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Embracing Comparative Ecocriticism Through Affect: Representations of Tropical Forest Ecologies in Indonesian and Nicaraguan Poetry

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Abstract

This article develops a comparative ecocritical approach to contemporary poetry concerning tree ecologies and forest conservation issues in Indonesia and Nicaragua. The poetry of Indonesian authors Taufik Ismail and Micky Hidayat evokes the richness as well as the vulnerability of tropical forest systems in Indonesia through diction disclosing varieties of environmental affect. Environmental affect encompasses the negative emotions associated with ecological loss—mourning, grief, melancholy, depression, malaise, anger, shock, disorientation, loss of hope and others—but also reasserts our ineluctable corporeal interdependencies with other-than-human life, particularly trees, herbs and other plants. Similarly, poet Pablo Antonio Cuandra narrativizes Nicaraguan forest bioculturalities in which the collective trees of the tropical landscape offer a potent biopolitics of resistance. Also writing on Nicaraguan trees and forests, Esthela Calderón forwards an ethnobotanical poetics predicated on environmental and, more specifically, arboreal affect. Her work underscores the human interrelations with trees that are disrupted when ecologies are under threat. The poetry of Ismail, Hidayat, Cuandra and Calderón embodies a shared concern for the biocultural wholeness of forests. Their poetry reveals the ways in which physical impacts on trees, forests and ecosystems through deforestation, pollution, vandalism and everyday disregard register on an affective level.

Keywords

affect, comparative ecocriticism, ecopoetics, Indonesian poetry, Nicaraguan poetry, phytopoetics, tropical forests

Introduction

Ecocriticism involves the literary, cultural and historical analysis of environmental texts, defined as those that narrativize the natural world, ecological issues and/or human-nature relations. In the mid-1990s, literary critic Cheryll Glotfelty characterized ecocriticism simply as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [demonstrating] an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). Glotfelty surmised that "in the future, we can expect to see ecocritical scholarship becoming even more

interdisciplinary, multicultural, and international" (xxv). Indeed, in the twenty-six years since the publication of Glotfelty and Fromm's landmark *The Ecocriticism Reader*, the field has diversified into numerous specializations including, among others, affective, material, empirical, zoocritical and phytocritical studies. Yet, despite the work of scholars such as Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber, ecocriticism as an evolving, interdisciplinary field fostering environmental-literary-cultural scholarship has yet to embrace the significant potential of "comparative ecocriticism." The aim of this article is to contribute to the development of comparative ecocriticism through an analysis of the depiction of tropical forest ecologies and botanical conservation issues in contemporary Indonesian (Southeast Asian) and Nicaraguan (Central American) poetry.

In her monograph *Ecoambiguity*, Thornber calls for "a deeper planetary consciousness enhanced by comparative ecocritical scholarship" (30). For Thornber, "the ubiquity of environmental problems and the interdependence of all life make it especially vital that creative articulations of environmental degradation be read not only as part of national literatures but also in terms of intercultural thematic and conceptual networks" (30). Elsewhere, Thornber encourages "scholars of East Asian literatures, who to date have focused primarily on how individual East Asian literatures (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Taiwanese) have celebrated harmonious human relationships with nature, to participate more actively in environmental criticism, and particularly *comparative environmental criticism*" ("Literature" 990, emphasis added). Thornber envisions a "transnational and trans-genre approach" to ecocriticism that aims to disclose the interconnections between processes of environmental degradation and social-cultural values that go beyond geopolitical boundaries ("Literature" 990). In similar terms, Ursula K. Heise comments that the global pervasiveness of environmental crisis has begun to inform a theoretical orientation to comparative ecocriticism that, "ranging as widely across regions, cultures, and languages as postcolonial ecocriticism, has tended to emphasize not so much the divergent environmentalisms that arise out of communities' different positions in an increasingly globalized economy and their varying exposures to risk, but similarities that the confrontation with shared crisis scenarios generates" (25).

Taking cues from Heise and Thornber, this article develops a comparative ecocritical approach to the contemporary environmental—and, more specifically, arboreal—poetry of Indonesia and Nicaragua. Indonesia's vast archipelago presents extensive natural wealth. Oceans constitute about sixty-two percent of the total area of the country. Containing close to

forty million hectares of tropical forest, Indonesia also has the third largest tropical forest coverage of any country in the world. Nonetheless, the country faces a harrowing range of ecological pressures including broadscale deforestation for palm oil production, the rapid loss of tropical biodiversity and the widespread contamination of air and water. These issues reflect the country's rapid population growth and techno-industrial transformation (Sarjana). Pesticide pollution, mercury contamination and carbon monoxide poisoning pose grave risks for human and nonhuman health on Indonesia's 17,500 islands but especially on population-dense Java, Sumatra and Sulawesi (Nakazawa). In comparison, in Nicaragua, deforestation has resulted primarily from the agricultural conversion of forests, illegal settlements in extant forests and enormous infrastructure development projects typified by the Grand Interoceanic Canal traversing the country 270 kilometers from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean (Forests of the World). Since 1960 in particular, deforestation in Nicaragua has intensified as a result of increased timber harvesting, land redistribution, internal migration and amendments to agricultural policies (Tobar-López 226). At the same time, tropical deforestation has become an issue of global interest because of the impacts of land use and land cover changes on biodiversity around the world.

In this context of comparative ecology and comparative ecocriticism, the poetry of well-known author Taufik Ismail (notably the poem "Lingkungan Mati" or "The Dead Environment," 1990) and Bornean writer Micky Hidayat (specifically "Hutan di Mataku" or "Forest in My Eyes," 2010) addresses the intertwined ecological and social issues contributing to tropical forest decline in Indonesia. In comparable terms, Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuandra in *Seven Trees Against the Dying of the Light* (c. 1978) and Esthela Calderón in her collection *Los huesos de mi abuelo* (*The Bones of My Grandfather)* (2018) narrativize the ancestral natural-cultural imbrications that become weakened as biodiverse tropical ecosystems in Nicaragua are replaced by monocultures and infrastructure. Regarding Ismail's work, the forest environments depicted in his poetry can be said to represent Indonesia's natural world as a whole, considering that Ismail is a poet who was born in Sumatra in 1935 and has spent most of his life in Java. Indeed, both Ismail and Hidayat evoke the richness and vulnerability of tropical forest systems in Indonesia through their selection of diction, as the following section elaborates.

Representations of Tropical Forests in the Poetry of Taufik Ismail and Micky Hidayat

Taufik Ismail is a famous Indonesian poet. He was born in West Sumatra and grew up in Java. Ismail graduated with a degree in veterinary medicine from the University of Indonesia in 1983 but then pursued journalism and creative writing. Ismail's name is included in the ranks of the greatest contemporary poets of Indonesia, and he has won awards from the Indonesian government (1970), a Cultural Visit Award from the Australian Government (1977), the prestigious South East Asia Write (S.E.A. Write) Award from Thailand (1994) and a Literary Writing Award from the Indonesian Language Center (1994). Meanwhile, Micky Hidayat is a poet from Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. Born in 1959, Hidayat studied Social and Political Sciences at the Islamic University of Borneo Syech Muhammad Arsyad al Banjary Banjarmasin. Hidayat is a very prolific writer. In 1981, he was nominated "Man of the Year" by the Bureau of Literary Information. Hidayat has published poetry in various local and national Indonesian media. In 1997, he won an award from the Indonesian Record Museum (MURI) for reading the longest poem—5.5 hours non-stop.

Ismail's poem "Lingkungan Mati" ("The Dead Environment") was written in 1990, while the poem "Hutan di Mataku" ("Forest in My Eyes") by Micky Hidayat was written twenty years later, in 2010. Ismail's poem was composed in the context of ecological concerns and the environment upon which all life depends. Similarly, the poem "Hutan di Mataku" particularly addresses the issue of deforestation. In Hidayat's poem, a forest is barren and burning. The poet personifies the forest as a wounded figure, suffering losses due to human decisions and actions.

Based on data from the Directorate General of Forestry Planning and Environmental Management, or PKTL, of the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry, the results of monitoring Indonesia's forests in 2019 indicate that forests in Indonesia occupy an area of 50.1% of the total land area of the country. According to Greenpeace, deforestation in the last five years in Indonesia has reached 2.13 million hectares or the equivalent of 3.5 times the area of the island of Bali (CNN Indonesia). Greenpeace's statement contradicts the Indonesian government's decree issued by the Ministry of Environment's Directorate General of Forestry Planning and Environmental Management (PKTL). According to the PKTL, Indonesia's deforestation trend tended to be stable at 462.4 thousand hectares over a five year period. Moreover, most deforestation occurs in secondary forests, according to the PKTL.

The contradiction between the government and the non-governmental organization Greenpeace illustrates what is conveyed by Ismail in his poem. Ismail discloses the reality of environmental damage, particularly tropical deforestation. Ismail and Hidayat do not explicitly mention the name of the forests described in their poetic narratives. However, most forests in Indonesia are tropical. The country's natural wealth includes diverse flora and fauna, both on land and in the ocean. The ecological damage discussed in these two poems is very relevant to environmental problems, especially those related to forests, as experienced by Indonesians on an everyday basis.

Ismail's poem contains a dialogue between 'I' and 'You'. 'You' in Ismail's poem is a representation of authority. The figure of authority in Ismail's poem is a person who speaks excessive lies. The authority figure in the poem spreads falsehoods about natural wealth being used for human welfare and justice. In fact, however, natural resources are exploited only for political and economic purposes. Technological progress enables humans to appropriate nature as well as other humans. Ecological damage marks the disruptive relationship between humans and the environment.

Very strong social critique can be found in all verses of Ismail's poetry. His tone, full of bitterness, anger, and sadness, is evident in the dominant alliteration found in the first verse of the eight verses. Alliteration is also dominant in Hidayat's poem. In particular, the repetition of the consonants 'k, l, m, p, r, ng' is characteristic of both Ismail's and Hidayat's poems. Here is the example of the alliteration:

Kau bercerita orang bicara tentang serangga dan fisika tanah,
unggas dan kimia udara, ikan dan habitat lautan,
manusia dan tetangganya, bumi dan klimatologi,
Tapi yang terdengar oleh telingaku adalah serangkai lagu
dimainkan lewat instrumen tua sudah, dan bertabur
debu.

You tell people talk about insects and soil physics,
birds and air chemistry, fish and marine habitats,
humans and their neighbours, the earth and climatology,
But all I hear is a series of songs

played on old instruments already, and sprinkled
with dust. (Ismail 6, translation by E. Liliani)

Ismail and Hidayat are very careful in choosing their diction. Ismail, for example, uses diction related to nature, technology and society to develop his critique of the authorities with their manipulative actions against nature and humans for the sake of enhancing their power and wealth. Diction related to nature in Taufik Ismail's poem, for instance, includes "*hijau dedaunan*" ("green leaves"), "*rimbun pepohona*" ("lush trees"), "*kilometer kubik air*" ("cubic kilometers of water"), "*serangga*" ("insects"), "*fisika tanah*" ("soil physics"), "*unggas*" ("poultry"), "*kimia udara*" ("air chemistry"), "*ikan*" ("fish"), "*habitat lautan*" ("ocean habitats"), "*bumi dan klimatologi*" ("earth and climatology"), "*tetumbuhan*" ("plants"), "*hewan*" ("animals"), "*angkasa*" ("space") and "*perairan*" ("waters"). The word choices describe the ecological richness of the regions about which the poets write.

Diction related to technology such "*penggergajian kayu*" ("saw mill"), "*pengedukan mineral bumi*" ("mineral excavation"), "*penyuburan industri dan transportasi*" ("enriching industry and transportation"), "*bedil*" ("guns"), "*bom napalm*" ("napalm bombs") and "*hulu nuklir*" ("nuclear warheads") was selected by Taufik Ismail to express the impacts of technology and military power on tropical forest ecologies. Technology and military power are not actually used for the welfare of the people. His diction also relates to society and social issues; for example, "*kemanusiaan*" ("humanity"), "*adil*" ("fair") and "*beradab*" ("civilized") are used by Ismail to describe the abuse of power by the authorities. Here is an example of the quote:

Kau ingat-ingatkan aku tentang harmoni budaya
antara
tetumbuhan – hewan – angkasa – perairan – dan manusia,
lalu kau beri aku 1000 kauseri tentang kemanusiaan
yang adil dan beradab,
serta 1000 petunjuk
mengenai sivilisasi yang lestari.

You remind me of the cultural harmony

between
plants – animals – space – water – and humans,
then you give me 1000 lectures
on justice and civilized humanity,
and 1000 instructions
on sustainable civilization. (Ismail 6, translation by E. Liliani)

In contrast to Ismail, Hidayat focuses more on a diction that relates to the emotional emptiness of the poet as a result of deforestation. Hidayat employs diction related to nature, such as "*hutan*" ("forest"), "*berpohon*" ("tree"), "*berakar*" ("rooted"), "*berdahan*" ("*branched*"), and "*berdaun*" ("leafy"). Hidayat uses these ecological terms as illustrated below:

sebuah hutan
tak berpohon
tak berakar
tak berdahan
tak beranting
tak berdaun
terbakar di jantungku

a forest
trunkless
rootless
branchless
branchless
leafless
burnt in my heart. (Hidayat 184, translation by E. Liliani)

Hidayat employs more metaphorical language and anaphora to reinforce the deforestation that has triggered his melancholy and mourning. The forest is also personified. In the poem, the forest "*menjerit-jerit*" ("screams"), "*melolong-lolong*" ("howls"), "*mengerang-erang*" ("groans"), "*meraung*" ("wails"), "*merintih*" ("moans") and "*terkapar*" ("collapses") because

of human actions that cause it to lose its stems, leaves, branches and other parts of its physical being.

Like Hidayat, Ismail also prefers a metaphorical language style that discloses the dishonesties of the authorities, the loss of nature and the impact of environmental damage. The lies of the authorities, for example, are described by Ismail in phrases such as "*serangkaian lagu tua sudah bertabur debu*" ("a series of songs sprinkled with dust"), "*seluas lapangan bola di bibir*" ("as wide as a football field on the lips"), "*sepotong nama*" ("a piece of name"), "*serakah ada sejumlah rupiah*" ("greedy for a number of rupiah [Indonesian currency]"), and "*suara pengatasnamaan penuh keteraturan*" ("in the name of order rules"). Natural losses are narrated in Ismail's verses below:

Kau sebut orang bicara tentang hijau daunan,
rimbun
pepohonan, bermilyar kilometer kubik air
yang
memadat, mencair dan menguap, garis gunung
dan
lembah yang serasi, komposisi zat asam
yang rapi
dalam harmoni,

Tapi yang nampak oleh mataku
orang-orang bertanam
tebu
seluas lapangan sepakbola di bibir mereka.

You said people talking about green leaves,
lush
trees, billions of cubic kilometers of water
that condenses, melts and evaporates, harmonious mountain
and valley lines, acid composition
neat in harmony,

But what my eyes can see are
people planting
sugar cane
the size of a football field on their lips. (Ismail 6, translation by E. Liliani)

The greatest impact of environmental damage caused by greed and lust for power is seen in the choice of the titular "*lingkungan mati*" ("the dead environment") metaphor. "The dead environment" is the key and the message of this poem. More specifically, environmental destruction will result in death for both the natural environment and cultural landscape. In other words, it's not only nature that loses; humans will lose their humanity, as the exploitation of people and nature becomes an inevitable outcome of the industrialization of tropical forests.

Both poets also express the impacts of environmental damage through visual and auditory images. Ismail and Hidayat provide a visual picture of the environmental damage that has transpired. Readers of Ismail's poetry are invited to listen to the voices of the authorities who deceive the public about the exploitation of nature for human welfare. Meanwhile, through Hidayat's poetry, readers can hear how the forest has been hurt, crying because of the choices and behaviors of humans. The forest, in Hidayat's poem, is finally described as "*terkapar*" ("sprawled"), permanently altered because of human exploitation.

Ismail develops both ecological and social critique in the poem "Lingkungan Mati" ("The Dead Environment"). According to the poem, environmental damage due to greed for prestige, power and wealth will trigger the next humanitarian problems. Industrialization and the use of technology that is not in favor of justice and human welfare, while disrupting the balance of nature, are the triggers. People will experience "horizontal conflict" ("*manusia diadu manusia*"), "vertical conflicts with the authorities" ("*manusia diadu dengan senjata*"), "the potential to escalate into conflicts between people or nations" ("*keroyokan atau pembantaian manusia pada rakyat sendiri atau bangsa lain dengan bedil, bom napalm, atau hulu nuklir*") resulting in a human tragedy which he describes through the ecological metaphor of "the dead environment" ("*lingkungan mati*").

In sum, these two poems by Ismail and Hidayat impart a critical lesson. The existence of the environment is very meaningful for human life and well-being, and not only for the survival of plants, animals and other organisms. In other words, damaging tropical environments will invariably develop into a problem for human well-being. Both poems thus

view nature and culture in tropical Indonesia as deeply entwined. The ancestral interconnections between human culture and tropical forests are further narrativized by Pablo Antonio Cuandra in his poetry, particularly through his engendering of affect.

Pablo Antonio Cuandra and the Affective Forest

Just as Taufik Ismail's "Lingkungan Mati" and Micky Hidayat's "Hutan di Mataku" address the complex emotional and social states triggered by the decline of tropical forests in Indonesia, the poetry of Nicaraguan author Pablo Antonio Cuandra (1912–2002) deals prominently with what can be termed *environmental affect*. To be certain, theorizations of affect in human geography, social psychology and other disciplines foreground bodies affected by—and affecting—other bodies within ecological milieux. Identical neither to embodiment nor emotion—but instead involving the synergistic alignment of both—affect has been characterized as "modulated intensities" (Ahern 1) and "embodied capacities—phenomena that arise and circulate as intensities among assemblages" (Bladow and Ladino 6). As empirical studies are increasingly demonstrating, trees are not solely the objects of our affects and affections but, to the contrary, exert their own affective intensities. For instance, sensitive to temperature changes and tactile stimulation, trees emit and receive chemical signals—what can be understood as odors—to communicate with people, animals, birds, reptiles, insects and fellow trees within ecosystems (Simard). Through their multisensorial capacities, relatively sessile arboreal bodies interact with the highly mobile bodies of humans and other creatures. Rather than monologically acting *upon* the tree corpus, these non-arboreal bodies act *with* trees in co-agential dialogue.

Cuandra's poetry of the arboreal world centralizes affect as a relational intensity, calling attention to longstanding human interdependencies with trees and forests. The poems comprising Cuandra's collection *Seven Trees Against the Dying the Light* were written between 1977 and 1978. As translator Steven F. White explains in his introduction the collection, this two-year period corresponds "to the insurrection against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, a fratricidal conflict that is similar to the war between the two brothers Eteocles and Polyneices" of Greek mythology ("Introduction" viii). Cuandra's arboreal poetry constitutes a response to the postcolonial, post-imperial legacies of Nicaragua. In the 1920s and '30s, U.S. troops occupied the country in their war against Augusto César Sandino, the heroic General of Free Men. Becoming an icon of resistance to American imperialism in Latin America, Sandino

was a revolutionary who led the rebellion between 1927 and 1933 resisting U.S. occupation of the country. Sandino was assassinated in 1934 by the forces of General Anastasio Somoza García, who would seize control of the country two years later, establishing a Somoza family dictatorship that would rule Nicaragua for the next forty years.

In many of Cuandra's poems, Nicaraguan trees, such as the ceiba tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), assume a prominent role in overcoming and expelling imperial aggressors. Throughout *Seven Trees*, however, the biopolitics of *native* (indigenous, local) versus *naturalized* (exotic, foreign) trees is not reinscribed as a pernicious binary in which the naturalized tree is cast as culturally inferior to its native counterpart. In this respect, literary critic Catriona Sandilands contends that trees and other plants are deeply implicated in biopolitical relations as vibrant agents with specific capacities rather than passive objects manipulated by other, more mobile creatures. Put simply, an arboreal biopolitics acknowledges the overarching difference of tree being. In particular, Sandilands develops the concept of *floral sensation* to articulate the ways trees and other plants are enmeshed in contemporary global biopolitics. On the one hand, the concept underlines the spectacular features of some plants that render them the desirable commodities (i.e. timber, flowers, seeds, resins, images and so on) of international exchange networks. On the other, the idea gestures toward scientific research in the field of vegetal cognition that suggests plants have sensations of the own that are both comparable to, yet divergent from, human sensations. Underscoring the agencies of trees as a function of their internal, felt-sensation, Sandiland's provocative idea of floral sensation is poeticized in the following lines from Cuandra's "The Mango Tree":

They are one invisible step
ahead of civilization.
You know about trees. You know
the native trees that helped to lift the land. River shepherds.
Trees that are so deeply Nicaraguan, like the pochotes,
which, even when slashed for kindling, sprout up again from the land.
And you know the strangers to this place
such as Senegal's abundant icaco tree,
or Algeria's pomegranate, or the immense breadfruit tree from the
Moluccas,

or the mango that arrived in Nicaragua from distant Hindustan. (Cuandra 41, ll. 9–18)

Cuandra imparts a resistive biopolitical agency to both native (the "river shepherds" such as the pochote and others) and naturalized trees (icaco, pomegranate, breadfruit and mango) inhabiting the tropical ecosystems of Nicaragua. Thus, "The Mango Tree" concludes with the following affirmation:

The mango tree also burned its story in time:
and now you consider it from this place.
It professes a familiar green,
was born in your islands,
accompanies you in rows along both sides of your roads,
grows in the courtyard at home,
takes in
your native birds
as it interlaces breezes and the drone of locusts
like a hammock
for your siesta. (Cuandra 47, ll. 9–19)

Cuandra's active verbs—"burned," "professes," "accompanies," "takes in," "interlaces"—impart subjectivity to the mango tree. Notwithstanding its distant origin in foreign lands, the tree has become an integral part of the community of species that distinguishes Nicaragua and constitutes its resistance to decades of political repression by successive regimes. In other words, the flourishing of arboreal life is intrinsically connected to the liberation of human being in Cuandra's work.

As previously suggested, a promising focal point for comparative ecocritical scholarship is environmental affect, a concept that underscores the intercorporeality of humans and non-humans, plants and non-plants. Intercorporeality can be understood as embodied interaction that generates intersubjective meaning shared between the self and the other. More specifically, the idea of *arboreal affect* expands Sandiland's floral sensation, signifying the two-fold nature of trees for spectacularism—underlying their commodification in global economic networks—in tandem with their innate or endemic capacities for sensation and

expression. In other words, arboreal affect recognizes the agencies of trees beyond their appropriation as materials, objects, symbols and figurations. In Cuandra's poem "The Cacao Tree," an arboreal biopolitics grounded in affect and a mythological provenance is weakened through the commodification of trees at the hands of imperial aggressors:

> Quetzalcoatl told us, 'We are people who wander'.
> And he gave us a drink called *pinol*, made from corn.
> And he gave us *tiste*, a drink made from cacao and corn.
> Drinks for the pilgrims.
> Because ours is the land of the uprooted.
> We are the people whose only country is called freedom. (Cuandra 31, ll. 23–28)
>
> […]
>
> And they took the best of our lands from us—all the cacao trees in the south!
> And as soon as they were the owners of these trees
> they used the seeds as money.
> The people no longer drank cocoa—
> only the *teytes*, the landowners,
> Only the rich lords and the warrior chiefs. (Cuandra 35, ll. 24–29)

Cuandra's arboreal poetics confers voice to tree life, disrupting the dominant emphasis on animals in biopolitical theory. As Jeffrey T. Nealon reminds us, plant biomass constitutes 99% of the global land biomass. Whereas animals receive extensive attention, plants are in fact central to a theory of biopolitics, specifically, for example, through the examples of the patenting of seeds and the broader global commodification of botanical materials. Indeed, companies such as Monsanto are legally allowed to patent—literally to become the exclusive owners of—some plants. Nealon refers to the "elision of plant life in recent biopolitical theory [and] outright hostility toward thinking about vegetable life [within] animal studies itself" (xi). He problematizes the liminal place of plants within the wider biopolitical focus on life in contemporary humanistic theory. Future biopolitics debates will need to take into account an enlarged conception of what constitutes life beyond humankind. To "radicalize biopolitical thought beyond its usual boundaries" would, Nealon argues, "extend to a consideration of

vegetable life: an engagement that would indeed take biopolitical thought beyond its current (animal-friendly) incarnations" (112). Cuandra's arboreal poetics offers a narrative medium for thinking about biopolitical thought with respect to vegetal life in the Nicaraguan context. His poem "The Panama Tree," for instance, narrates a vegetal biopolitics that gives prominence to the felt-sensation and voice of the tree:

> That's why, when the tree eventually fell and a fisherman wanted to use its wood,
> a voice ordered him, 'Don't cut here, cut higher'.
> And again the voice commanded: 'Not there, cut lower'.
> And the voice kept guiding him
> and ordered him to dig out the trunk and hollow it with fire.
> And the man slid the trunk into the water and saw how it navigated like the *gaspar* fish.
> And the man had built the first canoe.
>
> Study this tree: *Sterculia apetala*
> *Sterculia carthaginensis*. (Cuandra 25, ll. 1–7)

In sum, Cuandra's poetry presents a revitalized vegetal biopolitics critiquing the politicization of trees, on the one hand, while fully recognizing the agential capacities of trees within biocultural communities, on the other. Cuandra's poetic recuperation of traditional arboreal knowledge functions as a counterforce to the appropriation of trees as resources or materials destined for human consumption. His tree-conscious poetry elucidates the complex manner in which the animacy and agency of arboreal nature is encountered sensorially and narratively in the everyday experiences of Nicaraguan people.

The Ethnobotanical Poetry of Esthela Calderón

The poetry of Ismail and Hidayat in Indonesia, and Cuandra in Nicaragua, reflects a shared concern for the biocultural wholeness of forests. Physical impacts on trees, forests and ecosystems register on an affective and corporeal basis. This focus on the affective bioculturality of tropical forests is also evident in *Los huesos de mi abuelo* (*The Bones of My Grandfather*), a bilingual Spanish-English collection of poetry by Nicaraguan author, artist and scholar Esthela Calderón. Calderón was born in Telica, a municipality famous for Telica, one

of the most active volcanos in Nicaragua. Her poetry publications include *Soledad* (*Solitude*) from 2002, for which she received the Juegos Florales Centroamericanos prize, *Amor y conciencia* (*Love and Awareness*) from 2004 and *Soplo de corriente vital: Poemas etnobotánicos* (*Breathing the Vital Current: Ethnobotanical Poems*) from 2008. In 2019, her exhibition *Pollen* showcased artworks she created using *marmoleado*, a technique entailing the rapid application of paint to a liquid surface to evoke organic shapes, colors and textures. A poet-activist, Calderón also directs Promotora Cultural Leonese, an organization dedicated to art, culture and equality in Nicaragua, and has taught Latin American culture at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York.

Los huesos de mi abuelo includes an introduction by Roberto Forns-Broggi and a preface by Steven F. White who translated the collection to English. This introductory material contextualizes Calderón's poetry in terms of ecopoetic theory and practice. In addition to selections from *Soledad*, *Amor y conciencia* and *Soplo de corriente vital*, the collection brings together work from *Coyol quebrado* (*Hard Seeds for One Meal*) from 2012, *La que hubiera sido* (*The Woman I Could Have Been*) from 2013 and *Las manos que matan* (*The Hands That Kill*) from 2016 as well as the long poem *Los huesos de mi abuelo* from 2013 and three previously unpublished poems. A comprehensive botanical appendix enumerates the Spanish, English and Latin names of ninety plants alluded to in the collection. In particular, the twenty poems reprinted from *Soplo de corriente vital* represent the pronounced ecopoetic dimensions of her work as a whole. Steven White observes that Calderón speaks for "the plants from the western part of her country that she knows so well due to the intergenerational knowledge passed on to her through her grandmother and mother, especially with regard to traditional medicinal uses" ("Translator's Preface" 155).

Calderón's ecopoetics foregrounds the significance of poetry and poetic thought in an era of widespread forest decline. More specifically, *Los huesos de mi abuelo* constitutes a vital literary corrective to the human-plant estrangements that attend ecological loss. A study of species around the world that have become extinct since Linnaeus' publication of *Species Plantarum* in 1753 suggests that recently-classified plants are disappearing at twice the rate of species described before the year 1900 (Humphreys). What's more, it is likely that many tropical forest species are becoming extinct before botanical science can identify them. In Nicaragua, the circumstances reflect the global situation. Between 2001 and 2018, for example, the country lost 1.40 million hectares of tree cover, an eighteen percent reduction entailing the

emission of 541 megatonnes of carbon dioxide (Global Forest Watch). As Calderón's ethnobotanical poetry makes clear, this profound ecological decline also creates nature-culture dislocations that jeopardize ancestral knowledge of plants and forest ecosystems as foods, fibers, healing agents, ornaments, totems, center points of rituals that bind human communities together over time, mediators between material, psychological and spiritual domains, living fountainheads of cultural sovereignty and lively embodiments of resistance to neoliberal pressures.

In this urgent context, *Los huesos de mi abuelo* offers a timely ethnobotanical poetics predicated on deep-time biocultural entanglements, interconnected human-vegetal histories, and plant-people interconnections engendering dialogue, filiation and affection. Understood in relation to Calderón's work, the idea of *arboreal poetics* signifies a mode of intermediation between humans and trees (and other plants within forest ecosystems) in which language—verbal, visual, sensory, material, bodily—becomes a medium of dialogical interchange between percipient subjects. More precisely, Calderón's arboreal poetics counters a reductive view of the botanical world—herbs, flowers, shrubs, trees, forests—as a backdrop to animalistic affairs or as a commodity destined to be appropriated, decorporealized and circulated through global networks. Consider the incisive ecocritique of her short poem "History," which opens the *Soplo de corriente vital* section of her collection:

> The sound of the first word was made by a tree,
> and the animals and waters answered.
>
> The first human being was deaf
> And did not hear the living current's breath.
>
> Ever since, that deafness has been our legacy. (Calderón 175, ll. 1–5)

If the arboreal world is a heteroglossic or multilingual assemblage—as the narrator suggests—then sound, vibration and song give rise to the animacy of beings, or "the living current's breath." For the poem's speaker, however, a "deafness" that refuses the vitality of the more-than-human—the tree, animal, water—underlies the pervasive denial of vegetal and other non-human agencies. In the context of critical plant studies, scholars have described the condition

intimated by Calderón as "plant blindness" (or, recast in the poem's terms, "plant deafness"), a refusal of vegetal presence in the world (Balding and Williams).

In vividly illuminating the detrimental effects of human activities on plant beings and arboreal systems, Calderón's work centralizes the more-than-human world, human-nature relations and the environmental crisis, in a manner comparable to the ecopoetics of Cuandra, Ismail, and Hidayat, discussed previously in this article. Yet, the distinctiveness of her ecopoetry is its emphatic—and *empathic*—concern with the biocultural, or ethnobotanical, disintegrations that arise from botanical loss. The collection's specific attention to trees and ethnobotanical knowledge of trees renders it a phytopoetic work grounded in traditional, local understandings of the botanical yet attentive to the global factors that impinge upon those traditions. "Madrone" is illustrative. The speaker addresses the madroño (*Calycophyllum candidissimum*), a tree species common to Central America and frequently wild-harvested for its wood:

> Dressed in your curtain of perfume,
> my voice, together with yours, grew in December,
> increasing the magnificence of other names in your name. (Calderón 178, ll. 4–6)

In conferring voice to the madrone, especially via its appeal to the olfactory sense, the poem mediates multispecies polyvocality. Nevertheless, the music "slowly but surely, will become extinct" (178, l. 18). By the poem's end, it becomes evident that:

> Roads overtake you, and the furrow of your family
> sinks hooks of ash into the insane mourning,
> whose only gift to you is death
> beneath the mask of progress. (178, ll. 19–22)

This trope of the mask of progress resurfaces in "The Great Tamarind Tree." According to an editor's note, the poem's arboreal subject is an old tamarind near León, Nicaragua, where Spanish colonizers hanged the Indigenous leader Adiac. Notwithstanding the legacies inscribed in the venerable tree, which should warrant respect from human society,

Drunks, garbage and a barred fence
keep you company now. (183, ll. 8–9)

The poem is as much about psychological isolation and environmental estrangement as it is about imperialism and ecological abuse. Poems such as this underscore that, without question, the Anthropocene epoch is an age of debilitating loneliness.

Indeed, a prominent feature of *Los huesos de mi abuelo* is its tonal diversity. In comparison to the graveness of "The Great Tamarind Tree," poems such as "Classified Ads" and "The Woman I Could Have Been" revel in the healing properties of vegetal life. "Classified Ads" is an exuberant commentary on local herbal medicines in which gentian, oregano, bitter orange, mango, papaya, castor, skunk root and other plant personae announce themselves as botanical curatives:

Four steps to the left of where the Avocado tree used to be,
the Mango Mechudo would like to remind you
that the cure for your bruises is in its hands. (189, ll. 7–9, bolding in original)

Similarly, "The Woman I Could Have Been" is a forcefully intercorporeal poem that analogizes parts of the human anatomy to the vegetal anatomy in lines such as the concluding couplet: "A bunch of Everlasting as a brain / and thick liquid from Hibiscus flowers for blood" (198, ll. 49–50). Like "The Woman I Could Have Been," the poem "Article of Faith," for instance, is an emancipatory narrative that is distinctly amenable to spoken performance. Its first three stanzas—each repeating the refrain "I believe in…"—evince an abiding faith in the plant world as a source of personal rejuvenation, community replenishment and cultural reinvigoration. Calderón's poetry of Nicaraguan trees highlights that, rather than reinforcing utilitarianism, intimate interaction with plants as food, medicine, agents and mediators is essential to our shared thriving as humans, trees and others.

Conclusion

Developing a comparative ecocritical approach, this article has suggested that the ongoing decline of tropical forests in Indonesia and Nicaragua entails complex biological and ecological as well as cultural and social consequences. The poetry of Esthela Calderón and Pablo Antonio

Cuandra on Nicaraguan trees, and Taufik Ismail and Micky Hidayat on Indonesian forests, narrativizes the biocultural—that is, the integrated natural and cultural—costs of environmental change. More specifically, the analysis has foregrounded the crucial role of environmental affect in developing comparative ecocritical approaches between diverse cultural and literary traditions, such as those of Indonesia and Nicaragua. Environmental affect encompasses the negative emotions associated with ecological loss—for instance, mourning, grief, melancholy, depression, malaise, anger, shock, disorientation and loss of hope—yet, at the same time, reasserts our ineluctable corporeal interdependencies with other-than-human life and, in particular, percipient trees, herbs and other plants. What's more, building on Sandilands' notion of floral sensation, the view of environmental affect developed here attributes affect not only to human subjects but also to tree personae. Environmental poetry that focuses on trees, forest ecosystems, conservation issues and traditional human-tree relations has the capacity to render visible the forms of affect held in common by different communities, underscoring the "similarities that the confrontation with shared crisis scenarios generates" (Heise 25).

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