into a collective subjectivity that we find in “Zona de sacrificio” mirrors a common tendency in travesti literature, one where the subject often embodies collective struggles and a collective knowledge, as well as always being represented as part of a community. In addition, in this story, said dissemination becomes a fundamental tool of resistance and systemic subversion: a collective that defies normative logics remains unintelligible for the oppressive system, the multiplication of selves cannot be stopped—indeed, as Latin Americanist and trans studies’ scholar Rizki Cole writes, “to claim travesti identity is to embrace a form of opacity and fugitivity that resists necropolitical systems that pointedly rely on capture” (149). This expansion of auto-fiction, in which the individual story serves to sustain a collective one, has been defined by Priscilla Gac-Artigas (17-18) as *colectficción*: the literary creation transgresses the auto-ficcional reading pact leading to a synthesizing narrative that comprehends the story of the ‘I’ as well as the story of the ‘you,’ transforming it into a story of ‘us’ (17), leading to “the expansion of the fictionality of the self’s reflections on the world around them” (158, my translations).

A remarkable example of travesti *colectficción*, which also shares with Rodríguez’s work the world-making and transformative potentiality of travesti experiential narration mentioned above, is Camila Sosa Villada’s novel *Las Malas* (*Bad Girls*).³ The novel delves into the life of Camila, the author/protagonist, and the group of travestis that live and work with her in the city of Cordoba, Argentina, as she reflects on her travesti identity as an experience resulting from the encounter with other women like her, constructing said identity as relational (Torre-Espinosa 159). Indeed, the group is introduced in the first passage of the book as a herd that moves together in the Sarmiento Park, as if they were “one body, cells of the same animal” (Villada 17). It could be argued that such a collective focalization

3 Villada’s novel will continue to be referred to as *Las Malas* but all English citations are from the translated novel titled *Bad Girls*.

ends up erasing individual experience in favor of an idealized community that flattens difference: however, it is important to stress that *colectficción* does not imply the dissolution of the individual into the collective, but rather, as shown in the mentioned texts, the construction of individuality as intrinsically relational, which survives thanks to the strength of the community itself, and is expressed by a multifaceted, complex choral voice.

The concept of *brown commons* developed by Muñoz can be a useful interpretative tool to read through the relationality that emerges in the text between the group of travestis: an organic collective, a being-in-common, “an impulse to move beyond the singular subjectivity” (2). In Muñoz’s conceptualization, things are brown in that they have been devalued, diminished, they suffer and strive together (1); he thinks of brownness “in relation to everyday styles of living that connote a sense of illegitimacy” (3). The travesti experience in *Las Malas* is constructed exactly like this, and the specific illegitimacy—or the ‘brownness’—of the travesti’s commons, lived at night, in the dark, in the Sarmiento Park, is also accentuated in so far as it is constructed against what Camila calls *la vida blanca*: literally, the white life.

“The legitimate life, daylight life lived among heterosexuals with light skin and good manners” (Villada 112) is a life that the travestis can access only in disguise, it’s the world of normativity, of the middle class’ hypocrisy and their repressed desires: here Villada’s *brown commons* exceed Muñoz’ notion, by virtue of the fundamental role played by desire. The necessary repression of desire that makes the heteropatriarchal ‘white life’ work, works precisely because there is another side to it, the queer, illegitimate side where the *brown commons* flourish. Camila states it clearly: “we are necessary to desire, the forbidden lust that those who dwell on this earth feel for us [...] to punish us they say no one will want us. But life couldn’t go on without us there, outside of everything” (62).

Indeed, Villada develops a counter-discourse that redeems sexual dissidence from the stereotypes that society has created around travestis, and she does so also by making herself a witness to a reality where the collective bursts forth by creating characters who are capable of

contravening the natural order in a hyperbolic way (Gac-Artigas 163). In *Las Malas*, travesti identity is reaffirmed as collective and manifold whenever one of the characters goes through a crisis or transformation and is unconditionally accepted and supported by the community's sisterhood: one example is Natali, whom "on nights when there was a full moon she turned into a she-wolf," embraced by the others—"we organized the house's routine around her cycle. We said it was like our pack was menstruating" says Camila (96); or Maria The Mute, who was "slowly turning into a bird with dark silver plumage," as the group "help[ed] her through her terrifying mutation, her agonizing change" (152).

In "I Monster: Embodying Trans and Travesti Resistance in Latin America," Joseph M. Pierce stresses how historically in Latin America the monstrous body is deployed as a mode of political resistance, questioning the power of the state to regulate flesh, challenging its "submission to an epistemology based in the incorporation of deviance in the norm" (310). Accordingly, the categories of magical realism and monstrosity in the novel become fundamental tools for identitarian de-essentialization and *fugitivity*, designating travesti subjectivity through the affiliation to the community that is narrated, a network that not only enables survival but also allows for the imagining of alternative social relationships, as well as through the embrace of a monstrous defiance that makes for the disavowal of normative categorization and state recognition.

In fact, the impossibility (and the refusal) to fit into 'the white life' seems also to undo the capitalist obligation to be functional and productive, accomplices in a system of exploitation and exclusion: since they claim for themselves the space of night, darkness, desire, and monstrosity, during the day they simply do nothing—"we didn't like going out in the daytime because we weren't used to it, we couldn't adapt to the corset of their restrictions [...] we did nothing during the day, *we banished ourselves from productive society*" (Villada 99, my emphasis).

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Claudia Rodríguez's and Camila Sosa Villada's texts, I highlight how a travesti poetics is built upon a process of identification that is, first and foremost, political. It claims not only a space outside of the gender binary, but also challenges the very concept of identity as something individual, intelligible and co-optable by normalizing projects promoted by progressive politics of inclusivity.

Travesti subjectivity emerges in the texts as a fugitivity, in Marquis Bey's terms, and it indeed resonates with their definition of a radical gender abolition: it is a practice that disallows neoliberal individuation, which presumes that the process of gender is extricated from sociality and evaluates it through a marketplace economy of its use-value, legibility, and ability to be productive; it demands instead a radical movement toward the dissolving of given gender ontologies (24).

Foregrounding the practice of *colectficción* as a site of epistemic resistance and political invention, my analysis shows how a radical illegibility is materialized in travesti literature primarily through an embodied world-making, as well as the collectivization and 'monster-ing' of subjectivity, engendering a relational mode of being that not only develops outside normative society, but ends up challenging its foundational paradigms as well.

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Biography

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