

Reading the material ecology of selected American spaces in the rural poetics of Frank Stanford and Sherwin Bitsui

“For people, ‘Here’ signifies not merely a physical space, but also an
historical space”¹

-Paulo Freire-

This article shall involve looking for “material ecologies” within the ambitious, ungovernable, romantic, and experimental, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* (2000) by Frank Stanford (1948-1978). Stanford’s opus is a surrealist adventure that exhibits hunger, breath, ideophony, and polyglossia (Weigers). We shall also examine the diagrammatic, sonorous, and mystical *Floodsong* (2009) by Sherwin Bitsui (1974-Present) (Bitsui). Both poems are written in “free verse” or *vers libre*, which seems to mimic human speech, but we feel the resonance of many varied poetic forms, including sapphic and haiku styles (Hollander, 26). We also see that both works are heavily influenced by “blank verse” and make frequent use of “enjambment”. At times, they present us with iambic rushes of monosyllables such is their sonic fluency and texture (Strand). Overall, both poems are irregular, graphic, and metrical in form (Hollander, 28). “Blank verse” or *verse sciolti da rima*, invented by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, is a poetic form seen everywhere from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to Thomas Wyatt’s translation of *The Aeneid* (Strand, 102). Coincidentally, any variation on “blank verse”, due to its complex verbal play and fluency, is an appropriate tone to address, the present themes of, “material ecologies”.

We could also understand both poems as “field-poems” or “post-modern pastorals”. A field poem arises “as the living body or form” (Hume, vi). Both works come close to organic material without fully becoming it, coalescing in space, and existing in the register of the “physical” (Hume).

Including posthumous volumes, both poets have published sixteen works between them. Remarkable eco-spatial projects such as Stanford’s creation, which was admired by John Berryman, Alan Duggan, and Allen Ginsberg, can also be traced back to *The Iliad* or the poetry of the 13th-century French Troubadours (Ryan). In an evaluation of poems of length, we often use the terms “cantos”, “letters”, “songs”, and “passages” (Conte). Through the elegant theme of “diverse spaces”, two sublime examples of poetic structure can be comprehensively examined. In both poems, sometimes single words and phrases project out “like sole blossoms on branches, made more precious by their loneliness” (Hollander, 29). Many recent anthologies have configured poetic place, such as, *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (Tarlo). The concept of “material ecologies” may share some affinity with the notion of “radical ecologies”.

Throughout this study, I shall investigate and develop the themes of place and physical, ecological space. Ecological awareness can be either organic or elemental and as Robert Tally Jr. states that ‘Matters of space and spatiality are, in some senses, nothing new to literature’ (Tally,1). The poems *Floodsong* and *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* are both situated in the wild physical regions of Arizona and Mississippi. *Floodsong* is a sequence of fragmentary and nameless pieces that present the broken cadence of Navajo life in the South West. Similarly, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* is written in the cadence of the American South. Both texts are immersed in the natural world and bear profound scars of colonial legacy, what has been termed the *Maangamizi* in Swahili in the case of African-American colonization (StoptheMaangamizi.com). Notable

instances of the “massacre” of African-American folk at the hands of their colonial masters, occurred in Mississippi at Vicksburg (1874) and Clinton (1875) (Zinn Education Project). We also had the slaughter of indigenous populations in Arizona, such as that which occurred under General George Crook’s Tonto Basin campaign circa 1872-1873 (The Forced Relocation of The Yavapai). The ethnohistoric “scars” of colonization also involve institutional or systemic violence such as that at *Kamloops Indian Residential School* in Canada where two hundred and fifteen bodies of indigenous children were recently recovered in May 2021 using ground-penetrating radar (Snucins). It is estimated that of the 150,000 children who attended residential schools in Canada, around 6000 died while in care (Miller). One cannot separate these African and tribo-ethnic identities of the Americas and the spaces they inhabit from the tyrannical echoes of occupation and forced migration. After-all the first Navajo peoples originated from Canada (Sundberg). Bitsui also implies that the Navajo language or *Diné bizaad* “was forcibly repressed at boarding schools” (Belin, xvi). Forced spatial displacement presents a problem of reconciliation. This study shall use an “ecocritical” reading of two poets to try and “resolve” this discrepancy. “Ecopoetics” shall be defined, according to Kate Rigby’s definition, as “the incorporation of an ecological or environmental perspective into the study of poetics” (Hume, ii). Eco spatial materiality frames a methodology that can somewhat mediate away from the violence of “coloniality”. Actual place names are described, such as the real-life Navajo reservations around the White Cone region in the case of Sherwin Bitsui and real regional place names such as Moon Lake, Snow Lake, Wolf River, and the land peninsula Abrahams knife in the case of Frank Stanford. Poets such as Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, A.R Ammons, Denise Levertov, and William Everson have embellished the field of “literary ecology” and “imagining the earth” in a tradition that, according to John Elder, predates to William Wordsworth (Elder). Moreover, Snyder sees the cosmos “as a protean flow of materiality” (Moe, 211). Stanford and Bitsui speak the language of inert eco-space, and

many of the “eco-spatial” tropes discussed throughout this chapter can act as panacea amid a violent undertow. “Material ecologies” juxtapose with “latent” landscape features such as “erasure, disappearance and exception”, these aspects are charted by authors such as Estela Schindel in her 2014 book, *Space, and the Memories of Violence* (Schindel).

This occupies a field of “memory studies”, discussed in volumes such as *Places of Traumatic Memory* by A.L Hubbell (Hubbell). Bitsui’s, Athabaskan, Navajo tongue, which appears in *Floodsong*, is currently at around 169,359 speakers, and *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope* was recently released on Disney + platform in Navajo (Ceballos). “Daily speech” and “verbs” are what help construct the fluency of Bitsui’s “landscapes,” and he states, “my poems feel like a landscape- a landscape that is never still” (Belin, 223). The *Diné* was established through laws and practices between 900-1400 A.D (Belin). It came to prominence in the 1890s through army surgeon Dr. Washington Matthews, who described *Diné* storytellers and singers (*hataali*) (Belin,12). Bitsui’s work can also be traced back to “avant-garde native poets” from Santee Frazier to Layli Long Soldier (Hume,147). It is crucial to note that “Navajo language” (*Diné Bizaad*) is hybridized and contains elements of some five hundred and sixty-six native tribes, and their one hundred and seventy-four languages, Navajo, is therefore exceedingly difficult to translate. The language can be understood by any speakers of the Apachean languages (Koenig). In the United States, Navajo lands extend 71,000 km²:in the South-West (Trocme).

Bitsui’s designation to poetry and corresponding expressive depiction of space was humble, and he was always a fan of science-fiction, particularly the short poems of Leonard Nimoy (Bitsui). One of the best portrayals of the Navajo *Diné* landscape was depicted by Irish descended artist Frank Tenny Johnson (1874-1939), who was also known as a great chronicler of the wild and untamed spaces of the American West (matteucci.com). Sherwin Bitsui is on a quest to perform authentic storytelling or retendering for the occupied *Diné*

tribe within the space of Navajo culture. He ascertains that “The songs and memories of our ancestors continue to reverberate...they bridge worlds and restore beauty within all things” (Belin, xvi). We shall also see that Stanford’s Francis is on a similar spatial journey or *fernweh* to find his birth parents.

Critic Jon Davis has stated that in Sherwin Bitsui’s memoir-styled poetics, the poet “haunts the edges between cultures, connecting the previously, unconnected, finally dissolving the boundaries between worlds” (Bitsui). Moreover, Stanford’s poetry is a “magnet for misfits and outcasts of every persuasion” (Weigers, x). It is a poetics linked to the idea of unknown spaces or *terra incognita*, which his fringe characters occupy. This belongs to fine symbolist and modernist styled traditions, as W. B Yeats (1865-1939) said, “There is another world, but it is in this one” (Yeats). Stanford traveled back and forth between life and death as if traveling from one room to another (Weigers, xiii). Similarly, Bitsui’s spiritual and ghostly limbo or song makes perpetual use of erasure of space (Vassar). Both Stanford and Bitsui are masters of spatial representation, reframing, and transgression within spatial fields. Bitsui also examines dynamic features of space through reading ‘the motion of poetic landscape’ (Vinas).

Stanford, whose poetry has been termed a “spatial familiar” or “constant stranger” (Ryan, 11), strives to represent undetermined spaces and spiritual esotericism; he was thought to have been raised by monks, to have lived an ascetic life, akin to the Jungian concept of *metanoia*, and to have been treated by voodoo herbalists (Weigers). Similarly, Bitsui seeks to map the spatial *logos* of the unknowable. In an interview with Bianca Vinas, who terms him ‘an ethereal writer of magical scenery (Vinas). Bitsui states, in his native Navajo language, “*So Ahots IP*”, or a man mirrors many ‘stars linked together’ (Vinas). Here, in this spectral image (*imagos*), he alludes to the indivisible complexity of man and the unknowable space between all things. There has been a ‘spatial turn’ associated with

postmodernism and poststructuralism in modern poetry, positing a new aesthetic sensibility; it shall be utilized for this critical analysis (Tally, 2).

Moreover, Tim Cresswell has termed poetic place as ‘a meaningful segment of space’, overlaid with things such as ‘meaning, subjectivity, emotion and affect’ (Cresswell). He terms the study of poetry and space ‘topoetics’ (Cresswell).

Although mixing a semblance of illuminating images related to culture, metaphor, and metamorphosis, as well as experimenting with form, blank space and ethnopoetic scores, Bitsui’s poetic sonority is chiefly concerned with travelling through the spatial horizons of America’s Southwest and the rhizomatic nature of *Diné* identity. In an issue of New York magazine, *Black Renaissance*, which features a section of *Floodsong*, we see, Bitsui’s situating of the noun as multi-dimensional object. He refers to ‘hummingbird’, ‘horses’, ‘twigs’ and ‘computer light’ (Bitsui, 86). His writing does not apprehend any distinction between these specific forms, stating ‘there is no tongue to smooth away the hairline fracture between *us* and *them*’ (Bitsui, 86). These forms outline a totalized vision of natural ecologies and state that all life is contained in one vista of plain space.

Stanford, in comparison, is fascinated with the subject’s location in space, seeking to reify it from the wreck of colonial violence and postmodern disarray. His monomyth poem is both postmodern and atavistic. He speaks of his song of “gross and the blended vision” (Stanford, 309). In this lyrical dream sequence, his language coalesces like Bitsui’s *Floodsong*, yet utilizes a mode of syntax not exclusively paired with the object. Stanford’s language is “indigenous transcendent alive for awhile” (Stanford, 309). It seems to musically ascend and descend, always afflicted by the metrical penum of sleeping phantasmagoria. He also refers to the “crab”, “stars” and “Dionysian debris” that enable him to “compress the language of the earth” (Stanford, 310). However, amidst the candor of spatial revelation, he states “I dream dictionaries and principals that won’t make

mementos out of the wild flowers I am one” (Stanford, 310). Stanford, like Bitsui, retains the signifying density of the subject “I”.

His nomadic *modus operandi* simultaneously creates and destroys, blending with the dynamic struggle between these two cleansing forces. Coincidentally space is something that is both annihilated and continually reborn in Stanford’s exhausting narration. In short, Bitsui’s “I” redeems the object while Stanford’s “I” reifies the subject. Both identifiers are linked through the conduit of “diverse” spaces.

According to Kent C. Ryden, “space” is a universal and theoretical concept, while “place” is localized and emotionally charged. “Space” is a blank surface with no inherent meaning and can be understood as “immanent” and a “matrix of objective historical facts”. In contrast, “place” is “immediate”, “concrete”, “particular”, and “finite”. It is concerned with the lived experience and the senses (Ryden, 37). The poetry of Bitsui and Stanford is bound up with landscape, experience, and location, as well as time and memory (Ryden, 39). The landscape is essentially a constructed or contrived notion. For example, at sacred American locations like Jamestown, alternative histories are often repressed or suppressed, as the focus instead shifts to stories of the wealthy (Shackel, 5). Both poets seek to excavate and envelop “lost narratives” in their respective regions. In Mississippi, we learn that before the depression era, it was an “extremely poor state” whose economy relied heavily on cotton and timber industries. In the poem, Stanford states affirmatively, “I know the men dragging 12 foot of cotton sack” (Stanford, 8). Similarly, African-American characters in The Battlefield where the Moon says I Love You are often deranged, disfigured and generally not so well off. We see this in the character of “Six Toes” who needs to wear “hand me down clothes” and has a father in prison (Ryan, 118).

We are also told that the “magnolia” state was “unfriendly in their attitudes towards nonwhites” and that “native Americans plainly do not count” (McElvaine, ix).

Shadowy, uncertain figures that have not attained *principium individuationis* haunt the specters of Stanford's text. We also encounter the stereotyping of Black African-Americans as "a genial mass", out of which emerges "the Mississippi folk negro" (McElvaine, x). In Mississippi, the farmer is "dependent on" the "sporadic blessings" of "forces" he cannot control (McElvaine, 8). Similarly, the Arizona landscape, chosen by the *Diné*, is a land of contrasts and survival. It is laden with geological chaos such as once molten, "igneous" rocks, but also sparse vegetation and violent beauty (Baars, ix). "Geology" is also related to George Oppen's poetic notion of "the geological imagination" which we see in critical regionalist writers as diverse as Lorine Niedecker (Hume, 42). *Diné Bikeyah* embodies this but also evokes words like *smultronstalle* and *wabi-sabi*, invigorating Bitsui's poetry with change and worldly influence. This "change" relates to Bitsui's desire that his readers "experience their world differently" and "see things anew" after reading his poetry (Belin, 224).

Navajo land was carefully chosen by the tribes some five hundred years ago. Mountains such as *sis Naajini*, *Tsoodzil*, and *Dook o oosliid*, take on particular significance to the *Diné* as they exist outside the cartography and influence of the western colonizing power. Navajo poet, Laura Tohe maps the magnanimity of the former in her poem *Tsoodzil, Mountain of the South* (Belin, 130). Bitsui conveys the majesty of the mountain in *Floodsong* when he speaks of it with relation to the "shrew" and compares the two in an existential evocation (Bitsui, 39). He also speaks of the humble "boat", which fizzles and flakes beneath "the mountain peak above" (Bitsui, 51). Sherwin Bitsui's poetics compares the object of the "particular" (boat, shrew) to the magnanimity of the "universal" (e.g., the mountain). Both poets conjure the landscape to create their spectral regio-poetic narratives.

Related to the exterior landscape is the universal eco symbolization of water. “Water” has been described as the “essential, ontological metamorphosis” (Cohen). Coincidentally, Stanford and Bitsui’s poetics seem to “surge with a power of rhythmic motion, pulsing and oceanic” (Hollander, 28). “Water” itself relates to “hydropoetics” (Hume, 102). The water cycle is also linked to the space of life by Bitsui, who speaks of ‘stratus, to cumulus, to nimbus, to drought’ (Bitsui, 38). He also states that *Floodsong* “makes the sound of dripping water...splashing” (Harjo, 262). The water cycle and cloud cycle are unified and can be connected to the circle of life. “Clouds” are also taken as abstract objects, blending with more diverse symbolizations that represent turbulent storms. As Bitsui states, in a tone that is both naturalistic and terrifying, “A cloud became a skull and crashed to the earth above black Mesa, The cloud wanted to slip through the coal mines and unleash its horses” (Belin, 244).

Water’s adaptable element totalizes space. J. Allan Mitchell describes “the interweaving of cosmos and human microcosm” wherein all creatures are “deeply enmeshed” (Cohen). Existence (*esse*) is imbued with life (*vivre*), sensation (*sentire*), and rationality (*intelligere*). This constitutes the nexus and ladder of life (Cohen). Central to this understanding is the affirmational symbol of water, appearing in a liquid, solid, and gas, an element. Water can separate as well as unify. Both water and its opposing condition, drought, are used by Bitsui in poems such as *Drought* from *Shapeshift* (Bitsui, 55). Water and marine symbolizations made popular by romantic lyricists such as Matthew Arnold in *Dover Beach* (1867) and modernist writers such as Ezra Pound in *The Seafarer* (1911) have been recently styled by poets such as Susannah V. Evans (2020) (*Cut Flowers*). Water is one of life’s most fundamental connecting forces, the elixir of existence, and the source of maritime travel but can also be a threat through storms, floods, hurricanes, tsunamis (Classen). In *Undine*

(1816), the fairy tale novella by Fredrich de la Motte (1777-1843), a water spirit merges with a knight to find its soul. We also see this amalgamation with the water psychopomp in Stanford's epic.

At the beginning of *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* narrative, Francis Gildart has a polarized conception of the water symbol, stating, "I look at water because my father says water is the weakest substance, it is the most powerful I know" (Stanford, 19). This "polarized", or "latent semiotic" dimension adds to water's intensity and valence. The power of "water" is associated with an Oedipalized condition and a rupture in the inauguration of the paternal. It evokes conflict (*Agon*). Stanford establishes the hydro-poetical as supreme symbol in his text, evoking absolute notions from Hegelian epistemology and the sacred idea of the driving *elan* of oppositions (*coincidentia oppositorum*). As Francis prophetically states, "I go to the extreme" (Stanford, 308). His text occurs around the Mississippi Delta, a symbolization that will inexorably culminate in the great flood on P.377-383 (Stanford). He speaks of "invisible water", "underwater", "vanished water", and "a parabola of water" (Stanford, 377). German sociologist, Klaus Theweleit (1942-Present), reminds us that "The flood process is abstract enough to allow processes of extreme diversity to be subsumed under its image" (Theweleit, 232). In any event, the flood, involves the breaking of boundaries and wrestling with the enveloping subject of the paternal. The figure of the Astronomer, who is a well-educated Egyptian, educates Francis, teaching him about "physics and floods" (Stanford, 10). He also enacts a paternal role for the young Francis.

"Boundaries", may involve a country, tradition, body, or moral sense and must unearth something taboo, new, or shocking (Theweleit, 233). The flood is always something imminent and proximate to the self, something in flow that can symbolize a revolution. We see this in Bitsui's *Floodsong*, a revelatory harbinger for change in the Navajo language

and *Diné*. Similarly, in Stanford, behind this flow lies the final cataclysm. The poet imagines a man, who could be a samurai about to commit *Seppuku* or *Hara-kiri*, kneeling under a “waterfall”, in reverence, as if in prayer, with a bushido katana (Stanford, 56).

This image could reflect, artist, philosopher, and swordsman “Miyamoto Musashi” (1584-1645), writer of *The Book of Five Rings* (五輪書), who Stanford greatly admired (Stanford, 7). Moreover, Stanford also resituates this waterscape image when he conjures “a sword like a man praying under a waterfall” (Stanford, 27). Stanford’s Mississippi flood has also been famously portrayed by artists such as Thomas Paquette (*The Artist’s Road*). Overall, for both poets, “water” becomes a translucent representation of material ecologies.

Bitsui speaks of “ocean water”, “river water”, “muddy water”, “pond water”, “spring water”, “boiling water”. For Bitsui, “water” is something that constructs “place” but is also ritualistic, e.g., “water of our clans” (Bitsui, 57). The poet belongs to the *Diné* peoples and *Todichilnii* (Bitter water Clan). Like Stanford, he also speaks of transformative “waterfalls” and ends his poem with the image of “rising waters” and the chopping down of a tree (Bitsui, 71). This may also relate to the colonial destruction of the *Yggdrasil* or runic “tree of life” (Britannica). As is evident, life-affirming, “water” is an incandescent and graceful symbolization for both Frank Stanford and Sherwin Bitsui. The latter being more explicitly attuned to eco-poetic sensibilities. According to T.S. McMillin, there are half a dozen different ways of experiencing the trajectorial flow of a “river”. These are “overlooking the river”, “by the river”, “up the river”, “down the river”, “crossing the river”, and “up and down the river” (McMillin xv). As “rivers” are an omnipresent motif in both Sherwin Bitsui and Frank Stanford texts, it is crucial to conceive of how “rivers” are orientated in “space”. Bitsui speaks of “the singer’s skin, a fingerprint on muddy river water” (Bitsui, 15). Here, the “river” is a motif that captures the polyphony of the poetic voice or song. He also uses the “riverbed” to personify “coughing” swans. This works to frame a holistic panorama of

the natural world and the “starlight” lovers depicted in this same section (Bitsui, 29). The name of the “Mississippi” or “*misi sipi*” came from the *Ojibwa* Indians of northern Minnesota. It is 2340 miles long, borders ten states, and every second, 612,000 cubic feet of water are discharged into the Gulf of Mexico (Adil).

It has been depicted in art by everyone from artist Ferdinand Richardt to poet Yusef Komunyakaa (Richardt). Space also blends with the ecological sublime in much of Bitsui’s poetry, such as *River* from *Shapeshift* which speaks of an anthropomorphized river with “blood vessels” and a “broken back” (Bitsui, 34). In *Floodsong*, much of Bitsui’s spaces occur near rivers or oceans (Bitsui, 15). He explicitly refers to the “mountain stream” and the ocean’s crashing waves (Bitsui, 39). Similarly, the Mississippi river is a vital signifier of the spatializing waterscape in *The Battlefield where the Moon says I Love You*.

Canoeing tribes, such as “The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole made their homes nearby the Mississippi river, and the word “canoe” some from native American parlance (Adil, 18). The rich primordial valley of the lower Mississippi dates back some two hundred and fifty million years. Its largest recorded flood occurred in 1927, when dams and levees were created *en masse* to reclaim agricultural land (Adil, 25). The Mississippi region has also given birth to the delta blues. Houston A. Baker Jr. speaks of “The matrix as blues” (Leitch,2230). A matrix is understood as both a network and womb. A plateau of veering impulses and interlocking transmissions. It is also a conduit for the trope of psycho-sensory space and is a vibrant codex or multiplicity. The bluesman erupts in a “festival of meaning” (Leitch,2231). He is often anonymous, and his signature is “atopic” (Leitch,2231). “The Blues” is also related to “visceral eco-poetics” and the concept of “proprioception” (Hume, 65). Baker defines blues as “code and force” (Leitch, 2232). Invariably, the Mississippi is inextricably imbued with the blues, and Stanford’s epic monomyth text is virtually written and scored through them. Although musical echoes of

his avant-garde expressions are mirrored everywhere, from Laurie Anderson and David Byrne to Arthur Russell and Philip Glass. Overall, “the blues” operates as a transformative, tribo-spiritual emblem for change and iconoclasm.

“Blindness” is also a symbol associated with the “blues”, and we see blind fishermen, horsemen, tigers, gospel singers, swordsmen, children, mechanics, tailors, fighting cocks, appear “blind” throughout Frank Stanford's world (Ryan, 117). Blues musicians, notably “Dark” or “Tom Beck”, appear throughout *The Battlefield where the Moon says I Love You*, characters visualized in a fashion like the photographic stylings of Ed Van Der Elsen (Ryan, 119). Both “blues” and the representation of the “Mississippi” river are indelibly intertwined, as is the idea of rivers, song, and cadence more generally. “Blues” essentially came into being with the cataclysmic flooding of the Mississippi delta in 1927, and see this spiritual message of the flood, etched in the poetry and parlance of both Sherwin Bitsui and Frank Stanford (Britannica). “Blues” and how they configure space also features heavily in Irving Broughton’s, 16mm, psychospiritual, Jean Cocteau inspired, Avant-Garde, adventure in filmmaking, about Stanford, *It wasn’t a dream It was a flood* (1978) (Broughton). Cocteau’s experimental film, with music by Georges Auric, *The Blood of a Poet* (1932), may have had an enduring effect on Stanford, mainly as it depicts a rueful poet who takes his own life by a gunshot to the head. The poem also deals with the soul (*Ātman*) of a poet and catharsis or the outpouring of emotions (*kenosis*), thus, relating to Federico Garcia Lorca’s concept of *Duende* to the conceptual notion of space. (Weismann).

The Flood signification helps us construct physical space in the poetry of Frank Stanford and Sherwin Bitsui. Critic Samia Rahimtoola relates it to “resilience”, “variability,” and poets like Lorine Niedecker (Hume, 189). Babylonian, Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Australian, Polynesian, African, and American traditions all contain the epic flood narrative (Frazer). In the instance of the *Papagos* of Bitsui’s southwestern Arizona around

the White Cone region, it was believed that a great spirit made the earth and that one of the first men was the hero Montezuma. He was saved from a great flood by heeding the warning of a coyote before the cataclysm “destroyed all flesh wherein was the breath of life” (Frazer). An acclaimed Jungian, Barbara Hannah, has spoken of how the hero trope is often supported by “helpful animals” (Hannah).

In North America, the *Pimas*, *Indians of Zuni*, *Acagchemem Indians*, *Luiseno Indians*, and *Mandan Indians* all believe similar semantic narratives of the “flood” *mythos*, which take us deep into reality (Frazer). Dr. Roberto Lima Netto states that “myths” do what science cannot, redeem us, and fill in a void (Lima Netto). They are the exegesis of the symbol. In Frank Stanford's Mississippi, the mythic tradition can be traced to the *Natchez*, who recall that “a great rain fell on the earth so abundantly and during such a long time that it was completely covered except a very high mountain where some men saved themselves” (Frazer).

It is also believed that a little red bird named “*couy-ouy*” brought this cataclysm from heaven (Frazer). Therefore, we see a genealogical view of Frank Stanford and Sherwin Bitsui’s beliefs in how man's actions are contingent on the natural and the profound salience of the “flood narrative” in poetry and storytelling. Invariably, the overriding message is that the deluge is still with us (Worthington). Exegetes such as Andrew George declare that the Genesis flood narrative precisely concords with *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and “few doubt” that it stemmed from it (George). There may be similarities between the epic poem of Gilgamesh and *The Battlefield Where the moon says I Love You*. Francis Gildart can be compared to the character of “wild man” Enlil, who convinces the Gods to bring the flood and describes himself and his “fearlessness” as “so dark” like Francis, “who bleeds so the stars have something dark to shine in” (Sandars). Moreover, unlike *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the text ends with an explicit evocation of *deus ex machina*. Frank Stanford's text also

concludes with Thomas Merton, the soft-spoken monk talking about Henri Rousseau's "art that shows how we dream" (Moharreri). Overall, Stanford's text relates to the multi-faceted theme of "diverse space".

"The flood narrative" in Stanford's text is invariably tied to spirituality, *mythos*, as well as the retribution and pathos of the paternal symbolic.

It is something that the spirit (*nus*) of, eponymously named protagonist Francis Gildart, must struggle with, and endure. Conversely, in Sherwin Bitsui's *Floodsong*, a dark-skinned survivor is pulled from the flood. We are told "how wooden his face looks when photographed on a horse facing west" (Bitsui, 50). Here, "the flood" is equated with the cataclysm, which befell the *Diné* at the hands of colonial America. The nameless figure planted on the horse and photographed also represents a lost tribe themselves. Similarly, Stanford's "flood" could be constructed with invaluable significance from a postcolonial perspective, e.g., 'the first load of dirt on the old levee, and when and if it ever came a great flood again that is where the black people would stand' (Stanford, 68). Once again, the "flood" riles the space of the earth. However, the primary "directionality" of space is defined by the movement of organisms (*autochthones*)

The texture and idiom of Bitsui's Arizona and Stanford's Mississippi are conveyed by the flora and living features of these landscape regions. These aspects are related to the conceptual idea of "biosemiotics" (Moe, 43). There has been a colonial "failure" in recent scholarly research to situate humans ecologically (e.g., Afro-American Slaves and the Navajo Indians). This "failure" is developed in the work of Sherwin Bitsui and Frank Stanford. Moreover, society, in general, has failed to situate non-humans ethically. Graham Huggan terms this 'hegemonic centrism' and relates it to 'environmental racism' and 'speciesism'. He also refers to 'speciesism' and the stigmatization of the social other.

However, the existence of humanity has been largely contingent on the “social other” and the “non-human” despite the “ideology of colonization” (Huggan, 5).

Stanford evokes nature through floral symbols from “water flowers” to ‘purple flowers from Hawaii’, conveying a delicate juxtaposition in a Mississippi landscape of hurricanes and extremes. He states that “I want to die like the flower in the west wind” (Stanford, 364). He also wants to preserve the beauty of the flower from ontological systems and paradigms. This is aptly conveyed when he states, ‘I dream principles and dictionaries that won't make mementos out of the wildflowers, I am one’ (Stanford).

As is evident, in the tradition of Arthur Rimbaud, Marcel Proust, and Jacques Prévert, Stanford achieves transcendence and holistic unity through the image (*imagos*) of the flower. Stanford’s abstract textual use of the floral visual image (*imagos*) also summons the “tongue and heart” artistic stylings of 20th century contemporary artists, from Robert Rauschenberg to David Wojnarowicz (azquotes). He also evokes “weeds”, associating them with uncertainty and death. He states, “I come out of nowhere I merge with death in the weeds” (Stanford, 308).

Educator Marjane Ambler discusses the fact that when Bitsui was growing up on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, art was an inextricable part of life. All his family were artists and as she states, “for native people a life without art is not an option” (Ambler). This Navajo affinity for art relates to an innate sense of natural beauty and there is none more beautiful than the flower. Bitsui conveys the cadence of his song through the beauty of the “sunflower”. He even perceives it as something which can allay the weight of a colonial past, stating that, through the “sunflower” image (*imagos*), ‘the past shrinks to a black dot behind us’ (Bitsui, 60). His entire poem is a “song” that he frequently connects to nature, proclaiming that ‘I wanted to swallow the songs flowers’ (Bitsui, 70). For both poets, the flower of nature stipulates a kind of valediction against sorrow and the ephemeral nature

of existence. Modern spatial poets such as Harriet Tarlo have also examined floral themes in her *Cut Flowers* series (2021) (*Cut Flowers*). Floral symbolizations regularly provide landscapes and spaces with an idiomatic, ecological aura.

Stanford and Bitsui's ecological sensibility is robust. The Intelligence model is, according to John Ryan, cerebrocentric and neurocentric. It invariably challenges "vegetative life" and "ontology". Yet plants possess some curious capabilities such as "photosynthesis" and "anemophily". Moreover, the projectile expulsion of the white mulberry has been known to travel at half the speed of sound or 537 miles per hour (Ryan, 2). In 2005, Indian mathematician, Lakshimarayanan Mahadevan, using quantum evidence, demonstrated that plants move all the time, albeit too slow for the field of human "qualia" to perceive (Ryan, 2). The model of the "intelligent plant" or "vegetal cognition" incorporates "communication, sensing, and emergence" into its model. Critical plant researchers suppose that plants are no longer mere autonomic or mechanistic "systems". Eccritics such as Lawrence Buell have contended that "the resolution of intensifying environmental crises hinges on a collective envisioning of non-appropriative and non-hegemonic relations to a non-human realm" (Ryan, 7).

There is a 21st century, "new age", *Cri de Coeur*, to reconceive how we understand "consciousness", or the human faculty of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), as pertains to the "Anthropocene" or "Capitalocene". This would enable poetry to portray the vast sensorium that conscious experience and plant life offer (Moore). In general, the "poetisphere" must remain receptive to a vegetal embodiment, and we see this in American ecopoets from Joy Harjo to Gary Snyder. We also see this phenomenon in Stanford and Bitsui. Aside from flowers, we see from the very first line of *The Battlefield Where the moon says I love you* that "Tonight the gars on the trees are swords in the hands of knights" (Stanford, 1). The plant and the landscape take on a mystical aura which subsequently colors Stanford's text.

Later in the text, we are told of spectral “blue trees” (Stanford, 358). Trees are as alive as men and decorate the spatial dimensions of the poem. He also speaks with incandescent reverence of “the great trees of night that genuflect in the lightening” (Stanford, 15). He speaks of ‘Cyprus trees and oaks’, ‘trees of dried blood’ and ‘trees that jump’. The protagonist, Francis Gildart, even states that he ‘walked through the halls, where the limbs of animals and men and trees were grafted to one another’ (Stanford, 137). The symbolization of “trees” relates to the arboreal poetics of writers such as Luis H. Francia and Howard Nemerov. It also relates to “vegetal poetics” (Yulianto). Stanford also states, “I with the expressive forest under me” (Stanford, 309). Here, vegetal incarnation is the source of his uninhibited desire. Therefore, we see a cohesive image (*imagos*) of “ecological consciousness”.

In *Floodsong* by Sherwin Bitsui, cedar and pine trees and plants are imbricated with the human form. He personifies the mesquite and cedar trees as ‘ache’, speaks of how he ‘convulses’ with the landscape of the ‘forest’ (Bitsui, 12), and evokes spectral ‘trees of monsoon lightning’ (Bitsui, 13). Bitsui’s phrase, at the beginning of *Floodsong*, *Na Ho Kos* seems to be referring to the space of nature which exists ‘under the weight of all that loss’ (Bitsui). Both poets evoke the German word *werifesteria* and take on the transformative aesthetic of the shaman, which comes from the *Tungusic* word *šaman*, meaning “one who knows” (Hutton). Francis Gildart and Sherwin Bitsui are veritable “shamans” like the Ancient Greek hero *Orpheus*. The evocation of the “Nijinsky of dreams” on the back of the 2000 edition of *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* seems to represent a homage to *Orphée*, a wild surrealistic film from 1950 by Jean Cocteau about a contemporized bohemian vision of Orpheus (Imdb.com). *Orpheus* was also the first poet and a common motif in many writers from Philip K. Dick to Jack Spicer, who may have influenced Stanford because of their reference to the shamanic ‘Nijinsky of dreams’.

Orpheus also represents, through his liberation from Hades, the symbolization of psychospiritual rebirth. As well as plants, trees, and flowers, we have fish and insects placed in both volumes. In the Navajo tradition, the insect is sacred, and many months of the year are named after insects, e.g., *Wuzzy-gishi* is the name for July and relates to the word “worm” (sacred-texts.com). Insects have the largest collective biomass of all living animals, circa ten quintillion. They, too, occupy the vast dimensions of natural ecologies and there are approximately ninety-one thousand species of insects in the United States alone. Critic Aaron Moe refers to the “vibrational poetics of insects and arachnids (Moe, 59). Insects are a defining yet hidden feature of any landscape (Janzen). In his poem *Dissolve*, Bitsui speaks of the often obscured song of the ‘cricket chirp’ and places it in juxtaposition to “engines” and ‘barbed-wire fence-line’ (Bitsui, 9). The “cricket” is a common trope used in Navajo literature, seen in writers such as Irene Nakai Hamilton in *Story of a Cricket* from 1978 and Orlando White in *The I is a cricket* (Belin,113,271). Throughout *Dissolve*, Bitsui is exhausted by the freight of change and progress. The sound of the cricket reverberates with the sensorium of the Arizona landscape, awakening him from his torpor. Stanford is similarly invigorated with the insect in the landscape. His young protagonist, Francis Gildart, states that “It was midnight or after, I knew by the moon and the animals and fish and insects” (Stanford, 205). In both texts, Animals, birds, fish, and insects ignite space with their vibrant codices. The ecological world or “biome” speaks a language that Bitsui, like Stanford, quietly understands.

“Fish” also contribute to a bright “directionality” of the contours of space. There are over 260 species of fish along the Mississippi river, 25% of all species in the USA (Tara Wildlife). “Fishing” is used as an explorative activity and even to describe individual characters. For example, on P.213, the intelligent character of “Tang” is said to possess “eyes like a fish” (Stanford, 213). “Fishing” is constructed as an important adjective and

habitual activity that helps Stanford's protagonist and his friend's location and mapping of the external spaces of the Mississippi landscape and delta regions. There is also the character of Bobo and the battle with the 200lb catfish (Stanford, 47) reminiscent of Captain Ahab's battle with Moby Dick (Ryan, 117).

Sherwin Bitsui also speaks of "dice fishing" and out fishing with the "line" in *Floodsong* (Bitsui, 65). To the Navajo peoples, "fishing" was an activity undertaken for subsistence amid a barren wilderness. In contrast, Fishing rods, poles, camp, and lines are mentioned explicitly throughout Stanford's text, and overall, the trope of "fishing" conveys movement, activity, and expressiveness. In the natural ecologies of both Mississippi and Arizona, "fish" are represented alongside other organic life.

Alan Bleakley references the exclusion of animals throughout history, animal presence, and the subsequent psychic return of the repressed animal (Bleakley). We see this explorative symbolization in Stanford's text. He states "I want to live with animals in the temple of Isis" (Stanford, 308). More specifically, the "canine" (*Canis*) metamorphizes young protagonist, Francis Gildart. Canines, like other organisms (*autochthones*), invigorate the revolutionary eco-space of the real.

We are also told that Francis Gildart rides and howls like a "wolf" (*Canis lupus*) and that he hears the "oboes that belong to the wolf" (Stanford, 111). We are told that "the wolf had the moon by the throat" (Stanford, 123) and that Francis is "lupus, the wolf of the night sky" (Stanford, 132). In Mississippi-Cajun superstition, "The legend of Rougarou" or *Loup Garou* denotes a tale of a beast with a "wolf's head" who terrorizes the region under the cover of nightfall.

The etymology of the legend of the wolf-headed man dates to ancient Roman *mythos*. The legend has been referenced, in turn, by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, to signify the abject and renegade state of the current refugee (e.g., *Homo-Sacer*) (Cassady, 176). It may be important to note that in 2009, the same year *Floodsong* was published, Bitsui was featured in the poetry anthology *Dedicated to the people of Darfur: writings on fear, risk, and hope*. The book informs us that, at that point, 2.4 million Darfuris had been rendered internally displaced persons (IDP) and that there were also around 200,000 living in refugee camps (Reynolds, xiv). Bitsui's contribution, *Rescuing fire from the flood* tries to articulate the lay testament to the inarable plight of the refugee (Reynolds,24).

This ancient concept of *Homo-Sacer* was officially removed from English law with the introduction of the *Habeas Corpus* Act in 1679 (BL.uk). Perhaps the plight of Indigenous Americans as well as that of the Afro-American "outcast", subject to racialization, stigma, and exception (*ex capre*) relate to Agamben's critical concept (Agamben). Aside from Bitsui's *Floodsong*, Stanford's proto title for *The Battlefield where the Moon says I Love You, Saint Francis and the Wolf*, could share in the mythical tradition of Agamben's critical concept. Other poets such as Daniil Andreev have also examined animal poetry as representing the "forthcoming transformation of the world as a whole" (Kotova). While Michael McClure, who famously read one of his poems to lions in 1964, has placed the onus for world change on the poetisphere, developing the idea of "spiritmeat", a process of connecting with animal energies (Hume, 69).

McClure proclaimed to the pride of lions "Thou feeling creature. Live not for others but affect thyself (Jacket2.org). Overall, in Stanford's text, "dogs" or "canines" are recurrently evoked alongside a sense of "exteriority" and phantasmagoric dreams (Stanford, 47). Both Stanford and Bitsui's animalism can be seen as part of a new age, shamanistic effigy of the real in the order of material and organic energies.

Both wolves and dogs are the “spiritual guides” of Francis Gildart as he searches through the plantations and woodlands of the Mississippi landscape for his biological parents. Similarly, in Sherwin Bitsui’s *Floodsong*, we are told of “Coyotes sweat” and that the “coyote howls into windows painted on the floor with crushed turquoise” (Bitsui, 46). The “coyote” (*Canis latrans*) is the animal psychopomp of the canyons and White Cone region of Arizona that saves the *Diné* people from the flood (Frazer). In the Navajo language, young males are often compared to different colored coyotes, e.g., *Máh-ih-klitsóji-sethkính* (Yellow coyote young man) (Sacred-texts.com). Many Navajo poets deal with the sacred theme of coyotes, such as Roberta D. Joe in *Coyote Shuffle Romance*, who equates them with mystical love (Belin,206).

In *Floodsong*, Bitsui states that he ‘can feel the faces of wolves’ (Bitsui,17). Wolves are also associated with hunting and the barren texture of the Arizona wilderness. Like Rex Lee Jim in his poem *Na'azheeh/Hunting*, many Navajo poets also deal with the sacred indigenous tradition of hunting (Belin,143). Similarly, hunting, like fishing, is a revered trope used in Stanford’s text to explore and express the landscape. For example, Francis evokes “the strong coffee of the hunting camps” (Stanford, 159). He speaks of the character “Delius” going “alligator hunting” in Florida, relating Mississippi to other “impressions” of North American wilderness (Stanford, 367). In a sense, the text is itself a sacred hunt or expedition to find one’s ancestral roots.

Both poets also display an intimate relationship with avian life. Birds also colour the “diverse spaces” of rural America. Around 40% of migratory birds occupy the Mississippi floodplains during Spring and Summer (Tara Wildlife) and poets of the Mississippi river such as Harris, Honeycutt and Kildegaard were known birdwatchers (Kolin, xxiii). In *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*, we are told that the young Francis has a bird that he has befriended and that he keeps on his shoulder (Stanford, 75) and are later told of

parakeets and all sorts of jungle birds (Stanford, 292). The parakeet is even compared to the trope of the poet, coincidentally, asleep in a cage! (Stanford, 363). It is possible that Frank Stanford, through the unbridled spatial form of his epic poem, seeks to awaken the poet from the “cage” of this slumber. In a sense, animal sentience is seen as latibulizing in a torpor, much like human sentience fraught by a dream and a pervasive unconscious reality, awaiting a great poetic awakening (*die Erweckung*). Stanford also evokes the symbol of the mythical bird from ancient Greece, the phoenix, referring to “The wrong phoenix below” (Stanford, 308). This symbolization may also relate to “plunged hawk” from the same section (Stanford, 307). Bitsui also evokes the “redtail hawk” to symbolize nature’s rebellion amidst an inevitable spate of change driven by “bulldozers”, “gasoline” and “shock coils from the jet engine’s roar” (Belin, 239). Overall, material ecologies and their changing spaces are key symbolizations for both poets. One of the most prominent ecopoets, Gary Snyder, describes the image (*imagos*) which the American Landscape evokes as like a “mirror” because the “mirror” can hold anything (Hiltner, 70). He also speaks of the ecological “mirror” as reflecting a home place (Hiltner, 70). The natural ecology of the “mirror” symbol is linked to man’s primordial, history immemorial, and the first “mirrors” were likely crystalline pools of liquid stillness, perhaps, accumulated in archaic containers. Psychologist James Hollis states that “meeting ourselves in the mirror---seeing in that glass darkly, the faint lineaments of our fuller nature---we may claim a larger humanity and widened consciousness” (Hollis).

Moreover, in an interpretation of Gadamer Hermeneutics, Richard Rorty evokes “The Mirror of Nature” or a “consciousness of the past which changes us” as emerging from nature’s “mirror” (de Cock). In the poetry of Stanford and Bitsui, the ecological symbol of the “mirror” is constructed as halcyon, *paracosm* and a space where natural ecologies and presence of the “spatial imaginative” can emerge (Stanford, 271, 310). “Sacred Mirrors”, a

commonly employed poetic trope, are also used by conceptual artist Alex Grey to explore physical energetic systems (Grey). All naturalist ecologies mentioned throughout this chapter are contained in the “verisimilar” trope of the “mirror”. The “mirror” may also reflect the “imaginative” realm of space that can embellish the theme of “material ecologies”..

As is evident from a reading of this article, natural ecologies are totalized and omnipresent. In contrast to Frank Stanford, Sherwin Bitsui’s *Floodsong* is written in first person parable. It uses caesura and idiomatic lineation to convey the poet’s *Umwelt*, *Ummah*, or *Diné*, which is broken yet fluent. His perspective is challenging, intoxicating, and beautiful. This chapter has imbricated these two luminary poets through ecocritical thought and spaces. I have discussed various tropes of water, flora and living beings, to evoke the phenomenology and symbolization of natural eco-space.

The guiding message of this eco-philosophical thesis on the poetry of space is, as Jason. W. Moore states that we must shift our centrism “from object to *Oikeios*” and that we must redefine what constitutes “making” (*poiesis*) in the order of the capitalist mode (Moore). The work of both poets can propel us to change our conception of material ecologies and advance our definition of ecopoetry in future works. We must find a new way to represent “ecology” in the web of capitalism (*Capitalocene*) because Moore’s central argument is that we are entering a new *zeitgeist*, one of scarcity and one that will see the end of cheap nature (Moore). Both Frank Stanford and Sherwin Bitsui’s eclecticist texts relate to the *aporia* of displaced peoples, displaced wildlife (ecocide), the “material ecologies” nature and peoples inhabit, and the corresponding cathartic adventure to seek a sense of material ecology in life’s journey.

Contemporary ecopoetics has a profound affinity with responding to “crisis”. We must vie for future research that deals with the pertinent issue of “environmental justice” to deal with a monumental crisis on earth (Hume,19) Perhaps, binding “material ecologies” can assist in achieving this aim. Scientist Philip Landrigan states that “In 2015, pollution caused three times as many deaths as AIDS, tuberculosis and Malaria combined” (Juniper, 464). Can poetry adapt? Critic Aaron M. Moe tells us “Poiesis must expand to include all processes of making. All morphings. Every gesture. Every blade of grass. Every flake of flint. All form” (Moe,238). Throughout this dissertation, we have seen that poetic spaces are filled with an appendage of representations of material ecologies that can illuminate space in the “material ecologies” of poetry (*Ars Poetica*) in Frank Stanford and Sherwin Bitsui’s spectral monism. I hope this thesis serves as both a solution to a dilemma (*aporia*) of reconciliation and as a call to action in future research communities, because as Whitman eloquently states, “any worthwhile theory” must ‘corroborate the theory of the earth’ (Moe, 329).

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