Transnational Imagined Homes in the Works of Naomi Shihab Nye and Luci Tapahonso

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Received: May 8, 2026 Accepted: July 15, 2026 Online Published: November 16, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v17n1p550 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v17n1p550

Abstract

This article explores how the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye and Luci Tapahonso reimagines place through selective acts of remembering and re-membering the past. Both poets portray their communities by envisioning decolonized geographical spaces in which nature connects diasporic experience with homeland, creating transnational spaces of belonging through the appropriation of nature. This article highlights the idea of an imagined space of belonging created in the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American poet, and Luci Tapahonso, a Navajo poet, who both employ nature and its elements to cross boundaries within a transnational flow. The article explores the concept of appropriating nature and its natural resources, both literally and imaginatively, which, as Bill Ashcroft proposes, rearranges the relation of the colonized to the land. It further investigates how images of the natural world become sites of cultural community, collective memory, and communal identity, revealing how connections to land and nature enable both poets to negotiate displacement and reconstruct belonging beyond national boundaries.

Keywords: imagined geography, diaspora, ecocriticism, Naomi Shihab Nye, Luci Tapahonso, transnational

1. Introduction

Within postcolonial and diasporic contexts, transnational fluidity has reshaped contemporary understandings of space and identity. Home is no longer understood as a fixed geographical location; rather, it is an imaginative construct through which memory reconstructs and re-members a version of home that transcends geographical boundaries. Through the close examination of place, poets become place-makers who recognize that the interaction between humans and nonhuman inhabitants creates a sense of belonging within an imaginatively constructed place. In this sense, poetry becomes a powerful tool through which displaced individuals form attachments to place and imagine different modes of belonging that extend beyond national and geographical boundaries. This imaginative construction of belonging lies at the center of the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye and Luci Tapahonso.

This article examines how Naomi Shihab Nye and Luci Tapahonso employ ecological imagery and memory to reimagine home. By integrating Bill Ashcroft's concept of the "transnational," the article argues that the poets mobilize elements of nature, such as trees and mountains, as active agents that reconnect fragmented memories and geographies. It also brings together postcolonial theory and ecocriticism to challenge rigid and static notions of homeland through the imaginative transformation of space. More specifically, it argues that, in the poetry of Nye and Tapahonso, displaced subjects construct home by imagining forms of habitation rooted in memory, storytelling, and cultural practice. These newly constructed places become sites of continuity and resistance. This study contributes to discussions of how literary texts reconfigure belonging and identity within a transnational imaginative framework.

2. Background: Home, Displacement, and Ecological Belonging

Within postcolonial studies, the concepts of home and belonging have become essential to understanding how colonialism transformed not only political and economic structures but also people's relationships with land, memory, and identity. Dispossession, exile, and forced migration have disrupted traditional understandings of home as a stable concept. Instead, home transcends geographical boundaries and is understood as a dynamic cultural and imaginative construct continuously reshaped through memory and cultural practices.

The loss of homeland signifies not only physical separation from land but also the fragmentation of collective memory and cultural continuity. Within this context of displacement, literary texts play a crucial role in constructing symbolic homes by preserving memories and imagining new forms of attachment that transcend geographical boundaries. Postcolonial writing explores how identities are shaped and sustained through the creation of imaginative spaces of belonging. These imaginative spaces challenge the colonial assumption that identity is fixed; instead, they emphasize the fluid nature of identity and home.

In the contemporary context of globalization, the fluidity of ideas and mobility of people challenge the conventional understanding of place as a fixed entity. Ashcroft's concept of the transnational refers to identities that cross geographical boundaries. Home becomes the product of an ongoing process of negotiation in which memory, history, and everyday practices shape the collective sense of belonging. Consequently, connections to the homeland are reconstructed not only through geographical references but also through stories, symbols,

and everyday experiences that carry cultural meaning across space.

Ecocritical studies have likewise undergone significant transformation. Early critical studies investigated literary representations of nature, wilderness, and human interactions with the natural world. Recently, the field has expanded to connect landscapes, mountains, trees, and other ecological elements to history, identity, colonialism, and cultural survival. Nature is no longer regarded as a passive element; rather, it becomes an active participant in shaping collective identities. This intersection between ecocriticism and postcolonial studies provides an important framework for understanding how displaced communities reconstruct their relationships with land.

Within postcolonial contexts, imagery of nature transcends its function as a mere backdrop to perform important cultural work. Natural symbols become repositories of memory through which histories of colonialism, displacement, and resistance are narrated. Symbols such as mountains, rivers, gardens, and landscapes maintain continuity with ancestral homelands while narrating the realities of migration and displacement. Literary texts use these ecological symbols to construct spaces of belonging that transcend geographical and political borders, challenging the erasure of the historical experiences of dispossession that produced displacement in the first place. Ecological belonging becomes an integral component of cultural memory, enabling literary texts to imagine dynamic forms of home.

The idea of imagining home is relevant to both indigenous and diasporic literary traditions despite the different historical circumstances. They both engage with questions of land, identity, and memory through representations of nature. In each case, lands are active participants in cultural life, challenging historical erasure, preserving histories, and constructing identities. Place is continually produced, shaped, and reshaped through lived relationships among people, culture, and the environment.

The poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye and Luci Tapahonso offers a promising comparative framework. Despite writing from different histories and cultural traditions, both poets explore how images from nature participate in shaping relationships among identity, memory, and belonging. Ordinary elements of nature become sites where personal memory intersects with collective history. Both poets challenge the traditional understanding of homeland as a fixed place by presenting it as an imagined site that is continuously recreated.

Examining these poets together contributes to broader discussions concerning postcolonial belonging, ecological imagination, and transnational identity. Their poetry shows that home is neither a physically inherited location nor a permanently lost place. Rather, it is imagined and reconstructed through acts of remembering, re-membering, and engagement with the natural world. Situating their work within timely discussions surrounding displacement and ecology provides a vision of how literary texts reimagine place beyond fixed geographical and political boundaries. Within this intellectual context, the study explores how Nye and Tapahonso use natural images to create imaginative homes that resist cultural erasure and articulate transnational forms of belonging.

3. Literature Review

As colonial histories and forced migration continue to reshape contemporary understandings of identity, scholars have challenged the static conceptions of home. The notion of home has come to be understood as a dynamic and culturally negotiated space. This shift has brought together interdisciplinary approaches, including postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and transnational studies, to examine how literary texts imagine and reconstruct concepts of home.

Recent scholarship on transnational literature demonstrates how writers challenge restrictive notions of national boundaries by imagining a space of identity that goes beyond territorial definitions. Mukattash (2021), for example, argues that Naomi Shihab Nye's poetry constructs home through movement and diasporic experience rather than fixed national affiliations. Mukattash explores how the poet reimagines home as a fluid experience in which geographical spaces become sites of cultural negotiation rather than alienation (pp. 30–31).

Ecocritical scholarship has significantly expanded to examine the relationships between natural spaces, histories, and memory. Contemporary ecocritical scholarship incorporates postcolonial and transnational perspectives, recognizing that landscapes are not merely physical settings but also cultural spaces where memory and imagination reshape identities. This evolving understanding of ecology provides a framework for interpreting literary texts representing land as active participants in shaping identity.

Earlier scholarship on Nye's poetry focused on its relationship to Arab American literature, the Palestinian diaspora, and the negotiation of Palestinian heritage and American identity. More recent postcolonial studies have broadened the scope by adopting an ecocritical perspective. Shamim (2024) argues that Nye's imagery of nature functions as a form of resistance through which ecological symbols preserve collective memory and challenge colonial displacement (p. 6). Similarly, Cohen (2022) demonstrates that Nye's poetry explores how ecological loss and colonial occupation are intertwined (p. 367).

Scholarship on Luci Tapahonso has emphasized the importance of Navajo cosmology, storytelling, and the concept of Hózhó in shaping Tapahonso's poetry. Researchers have likewise argued that Tapahonso presents the natural world as an active agent in sustaining cultural continuity and imagining home. Her poetry is interpreted as a space of resistance that challenges colonial conceptions of space and boundaries. In her study, Fast (2007) argues that Tapahonso's poetry presents the Navajo homeland as a space where memory and history operate to retell stories that affirm continuity despite colonial displacement (pp. 208–209). More recently, Clark (2024) reads Tapahonso's work through the lens of ecopoetics, arguing that her representation of nature responds to ecological degradation and colonial practices (pp. 15–16). Clark further emphasizes the relationships between humans and the nonhuman world as a decolonial practice that affirms Indigenous belonging to land and environment (pp. 6–7). These studies demonstrate that Tapahonso's representations of landscape embody intergenerational knowledge and Indigenous sovereignty. However, fewer studies have approached her work through a

transnational framework or analyzed and compared it with Arab American literary traditions.

Existing scholarship has generally examined the two poets within separate literary traditions. Scholarship on Nye emphasizes Arab American identity, Palestinian heritage, memory, and diaspora, whereas research on Tapahonso mainly focuses on Indigenous cultural traditions and the native relationship to land. Despite the recognition of the importance of place, imagination, and memory in both bodies of scholarship, few studies place the two poets in direct comparative dialogue, demonstrating how these themes operate across different postcolonial experiences. Furthermore, existing studies frequently analyze identity and ecology as separate categories despite acknowledging their intersection. Relatively little attention has been paid to exploring how images of nature function as agents in constructing transnational forms of home.

Building upon these discussions, this study extends existing research by bringing Naomi Shihab Nye and Luci Tapahonso into comparative dialogue by combining the perspectives of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. Focusing on Bill Ashcroft's concept of the transnational, together with spatial theory and ecocriticism, the study positions both poets as place-makers who imagine homes not as fixed geographical locations but as an evolving relationship with nature and culture. By exploring how landscapes function as spaces of memory and identity, this paper shows that ecological belonging is an integral part of reimagining home beyond the limitations of colonial and national boundaries for both Arab American and Indigenous communities.

4. Theoretical Perspectives

In her discussion of the constitution of social space, Doreen Massey (1994) argues that "in terms of the articulation of social relations, they necessarily have a spatial form in their interactions with one another" (p. 120). Place, therefore, consists of intersecting social relations that are continually built over time, transformed, and renewed. These relations could be divided into ones that are "contained within the place [while] others will stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too" (Massey, 1994, p. 120). Places are dynamic sites constituted through networks of social relations. Creating a place extends beyond one's immediate surroundings by crossing the boundaries imposed through colonial mapping. Indigenous communities "are divided, renamed, and reconstituted, caught within geographical areas which have no relation to their social make-up, traditions, or needs" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 176).

Arab American writers have long called for a transformative project of representing the complexity of their communities through constructing both communal and individual self-representation that responds to the rigid stereotypes about Arabs. These writers advocate an imaginative space through which they portray their shared concerns and experiences of belonging and connection to their homelands. Original Arab homelands and their cultures are "imagined, replicated, portrayed, and lived by multiple generations of Arab Americans [inviting] new engagements with US citizenship and belonging that are repositioned outside the frameworks of Orientalism and neoimperialism" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 3). These writers revise and re-examine the problematic binary of "us versus them." The reconfiguration of this binary and the restoration of connections to the homeland constitute the main discursive strategy for challenging exclusionary and uniform notions of U.S. citizenship. Memories of the homeland are reconstructed within the U.S. space.

This reconfiguration of the binary aligns with Bill Ashcroft's concept of "transnation," which suggests that diaspora offers liberating possibilities of mobility. The transnational "represents the utopian idea that national borders may not in the end need to be the authoritarian constructors of identity that they have become" (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 13). For Ashcroft, the transnational signifies more than the international; it distinguishes between "the occupants of the geographical entity—the historically produced multi-ethnic society—whom we might call the 'nation' and the political, geographic, and administrative structures of that nation that might be called the 'state'" (Ashcroft, 2009, pp. 13–14). The transnational is characterized by fluidity; it is the migration "outside of the state that begins within the nation" (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 14).

Similarly, Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) differentiates between two forms of diasporic writers: diasporic subjects who "are always defined by their lack of or provisional access to an original homeland, [and] transnationals [who] embody a simultaneous physical or metaphorical placement in dual or even multiple locations that cut across national boundaries" (p. 6). Transnational mobility extends beyond the physical into the imaginative realm. Transnational consciousness emerges through an imaginative connection between the United States and the Arab homeland. Arab Americans negotiate and reshape their sense of belonging in the United States by reimagining Arab space within American landscapes. Reimagining "brings [the two spaces] into direct conversation in ways that reconfigure strict definitions of homes, homelands, and national belongings" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 10).

5. Nature, Memory, and the Reconstruction of Homeland

Naomi Shihab Nye was born to a Palestinian father and a mother of Swiss-German descent. She was raised in St. Louis on a farm where she learned from her father the importance of humanity's relationship with place. Nye explains that her father's "entire life was shadowed by grief over the loss of his home in Palestine in 1948. Millions of refugees worldwide have known a similar grief. [She] never [has]. But [she has] tried to mention theirs again and again in some of [her] writings" (Long, 2009, p. 32). Nye's work is informed by multiple cultural influences; her familial ties to Palestine shape her work, while her personal storytelling incorporates the American Southwest and Latin American locales.

In her interview with Suhair Majaj (1996), Nye describes the process of writing as a bridge between worlds. She says that [She] was aware very early on that [she] could look at experience in both a participatory way and a detached way where [she] could stand back,

examine and wonder how things go together and how [she fits] with them. So, writing helped [her] see [her] own life as a child. [She] also had a sense of [her] big family out there in the Middle East, who [she] had never met at that time but who were very crucial to [her] sense of existence and where [she] came from (para. 7).

In "My Father and the Fig Tree," Nye employs the image of the fig tree to create a transnational site where memory, displacement, and identity are negotiated and re-formed. The fig tree functions as a dynamic mediator between geographic and temporal spaces, linking the father's lost homeland in Palestine with his present life in the United States. This connection is not merely nostalgic; it creates an imaginative habitat through which fragmented memories and histories are re-membered and reassembled within the diasporic present. The fig tree becomes the medium through which the father transmits his Palestinian heritage to his daughter:

> In the evenings he sat by my bed
>
> weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
>
> They always involved a fig tree.
>
> Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.
>
> Once Joha was walking down the road and he saw a fig tree.
>
> Or, he tied his camel to a fig tree and went to sleep.
>
> Or, later when they caught and arrested him,
>
> his pockets were full of figs (Nye, 1992).

The father inserts the symbolic fig tree into his stories, even when it does not fit, which reflects a persistent commitment to preserving cultural memory despite the ongoing erasure. This insistence on embedding the fig tree throughout his narratives transforms storytelling into a practice of cultural continuity. This process of actively reconstructing memory aligns with Bill Ashcroft's notion that postcolonial subjects can appropriate the available resources to reconstruct their relationship to the place. The fig tree transcends the boundaries between homeland and diaspora.

The moment the father encounters a fig tree in Dallas, the distance between the two spaces collapses. The presence of the "fig tree in Dallas does not solve the politics of Palestinian displacement, and it does not redress the injustices of the lack of Palestinian right to return to their homeland, but it gives a bit of sustenance to one displaced Palestinian in a small-scale way" (Bujupaj, 2015, p. 16); thus, it is a process of constructing a form of belonging grounded in continuity. This transnational presence of the tree on American soil reconfigures the space in which the elements of the homeland are neither lost nor fully recovered but instead reconstructed in a new context. Like many diasporic subjects, the father is present in two places at the same time. The fig tree connects the father's present place of residence with his lost homeland. This tree becomes a symbolic site through which home is imagined.

The poem conveys "a sense of rootlessness evoked by the poignant absence of Palestinian native soil and trees from the U.S. space of exile" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 37). Both the fig tree and its absence become symbols of the father's homesickness. Despite the sense of dislocation, mourning is not present. Mourning is replaced by hope and the promise of change. This hope stimulates the imagination to forge new connections and envision alternatives. After spending years dreaming of and remembering the figs of his homeland, the speaker's father finds a planted fig tree when he moves to the new space of Dallas. The poem maps new configurations of belonging using the two spaces of Palestine and the United States, one that is remembered while the other is lived, which creates a fusion of past and present. The uprooted father pieces together the remnants and fragments of his homeland.

This loss of homeland produces absence and negation; however, it also gives rise to imagined communities. Ball (2012) argues that "the diasporic landscape is inevitably inscribed with a sense of loss, and that search for a way to return to or connect with the lost home endures within the diasporic environment" (p. 148). In "My Father and the Fig Tree," the fig tree cultivated by her father in Palestine represents his longing for his homeland. His constant refusal to grow figs represents his refusal to reconcile with diasporic space as his home. This memory can only be fully experienced in his homeland. However, in the final stanza, her father finds the ability to nurture a fig tree in his new home, where he can reimagine his memories and relive them in his new location:

> He took me out back to the new yard.
> There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
> a tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the world.
> "It's a fig tree song!" he said,
> plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
> emblems, assurance
> of a world that was always his own (Nye, 1992).

Despite its connection to the memory of land and history, the symbolic fig tree represents the possibility of a new sense of belonging to be nurtured in new soil. Nye reveals her father's longing and desire to reimagine and reconnect with Palestine. Nye remains connected to her Palestinian heritage while simultaneously presenting a "possibility of forging many other communal connections based in variously postcolonial […] and creative solidarities" (Ball, 2012, p. 154). Nye's position within the two cultures of the United States and the Middle East enables her "to project dissenting voices within the imperialist landscape of the U.S. itself, while destabilizing the very structures of

cultural 'otherness' on which imperialist intervention in the Middle East is premised" (Ball, 2012, p. 156).

J. Scott Bryson (2005) argues that ecopoetry offers "a vision of the world that values interaction between two independent and seemingly paradoxical desires, both of which are attempts to respond to the modern divorce between humanity and the rest of nature" (p. 8). Similarly, by presenting nature as an active agent in imagining homelands, Nye emphasizes the constructive function of ecological imagery, challenging the view that the elements of nature are merely passive or decorative. Through the fig tree, Nye reimagines a new definition of home, one that is continually produced and shaped by memory and the presence of the natural world.

Like Nye's new map of belonging, Luci Tapahonso constructs a new sense of belonging by portraying mountains as symbolic connectors between places. Tapahonso, born in New Mexico in 1953, is a Navajo poet who was raised on a reservation. The Navajo Nation continues to exist within the political framework of the United States while retaining significant portions of its ancestral lands. Tapahonso addresses this colonial condition by depicting Navajo life while emphasizing the enduring relationship between culture, land, and identity. Tapahonso's poetry emphasizes the connection between the different Navajo generations and their land.

Robin Riley Fast (2007) states that "Tapahonso's writings inhabit a world defined by two histories: that of the traditional Navajo world, its origins recounted and its order established in the stories of creation; and that of colonization, a history that perhaps most vividly represented, for many Navajos, in stories of the Long Walk period (1864–1868)" (p. 185). "This is How They Were Placed for Us" portrays the strong relationship between the Navajos and the mountains of their homeland. She emphasizes the continuity of a holistic relationship among the physical, human, and spiritual worlds. This vision is reinforced through the poem's evocation of the mythic foundations of Navajo existence.

In her poem "This Is How They Were Placed for Us," Tapahonso constructs an imagined home that is deeply rooted in Navajo cosmology. This imagined home resists the territorial disruptions imposed by colonial history. Like Nye's fig tree, the four Navajo sacred mountains are not presented as mere geographical markers; rather, they represent cultural memory, continuity, and collective identity. Tapahonso articulates a conception of place that, within an ecological framework, transcends colonial boundaries and redefines Indigenous people's relationship with their land.

In the poem, Tapahonso describes the surrounding mountains:

This is how the world was placed for us.

In the midst of this land, Huerfano Mountain

is draped in precious fabrics.

Her clothes glitter and sway in the bright sunlight.

Gobernador Knob is clothed in sacred jewels (Tapahonso, 1997).

The poem emphasizes the importance of the mountains to the survival of the Navajo Nation, thereby reasserting the idea that human and nonhuman elements are inseparable. Tapahonso uses personification by describing the mountains as "draped in precious fabrics" and "clothed in sacred jewels" to remove any barrier between the human and the natural world. This strategy shows that the land actively participates in the formation of identity. The natural world becomes a space of cultural knowledge that continues to sustain a collective identity that resists colonial erasure. Nature:

wears mornings of white shell.

She wears the midday light of turquoise.

She wears evenings of abalone, the light of the moon.

She wears nights of black jet (Tapahonso, 1997).

The lines depict the passage of time and its effects on the mountains; however, the Navajo people are so deeply connected to their land that they incorporate qualities of nature into their own cultural identity:

This is how they were placed for us.

We dress as they have taught us,

adorned with precious jewels

and draped in soft fabrics (Tapahonso, 1997).

These lines further demonstrate the connection between the land and its people by incorporating elements of nature into clothing and artistic practices, showing respect to their land. Here, the mountains represent the hope that keeps the Navajo people strong and connected to their culture:

All these were given to us to live by.

These mountains and the land keep us strong.

From them, and because of them, we prosper (Tapahonso, 1997).

This conception of place as an active form of habitation rather than a passively occupied one reflects what Ashcroft describes as a

transnational habitat. The Navajo people's relationship to their land remains dynamic despite reservation life and colonial violence. In a way that challenges colonial cartography, the sacred mountains extend beyond official borders, demonstrating that place is never confined to colonial maps but is continually produced through cultural practice.

Another example that demonstrates the close relationship between the Navajo people and this mountainous landscape is their traditional dwellings, which are shaped like mountains. Although far away from home, the Navajo people continue to build their homes near the mountains they love. The poem elaborates on the relationship between the people, the mountains, and the mountains' sacred significance. It maps their homeland by reaffirming a sense of home. The poem evokes "the Navajo homeland, [evoking as well] the beauty, order, and balance that can heal alienation, but that also may be vulnerable to disruption without the attentive care and participation of individuals and the community" (Fast, 2007, p. 190). This relational spatiality is reasserted through the invocation and repetition of the communal "we":

with this we speak,

with this we think,

with this we sing,

with this we pray (Tapahonso, 1997).

By relating the intertwined histories of the Navajo people and their mountains, Tapahonso maintains familial ties and a sense of home that affirm communal practices of speaking, thinking, singing, and praying. This commitment to cultural survival stems from Tapahonso's commitment to the central concept of Navajo philosophy: hózhó. Hózhó is a term used to express order, balance, beauty, and harmony. In Sáanii Dahaatal, Tapahonso states that:

As a Navajo person, I was taught that my efforts and energy should always be directed at maintaining a state of hózhó—a state of balance with all things around me, living and non-breathing. Hózhó means that all things should be right and proper. It means maintaining good health, avoiding excess in all things, being thankful and prayerful, adhering to the old stories and songs, believing in oneself, and recognizing one's responsibility towards all aspects of the world we live in (Tapahonso, 1993, p. 40).

To achieve this state of hózhó, or balance, she concludes her preface to Sáanii Dahaatal by stating that:

for many people in [her] situation, residing away from [her] homeland, writing is the means for returning, rejuvenation, and for restoring [their] spirits to the state of "hózhó," or beauty, which is the basis of Navajo philosophy. It is a small part of the "real thing," and it is utilitarian, but as Navajo culture changes, [they] adapt accordingly (Tapahonso, 1993, xii).

The structure of the poem reflects the balance of hózhó. The poet uses repeated words and recurring ideas along with a cyclical movement of the four numbered sections to create a multilayered structure. The commitment to balance is further evident in the "embracing effect of the final, unnumbered section, which moves into the symbolic center of the Navajo world, implicitly returning to the poem's beginning with mention of Gobernador Knob and Huerfano Mountain—locations associated with the origin and early life of Changing Woman, the most beloved of Navajo deities" (Fast, 2007, pp. 191–192), that unites all four mountains into a promise of prosperity. The figure of Changing Woman embodies the Navajo ideals of balance and home, for she is responsible for the changing seasons, and she is the creator of corn, animals, and human beings. The poem presents Tapahonso's definition of home as a lived and practiced relationship rather than a fixed location.

6. Intergenerational Memory and Cultural Survival

This Navajo concept, embodied in the figure of Changing Woman, finds a compelling parallel in Nye's representation of the grandmother figure. In spite of the "uprootings and dislocations experienced by those within the diaspora, though, diasporic space has also emerged as a site of creative energy from which many authors […] have sought both to affirm structures of belonging and to engender new, imaginative forms of community" (Ball, 2012, p. 131). Exile and diasporic experiences are integral to the formation of Palestinian identity. Nye represents the transnational and U.S. landscapes of belonging by portraying familial relationships. Her poetry "displays a deep commitment to the connective and healing powers of creative expressions and to its social potentials to educate, inspire, and forge dialogue within and across many different kinds of community" (Ball, 2012, p. 146). She traces her father's traumatic experiences to reconsider the meaning of home across generations.

Nye connects her life to the lives of her father and grandmother. In "The Words Under the Words," Nye foregrounds the Palestinian grandmother as a figure of collective memory and cultural continuity. In the first stanza, Nye describes her grandmother's hands touching grapes in a village setting. These same hands cover the speaker's head "like cool prayers," transforming familial care into a source of healing:

My grandmother's hands recognize grapes,

the damp shine of a goat's new skin.

When I was sick they followed me,

I woke from the long fever to find them

covering my head like cool prayers (Nye, 1995).

These hands, shaped by agricultural labor and intimate engagement with the land, become sources of healing and continuity. In the third stanza, Nye evokes absence and the family's inability to sustain direct communication across geographic distance:

She knows the spaces we travel through,

the messages we cannot send—our voices are short

and would get lost on the journey (Nye, 1995).

The shift in pronouns suggests that both the speaker and her grandmother share a profound sense of displacement and emotional separation. The poem ends with the grandmother's mode of communication: farming. The speaker connects the two spaces through nature, using the metaphor of planting Palestinian seeds in another space where they can take root while retaining their connection to their origin:

My grandmother's eyes say Allah is everywhere, even in death.

When she talks of the orchard and the new olive press,

when she tells the stories of Joha and his foolish wisdoms,

He is her first thought, what she really thinks of is His name (Nye, 1995).

Nye also mentions "orchard" and "new olive press." She specifically uses the olive tree as a symbol of Palestinian rootedness in the land and culture. She also incorporates Arabic folktales through her grandmother's stories of Joha. Together, the stories of Joha and the olive tree construct a distinctly Palestinian sense of rooted belonging.

Most Arab American literary texts published since the 1990s represent the dispossession that resulted in the displacement of millions of Arabs, leaving their homes behind. Such representations shape connections to Arab homelands. These attachments became essential in developing "heterogeneous enactments of Arab American identities" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 20). The nature of such attachment is interrogative rather than assimilative, as these texts approach the question of U.S. identity through critical inquiry. The contemporary Arab American nostalgic remembrance in literature is "often undercut by a stark political knowledge of neoimperialist and settler-colonialist agendas and the ensuing traumas of war and dispossession they incur" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 20).

Poetic representations of second- and third-generation Arab Americans, most of whom have never been to the Arab world, reimagine and revise their understandings of their homelands and the connections to them inherited from their parents. Moving further away from the older immigrant generation's nostalgia, "these younger generations of Arab Americans destabilize such nostalgia by moving depictions of original homelands beyond a celebratory focus on ethnic and cultural traditions to incorporate accounts of the harsh realities of war, dispossession, and exile" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 29). Such writers participate in the demythologization of their homelands. This antinostalgic mapping of homelands produces frameworks of knowledge to imagine a different form of belonging. This approach brings the political and cultural landscapes of original homelands into the space of the United States. The geographical, "spatial, material , and temporal positionalities of Arab American identities within the U.S. [are] mediated by an older immigrant generation" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 29). The United States becomes the site from which the Arab homeland is continually reimagined.

7. Political Trauma, Displacement, and Diasporic Identity

In the absence of the direct experience of homeland, the memory of immigrant parents and their storytelling becomes the site where younger generations can connect with their homelands. Such productions of memory occur through material fragments such as food, plants, folktales, music, and photographs. In "Blood," Nye situates the construction of homeland within the contexts of political violence and media representation to further explore diasporic identity. Unlike "My Father and the Fig Tree," where a reconciliation between past and present is possible through memory, "Blood" shows how unstable such reconciliation is. The poem bears witness to the limits of transnational belonging when the homeland is entangled in ongoing conflicts. It emphasizes the persistence of geopolitical realities rather than symbolic resolution, which complicates the idea of imaginative return:

"A true Arab knows how to catch a fly in his hands,"

my father would say. And he'd prove it,

cupping the buzzer instantly

while the host with the swatter stared (Nye, 1995).

The juxtaposition between the father's earlier stories of the "true Arab" and the speaker's encounter with images of war creates a conflict within the inherited narratives of identity. The father's story in which "a true Arab knows how to catch a fly in his hands" represents a cultural memory of everyday life and historical anecdotes. However, this affirmative image of the "true Arab" is disrupted by headline news dominated by violence and bloodshed. Blood here can be interpreted as both familial inheritance and the effects of political trauma and war. The images collapse the distance between personal and collective suffering:

Today the headlines clot in my blood.

A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.

Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root

is too big for us (Nye, 1995).

Death overshadows the father's memories of the homeland. The presence of the homeless fig tree among the ongoing atrocities is a reminder that the symbolic tree, although it evokes the Palestinian fig tree, does not ensure a complete re-rooting of Arab identity in U.S. space. The poem asserts that "such security remains impossible and even undesirable as long as Arab homelands are embroiled in wars, conflicts, and military occupation" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, p. 67). Consequently, it becomes crucial to bring these geopolitical histories into everyday life in the United States to stress their relevance to both spaces. With the father's inability to articulate his feelings of dismay, it is the second generation's responsibility to challenge the present through selecting memories of the homeland "that the younger generations have witnessed their parents and grandparents enact within the insular space of the immigrant home or ethnic enclave" (Fadda-Conrey, 2014, pp. 61–62). Faced with this dilemma, the speaker turns once again to nature to find refuge. However, nature here becomes a space for questioning, as the speaker "plead[s] with the air" and asks, "who calls anyone civilized?" Nature does not resolve the tension between homeland and diaspora; instead, it exposes the contradictions that define diasporic existence.

> I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,
>
> to plead with the air:
>
> Who calls anyone civilized?
>
> Where can the crying heart graze?
>
> What does a true Arab do now? (Nye, 1995)

Nye extends Ashcroft's notion of the transnational by indicating not only its possibilities but also its limitations. In "My Father and the Fig Tree," she shows how elements of nature can mediate belonging across spaces. In "Blood," however, she indicates that such mediation cannot be complete in the context of ongoing historical rupture. The poem suggests that the issue of diasporic identity remains unresolved because it is continually negotiated between inherited memory and present experience.

The perception of home among Arab Americans, especially younger generations, depends on how families and communities interpret the homeland which creates generational gaps. Hayan Charara (2008) explains why Arab American poetry reflects these gaps; they are

relevant to a growing number of Arab Americans with the absence of a "personal" history of the Middle East. It simply does not exist for many of them, especially for those whose families were among the first waves of Arabs to immigrate to the United States. Such a personal history tends to belong more to a father or mother, or to grandparents, or to even more distant relatives. But the connection remains strong; it is kept strong (p. xxv).

Turning to the Navajo context, the Long Walk is one of the most devastating events in Navajo history, preserved through collective memory and storytelling. In 1864, Kit Carson, long celebrated in dominant American historical narratives, ordered his troops to kill the Diné's horses and sheep and destroy their gardens of squash, beans, and corn. People were forced to walk more than 300 miles from Arizona and New Mexico to Bosque Redondo. The Navajos called this reservation "Hwéél̨di." However, "the brackish river water caused severe intestinal problems, and diseases were rampant. With little good water, the gardens that were planted at Hwéél̨di failed" (Adamson, 2014, p. 52). The Diné suffered at this campsite for four years before the U.S. allowed them to return to their homelands. The Long Walk occupies a central place in Tapahonso's poetic imagination.

In "1864," Tapahonso portrays a mother traveling with her daughters, using the journey as a narrative framework through which historical memory is transmitted across generations. During the journey, the mother recounts how her great-grandmother and her family endured starvation immediately before the Long Walk. After being assured by the soldiers that they would be safe, the grandmother and her family moved to Hwéél̨di, where they endured starvation and suffered from diseases until they were finally permitted to return home and began "re-planting their cornfields and rebuilding their flocks of sheep" (Adamson, 2014, p. 53). Tapahonso uses this story to recount both the horrors of the Long Walk and the resilience of the Diné.

The speaker remembers the Long Walk during a car journey. Throughout the journey, the mother retells Navajo stories of struggle and survival and passes these stories on to the next generation through her daughters. She speaks of a Navajo electrician who left his home and his job because "the place contained the pain and cries of his relatives" (Tapahonso, 1993). The speaker repeats the words of her aunt and great-grandmother, preserving the history of Carson's campaign and the horrors of the journey: "We must not ever forget their screams and the last we saw of them - hands, a leg, or strands of hair floating" (Tapahonso, 1993). The poem's multiple voices of remembrance embody a form of communal resistance in which retelling the past becomes an act of cultural continuity and survival. In addition to memorializing the experience, the speaker tells her daughter that they continue to survive and resist by adapting to new historical realities without relinquishing their cultural identity:

> There were many who died on the way to Hwéél̨di. All the way
> we told each other, "We will be strong, as long as we are together."
> I think that was what kept us alive. We believed in ourselves
> and the old stories that the holy people had given us (Tapahonso, 1993).

Tapahonso presents the natural world as an essential part of the Navajo culture; it preserves cultural memory and sustains the enduring relationship between the land and its people. She also illustrates how Navajo traditions are transmitted from one generation to the next.

In another poem, "They Are Silent and Quick," Tapahonso further emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge.

The poem opens with a mother and her daughter quietly observing fireflies at dusk. The mother subsequently gives voice to an overwhelming sense of emotional pain and heaviness:

"What is it?" she asks.

"What's wrong?"

There are no English words to describe this feeling.

"T' áá'iighis ííbiniihaa shil hóyéé," I say

Because of it, I am overshadowed by aching.

It is a heaviness that surrounds me completely.

"Áko ayóóshi"navl" hóyéé." We are silent (Tapahonso, 1993).

Healing through communion with the natural world gradually restores her emotional equilibrium:

And now, as I watch these tiny bodies of light,

the aching inside lessens as I see how

the magic of these lights precedes the gray dawn (Tapahonso, 1993).

Nature functions as the foundation upon which Navajo identity and homeland are imaginatively reconstructed. Through familial bonds, the speaker passes on knowledge of nature and its healing power. This inherited knowledge reactivates communal memory and renews the speaker's relationship with the land. Within Indigenous relationships to land, oral storytelling remains essential for preserving culture and connecting communities to their shared knowledge. In Blue Horses Rush In , Tapahonso argues that:

many of the [stories] were originally told in Dine, taking no longer than ten minutes in the telling. Yet in recreating them, it is necessary to describe the land, the sky, the light, and the other details of time and place. In this way, [she attempts] to create and convey the setting for the oral text. In writing, then, [she revisits] the place or places concerned and tries to bring the reader to them, thereby enabling [herself] and other Navajos to sojourn mentally and emotionally to [their] home, Dinetah (Tapahonso, 1997, p. xiv).

Most of these narratives revolve around the community's enduring relationship with its natural environment.

8. Place-Making and Domestic Spaces

Drawing on the linguistic anthropologist Keith Basso, Bryson conceptualizes poets as place-makers. In Wisdom Sits in Places, Basso (1996) argues that place-makers construct imaginative worlds through storytelling. These poets "fashion possible worlds, give them expressive shape, and present them for contemplation as images of the past that can deepen and enlarge awareness of the present" (Basso, 1996, p. 32). The stories created by these poetic place-makers remain firmly rooted in the surrounding landscape. Basso claims that:

for Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth—in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields—which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the ways they think. Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person (Basso, 1996, p. 34).

In "Counter Narratives: Cooking up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's 'Crescent,'" Mercer and Strom (2007) comment on Nye's use of domestic settings, arguing that "Nye's poetry hinges on the feminist notion that the personal is political. Her poems are often set in kitchens, gardens, grocery stores, and other domestic spaces traditionally associated with women and women's work" (p. 34). By foregrounding the personal, Nye expands it into the collective and political. Her grandmother's garden comes to symbolize Palestinian gardens more broadly. Nye demonstrates an ability to connect geographically and culturally distinct spaces through her choice of place and setting. Charara (2008) also notes that "the sense of place in Naomi Shihab Nye's poems is undoubtedly international in scope; she reflects this in her work not only as a poet but also as an editor, a children's book author, and a fiction writer, boundaries crossing each other and at times disappearing altogether" (p. xxiii).

Nye's poem "Half and Half" introduces two sharply contrasted characters. The first character expresses exclusion and separation from others who have different religious identities. He begins by asserting that religious identity is stable and cannot be "half-and-half." Nye places the opening line in dialogue with the title to reinforce the speaker's belief that

"you can't be half and half";

You can't be, says a Palestinian Christian
on the first feast day after Ramadan.
So, half-and-half and half-and-half.
He sells glass. He knows about broken bits,
chips. If you love Jesus you can't love
anyone else. Says he (Nye, 1998).

This is the image he has painted for himself. The speaker is identified as a "Palestinian Christian"; however, in the second line, we learn

that he lives in a Muslim frame of reference. The "half-and-half" situation the man refers to is indicative of the state of pluralism surrounding him, where Christians and Muslims live together, despite his verbal denial of that possibility. The poem relates "this character's insistence on having one discrete religious identity not with wholeness, but with 'broken bits' of glass, which are hard and sharp and, one can go on to infer, may even be harmful" (Bujupaj, 2015, p. 14). By contrast, the second figure is a woman who

> opens a window—here and here and here—
> placing a vase of blue flowers
> on an orange cloth. I follow her.
> She is making a soup from what she had left
> in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean.
> She is leaving nothing out (Nye, 1998).

In these lines, Nye employs the everyday domestic activities of a woman to construct a sense of wholeness and inclusion. Through the simple act of opening the window, the woman creates her own imaginative space from which to view the world. She opens a window "here and here and here"; this repetition multiplies the sense of "here," expanding the domestic space into an imaginative one. Unlike the man's abstraction, the vivid colors of the flowers invite the reader to visualize the act of placing them in the vase. Samina Najmi argues that the aesthetically small details used by Nye create a feminine space in a "politically defiant posture against traditionally masculine turfs of war and international politics" (Najmi, 2010, p. 158). From an ecocritical perspective, each character negotiates a different relationship with place. Whereas the woman cultivates attachment to place, the male speaker isolates himself from it. Her preparation of the soup becomes a metaphor for inclusion, hospitality, and cultural openness.

9. Habitation, Cultural Adaptation, and Transnational Ecocriticism

Across their place-based and family-oriented poetry, Nye and Tapahonso transform spaces through ecological and cultural appropriation. Nye demonstrates how Arab American symbols, including the fig tree, olives, grapes, and other elements of the natural world, cross geographical boundaries and participate in the appropriation of American culture. The Navajo people, however, incorporate selected elements of American culture into their own cultural landscape without relinquishing their Indigenous identity. Bill Ashcroft (2001) conceptualizes habitation as a strategy that "describes a way of being in place, a way of being which itself defines and transforms place" (p. 157). Whether this place is shaped by the pressures of imperialism and its discourse or global culture, "the local subject has a capacity to incorporate such influences into a sense of place, to appropriate a vast array of resources into the business of establishing and confirming local identity" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 158). Because of the colonial experience, the subject transforms empty space into a socially inhabited place. Ashcroft claims that the term "place" is "polyvalent, for clearly, it can, and does, refer to a place in various physical and imaginative environments" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 158).

Ashcroft (2001), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, argues that habitus conceives of place as a practice rather than a mere geographical location. Habitus is formed through the individual's everyday practices, which are linked to cultural values acquired through the process of self-formation. Ashcroft (2001) continues to describe habitus as "not only a practice but a relational practice" (p. 160). This relational practice entails "the practical ways in which an individual may make choices that utilize some of the cultural capital of a dominant power or ideology: a practical mediation of the pressure of ideology with the strategies of self-fashioning" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 160). Relational practice means that the subject actively appropriates imperial discourse rather than passively accepting it as a colonial subject. Transforming a place requires a connection between discourse and material, which Ashcroft describes as habitation as representation: "Our ways of being in a place are so intimately connected to our ways of representing it that habitation may be seen to be a way of representing. This implies a habitation which transcends seeing, constituting place as a network of actions, practices, and relationships" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 161).

During their imprisonment at Hwéẹ̀di, the Diné inhabited the imposed space and transformed elements of the colonizer's food culture into resources for survival. The process of incorporating unfamiliar elements into Navajo cultural life is further explored in Tapahonso's poem "Hills Brothers Coffee." In the poem, Tapahonso recalls a visit from her uncle, during which she offers him a cup of coffee. The scene evokes a history of deprivation because "coffee was first introduced to the Diné during their imprisonment at Hwéélḍi" (Adamson, 2014, p. 54). After the crops failed to thrive, "the U.S. government supplied the people with coffee, white flour, canned tomatoes, and peaches" (Adamson, 2014, p. 54). Over time, these imposed food items were adapted and incorporated into Diné culinary traditions:

> I pour him more coffee
> and he spoons in sugar and cream
> until it looks almost like a chocolate shake.
> Then he sees the coffee can.
>
> Oh, that's that coffee with the man in a dress,
> like a church man.
> Ah-h, that's the one that does it for me.
> Very good coffee (Tapahonso, 1982).

In Bringing the Biosphere Home, Mitchell Thomashow (2003) observes that globalization has produced extensive patterns of migration and displacement. This displacement of Indigenous peoples encourages writers and intellectuals to reconsider traditional concepts of place

within broader frameworks of migration, cultural continuity, and ecological attachment (p. 182). Tapahonso's poetry illustrates "how Navajo women writers weave stories of ancient migrations in search of shelter, food, and trade into stories of the historical experiences of people under colonization" (Adamson, 2014, p. 50). Tapahonso mourns the loss of seeds and gardens while depicting the experiences of contemporary Din é people living far from their traditional homelands. At the same time, she sustains a sense of hope by recounting the Diné people's capacity to adapt to imposed colonial elements for survival.

Collective memories of migration, food traditions, and nature help "place-based communities retain their cultural and geographical knowledge even when, by necessity or choice, they live far from their homes" (Adamson, 2014, p. 51). Derived from a Greek term meaning "to sow, scatter," diaspora is conceptually linked to the movement of people, animals, and plants. The Navajos believe that they "emerged from the earth into a beautiful, deep red rock canyon, called 'Tseyi' or as the European Americans call it, 'Canyon de Chelly'" (Adamson, 2014, p. 51). Thomashow (2003) argues that, under the conditions of cultural and ecological diaspora, communities may learn from forms of "place-based transience" that cultivate care for local environments even while people live away from ancestral homelands (p. 174). In the introductory essay to her poetry collection, S ánii Dahataal, Tapahonso recounts a 1,300-mile drive with her daughters from Kansas to the Navajo Nation. When she arrived home, she observed the San Juan River near her parents' house. Observing the river heightens her awareness of the relationship between landscapes; she compares it with the Kaw River near her house in Kansas. This awareness of interconnected landscapes and attachment to home is "highlighted by her own place-based knowledge of the migrations and history of the Diné" (Adamson, 2014, p. 55).

Tapahonso's work foregrounds the dynamic relationships among peoples, species, and environmental conditions within local places, while also connecting those places to global political, economic, and ecological forces. Tapahonso moves fluidly among multiple worlds, "investigating deep time and traversing diverse landscapes that offer [an] understanding [of] global social and environmental change" (Adamson, 2014, p. 56). As a Native North American poet, Tapahonso uses poetry to reimagine "place-attachment in the global age by illustrating how contemporary Indigenous people, both those who still live in traditional places and those who are in diaspora, are working to build the ancient future" (Adamson, 2014, p. 66).

For subjects whose identities have been destabilized by displacement or colonialism, place signifies more than a physical location. When the imagination of home is understood as a form of habitation, place extends from intimate and familial relationships to wider global networks of cultural influence: "the family group amongst whom you belong; that group which provides the first and most powerful context for identity; the people with whom you sit down every day to eat; the daily habits of existence—to the most attenuated: those myriad global effects on living which you may or may not appropriate in particular ways" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 159). Imagination enables subjects to envision alternative worlds and, in doing so, sustains the possibility of material and cultural transformation.

Ecocriticism examines how literary texts represent relationships between human communities and the natural world. Earlier ecocritical scholarship often emphasized rootedness within a particular place. More recent scholarship, however, has expanded this concept from regional attachment to transnational forms of ecological belonging. Migration and displacement play a formative role in shaping human relationships with the physical environment. In their poetry, nature does not represent an escape from cultural politics; rather, it adds an ecological dimension to experiences already shaped by political and cultural conflict. Both poets bridge generations by depicting ordinary ecological images across cultures, thereby linking personal memory to physical environments that offer possibilities for healing, cultural continuity, and resistance.

10. Conclusion

The poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye and Luci Tapahonso demonstrates that the construction of home within diasporic and Indigenous contexts extends beyond geographical boundaries. It offers a vision of "doubled places: the diasporic place in the present time of the speaker or protagonist, and that other place which throws its shadow on the present, coming from memories of displacement and experiences of immigration" (Bujupaj, 2015, p. 2). Rather than merely representing the homeland, both poets actively reimagine and reconstruct it through ecological relationships. These natural elements reconstruct imaginative homes in which past and present, homeland and diaspora, remain in productive dialogue.

According to Bill Ashcroft's concept of the transnational, these reconfigured poetic landscapes become not only a new rooted habitat for the displaced but also a site of negotiation where colonized subjects reorder and rearticulate their relationships to land and identity. Through ecological relationships, identities are continually reconstructed to challenge and resist the colonial fixity of national boundaries.

The poetry of Nye and Tapahonso constructs imaginative homelands through a process of continuous change, so home is continually reimagined and renegotiated through acts of remembrance, territorial transcendence, and engagement with the natural environment. This interplay between postcolonialism and ecocriticism shows how poetry offers timely alternative ways of understanding the concepts of place, identity, and belonging in a transnational home. Such imaginative homes challenge and resist the dominant narrative of displacement and affirm the active agency of marginalized communities and their capacity to transform spaces of rupture into sites of continuity and resistance.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Competing interests

Sample: The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Grammarly and LanguageTool (LT) were used during the final revision stage of the manuscript to assist with proofreading and improving clarity and readability. These tools were used solely for language editing purposes and did not contribute to the development of the research ideas, theoretical framework, or literary analysis, which are the author's own. The author reviewed and retained responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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