

Toward an Environmental Imagination of Displacement in Contemporary Transnational American Poetry

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In the foreword to the anthology *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (1998), renowned Ethiopian-born, Indian American author Abraham Verghese stages the very process of writing the foreword for the book in his readers' hands. Verghese describes himself as he is working in his home office looking out the window and then comments: "This xeriscaped west Texas is now my world. It resembles in no way other lands and continents I have lived in. But physical geography is of no longer much importance to me (as long as it isn't cold)."¹ Styling himself as a world citizen and as a postmodern world-traveler, Verghese repeats a truism that still seems to guide much of the writing, whether literary or critical, that concerns itself with issues of globalization and transnationalism, that is, the notion that we are living in a time of deterritorialization in which technological advances and socio-political changes related to increased mobility of goods, peoples, and ideas have effectively detached culture from place.² According to Verghese, such a condition of placelessness is a lived reality that shapes the works of transnational American authors in crucial ways, a fact he illustrates with a particularly striking spatial image. Describing the socio-cultural context in which he and others

like him produce their literary and critical works, he speaks of "a third South Asia, a continent that hovers in space over North America supported by massive pillars in New York/New Jersey, Toronto [...and] columns thrusting up from every other city."³

From a geocritical perspective, such a spatial coding of the process of literary production in the context of migration and diaspora is intriguing. From the point of view of the ecocritic, however, the separation or at least distance between the transnational poet and the world suggested by Verghe's feeds into the very crisis of the imagination that, as Lawrence Buell so convincingly argued in *The Environmental Imagination*, has everything to do with our present global environmental crisis. What is more, describing (post)modern culture in general and ethnic American cultures in particular as detached from place, even if these texts may indeed be increasingly enmeshed in transnational networks, constitutes a reductive overgeneralization. Such overgeneralization is problematic because it keeps scholars of literature from investigating the complex ways in which processes of globalization shape textual representations of places and, by consequence, how these processes affect human-place relations.⁴

In light of the continued prominence of the myth of placelessness in American literature and literary criticism, Verghe's self-portrait is telling in yet another regard. Upon a closer reading, his text reveals more and more contradictions that accumulate to contest his seemingly confident dismissal of physical geography. From the start, Verghe seems to be very much aware of and informed about the ways in which the Texas landscape outside his window has been transformed by human intervention. It is "xeriscaped," he remarks, which is to say that it has been developed through a kind of "dry-gardening," probably for reasons of sustainability. Only one page later Verghe reveals how his sense of place as well as his poetic imagination have been affected by his experience of migration. He writes: "when I go out there and see the white flowers and smell the jasmine I can call up the image of an evening in Madras. ... This morning, ... everything in my world seems to depend on the jasmine blooming."⁵ What Verghe describes here alluding to William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" is not a condition of placelessness, but instead one where the sensual experience and meanings of one place are overlaid and enriched with the memories and meanings of another. Verghe's foreword to *Contours of the Heart*, then, illustrates two tendencies in the conceptualization of transnational American literature at large: first, a more general inclination to view culture as a kind

of urban-centered superstructure with little or no connection to the physical world, and second, a tendency to allow the physical world (urban as well as non-urban) to make its return in these texts. It is this complex layering and porous nature of "concrete places," rather than the celebration of abstract spaces that deserve more critical attention from scholars of transnational American literature. As they acknowledge and struggle with the effects of a variety of past and present movements and displacements, these texts re-imagine places as relational, (multi)perspectival, and multilayered sites of attachment that allow us to rethink traditional notions of belonging. In addition, the textual strategies used to make these places tangible raise questions about human-world-text relations that have made their comeback in recent scholarship indebted to but also critically engaged with the legacies of poststructuralism such as geocriticism and ecocriticism. By evoking landscapes that are both physical and textual, the poets I analyze in this article not only struggle for a poetics of place complicated by different kinds of displacement, but also strive for an ethics of being in and with nature in a world that is increasingly affected by global mass migration and environmental crisis.⁶ Focusing on poetry rather than on prose—a genre that continues to dominate studies of place and displacement in literature—allows me to explore literary engagements with place and displacement that go beyond traditional migration narratives and realist modes of representing human-nature relations.

For the purpose of this essay, I will concentrate on selected passages from Derek Walcott's celebrated epic poem *Omeros* (1990) and Agha Shahid Ali's collection *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991).⁷ These two books of poetry are of special import here because they are preoccupied with displacement and also evoke a complex layering of U.S. landscapes that invites investigation from both a geocritical and an ecocritical perspective, "place" being one of the terrains where these two critical approaches meet conceptually. As Lawrence Buell points out in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, the concept of "place" has proven productive for ecocriticism since it gestures "toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond."⁸ Buell acknowledges that his definition owes much to the writings of human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, whose works are routinely cited by ecocritics and geocritics alike.⁹ By returning to "place" as a category of analysis, I thus continue the work of ecocritics such as Buell or Ursula Heise and geocritics such as Eric Prieto or Sten Pultz Moslund, all of whom have stressed the importance of a renewed engagement with place in literary studies.

In considering place in the context of displacement, I join their efforts of putting pressure on the conceptualization of places as closed and stable sites of human attachment and engagement. By turning to the transnational American poetry of Walcott and Ali as my object of analysis, I furthermore hope to elucidate the special means poetry has to evoke the physicality, complex historicity, and diverse sociality, along with the rich symbolism of American places in the context of displacement. In fact, I would argue that it is the challenging multidimensionality and multidirectionality of poetry as a form of expression rather than any kind of explicit environmentalist message that makes texts like those of Walcott and Ali powerful responses to the current environmental crisis, a crisis that can be conceived as resulting, at least in part, from narrowing down of human-place relations to those of economic exchange.¹⁰ By depicting landscapes as profoundly historical, social, and material, as both real *and* imagined, Walcott's and Ali's poetry not only depicts places that are complexly layered sites of individual as well as communal attachment, their poems also foreground multiple world-text relations that are of interest to both geocriticism and ecocriticism.

In contrast to Ali's works, which have begun to receive increasing critical attention only fairly recently, Walcott's poetry has been studied extensively by literary scholars since the late 1970s. Walcott criticism both topically and methodologically arose from within early postcolonial and Caribbean studies, developed and flourished along with these fields, contributing significantly to both, and later witnessed the emergence of diaspora and transnational studies. As a result of Walcott's many migrations and the increasingly global outlook of his poetry, the poet's work quickly began to garner interest by scholars invested in the idea of a more consciously hemispheric or transnational American Studies. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell turns to Walcott at the end of his chapter on "Space, Place, and Imagination from Local to Global" in order to raise the possibility of "a place-responsive ecoliterature of global scope."¹¹ It is no coincidence, I would argue, that this particular chapter from Buell's book, which accounts for both the place-consciousness and the transnational tendencies of Walcott's poetry, also stresses the importance of a re-examination of spatial concepts for "the future of ecocriticism," a future, we might say, that manifests itself in this very collection of essays.

Existing ecocritical readings of Walcott's work, together with recent geocritical articles such as Joanna Johnson's "Furrowing the Soil with His Pen: Derek Walcott's Topography of the English

Countryside," attest to the converging territories of ecocriticism and geocriticism in transnational American poetry. So does criticism on Ali's works, albeit less obviously. In his article "Beyond Walden Pond," (2007) Robert T. Hayashi draws attention to the quasi-absence of Asian American texts in ecocriticism and then lists a number of authors whose works he would like to see represented. In a short paragraph on Ali, Hayashi remarks:

Although this work [*A Nostalgist's Map of America*] offers much to our understanding of American places and the literary canon's presentation of them I doubt that many ecocritical scholars or, more important, teachers of literature and the environment would consider Ali's brilliant work for inclusion in their scholarship or syllabus.¹²

Despite the fact that it is phrased negatively, this statement represents a call to read Ali's works from an ecocritical perspective. At the same time Hayashi's contention that Ali's poetry offers much to our understanding of American places and the literary canon's presentation of them might as well be said to advocate for a geocritical reading of his texts. In a logic similar to that of Bertrand Westphal, who argues in his foreword to *Geocritical Explorations* (2011) that reading as a geocritic means studying "a city, a region, a territory, and so on, rather than studying a given author's treatment of that place,"¹³ Hayashi contends that the study of particular "American places and the literary canon's presentation of them" would gain by adding the viewpoint of Asian American authors like Ali. Indeed, a central point of convergence for geocriticism and ecocriticism is a tendency toward geo- and eco-centeredness, or in other words toward a shared primary focus on "places." And yet, what makes both geocriticism and contemporary ecocriticism so relevant in a time characterized by increasingly complex processes of globalization and rising environmental pressures is the shared understanding that place-centered readings always also require close critical attention to human-place relationships and, what is more, to human-place-text relations. When Imagining complexly layered non-urban U.S. places, both Ali's and Walcott's poetry foreground such relations.

Little considered by scholars before his death in 2001, the work of the Kashmiri-American, Ali has mostly been read with regard to central issues of postcolonial or immigrant literature, like exile and nostalgia for a lost home, or the mixing of western and eastern poetic traditions

and forms.¹⁴ Because issues of displacement and cross-cultural contact also affect Ali's representation of place, and because his poetry casts places both as cultural and as natural spaces, metaphorical and literal landscapes, third wave or "transnational ecocriticism"¹⁵ provides useful tools for analyzing his poems, especially when enriched by insights from geocriticism. Ali's collection *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991) is of particular interest from a geocritical perspective because, as its title already suggests, it engages readers and critics in the project of *mapping* real-and-imagined spaces.¹⁶ The poems in the collection are "bent toward [...] extratextual landscapes," as Lawrence Buell once called it,¹⁷ in that they repeatedly reference very specific American geographies, especially places and landscapes in and around the Sonoran Desert, but also explore the complex social and cultural histories of the region. Ali's poems, however, do not merely rely on toponyms and detailed descriptions of existing places to situate themselves within specific real-and-imagined American geographies; like Walcott's poetry, they also often employ ostensibly figurative language to evoke the materiality of places. In the poem "No," for instance, Ali uses synesthesia to make tangible what can only be seen and thus create a richly material, albeit in no sense realist, representation of the desert landscape described. What is more, the text draws attention to itself as text by evoking literary forbears, whose works, in turn, raise questions about human-world-text relations of interest to both geocriticism and ecocriticism. The poem's beginning reads: "not in the clear stream,/ I went fishing in the desert sky./ With rain-hooks at the sun's end."¹⁸ This passage, together with the following lines in which the speaker catches "a rainbow" the colors of which are compared to "the bones of a trout," echoes the famous dialogue between Hermit and Poet from the ecocritical ur-text *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau,¹⁹ in which fishing is described as "the true industry for poets?" As different critics have remarked, fishing in *Walden* stands for "truth seeking," whereby the truth sought is that of man's position in relation to "nature" and "civilization."²¹ At the same time, fishing in Thoreau comes to stand for the practice of rigorous inner exploration and, maybe more importantly, of close outer observation which in Thoreau's Transcendentalist philosophy leads not only to a disposition that harmonizes cultivation and wildness,²² but also to a better understanding of human and nonhuman ecologies.²³ Ali's speaker is a truth—seeker in the Thoreauvian sense and a poet who turns to nature as the central matter of his work, a process made literal in the above poem.

And yet, Ali's speaker is not a nineteenth-century Romantic poet. He is a late twentieth-century poet whose writing combines modernist strategies and postmodern sensibilities²⁴ and whose nostalgia for truth and beauty in the poetic representation of nature is tempered by doubts about represent-ability in language and by self-consciousness about the ethical dilemma inherent in continuing to write despite these doubts. Indeed, the poem "No," not only alludes to *Walden*, but also to Emily Dickinson's "Split the Lark—and you'll find the Music,"²⁵ an ironic, metapoetic text that foregrounds problems of representation and artistic production. Like Ali's rainbow, whose magnificent colors become "slippery in [the speaker's] hands"²⁶ as he begins to separate them with his "knife sharp, silver exact," Dickinson's lark is dissected in the process of being described, which reduces the music of the bird "Saved for [the listener's] Ear" to "Gush after Gush" and "Floods" of "scarlet" blood. Where there was once airy life, mystery, and beauty remain only dirt, blood, and death. Both Ali's and Dickinson's texts end with the bitter recognition that all attempts of rendering nature—for all the possible gains of poetic creation—may come at the cost of sacrificing those qualities of the natural world that lie beyond representation. In her ecocritical reading of Dickinson's poetry, Christine Gerhardt demonstrates that the poet's works can be seen as ecologically suggestive because of her "commitment to place and her simultaneous expression of doubt and reluctance vis-à-vis the natural world and our human capacity to relate to it."²⁷ By alluding to Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau, whose "writings share the preoccupations and doubts of his own place-conscious poetics, Ali creates a poetry that displays its own ecological sensibilities. At the same time, and through a self-conscious transposition of a mid-nineteenth-century New England nature poetics onto a late twentieth-century platial poetics based on an engagement with the landscapes of the American Southwest, Ali's intertextual references to Dickinson and Thoreau establish a literary genealogy that connects the wandering poet Shahid represented in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* to the American geographies that this book of poems is mapping, while demonstrating the necessity to rethink human-nature relationships in the era of globalization.

Like Ali's speaker Shahid, Walcott's speakers also frequently struggle with the limits of representation. Yet, while the tone in Ali's poems remains genuinely earnest and gentle in the face of the fear that writing

may be a futile or even destructive activity, and while Ali's texts continue to express faith in the power of poetic language, Walcott's poetry on U.S.-American places is highly ironic, even bordering on the sardonic, and often leaves the reader with hardly any assurances about the poet's right to act as witness. Book Four of Walcott's award-winning twentieth-century epic poem *Omeros* follows the Caribbean poet Derek, the main narrator of the long poem's different Storylines, to the United States, where he finds himself in different locales, ranging from New York to Colorado and rural Georgia. Over and over again, the poet-speaker draws attention to the complex material, historical, and social texture of the places before him. By staging the act of poetic creation, Walcott, like Ali in the poem "No," makes explicit the process by which landscapes become texts, or perhaps rather the extent to which landscapes are texts open to individual interpretation. In Book Four Chapter XXXIV, Section I of *Omeros*, Walcott writes:

The Crow horseman pointed his lance at the contrail
higher over the Dakotas, over Colorado's
palomino mountains; [...]
Clouds whitened the Crow horseman and I let him pass
into the page, and I saw the white wagons move
across it, with printed ruts, then the railroad tracks
and the arrowing interstate, as a lost love
narrowed from epic to epigram.²⁸ [...]

While contemplating the majestic landscapes of the American West, the speaker envisions a Crow horseman, a heroic but also tragicomic figure of a long-gone, mythical past, who points to condensation trails in the sky. Like the "arrowing interstate" mentioned a few lines later, these contrails are not only symbolic of a late twentieth-century America constantly on the move. The word component "trail," together with the reference to "white wagons" and "railroad tracks," also evokes other, much more violent histories of movement in the country's past: the American westward expansion and the resulting Native American removal most harrowingly instantiated by the Trail of Tears. These evocations, finally, are what give the above lines a bitter aftertaste: while the rather stereotypical image of the Crow horseman acknowledges the history of Native American displacement granting it representation, the warrior's "whitening" by the ephemeral clouds highlights the precariousness of his memorialization in poetry. The horseman's accusatory gesture as he points to the contrails, which appear like writing in the desert sky, and his gradual erasure by the

passing time and a natural world that does not record human suffering foreshadow his eventual disappearance “into the page” of the poet. What is more, the history of the Crow and his people as well as that of all the other tribes forced on the Trail of Tears is literally “narrowed from epic to epigram” in Walcott’s Caribbean-centered epos, in which U.S.-American landscapes and the Native American presence (and absence) remain on the margin.

Throughout Walcott’s U.S. passages, and in particular Chapter XXXVI, ostensibly jarring metaphors are assembled to form incongruous images:

[...] Under the crumbling floes
 Of a gliding Arctic were dams large as our cities,
 and the icy contrails scratched on the Plexiglas
 hung like white comets left by their seraphic skis
 [...]

These odd equivalences produce an unease in the reader which becomes almost unbearable in the last two lines of the section, where the speaker laments the end of his marriage by describing his face as “frozen in the ice-cream paradise/ of the American dream, like the Sioux in the snow.”²⁹ And yet, the ill-proportioned imagery in this passage is not a sign of thoughtless callousness on the part of the author, I would argue, despite what some critics have suggested.³⁰ Rather and in some ways more urgently than Ali’s poetry, Walcott’s lines attest to the poet’s self-conscious exploration of the limits of poetic representation and to his desperate will to act as a witness despite these limits, especially when it comes to histories of violent displacement.

At this point it is important to again draw attention to the fact that Walcott’s concerns with histories of displacement, like Ali’s (as we will see later), are directly linked in the text to a preoccupation with specific places, or more precisely natural landscapes that appear as reluctant and yet compelling mnemonic sites. At the beginning of Book Four, Chapter XXXV of Omeros: Walcott writes:

“Somewhere over there,” said my guide, “the Trail of Tears
 Started.” I leant towards the crystalline creek. Pines
 shaded it. Then I made myself hear the water’s
 language around the rocks in its clear-running lines
 and its small shelving falls with their eddies, “Choctaws,”
 “Creeks,” “Chocktaws,” [...] ³¹

The guide's insecurity about the exact location of "where the Trail of Tears/ Started" in the lines above, like the Crow horseman who is whitened out by the clouds in the previous passage, points to the problem of forgetting and to nature's tendency to cover up the traces of human history. Where one might hope to see a landscape affected by human suffering, the poem presents a pleasant, idyllic scene to the observer, which recalls conventions of the pastoral tradition before breaking them with images of violence and death. No matter what a cursory reading of the second verse might suggest, nature is not "telling" the secret histories of those Native American tribes that were displaced in the aftermath of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Instead, it is the poet who wills himself to hear what he needs to hear in order to be able to write about the destiny of displaced tribes. The "clear-running lines" are the speaker's and—by extension—those of Walcott's poetry, not the river's; and what will be shelved are not the river's waters, but the poet's books of verse which can imagine those stories that nature does not tell. While much of Walcott's Caribbean poetry opts for singing the praise of the islands' natural beauty when faced with what George B. Handley has described as nature's opaque and deep history,³² Walcott's texts focusing on North America work hard to conjure up histories of colonization and displacement and are ultimately much less forgiving about the poet's failings, more suspicious about his motivations to continue writing, and more doubtful about his authority to do so.

Like his unsettling juxtaposition of genocide and divorce, the descriptions of the Dakota plains in the first passage quoted seem strangely out of scale. Natural phenomena as unfathomable as the geographical formations left behind by glacial movements are figured as scratches on Plexiglas and angelic ski trails, which in turn are compared to a plane's contrails. Again, I would suggest, these lopsided comparisons do more than deconstruct or mock what might otherwise be perceived as the sublimity of "Colorado's/ Palomino Mountains." In fact, one can argue that it is precisely the awkwardness of Walcott's language that highlights the awe-inspiring vastness of natural history and the beauty of the landscapes before the speaker's eyes. Unlike the speaker of Walcott's Caribbean nature poems, who has confidence in his right and ability to name and describe the world before him and to fill the gaps of history using his poetic imagination, the narrator of *Omeros* is more self-conscious about his attempts at witnessing, for example, when he "mistakes mountains for lakes." What this passage is about and ironizes at the same time is the belief that literature—be it prose or poetry—could ever do full justice to

the multiple competing histories of a place and thus to a place's complex layering. This, however, is not to say that the poet should remain silent when faced with an ultimately impossible task. On the contrary, in keeping with the understanding that the construction of places as real-and-imagined sites of social and cultural production works by accumulation, there is value in adding a perspective like Walcott's—that is, one that struggles to include marginalized histories and draws attention to the multilayered and processual nature of place-identity.

Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America* too includes these marginalized kinds of histories in its evocations of the American Southwest. Like Walcott, Ali imagines places as multilayered formations affected by a great variety of movements and displacements and thereby questions essentialist and stable notions of belonging derived from the kind of racist spatial vocabulary that conceives of iconic landscapes as sites and sources of national identity devoid of minority presence.³³ The Sonoran Desert, the region that features most prominently in Ali's collection, covers parts of Arizona and California, but also extends into Northern Mexico, which would make it an ideal site for all kinds of transnational border-crossing, if it were not for miles and miles of barbed wire. Despite these fences, the Sonoran Desert is an extraordinarily diverse bioregion.³⁴ What is more, it is marked by a long and complicated history of settlement, displacement, and migration, making it an especially resonant landscape for a poet like Ali who is invested in exploring the relationship between place and displacement, place and belonging. And indeed, Ali's poems weave together physical, social, and historical dimensions of place as they depict Sonoran desert landscapes. In addition, *A Nostalgist's Map of America* is rich in intertextual references, emphasizing the imaginary or symbolic dimension of place.

A text that illustrates all of these layers of place particularly well is "Snow on the Desert," the last poem of the collection. "Snow on the Desert" begins by locating the speaker very precisely in time and space as he is taking his sister to "Tucson International" airport "on January 19, 1987," an action that alludes to the speaker's own migratory background. Gazing at the snow and the frozen cacti on the roadside, the speaker Suddenly interrupts his contemplation of the scenery and 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 [...] ³⁵

The text in italics is the title of a 1982 book by renowned agricultural ecologist, conservation biologist, and sustainability activist Gary Paul Nabhan, which carries the subtitle *A Naturalist in O'odham Country*. Nabhan's book focuses not only on the flora of the Sonoran Desert, but also on the *O'odham Himdag*, that is, the "Papago Way" of living in and cultivating the desert, a sustainable "xeri-culturing" to go back to Verghe's description of his Texas garden quoted at the beginning of this article, and a form of agriculture that has been practiced and perfected by the local Tohono, as they are nowadays usually referred to, for centuries.³⁶ As the reference to Nabhan's book suggests, the speaker's perception of the landscape around him is influenced by the Tohono view of the desert; or rather it is influenced by the *O'odham Himdag* filtered through the writing of Gary Nabhan, a non-Tohono naturalist who is himself of Lebanese-American descent and has dedicated his life to studying the agri/cultural practices of the Native American peoples of the Southwestern deserts. While Nabhan's background resonates with the speaker's own migration history, the ethno-botanist's commitment to learning from and preserving the traditional environmental knowledge of the Tohono is mirrored in the speaker's own interest in the geological as well as the human history of the region, in particular where histories of violent displacement and oppression are concerned as revealed in the reference to both Native American ritual practices and "blood" in the passage above. On a more abstract level, the speaker's quoting of Nabhan's book, which stands in the tradition of American essayistic nature writing but also acknowledges colonial histories and tries to incorporate elements of Native American oral storytelling, makes obvious the speaker's desire to engage deeply, respectfully, and through many different channels with his new place of residence.

Place in Ali's poem is not only both material and textual, real and imagined, it also has a distinctly social dimension since it links people of very different origins through their shared experience of particular places and natural phenomena as well as through their contact with a variety of texts about them. What is more, Ali's Sonoran desert landscapes, like Walcott's U.S. American South and Western plains, are imbued with a rich historical dimension, in terms of both human and natural history. "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 Papagos say:
 not only because they have arms and veins
 and secrets. But because they too are a tribe,
 vulnerable to massacre.³⁷

The unfathomable geological age of the landscape, an element that also features in the passage of *Omeros* quoted earlier and illustrates the ways in which places exceed the limits of human experience, is here juxtaposed with human memory and Native American mythology without dismissing either as insignificant. Without Walcott's bitter irony, I would argue, Ali employs the metaphor of the "tribe," in order to evoke a kinship between the iconic Saguaros, whose population is threatened by pollution and climate change, and human victims of violent displacement and oppression, victims like the speaker himself, who later in the poem recalls scenes from the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, and like the Tohono, who suffered from and are arguably still experiencing the consequences of Spanish, Mexican, as well as American settler-colonialism.³⁸

Like this central image of the tribe, the entire poem attests to the speaker's desire for community and belonging. At the same time, the comparison of human beings to the most iconic plant of the Southwest, the Saguaro, which is in fact endemic to the Sonoran Desert, also attests to the migrant's desire to establish meaningful relations to a place he is not native to, whose history he cannot fully fathom, and that he may only inhabit temporarily. One basic question this poem raises, then, is to what extent a meaningful relationship to place really requires "long association with the environment,"³⁹ as Yi-Fu Tuan famously claimed, a notion that still dominates American environmentalist and to some extent also American ecocritical thought. Many of Ali's poems suggest something else, namely that displacement and movement do not foreclose a meaningful sense of place. On the contrary, his poems seem to propose that a sense of place that acknowledges histories of displacement and therefore struggles all the much harder to make up for a lack of "long association" with intensity of engagement and a wealth of imagination, fosters an ethics of being in place that we may call ecological, precisely because it is based on multiple interrelations, interactions, and exchanges between human beings and their environment. What is more, by weaving together a

variety of perspectives on a particular place through intertextual references, Ali's poetry highlights the central role of literature in the production of a meaningful and yet open sense of place: in much the same way that literature fulfills a crucial role in shaping an environmental imagination of the global which cannot be the result of individual lived experience, as Ursula Heise has suggested,⁴⁰ texts like those of Walcott and Ali invite us to consider how literature might participate in the formation of an environmental imagination in those contexts where a long, association with place is impossible, which is to say in the formation of an environmental imagination of displacement.

NOTES

1. Abraham Verghese, "Foreword," in *Contours of the Heart: South Asians: Map North America*, eds. Sunaina Maira and Rajini Srikanth (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), xiv.
2. Of course I am not the first to draw attention to this overemphasis on "placelessness" in contemporary criticism, nor am I the first to point out that the overgeneralization that this emphasis is widely exaggerated. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Karen Halttunen's 2005 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association ("Groundwork: American Studies in Place," *American Quarterly* 58.1 (March 2006), 1-15) or Wilbur Zelinsky's monograph *Not Yet a Placeless Land: Tracking an Evolving American Geography* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).
3. Verghese, *Foreword*, xiv. Verghese's reference to "a third South Asia" recalls V.S. Naipaul's famous differentiation between "two Indias"—a loud, crowded, physical India, and a mythical one. It also points to Homi Bhabha's "third space," or at least to a simplified version of the concept as it has gained widespread usage in criticism, that is, a "space of hybridity" or a "contact zone" to use Mary Louise Pratt's term, where the meeting and mixing of cultures results in something new and at least potentially subversive. Both allusions, I would argue, only exacerbate the separation from the space of cultural production from any kind of physical environment or location.
4. In the introduction to her influential study *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), Ursula Heise argues that environmentally oriented literary scholarship needs to reckon with the fact that processes of globalization have led to the emergence of "new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place" (10) and, thus, help establish an environmental imagination that is "premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the

planet as a whole" (10). Starting from these same premises, I follow Doreen Massey and Eric Prieto in arguing that "place" remains a useful theoretical category for literary criticism. I would contend that, if redefined as porous, relational and (multi-)perspectival rather than closed and bounded, the concept of "place" allows us to imagine how transnational literatures imagine the material and environmental effects of global flows of people, goods, and ideas. See Eric Prieto, *Literature and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 28-29.

5. Vergheze, "Foreword," xv.
6. When I speak about "different kinds of displacement" in this article, I usually mean physical displacement, whether forced or voluntary. As Rob Nixon points out in his 2011 study *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), another kind of displacement worth considering in the context of environmental criticism would be a "displacement in place" (17), which is to say a "displacement without moving," which "instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19).
7. Having selected Derek Walcott and Agha Shahid Ali for discussion in this essay due to a certain convergence of themes and textual strategies, I am well aware that there are other authors who would have deserved consideration. One question that goes beyond the scope of this paper, for example, is how gender politics affect representations of the natural environment in transnational American poetry. For a reading that touches upon the issue of gender, while also exploring questions of place and displacement in Walcott's poetry about the Caribbean, see, for instance, Marija Bergam's "Transplantations: Vegetation Imagery in the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Lorna Goodison," from the *European Journal of English Studies* Special Issue on "Dislocation and Ecologies" (16.2, 2012, 113-124).
8. Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 63.
9. Examples of scholars quoting Yi-Fu Tuan's "things from the field of ecocriticism include Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, J. Scott Bryson's *The Westside of Any Mountain: Place, Space and Ecopoetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005) and Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For examples from the field of geocriticism, see for instance, Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Robert T. Tally Jr.'s *Spatiality* (New York:

- Routledge, 2013), or Prieto's *Literature and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*.
10. Christine Gerhardt makes a similar argument about the special potential of poetry with regard to the interconnected issues of mobility and environmental crisis in her article "Beyond Climate Refugees: Nature, Risk and Migration in American Poetry" (*The Shaping Power of Risk: Literature—Culture—Environment*, ed. Sylvia Mayer and Alexa Weik von Mossner (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 137-156).
 11. Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 92.
 12. Robert T. Hayashi, "Beyond Walden Pond. Asian American Literature and the Limits of Ecocriticism," in *Coming into Contact. Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, ed. Annie Merrill Ingram, Ian Marshall, Daniel I. Philippon, and Adam W. Sweeting (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 58-75, 58.
 13. Bertrand Westphal, "Foreword," in *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), iii-xv, xiv.
 14. See for example, Lawrence Needham's "'The Sorrows of a Broken Time': Agha Shahid Ali and the Poetry of Loss and Recovery," in *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 63-76; Bruce A. King's "The Diaspora: Agha Shahid Ali's Tricultural Nostalgia," in *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition*, ed. Bruce King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Shaden M. Tageldin's "Reversing the Sentence of Impossible Nostalgia: The Poetics of Postcolonial Migration in Sakinna Boukhedenna and Agha Shahid Ali," *Comparative Literature Studies* 40.2 (2003), 232-264; Ananya Jahanara Kabir's "Language and Conflict in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali," in *Perspectives on Endangerment*, ed. Graham Huggan and Stephan Klasen (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2005), 199-208; Malcom Woodland's "Memory's Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Ghazal," *English Studies in Canada* 31.2-3 (June/September 2005), 249-272; Nishat Zaidi's "Center/Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali," *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 23 (2008), 55-66.
 15. See Heise's discussion of this very recent sub-discipline of ecocriticism in her article "Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 128.3 (2013), 636-643, especially 638-639.
 16. See Tally, *Spatiality*, 50, 140ff.
 17. See Buell *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 33ff.
 18. Agha Shahid Ali, "No," in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 85.
 19. I would like to thank Christoph Irmscher for pointing out this particular intertextual connection to me in a discussion about the conference paper from which this essay derives, and for his helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

20. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods: Bold-faced Ideas for Living a Truly Transcendent Life*, ed. Laura Ross (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009), 296.
21. See for example, Maurice S. Lee's *Certain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134 and John Dolis's *Tracking Thoreau: Double-Crossing Nature and Technology* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 131.
22. See for example, Raymond P. Tripp Jr.'s *Two Fish on One Hook: A Transformative Reading of Thoreau's Walden* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998), 112; or Ryan Patrick Hanley's "Thoreau Among his Heroes," *Philosophy und Literature* 25.1 (April 2001), 59-74, especially 60ff.
23. See Robert Milder, *Reimagining Thoreau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 139; or Thomas Pughe "Brute Neighbors: The Modernity of a Metaphor," in *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon*, ed. Francois Specq (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 249-264, 251.
24. For a more detailed discussion of the problems and benefits of categorizing postcolonial or transnational poets like Agha Shahid Ali as either postmodern, or modern, postmodernist, or modernist, see Jahan Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), especially Chapter 1 on "Poetry, Modernity, and Globalization."
25. Emily Dickinson, "Split the Lark"; see poem FR 905 in R. W. Franklin's edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
26. Ali, "No," 85.
27. Christine Gerhardt, "'Often seen—but seldom felt': Emily Dickinson's Reluctant Ecology of Place," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 15.1 (2006), 56-78, 61. For a more extended discussion of the environmental overtones of Emily Dickinson's place-conscious poetics, see Christine Gerhardt's monograph *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).
28. Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 174-175.
29. *Ibid.*, 175.
30. See Robert Daniel Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 95; and Paul Breslin *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 262.
31. Walcott, *Omeros*, 177.
32. George B. Handley, *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 6.

33. For a discussion of the concept of the “ethnoscape” and its relevance in U.S. history and national mythology, see Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 150; or Sarah Phillips Casteel's *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 5.
34. As Sarah Jaquette Ray points out in her study *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013; see particularly pages 136-164), the Arizona-Mexico borderland is a region that has in recent years come to reverberate with the environmental impact of immigration in dramatic ways that were, I would argue, unforeseeable or at least hard to predict when Ali published his collection of poetry in 1991.
35. Ali, “Snow on the Desert,” *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 100-101, emphasis in the original.
36. Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in O’odham Country* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1982), xi.
37. Ali, “Snow on the Desert,” 101-102.
38. Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, 68.
39. Yi-Fu Tuan, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,” *Human Geography: An Essential Anthology*, ed. J. D. N. Livingstone Agnew and A. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 444-457, 446.
40. Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place und Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).