

Review / Reseña

Hoyos, Héctor. *Things with a History: Transcultural Materialism and the Literatures of Extraction in Contemporary Latin America*. Columbia University Press. 2019.

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Héctor Hoyos writes *Things with a History: Transcultural Materialism and the Literatures of Extraction in Contemporary Latin America* (2019) inspired by the resulting intricacies of language trying “to come to terms with material transformation” (1). Following the 1940’s materialist approach of Fernando Ortiz in the book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* and the essay “The Human Factors of Cubanity,” Hoyos proposes an understanding of Latin American works, filtered by what he calls Transcultural Materialism. For Hoyos, *transculturación* implies an intellectual praxis, and its potential actualization relies on its use as a methodology. Hoyos proposes this updating by moving transcultural materialism as a tool to think about objects in thought-provoking ways, to incite new relations to understand the nature-culture dichotomy. The author interprets how poems, novels, short stories, songs, or photographs inform the interaction between the human and the nonhuman. He focuses on how nonhuman representations and human characters trespass the barriers between the two. Based on an exploitative economic relation as the base of the debate, Hoyos questions the function of language in shaping the division between objects and subjects. For example, he observes episodes where humans treat a thing as raw material, or someone makes a product out of it or disposes of it as well. By doing this, Hoyos expands the concept of extractivism as a practice with effects beyond the

economical, which is part of the forms in which language represents things.

The book also proposes an updating of World Literature (Hoyos capitalizes it) as a relevant paradigm for Latin Americanism. Nevertheless, he recognizes the limits (anthropological and Eurocentric) of World Literature and how they may prevent its development as a paradigm to understand the representation of the pair culture and nature. Hoyos' project aims "to underline the recursive structure that leads to the absorption of opposing views within the paradigm" (108). Because of this, among other resources, he translates the primary sources of his analysis, making evident the changes he or others made on the texts. At the same time, he compares genealogies and parallels of authors and works or sometimes carefully reads one singular case. The works Hoyos selects are usually marginal in a Eurocentric world view but are privileged for him because of the reflections they generate around capitalism. Different from Heideggerianism or Marxism, Hoyos' contribution of hyperfetishism refers to the authors and works that construct an expressive language as "counterforce to both mystification and economicism" (170). For Hoyos, this advance comes from Latin American cultural objects because of their "positionality at both the receiving and giving ends of modern extractivism' (ibid.).

Hoyos admits the need for these updates because of the transformation in our relationship with things and the way they are being produced in the last decades. Also, he sees the recent changes in communicational technologies, industries and exploitative models as "a shift in a long-prevailing material paradigm" (2). He also identifies a need to understand the conjuncture that literature, and its study, faces in an economic system like this that accelerates obsolescence. These shifts imply that to question modernity, scholars require an update of their conceptual tools. In this sense, it is necessary to return to terms like ideology in order to set a distinction between historical materialism and new approaches. After 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, these new stances represent the constant critique over capitalism but within a globalized world, where Latin American authors have not always been thinking modernity in the same way as in Eastern Europe or with theories produced in other latitudes.

Hoyos organizes his book in two parts: "Objects" and "Assemblages." In the first, he talks about raw materials in their allegorical or cultural, economic and, literally, organic sense, as components that constitute a socioeconomic system. He uses the example of how some words change even when we refer to the same matter, and by this change, they reveal a different relationship established by humans with things. For

example, flesh and meat mean different needs or situations, although the object they point to has one term in Spanish (*carne*). Hoyos sees, in this case, an expression of anthropocentrism and places himself in the debate about decentering the human while thinking about writing. In particular, Hoyos prioritizes literary language over everyday communication for its economy because it represents and prescribes a specific relationship with nature. Terms as “raw materials,” for example, determine beforehand the form, need, use, or value of a thing. By proposing this in this part of the book, Hoyos is looking for how *materia prima* constitutes objects and is part of the processes of cultural transformation.

In the first chapter, titled “Raw stuff disavowed,” Hoyos analyzes a crucial text about the exploitation of rubber in the Colombian Amazon: *La vorágine* (1924), by José Eustasio Rivera. Hoyos reviews the metaphoric perspective on Rivera’s novel and confronts it with a Marxist and a liberal economic, historical point of view. Hoyos analyzes how in Rivera’s work, the system created to exploit nature also coincides with the interference of nature in human language. To “interrogate raw material,” Hoyos states that similarly as rubber, the minerals in the human body—swallowed by the tropical forest—nurture that system, “yet the organisms will not endure” (49). Therefore, he sees the assemblage established between rubber and human through the processes of extraction and growing as untenable. For Hoyos, tobacco and sugar are the substratum that, for Ortiz, compound the exploitative economic model that integrates Cuban Society. Hoyos’ actualization of Ortiz’s concept reveals that rubber works the same in Rivera’s novel and adversely, it displays an “unsustainable experiment at coevolution” (49).

Hoyos develops the question about human exploitation in a more recent novel, written by a Latin-American author located in Europe, Ariel Maguns’ *Muñecas* (2008). The book tells the story of flirting between an unnamed Jewish librarian and the daughter of a Nazi soldier, Selin, who is a library patron. Narrated by each character in two parts, it stands in a “double erasure” about two atrocities. First, extermination refers to the Nazi background of the male figure. Second, extractivism is present in the dialogues between the couple, in the plants of the librarian’s apartment, in the rubber his sex dolls are made of, among other disturbing examples. Hoyos identifies that these concepts are articulated by a “contradictory desire, self-canceling and imperious, for absolute control” (57). Hoyos observes how Maguns’ novel rejects the *pathos* in the representation of these historical events in the novel, avoiding the assignation of a destiny or a rational plan for genocide. Opposed to an exposure as

raw data, the placement of those events in a constellation improves their understanding.

To finish this chapter, Hoyos reviews other interpretations of raw materials in cases like Diego Rivera's mural of Cacao (1949), or Vik Muniz's *Chocolate Pictures* (1997). Next, Hoyos revisits the Marxist notion of raw material and finds that it relies on the separation between nature and culture, and the organized transformation of raw materials by means of production. According to Hoyos, Marx separates the worker from the environment because he is the one who transforms things taken from nature through labor to produce value. Hoyos states that eventually, the system eliminates and treats the product and the worker as it does with nature. Hoyos, then, revisits Marx's example of how humans, not like bees, have the ability to construct something according to what they see in their imagination and create something. He then digs into this comparison, exploring the relationship between agricultural production and the concepts of laborer and worker, and how they relate to the subordination and exploitation of an economical process that repeats schemas. For Hoyos, this process starts with the enforcement of a separation from nature, evidenced in language by the use of terms like "raw material" or "meat."

Similarly, the next two chapters question the agency, influence, and interaction of the major components within the literary language. The second chapter of the book is called "Of Rock and Particles" and focuses on the novels *El jardín de Nora* (1998), by Blanca Wiethüchter, and *El té de Dios* (2010), by César Aira. In this chapter, Hoyos recognizes in both novels some attributes of the concept of transcultural materialism. In Wiethüchter Novel, the articulation of nature and culture happens in a family with mute children's domestic garden. They are part of a second generation of European immigrants established in the Andean landscape. In this environment, the menace of a hole in the garden grows along with a series of cultural contradictions. After commenting on Wiethüchter's novel, Hoyos states that for transcultural materialism, the dissolution of the borders between the human and non-human is not a caricaturized representation. He says that: "becoming nonhuman appears as a verisimilar, disturbing possibility—death, the dissolution of a body into its constitutive elements, is just that" (76). Furthermore, Hoyos highlights the attention paid to the form in the novel, and how the use of language differentiates the transcultural materialistic approach from postcolonialism or interpretations influenced by Rama's concept of *transculturación*. The language in the novel and the use of rhetorical figures in a textured style, as he says, make objects and language intertwine. However, this

does not remediate the nature-culture division. He interprets this “aesthetic inquiry [as] an exercise in political ecology” (79) that does not solve any contradiction, rather than recreating it. While in Wiethüchter’s work Hoyos examines the boundaries between humans and non-humans from the perspective of a *hyper-object*, such as the Andean Pachamama, Hoyos observes transcultural materialism on a microscale in Aira’s novel. In *El té de Dios*, it is not nature or a garden that destabilizes notions such as colonialism or history, in a mythical parody of the origin of the universe, but a subatomic particle. And finally, in the third chapter entitled “Corpse Narratives as Literary History,” Hoyos sees the corpse in Roberto Bolaño’s posthumous novel, *2666*, as that produced (execrated and secreted), or as the abject, which is differentiated and covered over for the interest and needs of the economic and social orders that produce it. Hoyos closes this part examining the association between translation and the image of the corpse. In particular, he reviews an objection against World Literature, about what to do with what is left out of the translated text.

The second part of the book, “Assemblages,” focuses on, precisely, the social, emotional, or material articulations among the human and the nonhuman. After looking at the components of commodities, culture, and societies in the first part of the book, in the second, Hoyos studies the changes produced by contemporary technology and consumption on a larger scale. “Assemblages” has two chapters. In the first one, titled “Politics and Practices of Hyperfetishism,” Hoyos thinks on the current uses of concepts such as *the accumulation of fetishism*. By doing so, he critiques the arbitrariness of Marx’s distinctions between exchange and use value, fantasy and reality, and materialism and idealism. He also questions the variable and dualist relationship that endows objects and turns them into commodities. For Hoyos, Marx’s proposition about the fantasy associated with fetishism is a way of covering the social relations that support a production system, but it can also expose them. Hoyos questions the pejorative use of the term fantasy as a filter for a reality that must be uncovered and thinks of two new applications for it. First, there is a possibility that objects have agency, interact, and produce more complex relationships. Second, he “consider[s] commodity fetishism as one fantasy among several possible fantasies that ‘negotiate’ (...), our relationship to things” (151).

The first case Hoyos analyzes in this chapter is the posthumous poem “La voz de las cosas” (1908), by José Asunción Silva. Hoyos’ translation of the poem is the first one ever made to English and is remarkably accurate (the title is literally, “The Voice of Things”). The poem describes the desire of a voice to capture things passing.

For Hoyos, its lyrical voice is trying to be the voice of the other (things) and contain it in poetry as a failed reliquary. Analyzing Silva's authorial figure broadly, Hoyos sees how the myth around his incestuous love for her dead sister is an example of profound doubt about the limits and contours of the subject and the object. Later, Hoyos contrasts Silva's posthumous novel *De Sobremesa* (1925) and *Almas en pena, chapolas negras* (1995), by Fernando Vallejo. For Hoyos, Vallejo, like Marx, considers that credit and debt are crucial for capitalism. Still, in Silva's notebooks, Vallejo perceives a philosophy in which "in order to exist truly, a person must owe" (157).

Consequently, for Hoyos, through Vallejo's perspective on Silva, modernity was based on debt and the attribution of moral values to it. Hyperfetishism, according to Hoyos, produces this "more oblique elucidation of an affective structure that is also economical" (160). In these narratives, objects establish emotional and intellectual bonds from which subjects are interdependent and complicate the notion of commodity fetishism as a "fascination with commodities" (ibid.).

The second example that Hoyos uses in this chapter is Margo Glantz's book, *Story of a Woman Who Walked Through Life in Designer Shoes* (2005) (Hoyos admits to a loss in the translation of the title, where the same word in Spanish designates story and history). Glantz's book revisits topics such as "the banality of feminine literature or the infantilization of women, and identification, and overattachment to, 'pretty things'" (161). She also talks about a visit to a doctor and the scar of breast cancer, through which, according to Hoyos, Glantz criticizes "the medicalization of the female body and machismo in Octavio Paz's poetry" (ibid). For Hoyos, Glantz avoids being defensive but subverts misogyny, instead of opposing it, and subjectifies objects, instead of de-objectifying women.

The story of Glantz's alter ego, Nora García, provides "an embodied reflection about the surface and depth of our attachment to things" (162). The fascination with things is preserved even after the recognition, for example, of the historicity of the Ferragamo brand, which makes it an icon and also makes it worldly. For Hoyos, through this contradiction between fantasy and skepticism, Glantz questions the analogy between craftsmanship and literature, and how the latter can function as a means of social positioning. However, Nora García's fascination brings "hyperfetishism to its musical climax" (163) the moment she decides to buy Ferragamo shoes and wear them only while writing Glantz's book about them, metafictionally. For Hoyos, Glantz does not model her character as a committed intellectual. She has a bourgeois sensibility but also confronts the contradictions of

consumption. The Ferragamo shoes she buys and wears inform her narrative. But at the same time, Nora questions history by reflecting on the possibility of using literature as a mechanism to subvert it. Given the impossibility of directly influencing Ferragamo's life through text, Nora's book is under the risk of becoming a commodity. In a thought-provoking way, Hoyos sees that Glantz's female character acquires social status when she degrades herself, exacerbating a masculine logic of reputation based on consumption. Nora disrupts the notions of commodity and fetishism by placing them on the same level as history.

At the end of the chapter, Hoyos looks at the work of the photographer Daniela Rosell as an emblematic case of Mexican hyper-fetishism. Rosell's portraits of young Mexican women, their mothers or servants, became world renowned when she photographed the relatives of Mexico's PRI politicians. In a selection from the collection *Rich and Famous*, Hoyos observes how the ambiguity and eclectic style of the portraits elicit questions from the audience rather than answering them. This effect relies on the exacerbation of the fetish that promotes critical thinking, as is the case with a photograph that simulates a harem. In other instances, Hoyos recognizes in Rosell's pictures "an enormous empathy and pathos, as if every human and nonhuman element were held prisoner to every other" (168). Her intricate work is, for Hoyos, a performative composition, which re-images (rather than analyzing) social situations. Her iconic character emerges as a result for the author, from the photographer's apparent non-political stance and from how her work has a diverse effect for different audiences. They see in Rosell's photographs their various backgrounds, desires, and interests, which implies that hyperfetishism complicates, following Hoyos, rather than affirms social status. However, he clarifies that his purpose is not to compromise the authors ideologically but to prove that "they present a different way of revealing the seams of the commodity" (170).

In the last chapter, "Digitalia from the margins," Hoyos matches the California gold fever of the middle XIX century with Carlos Slim's phone empire. Slim had rapid financial success during the privatization of the telephone networks in Latin America during the early 2000s. Smartphones illustrate what Hoyos calls a material shift during the digital era. Although they have changed our relationship to objects, for Hoyos, they eclipse the broader movement to which they belong. Hoyos concentrates on the insights of the raw material and luxury goods of the previous chapters to mobilize, through the example of the smartphone, what he says about extractivism, commodity fetishism, and argues that "the potential role of literary language in, fittingly, 'throwing

a wrench' into their workings" (172). Transcultural materialism leads Hoyos to prove that the region's writers have resisted and also felt infatuated with the ideology brought with the notions of the personal computer and cloud computing.

According to Hoyos, one of the first works to emerge from the world of Slim and Gates is the *corrido* "El celular" (1992), by Los tigres del Norte, originally from the region of Sinaloa, on the border between Mexico and the United States. Hoyos analyzes the *corrido* rhythmically, and translates fragments from it. The central character in the song is a man who addresses an interlocutor to whom he relates the disappointment he feels about his phone. The device that at first gave him status ends up feeding his desires for greatness and then becomes a device of control. Hoyos says this is a song about alienation, that, on the one hand, implies how contemporary cultural objects promote the narrative of connectivity and immediate gratification as a norm. On the other hand, they feed a false sense of proximity and an insatiable desire for consumption.

Next, Hoyos analyzes the story "Recuerdos de un computador personal" from the collection *Mis documentos* (2014), by Alejandro Zambra. He defines Zambra's work for being apparently "naive love stories that comment more or less obliquely on Chilean history" (177). Beyond the anecdotal elements, Hoyos sees in Zambra's work a metonymy of the years of the dictatorship through the images of the present. Hoyos identifies the title of the collection with a reflection on technology, writing, and obsolescence. He describes the story "Recuerdos de un computador personal" as: "the parable of a couple, Max and Claudia, who fall in and out of love" (179) in Santiago de Chile. However, the highlight of this relationship is the centrality of the computer, through which Claudia discovers that Max is a regular consumer of pornography and has a son living in Temuco. It is not the machine itself that has agency. Rather, the tale develops through the computer's assemblage with the human character. Once the computer is installed in the home, it affects the routines of the characters inhabiting it, their rhythms, and even their memory. Hoyos identifies the computer in Zambra's tale as a feature of ideology because it is "second nature" (181). As a result, love relationships are submitted "into the waning moments of a production cycle" (183) that, in the case of Claudia and Max, leads to obsolescence. For Hoyos, Zambra's work accurately assesses the ideological, historical contingencies of computation, but avoids making a radical statement about the effects of technology. It is a profound reflection on time and perishing as experiences shared by human relationships and digital artifacts. Hoyos finishes the last part of his book debating on how digital resources

like the cloud or art installations will necessarily inform our way of understanding archives or art itself.

Hoyos' book has, among its achievements, translation as an interpretative and argumentative resource. He makes explicit the decisions when translating Silva's poem into English or critical terms from the novels and songs he quotes. This straightforward process conveys an updated approach to World Literature while applying close reading, classic and new materialisms as methodological and theoretical resources. The translation into English of poems, *corridos*, and short novels is, for some, homogenization of a heterogeneous corpus of works. As an offset, Hoyos switches the traditional locations of centers and peripheries. By basing his theoretical methodologies on Ortiz's work, Hoyos shows that the answers to a series of questions motivated by the modernization of Latin America can be found in Latin American literary works. This process prioritizes the way the novels deal with the relationship between the human and nonhuman in a situation informed by new technological devices.

Another remarkable aspect of Hoyos' book includes the use he makes of transcultural materialism as one of the main concepts of his project. By continually confronting new materialism and classic materialism, Hoyos finds the spaces and debates where this perspective might contribute. Hoyos offers a solid understanding of the relationship between objects and subjects to decentralize the anthropocentric critique of the representation of production systems. Through a careful reading of novels like *La vorágine*, or an exhaustive analysis of Rossell's photographs, Hoyos discovers the moments when dichotomous borders can be blurred. However, beyond that, Hoyos' approach maintains some standard terms as *commodity* and expands the limits of who and what can participate in the power relations they imply. He sustained this conceptual growth successfully on his chronological and practical review of Ortiz's concept of *transculturación*. This project invites other scholars to study, see or read other Latin American works with the concept of hyperfetishism at hand, especially when thinking through the politics of an image, but not necessarily when questioning the ideology sustained by a phone call.

However, thinking about the updating of World Literature as a critical approach can be perceived as an anachronistic gesture. But more than a theoretical return or the objections to World Literature that Hoyos examines, the selection of the literary corpus that *Things with a History* presents resembles a circulation network. Thinking of World Literature as a group of literary texts recognized at different times

for their various attributes implies the use of a norm or regulation necessary for the selection. In addition to being Latin American himself or focusing on economic exploitation, the restrictions and limitations of Hoyos' conceptualization and updating are not always explicit. For example, the desire for control cuts across the relationship between objects and subjects. When Hoyos reads Rivera's novel or observes the photographs of the PRI's relatives, or comments on a fragment from Bolaño's short story "El retorno", the transference of desire seems to be regulated by its reproductive use. In this sense, when desire destabilizes the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, it does so within heterosexual parameters. Other forms of non-reproductive desire are associated with images of perishing objects, such as the corpse and the ghost. Considering how transcultural materialism and hyperfetishism are present in the literature circulating in other scenes in the region could offer new views of the materiality, fascination, and exacerbation skillfully expounded in this book.