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## Research Article



## “Where are you going?”: Investigating Spatiality from a Translocational Perspective in Forrest Gander’s *Core Samples from the World*

Sudesna Som

Assistant Professor of English (W.B.E.S)

Government General Degree College, Kalna-I, West Bengal

Ph. D Research Scholar, Visva-Bharati University,

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

Email Id: [sudesnasom00@gmail.com](mailto:sudesnasom00@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1077-781X>

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### Abstract

An illustrious poet, editor and translator Forrest Gander probes into the conditions of modern human existence with a remarkable sensitivity towards the contemporary environmental challenges. The finalist for Pulitzer Prize 2012, Gander’s *Core Samples from the World* (2011) recounts his experience of distant, exotic places like China, Mexico, and Bosnia-Herzegovina from the perspective of an ecopoet writing in the Anthropocene. Composed from the objective viewpoint of a traveller the book exploits the Japanese Haibun form to juxtapose poetry, essays and photographs taken by his collaborators— Raymond Meeks, Graciela Iturbide and Lucas

Foglia. Together the detached prose pieces, the disorienting poetry and the evocative photographs shed light on the severity of current ecological crisis and raise critical questions regarding one's ecological self and identity. The present study aims to explore how Gander's singular conception of space simultaneously instigates the readers to open dialogue regarding such pivotal questions and plays a seminal role in the evolution of his ecopoetic vision. This paper further aspires to analyse the ways in which Gander exploits his inclusive spatial engagement as a traveller to portray the world as a shared, connected space permanently altered by the reckless exploitation of nature and natural resources. It also intends to enquire the subsequent deterioration of the bond between human beings and their surroundings which ultimately results in a sense of fragmentation along with a loss of identity. The present study also scrutinizes how Gander's unconventional imagination and delineation of translocal space which is essentially an open-ended, mobile and multilateral concept rather than a static geographical locale influence his engagement with contemporary environmental issues on various levels.

**Keywords:** Ecopoetry, Haibun, Spatiality, Translocal space, Anthropocene, Heterogeneity, Environmental crisis, Fluidity, Inclusiveness, Plurality

## Introduction

In the last few decades human-induced environmental changes and the multifaceted planetary crisis have finally been acknowledged by the academia as a phenomenon that demands profound creative critical engagement. While the burgeoning field of environmental humanities addresses the various aspects of current environmental crises, this particular field can never be defined in linear terms. An inclusive intersection of the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences, environmental studies provide a multidimensional critical perspective and cultural relevance that have inspired creative artists from disparate fields to engage with contemporary environmental issues within and beyond the purview of environmental humanities. Ecopoetry is a particular branch of environmental humanities that though rooted into the age-old tradition of nature poetry markedly deviates from it and promotes an experimental poetic vision. This rapidly evolving field underscores the interdependent nature of human existence and aspires to change the dominant anthropocentric point of view towards the environment. Besides prioritizing environmental questions that are rarely discussed, ecopoetry attempts to re-define accepted notions surrounding nature, culture and the multilateral connection between them. Ecopoetry, that consciously rejects any rigid definition and thrives on fluidity and inclusiveness investigates environmental issues that are wide in range and multifaceted in nature.

## Contextualizing Forrest Gander as a Contemporary Ecopoet:

In the last few decades, the United States of America proved to be the epicentre of what Buell labels as "literary ecodiscourse" (vii) - of which ecopoetry is an inseparable part. Hence, unsurprisingly, the ecologically conscious poetry of contemporary American poets represents the variegated sphere of ecopoetry with a breathtaking ingenuity. In recent times,

the innovative avant-garde poetry of a few contemporary ecopoets from different corners of the world, not only drew the attention of the critics and scholars working in the particular field but also established ecopoetry as a dynamic sphere of modern poetry with immense potential. Forrest Gander is one such ecopoet. As one of the most relevant ecopoets of the present time Gander attempts to address current planetary changes from various social, cultural, political, ethical and ecological points of view. Born in California's Mojave Desert, Gander is a geologist by training and a poet by passion. Apart from *Core Samples from the World* published in the year 2011, Gander's most important poetic works include *Twice Alive* (2021), *Knot* (2022), *Eye Against Eye* (2005), *Torn Awake* (2001), *Be With* (2018) and *Science & Steepleflower* (1998) etc. Besides his poetry, Gander's translation of other eminent poets, his novels, essays, and the several anthologies that he has edited, establish him as a versatile creative artist who approaches different aspects of life with an empathetic yet critical viewpoint. Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in poetry Gertrude Stein Award in Innovative North American Poetry, PEN Translation Fund Grant from PEN American Center, Best Translated Book Award are only a few of the innumerable awards and recognitions that Gander has received for his literary endeavours.

At the heart of Gander's ecopoetic investigation lies his perception and representation of space. Like the environmental issues that Gander attempts to address through his innovative ecopoetry his perception of space too transcends cultural, political, social and economic boundaries only to shed light on the material and spiritual impacts that the rapid planetary changes bring to both the human and the non-human inhabitants of this planet. As one of the very few contemporary ecopoets who play a seminal role in the development of both the theory and the praxis of ecopoetry, Gander recognizes and acknowledges the fact that reckless human actions have transformed the planet in an irreversible manner. Gander's Pulitzer Prize nominated volume *Core Samples from the World* records the poet's candid poetic response regarding the permanent planetary changes caused by the blatant exploitation of the environment in a most striking manner. Gander's ecopoetic preoccupation with the landscape is reflected in his evocative manipulation of space. Hence, the objective of this paper is to explore the nuances of Gander's unorthodox conception and representation of space as portrayed in the volume *Core Samples from the World* from an ecopoetic point of view. The paper further endeavours to scrutinize how Gander's poetic response regarding the continuously changing dynamics of the relationship between mankind and the environment they inhabit finds expression through his engagement with translocal space.

A Pulitzer Prize finalist in poetry Gander's *Core Samples from the World* is an experimental collaborative work that incorporates poetry, prose and haunting photographs taken by Raymond Meeks, Graciela Iturbide and Lucas Foglia. In this volume Gander introduces a postmodernist ecopoetic vision of the contemporary postnatural world. By using travel as the central metaphor, Gander exploits the inclusive Japanese haibun form and seamlessly synthesizes poetry, prose and photography to portray an almost apocalyptic vision of the rapid environmental degradation throughout the world as well as the human reaction to such crisis. Drawing from the firsthand experience of his travel into places like China, Mexico,

and Bosnia Gander studies these disparate places and their cultures from the perspective of an outsider only to delve deep into the environmental challenges their inhabitants face on a regular basis. *Core Samples from the World* to borrow Gander's own words at the beginning of the book, "comes about as unprecedented human movement leads, here as elsewhere, to conflicts, suspicions, and opportunities to reconsider what is meant by 'the foreign,' by 'the foreigner'". Hence it will not be an exaggeration to define this volume as a journey across geographical borders that not only highlights the fissures in the relationship between the land and its inhabitants but also attempts to bring the factors responsible for such chasm to the fore. Space stands at the centre of this journey.

### **Conceptualising Spatiality in the Anthropocene:**

Different dimensions of temporality along with various physical and psychological aspects of human existence have always dominated the sphere of literature and literary criticism until the last few decades. In the final decades of twentieth century the academia has witnessed what scholars and critics often recognize as the "spatial turn". The seminal works of cultural geographers and social thinkers like Michel Foucault, Edward W. Soja, David Harvey, Gaston Bachelard, Derek Gregory, Nigel Thrift to name only a few and the theoretical underpinnings provided by postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism among other ways of thinking have finally established space as a factor which is much more than a mere background in a literary work and is as significant as time and temporality. While analysing the significance of spatiality, Robert T. Tally Jr. opines that, "Today, spatial literary studies offers an approach to literary and cultural texts that emphasizes the relations between space and writing, offers a new perspective that seems particularly momentous in the twenty-first century, as borders and boundaries seemed to be transgressed, erased, redrawn, or reconceived almost daily" (2). Ecopoetry, a recent development within the tradition of nature poetry quite unsurprisingly expresses an acute sensitivity towards space. Since environmental concerns lie at the heart of ecopoetic discourse and environment is, to borrow Lynn Keller's words, "the surroundings or conditions in which a person, plant, or animal lives, implies a locale, a terrain, a habitat—that is, emplacement" (174), spatial engagement often constitutes the thematic core of ecopoetry. Hence space – both textual and geographical - emerge as the principal factor which constitutes the quintessence of his ecopoetic vision in a globalized world. As an ecopoet writing in the twenty first century, Gander is very much aware of the fact that mankind now has entered a new geological era that freshwater biologist Eugene Stoermer and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen respectively coined and popularised as the "Anthropocene". According to Josef Barla and Franziska von Verschuer –

Denominating a fundamental shift of the relationship between humanity and nature, the Anthropocene marks a new geological era in the history of the planet. The eponymous Anthropos, that is, humans as a collective, is said to have become a geophysical force on a planetary scale, crossing multiple boundaries and in doing so affecting the functioning of the Earth system as a whole. (137)

Gander's awareness of the rapidly evolving world and the forces that facilitate such changes shapes his imagination of space. Though Gander's ecopoetic imagination value rootedness

unlike other celebrated ecopoets such as Wendell Berry, W.S. Merwin, Mary Oliver and a few others Gander does not believe that building a deep spiritual and physiological bond with a particular geographical locale is the only way one can resist the growing sense of “placelessness” and the reckless exploitation of the landscape. But Gander being what Lynn Keller categorizes as the “self-conscious Anthropocene” (2) is fully aware of the fact that in the contemporary globalised world when mobility and fluidity define modern human existence space cannot be defined in static or rigid unilateral terms. Hence, space acquires a complex multidimensionality in *Core Samples from the World*.

### **Translocal Space in Contemporary Globalized World:**

Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his ground-breaking study *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, published in the year 1977 recognises “space” and “place” to be two different ideas that are integral to the concept of spatiality. According to Tuan –

“Space” is more abstract than “place”. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. . . . “space” and “place” “require each other for definition. From security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (6)

Hence, to put it in Tuanian terms for most of the ecopoets infusing “space” with human emotions and thereby transforming it into “place” constitute the crux of their spatial exploration. But Forrest Gander - a self-conscious poet of the Anthropocene cannot afford to remain confined within the one-dimensional idea of space as movement and place as pause. At the present time when the forces of globalization are advocating for a unified, connected coexistence, the idea of local place also needs to be re-imagined. The traditional idea of a locality confined within physical geographical boundary is not feasible anymore in the present context of transnational mobility, migration and economic transaction. To overcome this restricted and disconnected view of a particular place or locality contemporary scholars champion for a translocal sense of place. According to Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak, “translocality is used to describe socio-spatial dynamics and processes of simultaneity and identity formation that transcend boundaries—including, but also extending beyond, those of nation states” (373). While this umbrella term cannot be confined within the straitjacket of a specific definition, translocality primarily seeks to explore how geographical locales throughout the globe influence transnational migration, socio-economic and cultural exchanges. Yet one must keep in mind that in spite of challenging the accepted notion of borders translocalism accepts and promotes local culture and interaction. In Katherine Brickell’s opinion translocalism represents “localities as specific situated places of connectivity that enable, rather than curtail, mobility within and beyond the nation” (Brickell and Datta 25). With its preoccupation to re-define space from a global point of view translocalism shares theoretical grounds with Doreen Massey’s conception of a global place as elaborated in her seminal essay “A Global Sense of Place” published in 1991. Hence, Gander in his *Core Samples from the World* constructs an ecopoetic space that incorporates all the three



major axes of spatiality i.e., Space, Place and their interconnection only to enrich them with a global perspective. Studied through these theoretical lenses the pieces in the volume gradually reveal a novel concept of spatiality which is open, non-linear and essentially characterized by conflicts and contradictions.

### **In Search of a Sense of Place Gander's *Core Samples from the World*:**

Divided into four main segment each section containing multiple photographs, poems and prose pieces, tell stories of places both familiar and unfamiliar. While a few poems are written in repetitive free verse style, for the rest of the volume Gander utilizes the unique form of Japanese haibun. Haiban is an amalgamation of prose and haiku traditionally used in different forms of travel writing. These poems, in Gander's own admission are "very personal account of negotiations across borders (between languages and cultures, between one species and all the rest, between health and sickness, between poetic forms, and between self and others)". Together they represent a journey in search of a sense of place that moves outward, defies border and inclusive. A trained geologist Gander is familiar with tours and travels the main object of which is to collect samples. As the title of the book suggests, the pieces of this volume too emerge as metaphorical field trips the aim of which is to collect samples from distant places for further experimentation and study. Like the samples collected by a geologist, the poetry and prose of the volume along with the photographs by three fine-art photographers provide an authentic glimpse of the remote places and provoke the reader to delve deeper in order to discover their full implications. All the four main segments of the book open with poems titled "Evaporation" which is originally a geological method used to examine water saturation in soil samples collected from various places. Throughout the collection the poet represents almost apocalyptic visions of distant lands gradually transforming into veritable deserts due to their heedless exploitation fuelled by human greed. Water, rather the lack of it acts as the central motif that connects distant geographical spaces together:

I can be read, say the rocks, but not by you.

The air burnished, almost mineral, like a thin peel of mica.

Mound in the photograph, iris in the eye.

What does it mean, a cauterized topography?

.....

As if the land had abandoned itself.

Rain-flushed from denuded hills, the soil powders in wind.

One step forward and we are with them. One step back, another realm absorbs us. (5)

Like water Gander's poetry too moves from one place to another without any constriction of border and connects them together. Yet one must remember that though Gander presents apocalyptic visions of different places with the aim of shedding light on the drastic effects of environmental degradation, he carefully avoids homogenizing these translocal places. In pieces of this volume such places appear with all their unique characteristics. In this volume though Gander negotiates space from the perspective of a foreigner, in his endeavour to promote a

global sense of place while representing a particular geographical locale he never strips a place of its cultural or environmental uniqueness:

After the Beijing conference, half the Chinese poets head home to jobs and families. The rest fly with a posse of foreigners to Kashgar in western China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Stepping down to the tarmac, each is aliened, each is opening. . . . According to plan, a young guide introducing himself as Abdul leads a trip to the shrine of The Fragrant Concubine, . . . Abdul announces the next stop, the famous Kashgar Market where everything but milk of chicken is sold. A labyrinth of stalls that display ancient Chinese and Roman coins, Pashmina wraps and scarves, dry toads wide as umbrellas, bins of walnuts and ripe cherries, cheap Pakistani suits, traditional Uyghur hats made in Italy, bolts of striped silk, jars of saffron, pelts common and exotic, and fragrant peaches. There are hanging carcasses harassed by flies at butcher stands one beside another and, at every corner, pomegranate vendors beside marvelous juice-presses ornamented in silver and wood.  
Men at the edge of  
their shops, spitting on fingertips  
to seal the deal. (14)

The breath-taking portrayal of the Kashgar Market attests to the fact that Gander imagines space as an intersection in which various cultures – both the local and the global imbricate without sacrificing their singularity.

### **Imagining Space from a Translocal Perspective:**

The translocal perspective towards space that Gander elaborates in this book represents space as essentially multidimensional and inherently conflicted. The insightful ways the poet intertwines the kaleidoscopic cultural and social traditions of the inhabitants authenticate and complicate his detached depiction of disparate places like Artux, Kyrgyz, Gobi, Mexico etc. His inclusive conception of space implies that while geographical spaces cannot be represented without taking into account the people who dwell the land or their cultural diversity, like their inhabitants, places also have multiple identities that are essentially fluid and fractured. Hence, it is important, to borrow Gander's own words–

To welcome the  
strangeness of  
strangers  
not versions  
simply of  
my own  
thought. (29)

Thus, the poet's relentless journey to achieve a true understanding of exotic foreign places transforms into an odyssey to discover one's identity and position in a larger global context. How foreign places as well as the act of travelling to these places play a pivotal role in the formation of an ecologically conscious self, constitute a seminal aspect of *Core Samples from the World*. While for some people travelling is a rare privilege through which they yearn to

bond with foreign places but for others being in different places physically is not enough to connect with those places emotionally:

Have you been to France?

I have.

How do they live?

Like everywhere.

They have sheep?

Sure.

How many might one shepherd have?

I don't know, thousands.

How could they be counted?

You've got me.

What did you say?

I said I'm not sure.

And what took you there.

I was looking for bonds. I wanted to break a mirror. I wanted to render myself accessible, available. I wanted to borrow eyes

from another language. I was looking for the words to come.

And now?

And now what?

And now that everything in your life has changed? (31)

Therefore, as the interaction between a foreign traveller and the Tsotzil Shepherdess reveal that different individuals respond to space in their own singular ways which often turn out to be contradictory. While the translocal space - as perceived by Gander celebrates conflict, contradiction and plurality, it also acknowledges and accommodates the heterogeneous response of people who actively engage with these places. While re-defining place in a globalized world, eminent cultural geographer Doreen Massey opines that, "If one moves in from the satellite towards the globe, holding all those networks of social relations and movements and communications in one's head, then each 'place' can be seen as a particular, unique, point of their intersection" (154). Besides being a site for social relations and socio-cultural mobility translocal space in Gander's imagination also proves to be the intersection that accommodates and celebrates the varied perspectives of individuals who has experienced the particular place. In his seminal work *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* Keith H. Basso also underscores the importance of understanding place in fluid terms and opines:

As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed, and the movements of this process inward toward facets of the self, outward toward aspects of the external world, alternately both together cannot be known in advance. When places



are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination, and where the latter may lead is anybody's guess. (107)

### **Gander's Representation of Space in the Context of Global Environmental Degradation:**

Leonard M. Scigaj in his path-breaking study *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Eco-poets* observes -

We have despoiled nature, the necessary context for any aesthetic act, to the point where we must pause before composing poems that present nature as a benign and reliable backdrop for human quests for an authentic voice. We can no longer conceive of nature as a bucolic idyll, a type of Christian resurrection, a rational exemplar of God's harmonious design, a romantic refuge from urban factories, an indifferent or hostile Darwinian menace, or an echoing hollow filled by poststructural language theory. (5)

A significant aspect of Gander's translocal representation of space is the apocalyptic manner the poet renders places that are severely damaged by contemporary environmental degradation. Such portraits of degraded landscapes from different remote corners of the world underscore not only the universality of ruthless ecological destruction but also the fact that the unbridled greed and callousness towards nature and natural resources strip a place and its inhabitants of their nationality, culture or identity. All the four segments of the book recurrently represent parched, barren landscapes that are more often than not the results of injudicious mining. Identical images of such "cauterized topography" (5) in varied places like Burma, America, Chile etc. bring the homogenizing effect of ecological crisis to the fore. Places, the ecological diversity of which have been irreversibly altered, lack the plurality that essentially defines Gander's unique translocal conception of space. By highlighting the severely degraded landscapes and the various types of pollution and toxicity that plague these landscapes Gander, an eco-poet of the Anthropocene compels the reader to confront uncomfortable questions regarding one's role and identity in the present context of an alarming planetary crisis. The poem titled "A Clearing" pivots around such questions:

Where are you going? Ghosted with dust. From where have you come?

Dull assertiveness of the rock heap, a barren monarchy.

Wolfspider, size of a hand, encrusted with dirt at the rubble's edge.

What crosses here goes fanged or spiked and draws its color from the ground.

Xanthic shadow at the edges.

Where are we going? Ghosted with dust. From where have we come?

Stretcher loaded with clods by a spavined work shed.

What does it mean, a cauterized topography?

One step forward and he is with us. One step back, another realm absorbs him. (5)

### **Decoding the Photographs in *Core Samples from the World*:**

The haunting photographs taken by three photographers from America and Mexico elevate Gander's rendition of space to a new height. Gander's innovative incorporation of these photographs not only adds a visual aspect to his eco-poetic imagination of space but also

encourages the readers to connect with distant foreign landscapes. From a Tunian point of view it can be surmised that the photographs act as the tool with the help of which the poet transforms an unfamiliar abstract “space” to a familiar connective “place”. Besides enriching the book with a striking sense of exoticism together these pictures replicate the planet in the face of disconcerting environmental crisis. While all the four major sections of *Core Samples from the World* exploit the works of Raymond Meeks, Graciela Iturbide, and Lucas Foglia –Gander never use these works as accessories to compliment his poetry or chooses to comment on them directly in his poetry or prose. They rather share the same poetic space and an integral part of the poet’s ecopoetic vision of translocal space. From their individual artistic niche, the subjects of the photographs like the bleak mining sites, parched, arid landscapes, dust covered men, women and children toiling in risky environments collectively as well as individually contribute to shed light on the overarching ecological, social, political and cultural issues that this volume aspires to engage with.

### Conclusion:

An evocative quest through space and time Gander’s *Core Samples from the World* exploits experimental poetic form and language to challenge the established notions regarding spatiality within the specific domain of ecopoetry. The poet’s ingenious juxtaposition of poetry, prose and photographs, his clever exploitation of the traditional haibun form to represent a subversive, dystopic travelogue, his effortless use of postmodern poetic diction – all serve to reflect the fluid hybridity which is the hallmark of Gander’s inception of space in general and translocal place in particular. Instead of resisting the rapid changes brought forth by various forces of globalization and urbanization by promoting rootedness to a local place Gander responds to the growing need of developing a divergent, translocal sense of place that thrives on mobility, conflict and plurality. Gander’s astute perception of translocal space and the translocal interrelations between different localities, their inhabitants and the culture they represent opens up a new horizon of ecopoetic spatiality that with its infinite possibilities provokes the reader to delve deeper.

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