Luci Tapahonso and Laura Tohe:
Ecopoetics of Navajo Poetry Amidst Climate Change

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Abstract

This article examines two Navajo Nation (Native American) female poets' works in the context of environmental studies, ecopoetics and climate change. Luci Tapahonso and Laura Tohe remain critically neglected female poet laureates of the Navajo Nation for a variety of potential reasons mentioned herein. By considering ecopoetics and concerns with climate change from the early 1980s onwards, this article examines how Tohe and Tapahonso's poetry from the same era reflects and engages with concurrent formal and environmental literary theories extending over thirty years. The bilingual and performative nature of the poetry is a formal testament to the difficult existence eked out by indigenous American dwellers of the Navajo Nation. Themes unveiled within poetry include social injustice, poverty, racism, extractivist enterprises on Navajo soil and environmental and spiritual pollution. Both poets, it is argued, deliberately situate their works in discourses of climate change, erosion, and environmental harm. How their poetry expands the field of ecopoetics and acts as an intervention against social and environmental injustices facing Navajo people is expounded.

Keywords: ecopoetics, environmental justice, poetry, marginalised community groups, climate change

The indigenous dwellers of America uphold a heritage of oral history innately connected to the environment from which it germinates and emanates. Many of the Diné, Hopi, Ute, Zuni and other tribespeople inhabit the Navajo Nation, an area designated between Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah after the attempted ethnic cleansing of these people following the Long Walk period from 1864-1868. During this period thousands of Native Americans were forced into exile from their homes. Environmentally displaced, Native American tribes are also vulnerable to both climatic and non-climatic stressors because of their reliance on natural resources for spiritual and socio-cultural practices (Jostad et al., 1996). Among this group, a third of the residents have no running water nor

electricity despite a coal fired power station operating on site until 2019. The Navajo Generating Station, along with the Kayenta Mine, employed approximately 700 workers, reaping $30 million to $50 million in revenue for the Navajo Nation (Becenti, 2022). Their closures negatively impacted the economics of the area, indirectly resulting in social challenges such as increased drug problems. The operation of the mine (1973-2019) and generating station (1976-2019) saw the extraction of precious materials from the earth while residents suffered from the diversion of scarce water supplies and air pollution. The Colorado Plateau elevation makes for an arid desert environment where literary and poetic output from the Navajo Nation is nonetheless fertile. In 2005, the coal-fired polluting Mojave Generating Station and mine situated on Diné and Navajo land was shut down. The Mojave Generating Station was a large employer and owned by Navajo and Hopi tribes and had had a chequered past including pipeline failure which killed six workers in 1989 and a series of CAA lawsuits concerning pollution brought against the plant by environmental groups in 1988. There are sacred and historic links to place, displacement, and environmental change throughout living Native American history and reactions to this can be read in creative literary output.

The same year as the Mojave Generating Station's closure, Diné poet Laura Tohe published a reminder of spiritual, ancestral, and environmental homemaking in a poetry collection entitled *TSÉYI/ Deep in the Rock, Reflections on Canyon de Chelly* (2005) featuring photography by Stephen E. Strom. Tséyi is the Diné name for the Canyon de Chelly. This collection amplifies a home-directed-bond to the Canyon de Chelly, a national monument to the east of both the Navajo Nation and the decommissioned Mojave Generating Station. Within the Four Corners area, the Navajo homeland is bound by four sacred mountains which are known locally as Sisnaajiní, Tsoo dzi, Dook o' oosliid and Dibé. Canyon de Chelly, resembling an ancient fort in the landscape, is situated in the heart of it. Calling to a harmonious philosophy of life balance (known as hózhó), Tohe (2005) introduces this bilingual poetry collection as an expression of the "worldview and our relationship to the earth" (p. *xiv*) and it is complemented by Strom's artistic stills of the landscape. The process of returning home is artistically and environmentally emphasized in the contents of this collection in 2005 at a time when images of pollution and news of knock-on effects of the station's closure would have been felt and disseminated in local media.

This is but one of many ecopoetic iterative literary responses to the Navajo environment and its degradation originating from contemporary female writers of the Navajo Nation. Such degradation and environmental concerns extend beyond the riverbanks of the San Juan and Little Colorado rivers which flow through this designated area into the fields of metaphysics, ancestral belief systems and very real social problems for the inhabitants. Since the 1980s (a turning point in the field of ecopoetics which will be referred to later) the output of two indigenous

American female poets Luci Tapahonso and Laura Tohe can enlighten ecocritical, indigenous cultural and feminist schools. Both Tapahonso and Tohe are scholars, active literary critics, linguists, and academics. Tapahonso became the inaugural poet laureate of the Navajo Nation in 2013 and was succeeded by Tohe in 2015. They publish creative works, non-fiction, and scholarly work prolifically and hold laureate prestige and yet scant scholarship scrutinises their writings in general and their ecopoetic impetus in particular. Their intricate work is without sustained critical response. Robin Riley Fast (2007) describes Tohe's poetry as being grounded in an axis of Navajo histories between the "necessary memory of exile (and recognition of present and possibly future sorrows), and the promise of sustaining relationality" with grief (p. 186). According to Adamson (2014) Tohe and Tapahonso's work "weaves stories of ancient migrations […] into […] historical experiences of people under colonization" (p. 51). Fellow Navajo poet Esther Belin (2010), in a review of Tapahonso's collection *A Radiant Curve* (2009) suggests that scholarly attention is contingent upon an audience existing to receive her work in the American literature canon. Further, the sense of audience and participation in Navajo language writing is public[1] and may be complicated when transmitted and translated into English and read solitarily. Examining multispecies interactions in the Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer's one Native American "grammar of animacy", Lynne Keller (2017) underlines the potential reputation of experimental poetics for transforming the relations that English speakers perceive and enact with the earth others (p. 173). The oral diffusion of Navajo poetry may be lost when "her [Tapahonso's] writing is meant to be heard" but Fast notes it is nevertheless globally "vital as a non-invasive academic text" (Keller, 2017, pp. 126-127). Introducing ethics into this plurality, critics have seen it as unfair to impose excessive unity on the assemblage of Tapahonso's voices (Roemer, 1993, p. 430). Her own work, Tohe states, "can't necessarily be categorised as Native American literature […] I prefer Navajo or Diné literature" (Tohe as cited in Belin et al., 2021, p. 119). Language is also an identifying factor with most Navajo poetry primarily written in English Language because Navajo literacy is still quite limited. The linguistic anthropologist Anthony K. Webster is one of few critics to have continually contributed to discussions of both Luci Tapahonso and Laura Tohe's work. Webster (2010) commends Tohe for her bilingual creative output and situates it in multiple discourses such as those surrounding reservation boarding schools (*No Parole Today*, 1999) and within the larger context of contemporary Navajo poetry (p. 45). Further, separating the role of the individual from the individual articulation of life stories in Navajo performance poetry, Webster reads Tohe's poem "Cat or Stomp" as an "ethnographic" account (Webster, 2008, p. 63). Elsewhere, Webster

[1] For instance, song has been incorporated into Luci Tapahonso's poetry readings and the Diné haatali figure is a traditional healing singer in poetry.

looks at Tapahonso's "Old Salt Woman" poem as a case study of "ethnolinguistic contours" embedded in and constitutive of a conception of the Navajo nation (Webster, 2015, p. 10). Tapahonso and Tohe write both bilingually or a translation into English from their native tribal tongues and since this is performative in nature, syntactically and rhythmically it makes for distinct scansion in English language. Given the complexities of the parameters of language, audience, poetry, history, place, and identity then within which Tapahonso and Tohe's work operates it is to some extent understandable that few book length studies exist examining their work.

This article will aim to pay heed to this neglect by examining a selection of Tohe and Tapahonso's poetry and non-fiction as it proceeds respectfully along indigenous and ancestral lines and simultaneously feminises and deromanticises the Najavo Nation. It will engage with the theoretical school of ecopoetics to argue that the writing itself is an active enactment of (as opposed to an *object* of) ecopoetics. The writing examined addresses environmental topics directly and indirectly. The most pertinent of which is climate change, an evolving global and well publicised concern since the 1980s. The most significant markers of climate change in recent planetary history include the 1985 Ozone hole discovery and ice core extractions revealing CO2 and increasing world temperatures; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s declared new era of climate change (1988); the geological Anthropocene (c. 2012) to most recent scientific predictions of world temperatures rising to reach 1.5C of warming by 2040. Though this list of events is by no means exhaustive, there is a temporal scale of interventions in ecopoetical thought and the pragmatics of climate change as it refers to indigenous Americans integrated within the works of Tapahonso and Tohe emerging from the 1980s to 2019. The data for this article will come primarily from poetry by Tohe and Tapahonso. Literary scrutiny will be supplemented by environmental research and historical context about the legacy of climate change within the Navajo Nation as it responds to the creative work. The poems which form the focus of this article are:

1. Luci Tapahonso's poems "Pay Up or Else", "Shaming vs. Stars" and "Independence" from her second collection *Seasonal Woman* (1982) and the sestina "The Holy Twins" from her sixth collection *A Radiant Curve* (2008).
2. Laura Tohe's poem "Japanese Garden" (2019) originally published in Poem-a-Day by the Academy of American Poets.

This article will proceed by a thematic analysis within the overarching theoretical framework of ecopoetics. This framework will be elaborated upon primarily. The first theme to be discussed is that of mythic and ancestral beliefs in more-than human entities in Tohe and Tapahonso's poetry. These entities persist

in Navajo environments (social, natural, psychological, and metaphysical) as it is negatively impacted by the effects of climate change in the nascent Anthropocene (2008-2019). Secondly, three human-oriented poems from 1982 (the CFCs ban era) by Luci Tapahonso ("Pay Up or Else", "Shaming vs. Stars" and "Independence") can be read through the lens of ecopoetics as interrogations of the human and environmental impacts industrial farming, the oil industry and littering.

Why Ecopoetics?

Ecocriticism was initially defined as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert, 1978, p. 71) and a wide term credited to William H. Rueckert's earliest and now seminal essay. By extension, the school of ecopoetics was (and to some extent still is) less of an application of concepts to poetic works and more of a novel approach to seeing the reflexive relationship between nature and poetic communication and its other related and entangled concerns, including culture, language, the individual and other species. With the publication of Rueckert's piece in the late 1970s and the subsequent output from both Navajo nation poets coalescing with this and the issue of climate change itself, the 1980s marks a suitable starting point in this article for theoretical and poetic innovation and interrogation.

Ecopoetics, by contrast, is not applied per se, but a fluid and reciprocal theoretical movement focussed on the arrangement and creation of literary works within the multispecies of a sustainable environment. Kate Rigby (2016) described it as *"*nothing less than the art of living genuinely sustainably" (p. 81). The editors of a recent collection on the topic categorise it as a broad framework which "point[s] to compositional processes […]is not limited to thematic process, or even verse" and wherein "one notable trend is toward transnational and even trans indigenous studies" (Fiedorczuk et al., 2023, pp. 1-4) It is the act of decentring beings from their ecosystems and by dint, the literary work that is produced is also shifted from human-produced focus, locus or narrative standpoint to account for more-than-human agencies of telling. This reorients the focus upon the macro concerns of nature and its species as creators and articulators of meaning. This disrupts the affective Cartesian body/mind correlative as the ecocritical school (Deyo, 2018, p. 205) has done in the past and instead opts for a reorientation of the hierarchical subject/object dichotomies wherein human agency reports on what is seen and experienced within nature. It is perhaps helpful to consider ecopoetics as working in the inverse direction as romanticism wherein man is centrepiece to artistic creation in (but not limited to) natural surrounds. See for instance artworks such as James Barry's *A Man Washing his Feet at a Fountain* (1767) or Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). William Wordsworth's seminal "Daffodils" (1804) poem may be looked to as an exemplar together with his contemporary John Clare for classic

examples of romanticist interaction with nature. Ecopoetics interrogates this individual-centred-outward direction of poetic inspiration. Indeed, in a recent issue of *Thoughts* Wayne Deakin (2023) links this interestingly to the philology of organicism where he notes "[…] given current environmental, farming and climate concerns, this type of Wordsworthian or 'high romantic' organicism in some sense feels highly anthropocentric, with its positioning of the human subject at the apex of the organic family tree" (pp. 56-57). "Feels" is apt vocabulary since affect is considered out with the Cartesian binary in ecopoetical approaches and the inversion of the organic family tree is also significant. For instance, the San Juan River takes centre stage in the indigenous American cinematic poem *Water Flows Together* (2020). It is the river as protagonist that occupies and dictates the on-screen narrative nonverbally. In the film, Colleen Cooley a Diné female river guide confirms the reciprocity of this relationship. She is only introduced after a series of 30 seconds of extreme long shots and close ups of the river. Eventually, we see a quick medium (waist up) shot of Cooley rowing before the focus is shifted to oars passing through the river as Cooley meditates: "We connect to everything around us; the land, the water, the animals. We see them as our relatives […]as living beings […] they're sacred" (Morse et al., 2020, 1:33). Laura Tohe and Luci Tapahonso are exponents of literary works that also communicate through interaction with natural and supernatural agencies. Their works dialogue with more-than-human elements emphasising how sacred nature is to indigenous heritage people both ancestrally and amidst contemporary climate change. The speakers of their poems include animals such as seeming stray dogs in Tapahonso's "The Holy Twins" (2008) which is in fact modelled on the Navajo creation myth's "Hero Twins" Naayéé'neizghání ("Slayer of Monsters") and Tóbájíshchíní ("Born for Water"). The twins are the sons of the goddess White-Shell Woman and the sun and will be discussed fully later (Navajo Nation Courts, n.d.). In Tohe's "Female Rain" (1983), the elements are gendered and communicate autonomously, and ancestral sculptures are voiced in her piece "Japanese Garden" (2019). It is not necessarily a conscious redressal of what has previously been considered "nature poetry" on the part of the poets nonetheless, it expands the ecocritical school of literary criticism beyond confines of "compositional processes" and indigenous "trends" (Fiedorczuk et al., 2023, pp. 1-4) to a process of reflexivity. This is especially pressing given that there are systemic threats posed to indigenous minority groups' environments amidst global climate change making this ecopoetical shift a welcome change in the climate of literary criticism.

More-than human entities in Navajo environments impacted by climate change: Luci Tapahonso's "The Holy Twins" and Laura Tohe's "Japanese Garden"

"The Holy Twins" is a sestina and within its six-line stanzas, six words ("deep", "inscribed", "died", "rib cage" (as compound, singular and plural nouns), "bruise" (as singular and plural nouns) and "figure" (as a noun and adjective) end lines in alternating orders. The fourth stanza defies the sestina convention changing the final word thus: "[T]he memory is an *invisible* cage" (ln. 24) which is perhaps a statement by Tapahonso on the elusive nature of the poetic form itself. Then, to end the poem there is a tercet of three lines which traditionally employ two of the chosen words to each line. However, the poem's final line does not conform to this convention either ending thus: "[f]rom grief, so now we can describe love and loss as the Holy Twins" (ln. 39). This is significant to mention at the outset since Tapahonso is communicating a subtext of formal and linguistic subversion preventing neat scansion of her work and underscoring a double meaning through the vocabulary choice of the sestina. The narrative of the poem provides an adult's and child's perspective of losing beloved stray dogs to rabies on the Indian reservation. Thematically, it beckons to indigenous creation myth, and environmental factors of climate change. Dubbed the "narrative façade" of the poem by Saddam and Yahya (2015, p. 144), "The Holy Twins" appears initially to be a poignant reflection on how a rabies outbreak results in the tragic deaths of many beloved pets in a Native American settlement. The poem is first told from the perspective of young children, "[O]urs was a play-filled childhood; irrigation ditches ran deep during the summers. We played in the water and dirt, then inscribed ABCs and numbers onto the smooth ground" (ln. 1-2). By the fourth stanza these children are grandparents. The older and wiser speakers in the poem, realizing the restrictions of the "cage" of memory, heal from the painful memories of their animals' deaths concluding that love and loss are the real Holy Twins. Saddam and Yahya (2015, p. 144) rightly note the connection of one generation of Native Americans to another in Tapahonso's piece and its reflection on loss of life and the colonial intrusion upon native language through rote learning their "ABCs." The environmental agencies amidst climate change and indigenous mythologies operating within the sestina also deserve airtime. An ecopoetic reading acknowledges multispecies and the reciprocation of the reservation's environment in the creation of poetry and adds to the poetics-starting point of other scholarship (Rigby, 2016).

In a report about drought impacting Native Americans living in the Colorado River Basin, where this poem is set, Kevin Moran from the US Environmental Defence Fund stated that the area is a "ground zero for water-related impacts of climate change" (Fonseca, 2021). Any future planning for the river and the watersheds will need to accord with what climate scientists predict he argues. This "ground zero" is a both a material and gendered ground. Water

rights had been historically allocated to tribes not based on their population size but for irrigation potential for their capacity to produce agriculture. It may seem worthwhile considering the feminist angle of the lexical choice "ground zero" here too in the feminist environment surrounding the composition of this poem. Tapahonso does not identify as a feminist, and this is out with the scope of the current paper. Nonetheless, it is conceded that Donna Haraway takes up the feminist stance that women have a potentially privileged epistemological position in that they sustain life more than men. She labels the visibility this proffers female activity as "the ground of life" (Haraway, 1990 as cited in Frederici, 2020) something Silvia Frederici (2020) also extends to "revolutionary practice" and prefaces in *Revolution at Point Zero* (p. *xvi*). Rather, here, the "ground zero" referred to is a starting location for ecopoetical examination of enactments of poetry which address climate change and multispecies engagement with the poem as a living object.

According to *Mission 2012: Clean Water* (Bowring & MIT, 2012), the legal history of water rights for Native Americans living on reservations in the west is based on the 1908 Supreme court decision called the Winters Doctrine. It rules that the establishment of reservations automatically implies that the water sources within and on the borders of the land are also reserved from the day the reservation is created, and if Native Americans choose not to use the water, they do not lose the right to it (Winters v. United States, as cited in Bowring & MIT, 2012). Distinct Native American tribes own the rights to use the water passing through their reservations, but these cannot be fully taken advantage of because of a lack of infrastructure. Furthermore, the United States' oldest irrigation system built in 1867 can no longer be effectively maintained for use by those tribes living in the area without adequate investment in their maintenance. Drought has a detrimental impact upon the agricultural and human environment in the Colorado River Basin.

Written in 2008 and remembering their childhoods, the speakers of Tapahonso's poem note that water was once plentiful enough to play in (ln. 1-2). The irrigation ditches mentioned at the beginning of the poem change by stanza three marking an ecopoetic turning point and change in tone and mood. The fertility dries up as the speakers come to an emphatic realisation of what the season brought them, "decades later, I can finally describe how that summer led us into a grief that felt like a bruise" (ln. 10-12). The spatial quantification of irrigation ditches as "deep" (stanza 1) relates to troubles human beings have conceptualizing vast hyperobjects[2] in their immediate human environments. The adjective also describes a transformation of water and emotions as they transition from "panic" (stanza 2) to "loss" (stanza 3), to "childhood loss" (stanza 4), to "hurt" (stanza 5) and eventually to "love" (stanza 6). The environmental impact of

[2] See the genesis of the intricate epistemological ecological work by Timothy Morton (2021) titled *Hyperobjects philosophy and ecology after the end of the world.*

climate change and water rights denial is thus humanised through reported affect in Tapahonso's piece and is situated in discussions about access to water in the Navajo community.

The poem's title is a direct reference to two of the most important characters in Navajo mythology. These are the twin sons of White-Shell Woman, the chief goddess, and the sun. The creation myth describes how both twins as valiant young men upon the creation of the earth, rid it of evil beings (Navajo Nation Courts, n.d.). Luci Tapahonso's poem humanises this myth and advances its understanding to account for the malicious rabies disease (itself a living species) as a generator of emotional change in humans and a reimagining of more-than-human myth is a vital cultural byproduct.

Laura Tohe's poem "Japanese Garden" is also concerned with the overlap of myth with natural environments. The piece embodies ecopoetics in so far as the physical environment of the stone and sand exhibit itself is not an object for scrutiny or analysis for the speaker of the poem in the same manner that ecopoetics does not pedestalise the artistic (read: poetic) output as object for scrutiny. Rather there is an interrelatedness and synergy. Tohe witnesses the Japanese garden exhibit in Portland and the poetry seems automatically written *for* her in Navajo from her English notes later. She remarks:

> [I] was looking at this exhibit because […]it looked like maybe a man in a cloak with animals and water behind him. I could only think maybe it was Noah, you know, who led the animals and who built this arc for the animals. Or Saint Francis of Assisi. I did write some notes down for this poem in English and just put it in my little notebook that I was carrying in my bag, and then when I got home, I started writing it in Navajo. It has a different sense when you write it in Navajo. It seems that the words, the sensibility, the thoughts are from a different world view. (Tohe, 2020)

To clarify, by bearing witness to the exhibit, Tohe's poetry is initially generated in Navajo from notes and then translated into English. Clearly the physical environment is not the exhibit here. It has awakened memories in Tohe about Christian creation stories, the colonisation of indigenous Americans, and Navajo mythologies. Tohe's clan father asked her to share her poetry, and this was a piece she offered him which is perhaps a testament to the historical and cultural significance the piece holds.

The poem comments on perceived movement of the rocks and likens it obliquely to those forced from their homes during the Long Walk of 1864-1868. "They" are "taking their songs […] their maps […]…their languages" (ln. 14-16) and it is asked "who was there to witness their leaving? To sing a song for their journey?" (ln. 10-11).

Another ecopoetic reading of "Japanese Garden" and the Navajo climate could see the sand and stone exhibit likened to Navajo sandstone which formed in the Jurassic period in the Colorado Plateau due to its dry climate. Navajo sandstone was formed 180 million years ago as sands were blown around of one of the planet's most ancient deserts. Before erosion, the substance of sand originally gathered as small rocks and today some Navajo sandstone stands over 2000 feet tall in the form of caves or mountain peaks. Both Sky Mother and Mother Earth are mentioned by Tohe with "footsteps like dinosaur tracks" (ln. 22) pressed between them in this exodus of human and more-than human entities in the poem. This is informed by the geography of areas in the Navajo nation. In Zion national park's canyons and valleys there are dinosaur footsteps which adds significance to Tohe's piece. The national park service remarks that "[a] few remote and inaccessible locations within the Navajo preserve dinosaur trackways, where multiple individual dinosaurs left their footprints" (National Park Service, 2015). The speaker of the poem concludes that when they (the footsteps, Sky Woman and Mother Earth) leave "I will weep/ I will weep" (ln. 25-26) in a poignant nod to the physical erosion of the sandstone and the erosion of mythic belief systems in the feminine creator principle of Gaia across cultures.

Interrogating the human and environmental impacts of littering, industrial farming and extraction: Luci Tapahonso's "Shaming vs. Stars", "Independence" and "Pay Up or Else"

There are limited resources for waste management as there are for water management within native American reservations. Lack of financial support to aid waste disposal and recycling facilitation means that the illegal dumping of litter and industrial waste is a problem. This has been a prevalent issue since the early 1980s which was the advent of ecopoetics and Tapahonso's collection *Seasonal Woman* poetry collection which will now be discussed. Illegal dumping also occurs when extractive industries such as mining and coal fired power stations cease operation and leave without proper clean up protocols being carried out in the area. The Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency now has a criminal enforcement department that investigates violations that pose threat to human health and the environment (Smith, 2021). A uranium mining site which closed in 1968 near Shiprock, New Mexico reportedly is still linked to leached radioactive waste from mill tailings into Many Devils Wash water from decades of operation. This was a former disposal site which used Many Devils Wash to facilitate drainage, but the groundwater and soil has been contaminated. Nonetheless, the site's surface and water and soil waste and debris saw a clean-up project U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Legacy Management (LM) in February 2023 and revegetation is now encouraged (Office of Legacy Management, 2023). There are many such former uranium mines around the New Mexico which are still causing environmental pollution and damage to human health in the area.

Navajo man Patrick Martinez first discovered uranium in New Mexico in the 1950s and received national accolade. The Navajo Nation poet Simon Ortiz (1992) (himself a former mineworker) penned "It was that Indian". This poem is indignant about the national fame of Navajo law officer Patrick Martinez and how he later became pilloried and blamed as "that Indian" responsible for radiation poisoning. The poem points to how Martinez was vilified by national press and even his own people when environmental and human health began to be impacted by uranium mining:

Well, later on,
when some folks began to complain
about chemical poisons flowing into the streams
from the processing mills, car wrecks on highway 53,
lack of housing in Grants,
cave-ins in Section 33,
non-union support,
high cost of living,
and uranium radiation causing cancer,
they - the Chamber of Commerce - pointed out
that it was Martinez
that Navajo Indian from over by Bluewater
who discovered uranium[..] (Ortiz, 1992, ln. 27-39)

Laura Tohe (2004) writes of first hearing Ortiz read the above poem in the 1970s and "a little revolution exploded in her [my] mind" (p. 54). Later in the same article she praises Ortiz' body of work for its consistent response "with the deeply rooted values and beliefs of indigenous peoples toward the earth, […] each other, and continuance as native peoples" (Tohe, 2004, p. 56). Both poets are acutely aware of the manners in which the Navajo environment and its people are faced with material, environmental and social forms of pollution.

Notedly, waste and its disposal are detrimental and ever-present environmental and health concerns for those dwelling in the Navajo Nation. The role that artists and writers play to mediate this concern is fundamental. Native American writers have responded to the subject of trash as a byproduct of how capitalism has negatively impacted reservations, as in Sherman Alexie's short story "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" (2003). There are also reactions which evocate how the noxious materialism of litter can be reversed by contemplating its spiritual and mythological potential for Navajo culture. Far from a trite statement the belief is that transformation is possible. Susan Morrison's study is one of a kind in its examination of the intersections of the literature of waste material, ecopoetics and ethics. She cites Native American writer Gerald Vizenor who meditates on litter.

This writer, she reports:

> "[S]uggests we practice waste meditation, paying attention to waste, not as evil or negative, but as *itself*:
> Martin Bear Charme teaches a seminar on refuse meditation and circumscribes his unusual images and wise transformations in the material world on a refuse mount. Landfill meditation restores the tribal connections between refuse and the refusers.
>
> Martin Bear Charme nostalgically extols the past:
>
> Once upon a time taking out the garbage was an event in our lives, a state of being connected to action. We were part of the rituals connecting us to the earth, from the places where food grew, through the house and our bodies, and then back to the earth. Garbage was real, part of creation, not an objective invasion of can and cartons. Refuse meditation turns the mind back to the earth through the visions of real waste. (Morrison, 2015, pp. 5, 146)

The ecopoetics of littering (the praxis known as material ecopoetics which interrogates waste) although fascinating is beyond the scope of this paper's particular focus on the reflexivity of Tapahonso and Tohe's works as they engage with ecopoetical school and overarching concerns of climate change. That said, many parallels can be made between the significance of observing waste according to Bear Charme and A.R. Ammons' long poem "Garbage" from the identically titled collection (1993). Gyorgyi Voros' reading of Ammons establishes "the significance of the trash heap as a site for nature and culture to fuse." (Nolan, 2017, p. 36)

Luci Tapahonso's poem "Shaming vs. Stars" (1982) adds a human-cultural dimension to the ethics of littering in nature. Modelled around a short conversation between a young girl named Misty and her mother, the poem offers generational perspectives on the ethics of littering and reflections upon littering campaigns. The women are driving when Misty remarks upon some people who should be ashamed of themselves as they "didn't even want to put their trash in the trash can. They just throw it on the ground" (ln. 2-4). Her mother somewhat banally says that because she is a nice girl who uses the trash can, she need not be ashamed of herself, and that Santa will not cross her daughter off of his list of good boys and girls. In fact, next to her name Misty will "always have lots of stars" from Santa (ln. 13). Misty is described as serious and frowning in the first and penultimate stanzas of the poem, her environmental concern undeterred by her mother's response. There is a wistful reflection to close the poem "My little girl with stars by her name on a far away Santa's list" (ln. 17-18).

Amidst waste disposal problems in the reservation, the composition and publication of "Shaming Vs. Stars" also came at a time when one of Keep America Beautiful's most successful and controversial anti-littering public service announcements (PSA) "The Crying Indian" (1970) was airing nationally and in living memory. The announcement featured Iron Eyes Cody (an Italian American actor who played Native American roles) dressed in buckskins with braids, canoeing, encountering smokestacks and litter before showing his profile emitting a single tear. Despite its success, the announcement was criticized for the racial stereotypes it perpetuated and the lack of agency of the character. Tapahonso's poem is arguably a retort to flippant mediated responses to Navajo waste and littering and Navajo culture. Misty's words "I always use the trash can" (ln. 10) read like a soundbite from a PSA. Santa, a prime example of capitalist myth if ever there were one, is held up in Tapahonso's piece as the spirit level against which environmental ethics of "nice" young Native American people can be measured. The mother-speaker in the poem is regularly dismissive of her daughter's concerns and there is no meditation over trash that Martin Bear Charme advances. Reading Tapahonso's wry piece within the framework of ecopoetics amidst climate change here requires an appreciation of the poet's irony and the fact that this piece would have been performed as is Navajo tradition rather than written and read. The conversation between mother and daughter deliberately undermines environmental concerns, diverting the focus to a Santa fantasy and the characters within the poem act as archetypes. The inauguration of ecopoetics in the 1980s (as was mentioned above) saw an active reorientation of the hierarchical subject/object dichotomies where human agency reports on what is seen and experienced within nature. Here, through such archetypes, Tapahonso's piece questions the reliability of human agency to report on the seen and experienced litter problems intergenerationally in the Navajo Nation amidst climate change. Harkening back to Robin Riley Fast's (2007) analysis, there is an increased sense of indigenous people being further put into a position of "exile" (p. 178) from their environmental surrounds for reasons of environmental degradation and an unreliable reporting agency in Tapahonso's poem.

Such irony continues in Tapahonso's "Independence" (1982) from the same collection. Here the speaker remembers receiving their first paycheck of 80 cents at 9 years old for "picking cucumbers in the large fields northwest of Shiprock on the mesas" (ln. 4-5). Situated on the flat hill tops (mesas) this area within the Navajo Nation in New Mexico is now used for agriculture. Weaved around the mesas are streets named Pumpkin Road and Nectarine Lane as a testament to this. The speaker of the poem describes how they cashed in their earnings immediately to purchase ice cream for themselves and their siblings. The terse poem concludes "[I]t sure was good to be independent, I thought, savoring a melting dreamsicle." (ln. 11-12) Dreamsicle is a fruit juice covered ice cream popular in the United

States but here there is a double entendre referring to the erosion of childhood fancy. The perspective of illegal Navajo child labour is seemingly readily forgiven and compensable by ice cream and this coalescences with a simultaneous melting of "dreams." That which is easily quantifiable, namely the age of the child (9 years), distance the child walks home (3 miles) and their paycheck (80 cents) are mentioned while their working hours are omitted. The cucumber pickers are said to have finished their work and be walking home on a hot July afternoon to underline the exploitative nature of their uncalculated and inadequately compensated labour. The materiality of this experience overrides and actively displaces childhood dreams and aspirations. The ironic tone of the poem implicates the poor cucumber pickers in a hostility felt towards the region within which they have been displaced historically.[3] The child labourer remains but a pawn in an environmentalism and slow violence of the poor. Robert Nixon (2011), in his analysis of environmentalism, postcolonialism and American studies terms this the "slow violence that wreaks havoc beyond the bioregion or the nation." (p. 239) Indeed works such as *Disposable People* by Kevin Bales (2012) show a recent concern with environmental justice and slave work. In the Navajo Nation, such environmental factors can be looked upon as injustices caused by a hangover from (colonial or capitalist) exploitation and can also be politicized. To do so however, requires further research detailing the true extent of the damage to ecosystems and human beings and access to official documentation. Transparency is at stake. Research documenting present day the Navajo Nation's environmental plight empirically and using apriori methodological approaches is surprisingly scant. In the case of "Independence", the language of injustice of human rights and ethics of place take center stage using a child labourer as a mouthpiece. The value of human life, issues of racial justice and environmental impacts of the politics of oil are pointed at elsewhere in the poet's work. Tapahonso's (1982) poem "Pay Up or Else" from the same collection expands the discussion of Navajo self-determination and the value of human life by reporting on the shooting of a Native American man named Vincent Watchman who ran an overflow[4] at a petrol station in Farmington, New Mexico by an "anglo gas boy." (ln. 6) The researcher examined newspaper articles from the 1972-1982 era but is not able to confirm whether this crime happened or whether the poet created it. An overlay of officially reported discourses and the speaker's indignance about racism appears in the poem. While officials remarked that shooting customers was not "company policy"; speaking for the Navajo people, the poem concludes "we realized our lives weren't worth a dollar and a 24-year-old Ganado man never used the $3 worth of gas he paid for." (ln. 19-23) Oil and gas have been present on Navajo land for over one hundred

[3] As mentioned earlier, this refers to the aftermath of the Long Walk period from 1864-1868.
[4] Drove away without paying the petrol charge in full.

years creating capital and compromising the natural environment. The reaction to this shooting is thematically aligned with the concerns of the capitalocene and the work of Jason Moore in particular.[5]

In terms of ecopoetics, the focus of this article, "Pay Up or Else" situates the brutalities of capital driven race relations in the Navajo Nation within wider discussions of social injustice, racism and poverty. Here Tapahonso turns to the inhuman (rather than *more-than*-human) discourses of official reporting on environmental and racial crimes. The Native American victim was inhumanely shot, by "poor shots" (ln. 9) and his life's worth is meted out in dollars. Tapahonso writing in 1982 amidst a climate of growing ecopoetical literary currents which would focus on the iterative and articulative abilities of species beyond the human embodiment. In fact, this poem, and others within the *Seasonal Woman* collection by dint of their irony and performative intention "call out" and ventriloquize the discriminatory and cruel discourses that are aired surrounding the people of the Navajo Nation, their culture, environment, and belief systems. As such the poetic form is adopted as a human, more-than-human and at times inhuman mouthpiece.

This article has examined the multifaceted ways in which two poet laureates of the Navajo Nation situate their works in environmental discourses of climate change, erosion, and environmental harm. It also scrutinized how the poetry was engaging with ecopoetics at times concurrent with rising concerns for the environment and climate change upon the discovery of holes in the ozone layer and anti-littering campaigns. The very real social injustices and environmental injustices facing Navajo people historically and recently has been unveiled. Tohe and Tapahonso remain critically neglected poets who deserve appreciation for their bilingual and performative works which voice the otherwise unvoiced plight of an indigenous minority, precarious resources and land.

[5] See Jason W. Moore's articles *The Capitalocene Part I and Part II* (2017-2018).

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