

POPULAR EPIDEMIOLOGY  
IN SAMANTA SCHWEBLIN'S *DISTANCIA DE RESCATE*

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The poison was always there,” writes Samanta Schweblin in *Distancia de rescate* (2015), a novel set in the Argentine countryside eerily recounting a poisoning by RoundUp (glyphosate) used as an herbicide in soy production (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The novel has received critical acclaim and was adapted into the 2021-film *Fever Dream*, directed by Oscar-nominated director Claudia Llosa, and produced by Netflix. Mat Youkee claims that Schweblin’s novel forms part of a larger gothic turn in Latin American literature, which frames the novel’s environmental critique in terms of horror, suspense, and the occult.<sup>2</sup> In *Distancia de rescate*, Schweblin sounds environmental alarms while simultaneously sounding the alarms that ring out in parents when their children exceed the “rescue distance” measured in the distance required to travel to rescue a child from danger.<sup>3</sup> Schweblin claims that when this distance is exceeded, it is like “an alarm that” Amanda, one of the mothers of young children featured in the novel, “can never turn off,” a claim reminiscent of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which also sounds environmental—as well as maternal—alarms.<sup>4</sup> This article examines the gothic elements—zombies, worms, and rituals—of *Distancia de rescate* through the lens of popular epidemiology in order to answer the following two questions. First, how does the ambivalence of popular epidemiology open generative pathways for literary analysis? And second, how do these findings contribute to a larger narrative of popular epidemiology in Argentina and across the Americas?

Michelle Murphy defines popular epidemiology as “the vernacular technoscientific practices of workers and lay people” in the face of emergent disease and toxic exposure (59).<sup>5</sup> Important to highlight is how popular epidemiology is susceptible to a wide range of political motivations. In 2020, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, who became cynical practitioners of popular epidemiology during the Covid-19 pandemic, dealt in panaceas at the cost of the lives of the citizens they represent. This cynicism is evident in Bolsonaro’s remarks in 2020 that, “A Brazilian jumps into raw sewage and nothing happens.”<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1.** “Vintage Monsanto Roundup Grass Killer 80s Commercial (1987).” Rewind Me, 30 Sept 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgGHkeXi\\_Lg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgGHkeXi_Lg).

The claim suggests that Brazilians become immune to emergent disease due to the toxicity they encounter in everyday life, while failing to consider toxicity as a source of illness, or even a comorbidity. Instead, popular epidemiology of the Far Right is concerned with the immunological danger of immigrants and foreign influence.<sup>7</sup> This is not unique, however, to the Far Right, as eco-cynicism has been employed by the Latin American Left, exemplified in Daniel Ortega’s nationally televised comments in Managua about concessions made to build the Nicaraguan Canal, which are further evidence of eco-cynicism. Lake Nicaragua “[i]s contaminated,” Ortega claims, a status exemplified by the fact that “[t]here used to be a species of freshwater shark that has practically become extinct without ever needing a canal . . . And why? Because large investors, large processing plants prove very costly to reaping the benefits of Lake Nicaragua.”<sup>8</sup> Ortega’s comments leverage more toxicity against existing toxicity, which amounts to a tautology, and thus eco-cynical *bona fides* for environmental damage of the largest freshwater lake in Central America. In *Fictional Environments*, Victoria Saramago identifies a potential source of this toxic eco-cynicism located in a “mimetic rift” that opens when the environments in fictional or nonfictional texts begin to disappear and take on a ghostly quality (13).<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Rogers situates this ghostly character in the “twin vocabularies” of nostalgia and mourning: the nostalgia for the unfilled promises of extractive economies and mourning of the environments lost to them, both of which are evoked in Ortega’s commentary on the Nicaraguan Canal (13).<sup>10</sup> How, then, is it possible that Ortega, Bolsonaro, as well as critics and authors like Schweblin, operate in the same space of popular epidemiology?

The ambivalence of popular epidemiology is made possible by the inherent tension between poison and cure, what Jacques Derrida calls *pharmakon*, a term that will aid in the analysis of literature through the lens of popular epidemiology.<sup>11</sup> Derrida deconstructs the Greek word *pharmakoni* in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and uncovers fertile polysemy: "*pharmakon* can be reversed: it can worsen the ill instead of remedy it" (97). Furthermore, Derrida identifies *pharmakon* as bound up with reading and writing, citing Socrates: "you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out (*dokeis moi tēs emēs exocou to pharmakon hēurēkenai*)," which consists of "speeches bound in books" and "whatever posture . . . most convenient for reading."<sup>12</sup> The practices of reading and writing are *pharmakological* in that they provide an escape from living memory, which, concomitantly, proves their external (immigrant) position as they relate to truth. Derrida writes, "The *pharmakon* is that which, always springing up from without, acting like the outside itself, will never have any definable virtue of its own" (102). Applied to the question above (How, then, is it possible that Ortega, Bolsonaro, as well as critics and authors like Schweblin, operate in the same space of popular epidemiology?), *pharmakon* is shorthand for the eco-social realities of toxicity, as well as the supplemental position of writing in relation to spoken word, particularly the spoken word of elected and unelected leaders.

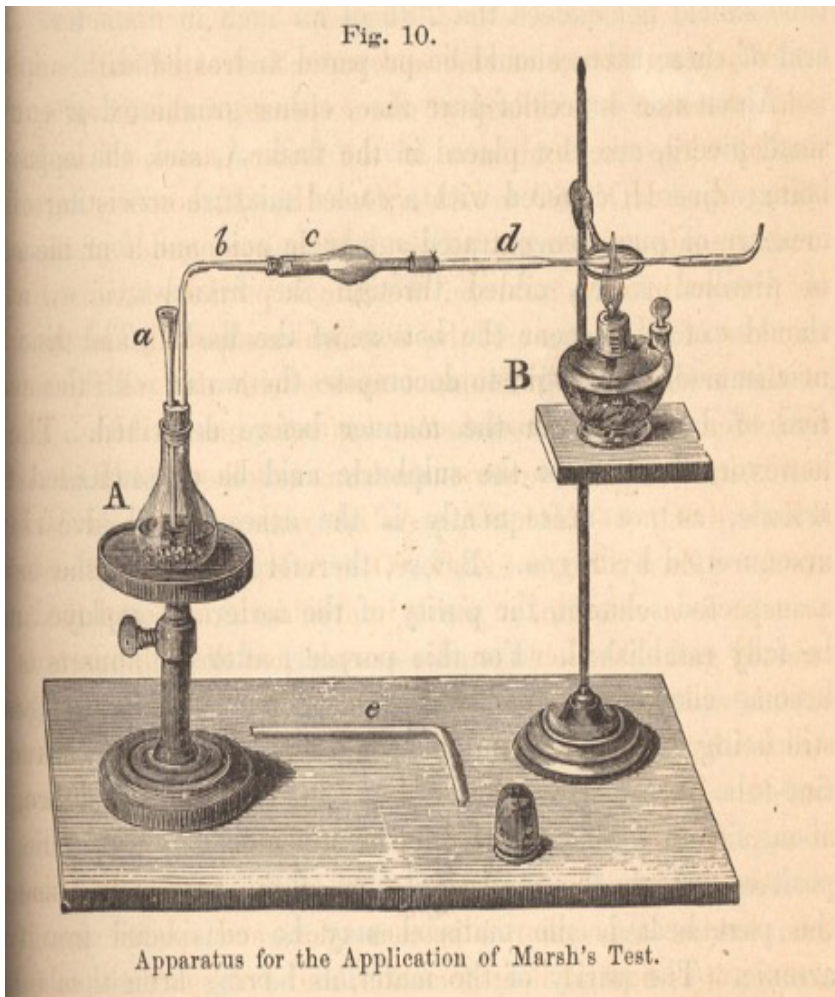
Also important for the analysis of *Distancia de rescate* are the epistemological roots of the field of toxicology, some of which can be found in the Americas. At the time of publication of *A General System of Toxicology* (1814), Mathieu Orfila brushed shoulders with Charles La Condamine and Alexander Von Humboldt, who were returning to France from the Americas with, previously unseen by Orfila's eyes, specimens of toxic species and chemicals that the Spanish expat cites extensively.<sup>13</sup> Volume Two of *A General System of Toxicology* systematizes the deleterious effects of poison chemicals from the Americas on the human body through case studies, which end in the subject's death: death *a priori* toxicology. *A General System* renders the stories of popular epidemiology from the colonial Americas into scientific categories (acid poisons, narcotic poisons, copper poisons, for example). This is made evident in Orfila's references to the naturalist Don Pedro Fermín de Vargas, member of the Real Expedición Botánica del Nuevo Reino de Granada in 1788: "persuaded by the assurance with which the negro recounted the effects of the Guaco for hindering venomous Serpents from biting, [he] desired to submit himself to the experiment" (443).<sup>14</sup> This recounting of the recounting (supplement) uncovers a critical moment when the practice of a Black slave was transformed into a category in a science book.

This colonial history of toxicology supplements makes clear how the law handles toxicity. Central to Orfila's influence is his development of a practitioner's guide to toxicology in France, and in 1840, testified to the guilt of

Marie-Fortunée Lafarge by determining the cause of her husband's death as poisoning by arsenic (see Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> The emergence of toxicology at the heart of an epistemological shift toward the biologization of life and law is what Sylvia Wynter characterizes as the secularization of life as overdetermined by the category of Man of European descent.<sup>16</sup> In the Argentine countryside of Schweblin, justice moves slowly, if at all, and intergenerational toxicity predominates, and the stories we tell about what makes us sick are intertwined with those discussions about what makes us human or less than-human. As this article will lay out, Schweblin simultaneously challenges in her bestiary of child zombies, toxic worms, and rituals, the system of justice and public health that are incapable of answering for toxicity.<sup>17</sup>

*Distancia de rescate* takes place in the Argentine countryside, where the protagonist, Amanda, recounts the events of the recent past in search for the precise moment when she and her daughter, Nina, were poisoned by herbicides used on nearby soy farms. As the soy industry has swelled across Argentina and Brazil, massive controversy has emerged as citizens have brought cases against the Argentine government in the face of monoculture's continued profitability. This is not, however, a uniquely twenty-first-century narrative. *Distancia de rescate* shares this with banana novels of the mid-twentieth century that also develop their critique with eerily similar eco-social awareness of long-term chemical poisoning in banana monocultures. *Distancia de rescate* operates within a nearly century-old popular epidemiology associated with monocultural capitalism (bananas-soy).<sup>18</sup>

As a final point of reference, this article is written from the vantage point of my own inherited toxicity, passed down to me from my father who was stationed at Denang Airbase as a combat medic during the Vietnam War (1972-1974), and who, for an unknown period of time, was exposed to Agent Orange. As is now widely known, Agent Orange was dumped by the barrel onto the forests of Vietnam during the Vietnam War in order to defoliate trees, a military technique called ecocide.<sup>19</sup> Traces of Agent Orange can live within the body for decades and be passed down generationally through congenital diseases like diabetes and macrocephaly. I write from the positionality of this toxic inheritance, and in toxic kinship with those children born to parents in Vietnam, and with the protagonist of *Distancia de rescate*, Amanda, who, like me, decipher the toxic alarms present in the body and in the world around us: "like a lit fuse, somewhere; the motionless scourge [is] about to erupt" (151).<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 2.** “Marsh Test Apparatus.” Theodore G. Wormeley, M.D., *Microchemistry of Poisons, including their Physiological, Pathological, and Legal Relations*. Steel engraving, 1867. New York National Library of Medicine. [https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/visibleproofs/galleries/technologies/marsh\\_image\\_3.html](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/visibleproofs/galleries/technologies/marsh_image_3.html).

## Zombies

The principle gothic feature of *Distancia de rescate* is zombiedom. Dalton and Potter write correctly that the zombie is a “disturbingly flexible receptacle of meaning” (1), and, as a concept, runs the risk of signifying everything and nothing in the same instance.<sup>21</sup> The analysis answers in the affirmative that zombie scholarship retains usefulness—notwithstanding its ubiquity—for no reason other than zombies continue to populate literatures about toxicity and thus warrant earnest examination. *Zombies* have historical roots in Haiti and Hollywood, but today are widely intelligible as the living dead, more material than a ghost, less alive than a human.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, zombies represent an outer limit of humanity; divided by an uncanny valley, and like other monsters are points of reflection for humankind. *Zombies* are environmental agents—often a result of contagion or toxicity—that blur distinctions between the human and non-human. This double character of zombiedom is found in David, the young boy who suffers toxic shock and Amanda’s primary interlocutor. Scholarship on *Distancia de rescate* has examined the *zombi-niño* character of David, part of whose soul has “migrated,” “Split into two bodies” in order to overcome the illness caused by splashing in a puddle of toxic water (22).<sup>23</sup> Outside of the limits of viable healthcare, Carla, David’s mother, brings him to a woman who lives in a green house who performs *migraciones*, which, on the one hand saves David’s life, but on the other, renders him zombie-like: a body in continual movement and locked into an obsession with dead animals. To understand David’s zombie-like character it is essential to characterize him within an existing literary corpus of herbicide-induced zombification.

Agrotoxic zombification is afoot in Ramón Amaya Amador’s banana novel *Prisión Verde* (1950). A novel published in exile and banned in Honduras, it narrates a popular uprising of workers at a Standard Fruit banana plantation in northern Honduras.<sup>24</sup> An old *regador de veneno*, or sprayer, Don Braulio, trains new recruits on the plantation:

I am no longer a man. I am a shadow nothing more. I have been to the hospital in the port three times. And nothing! Now, I no longer take medicine because what the Company gives me never arrives, and the medicine that could help me I would have to buy in the very same hospital or dispensary. And the money no one sees. What to do? Let me rot! I am a cadaver. Before, I was a strapping man like you. Now, look at me, I can barely have the strength to lift the *escopeta* and spray. Once I tried to change jobs, but I got hooked in the tubing, but my body was already shit. I had to go back to spraying *veneno*. I am going to die here.<sup>25</sup> (61-62)



Present in Don Braulio's soliloquy are the long duration of toxicity, the failure of public health, and his zombification: "Let me rot! I am a cadaver" (62). Amaya Amador describes zombiedom here in a supplemental manner—both a consequence of toxic working conditions, as well as requirement for it—and inextricably linked to labor practices of Standard Fruit. The *regadores de veneno* have a privileged place within banana novels of Central America, as they are victims of alienation by poison, as well as agents of massification and direct political action.<sup>26</sup>

The zombiedom of the mid-twentieth century, inextricably linked to labor, spreads into the idyllic landscapes of leisure and of the pastoral myth of Argentina. In their analysis of imagery used to promote Argentine tourism, Cecilia Pérez Winter and Claudia Troncoso highlight two mythic images: "(i) the gaucho and landscape of the pampas as synonymous with liberty, security, especially from the tourist region of the campo; (ii) 'white European,' through a community that was the product of migration that took place in the country during the end of the nineteenth century" (20).<sup>27</sup> Schweblin distorts these images of the Argentine countryside. The figure of the gaucho, Omar, is largely absent from the novel. Along with the poisoned horses, the novel describes an equestrian industry sickened by the growing soy industry. On the one hand, the masculinity associated with gauchos and horses is in peril. On the other hand, the safety of the countryside (the rescue distance), held together by women and children, is short-lived. In fact, an escape to the countryside does not reaffirm a national identity, or the mythopoetic image of the able-bodied gaucho on horseback, but instead reveals the countryside as a vector for illness, congenital disease, and zombiedom.<sup>28</sup>

## Worms

Returning to Don Braulio of Prisión verde, worms are both bioindicators of toxicity, as well as social indicators of otherness: "If we do not decide to live like worms, the Company will not prosper. And you will see how life becomes, the more she fattens up, the less human we become" (62).<sup>29</sup> Worms are *pharmakological* alarms, and in *Distancia de rescate*, where they feature as essential agents of popular epidemiology.<sup>30</sup> In *Parasites, Worms, and the Human Body*, Mischa Tadd identifies a unique ambiguity present in helminthology: worms are strange creatures to human eyes, but they are nevertheless essential parts in an ecosystem; worms consume decay, which, includes human remains.<sup>31</sup> Worms create a shorthand in *Distancia de rescate* for the omnipresent toxicity that operates—as the ambulation of worms—below human consciousness.<sup>32</sup> This reading of worms and toxicity aligns with Fernanda Sánchez, who writes in *La Argentina fumigada*, "They're there. Even though we don't see them,

they're there....we know little to nothing" (11).<sup>33</sup> In the case of *Distancia de rescate*, worms figure more centrally as the structure around David's pleas for Amanda to remember when she first noticed the worms (toxicity): "They're like worms....It's the worms. You have to be patient and wait. And while we wait, we have to find the exact moment when the worms came into being" (1-2).<sup>34</sup> Megan McDowell's translation capitalizes on the phenomenological phrase, "came into being," whereas Schwebelin's original reads "nacer." These choices pair glysofaptic poisoning with motherhood ("...around here there aren't many children who are born right," (128-129)).<sup>35</sup> Dinorah Cossío has argued that among the reasons the novel is unsettling—or gothic—is its depiction of "ambivalent motherhood," particularly in the case of Carla, who views her son David as a monster, but only as a result of her efforts to save his life. The use of the verb *nacer* in describing worms is both akin to "mother as nature" as well as "mother as death."

The novel begins with the phrase "They're like worms," thus laying out the worm's importance to the text. "Earthworms?" Amanda asks. "No, another kind of worms," David responds (1). Structurally, worms embody the temporality of the novel, an "already-there" quality that is emblematic of Derrida's theorization of the *pharmakon*. Worms are supplemental in the novel in a Derridean fashion: both as addition (indicator) and substitution (consumer of decay), as poison and cure, "Superfluous and necessary, dangerous and redemptive (ix)."<sup>36</sup> The all-important quotation from *Distancia de rescate*, "The poison was always there," could be altered to read "The worms were always there," as worms emerge simultaneously with the poison as having already been present. This temporality is evidenced further by the intergenerational toxicity found in the waiting rooms of the clinic. Amanda asks David who the other patients are, to which David responds, "*Not all of them go through poisoning episodes. Some of them were born already poisoned, from something their mothers breathed in the air, or ate or touched*" (151). In this quotation, the reader begins to recognize the peculiar entanglements of worms, motherhood, and temporality described in the novel, which leads to the following proposition: will our mothers save us? Worms will eat us.<sup>37</sup>

## Ritual

Deliverance from toxicity is accomplished through ritual, which is the final point I will examine in *Distancia de rescate* through the lens of popular epidemiology. Like other features of popular epidemiology, ritual is ambivalent, owing to varying religious and political motivations, examples of which are seen recently in the diverse groups adopting ritual defenses against Covid-19.<sup>38</sup> There are rituals of freedom and rituals of deceit; rituals of cure and rituals of poison. Ritual features centrally in twentieth-century Latin American litera-



ture, but as it relates to *Distancia de rescate*, ritual appears in the absence, or failure, of public health. The novel is bookended by the transmigration of young children (David and Nina), and Carla recounts to Amanda that “The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the only possible way out” (19).

The woman at the green house placed David’s swollen body into a basin of water and “she came back with a big spool of thin hemp rope and a handheld fan, and she went back into the room” (33). Outside of this description, the ritual is itself somewhat unclear, only that “[Carla] couldn’t choose the family he went to” (30), nor could she choose who inhabited David’s body: “The transmigration would take David’s spirit to a healthy body, but it would also bring an unknown spirit to the sick body . . . and I would have to be willing to accept his new being” (29-30). The ritual animates the traumatic events in Argentina during the military dictatorship, during which children born to political prisoners were given to families supportive of the regime.<sup>39</sup> This historical reference at the heart of the ritual is made clear in Schweblin’s original, “su nueva forma,” which evokes a generation of children transformed through ideological poisoning. The political subtext of ritual in *Distancia de rescate* is a useful point of comparison to ritual elsewhere in literature, and specifically, as it functions as a mechanism of contestation in the Central American banana novel.

Ritual is a feature of Miguel Ángel Asturias’ banana novel, *Viento fuerte* (1950), a novel I read in comparison to *Distancia de rescate*, as both texts, published 64 years apart, evoke ritual to cure bodily and environmental poisoning from monocultural production.<sup>40</sup> The omnipresence of toxicity is shared by Asturias: “such a sweet blue the Bordeaux poison” (see Figure 3 for an early advertisement of the product).<sup>41</sup> The symptomology of characters like el Cucho mirror the worsening banana blight caused by Panama disease: “though the plants seemed to be sick, sick like el Cucho who was by then just up to his ears, sick like el Cucho because, like him, the leaves coughed in the blowing wind” (9).<sup>42</sup> This prosopopoeia reveals the double-place of toxicity—in environments and in bodies—which, coupled with State violence, made labor organizing a herculean task in pre-revolutionary Guatemala. The final events of the novel feature Hermenegilo Puac, an obscure character who meets with a shaman, Rito Peraj, to offer his own head for ritual sacrifice in exchange for the winds of hurricane to cleanse the landscape of the banana plantations: “Sugusán, sugusán, sugusán. The Shaman returned to the cemetery with the head of Hermenegilo Puac and buried it. The crosses had leapt into pieces when the hurricane swept over the tombs. Sugusán, sugusán, sugusán” (209).<sup>43</sup> Asturias, like Schweblin, animates the literary figure of the *pharmakeus* that serves as the final connection between toxic novels and Derrida’s *Dissemination*.

Glyphosate, Bordeaux, and, more recently, *Nemagón* (dibromochloropropane) are used to protect soy and banana crops and are the same substances



**Figure 3.** “Bouillie bordelaise Excelsior... pour le traitement des maladies cryptogamiques de la vigne et des arbres fruitiers. Affiche.” Galicia Digital Library, 1903. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Bordeaux\\_mixture#/media/File:Bouillie\\_bordelaise-1903.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Bordeaux_mixture#/media/File:Bouillie_bordelaise-1903.jpg)

that threaten the lives of people and animals.<sup>44</sup> From this seeming paradox erupts the figure of the *pharmakeus*, who is a magician or a sorcerer (or “even a poisoner?” (117)), whose very position within society skirts the line between poison and cure.<sup>45</sup> Rito Peraj, the shaman, and the woman in the green house can be likened to Socrates because they possess valuable knowledge, while at the same time require ritual compensation: a head, half a soul, or a pound of flesh, so to speak. The *pharmakeus* lives outside of town and creates an escape from agricultural empires like those created by United Fruit and Bayer-Monsanto. While *Distancia de rescate* is not a decolonial novel as such, and Asturias’ well-documented racism conflicts with his later writing, ritual is a performance that strikes at the heart of the modern/colonial *pharmakon* (poison, cure, outsider) in both texts.<sup>46</sup> Toxicology—from Orfila’s references to the Real Expedición Botánica—borrows from Black and indigenous knowledge of poisons, and the rituals performed in both novels engage with toxicity from outside of toxicology. Instead, the powers of magic and the textual references to ritual are powerful criticism of the enduring incapacity for health and justice systems to respond to the toxicity produced by profitable agricultural systems.

## Conclusion

As this article claims, popular epidemiology spans political affiliation and carries with it *pharmakological* ambivalence, postulating both cure and poison concomitantly. Samanta Schweblin critiques this ambivalence in spaces where public health and law are absent, specifically in monocultural soy production. Argentina today is the world’s largest exporter of soy products, and the soy industry contributes to nearly a quarter of total exports, as compared to beef, which makes up only 3.8% of total national exports.<sup>47</sup> To protect this investment, glyphosate herbicide is sprayed onto soy crops. It is no accident that Syngenta, which is today the largest agricultural chemical company in the world, held its press conference with president Alberto Fernández on December 3, 2020: Global No Pesticide Use Day. President of Syngenta’s operations in Latin America, Antonio Aracre, insisted on the virtues of sustainability, but not at the cost of jobs or overall economic development.<sup>48</sup> While Argentina’s government is committed to new developments in soy production, popular discontent with Bayer-Monsanto and Syngenta operations in the region grows.<sup>49</sup> In fact, each May 21 sees protestors from the Plaza de Mayo to Washington and London turn out in what has been named the Global March Against Bayer-Monsanto Syngenta.<sup>50</sup> The twenty-first century has seen widespread protests against toxic chemical use in industrial agriculture. *Nemagón* (dibromochloropropane), which replaced the Bordeaux mix in banana production, was found to cause infertility.<sup>51</sup> In 2005, over 3,000 Nicaraguans marched from Chinandega to Managua against *Nemagón* use, and it is estimated that 30,000

Costa Ricans have been negatively affected by the use of the fungicide.<sup>52</sup>

This article asks two critical, toxic questions: how does the ambivalence of popular epidemiology open generative pathways for literary analysis of toxicity, and how do these findings fit among other narratives of popular epidemiology in Argentina and across the Americas? In reference to the former, zombies, worms, and ritual have fascinated readers of *Distancia de rescate*. While they have been extensively studied by overlapping fields of criticism, this article claims that these figures and practices continue to be potent literary features of social critique of cure and illness. Zombies, worms, and ritual operate at the edge of Argentine society and consciousness, and these features subvert social and familial roles: child zombie, ambivalent mother, and absent gaucho father. Writing gothic fiction is certainly contrasted by writing social realist fiction. However, read through the lens of popular epidemiology, *Distancia de rescate* adds to the constellation of meaning around a deep-seated ambivalence regarding what poisons us and what cures us.

The second question of this article is rooted in the paradigmatic line of *Distancia de rescate*: “The poison was always there.” I read this as an invitation for readers to trace toxicity historically, particularly when the meaning of toxicity has changed: the early nineteenth century linked toxicity to law and the mid-twentieth century brought about pesticide and herbicide use on a pharaonic scale. These two moments in time—alarms, perhaps—inform the early twenty-first-century struggle for justice and the battle for popular sentiment about toxicity where we live, in what we eat, and where our parents did these things. Recently, in public statements, Jair Bolsonaro, Daniel Ortega, and Antonio Aracre of Syngenta-Argentina have cynically leveraged the strange temporality of toxicity (always already there) against economic growth, and their commentary represents a final cost-benefit analysis of life itself. The popularity of *Distancia de rescate* is due in part to Schweblin’s great ability to stir emotion in readers, but also because the novel describes the truly terrifying reality of already living in the aftermath of this final cost-benefit analysis.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Siempre estuvo el veneno.” Samanta Schweblin, *Distancia de rescate* (Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2014), 116. English-language translations are by Megan McDowell and in-text pagination refer to the novel’s English-language translation. Samanta Schweblin, *Fever Dream*, trans. Megan McDowell (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Mat Youkee, “Gothic becomes Latin America’s go-to genre as writers turn to the dark side,” *The Guardian*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/31/latin-american-literature-gothic-genre-books>.

<sup>3</sup>On the monstrous character of David in *Distancia de rescate*, see Rodrigo Ignacio González Dinamarca, “Los niños monstruosos en *El Orfanato* de Juan Antonio Bayona y *Distancia de rescate* de Samanta Schweblin,” *Brumal* 3, no. 2 (2015): 89-106; Lucía Feuillet, “Complot y paranoia en *La maestra rural* y *Distancia de rescate*,” *Revista Chilena de Literatura* no. 104 (2021): 549-574; and Dinorah Cossío, “Ambivalencia y toxicidad: el vínculo materno-filial en *Distancia de rescate* de Samanta Schweblin,” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup>“[U]na alarma que ella (uno) nunca puede apagar,” “Entrevista a Samanta Schweblin por su libro ‘*Distancia de rescate*,” *Revista Leemas de Gandhi*, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJvZ4Ds8fXY&t=44s>.

<sup>5</sup>Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). See also Michelle Murphy, “Chemical Regimes of Living,” *Environmental History* 13, no. 4 (October 2008): 695-703, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25473297>.

<sup>6</sup>Pedro Henrique Gomes, “Brasileiro pula em esgoto e não acontece nada, diz Bolsonaro em alusão a infecção pelo coronavírus,” *Globo*, March 26, 2020, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/03/26/brasileiro-pula-em-esgoto-e-nao-acontece-nada-diz-bolsonaro-em-alusao-a-infeccao-pelo-coronavirus.ghtml>.

<sup>7</sup>See Felipe Monestier and Gabriel Vommaro, “Los partidos de la derecha en América Latina tras el giro a la izquierda. Apuntes para una agenda de investigación,” *Revista Uruguay de Ciencia Política* 30, no. 1 (2021): 7-22.

<sup>8</sup>“Daniel Ortega justifica construcción de canal: ‘Ese lago está contaminado,’” *La Prensa Nicaragua*, October 13, 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMY15VVxi7A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMY15VVxi7A). “Ese lago está contaminado . . . allá había una especie de tiburones en el agua dulce que prácticamente ha sido extinguida sin necesidad de canal. ¿Y por qué? Porque grandes inversiones, grandes plantas procesadoras, son muy costosas para que se pueda precisar todo lo que va al gran lago de Nicaragua.”



<sup>9</sup> Victoria Saramago, *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Rogers, *Mourning El Dorado: Literature and Extractivism in the Contemporary American Tropics* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 13. See also Bruce Braun's identification of eco-tourism and adventure hiking as a paradox at the center of "what it means to be modern" (111): *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture, and Power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> This section expands upon Fernando Rosenberg's analysis of Argentine literature through the framing of *pharmakon*: "Toxicidad y narrativa: Los suicidas del fin del mundo de Leila Guerriero, Cromo de Lucía Puenzo, y *Distancia de rescate* de Samanta Schweblin," *Revista Iberoamericana* 85, no. 268 (2019): 901-22, <https://doi.org/10.5195/reviberoamer.2019.7813>.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981). Derrida writes, "only hidden letters can thus get Socrates moving" (71).

<sup>13</sup> José Ramón Bertomeu-Sánchez and Agustí Nieto-Galan, *Chemistry, Medicine, and Crime. Mateu J.B. Orfila and His Times* (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2006), xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Matheiu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila, *A General System of Toxicology, or a Treatise on Poisons, drawn from the Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal Kingdoms, Considered as to their Relations with Physiology, Pathology, and Medical Jurisprudence*, vol. II, trans. John Augustine Waller (London: E. Cox and Son, 1821).

<sup>15</sup> Orfila, "Of the Proper Means for Ascertaining the Existence of Poisoning," 490.

<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 264, DOI: 10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

<sup>17</sup> Patricio Eleisegui, "Glifosato: en el mundo produce cáncer, en Argentina es inocuo," *Editorial Sudestada*, July 2, 2022, <https://www.editorialsudestada.com.ar/glifosato-en-el-mundo-produce-cancer-en-argentina-es-inocuo/>.

<sup>18</sup> Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xvi.

<sup>19</sup> David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>20</sup> "Como una mecha encendida en algún lugar; la plaga inmóvil a punto de irritarse." It is worth noting that today, the number one export destination for Argentine soymeal



is Vietnam, connecting an additional point of toxic triangulation within this essay. See “Soybean Meal in Argentina,” *Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)*, *BACI International Trade Database Data (1995-2020)*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/soybean-meal/reporter/arg>.

<sup>21</sup> David Dalton and Sara Potter, “Introduction: The Transatlantic Undead: Zombies in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Cultures,” *Alambique. Revista académica de ciencia ficción y fantasía / Jornal académico de ficção científica e fantasia* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1-12.

<sup>22</sup> See Sara Lauro and Karen Embry’s “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism,” *boundary 2* 35 (February 2008): 85–108, which has become a generative starting point for describing the fungibility of zombihood.

<sup>23</sup> “Dividida en dos cuerpos había chances de superarla.” See also Nicolás Campisi, who identifies the zombi-niño as a potential limit of maternity in the toxic Argentine countryside in “Tiempos extraños: comunidad, supervivencia e imaginación sostenible en *El Huésped* de Guadalupe Nettel y *Distancia de rescate* de Samanta Schweblin,” *A Contracorriente* 17, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 174.

<sup>24</sup> Banana novels have come under renewed interest following the publication of *Tiempos recios* (2019) by Mario Vargas Llosa. See Nicasio Urbina, review of *Tiempos recios*, by Mario Vargas Llosa, *Latin American Literature Today* 1, no. 13 (February 2020), <http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/february/tiempos-recios-mario-vargas-llosa>. Valeria Grinberg Pla and Werner Mackenbach situate the emergence of the banana novel at the “peak of the ‘social’” (“auge de ‘lo social’”), following “regionalism, the *criollista* novel, and in the so-called *novela de la tierra* . . . finally culminating in testimonio in the second half of the 20th Century.” See their article “Banana novel revis(it)ed: etnia, género y espacio en la novela bananera centroamericana. El caso de *Mamita Yunai*,” *Iberoamericana* 6, no. 23 (2006): 162, 164.

<sup>25</sup> Ramón Amaya-Amador, *Prisión verde*, 5th ed. (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 1988), 61-62, my translation. “— Ya no soy hombre. Soy una sombra no más. He ido tres veces al hospital del puerto. ¡Y nada! Ahora ya no tomo medicinas porque las que da la Compañía no me llegan y las que pudieran servirme hay que comprarlas en el mismo hospital o en el dispensario. Y la plata no se ve. ¿Qué hacer? ¡Dejarme pudrir? Soy un cadáver. Antes era un hombre macizo, como usted. Ahora, míreme, apenas tengo fuerzas para levantar la ‘escopeta’ y regar. Una vez quise cambiar de trabajo y me enganché en la conexión de tubería, pero ya mi cuerpo era una mierdolina. Tuve que volver al riego de ‘veneno’. Aquí voy a morir.”

<sup>26</sup> The primary ingredients of Bordeaux are copper sulfate, lime, and water. United Fruit, for example, implemented its use on a large scale. *Regadores de veneno* (poison sprayers) were known in Costa Rica as *pericos* (parakeets), a nickname given for the

blue-green stains Bordeaux produced on clothes and skin. It was well-known within popular epidemiology that *pericos* suffered from what became “sprayer’s lung,” due to inhaling aerosolized Bordeaux. Symptomatically, sprayer’s lung resembles *fiebre met-al*, and toxicologically, both ailments are caused by copper accumulation in the lungs. See Steve Marquadt, “Pesticides, Parakeets, and Unions in the Costa Rican Banana Industry, 1938-1962,” *Latin American Research Review* 37, no. 2 (2002): 3-36.

<sup>27</sup> Cecilia Pérez Winter and Claudia Troncoso, “La imagen turística del campo pampeano bonaerense (Argentina) desde la promoción oficial,” *Cuadernos de antropología social* 50 (2019): 101, <https://doi.org/10.34096/cas.i50.5341>. The translation in the above text is my own: “(i) el gaucho y el paisaje pampeano como sinónimo de libertad, seguridad, especialmente desde la región turística Campo; (ii) la Argentina “blanca y europea”, mediante una comunidad producto de las migraciones que tuvo el país durante fines del siglo xix.”

<sup>28</sup> I employ the term mythopoetic with reference to the body following Lennard J. Davis. See “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Amaya-Amador, *Prisión verde*, 62, my translation. “Si nosotros no nos resolviéramos a vivir como gusanos, la Compañía no prosperaría. Y vea usted cómo es la vida, entre más engorda ella, nosotros somos menos hombres.”

<sup>30</sup> Donna Haraway calls for “retying some of the knots of ordinary multispecies living on earth” (3) in *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Brenda Gardenour and Misha Tadd, ed., *Parasites, Worms, and the Human Body in Religion and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), xix.

<sup>32</sup> Germán Vergara, “Bestiario latinoamericano: los animales en la historiografía de América Latina,” *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* 28 (December 2021): 187-208, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702021000500010>.

<sup>33</sup> Fernanda Sánchez, *La Argentina fumigada. Agroquímicos, enfermedad y alimentos en un país envenenado* (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2016), 11, my translation. “Están ahí. Aunque no los veamos, están ahí....sabemos poco y nada.”

<sup>34</sup> Schwebelin, *Fever Dream*, 1. “Son como gusanos....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,” 11.

<sup>35</sup> “Pero acá son pocos los chicos que nacen bien,” 108.

<sup>36</sup> This verbiage is used by Barbara Johnson in the introduction to *Dissemination*, ix.

<sup>37</sup> Director Claudia Llosa's film, *La teta asustada* (2009), tells the story of intergenerational trauma passed through breastmilk. It is thus no surprise that Llosa was chosen for the film adaptation of Schwebelin's novel.

<sup>38</sup> See Mariana Abalos Irazabal, María Soledad del Río, Yanina Faccio and María Bargo, "Creer en lo invisible, domesticar el ritual. Coronavirus y espiritualidad," in *Producciones colectivas en tiempos de pandemia. Jóvenxs investigadorxs del IDAES discuten impactos sociales, económicos y culturales del COVID-19*, Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales, 2020, <https://noticias.unsam.edu.ar/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Producciones-Doc61.pdf>. See also Alice Su, "¿Mala suerte? ¿Trabajo perdido? ¿Brote de coronavirus? Los amuletos de Hong Kong vencen todos los miedos," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/vida-y-estilo/articulo/2020-03-28/mala-suerte-trabajo-perdido-brote-de-coronavirus-los-amuletos-de-hong-kong-vencen-todos-los-miedos>.

<sup>39</sup> See Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, "History of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo," accessed April 8, 2022, <https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/history.htm>. "In the 30 years, we have been able to locate 120 of the disappeared children, including 4 found by governmental commissions and 2 located by CLAMOR, the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Southern Cone." See also Kerry Bystrom and Brenda Werth, "Stolen Children, Identity Rights, and Rhetoric (Argentina, 1983-2012)," *JAC* 33, no. 3/4, *Rhetorics Regulating Childhood and Children's Rights* (2013): 425-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43854562>.

<sup>40</sup> The sequels of the banana trilogy include *Papa Verde* (1954) and *Los ojos de los enterrados* (1960). See René Prieto, *Miguel Ángel Asturias's Archeology of Return* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): "we could add that the author of *Viento fuerte* wrote *novelas de la tierra* with a twist, but a twist that makes them seem like no other work written before or since . . . [t]he sole exponent of a unique language" (2).

<sup>41</sup> Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Viento fuerte* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1950), 40. "John nunca había visto tan verde el campo...tan dulcemente azul el veneno bordelés que arrojaban los escopeteros hacia lo alto y tan escurridos hacia la nada de los banales enfermos con el mal de Panamá."

<sup>42</sup> Asturias, *Viento*, 9. "[A]unque más parecía plantas enfermas, enfermas como el Cucho que se fue ya solo orejas, enfermas como el Cucho porque, como él, tosián las hojas al soplo del viento."

<sup>43</sup> *Popol Vuh*, trans. Dennis Tedlock (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 154. "Sugusán, sugusán, sugusán...El Chamá volvió al compsanto con la cabeza de Herme-negilo Puac y la enterró. Las cruces habían saltado en pedazos al pasar el huracán sobre las tumbas. Sugusán, sugusán, sugusán." The ritual of Puac resembles that of the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuh*, who sacrifice themselves in order to trick the lords of

the underworld into taking their own lives, which ultimately delivers the underworld from Xibalba and lays a foundation for a new order of humans on earth. Puac's head is preserved in the home of the shaman, Rito Peraj, where it is in a state of suspended animation, continuing to exert its effect on the narrative: "dejando en su casa la cabeza de Puac orientada hacia donde sale el sol en colchón de plumas de gavilán" (207).

<sup>44</sup> H. Babich, D.L. Davis, and G. Stotzky, "Dibromochloropropane (DBCP): A review," *Science of the Total Environment* 17, no. 3 (1981): 207-221, DOI: 10.1016/0048-9697(81)90062-0.

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> See Arturo Arias, "Constructing Ethnic Bodies and Identities in Miguel Ángel Asturias and Rigoberta Menchú," *Postmodern Culture* 17, no. 1 (September 2006), <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.906/17.1contents.html>.

<sup>47</sup> "Soybean Meal in Argentina," *Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), BACI International Trade Database Data (1995-2020)*. See also Santander Trade Portal, which has figures based on data from the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other sources: [https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/argentina/foreign-trade-in-figures?actualiser\\_id\\_banque=oui&id\\_banque=10](https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/argentina/foreign-trade-in-figures?actualiser_id_banque=oui&id_banque=10).

<sup>48</sup> In 2018, the Misiones province banned the use of glyphosate pesticides starting in 2020. The press conference was streamed live on the YouTube channel of Argentina's Casa Rosada. "Anuncio de inversiones y plan de venta de soja de Syngenta y Sinograin Oil," filmed December 3, 2020 at Syngenta Agro, S.A. in Venado Tuerto, Santa Fe Province, Argentina, streamed lived on Casa Rosada - República Argentina YouTube Channel, video, 31:57, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Mpq8\\_HSTM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Mpq8_HSTM).

<sup>49</sup> "Marcha mundial contra Monsanto y semillas transgénicas," *teleSUR*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/multimedia/Marcha-mundial-contra-Monsanto-y-semillas-transgenicas-20170520-0041.html>.

<sup>50</sup> See "La Marcha contra Monsanto en Buenos Aires reunió a una multitud que exige terminar con los agrotóxicos, el extractivismo y el trigo transgénico," *Argentina de Noticias RedAcción (ANRed)*, <https://www.anred.org/2022/05/23/la-marcha-contra-monsanto-en-buenos-aires-reunio-a-una-multitud-que-exige-terminar-con-los-agrotoxicos-el-extractivismo-y-el-trigo-transgenico/>. Repost of "Ecología Social. La Marcha contra Monsanto en Buenos Aires reunió a una multitud que exige terminar con los agrotóxicos, el extractivismo y el trigo transgénico," *Resumen Latinoamericano: La Otra Cara de las Noticias de América y el Tercer Mundo*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2022/05/22/ecologia-social-la-marcha-contra-monsanto-en-buenos-aires-reunio-a-una-multitud-que-exige-terminar-con-los-agrotoxicos-el-extractivismo-y-el-trigo-transgenico/>.

<sup>51</sup> “Victims of Nemagon Hit the Road,” *Envío* no. 287 (June 2005), <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2972>. In 1995 it was confirmed by Raquel Fernández, a reporter at *Envío*, that “[a] very frequent method is to inject [Nemagón] directly into the soil, as close to the roots as possible, with a sort of giant needle.” Raquel Fernández, “El Nemagón en el banquillo: acusan los bananeros,” *Envío* no. 157 (March 1995), <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/109>. See also Javier Otaola Montagne, “Ciudad Nemagón, Historia de una Tragedia,” *EcoPortal*, September 29, 2005, <https://www6.rel-uita.org/agricultura/agrotoxicos/nemagon/ciudad-nemagon.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> Gilberto López, “Nemagón: un pesticida devastador,” *BBC Mundo*, July 20, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/business/newsid\\_6904000/6904694.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/business/newsid_6904000/6904694.stm).