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To cite this article: Héctor Hoyos (2018) History and Raw Material in *Muñecas*, Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas, 51:1, 14-20, DOI: [10.1080/08905762.2018.1485282](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905762.2018.1485282)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905762.2018.1485282>



Published online: 14 Aug 2018.



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# History and Raw Material in *Muñecas*

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A major part of the world-system, Latin America is uniquely situated as subject and object of Western capitalist domination. From imperial rule through modern republics, its social and natural history showcase every stage and form of colonialism and neocolonialism. While northern locales preeminently speak the language of hegemony, and other southern locales that of dispossession (most of Africa, parts of Asia), the region is at a crossroads. Its literature captures the unresolved tensions in the coming-to-be of the current world order from this unique vantage point. This essay focuses on a novel, the Argentine Ariel Magnus's *Muñecas* (2008; Dolls), which showcases a major cultural phenomenon I call "transcultural materialism." It is a narrative mode where the non-instrumental use of stories and literary language seeks to affect our rapport to things. This distinctive form of storytelling elucidates critical concepts, notably the continuity of nature and culture across human and nonhuman history. Not subservient to grand theory, metropolitan or otherwise, it is a self-sustaining speculative exercise rooted, to different degrees, in fictionalization. Its foundational figure is Fernando Ortiz, whose notion of transculturation I have revised; its contemporary practitioners include authors like the Chilean Alejandro Zambra, the Bolivian Blanca Wiethüchter, and the Guatemalan Eduardo Halfon, among others.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The present article is adapted from my forthcoming book manuscript, *Things with a*

Thought-provokingly, Magnus constellates the Shoah (extermination) with the history of rubber (extractivism). These two historic atrocities serve as background to the main plot. Regarding the first, its characters

*History: Transcultural Materialism in Latin America.* A Spanish version appeared as “Materia prima e historia en *Muñecas*” in *Cuadernos de literatura* 40 (2016): 453-464. All quotes from the original text of *Muñecas* cited throughout this essay have been translated by the editors.

are, as in some crass joke, a Jew and a “Nazi.” More precisely: an unnamed, immigrant librarian in Germany whose father was a socialist worker in some faraway place about which we know little, and Selin Sürginson, a library patron and daughter of a Nazi soldier who was stationed at Auschwitz. On a whim, Selin invites the librarian, whom she does not know, to her thirtieth birthday party. Almost no one shows up. Drunk and disappointed, she offers to drive him back home. On the way, they have an unfortunate encounter with the police. Flustered, they arrive at the librarian’s place and fall abruptly silent, as a secret about him, to which I shall turn momentarily, is revealed. Sexual tension grows, and Selin ends up in his bed, offering herself up. At the close of the narration, he does not seem inclined to reciprocate. Extractivism comes to bear regarding the librarian’s secret-in-plain-sight: he lives with six dolls made of inflatable silicone. He collects them, he explains, “as one would collect horses, or cars. That is, I have them in the stable or in the garage but also . . .” (90). As I see it, the long history of rubber extractivism, the dolls’ historical precursor, is as present in the narration as what historian Saul Friedländer would call “the years of extermination,” referring to the crimes taking place in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Magnus situates his writing in the double erasure of these horrors and their corresponding literary traditions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Magnus tackles the topic of extermination and its aftermath more straightforwardly, and in a non-fiction register, in *La abuela*, based on his family history (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2006). He is interviewed in *Der Spiegel*: “Argentinischer Autor Magnus: ‘Alle Wollen, Dass Du Nicht Deutscher Bist,’” by Stefan Kuzmany, *Spiegel Online*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/argentinischer-autor-magnus-alle-wollen-dass-du-nicht-deutscher-bist-a-721615.html> (accessed June 20, 2015).

Rubber originates from the Amazonian tree *hevea brasiliensis*, which the Witoto and Tupí peoples, among other ethnic groups, used for centuries before its commercial exploitation. The latter coincides with those peoples’ own exploitation at the hands of Casa Arana and other colonists. As crude as it often is, José Eustasio Rivera’s famous novel *La vorágine* (1924) pales in comparison to the ghastly accounts and documentation from non-fiction sources. In the frontispiece of Hardenburg’s early denunciation piece *The Devil’s Paradise* (1912), there are indigenous slaves in shackles; in the interior pages, a picture of the emaciated carcass of a woman who was reportedly condemned to die of hunger (25). Maiming was common punishment for gaps in production—even a willy-nilly pastime (38). The understudied and insufficiently memorialized killing of thousands of natives through work exhaustion, summary execution, and outright torture was, in a strict sense, a genocide comparable in scale to the pogroms that were carried out in Europe. As is well known, the phenomenon that Friedländer documents was the first genocide to carry this name, and the only one of its scale. Works by Rivera and Euclides Da Cunha accompany the first event, and those by Céline, Celan, and many others accompany the latter one. Nazi Germany synthesized rubber for the first time, as a response to an embargo and to the arms race (Tully, 14). The English had brought natural rubber to Asia, where it was cultivated on plantations and no longer in the middle of the jungle. As one can see, the trajectory of this group of substances (gutta-percha, rubber, plastic, silicone)—first natural, then artificial, and later

synthetic—is rich in meaning. The twentieth century, with its neocolonialism and its wars, is inscribed in this trajectory.

The first appearance of the rubber family in the novel is inflated condoms hanging from the ceiling during the failed party (43). Selin will later make reference to the “plastic cock” that her ex-boyfriend, Günther, had asked her to stick in him (79). Foretelling the dolls’ appearance, the librarian lectures her on the advances in “*materia de androides*,” especially after the arrival of silicone (87). Putting to the test the work’s pact of verisimilitude, which carefully skirts the absurd, he states, “The doll you see there, for example, it breathes, its heart beats, its body warms up, it menstruates every 28 days. And that’s a relatively old model, I bought it a year ago. The new ones talk and carry a video camera in their eyes” (89). Noting that the plants are also plastic, Selin thinks that the librarian, “*perversamente ecológico*,” is “more German than the Germans” (102). In the last few pages of the novel, Selin kisses the librarian, who remains undaunted. Just after, she lies down on the bed with Lais, the doll, hoping that Magnus “sticks it in me like he sticks it in Lais . . . His latex cock in my silicone hole” (114). In the very end, when Selin falls asleep with the dolls, she asks if “all that about women getting silicone implants everywhere, do they get it from the dolls, because nature imitates art and vice versa” (115).

So much for the latex plot. The first fifty pages are in free indirect speech focalized on him, in a section astutely called “Her,” and it lasts until the end of the party. The second section, somewhat longer, is called “Him” and corresponds to her free indirect speech as they make their way to the librarian’s apartment. This inversion of names brings to mind the expression “twin souls,” yet is also about false symmetry: the characters would almost fit into a joke or fable, but not quite. Well underway, the librarian mentions that he is Jewish, and Selin talks about her father (58). The *récit*, as the page numbers I have emphasized suggest, is more important than the *histoire*: the novel is made up of what it tells, but the way that it tells is indispensable. Ultimately, the goal of this complex timeline is to lay open the continuum of History and stimulate counterfactual thinking.

In one particularly notable party moment, the librarian, Selin, and Ben (her landlord) resign themselves to bringing out seats to sit on, since they already suspect that no one else will arrive. The border between animate and inanimate objects insinuates its importance when the librarian points out that another name for the expression “musical chairs” is “trip to Jerusalem [*Reise nach Jerusalem*]” (32-33). Making conversation, Selin supposes that somewhere behind that expression there must be “a modern fable, of the sort that relegates the moral to the ethical creativity of its listeners” (32). This describes the novel as a whole. The saying goes: “he who goes to Seville loses his seat.” Travelling to Jerusalem and back, only to be incapable of finding one’s place, could be related to the Crusades or to Zionism. Selin wonders if there might be something

antisemitic in the expression. One seat always corresponds to one human. The ending is not a revelation about the profound relationship between rubber and Nazism but a realization of the possibilities of Magnus's emplotment. In the absence of a moral, what the novel does achieve is a staging of the contradictions at the heart of the memory of these events. That is, if you concede that things hold a certain material and cultural memory, as tobacco and sugar cane did for Fernando Ortiz, that awaits to be narrativized.

These days, silkworms are genetically modified to produce thread for industrial purposes. Latex was the original super substance: the first thing that promised to become everything else. Ambitions court hubris and tragedy, and this one was no exception. Rubber proposed a new effective border between nature and culture by isolating the wet from the dry or, in one word, waterproofing. A space to overcome the human, so intrinsically bound with water. As Bruno Latour points out, when attempts are made to stop hybrids between the human and non-human, which are in reality the norm and not the exception, such hybrids proliferate, and not necessarily with favorable consequences. Waterproofing supposes a new radical pact between objects. Racism, that organizing principle of National Socialism, is a fantasy of perfect impermeability. Its forceful institutionalization triggered a new and lamentable disruption in the order of things, which also led to the objectification of millions of human beings.

Fittingly, Selin approaches historic National Socialism in an oblique way. In Selin's apartment, the empty seats hardly evoke victims; however, this reading gains traction when other elements are taken into account. The phrase "imagine if there were a war and nobody came" (64), said at the party regarding the small probability that Germany and France would participate in the war in Iraq, is iterated again at the end of the night when the librarian justifies his solitary life: "life is a party where you're invited and when you go no one is there" (92). When a car passes by, the basement apartment is illuminated. Selin recounts, "Suddenly the room seems like a trench swept by the enemy's headlights. Are we below sea level?" (104). Notice how the latent war is represented as permeability. Before, in the party, the librarian feels in his overcoat the weight of the many gifts that he has brought for the birthday girl—like stones that drag him to the bottom of the sea (17). That contrasts with the brutal image, impermeable and dry, of the latex penis in a silicone hole. Selin, whose Oedipus complex, let us remember, would have her desiring a perpetrator, here searches for total friction, violence.

Seen in a different way, she wants to be objectivized. That said, in this novel humans are no more than things. Genocide is horrific, not because it reduces its victims to objecthood (there are things no one would do to *things*), but because it is the very definition of that which is horrific. It is not *tragic*, however, as Hayden White observes about the work of Saul Friedländer (5). If ever he had it, Magnus resists the temptation to give

pathos, agony, destruction, and anagnorisis to genocide, as if there existed a tragic destiny or a cosmic plan. Instead, he *displaces* that narrative onto the plot of rubber and onto the discrete drama of a bad night of drinking between a shy, solitary man and a woman who reproaches herself. A fable or joke would ask that a general inference be made from these characters, much in the way that the hare and tortoise teach something about patience and ethical values, or that the laughter of a Jewish joke mobilizes and dissolves (absolves?)—to say it with a German concept—the pain of the world (Weltschmerz). White says that Friedländer “de-narrativizes” (de-storifies) extermination, as Toni Morrison did slavery, following a modernist paradigm present in Proust, Woolf, Kafka, and Joyce. Like Magnus, they prefer parataxis. Horror is incommunicable, but the unending searches to understand it are not, especially when textured language is privileged over crude data.

Meanwhile, there are many traces of extermination literature in the novel. At the party, the librarian is a “witness to a tragedy” (43), or, even more suggestive, “the only survivor of a personal tragedy which would keep happening in another form in Selin’s memory, invisible to others and in the course of time to her as well” (47). This is not the habitual language used to speak of a trivial embarrassment, namely, that Selin’s social circle left her along with her ex-boyfriend; it recalls discussion about giving testimony in Primo Levi as something both necessary and impossible. Also, the role of the writer facing trauma in Dominick LaCapra, for whom there would be written works about compulsive repetition and others about healing, without it being possible beforehand to distinguish between them. The name Selin alludes via homophony to Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a nihilist and Nazi. The librarian refers to himself as an idiot “in the etymological sense” of the word, which is precisely the way that Hannah Arendt criticizes those who, as in the Greek root, are “for themselves”: if every man focuses only on his own matters, neither political action nor a space for the commons is possible (107). This last position fully coincides with the final monologue of the librarian, for whom the dolls appear to have been emancipated, as Rimbaud would say, from that hell that is other people.

What interest might Magnus have in collapsing into one figure a witness, a victim, an idiot, and, even, potentially, a victimizer? For some, the moral will be that History has ended, and that only its most distant echoes remain. Or that technology will elicit ethical idiocy, or posthumanist utopia. Or that, facing the onslaught of androids, we must return to a state of nature. The collapse of victimizers, victims, witnesses, and idiots could form the basis of a relativist argument and, dangerously, even one of denial. Instead, my sense is that this is both about negative critique and about confronting politically correct, thoughtless platitudes. With the important qualification that its misogynistic subplot suggests a truncated scapegoat mechanism, the novel’s great merit is finding an internally

coherent narrative solution for the contradictions that situate it historically. The synthesizing of rubber and its afterlife in new materials, in which both ruthless *caucheros* [rubber tappers] and Nazi scientists played a part, provides the very fabric of the modern world. It bears repeating: there would be no sex dolls, as there would be no modern syringes in hospitals nor the transatlantic flights that make literary conferences possible, without the exploitation of Amazonian rubber and its synthesizing by the German military-industrial machine. The possibility of creating something that can take any form is an aspiration to omnipotence. Inventions from the fields of nanotechnology and synthetic biology, not to mention from the combination of the two, announce a very near future in which, what silicone is to gutta-percha, new compounds will be to silicone. Meanwhile, sex dolls are imported into Latin America as luxury goods, *mutatis mutandis*, as Ford's cars carried in their tires, on their way back to the Amazon, the latex of trees from that same jungle—*Muñecas* goes against the grain (60). Trauma lives on in situated things.

“Something in the purity of the air and the overexcited stillness of the furniture,” says the unnamed librarian as he contemplates the empty party, reminds him of the library before it opens, before the books are “handled” (22). In both, there are more seats than people. Later, the apartment, where there are more dolls than people, is another sanctuary. Faced with these three impermeable spaces, curated in proximity like an artistic installation, critics must choose where to sit. But the novel is anything but hospitable: one can only sit, as Selin, next to a thing. Or hold a book and smear it with one's fingers, as one unavoidably does, in that act called reading that somehow evokes more spiritual and less physical phenomena. If Christian hermeneutics asks its readers to approach the Bible as if it were the word of God, or close reading, its secular daughter, asks them to read texts as if they were complete worlds unto themselves, my modest hermeneutical contribution, in formulating the notion of trans-cultural materialism, is to read *as if* in the presence of *things with a history*.

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