

Mining literature in Bolivia: documenting the hyperobject

Research Seminar “Starbucks to Bolaño: A Graduate Student Showcase” March 28, 2018.
Juan Felipe Hernandez

0- The hyperobject

Consider becoming enveloped by particles of mineral all around your body. You’re a miner and dust has landed on your skin. It also found its way into your lungs via nose, eyes, mouth. This is a shocking image, but beyond its repulsiveness it raises several questions about the nature of what we call mining. This is exactly one of the first experiences described in mining texts in general, and in particular the image that marks and welcomes the protagonist of the first twentieth-century mining novel, Martín, from *En las tierras de Potosí* to the world of the mine. When Martín finds himself enveloped by dust on his arrival to the Llallagua mines, his friend Emilio promptly interjects: “Este es el país del polvo. Nadie se libra de él. El polvo es el rey. Es como un símbolo. La misma industria se reduce a hacer polvo. (...) Aquí el estaño está en todas partes: en el seno de la tierra y en su superficie, en la arena, en las piedras, en el agua... — ¿Y en el aire?— añadió Martín con buen humor. —También, y, por ende, en la ropa de las personas, en su piel, en sus pulmones, en su estómago. . . — ¿Y en su cerebro? —En su cerebro sobre todo.” The industry of mining has effectively reached inside the body and in fact the bodies of thousands more who earn a living working the rich tin veins of Bolivia. This penetration is not restricted to the private organism; it also operates at a macro level, turning the entire nation, symbolically and to a degree factually, into a factory of dust. Mining has effectively intruded all spaces: bodies as well as constructs.

Here, I argue that mining is an object that goes beyond all calculation and which is for the most part still unaccounted for. I say beyond calculation and unaccounted for because the impact of mineral extraction (biological and social) on ecosystems and human bodies is still unfolding as we speak and in many cases these effects are not yet fully understood by modern science or mining experts. This leads to thinking about mining as a type of object that defies the boundaries of our traditional thought. Thus, I conceive of mining as a hyperobject. Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* (2013), explores the commonality of entities marked by vast spatial and temporal dimensions. Morton defines hyperobjects as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans,"¹ such as global warming, black holes, radioactive contamination. They seem to challenge familiar scales of time and space, as well as our relation to one another, and to non-humans. In other words, "Hyperobjects, are vast objects. You can't pick them up as easily as an orange. They exceed human apprehension, but we constantly notice their local manifestations. They challenge our assumptions of human mastery over things; we can philosophize more simply, it seems, about the existence of ordinary things like oranges, but hyperobjects are scary game-changers, and they have a touch of the sublime."²

The passage cited above opens up a set of questions that will guide the discussion of this **chapter** but also beyond these texts to elaborate on mining, the body and the hyperobject in general. The most immediate one concerns the threshold of categories such as object/subject, internal/external when conceptualizing miner and mineral in such circumstances. For instance: Is the experience of the Bolivian miner so liminal that one can argue that worker and commodity

¹ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 1.

² Stephen Muecke, "Global Warming and Other Hyperobjects." <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/hyperobjects/>

become one, or perhaps from a different angle, become neither? If so, how did we obtain such scenario? After all, miner and mineral form the most basic components of a complex and productive assemblage where any attempt at extrapolation becomes at best futile. And in terms of representation, how does the creole literary and rhetorical discourse respond to this? Is there a precedent or a parallel case in the Latin American corpus at all?

1-El oro negro

Writers are always at the point of intersection of a myriad of affects. The mining writer, that is the author whose main concern is exploring mining in all its forms, is always crossed by particles emitted by the hyperobject mining which translate into modulation in affects and becomings. *El oro negro* tells the story of Antonio Saldaña, a common miner from the Bolivian highlands whose life seems almost determined by the boom and bust cycle of tin demand and its international price during the late 1910's. The period is not accidental but responds to the historical demand for mineral commodities during the European arms race and leading up to the Great War. Interspersed with moralist reformism and calls for better governance and temperance laws, the novella reads more as a vehicle to push for a national social reform than a serious literary work on the richness of the mining collective consciousness.

El oro negro follows the life stories of a few miners struggling to find stable work in Oruro, but if we direct our attention beyond these life stories it seems that the only real protagonist is the hyperobject mining and the rest of actors, mere reflections. Céspedes begins by discussing how Oruro grew and declined several times always subordinated to the arriving or departure of personnel associated in one way or another with the hyperobject mining. “Un entusiasmo febril se

había apoderado de los habitantes de Oruro.”³ The opening line situates the life of Antonio our protagonist under determinant macroeconomic forces. In other words, there is no colonial history, or republican past in the Oruro presented by Céspedes, but only a town that grows and declines according to the international demand for tin and a score of characters who wander around the province responding to and forming in some measure the hyperobject mining.

The text shows the unfolding of an almost invisible event that transcends the human scales through which we are accustomed to experience the world. Céspedes narrates the story of Antonio and his companions as they move from town to town following the ups and downs of the international prices of different minerals. Antonio, Nicolás and Dorotea navigate the cartography of mineral exploitation with their own bodies even if they do not seem aware or particularly preoccupied about it. This acceleration of inhabiting/uninhabiting not only becomes relevant for Bolivian history vis-a-vis its early integration to the global economy but helps to locate the preconditions for understanding in a different, unconventional way the dynamics of capital, extraction and human becoming.

The global forces of production and consumption that shape life, human and non-human alike, shouldn't be overlooked, or analyzed separately without formulating the causal connections that allow for interpreting the globalization of commodities, territorializations and desire. Hence, the units that make up narratives like *El oro negro* – the population and sudden depopulation of Oruro, the drawing and redrawing of large areas by peasant and miner displacements, the penetration of toxic waste into the water system, among others - can be thought of as units that mark the temporality and rhythm of the hyperobject of mining. Each hyperobject displays signs that mark its development. For instance, radiation -now globally spread-, global warming, and in

³ “A feverish enthusiasm had seized the inhabitants of Oruro...” Julián Céspedes, *El oro negro* (La Paz: La prensa de José Calderón, 1921), 1.

this case *global mining* all have different stages that defy the basic scales to which thought is used to operate: regardless of any plan to contain it, radiation will be with us for the next thousands of years, the same with global warming. The effects of global mining will also affect human and non-human life drastically, in ways that are still difficult to predict: water scarcity, species extinction, exposure to endocrine disruptors such as mercury (in Huancavelica, Peru since colonial times) and other pollutants, intensification of resource conflict, among many, confront us with an indeterminate chain structured as a multiplicity of events hinged on others which are in their own way unforeseeable. If one takes another step back to observe the dynamics of social being at a larger scale, the ruination of hamlets and towns can be thought of as the materialization of this cycle at a collective scale. These displacements are embodied by the miner and his family as their bodies drew invisible cartographies in the Andean altiplano.

2-Los eternos vagabundos

In 1939, author Roberto Leitón publishes *Los eternos vagabundos* a novel organized as an anti-story that sometimes reads more like a cross-section of the lives of a few miners where nothing special really seems to take place. If in earlier novels we discovered entirely delineated characters and followed them through their journeys (Martín from *En las tierras de Potosi* and Antonio and Dorotea from *El oro negro*), in *Los eternos vagabundos* the cast is small and partially nameless: there are a few miners, such as Lucachu, the young and rebel laborer; there is also Don Marcelo, a despot mestizo manager who is the object of contempt by every miner in the story; there are a few tragic events, and there's deceit and greed but in all nothing really changes after we turn the last page.

What strikes the reader most about this work is that *Los eternos vagabundos* is that it constitutes an attempt to locate the hidden ghosts, or the phasing of the hyperobject mining. That

is, the narrative allows us to see how a larger object such as the hyperobject mining appears reflected in different unexpected ways across a heterogeneity of bodies, landscapes, and language – in “events” or “phenomena.” “Phasing -in Morton’s words- is an *indexical sign* of an object that is massively distributed in a phase space that is higher dimensionally than the equipment (our ears, the top of my head, a weather vane) used to detect it.”⁴ We hear about human life becoming mineral and discover parts of this hyperobject mining when Leitón discovers workers’ faces hidden somewhere under layers of pulverized mineral: “Desencajados, maquillados de polvo metálico, envueltos en su desgracia suprema, como seres entenebrecidos, salen los mineros.”⁵ The mining hyperobject also appears in the body in many forms. In another passage one can perceive it in the description of the hunger of young mothers who struggle to lactate and feed their children: “Flotan en contorno de ellos misteriosas sombras, caras flácidas. Son niños harapientos y enfermos, embarrados con la miseria paternal. Madres raquílicas, sin lactancia para los infantes alimentados con sémola, *chuño*, *ckispita* [sic] y oca ~~*ekahui*~~ [sic].”⁶ Leitón lets the reader into a world where the human is removed of a privileged location in the narrative and made to appear at times as one more body working inside this hyperobject: when describing the nature of their subterranean work and realizing the vast disproportion of scales: “Millares de granos son los hombres que viven bajo la enorme presión de las montañas.”⁷ Or when his characters (Leitón’s) meditate on their poverty and impossibility of improving their lot, on their feeling of becoming smaller and insignificant with every passing day: “Nosotros no tenemos nada. Hemos nacido en este campamento minero. No tenemos familia, menos aún, arraigo a la vida boliviana. Nadie nos conoce. Somos partículas de

⁴ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 77. Emphasis in the original.

⁵ Leitón, *Los eternos vagabundos*, 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

arena en medio de estas montañas sucias que nos roen el alma.”⁸ In his deterritorialization of space, of representation, of literature, Leitón not only reveals a glimpse into a previously hidden aspect of mining but also invites us to think, narrate, and create differently.

Since hyperobjects are such vast temporal and spatial entities (again, global warming, radiation, black holes), they defy traditional ways of thinking about things and processes, and call to conceptualize and address them in a wholly new way. It is through the parts revealed to us -in a metonymic fashion- that one can truly comprehend the transdimensional quality of the hyperobject: “We can only see pieces of the hyperobject at a time.”⁹ So, an exceptionally strong hurricane or an uncommon drought are parts of the -otherwise almost invisible- hyperobject global warming. For me, the multiple and heterogeneous causes and effects of mining constitute the indexical signs of the hyperobject mineral extraction. In this study, I focused my attention on the mineral extraction that takes place during a specific historical period and geographical region of the world. Thus, my examples come from a specific corpus of literature and require a determinate methodological approach. The hyperobject mining can be observed at least indexically in several instances offered by Bolivian mining literature: faces covered in mineral, mothers who can’t breastfeed, the overall sensation of human life becoming smaller “partículas de arena,” of life becoming mineral should prompt us to rethink the activity of extraction as it is represented in the Spanish American tradition.

After reading these early twentieth-century Bolivian narratives, mineral extraction begins to appear less as a part of a larger primary sector of the economy, but as something that goes beyond the axe and pick business. Its location seems to be highly indeterminate as mineral is

⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁹ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 70.

discovered literally everywhere. Mining seems to be located not only at the mining camp, but at a non-location, at a vast unquantifiable space that encompasses the mineral vein as well as the deepest of the private bodies of miners. Since the early days of Potosí, mercury (*azogue*) brought from Peru entered the local waterbeds, and was breathed by all those who live close to a mine, not only the laborer.

3-Conclusion

The idea of the hyperobject allows us to reevaluate the traditional thinking on mining as we conventionally conceive it in compartmentalized ways: an economic activity, or a source of political capital, or a specific and differentiated culture. For instance, in *El oro negro*, the protagonists as well as the urban center where they live seem to partially be more the result of the temporality of a hyperobject called mineral extraction than the product of historical national development as historians or novelists of the time would argue.

Early mining literature from Bolivia is characterized for its understanding of mining as an activity endowed with multiple facets for the worker, the community, but also in terms of larger spatial and temporal scale. The literature of this period is *not* yet concerned with the formation of worker's unions, or transnational alliances that occurred between Bolivian and Chilean miners, or much less the construction of a national revolution. Those concerns will arrive later. For now, the early cycle that begins with *En las tierras de Potosí* in 1911 is much more interested in other aspects of this activity. These narrators seem to be concerned with exploring the corners of miner's subjectivity, language, and the mysterious properties of the land.

In fact, one of the purposes of this discussion is to rescue the quality of attention that early writers invested in thinking about mining from these varied perspectives. This is why I use the object-oriented-ontology concept of hyperobjects to discuss the large-scale processes that

constitute mining in Andean America. This decision is made in part by the notion's privileged point of view that allows me to conduct literary analysis while examining a deeper layer of mining as an entity that goes beyond previous definitions. I believe viewing mining from this perspective facilitates a dialectic investigation focusing on the macro scales (deep time, Anthropocene, slow violence)¹⁰ and their impact on human and nonhuman life, while at the same time, conceptualizing the act of mineral extraction beyond a conventional economy-base model or a folklorist-anthropological perspective.

4-Coda

What is then the relation between art and living in the time of the Anthropocene in the apogee of the hyperobject global warming. This literature is valuable because it includes in it and is responsive for the pressures of the hyperobject mining and the unfolding of slow violence. In addition, it enables us to see and tell stories with the possibility to alter beliefs, habits, and behaviors. Mining literature constitutes perhaps the only subcategory within the Latin American corpus that is somewhat aware of these aspects –although it must be said unevenly and partially. Even though it lacks the lexicon or conceptual scaffolding to name and extrapolate things in the language of modern philosophy (i.e., Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontologies, etc.) mining literature is exceptional for allowing the nonhuman enter the space of art.

¹⁰ The name *Anthropocene* is a combination of *anthropo-* from *anthropos* (Ancient Greek: ἄνθρωπος) meaning "human" and *-cene* from *kainos* (Ancient Greek: καινός) meaning "new" or "recent." The Anthropocene Epoch is an unofficial interval of geologic time, characterized as the time in which the collective activities of human beings (*Homo sapiens*) began to substantially alter Earth's surface, atmosphere, oceans, and systems of nutrient cycling. John P. Rafferty, "Anthropocene Epoch" Encyclopædia Britannica. August 31, 2016. Accessed on February 19, 2018. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/science/Anthropocene-Epoch>.

