

Michael NIBLETT, *World Literature and Ecology. The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890-1950*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, ISBN 978-3-030-38580-4, 264 p.

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Emerging as an interdisciplinary field in recent debates, ecocriticism re-articulates the basis of literary theories and current theoretical paths and initiates alternative discourses in the history of literature, beneficial for a wider understanding of present dynamics. Read through the lens of ecological realities, literary works face hybrid translations that challenge the canonical order and raise awareness of the configuration of geographical zones seen as both a distinctive phenomenon, but also as interconnected with the large-scale discourse. Michael Niblett's *World Literature and Ecology. The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890-1950* manages to combine a materialist view specific to Marxist World Literature studies with the insights of environmental humanities, aiming to unravel the dialectical interrelations set in peripheral and (semi)peripheral zones. Basing his analysis on the notion of world-literature (Warwick Research Collective, 2015) and Franco Moretti's 2000's texts on World Literature, Niblett focuses on the heterogeneous nature of the world literary system, accordingly to "the Marxist theory of uneven and combined development" (6).

Divided into seven chapters (1. "Introduction: Or, Fictions and Frontiers – The Making of the Modern World-Ecology"; 2. "The Commodity Frontier and Its Secret"; 3. "Fictions of Appropriation and the Nature of Frontier Romance"; 4. "Romance, Realism, Modernism: Frontier Forms in the Work of Rhys Davies and José Lins do Rego"; 5. "The 'Mangled' Body: Proletarian Writing and the Dialectic of Labour"; 6. "'Stop the Oil!': Narrative Energetics and the Political Ecology of Strikes"; 7. "'We State the Facts': Romance and Revolt in the Work of Jose Amado and Gwyn Thomas") the book displays the ongoing reconfigurations of both the geopolitical status and literary representations of sugar, cacao, coal and oil frontiers in zones such as Trinidad, Brazil and Britain in the early stages of capitalism. The most distinctive features of his project are reflected by the

theoretical attention to the ways social life is structured not only at the level of content, but also at the level of imagery, style and form, which Niblett proclaims as “disjunctions and rifts engendered by the world-ecological transformations associated with commodity frontiers” (13). Furthermore, his study prioritizes a heterogeneous understanding of the representational issues that these aesthetics face given the uneven development of peripheral modernism, seeking to reinforce the interrelated nature of such forms: “categories [of modernism and realism] I propose to consider not as antonyms, or as successive stages in a linear literary history, but as dialectical counterparts” (32). By selecting a various corpus of literary texts from authors like Jose Amado, Rhys Davies, Yseult Bridges, Joseph Keating, Irene Saunderson, Stephen Cobham, Charles Kingsley, José Lins Do Rego, Jack Jones, Ellen Wilkinson, Ralph de Boissière, Gwyn Thomas and, regarding poetry, Grace Nichols, Nicolás Guillén, Idris Davies, *World Literature and Ecology* treats the mutations of the canon, “bent out of shape when confronted by the realities of frontier life” (33), the literary depiction of the moments of crisis and conflict which build up in local (sub)genres.

Firstly, he begins with an extensive definition of the “commodity frontier”, not only as a “locus” as its name might suggest, but more as a paradox, hence the ambiguity of previous critics on this topic. Pursuing Jason W. Moore’s approach on commodity frontiers which first appeared in one of his earliest works, *Sugar and the Expansion of the Early Modern World-Economy* (2000), this phenomenon is rather registered as a movement since it encapsulates a set of relations between “vast streams of cheap energy” (44) and, subsequently, the production of surplus-value by draining the socio-ecological resources. Revealing the tension that lies in the terminology itself, Niblett extends his analysis, distancing himself from previous theories by implying a more than conceptual attribute of the commodity frontier – the commodity frontier as a narrative category.

Hence, I would reiterate my suggestion that the term “commodity frontier” be grasped in the first instance as a narrative category: for it describes how the abstract shapes and relations of the exploitation-appropriation dialectic are realized and unfold historically through the encounter with the contingencies of a specific environment and the forces of sociopolitical struggle (59).

Paraphrasing Marx, Niblett stresses the dual structure of commodities as a value and as an object of utility in order to reveal the interwoven characteristics of the frontier-relation: exploitation and appropriation. Consequently, these discontinuities materialize in literary forms as narrative juxtapositions, which, at first, could be identified in the genre of magic realism as outlined by Fredric Jameson. However, Niblett proposes the concept of “irrealism” as Michael Löwy understands it, not as an antonym to realism, but rather as a fluctuant variation in which both of them can exist. The term “irrealist aesthetic mode” is more appropriate for fictions about the tendencies towards fetishistic personification of energy sources, viewed as a common trope for the purpose of capturing the experience of frontier zones.

In the third chapter, Niblett brings forth a comparative analysis between the pattern of “export reverie” as enunciated by Ericka Beckman and the influence of the romance genre on peripheral literature in the context of the export boom in the late nineteenth century. Although not formalized as a genre, Niblett applies Beckman’s concept to wider zones, not only Latin America, practising his argument on Yselt Bridgers’s *Creole Enchantment* about Trinidad, Jose Amdo’s *The Violent Land* set in Bahia, Brazil and also, in the context of the Welsh mining frontier, on Joseph Keating’s and Irene Saunderson’s novels. However, the authors respond differently in exposing the violence done to the laboring body, its image being reflected in the way they instrumentalize two different narrative manners: the “reverie” and the “real” techniques of export literature. Moreover, Niblett assumes the imperialist ideology that romance is reflecting by arguing that:

Romance in these terms correlates closely with the logic of the commodity frontier. The ideology of romance as a genre that, by staging the encounter with a ‘primitive’ or ‘uncivilized’ lifeworld, can revive a moribund national literary scene and re-energize British culture stands in dialectical relation to the movement of commodity frontiers, which in channelling weakly commodified natures into the metropolitan core can help to counter the tendentially rising value composition of capital and—in the context of the Great Depression of the late nineteenth century—revive the imperial economy (86).

Subsequently, responding to historical changes in the initial phase in the development of a frontier zone, literary texts display distinctive attitudes, either a nostalgic longing

for the national past, or a progressive “wish to transcend the logic of underdevelopment”, each of them revealing in fact “the volatility of frontier life” (109).

Continuing this analysis in a chronological logic, the fourth chapter investigates the shift from irrealism to more realist forms used in the portrayal of “new forms of life and environment-making [that] have been consolidated” (119). In Jameson’s account of realism and modernism as a constant dialectic that reinvents narrative forms, Niblett notices the logic of frontier-relation itself, which aims to represent “new socioecological formations that facilitate accumulation” (123). Given as an example, Lins do Rego’s utopian ideology of past-continuity alongside the integration of technology into daily life is reflected in the option for specific structures, such as “traditional folk genres in combination with more elite forms” (131) and in the capacity of metabolizing the rhythms of the production process into his narrative.

This is style as socioecological relationship, in other words: narrative tone and rhythm, voice and perspective, mediate and rehearse the specific modes of life- and environment-making through which the hierarchical world of the *engenhos* structured itself. Thus, while Lins do Rego’s novels undoubtedly register the historical reality of modernization and its disruptive impact on the Northeast, they nevertheless harbour within themselves the Utopian desire to restore the sugar frontier to an earlier phase in its cycle, before the crises of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries compelled its reorganization (136).

In dealing with Rhys Davies’s prose, Niblett raises awareness of the way public strikes were converted into literary form not as resistance but more as unjustified violence, unveiling an “observational distance” (149) rather than a social, militant engagement.

In the fifth and most compelling chapter, the focus is on the political implications of proletarian writing as a way of exposing the inequities of working-class life. As such, the emphasis is on a specific trope of commodity frontier literature: the image of the laboring body “on the brink of collapse or broken and disfigured” (158). Niblett demonstrates that through this imagery realist representations shift to modernist or irrealist registers. From an ecocritical perspective, the literary works not only treat the

issue as a corporeal dilemma, but also as an extensive phenomenon by involving the environment as more than a background.

In remaking these received narrative conventions, therefore, the proletarian novel has to treat not only industrial work as more than just “background” or a “new ‘setting’ for a story” (Williams 2003: 103); it must also grasp non-human nature as agential and formative, mediating the “disturbing compound” it forms with the human body (168).

By functioning as a collective commonplace, the “mangled” body also draws attention to and serves as “a figure for the novel’s own representational struggles” (171). It detaches from the inherited bourgeois realist tradition and, as a result of its limitations, it opens up the possibility of an autonomous narrative form. Niblett detects this tendency in various literary works such as in James Welsh’s *The Underworld* (1920) where, in scenes of great tension and graphic violence, the corporeality of the worker gains irrealist features. Moreover, the imagery of the deformed body also exposes the domestic sphere’s instability in the frontier’s exhaustive and brutalizing logic, given the exploitation of unpaid work represented by women and children. In this regard, the novel *Trash* by José Américo de Almeida registers in a complex manner the “exploitation’s necessary complement in the realm of unpaid work: appropriation” (189), through which both human and extra-human natures are mutated.

The next chapter explores the turning point in the “world-economy *qua* world-ecology” (206) through the materializations in literature of the general strikes in Britain and Trinidad, with emphasis on Ellen Wilkinson’s novel *Clash* (1929) and Ralph de Boissière’s *Crown Jewel* (1952). Both of them reveal the struggles between capital and labor regarding working-conditions and stand for a militant discourse and a revolutionary transformation of society.

As we have seen throughout this study, to speak of the ecologies of coal and oil is to invoke not merely their biophysical properties, but the particular ways in which these properties have been combined with specific productive technologies, infrastructures, scientific knowledges, labour regimes, and so on. In this view, strikes might be seen as an

effort to transform such ecologies by seizing control of the flows of energy they generate (210).

Even if coal and oil frontiers were in a blooming period, the human resources faced drastic situations due to low wages compared to the wages of ex-slaves for the first industry and to the susceptibility of industrial stoppages for the latter. In trying to give a voice to masses, these novels face the challenge of blending almost opposed literary generic models and re-working their paradigms: the *Bildungsroman* and the cross-class romance.

The last chapter exposes the direct implications of political representation to literary representation as seen in three illustrative novels: Jorge Amado's *The Violent Land* (1943) and *The Golden Harvest* (1944) for the cacao frontier in Brazil and Gwyn Thomas' *All Things Betray Thee* (1949) for the coal frontier in Britain. Determined by a period of social unrest, the political consciousness of these authors appears as a committed and voluntary action in order to "keep alive the possibility of resistance to the depredations of capital" (229). Consequently, both authors attempt to internalize the experience of an era marked by poverty, malnutrition and disease at the most intricate level of form and narrative style. The political critique is revealed in the performative nature of these texts, characterized in Amado's by a "cultivated exhibitionism" (246) and in Thomas' by the romance form. This kind of performance has the role of imposing a specific distance from the literary text, in order to prevent the reader's immersion into it as in a fictional one, while also acknowledging its "literariness" and producing the "recognition of its representational mechanisms" (246).

By unveiling the literary and socio-political mechanisms of the nuanced literature of commodity frontiers, Niblett manages to elaborate a significant discourse for the field of comparative literature. With a precise attention for every level of influence and relation, his analysis initiates a plural understanding of the logic of the commodity frontiers, raising awareness regarding both the environment and the environment-making dynamics that compose a new narrative category that changes the course of canonical literary forms.