

Suicidal Cows and Fields of Worms: Apocalyptic Agribusiness in Brazil and Argentina

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Abstract: Latin American literature has responded to the environmental crises that have reawakened our apocalyptic imaginaries beyond twentieth-century nuclear fears. This essay focuses on two South American novels that engage with the damage caused by agribusiness in Brazil and Argentina: *De gados e homens* (2013), by Ana Paula Maia, and *Distancia de rescate* (2014), by Samanta Schweblin. I argue that these works not only feature apocalyptic tropes but also oppose the destructive forces of agribusiness by staging different practices of care that involve a closer relationship with the environment: in the Brazilian case, through an openness to the shared vulnerability of people and other animals; in the Argentinian case, through a proactive and retroactive thinking that both anticipates and reevaluates risk by mimicking the bonds between parent and child.

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If there are four horsemen announcing our latest apocalypse, two of them are certainly industrial cattle raising and agriculture. These economic activities play a decisive role in the intensification of the ecological crisis that we fight in this century. The release of greenhouse gases and the high consumption of water, for example, contribute directly to the

disproportionate increase in temperature and to the climatic changes that have altered our planet (Watts). Contemporary Latin American literature has not ignored these problems and has discussed the new impacts of late capitalism on the environment. This paper focuses on two important novels of the last decade: *De gados e homens* (2013), by Brazilian author Ana Paula Maia, and *Distancia de rescate* (2014), by Argentinian writer Samanta Schweblin. I argue that these works not only stage the beginnings of an environmental apocalypse but also present ways of responding to it through a careful reading of the almost illegible, through an attempt to make sense of an elusive reality that is not easily accessible to the senses.

Industrial-scale cattle raising and agriculture in these two countries have been of the utmost economic importance. The second half of the twentieth century was a key moment for the expansion of the meat industry in Brazil. The military governments, interested in the development of the interior of the territory, created institutions such as the Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária (EMBRAPA), in 1973, and a credit system that encouraged ranching (Brisola 32). By 2004, Brazil surpassed Australia as the world's largest beef exporter (35), and in 2015 it had more than 200 million heads of cattle, that is, a one-to-one ratio with respect to the country's own population (25). The success story of Brazilian cattle ranching has even reached the political sphere. In Congress a *bancada ruralista*, a political front in the legislative chambers that acts according to the interests of the agrarian elite, has been formed. In fact, the fires that have affected vast areas of the Brazilian Amazon in the late 2010s are associated with this group (Tormaid Campbell). Ana Paula Maia's *De gados e homens*, in which animals in a slaughterhouse start taking their own lives as the demand for meat grows with the arrival of hamburger factories in the area, was published in this context of economic prosperity and industrial expansion.

The soybean monoculture has been part of Argentina's national economy since the 1970s. However, it was not until the 1990s that the product took center stage. With the creation of the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR) and the adoption of neoliberal measures, genetically

modified soybeans reached the fields of the Argentine pampa in 1996 (Hendel 87). The market was opened to foreign companies, tariffs were extinguished, and the fields were mechanized through the introduction of new technologies in all sectors of production (Hernandez and Phélinas). The soy boom soon became the spearhead of Argentina's economic recovery after the 2001 crisis (32). Indeed, in 2013 Argentina was already the leader in the soybean meal export market, representing almost fifty-seven percent of all exports in the world, while Brazil and the United States together accounted for forty-four percent of the market (34). The expansion of the monoculture, however, implied environmental degradation, deforestation, water and soil contamination, and damage to the flora and fauna (Torrado 172). The case of the Ituzaingó Anexo neighborhood, in Córdoba, is paradigmatic. Since 2002 the population has experienced cancer and other diseases at an alarming rate owing to a cocktail of metal-heavy chemicals and pesticides in their soil and water (176). In Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate*, published in 2014, the protagonist and her daughter try to survive contamination in a small town whose economy is based on soybeans.

The expansion of these industries makes up what German sociologist Ulrich Beck in the late 1980s characterized as "risk society." Considering the nuclear race of the Cold War and accidents such as that of Bhopal in 1984 and that of Chernobyl in 1986, Beck proposes that capitalism no longer simply fights against nature (which must be dominated) and scarcity (which must be eradicated through technical and economic progress), but also faces the damages and risks that capitalism itself has caused (26). In other words, it is no longer possible to dismiss pollution, disease, and accidents as secondary effects of the capitalist mode of production: the system generates and distributes both wealth and risks. In literary studies, Beck's idea gives way to a type of interpretation that Molly Wallace calls "risk criticism." By updating the concerns of the nuclear age—such as the difficulties of representing an apocalyptic nuclear war that had not happened yet—with contemporary ecocriticism, risk criticism would offer

the possibility of theorizing the “megahazards of the present.” This would imply special attention to these temporalities of risk, that is, the notion that one unconsciously takes risks every day and that the confirmation of the existence of danger is always *a posteriori* (4). Literature, as a privileged site of the symbolic, imagines catastrophes and risks we are not even aware of yet. This paper discusses the foretold tragedies of risk society at the beginning of the twenty-first century in these two contemporary Latin American novels. I contend that in the antechambers of the apocalypse only a select few possess the sensibility that allows them to perceive the signs of impending doom and offer ways to counteract it, although in the end the possibility of real change is truncated. The protagonists, by fine-tuning how they interact with the nonhuman world, enter apocalyptic time: with a sense of foreboding, they realize that their current predicaments are the opening act of something bigger and they cannot do much to warn those around them.

I understand the apocalypse in literature as a secularization of the Judeo-Christian narrative of the end of the world, a cataclysmic event that will destroy the Earth and the established social order. Once a pedagogical instrument to bring hope to the faithful (Focant 37), apocalyptic narratives have also been understood as a denunciation of the status quo. Their narrators, apocalyptists, are subversive figures “awaiting God’s intervention in human history, when the corrupt world of the present will be supplanted by a new and transcendent realm” (Parkinson Zamora 2). It is worth remembering the Greek origin of the word *apokálipsis*: to uncover, reveal, disclose (10). The protagonists of these novels, as subjects attuned to their surroundings, are in their own way prophets of the end of times. In this sense, I argue that *De gados e homens* and *Distancia de rescate* oppose the apocalyptic forces of agribusiness by staging different practices of care that involve a closer relationship with the environment.

Radical care has been defined as “a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds” (Hobart and Kneese 2) in the context of social movements and government policy. The literary characters

here discussed provide us with some clues as to what these strategies could look like: in the Brazilian novel, they refer to a rhetorical gesture toward the possibility of communication with nonhuman animals, even in the extreme case of their systemic slaughter; and in the Argentinian novel, just like the protagonist constantly anticipating danger around her child, they elicit a preemptive and defensive attitude toward environmental risk. Together, the novels evoke a desolate landscape of bloody rivers and dry fields occupied by the dispossessed, the sick, and the dead. But it is worth noting that Hobart and Kneese's definition of care is less about fighting precarious worlds than enduring them: owing to socioeconomic and health barriers, these characters fail to effect actual change. Still, baffled by the overwhelming damage, the protagonists allow readers to glimpse not only a way to look at the world but also a way to (attempt to) counteract its destruction and strengthen human and nonhuman bonds.

They Lost Their North. This Is No Good.

Born in 1977, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Ana Paula Maia came to prominence in the late 2000s after the publication of *A saga dos brutos*, a trilogy composed of two novellas and a novel featuring marginal humans and nonhumans, bent by the crushing routine of hard labor. In the 2010s she reached a wider audience by winning literary awards such as the Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura and by writing scripts for television and film (more recently for *Desalma*, a television series produced by Rede Globo). *De gados e homens* is the first installment of an apocalyptic series comprising so far *Enterre seus mortos* (2018) and *De cada quinhentos uma alma* (2021). In it, we find Edgar Wilson working for Seu Milo at a slaughterhouse in a rural area called Vale dos Ruminantes, in an unidentified region of Brazil.¹ The character's job as an *atordoador* is to

¹ Having appeared in previous texts of the author's literary universe, such as *Carvão animal*, Edgar Wilson is now the protagonist of his own series. The following books move past the preamble and feature an apocalypse where humans and nonhumans die mysteriously and the country collapses.

stun the bovine before slaughter, hitting the animal's head with a sledgehammer. Conflict arises as the cows start committing suicide in droves and, together with his colleagues Bronco Gil and Helmuth, Wilson drives around the desolate landscape in search of answers.

Critics have noted Maia's affiliation with the Brazilian naturalist-realist tradition and the Anglo-Saxon noir genre (Vicelli), her approach to social inequalities and labor exploitation (Casarin; Santos da Silva), and the excesses and scarcities of modern societies in her work (Barberena). The approach that interests me here, however, is the ecocritical one developed by scholars such as Leila Lehen, who highlights not only the environmental damage that late capitalism has impressed upon the Brazilian landscape but also the fuzzy limits between the worlds of humans and nonhumans in Maia's novels. In this sense, my analysis of *De gados e homens* posits that in order to understand the apocalypse, in its barely perceptible early signs, special attention to the nonhuman world is fundamental. This means that Edgar Wilson, by worrying about the souls of the animals he slaughters daily and attempting to penetrate the darkness in their eyes, acknowledges both the ruthless exploitation of the meat industry and the animal capacity to produce messages. In this case, the cows' moos as they choose death could be the trumpets of the end of times—trumpets to which only the protagonist seems to pay attention. Living and perceiving the apocalypse implies a reading of its subtlest signs. Animal slaughter, labor exploitation, the cows that do not graze facing north, the blood-colored roses by the salty river: there is a thread that connects them all.

Ana Paula Maia sets the stage for her rendition of the end of times through two essential elements: environmental degradation and references to Christian mythology.² First, we should note that there are some apocalyptic signs that are indeed legible to all humans in the story. On one

² During the Na Janela: Festival de Literatura Brasileira, hosted online in April 2020 by Brazilian publisher Companhia das Letras, Ana Paula Maia shared her views on a slow apocalypse: "Eu também não vejo o fim do mundo como um meteoro que vai cair, como um grande acontecimento, ou um grande abalo. Mas eu acho que as coisas vão dar sinais na natureza, sutilmente... de uma forma muito sinuosa" ("#NaJanelaFestival").

of their excursions, the workers check the state of the waters of the local river: “É o sangue, é isso que tem contaminado o rio — diz Bronco Gil analisando o cheiro da água e experimentando com a ponta da língua o seu sabor. — Tá salgada” (100). The passage invokes the senses of smell and taste as useful tools to perceive the environment. If, in risk society, danger does not appear to the senses but depends on science to be legible (Beck 28), in *De gados e homens* certain threats are still open to human perception. What these damages suggest in the novel is a desolate environment where livestock, drinking water, and work are scarce, not unlike the arid empty landscape of apocalyptic dystopias and not unlike the rural area depicted in Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate*.

What interests me here, however, is the type of sign that Edgar Wilson alone seems to notice. The first indication that the protagonist shares a special bond with nonhumans is his distinct role in the slaughterhouse. Seu Milo enlists him to separate the Israeli and Lebanese cows that were mixed up in the corral, since the cowboy on duty simply cannot tell them apart. Edgar Wilson hisses, claps, and treads lightly among the cows, “deixando tornar-se parte do rebanho” (52). This camouflage technique allows for a unique rapport with the nonhumans and he succeeds in his task as he notices something peculiar about their behavior for the first time. “Observa três vacas recuadas, num canto, com as faces muito próximas, como se confabulassem” (52). Later, Edgar Wilson notices that, instead of facing north, the cows now graze facing west. “Não sei ... nunca vi isso acontecer ... elas perderam o norte. Isso não é nada bom” (60). That the cows act as if they were conspiring or as if they had lost their north is an inkling of how nonhumans perceive change before humans do in this apocalyptic preamble. And in the context of the novel only the main character can tell that something is wrong with them.

That is not to say that Maia’s protagonist has a deep understanding of the cattle. He is just as baffled by the bovine suicides as his colleagues. One cow desperately smashes its head against a wall (64), another drowns (86), and others are found dead in the valley (106). Yet only Edgar Wilson senses

the animals' uneasiness, like a foreboding. Bronco Gil, for instance, hypothesizes less metaphysical causes for such behavior. He insists that there is a predator disturbing the cattle during the night (78). By the end of the novel, facing the mass suicide, there is such perplexity on the part of the workers that they cannot do anything other than watch the cows jump to their deaths. It is at this helpless moment that another human, besides Edgar Wilson, finally has an insight. Bronco Gil asks their bewildered colleague: "Você ainda não entendeu, Helmuth? Não entendeu quem é o predador?" (112). Gil finally understands what Edgar Wilson has known all along: that the cows commit suicide because their exploitation by humans has reached such drastic levels that they would rather end their own lives than have their bodies subjected to the hammering and cutting and grinding of the slaughterhouse. In fact, the increasing demand for meat in the region suggests that the cycle of death in which the slaughterhouse is inserted will only intensify.

If the environmental damage and the bovine abnormal behavior are insufficient to classify the novel as apocalyptic, Maia's third-person narrator settles the question with recurring descriptions of the vast sky of Vale dos Ruminantes. They instill in the story a sense of awe, as if human endeavors were insignificant next to its timeless magnificence. Reminiscent of 1930s Brazilian Modernism, using short sentences and a limited number of adjectives and adverbs, the narrative points out the reddish cracks in the sky "como fissuras de um vulcão" (27). Such language, privileging geological time over human time, displaces Western anthropocentric narratives and hints at a world beyond human experience. In addition, the recurring separation between earth and sky is crucial to understanding the apocalyptic time mode the story adopts: "Nem a lua consegue fazer distinguir céu e terra. É como se a imensidão tivesse engolido o vale, é como se Edgar Wilson estivesse dentro da barriga de Deus, no princípio da criação, quando tudo era treva" (64). This reference to the Old Testament not only reinforces the novel's connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition but also highlights the strangeness of the time and place of the story as a

type of return to the initial chaos of the universe. In fact, this description comes at the end of chapter 5, which features cases of miscarriages among cows, the desperation of the poor begging for rotten meat, and the first bovine suicide. This is a turning point where the threats sprinkled throughout the first half of the novel coincide with the protagonist's feeling that he has returned to "the belly of God," to a primitive stage of disorder of the world. That most of the other workers live their lives as usual suggests that the end of the world is felt differently among humans, that only those more connected to the environment can read the disruptive signs that nature manifests.

The confusion between earth and sky translates to the blurring of the border between human and nonhuman worlds. At different points the narrator remarks that it is not easy to distinguish between men and cattle, because of their cognitive capacities (38), the exploitative environment that kills both (68), or even their smell (20). The novel, however, never sets forth an overcoming of these diffuse borders. There is no utopian space where humans and nonhumans share a more horizontal relationship. Still, Maia's story "oscillates between the deconstruction and the bolstering of the hierarchic differentiation between species," helping readers glimpse a position that reevaluates the old hierarchy between humanity and animality (Lehnen 27). Through the lens of animal studies, *De gados e homens* stages the crisis at the center of what Giorgio Agamben calls "the anthropological machine," that is, the formulation of different justifications for human difference and, consequently, domination over other beings throughout history (75). For the Italian thinker, it is necessary to stop this machine. It is better to understand the political reasons behind this divide than to seek a metaphysical understanding of human superiority (35). Jacques Derrida, drawing on Jeremy Bentham's ideas about the animal capacity for suffering, proposes a more passive understanding of what humans and other beings share. Instead of perpetuating the exclusive Cartesian system in which humans separate themselves from animals owing to their capacities (to reason, to speak), it would be worthwhile to formulate a system in which

we understand each other as *exposed* beings, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the environment, and, ultimately, to death (44). For Derrida, the greatest flaw in Western philosophy, from Aristotle to Heidegger, is that philosophers have never “seen themselves seen” (29). They have never imagined themselves as interlocutors, as beings questioned and interpellated by other animals.

Edgar Wilson understands the vulnerability of life and although he occupies the role of executioner in the production chain, he does so with the awareness that he must respect the soul of the animal at the time of its death. His pity for the irrational (13) informs his commitment to a “humane slaughter” that is also extended to humans. He coldly kills Zeca, his fellow *atordoador*, because he cannot accept the young man’s disrespect as he takes pleasure in killing the bovine (21). It is a precise, fast, bloodless kill, like the one he gives to nonhumans. This episode might be read as a symptom of Edgar Wilson’s cold-blooded alienation, product of a capitalist system that barbarizes men (Casarin 86). My reading, however, has to do with the ethics that the character develops throughout his career as an *atordoador*, after killing thousands of animals. What is at stake in Zeca’s murder is the control that Edgar Wilson wishes to have, from his very limited sphere of influence, over the death of beings that he sees as irrational, vulnerable, victimized by a system that slaughters them on an industrial scale.

Although in many moments Edgar Wilson feels in harmony with the ruminants, lost in his human consciousness (68), the narrator mentions that the protagonist can never really penetrate their gaze (17) since their eyes are as unfathomable as the night (35). Yet in two moments the protagonist does see something in the eyes of his victims. First, the “*imagem da besta. Diariamente é a si que enxerga quando mata, pois aprendeu a ver sob a neblina que encobre os olhos do animal*” (62). Then, at the end of the novel, the reason he knows that something is still wrong at the slaughterhouse is the fact that he continues to be reflected in the eyes of the cows (96). In other words, the protagonist literally sees himself in the gaze of the cows.

More than an optical phenomenon, the image of man—demonized, bestialized—in the eye of the animal is a recognition on the part of the human that he is an interlocutor. In these elusive moments, Edgar Wilson is aware of what Derrida sees as the failure of Western thought, the fact that human beings are also subject to the gaze, vulnerable to the interpellation of the animal.

For Diane Davis, corporeality, more than reason, is the condition for beings to relate and to respond. Hence the idea that rhetoric is not a human exclusivity: corporeal exposure to the alteration of the other entails obedience to a “rhetorical imperative” (90). In this sense, we can read Edgar Wilson as a character who recognizes this rhetorical predisposition of the animals that he slays and puts himself in the position of the interlocutor of these beings who have historically been denied the ability to articulate messages. I repeat that this position of interlocutor does not confer understanding of the other, or overcoming of the human/animal border. However, it is precisely this openness to the rhetorical capacity of the nonhuman that gives him the glimpse of a disorder that the humans around him cannot perceive. Edgar Wilson’s personal tragedy, therefore, is to be trapped in an exploitation machine that does not allow him to do more than kill those animals in the most painless way possible. The tragedy is that the apocalyptic prophet of this forsaken world is in no social position to question his boss’s business, rally his coworkers, or preach to meat eaters in the distant urban centers. Workers and cattle, under different roles in the same logic of exploitation, follow their destiny almost with resignation. When the sun goes down and the borders between heaven and earth are blurred, men and cattle are barely distinguishable.

What Is Important, David?

Samanta Schweblin was born in 1978 and her first publications in Argentina were short story collections such as *El núcleo del disturbio* (2002) and *Pájaros en la boca* (2009). After winning awards such as the Casa de las

Américas, Juan Rulfo, and *Narrativa Breve Ribera del Duero*, she was nominated in 2017 (together with her English-language translator Megan McDowell) for the International Booker Prize for her first novel, *Distancia de rescate*. She is part of a new generation of Argentine writers born in the 1970s (such as Mariana Enríquez, Ariana Harwicz, and Pola Oloixarac) who in recent years have stood out not only in the Hispanic world but across languages for their innovative literary work, which, while adhering to Argentinian tradition, also borrows elements from transnational genres such as horror and science fiction to address key issues of contemporary globalized culture. In fact, not only has *Distancia de rescate* been adapted into a Netflix film but Ana Paula Maia herself has read it, recognizing its eschatological affinities with *De gados e homens* (“#NaJanelaFestival”). The novel takes place in an unnamed rural town a few hours from Buenos Aires. Amanda, the protagonist, arrives with her daughter, Nina, at a rented summer house with the promise that her husband will follow days later. She soon befriends the neighbor, Carla, despite the woman’s unusual attitude toward her son, David. What seemed like a peaceful summer turns into a nightmare when Amanda finds herself in the same situation Carla says David experienced in the past: she and Nina are contaminated by the pesticides in the soil of a local soybean field. Mother and daughter then begin a troubled journey in search of survival.

Schweblin’s popular appeal also translates into attention from literary critics. They note how in *Distancia de rescate* the Argentine pampas, a national symbol, become a risk to the health of the population and a threat to the nuclear family (De Leone). The “necrophiliac” soy fields generate death as the novel unravels the threads that tie the characters to hegemonic ideas of progress (Grenoville). Its toxicity not only affects the body but also spreads to the social fabric (Rosenberg). Yet, they have also noted how the story subverts the logic of silencing bodies relegated to abjection and precariousness (Garralda). My contribution lies in making the apocalyptic mood of the novel more explicit and highlighting the alternatives that the protagonists offer to the end of times. I argue that the title concept of a

rescue distance is both a proactive and a retroactive practice of care. On the one hand it exercises an apocalyptic thinking of worst-case scenario and preemptive action; on the other, it works as a thread that ties memories together and rescues the past from oblivion. One constantly measures the rescue distance in order to endure the apocalyptic preamble by being both fearful about future threats and aware of the importance of preserving the past.

Schweblin gradually builds a cataclysmic atmosphere that is mainly attributable to three elements: the dialogical form that structures the text, the incorporation of gothic tropes, and the anxiety of toxic discourse. Unlike *De gados e homens*, with its third-person narrator closely following Edgar Wilson's metaphysical musings, *Distancia de rescate*'s entire text comprises a dialogue between Amanda and David. This formal choice is essential for understanding the sense of urgency, discomfort, and even despair that the text evokes. David's speech is in italics, in separate paragraphs from Amanda's. The protagonist tries to clarify what is happening on the first page. "It's the boy who's talking, murmuring into my ear. I am the one asking questions" (1).³ It is an interesting clarification because overall Amanda is the one who speaks and David, the one who asks. "*You have to be patient and wait. And while we wait, we have to find the exact moment when the worms come into being*" (2). It is through this tug-of-war between the speaker and the listener that the reader, hostage to the interlocutors, becomes entangled in an overwhelming investigation about the mysterious worms, without an omniscient narrator from the outside.

Gradually it is understood that the dialogue takes place by a hospital bed and that the search for the worms is the search for the genesis of the tragedy, the exact moment in which Amanda and her daughter are contaminated during their brief stay in town. The protagonist, almost delirious, reviews her itinerary and, encouraged by David, reflects on each moment of possible

³ All quotes from McDowell's translation.

contamination. What heightens the sense of urgency is David's laconic control over Amanda's story. The child constantly comments on which aspects of the story are important, urging her to ignore certain details. Amanda keeps asking, "Is that important?" and telling her story in the hopes of saving her daughter. Readers increasingly share her anguish as it becomes clear that David, the true editor of the narrative, privileges his ulterior motives over Amanda's despair.

Likewise, to compose her apocalyptic scenario, Schweblin borrows from an originally Anglo-Saxon genre that, despite having over a century of history in the region, is not yet widely investigated in Latin American studies: the gothic (Eljaiek-Rodríguez). Being the territory of defamiliarization, where the strange, the hidden, and the Other manifest in an overwhelming way (14), the gothic allows for the construction of a horror atmosphere in the novel, where the distance from urban spaces, monsters, doubles, and supernatural forces all play a role. The sunny, rural, summery ambience of the beginning gives way to darkness, nightmare, and delirium as poison insidiously spreads. In that setting, a specific gothic trope gains strength: the monster.

When recounting the episode in which David has his soul transmigrated by a healer in order to save him from death by contamination, Carla concludes: "So this one is my new David. This monster" (38). This monstrous David reflects Amanda's anxiety to protect her daughter from becoming a body that is also read as abject (Dinamarca 98). It is no coincidence that the town's deformed children burst into their path at the apex of Amanda and Nina's despair: the moment in which mother and daughter, contaminated and delirious, look for a doctor. "They don't have eyelashes, or eyebrows. Their skin is pink, very pink, and scaly too. Only a few like you [David]" (158). This is the last time Amanda sees Nina before the child is taken away by Carla to also have her soul transmigrated. The image of monster children, therefore, haunts the final moment between mother and daughter as a sinister promise of what can happen to children in that toxic and polluted environment. These gothic sick bodies have been

read as a means “to make the slow violence of agrochemical pollution visible and urgent” (Mutis 43) and as “horrifying metaphors of the continued exploitation ... of a natural world that has also been reconfigured” (Heffes 69). Yet, what I am drawing attention to here is the affective experience of reading the short novel. Schweblin activates the gothic mode to increase the reader’s discomfort in a story with no chapter breaks, only a meandering dialogue where past, present, and future are tightly and confusingly woven together. This temporal plasticity is also present in *De gados e homens* as Edgar Wilson contemplates the world’s return to its initial chaos. *Distancia de rescate*, however, paints a more desperate picture as the end is experienced viscerally, from within the body.

This approximation between the gothic genre and environmental concerns takes us to the last of the three elements that intensify the apocalyptic experience of the story: the insidious toxicity. The novel drops some hints: Carla avoids tap water (144), many of the town’s children have disabilities (157), and Amanda has a nightmare (70). In the dream, she and her husband look at a can of peas in the kitchen, peas that Amanda would never buy owing to their inferior quality. “On the table, at that early-morning hour, the can has an alarming presence” (73). At first the connection between the can, the nightmare, and the narrative as a whole is not very clear, but it becomes a piece of the puzzle that David wants Amanda to put together.

The child, from his editorial role, confirms the exact moment of contact with the so-called worms. As they prepare to leave town, Amanda recounts their visit to the soy field where Carla works. They sit on the ground, wet from “dew,” for a moment. And David intervenes, “*This is it. This is the moment. [...] That’s how it starts*” (87). Thus, the child stops referring to the worms and begins to speak of “the poison, the contamination” (110). What was innocent natural dew becomes toxic chemical pesticides. The alarming presence of the can of peas in her nightmare is explained as a foreshadowing of the poisoning, or even a metonymy of the toxic fields outside (Dinamarca 99). In the dream, the poisoned product invades the

home space of the kitchen, the space where the food that sustains the family is prepared. Before they can escape the toxic environment, the poison invades the body, both that of the mother and that of the daughter.

These three elements discussed so far not only contribute to the typical discomfort of apocalyptic fiction but also respond to what Rob Nixon understands as a representational crisis generated by slow violence. This type of violence happens gradually and almost imperceptibly, an environmental aggression whose effects cannot be felt immediately but over space and time (2). “To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency” (10). Schweblin chooses the abject image of the worm as a parasite—associated with dirt, disease, and underdevelopment—to powerfully represent the harmful effects of herbicides on the body of human and nonhuman animals. Cancers and deformities that chemicals cause at the cellular level are not easily legible without the aid of medical and scientific discourse. On the contrary, a worm that corrodes the flesh can induce more visceral reactions such as itching, tingling, and disgust, sensations that only heighten the eschatological sense of the story for the reader.

Just like *De gados e homens*, *Distancia de rescate* allows for, if not a solution, at least a counterpoint to the imminent cataclysm. Amanda’s narrative does not end when she finally finds the point of contamination. “*Because you still haven’t realized. You still need to understand*” (131). David’s last resort is to “push” Amanda. In the final episode of the narrative, she embarks on a spiritual journey through time and witnesses Nina’s father’s visit to David’s father a month later. The two men briefly comment on their children’s peculiar behavior, unaware of the causes behind such eccentricity. The mothers are no longer present: Amanda has died and Carla has left the house. There is only paternal silence and estrangement. Indeed, the episode is the opposite of Amanda and Carla’s first scene, where the two women discuss motherhood and cultivate a budding friendship. The novel closes with Amanda’s widower’s inability to recognize the threats in his

surroundings. This is the moment Schweblin allows the reader to extrapolate the limits of the family tragedy and infer that the problem with the use of pesticides in the Argentine fields runs beyond the affected families and beyond the town that encompasses the soy plantations. As he drives back to Buenos Aires, Amanda's husband fails to pay attention to the empty fields, factories, and abundance of cars. Gisela Heffes suggests that he willfully ignores these signs (63), but I argue that this passage instead illustrates the paternal inability to read the environment and, by extension, take care of his daughter. Hence the importance of the lexical choice. The father "doesn't stop," "doesn't see," "doesn't notice" (183). Oblivious, he is unable to understand the key concept of the story, the idea that obsesses David: the rescue distance.

The rescue distance refers to a way of exercising motherhood that Amanda inherited from her own mother (55), often described like a tightening thread in the mother's body depending on the level of anticipated danger surrounding the child. The protagonist explains: "I always imagine the worst-case scenario. Right now, for instance, I'm calculating how long it would take me to jump out of the car and reach Nina if she suddenly ran and leapt into the pool" (19). It is precisely this apocalyptic thinking, this ability to always imagine the worst-case scenario, to calculate the distance that separates one from their child and to devise an *ad hoc* rescue plan that the fathers lack at the end of the novel, this metaphorical umbilical cord that continues to bind mothers and children after birth. That is not to say, however, that the novel essentializes motherhood as this innate ability to care. Let us remember that Amanda and Carla ultimately do fail. There is no fail-proof way to look after a child. There are dangers—or risks—that are simply beyond our human capabilities to grasp. Yet, as the protagonist perishes, the novel urges readers to exercise this fallible but essential preemptive thinking. It befits both parenthood and environmental preservation.

It is such a productive protection that Schweblin makes it stretch not only toward the future but also toward the past. In her spiritual projection

onto life a month later, Amanda notices in David's house a series of objects tied with sisal thread. She sees old photos of his dad hanging from the same nail (176) and then many other objects hanging in the living room: "in your own way, you were trying to do something with the deplorable state of the house and everything in it" (179). David appropriates the fundamental metaphor of the rescue distance thread and creates his own network of associations and objects related to memory. If throughout the novel the invisible thread ties mother and daughter in case the girl needs to be rescued, in David's case the literal thread tying the objects metaphorically rescues the past from oblivion. If the threads that tied his life are now loose, cut and forgotten, his mission is to reattach them and thus recover, albeit in a precarious way, something that resembles the life he had with his family before he was contaminated, before that part of his soul left his body, before his mother left. David is revealed in the end as the great organizer not only of Amanda and Nina's story, but also, ultimately, of his own story and that of his people, whose youth are disabled by disease. In this sense, the novel privileges storytelling as a means not only to resist oblivion but also to generate a testimonial of the forgotten (Garralda 255). Tying together objects of memory means organizing a story, a story of family and community dissolution.

The novel thus presents both a retroactive and a proactive view on environmental dangers. If, on the one hand, it stages the narrative reconstruction of a contaminated community, *Distancia de rescate* also names a way of acting upon the world that involves observation, forecasting, and care. It is by no means an infallible method—in fact, Amanda's harrowing lesson is precisely that it can fail—but as the narrator zooms out of the family drama in the last sentence, she implies that environmental responsibility concerns everyone. We must all see the soy fields and the land emptied of livestock. We must all notice the smoke and the number of cars, calculate the rescue distance and perceive "the important thing: the rope finally slack, like a lit fuse, somewhere; the motionless scourge about to erupt" (124).

Conclusion

While in *De gados e homens* the anxiety stemming from environmental insecurity takes on metaphysical tones as Edgar Wilson worries about the souls of the animals and the final judgment, in *Distancia de rescate* the sense of urgency conjured by the text has to do with what Lawrence Buell calls toxic discourse—that is, the rhetorical devices used by activists, politicians, journalists, and artists to address toxicity in contemporary society. One of the tropes of toxic discourse is the pastoral betrayal, a sense of deception as green spaces like the suburbs or the countryside are revealed to be toxic waste sites (649). Amanda and Nina, at the beginning of the novel, vacation at the unnamed small town and enjoy the rented country home and its facilities. However, the gothic atmosphere turns enjoyment into nightmare and the Argentine pampa becomes a toxic soup of pesticides. Maia's dry landscape peopled by poor workers and the dispossessed does not allow for such a betrayal but one of the things her novel has in common with Schweblin's is a sense of foreboding. In the Brazilian case, this is attributable to the protagonist's ethical meditations and a sense of humankind's insignificance before the sky and the earth; in the Argentinian case, to the protagonist's first-person feverish search for survival in a sick environment. Following Molly Wallace's idea of risk criticism, these novels hint at the dangers of a contaminated world through strong affective terms that only artistic works can achieve. If scientific and journalistic discourses must abide by empirical rules of experimentation and fact-checking, literature can use its own weapons against the insidious influence of toxicity in Brazilian and Argentinian rural areas, especially when the subject matter is industrial cattle raising and soybean plantations, staples of the two countries' economies.

When I say that literature can fight the apocalypse, I do not mean it in a naïve way where readers, incensed by these novels, will morph into a sickle-wielding mob and storm the farms of Brazil and Argentina. Rather, I

am thinking along the lines of Patrick Murphy's work and his question of whether literature—and ecocriticism—can be considered activism. According to the author, while the answer is no in a narrow sense, art and ecocriticism do carry a “propagandistic” and “agitational” element, thus contributing “to the potential success of activism through its effect on social consciousness” (16). Literature and cinema are then ideal in their repetition and variation of themes as the affective and intellectual engagement that they require of readers and viewers can have a lasting impact (xv). It is in this sense that I argue that the protagonists of *De gados e homens* and *Distancia de resgate* offer readers a glimpse of alternative relations with the nonhuman world.

In the Brazilian novel, the animals' death drive, the environmental degradation, and the descriptions of the vast sky result in a contemplative experience of the end of the world. Maia highlights Edgar Wilson's awareness of his limited agency in a system where he himself can hardly afford to eat meat. What the protagonist has left is his personal ethics and his care for the animals' souls, which should imply a dignified death. In the Argentinian novel, the dialogical form, the gothic genre, and the insidious toxicity make for a very different experience of the apocalypse. Pain and longing cut across Amanda's jagged narration as she tries, from a hospital bed, to make sense of her tragedy and learn about her daughter's health. David's constant interference and the mystery of the worms keep readers on the edge of their seat until the end as the child attempts to rescue his past based on what he learned from Amanda. The protagonists of both novels fail to fight the apocalypse. Their ability to change their surroundings is forestalled by either socioeconomic forces or death. Yet, as Edgar Wilson drives away from the slaughterhouse and Amanda's widower from the toxic small town, it is the reader who is left to pick up the pieces and reevaluate their relationship with the nonhuman. If agribusiness is killing our world and literary characters fail to stop it, Ana Paula Maia and Samanta Schweblin suggest that we in turn become the prophets of our own apocalypse.

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