



*Brújula*  
Volume 16 • 2023

## Topographies

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*Radical Alternatives and Relativizing Frameworks:  
An Interview with Jennifer French\**

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For this 16th volume of *Brújula*, we are proud to feature an interview with ecocritical thinker Jennifer French. French is a writer and professor of Environmental Studies and Spanish at Williams College, Massachusetts. Among her many publications, she is the author of *Nature, Neocolonialism and the Spanish-American Regional Writers* (2005) and co-author of *The Latin American Ecocultural Reader* with Gisela Heffes (2021). Her insightful answers in the following interview invite us to critique neoliberal environmentalism and reflect on the past, present, and future of literary ecocriticism.

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**Leigh Marlene Houck y Carlos Torres-Astocóndor (L. H. y C. T. A.):** *What originally sparked your interest in environmental humanities?*

**Jennifer French (J. F.):** That's a funny question. Not in a bad way at all, but I have been doing what I do since way before the concept of the environmental humanities came online. Ecocriticism was a really new idea when I was a grad student. I was in Comp Lit, and I was increasingly focused on Latin America and Hispanic studies; increasingly saw myself as somebody who would one day work in a Spanish department. And ecocriticism was really quite a fringe endeavor at that time, even in departments in English, which is where ecocriticism began. I was fortunate to work with Jorge Marcone, who was one of a very, very small handful of Latin Americanists, Candice Slater being another, who were interested in this new endeavor that was ecocriticism. I was a grad student looking around for a dissertation idea. I was struck by the points of intersection between British colonial literature and the Latin American *novela de la selva* and *regionalismo* more broadly. And this thing that was becoming ecocriticism seemed to offer some interesting ideas and questions, and even perhaps a new mode of engagement that would be useful for thinking about that overlap and the connections between these two bodies of literature that I was trying to bring into conversation with each other.

I guess I could say I was really drawn to Cheryll Glotfelty's description of ecocriticism in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, which had recently been published. She made what seemed to me a very compelling argument that we ought to be able to talk about place and make place into an analytical category the same way scholars of literature were working with race, gender and class. And to me that was a very compelling argument. And from the origin, from the get go, it wasn't a question of place *instead of* race, gender and class. It was place *in addition* to those other analytical categories, and thinking about, how can we develop analytical

frameworks that would allow us to work with all of these categories and all of these concepts as they manifest themselves in a text.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *We know that the environmental humanities are constituted as a transdisciplinary space, which greatly benefits the reading of art as it is approached from different angles. Considering that your book focuses on analyzing a group of literary works called "novelas regionalistas", and that together with Gisela Heffes you have published a re-reading of the Latin American literary canon from an ecocritical approach, first, in what way has your training in literature allowed you to adapt to this critical environmental thinking? Second, do you consider that some theories or categories produced from literature were useful to understand this ecological thinking? Third, what knowledge or currents of thinking learned in your humanistic training do you consider that were useful to you in adapting the environmental humanities?*

**J. F.:** That's a very big question and I have what will sound like a very modest response. But this is what I always tell my students at the start of the semester and subsequently: that my method is rhetorical analysis. I, like you, was trained as a literary critic and my work is transdisciplinary, absolutely, in the sense that I always contextualize literary texts historically and geographically; I'm interested in the way literature interfaces with technologies, materialities, and places. In that sense, transdisciplinary thinking is extremely important to my work as a literary critic. But it's always this question of rhetorical analysis that I think accounts for the rigor in the scholarship that we produce and that allows us to do methodologically rigorous scholarship in transdisciplinary frameworks. That's what we do, right, when we write, when we read, when we think, when we teach— we look at the language of a text. We have the language of Lispector, or Rivera, or of writing from the colonial period, the nineteenth century, or the present. What makes these texts fascinating and relevant for me as a literary critic is what they do with language: how they work with language and what their language shows us about conceptual frameworks that are in place, that are

inherited, that are passed on, that are predominant; or how their thinking is breaking those inherited frameworks and presenting different ideas, different ways of thinking, different modalities of thought. All of that happens in and through language, and we can get at it in a fine-grained way using the tools of rhetorical analysis. I'm not a deconstructionist. I never have been, but I was trained by deconstructionists both as an undergraduate and as a grad student, and I think that fine-grained rhetorical analysis that we learned at that time in the nineties is still essential to how I see myself as a scholar, despite the fact that in some ways I'm way out on the margins of what counts as literary scholarship.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *Are there certain authors or works besides those in the Latin American Ecocultural Reader, that you consider critical for those who want a basic knowledge of the environmental humanities?*

**J. F.:** There's so much, there's just so much. Gisela and I compiled that anthology, which spans so much ground in so many genres and periods because we really wanted say *this* and *this* and *this* and *this* and *this*. It's all essential. It's all important, in the sense that diversity and heterogeneity are fundamental qualities of Latin American environmental cultures.

That said, of the works that I always come back to as a scholar, that I love to teach and that I find are eye-opening for students, as they have been for me personally, one is *La vorágine*, with its fundamentally unreliable narrator who takes us so deep into his ways of thinking about nonhuman nature and women and indigenous Amazonians and capitalism. He takes us so deep into his own completely distorted thinking that we see the distortions for what they are. And he is fundamentally Western. He's very self-consciously a Latin American *letrado* from the early twentieth century, he's a criollo poet, and he takes us so deep inside this very canonical perspective that we see how distorted and bizarre it is. And then we can begin to see also, around the margins of the text, different ways of

thinking about nonhuman nature. That is an obvious choice for me given my trajectory.

I also love *La amortajada* by María Luisa Bombal, which is a *novella*, a short novel or *relato*, we would say in Spanish. Bombal is Chilean writer from the early twentieth century, active in the twenties and closely associated with Borges and surrealism. *La amortajada* is the discourse of a woman who's narrating her own wake. It's an amazing story of a woman who's already dead looking back on her life. They can't hear her, but she's reacting to the people who come and visit her, her former lovers, her children, and she is thinking about her own materiality in her relationship –in life and in death– to nonhuman nature and the material world. It's extraordinary. It's wonderful. It's amazing. And then Bombal also has a short story called “El árbol” which complements *La amortajada* and also *La vorágine*. She's brilliant. And the third piece in my trilogy is *Los ríos profundos*. Bombal and Rivera are both *criollos*, and in that sense more conventional literary figures for whom non-European epistemologies and ways of thinking about nonhuman nature, are foreign, are “other,” on the other side of the colonial divide. But Arguedas situates himself on that divide, the colonial wound. And his writing conveys an idea of what that signifies in terms of his narrator, Ernesto's, relationship to nonhuman nature. The novel is so beautiful and so painful in the ways he's able to articulate that divide.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *I remember that Arguedas actually read a lot of José Carlos Mariátegui, and tried to find a new way to live that included indigenous thinking. In your book, you mention that the left has for years established artificial oppositions between the needs of human beings and the environments they inhabit. What environmentalist thoughts do you think can enrich the left and how can ecology benefit from socialist ideology?*

**J. F.:** I don't think that's necessarily true anymore. I mean, my book came out in 2005, and that was definitely how I read the landscape politically, academically, and culturally, at that time. I think things have changed quite a bit since then with

the emergence of decolonial thinking, which has become a real force in Latin Americanist thought, and particularly a real force in Latin Americanist environmental thought. Ecocriticism as an approach to Latin American literature often draws implicitly and explicitly on decolonial theory. I think that divide between the left and environmentalists that I felt quite strongly in the nineties and early two thousands is less apparent today. I'm sure we could qualify that statement if we're talking about economics and politics as practiced today, but at least as a theoretical problem, the work of people like Eduardo Gudynas has taken us quite a long way towards synthesizing those two positions, towards recognizing that calls for social justice and calls for environmental justice are compatible. Latin American ecocriticism tends to think through the cultural and political history of originary peoples in the Americas and their calls for justice.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *So moving to Latin American thinking. Latin American intellectual production is thought to be provincial compared to that produced in the West. However, in your books and articles we have seen an important influence of Latin American decolonial and postcolonial studies. What categories of Latin American critical thinking do you find useful in the development of environmental humanities?*

**J. F.:** I'm curious. Who is saying that Latin American environmental thought is provincial? Is that an opinion that you are encountering?

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *Well, for example, when I was an undergraduate student, our professors tended to say that. Now, I don't know the syllabi of the courses in English departments here in the US. But before I was told that Latin American thinking was not included at all in these departments, but that it might appear in Spanish and Portuguese departments.*

**J. F.:** Thank you for explaining that, Carlos. I suppose I tend to avoid the so-called mainstream. I think that Latin American environmental thought is absolutely the opposite of provincial. I mean it is divided, I would say it's divided against itself all the way down. If you are a Latin Americanist, part of our theoretical bedrock

is a book like Edmundo O’Gorman’s *La invención de America*. This book that he publishes in the aftermath of World War II arguing that the Americas are not only invented – as opposed to discovered – but invented as nature. That’s an argument and a text that Walter Mignolo cites a lot and that’s found a second life in the contemporary moment. I think that Latin American environmental thought, Latin American cultural and critical theory in general, takes this critical stance vis-à-vis Western modernity and is able to look at Western modernity and its master narratives as a construct, as postmodernism does in European and North American contexts, but Latin American critical thought also says, “Well, this is what we really mean by that. And this is what is at stake,” pointing to Amerindian epistemologies, Amerindian ontologies and saying, “It isn’t just the world view of European modernity and its footnotes.” There are radical alternatives, radically different ways of understanding reality that are alive and well in the world, and that we as scholars can respect and understand. That kind of thinking provincializes Europe – to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s phrase – and is quite fundamental to what we do as Latin Americanists.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *Speaking of those alternate ontologies, in your introduction to the Latin American Ecocultural Reader, you mentioned the opportunity that we have to cast aside these dominant Western ontologies and consider alternatives. Of these indigenous alternatives are there specific practices that you consider the most important or the most applicable?*

**J. F.:** I should clarify that at this time, my scholarship does not deal with indigenous ontologies or indigenous literature first hand. I wish that it did, but I’m not there yet and can’t claim an expertise that I don’t have. The work that I do personally tends more towards the relativizing of Western frameworks. I’m involved in a long-term project on Rafael Barrett, who was originally from Spain and settled in Paraguay. He died young, and so his career as a literary writer spans only from 1904 to 1910. He wrote texts that were not considered literature at the

time; he wrote mostly *crónicas* that were published in the local press. I am fascinated by Rafael Barrett and have just finished a chapter on Barrett for an edited collection of ecocritical approaches to nineteenth century Latin America. Barrett was very attuned to Paraguayan *campesinos* who were displaced in the aftermath of the Triple Alliance war, and as he became an anarchist he was increasingly marginalized from the Paraguayan elite, which had embraced him when he arrived in 1904. So he starts working as a surveyor, because that's a kind of work that he could do, since he was trained in mathematics and science more broadly. And so, Barrett becomes increasingly interested in the kinds of stories that displaced *campesinos* are telling him.

He becomes a kind of self-taught ethnographer, and we see that in some of his *crónicas*, where he's collecting what we would think of as Paraguayan folklore, including stories that have a lot of the same kinds of attributes that Viveiros de Castro describes when he's talking about Amazonian ontologies. It's a very transformative world. People become animals, become stones, become plants. It's very lively, it's a world in which spirit and intelligence and sentience extend far beyond the human and nothing remains what it is for very long. Barrett seems to be quite interested in that. But he's also fascinated with Darwin and Henri Bergson, whose book *Creative Evolution* was published in French in 1907. Barrett, in his *crónicas*, will respond to Darwinian frameworks in ways that also make room for Paraguayan indigenous ontologies. He takes from Darwin this idea that we all descend from the same ancestors, genealogically, evolutionarily. And Bergson takes up this idea also, and argues that understanding our common descent enables us to feel a kind of consanguinity or kinship with nonhuman life forms. Barrett feels connected to all of life, even all of matter. It's a fascinating concept that the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz has developed more recently. In Barrett's case, he sees Darwin as this revolutionary thinker whose ideas are distorted by the political right of the time and used to justify genocide and colonialism and dehumanizing rhetorics with regard to non-Western peoples.



Barrett takes Darwinian thinking and runs with it in the opposite direction to create these nonexclusionary mental frameworks, cognitive frameworks that you can see in his *crónicas*.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *That's a great segue to the next question I wanted to ask you, which has to do with animals, since we're talking about animals and plants and rocks and spirits. I was hoping that you could comment on animal studies and their relationship with environmental humanities. How do you conceptualize the human/animal division, and do you consider it important to deconstruct this division?*

**J. F.:** I do. Ximena Briceño has a wonderful piece on animality in the *Handbook of Latin American Environmental Aesthetics*, which was just published last year by De Gruyter. It's great. Jens Andermann, Gabriel Giorgi and Victoria Saramago are the editors and it's full of really great work, including Ximena's piece on animality. And I think she's totally right. She uses Jason Moore's work, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, which is completely brilliant. She talks —through his framework essentially, but also drawing on Giorgi— about this human/animal divide that we in the West take to be so natural, so fundamental and self-evident, as itself a product of a specific historical formation of capitalism and coloniality. Moore takes from Marx and Engels the concept of historical nature, which turns upside down the conventional idea that nature is what is outside of history. As Latour tells us, modern Western thought has it that politics, and human society in general are historical in the sense that they change over time, whereas Nature is held to be outside of time, eternal. Like Marx and Engels (and of course Latour), Moore argues that this is not the case at all; on the contrary, Nature is historically produced. In modernity in the West, it's produced through capitalism, and through different iterations of capitalist economic structures and technology. And Briceño uses that framework to talk about animality and the human/animal divide as something that we see crystallized in the Atlantic world in the moment

of colonization, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And she's absolutely right in terms of that reading.

Animal studies, posthumanism, ecocriticism, biopolitical theory, the environmental humanities, these are all useful frameworks. They have all generated vast amounts of bibliography and scholarship over the last few years, and I don't say that sarcastically at all. I say that with a kind of amazement, I think they are really useful frameworks in terms of conceptualizing problematics and helping us to develop scholarly paradigms and protocols around those problematics. And I think they're all helpful. If no one has already done it, we could draw Venn diagrams and figure out where the overlaps are, what the differences are.

I tend to take a big tent approach, right? I'm not particularly interested in internecine fighting. I think there are better fights to be fought, more important ones, and I do think that all of these growing currents or bodies of thought — which are also positionalities — they all have their utility. And I have respect for the work that people are doing in all of them, while I also understand that it's helpful to draw boundaries, permeable boundaries for sure, but to think of them as relatively separate approaches which have their points of overlap and shared commitments.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *How do you perceive the role of recent literature, or art in general, in relation to the development of environmental thought?*

**J. F.:** For me, particularly, the contemporary poetry that Gisela Heffes and I were looking at and that we included in the *Latin American Ecocultural Reader*, it was the poetry for me in particular that was really eye opening and novel, and particularly wonderful. I remain quite taken with Esthela Calderón's poems, which activate what Michael Marder calls “plant thinking”. You know, it's one thing to read a theoretical essay that develops a philosophy based on plants, and it's another to read Esthela's poems, which imagine what it is like to be a plant or a seed that's

been picked up by the wind, and is hurtling across the sky. She has another poem called “Hablando con mis gusanos”. It is wonderful, just wonderful. So for me that poetry, including poems by Eduardo Chirinos, who was a very dear friend of mine, and also work by Homero Aridjis and Juan Carlos Galeano, I find very successful in what is sometimes described as imagining new ways of being in the world. The path forward through our current state of environmental crisis has to involve radically different ways of thinking, radically different ways of understanding ourselves and our place in the universe. The poetry for me is where that really happens in the most dynamic and accessible way. I see that as the forefront of ecological thinking.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *Earlier you mentioned your current project briefly. Could you talk a little bit more about it, and how you imagine the future of the field more widely?*

**J. F.:** Barrett is an absolutely brilliant writer, he’s extraordinary. He’s extraordinary in terms of his imagination, his ability to interlace science and politics in this very literary, extraordinarily innovative, imagistic, wildly rich, modernist prose of the early twentieth century. He’s also absolutely militant in his commitment to anarchist politics. And he’s fascinating. He’s the kind of writer that —every time you read Barrett you see something extraordinary that you hadn’t imagined before you read him. And Barrett is still an underground figure. I have a second line of research interest in Paraguay, which I’ve been developing since soon after my first book came out. And Barrett is extremely important for thinking about Paraguayan literature, especially Augusto Roa Bastos’s work; he’s also, as Ana María Vara points out, a very important underground influence in the Rio de la Plata more generally. Horacio Quiroga would not have written what he wrote if it hadn’t been for Barrett. He’s essential in many ways and he’s never been translated into English. I have recently finished a chapter on Barrett for an edited collection called *Changes in the Landscape: Humans in Nature in 19th Century Latin America* that is in production now with Vanderbilt. With that and the compilation Felipe Martínez-

Pinzón and I have co-edited to commemorate the centenary of *La voragine* wrapping up, my main commitment is to translate Barrett and finally introduce his work to English speaking audiences. He's an exceptional writer and more necessary now than ever because of how his work speaks to the politics of our own time. That's what I'm excited to be starting.

As for the field, it's just an extraordinary moment. As I started out by saying, I have been working in the profession for roughly 25 years, and to see Latin American ecocriticism, a field that was practically nonexistent in the beginning, become such an enormous undertaking is incredibly exciting. There are divisions, to be sure. As I suggested earlier, when I was a young scholar, the legitimacy of ecocriticism as a critical approach was entirely in doubt. I did not identify as an ecocritic for a while. I have always been drawn to Marxist methodologies, and at the time someone like me could find a degree of legitimacy in positioning themselves as a green Marxist, whereas I couldn't have done that as an ecocritic. As ecocriticism expands, it has gained a lot of legitimacy. But there are also a lot of tensions, and you probably are dealing with those tensions as grad students in terms of what is a legitimate approach to literary study. What is a legitimate way to study literature? And, of course, according to whom?

I came of age as a scholar during what we referred to as the linguistic turn, when scholarship that was not explicitly post-structuralist had to work very hard to justify itself. In some ways we are still working out that old issue, particularly with regard to the tension between ecocriticism and biopolitical theory. There are important theoretical and methodological questions that are still pending around these issues. The field has grown at an astonishing rate, and it remains the case that there are cultural texts ripe for reconsideration through an ecocritical lens -- as well as new works of art and literature. But it would be a mistake to let that sense of abundance prevent us from having important conversations and debates about methodology and theory, including the utility of Deleuzian philosophy to think through issues like I was describing in the writings of Rafael Barrett.

**L. H. y C. T. A.:** *Is there anything else that you wanted to share with the readers of *Brújula*?*

**J. F.:** I think it important to specifically critique green capitalism. You know, if you are in the United States, chances are pretty good that you are subjected all the time to the ideology of green capitalism, which has become the answer to everything in the United States these days. Last spring the *New York Times* published a piece about “decarb bros” who are sick of the so-called “gloominess” of climate change and ready to embrace the sexiness of Teslas and all of these other new products that green capitalism is creating ([Nell Gallogly, “Do You Even Decarbonize, Bro?” April 22, 2023](#)). We as literary scholars and Latin Americanists in particular, have a real responsibility to engage with that narrative and to critique it, because it is misleading. People find it very appealing because it seems to have a kind of virtue in an ostensible commitment to carbon neutrality. But it is based on the “same old, same old” in terms of the idea that the response to climate change and environmental crisis should somehow be to produce more stuff. And to produce more stuff that requires lithium and other materials that are extracted on the frontiers of capitalist expansion in Latin America and elsewhere. We need to push back on that narrative, we need to push back on that framework, and get behind other narratives and other frameworks.

I recently took a group of students to Uruguay for a course on sustainability, and the idea was to look at what people are doing in a cultural and geopolitical context that is very different from the US. We were mostly on the coast, and it was refreshing to see a model of sustainability that isn't based on the production of new products, on the production of new stuff. My students were quite surprised to see that solar energy isn't happening to the same degree that it is happening in the US; they were also surprised by the quantity of beef that many Uruguayans still consume today. Instead we met people who are committed to their local communities and a small scale, artisan model of production to meet

food and other basic needs, including bioconstruction in home-building. It was eye-opening in terms of alternatives to the market-driven model of green capitalism that we have seen in the US, which is based on the idea that change comes about through individual choice rather than relationships and collective actions.