

Toxic Chemicals in Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*)

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Abstract

Published in 2014 under the Spanish title *Distancia de rescate* and then in English translation as *Fever Dream* in 2017, Samanta Schweblin's first novel joins the long and celebrated inventory of Argentinean literary works that draw upon innovative forms to question our reality. Set in a small town "four and a half hours" away from the capital, *Fever Dream* presents the stories of Amanda, Carla, and their families, whose lives are forever changed by the nightmarish environment around them, as they deal with the physical, emotional, and mental effects of the exposure to an omnipresent substance. In this article, I analyze *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*) in the context of the global change in ecosystems driven by toxic waste and persistent pollutants as byproducts of industrial and agricultural capitalist practices. From this perspective, Schweblin's novel poses some thought-provoking questions: How does an environment altered by chemical poisons affect our perception of reality? What are we to do in the face of such invisible but omnipresent menaces? How can we talk about concepts such as medicine, science, and superstition? What possibilities does literature offer to examine the effects of the spread of toxic chemicals at a global scale? I propose some answers by establishing a dialogue with previous works that have examined the presence of toxic chemicals in the environment from a historical, anthropological, and literary studies perspective.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Argentinean literature, toxic chemicals, Samanta Schweblin, *Fever Dream*.

Resumen

Publicada en 2014 con el título *Distancia de rescate* y luego en la traducción al inglés como *Fever Dream* en 2017, la primera novela de Samanta Schweblin se une al largo y célebre inventario de obras literarias argentinas que se basan en formas innovadoras para cuestionar nuestra realidad. Ambientada en un pueblo a "cuatro horas y media" de la capital, *Distancia de rescate* presenta las historias de Amanda, Carla y sus familias, cuyas vidas cambian para siempre por el ambiente de pesadilla que las rodea, mientras enfrentan los efectos físicos, emocionales y mentales de la exposición a una sustancia omnipresente. En este artículo analizo *Distancia de rescate* en el contexto del cambio global en los ecosistemas impulsado por desechos tóxicos y contaminantes persistentes, subproductos de prácticas capitalistas industriales y agrícolas. Desde esta perspectiva, la novela de Schweblin plantea algunas preguntas para reflexionar: ¿Cómo un ambiente alterado por venenos químicos afecta nuestra percepción de la realidad? ¿Qué debemos hacer frente a estas amenazas invisibles pero omnipresentes? ¿Cómo podemos hablar de conceptos como medicina, ciencia y superstición? ¿Qué posibilidades ofrece la literatura para examinar los efectos de la propagación de químicos tóxicos a escala global? Propongo algunas respuestas estableciendo un diálogo con trabajos previos que han examinado la presencia de sustancias químicas tóxicas en el medio ambiente desde una perspectiva histórica, antropológica y de la crítica literaria.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica, literatura argentina, productos químicos tóxicos, Samanta Schweblin, *Distancia de rescate*.

Sick Bodies, Toxic Chemicals, and the Environment

At a climactic moment of Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*), one of the main characters, David, declares: "The poison was always there" (169). This sobering phrase, which at first glance looks like it belongs in a detective novel, refers to the omnipresence of a toxic substance in the rural environment where the novel takes place. Moreover, the assertion implies the inability of other characters to effectively assess the risk that such substance poses, much to their own detriment, as a revelation like this one is often made at a point in the plot when the options to act in response are extremely limited, if there are any options left at all. In this sense, *Distancia de rescate* alludes to broader conversations about the role of toxic chemicals, particularly those that are byproducts of industrial and agricultural practices, in the global change of ecosystems.

In *La Argentina fumigada* (literally, fumigated Argentina), Fernanda Sánchez gives an account of her travels across the South American country's agricultural lands. Her report is full of testimonies of the health-related effects of toxic chemicals. Frequent complaints include the lack of adequate medical care, along with an unusually large number of birth defects and fertility issues, much like in the village where *Distancia de rescate* takes place. Sánchez's book follows the path outlined by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, documenting the profound impact that the widespread use of pesticides has had on rural communities, in this case, after the transformation of the Argentinean landscape into an industrial agriculture system of colossal proportions. As Sánchez mentions, Argentina is currently the third largest soy producer in the world, just behind Brazil and the United States, and devotes two thirds of its arable land to soybean production (105). Schweblin's novel transports us to this context not to observe, but to actively engage with some of the pressing questions it raises: How does an environment altered by chemical poisons affect our perception of reality? What are we to do in the face of such invisible but omnipresent menaces? How can we talk about concepts such as medicine, science, and superstition when it is clear that traditional notions of objectivity no longer apply? And hence, what possibilities does literature offer? At first glance, *Distancia de rescate* captures some of the anxieties caused by the rapid change of Argentina's countryside by juxtaposing anthropocentric depictions of the land within the tourism-agribusiness continuum. However, I would argue that the transformation of the environment in the novel goes a step further. Thinking within Jane Bennett's framework, land in the novel is portrayed as vibrant matter, a human-nonhuman assemblage of vibrant materialities that through collective action express their agency.

To be more precise, in the coming pages I will present a critical analysis of Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* that will be informed by previous works in historical, cultural, literary, and anthropological studies, that is to say, within the scope of environmental cultural studies. The hope is that this transdisciplinary approach will prove suitable to examine the role of toxic chemicals in shaping the connections, interactions, and hybridizations that take place in the material world (Ares-López and Beilin 179). To accomplish the task at hand, certain ideas and approaches will be particularly useful, including those that engage with questions of materiality and affect.

Methodologically, Nicholas Shapiro's work on the "chemical sublime" provides a roadmap. Developed from an anthropological point of view influenced by Kant's notion of the sublime, this is a process in which "indistinct and distributed harms are sublimated into an embodied apprehension of human vulnerability [...] provoking reflection, disquiet, and contestation" (369). Shapiro argues that through "minute aberrations of the body" one can discern prolonged and low-level encounters with toxic chemicals present in our daily lives. A key element of his proposition is that of "bodily reasoning," a concept not too distant from what Alexa Weik von Mossner describes as "embodied cognition" (10). For Shapiro, this is the process by which one's body viscerally logs chemical exposures and produces knowledge to calibrate our understanding of toxic effects.

Although this framework is useful to approach long-term exposure to toxic chemicals, what happens when a given exposure becomes so concentrated, violent, and rapid that the body is incapable of calibrating such knowledge before facing the destructive effects of poisoning? I propose that in this case the body undergoes a different but interrelated experience. Rather than emphasizing the role of human forces in the production of subjectivities, a path that many of the previous studies of the novel have followed, the main argument of this essay is that, in *Distancia de rescate*, toxic chemicals are constructed as vibrant matter that interacts with living bodies at a fundamental level, changing them in ways that cannot be predicted or completely understood. But also, that beyond the complex interactions taking place at a molecular scale, toxic chemicals trigger many other processes that can be just as unintelligible. At the human scale, as exemplified by Amanda, one of the main characters, the human body reaches an exalted state of consciousness when faced with the realization of inescapable suffering due to a violent poisoning. In fact, Tanya Jeffcoat has previously suggested a comparable process. In her words: "understanding the implications of our ecological embodiment often leads to the development of a 'tragic consciousness' as we become aware of our precariousness in light of the dangers within the systems of which we are a part" (71). I propose that the processes that result in what I call "chemical tragic consciousness" are affective in nature and can be described as a particular case of such awareness, in particular as an altered state reached after a sudden and vicious chemical poisoning caused by toxic substances released into the environment. At a global scale, the novel illuminates the contradictions of an agricultural system that relies on the productivity and health of large tracts of land, but at the same time treats them as wastelands and their inhabitants as expendable. In summary, the multiple, complex processes triggered by toxic chemicals draw attention to the continuity of the material world and the illusory separation between human and nonhuman beings, and exemplify the challenges we as a species face in the Anthropocene.

Chemical Poisoning in Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (Fever Dream)

Samanta Schweblin first published *Distancia de rescate* in 2014, with first editions in Mexico, Argentina, and Spain. Capturing the attention of readers and critics, the novel would be published and distributed a year later under the Literatura Random House seal across the Spanish-speaking world, and was soon translated into many other languages.

An English translation by Megan McDowell was first published in 2017 with the title *Fever Dream*, receiving overwhelmingly positive reviews and being shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize that year. In order to be consistent with the language used in this article, I will be referring to the 2017 English translation of Schweblin's novel when discussing specific extracts. However, when appropriate, I will also point to the 2014 original version in Spanish to highlight significant differences.

Schweblin's first novel joins the long and celebrated inventory of Argentinean fiction that draws upon innovative forms to question our reality, with works by Borges, Cortázar, and Ocampo at the forefront, just to name a few. Set in a small town "four and a half hours" away from the capital, *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*) presents the stories of Amanda and her daughter Nina, and Carla and her son David, two families whose lives are forever altered after being exposed to an omnipresent, unknown poisonous substance used in the soy fields that surround them. Throughout the novel, the four of them have to deal with the physical, emotional, and mental effects of living, and dying, in this toxic environment. The novel begins with the conversation between Amanda, a sick woman unable to move, lying in bed in a small emergency clinic, and David, an ominous-looking boy seeking some answers. The rest of the story unfolds through their dialogue.

The author sees the connections between both mothers, and between the two mothers and their children, as essential, since it is through these relationships that affective processes are mobilized. To emphasize such connections, Schweblin takes advantage of discursive mechanisms commonly associated with parallel narratives, namely: the use of flashbacks and a nonlinear structure, the construction of characters on independent but converging journeys, and the deployment of analogous life-changing incidents to unify their experiences.

In this regard, the difference in the titles used in the Spanish and English editions becomes significant precisely because it affects the way we initially approach the novel and the importance attached to the mother-child relationship. The reader immediately suspects a loss in the rendering of *Distancia de rescate*, literally "rescue distance", as *Fever Dream*. The Spanish title alludes to an essential concept in the novel, described by Amanda very early on. According to her, "rescue distance" is the variable distance between her and her daughter that the protagonist considers would allow her to successfully intervene in case of emergency. And, as Amanda herself admits, she spends a significant amount of time calculating it, given that its variability depends on Amanda's risk assessment of a given situation. In her words: "I need to measure the danger, otherwise it's hard to calculate the rescue distance" (55). The constant state of alert that Amanda experiences is rooted in fear, fear of not being able to help her daughter if she is ever in distress, a fear that, as the novel progresses, will evolve into anguish as her worst apprehensions start to materialize. In fact, the absence of an omniscient narrator and the interrogation-like atmosphere used to construct the novel forces the reader into this constant state of alert too, pushing us to make our own calculations at every turn of the page.

In part, this sense of anticipation is triggered by David's first encounter with toxic chemicals. When David was about three years old, a stallion borrowed by his father, Omar, died after drinking water from a contaminated stream. Since David entered the same

stream, Carla immediately suspects that her son has been poisoned too, a suspicion that is soon confirmed. By linking David's fate with the stallion's, the novel advocates a continuity in the material world between human and nonhuman bodies, bodies subjected to molecular interactions with toxic substances, but that are also visibly altered at a much larger scale. For example, when Omar finds the horse lying in the pasture, we witness its physical transformation—with lips, nostrils, mouth, and eyelids swollen—before it dies.

David's poisoning also allows Schweblin to interrogate notions such as illness, healing, and superstition in the absence of scientific expertise. In this remote village, there is only one small clinic that doctors rarely visit, which is instead attended by nurses. From what we learn, more than curative, the clinic seems devoted to palliative care, and the people living in this remote village are very much aware of the limitations of the medical knowledge they can access. As Carla describes when she talks about a mysterious green house: "The people who live around here go there some times, because we know that those doctors they call in to the clinic always take hours to arrive, and they don't know anything and can't do anything. If it's serious, we go to the woman in the green house" (20). In this description of the medical services provided in the village according to Carla, we can see her profound distrust in the ability of doctors to cure anyone. We also see the appearance of an enigmatic figure: the woman in the green house, who becomes not only the alternative, but the only real option. Ironically, and perhaps not surprisingly, this is an environment where people are constantly dealing with the effects of chemical pollution. In fact, at some point we learn that a large number of children visit the clinic regularly, since, as David puts it: "around here there aren't many children who are born right" (157). Hence, scientific medical knowledge is in crisis, a crisis of legitimacy, trust, and capability, allowing for other medical knowledges to flourish.

However, the knowledge possessed by the healer is presented not as the less desirable substitute when compared to scientific knowledge, but as the alternative epistemology required in this case. When Carla describes this woman, she mentions that "[s]he's not a psychic. She always makes sure people understand that. But she can see people's energy, she can read it" (21). The reference to body energy and the ability of the woman in the green house to read it will be essential in this context, as it positions her as someone who works within the continuity of human bodies and the material world. In the following extract, for example, we can see the process that the woman follows to diagnose and then a list of ailments she is capable of curing: "She can tell if someone is sick, and where in the body the negative energy is coming from. She cures headaches, nausea, skin ulcers, and cases of vomiting blood. If you reach her in time, she can stop miscarriages" (21). Here we can see that in practice the healer performs the role traditionally assigned to a primary care physician, essentially blurring the limits between science and superstition.

Nonetheless, the healer not only fills the void left by absent medical practitioners but also questions the capability of the tools at their disposal to tackle ineffable experiences. As soon as Carla and David enter the green house, the woman immediately knows that David has been poisoned, even though he is not showing any symptoms. However, we do have the sense that David's body is experiencing "minute aberrations," in

Nicholas Shapiro's terms, which only the woman can perceive. Although, as opposed to the long-lasting period of adjustment, or "bodily reasoning," triggered by small doses of toxic chemicals described by Shapiro, here everything occurs in an accelerated timeframe. In only minutes, David's body enters a state of disruption. At this point, his body could be that of the dying stallion: unresponsive and unable to effectively neutralize the attack upon it. The solution to David's poisoning offered by the healer includes a process she calls "a migration," that is, David's spirit would be transferred to an unknown body to diminish the effects of the poison, and an unknown spirit would then inhabit David's body, as no two spirits can occupy the same body. In this regard and when discussing the case of agricultural workers being poisoned by pesticides in the Central Valley of California, Linda Nash addresses "the tension between the imperatives of capitalist modernization and the concern with health" in relation to "the tension between local and translocal knowledge" (9). She describes how scientific experts, adhering to a very "specific way of conceptualizing the relationship between bodies and their environment," were unable to face the health emergency. On the other hand, workers and laypeople "were far more willing to abandon the modern model when it failed to explain their experience" (208). Similarly, Carla is inclined to accept new medical epistemologies to save David. In this context, David's sickness is not just a physical dysfunction limited to his body, it becomes the site where the social, ethical, political, and environmental converge. David ultimately survives, but what comes next is a true tale of horror. He becomes a ghost-like creature, a monster unrecognizable to his parents, who spends most of his time burying dead animals in the yard.

To further develop the connection between Carla and David, but also between Amanda and Carla, the novel takes us to the moment when Carla became a mother by way of a *mise en abyme*. Carla admits that as she held David in her arms for the first time, she was convinced that he was missing a finger, only to be reassured by a nurse that "sometimes that happens with the anesthesia, it can make you a little paranoid" (9). According to González Dinamarca, this passage has a foreshadowing purpose and even pushes the reader to interrogate Carla's responsibility in turning David into a monster. I would argue that this passage in fact fulfills multiple narrative functions. On the one hand, it is a useful mechanism to advance the plot as it justifies the instant bond between both women. It illustrates how the affect of anguish dictates most of Carla's actions, but it also establishes commonalities in the way both Amanda and Carla conceptualize their relationship with their children. Amanda is able to empathize with Carla precisely due to her own struggles and the constant sense of alertness she feels is needed to ensure Nina's safety. In other words, this passage establishes a rhetorical connection between Amanda and Carla through their common trepidation, given that both women experience motherhood as a state dominated by anguish and fear. On the other hand, this parallelism does not go unnoticed to the reader. The *mise-en-abyme* structure of the passage generates a foreshadowing effect, almost as a game of nested mirrors that reflect the present into the past, and the past into the future. Carla's story not only works as a precautionary tale of what was to come in her own life, but it also projects her past into Amanda's future. That is, the parallelism of Carla's and Amanda's past motherhood

experiences reflect into a future in which Amanda's bond with her daughter will be tested, just as Carla's relationship with her son had been.

Poisoned Matter, Poisonous Matter

In the novel, the village and the soy fields around it are the locale where multilayered ecological relationships take place. Very early on, we find out that Amanda and her daughter Nina are in this village, far from the city and its discontents, to spend the summer. A peaceful place of rest where they are both waiting for Amanda's husband, who will join them later. In the following passage, Amanda describes her surroundings when she thinks that they are about to leave the village: "A group of trees gives us some shade, and we sit near the trunks, close to the well. The soy fields stretch out to either side of us. It's all very green, a perfumed green, and Nina asks me if we can't stay a little longer. Just a little" (93). As we can see, in Nina's eyes, the eyes of innocence, this is a place of enjoyment, and hence she wants to extend her stay if possible. Conversely, by this time Amanda has already decided that they needed to leave the area, and her description conveys an underlying sense of unease. We find again a reference to the color green, but the connotation here is slightly different than when referring to the healer's house. Although this time the association appears to be with nature at first sight, it almost seems as if the reference still implied a human-made structure, an artificial landscape, much like a perfectly manicured golf course full of eerie vibes.

There are no explicit references that locate the diegetic space of the novel in a precise geographic location. Nonetheless, some critics have seen convincing evidence to situate the actions that take place in Schweblin's work somewhere in the Argentinean Pampas. In this sense, Lucía de Leone has noted the transformation of the recreational and productive meanings associated with the Pampas lowlands, revealing how the Argentinean countryside in the novel "instead of being a space available for leisure, outdoor enjoyment or a focus of a landscape of endless horizon, promising of illusions, it becomes a post-utopian scenario, more claustrophobic than wide open, more circular than horizontal, more stifling than refreshing, less serving to give and sustain life than to bring danger, pollution, and death" (66).¹ De Leone's depiction alludes to distinctive characteristics of this particular region, namely, that it is a place seen by Argentines, many from the not-so-distant capital city of Buenos Aires, as a tourist destination, due to its temperate climate, whose fertile soil and vast grasslands make it the breadbasket of the country. Gisela Heffes also notices how the novel portrays "a territory transformed by the implementation of technology," a natural world that has been substituted by a post-natural one. Heffes' remark draws attention to a key element in the construction of the natural space, namely that human action has eliminated the idea of "untouched nature."

¹ Translated by the author from Spanish: "en vez de resultar un espacio disponible para el ocio, el disfrute al aire libre o un punto de mira de un paisaje de horizonte sin fin, prometedor de ilusiones, se convierte en un escenario posutópico, más claustrofóbico que ensanchado, más circular que horizontal, más irrespirable que refrescante, menos proclive a la producción y previsión de vida que al peligro, la contaminación y la muerte."

In Bruno Latour's terms, the Argentinean Pampas constitute a hybrid, a mixture of nature and culture (10): they are a lowland ecosystem shaped by a combination of agriculture and tourism. Or perhaps more productively, a natureculture (Haraway 8) that conveys the inseparability of human and nonhuman ecological connections and interactions.² These tensions are certainly present in the novel. Beyond portraying a passive landscape that, at the mercy of human desires, moves between the poles of tourism and agribusiness, *Distancia de rescate* recognizes the agency of nonhuman entities and the complex interactions that occur in this agrarian region. Land in the novel is constructed as vibrant matter, in Jane Bennett's terms, or more accurately, as a human-nonhuman assemblage of vibrant materialities, actants that "are not governed by any central head" (Bennett 24), but that through collective action express their agency. Or from Stacy Alaimo's perspective on the materiality of the human body and the natural world (21), Schweblin's novel recognizes the material world as agential.

At its very core, the novel exposes an ontological metamorphosis of the land from a passive object at the mercy of human desires to a dynamic ecosystem activating connections and interactions to seek balance after being disturbed, from fields poisoned by human-made chemical substances to a human-killing poisonous entity, an assemblage of human and nonhuman affective bodies. This is a land that is no longer submissively accepting anything and everything humans throw at it. Here, the land, its streams and grasslands offer the pollutants back to their unsuspecting creators, who are being subjected to a transformation process themselves in the opposite direction: from the poisonous to the poisoned. Such processes, in effect, recognize the human species as part of the continuity of the material world. Nonetheless, Samanta Schweblin never really tries to fool us with the trope of an idyllic environment that unexpectedly goes wrong. Instead, from the very beginning, the reader is forced into a constant state of alertness, as the novel does not rely on any conventions when it comes to setting the atmosphere, for example, when compared to the calmer pace of a classic Gothic novel. Instead, the novel begins *in medias res*, then rapidly fragments, and from the very first pages we know something has gone terribly wrong.

At this point, more needs to be said about the English title of the novel and its invocation of an altered mental state. If readers of the English translation lose the allusion to a constant state of alertness that comes with the notion of "rescue distance" in the original Spanish, the English title, *Fever Dream*, does highlight another bodily experience that takes place in the novel. In this regard, Marta Sierra pays special attention to the phantasmagoric atmosphere that dominates the ending. For her, the "town becomes the image of a haunted place" (61), as we see deformed children and graves on the side of the road in a town devastated, for years, by pollutants. Informed by Walter Benjamin's work on phantasmagoria, Sierra notes how the presence of ghost-like figures creates an

² In the context of Iberian environmental cultural studies, Daniel Ares-López has used the term "cultures of nature" or "culturas de la naturaleza" (Ares-López and Beilin 176), defined as "historically and geographically situated clusters of material-semiotic practices that involve conscious encounters or attentive interactions between people and nonhuman living organisms or inanimate matter" (Ares-López 58).

experience that resembles dreaming (61). And indeed, as we approach the end, we realize that Amanda has been in an altered mental state (a fever dream?) since the beginning as the result of an intoxication. Nerea Oreja Garralda sees this state as an expression of the 'abject', going back to Julia Kristeva's conception of the term.³ In her words: "In that state of semi-consciousness prior to death, in an undefined and decontextualized place that she has stopped remembering and recognizing, Amanda is unable to make sense of past and present events. The facts are incomprehensible, difficult to recognize" (250).⁴ Ultimately, Oreja Garralda contends, this abjection process would drag both Amanda and Nina to become beings that lack meaning, and hence the need of resistance and resignification offered by telling her own story (250). Yet, I would argue that what is taking place here is a slightly different process, not so much anchored in bodily repudiation, most often related to abjection (Menninghaus 378), but in the confluence of anguish and fear mediated by the land as natureculture, where the inseparability of human and nonhuman interactions break down the boundaries between the acts of poisoning, being poisoned, and becoming poisonous.

Chemical Tragic Consciousness and the Possibilities of Affective Ecologies

Up until now, my goal has been to describe the processes that give rise to an altered state of consciousness intimately related to the bodily experience of being poisoned by toxic chemicals, a state I call "chemical tragic consciousness." Toxic chemicals alter human and nonhuman bodies at a fundamental level through interactions at the molecular scale that are nonetheless projected to other scales of action. At the human scale, such interactions result in a physical state of sickness, understood as a relational concept that dissolves the body-environment boundary. In this sense, the continuity of the material world becomes apparent, being the locale in which human and nonhuman actants connect, interact, and hybridize. At the same time, an acute poisoning episode initiates a rapid succession of bodily responses. First, it triggers affective responses. Then, when faced with the insurmountable, those affected enter a state of reflective consciousness, trying to make sense of their past, present, and future.

In this particular case, Nina's and her own exposure to toxic chemicals has forced Amanda into this state of chemical tragic consciousness, allowing her to tell the story we are reading and to come to the conclusion that her fate and that of her daughter are sealed. It is at this same time when the reader realizes what is happening, that is, that both Amanda and Nina have come into contact with the unknown deadly substance that killed the horse and affected David. In fact, the author starts building this moment from the very

³ In the context of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), a controversial condition to describe symptoms that are the result of low-level exposures to commonly used chemicals, Michelle Murphy also finds the idea of abjection useful, as it "is not simply a form of social exclusion, it is the making and marking of a domain of impossibility" ("The Elsewhere" 89).

⁴ Translated by the author from Spanish: "En ese estado de semi inconsciencia previo a la muerte, en un lugar indefinido y descontextualizado que ella ha dejado de recordar y reconocer, Amanda es incapaz de dar sentido a los acontecimientos del pasado y del presente. Los hechos se le presentan incomprensibles, difíciles de reconocer."

first line: “They are like worms” (1), declares David as he tries to explain some of the symptoms associated with the poisoning. This very first line illustrates the affective perceptual experiences that Amanda, and other human and nonhuman animals, will experience throughout the novel. Furthermore, David insists on learning more about the worms, since their emergence is directly connected to key events, in his words: “We’re looking for worms, something very much like worms, and the exact moment when they touch your body for the first time” (52). Although David is referring to the symptoms of chemical poisoning, as opposed to literal worms, it is undoubtedly a stimulating metaphor. Worms establish a connection to the land, but they also mediate the transition between life and death. When David wants to know exactly when the worms touched Amanda’s body for the first time, he is inquiring about the moment when her living body started to transition into a dead one. Death as a process, with worms as mediators, serves as a reminder of our own materiality. In this respect, and returning to Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, worms become nonhuman actants, but more importantly their presence establishes that of affective bodies. According to Bennett’s reading of Deleuze: “the power of a body to affect other bodies includes a ‘corresponding and inseparable’ capacity to be affected” (21), or in other words, through tactile bodily experiences, human and nonhuman bodies establish an affective assemblage.

This locates us at the convergence of what scholars like Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino have called the “two dominant vectors” of affect theory prevalent in the humanities (4). On the one hand, a reading in the context of the “psychobiology of differential affects” allows us to examine the role of fear and anguish in shaping the ways both Amanda and Carla face the insurmountable challenges of ecological devastation. On the other hand, a reading closer to Deleuze’s and Spinoza’s conceptualization of affect within the “ethology of bodily capacities” can be valuable to explore human and nonhuman interactions of the kind Jane Bennett proposes.

As Amanda nears her death due to the poisoning, it becomes clear that Schweblin has carefully assembled a mirror-like literary artifact in which readers see themselves reflected through affective responses, in particular by Nina’s fate. In order to save her, Carla takes her, without her mother’s authorization, to the woman in the green house to subject her to the same life-saving procedure performed on David, a procedure that transforms little sweet Nina forever into the ghost-like ominous child that David had previously become. By this time, the reader too takes part in the altered state of consciousness that Amanda has reached. This is accomplished through a variety of means. At the structure level, the *in medias res* beginning, the rapid pace, the interrogation-like atmosphere, the flashbacks within flashbacks, the mises en abyme, are all working to produce a general sense of disorientation that leaves little room for the reader to make sense of what is happening and triggers an affective response. At the plot level, we have been warned that no doctor could arrive to this remote place in time to find Amanda or Nina alive, and even if they could, they do not possess the means to save either of them. No hope is possible anymore and feelings of helplessness, anguish, and fear overwhelm us too. Suddenly, all seems lost. This, nevertheless, would not be Carla’s conclusion. In her view, toxic chemicals transform us in ways we cannot anticipate, just as she could not

anticipate what would happen to David. In this context, however gruesome it might be, there is hope, a grim hope, if one can imagine such a thing. *We* might become ghost-like creatures like Carla's son and Nina, living in altered mental states that will become the norm. Our spirits will be housed in bodies *we* might not recognize, but that is the price *we* will have to pay to survive in an environment that *we* have radically transformed, and keep transforming, where human-made toxic chemicals have become omnipresent.

***Distancia de rescate* (Fever Dream) as Ecosickness Fiction**

If there is no denying that the human species as a whole will have to bear the consequences of the increased production of toxic chemicals at a global scale, the *we* used at the end of the last section is certainly problematic. It is undeniable that a subset of individuals within the species is actively involved in producing and spreading the largest proportion of toxic chemicals and, very often, this group of individuals is not the one facing the most negative effects of the growing presence of these substances in ecosystems around the world. Schweblin's novel does not shy away from this conversation. Just as Linda Nash describes how the agricultural workers in California, mostly immigrants, are the most vulnerable to the effects of pesticides, in the novel, the most vulnerable beings are also the ones bearing the heaviest weight. In fact, it was the spectre of financial ruin in an already precarious situation that pushed Carla to go to the fields and lose track of David's whereabouts. Also, it is implied that other village neighbors, mainly children, have been poisoned in the past and then subjected to the same treatment as David and Nina. And just as humans in vulnerable situations, we witness other nonhuman animals constantly dying.

It is worth noting that the interactions between living bodies and toxic chemicals do not always have such fulminant effects. It is suggested too that there are many children whose bodies were physically changed before birth due to the action of these substances. Michelle Murphy has suggested the emergence of what she calls a "chemical regime of living" to explain the low-level accumulation of synthetic chemicals in human and nonhuman organisms, "in which molecular relations extend outside of the organic realm and create interconnections with landscapes, production, and consumption, requiring us to tie the history of technoscience with political economy" ("Chemical" 697). These are the kinds of connection established in the novel at the social scale, a community that over the years has been shaped by the presence of toxic chemicals, forced to seek means to understand the effects of such substances and to live with them.

Meanwhile, there is one exception to the overall despair: Sotomayor, the person who owns most of the agricultural land surrounding the village and Carla's boss. As described by Amanda: "Sotomayor's fields start at a big manor house, and they open out behind it, indefinite" (80). Nonetheless, and although there is an acknowledgement of the role that characters such as Sotomayor play, the author does not look for easy scapegoats. For instance, Sotomayor's character is underdeveloped. Instead, the novel problematizes the practices of the global agricultural system that regularly abuses numerous ecosystems

through intensive farming and treats human and nonhuman beings as disposable, a system plagued by a general lack of accountability.

Heather Houser has recommended the term “ecosickness fiction” to describe a group of contemporary novels and memoirs that “deploy affect in narratives of sick bodies to bring readers to environmental consciousness” (2). Houser revisits the notion of sickness, warning us that she does not use it as a synonym of either “disease” or “illness.” Instead, she sees “sickness” as a relational concept, “a pervasive dysfunction” that “cannot be confined to a single system and links up the biomedical, environmental, social, and ethicopolitical; and it shows the imbrication of human and environment” (11). This broad definition of “sickness,” not attached to a diagnosis (disease) or a personalized experience (illness), allows her to build an argument of how ecosickness fiction works through the affects it activates. Furthermore, according to Houser, “ecosickness narratives establish that environmental and biomedical dilemmas produce representational dilemmas, problems of literary form that the techniques of postmodernism realism, nature writing, scientific communication, or activist polemic alone cannot neatly resolve” (4). That is, if ecosickness fiction does not provide a solution to the crisis of representation, at least it provides a channel to illuminate its own limitations and those of other literary forms. And while the intent of her work is not to elaborate a genealogy, Houser does recognize the place of *Silent Spring* in the “prehistory of ecosickness fiction,” as it “sought to convince readers that animal and human bodies are barometers of ecosystemic toxicity” (5). With such considerations in mind, Samanta Schweblin’s novel can be read as ecosickness fiction, given that it involves “readers ethically in our collective bodily and environmental futures” (Houser 3) through affective processes. If according to Heather Houser ecosickness fiction “can carry us from the micro-scale of the individual to the macro-scale of institutions, nations, and the planet” (223), perhaps *Distancia de rescate*’s most notable achievement is precisely its ability to translate the complexities of a poisoned world into the stories of two families affected by toxic chemicals; to take us between scales of action that bring the macro to the micro and back. That is, Samanta Schweblin’s novel takes advantage of the possibilities provided by fiction to assemble a journey from the global scale of industrial and agricultural capitalist practices, to the human scale of sick bodies, to the molecular scale of chemical interactions, to the human scale of affect, to the global scale of human and nonhuman materialities. At the same time, its brevity and pace are likely to trigger affective responses in the readers: it is a work that will stay with them and encourage reflections on accountability, obligations, and responsibilities long after they have turned its last page.

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