

*DISTANCIA DE RESCATE: EXILE AND LOSS OF IDENTITY*  
IN THE FACE OF RURAL CONTAMINATION

*DISTANCIA DE RESCATE: EXILIO Y PÉRDIDA DE IDENTIDAD*  
ANTE LA CONTAMINACIÓN RURAL

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**Abstract**

This article explores Samantha Schweblin's novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014) within the contexts of environmental literature and eco-horror. It analyzes the rural Pampa setting in the novel as a focal point for analyzing the impact of ecological degradation on human relationships and societal norms. The novel's depiction of the Pampa as a Foucauldian heterotopia—a space that both mirrors and subverts idyllic rural landscapes—sets the stage for a narrative that intertwines ecological devastation with elements of horror. Central to this discussion is the novel's portrayal of “soul migration,” analyzed as a metaphor for exile that leads to a loss of personal identity, and a breakdown of family bonds. Characters such as David and Nina are examined as embodiments of this metaphorical exile, representing broader cultural fears about ecological and existential threats. The article also examines how these figures embody abjection within the Anthropocene, mirroring fears about irreversible environmental damage. Through this lens, the present article explores how the novel critiques modernity's dichotomy between nature and culture and presents a more integrated view of human and environmental interdependence. This article argues that *Distancia de rescate* not only critiques

**Resumen**

El presente artículo explora la novela *Distancia de rescate* (2014) de Samantha Schweblin dentro de los contextos de la literatura ambiental y el eco-horror. Analizo el entorno rural de la Pampa en la novela como un punto focal para examinar los impactos de la degradación ecológica en las relaciones humanas y las normas sociales. La representación de la Pampa como una heterotopía foucaultiana, un espacio que tanto refleja como subvierte los paisajes rurales idílicos, establece el escenario para una narrativa que entrelaza la devastación ecológica con elementos de horror. Central en esta discusión es la representación de la “migración de almas”, analizada como una metáfora del exilio que conduce a una pérdida de identidad personal y a la desintegración de los lazos familiares. Personajes como David y Nina se examinan como personificaciones de este exilio metafórico que representan temores culturales más amplios acerca de las amenazas ecológicas y existenciales. Asimismo, el artículo examina cómo estas figuras encarnan la abyección dentro del Antropoceno y, así, reflejan temores acerca del daño ambiental irreversible. A través de esta lente, el artículo explora cómo la novela critica la dicotomía de la modernidad entre naturaleza y cultura, y presenta una visión más integrada de la interdependencia humana y

contemporary environmental issues but also serves as a commentary on the profound impacts of human actions on nature.

ambiental. Este trabajo argumenta que *Distancia de rescate* no sólo critica los problemas ambientales contemporáneos, sino que también sirve como un comentario sobre los profundos impactos de las acciones humanas en la naturaleza.

**Keywords:** *Samantha Schweblin* || *Environmental degradation in literature* || *Ecoliterature* || *Ecocriticism* || *Terror in literature* || *Argentine literature*

**Palabras clave:** *Samantha Schweblin* || *Degradación ambiental en la literatura* || *Ecoliteratura* || *Ecocrítica* || *Terror en la literatura* || *Literatura argentina*

Latin American literature, traditionally linked with magical realism, historical narratives, and poetry, has not commonly been associated with the horror genre. However, over the past decade, various contemporary authors have extensively explored the darker aspects of the Latin American reality through various forms of horror literature. This exploration ranges from dystopian tales to Gothic narratives, each delving into the socio-political and ecological anxieties prevalent in the region. Among these authors is Samantha Schweblin, whose novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014, translated to English as *Fever Dream*, 2017) contributes to the emerging trend. Schweblin's work explores the connection between ecological degradation and familial relationships, which sets a disturbing backdrop in the rural landscapes of the Pampa. In her narrative, the once idyllic countryside, a symbol of refuge and purity, becomes a sinister space of environmental and emotional catastrophe. The novel's portrayal of a family's disintegration mirrors the broader ecological decay, presenting an example of eco-horror within Latin American literature. This intersection of ecological concern and horror provides a critique of contemporary environmental issues. Thus, Schweblin's work is not only a narrative of loss, but also a commentary on the irreversible impacts of human actions on nature.

The novel is set in the rural Pampa and focuses on four main characters: Carla and her son David, and Amanda and her daughter Nina. Amanda travels to the countryside with hopes of a peaceful vacation. There, she encounters Carla, a mother haunted by the drastic changes in her son, David. The local water, polluted and toxic, provokes a transformation in David that forces his soul to flee his body, thus transforming

him into a monstrous and unrecognizable figure to Carla. This horrifying scenario of soul migration, initiated by David, ominously echoes later in Nina, whose soul is also destined to abandon her body under escalating environmental and supernatural pressures. The novel depicts the impact of ecological disaster not only on the land but also on the existence of its inhabitants.

This article begins by categorizing the novel within environmental literature and eco-horror genres. It focuses on how the text intertwines ecological devastation with elements of horror. Then, it analyzes the Pampa as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a reflection and inversion of the idealized rural landscape, setting the stage for a narrative that subverts traditional concepts of nature. Following this, the article explores the novel's portrayal of soul migration. This concept is analyzed as a metaphor for exile that leads to the loss of personal identity and the breakdown of family ties. The characters David and Nina are then examined as monstrous figures that embody the consequences of this exile. The narrative is further explored to show how these monstrous figures represent broader cultural fears and anxieties. Finally, the paper discusses the concept of exile as a manifestation of abjection within the Anthropocene.

### **Environmental Literature, Ecohorror, and the Fears of the Anthropocene**

In his book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Bruno Latour critiques the foundation of what is considered “modernity” in the Western world. He criticizes the separation between nature and culture that has been a hallmark of modernist thought. Latour describes the modern and westernized worldview in terms of two separate periods. In the “premodern” way of living, humans and non-humans (entities such as animals, plants, objects, and natural elements) were intertwined in a network of relationships. In contrast, “modern” times presuppose a separation between nature and human beings. He suggests that this dichotomy is a false construct and that, in reality, nature and culture are linked (Latour, 1993: 10). Latour's concept of the “network of relationships” involves a web where humans, animals, objects, and natural elements interact and influence each another. He argues that rather than existing in isolated categories, these entities co-create and shape each other's realities: “To shuttle

back and forth, we rely on the notion of [...] network. More supple than the notion of system, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity, the idea of network is the Ariadne's thread of these interwoven stories” (Latour, 1993: 3). Ariadne's thread was used by Theseus to find his way out of the labyrinth after slaying the Minotaur. Similarly, Latour suggests that the concept of *network* serves as a guiding thread that allows us to make sense of the interwoven relationships that constitute reality. By following the “thread” of these networks, we can better understand how changes in one part of the system can ripple through and affect the whole, leading to more nuanced insights into both scientific and social phenomena. This integrated perspective challenges the traditional modernist view and calls for a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected nature of the world. Furthermore, Latour emphasizes the continuity, flexibility, and historical depth of these connections, highlighting the inadequacy of rigid, isolated categories in explaining the dynamic and co-creative interactions between nature and culture. In this way, the distinction between the human and the non-human, nature and culture, is blurred, with all actors participating in a dynamic interplay.

This perspective is echoed in the broader field of environmental literature, which often portrays humans as integral parts of the ecological web rather than as separate or superior to nature. As Ben Holgate (2019) suggests, “the philosophical foundation of environmental literature is that everything is interrelated. This shared biocentric point of view presents humanity as merely one element of the universe” (3). As opposed to the Western, anthropocentric notions of modernity, environmental literature portrays a world in which humans are not superior to nature; rather, they are one element of the universe represented in the work. It is based on this theoretical framework that I consider *Fever Dream* to be part of environmental literature. The novel does not present nature as a backdrop against which human actions take place; rather, it represents a relationship in which nature directly influences the human. The contamination of the countryside has implications for human health and social relations within the story, and the characters cannot escape the environmental devastation that surrounds them. Their lives are linked to the soil they live on and the water they drink. *Fever Dream* places humans within a larger ecological system and, in this way, the text emphasizes that human well-being depends on the health of the environment. The novel portrays humans not as dominators of nature,

but as participants in an ecological web where human actions can destroy the interconnected fabric of life.

More specifically, the novel portrays how water contamination in the countryside affects human characters. As Lucía de Leone (2017: 65) explains, the rural landscape in Argentina has been reshaped by the cultivation of transgenic soy, leading to different environmental and health problems. According to her, the transgenic soy cultivation not only reshaped the rural landscape and social dynamics in Argentina, but also set the stage for narratives of displacement and exile. In Schweblin's novel, the chemicals used to enhance the soy crops permeate the soil and contaminate the water that townspeople drink, making them sick. This environmental degradation not only sickens the community but also disrupts the bond between mother and child. As a desperate measure to preserve life, parts of children's souls are forced to migrate to new and healthy bodies, rendering them unrecognizable to their mothers. This soul migration can be interpreted as a form of exile. According to Edward W. Said (2000), exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (173). In the context of the novel, the children are not only forcefully displaced from their physical selves but also from their familial connections and identities. This soul migration represents a profound dislocation, akin to Said's definition of exile, where there is an unbridgeable gap between the child's essence and their original body and family. In the novel, this forced separation is not just physical but also emotional and psychological, exacerbating the sense of exile. The contamination metaphorically "pollutes" the connection between mother and child; hence the text constructs the notion that ecological disturbances have consequences on human life. This environmental and emotional exile underscores the broader themes of displacement and alienation brought on by ecological catastrophe.

The contamination caused by the soy crops in the novel can be understood through Rob Nixon's (2011) notion of slow violence: "by slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). The environmental degradation of the countryside has been so slow that characters do not notice it. Given that it has occurred "gradually and out of sight," it is presented as a veiled threat, an unnamable evil that will end with Amanda's life, and causes David's and Nina's soul migration. Amanda does not know what has caused her death; therefore, she and David must review everything

that happened since she arrived in the countryside to find the exact moment when she and her daughter were poisoned by the water:

Son como gusanos.

¿Qué tipo de gusanos?

*Como gusanos, en todas partes.*

El chico es el que habla. Yo soy la que pregunta. ¿Como gusanos en el cuerpo?

*Sí, en el cuerpo. [...]*

No me puedo mover, digo.

*Por los gusanos. Hay que ser paciente y esperar. Y mientras se espera hay que encontrar el punto exacto en el que nacen los gusanos.* (Schweblin, 2014: 1)

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the entity described as “como gusanos” in Amanda’s body is the contaminated water she accidentally ingested. The poisoned water entered her body and turned her into a living corpse, infested by worms and rotting away. This imagery reflects Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence as the metaphorical worms invaded her so gradually and imperceptibly that they are almost invisible.

The representation of water pollution as slow violence contributes to the novel’s atmosphere of ecological horror. Gothic and horror texts often employ veiled threats that lurk on the periphery of everyday life and attempt to annihilate characters. For instance, in Ian McEwan’s *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) the threat comes from a seemingly benign couple that lures tourists into a trap that reveals the perverse underbelly of human relationships and the dangers within intimate connections. Similarly, in *Dracula* (1887), the vampire invades England in the dark, without being noticed. He represents a threat to Victorian society as it attempts to corrupt its moral codes and values. These narratives share a common thread in their depiction of horror as a mysterious force that subtly infiltrates the established social order, often going unnoticed until it is too late. In Schweblin’s novel, the unnoticed evil is water pollution. Tidwell and Soles (2021) define ecohorror in the Anthropocene as presenting “a vision of [a] terraformed planet as frightening rather than promising and [reflecting] both the horrors we face now and those we fear will occur in the future” (3). In the context of the Anthropocene, eco-horror represents the anxieties of living on a planet

where the consequences of human actions against the environment are destructive and irreversible. The terror comes from the realization that the damage being done is not just to the environment, but to human life. This impact on both the ecosystem and human existence mirrors the unsettling transformations seen in horror narratives, where familiar settings become sources of fear and alienation.

### **Foucault, the Heterotopia, the Inversion**

In every horror text, the setting is crucial to the narrative. In Gothic literature, spaces often serve as thresholds or boundary between the known and the unknown, the living and the dead, the sane and the insane. These liminal spaces are where transformation and transgression occur. For example, in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the castle that should protect its inhabitants entraps them; in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), London is a labyrinth that allows Mr. Hyde to lurk and create terror. This is also true in more contemporary Gothic fiction. For example, in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002), the protagonist crosses a secret door only to find on the other side a world that is an inverted reflection of her own. There is another mother, another father, another reality that is the twisted and dark version of her own life.

In the case of Schweblin's eco-horror novel, the setting is portrayed as what Michel Foucault (1986) defines as heterotopia:

utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places [...] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. [...] I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (24)

According to Foucault's definition, a heterotopia is an "other" space—a space that simultaneously contains everything that a utopia represents and inverts it. Foucault



also points out the fact that utopias “are fundamentally unreal places”, or, in other words, imaginary places. Foucault’s notion of heterotopia suggests a layering of the real and the unreal, where the imagined perfection of a place confronts its real-world contradictions and challenges. This concept frames Amanda’s experience in the novel as her initial perceptions of the countryside are soon challenged by its hidden complexities.

Amanda idealizes the countryside as a utopia. Her descriptions of the space and choice of the Pampa for her vacation are evidence of this. Grenoville (2020) defines a vacation as “siempre un viaje paradójico: la promesa que la sostiene no es la deriva sino la utopía individual y privada. [...] La elección de la vacación se hace [...] en base a toda una serie de signos exteriores de felicidad [...] que recuperan motivos rurales para convocar el imaginario de la campiña” (70). Amanda imagines the countryside as a place full of the “ideal” features that Grenoville outlines—the solitude, natural beauty, and the autarchy: “Los campos de Sotomayor empiezan con una gran casona al frente y se abren hacia atrás, indefinibles. No hay vereda todavía. Pero hay pasto entre la calle y la casa. Hay dos galpones medianos detrás, y siete silos mucho más allá de los primeros sembrados” (Schweblin, 2014: 80). She perceives the fields as “indefinite”. They are vast, enormous, and free from the path that has not been built yet. She also notices the sheds and the silos, both of which contain sources of life: water and food. What she perceives is life thriving in this enormous and green space. Furthermore, she compares this place with the city: “Me sorprenden las ganas que tengo de tomarme unos mates, las pocas ganas que tengo de subirme al coche y manejar cuatro horas y media hasta capital. Volver al ruido, a la mugre, al congestionamiento de casi todas las cosas” (Schweblin, 2014: 68). For her, the grime and the congestion associated to the city is not present there. The countryside represents cleanness and life. Finally, she has a sentimental attachment to the Pampa: “Mi madre decía que el campo era el mejor sitio para aprender a conducir. Yo aprendí en el campo, cuando era chiquita” (Schweblin, 2014: 90). Being in the countryside reminds her of sharing a moment with her mother. This utopic space is not only full of possibilities for the creation of life, vastness, and cleanness; it is also full of positive memories.

Following Foucault’s proposal, the utopia in Amanda’s head can simply not exist since utopias are not real. What she encounters in the Pampa is the *real place*, the enacted utopia that simultaneously contains everything that a utopia



represents but inverts it. When Carla describes the space, we can see more clearly that it is a heterotopia:

Sí, una locura para vivir donde vivo, pero qué ilusión me hacía. Omar tenía dos yeguas madres de lujo de las que habían nacido Tristeza Cat y Gamuza Fina, vendidas ya y que corrían, y corren todavía, en Palermo y en San Isidro. Después nacieron otras dos, y un potrillo, pero de esos ya no me acuerdo los nombres. Para que te vaya bien en ese negocio tenés que tener un buen padri-llo, y a Omar le prestaban el mejor. Cercó parte del terreno para las yeguas, hizo un corral detrás para los potrillos, plantó alfalfa, y después más tranquilo fue armando el establo. (Schweblin, 2014: 18)

In this passage, Carla is describing her husband's business. We can see here that life thrives in this space: Tristeza Cat and Gamuza Fina bore two more mares. The land also provides the food necessary—the alfalfa—to sustain the horses. In this way, this space indeed contains all the characteristics that Amanda attaches to the Pampas. However, this idealized vision is subverted by the lethal aspects of the place. Carla also says: "David se había acuclillado en el riachuelo, tenía las zapatillas empapadas, había metido las manos en el agua y se chupaba los dedos. Entonces vi el pájaro muerto. Estaba muy cerca, a un paso de David" (Schweblin, 2014: 20). Next to an element closely related to life (the water), we see death (the bird). We also witness the moment in which David, Carla's son, is poisoned by the contaminated water from the crops. In this way, the novel portrays death within a life-thriving space. We see how water can be life-creating and lethal at the same time. This heterotopic Pampa creates life and has the characteristics that Amanda dreams of, but at the same time inverts them and houses death. Amanda's vacation in a utopic place proves impossible. Later, when David asks, "*¿de verdad este sitio te parece un lugar mejor?*" (Schweblin, 2014: 68), the question acquires a sinister tone since both Amanda and the reader realize that this is not a better place. The phrasing of the question implies that there is something fundamentally wrong with the countryside; it constructs the idea that there are hidden dangers. This suggestion inverts the pastoral ideal, a literary trope that romanticizes rural life. By casting doubt on the countryside's

benevolence, David’s question disrupts this romanticization, instilling a sense of dread about what has traditionally been a setting of solace.

In the heterotopic countryside, the inversion of the natural order creates a reality where the characters are exiled not just from their land, but from themselves. The contaminated water penetrates the soil and the bodies of Nina and David; it poisons them and forces a soul migration. The heterotopia thus becomes the stage where the body-to-body exile unfolds. As the characters’ souls are forcefully displaced into unfamiliar bodies, the space around them mirrors this dislocation: a once nurturing environment turns alien and threatening. In this corrupted countryside, the characters’ experiences of exile go beyond physical displacement. The estrangement in the Anthropocene depicted in the novel is the alienation from a natural world that has become hazardous due to human-induced environmental degradation. This estrangement marks a deeper disconnection from their identities and the natural world, which is a manifestation of the Anthropocene’s deepest horrors: the transformation of life-sustaining environments into sources of danger and contamination.

### **Sick space, sick humans: the abject**

As mentioned before, the text depicts how environmental degradation leads to the deterioration of the human character’s health and wellbeing. If the space is sick, then characters also become sick. The character’s deterioration manifests on two levels: physically, where the body becomes ill due to environmental pollution, and in the psyche of the characters in the form of the abject, which challenges the individual’s fundamental sense of self. Julia Kristeva develops the concept of the abject in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). For her, the abject is that which is disturbing to someone’s identity, culture, and the natural order of things; it is what does not “respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, 1982: 4) and threatens to break down order and meaning. It is all that breaks boundaries, including those between subject and object. The abject is connected to what is expelled from us, or what we find unsettling or repulsive. This includes bodily fluids (such as excrement) and decay that remind us of our mortality. An encounter with the abject confronts us with the fragility of our existence and our boundaries as individuals.

In this sense, the rupture of the bond between Nina and Amanda can be interpreted as the abject. Amanda has a millenary connection with her daughter: “the rescue distance”. Amanda defines it in the following way: “Yo siempre pienso en el peor de los casos. Ahora mismo estoy calculando cuánto tardaría en salir corriendo del coche y llegar hasta Nina si ella corriera de pronto hasta la pileta y se tirara. Lo llamo ‘distancia de rescate’, así llamo a esa distancia variable que me separa de mi hija y me paso la mitad del día calculándola, aunque siempre arriesgo más de lo que debería” (Schweblin, 2014: 13). This maternal sixth sense that allows Amanda to constantly know if her daughter is in danger has been passed from mother to daughter for generations. She states “lo llamo” without clarifying what the antecedent of that *lo* is. This creates the notion that the name “distancia de rescate” is a euphemism to refer to something that cannot be defined. It is impossible to describe with words the connection that exists between Amanda and her daughter because it exists beyond language. This gives it an almost mythological connotation: before language existed, the link between mother and daughter was already there.

When Nina’s soul is forcibly migrated (or exiled) to a new body, this link between her and Amanda starts to fracture. This migration entails not only a relocation of the soul, but an abject breakage of the maternal bond: “Ese hilo no puede partirse, Nina es mi hija. Pero, sí Dios mío, se corta” (Schweblin, 2014: 117). Amanda’s realization that the link will break is expressed with a tone of panic. First, she reminds herself that “ese hilo no puede partirse”, yet it breaks. Amanda’s constant anxiety over maintaining the rescue distance is tied to her fear of losing Nina. Amanda’s individuality becomes inseparable from her role as Nina’s protector. If she loses the connection, she will lose part of herself. She faces the abject fear of potential disintegration of her own identity and the maternal bond that defines her. The abject does not respect the rescue distance and it threatens to destroy Amanda’s meaning as a mother. All in all, environmental degradation not only poisons Amanda physically but also psychologically.

David’s exile from his body also provokes an encounter between his mother and the abject. After licking his wet fingers, he is intoxicated by the water, and he is taken to the woman of the green house so that she can perform the soul migration:

—Dijo que el cuerpo de David no resistiría la intoxicación, que moriría, pero que podíamos intentar una migración.

—¿Una migración? [...]

—Si mudábamos a tiempo el espíritu de David a otro cuerpo, entonces parte de la intoxicación se iba también con él. Dividida en dos cuerpos había chances de superarla. No era algo seguro, pero a veces funcionaba. (Schweblin, 2014: 26)

David will lose part of his essence (part of his soul), and his identity, and become someone else because of this forced migration. The woman from the green house explains the consequences to Carla:

Dijo también que la migración tendría sus consecuencias. No hay sitio en un cuerpo para dos espíritus y no hay un cuerpo sin espíritu. La trasmigración se llevaría el espíritu de David a un cuerpo sano, pero traería también un espíritu desconocido al cuerpo enfermo. Algo de cada uno quedaría en el otro, ya no sería lo mismo, y yo tenía que estar dispuesta a aceptar su nueva forma. [...] incluso sin David en ese cuerpo, yo seguiría siendo responsable del cuerpo. (Schweblin, 2014: 28-29)

The body has become a space that different half-souls can inhabit. David is no longer himself: he is now a contaminated space that mimics the contamination of the Pampa. His mother is now responsible for this space (“el cuerpo”), but she no longer has a son. The relationship between mother and son has been broken due to a forced migration. When David loses part of his soul, he becomes an embodiment of the abject because he is neither fully himself nor completely the other. His state of being is in limbo; he exists on the threshold of two identities. In this context, the idea of existing in a limbo between two identities provokes unease and estrangement because it challenges the fundamental notion of a stable, unified self. The Anthropocene, characterized by human-induced environmental changes, heightens this horror by disrupting the natural world and, consequently, human identities. The contamination of the environment leads to the contamination of the self, blurring the boundaries between subject and object, self and other. This instability reflects the deeper anxieties of the Anthropocene, where the impact of human actions on the environment creates a sense of disorientation and fear. The horror lies in the realization that human

identities, like the environment, are vulnerable to disruption and fragmentation, leaving us in a perpetual state of existential uncertainty and dread. David's meaning as an individual has been destroyed by the abject. His fragmented existence symbolizes the broader impact of environmental degradation on human identity, illustrating the profound and unsettling consequences of living in a world where natural and cultural boundaries are constantly being eroded.

Moreover, David's soul loss breaks the boundaries between life and death, health and illness, and familiarity and strangeness. Half of his soul died, and half is alive. He never fully recovered his health (he has white spots all over his face), but he is not sick. He looks like himself (he is familiar), but at the same time, his mother does not recognize him. By transgressing these boundaries, David's condition upsets the symbolic order and confronts those around him, especially his mother who is now responsible for a body occupied by an unknown entity. What David used to symbolize to his mother has changed, and thus he becomes an unsettling presence. Carla talks about her new son in the following way: "Así que este es mi nuevo David. Este monstruo" (Schweblin, 2014: 34). The maternal bond is now tainted by the abject presence of something unfamiliar within the familiar body of her child. The love and responsibility she feels for her son are now intermingled with fear and repulsion, emotions evoked by the abject. David's abject condition is a metaphor for the environmental crisis depicted in the novel, where the contamination of the natural world leads to a perversion of what is natural and safe. Just as David's body becomes a host for something foreign, the countryside becomes a host for pollutants. As a result, it is a world that is familiar yet irrevocably altered. In other words, a world that has become abject in its defiance of the natural order.

### **The monster: a cultural construction of the Anthropocene**

The notion that David is a dangerous monster becomes increasingly evident as the novel unfolds. When he enters Amanda's house without her permission, Carla becomes paranoid and tells Amanda that he cannot be alone with Nina (Schweblin, 2014: 29). Amanda screams at David and demands to know where Nina is: "Mi excitación no te asusta ni te sorprende. Parecés cansado, aburrido. Si no fuera por las manchas

blancas que tenés en la piel serías un chico normal y corriente. Eso fue lo que pensé” (Schweblin, 2014: 30). David’s reaction to Amanda’s heightened state is strange as he shows neither fear nor surprise. Furthermore, the presence of white patches on his skin adds to the sense of otherness about him: it is an abnormal characteristic that marks him as different. There’s an underlying wrongness to him that the text hints at but leaves undefined. This creates an aura of mystery and unease.

The mystery surrounding him begins to unravel when we learn about his relationship with animals:

Tu madre dice que el perro llegó hasta las escaleras de la casa y estuvo sentado ahí casi una tarde entera. Dice que te preguntó por el perro varias veces, y que cada vez le contestaste que el perro no era lo importante. Que te encerraste en el cuarto, que te negaste a salir. Dice que solo cuando el perro terminó desplomándose como vio desplomarse a los patos, solo entonces saliste de la casa, arrastraste al perro hasta el jardín trasero, y lo enterraste. (Schweblin, 2014: 46)

According to Carla’s account, David had been alone with the dog near their home. She describes how the dog sat at the stairs of the house for an entire afternoon, indicating that David had interacted with it during this time. Carla claims to have repeatedly questioned David about the dog, to which he consistently responded that the dog was not important. His lack of concern, coupled with his refusal to leave his room until after the dog had collapsed in a similar manner to previously affected ducks, paints a worrisome picture. David’s subsequent actions—dragging the now lifeless dog to the backyard and burying it—could be interpreted as compassionate, an attempt to care for the animal post-mortem. However, the context provided by Carla’s intense interrogation and the eerie calmness with which David handled the situation suggest something more sinister. Carla’s pointed questions imply that she suspects David had a role in the dog’s death.

Almost at the end of the novel, the reader and Amanda understand what is wrong with David: “*Ahora voy a empujarte. Yo empujo a los patos, empujo al perro del señor Geser, a los caballos. Y a la nena de Casa Hogar*” (Schweblin, 2014: 71). David’s ominous words *ahora voy a empujarte* are immediately followed by a list of those he has

previously “pushed”: the dog that he buried and the docks. This metaphorical pushing, as the context suggests, is equivalent to killing. This unravels the mystery behind the series of deaths. Amanda’s death after David’s declaration confirms the lethal nature of David’s “push”. She adds to David’s list the girl from the orphanage, which reveals that Amanda realizes that David is a killer. The addition of the girl to the list also indicates a pattern: Amanda is not David’s first human victim. David’s existence as an abject entity has turned him into a child killer.

Nina also becomes a monstrous entity after her soul is exiled from her body. There are multiple occasions in which Amanda describes the way Nina sits in the car. She crosses her legs, then puts the seatbelt on, and hugs her stuffed mole. As the novel progresses, this becomes one of Nina’s characteristic traits. In the end of the novel, after all the soul migrations have taken place, David gets in the car of Amanda’s husband. He sees David sitting in the back and Amanda describes this:

Entonces mi marido te ve. Estás sentado en el asiento trasero. La cabeza apenas pasa el respaldo. Mi marido se acerca y se asoma por la ventana del conductor, está decidido a hacerte bajar, quiere irse ahora mismo. Erguido contra el asiento, lo mirás a los ojos, como rogándole. Veo a través de mi marido, veo en tus ojos esos otros ojos. El cinturón puesto, las piernas cruzadas sobre el asiento. Una mano estirada apenas hacia el topo de Nina, disimuladamente, los dedos sucios apoyados sobre las patas del peluche, como si intentaran retenerlo. (Schweblin, 2014: 75)

In this passage, Amanda identifies where her daughter’s soul has gone—to David’s body. David is sitting in the car, crossed legged, trying to hold on to the stuffed mole, meaning that Nina’s soul is now inside him. Amanda can see in his eyes those other eyes—Nina’s eyes. This fragment also shows that Nina is trapped inside David. The eyes show that she is begging his father to recognize her inside the boy and she is also trying to retain the stuffed mole. David has consumed Nina and is entrapping her. The idea that a part of Nina is consumed by David, a child who has already been established as a killer, heightens the horror. It suggests that Nina, though not directly committing the acts, becomes part of the cycle of violence and death. In other words, her innocence is tainted by David’s malevolence. This involuntary consumption of her being by something



dark and destructive is evidence of a violation of the self. It is a forced union that is both metaphorically and literally monstrous.

Nina, as part of David, becomes part of the abject and this elicits both horror and pity on the reader. Her existence, now bound to the actions of David, becomes an eternal state of liminality, where she is neither entirely herself nor entirely an other, but an uncanny amalgamation that resists categorization and understanding. This monstrous entity that they form together embodies the abject because they literally become a transgression of the boundaries. They transgressed the boundary between them and the other, between possible and impossible, between self and non-self. David is a child whose body is now shared by half of his own soul and half of enigmatic others. We know part of Nina is inside him, but it is possible that more souls are inhabiting him. This transformation can be traced back to the environmental exile caused by water pollution, which puts him into the realm of the abject. The contamination of his home (the Pampa) mirrors the contamination of his being. David's tragic fate is a metaphor for the ecological disaster: just as the environment has been corrupted and transformed into something monstrous, so too has this young boy, who now personifies the novel's theme of ecological and personal disintegration.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) comments on the cultural dimension of the monsters represented in fiction: “The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection” (4). David, as a child killer inhabiting a contaminated body, is the embodiment of the fears of the Anthropocene. He is the monstrous consequence of environmental negligence. His existence as a child assassin becomes a cultural commentary. It projects the real-world implications of environmental disregard onto a fantastical narrative. His transformation into an abject being serves as a representation of the profound cost of humanity's disregard for nature.

## Exile as the object in the Anthropocene

Brazilian philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback (2009) understands *exile* in the following way:

Exílio não é tanto vida em outro lugar ou vida no mundo do estranho. É bem mais a vida-entre o familiar tornado estranho e o estranho que não consegue tornar-se familiar, entre o conhecido tornado desconhecido e o desconhecido que nunca pode ser conhecido, entre um passado que nunca passa e um futuro que nunca chega. [...] No exílio, não é possível ver as coisas a olho nu, numa visão frontal e sem conflito com as coisas. Tampouco se pode falar de uma experiência corpo a corpo com as coisas, já que vida em exílio é vida de um corpo sempre longe de si mesmo, vida de um corpo partido e dividido. Nessa vida-entre, que é a vida do longe, a vida em exílio, só é possível ver as coisas olho a olho, desde os encontros e os desencontros com o outro, tanto o outro de si como o outro dos outros. (9-10)

The philosopher suggests that exile is a liminal state where the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and the strange can never be fully integrated into the known. She also suggests that life in this liminal state resembles a fragmented body, always broken and divided. This metaphorical definition of exile is made literal in *Fever Dream*. The children's souls leaving their bodies is a manifestation of the fragmentation that happens because of exile. The soul is away from its body and the integral wholeness of the characters' beings is broken. Nina and David experience a physical and existential displacement that parallels the emotional and psychological disorientation of exile. Their bodies, once the familiar home to their spirits, become foreign territories, estranged by the soul's partial absence. The children, therefore, embody the "life of a broken and divided body".

The "eye to eye" encounters and "dis-encounters" with the self and others can be seen in the way Nina's fragmented soul struggles to reconcile with her new reality. She has an "eye to eye" encounter with her father in the car who fails to recognize her given that her soul is inside David's body. She also has an "eye to eye" encounter in the car with her mother who does recognize her inside the new body but can

no longer help her. In this way, she “dis-encounters” her past relationship with her parents. Some aspects of her identity—the way in which she sits, her stuffed animal—become unfamiliar inside her new body. Inside David’s body, she cannot do things that Nina used to do because they are not accepted by others. After Nina/David tries to hug the stuffed mole, the father orders them to get out of the car (Schweblin, 2014: 75). Everything that was once familiar to her becomes unfamiliar. She is caught in an irreversible exile inside someone else’s body, where the known has become unknown, and the continuity of her past self seems unreachable—a “past that never passes” and that cannot become a future. Their condition is a “life-in-between”. The children live in a liminal space between what they once were and what they have become. It is a life of distance, of perpetual exile within their own altered existences. The characters are not just exiled from their physical homes due to environmental degradation, but also from their bodies, and this leads to a fragmented existence. Thus, the children’s fragmented bodies become a metaphor for the dislocation and disintegration that exile can inflict upon the self. This fragmentation suggests that our intervention in the natural world has repercussions not only on the environment but also on the human psyche. Both the earth and the self can no longer be seen as whole and unbroken.

*Distancia de rescate* is more than a narrative about environmental pollution: it is a commentary on the Anthropocene’s disruption of the self. The soul migration portrayed in the novel serves as a metaphor for the psychological and physical fragmentation that characterizes exile in the context of environmental crisis. Through eco-horror, the novel represents the consequences of environmental degradation, where the displacement of souls from bodies symbolizes the larger dislocation humans experience from their environment in the Anthropocene. Moreover, the transformation of characters like David and Nina into monstrous entities reflects a cultural anxiety about the irreversible changes we are making to our planet. By positioning exile as a state of abjection, the narrative evinces the consequences of environmental neglect. This portrayal can be interpreted as a warning about the potential for humanity to become estranged from the world it inhabits and blur the distinction between monster and human being.

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