

# A Tale of Two Materialisms

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In recent years, a seismic shift has transformed our rapport with objects. Prior to roughly 1989, there were no widespread mobile phones, let alone smartphones; no consolidated World Wide Web, no buzz about an “internet of things” or “3-D printing”; a much smaller trade in digital-age commodities (such as lithium from Bolivia for batteries); a more modest market for global luxury brands; fewer poor people around the world getting their nourishment from industrial food supply chains; fewer better-off, “food-conscious” enclaves abandoning them here and there; a larger Amazonian rainforest; and smaller amounts of waste everywhere, among many other possible examples. The cumulative fact of these transformations, which have lately increased in speed, suggests that we are currently undergoing a shift in a longtime prevailing material paradigm. If one imagines a long-standing, unwritten pact between humans and nonhumans, then, as of late, we have been in the process of rewriting it.

Keep this broader shift in mind as I discuss a limit case for the circulation of objects and peoples: the island of Cuba. My goal is to propose the articulation of two materialist approaches to the novel. One is the study of things as a means to reveal the true nature of social relations, an approach rooted in critical theory. The other considers objects as autonomous nonhuman entities. The first materialism has played a crucial role in intellectual history but separates nature from culture. The second bridges this gap but neglects labor.<sup>1</sup> I shall focus on Cuban materiality to illustrate how to read commodities both as expressions of social relations *and* as influential objects in their own right. I regard novels, and literary language in general, as cornerstones of this hybrid approach. My essay illustrates this with an analysis of Antonio José Ponte’s 1997 *Las comidas profundas* (*Deep Foods*), preceded by a succinct revision of his countryman Fernando Ortiz’s classic ideas about Cuban identity. A central tenet of my approach is appreciating the role of literary language in remediating the relationship of humans and objects. Such an operation has political consequences in a traditional sense, as engaged literature has had for decades, but it also extends the reach of politics to nonhumans.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jane Bennett explains the schism and her mediating position therein: “I pursue a materialism in the tradition of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze more than Hegel-Marx-Adorno. It is important to follow the trail of human power to expose social hegemonies (as historical materialists do). But my contention is that there is also public value in following the scent of a nonhuman, thingly power, the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts” (xiii). My own position, although also mediatory, is closer to historical materialism than the one adopted by Bennett.

## Lessons from Tobacco and Sugar

A revisionist reading of Ortiz's influential book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (*Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*) and companion essay "The Human Factors of Cubanity" ("Los factores humanos de la cubanidad"), both from 1940, would show how Latin America developed new materialist thinking *avant la lettre*. Against the trend of interpreting *Cuban Counterpoint* in terms of commodity fetishism and cultural critique (Malinowski; Rama; Pratt; Coronil; and others) and "Human Factors" in terms of allegory, I regard them, respectively, as a precursor to new materialist thought and as a literary emplotment of new materialist ideas. As is well known, tobacco and sugar are, for Ortiz, two poles that explain the development of Cuban society, for they represent opposing forms of production and social organization. Tobacco, the native crop, traditionally revolved around artisanal labor and empowered, skillful workers; from early on, sugar demanded large plantations and disenfranchised, rote labor. Point and counterpoint: one favors the growth of a middle class of independent producers; the other divides society and leads to monopoly, and so on. The resulting "tune" would be the soundtrack of Cuban history.

The literature on Ortiz has reduced the rich interaction of tobacco and sugar in *Cuban Counterpoint*, a three-hundred-plus-page treatise, to the notion of transculturation, which it supposedly illustrates. Transculturation is the idea—revolutionary in a time of rampant eugenics and racism—that there is no net loss in cultural exchange, but gain. This in opposition to the notion of acculturation, used in the early twentieth century to describe how immigrants to the United States "lost" their cultures through assimilation.<sup>2</sup> If we accept the reductive reading that all *Counterpoint* does is illustrate transculturation, sugar and tobacco would merely be excuses to refer to that broader abstract problem. At best, when Ortiz goes into great detail about the specific botanical properties of plants, this amounts to digression; and when he dresses them up and treats them as characters in a novel, to embellishment. At worst, sugar is simply a stand-in for capitalism and tobacco for socialism, and transculturation is something of a third way.

In my nominalist interpretation, *Counterpoint* exemplifies transculturation rather than explains it. Consider the most often-cited passage of the book: "Cultural unions, like genetic unions between individuals, lead to offsprings that partake of elements of both sources, and yet are different from them" (Coronil xxvi) ("En todo abrazo de culturas sucede lo que en la cópula genética de los individuos: la criatura siempre tiene algo de ambos progenitores, pero también siempre es distinta de cada uno de los dos" [Ortiz, *Contrapunteo* 103]). Ortiz is trying to express that transculturation is a sinuous affair. He is pointing in the direction of the totality of human-vegetable-economic history, alluded to in the "reproductive process between individuals," which evokes at one time sex, cellular reproduction, and capital accumulation (my modified translation of the above). If a statement such as this one makes any sense at all, it is because a complex assemblage, conveyed as simple fable, stands behind it. Transculturation is less a concept one can adopt or not, agree with or take

<sup>2</sup> Jossiana Arroyo provides an invaluable, if anthropocentric, account of the history of transculturation and kindred notions in Latin Americanism.

exception from than something much broader: a methodology based on a specific worldview, one wherein a continuum connects human affairs to the vegetable kingdom, both of which are engulfed in materiality. It is as if Ortiz were saying: to think transculturally, you must follow the many twists and turns of my history of tobacco, taking in the whole story. In importing the term into literary and cultural criticism, under the aegis of the cultural turn, critics have kept the socioeconomic narrative but discarded the veritable “life stories” of leaves and stems that Ortiz so frequently and carefully describes.

Yet those life stories are the most pertinent aspect of *Counterpoint* for today’s critical discussion. They represent a de-allegorization, a literalization of this fundamental study, which really is about plants that are also goods, for Ortiz examines them in their becoming. Ortiz is not only a constructivist but also a realist; a precursor not merely of cultural studies but also of the new materialism. *Transculturación*, a narrative praxis rather than an abstract concept, posits that there is always a material basis for culture. However, it does not resort to the familiar sense of Marxist infrastructure and superstructure, a layered metaphor that leads to separating nature from culture. Sugar and tobacco are part of nature as they are part of the economy. One can follow their movements seemingly in and out of the purportedly separate realm of culture, or one can appreciate the continuum, as Ortiz does, and use narrative to trace their becoming across disciplinary, epistemological boundaries.

Seen in this light, Ortiz’s companion essay has much to say. For a piece on “human factors,” food is a surprisingly central element and especially the ingredients that different ethnic groups contributed to the national soup, *ajiaco*. Gustavo Pérez Firmat has observed that the essay makes essentially the same argument as the book on transculturation, with “a different vocabulary and style of argument” (24). That would be true if the former were indeed an essay about an abstract notion that one could succinctly summarize or extricate from its materialist unfolding rather than the narrative experiment that it is. In *Counterpoint* one learns to think differently about matter as one reads; the same could be said about the *ajiaco* piece. In the latter we read a long enumeration of the ingredients in the soup, with the ethnic groups that contributed them. It is a long paragraph, too long to cite here, framed thus:

*For us, the image of the ajiaco criollo symbolizes well the formation of the Cuban people. Let’s follow the metaphor. First of all, an uncovered casserole. This is Cuba, the island, the stove pot placed over the flame of the tropics [enumeration of ethnic groups and ingredients] along with the fire of the tropics to warm it, the water of its skies for the broth, and the water of its seas for the sprinkling of the saltshaker. With all of that our national ajiaco has been made.*

*La imagen del ajiaco criollo nos simboliza bien la formación del pueblo cubano. Sigamos la metáfora. Ante todo una cazuela abierta. Esta es Cuba, la isla, la olla puesta al fuego de los trópicos [enumeration of ethnic groups and ingredients] junto con el fogaje del trópico para calentarlo, el agua de sus cielos para el caldo y el agua de sus mares para las salpicaduras del salero. Con todo ello se ha hecho nuestro nacional ajiaco. (“Factores humanos” 155–56; my translation)*

The loving bird's-eye view of a Caribbean island gives us an aeronautical, modernist metaphor. But years before food studies, the idea of a multiethnic nation as a cauldron of soup makes the essay just as thought-provoking as the more elaborate *Counterpoint*. And, crucially, like the occasional nod to beets and rum in that book, it hints at a "chorus"—a field of interacting forces rather than a dialectic.

Note also the malleability of Ortiz's language. He says *ajiacó* symbolizes the *formation* of the Cuban people. Not simply the Cuban people, which would mean that, say, corn stands for the indigenous, beef for Spaniards, plantains for Africans, or spices for Asians. There a thing would take the place of a group of people, in a more straightforward symbolic function. But the soup, with all its slow brewing, stands for the *process*. Symbolization is asymmetrical and diachronic. A whole that is more than the sum of its parts, a gastronomical (benignly nationalistic) affair that exceeds the more pragmatic American melting pot. And then the next line posits, rhetorically, "*sigamos la metáfora*"—*let's follow the metaphor*. One could read that as a rhetorical cue—for the essay was originally a public lecture—meaning, "let us dwell on this." But when one takes into consideration what takes place in *Counterpoint*, this is more a matter of gaining elucidation through language. Through the elusive but revealing qualities of literary language, that is.

Ortiz's core belief seems to be that literary imagination allows us to reassess our historical *and* material situation. He founds a mode of Latin American, new materialist writing that seeks both explanation and intervention, interweaving human and nonhuman history through literary language. He shows us how objects or materiality in general can awaken history. As Coronil is keen to show, the characters in Ortiz's fable owe to Marx's *Madame La Terre* and *Monsieur Le Capital* at least as much as they do to the Archpriest of Hita's less polemical relatives, Mr. Carnival and Lady Lent (Coronil xxviii). Understatedly, Ortiz is integrating historical and new materialisms already. His writing cuts across divides between the sciences and the social sciences, revealing phenomena straddling botany, economics, and literature. Counterfetishism of the commodity and *longue durée* accounts of the agency of objects are both within the reach of this narrative mode, which, in Ortiz's honor, I shall call *transcultural materialism*. In it the nonhuman aspect of culture is revealed, without reducing it to cold facts or disingenuous description. Historical materialism unmasks the social relations that our fascination with a desired object or good hides from view. New materialism reveals the agency of such objects and nonhumans at large, less inert than they may appear at first sight. Transcultural materialism deploys the powers of literature to *affect* that fascination and renegotiate that agency. Today's fiction responds not only to the legacies of colonialism so vivid in Ortiz but to the unprecedented changes in our rapport with objects in the last two decades. A case in point is the work of the contemporary Cuban writer Ponte.

### Eros and Hunger

Flash forward from prerevolutionary to post-Soviet Cuba: in Ponte's *Deep Foods*, the Special Period is the elephant in the room. Fidel Castro introduced the phrase

“special period in time of peace” in 1990 to frame the dire years—continuing until at least 1996—after the withdrawal of USSR economic activities from the island (Castro; my translation). Indicative of the unique challenges this withdrawal posed to the regime, a caption for photos of protests at Havana’s Museum of the Revolution reads, “Groups of antisocial elements and tramps performed counter-revolutionary riots in two neighborhoods” (Gordy 23). Although never explicitly mentioned, this is the backdrop of *Deep Foods*. It starts with the phrase “A castle in Spain . . .” (“Un castillo en España . . .”), a French idiom for daydreaming (Ponte, *Comidas* 7; ellipsis in original).<sup>3</sup> True to the saying, the narrator sits at an empty table in Cuba and yearns for foods that do not come to him. His story quickly blends into that of King Charles V, expecting a royal visit: that of a pineapple, lion among fruits as he is lion among kings (“La piña es el león de las frutas y Carlos el león entre los monarcas” [9]). Struck with love for the unique, hitherto unknown fruit, Charles contemplates it, compares it to a walled city, wonders if it is a he or a she, thinks of her as a captive queen, an offering. In his hands, readers are led to believe that the pineapple is Cuba, or the colonies, or the world: a multifarious orb similar to those Peter Sloterdijk analyzes in *Spheres*, symbols of empire. All along, it is also something immaterial, a dream within a dream, a *mise en abyme* of hunger.

Ponte went into exile a few years ago—he defected, one could say, borrowing vocabulary from a different era. Unavoidably, reading about Charles V, one wonders: is this conservatism, nostalgia for the old regime? An oblique comparison of the most powerful man in the history of Hispanic cultures to the island’s aging strongman, Fidel Castro? Speculation is cut short by the startling denouement of the vignette: Charles worries that eating the pineapple will make him insane, like his mother, Juana La Loca (Joanna the Mad). Even more interestingly, he fears that an unknown ocean would extend between them (“Se extendería entre ellos el océano que desconoce” [11]). If aura is the effect that something close is at a distance, then ingesting the thing would *deauratize*, render banal. In this case, the illusion of possessing unseen distant lands bursts. Biographical fallacy permitting, here one sees the hungry writer in Havana and the *exilé* in Madrid. As this vignette suggests, reading political content in Ponte is anything but straightforward.

It is a wicked thing to write about food during a time of hunger; all the more wicked to do so with an eye for the historical configuration of food at a time of historical change. The narrator sets himself the task of invoking the spirit of ancient foods (“[e] espíritu de las viejas comidas” [12]). The book, a collection of vignettes and ruminations with a novelistic quality, is the spiritist séance. Consider the roads not taken: it is not a criticism against the increasingly autarchic Castro regime for favoring scarcity over international dependency; not a condemnation of a world order—or not an obvious one, in any case—that left Cuba to its own means. Ponte chooses the more circuitous Ortizian route of imbricating material history (of Cuban foods, in this case) with history tout court. At stake is no less than the claim, which made great waves in the nineties, that history came to an end.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of *Las comidas profundas* are mine. Mark Schafer translated an excerpt of Ponte’s work, under the title “Meaning to Eat,” in *BOMB Magazine*.

The idea was Francis Fukuyama's. "What we may be witnessing," he wrote in the summer of 1989, "is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4). Writing from neoliberal Mexico, Octavio Paz reached a similar conclusion a few months later in his *Pequeña crónica de grandes días* (1990), where he also characterized said political system as the next and last step for what was once known as the Second World (25). Paz represents a highly influential view against which the Special Period was required to react; citing him illuminates Ponte's historical conjuncture. Says the Nobel laureate, unequivocally, "The revolutionary ideal has suffered fatal blows; the hardest and most devastating ones have not been from its adversaries, but from revolutionaries themselves: wherever they have conquered power, they have muzzled the people" ("La idea revolucionaria ha sufrido golpes mortales; los más duros y devastadores no han sido los de sus adversarios sino los de los revolucionarios mismos: allí donde han conquistado el poder han amordazado a los pueblos") (Paz 98; my translation). For a sharp but elucidating contrast, consider Fidel Castro's words from the speech that launched the Special Period, delivered in the Karl Marx Theater of Havana in January 1990:

*[T]he way we see the future, we really see the Party leading indefinitely.*

*Neither Carlos Marx, nor Lenin, nor Engels said on what day the Party would come to an end—they did not say. They said that one day the State would disappear, which is something more than the party. Still, as far as one can tell, the moment in which the State comes to an end is distant. So we will have to keep on dealing with this apparatus—what is there to do. It is still undecided at the theoretical level, and, foremost, beyond theory in praxis, on what day and in what world the State will have disappeared. Then, truly, it won't be like somebody hopping onto a rocket to go to another planet—that day we will have changed this planet (APPLAUSE).*

*Carlos Marx said that one day humanity will have overcome prehistory. And I think, I always did and still do, that the day that the exploitation of man by man disappears, the day that humanity as a whole is ruled by socialist principles, or beyond, by communist principles, that day prehistory would be over. (Castro; my translation)*

*[T]al como vemos el futuro, vemos en la realidad al Partido dirigiendo indefinidamente.*

*Ni Carlos Marx, ni Lenin, ni Engels dijeron qué día se acababa el partido, no lo dijeron; dijeron que un día desaparecería el Estado, algo más que el partido. Todavía, por lo que se ve, está lejos el momento en que se acabe el Estado, y tendremos que seguir lidiando con este aparato, qué vamos a hacer. Está por decidir teóricamente, y, sobre todo, más que en la teoría, en la práctica, qué día y en qué mundo el Estado haya desaparecido. Entonces, de verdad, ya no será como alguien que se monte en un cohete para ir a otro planeta, sino que habremos cambiado este planeta (APLAUSOS).*

*Carlos Marx dijo que ese día la humanidad habría salido de la prehistoria. Y lo creo, lo creí siempre y lo sigo creyendo, que el día que desaparezca la explotación del hombre por el hombre, el día que toda la humanidad se rija por principios socialistas o algo más, por principios comunistas, habría terminado la prehistoria. (Castro)*

The note “applause” is part of the official, tachygraphic record. The message is clear: the Party is not over, nor is history—here “prehistory.” The caesura is to be the end of the state, an apparatus that Castro appears willing to do without, if only conditions were more favorable, but that project belongs to the future or to a different world. He vindicates the end of history as a resolution of contradiction in socialism, not in liberal democracy. Since the end of the state is not a viable option, history must continue. In other words, the Cuban communist party must remain a beacon for the world. Cubans must continue *la lucha* in times of peace, diverting their efforts and energies from preparation for a possible US invasion to the task of staying steadfast with the Revolution in the face of economic adversity. (The more pragmatic aspects of the speech mention the shortage of Soviet oil.) The speech marks the turning point that leads to Ponte’s hungry narrator; Castro’s language, particularly its way of talking about history, rings very differently from the novelist’s musings on Charles V, whom he successively invokes with envy, parody, and mild reverence.

Meanwhile, Ponte renders history as an erotically charged fruit. (With his usual graphic good sense, Daniel García’s cover illustration for the Argentine edition captures this, with a vertically sliced pineapple that evokes, as the French painter Gustave Courbet might put it, “the origin of the world.”) *Deep Foods* sides neither with Castro nor with Fukuyama or Paz. The book does not advocate an end of history or a continuation; it founds, in the autonomous space of literature it fiercely defends, a third temporality. Ponte sides with José Lezama Lima, the great *originista*. Ponte offers a brief commentary on Lezama’s influential essay “Corona de las frutas” from 1959. It was published in *Lunes de revolución*, a short-lived literary supplement from the honeymoon period when intellectuals of all sorts embraced the Cuban revolution. There Lezama writes something that Ponte might find prescient: “From Charles V to Talleyrand, names of classical sturdiness or devilish demands have proclaimed the extension of their domains in the firmament of their palate” (“Desde Carlos V hasta [sic] Talleyrand, nombres de clásica robustez o de demoniaca exigencia, han proclamado la extensión de sus [sic] dominios en el cielo del paladar” [135; my translation]). At the time, there were government-sanctioned recipes for making Cuban dishes out of animal parts, including skulls, hitherto considered industrial waste. In *Con nuestros propios esfuerzos*, published by the Cuban army in 1992, we read, “By taking meaty advantage of these parts of the cow, one can obtain by-products that were earlier discarded due to lack of experience. The initiative consists in utilizing the ears of the cow, the trachea, esophagus, lips, cuts of the innards, skull and tendons in order to fabricate croquettes, homemade blood sausages, and hamburgers” (“Con el aprovechamiento cárnico de estas partes de la res pueden obtenerse subproductos que antes eran desechados por falta de experiencia. La iniciativa consiste en utilizar las orejas de las reses, la tráquea, esófago, bumbo, recortes de tripas, cráneo y tendones para la fabricación de croquetas, morcillas caseras y hamburguesas”) (50; my translation). This is a diet suitable for a city under siege—Leningrad, say, or Berlin, enduring the tug of war. The island, that is, the extension of Castro’s domain, could be seen as proclaimed by those manuals of resistance through hunger.

How to think *sub specie aeterni* in the face of scarcity? This unresolved question is the driving force of Ponte's book; its dialectic is one between the will to historicize and the immediate demands of survival. Like Lezama, Ponte sets his eyes on a long historical horizon—longer, particularly, than Marxism. It was already challenging, one presumes, to persuade a people to maintain an orthodox communist teleology, with its emphasis on postponement, during pressing shortages of food, clothing, and medicine as well as shortages in most areas of life. Ponte's pact of verisimilitude hinges on an even more challenging premise: the flight to a deeper, heterochronic, nonteleological history. In *Deep Foods*, as in Marxism, history is a dialectical process. However, on one hand, the book redefines its scope and movement; on the other, it does away with telos altogether. Official Cuban publications, including manuals on how to cope during the Special Period, are dated, following a Jacobin convention, "year X of the *Revolución*." In the government's chronology, the Revolution was a rupturist event that is renewed every day, that must be maintained. Meanwhile, Ponte's Cuban present is like a time without time.

One of the most compelling features of Ponte's book is how he derives lessons about mankind and its relation to food from the more historically precise coordinates of the Special Period while illuminating that moment all the same. We can then extend this line of thought to say that hunger, that original form of desire, is always embedded in literature. One can find it in texts as one can find eros, whose imprint on culture is a major theme in psychoanalytic approaches. Here mother's milk is both about the mother and about the milk itself, the psyche and the body, life and survival. Reading hunger in literature is finding human conatus; that is, perseverance in being. There is the memory, in Ponte's simile, of having been cold: "Like the ill who cannot forget the cold even in very heated rooms, our hunger is seated deep inside" ("Como enfermos que ni siquiera en habitaciones muy caldadas consiguen olvidar el frío, tenemos instalada el hambre bien adentro" [*Comidas* 36]). Cold: the risk of losing oneself to the elements; hunger: that of losing oneself to lack. These are experiences of the human-nature continuum. Finding the traces of hunger in literature, beyond a mere heuristic device, can be part of a critical agenda that recognizes very concrete forms of precariousness and thinks alongside them. Food is of a piece with language. We read about how despair (read: hunger) multiplies metaphors: "pork chops of rice with fries, fried calamari without calamari" ("[c]huletas de arroz con patatas fritas, calamares fritos sin calamares" [30]). Eating, the indispensable operation that binds humans and the nonhuman, is the site for a historical, political reflection.

For his part, Bruno Latour favors the term "nature-culture" (7). He also prefers "collective" over "society" to account for the nonhuman elements that underpin human life (4), and he formulates the notion of the "network," a concept that cuts across multiple disciplinary divisions, for it is "*simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society*" (6). He also talks about hybrids, as in assemblages of human and nonhuman elements, and of a Constitution with a capital C, their reified status quo (15). Borrowing this terminology, one could say that Cuban writers like Ortiz and Ponte present networks, deal with hybrids, and

undertake something of a Constitutional reform. Except that their efforts, which in Ortiz's case predate Latour's by several decades and in Ponte's run parallel to it, do not need such a profusion of terminology. Latour's neoscientific language and the Cubans' literary experiments are different answers to a common question about how to conceive and talk about the continuum connecting natural to human affairs. Following the contours of Ortiz's and Ponte's narratives might ultimately make the lingo unnecessary.

In that vein, one could revisit the sections of Ponte's book for their theoretical value. There are many insightful discussions there of foods and of more- or less-known accounts of food, by a heterogeneous group of writers that includes Gertrude Stein, Silvestre de Balboa, and Bertrand Russell, who writes about apricots. Before turning to the conclusions drawn there, I shall focus on a key image from the later sections: an *aliñado*, or *prú*, a homemade liqueur made of fermented fruits and other staple crops, like rice, from the eastern part of Cuba. In peasants' homes, recounts Ponte, it is customary to prepare one when a woman is pregnant: the drink ferments as the baby grows (39). In this way, the *aliñado* will be ready for the baptism celebrations and beyond. As fermented drinks hold well, there are families that keep some of the beverage for years, to be had in wedding celebrations for those same children (40). The liqueur is, quite literally, an *eau de vie*. Ponte cherishes the parallel between bottle and womb, which become "twin fermentations" ("fermentaciones gemelas" [40]). The image is something of an *ars poetica*, as his book has been a long, vitalist effervescence, a quest for satiety and celebration. And, although it goes unnamed, here there is a nod to a famous quotation. The reference would not escape Cuban readers, who still congregate in the Karl Marx theaters of the island: "Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one" (916, chap. 31). Is Ponte suggesting revolution in the revolution? Or casting himself as a different kind of midwife, where violence is sublimated, if at all present? This endpoint to the book's erotic charge is purposefully puzzling, and too narrow an interpretation would not do it justice. Yet what is certain is that Ponte prefers a historical movement that is organic and nonteleological. This is his take on "incorporation," as in Lezama's ambiguous dictum that Cubans incorporate (into) the forest as they eat—a far cry from straightforwardly incorporating into a party (Lezama 136).

The other vignettes in the section contribute to this reading. The narrator ventures from the *aliñado* to Ortiz's *ajiaco* to the *Shatapatha Brahmana* and closes with a poem by no other than Luis Marré, founder of the National Union of Artists and Writers of Cuba (UNEAC). Ponte embraces Ortiz's use of the dish as a figuration of Cuba, adding that "moros y cristianos"—rice and beans; literally, Moors and Christians—would extend his logic all the way to Charles, awaiting the pineapple ("aguarda por la piña" [41]). The fable from the Brahmanic sacred text holds that in heaven what we have eaten on Earth will assume human form and eat us. In the four corners of heaven, animals will slice us, trees will chop us, mute vegetables will swallow us, water will drink us. I read this as reinforcement of the human-nature continuum and circle-of-life concepts from earlier chapters. There is also an oceanic feeling that befits the fictional reconciliation with the motherland as a land of plenty.

Indeed, throughout the book Ponte makes several references to Eastern religions, the very source of the concept of “oceanic feeling” in Romain Rolland and Sigmund Freud’s correspondence (Rolland to Freud, December 5, 1927, 86).<sup>4</sup> But here the proverbial “being one with the world,” so evident in the *aliñado*-woman coupling, quickly fades into failed cosmopolitanism. Ponte quotes Marré as writing:

*This loaf of bread was made with flour from the USSR. The rice came from China. The lentils were sown in old Spain. The vegetables were picked from the valley of Güines. . . . We drink well water. We draw it with a fourth of a horse (-power, a small engine of). The well is of blue serpentine rock and sits next to a lemon tree.*

*Ese pan fue amasado con harina de la URSS. El arroz vino de la China. Las lentejas granaron en la vieja España. Las verduras fueron cortadas en el valle de Güines. . . . Nosotros tomamos agua de pozo. La halamos con un cuarto de caballo (con un motorcito de). El pozo es de roca serpentina azul y está al pie del limonero. (qtd. in *Comidas* 44)<sup>5</sup>*

The excerpt comes from “Nos comemos la tierra,” whose title is a double entendre for “we eat dirt” and “we take the world by assault.” The irony in citing this quaint prose poem lies in that it was written at a time of relative abundance and integration into the world; by contrast, the Special Period was anything but that. Marré harmonizes the global and the local; Ponte explores their contradictions. The one-quarter-horsepower engine, which irrupts into the poem surrealistically as a fraction of a horse, is in Ponte’s gesturing more about scarcity than about simplicity. Worldliness, organicity, and exile all clash in this thought-provoking envoi to Ponte’s chapter. Real-life implications are very real, too, if one remembers Ponte’s expulsion from the organization that Marré had founded (he had no bureaucratic position at the time). Indeed, after Ponte’s lifetime of participation in the cultural milieu, UNEAC ostracized him in 2003, which ultimately led to his leaving the island for good in 2007. (Conspicuously, Marré changes the “USSR” in the first line for “Ukraine” in later editions of the poem—for example, in the selected works he published after receiving the National Literature Prize in 2012 [*Obra Escogida* 50–51].) This is an overdetermined, heterodox fable, one that brings together apparatchik, *ajiacó*, and Brahmanism. Its lesson of “those who eat will be eaten” echoes concerns of historical and new materialism.

The seventh and last section of *Deep Foods* consists of nothing but the curt phrase “A table in Havana . . .” (“Una mesa en La Habana . . .” [45; ellipsis in original]). It brings us back to the start—indeed, the origin—to hungry dreams: a

<sup>4</sup> I have consulted the valuable elucidation of the concept of oceanic feeling in William B. Parsons’s *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling*.

<sup>5</sup> In the first edition of Marré’s book, there are no punctuation marks through the traveling enumeration until the resounding, very local end: “Ese pan fue amasado con harina de la URSS El arroz vino de la China Las lentejas granaron en la vieja España Las verduras fueron cortadas en el valle de Güines . . . . Nosotros tomamos agua de pozo La halamos con ¥ de caballo (con un motorcito de) El pozo es de roca serpentina azul y está al pie de un limonero” (30). Ponte slyly cites from a later, punctuated, and de-Sovietized edition.

table in Havana is worth a castle in Spain. It also evokes the punchline of another famous seven-part work, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (108). For the Austrian philosopher, such denouement signaled the aspiration that language could exhaust reality. For the Cuban novelist, it rather posits that both language and reality are inexhaustible, try as we may to make foods into words and eat them whole. Censorship was quite possibly another consideration. After all, love-hate for socialist Cuba, or for Cuba tout court, is a frequent topic in the nation's diasporic literature. Without ignoring the explanatory power of exile, I have preferred instead to examine how the text actualizes the legacy of Ortiz's thought, engaging historical and new materialisms in original ways.

### Contemporaneity, Multipolarity, Hospitality

Narrative has the power to counterfetishize commodities and historicize foods; more broadly, it has the power to interrupt our unreflective ways of relating to objects. In the abandonment to the pleasures of literature there is the potential to repair the rift that Cartesianism has made in Western rationality. We know that we are objects ourselves; we, too, are matter. The division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, our thinking selves and our materiality, remains so entrenched, though, that it is very difficult for us not to think in those terms. It is easier to fantasize, in a literary register, that tobacco and sugar are sentient beings that condition our ways of living or that the pineapple is a traveling queen. Metaphor, metonymy, allegory, and literary figures in general supplement that with which deduction and inference have difficulty grappling. Under the spell of narrative, we may reassess our social and historical conjuncture, rethink our place within the material world entirely.

Contemporary Latin American fiction not only reflects material transformation, it enriches our understanding of it and challenges the status quo that underpins it. Latin America's role in globalization makes it a privileged locale to theorize our times (Hoyos). In the present essay, I have suggested that critique needs new approaches to materiality and vice versa. Overall, Latin American fiction continues in the social vein for which it is most commonly known. At the same time, however, it develops an additional, complementary dimension that one could describe as postanthropocentric. Latin American literature can thus be understood as a site for the articulation of two distinct and, to some extent, opposing ways of thinking: historical and new materialism. One puts the human species first; the other seeks precisely to decenter it. Transcultural materialism is a sublation of the two. It is a form of storytelling that elucidates critical concepts, particularly the continuity of nature and culture across human and nonhuman history. It is not subservient to any theory, metropolitan or otherwise; rather, it is a self-sustaining speculative exercise. One may cite new materialist thinking à la Latour or Jane Bennett to footnote it but not the other way around.

Where other approaches are reductive, Ortiz and Ponte enable us to theorize an alternative that does not instrumentalize storytelling and literary language. Rather, these are the cornerstones of a heterodox methodology capable of producing

knowledge and elucidation. Human relationships with nature are always already mediated by language and culture; there, too, they can be remediated. As politics is part and parcel of that relationship, as with the availability of food staples in Cuba, transcultural materialism provides the rudiments of a negative political ecology. It calls on the close reader to investigate what the silences of our tales of nature reveal. Against the grain of various leading contemporary critical currents, I would suggest that suspicion and interpretation have their place in today's world and not least in Latin American literature.<sup>6</sup> Attending to form and to socioecological content is not an either/or choice.

We began the twentieth century trading in heavy bunches, bushels, balls, heaps. We now exchange those very same things, *but also* bits, bytes, software, and intellectual property. As before, narrative can reveal the material element in culture, economically and otherwise—even botanically. The tale of two materialisms might end happily, for you can have them both, at least in literature.

But what if it does not? The consequences of ignoring the ties between economic and ecological systems are plain to see. If ignoring the plights of nature and labor were not risky enough, though, there is also a more basic epistemological consequence: doing so paints an erroneous picture of the world, as if there could be two different, parallel orders—one of things and one of humankind—and as if solving a problem in one order had nothing to do with solving, or creating, one in the other. Our modest but not quite negligible contribution as literary critics has to do with a critical term whose revival I have discussed elsewhere: world literature. If we are to imagine a world to make sense of world literature, and vice versa, it might be beneficial to do so through the lens of transcultural materialism. “[A]rt exists,” as Victor Shklovsky famously put it in “Art as Technique,” “to make the stone *stony*” (219). The Russian formalist’s foe was habitualization and its speedy perception, which “devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (219). His were the early days of Soviet industrialist zeal, which he both echoes and fears: my Slavicist colleagues report that the word *device* in the title of his essay connotes machinery, such as a tractor.<sup>7</sup> Yet the slowing down he advocates, which he casts as art’s *raison d’être*, is nothing other than a resistance to the drudgery of Taylorism.

We are quite some distance from the one-quarter-horsepower engine of Cuban communism, but there are family resemblances. Shklovsky was a White Russian turned Red and Marré a lifelong Party member; Ponte is a disenchanting son of the Revolution. If world literature scholars were to weave the stories of these men together, they could show how their world was not just made of ideology but of

<sup>6</sup> Here I agree with the overall case made recently by Rita Felski to approximate new materialism and literary studies. However, I take issue with how she builds her argument on false dichotomies and the scapegoating of suspicion: “Instead of engaging in a hermeneutics of suspicion, we conceive of interpretation as a form of mutual making or composing. Instead of stressing our analytic detachment, we own up to our attachments, shrugging off the tired dichotomy of vigilant critic versus naïve reader. Instead of demystifying aesthetic absorption, we see that experience as a key to the distinctive ways in which art solicits our attention” (741–42).

<sup>7</sup> Nariman Skakov and Alice E. M. Underwood have been my interlocutors on this issue. Aleksei Gastev (1882–1939) imported Ford’s methods into the USSR and wrote poems, too. He died in the purges.

things with a history. Shklovsky falls back on Cartesianism when he claims, a few lines below the passage cited above, that “*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*” (219). However, objects are what brought about his estrangement (остранение), objects reconsidered and written into poems but never quite abandoned. So important, in fact, that he avoids them: Scylla in a sea where the reduction of literature to algebra is Charybdis. Neither object nor symbol, literary language had to chart its way for formalism. The object *is* important, Ponte reminds us, when the object is food. But then food, and the hunger that drives us to it, model how we relate to all things. Shklovsky was a vitalist who, at least in the essay we more commonly associate with him, overlooked that sustenance is life itself.

In closing, I would like to outline three principles for a world literature infused with transcultural materialism. These are effective contemporaneity, affirmative multipolarity, and critical hospitality. The first speaks to the need to *make contemporary* works that, although strictly speaking come from the same time, are treated as though they came from different epochs. That is the case with contemporary Latin American literature: can we, North America-based scholars, truly share its times? Slow translations, asymmetrical cultural institutions, and literary markets work against effective contemporaneity. Works from the periphery are always already relegated to a past condition; belatedness and peripherality quickly enter into a vicious circle. The recent reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the United States notwithstanding, this is all the more prevalent in the case of Cuba. It has now become commonplace to say that the island is “frozen in time,” an utterance often prompted by the sight of American cars from the 1950s (not the equally ubiquitous Russian Ladas). No critic can transform material conditions by fiat, but we would do well in asserting the contemporaneity of seemingly disparate experiences of the present.

Multipolarity is closely related. Center-periphery models seemed to make sense during the Cold War: influence, including culture, would irradiate from Moscow and Washington onto the world—as did the radio waves of their flagship radio stations—and cover their respective, sometimes overlapping spheres of influence. The image was wrong then and is wrong now too, for there is always agency at the margins. A certain missile crisis made that amply clear back in the day; today, one need just appreciate how there are many centers, not one or two. Our thoughts about world literature still need to fully catch up with this state of affairs. Cultural flows are more unpredictable than ever: witness the television series *Breaking Bad*, essentially a *narconovela* born again in the North. From suburban America, it would migrate South again, remade into Spanish by the Colombian producer Teleset, as *Metástasis*—no translation necessary. Without downplaying the formidable clout of U.S. cultural institutions and literary market, it is time to factor in more players on the world stage.

Hospitality, Jacques Derrida reminds us, is risky: to truly be hospitable, hosts must be willing to give the house away to guests (129). At the same time, a preponderance of influence is given to those whose houses are roomy enough to entertain, their pantries on the ready. Both factors, risk and power, come to bear on

critical hospitality, which I see as essential for the articulation of a global literary sphere. A multipolar, contemporizing exercise in critical hospitality demands that hosts and guests constantly trade places. We will live in a different world when, say, highly qualified US undergraduates relocate South to further their studies in coveted, selective institutions. Short of that utopia, formulated by José Martí as far back as 1891, world literature could pay more attention to guests qua hosts.

For a brief illustration, consider Bogotá 39, a literary festival-cum-anthology that in 2007 brought to the city thirty-nine Spanish-language writers who had not yet turned forty. (The UK-based co-organizer, Hay Festival, used this rather gimmicky premise elsewhere; on this occasion, it worked.) Provocatively, the event summoned Pulitzer Prize-winning Dominican American writer Junot Díaz, who writes in English. Meanwhile, Casa de las Américas, the leading cultural institution of the Cuban Revolution, regularly grants prizes to Latino literature in the United States. Why? Because such institutions vindicate their right to host, *mutatis mutandis*, like the United States makes permanent residents of Cubans who make it to its shores. In fairness, Bogotá 39 was a one-time event, which means that its organizers did not face the risk of putting together an equally successful second part—Bogotá 43? (Bogotá 39-2017 was but a muted echo.) Casa's prize is such an unambiguous part of the country's cultural diplomacy that the stakes, as least as far as book choice is concerned, are similarly low. It would take more than a few years of bad calls for Scandinavians to squander the cultural capital of the Nobel Prize. Its gargantuan financial endowment could take longer, but both things could happen: risk is always there for hosts.

Critical hospitality entails distributing the perils and entitlements of hospitality, with an eye out for the communicating vessels between political influence, cultural capital, and capital tout court. The goal is less to bring about a world where everyone awaits the call that a few Southern literati make, channeling Harold Bloom, about "what to read and why." The goal is to upset such power dynamics altogether. By implicating us in a shared world of things with a history, the materialist turn may contribute to that endeavor. Reading novels as imbued with the continuities of a globally shared materiality contributes to de-exceptionalizing them and their contexts, providing ample opportunities for cultural critique. Cuba will not come closer by executive presidential decision and "educational tourism" alone. Neither will we be able to learn from a work such as *Las comidas profundas* if we pin it down to the Special Period, as if those specific coordinates in time and space could not inform discussions of Northern consumerism and abundance. Censorship may not be as salient a factor in liberal democracies, but differentials in patronage and in marketability, across old and new media, have similar effects. The regime sees Cuba as center, host, and present. Ponte does too but, as we have seen, to multiply rather than to appease contradiction.

World literature could be less Don Quixote—pure soul and flights of fancy—and pay heed as well, dialectically, to Sancho's grounding, growling belly. An empty table is a fitting image for literature at large, let alone for Cuban or Hispanic writing. Precarious opulence and opulent precariousness, the novel stumbles from shelter to banquet and back.

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