On Common Ground: Translocal Attachments and Transethnic Affiliations in Agha Shahid Ali’s and Arthur Sze’s Poetry of the American Southwest

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1. Introduction

Like most prose texts dealing with the immigrant experience, much of the work of contemporary U.S.-American poets with a migratory background deals with identity politics, personal memory, family histories, and issues of cultural contact and conflict, often against the backdrop of the American city. Similarly, scholarship on American diaspora and immigrant poetry frequently focuses on the poets’ struggle to consolidate multiple, at times competing identity constructions and cultural positions, and on individuals caught between different languages and (poetic) traditions, as well as between feelings of belonging and alienation from the United States, their country of residency, and nostalgic yearning for a lost homeland (see Jenkins; Kabir; Russell; and Freitag). Following the spatial and transnational turns in literary studies, and in an attempt to broaden the scope of critical studies on U.S.-American ethnic and immigrant literature, including poetry, scholars in the field have begun to explore human-place and human-nature relations in the context of migration, pushing for a critique of traditional conceptualizations of place as a closed and stable site of human attachment (see Casteel; Zhang, Asian Diaspora Poetry 29-72; Kandiyoti; Boschmann 88-120, 175-200; Ray 139-78). It is in this context that my paper discusses the ways in which the lyric representations of the American Southwest by Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali and Chinese-
American poet Arthur Sze revise notions of national and indeed regional belonging and put forward an ethics of place that acknowledges the many pressures of globalization, in particular those of mass migration and global environmental crisis.

2 Agha Shahid Ali’s *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991) and Arthur Sze’s *The Ginkgo Light* (2009) combine, in different yet related ways, a concern for the cultural and political implications of migrancy with a preoccupation with the physical environment. In other words, Ali’s and Sze’s poems are concerned with human displacement, both voluntary and forced, while also being invested in thinking and working through the (post)modern migrant’s relationship to the natural world and non-urban places. Instead of contenting themselves with broaching issues of migration as movement between or through abstract cultural spaces, Ali’s and Sze’s poems engage with very concrete North American geographies in the American Southwest, and feature speakers who are struggling with the conflicted histories of as well as their own relationships to this region, reimagining it in the process. Both poets, while coming from vastly different backgrounds, share a profound investment in the links between cultural difference, mobility, and the natural geographies of the Southwest, inviting us to rethink issues of regionalism from perspectives that have been brought into focus by transnational and environmental literary studies.

3 The concrete landscapes discussed in Ali’s and Sze’s poems about the American Southwest reveal a complex layering of place, which includes the historical, social, cultural, as well as the physical or material world. Transnational and translocal movements of people, objects, and ideas come into play in all of these interconnected layers of place, constituting the Southwestern region as an imaginatively bounded yet open, processual, perspectival, relational, and inherently porous site of individual and communal identification. Agha Shahid Ali and Arthur Sze, I hope to show, create a distinctly open and dynamic sense of place in their texts, one that is meaningful not merely in spite of, but precisely because of the various histories of displacement that inform Ali’s and Sze’s individual perspectives, and that have affected the Southwest in the past and are still affecting it today. What develops from the two poets’ creative struggle to make sense of human-place and human-nature relationships in the light of migration, I argue, is a poetry that imagines decidedly inclusive and flexible notions of belonging on the basis of translocal attachments. By simultaneously emphasizing the permeability of boundaries and borders and the importance of regional attachment, Ali’s and Sze’s poems open up a space where tranethnic affiliations can be imagined on the common ground of an engagement with specific places as well as with the natural world at large. Their poems suggest a profoundly ethical way of being in the world that can be called ecologically sensitive because it acknowledges the desire of and possibility for migrants and displaced peoples to form meaningful connections with the land, even if their arrival may be recent and their residence temporary. Finally, and by foregrounding the ways in which the intertextual references (Ali) and the multivalency of poetic language in general (Sze) reach across time and space, the poems of Agha Shahid Ali and Arthur Sze point toward the role literature might play in forging such deep yet flexible connections.

2. From Transnationalism to Translocality

4 In his 2009 study *A Transnational Poetics* Jahan Ramazani analyzes the works of a wide range of twentieth-century poets writing in English—among them Agha Shahid Ali—
tracing “circuits of poetic connection and dialogue across political and geographic borders and even hemispheres” (x-xi). In his analysis of transnational poetics, Ramazani is primarily interested in moments of intertextuality, metaphorical border-crossing, the mixing of genres from different cultures, and in what he calls “new intergeographic spaces” in poetry (60). At several moments in his study, however, Ramazani also acknowledges the continued relevance of place in the “traveling poetry” (51) he discusses and proposes not a transnational poetics but “a translocal poetics as an alternative to understandings of the relation of poetry to place as either rooted or rootless, local or universal” (xiii; emphasis in the original). Defined by Ramazani as the interlacing of “localities and nationalities with one another in a globally imagined space” (15), the translocal is closely associated with the poetic technique of “translocal ‘super-position’” (101) or the fusion of different locations within one poetic image, a strategy we can for example see at work in Sze’s poem “Pinwheel,” where the speaker describes his writerly activity as pinning “there / to here” (Sze 50; emphasis in the original). Borrowed from James Clifford’s influential study Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (1997), Ramazani’s translocal also conjures up what the human geographers Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta have described as a “grounded transnationalism” (3). Translocality here suggests a recognition of “[spatial] processes and identities as place-based rather than exclusively mobile” (Brickell and Datta 3) and an acknowledgement of the importance of “groundedness” during movement, including those everyday movements that are not necessarily transnational” (4). While being linked to certain poetic strategies, the translocal is thus relevant to my analysis because it gestures toward an understanding of identities as emplaced as well as mobile, and toward an understanding of place-making as a process which depends on transnational as well as on more localized movements. Conceived in this manner, the translocal becomes a crucial category for a revision of the concept of the region in relation to literatures of migration.

5 Both in Ramazani and in Brickell and Datta, the turn from the transnational to the translocal indicates a move away from purely abstract cultural spaces to concrete places, and from too exclusive an emphasis on global mobility to a recognition of those forces of emplacement at work on different levels of spatial and indeed “palatial” imaginaries, including the nation and the region. When I use the term translocal instead of transnational in relation to Ali’s and Sze’s poetry, it is first because the term allows me to discuss the ways in which these two poets move away from the idea of the nation as a privileged site of territorial attachment and identity construction. Considering the translocal also allows me to highlight the ways in which Ali and Sze explore the region as a site of multiple local-global and local-local crossings. Finally, I use the translocal because it gestures toward the grounded, “earthy” quality of much of Arthur Sze’s and Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry on the American Southwest. This groundedness, I suggest, has little to do with deterritorialization as it is frequently evoked in the context of transnationalism, that is, as a detachment of culture from place. Instead, it has more to do with deterritorialization in the sense that Ursula Heise uses it in her study Sense of Place and Sense of Planet, namely, a variety of processes, ranging from the local to the global, that complicate the relationship of culture to place without severing it completely (10, 55-58). As a term that connotes borders as well as border crossings, and a certain concreteness or materiality rather than abstractions, the “translocal” thus becomes a suitable term to describe both the tentative ecological sensibilities expressed in Ali’s poetry of migration and the diasporic sensibilities of Sze’s nature poetry. Indeed, I think it is no coincidence that
Lawrence Buell, one of the most eminent figures of environmental criticism, sees the world as being shaped by global and “translocal” forces (63), especially at the level of the region. “[T]he bioregional horizon,” Buell argues, “must extend beyond a merely local horizon” because, whether urban or rural, “regions remain permeable to shock waves potentially extending worldwide” in the sense that no locale can “shut itself off from translocal forces even if it wanted to” (88).

3. Where Critical Regionalism Meets Ecocriticism

Since the beginnings of American Studies, the region has played a central role in the discipline as the “spatial dimension of cultural pluralism” (Steiner and Mondale x). Cultural pluralism in this early Americanist understanding was considered an effect of differences between rather than within regions and thus tended to embrace the category as a decentralizing force to counter nationalist politics, often overemphasizing coherence and unity in its internal construction. Recent studies in the field of critical regionalism and particularly of New Western Criticism have instead come to conceive of regionalism as a “critical interrogation of the center, with its official histories and definitions, and the celebration of local multiplicity as well as national identity” (Campbell and Kean 125). From such a perspective, regions are defined and constantly redefined by “cultural history [and] the cumulative generative effect of the interplay among the various, competing definitions [of place]” (Powell 5). Reading regions in general and the American West in particular in this new critical context requires, as Stephen Tatum has argued, a “newer field imaginary for the American literary West [that] involves subaltern voices and alternative histories” (461). Both Arthur Sze’s and Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry integrate such voices and histories, first by introducing their ethnic speakers into the ethnoscape of the American Southwest, and second by weaving Native American histories into their texts.

In an effort to describe such a “newer field imaginary,” José E. Limón emphasizes the potential of critical regionalism as a theory, methodology, and praxis for recognizing, closely examining, fostering, but also linking cultural and socioeconomic localized identities, especially as these stand in antagonistic, if also negotiated, relationships with late capitalist globalization. (167)

Like Limón, Krista Comer contends that identity remains a central issue in critical regionalism. Yet, she also argues that “one unstated issue under discussion concerns identity and its politics and their relationship to an ethics of place” (160; emphasis added). Comparing her own work on the region to Ursula Heise’s practice of working with and from the contradictions of place in the latter’s groundbreaking ecocritical study Sense of Place and Sense of Planet (2008), Comer points to the similarities and differences between the field of critical regionalism and that of environmental literary criticism:

The knowledge projects of WLA [the Western Literature Association] and ASLE [the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment] overlap, to be sure, but the ethics of place in which WLA and critical regionalism are invested is not so much toward “environment” as toward the interface among people, communities or places and their constitution with and through discourse, materialist geography, and in-place structures of feeling. (173)

While I would not object to Comer’s argument about a difference in emphasis between the fields of critical regionalism and ecocriticism, at least not in the very general sense
suggested here, one larger point I am trying to make is that, in an age of global environmental crisis and mass migration, an ethics of place invested in the natural environment always also has to be invested in the multidimensional associations between people, communities, and places—and vice versa.

On a theoretical level, this is why the overlap of the knowledge projects of ecocriticism and critical regionalism Comer speaks of should be further developed, something I am trying to do here. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and Arthur Sze is instructive in this critical and theoretical project because their texts put forward an ethics of place in which human-nature relations become the common ground for human-human connections: by exploring the ways in which the region of the American Southwest is and always has been open to translocal movements, their poems imagine non-exclusive communities across racial, ethnic, and cultural boundaries that are based on a shared experience of the land. They also imagine how migrants and victims of displacement may develop a sense of place that does not necessarily require “long association with the environment” (446), as human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan famously claimed. Or put differently, Ali’s and Sze’s poetry imagines regions as sites of tranethnic affiliations and translocal attachments, attachments that depend on meaningful relationships to the natural world and thus become ecologically resonant.

4. Agha Shahid Ali’s Porous Regionalism

Agha Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri-American poet who grew up in Kashmir and eventually moved to the United States, where he attended Pennsylvania State University and the University of Arizona before he began teaching at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Princeton College, and in the MFA program at Warren Wilson College. Although Ali had already published poetry in India during the 1970s, his works received little critical attention before his death in 2001, the same year his eighth collection Rooms Are Never Finished (2001) was a finalist for the National Book Award and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Much of the existing scholarship on Ali focuses on the poet’s three final collections and in particular on his ghazals, an ancient Arabic type of poetry which Ali famously worked to promote in the United States in its traditional form. Also focusing on his final collections, more recent articles on Ali have begun to discuss issues of space and dislocation in the context of transnationalism rather than postcoloniality. For the purpose of this paper I will read one of Ali’s earlier books of poetry, A Nostalgist’s Map of America (1991), which deserves critical attention in the context of transnational approaches to North American regionalism due to its preoccupation with very specific U.S.-American geographies, in particular the desert landscapes of the American Southwest. I will first explore how Ali imagines the region as a translocal formation concerned with the relation of the local to the extra-local as well as with the material dimension of place, and then analyze how Ali uses intertextuality to establish tranethnic affiliations based on shared translocal attachments.

Throughout A Nostalgist’s Map of America, Ali’s poems feature specific locales that the reader is encouraged to think of as both metaphorical and as actual places (Needham 66; Katrak 130). One way in which Ali’s poems produce a poetic effect of concreteness that invites the reader to recognize the material dimension of landscapes is by using topographical markers—an aesthetic decision, Lawrence Buell has argued, that indicates an ecologically suggestive orientation toward extra-textual landscapes (33). Yet, while
several of Ali’s poems are quite literally mapping the American Southwest by mentioning cities such as Tucson, Phoenix, or Las Cruces, historical sites like the Native American Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico, or natural sites like the Superstition Mountains in Arizona, his poems also frequently refer to places outside the Southwest. The beginning of Ali’s poem “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror,” for example, reads:

The dream of water—what does it harbor?
I see Argentina and Paraguay
under a curfew of glass, their colors
breaking, like oil. The night in Uruguay
is black salt. I’m driving toward Utah,
keeping the entire hemisphere in view—
Colombia vermilion, Brazil blue tar,
some countries wiped clean of color: Peru
is titanium white.... (96)

“I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” presents the speaker as a traveler, a motif which occurs quite frequently in A Nostalgist’s Map of America. In fact, Ali’s speaker Shahid is depicted en route in most poems, whether he is driving near Sedona, Arizona, as in the poem just quoted (96), on the Schuylkill Expressway in Pennsylvania, or on an unnamed road in the desert. Apart from symbolizing the perspective of the traveler, the car mirror keeps “the entire hemisphere in view” while the speaker is driving through Arizona and thus visualizes the poetic device of “translocal superposition” discussed earlier. On a more theoretical level, the car mirror can also be argued to represent the complex, refracted regionalism evoked in much of Ali’s poetry as well as the translocal attachment this revised regionalism allows. While the collection’s preoccupation with movement as well as with specific Southwestern locales bespeaks a migrant’s desire and struggle for belonging in the face of displacement, the frequency with which these locales are put in relation to places elsewhere suggests that the region is imagined as open and relational. What emerges here is the kind of regional imaginary I find in both Ali’s and Sze’s poetry, namely, one that conceives of the region as a porous object always open to translocal trajectories and constant renegotiations—renegotiations in which not only long-term residents but also migrants can participate.

While “I See Chile in my Rearview Mirror” employs topographical markers and thus references to extra-textual geographies in order to evoke concrete Southwestern landscapes, the poem also illustrates how a highly metaphorical poetic language can be used to evoke the material dimension of the translocal. By describing the night in Uruguay as “black salt,” Columbia as “vermilion,” Brazil as “blue tar,” and Peru as “titanium white,” while the colors of Argentina and Paraguay are “breaking, like oil” and other countries are “wiped clean of color” (Ali 96), Ali produces a rich tableau of Middle and South America in several senses of the word: his description not only sketches a portrait that hints at economic exploitation, violence, war, political unrest, and even genocide, it also conjures up a brightly colored map, which relates these histories to the colonial project and its aftermath. At the same time, the continent reflected in the poet-speaker’s mirror (of language) is presented as a painting, drawing attention to the artistic process of representation and the poem as text. The combination of the colors black, blue, and white with the words salt, tar, and titanium emphasizes the materiality of paint and thus, I would argue, the importance of both word and world in Ali’s poetic struggle to render the translocal geographies that lie at the heart of the porous regionalism evoked in his book of poetry.
Another poem from *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* that uses the art of painting to draw attention to both the material and imaginary dimension of Ali’s Southwest is “In Search of Evanescence.” “In Search of Evanescence” parallels the speaker’s never-ending spiritual quest for consolation after the death of a friend and the equally endless artistic quest to find adequate expression for his loss with what seem to be both remembered and imagined journeys through the American Southwest. Section 5 of the poem sequence combines allusions to Georgia O’Keeffe’s abstract and yet organic flower paintings and hyperrealist Southwestern desert landscapes with stanzas quoting letters that O’Keeffe wrote to Alfred Stieglitz (O’Keeffe 26):

From the Faraway Nearby—
of Georgia O’Keeffe—these words—
Black Iris—Dark Iris—Abstraction, Blue—
her hands—around—a skull—
‘The plains—the wonderful—
great big sky—makes me—
want to breathe—so deep—
that I’ll break—’
From her Train—at Night—in the Desert—
i its only—passenger—
I see—as they pass by—her red hills—
black petals—landscapes with skulls— (Ali 46; emphasis added)

The reference to O’Keeffe’s painting *From the Faraway, Nearby* (1938) in the beginning of this passage, especially with its elision of the dividing punctuation, points toward the entanglement of the close-by and the far-away, of the local and the global, which is central to Ali’s translocal regionalist imaginary. The third stanza once more casts the speaker as a traveler. Due to the countless intertextual references and the ambiguity of the poetic language used in the few lines above, it is impossible to say whether we are to imagine the speaker on a train in the desert, watching the landscapes outside pass like paintings in a museum, or in a museum, describing his visit as a train ride.

In fact, we do not have to imagine any scene at all. What we are invited to do in either case, though, is to acknowledge the importance of actual, painted, and written landscapes in the poem and the strong emotional response they evoke in the speaker. Through a personal and an artistic engagement with place, the poem suggests, O’Keeffe has developed an intense relationship with the land. Through a personal and artistic engagement with the same place and with O’Keeffe’s artful renderings of the place, the speaker Shahid has developed an equally intense relationship with the land, a relationship which in turn forms the grounds for a connection between the poet and the painter. Or, to take this one step further, if we accept the speaker’s identity as that of a Southeast Asian immigrant to the United States, something that is hinted at repeatedly in the collection, the poem evokes more than just different connections across time and space. On the basis of a shared attachment to the iconic desert landscapes of the American Southwest, the poem conjures up connections that transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries—it conjures up tranethnic affiliations.

I want to end my discussion of Ali here with a poem that allows me to bring together a number of points I have tried to make about translocal attachments and tranethnic affiliations in order to suggest how the porous regionalism Ali evokes by way of metaphorical language and intertextual references might become ecologically suggestive. “Snow on the Desert,” the last poem of *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, returns to the place
featured most frequently in the collection, the iconic landscape of the Sonoran Desert. The Sonoran Desert is a subtropical desert that covers large parts of Arizona and California, but extends even further into several states in Northern Mexico. Divided by the U.S.-Mexican border, the Sonoran Desert forms an extraordinarily diverse bioregion that supports many different kinds of vegetation zones and great species variety. Home to cities like Tucson and Phoenix, one of the fastest growing urban centers of the United States, as well as to several Native American reservations on both sides of the border, the region is culturally diverse and marked by a long and complicated history of settlement, displacement, and migration. This history continues to this day due to the continuing marginalization of local Native peoples in the area and the fact that the region’s vast strips of scarcely populated land have made the Sonoran Desert a popular route for illegal border crossings, especially since Southwest border enforcement strategies like Operation Gatekeeper came into effect under the Clinton administration during the 1990s (Ray 167). With certain limits—A Nostalgist’s Map of America appeared in 1991, so right before immigration policies began to push border crossers further into the desert in the Southwest—Ali’s poetry attempts to register the complexity of this region, in terms both of its social and natural dimension. In the process the role of literature as a means to establish meaningful relationships to place comes to the fore.

“Snow on the Desert” begins by situating the speaker very precisely in time and space. Shahid is driving through the Sonoran Desert in order to take his sister Sameetah to Tucson International airport “on January 19, 1987” (Ali 100), a fact that, together with the speaker’s memories of a concert by Begum Akthar, the “Queen of Ghazals,” in New Delhi also mentioned in the poem, hints at the family’s migratory background. On the way, Shahid is contemplating the frozen cacti on the roadside and then muses:

The Desert Smells Like Rain: in it I read: The syrup from which sacred wine is made is extracted from the saguaros each summer. The Papagos place it in jars, where the last of it softens, then darkens into a color of blood ... (100-101; emphasis in the original)

The Desert Smells Like Rain is the title of a 1982 book by renowned agricultural ecologist, conservation biologist, and sustainability activist Gary Paul Nabhan. Nabhan’s book, which carries the subtitle A Naturalist in O’odham Country, not only describes in detail the flora of the Sonoran Desert, but also the culture of the native Tohono (Papago) and the O’odham Himdag, or the “Papago Way” of living in and cultivating the desert, a sustainable form of agriculture that has been practiced and perfected by the local Native American population for centuries (Nabhan xi). As the reference to Nabhan’s book suggests, the speaker’s perception of the natural world around him is strongly influenced by the Papago view of the desert; or, more accurately, it is influenced by his reading of The Desert Smells Like Rain, a book by a non-Papago naturalist of Lebanese-American descent. While Nabhan’s own ethnic background links him to the migrant speaker, the ethno-botanist’s commitment to recording and transmitting the environmental knowledge of the Papago echoes the speaker-poet Shahid’s interest in learning and then writing about the human and geological histories of the region. In “Snow on the Desert,” Shahid reflects on the strange beauty of the natural environment he encounters, the unfathomable geological age of the desert, Tohono ritual practices, and the region’s complex human history. Like the intertextual references to O’Keeffe in the poem discussed earlier, the juxtaposition of quotes from and references to Nabhan’s book with the speaker’s own impressions and
thoughts in “Snow on the Desert” emphasize Shahid’s desire to engage deeply and through a wide range of different sources with his momentary place of residence.

21 By entwining descriptions of Sonoran Desert landscapes with quotes from texts about them, “Snow on the Desert” once more depicts place, and in particular natural environments, as material and textual, real and imagined. Place in the poem also has a distinctly social dimension, since it links people of very different origins through their shared experience of particular geographies and natural phenomena as well as through their contact with and production of a variety of texts about them. “Snow on the Desert” continues:

the saguaros have opened themselves, stretched
out their arms to rays millions of years old,
in each ray a secret of the planet’s
origin, the rays hurting each cactus
into memory, a human memory—
for they are human, the Papago say:
not only because they have arms and veins
and secrets. But because they too are a tribe,
vulnerable to massacre…. (101-2)

22 Probably the most iconic mega-flora of the Southwest, Saguaros are endemic to the Sonoran desert and thus threatened in particularly dramatic ways by the effects of urbanization and climate change on the region. By calling these giant cacti a “tribe,” Ali creates a metaphor that evokes a kinship between all victims of violence, oppression, and displacement, including the speaker, who later in the poem recalls scenes from the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, and including the Papago, who suffered from Spanish colonization, Mexican occupation, as well as American settler-colonialism (Nabhan 68). This kinship of the immigrant speaker with Native American peoples in the Southwest plays a central role in several other poems in the collection, too. Again and again, Ali’s speaker travels the desert and mountains of the region in search for traces of the Anasazi and Navajo of San Juan County, the Hohokam of Sonora, or the varying Native American inhabitants of Acoma Pueblo, often finding nothing but the places they lived in to engage with (Ali 26, 29, 39). The speaker’s evocation of Papago oral tradition as the source for his metaphor of the Saguaros as a tribe—“for they are human, the Papago say” (102)—evokes tranethnic affiliations with this Native American tribe through a shared engagement with the land.

23 In terms of the poem’s possible environmental or even environmentalist implications, it is worth noting that although “Snow on the Desert” references Nabhan’s book, the text does not contain any explicitly environmentalist message, for example concerning the traditional Papago way of inhabiting the desert, which, if we are to believe Nabhan, provides a number of valuable lessons for a more sustainable way of living in and from the deserts of the Southwest. What makes Ali’s poem “Snow on the Desert” ecologically resonant, instead, is the fact that the speaker’s engagement with the Tohono’s perspective on nature provides him with new tools to reimagine his own relationship to Sonoran landscapes. Interestingly, it is not histories of rootedness but of
uprooting and thus of a shared struggle for emplacement that emerge as the common
ground for the migrant speaker and the Native American population of the area.
Although Ali is careful to acknowledge the Southwest’s violent history of colonization and
its effects on the local Native American peoples, his investigation of alternative models of
“palatial” belonging in A Nostalgist’s Map of America does not depend on a simplistic
dichotomy of settlers versus original inhabitants of the region. Instead, Ali repeatedly
hints at the ways in which migration and displacement have not only affected his
speaker, but the region’s different Native American tribes as well. In the end, Ali’s poems
suggest, no history of displacement, however long past or recent, automatically precludes
a meaningful relationship to the land. Instead, such a meaningful human-place and
human-nature relationship requires constant work, work which, especially in the case of
the traveler, migrant, or victim of displacement, might have to rely heavily on an
engagement with literature. An analysis of Arthur Sze’s poetry allows us to draw similar
conclusions.

5. Arthur Sze’s Intimate Translocal Geographies

Born in New York City and educated at the University of California, Berkley, Arthur Sze is
the author of eight books of poetry and a celebrated translator from the Chinese. He
taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts and became the first poet laureate of
Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he continues to live and write. Despite the recognition his
poetry has received from fellow poets, Arthur Sze’s work has so far received very little
sustained attention from scholars. This scarcity of criticism may be due to the fact that
both thematically and aesthetically, his writing seems to have much less in common with
the works of other diaspora poets like Meena Alexander or Naomi Shihab Nye than with
the works of such nature poets as Gary Snyder. The fact that Sze, at least at first glance,
reads more like a nature than a diaspora poet, let alone an immigrant poet, may explain
why what is to my best knowledge the first article on Sze appeared in the essay collection
Redshifting Web (1998), Xiaojing Zhou discusses Sze’s ecopoetics, defined as a poetics
which “foregrounds the interconnectedness of all things” both in content and form (180)
and which explores “alternative modes for understanding the world and the self in which
humans and nature exist within a single complex network or relations” (189). While Zhou
acknowledges the influence of Eastern philosophy on Sze’s ecopoetics—in particular of
the principle of “multiplicity in oneness”—he does not explicitly link the environmental
aspects of Sze’s poetry to its simultaneous interest in questions of diaspora and
displacement.

Conversely, Benzi Zhang’s article “Of Nonlimited Locality/Identity: Chinese Diaspora
Poetry in America” (2006) reads Sze in the context of diaspora, without putting much
emphasis on his significance as a nature or environmental poet. Zhang’s argument is
nonetheless of interest for my reading because it touches upon the noticeable tension
between the local and the global in Sze’s works. Focusing on processes of “cultural
spacing,” Zhang argues that Chinese diaspora poetry like Sze’s “challenges the force of a
singular cultural dominance by relocating the site of identity articulation in a domain of
‘nonlimited locality’” (“Of Nonlimited Locality” 133). This “nonlimited locality,” Zhang
explains, is the result of cultural passages and crossings that redefine place in the context
of diaspora as “a site of cultural transliteration, a dynamic body of trans-local inter-
relationships” (137). Place and displacement and the way the two come together in the “trans-local” are here considered in a highly abstract manner and thus in a way that deemphasizes potential environmental implications of a poetry concerned with such dynamics. What I would like to demonstrate in the following is how the ecological and diasporic sensibilities of Sze’s “nature poetry” can be combined to read the “complex platiality” of Sze’s latest collection *The Ginkgo Light*. For it is in this collection, I argue, that Sze explores, more intensively than in his earlier books, how a meaningful relationship to the natural world may be imagined in a time of mass displacement and global environmental crisis. Similar to Ali’s poems, translocal attachments and tranethnic affiliations feature centrally in the regional imaginary that derives from Sze’s poetic explorations.

Like Sze’s previous collections, *The Ginkgo Light* interweaves references to Chinese and Native American history, traditions, and philosophy with descriptions of the natural world and scenes from everyday life, using vocabulary and imagery that heavily draw from the natural sciences, especially from physics, botany, and geology. Also like in previous collections, many poems in *The Ginkgo Light* consist of a series of fragments; disparate yet ultimately connected moments, perceptions, and memories that reach across time and space. The geographical locations evoked in the texts range from places in Japan and China to a variety of specific sites in North America. At the same time, and more than in previous collections, the American Southwest, particularly Sze’s home in Santa Fe County, New Mexico, as well as the environing mountains and forests, feature as a center of gravity against the centrifugal, chaotic forces of a world always in motion. While Sze’s poems thus evoke multiple translocal connections, they keep returning to contemplations of the speaker’s garden and reflections about his hiking trips through the region. Apart from drawing attention to the speaker’s intensive engagement with the natural world around him and his deep knowledge of and care for the environment, the alternation of instances of stasis with instances of mobility highlights how traditional notions of being grounded in place or “staying put” as a basis for bioregional attachment actually depend on localized movement. Moreover, whenever Sze’s nature poetry points beyond Southwestern landscapes, it gestures toward an environmental perspective that emerges when a sense of place opens itself up beyond the local, the region and, at times, even the nation. The poem “Labrador Tea,” for example, begins:

Labrador leaves in a jar with a kerchief lid
release an arctic aroma when simmered on a stove.
Yesterday when fire broke out in the bosque,
the air had the stench of cauliflower in a steamer
when water evaporates and the pot scalds.
Although Apache plume, along with clusters of
western peppergrass, makes fragrant the wash,
owls that frequent the hole high up the arroyo’s
bank have already come and gone.… (11)

Mapping what Sze’s speaker elsewhere in the collection calls his “intimate geographies”—cf. “In the Rose Light” (18)—the quote above represents an engagement with Chinese tea culture in the age of globalization, and thus with the various translocal cultural and material passages that affect every aspect of our lives today. The Labrador leaves used by the speaker, rather than more traditional kinds of tea, point toward North American geographies far away from the speaker’s Southwestern home as well as to the tea brewing practices of Native American peoples in Alaska, Canada, and Northern California, who prepared Labrador tea long before it spread to the homes of American settlers. Just as the
tea begins to release what the speaker describes as an “arctic aroma” (11), conjuring up what may be memories of a trip to Alaska, a region that appears several times in the collection, the poem turns to the specifics of the natural world of the Southwest. A family of owls, the speaker recounts, was scared away by the stench of a bushfire, for which the pleasant smells of local plants, Apache plume and peppergrass, was no match. This short episode again makes apparent the speaker’s concern and care for the environment. It also suggests that the natural world can both make a home and thus become an agent of emplacement, and destroy homes and thus turn into an agent of displacement. Such a dynamics acquires a range of new meanings in an era during which climate change produces increasing populations of climate refugees among animals as well as human beings. It also raises a range of questions concerning an ethics of place that reckons with the consequences of displacement, especially if we consider that the cause of climate change, like what may have caused the fire in the poem, is not nature’s cruelty but human carelessness.

28 “Labrador Tea,” then, like many of Sze’s poems, combines an awareness of how goods, living beings, and cultural practices travel, with close attention to the natural environment, and thus to the translocal dimensions of a revised regional imaginary. One of the textual strategies Sze uses in his poems for this purpose is a complex vegetation imagery which not only pays close attention to native flora and fauna, but also makes frequent notice of plants that were introduced to the region for agricultural or decorative purposes. The poem “Chrysalis” alone mentions three of these “migrant plants”: first, the ginkgo, a tree which, as the speaker notes, was rediscovered and then “propagated back into the world” after it had long been thought extinct (7); second, the “golden rain tree” (9), a yellow deciduous tree also known as “Pride of India” or “China Tree” due to its original provenance from Asia, China, and Korea; and, third, the “Russian Olive” (12), also known as silver berry, a thorny shrub native to central Asia and southern Russia which was brought to North American in the 19th century, quickly escaped cultivation, and is now considered an invasive species, especially in the Southwest.

29 The Ginkgo Light sometimes alludes to but does not interpret the diasporic history of these plants, which in the poems seem to have integrated rather smoothly into Sze’s Southwestern landscapes, increasing the region’s biodiversity and beauty. Nonetheless, I would argue, Sze plays with notions of nativeness and transplantation when referring to plants that arrived in the American Southwest as a result of human travel and migration. The frequent allusions to the plants’ histories of displacement, together with the lack of comment on them, allows us to read the respective passages as ecologically attentive descriptions of a specific natural environment and as metaphors for human displacement and emplacement at the same time. Confronted with these two levels of reference, the reader is asked to question ideas of “rootedness,” “natural habitat,” and “invasiveness” not only with regard to the Southwest as a bioregion, but also with regard to the kinds of regionalist discourse that Sze’s poetry contests.

30 Like Sze’s vegetation imagery, references to specific geographical and geological features of local landscapes by their Southwestern names draw attention to the speaker’s intimate association with the local environment on the one hand, and to the region’s complex history of settlement and displacement on the other. In the poem “Labrador Tea,” for example, Sze mentions a “bosque” (11), a special type of gallery forest to be found along the flood planes of river banks, and an “arroyo” (11), an intermittently dry creek common throughout the Southwest. Both terms come from Spanish and, as they are
inserted into the otherwise English poem, testify both to the linguistic and cultural after-effects of Spanish colonization and Mexican rule in the area as well as to the subsequent takeover by the United States in the process of westward expansion. One particular way in which Sze links an interest in diasporic constellations with new ways of seeing actual places and people’s shifting ties to their environments, is by weaving into his poetry the histories of Native peoples in New Mexico and Arizona.

31 As a matter of fact, Sze’s collection, similar to Ali’s, reveals a general interest in Native American cultures, traditions, and philosophies, as well as genuine concern about the hardships and challenges of present-day Native American life on and outside the reservations. The poem “Yardangs” from The Ginkgo Light is a powerful example for this interest in Native American presence and absence in the Southwest. At the same time, the poem illustrates Sze’s tendency to expand the “intimate geographies” of his speaker’s home to include stories and places beyond the immediate environs of house and garden:

She who can’t sleep takes a sleeping pill, then another, and another. A crab apple in the yard blossoms along the curve of spring. Along a stone wall, we yearn for a line of Japanese irises that does not appear, glimpse a body on a stretcher loaded into an ambulance. In the winter of spring, a neighbor frets over air-pollution vectors; a teenage girl worries her horse slashes its neck along barbed wire. Prevailing winds: west-northwest. As a physicist posits all languages have a single root, I weigh arête, yardang, strike valley, ciénega, Tsé Bit’áí: Shiprock, the rock with wings. But is there bedrock? (57)

32 “Yardangs” begins with two lines that refer back to an earlier poem in the collection, in which Sze contemplates the high suicide rates among Native American peoples, while also evoking both the American Trail of Tears and the Chinese Long March as two parallel histories of oppression (30, 32). After this introduction, the poem turns to a series of vignettes, all of which point to different instances of human suffering but also to the persistence of human desire, hope, and compassion. While exposure to air-pollution, like the experience of pain and the certainty of death, may indeed be something that unites everyone in the text, differences, the poem suggests, appear as soon as experience and perceptions are translated into words. Regardless what a “physicist” (57) might posit, the individual’s location, perspective, and interpretation are of key importance in the natural sciences, as the reference to “prevailing winds / west-northwest” in the poem highlights. Any argument about single origins or “a single root,” as the physicist puts it, becomes even less convincing when it concerns language, or so it seems initially. Words and proper names like “arête” or “yardang” (57; emphasis in the original) emphasize the limits of language as a means to unequivocally communicate information. The two words derive from French and Turkish, respectively, and are used in English to describe very specific geographical features, namely, a thin, saddle shaped ridge of rock which is typically formed by two parallel U-shaped valleys (the arête), and a streamlined hill or stone formation carved out of bedrock by wind erosion (the yardang). By inserting these words in his text, the poet risks obstructing effective communication at the very moment that
he is struggling to render the particularities of the world before him as precisely as possible.

33 Of course, the strength of poetry does not lie in the accuracy of its descriptions, but rather in its power to evoke, sometimes with only a few words, a variety of possible meanings. In the case of Sze’s poetry, which frequently reflects on the location of the individual between cultures and on the diasporic subject’s relationship to different places as it is mediated by language, a word like yardang carries several implications. It suggests that words travel, and also that they can be used to refer to natural phenomena that exist all over the world, creating the “bedrock” Sze’s text mentions, that is, a connection between those who encounter, appreciate, and attempt to describe similar phenomena across cultures and national borders. In the poetry of a second-generation Chinese-American poet like Sze, who is concerned with Asian as well as American cultures and geographies, the example of the yardang is especially resonant. In fact, yardangs were first recorded in China, but are prevalent in most deserts of the world, including those of the American Southwest. Depending on how narrowly one defines the term, rock formations like Window Rock in Arizona may be counted as a yardang, just like “Tsé Bit’aa’,” or Shiprock, also a sacred Navajo site, and one which Sze mentions in the poem. On the one hand, this reference to Shiprock can be read as alluding to the long, intensive association of the local Native American people with place as well as to the speaker’s desire for a similar connection to the land. On the other hand, however, such a reading is undercut by the poetic text in which single-word references to different translocal connections abound. In the context of the history of the American Southwest, the English name of the site, Shiprock, turns it into a formidable memorial for settler-colonialism. Moreover, the translation of the Navajo name, “rock with wings,” reveals the Native myth associated with the mountain, which recounts how the peak once sprouted wings and carried the first Navajo to what is now New Mexico, after they had to flee from their ancestral homelands further North. As in the poetry of Ali, Sze’s poetry suggests that even the place-attachment of the region’s Native people is marked by histories of displacement, a fate that, again as in the poetry of Ali, forges a connection between them and the speaker.

34 As these examples illustrate, Arthur Sze’s poetry combines a preoccupation with the details of the natural world and particular geological and geographical characteristics of the American Southwest with a more latent concern for questions of displacement and emplacement. It is in this sense that the poems in The Ginkgo Light explore the possibility and limits of a kind of place-attachment that is not environmentally suggestive because it depends on traditional notions of rootedness to explain an attunement to the natural world, but rather because it rethinks precisely such notions from the perspectives of a speaker who is highly aware of the multiple translocal movements that constitute the Southwest, and who is invested in the tranethnic affiliations that such a sense of place enables.

6. Conclusion: Dwelling in Diaspora?

35 Starting with Heidegger, who emphasized the individual’s subjective experience and attachment to place (cf. Heise 35; Halttunen 5; Clark 59), and continuing with American ecocritical and environmentalist thought, which for a long time celebrated long-lasting association with a clearly circumscribed place as the primary mode for developing an
ethical relationship with the natural environment, place-attachment or dwelling as an “authentic,” wholesome way of being in and with nature has carried with it problematic notions of racial and ethnic purity. What is more, it has often led to an uncritical privileging of sedentary forms of living over ones affected by displacement. Sze’s take on nature poetry and Ali’s take on poetry of migration illustrate that this is not a necessary logic. In *The Ginkgo Light*, the intimate translocal geographies the speaker maps by way of constant references to specific geographic and geological features of the Southwest always also point beyond the local and the regional. Taking advantage of the multivalency of poetic language, and in particular of vegetation imagery, Sze’s poems take note of material environments and at the same time establish translocal connections between the speaker’s immediate environment and a range of other places, places which by consequence become objects of attention, concern, and care. What makes Sze’s ecologically attuned poetics so relevant in our present times, then, is precisely that his vision of a wholesome way of being in and with nature allows for cultural difference; more than that: Sze’s intimate translocal geographies invite cultural difference and thereby give room to the uneasy, drifting perspectives of migrants, travelers, and displaced peoples.

36 Approaching the problematics of dwelling in diaspora from a slightly different angle, Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry of migration is preoccupied with the perspective of the traveler/migrant who encounters landscapes in and outside of the Southwest. Informed by such a perspective of unsettlement, Ali’s poems take pains to cast places as real and imagined, as material and textual formations by using richly metaphorical language and intertextual references. Conceived in this way, the Southwestern landscapes in *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* become fertile ground for transethnic affiliations, especially with local Native American peoples. Established through a shared experience of and an artistic engagement with particular natural environments, these transethnic affiliations attest to the migrant speaker’s desire for regional belonging, while also acknowledging that regions are porous constructions affected by many translocal trajectories and histories of displacement.

37 Neither the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali nor that of Arthur Sze assumes that displacement automatically prevents the individual or the community from developing meaningful relationships to place. On the contrary, the human-nature relationships their poems explore become particularly meaningful precisely because they acknowledge that diaspora experiences and histories of migration shape America’s past and present, especially in the Southwest. It is this acknowledgement of the ways in which the competing forces of emplacement and displacement play out on all levels of territorial attachment, including the local, the regional, and the national, I would argue, that supplements potentially problematic aspects of an ethics of proximity popular in environmentalist discourse and implicit in the notion of dwelling with a dynamic ethics of difference. On the level of poetics, the foregrounding of poetic language, intertextuality, and processes of artistic production in Ali’s and Sze’s poetry highlights the special role literature plays in the struggle for alternative modes of belonging that do not have to rely on a long, intimate association with one particular place. Literature, these texts suggest, forges translocal attachments and transethnic affiliations and thus helps to imagine a common ground from which an ecologically attuned ethics of place in the context of migration can emerge. On a more abstract level, reading texts by authors whose works combine an interest in natural environments with an interest in questions of displacement is productive because such an analysis allows us to theorize alternative
regional imaginaries that factor in the local effects of global pressures related to mass migration and environmental crisis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


ii. For a detailed discussion of reconceptualizations of “place” in recent spatial theory, see for example Eric Prieto’s monograph *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (2013).

iii. For early conceptions of the region in the U.S. see for example Josiah Royce’s definition of “the province” in his 1908 book *Race Questions, Provincialism and Other American Problems* (61) and Donald Davidson’s description of the function of the region in his 1938 study *Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States: The Attack on Leviathan* (232).

iv. Zhang retains this tendency toward theoretical discussion and abstraction in his 2008 study *Asian Diaspora Poetry in North America*. More explicitly than the article, the monograph connects Zhang’s idea of “nonlimited locality” to a discussion of the concept of “place” in the works of scholars like Edward Casey (philosophy) or Doreen Massey (human geography). Yet Zhang’s reading continues to focus on the new geographies in Asian American diaspora poetry mainly as a metaphor for multidirectional processes of identification across cultural borders that help to chart “a new land of diasporic poetics, whose topography and dimensions have not yet been fully recognized or mapped in critical terms” (156), rather than investigating the environmental implications of these new geographies.

ABSTRACTS

Combining insights from human geography, critical regionalism, and environmental literary criticism, I argue that the concept of the translocal, rather than the transnational, is useful to describe the complex poetics of place in Agha Shahid Ali’s *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991) and Arthur Sze’s *The Ginkgo Light* (2009). Engaging with landscapes of the American Southwest and elsewhere, and in particular with the natural environment, both poets reimagine the region as a site of translocal attachments and as the grounds for tranethnic affiliations, especially with local Native American peoples. What emerges from this inclusive and yet open sense of belonging to place is an ethics of being in and with nature that attempts to reckon with the increasing pressures of both globalization and global environmental crisis. Literature, as Ali’s and Sze’s poetry suggest by foregrounding poetic strategies like intertextuality and metaphorical...
language, plays a central role in the development of such an ecologically suggestive ethics of place in the context of migration and displacement.

INDEX

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Arthur Sze, Contemporary American poetry, critical regionalism, ecocriticism, ethics of displacement, ethics of place, immigrant literature, migration, Native American history, nature, the American Southwest, translocality

AUTHOR

JUDITH RAUSCHER

University of Bamberg