A POETICS OF CO-EXPERIENCES AND DIVERGENCES:
TOPOPHILIAC AND TOPOPHOBIC ENCOUNTERS IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF SALOMON DE LA SELVA IN TROPICAL TOWN AND OTHER POEMS

Jan Raen Ledesma

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to flesh out the tropes of topophilia (affective connection between people and their settings or places) and topophobia (the revulsion toward a place and its attendant complexities) in the selected poems of Salomon de la Selva in *Tropical Town and Other Poems*, his first book written in traditional English verse forms. With reference to the biography of de la Selva, a life of crossed times and cultures, particularly that of residing in a chauvinistic United States, and his romantic memories of his beloved homeland, Nicaragua, under the yoke of neo-colonialism, are the central shaping element of his images and themes of place-making in the selected poems. These selected poems in *Tropical Town* are resilient poetic articulations and tropes of how place is essentially a beacon of life, as attested by de la Selva's biophilia in rendering place as a site of primordial anchorage and reclusion, memory and rootedness, and how dispositions are rendered as offshoots of metaphysical and geographical positioning, yielding familiarity with the home ground from the vantage point of the "oikos" or integrated relationships.

The topophobic tendencies are seen in how de la Selva straddles conflicting cultures and lifetimes in his poems, particularly that of living in a United States teeming with racism and xenophobia. This is evinced by how one experiences ruptures leading to the formation of an exilic perspective brought about by the breaches of the diaspora, cosmopolitanism, racial intolerance, and the disconcerting formation of Nicaragua's belligerent relationship with the American empire.

Keywords: Affective connections and revulsions, Nicaragua, place-making, topophobia, topophilia

Tropical Town and its Place-Based Referentialities

Struggling between two different cultures and the concomitant intricacies of exoticism and racial politics are the very forces that allowed Salomon de la Selva to pen his first collection of poems in English titled *Tropical Town and Other Poems*. The poetry collection, composed of sixty-five poems, is noteworthy for its deployment of traditional meter, rhyme and form, complemented by its desires and aspirations of establishing meaningful connections between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking peoples of the continent. This makes the collection an important book of poetry in both North American and Nicaraguan Literatures. In the foreground of this poetry collection is Salomon de la Selva witnessing the working and convolutions in his native Nicaragua while living as an exile in the northeastern United States (Padilla, 2019). The continent where he was exiled was an embryonic empire experiencing the turbulent conflicts brought by xenophobia and racism. *Tropical Town* is a poetry collection that has been valorized in Nicaraguan literature as a text written between two lands, in English of a recognizable nineteenth-century style. The formalist English

verses of this collection are noted for their powerful expressions of the concerns of an immigrant native in another language. For instance, nostalgia and the longing for his beloved nation, as seen in his poignant creation of *costumbrista* images of his native Leon, Nicaragua, including the citizens, customs and practices of the place, the traumas of immigration, the horrors of warfare, the institution of cross-cultural negotiation and interchange with the Americans, de la Selva' s political sensibilities, and even the complexities of assimilation—its ruptures, differences, and continuities.

In Nicaraguan literature, *Tropical Town* is notable for its pastoral tone and its metaphorical conception, or as de le Selva calls them, his "delicate verses in a tapestry for the brave king," regarded as simple yet detailed, producing a photographic rendition of his ideals and apprehensions as a native of Nicaragua, and as an exile struggling between two warring cultures and ideologies. The poems' mode of representation gravitates toward realism, with images noted for their clarity and simplicity, unadorned by concepts (Turriza, 2018). Amidst the simplicity and traditional aestheticism of his poems, the politics of radical subversion against the workings of transnationalism and colonialism, and the remarkable emotionalism of yearning for his native Nicaragua, are clearly and dynamically reproduced using a poetic voice that is both "disenfranchised by the alienation of immigration, and authoritarian in its traditional aesthetic and conventional style" (Colon, 2012). Aware of these forces in the poetry of de la Selva, it is important to highlight the role of the poet as a kind of a quixotic visionary and keeper of memory—a man with a revitalized point of view on the ecocritical notion of "place-making," as shaped by forces such as immigration, exile, and nostalgia. De la Selva's concern for this memory of place, colored by both politics and aesthetics, contains the idea of how places (his beloved Nicaragua as home country, and the United States as host country) stand as respective characters on their own, animating his poetry and rendering

the poems as ecocritical interlacing narratives of alteration, aftermath, chaos, and interconnectedness. By employing the ecocritical lens of literature, de la Selva's *Tropical Town*, the book can stand as a model that poetically and politically discourses the affective interrelation between the idea of place, its memories, and all of its intricacies (Peacock, 2012). David A. Colon (2012), in his article titled "Deep Translation and Subversive Formalism: The Case of Salomon de la Selva's *Tropical Town and Other Poems* (1918), succinctly mentions how the poet masterfully handles and addresses the idea of place-making in his poetry. To quote Colon:

> De la Selva describes the poet as both a "treasurer", in essence, a guardian, as well as a visionary, a "master of the tomorrow." The poet saves our hope for posterity, a curious conflation of past and future. And this is what de la Selva's English poetry is. De la Selva preserves inherited forms, and at times antiquated tones and diction, while narrating the depth of his angst as a "Pan-American," a revolutionary, a New World man (15).

It is essential to note that the poetry of de la Selva is grounded both in the past—as attested by his nostalgic and *costrumbrista* images of Nicaragua, and in the present—as confirmed by his political sensibilities of poetically confronting the issues of experiential ruptures and differences brought about by war and immigration. Caught in the middle of these issues, while employing a conventional voice, de la Selva's idea of place-making becomes clearly noticeable, with him strongly conveying how place can be seen as both abysmal and paradisiacal. Recognizing the significance of the forces that foreground the shaping of de la Selva's poetry with special reference to his biography, I argue in this essay that the selected poems from *Tropical Town* can be regarded as poetic articulations of topophilia and topophobia. The former underscores the idea of connection, and the

latter that of disconnection, with the physical world, supporting the notion of place-based referentiality and the projection of concrete spaciousness in poetry (McNee, 2013).

As informed by de la Selva's simple, judicious, pragmatic, and confessional voice, the titular poetics of co-experience and the polarities of politics are lucidly expressed in *Tropical Town*. I pay tribute to the idea of "place-based referentiality" by Stuart Cooke that highlights place and place-making in articulating poetic consciousness: place can offer various imagings and tropes in literature, most especially when it is examined with its attendant elements (Cooke, 2013). The unrestrained spatial continents of literature become the avenue for scrutinizing the concept of emplacement, the notion of place as a distinct conception, as well as the spatial-personal rhetorics of a particular literary work. As one witnesses the poetics of nostalgia as an exile and an outsider—the very contingencies of the notions of topophilia and topophobia— *Tropical Town* provides an excellent space for a discourse on the affective and dissevering relationship to the physical realm with special reference to that of the self or the "I" persona in the selected poems.

Research Questions

The poetic creative process of de la Selva is seen as rendering "place" as a voluble domain, where the dynamism of space highlights the frenzied spatial continents of literature. This renders his selected poems as potent spaces for understanding the idea of place-making, as well as powerful articulations of topophilia and topophobia, and how these tendencies affect the dispositions, ideologies and the realities of emplacement (White, 1996; Indriyanto, 2017). De la Selva affirms his love for the homeland in the collection's first poem titled "My Nicaragua," where he avers that "I come from there, and when I tire of hoping, and despair is heavy over me, my thoughts go so far, beyond that length of lazy street, to where the lonely green trees and the white graves

are" (11); and in "Tropical House," where he declares that we readers will love his home, "his house in Nicaragua so large and queenly looking" (12). On the other hand, his discomfort in, if not aversion, for the host country can he be seen in "Deliverance," where he questions himself "What am I doing, here, in New England?" (47); and in "The Secret," where he remembers "In that New England day; and they murmured because I wanted to pack my things and run away" (49). Citing these representative lines from his poetry, one can clearly see de la Selva asserting his topophiliac/topophobic attachments, narrating place, ambience, situatedness in the entirety of *Tropical Town*.

To operationally define these ecocritical terms, let me cite Tuan, who defines topophilia as the affective connection between people and their settings or places. This connection varies depending on the concentration and elusiveness of the subject. On the one hand, topophilia can be understood based on the aesthetic, perceptible, and responsive response of the people towards the environment (Tuan, 1980). Moving in accordance with topophilia is the idea of "topophiliac affections." This is made manifest in a particular literary work when the text is heavily foregrounded with the complexities of the environment, or the densities of the place in particular (Indriyanto, 2017). These affections also convey the ecological values of life processes, adaptations, and environmental/spatial sensibilities in the light of connecting with place based on the aesthetic, perceptible, and responsive responses towards the environment or to the environment at large (Tuan, 1980). The concept of biophilia is a strong element of topophilia. This is where one witnesses the human world experiencing the immensity of the environment's grip and hold, disclosing it or the place as a revitalizing force.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of topophobia, referencing R. Johnson, is experienced when one associates fear with a particular place. Put simply, it is repulsion and distaste toward a place and its attendant complexities, which can be the result of displacement, trauma, warfare, exile,

and other contingent ruptures. These are manifested in the poetry of de la Selva (Johnson, 2000).

Capitalizing on the critical concepts of topophilia and topophobia, the readings of the poems posited in this essy affirm that one does not merely speak from a gendered and racialized position (as shown by the various lenses of literary criticism), but also from an ecologically and spatially situated body and perspective. Disposition is a result of the workings of situatedness, emplacement, and referentiality—terms that encompass the symbiotic relationship between the environment and the emplaced subject as reflected in the poetry of Salomon de la Selva. In this essay, I posit a topophiliac and topohobic imaging of place and environment in *Tropical Town* as foremost characters, as well as interwoven chronicles imbued with various foregrounding affecting and effecting the situatedness and placements of de la Selva in his poems. From the perspective of the rhetorics of place, the textuality of the environment and place is to be underscored. Taking my cue from the book "*Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, I deploy Karl Kroeber's concept of an environment that is "proto-ecological" to supports the aim of this essay, since the natural environment in the poems of de la Selva is seen to be taking on a life of its own, as it is situated outside one's unusual and idiosyncratic personal awareness and essence (Kroeber, 1994). Though the environment is foregrounded in the poems, this study conceives places as dynamic entities, opposing their static conceptions and imagings. The concept of place is presented as a discursive category shaped by the ideologies of both connectivity and detachment. This essay attempts to answer these questions:

- What are the tropes of topophiliac and topophobic place-making that can be deduced from the selected poems of Salomon de la Selva in *Tropical Town and Other Poems*"

as revealed by their metaphors, images, symbolism, and nuances?

- How does de la Selva disclose his idea of place-making as dynamically interweaving narratives and images of relation, disharmony, and disconnectedness in *Tropical Town*?

I claim that the poems of de la Selva in *Tropical Town* are a form of validation of the so- called "constitutive existence of writing," and the very "production of discourses and its connection with places" (Dobrin and Weisser, 2001). I highlight the pronouncements of spatial attachments and pieces of wisdom in the selected poems of de la Selva that underscore the significance of place as a site that shapes the mindset and disposition of the subject in the poems.

Very notable are the poems in the sections titled "My Nicaragua" and "In New England and Other Lyrics," where one can see how place is rendered as an essential element that discursively affects the existence and composition of writing. The poems speak about the physical environment and the constructed environment as informed by the poet's experiences of diaspora, exile, and warfare (Dobrin and Weisser, 2001). A clear instance of de la Selva's projection of place-making is strongly conveyed in the first poem of the collection titled "Tropical Town." It is notable in this poem de la Selva's inclination toward the realism, as he brings his readers to a specific place, complemented with his lucid reflections on the very memories of the place, "elevating his vantage one step beyond image and testimony" (Colon, 2012). In "Tropical Town," the aesthetic and political sensibilities of de la Selva intertwine in interesting and surprising ways. The reader witnesses a clear demonstration, in the opening couplet and in middle octet of the poem, how de la Selva creates landscape in his poem. The poem is noteworthy for its depiction of bleakness:

Blue, pink and yellow and, afar,
The cemetery, where the green trees are.

Sometimes you see a hungry dog pass by,
And there are always buzzards in the sky,
Sometimes you hear the big cathedral ball,
A blind man rings it; and sometimes you hear
A rumbling ox-cart that brings woos to sell.
Else nothing ever breaks the ancient spell
That holds the town asleep, save, once a year,
The Easter festival (11).

In the opening couplet, we see a cemetery in the tropical colors blue, pink, and yellow. We do not see a persona or any other human subject, just a clear and austere dreary landscape. In the octet, the word "sometimes" imbues the poem with a light tone, while the use of the pronoun "you" becomes a clear indicator of a subject, the onlooker who "begins to take it all in and issue judgment on the importance of details" (Colon, 2012). The middle stanza of the poem vividly appeals to this "you," which give us the impression that the landscape of "Tropical Town" is a enveloped by barrenness and desolation. The images of the poem speak of bleakness; the place is stifling and enervating, highlighted by the image of a cemetery. The speaker of the poem declares that he comes from there, "tired of hoping and thoughts heavy over him thoughts going far beyond that length of lazy street" (11). This is a remarkably charged expression, since it conveys de la Selva's attempt to romanticize the memory of his place, a life actively engaged in trying to make sense of the world, and in seeking a place that can potently rejuvenate his existence as a being caught between the forces of continuity and discontinuity. The detailed imaging of the town in this poem declares the speaker's vicarious but earnest experience of the place. The topophiliac attachment of the speaker is further affirmed in the declaration "I come from there" (11). The heartfelt expression of his despair and exhaustion is a metaphysical projection of the location and

disposition of the speaker. This location and disposition of de la Selva in "Tropical Town" can be used as a means of probing the exilic perspective of the poet.

The exilic mind has a strong desire to reconstruct Leon, Nicaragua. As his "thoughts go far beyond that length of lazy street" (11), it becomes essential to note that Leon will always be the very emblem of stimulation and encouragement for his life at its roughest times. Aware of his origins, the persona also finds his way back to his beloved roots in Leon; he always romantically returns to Nicaragua in times of suffering and delight. Such constitutes his topophiliac attachment to Nicaragua—a place of utmost familiarity and the gathering of joyful and convivial thoughts.

The cemetery is a vital image in this poem. Underscoring the implications of the native ground "heavily invested" with souls, the poem also espouses a strong discoursing of the poetics of co-experience, and the romanticizing of the homeland which is brought about by his being an outsider troubled by exile and displacement. The topophilia in this poem also embraces the concept of the "ecosphere," as it emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between de la Selva and his memory of and rootedness in Leon, Nicaragua—the vey locale that animates the poem "Tropical Town." Colon (2012) further substantiates the meaningful employment of the image of the cemetery in the poem:

> The cemetery is the place of final rest, but, as a monument, quite a part of the reality of the living—especially in Latin American cultures—and thus it signifies de la Selva's idealization of a repose: a kind of a sanctuary from experience. Ground is a potent image in de la Selva's poems; it often feels like a boundary as much as it does a place (18).

The poetics of co-experience operates in accordance with that of nostalgia and a high regard for the homeland. The titular poem "Tropical Town" shows how disposition is not simply configured by metaphysical disposition, but also by environmental and geographical positioning that remarkably enhances one's physical and metaphorical evocative experience of the place.

The Human-Nature Bond: Imaging the Perfection of Place in Nicaragua

One of the topophiliac themes that the poems of de la Selva underscore is the notion of how place is inclusive—it includes the complexity of the physical environment/place as constituting the very bond between the human and non-human realms. The interconnectedness between the two creates a bond which becomes the basis of the idea of place-making (Mishra, 2016). This concept of place-making is accentuated by the idea of "perfect ecology," creating a picture in which one can see the very connection between its living and the non-living elements. Expanding on these precepts, the poems "Tropical House," "Tropical Park," and "Tropical Morning" reveal a strong sense of place-making, as well as the connection of the subject with his environment, supporting the assertion that in place-making, writing is deemed to be "constitutive" (Dobrin and Weisser 2). The picturesque description of the poet's abode in "Tropical House" is the affirmation of the topophiliac project of poetically highlighting the so- called "cognitive biophilia" (Buell, 1995). Such undertones of biophilia are the very reason why the poet proudly declares "When the winter comes, I will take you to Nicaragua, You will love it there! You will love my home, my house in Nicaragua." The innate tendency, revealed by the kind of "privacy" that the speaker shares with nature or his environment, projects the interactive and interpersonal form of spatial thought and consciousness. Love and connectedness with one's environment serve as the basis of this "biophilia."

A striking offshoot of this love and interrelationship with the place is the Edenic imaging of Nicaragua, where the poet makes us see "poppies, like a little army, row on row and the jasmine bushes that are so white and light and so perfect and so frail. The bath is in the garden, like a sort of pool, with walls of honey-suckle and orchids all around" (12).

In consonance with what Gregory Bateson said in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (2007), this consciousness of place, together with its attendant relational principles, entails the act of sensing and sensing conformations in the various provinces of the domain (2)—in particular, Leon, Nicaragua. The "immersed immensity" that the landscape of the poem divulges serves as the spatial analogy of the man and the place where he is emplaced, and establishes the common ground on the harnessing of vitality and energy. The abundance that the speaker obtains from his relation with the environment affirms the idea of nature in general as providing the very grounds for the formation of topophilia, as is illustrated by his remarks on metaphorical and relational prosperity, and of being sanctified and privileged. This forms the basis of the so-called "ecology of mutualism" that the speaker wants to share with others through the poem. This interactive, detailed, and figurative consciousness is the orientation that serves as the foundations of the living world, as well as the groundwork for framing the topophiliac dynamism of place-making. Such cognizance and interface are the topophiliac factors that will urge the speaker to declare the beauty of Nicaragua, as validated by the lines from the poem:

> But when the moon is up, in Nicaragua,
> The moon of Nicaragua and the million stars,
> It's the human heart that sings, and the heart of Nicaragua
> To the pleading, plaintive music of guitars (13).

It becomes essential to note that the communal frontiers being depicted by de la Selva serve as the location of the very revelation of the spatial thought of mutual properties. This spatial-ecological thought is the validation of the experience of the "immensity" of "nature's embrace"—a projection of the image of the relational consciousness gracefully flowing between the environment or place and humans, as the stewards of creation (Wheeler, 2006). This strong predilection towards the memory of a place, Nicaragua in particular, is also the impulse that will make de la Selva romanticize his place, rendering it better than the real world (Colon, 2012). As a source of wealth and a kind of armament for the poet, the pictorial description in the poem "Tropical Park" espouses an image of nature that is both regenerative and edifying—one that is highly idealized to the extent that its perfection becomes magical in nature. The poem romanticizes the titular tropical park as the speaker lucidly describes it:

> The paths are made of sand so fine
> That they are always smooth and neat;
> Sunlight and moonlight make them shine,
> And so one's feet.
>
> Seem ever to tread on magic ground
> That glistens and whispers curiously,
> For sand, when you tread it, has the sound
> Of the sea (14).

The topophiliac undertones in this poem are made manifest by the act of rendering the place as a conjured and idealized place. As an ideal space, wisdom becomes emplaced right beneath one's feet. As de la Selva describes it, the ground becomes animated by magic, which by connotation is spectacularly autonomous and overwhelming. In this poem, the ground is portrayed as the boundary between reality and fantasy (Colon, 2012). As

a topophiliac site, the titular tropical park becomes, like "Tropical Town," a kind of substitute for that nostalgic longing for the poet's native heritage. The locale in this poem is paradoxically rendered vivacious and dynamic by the poet's aspiration for tranquility in his native land. In the merging of de la Selva's voice and disposition in the poems "Tropical Town" and "Tropical Park," the theme of topophilia emerges, notably blending with the environment, and echoing the idea of repose or perfect cessation. The topophiliac tendency allows the poetic enterprise of de la Selva to search for the impeccable disposition and the picture-perfect ground for reflection (Colon, 2012). The poem "Tropical Morning" also renders this notion of biophilia, by projecting an actual photographic depiction of "Indian girls from the river with flowers in their hair," "fresh eggs in wicker boxes," "skins of mountain cats and foxes caught in traps at home," and "faithful men adoring virgins passing by stately and gracefully" (15-16). One can also notice that the topophilia is specified, and is made possible by his high regard for the quotidian affairs transpiring in Leon, Nicaragua—a vibrant illustration of how de la Selva merges the romantic and the realist points of view, while capitalizing on a language that is plain, classical, and conventional.

The topophiliac foregrounding of the poems, moving in accordance with the persona's perception and idealized descriptions of his place and environment, professes the spatial foundation of the symbiotic relationship between man and his environment, and between "space" and "place." The aforementioned foregrounding can also powerfully convey the theme of reclusion, like in the poem "Guitar Song with Variations." De la Selva, who was regarded as "one of the most politically aware poets of his time," renders the theme of nostalgia by romanticizing of his homeland. In the poem, Nicaragua is the topophiliac energy that animates his song with the natural elements, such as the stars, the moon, and the sea. The speaker's song chronicles the "intimate things of wonder," the "waves that come and

go," and the "winds that kiss and fly with a fleeting, pleading something" (17). Nicaragua is the amazing site of inspiration that unleashes his utmost potentialities as a poet. The first two stanzas of this poem are romantically and nostalgically charged:

> Beneath the stars, beneath the moon,
> Over the sands, beside the sea,
> One time, in Nicaragua,
> I was a poet.
>
> I and my guitar were always
> Talking to each other,
> Like lover and beloved,
> Like child and mother (17).

"Guitar Song" projects the image of the persona seeking solace and reclusion in his beloved Nicaragua, which is a symbol of topophilia in the poem. The declaration of his plangent melancholy is triggered by his belligerent relationship with the United States, a country that participated in the tempestuous mid-nineteenth century civil wars of Latin America. The emotive conception that can be deduced from the speaker's disposition, as reflected in the first line of the poem, is perhaps an instance of living the ruptured life of difference, exile, and cosmopolitanism. With the theme of nostalgia being expressed also in this poem, Nicaragua once again serves as the poetic impulse—the topophiliac muse that can cure the unexpected malaise triggered by a life of borrowed times and cultures. The simple yet powerful handling of the theme of melancholy should not only be viewed as an endeavor of "romanticizing" per se, but also as the poetic communication of an identity that is marginalized, as well as the exposure of the exploitations of American expansionism. In a sense, the poems act as a kind of "interdict between languages, territories, cultures, and aesthetic forms" (Padilla, 2019).

Deploying topophiliac undertones, the aforementioned poems provide a sort of "counter" to the tendencies and coercions brought about by the issues inherent in hegemonic discourses: the binary of center and margin, the problems of representation, and the indefatigable quest for independence and the legitimacy of peripheral identities.

Tropical Town and the Poetic Dictums of Relatedness

Barry Commoner, in his bestselling book *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*" (1972), avers the principle of interconnectivity in every aspect, thing, and endeavor. Topohiliac attachments underscore the importance of place as an essential element, that can discursively affect the existence and composition of writing, as well as that of the subject. The physical and constructed environments, and their topophiliac attachments are always centered on the place or site that powerfully shapes the subject. (Dobrin and Weisser, 2001). The poems "Tropical Life" and "Tropical Childhood" have sites that convey relatedness, for de la Selva, as the speaker, strongly establishes an unbreakable affinity with place that is so potent in summoning "a memory of herds of sun pasturing quietly through his days" (29), chronicling the wonderful garden and spectacle of his childhood, and capable of making him "look behind at the vanishing years and before the approaching tide" (31). The poem "Tropical Life" reminds de la Selva of the familiarity of the home ground that resembles tthe face of his father, and the sun resembling that of a golden flock that browses until the day is done (29). The light emitted by this place of familiarity can sometimes be so heavy and slow moving, but one that can also give the promise of continuity and the very spur of continuity. The connection is made manifest by this act of remembrance of his father's life, and how the place itself has been able to augment or even distress this life, which culminates in death. Place here has the powerful capacity to make the speaker recall that:

The light is heavy, and moves so slow,
And sometimes huddles in a heap
And seems to lift large heads and go
To thoughtful sleep.

I wonder if he ever saw the light
This way. He must have thought strange things
(And never told them, that I might),
So fast there clings

To my remembrance of his ways
A memory of herds of sun
Pasturing quietly through his days
Until life was done (29).

Another strong instance of relatedness associated with the concept of place is conveyed in the poem "Tropical Childhood." The poem displays the strong dichotomy of the de la Selva who is caught in the past, particularly his childhood self, and the de la Selva of the present, where he sees himself as a "turmoil of mysteries" and "life as a whirlwind" (31). With a photographic rendition of his childhood days vis-à-vis the concomitant challenges of these "present" days, de la Selva is able to capture once again how place becomes an essential force that makes the poet oscillate between the present and the past. Nicaragua's beauty is a kind of beacon that guides the eyes to see the processes of place-making and place-consciousness. It is important, therefore, to note that the poems of de la Selva do not only render place as a site of nostalgia, but also as a beacon for powerful reminiscences. A noteworthy offshoot of this careful handling of the theme of place in his poetry is the dualistic projection of the idea of symbiosis. It is essential to remember that place in his poems is not only confined to the romantic trend and perspective; it also includes the symbiotic view of man and his environment.

"A Song for Wall Street" typifies how de la Selva disregards the "greenish leprosy" of the dirty dollar (27) and its negative effects, and celebrates, instead, the sacredness of Nicaragua as a kind of banquet that wonderfully sustains the people. "What can you buy for a penny there?" (27), the speaker's question in the second line of the poem, becomes the very revelation of the sanctified and fertile foregrounding of the environment/place. For the poet, it is a site of nourishment, a spiritual haven, a place of steadfast fellowship, and a locale that can politically and economically sustain itself, as supported by the poem's images of a "long and deep golden mine" and a "forest growing high" (27). The beauty and richness of the place compel the poetic voice of de la Selva to isolate it from external forces that can destroy the paradisiacal life transpiring in Nicaragua, as supported by the last stanza of the poem:

> But for your dollar, your dirty dollar,
> Your greenish leprosy,
> It's only hatred you shall get
> From all my folks and me;
> So keep your dollar where it belongs
> And let us be! (27)

One can clearly hear the emotive and powerful voice of de la Selva in this poem—his pride in his capacity to establish meaningful connections with Nicaragua and its specific constitutive components, such as nature's fruits, the prayer of the priest, golden mine, growing forest, the clay bird, and even the cemetery in the poems "Tropical Town" and "Tropical Life." In recognizing the resilient images of place-making in "Tropical Life," "Tropical Childhood," and "A Song for Wall Street," the poems become indicative of the concept of the so-called "oikopoetics" or "oikopoetical wisdom." Place, from the perspective of ecology, is not only viewed as a place per se, but also as an "oikos," where humans, culture, and nature are emplaced in an

"integrated relationship" (Selvamony, 2001). The high regard for the "oikos" in the aforementioned poems reveals the utmost importance of place-making in de la Selva's poetry, for we hear the suggestion that one must always return to the heart of that fire, what de la Selva affectively calls in his poems as "My Nicaragua"—the topophiliac attachment that serves the light within, one that gives warmth and life. These are the reasons why Javier Padilla, in "Between Politics and Exoticism: Towards a Reevaluation of Tropical Town and Other Poems" (2012) declares that *Tropical Town* is a kind of landmark document in the Nicaraguan literature. It is in Padilla's declaration where one can fully understand the resilient topophiliac attachment of the brave de la Selva in *Tropical Townas*, as the poet underscores his life ruptured by xenophobia and neo-colonialism. To quote Padilla:

> *Tropical Town* is a real rarity in Nicaraguan literature, and even more so in American literature. It is the product of an extremely young and audacious poet who writes in an adoptive language, in a labored nineteenth-century style, while living in racist and xenophobic United States and remembering his battered Nicaragua under the neo-colonialist boot. *Tropical Town* is a book written between two lands and in the middle of two opposing language (51).

Padilla's assessment can also be considered a good starting point to flesh out how de la Selva vividly projects the topophobia he has experienced as immortalized in the poems of *Tropical Town*.

De la Selva's Topophobia: On Colonialism and Displacement

Topophobia is experienced when one associates fear with a particular place. It is the very aversion toward a place and its consequent complexities

(Johnson, 2000). In the literary criticism of place, a fundamental element of the discursive molding of place, locations, and nature is the trope of catastrophe fomented by the portrayal of place as a powerful being, the land lucidly painted as wrecked and placed under nature's power and unpredictability. Associated with this topophobic outlook are the experiences of rupture from an exilic perspective: breaches triggered by the diaspora, cosmopolitanism, and the revulsions of racism and xenophobia—forces that make de la Selva always return to the past, seeking refuge in the memory of a specific place, in the memory of his beloved Nicaragua.

The depiction of imbalance in the poem "Tropical Rain" is an assertion of the persistent presence and insistence of a place regarded as powerful and destructive that undermines the subject's topophiliac ideologies. In this poem, we see de la Selva personifying the drenching rain of the Nicaraguan winter as a witch, who "keeps all the world in her bag and blows the heavens away" (24). A clear instance of this revulsion towards place, the last lines of the poem reveal the place and nature's sagacious, dramatic, and communicative power, as a bearer of destruction and as the cause resignation of the people, disclosing its apocalyptic powers and rendering the image of a place beyond rescue, making the speaker call to "Sweet Jesus" to "pity the birds, roses and him" (24). The very mood of this poem is said to be "born out of crisis" (Thompson 13), emanating from the poem's topophobic rendering of the beloved place. With the expressive character of nature and how it affects the place in this poem, the topophobic outlook is regarded as "tragic," in the sense that the emotive conception of the poem is grounded on a drastically dualistic perspective—that of a catastrophic and deterministic point of view—presenting the idea of "victimage," with man as the victim of the environment's dramatic and expressive character. To quote the lines from the poem:

And the streets swollen like rivers, and the wet
earth's smell,
And all the ants with sudden wings filling the
heart with wonder,
And, afar, the tempest vanishing with a stifled
Thunder
In a glare of lurid radiance from the gaping
mouth of Hell! (24)

The poem shows how de la Selva painstakingly paints the aftermath of the rampaging storm. The topophobia is clearly made manifest, for the poet captures the storm and the damage it has inflicted on the place from a tenebrous vantage point, transmuting the vitality of place into the experience of the gothic and the appalling. The catastrophic foregrounding projects the histrionic workings of cosmic power—an unfathomable force, as attested by the speaker in the poem when he calls to "Sweet Jesus." The place makes its subject realize its sacredness, which is also paradoxically conceived as the impetus for environmental/spatial doom that emanates from the gaping mouth of Hell.

In de la Selva's poetry, ruination is another manifestation of topophobia. The poems "Body and Soul" and "My Nicaragua" intensely capture how a place is destroyed, and how it triggers topophobia. De la Selva notably embodies this idea when he expects to "behold the self," "stretch the triumphal path," and "test the might" of the dolorous Nicaragua. The molding of nature by culture is a complex undertaking, since it must be linked to a broader social context. In the case of de la Selva, this is none other than the remembrance of his beloved Nicaragua under the light of the neo-colonialist boot (Padilla 51). This neo-colonialist force is the one that summons the appalling in the poems "Body and Soul" and "My Nicaragua."

The former naturalistically paints for the reader a picture of the "coloured roofs as sorry captured wings" and "churches as brown beetle

carcasses," where everything is enveloped by solid loneliness, lust, despair, hunger, grief, and death. The latter, in a very detailed manner, chronicles the things that are ugly and frail in Nicaragua and labelled by the poet as "dreary commonplace." In attempting to specify this dreariness, he paints in the poem images of "shreds and trash of things" and "broken piles of masonry outworn" (36). His topophobia is also made apparent by his disdain of the colonial influences of Germany, England, and France, and most importantly of America, as typified by New York, the nation that has made de la Selva passionately declare "That never was my country!" (37). Colonialism is a force that counters the topophiliac project of de la Selva's poetry. In the biography and poetry of de la Selva, this colonial force is regarded as the threshold that ushers in the loss of vitality, destruction, and Nicaragua becoming a kind of a betrayed Eden (Buell, 1995). The subversiveness in his poetry is the result of the civilizing hubris of the colonial project and discourse. The romanticizing tendency of de la Selva's speaker is a noteworthy revelation of the poet's topophiliac attachment and yearning for the idealized past, where Nicaragua and its peoples are formed "oikopoetically" —the very ground where humans, culture, and nature are emplaced in a complex relationship (Selvamony, 2001).

In the foreground of his poems, the agenda of colonialism moves in accordance with the concept of eco or spatial injustice. Coming from the point of view of this environmental degradation, it is essential to note that the notions of spatial balance and harmony are rendered as upset and interrogated from a constructionist perspective. The common trope that one can see in these two poems is the image of the very destruction of place, or the narratives of "grand environmental endism" (Bristow & Moore, 2013), that de la Selva is radically subverting, as he invokes such ideas of "counter-politics resisting colonial transnationalism" (Colon, 2012). However, it is also important to note that the topophobia brought by the colonialist agenda

of the United States in Nicaragua is the same force that gives rise to his topophiliac attachment to his beloved Leon, Nicaragua. De la Selva heartily expresses this in his promise to his homeland in the poem "Body and Soul":

> You shall behold your self and test your might,
> And through this sad and barren laziness
> Shall stretch my passion, your triumphal path,
> And you shall weep to know my tenderness (34).

Remembered and Redefined Landscapes

In the poems "Deliverance" and "The Secret," the reader can vividly see de la Selva emplaced in the northeastern region of the United State, significant instances of displacement and exile that de la Selva has captured. The poem "Deliverance," despite its brevity, captures the force of de la Selva's antipathy toward the new locale. The rhetorical statement of the speaker is a clear testament of how topophobia essentially animates the theme of the poem. To quote the poem in full:

> What am I doing, here, in New England?
> All day long, till the end of the purple afternoon,
> Watching to see, over the hills of New England,
> The rising of the universal moon (47).

This short poem raises many topophobic concerns on the part of de la Selva. In a new place continentally distant from Nicaragua, the experience affirms that he can never fully construct an unified monolithic self. As he watches all day long the affairs in New England, one can witness in de la Selva an organizing or even rupturing of possible scripts or selves that shift in accordance with the situation.

De la Selva validates this capacity for reconfiguration in the poem "Confidences," where he addresses, in an apostrophe, the concerns of adapting and assimilating to a new culture through a kind of struggle brought by dynamic management. Identity is a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within and not outside representation (Hall 392). And this is an instance of rupture and difference that the poem "Deliverance" significantly captures. On the part of de la Selva, this involves imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, making the poet veer away from the host place. To quote from the poem:

> Dance, all you little children,
> And I will play with you!
> I am afraid of witches
> Also; I burn them too… (50)

The revulsion toward the exilic experience is evident as well in the poem "The Secret," where the poet declares that in the "lower Berkshires, the experience was most like witchery" (49). The subject finds it difficult to adjust to the quotidian affairs of the New England town, making him incur the anger of a good folk in the locale. The topophobia is once again highlighted, for the heart and mind are romantically associated with Nicaragua, as substantiated for us by the last line of the poem, where the persona "wanted to pack my things and run away" (49). The emplacement of de la Selva in these three poems, as well as his revulsions and the longing for the homeland, shows the topophobic portrayal of cultures in utter confusion and outright collision—one that emphasizes institutions, categories, and power plays, by means of which the relational dynamics and the people are structured, synchronized, and regulated. It shows how the very landscape in the poems of de la Selva is comprised of and grounded on current identity politics, in which culture

becomes an element that is constantly being remembered, renegotiated, revised, and redefined.

It can also be viewed as the instinctive, the natural, and the primordial affecting the ways in which de la Selva remembers the past, lives with his present, and build his future. We underscore here the fact that the topophobic undertones of the poem are brought about by the experiences of disenfranchisement and the alienation of immigration (Colon, 2012). This is de la Selva living a life that is spirited and governmental. The result of this conflicted life is seen in his commentaries on the glocal state of affairs and his cognizance of the confluence of the past and the present—the kind of positioning and emplacement that pervades the poems of *Tropical Town*. Aware of how the redefining of landscapes also becomes the central trope in "*Tropical Town*" in the poem "Finally," we see de la Selva acquiring the suppleness of living in a borrowed time and culture. It implies that de la Selva is situated within the vectors of rupture and difference, and continuity and similarity. The assimilation is made manifest as the speaker says,

"finally," after months of being shy and silent:

> An autumn and a winter of looking at each
> Other
> With a suspecting eye,
> It is good to know at least that I have found you,
> New England, little mother!
> Ah, good to put my arms around you,
> To clasp you fast and hold you fast,
> Suspicion done away, and shyness past (51).

Though the speaker has remarkably adapted to his changing cultural environs, the issues of living with the politics of multiculturalism, and the redefinition of cosmopolitanism that is complemented by the actualization of an exilic perspective, can never be disregarded in *Tropical Town*. The

topophobic outlook is formed because of the retention of collective memory, the regard for ancestral Nicaragua as the true or ideal home and place of final return, the commitment to the maintenance or restoration of safety and prosperity in the homeland, and the strong linkage or vicarious relations to the homeland forming in an ethno-communal consciousness.

Distances and Historical-Cultural Memory

One of the factors that mold the poetry of de la Selva is his political awareness that has been made possible by Nicaragua's belligerent relationship with the United States, and its lengthy, rancorous history. This includes the unsettled times of the mid-nineteenth century, when emigrant U.S. Southerners participated and fought as mercenaries in the Latin American Civil Wars, where they sought to establish plantation colonies to be tilled by the slaves from Nicaragua. This is the event that de la Selva captures in the poem "The Haunted House of Leon (Burned by American Filibusters 1860)." The year is a significant detail to be underscored in this poem, since it was the year that the infamous William Walker, an outlaw from Tennessee and leader of the rebel forces notorious for dominating Nicaragua four years earlier, was executed (Colon 19). The topophobic outlook of de la Selva in this poem is once again conveyed by the cessation of the very emblem of American imperialism by firing squad. De la Selva paints a dismal landscape in this poem:

Shattered walls
The rain has eaten,
The earthquakes shaken,
The swift storms beaten—

No one owns them,
No one would care

To mend them and roof them
And live there

They say that house
Was burned down
By the Yankee filibusters
When they sacked the town:

Sons of the Devil
Who drank to the Devil
All one night, and burned the house
After the revel (25).

With the execution of Walker looming in the foreground, de la Selva immortalizes such a nefarious historical event, while acclaiming at the same time the victims of Walker's carnage. The topophobia remarkably stems from Walker's conquest of Nicaragua. The repulsion toward the place is clearly highlighted, since the place is depicted as ramshackle, bygone, and a distant occurrence from the past. The turbulent historical-cultural memory is the residual force that makes de la Selva condemn the place and the workings of American imperialism emblematically. The place is empty and abandoned, remarkably different from the landscapes of the poems "Tropical Town" and "Tropical Park." Amidst the lingering effects of colonization, the idea of co-experience still persists, as de la Selva lauds the "Faithful wives" and "la Juanita" (26), who were forcibly violated on the sacred grounds of the Nicaraguan soil. Aware that "no one owns them and no one would care to mend them and roof them," the speaker plans to marry a "Yankee girl" and dare to rebuild the ruins left by the repercussions of Walker's historic execution. The predicament arising because of this memory, particularly the memory of imperialism, is the very concern that makes de la Selva poetic positioning conflicted and ambivalent—one that is considered as a good

ground for declaring that his poems are the products of political as well as cultural asymmetries (Padilla, 2019).

Conclusion

With de la Selva being regarded as one of the most politically aware poets of his time, the theme of nostalgia and the romanticizing of the homeland, and the capturing of current identity politics and spaces, becomes highly notable in his poetry. Nicaragua is the topophiliac energy that animates de la Selva's articulations—the very site that makes possible how his poems become powerful chroniclers of topophilia (affective connections toward a place) and topophobia (revulsions toward a place). Grounded on the idea of place-making, the poems in *Tropical Town* are resilient poetic articulations and tropes of how place is essentially a beacon of life, as attested by de la Selva's "biophilia" in rendering place as a site of primordial anchorage and reclusion, memory and rootedness, and how dispositions are rendered as offshoots of metaphysical and geographical positioning yielding familiarity with the home ground from the vantage point of the "oikos." As a counteracting force to these affections as de la Selva straddles conflicting cultures and lifetimes in his poems—specifically that of living in the United States teeming with racism and xenophobia—the topophobic outlook is also poetically rendered as evinced by how the persona has experienced ruptures that lead to the formation of an exilic perspective brought about by the breaches of the diaspora, cosmopolitanism, racial intolerance, and even neo-colonialism, as well as Nicaragua's belligerent relationship with the American empire. De la Selva also essentially depicts how the exilic self experiences the predicaments of utter confusion and outright collision as a result of residing in the geography of altering identities and realities.

Aware of these forces in the poetry of de la Selva, it becomes notable to highlight that the persona in *Tropical Town and Other Poems*" is a kind of

quixotic visionary and memory keeper—a man with a revitalized point of view regarding the ecocritical notion of "place-making" as shaped by forces such as immigration, exile, and nostalgia. De la Selva's concern for this memory of place, colored by both politics and aesthetics, significantly moves in accordance with the idea of how places, his beloved Nicaragua (as home country) and the detested United States (as host country) in particular, stand as respective characters on their own, animating his poetry with vigor, as he weaves into a tapestry the braided narratives of alterity, aftermath, chaos, and interconnectedness, creating a poetics of co-experiences and divergences.

Works Cited:

Bateson, Gregory. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Creskill: Hampton Press, 2002.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

Colon, David A. "Deep Translation and Subversive Formalism: The Case of Salomon de la Selva's Tropical Town and Other Poems". In *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, Vol. 7 (17), 2012. Retrived from https://philpapers.org/rec/COLDTA-9

Commoner, Barry. *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*. Bantam Books, 1972.

Cooke, Stuart. "What's an Ecologically Sensitive Poetics? Song, Breath, and Ecology in Southern Chile." In *AJE: Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*. Vol. 3, 2014: pp. 92-102

De la Selva, Salomon. *Tropical Town and Other Poems*. John Lane Company, 1918.

Indriyanto, Kristiawan. "Place and Space: Ecological Reading on Selected Gun-Aajav Ayuzana's Poems". Paper presentation. *International Conference on Research Development in Humanities, Social Sciences, and Interdisciplinary Studies* (RDHSSIS-17). Balo, Indonesia, 2017.

Johnston, Ron, et.al. Definition of "Topophobia". In *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2000.

Kroeber, Karl. *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of the Mind*. Columbia University Press, 1994.

McNee, Malcolm K. "Between Backyard Swamps and the Cosmos: Place, Space, and the Intersubjective Mesh in the Poetry of Manoel de Barros." In *Ellipsis* 11. American Portuguese Association, 2013: pp. 161-186

Mishra, Sandip Kumar. "Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature." In *BRICS Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 6 (4), 2016: pp. 168-170

Padilla, Javier. "Between Politics and Exoticism: Towards a Reevaluation of Tropical Town and Other Poems" (Entre la política y el exotismo: hacia una reevaluación de Tropical Town and Other poems). In *Revista Iberoamerica*, Vol. 85 (268), 2019. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.5195/reviberoamer.2019.7815

Selvamony, Nirmal. "Oikopoetics and Tamil Poetry". In *Tinai* 1, 2001. Retrieved from http://www.angelfire.com/nd/nirmaldasan/oikos.html

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Landscapes of Fear*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

_____. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*. Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974.

Turriza, Tatiana de los Reyes Suarez. Tropical Town and Other Poems by Salomon de la Selva: Pan-American Poems in Times of the Great War. In *Valencian* 22, 2018. Retrieved from https://philpapers.org/rec/TURTTA-6

Weisser, Christian R. and Sidney I. Dobrin. *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*. State University of New York Press, 2001.

Wheeler, Wendy. *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture*. Lawrence & Wishart, 2006.

Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994: pp. 392-401

White, Jr., Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 303-322.