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Sense of Place and Solastalgia: An Ecocritical Reading of *La seca* by Txani Rodríguez

ABSTRACT

Grounded in Glenn Albrecht's concept of *solastalgia* and *sense of place* theories, this article offers an ecocritical reading of Txani Rodríguez's *La seca* [The Blight] (2024). By applying Timothy Clark's ecocritical frameworks (2015, 2019), the analysis reveals how the novel transforms scientific abstractions (e.g., *la seca* disease, avocado monocultures) into visceral narratives of loss, bridging local and global ecological crises. The novel's polyphonic structure exposes the socio-economic asymmetries driving environmental degradation and models a nuanced ecological ethics that resists reductive activism. *La seca* thus enlarges eco-fiction by revealing solastalgia as both symptom and catalyst in Spain's rural Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS

environmental humanities; sense of place; solastalgia; Spanish novel; Txani Rodríguez

1. Introduction

As the global ecological crisis intensifies, contemporary literature has emerged as a vital medium for interrogating the intersection of affective experience and environmental ethics. In the western Mediterranean, climate disruptions have precipitated acute hydrological stress, reshaping water politics across Andalusia and galvanizing Spanish literary responses. Recent novels by authors such as Susana Martín Gijón (*Planeta*, 2022), Marta del Riego Anta (*Cordillera*, 2025), Jordi Colonques Bellmunt (*Carnívora*, 2025) and Manuel Rivas (*Detrás del cielo*, 2024) articulate collective anxieties about water scarcity and commodification, yet their approaches diverge generically, spanning thriller to telluric realism.

Within this corpus, Txani Rodríguez's *La seca* (2024) stands out for its nuanced portrayal of rural communities confronting ecological attrition. Despite Rodríguez's recognition (Euskadi Literature Prize in 2022), her work remains critically underexamined. This article pioneers an ecocritical reading of *La seca*, analyzing its intertwined themes of solastalgia and environmental memory through the lens of Anglo-American and Iberian ecocritical theory.

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Set in Andalusia's Los Alcornocales Natural Park, the novel centers on protagonist Nuria's return to her childhood village, where the blight *la seca* (a disease killing cork oaks) serves as both ecological reality and metaphor for irreversible loss. Through Nuria's reckoning with a transformed landscape, Rodríguez poses urgent questions: How does environmental grief manifest when home becomes unrecognizable? Can literature mediate between local knowledge and global systems driving collapse? By applying Lawrence Buell's framework of "sense of place" (2017) and Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia (2005), this study demonstrates how *La seca* bridges personal and planetary scales of crisis, while interrogating the novel's potential to act as a form of environmental witness.

Methodologically, the analysis combines close reading of sensory-rich passages with hermeneutic attention to the novel's polyphonic voices, selected for their thematic relevance to solastalgia and socio-environmental conflict.

2. Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism, defined by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. 18), has evolved into a multidisciplinary practice that engages ethics, aesthetics, and material politics (Buell, 2005; Clark, 2015). Although Anglo-American scholarship continues to dominate the field, this analysis foregrounds Iberian perspectives – particularly Carmen Flys Junquera's (2018) works on Mediterranean narratives – to examine how *La seca* reframes ecocritical debates through the lens of rural Andalusian precarity. In contrast to pastoral elegies or urban climate fiction, Rodríguez's novel centers the voices of *corcheros* (cork harvesters) and offers a critique of extractive economies – such as avocado monocultures and wind farms – that destabilize local ecosystems.

This study is underpinned by Greg Garrard's notion of transversal ecocritical praxis as articulated by Patrick D. Murphy (2013), which seeks to bridge theory and practice while emphasizing the interplay between local and global environmental dynamics. Particularly relevant is Murphy's (2009) focus on referentiality – literature's capacity to engage with material realities (p. 4) – which closely aligns with *La seca*'s portrayal of environmental memory and solastalgia. By rejecting universalizing frameworks, Murphy's approach draws attention to the novel's commitment to cultural-ecological specificity, such as the symbolic resonance of *la seca* as both ecological catastrophe and metaphor for communal trauma.

To further contextualize the analysis, it is essential to incorporate the notion of *sense of place*, a concept that enriches the ecocritical reading of *La seca*. As Goodbody and Flys Junquera (2016) observe in their introduction to *Sense of Place: Transatlantic Perspectives* (p. 11), "sense of place is a deceptively simple phrase" whose meaning becomes highly nuanced due to its use across disciplines such as geography, sociology, anthropology, literature, and the arts, each contributing distinct perspectives and concerns. From a phenomenological

standpoint – especially in the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty – place is regarded as foundational to human existence, since “to exist” is necessarily “to be somewhere”. This ontological rootedness is further elaborated by Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (1992, pp. 165–175), who conceptualizes sense of place, or place attachment, as a symbolic relationship between people and physical environments, shaped over time by shared cultural practices and emotional meanings. While this attachment is grounded in the material features of a place, its full significance emerges through culturally mediated associations, often reflected in literature and the arts. The dual nature of the concept – at once objective and subjective – can be traced back to Romanticism and the classical idea of the *genius loci*, whereby nature was re-invested with intrinsic value through aesthetic and poetic representation (Flys Junquera et al., 2010, pp. 20–21; Goodbody & Flys Junquera, 2016, pp. 14–15).

Closely linked to sense of place is the concept of *environmental memory*, which Buell (2017, pp. 95–96) defines as the conscious or unconscious, accurate or distorted, individual or collective awareness of environments as lived experiences over time. This form of memory is crucial not only for understanding the historical transformation of specific landscapes, but also for examining how communities develop and maintain affective relationships with ecosystems. Within the framework of the Anthropocene – where human impact on the environment has reached global and intergenerational proportions – Buell emphasizes the need to cultivate shared notions of environmental memory that transcend individual lifespans. He further distinguishes four spatiotemporal layers in which such memory functions: biogeological, personal, collective or social, and national. *La seca* contributes to this dynamic through its intricate portrayal of memory as rooted in place, allowing the novel to articulate environmental trauma not as an abstract or distant issue but as a form of intimate, embodied loss.

Moreover, the novel’s engagement with the concept of *solastalgia*, coined by Glenn Albrecht (2005, pp. 41–42), deepens its affective and psychological dimensions. Solastalgia refers to the emotional distress experienced when one remains in their home environment while witnessing its ecological degradation – a condition marked by a loss of identity, stability, and comfort. Unlike nostalgia, which is triggered by absence or spatial distance, solastalgia emerges from the unsettling experience of presence in a transformed and deteriorating landscape. Albrecht developed the term in the context of open-cut coal mining in Australia’s Hunter Region, where communities faced severe mental health crises – including anxiety, depression, and rising suicide rates – under conditions of environmental injustice. As he contends, solastalgia holds universal relevance in any context where individuals observe the destruction of their environment while being rendered powerless by economic and political interests. In *La seca*, solastalgia is vividly narrated through Nuria’s physical and emotional reactions to the decline

of her native landscape. Her unease, disorientation, and melancholia serve as manifestations of the rupture between memory and material reality. Albrecht's (2005) assertion that "loss of place leads to loss of sense of place experienced as the condition of solastalgia" (p. 46) resonates throughout the novel, anchoring its exploration of environmental grief.

Building upon these frameworks, it is important to recognize that fictional narratives possess a unique ability to render abstract environmental concerns into emotionally resonant and culturally situated experiences. Flys Junquera (2018) contends that literature can function as a catalyst for ecological awareness by activating the reader's ethical imagination and fostering affective engagement with ecological crises. Fiction does not simply represent environmental problems; rather, it reconfigures them through narrative, generating symbolic and emotional structures that mobilize readers and stimulate critical reflection. In a similar vein, Clark (2015) emphasizes the novel's capacity to engage with the complexities of the Anthropocene by dramatizing the entanglement of personal, political, and ecological dimensions. Unlike scientific discourse, the novel offers a form of immersive understanding that conveys how individuals and communities perceive, evade, or confront ecological realities in their everyday lives. Through this affective immersion, narrative fiction contributes to what Clark describes as "literature as public witness", a process through which scientific data and environmental abstractions are transformed into personal and sensory narratives. Consequently, the ecological novel not only documents environmental issues but actively participates in environmental activism through aesthetic, cognitive, and emotional channels.

Applied to *La seca*, these interrelated theoretical frameworks – ecocriticism, sense of place, environmental memory, solastalgia, and narrative fiction as public witness – reveal how Rodríguez intertwines Nuria's personal reckoning with broader socioenvironmental transformations. The novel ultimately functions as a form of environmental activism, documenting the fragility of rural life while resisting simplistic critiques of global capitalism. Instead of offering prescriptive solutions, it amplifies dialogic tensions – between tradition and adaptation, local knowledge and external pressure – thus mirroring Bakhtinian polyphony (Murphy, 2011) and underscoring literature's potential to engage ethically, politically, and emotionally with the lived realities of environmental change.

3. Landscapes of Loss: Memory, Solastalgia, and the Erosion of Rural Ecologies

Txani Rodríguez's *La seca* (2024) constructs a piercing narrative of ecological and generational rupture through protagonist Nuria's return to her childhood village in Los Alcornocales Natural Park, where the advancing *la seca* disease in cork oaks mirrors the disintegration of traditional environmental stewardship. The novel's

power emerges from its nuanced examination of how sustainable traditional livelihoods – particularly cork harvesting – are being supplanted by profitable but environmentally devastating avocado plantations, framing this transition through Lawrence Buell’s concept of environmental memory (2017) and Glenn Albrecht’s solastalgia (2005).

Rodríguez establishes Nuria’s profound connection to the landscape through visceral, sensory descriptions, exemplifying Altman and Low (1992) theory of embodied place attachment while echoing the Romantic *genius loci* tradition (Goodbody & Flys Junquera, 2016). These meticulously crafted moments of ecological intimacy make the subsequent unraveling more devastating: as Nuria witnesses the blighted oaks and the displacement of traditional cork harvesters by industrial avocado operations, her dislocation crystallizes into what Albrecht identifies as solastalgia – the anguish of watching one’s home environment become both ecologically and culturally unrecognizable.

The novel’s sophistication lies in its multidimensional portrayal of this crisis; the mysterious *la seca* embodies Timothy Clark’s (2015) “Anthropocene dissonance”, where local ecological knowledge fractures under global market pressures. Rodríguez particularly highlights how the replacement of sustainable cork harvesting with water-intensive avocado farming – economically attractive but environmentally catastrophic – creates what Patrick Murphy (2009) terms a “referentiality gap”, as generations of environmental wisdom become incompatible with extractive agricultural practices.

What begins as Nuria’s personal grief expands into a collective portrait of cultural erosion, exemplified by secondary characters like Ezequiel, whose dementia manifests the landscape’s affliction, and the olive-grove girl whose unexplained suicide underscores solastalgia’s human cost. Even Nuria’s eventual “comfort of belonging” resonates with ambiguity, representing not resolution but a precarious adaptation to irreversible change.

3.1. Sense of place and environmental memory

The notion of “sense of place”, while ostensibly straightforward, reveals profound complexity when examined through interdisciplinary lenses. Goodbody and Flys Junquera (2016, p.11) aptly characterize it as a concept enriched by diverse academic traditions – from geography’s spatial analyses to anthropology’s cultural readings and literature’s aesthetic interpretations. This multidimensional understanding finds its roots in phenomenological philosophy, where thinkers like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty established place as fundamental to human consciousness. Altman and Low’s (1992) seminal work on place attachment further develops this foundation, demonstrating how physical environments become meaningful through symbolic relationships forged by shared cultural practices and accumulated emotional resonances. Buell’s (2017) framework of environmental memory

provides essential theoretical scaffolding for understanding these dynamics, particularly in our current geological epoch. His conceptualization spans multiple scales of remembrance – from the intimate sphere of personal recollection to the vast temporalities of biogeological processes – while emphasizing how environments are experienced as layered palimpsests of meaning.

In Rodríguez's *La seca*, this theoretical perspective finds vivid narrative expression through protagonist Nuria's evolving relationship with her childhood landscape. The novel carefully constructs Nuria's environmental memory around sensory-rich experiences in Los Alcornocales, where her father worked as part of the traditional cork harvesting community. The river emerges as the emotional and ecological heart of these recollections, with Rodríguez employing precise physical details to convey its significance: "Se secó en la orilla, de pie, al sol. El agua fría del río la serenaba. Respiró hondo y se sintió parte de aquel lugar" [She dried herself on the shore, standing in the sun. The cold water of the river calmed her. She took a deep breath and felt like she was part of that place] (Rodríguez, 2024)¹. This passage exemplifies Buell's concept of embodied environmental memory, where cognitive recognition ("felt like she was part of that place") emerges from direct sensory engagement (the sun's warmth, the water's chill) – a fusion of physical experience and emotional response that transforms space into place.

Rodríguez extends this portrayal through nuanced attention to how childhood environmental interactions shape adult perception. The young Nuria's consciousness of her surroundings focuses on immediate, tangible elements: the river's refreshing embrace, the palpable texture of stones beneath bare feet that gradually toughen over summer months:

Notó un dolor familiar al pisar las piedras. Cuando terminaban los veranos, era capaz de caminar por la orilla sin problemas. Su estancia en el pueblo no se medía por el bronceado, sino por el curtido de las plantas de sus pies. [She felt a familiar pain when stepping on the stones. By the end of summer, she could walk along the shore with ease. Her time in the village wasn't measured by her tan, but by the toughening of the soles of her feet.]

These bodily experiences exemplify Altman & Low's (1992) theory of place attachment developing through repeated sensory engagement. As Nuria matures, her environmental awareness expands beyond this primal connection to encompass more complex ecological understandings. Where she once overlooked the migratory swifts traversing the Strait of Gibraltar, she now perceives their "ancient restlessness" as part of larger natural cycles, while also recognizing their role in local economies through birdwatching tourism:

¹ All quotes are taken from the electronic version of *La seca*, which does not include pagination. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from this novel. All English translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

A esas horas de la mañana, cuando la sombra aún no se ha echado sobre el cauce, el agua se veía de color esmeralda. Por el cielo pasó lo que le pareció un bando de vencejos. A finales del verano, millones de aves migran desde Europa hasta África, y atraviesan para ello el Campo de Gibraltar. Nuria creía que los pájaros habían heredado una inquietud remota. De pequeña jamás se fijaba en las aves. El pueblo le gustaba por el río y porque sabía que en las montañas había muchos animales, pero los pájaros estaban excluidos de aquel inventario. Por eso le sorprendió saber que muchas personas viajaban hasta aquel lugar recóndito para observarlas. [At that time of the morning, before the shadows had crept over the riverbed, the water shimmered emerald green. Across the sky flew what appeared to Nuria to be a flock of swifts. At the end of summer, millions of birds migrate from Europe to Africa, passing through the Strait of Gibraltar. Nuria believed the birds had inherited some ancient restlessness. As a child, she had never paid attention to birds. She liked the village for the river and the knowledge that the mountains were home to many animals, but birds had been absent from that inventory. That was why it surprised her to learn that many people traveled to such a remote place just to observe them.]

This developmental trajectory mirrors Buell's observation that environmental memory dynamically incorporates new layers of comprehension while retaining foundational sensory impressions.

The novel's meticulous attention to sensory detail serves not merely as atmospheric backdrop but as narrative strategy to underscore the phenomenological depth of place attachment. When Nuria observes "las tortugas que descansaban en los salientes de las piedras o en los troncos retorcidos de las orillas banks" [turtles resting on the edges of rocks or the twisted trunks along the], or when morning light transforms the river into "shimmering emerald green" [el agua se veía de color esmeralda], these are not generic pastoral images but specific, lived experiences that accumulate to form what Buell terms "personal-scale environmental memory". Rodríguez particularly emphasizes how visual and tactile impressions intertwine to create lasting bonds – "el vuelo azulado de algún martín pescador" [the blue-tinged flight of a kingfisher] startles not just as visual spectacle but as embodied encounter, just as the river stones' familiar pain gives way to seasonal acclimatization. Through such passages, the novel demonstrates how environmental memory operates as both cognitive map and emotional register, where aesthetic appreciation and physical familiarity combine to create profound, if vulnerable, attachments to place.

3.2. Solastalgia

Nuria's profound connection to her ancestral landscape makes her transformation into a witness of its degradation particularly devastating. When excavators suddenly appear at the riverbank – their engines shattering the silence with "motores encendidos, golpes secos, corrimientos de tierra" [sharp blows, landslides] – her distress stems not just from the physical destruction but from the epistemological crisis it represents. The villagers' conflicting speculations about the machines' purpose – "Algunos dicen que es por los aguacates; otros por la

central hidroeléctrica” [Some say it’s for the avocados; others for the hydroelectric plant] – mirror what Timothy Clark identifies as Anthropocene dissonance, where local knowledge becomes inadequate to interpret environmental trauma. Nuria’s futile attempt to protest – cut short by the pragmatic question “With whom?” – encapsulates the powerlessness at solastalgia’s core, what Albrecht (2005) defines as the lived experience of “loved environment transformation” (p. 46).

The *la seca* blight becomes the novel’s central metaphor for this existential dislocation. Rodríguez portrays the disease’s progression with ecological precision: the fungus spreading “bajo sus pies, silencioso como la traición” [silently beneath their feet, like betrayal] attacking not just cork oaks but the entire ecosystem of rockroses and heathers. What renders this especially traumatic is the community’s inability to determine its cause – whether drought, pollution, or climate change – transforming their once-familiar landscape into a source of ontological insecurity. The villagers’ “expressions of defeat” gazing at the mountains capture solastalgia’s collective dimension, where environmental loss erodes cultural identity and economic stability simultaneously.

Rodríguez extends this exploration through secondary characters whose psychological unraveling literalizes ecological trauma. Ezequiel, the deranged former cork harvester who wanders naked with an axe, embodies the violent dissociation between human and environment when he claims to suffer from “el mismo mal que afecta a los alcornoques” [the same evil that affects the cork oaks]. His son Montero’s aggressive pivot to avocado farming – and subsequent violent outbursts – demonstrates how economic adaptation can exacerbate rather than alleviate solastalgia. Most tragically, the olive-grove girl’s suicide epitomizes what Albrecht calls the “mental anguish” of environmental loss, her death signaling the ultimate severance between person and place.

Nuria’s solastalgia manifests most acutely in her haunting premonition of cork harvesting’s potential future – a sanitized tourist attraction completely disconnected from the living ecosystems that gave it meaning. She agonizes over the prospect of this deeply rooted practice being reduced to performative pageantry, stripped of both its ecological context and socioeconomic function. For Nuria, such commodification of environmental memory represents the ultimate severance between cultural tradition and the land that sustained it, where authentic relationships to place become packaged experiences for external consumption.

This existential fear finds its material counterpart in Andalusia’s expanding avocado plantations, which embody a devastating paradox: their short-term economic promise relies precisely on the long-term ecological damage they inflict. Nuria perceives these monocultures as both symptom and accelerator of a self-reinforcing cycle – the very act of adapting to environmental degradation (through water-intensive crops) exacerbates the original displacement, trapping communities in an inescapable feedback loop of ecological and cultural loss.

Through these layered narratives, *La seca* demonstrates how solastalgia operates simultaneously across multiple registers: the phenomenological (Nuria's visceral grief over the deforested riverbanks), the economic (Montero's conflicted embrace of unsustainable agriculture), the cultural (the cork harvest's transformation into empty spectacle), and the intergenerational (Ezequiel's madness versus his son's precarious adaptation).

Rodríguez ultimately presents solastalgia not as individual pathology but as structural condition – what Albrecht might call the “psychic instability” of communities caught between global markets and local ecosystems. The novel's achievement lies in rendering this abstract concept through specific Andalusian textures: the crack of axes giving way to excavators' roar, the cork oak's decline mirrored in human unraveling, and most poignantly, in Nuria's realization that her childhood refuge has become “un paraje ajeno a sus recuerdos” [a landscape alien to her memories].

4. Polyphonic Ecologies: Literature as Witness and Catalyst in the Anthropocene

Nonetheless, throughout the novel, Nuria develops an environmental consciousness that integrates diverse perspectives and addresses the intersection of social, economic, and environmental issues. The protagonist ultimately refrains from making value judgments or adopting uncompromising ecological stances. This shift can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a tacit acknowledgment of the overwhelming complexity of issues that defy straightforward solutions, and on the other, as a sign of maturity reflected in her ability to refrain from imposing her perspective on others.

Nuria's transformation aligns with Carmen Flys Junquera's argument that literature fosters ecological empathy by dismantling rigid binaries – such as human/nature or progress/conservation – and embracing a dialogic approach to environmental crises (Flys Junquera, 2018, p. 185). Like the works analyzed by Flys Junquera, this novel resists didacticism, instead presenting a polyphony of voices – villagers, scientists, and the land itself – that complicate any singular narrative of sustainability. When a local complains that the park “está asfixiando al pueblo” [is suffocating the village], or when Milo, Nuria's friend, critiques wind farms as “el nuevo colonialismo energético rural” [a new rural energy colonialism], the novel echoes Flys Junquera's assertion that effective ecological storytelling must “provoke the reader through emotion” (p.182) while honoring the lived experiences of those most affected by environmental change.

By listening rather than lecturing, Nuria embodies what Flys Junquera, drawing on Val Plumwood, calls an “ethics of narrative openness” (p. 188) – one that recognizes non-human agency (the drought, the diseased cork oaks) as an active force in the story. The villagers' pragmatic concerns about unemployment

and restrictions mirror Flys Junquera's examples of literary works that refuse to romanticize nature at the expense of social justice, instead situating ecological crises within "networks of power and survival" (p. 190).

Finally, this novel exemplifies environmental activism, going beyond mere information to engage readers emotionally with the complexities of ecology, economy, and society. As Timothy Clark (2019) argues in *The Value of Ecocriticism*, novels uniquely explore how biases, personal experiences, cultural assumptions, and scientific insights intertwine in people's responses to environmental issues (pp. 78–80). Through its narrative structure, the novel transforms scientific abstractions into sensory representations and personal stories, making ecological challenges publicly relevant and emotionally resonant – a technique Flys Junquera (2018) praises as essential for overcoming the "numbness" induced by data overload (p. 186, citing Slovic & Slovic, 2015).

The novel also acts as a "public witness", documenting the effects of environmental change on rural communities. It portrays issues like the *seca* disease and the expansion of water-intensive avocado monocultures, highlighting the ethical dilemmas of sustainability and the socio-economic pressures behind ecological crises. As Clark (2015) notes in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, art in the Anthropocene reveals the interconnected systems of human and non-human life, making visible the hidden material dynamics of our daily interactions (pp. 175–194). This aligns with Flys Junquera's (2018) analysis of Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, where the land "speaks" through its degradation, demanding recognition as more than a passive backdrop (p. 192).

By focusing on Nuria's individual story while amplifying the voices of her community, the novel embodies Flys Junquera's vision of literature as a space for "holistic understanding" (p. 186). Its polyphonic structure fosters a dialogue that avoids simplistic solutions, urging readers to reflect on the complexity of these issues. In doing so, it becomes a transformative tool for environmental awareness – one that, as Flys Junquera asserts, "reanimates the silent world" (p. 194) by granting agency to both human and non-human actors.

5. Final Reflections: Witnessing Loss, Refusing Closure

In *La seca*, Rodríguez constructs a polyphonic narrative that does not aim to resolve the ecological crisis but rather exposes its intimate, historical, and contradictory dimensions. Far from presenting an idealized vision of nature, the novel reveals how sustainability policies – often promoted as technical and global solutions – can devastate community structures and traditional ways of life deeply embedded in the landscape. Through the use of pain, uncertainty, and helplessness as narrative forces, *La seca* becomes a testimony to rural life under siege by discourses that, in the name of green progress, reproduce new forms of dispossession.

However, the novel does not settle for denunciation, nor does it lapse into nostalgic lament. Its most compelling gesture lies in its ethical narrative stance – one grounded in listening, ambiguity, and the coexistence of discordant voices. Rather than offering a moralizing fable, *La seca* lucidly observes how affective ties to the land are eroded by extractive logics that commodify environmental memory. Its most radical move is not its critique, but its refusal to close the wound: Rodríguez dares to leave the landscape open, showing us that the uninhabitable is not always remote – it is often what once was home.

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