Chapter One
Pleasure Dolls and Inorganic Intimacy

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ABSTRACT
This chapter, which investigates one novel’s representations of intimate exchanges between human protagonists and their non-human partners, focuses on how anthropocentric understandings of gender and sexuality can be expanded through a focus on the material nature of those exchanges. As I analyze Ariel Magnus’ Muñecas (2008) with a new materialist approach, I will call attention to the ways that this novel forefronts intimacy’s materiality, specifically the way it operates both culturally and environmentally. The central aim of this chapter will be to explore how thinking about and through the materiality of these dolls might put pressure on the very idea of sexuality - a human-centric quality - by focusing on the abilities of these non-human actants to influence and even satisfy sexual desires. I will argue that such intimate engagements lead to a destabilization of what counts as human intimacy and reveal an important aspect of posthuman intimacy: things can be our partners, too.
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“The permanent search for knowledge of the intimate other, and the inevitable comic and tragic mistakes in that quest, commands my respect, whether the other is animal or human, or indeed, inanimate” (Haraway 2003: 36).

Introduction

Gynoids, robotic effigies, marital aids, fornicatory dolls, artificial partners, and fembots - these are just some of the names in circulation today for the posthuman figure that this chapter explores: the “sex doll.”¹ The dolls featured in Ariel Magnus’ novel, Muñecas, are also called androids, perhaps to signal their more technologically advanced robotic features. These androides, as one of the characters calls them, represent some of the latest iterations of sex doll development, a trajectory that has a long history. The modern sex doll began with the dama de viaje or dame de voyage, a rag doll with a vaginal opening that seventeenth-century Spanish and French sailors would take on long voyages. Cloth remained the most common base material for these dolls for the better part of three centuries. Doll technology would later take a great leap forward after the “discovery” of rubber around 1745 by European colonists exploring South America. In 1839, Charles Goodyear would learn how to vulcanize raw rubber, making it inflatable. Latex rubber was invented in 1928, and vinyl soon after (Tully). Vinyl sex dolls became a marketable product in the second half of the 20th Century, though these blow-up dolls were typically purchased as gag gifts at the time.

Magnus’ choice to set Muñecas in Germany is particularly appropriate for an exploration of sex dolls, as Germany was the first country to make synthetic rubber and can be credited with playing a prominent role in the making it more cost effective. What’s more, the world’s first sex shop opened there in 1962, though it is likely that sex dolls were in circulation in Germany long before that² (Ferguson 15). In fact, historians of World War II once believed they had unearthed a

¹ While I recognize that these denominations may present subtle differentiations from the more generic term, “sex doll,” for the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to all such figures simply as “sex dolls” or “dolls.”
program sanctioned by Adolf Hitler called the "Borghild Project," which ordered the production and distribution of sex dolls for German troops.\(^3\) It was thought that these dolls might dissuade German soldiers from visiting French whores, who were believed at the time to pose the greatest threat to German troops: syphilis. Little to no evidence has surfaced to support the existence of the Borghild Project, however, and today it is widely seen as a hoax.\(^4\) Still, its presence in the cultural imaginary is notable nonetheless because it points to a circulation of ideas surrounding the sex doll as both sterile and willing.

Since the 1970s, sex dolls around the world have primarily been made from three kinds of materials: vinyl, latex, and silicone, with the price going up in ascending order. While some people may own or collect these dolls for aesthetic reasons, others buy them with the intent to use them. Such users are practitioners of technosexuality, an orientation that pushes the boundaries of sexuality away from the biological and towards the mechanical. Anthony Ferguson, a sex doll historian, explains that there are two basic types of technosexuals with doll fantasies: one that engages a doll “for sex, companionship, or both,” and another that engages a human partner who role-plays as if he or she were a doll (66-67). The expression of these two types of technosexuality, known as “built” and “transformation,” respectively, are closely linked in Muñecas, because the novel's practitioners seem to alternate between them. This slippage is one of the key ways that the novel produces an erotic companionship between human and non-human beings.

While androids (the most technologically advanced dolls) may have only appeared in the last few decades, the desire for artificial partners is likely as old as their human counterparts. One need only recall the statuophilia of Ovid’s Pygmalion to trace this trope at least as far back as the ancient

\(^3\) See Norbert Lenz’s “The Borghild Project: A Discreet Matter of the III Reich” for the alleged discovery of this initiative.

\(^4\) Sarah Valverde writes about this episode in her thesis, “The Modern Sex Doll Owner: A Descriptive Analysis.”
Greeks, a tradition that Magnus’ epigraph alludes to in Muñecas. The epigraph, which reads, “Y oprime con su propia boca / una boca que por fin ya no es de ficción,” (And he presses with his own mouth / a mouth that at last is not of fiction) is a reference to book ten of Ovid’s Metamorphosis and the story of Pygmalion. Pygmalion fashions his own perfect woman out of stone after having been repulsed by witnessing women prostituting themselves. He prays to the gods for a wife like his ivory woman, and they turn his statue into flesh that will eventually bear him a child.

In the second millennium, we might think about works such as E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Der Sandmann about a man who falls in love with a life-sized doll. Androids have particularly been common in the contemporary cultural imaginary. The Stepford Wives, Blade Runner, and Ex Machina all come easily to mind. And yet, despite their common appearance in literature and later in film, until quite recently the sex doll has remained at best a college prank and at worst an anti-human taboo.5

This holds true as well for Latin American literature from the twentieth century, where the sex doll has a robust history as an either demonic or laughable literary figure. Dolls make an early appearance in Felisberto Hernández’s “Las hortensias” (1949), in which one character develops a strong erotic attraction to a doll and ends up going mad after having her made more and more lifelike. Then there’s “Pygmalión” by Augusto Monterroso (1969), whose protagonist creates several statues that come to life and can talk. These statues believe they are superior to their creator, so he punishes them by spanking them until they fall over and shatter. Julio Cortázar also has a pair of stories featuring artificial partners, including “El ídolo de las cícladas” (1964) in which a character caresses a statue that sets the stage for his own death and “62/Módulo para armar” (1968) in which a doll is stuffed with an (undisclosed) object that sends at least one character running. In both, the doll is used as a way both to express love and subvert it. Several years later, Rosario Ferré would publish “La muñeca menor” (1976), which tells a story of medical corruption and a means to

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5 Two exceptions include Craig Gillespie’s Lars and the Real Girl (2007) and Spike Jonze’s Her (2013).
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revenge via a life-sized doll filled with angry chágaras (a fictionalized, more sinister version of crayfish, according to Ferré). As one can see, all of these dolls negatively affect their owners, and this is true for the vast majority of literary production in the twentieth century.

The sex doll appears in these works as an enigma, often dangerous and immoral. Perhaps only in Rubem Fonseca’s humorous “A matéria do sonho” (1969) - where a sex doll named Gretchen helps a man transition from copulating with animals to being intimate with a woman - do we find a somewhat positive (if not satirical) portrayal of a sex doll in Latin American literature from the past century. Still, all of these portrayals of artificial partners are sparse on details and most make only passing references (if any) to the dolls' sexual functionality. By contrast, I argue that what we find in Muñecas is an embrace of sex dolls’ within the narrative as well as a detailed description of how they are made, and how they are meant to function sexually. In general, sex-positivity means a “live and let live” perspective about sexuality that argues that agency over one’s own sexual expression is a fundamental right when consent, pleasure, and the well being of participating adults is present. The effect of this progressive depiction in Muñecas, I argue, is that this novel allows us - for the first time in Latin American literature - to explore the aesthetics of sex dolls and learn of their intimate particularities.

Magnus first published Muñecas in 2008. It tells the story of a lonely man who finds intimate company in unexpected ways. The short novel takes place in present Heidelberg, Germany, where a solitary immigrant (we don’t know from where) has been living for a decade. He currently works as a librarian and avoids socializing with adept skill. One winter day, a patron, Selin, catches him off guard by inviting him to her birthday party later that evening, and he suddenly finds himself buying presents and making the bus trip to her rented home outside of the city. He’s the first guest to arrive, and practically the last. The only other guests are a boorish landlord and a buxom woman who stays only long enough to have a drink of whisky before hastily abandoning the sad party. The
librarian eats and drinks ravenously to try to make up for the over-abundance, clearly meant for a much larger gathering. The action of the first part of the book, narrated in first person by the librarian, concludes with the librarian curled up around Selin’s toilet as he contemplates escape through the bathroom’s sunroof. The second half of the book is narrated in first person by Selin, who urgently wants to leave the scene of her failed party. She wakes the librarian and offers to give him a ride home. When they finally make it to the librarian’s basement apartment, he opens the door to reveal a room full of sex dolls. Drunk and vulnerable, Selin wavers between disgust and desire. The book closes with the librarian exiting his apartment, leaving Selin in bed with one of the dolls.

The dolls in this novel are deemed “top of the line,” and the librarian admits that his newest and most advanced doll, Lais, cost all of his savings.6 With today’s advances in doll technology, one can expect dolls made from silicone with very lifelike features, including real pubic hair and ultra-flexible joints. They weigh close to what an actual woman might weigh, and a PVC or metal skeleton fortified by Kevlar reinforces them so that they can resist pressure. Their skin-like periphery, according to Ferguson, ”is reported to feel exactly like real human flesh, and goes by a range of copyrighted brand names - CyberSkin, UltraSkin, and EroSkin, to name a few” (34). In the novel the librarian explains to a fascinated Selin how his contemporary sex dolls differ from the plastic gag gifts of the past century:

Yo ya no las llamaría muñecas sino androides. […] Los androides no tienen ya mucho en común con las primeras muñecas de plástico, esas que usted debe haber visto o de las que habrá escuchado hablar. […] La silicona en lugar del plástico es sólo una de las revoluciones que vivió la muñecología a fines del siglo pasado.

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6 For reference, midrange sex dolls cost about $300, while the latest dolls with the most advanced cyber technology sell for about $8000 and up (Ferguson).
Incluso el pelo natural, las uñas laqueadas, las pestañas o las caderas móviles han dejado hace tiempo de ser una novedad. (88)

I would no longer call them dolls but androids. [...] Androids no longer have much in common with those first plastic dolls, those that you must have seen or about which you will have heard. [...] Silicone in the place of plastic is only one of the revolutions that dollogy went through at the end of the last century. Natural hair, painted nails, eyelashes and mobile hips – all have stopped being novel for some time now.

This long and yet incomplete list of available features points to aspects of an idealized feminine form, though some go well beyond what an all-organic woman might offer. What we should gather from the “specs” of doll design is that sex dolls are superhuman forms that push and at times supersede human norms of femininity, sex appeal, and companionship.

In fact, the librarian has chosen silicone companions as a way to eschew “real” or “alive” ones, but in this chapter I argue that his dolls are not surrogates for human lovers. Instead of enacting an outright rejection of human sexual partners, Magnus’ novel portrays a relationship where organic and inorganic forms complement (and indulge?) each other. This is where the novel is pushing Latin American literature toward the edges of technosexuality in today’s world, which up until now has largely outlined the sex doll as merely a prosthetic for achieving solitary pleasure. Posthuman intimacy amounts to more than the sex dolls’ intimate parts, because the magic happens in the exchange of the organic with the inorganic. It is flesh-on-flesh and hand-in-hand, where a synthetic heartbeat and curious gaze combine to re-work our understandings of “human” pleasures and desires.

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7 According to Ferguson, "Additional options include vibrating and pulsing vaginas, nodule mouths, sucking mouths, movable arms, soft hands, realistic hair, painted nails, body scent, blinking eyes, rotating tongue, soft lips, realistic erect nipples, vibrating love grip hands, realistic feet, squirting breasts, squirting vaginas, and pierced vaginas" (37).
When it comes to intimacy between human protagonists and humanoid dolls, thinking about and through the material requires a reconsideration of the abilities of non-human beings to participate in intimate acts. Before beginning my literary analysis, I would like to provide a brief introduction to new materialist feminism, a theoretical approach that shapes my critique in this chapter. By and large, new materialist scholars have emerged from the field of science and technology studies, though some, like Vicky Kirby, have pointed to the arts, and to literature in particular, as an especially robust field in which to understand the vibrancy of matter. I will provide a bit of background on what these feminists have contributed to the study of materiality in general, followed by a more in-depth explanation of key terms and ideas that should facilitate comprehension of my later literary arguments.

Post-structuralist feminists have described femininity as a social construction not determined by any biological or material reality. The “rules” of the gender game have been set by cultural and not natural standards, according to this line of thought. In Bodies that Matter (1993), Judith Butler highlights the discursiveness behind our understanding of something even so “biological” as the male and female sex taxonomy. She explains that a binary division of sex differences is not well supported by science, as feminist biologists have pointed out with a range of studies on intersex bodies present in nature. Along with Gayatri Spivak, Butler argues that there is no unmediated way to access the body, so how we know our own “nature” is always already the materialization of a thought construction. This is not to say that there is no material body outside of discourse, but Butler maintains that our own recourse to knowing it is through discursive possibilities.

As Foucault would remind us, such epistemologies presuppose and constitute power relations. Focusing on the discursiveness of the body and the gender system associated with

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8 See, for example, Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990).
particular bodies has remained a way for feminists since the 1970s to challenge societal norms that privilege male-designated bodies and their presumed masculine traits. The turn away from the matter of female-designated bodies - their flesh - is an attempt to escape the limitations assigned to such flesh, which, as Simone de Beauvoir describes in *The Second Sex* (1949), are similar to those of an inert, passive doll (293). I would argue, however, this rejection of the doll and its alleged inertness overly diminishes the active materiality that dolls present. The emphasis on language and sociality - two great epistemological forces of human nature –that has been used to discredit the naturalness or biological basis of sex taxonomies has also been employed by humanists more generally to justify the paramount rank of humans atop all other kinds of matter. That is, since humankind has recourse to discourse, it deserves a place at the top of nature’s hierarchy.

New materialist feminists, however, have changed the debate in two major ways. The first is to shift the focus away from epistemologies of the material world towards ontologies of the material world. The second, which is related to the first, is to redeem the agency and vibrancy of matter. By making both of these maneuvers, new materialist feminists seek to further the feminist cause to establish and advocate for equality of women by resuscitating the importance of materiality in gender and sexuality studies. This is a posthuman turn away from language and towards a non-human or more-than-human nature.

**An Ontology of Sexy Matter**

New materialist scholars Elizabeth Grosz and Claire Colebrook argue that femininity may be discursively produced, but it also has a material basis. Colebrook criticizes Butler for focusing too exclusively on discourse at the expense of the material, saying Butler "conflates the being of a thing with the mode in which it is known” (2000: 78). Grosz, Colebrook, and others have therefore proposed more ontological approaches to matter that honor the bodies that give genders their form, function, and allure. One quick note on the terminology of matter versus materiality – for this
dissertation, I follow Katherine Hayles’ distinction: "Materiality […] is an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies. […] I like to think of materiality as the constructions of matter that matter for human meaning” (2005: 13). Thus, “matter” will be used to refer to a physical or tangible artifact while “materiality” will signal the quality of being a physical artifact. As it concerns gender and sexuality studies, we can understand an ontology of matter to mean the way by which gender relations and sexual desires are continually produced and reproduced on atomic, molecular, and macro levels by assemblages that include both human and non-human actants.

Bruno Latour writes that the ontology proposed by new materialists is neither a hybridization of nature and culture nor a purification that would separate a human ontological zone from a nonhuman ontological zone (10). Instead, we can think of matter as coming into being through assemblages of many actants, both human and not, both organic and not, that share a distributive power as if in a federation. Jane Bennett builds on Latour’s work and adds that in these assemblages, "the locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group” (xvii). Matter is not solid or stable, and it constantly undergoes metamorphosis. Matter’s constant flux and its relationality with all other matter give it a kind of vibrancy, according to Bennett. By focusing more on the ontology of matter rather than how we can come to know matter (in our limited human capacities), we de-center the human in this matrix and focus on relationality, much as recent eco-critical movements have done.10 This chapter is concerned with the erotic potentials of that relationality.

Humanists tend to criticize this ontology, which marks no clear difference between (human) subject and (other) object. They fear it could lead to the instrumentalization of humans, as Bennett explains:

Yes, such critics continue, objects possess a certain power of action (as when bacteria or pharmaceuticals enact hostile or symbiotic projects inside the human body), and yes, some subject-on-subject objectifications are permissible (as when persons consent to use and be used as a means to sexual pleasure), but the ontological divide between persons and things must remain lest one have no moral grounds for privileging man over germ or for condemning pernicious forms of human-on-human instrumentalization (as when powerful humans exploit illegal, poor, young, or otherwise weaker humans). (Emphasis in original, 12)

For our purposes, we might add the concern that getting rid of the ontological divide between human women and silicone dolls might encourage chauvinist beliefs and practices that are already in circulation. My arguments in this chapter will work against precisely this concern by focusing closely on how human-doll exchanges in Muñecas disrupt anthropocentric understandings of intimacy to achieve a space where subject and object repeatedly switch roles in a network of cellular and silicone arousal.

I agree with Bennett and others who point out the folly of human exceptionalism, even and especially when human gender and sexual equality are on the line. While it is true that posing humans as the subjects of non-human nature can alleviate human pain and suffering in some cases, those successes are often gained at a cost to non-human nature in ways that are at times antithetical to long-term human interests. The deforestation in Amazonia to make room for low-cost housing for Brazil’s urban poor serves as one example among many in Latin America. Besides, as Bennett points out, attempts to privilege humanity above all else do not exactly have a great historical track
record, as genocides, global warming, and ongoing sexism might attest. What Bennett and other new materialists propose is to "to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed" so that we might look for alternative approaches to achieving success for the greater assemblages in which humans find ourselves (Bennett 12).

Bennett is interested in exploring the agentic capacities of matter, where agency is understood to be distributed across “a confederation of human and nonhuman elements” (2010: 21). This capaciousness is not one that humans recognize in or bestow upon matter; rather, things command attention in their own right, “as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects” (4). It is not clear in Bennett’s work to what extent agency is equally distributed throughout the confederation that she describes, but others like Karen Barad understand agency as part of a relational ontology that makes such a question moot. Barad writes,

[Agency] is not something that someone or something has to varying degrees, since I am trying to displace the very notion of independently existing individuals. […] Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements. (54 quoted in Dolphijn and Turin)\(^\text{11}\)

Barad’s is a useful definition of the relational or distributive aspect of the agency of things because it helps us understand that the sexual tension in Magnus’ novel results from a heterogeneous assemblage of intimate relating across different kinds of things. Understood within the frameworks established by Bennett and Barad, \textit{Muñecas} locates sexual agency not in the human body (or bodies) but in a much more diverse orgy of things. Crucially, I make the case that the novel shows how

\(^{11}\) Calling the world “a knot in motion,” Donna Haraway also sidesteps the issue of how agency is distributed by arguing that “beings do not preexist their relating” and, therefore, no one agency preexists or mutes another (2003: 6).
human sexual desires come into being through and are sometimes satisfied by these heterogeneous assemblages.

As I explained in the introduction to the dissertation, sexual desire transcends the porous boundaries of the human and can respond to the material thingness of many objects, both organic and inorganic. Because the epistemologies of gender and sexuality are so anthropocentric, arguments about material desire must look beyond those epistemologies and employ a more capacious relationality, one that is not limited to human relations. Simply put, in the case of Magnus’ librarian, he derives pleasure from using his sex dolls because of the very fact that they are ultimately not humans.

While there are various notable similarities between a feminine doll body and the idealized female human body, the androides in Muñecas emerge as something more than an imperfect mimetic version of a “real” human. In fact, the allure of silicone in the novel (including repeated references to a dildo) is that it offers something different than, or additional to, what one might experience with another human partner. Without trying to produce a comprehensive list, sex dolls embody or exhibit a number of attributes that differentiate them from the human form: they can be personalized for particular people or adapted for various uses; they have a relatively inexhaustible endurance (assuming the silicone holds up); and they never create with language. In fact, this last characteristic is perhaps one of the most salient for the close readings I will do later on in this chapter, because Magnus breathes life into Lais (the doll) without resorting to writing in a personality or dialogue for her. Instead, he narrows the divide between the supposedly inert dolls and their human counterparts by turning mimesis on its head. Between the doll and the woman lying beside her, it is not clear who is imitating whom.

Muñecas raises the status of our own materiality as it challenges us to include silicone dolls in our most intimate moments, at once making the material world sexy and “sex” more material. The
novel reveals a kinship in which humans are revealed to be just one of many vibrant things in an assemblage of desire and companionship. Allow me to conduct a process of leveling as I celebrate the matter, or thing-ness, of not just the sex dolls but also of those who keep them company. In doing so, I hope to situate these affective bodies (to use Spinoza’s term) in a posthuman network of shared rather than instrumentalized intimacy.

**The Agency of Matter (How Matter Empowers Us and Turns Us On)**

Lest we be tempted towards human-aggrandizement, we should not ignore the materiality – the *thingness* – of the very humans who use silicone to enhance their intimate lives. Bruno Latour reminds us, “We live in communities whose social bond comes from objects fabricated in laboratories” (21). Laboratories (and by extension the factories that serve to mass produce the advances discovered in those laboratories) capitalize on and simultaneously produce ontologically dependent networks of humans and nonhumans. Framed in terms of a feminist debate that worries about the historical association between women and materiality, we can now see that the association is quite apt, not because of the traditional misogyny that (literally) objectifies femininity, but because the boundary between humans and *all* nature is porous and material, and because being a part of the assemblage of things is fundamentally a human trait, not only a feminine one.

For that very reason, we must refrain from thinking about the association of the feminine with the material world as always a great problem. As I mentioned, prior to materialist feminists such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, and Claire Colebrook, feminist theory tended to diminish the significance of materiality. This is as true or more so for feminist currents in Latin America, who, for a time, make it their mission to segregate the association between women and a presumably “backwards” or “primitive” nature. As Colebrook writes,

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12 For example, Marta Sierra’s *Gendered Spaces In Argentine Women’s Literature* (2012) historicizes the struggle to redefine women’s place in the public culture.
“When feminists criticized or rejected the notion of women as mired in material embodiment, they did so because matter was deemed too devoid of dynamism” (64). Alternatively, neo-materialist feminists actually privilege the material and recuperate its dynamic qualities. According to Alaimo, “The material turn in feminist theory casts matter as, variously, material-sembiotic, inter-corporeal, performative, agential, even literate” (244). Alaimo explains that neither nature nor humans (if we can even distinguish them in this way) are really autonomous because they share an interdependence and an interrelatedness that she calls “more-than-human-nature” (238). My approach to material desire in this chapter recognizes that intimacy takes place in this broader realm of more-than-human-nature.

Even if convinced that women, like men, are best situated in this greater assemblage, some feminists still might regard sex dolls as accessory to masculinist sexual practices that objectify women. By selling flesh – though inorganic – the argument goes that these products serve to reaffirm a patriarchal system that posits the feminine as belonging to masculine consumers’ domain. Seen this way, a sex doll, in particular, represents the quintessentially silenced and submissive woman who remains ready to be used as a receptacle for masculine pleasure. In fact, we can find this view temporarily reflected in Muñecas, when Selin, who upon first seeing the librarian’s dolls, states, “Esta es de lo más desagradable que vi en mi vida” (This is up there with the most unpleasant things I’ve seen in my life) (85). I argue, however, that because Selin’s views shift as she spends more time with the dolls, Magnus’ novel ultimately celebrates the figure of the feminine body in its most material presentation. I contend, along with Magnus’ characters, that there is space for sex dolls within a “sex-positive,” feminist approach to intimate practices. Without dismissing the concerns I have mentioned above, which point to the dangers of humanizing things, I would like to open up a discussion of the material nature of sex dolls (and other inorganic sexual aids) and their role in both satisfying and fomenting posthuman sexual desires in the novel. Magnus entreats us to recognize the “thingness” in all of us.
It is the network of different entities that makes the final result of sex-positivity possible, not just the objects or people by themselves. This network potentiates many possible outcomes, including those that would empower women and their silicone look-alikes to be subject to gendered and sexualized encounters. In the novel I analyze here, there is a strong argument to be made that sex dolls in the home of the protagonist do not objectify women, precisely because of the way the dolls and the characters interact. This is a sex-positive work that presents a scenario in which the network of different entities does not lead towards chauvinist, obvious ends. The sex dolls in this book have a particular agency with and over their human counterparts, and the protagonists show the dolls an unusual amount of interest and even respect. These observations lead me to argue that, within the framework of this novel, we are presented with a counterexample to the objectification of women. Here, the ultimate commodification of feminine sexual prowess does not objectify its organic counterparts but actually empowers them. In the next two sections, close analysis of the novel supports this position.

**The Matter of Desire**

In this section, I address how the characters specifically relate to the dolls, and what these exchanges say about how desire is materially produced and satisfied. The book resists reading too much into the dolls, and it asks us to consider the dolls for what they are rather than what they might stand for. I explicate how the dolls, as objects or things and not as personified or animate characters, evoke a sex appeal to which both human protagonists are susceptible. I make the case that during this process of excitation, the synthetic objects draw humans closer into the heterogeneous assemblage that is posthuman intimacy.

In a recent talk, Héctor Hoyos has highlighted the importance of the dolls’ material history in *Muñecas*. Hoyos’ reading of what he calls the “latex plot,” which he argues reminds us
of the double erasure of the historical atrocities of Nazism and extractivism, grounds the novel both in Latin America (from where rubber was first extracted) and in Germany (where such extractivism enabled another atrocity). Hoyos’ introduction of the term “transcultural materialism” is useful for understanding how cultural productions and material realities co-exist along a single continuum:

Transcultural materialism is a way of narrating that traverses the human and non-human (be it vegetal, mineral, or animal) order to offer a post-anthropocentric vision of history. It grants objects the agency and importance that they are due without, in doing so, taking importance away from themes that are essentially human, political, and social, such as justice and work. (Yale talk)

Yet, his study of the historical atrocities surrounding the development of silicone might have overdetermined Hoyos’s negative reading of synthetic pleasure and intimacy in the novel. That is, the dehumanizing violence of Nazism and extractivism, for Hoyos, map on to the objectification of Selin and a violent image of sex. I propose instead that Muñecas presents us with a new and enabling form of intimacy, one that is fortunately infused by silicone despite the commodity’s brutal past, not defined by that past. To be fair, Hoyos seems to soften his interpretation towards the end of his talk, saying, “Muñecas speaks to the risks and pleasures of thingification, and it raises the question of a new way for humans to dwell with things.” I am interested in exploring further just what that new way might mean.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Muñecas treats its dolls differently than its literary predecessors from the region. In this novel, the dolls and their users are neither pathologized nor exploited for comic relief. I contend that Magnus’ dolls are not to be taken as metaphorical stand-ins or allegorically constitutive values. Instead, this novel urges us to take sex dolls seriously – as sex dolls.
To show us how not to read his novel, Magnus gives us an example of what it looks like to over-analyze the meaning of objects in a narrative: when Selin tries to interpret a song the librarian sings about an apple tree. From the start, Selin is already reaching for an interpretation, since she cannot understand the language in which the librarian sings. All she has to go on are the tone of the song, the subject matter (the loss of an apple tree), and the librarian’s description of the song’s circumstances in his life. First, she thinks the apple tree must be a stand-in for an absent mother. When told she is wrong, she suggests an even more fanciful reading and guesses that the tree represents “la fruta prohibida,” (the forbidden fruit) – he must be a virgin (109). Though she is correct about his virginal status, her interpretation has strayed far from the content of the song itself, not to mention from that apple tree. In acknowledgment of Magnus’ joke on interpretive technique, as I analyze the presence of the dolls in his novel, I stay close to the material surface of the dolls, because the way the novel presents them resists interpretations about a broader semiotic or metaphorical significance.

The feel and appearance of these dolls are so life-like that the librarian explains on two occasions that they require little imagination, just like he likes it. Defending the presence of the dolls to Selin, the librarian states, “Usted está rodeada de fantasmas, yo estoy rodeado de muñecas. Usted tiene un poco más de imaginación que yo, eso es todo” (You are surrounded by ghosts, I am surrounded by dolls. You have a little more imagination than me, that’s all) (85). Later, when comparing the first generation of plastic dolls with the silicone “androids” he uses, he explains, ”[Los enamorados de la primera generación] son más intelectuales y prefieren darle más espacio a su imaginación. A los otros nos seduce el realismo, que es, como le digo, una cuestión de técnica” ([The lovers of the first generation] are more intellectual and prefer to give more space to the imagination. For others, realism seduces us, which is, as I’ve been saying, a technical question) (88). Crudely put, what you see is what you use. Still, Selin holds out false hope for a greater purpose – that the librarian might make them, or that he collects them for commercial
aspirations. Perhaps he lost a bet? The librarian responds, “Nada de eso. Yo las compro y las uso” (Nothing like that. I buy them and I use them) (86). Trying to locate, if not invoke, some sentimentality in the librarian, Selin presses him on what looks to her like the work of a collector, but the librarian dryly replies, “Pero las colecciono como, no sé, como alguien podría coleccionar caballos, o autos. O sea los tengo en el establo o en el pero también… en fin, no es una comparación demasiado feliz” (But I collect them like, I don't know, like someone who could collect horses, or cars. I mean I have them in the stable or in the… but also… in the end, it's not a very happy comparison) (90). In robust detail, he professes in a scholarly, unhurried tone about the functionality and aesthetics of contemporary sex dolls on the market. The explicit details resist allegorical readings, because, as he unceremoniously explains, he has chosen these particular features for specific, material ends.

The reading goes only skin deep, or in this case, as deep as the librarian has custom-ordered. In fact, even when Selin later imagines having a conversation with one of the dolls, Magnus resists writing in even an imaginary personality for her.13 The exchange remains one-sided and mute. In effect, this doll’s agency over her surroundings is both material and literary – material because she commands the protagonists’ attention to her well-textured existence, and literary because she is the most compelling figure in the second half of the novel, and we might say the action revolves around her. But just as her hyper-real features leave little to the protagonists’ imagination, so too does the dry, at times overly descriptive characterization of the dolls discourage readers from searching for what they might symbolize.

Lais and the other dolls are clearly objects of desire, but they are also subjects of seduction, in as much as they participate in the material vibrancy around them. We can understand the sultry effect the dolls have on the protagonists through Karen Barad’s work on “intra-actions.” Barad, a

13 The same cannot be said of J.P. Cuenca’s O único final feliz para una historia de amor é um acidente, published just two years after Muñecas. Cuenca’s novel features a top-of-the-line sex doll equipped with a personality and even a narrative voice.
feminist physicist, understands intra-action as a process by which things, objects, or bodies come to mutually materialize. Intra-active phenomena “are the entanglement – the ontological inseparability – of intra-acting species” (in interview with Adam Kleinmann 77). Intra-action should not be confused with interaction, “which assumes that there are individual, independently existing entities or agents that preexist their acting upon one another” (77). Instead, Barad understands that individuals, if we can even call them that, mutually constitute one another in a constant entanglement of agencies.14 If we return to Muñecas and look at the circulation of desire in the librarian’s apartment, we find that the dolls acutely influence the pulls of sexual attraction and even bend a human-to-human vector of desire towards and through the plastic.

What I take from Barad’s work is an understanding of how the things around humans as well as the humans themselves come into being through the intra-actions they have with each other. In a novel that makes me pay attention to the role of silicone in modern love-making, I look to the intra-active phenomena that Barad theorizes to see how the dolls in Muñecas participate in creating an eroticized atmosphere, at least for Selin, which we know about because she is narrating this part of the novel. The sexual tension bounces from epithelia to polymers and back again.

While it is difficult to know if Selin begins to be sexually attracted to the librarian before finding out about his perversions (since we do not hear her narrative voice in the first part of the book and because the librarian’s narrative voice is woefully insecure), the novel does leave room to think that she starts to desire the librarian because of the dolls around her. Their exposed silicone bodies make her surroundings feel pornographic, and, as I argue, she soon develops an openness to being one among them, perhaps even one of them, if that will encourage the librarian to want her.

14 Barad offers the example of social amoeba, which are single-celled organisms that have the ability to agglutinate and form a colony that acts like a multicellular organism equipped with an immune system, muscles, and a simple brain. At this point, she argues it is difficult to distinguish an “individual” by form or function.
In this entangled web of desire for the librarian, she appeals to his plastic proclivities by both recognizing and accentuating her own doll-like features. In reaching beyond the human, she searches for a more-than-human sex appeal.

Through these intra-actions, Lais surfaces as an agentive, sexual figure in relation to Selin and the librarian. The kind of agency that emerges from their exchanges might make some think that this is simply a materialist version of personification, and in a way, it is. I do not suggest that Lais somehow becomes human through her relationship with the characters in the room, but these intra-actions do destabilize what we understand as “human” to such an extent that we might ask if it were not possible for her to become more human, changing “human” from an all-or-nothing qualifier to one that is expressed in degrees. By the same token, I argue that Selin and the librarian become more-than-human or post-human through these kinds of intra-actions. This is a post-anthropocentric intra-action that goes two ways. As I argue towards the end of the chapter, both characters seem to become more doll-like as we draw closer to the end of the novel, and Selin not only starts to feel attraction towards the agalmatophile but also starts to self-identify with the dolls, all in an effort at plastic seduction and satisfaction.\(^{15}\)

The plastic intra-actions portrayed in Muñecas bring about a negotiation of what we understand as human, particularly our understanding of traditional “feminine” beauty. In fact, we might understand the aesthetics of these dolls – *plæsthetics* – as both formative and attendant to human beauty ideals.\(^{16}\) As the intra-actions between Selin and Lais show, the division between ‘artificially’ feminine and ‘naturally’ female qualities begins to dissolve in the strikingly similar depictions of the two. In fact, these similarities begin right on the front cover of the first edition (published by Emecé Editores in 2008). The cover, shown in Figure 1, depicts two Caucasian

\(^{15}\) Agalmatophilia is sexual attraction to an object in the shape of a human form.

\(^{16}\) I thank Caroline Egan for brainstorming this term with me.
feminine figures with almost identical blonde hair and heavy eye makeup. The one in the background lies under white sheets and looks back at the viewer with a barely discernable smile that reveals a row of teeth. In the foreground, the spine of the book bisects the other woman’s image, but we can make out her parted, pouty lips, manicured nails, and well-endowed chest. The lit cigarette in her hand seems to give her life, but the vacant gaze of her eyes and unnatural gloss of her skin suggest otherwise. A viewer’s eyes travel back and forth between the two women, trying to spot the differences and decide which of the two (if either) is the doll. Of course, the novel gives this image more context – it is Selin who smokes and sits on the bed next to Lais, who, like the figure on the cover, lies naked – but right from the beginning, we are encouraged to confuse the two.

Figure 1 The image on the cover, called “Morning After: Britney & Rui,” was photographed by Stacy Leigh. Her models are Real Dolls, created by Abyss Creations LLC, one of the best-known doll manufacturers in the United States.
We first learn of Selin’s doll-like features from the librarian, who appraises her beauty with language that recognizes the material traces of a sexual desire for dolls:

Selin era la mujer más hermosa que había visto en mi vida. Sus facciones de muñeca (ayudadas por el encuadre de pelo rubio) y su cuerpo de maniquí (ayudado por el vestido minúsculo y rojo), me provocaron (ayudados a su vez por la bebida) un ligero mareo, como si me encontrara frente la estatua de una diosa que de pronto había adquirido vida. (31)

Selin was the most beautiful woman that I had seen in my life. Her doll-like features (helped by the framing of blonde hair) and her mannequin body (helped by a miniscule, red dress), provoked in me a light dizziness (helped by drinking), as if I found myself in front of the statue of a goddess that all of a sudden had acquired life.

The librarian exhibits kind of reverse pygmalionism, with a distinct preference for lifeless figures.

While clearly attracted to Selin, the librarian fears her human nature, because he feels more comfortable with “mujeres de mentira” (fake women), or feminine forms that manifest their thingness in every moment. Perhaps this is why when Selin takes a seat and looks even more like one of his dolls, his attraction for her quickly grows: “… a mí me gustan las mujeres cuando están sentadas y la belleza de Selin, de pie ya perturbadora, sedente se potenciaba al punto de aturdirme” (… I like women when they are seated, and the beauty of Selin, who when standing was already unsettling, when sitting became so moving to the point of knocking me out) (39). Even as he contemplates kissing her, he remains fearful that a mere movement of her lips would betray her doll-like allure: “Tuve ganas de besarla y si me contuve no fue por miedo al rechazo, sino por miedo a que sus labios de muñeca me respondieran, por miedo a que Selin fuera de verdad” (I felt like kissing her and if I contained myself it wasn’t for fear of rejection, but out of fear that her doll-like lips would respond to me, out of fear that Selin was real) (40). Thus, the librarian’s attraction to Selin goes only as far as her plaesthetic, the features that make her more-
than-human or posthuman. (One might question why I use “more-than-human” instead of “less-than-human” to refer to the qualities of a doll. After all, humans are capable of far more than dolls are, at least for now. My choice, however, recognizes the de-centered positionality of the human within a new materialist framework and acknowledges the many capacities of a doll that humans simply cannot or have not achieved by virtue of being, in effect, organic.) This is important because it is the first disclosure of the librarian’s technosexuality, and he admits it without shame or, indeed, further comment. His remarks also indicate uneasiness with the murkiness of the doll/human divide.

The structure of the novel, separated into two parts named “Ella” and “Él,” suggests a certain symmetry. For instance, in part two of the novel, we shift from the librarian’s first-person narration to Selin’s, and as the story moves from her apartment to his, we turn from his desires to hers. The librarian’s fear of Selin’s not-quite-doll features in “Ella” will be reflected by Selin’s discomfort with the not-quite-human entities she encounters in “Él.”

Before they enter his home, the librarian stops to warn Selin that if she does not like what she sees, he will understand. The librarian, “tan inofensivo, tan delicado, tan de juguete” (so inoffensive, so delicate, so doll-like) according to Selin, only welcomes her inside after feeling obligated to do so (84). When Selin sees all of the dolls positioned around the room, she is shocked. She wonders why they aren’t at least dressed and observes, “A medida que las miro, sus rostros se van ablando. Parecen más humanas. Es horrible” (As I watched them, their faces began to soften up. They look more human. It’s horrible) (86). Her reaction to the dolls’ apparent but seemingly incomplete inertness reminds the reader of the earlier uneasiness of the librarian, who, upon perceiving the vitality beneath Selin’s doll-like exterior, feels fear.

But when the librarian begins to explain how the dolls are made and details their functionality, she starts to enjoy herself. Selin repeatedly asks to know more, and begins to joke
around with the librarian. He, however, maintains an almost academic tone as he informs her about their specifications. When he explains that the dolls cannot stand on their own and that he prefers them seated anyways, Selin is already showing signs of a willingness to tap into this fantasy. Her very next line, shared only with the reader, is, “No sé dónde sentarme” (I don’t know where to sit) (87).

It is not my intention to argue for equivalence between how the librarian perceives Selin (a human does not want to see a human as human) and how Selin perceives Lais (a human does not want to see a doll as human). I do wish to point out, however, that both characters find human and nonhuman traits in figures where they do not want them to be. For both characters, the destabilization of the human/nonhuman divide is cause for concern, but with increased exposure, they grow more accustomed to the intra-activity of nonhuman and human matter. In time, Selin contemplates her own “facciones de muñeca” (doll-like features). For instance, gazing at one life-like doll sitting in front of the television, she thinks, “Esa mirada perdida, la boca medio abierto. ¿Yo también pondré esa cara cuando miro televisión?” (That lost look, the mouth half-open. Do I also put on that face when I watch television?) (86). This plastic intra-activity has provoked a self-reflexivity, one that makes Selin question her own habits and insecurities.

The interest that Magnus’ characters manifest towards the dolls shows an attraction to plastic bodies that provoke new ways of appraising beauty. While recent doll technology has facilitated the ability to reproduce particular feminine features with far greater exactitude, calling these representations “artful mimesis,” as the librarian does, risks oversimplifying the intra-activity of the bodies in the room (both born and made) in two ways. First, mimesis, at least classically defined, is a representation of nature. 17 And yet, as Hoyos has convincingly conveyed, the “natural” world sits along the same continuum as the artificial or cultural world. As humans continue to seek more diverse forms of body modification, I argue, it becomes less clear what an ideal, “naturally

17 Both Plato and Aristotle describe mimesis as re-presenting nature.
beautiful’ human body looks, feels, smells, sounds, and even tastes like. Magnus’ novel makes us question what it means to be anatomically correct.

Second, the process of mimesis assumes a stable referent whose semblance can be reproduced, but as the intra-actions between Selin and Lais show, not only are the contours of bodily matter unstable, but a referent and its representation can also switch places. In the closing pages of *Muñecas*, Selin’s imagined conversation with Lais points to the inseparability of nature and culture, and the resulting cyclical aspect of mimesis:

Me pregunto si esto de que las mujeres implanten siliconas por todos lados no les vendrá de las muñecas. La naturaleza imita al arte, Lais. […] Primero el arte a la naturaleza y después al revés. Así. Y cuando te puedas embarazar, de nuevo al revés. Ida y vuelta ida vuelta idayvueltaid. (115)

*I wonder if this thing of women implanting themselves all over with silicone might not come from dolls. Nature imitates art, Lais. […] First art imitates nature and then the other way around. In that way. And when you can get pregnant, it flips around again. Going and coming going and coming going and coming and going.*

Technology is fast shaping what counts as high femme, and for that reason, we might say that the developers of these high-end sex dolls are selling an “advanced femininity,” where feminine aesthetics are understood to be in some ways more-than-human. In short, these dolls exhibit a femininity that only moldable silicone can achieve.

*Muñecas* presents plaesthetics as a form of posthuman beauty but also posthuman sex appeal, both for men and for women. Selin, for example, begins to fixate on Lais. She evaluates Lais’ genitals with fascination and admits to the reader that she wants to see the librarian play with them.

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18 For this reason, Kim Toffoletti’s approach to dolls and other cyborg figures is to study how the simulacrum of posthuman representations “displaces the notion of an original, and the implications of this for theories of identity” (8).
The thought arouses her. When the librarian excuses himself to go to the restroom, Selín lights a cigarette, then mischievously wonders, “¿Cuál es la masoquista de ustedes, chicas?” *(Which of you is the masochist, girls?)* (101). She resists this kinky “impulso diabólico” *(diabolic impulse)* but does advance upon Lais in the librarian’s brief absence:


> Neutro. A dentífrico un poco. Ahora me tienta olerle abajo. Me levanto. *(101)*

*I touch one of Lais’ thighs. The rubber sinks smoothly. What a feeling! I touch one of breasts, her hair. The hair seems real. No, it is, it is! She even has split ends! Through the crack in her lips you can see that her mouth has something inside. I stick in a finger. Ick! I clean it off. It’s like a lukewarm gelatin. Is that where he penetrates her? And where does he finish? Inside? I put my nose close. I don’t want to put my nose close, but I do it. It smells good. Neutral. A little like toothpaste.*

> Now I’m tempted to smell her below. I get up.

The human hair and the smell of toothpaste on Lais’ proverbial breath leave Selín feeling aroused, open to sexual experiences with the librarian and his companions.

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By the time the librarian emerges from the bathroom, she’s ready for him to make a move:

> “Por qué no me dice que tengo buenas tetas y ya” *(Why doesn’t he just tell me I have nice tits and be done with it?)* (102). Interestingly enough, the more she begins to desire him, the more doll-like he becomes. Selín observes, “Es tan sumiso” *(He’s so submissive)*, and says, “Cuando piensa se queda tan quieto que parece un muñeco. ¡Es muñeco! ¿Cómo no me di cuenta antes?” *(When he thinks he stays so quiet that he looks like a doll. He is a doll! How did it not occur to me before now?)* (109). Throughout the
second half of the novel, Selin routinely dehumanizes the librarian. For instance, when she finds him passed out in the bathroom of her house, she notices his small watch and small eyeglasses, and concludes, “Todo en él parece de juguete” (Everything about him seems doll-like) (55). She repeats this statement when the librarian assures her that she’s free to leave his apartment at any time: “Es tan inofensivo, tan delicado, tan de juguete” (He’s so inoffensive, so delicate, so like a toy) (84). Thus, what we find here is an erotization of a motif already well established at this point in the novel.

A sexual tension builds up between them, but it is unclear whether or not the feeling is mutual. Resorting to the very kind of “truco” (trick) of which she has suspected the librarian, she projects her own desire onto him and tries a bit of reverse psychology by rebuffing aloud what she declares are his prurient intentions; this, even after he admits that he is still a virgin. Her accusation prompts a conversation about how much he likes being alone, but Selin does not seem to pick up on the hints. Just as she advanced on the feminine doll, she now moves in on the masculine one. They kiss, but the kiss is as one-sided as one might expect with unrequited desire, or when kissing a muñeco. In her typically sardonic fashion, Selin reports, “Ni mueve los labios. Le meto la lengua a ver si mejora. Se deja, pero no mueve la suya. ¿Hay que mandarle una carta documento para que reaccione?” (He doesn’t even move his lips. I stick my tongue in to see if it gets better. He lets me, but he doesn’t move his own. Do I have to send him a permission slip for him to react?). Her frustration grows as she wonders, “¿Por qué no dice nada? ¿Todo lo tengo que hacer yo?” (Why doesn’t he say anything? Do I have to do everything myself?) (113). Then, definitively, she goes on the offensive: “Ay, acabemos de una vez con esta farsa. Si vamos a tener sexo, quiero que sepa que no tengo profilácticos” (Oh, let’s just be done with this farce. If we are going to have sex, I want you to know that I don’t have condoms) (114).19 While

19 The role of silicone in today’s intimate practices presents itself here in the avatar of the condom, and Selin will later reflect that not having to use a condom with a doll is just one more advantage that dolls have over their supposedly mimetic objects. She has no condoms because she used all of them as balloons to decorate her poorly attended birthday party.
Selin may not find the librarian’s stiff, doll-like demeanor satisfying, it certainly keeps her hungry for more.

Selin grows sleepy and tries to keep herself awake by having a mental conversation with Lais. This “conversation” reflects the arc of Selin’s evolving thoughts about sex dolls. Instead of looking for differences between herself and the dolls, she now looks for similarities: “¿Sabías que somos parecidas? Las dos somos rubias, altivas, pulposas arriba” (Did you know that we look alike? We both are blonde, tall, and thick down there) (113). This last admission, one that Haraway might justly label “humanist technophilia narcissism,” stands out because Selin initially dismissed Lais’ vulva as being “demasiado pulposa para mi gusto” (too thick for my tastes) (2003: 33; 90). Now envious of Lais’ apparent sex appeal, she resolves to imitate Lais to try to seduce the librarian:


In the final pages of the novel, Selin’s fantasies signals a newfound intra-action with the doll:

“Porque yo también siento que me ablando, que mi cuerpo pierde su olor. Ahora estamos de igual a igual. ¿Te puedo abrazar?” (Because I also feel like I’m softening, that my body is losing its smell. Now we’re the same. Can I hug you?) (115). Then, upon remembering that a woman at her birthday party had advised her, “Hay que cumplir años con algo entre las piernas” (You have to celebrate birthdays with something between your legs), Selin turns to Lais and asks her, “Dame tu mano” (Give me your hand). As Hoyos has astutely pointed out, the closing lines’ repetition and blending of the words “ida” (going) and “vuelta”
(coming) recalls the rhythm of sex: “Ida y vuelta iday vuelta idayvueltaid” (Going and coming going and coming). Where Hoyos considers this evidence to suggest that the librarian has snuck back into the room to rape the now asleep Selin, I find it more convincing, given Selin’s curiosity about Lais and the librarian’s repeated rejections, that Selin and Lais are having sex. If we can call it that.

**Odd Bedfellows**

In this next section, I take up the question of what sex might mean in light of the kinds of posthuman intimacy described in the scene above. Plastic intra-actions in *Muñecas* raise some fundamental questions about human sexuality and, indeed, displace anthropocentric views of intimacy. Instead, the novel presents possibilities for an alternative, perhaps kinky kinship that would allow humans to couple with the rest of the material world – natural and artificial. Mine is a non-organicist argument in favor of a posthuman intimacy that widens the pool of eligible significant others.

Plastic intra-actions make us reevaluate anthropocentric understandings of virginity, promiscuity, and sexual orientation. Similar to other non-normative sexual experiences, plastic intra-actions destabilize how we conceive of intercourse. It is not my intention, therefore, to privilege the contemporary moment as the first one in which a broader conception of sex has been possible. Like other sex-positive works before this one, *Muñecas* continues the work of redefining sex to make it ever more capacious, enough to include a wide host of genital interactions, with or without penetration, with or without ejaculation, indeed, with or without another partner at all, as in the case of self-sex or masturbation. In particular, I understand the kind of human/non-human intimacy

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20 “The last line, where the syntax breaks down, marks a rhythm like that of intercourse, which after all is a central motif throughout the book” (Hoyos Yale Talk).
21 “In my view, the last line of the novel leaves space to think that when the librarian leaves the room to let Selin sleep off her drunkenness, he awaits the opportunity to possess her” (ibid).
depicted in the novel to be crucial for normalizing the increasingly intimate exchanges between humans and technology, many of which have gotten pretty steamy.

Selin, in particular, disrupts more traditional methods of approximating sex by queering the concept of virginity. Just after taking over the narrative voice of the novel, she remarks that whereas some men like to be the first man a woman ever sleeps with, some women like to be the last woman a man sleeps with – before he chooses to sleep exclusively with other men. Presumably a woman achieves a sort of inverse deflowering in this instance. Obscuring the meaning of virginity and downplaying its significance are both important first steps for enabling Selin and the reader to appreciate inanimate things as potential sexual partners. Her musings set the stage for a kind of intimacy that does not depend on penetrating or being penetrated by another human organ.

*Muñecas* speaks most directly to the slippage in the meaning of the term “sex” when Selin later wonders whether the librarian might still be a virgin. She has trouble categorizing what he does with the dolls. “¿Eso cuenta?” she asks. She continues,

Para él, seguro que sí. Yo también siento que perdí la virginidad no con un hombre sino con un lápiz. Lo importante es cómo lo siente una. Se puede estar con mil hombres y seguir siendo virgen. Las putas por ejemplo son todas vírgenes. Y las vírgenes pueden ser putas. Yo de virgen era bien puta. Lo hice con todos los 36 colores de mi Faber Castell. (109)

*For him, surely yes. I also feel like I lost my virginity not with a man but with a colored pencil. The important thing is how a woman feels. You can be with a thousand men and continue being a virgin.*

*Whores, for example, are all virgins. And virgins can be whores. When I was virgin, I was such a whore. I did it with all of the 36 colors in my Faber Castell.*

For Selin, virginity is not a settled, physical state that hinges upon heterosexual or even humanist understandings of sex. Instead, she understands virginity to be more of an identificatory quality that
is shaped by people and things alike. As it turns out, the librarian replies that he does think of himself as a virgin, but by then the term has already been significantly destabilized. By expanding a traditionally human-only, phallocentric condition to include nonhuman actors (like her box of colored pencils), Selin points to the transgressive power of things to shape human sexual identities and the societal meanings of particular sexual experiences.

Destabilizing the concept of virginity also affects the presentation of its conventional obverse—promiscuity. For, despite the ambiguity over the meaning of virginity and if it “counts” to use a sex doll, both the librarian and Selin agree that there is something profoundly licentious about using so many of them. For instance, when Selin asks the librarian why he has so many dolls, he replies, “No sé. Será que soy un poco promiscuo” (I don’t know. Perhaps I am a little promiscuous) (90). So, notwithstanding his virginal identification, he characterizes himself as one who has sexual relations with various partners. Selin confirms this characterization a bit later (after the librarian politely rebuffs her veiled seduction) by saying, “Usted vive obsesionado por el sexo. No le basta una muñeca para saciarse. Necesita diez, veinte. […] Usted es un sexópata” (You live obsessed with sex. One doll isn’t enough to satisfy you. You need ten, twenty. […] You are a sex addict) (110). Put into focus, then, the librarian is a promiscuous virgin. As such, I take one of Muñecas’ core messages to be that virginity only makes sense in an anthropocentric realm. Promiscuity, on the other hand, is a pan-thing behavior. Unlike the narrow bounds of virginity, the contours of licentiousness are stretched to include intra-actions with a world of things.

Along similar lines, sex dolls also make us question the nature of sexual orientations. For the librarian, showing Selin his “collection” is clearly a “coming out” moment, but this revelation does not fit into hegemonic understandings of gay, lesbian, and bisexual orientations, which exclude non-human partners. Is it a heterosexual act if a man uses a feminine sex doll? Is it a homosexual act if a woman does? When Selin says the mass of dolls “parece una reunión de consorcio de lesbianas”
(looks like a consortium of lesbians) her anthropomorphizing comment inadvertently excludes the librarian from any sex act and perhaps is a symptom of the illegibility of the librarian’s technosexual orientation (85). Selin reports being relieved to find no masculine dolls in the room, thinking that must mean that the librarian is straight (86). Throughout the second half of the book, Selin has repeatedly tried to figure out what makes a “puto” (fag), basing her analysis on comparing her now “out” ex-boyfriend’s mannerisms with other men’s. For example, since her ex never cried in front of her, she concludes, “De puto es contenerse” (Being a fag is to contain oneself) (101). This reoccurring source of comedy in the novel suggests that trying to pin down “lo puto” is an impossible, laughable task. Even so, in wondering if Günther, now her benchmark for all things gay, might have sex with a masculine doll, Selin entertains the idea that silicone might fit prominently into realm of human sexuality. In fact, earlier in the novel she reveals to the reader that the reason Günther broke up with her was because he didn’t like how she reacted when he presented a dildo to her, presumably with the invitation to use it on him. According to Selin, “Se ofendió tanto que no me dejó reaccionar. Porque yo lo habría puesto. Lo habría montado con eso, si tanta ilusión le hacía. Tal vez hasta era divertido” (He got so offended he didn’t let me react. Because I would have put it on. I would have mounted him with that thing, if it gave him so much fantasy. Maybe I would have even enjoyed it) (80). Now his ex-girlfriend, she identifies as “su dildo erecto y solitario, a la espera” (his erect and solitary dildo, waiting) (80).

Based on Selin’s initial shock, it is clear that the librarian’s sexual proclivities are far from normative, even if they might be considered hetern. His affection for dolls might even be deigned queer by some readers, but such a label belies the sheer materiality – that is, more-than-humanness – of the exchange. The term “queer” has become somewhat of a catchall for non-normative sexual behaviors, but this umbrella term obscures the very specificity that this novel bravely puts forward, one in which silicone actually comes to matter and signify. For that reason, I find the term “queer”
unsatisfying, at least as it has been traditionally employed outside of cybercultural theory.\textsuperscript{22} As cybercultural theorists have done, we might think of another moniker like technoqueer, but I find an easier avenue in the already existing yet understudied (and hushed up) world of kink. After all, latex has long been accepted in kink communities as a well-recognized fetish, and its chemical sibling silicone would fit right in with the community of rubberists. In any case, it is surely safe to say that the librarian’s sexual preferences—his “plastic” orientation—differentiates itself from more human-centric sexualities, and through reading this novel, we learn that things don’t quite fit into the anthropocentric rhetoric of sexuality.

What’s more, Selin teaches us that this type of exclusion is an ignorant oversight. Even though Selin at times calls the librarian a “sexópata” and a “pervertido” (because “todos los hombres son pervertidos”[\textit{all men are perverts}]) for using sex dolls, her first-person narration allows us to understand that these are defensive stances that do not eclipse her curiosity about, and eventual attraction to, one of the dolls (86). Selin eventually backtracks, telling the librarian, “Claro que si a usted le gustan [las muñecas]… No le hace mal a nadie” (\textit{Of course if you like [dolls]… It doesn’t hurt anyone}) (93). Her shifting attitudes mark the inadequacy of human-only discourse on sexuality that fails to recognize our many plastic partners.

Lais, in particular, provides the “slightly perverse shift of perspective” that Donna Haraway argues “might better enable us to contest for meanings, as well as for other forms of power and pleasure in technologically mediated societies” (2004: 13). Lais does not fit into discourses of gay and lesbian sex, nor of prostitution, mail-order bride services, sexual victimization, or necrophilia.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Some scholars who have already begun to work on queering cyborgian figures like the sex doll include: Nina Lykke in “Are Cyborgs Queer? Biological Determinism and Feminist Theory in the Age of New Reproductive Technologies and Reprogenetics” (2000) and Esperanza Miyake’s “My, Is that Cyborg a Little Bit Queer?” (2004).

\textsuperscript{23} Magnus makes the disjunction between prostitution and sex doll consumption explicit. When Selin suggests that the librarian go out with prostitutes to ease what she temporarily diagnoses as
In the end, the novel does not go so far as to normalize the librarian’s plastic orientation, but it does welcome us, along with Selin, to wonder for ourselves what it would be like to share a bed with Lais. Magnus’ open ending crafts an opportunity for a new normal that might lessen the constitutive and exclusionary orientations of anthropomorphizing norms and normativities.

The novel’s underlying provocation to think more about sex dolls – how they might look and feel – and, the kind of people who make use of them reflects the novels openness to different sexual practices. I argue that *Muñecas* is ultimately a sex-positive work that encourages its readers to think twice before labeling a man a pervert or misogynist for using sex dolls. In taking such a stance, this work is one of the first in Latin American literature to take sex doll users seriously and depict them in a positive, sexual light. As Andrew Brown has convincingly argued in his book on Latin American works from the 1990s, previous cyborg figures including dolls featured in the region’s literature functioned as subversive reminders of traumatic histories, especially torture. He concludes, “Haraway’s characterization of the fusion of flesh and technology as a ‘pleasureably tight coupling’ seems wildly inappropriate here” (36). Magnus’s 2008 novel, however, proves closer to Haraway’s initial characterization of the cyborg figure, with emphasis on the dolls’ subversive ability to provide pleasure.

One sex-positive aspect of the book is Selin’s willingness to experiment with a technosexual fantasy where she would transform herself – through role-play – into a sex doll. Some critics might interpret this willingness as evidence of the books misogyny, but instead of characterizing Selin’s fantasy to have the librarian’s "verga de látex" (*latex cock*) in her "agujero de silicona" (*silicone hole*) as a "brutal image, impermeable and dry,” as Hoyos does, we might interpret it as indicative of her openness to silicone-infused intimacy. Hoyos maintains that Selin is searching for “total friction, depression, the librarian replies, “Jamás podría darle dinero a una mujer para que… Humillarla así” (*I could never give a woman money so that… humiliate her that way*) (99). This is a reminder to resist anthropomorphizing the dolls.
violence,” but there is little textual evidence that Selin craves violence – just a forward man who wants sex. For example, she recalls how she liked that her ex-boyfriend first introduced himself by grabbing her butt before kissing her ‘Hello.’ These inclinations are well in line with roleplaying involving dominance and submission, where her informed consent as a “submissive” would be essential. A reading that construes the librarian as a misogynist victimizer sells both the librarian and Selin short, first because the librarian has been clear from the start that he will not touch her, and second because Selin admits to being a willing partner in this technosexual fantasy. I argue that Selin’s first-person account of her own consent and sexual arousal, together with her fascination (Selin’s word, not mine) with the dolls, makes it plain that the sexual tension in that basement apartment is not one of planned violence or coercion. Instead, I see the growing tension as a result of the sex appeal of the dolls coupled with Selin’s attempts at seduction by mimicking them.

In general, an attraction to dolls and an attraction to women are not mutually exclusive, and might be quite complementary. In Muñecas, however, Magnus explicitly presents the doll-inclined librarian as a man with more narrow preferences. Still, this does not make the librarian a misanthrope or sexist. If anything, he is a man who fears women, calling them “peligrosas” (dangerous), but he does not disrespect them (102). Remember, when at Selin’s party earlier in the evening, he admits to the reader, “Tuve ganas de besarla y si me contuve no fue por miedo al rechazo, sino por miedo a que sus labios de muñeca me respondieran, por miedo a que Selin fuera de verdad” (I felt like kissing her and if I contained myself it wasn’t for fear of rejection, but out of fear that her doll-like lips would respond to me, out of fear that Selin was real) (40). The librarian finds comfort in the unreciprocated plastic kiss of a doll not because he has rape fantasies but because he has specifically plastic ones.

What’s more, the librarian’s formal etiquette around the female characters in the novel evidences respect in action. Indeed, as he entertains Selin in his own apartment at three o’clock in
the morning, he continues to addresses her formally as “usted” (this, even after she has already used the less formal “tú” earlier in the night). In fact, Selin bets he even speaks to the dolls this way (91).

Even the erudite tone he uses to speak about the dolls is dryly academic, not sexually or emotionally contemptuous towards their feminine forms. Furthermore, his discourse on the dolls praises their womanly qualities – heartbeat, menstruation, etc. – and not once does he intimate that dolls are inherently better than women, or that women should be more like dolls. In fact, these are sentiments revealed only by Selin’s first-person narration. In sum, the librarian’s extreme politeness and Selin’s willingness to submit and role-play like a doll speak more to the book’s acceptance of kink than to misogyny.

In Muñecas the dolls allow the librarian to maintain a home free from species-normative intercourse and kinship ties. Despite the fact that Selin once jokingly calls the librarian Lais’ “marido” (husband), there is nothing in that basement apartment that resembles traditional monogamy. As Brown and others have noted, “Cybernetic bodies escape the need for a nuclear, heteronormative family structure” (5). Instead of families, one useful way of thinking about the companionship between dolls and humans is to look at them as what Haraway calls “cohabiting companion species” that can be “of many ontological kinds, organic or not” (2004: 5). Haraway characterizes companion species as “a bestiary of agencies” that co-constitute each other through intimate approximations (2003: 6). In particular, and most relevant for my argument, she writes,

24 Here, Haraway is expanding her previous work on cyborg studies to re-vision “cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species” (Haraway 2004: 300). Still, “These figures are hardly polar opposites,” she writes. “Cyborgs and companion species each bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicone, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways” (Haraway 2003: 4). She would later expand and reformulate this concept further by working with an even more capacious term, “critter.” She defines critters in When Species Meet as: “A motley crowd of lively beings including microbes, fungi, humans, plants, animals, cyborgs, and aliens. Critters are always relationally entangled rather than taxonomically neat” (2008: 330).
“The ontology of companion species makes room for odd bedfellows,” which include the inorganic and at times elaborate sex toys featured so prominently in the novel (2004: 307). Together, the dolls, the humans, and even the plastic houseplants are all part of the more-than-human ontological “becoming with” and “turning on” that occurs in this kinky/technoqueer household.

These plastic companions – organic and inorganic – are best described as significant others rather than as “prosthetics” in relationship, the way that some cyborg studies theorists have characterized human-doll relationships in other works. In *Muñecas* Lais is not a surrogate for a wife or lover, neither of which the solitary librarian desires. Human partners are not missed or lacking here. The librarian lives another trope, one of *being with* non-human companions in order to be apart from human ones. But calling himself a “fóbico” (phobic) who prefers to inhabit a world with as little intra-actions with people as possible does not mean he is a true loner. That is, even for this practitioner of solitude who dreams of locking himself in a tollbooth on an untraveled road, he is never really alone at home, because he enjoys the company of the plastic things around him. Selin herself remarks on the quality of their company when the librarian has left the room: “Es verdad que algo en este pozo hace que una no se pueda sentir sola. O que se sienta sola, pero bien. Bien sola. ¿Serán las muñecas? ¿O las plantas? ¿Cuál es la diferencia entre las plantas y las muñecas?” (It’s true that something in this place makes it impossible to feel alone. Or that you feel alone, but good alone. Could it be the dolls? Or the plants? What is the difference between the plants and the dolls?) (102). As Haraway would say, “The relationship is the smallest possible unit of analysis,” and there is no shortage of relationships in this home “invaded” by sex dolls and plants (2004: 315). By calling the other things in the room

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25 See King and West’s analysis of *Lars and the Real Girl*. Notably, they write, “Bianca operates as an emotional prosthesis for Lars. She is an artificial device designed to act as a replacement for something that is missing or defective in his life—namely, attachment to or connection with others. In addition to Bianca’s role as a replacement for a loss that is specific to Lars, Bianca also operates as a prosthesis by helping mediate Lars’s relationships with others” (73).
significant others or plastic companions instead of prosthetics, we de-center the human in these relationships and recognize the plastic company that he keeps.

The librarian and his dolls are, indeed, like significant others, if we understand significant otherness as Haraway does: “non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures” (2003: 7). That is, their futures are wound up together, even if their histories are not. The novel gives us a vague sense of the librarian’s history as the son of an abusive, Jewish father and of his desire for a solitary future in a country notorious both for its formality and its anti-Semitic history. Achieving that future in Germany rests on making enough money to makes ends meet and to purchase the sex dolls that would satisfy him. These dolls, whose production history the librarian extolls in extended discourse, provide him the kind of solitary futurity that no human companion ever could. The dolls and the librarian have different origin stories, of course, but they share an intimate future.

Because of the advanced features I’ve previously described, these dolls are in effect superhuman sexual partners, and for those who enjoy them, humans may become obsolete for sexual satisfaction. Sure, masturbation has been filling a similar niche since the dawn of time, but these life-like sex dolls provide uses, sensations, and companionship that extend beyond those of self-love. The dolls present the possibility of a different kind of intimacy, of “being with” someone (or something) that destabilizes the very structures that organize our human-centric imaginations of personal and social possibility: sex, sexuality, and, as Selin imagines, even reproduction. According to Selin,

Se las podría usar en los laboratorios de inseminación artificial. Primero hacen una muñeca que por fuera reproduce a la madre y por dentro es como un laboratorio.
Ahí le ponen el ovulito. Después el padre se la monta y el bebé se gesta en la barriga en vez de en un tubo de ensayos. (114)

You could use them in artificial insemination laboratories. First they will make a doll that on the outside reproduces the mother and on the inside is like a laboratory. There they will put the egg. Then the father will mount her and the baby will gestate in her belly instead of in test tubes.

Note that Selin is not thinking about entirely replacing human women with sex dolls. Rather, her imaginings point to a future of continued co-evolution, where the endurance of both constituents of the companion species is contingent on the other. Here, we can think of the co-domestication process that Michael Pollan writes about, whereby plants re-make and even domesticate humans in an “unconscious, unwilled process” to reproduce “by whatever means trial and error present” [xxi]. These sex dolls, like the plastic houseplants around them, would be just one more step away from natural selection and towards artificial selection, or, more precisely, an acceleration of a blending process of naturecultures whose many cycles make it impossible to locate a segregated, discrete endpoint. At the very least, plastic intimacy is a process of significant otherness that transcends human exceptionalism, and at most, could be a next step in a myriad of co-evolutions that make us more artificial and more natural at the same time.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter I have analyzed Muñecas’ representations of the intimate exchanges between its human protagonists and their non-human partners to call attention to the way these representations expand our understanding of human gender and sexuality by focusing on the material nature of those exchanges. Through a new materialist approach, I interpreted the novel’s objects as a network of things that share a distributive sexual power to influence one another. The cultural and environmental functions of intimacy’s materiality are difficult if not impossible to
disentangle. As the human protagonists are portrayed as haltingly doll-like, so the dolls are portrayed as uncannily alive. The dolls in this novel are no joke (unlike their literary predecessors), nor are they stand-ins for anything missing. Magnus’ descriptions of the dolls are innovative and explicit, and explanations about their function in that technoqueer dwelling couldn’t be clearer. Selin’s eventual acceptance of this material dynamic makes this a sex-positive work that encourages readers to rethink stereotypes and anthropocentric prejudices.

We might celebrate the feminine form – organic or inorganic – in all its material allure, but recognize that gender is a limited, human-inflected way to understand the assemblages around us. Mimesis in the case of Muñecas leaves us feeling uneasy about presumed imitations of nature, when that nature seems increasingly to be shaped by art, science, and culture at large. Soon, femininity might come to be defined by plaesthetic standards.

We also have to rethink what “company” means, as our toys and gadgets become ever more affective, ever more seductive. Can we ever really be alone in their presence? Muñecas elevates the presence of the material in our lives, even as it re-contextualizes humanity in a much broader material matrix, a more-than-human nature that sometimes calls us to bed.

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