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"Something in the Body": Material Memoir and Posthuman Horror in Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream*

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ABSTRACT: Samanta Schweblin's 2014 novel *Distancia de rescate*, published in English as *Fever Dream,* tells the unsettling tale of a mother who, while vacationing in a rural area of Argentina, may or may not be exposed to a toxic agricultural chemical that may or may not have poisoned the area's children, who have been subjected to an unconventional healing treatment that may or may not have displaced their souls from their bodies, causing pieces of them to reside in someone else. The novel has been read as "a toxic ecohorror tale" (Meyer) or as an "ecological horror story… about toxic agribusiness" (Economist), yet here I argue for another interpretation of *Fever Dream*: one that utilizes the tropes of what Stacy Alaimo characterizes as the "material memoir," peeling back their familiarity to expose a toxic uncanny and literalizing the leaky, confused human subject that is found dwelling in it. The novel's ambivalent, dread-laced depiction of a posthumanist reality in which the whole, complete, and "real" human subject is unrecoverable— and in which we contaminate and are contaminated by the familiar body of the human other as well as the foreign body of the nonhuman threat— offers, I suggest, the possibility of a new approach to ethics of responsibility in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS: Schweblin; *Distancia de rescate; Fever Dream;* posthuman; material memoir; ecohorror

The central narrative of Argentinian author Samanta Schweblin's 2017 novel *Fever Dream* unfolds as a dialogue. We enter, *in medias res*, the strange interrogation of the narrator, a woman who is dying, by a boy who is attempting to help her realize the exact moment when what is killing her began. This process requires her to tell him the story of everything that has happened since she first came to her vacation home in this small rural town. He prompts her with questions: "*What else? What else is happening in that very moment?"* (His speech is represented in italics, as though his voice is ambivalently real.) There is no clear logic that governs what details are and are not important; when the woman, whose name we learn is Amanda, demands to know where her daughter, Nina, is, she is told this doesn't matter. The fact that she is going to die in a few hours is similarly unimportant. But the fact that Nina has a habit of running around the vacation house in circles at lunchtime is important, as is the memory of a three-legged dog that crosses the street after running out of a field. "I need to understand which things are important and which things aren't," Amanda pleads. But she doesn't. She can't. The boy, David, can tell her only that *the* important thing is "*something in the body. But it's almost imperceptible, we have to pay attention"* (66). Yet this important thing never seems to arrive. It centers around an incident in which Amanda, Nina, and David's mother observed the delivery of several plastic drums containing a substance toxic enough that the drum- handlers have to wear gloves, and a sudden wetness on Amanda and Nina's clothing, and a strange smell, and Amanda's sudden sickness. "*This is the moment,*" David says. "… *We're looking for the exact moment because we want to know how it starts*" (90). However, "the exact moment" seems to both keep happening and never quite happen. It is *about* to happen, and then has *already* happened without Amanda perceiving it— David shifts abruptly to the Anthropocenic pronouncement that "*[t]he important thing [has] already happened. What follows are only consequences*" (131).

Has Amanda's illness been caused by whatever was in the plastic drums? Is this same substance related to the dead bird in a stream that David drank from, or a horse that sickened after drinking from the same stream? What afflicts David and the town's other children, some of whom "*go through poisoning episodes*" ("*sufrieron intoxicaciones*") and some of whom "*are born already poisoned, from something their mothers breathed in the air, or ate or touched*" (151)? The implication seems to be that David is trying to discover the "exact moment" of Amanda's contamination, and thus the contamination of the town. Yet time and space have become unstable and disjointed. "Is this about the poison?" Amanda asks. "It's everywhere, isn't it, David?" David replies, "*The poison was always there.*" (169). When Amanda reflects on the afternoon when she encountered the plastic drums, she laments that the "rescue distance" she monitors, her sense of the distance she would need to cross in order to save her daughter, "didn't work, [she] didn't see the danger" (170). The book's title in its original Spanish is, in fact, *Distancia de rescate,* or *Rescue Distance*, foregrounding the disordering of geographies and the disrupted calculations that consequently pour outwards.

Reviewers have described *Fever Dream* as a "toxic eco-horror tale" (Meyer), an "ecological horror story… almost as if Henry James had scripted a disaster movie about toxic agribusiness" (Economist), situating it in the context of growing concern about the effects of pesticides and fertilizers on Argentina's rural farms. Yet to read the book as a tale of environmental contamination's catastrophic and insidious effects upon the natural world neglects to observe the extent to which the unease in *Fever Dream* arises not from toxic contamination and its effects, but rather from the uncertainty as to whether or not there *is* or *could be* toxic contamination, and, if so, whether or not it has *had* any effects— the inability to locate any precise moment at or way in which the human body might have been corrupted, or to confront the implications of this confusion for humanness. In this respect, *Fever Dream* draws upon the tropes of the increasingly influential environmental contamination genre that Stacy Alaimo characterizes as "material memoir," peeling back the assumptions of these tropes to locate their anxiety not in the infiltration of the body by outside elements, but in awareness of the body as always already infiltrated and therefore impossible to discretely bound. Schweblin's novel thus becomes a powerful lens through which to critique the binary speciation in which material memoir deals, and a lens that directs our attention away from this obsessive battle against contamination, towards the need to re-evaluate the very body that this genre seeks to protect and defend.

Material memoir

Material memoir is, Alaimo writes, a form of "trans-corporeal autobiograph[y]" that insists "the self is constituted by material agencies that are simultaneously biological, political, and economic" (87). In practice, the kernel of a material memoir is the author who is sick, or who has been sick, or who feels sick. The author interprets the environment through the lens of her sickness, in search of its origin. Narratives of sickness, of personal history, of local history, of science, and of environment are drawn together in a way that implies an attribution but cannot ever quite point to it. As Alaimo explains, "at present it is not feasible to trace the exact causes of cancer or other environmentally generated illnesses within an individual" (88), and so, though the material memoirist may present scientific studies suggesting the carcinogenic properties of toxic chemicals, or the devastating effects of radioactive discharge, "there is a chasm, a vast lack of proof, between these scientific facts and the murkier realm of the individual case history" (ibid). Therefore material memoir is always a genre of doubt, of indeterminacy, a form of discourse, which, as Lawrence Buell writes, "is of allegation rather than proof" (659). Sometimes sickness itself serves as a bodily allegation: while Sandra Steingraber, in *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*, recounts her experience with bladder cancer, other material memoirs deal in ailments that are unclear, unnamed, or even disputed. In *Body Toxic*, Susanne Antonetta outlines a list of complaints: "Every vital system of my body disrupted: an arrhythmic heart, a seizing brain, severe allergies, useless reproductive organs" (203). Mel Y. Chen, whose *Animacies* contains a chapter that engages in tropes of material memoir, variously describes their condition as "multiple chemical sensitivity," "heavy metal poisoning," and "mercury toxicity" (197)— widely disputed diagnoses (Rossi and Petidis; Rathore et al). Kristen Iversen, in *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats*, describes the "chronic fatigue, fever, and swollen lymph nodes" from which she and her brothers and sisters suffer. "No one has any answers for us," she says (286).

From its opening line, "*They're like worms*" ("*Son como gusanos"*) (1 English; 11 Spanish), *Fever Dream* works to foreground a similar sense of epistemological unsteadiness. We quickly realize that this opening line is David's attempt to describe Amanda's contamination— if we accept that it is really David, rather than an hallucination, which the failure to format dialogue between him and Amanda in quotation marks may cause us to doubt. He repeats the same metaphor ("*Like worms, all over,*" or, in the Spanish, "*Como gusanos, de todas partes"*) before subtly shifting his explanation; when Amanda finds herself unable to move, he tells her that "*[i]t's the worms"*— "*Por los gusanos*" (2 English; 11 Spanish), which could more accurately be translated as "because of the worms," which also implies the worms' actual, literal existence. This establishes an uneasy oscillation between simile and literal statement and between individual and collective entity that continues throughout the book: whatever is in Amanda's body is both worms and only *like* worms, is simultaneously a *they* and an *it.* [1] Furthermore, David, pushing Amanda to describe the events of the previous days in more detail, tells her: "*We're looking for worms, something very much like worms, and the exact moment when they touch your body for the first time"* (52). Yet earlier he has told her, "*[W]e have to find the exact moment when the worms come into being*" (2). In other words, even as he reiterates that the contaminant both is worms and is like worms, he suggests these are also worms that do and do not pre-exist Amanda's contamination: that infest her, but are a product of her infestation. They are at once something that has penetrated her body and something that has been created within it.

The uncertain, even paradoxical existence of these worms does not seem to trouble Amanda or David. What is "*important… very important for us all*" (ibid) is not the worms themselves, but discovering how they got into Amanda. Yet David's questioning only seems to further confuse matters. He elicits detailed accounts from Amanda about her experiences of driving in the city and the country, the scenes she encounters as she walks past the fields at night, her feelings about his mother— "Are you sure these kinds of comments are necessary?" Amanda asks dubiously at one point. "Do we have time for this?" (3) David confirms that the details are important, but he does not elaborate on their connection to Amanda's illness. Their importance is solely attendant on David's evaluation of Amanda's bodily sensations, or rather by her reported memories of these sensations. The dialogue between David and Amanda comes

to form the figure that Alaimo sketches of the chemically reactive/environmentally ill person as both scientist and instrument, in this case not monitoring material agencies around them, but attempting to parse material agencies in the past. In the sense the potential reading of David as hallucination takes on significance: has Amanda created him as a self-who-investigates, an outside observer who can glean meaning from an experience that resists normal meaning-making procedures? Amanda's body registers that something—the undefined "it" that David refers to— is happening, but requires an interpreter (or, perhaps, a narrator) to place it in an intelligible context. "*Don't you realize what's happening right now?"* David asks. "I can't realize, David," Amanda tells him (92)— in the original Spanish text, "No puedo darme cuento" (68), which suggests not that she *doesn't* realize, but that she *cannot*. She has not yet, in that moment, learned to translate the knowledge she will later understand her body as having. Yet the formal structure of their conversation, in which Amanda's guided journey into her memories is voiced by both herself and David in the present tense, means that the novel represents her as simultaneously knowing and not-knowing. Her constant uneasiness in the past appears to stem from the awareness that she knows *something*; her body registers symptoms of wrongness, yet she is unable to identify what that wrongness is.

The production of material memoir is typically a way of producing an answer to this urgent question, a *why* an illness is, with the result that a recurring tension in the genre is that between acceptance of a condition that must remain nameless and sourceless, and a narrative that *qua* narrative is an act of attribution. Iversen, for example, asks, "What does it matter, anyway, where my symptoms come from? It could be anything. Allergies, viruses, flu, exhaustion, bad weather, a bad day at the office. Maybe it's all in my imagination. The uncertainty is frustrating" (301). Yet her uncertainty is not, after all, so very uncertain: the "lingering feeling that this chapter wasn't supposed to be a part of my story, or my family's story, or anyone's story" (ibid) is apposed to the assertion that "[g]overnments aren't supposed to poison their own people" (ibid). There is a cognitive dissonance here, a knowing that can never quite be knowing, as when Antonetta writes, "I don't expect anyone to explain what's wrong with me," and follows the statement by noting that she "[doesn't] believe in coincidences of this magnitude, either: clusters of children with brain disorders, toxic plumes and clouds, radiation spewing in the air" (203). And, indeed, Kroll-Smith and Floyd characterize sufferers of environmental illnesses as believing that "their bodies know things," drawing attention to the centering of subjective experience in narratives of environmental illness and its production as evidence of this. Alaimo highlights the possibility of resistance in this act, characterizing the material memoir as a critique of the divisions between popular and "expert" knowledge and a place where the author offers up "personal experiences as 'data'" and "examines her own life story through a scientific lens" (87). The genre, she argues, allows the option of "refusing the oppositions between objective scientific knowledge and subjective autobiographical rumination, between the external material environment and the inner workings of the self" (95). Much ecocriticism reads this option as inherently radical: Michelle Murphy suggests that environmental illness produces "new knots of possibility for inhabiting bodies" (157), and Chen describes their own environmental illness as providing "reminders of interdependency, of softness, of fluidity, of receptivity, of immunity's fictivity and attachment's impermanence." (Episodes produced by environmental illness, they write, force them "to rethink animacy" [202-3]). Kroll-Smith and Floyd see environmentally ill bodies as having found a voice, in resistance to "the Cartesian revolution [that] successfully silenced the authorial voice of the body" (52). They suggest a radical "heretic" bent to the environmentally ill tendency to seek truth within "a deliberately rational practice" while basing that practice on "human experience" (98).

Yet the dangers of this "heretic bent" are evident in its similarity to current anti-vaccination rhetoric, which rejects scientific evidence in favor of intuition and anecdote (Kata). Indeed, this rhetoric is explicitly present in Mel Chen's *Animacies*, in which the author's theorizing (in part) of their own environmental illness includes numerous inaccurate statements about mercury poisoning from dental fillings and allergy shots (198), as well as a claim that "a significant number of accounts tie childhood autism to the neurotoxicity of environmental mercury, with much attention to vaccines" (211). How ought we to respond to such claims, which feed into and reinforce what Dennis Flaherty has described as "perhaps… the most damaging medical hoax of the last 100 years"? The "evidence" or "data" of Chen's body is not in dispute; however, something has gone badly wrong in the situation of this popular, subjective knowledge within a rational, objective framework when it leads us into positions where the "voice" of the body can simply assert whatever it likes and expect the assertion to be accepted as true. The difficulty appears to be that, rather than functioning as the trans-corporeal autobiography Alaimo claims that it is, the material memoir does not refuse the dualisms between subject/object, self/environment, or rational/natural— rather, the environmentally ill subject argues for the admissibility of their private subjective sensations into the realm of legitimate objective data, but does not challenge the model of the discrete subject distinct from its surroundings, either in a material or in an ontological sense. This is part of a larger tendency in the environmentalist movement that Val Plumwood criticizes, particularly when it makes an appearance as "the feminism of uncritical reversal" (31) which argues for a turning-towards women/nature/emotion and the consequent renunciation of men/culture/reason without challenging the flawed assumptions at the heart of such a divide. In its commitments to overturning the "masculine" logic of scientific rhetoric, material memoir unwittingly reproduces the violent binary that it ought to reject.

Mother Nature

As Giovanna Di Chiro and Alexis Shotwell have explored, anti-toxic rhetoric fundamentally depends upon a set of assumptions that arise from "the idea that there is an uncontaminated, pure, natural state that is being affected by artificial chemicals" (Shotwell 90), and that "toxic chemical pollution is responsible for the undermining or perversion of the 'natural:' natural biologies/ecologies, natural bodies, natural reproductive processes" (Di Chiro 2010 201). What *seemed* natural (and *should have been* natural) was in fact *unnatural*. This perception of the contaminant as deceptive and insidious, "a grim specter [that] has crept upon us almost unnoticed," as Rachel Carson described it (13), the secret threat in "visuals that seemed to signify 'normalcy,'" as Buell quotes from an analysis of Love Canal coverage, "but [that revealed] the opposite" (645), is repeated even in Iverson's *Full Body Burden*, which leans less heavily on anti-toxic rhetoric. Iversen compares the moon— "a thin curl of ribbon," or "round and full and portentous, a pregnant beacon"— with the "other beacon" that is the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant:

> The lights from Rocky Flats shine and twinkle on the dark silhouette of land almost as beautifully as the stars above, but it's a strange and peculiar light, a discomforting light, the lights of a city where no true city exists. It, too, is portentous, even sinister— if only one could have the ability to see beyond the white glimmer, to see what is really there (12).

This perception of the unnatural as a "sinister" mimic of the natural speaks to an anxiety that frames itself in terms of invasion, subterfuge, and disruption. The unnatural attacks the natural, disguises itself as the natural, and disrupts the natural; more than any "natural" itself, it is this boundary, the distinction (the idea that there *is* a natural, clearly distinct from the unnatural) that is under threat, a fact that further emerges when we consider the sites at which anti-toxic rhetoric has tended to focus its energy— sites that are significantly unstable, and traditionally zones of, in Mary Douglas's terms, purity and danger.

Both Shotwell and Di Chiro focus on the ways in which anti-toxic rhetoric has shown a troubling tendency to center around the perceived danger of sexually fluid or gender-unstable bodies, which are presumed to result from contamination. Early alarm, in the 1990s, about the effects of endocrine-disrupting industrial chemicals linked these endocrine disruptors to the "breakdown of the family" and "dysfunctional behavior in human society" and offered the hypothesis that "the hormonal experience of the developing embryo at crucial stages of its development has an impact on adult behavior in humans, affecting the choice of mates, parenting, social behavior, and other significant dimensions of humanity" (Colborn, Dumanoski, and Myers 238). Environmental historian Nancy Langston lamented "Gender Transformed" in a 2003 article on the peril of endocrine disruptors, arguing for the natural biological determination of gender and positioning the reproductive system as the site of both gender and the natural. "Our most intimate reproductive environments," she writes, "the places that make us most female and most male, the places we are most vulnerable and most natural, may have been hijacked by the residues of our industrial world" (154). Significantly, both Langston and the team of Theo Colborn and Dianne Dumanoski, whose book *Our Stolen Future: Are We Threatening Our Own Fertility, Intelligence, and Survival?* achieved national attention upon its publication, figure industrial toxins as intruders into or disruptors of the home, which Colborn and Dumanoski suggest, in their title, is fundamentally linked to the human and its survival. Industrial chemicals "hijack" the "most intimate" environment, in Langston's language; they not only "break down" the family and cause "dysfunction," but "steal our future," as the title of Colborn and Dumanoski's book also suggests, and the cover of which— across numerous editions— features the image of an embryo, the book's titular future emblematized as embodied biological reproduction, which, after all, seems to be at the center of what Colborn characterizes as "significant dimensions of humanity."

It is unsurprising, therefore, that material memoirs, among whose authors women are heavily overrepresented, often showcase an obsession with toxic interference in motherhood. Susanne Antonetta's inability to have children haunts *Body Toxic*; she writes of "the moment when [her] biological children were lost" (115) as though these children had existed within her and been taken, returning multiple times to the theme of infertility-as-bodily-injury, an idea that frames childbearing as the way in which a woman's body is *meant* to function. She writes that radionuclides "bear only female children, at least in language, and are astonishingly prolific… As they throw off atomic bits radionuclides decay into other elements: fertile children, daughters" (209). The radionuclides are rendered faintly monstrous in their usurpation of the female body, filling the function that Antonetta can't, and echoing her observation that humans have "failed to make immortality for our bodies" but have "made immortality for our [nuclear] waste" (208-9)— radionuclides outbreeding and outlasting the human, which has made its women sterile. "Radiation is the alpha and omega of our lives, the beginning and the end," she writes, by which she means that "in many cultures—Yoruba, Shinto, old Hebrew— my father is dead anyway, lost through the loss of a continuing line of bodily offspring," and thus Antonetta's own birth "under a cloud… [t]he daughter of my father, who did not die in the Sea of Japan because we had the bomb" (222) is bookended by the figurative death of her infertility. The "malfunctioning" female body is positioned as the mortality of the human itself. Sandra Steingraber does not fare much better in her own discourse of the female body; though Di Chiro praises her as taking "an anti-toxics approach that demonstrates the interconnection of environmental and health problems with gender, class, and racial injustices" rather than "resorting to the discourse of environmental normality to drive home her point"

(2010 218), Steingraber has written an entire memoir devoted to motherhood and toxicity, 2001's *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood.*

In this book, a material memoir in which the author's physical testimony in rooted in pregnancy rather than sickness, Steingraber combines scientific discourse on the physical processes of pregnancy with meditations on the "mystery" and "miracle" of her condition, frequently likening the pregnant body to the nonhuman world: "[t]he internal anatomy of a human placenta closely resembles a maple grove: the long columns of cells sent out by into the uterine lining… quickly branch and branch again until… the treetops of an entire forest press up against the deepest layers of the womb" (30-1); the placenta is "a blood-drenched forest," "the sapwood of pregnancy" (33). At the close of the book, she offers a "prayer" celebrating the commencement of weaning: "*Sleeping girl, I release you from my breast into the world, where the tides run with fish and berry bushes flutter with migrating birds"* (283). This "world" is really an *ideal* world, the prelapsarian "green oasis" of anti-toxic fantasy, which is also figured as the natural body of the mother, in turn identified (as Lawrence Buell points out of the "pastoral-utopian innocence" of threatened landscape) as a purity that is always at risk.

In Steingraber's work, the implications of these ideas go unexplored, leading to a heteronormativity that even Alaimo— who defends Steingraber by arguing that "[f]eminism, even gender-minimizing feminisms, cannot turn away from matters of reproductive health and bodily politics" (104)— acknowledges. Indeed, Steingraber's preface allies itself with such views, marking the body of the mother as "the first environment," and intrinsically linked to the outer environment of the Earth (x). This "truth," as Steingraber labels it— and the threat it implies to the rhetorically powerful figure of the child, who in turn might be contaminated through "the ecosystem of a mother's body"— "should inspire us all— mothers, fathers, grandparents, doctors, midwives, and everyone concerned about future generations— to action," Steingraber writes (ibid), reinscribing the centrality of procreation in the anti-toxic narrative, and reaffirming its moral valence. Yet Steingraber's book is not really organized around toxic threat. Rather, *Having Faith* is concerned with the violation of the natural zone of the maternal body by the artificial, represented not only by toxic chemicals, but by technological intervention. Steingraber passionately endorses natural childbirth, criticizing episiotomy (the common surgical severing of the perineum) and the use of epidurals. She describes her own experience of labor as "a *profound* pain… like the chords of a pipe organ filling a cathedral… like an earthquake" (196), and interposes into her account of childbirth the memory of a surviving an avalanche while hiking a mountain (197)— the nonhuman, in its guise as the wild and the sacred, inhabiting the flesh of the mother once more. The entirety of childbearing becomes the hyper-natural, the ur-natural, the same "natural" that Langston endorses when she writes of the "intimate" reproductive system as the site of what it *means* to be natural in the first place.

Material memoir's fixation on the maternal appears in *Fever Dream* as a foregrounding of the maternal body as the site at which anxiety about toxic contamination congeals. Yet in *Fever Dream* the legitimacy of this anxiety, and the validity of the actions it generates, are rendered ambiguous, as they are not in the material memoir. On the one hand, the novel suggests that the spatiotemporal dislocations of toxic contamination— its counterintuitive, disjointed timelines, its tendency to go unseen— render useless Amanda's constant calculations of the "rescue distance" between herself and her child, and thus the natural bond that inspires a mother to protect her child. "Is it because I did something wrong?" Amanda wonders about Nina's contamination. "Was I a bad mother? Is it something I caused? …When Nina and I were on the lawn, among the barrels. It was the rescue distance: it didn't work, I didn't see the danger" (169-70). Carla, too, recalling the incident when David was poisoned, tells Amanda, "It's just that sometimes the eyes you have aren't enough, Amanda. I don't know how I didn't see it—" (19) echoing Amanda's later lament that she *couldn't* realize what was happening at the instant that she and Nina were contaminated.

However, at the same time as the emotions and mechanisms of natural motherhood seem undermined by the new danger posed by toxic chemicals, *Fever Dream* suggests that new possibilities of non-biological and "unnatural" kinship are not only engendered but also demanded in response to contamination. These new kinships arise from the last-ditch cure available for poisoning victims, an ambiguously magical procedure offered by the town's alternative healer, "the woman in the green house." When David is contaminated, Carla takes him to this woman, who proposes that she "move David's spirit to another body" so that "part of the poison would also go with him. Split into two bodies, there was the chance he could pull through" (26-7). This soul migration would cause complications, the woman outlines: "The transmigration would take David's spirit to a healthy body, but it would also bring an unknown spirit to the sick body. Something of each of them would be left in the other" (29-30). David will thus be, according to the woman, a "new being" ("nueva forma"), or rather more than one new being: "David's body, and also David in his new body" (38). The woman emphasizes that Carla is still responsible for "the body," even without David in it; at the same time, she refers to David's body post-migration as David, and Carla as his mother, raising the question of how one ought to think and speak about the now- multiple Davids and their family relationships.

This situation is further complicated by the realization that Amanda's daughter Nina may also not be who or what she seems. Nina's seemingly innocuous child-habit of referring to herself in the first-person plural— she "has always been convinced that lords and ladies speak in the plural," Amanda explains— takes on another, more disquieting interpretation: is Nina harboring some part of one of these dislocated souls? Is she harboring *David*'s soul? An incident in which Carla shows up at Amanda's house, claiming that David is inside it and pointing to Nina's room, also raises this possibility. That

night, Amanda dreams that Nina tells her that she, Nina, is David. The latent confusion about the identity of both children is heightened when the Amanda of the present tense realizes that David is telling her about scenes he could not have witnessed: moments when only Amanda, Carla, and Nina were there.

Certainly, *Carla* seems convinced that there is a chance Nina might harbor part of David. She is obsessed with locating David's soul and returning it to his body in order produce a "real" or whole David— she confesses, "I checked all the kids [David's] age… I follow them without their parents' knowing. I talk to them, take them by the shoulders to look them right in the eyes" (146-7). Ultimately, she steals Nina off to the woman in the green house while Amanda is ill, telling Amanda, "[W]hen I find my real David… I won't have any doubt it's him" (164). The novel's conclusion strongly suggests that Nina is left in David's body: when Amanda's husband visits the town after Amanda's death, David climbs into the backseat of his car, crossing his legs in the pose that Nina has adopted throughout the book. Amanda, watching supernaturally through her husband's perspective, sees "those other eyes" ("esos otros ojos") in David's own eyes (182). Someone must be in Nina's body, as well; Amanda's husband says that though Nina is recovering, "there's something else, and I don't know what it is. Something more, within her" (177). But it is unclear who or what this something is.

This confusion of identity suggests that the "migration" that occurs in the green house makes a mess of what are meant to be "natural" connections and divisions, raising the possibility that a mother might not be [able to be] the mother of her own child, that a girl might be partly a boy, or a boy a girl, or that both might be more than one person and therefore a girl and a boy at the same time. What's more, the migration raises the question of what it *means* to be a mother or a child, to be one or the other gender, to be a person, and whether these qualities and relationships are fixed or subject to change— whether there can be such a thing as a "son who is no longer [his mother's] son" ("hijo que ya no es su hijo") (160 English; 110 Spanish), or a boy who has a girl inside his body, or a girl who goes away and comes back with more self inside her than there was when she left. In short, migration disrupts the natural order of the body and the natural order *between* bodies.

This disruption of the natural is the ultimate terror that underlies material memoir, yet it is not the ultimate terror of *Fever Dream.* Instead, the novel uses it as a site at which to stage a fundamental question of posthumanist ethics: how do we figure human responsibilities in a world where the human is disrupted? When Carla brings David to the woman in the green house who will "migrate" his soul to another body, the woman emphasizes to Carla that not only must she "be responsible for it, for the body, no matter what happen[s]," but that Carla must "be willing to accept his new being" (30)— "*su nueva forma*," *forma* being a word that can connote both a body and a way of being. Carla violates this adjuration almost immediately, when she won't pick the new David up, hold him, or even touch him. She regards the "new David" only as a "monster," and though she acknowledges that David is now two Davids, she insists that there can only be one "real David," and her responsibility is to him. The possibility that part of David is in Nina does not inspire her to treat Nina with love and fondness, but drives her to allow, if not orchestrate, Nina and Amanda's poisoning and Amanda's death. She, not David, is *Fever Dream's* truly sinister character, for she is incapable of perceiving that a world in which people she loves dwell in and through a multitude of bodies is one in which she has a responsibility to all of them: to every body that they may have been, may be, might yet be a part of. "Is there part of you in her body?" Amanda asks David, remembering a severely disabled child whom she saw crying in a store (52). It's not clear if even David knows the answer, or how he *could* answer for the people that he might become now that he is unmoored from the easy markers of skin and selfhood. He might be that girl. She might be him.

The Toxic Uncanny

It is not only identity that has been disrupted by the destabilizing of the human in *Fever Dream.* Carla believes, David tells Amanda, "*that changing me that afternoon from one body to another body has changed something else. Something small and invisible that has ruined everything*" (160). It is a belief that seems to concisely articulate the fear at the heart of current anti-toxic thinking: literally, the fear of *contamination*. This is not the fear of toxins themselves, but the fear that conceptual categories in the world are not firmly divided from each other but instead unstable and leaky, prone to collapse at the least disturbance— that objects (including, but not limited to, objects in the mirror) may be less solid than they appear, and that the structure our society is built upon is revealing itself as patchy and unsustainable. It is, in short, a classic case of the uncanny— here, what we might term the *toxic uncanny*.

In using the term "toxic uncanny," I do not mean to imply that this is a state of being *created* by the toxic. That is the impression given by many material memoirs. Antonetta describes "the world of chemicals," by which she means the world of industrial chemicals, as a separate sphere whose focus is "the restructuring of the carbon atom, the building block of life, into new and insidious molecules that could penetrate and alter the basic functioning of the body" (199)— the toxin construed entirely in terms of two characteristics, mutation and infiltration, the ability to transgress the boundary of a person and subvert the normative set-up it found within, the ability above all to *change*. "A *new thing* had just been born," she quotes I.I. Rabi as saying upon the first test of the atomic bomb, then adds: "Like Michelangelo's ceilinged God we stretched out our hands. And brought them back burning. Different, atomically charged" (218-9). Steingraber writes in *Living Downstream*, on the topic of dioxins and furans (which can be produced by incineration, including forest fires): "Dioxins and furans are not the natural-born children of fire. They are the unplanned, unwanted offspring of modern chlorine chemistry" (218). That is, toxins not only *cause* the corruption of

procreation, but they *are themselves* "unplanned" and "unwanted" products of an artificial procreation, in contrast to the "natural-born" children who existed "until the 1920s and 1930s, corresponding to the advent of organochlorine production," when widespread dioxin contamination began to register (ibid). The pre-toxic era is fundamentally a *natural* time— indeed, Steingraber's descriptions in particular evoke the mythologization and sacralization that Cronon sees underlying the concept of "wilderness"— before toxicity sabotaged the previously unproblematic speciation of reality.

However, what toxicity in fact reveals is that this speciation has always been incoherent. The toxic uncanny is a mode of revelation. Material memoirs acknowledge the discomforting uncanny of the toxic, but attempt to account for this by characterizing it as a quality of modern contaminants, and therefore as an external threat that can be eliminated, or at least contained. If one understands the toxic uncanny as itself a form of contamination, an external force disrupting the conceptual body into which it has leaked, then it is not necessary to view the body itself as in need of re-evaluation.

Schweblin's innovation lies in highlighting the destructiveness that results from this attitude towards the toxic. Not only is Carla consumed by her need to restore some whole, "real" version of David that would be undisrupted, unpolluted, and complete, but David himself seems yoked to a quest that would allow him to trace, isolate, and expel the intruder. When Carla describes one of the incidents in which David seemed to draw animals to him and engage them in silent communion before burying them, she tells Amanda that she "asked [him] about the dog several times, and each time [he] replied that the dog wasn't the important thing" (106). There is an implication that David did to the animals what he is doing to Amanda: interrogating them in an effort to discover the "exact moment" at which they became contaminated by toxins, and thereby understand "the important thing," which seems linked to a coherent theory of the town's uncanny deterioration. Too, in the final pages of the book, Amanda's husband sees that David has begun tying objects in his house together— pictures arranged so that each "hangs from the previous one… tied with the same thin rope" (176) and other objects that "are hanging from rope, or are tied together with it" (179). Amanda tells David, "It seems… like, in your own way, you were trying to do something with the deplorable state of the house and everything in it" (ibid). This tying-together suggests a desperate need to arrive at or maintain some structure that will prevent the literal disintegration of everything around him. His use of rope is particularly evocative, perhaps implying a *pulling* that is the opposite of the "pushing" that David describes himself as performing on the animals, the children, and Amanda. The book uses the term "push" without defining what it means for David to "push"— *empujar*— someone or something; it seems to be a form of dislocation in time that allows them to review the past and the future, but which also inevitably ends in their deaths. One interpretation is that David is struggling to rearrange the pieces of the world into their "proper" places by this pushing and pulling. Interestingly, the term that Amanda uses to describe the material with which David ties things together (rope, *hilo*) to describe the invisible cord that binds her to Nina, with which she measures the rescue distance. David's tied-together objects therefore mirror the "natural" bond between mother and child, which the contamination has revealed as always unstable, contingent, and in need of construction. His efforts to replace or render concrete the lost connective structure only point towards the fact what is happening in the town can't be resolved by locating the source of the contamination. The *real* danger lies in the unreliability of all previous structures. "The rope cannot break," Amanda insists frantically, "because I am Nina's mother and Nina is my daughter… This rope can't break, Nina is my daughter. But yes, my God, it's broken" (171). Later, she describes the rope as "slack," suggesting that the rope is neither broken nor unbroken, but that something else has occurred: perhaps that there is no longer anything to tie the rope *to*, on one or both sides, that the body/ies of Amanda and/or Nina are no longer solid enough to sustain such a connection. To attempt to re-lasso these elusive bodies, to push and pull at them in an effort to make them materialize in the desired places, is fundamentally misguided— a child's idea of how to cope with the "deplorable state" of the conceptual house in which they live, or find that they can no longer go on living. Yet because *Fever Dream* is a horror novel, no character steps forward to offer the obvious solution: what is needed is a total renovation of the house, a new way of understanding relations to one another.

Conclusion

A substance moves through multiple bodies, muddying the issue of where they start and it ends, making it difficult for us to define and regulate the "real," the "original," the "natural" state of things. Sometimes the substance is harmful. Sometimes it is hard to rule on: delivering both positive and negative effects. Mostly, it requires from us a new way of relating to ourselves and to that which is not ourselves, and a reconsideration of the boundary between those two elements. Though our "souls" may not migrate, everything else does— one might say, from our cells to our selves— and much of that which is "us" has its own identity, toxic or nontoxic, transitory or lasting, of which we may form only a part. What are our responsibilities in this case? What invisible ropes link us together— or is our task to find a way of living free of ropes, in the strange spatiotemporalities where we still require rescue, but are no longer (troublingly or reassuringly) quite so far apart?

Fever Dream ends with Amanda's husband returning to the city, having turned his back on David (who may also be Nina). His journey accrues shades of dread: "He doesn't see," Amanda says, "the soy fields, the streams that crisscross the dry plots of lands, the miles of open fields empty of livestock, the tenements and the factories as he reaches the city" (183)— the indications of environmental disaster. Finally: "He doesn't see the important thing: the rope [that connects Amanda to Nina, measuring the rescue distance] finally

slack, like a lit fuse, somewhere; the motionless scourge about to erupt" (ibid). At the last, we are granted a definition of "the important thing" in Amanda's story: the failure of the structure that has held things together in the past. The slack rope that has previously marked order is now a dislocated fuse, promising or counting down to a "*plaga inmóvil a punto de irritarse*," an immobile plague about to excite itself. This cryptic image seems to suggest the toxins that lie sown in the soy fields, waiting to arise and inflict their poisonous effects. Yet at the same time there is the rope, burning itself down to some affective explosion (*se puede irritar*— one can excite— strong emotions, just as is the case in English) that will unleash a "plague" previously imprisoned, paralyzed. There is a profound sense of danger, but also anticipation, the "fuse" prompting the reader to an indrawn and unreleased breath. This ambivalence is, perhaps, the most appropriate possible note for the book to end on. A collapse is coming, *Fever Dream* suggests. And something new is waiting for it.

NOTES

[1] This worm-description is perhaps not incidental; it is reminiscent of Morgellons, a recent form of delusional parasitosis in which sufferers believe that they are incubating and extruding fibers in/from under their skin.

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