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The (C)hueca Writing of Claudia Rodríguez as Travesti Revenge

ABSTRACT

Claudia Rodríguez (Chile, 1968), writer, performer, and activist, is a key figure in the Latin American travesti movement. This paper examines her literary production, which emerged in the second decade of the 21st century through the self-publishing of her works in fanzine format: *Dramas pobres. Poesía travesti* [Poor Dramas. Transvestite Poetry] (2013); *Cuerpos para odiar. Poesía travesti* [Bodies to Hate. Transvestite Poetry] (2014a); *Manifiesto horrorista* [Horrorist Manifesto] (2014b); *Enferma del alma* [Sick at Heart] (2015); and *Para no morir tan sola. Escritura en pandemia* [So as not to Die so Alone. Writing in a Pandemic] (2022). Our focus will be on the hybrid and mestizo nature of her texts – not linear but fragmentary – and her incorporation of orality.

KEYWORDS

Claudia Rodríguez; travesti writing; Chilean literature

1. Resentment, Fury, and Revenge

Claudia Rodríguez (Chile, 1968), writer, performer, and activist, is a leading figure in the Latin American travesti movement. Her journey began in 1991 with the historic Homosexual Liberation Movement of Chile (MOVILH). In 2007, she earned a diploma in Gender Studies from the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities at the University of Chile, and a year later, she began her studies in Social Work at the Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano. In 2008, she collaborated in the collective volume *Las transexuales hablan. Cien historias en cien palabras* [Trans Women Speak: One Hundred Stories in One Hundred Words] (Bustamante Lobos et al., 2008). In 2011, she founded the first travesti theater company with the play *Historias travesties* and adapts his fanzine *Cuerpos para odiar* for the play of the same name in 2015. Her literary production began with self-published fanzines: *Dramas pobres. Poesía travesti* (2013); *Cuerpos para odiar. Poesía travesti* (2014a); *Manifiesto horrorista* (2014b); *Enferma del alma* (2015); and *Para no morir tan sola. Escritura en pandemia* (2022). Later, her works were published by Argentine and Spanish publishers: *Ciencia ficción*

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travesti [Transvestite Science Fiction] (Buenos Aires, 2023) and *Cuerpos para odiar* (Seville, 2024).

In various interviews (Medios, 2019; Orellana, 2019), as well as in her own publications, Claudia Rodríguez alludes to resentment from the very titles of her works: *Rucia¹ pero resentida. Poesía travesti* [*Blond but Resentful. Travesti Poetry*] (2019) and *Poesía travesti, resentía y furiosa* [*Travesti Poetry, Resentful and Furious*] (2021). In an interview with the Chilean digital media outlet *El Desconcierto*, she states that her writing emerged when she became aware of that resentment as, despite her activism, she was sidelined as a travesti in various LGBTI organizations led by homosexual men with certain privileges. From this experience arose her interest in problematizing travesti history (Rodríguez, 2018).

According to the *Dictionary of the Spanish Language DLE* (2014), [resentida] (resentful) is an adjective referring to a person who displays or harbors some resentment. In this sense, it is synonymous with [rencorosa] (spiteful), [despechada] (bitter), [amargada] (soured), [disgustada] (upset), [dolida] (hurt), [molesta] (annoyed), [ofendida] (offended) and [quejosa] (complaining). Similarly, it is used to describe someone who feels wronged by society or by life in general. This sense of spite or “ill will born in the spirit from disillusionment suffered in the pursuit of desires” (*DLE*, 2014) is what leads Marlene Wayar, when referring to Claudia Rodríguez, to speak of “The art of re-feeling” (2018, p. 29). Later, the Argentine essayist will link resentment and fury in the following terms:

Furia trava² is already a concept and is part of a reality, one of the axes of the struggle. We come from poverty, from failure, and we are *resentful*. *Resentment* is our creative power. The issue is how we elaborate on it. This is about recognizing ourselves as vulnerable, that we are broken, with our phobias, with HIV, panic attacks, the hormones that abandoned us, the silicones, the liver in misery... There are a lot of intersecting vulnerabilities in each body and of impotence as well [emphasis added]. (Wayar, 2021, p. 179)

Thus, the way of confronting rage will be what gives “body to the Latin American travesti trans theory” (Wayar, 2018, p. 29). The travesti language will be revenge. Despite the Chilean writer’s insistence on describing herself as resentful, we have opted for the adjective “chueca” to define her writing. *The Dictionary of Americanisms ASALE* (2010) suggests that it may come from the Nahuatl “xocue”, which, according to Thouvenot (2015, p. 456), refers to someone who

¹ Rucia is used in Chile to refer to blonde hair and also to a blonde person (*ASALE*, 2010). With the title *Rucia, pero resentida*, Claudia Rodríguez lashes out at the derogatory stereotype of the “dumb blonde” to transform it into a blonde who is not passive but active, aggressive.

² Trava is an apocope of travesty which, when reappropriated by the travestis themselves to designate themselves as such, is resemanticized and stripped of pejorative connotation. We will always use the term travesti/trava. For analogies and distinctions with other terms (transgender, transsexual, trans or trans*) see Mateo del Pino (2023, 233–281).

is “lame of the foot”. This “lameness” connotes different meanings, depending on the Spanish-speaking countries, as collected from the term. Thus, “chueco” refers to something twisted, not straight; something poorly made, defective, or useless. Metaphorically, it is used to refer to someone who acts dishonestly, is disloyal, treacherous, or has a jealous and malicious gaze. It can also refer to an erroneous, deviated idea. Or it is used to indicate that a matter or business is illegal or has no prospects of legality; a confusing, shady, suspicious event, or even a false document. In the case of people, it is also used to designate someone with bowed legs, who has a limp, is left-handed, or manifests health problems, is sick, or frail; or someone who is upset, angry, or overwhelmed by something. Similarly, it denotes a thing that is damaged or broken, poorly fixed; a problem difficult to resolve. Specifically, it symbolizes an effeminate man. And it is precisely this last meaning that leads us to the adjective “hueco”, which we have used to title these pages, in a kind of paronymy: *chueca* vs. *hueca*.

Radomiro Spotorno (1995) notes that in Chilean speech “hueco”, as a term for a male homosexual, is a “metaphor that expresses old ideas of masculinity as the full, the complete, and femininity as the empty, the hollow” (p. 121), clearly alluding to the sex-gender binomial (man/woman and masculine/feminine), the biological order dimension, and the socio-cultural construction that assigns roles and stereotypes to each sex. Víctor Hugo Robles, taking up this meaning, titles his book on the history of the homosexual movement in Chile, *Bandera hueca*. In this way, he makes a reference to the performance he carried out on May 4, 1994, during a Congress of the Socialist Party and in the presence of France’s First Lady, Danielle Mitterrand, by displaying a Chilean flag with a hole in its center, symbolizing the invisibility of lesbians, homosexuals, and trans people in Chile and demanding support for the fight against Article 365 of the Penal Code, which penalized with imprisonment consensual sexual relations between adult men (Robles, 2008, p. 10).

2. A crooked language

I claim my right to be a monster,
neither man nor woman,
neither XXY nor H2O.

[...]

I claim my right to be a monster
and for others to be the Normal.

[...]

Only my vital right to be a monster

[...]

Amen.

Susy Shock, *Yo, monstruo mío* (2011/2022, 55-57)³.

³ All translations from Spanish are by the author.

The travesti figure exemplifies very well this union or fusion between the hollow and the crooked, not only by referring both terms to sex-gender dissidence – “effeminate man”, “male homosexual”, as we saw above – but also to that social awareness that perceives someone as twisted, defective, and deviated. As *lu ciccía*⁴ warns, deviation is a concept associated with “*atypical bodies or disorders of sexual development*” and refers to how the biomedical discourse classifies intersex bodies, although it also encompasses non-normative gender identities and sexualities [emphasis original] (2023, p. 264). For this reason, *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis*: Pedro Lemebel and Francisco Casas (1987–1993) with their aesthetic and political project introduced in the Chilean landscape the figure of a poor travesti in a prostitution situation as a strategy for awareness and social transformation. In an interview with Luis Alberto Mansilla, when asked if *Las Yeguas* were reclaiming travesti with their actions, Lemebel responds firmly: “Travesti don’t need to be reclaimed by apostles, just let them live as they are”. However, he will state that in his work *Loco afán. Crónicas de Sidario* [*Crazy Desire: Chronicles of the AIDS Ward*] he expresses his concern for travestis: “the most discredited, beaten, and ridiculed of Latin American homosexuality” (Mansilla, 1996). In this way, he acknowledges the tremendous discrimination these people are subjected to.

In this context we locate Claudia Rodríguez and her literary production. Her beginnings in writing date back to 2007, when she took writing workshops with poet Diego Ramírez, and sometime later, she received a grant from the National Book Fund for emerging writers (FONDART, 2010). Her first texts, therefore, emerged linked to the workshop, where they were generically named “travesti poetry”, which appears as a subtitle, labeling some of her works. However, the nature of these writings points more towards a hybrid, mestizo genre, not linear but fragmentary, much like orality itself. The format in which she publishes her work is the fanzine. From the first pages of *Dramas pobres* and *Enferma del alma*, it is evident that we are dealing with “a precarious, self-managed production that disobeys the omnipresent cultural industries, a production that can be derogatorily called a fanzine, a product of failure, without a publisher” (Rodríguez, 2013, 2015). However, in *Cuerpos para odiar*, she replaces the term fanzine with “LIBRILLA” (Rodríguez, 2014b; capitalization in the original), while maintaining the rest of the premises. In this way, the author highlights not only the handmade nature of the work but also the distribution, which is carried out through her social media, Instagram and Facebook. The sale of the copies is done from her home. This movement in the underground world of self-management, outside the editorial market, has allowed her to connect with other Argentine travestis companions such as Susy Shock, Camila Sosa Villada, and Marlene Wayar. As she herself describes it, it is an autonomous activism through writing (Curia, 2021).

⁴ This is the original spelling of the author’s first and last name.

In an interview with journalist Alejandra Gajardo, Claudia Rodríguez emphasizes that in her early years, publishers were not interested in her work. One of the responses she received was that her writing, her composition, was “poor, with spelling mistakes”. In response to this, the author states that in the workshop she took with Ramírez, these flaws were “considered poetic in themselves” (Gajardo, 2022). Laura Haimovichi (2024) sees it as a “political gesture”, as it “challenges spelling norms as a symbol of resistance and advocacy for those without a voice”. “A New Language” (Enríquez, 2023, p. 14). These ideas connect with those of Valeria Flores⁵, who reflects on language, its oppressive nature, but also its disruptive potential, elements that make us think of Claudia Rodríguez as a “deslenguada”:

The language of dissidence breathes through the pores of the enemy. Its somatic disturbance makes any pact of control explode. [...] The deslenguada coins grafts of heteroglossia and synthesizes them into irreverent formats. It is stunned when groping. It wobbles and becomes agitated, but it does not want the terrible limitation of someone who lives only because they are authorized to do so. The bending of fantasies detonates with its mocking skepticism. It communes with the feline community that makes of the fall an artifice of beauty. It practices the mentalism of the butterfly. Breakage is a risky craft. (Flores, 2010, p. 32)

Dolores Curia (2021) argues that “the error is proof of horror, a mark of segregation, a debt”, a statement that will be corroborated by the writer herself: “I wrote without paying much attention to form. They were like vomits, things that happened to me and I just recorded them”. This paronymy or resemblance between error and horror is not accidental, as it led Claudia Rodríguez, starting from the *Manifiesto Errorista* [Manifesto of Errorism], a collective action project published in *Reexistencias* [Re-existences] fanzine No. 3 (2011, pp. 31–32), to create her *Manifiesto Horrorista*. If the *Internacional Errorista* [International Errorist] (2011) took on “the fight against all forms of cultural, social, sexual, racial, spiritual, political, or economic control or domination”, and called to join its ranks “for the worldwide liberation of error” (p. 31), Rodríguez reformulates some of these principles, embracing disqualification, as Susy Shock (2011/2022) did in “Yo, monstruo mío” (pp. 55–57) – a text that shows certain similarities – to rebel and re-signify herself.

I am a travesti who practices a horrible poetry, I am a horrorist terrorist. I refuse to believe that it's a lie, that everything that makes me monstrous is not my identity. [...] Being a horrorist is to assume oneself as a Trojan horse, a retrovirus, an overlap, a mestizo. The scandalous event is wanting to be an ordinary citizen.
[...]

Horrorism is thinking of yourself before others think of you. (Rodríguez, 2014b)⁶

⁵ This is the original spelling of the author's first and last name.

⁶ We want to highlight the connection between terrorism, errorism, and horrorism in both manifestos. In the text of the International Errorist, it reads: “The concept of ‘(t)errorism’ constructs an identity and a stereotype: the ‘(t)errorist enemy’; which makes visible the right to be ‘suspected

In this way, Claudia Rodríguez, overcoming the barriers of illiteracy, in a strategy that we could call a narrative of resilience, turns writing into a powerful tool, one that fills “the concept of travesti with political power”, as the author stated in the prologue-interview with Mariana Enríquez (2024, p. 22). To do this, she relies on orality, a key element of her discursive register, as the stories told to her by her travestis companions – anecdotes, tales, confessions – become written matter. Textual bodies that reflect “localized knowledge”, emerging “from the traffic of spoken and uncensored bodies in the flesh” (flores, 2010, p. 34), with the purpose of recording memories, wounds, injustices, hatreds... that otherwise – as the writer refers to it – “would pass into oblivion” (Font, 2019). This is the true power of her *trava* language.

Travesti orality, with its tones, its own words, its twists, has to do with seeking effects in the other through all the tricks and manipulations known to humankind, but always with a good dose of verisimilitude. Our language draws on the exaggeration of some things at the right point so that it creates a sensation, so that a sensation can be seen, because visually many differences are not easily noticed. [...] *Trava* orality grabs onto everything that exists to handle it in a totally different way with the aim of producing an effect, especially in exaggeration, in humor, in every discussion. (Wayar, 2021, p. 196)

The same effect that Pedro Lemebel used, not in a mere attempt to caricature his characters, but with the intention of going further: “when attacked minorities use the caricature of themselves, it is to cross borders” (Mansilla, 1996). This is what can be observed in Claudia Rodríguez and in her polyphonic discursive register, echo of other voices and subjectivities to form a “nostredad *trava*” (Viola, 2021, p. 292) or “travestidad” (Wayar, 2021, p. 46). Writing as memory, archive of the *trava* word:

Al tiempo supe que una travesti que le decían Miriam dejó la cagá una noche. Se curó raja y, cuando llegaron los pacos, ellos mismos le robaron toa la plata de la noche y vo sabí cómo es la esta, se puso chora y se la llevaron presa. El lunes vamos a tener que ir a verla a la cárcel de San Miguel. Así que le estamos juntando monedas pa cigarras y comía. ¿Con cuánto te poní vo? (Rodríguez, 2024, p. 80)⁷

3. *Cuerpos para odiar*⁸

This text discusses the self-managed fanzine *Cuerpos para odiar. Poesía travesti*, subtitled *Sobre nuestras muertes, las travestis, no sabemos escribir*

of everything” (2011, p. 32). In the case of Claudia Rodríguez, the travesti identity, considered more than suspicious, monstrous, is re-signified by reappropriating language, through and against the discourses/thoughts that attempt to repudiate her, paraphrasing Judith Butler (2002, p. 315).

⁷ This text has not been translated so that its oral nature and use of Chilean speech can be appreciated.

⁸ In the following pages I will cite the fanzines by Barrett’s edition (2024), as it reaches a wider audience. Without specifying the year 2024.

[About our Deaths, We Transvestites, We do not Know How to Write], which was first photocopied and released in Chile in February 2014. The author referred to it as “LIBRILLA, a product of failure, without a publisher” (2014a, p. 2). This self-published fanzine led to the creation of a publication “managed” by the independent publisher Barret, located in Seville, which began in late 2016. Although the book cover is titled *Cuerpos para odiar* (2014), it includes almost all of Claudia Rodríguez’s fanzines: *Cuerpos para odiar*, *Dramas pobres*, *Manifiesto horrorista*, and *Para no morir tan sola*. The only one excluded is *Enferma del alma*. Additionally, the book contains a prologue-interview by Mariana Enríquez (2024) titled “Todas íbamos a ser reinas” (pp. 15–40), who also edited the text. We should remember that Enríquez (2023) also wrote the prologue “Una nueva lengua” (pp. 9–14) for the Argentine publication *Ciencia ficción travesti*. The book also includes eight illustrations, on the cover, back cover, and flaps, by Nazario Luque (Sevilla, 1944), the father of Spanish underground comics, known for works such as *Anarcoma* (1977), featuring a travesti detective who roams the Ramblas of Barcelona. On the Facebook page of Barret (2024), it is revealed that these images were not created specifically for *Cuerpos para odiar* but come from the *Póker del Sexo* [Sex Poker] deck (1995), which includes forty illustrated cards by Luque.

This data helps illustrate the leap Claudia Rodríguez’s work has made from being a handmade, self-managed process – production, printing, and distribution – to being managed by a publishing house. In this way, the “precario” fanzine becomes a “book” that obeys the cultural industry. With this change, the work loses the freshness of its format, as the original fanzine, made with few resources and therefore at a low cost, which recalls the revolutionary and countercultural pamphlet, sheds the collage, cutouts, different fonts, effects, styles and letter sizes, fragments in different positions – horizontal and vertical – drawings, and photos, etc., to submit itself to a carefully crafted orthotypography and occupy the ordered space of the blank page, where nothing disturbs the attention the text commands, privileging content over form.

One of the striking aspects of this work is the insistence on using the “perverse language, the one of infratext” (p. 85), which Claudia Rodríguez says she learned from Barby, known as “La Ponete Tú”, for “speaking and murmuring a correct and glamorous Argentine language” (p. 85). This is the language of “unease and search for the unspoken, like a spy, a Chilean Mata Hari, a folkloric trafficker, a marginal witch, faithful to herself and to the travesti, transgender, transsexual gang” [emphasis added] (p. 85). A concept that the Chilean writer Martín Cerda used in his work *La palabra quebrada. Ensayo sobre el ensayo* (1982) to refer to the restoration of “experiential background”, which, although achieved from context, also happens through what he calls the infratext (Cerda, 1982, p. 32). In this regard, poet Thomas Harris emphasizes that for Cerda, memory is “a form

of knowledge, as a re-cognition of our humanity, as a remaining memory of *the pack* and as an invocation of the most primal wisdom [...] Memory thus becomes the overcoming of the tear, of anger, of guilt, of shame, of trauma, in the end” [emphasis added] (Harris, 2009, p. 215). In Rodríguez’s case, this pack implies territoriality, because, as she will acknowledge in *Dramas pobres*, when she speaks and writes, she always “implicitly, infratextually” tells the history of Chile (p. 141).

I speak of being a migrant, in the same way that I speak of being born in a world with mountains, and, likewise, of the barren space that being a travesti implies, in the narratives of those born here who do not name us. [...] Being born here includes me, even though I am a travesti, even though they do not name us in the history of Chile. We are from here, from this territory. Even though they do not name us in the struggle of the poor, we have always been here. The travestis have been illiterate of the history of being born here. (Rodríguez, 2024, pp. 141–142)

This language of the infratext also refers to biographies, which the author believes are not given the proper importance (p. 141). A genre that, as her writing reveals, blends personal experience with the stories of others, in a kind of autobiographical memory, where the boundaries between others and herself blur, resulting in fragmented narratives or “writing of life”. This is why the work, as a tribute and recognition, is dedicated, among others, to her mother and to the travestis friends “who have not written love letters” (p. 47), which, beyond gratitude, is a way to give them a voice and cede them the word (Aparicio, 2024). Manuel Alberca (2021) has called “consanguineous biographies” those written by children or partners who try to “wash the family’s dirty laundry in the detergent of the blank sheet” (p. 127), showing hybrid texts that register a shared life. In the case of Claudia Rodríguez, resentment will be the trigger for her literary production, and revenge, as previously noted, will be her *chueca* and travesti writing.

That Claudia Rodríguez (2024), who stated on the first page of *Cuerpos para odiar*, “I was never a hope for anyone” (p. 49), as initially “babbling was her language” (p. 53), illiterate – something she repeats throughout the pages like a mantra – ends up taking ownership of words and rebelling. In this way, she constructs a powerful travesti poetics. Thus, in a process of learning, taking possession of the necessary tools, she acquires her own voice and letter, which materialize through the pages: “I don’t know how to speak, but I’m not mute” (p. 60). “Learning to read and write was starting to fill me with fears” (p. 61). “They say I don’t know how to tell stories and since I was diagnosed as incomprehensible, the city inside me went silent” (p. 63). “They say I don’t know how to write” (p. 65). “Learning to read and write helps to know about sin” (p. 65). “Sometimes I drown in thinking seriously and I get pneumonia from not knowing how to write like people do” (p. 65). “I come from illiterate women whose histories do not exist” (p. 67). “Not knowing how to read or write made us bodies to be hated” (p. 73).

“Now, when I’m older, I can write these things and say I’m a travesti” (p. 82). “My theme is writing about the form and the things that, according to the world, were born damaged. Ripped, ugly, and monstrous writings, resentful like me” (p. 100). In *Dramas pobres*, the revenge is confirmed:

They say I don’t know how to speak, and they speak for me but against me because, according to them, it’s my fault for being as foolish as I am. But they lie. It’s their twisted way of seeing the world that sinks me, that humiliates me, that makes me sick and weak. They lie when they speak of the people, the hunger, and the cold, denying the travestis. When they speak, they always speak in their favor, for their benefit. They never lose, they always recover. They lie when they never imagine that a poor and resentful travesti like me could survive and resist. (p. 145)

Nonetheless, Claudia Rodríguez, overcoming the barriers of illiteracy, in a strategy we have called a narrative of resilience, turns her writing into a powerful tool, one that fills “the concept of travesti with political power”, as was her desire (Enríquez, 2024, p. 22). And in doing so, she contributes to fleshing out Latin American travesti theory, joining those who have made it possible: Lohana Berkins, Marlene Wayar, Susy Shock, Camila Sosa Villada, among others.

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