"'Here at the Brink': Don McKay's Edge Poetics and the Articulation of Wilderness in Canadian

Poetry"

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to interrogate how select English Canadian poets have broached the unknowability of an elusive subject in the natural world, paradoxically articulating the unspeakable or ineffable. This study focusses most explicitly on the edge poetics of contemporary Canadian poet Don McKay. Reading McKay's oeuvre for poems situated *at* or *within* edges, thresholds, and peripheries, this research analyzes how McKay's poetry problematizes the ever-categorizing mind, thereby challenging our perception of the non-human other in his work. Drawing a line of influence back through the tradition from which he comes, this study first surveys a long history of Canadian nature poems (1888-1966). Examining five poems that confront the "inappellable" (Scott, "Height of Land"), the first chapter shows how five English Canadian poets (Lampman, D.C. Scott, Pratt, A.J.M. Smith, Atwood) play with a poetics of unknowing to resist articulation of the non-human other they describe. The second chapter investigates parallels between Al Purdy and Don McKay. Purdy's poems create room to behold *mysterium tremendum*—a concept that parallels McKavian wilderness. In the third and final chapter, this study focuses on McKay's edge poetics, revealing how his poems gesture at a non-linguistic space. I conclude by showing the ethical potential of this poetics of "unknowing" the other.

Le but de cette étude est d'interroger comment certains poètes anglais-canadiens ont abordé l'inconnaissabilité d'un sujet insaisissable dans le monde naturel, articulant paradoxalement l'indescriptible ou l'ineffable. Cette étude se concentre le plus explicitement sur les "edge poetics" du poète contemporain canadien Don McKay. En examinant l'œuvre de McKay pour des poèmes situés aux limites, aux seuils, et aux périphéries, cette recherche analyse comment la poésie de McKay problématise l'esprit toujours catégorisant, et comment elle remet en question notre perception de "l'autre." Dessinant une ligne d'influence de la tradition dont McKay vient, cette étude examine d'abord l'histoire de poèmes naturels canadiens (1888-1966). En examinant cinq poèmes qui font face à ce qui est "inappellable" (Scott, "Height of Land"), le premier chapitre illustre comment cinq poètes anglais-canadiens (Lampman, D.C. Scott, Pratt, A.J.M. Smith, Atwood) se servent d'une poétique de "unknowing" pour résister l'articulation de l'autre non-humain qu'ils décrivent. Le deuxième chapitre étudie des parallèles entre Al Purdy et Don McKay. Les poèmes de Purdy créent de l'espace pour le "mysterium tremendum"—un concept qui est parallèle à la "wilderness" de McKay. Le troisième chapitre se concentre sur les "edges poetics" de McKay, révélant la manière dont ses poèmes font des gestes à un espace non linguistique. En terminant, je montre le potentiel éthique de cette pratique de "unknowing" de l'autre.

Acknowledgements

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished and independent work by the author, Blythe Hutchcroft.

Abbreviations

AU   McKay, Don. *Angular Unconformity: Collected Poems 1970-2014.* Goose Lane, 2014.

DW   McKay, Don. *Deactivated West 100.* Gaspereau Press, 2005.

"GF"   McKay, Don. "Great Flint Singing: Reflections on Canadian Nature Poetries." *The Shell of the Tortoise: Four Essays and an Assemblage.* Gaspereau Press, 2011, p. 25-78.

VV   McKay, Don. *Vis à Vis*: *Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*. Gaspereau Press, 2001.

BE   Purdy, Al. *Birdwatching at the Equator*: *the Galapagos Islands Poems*. Sutton West: 1982.

RBS   Purdy, Al. *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea: An Autobiography*, edited by Alex Widen, Harbour Publishing: 1993.

YA   Purdy, Al and Sam Solecki. *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy,* edited by Sam Solecki, Harbour Publishing: 2004.

OD   Mason, Travis V. *Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay.* Wilfrid Laurier Press: 2013.

INTRODUCTION

English Canadian nature poetry has long struggled to classify the non-human other about which it writes. Wrestling with the problem of linguistic limitation, one question is implicit in any poetic encounter with that which is "other-than-human" (Mason, 41): how can a poet represent and name the non-human other it encounters without colonizing, appropriating, and reducing it? How can poetry name this incalculable other into notion in a way that is ethically responsible to its vast unknowability? And if there is anything beyond language, how can poems— paradoxically, of course—play with language to confront that which exceeds it?

Throughout the last half of the twentieth century and into today, a group of ecologically-tuned, philosophy-driven Canadian poets—termed "the new eco-poets" by Nancy Holmes (*Open Wide* xvi) or a group of "poet thinkers" by Marc Dickinson ("Canadian Primal," *The Walrus*)— have brought "a new ontological understanding of the natural world" (McKay, "GF" 55) into the tradition of Canadian nature poetry.[1] Each, in their own way, has written poetry and criticism that addresses the aforementioned problem of speaking the unknown. Beginning in the 1970s, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Robert Bringhurst, Jan Zwicky, and self-titled "nature poet" Don McKay (*VV* 25-28) have collectively theorized an eco-critical attention that is rooted in the practices and poetics of unknowing. In an article published in *The Walrus* in 2009, Marc Dickinson explains the lengthy, tangled influence that this group of poets has had on each other:

> While Lee may be the group's elder statesman, Tim Lilburn is its catalyst. He met
>
> McKay at a poetry reading at the Princess Theatre in Kitchener in the late '80s, and

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[1] It should be noted that these poets precede the "official" emergence of Canadian eco-criticism (Bradley, *Greening* xix)—a "capacious" field of critical inquiry that, despite nebulous origins, had crystallized by the early 1990s (xix)—and thereby illustrate Nicholas Bradley and Ella Soper's assessment that a "theoretical reflection upon the natural world" in Canadian literature and the "role of language and literature in describing [or] imagining" this natural world "has a lengthy past" (xvii).

through him became aware of pockets of conversation taking place across the country among poets with similar concerns. Lee and Bringhurst, for example, have enjoyed a lengthy correspondence since the '70s. These conversations began to coalesce in a couple of gatherings in the mid-'90s, the largest taking place at Trent University in Peterborough in 1996. … 'I thought there was something historic and important that I was witnessing in these conversations,' [says Lilburn]. ("Canadian Primal")

To illustrate the influence this group has had on McKay himself, one only needs to read the author's notes section of his book on wilderness poetics, *Vis à Vis*, where he thanks Lilburn, Bringhurst, and Zwicky for "the companionship, fierce listening and editorial patience required for these notions to struggle into written form" (*VV* 9).

Playing with silence, unknowing, and unnaming, the work of these new eco-poets reflects "elder statesman" Dennis Lee's desire to define by negation. In an interview titled "Poetry and Unknowing," Lee explains the influence that "the contemplative tradition, specifically the strain called the negative way" has had on his own poetry (183). The *negative way*, also called the *via negativa*, is a way to gesture at description by saying what some elusive thing is *not*; implicit in this tradition is a resistance to the presumption that any finite descriptor will be sufficient in describing the ineffable, or that which is wholly other. This contemplation of the wholly other hinges on practices of unknowing. Lee explains the relationship between writing poetry and embracing unknowing, saying that, "both start by moving into a space of darkness, silence, [and] attending," and that neither "own[s] anything" ("Poetry and Unknowing" 196). Though paradoxically impossible to articulate in full, Lee claims that, in his poetry, he would like to "get at what that feels like, what it is, to be summoned to a knowing outside of language altogether— a knowing outside of knowing" ("Poetry and Unknowing" 185).

Much of Lee's interest in this non-linguistic knowing set the stage for Lilburn's own reflective essays on poetics—see *Living in the World as if it Were Home, Poetry and Knowing* (ed. by Lilburn)*, and *Thinking and Singing*[2]—in which Lilburn presents "poetry as a practice and *a way of knowing*" itself, "an alternative to the appropriative and possessive epistemology left [to] us by the Enlightenment and our colonial past" (McKay, "GF" 59, emphasis mine). This attitude—though perhaps attention is a better word—shows up repeatedly in McKay's own thinking, too. Like Lee, both Lilburn and McKay bring a poetics of unknowing—of defining in negation, of acknowledging that which is wholly other and therefore unspeakable—into their poetic practice. For each poet, signing the world in verse means "the opposite of the reduction of a thing to knowledge systems or taxonomy" and instead means "beholding the thing intensely while knowing that it cannot be known," and certainly not named (McKay, "GF" 60).

While this school of poets provide a thoughtful way to wrestle with the problem of nomination, there is a long history of Canadian nature poetry that precedes their work, anticipating these questions in some early shape or form. In his essay "Baler Twine," McKay extends Canadian literature's well-established tradition of articulating a wild other, explaining his own poetic interest in "wilderness," which he redefines as "not a set of endangered species," but rather, "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (*VV* 21). My research therefore considers the way McKay both reflects a long tradition of representing nature as other, and deviates to provide his own contemporary emphasis, appealing to the edge of an encounter with the non-human to highlight its inherent wilderness. By analyzing the way McKay represents edges—whether physical borders, the edge of an encounter, or a cognitive threshold—as porous and malleable constructions, this thesis explores how McKay writes edges as a site where

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[2] This last collection, edited by Tim Lilburn, solidifies the self-articulated "five-pointed conversation" between these five new eco-poets, as it consists of essays by Lee, Lilburn, Bringhurst, Zwicky, and McKay. See *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*, ed. by Tim Lilburn. Cormorant Books: 2002.

McKavian "wilderness" (*VV* 21) can be glimpsed in part, though never tamed and certainly not completely named. In doing so, I show that McKay's poetry "undermines the exactitude of definition and shows that there is a kind of wilderness in everything which resists transmission," or, translation (Dawson 66).

Before analyzing the ramifications of McKay's edge poetics, it is critical to situate McKay in the history that precedes him: that of prior Canadian poets articulating wilderness. It is crucial to trace this connective tissue because of McKay's significant involvement in shaping the Canadian literary community—he is co-founder of Brick Books, former editor and current board member of *The Fiddlehead*, winner of two Governor General's Awards and the Griffin Poetry Prize, and Director of Poetry at the prestigious Banff Centre—and because of his academic experience teaching this tradition, as his involvement with Nancy Holmes's anthology of Canadian nature poetry indicates. He is consequentially inseparable from the national literary context that has both formed him and been significantly formed by him.[3] Therefore, in chapter one, I provide a brief history of Canadian wilderness poetry, looking at Archibald Lampman's "Morning on the Lièvre" (1888), Duncan Campbell Scott's "The Height of Land" (1916), E.J. Pratt's "The Shark" (1923), A.J.M. Smith's "The Lonely Land" (1926/1943[4]), and Margaret Atwood's "Journey to the Interior" (1966). Here, I explore the ways in which each poem expresses a latent seed of attention to McKavian wilderness—a wilderness that signifies not just feral brush and vast landscape, but rather, an other's "rawness, its *duende*, its alien being" (*VV*

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[3] In her preface, Nancy Holmes credits the anthology's introduction, written by McKay, as having significantly influenced her selections for *Open Wide a Wilderness* (xvi), thereby illustrating the impact his thinking has had on the formation of Canadian canon.

[4] While 1926 is the year most often used to date "The Lonely Land," the more popular—and today's most-anthologized version—wasn't published in its final form until 1943. I discuss the critical differences between these two versions in my own analysis of Smith's poem, on p. 27-29 of chapter one. For further comparison, see Nancy Holme's *Open Wide a Wilderness* (p. 132) for an example of that which is commonly anthologized and Brian Trehearne's *The Complete Poems of A.J.M. Smith* (p. 46 and 228) for both versions.

21). In highlighting these latent seeds of wilderness in Canadian poetry, I show how each of these poets broaches its *unknowability*: by romantically mystifying it (Lampman), resisting easy classification (Pratt), or asserting its resistance to mapping (Atwood). In doing so, this chapter considers the ways these early poems anticipate a later school of Canadian literary eco-thought, exemplified in the poems of Don McKay. Here, I stress the connective tissue between Lampman's "skirts of mist" (7), Scott's "inappellable" "Something" (52, 50), Pratt's undefinable shark and a poetics of unknowing, which emerges with force many decades later in the writing of Lee, Lilburn, Zwicky, Bringhurst and, of course, McKay.

In the second chapter, I focus more in depth on one Canadian poet's attention to that which is wholly other. Statements about McKay's similarity to Al Purdy have been tossed around in Canadian criticism[5] but, to my knowledge, this similarity has yet to be analyzed with any critical depth. I therefore demonstrate similar lines of inquiry and influence in these two careers, connecting Purdy's "open or fragmentary" lyric (Solecki 103) with McKay's own edge poetics. Here, I show how Purdy plays with deep time to widen the spatio-temporal scope of his reader's perception. I then suggest that the origin of this motif stems from Purdy's attention to *mysterium tremendum*, literally defined as holy otherness—an attention that existed throughout Purdy's long career but was significantly refined by the influence of Dennis Lee in the 1960s and onwards. In my analysis of Purdy's later work—which looks at poems in *North of Summer* (1967), *Birdwatching at the Equator* (1981), and *The Woman on the Shore* (1990)—I show how he invokes encounters with both tremendum and deep time to interrupt a possessive human gaze of the non-human other. Through this invocation, I suggest that Purdy's poetry opens readers up

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[5] See Listra, "Michael Listra, On Poetry".

to an alternate cognitive space, and in doing so, eschews the thinking, signing mind's tendency to appropriate something that Purdy sees as wholly other.

In my third and final chapter, I analyze how McKay extends the wilderness tradition in Canadian poetry, building upon Purdy's own interest in some radical other in a way that similarly appeals to an alternate cognitive space. Here, I demonstrate how McKay's poems wield words in a way that puts "their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of representing the world" (McKay, *VV* 85). When McKay's speakers "approach the edge" ("Drag" 11), these edges "bleed" ("Wintering" 13), are "redefin[ed]" ("Talks End" 16), signal language's end ("Listen at the Edge"), and provide a cognitive "carry[ing] across" into a space where wilderness reigns ("Drag" 13). By perforating his poems with these edges—liminal borders in which wilderness is glimpsed—McKay challenges the way we perceive and articulate our non-human surroundings. With this in mind, my final chapter considers the ethical ramifications of these literary representation of edges, suggesting that McKay's edge poetics impact how we relate to, and conceptualize, the non-human other—a key concern for the responsible eco-poet. I argue that, by situating speakers at or within edges and breaking down the speaker's language, McKay troubles assumptions of fixed categories and plays with the border between linguistic human and McKavian wilderness. By analyzing these edge poetics, I demonstrate how McKay's poetry breaks down categorically entrenched dichotomies to reveal a "permeable membrane" (*DW* 27) or "back-flow" (Bartlett 172) between what McKay calls "poetic attention" (*VV* 26) and "wilderness" (*VV* 21). In doing so, I reveal that, by situating poems *in* porous borders, McKay draws attention to a cognitive "in-between" ("The Speaker's Chair" 16): an alternate space which has not been colonized by language. Finally, I suggest that, by drawing his readers' attention to these non-linguistic spaces—to that which can't be known or

spoken—McKay purposefully disorders how readers categorize the non-human world, thereby challenging, "in ethical terms" (Mason, *OD* 41), how we perceive the other that resides in wilderness—or, rather, the wilderness that pulses within the other. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates how McKay's poetic attention to edges, and the poetry that comes from this attention, undermines established systems of human power and authority over the non-human world, choosing instead an apophatic attention—one that prefers unknowing to naming, and "does not really wish to be talked about" at all (*VV* 26).

CHAPTER ONE:

BETWEEN WORD AND WILDERNESS IN CANADIAN NATURE POETRY

"What sort of noise would the mind make, if it could, here at the brink?"

— Don McKay, "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River"

There is a long history of thinking about natural space in Canadian literary criticism. Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* and Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* provide cornerstone work on this topic in Canadian criticism, each suggesting that the Canadian literary imagination is shaped by ideas of its landscape.[6] If Canadian identity is rooted in, as E.K. Brown similarly suggests, a wilderness "that *haunts* the imagination of its people" (qtd. in Dragland, *Floating Water* 231, emphasis mine), then it is equally rooted in our literature's articulation of both that wild space and our relationship to the non-human that dwells in it. But what happens—or rather, what has happened—when Canadian nature poets confront something unnameable in nature, generating an encounter that brings them to the edge of language? How can nature poems reflect a non-human otherness that exceeds language without possessing it in verse? In the past 150 years, how has our country's literature signified that which arguably has no signifier?

In her 1972 publication *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature,* Margaret Atwood claims:

In a lot of early Canadian poetry you find the desire to name struggling against a terminology which is foreign and completely inadequate to describe what is actually being seen. Part of the delight of reading Canadian poetry chronologically is watching the

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[6] See also Northrop Frye's conclusion to Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada*.

gradual emergence of a language appropriate to its objects. (62)

With that in mind, this chapter looks at Canadian nature poetry through the decades, excavating its long history for early seeds of McKay's own perspective on writing wilderness—a wilderness that is not excluded to "a set of endangered species," but rather, includes "the capacity of all things to elude" the thinking, signing poet (*VV* 21). By reading five poems, which span from Archibald Lampman's "Morning on the Lièvre" (1888) to Margaret Atwood's "Journey to the Interior" (1966), I will show how five Canadian poets broach their own version of McKavian wilderness—whether mystifying it, resisting its easy classification, or asserting its resistance to mappability. I will discuss the way these early poems anticipate a poetics of unknowing, later promoted by Canada's "new eco-poets"—a group in which McKay himself is included (Holmes xvi). The purpose of this chapter is to trace McKay's poetics back through the tradition from which he comes. In doing so, this chapter reveals not a gradual acquisition of language that reflects the Canadian nature poet's surroundings (Atwood, *Survival* 62), but instead, a slow move towards unknowing, silence, and the development of a poetics that holds space for that which cannot be named.

VEILED PRESENCE: UNKNOWABILITY AND THE CONFEDERATION POETS

The struggle to signify wilderness dates back to the early settler's endeavour to articulate his new, more "sinister" land (McKay, "GF" 53). It is commonly believed that Canadian literature's early roots began, like most colonial literatures, "to maintain or extend the artistic, social, and moral standards of the mother country" (Trehearne, *Aestheticism* 8). Yet Canadian settler poets confronted an "inhospitable" space (Trehearne, *Aestheticism* 8)—one that, as Atwood articulates, necessitated terms beyond the Romantic heritage that emigrated with these poets across the Atlantic. In his essay "Great Flint Singing"—named in reference to a line from

Earle Birney's poem "Bushed" and initially prepared for Nancy Holmes's anthology of Canadian

nature poetry, *Open Wide a Wilderness*[7]—McKay rejects Frye and Atwood's view of Canadian

poetry, which suggests early settler poets saw the natural world "primarily as sinister" ("GF" 53)

or even "morally nihilistic," a view in which death and decay induce fear instead of signal

"crucial components of an ecosystem" ("GF" 36). Instead, McKay suggests the early Canadian

poet was far more nuanced—more "resourceful" ("GF" 36)—in the challenge to articulate the

"violent energy he beholds" in the Canadian wild ("GF" 37).

Looking at the Confederation poets, we do see a breadth of ways to represent nature,

ranging from communion with[8] to alienation from.[9] However, both Archibald Lampman's

"Morning on the Lièvre" and Duncan Campbell Scott's "The Height of Land" represent nature in

a way that falls somewhere between communion and alienation—one that, perhaps, trades these

tropes for an encounter with McKavian wilderness. Both Scott and Lampman represent a nature

that resists or eschews the human gaze, leaving space for an evasive and unnameable other.

These poems offer an alternate way of conceiving wilderness: one that extends from Romantic

awe but takes on new legs amidst the Canadian landscape in which their young colony resided.

Archibald Lampman wrote "Morning on the Lièvre" (1888) in response to his "first foray

into a wilderness environment" (Ball 85). After the canoe trip featured in this poem, in which he

travelled with two friends into undeveloped territory in northern Ontario and Quebec,

Lampman's poetic vision crystallized: from this point on, he began to claim wilderness as his

principal poetic subject (Ball 85). "Morning on the Lièvre" represents this central subject in a

way that resists the human gaze—a gaze which often attempts to own the other, sweeping aside

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[7] "Great Flint Singing" is also included in McKay's *The Shell of the Tortoise*.
[8] See Lampman's "On the Companionship with Nature."
[9] See Pratt's "The Shark," discussed later in this chapter (p. 25-26).

any difference and choosing instead an attitude of possession or consumption. Instead, Lampman veils nature with foggy imagery that grants anonymity, and in turn, maintains a sense of nature's radical otherness. In mystifying our gaze of the river down which his speaker paddles, Lampman unsituates the reader, both in place and conception.

"Morning on the Lièvre" begins in suspension, so that readers aren't quite sure what to picture as they read. They hear a "jay" (1) but do not see him. The bird is "far above" (1) and the speaker is surrounded by "skirts of mist" (7) as if suspended in a fog. Lampman critic Eric Ball astutely observes that there is a purposeful lack of clarity in this first stanza, saying that, "the absence of a central point of focus makes us pause over the images themselves" (Ball 88). While there is an identified subject and predicate within the opening stanza—"skirts of mist" (7) which "lift and hang" (9)—these are not given until seven lines in. This delay accentuates the reader's affective sense of suspension. If we are to grasp anything upon first read, therefore, it's a series of images that conceals or obscures: "vapor" (4), "skirts of mist" (7), "a cloud" (10), "sky above and sky below" (11), "silvery drip" (13), and that "misty line" (21) which is "like a dream" (24). In addition, the rhyme pattern breaks down after the first two lines, giving readers an irregular rhythm that "prevent[s] us from taking aesthetic refuge in a predictable pattern of decorative sound" (Ball 88). Lampman therefore couches his subject in a form that best reflects nature's resistance to easy representation, and even to predictable categorization.

Formally, this is an evolution or extension from Lampman's inherited Romanticism. In this poem, nature is obtuse. The "vapor" is further imagined as that which stems from "the forge / Of a giant somewhere hid, / Out of hearing" (4-6), which invokes a magic presence in an already misty poem. Further to its obscuring, nature is taciturn and does not yield much: the morning is silent (16) while the forest sleeps (17). At one point Lampman even inverts the

human gaze—instead of the speaker framing the land within his vision, it is the "muskrats" who "peer" at the speaker (29). Finally, towards the end of the poem, we are given a subject more solid than this vapour-clad, wooded river: "seven ducks / With a splashy rustle rise, / Stretching out their seven necks" (33-35). And yet, even these ducks resist the speaker's gaze. The poet eschews his own ability to frame them as they move into the "purple shadow" and become pure sound. Though the rest of its contents are silent, this poem begins and ends in avian sound *without* the avian body: the speaker hears the bird song but cannot see it, not unlike the speaker's experience in Keats's "Ode to the Nightingale." But instead of flying to the hidden, unreachable bird "on the viewless wings of poesy" (Keats, "Ode" 33), Lampman places the bird just beyond his speaker's grasp and cements her there. Therefore in "Morning on the Lièvre," "poesy" is not some conduit of connection but rather that which establishes nature as wholly other, evasive, and out of reach.

Duncan Campbell Scott's "The Height of Land" (1916) is similarly cautious in its ability to represent nature. "The Height of Land" is a fireside "meditation in situ" akin to the "Romantic epiphany poem" with some key deviations from that trope (McKay, "GF" 30). McKay remarks that Scott adjusts "the standard Romantic view of nature" in how he "steps away from the practice of understanding it through human categories … while dramatizing instead an acceptance of linguistic limits" ("GF" 30). The night featured in this poem is auto-biographical, taking place during Scott's trip from Pic River to Heron Bay and the Long Lake post in 1906 (Dragland, *Floating Voice* 234). The poem offers narrative details from the preceding day: the crew has "come up through the spreading lakes" (25), passed through a "rocky islet" (36), seen bushfires (106-108) and paddled swampy waters (100-105). Now, sitting in relative solitude— the two "Indian guides" who made this trip possible are almost entirely erased from the poem,

both present but "dead asleep" (22)—the speaker contemplates his surroundings: the "height of land" (1), the "watershed" (2), the "wind in the woods" (3), and the peace of the fire. But despite all the lush or swampy descriptions of nature, this poem is most concerned with an inarticulable, untamed presence: a "Something" (17) that "comes by flashes / Deeper than peace" (17-18).

Scott scholar Stan Dragland suggests that the "key to the poem's structure" is its unpredictable but repeated return—"an irregular, incremental repetition"—to this mysterious presence, an entity that is sensed "but for which there are no words" (Dragland, *Floating Voice* 243). This entity is outside language. The speaker repeatedly glimpses its unutterable presence, and it speaks to some other within his own self:

> But here is peace, and again
>
> That Something comes by flashes
>
> Deeper than peace,—a spell
>
> Golden and inappellable
>
> That gives the inarticulate part
>
> Of our strange being one moment of release. (49-54)

As Dragland says, it is one thing to meditate on the unknown but "it's quite another to give it a body" (241). And yet this poem does precisely that, giving its thought an ambiguous manifestation—"Something" comes and goes—while creating mystery for "the reader who attempts to map *precisely* its complex form" (Dragland, *Floating Voice* 241, emphasis mine). The images in Scott's poem give way to "enigma" (Dragland, *Floating Voice* 241), the tactile surroundings dissolve, and even "the border between subject and object," or self and other, melts (Dragland, *Floating Voice* 242). The experience is decidedly mystical, but as McKay points out, Scott is no mystic ("GF" 32): he is first and foremost a poet, and is therefore stuck in the poet's

paradox. He "must answer" (57) this "Something" (50) via the means he knows—"*in chime*" (57, emphasis mine). But even chime will be insufficient because as we learn: "no man may tell / The secret of that spell / Golden and inappellable" (57-59).

In "The Height of Land," Scott confronts the alien duende of the natural world—unspeakable "wilderness" in the McKavian sense of the word. As dawn approaches, tolling "from the dark belfries of the spruces" (122), the speaker asks how he, as a poet, might address this experience of wilderness:

> Shall the poet then,
>
> Wrapped in his mantle on the height of land,
>
> Brood on the welter of the lives of men
>
> And dream of his ideal hope and promise
>
> In the blush sunrise? (125-129)

One way to interpret this final stanza is to interpret Scott's opposing questions of poetic vision, in lines 125 ("Shall the poet…") and 143 ("Or shall he see…as I see"), as temporal. With this line of thinking, Scott wonders if poetic vision will progress beyond the limit he currently confronts: is the speaker "at the zenith of wisdom" or will some future insight prevail (154)? The speaker asks if "intuition" (152) of nature's "Secret" (157) is the only "measure of knowledge" (152) with which the "golden and inappellable" (157) presence can be sensed—or, alternatively, will the future poet, refined by progress, have more knowledge from which he can draw an articulation of this encounter? This latter question is implied in the following lines, which emphasize progress, cycles of death ("autumn") and resurrection ("rebuilt"), and an evolution of insight ("deeper meaning"):

> How often in the autumn of the world

Shall the crystal shrine of dawning be rebuilt

With deeper meaning! (123-125)

It is therefore appropriate to say that Scott wrestles with the current speaker's limits of cognition—of what can be sensed by anyone, both now and in the days to come. As he meditates on nature's mysterious presence, his thoughts return to both poetry and the limits of human thought or articulation. While I can see this more traditional reading at work, I want to emphasize an alternate reading, one that is less concerned with sequential progress and more attentive to a resistance of wilderness fantasies in the speaker's present moment. I suggest that the former lines (125-129) Scott asks if the poet should idealize the sunrise while stewing over the turbulence of human lives: "Shall the poet then… / …dream of his ideal hope… / In the blush sunrise?" (125, 127, 129). In this question the sunrise offers a promise, a solace—even a fantasy of communion—while "the lives of men" (127) are contrasted as chaotic. Scott therefore presents a binary in which nature is in a dyadic relationship with culture—the two like oil and water, separate and distinct, one (nature) curing the ailments of the other (culture). This poem does not particularly endorse this view, but rather, articulates it as one of many ways a poet *might* view nature. Later on, the speaker-as-poet expresses how *he* sees the sunrise (143-145) but not before pausing at the image contained in these lines (125-129) in which the poet is "wrapped in his mantle" (126), idealizing the beauty of the sunrise.

Scott's use of the word "mantle" (126) is curious here. Etymologically, the noun mantle signifies a role, a responsibility, or a burden—three related meanings that stem from its Latin root *mantellum*, which signifies "cloak" ("mantle, n." *OED Online*). Therefore the nature poet has a job to do, a responsibility he must fulfill: he must put land to song. As a verb, to mantle something means to conceal, clothe, or obscure it, like the cloak of fog or a veil of mist ("mantle,

v." *OED ONLINE*). Perhaps here the noun *mantle*—referring to the role of the poet—contains some trace of its concealing verb. "Wrapped in his mantle on the height of land," there is some barrier between the land and the poet—*language* itself—and his responsibility as poet mantles both him and the subject he must describe. Hugging him like a cloak, this role obscures his ability to truly address the encounter with radical otherness, so the sunrise is instead reduced to a trite idealization. It is as if Scott says that the experience with "Something" cannot be spoken, not even in slant, and perhaps to speak it only mantles the experience further. And yet, perhaps that is precisely the nature poet's burden: to dwell in paradox, articulating that which exceeds language. Scott *does* answer the inappellable. This poem is a record of that answer "in chime" (57). But it's an answer that offers an alternate way of signing nature's otherness. The speaker continues, presenting this alternate way of conceiving his surroundings:

> Or shall [the poet] see the sunrise as I see it
>
> In shoals of misty fire the deluge-light
>
> Dashes upon and whelms (143-145)

The word "deluge-light" (144) visually symbolizes the speaker's figurative feeling of being overwhelmed by "Something." The speaker is flooded by cascading light—that of a sun rising over the misty horizon—signifying the way in which his ability to define is overwhelmed. This definition is reinforced by the fact that this light "whelms" him (145): it engulfs or buries his senses. *This* sunrise, as he sees it, is both overwhelming and concealed in mist, and therefore inaccessible in part. By presenting nature "as [he] see[s] it" (143) in this poem, Scott signals that, actually, he *doesn't* idealize or invest in the sunrise, nor claim any ability to portray its unutterable parts.

Finally, I want to consider the space this poem occupies. "The Height of Land" is situated somewhere between north and south. Of course, one is always between *a* north and *a* south—that edge is rather arbitrary—but Scott particularly emphasizes his speaker's in-between position. The speaker cogitates the precipice in which he dwells:

upon one hand

the lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams

…

On the other hand

The crowded southern land

With all the welter of the lives of men. (41-48)

This poem demonstrates W.L. Morton's assertion that "the line which marks off frontier from the farmstead, the wilderness from the baseland, the hinterland from the metropolis" is the foundation that "runs through [the] Canadian psyche" (qtd. in Dragland, *Floating Voice* 231). Morton articulates a Canadian fascination with borders of wild/tamed land, but one that perpetuates dyadic dichotomies of frontier/farm, or nature/culture. Instead of investing in these binaries, Scott's poem occupies a liminal middle. The speaker is between northern wilderness and southern city, bringing the latter into the former himself as he scouts the land for colonial opportunity. Furthermore, the wild "Something" (50) speaks to an "inarticulate part" (53) of the speaker, suggesting that perhaps there is also some wilderness in the man himself, thereby fraying the border between wild nature and civilized human on both fronts. This poem, therefore, is interested in the threshold, an encounter with a liminal edge, or what McKay's terms "betweenity" in his essay on the importance of interstitial thinking ("The Speaker's Chair" 4). Perhaps Scott highlights this betweenity to emphasize the way this poem's central subject—

"Something...inappellable" (50-52)—occupies its own threshold place between perceived and imperceivable, glimpsed only in part as it fleets between known and unknowable. The poem's setting, therefore, reflects its central interest. McKay comments on the rhetorical weight of titling this presence "Something":

> To call it that, even with a capital S, is to name it without pinning it down, a kind of naming without nomination which leaves this presence on its own watershed *between* language and silence. Where some might see Scott's term as a vague placeholder for the ineffable, I read it as a deliberate chastening of noetic hubris, that tendency of language to grow too big for its boots and consume what it signifies. ("GF" 30, emphasis mine)

Scott, an early Canadian poet, therefore suggests that the "language appropriate" (Atwood, *Survival* 62) to nature is a language of unknowing and unsaying, of teetering between articulation and its otherwise.

CANADIAN MODERNISM AND POETICS OF UNKNOWING

By the 1920s, Canadian poetry saw a slow but significant shift in tone as it gradually embraced new forms to reflect modernist poetics (Dudek 3, Norris). Though old tropes evolved, signposts of Scott and Lampman's curiosity for a radical other in nature—and how to articulate its veiled presence—remain detectable throughout these changes. Though some Canadian modernist poems continued to employ conservative metre and rhyme schemes (e.g. E.J. Pratt's "From Stone to Steel"), E.J. Pratt's "The Shark" (1923) is a mark of the modernist shift in form— referred to by one critic as "an imagist poem in motion" (Whalley 186). In "The Shark," Pratt mulls over the titular animal's alien being. The shark is described with cool, industrial terms: his fin is "sheet-iron" (4) with a "knife-edge" (6), his eyes "metallic" (19), his body "tubular" (10,

28) and "smoke-blue" (12, 28). Pratt's imagery is cold and colourless; he paints the poem's sea creature with language and images lifted from human infrastructure. While some might see this as a peculiar anthropomorphism—translating the language of human culture onto an animal body—I argue that it serves rhetorical purpose. As this cool imagery builds in momentum, it lends strength to the affective experience of Pratt's closing lines:

> Lithely,
>
> Leisurely,
>
> He swam—
>
> That strange fish,
>
> Tubular, tapered, smoke-blue,
>
> Part vulture, part wolf,
>
> Part neither—for his blood was cold. (24-30)

This poem closes with a shiver. Readers arrive at its conclusion having developed a sense for something cool and eerie, though amorally so, causing the final line to clinch the reader's sense of animal otherness. Though Pratt describes the shark's "double row of white teeth" (17), which might cause some readers to project their own fear of sharks onto the poem, he never projects a qualitative assessment on the animal. This creature is neither good nor terrible, just animal: a cold-blooded animal. The purpose in defining the animal's blood as cold is explicated by the first half of that final line—a line Pratt agonized over.[10] In trying to define this shark—what is arguably the preoccupation of this poem—Pratt arrives at a conclusion that purposefully resists definition. This shark is "Part vulture, part wolf, / Part *neither*—" (29-30, emphasis mine). And though he is *neither* wolf nor vulture, Pratt doesn't say what he *is*. Instead, the creature's neither-

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[10] This painstaking attention to the final line is explicated in an introductory note to "The Shark" in *The Complete Works of E.J. Pratt: The Hypertext Pratt*, in which Pratt explains his meticulous approach in refining a poem's conclusion, calling it "the most important part" (Trent U).

ness is emphasized by his cool blood, reminding readers of its non-human difference. This is definition by negation—that favourite strategy of Dennis Lee's—rooted in the parts of the shark that escape language. Formally, in this final line, the shark's animal otherness is underlined by the poet's inability to articulate the wilderness of the shark—and vice versa. Therefore, Pratt embraces an early type of the new Canadian eco-poet's poetics of unknowing, choosing to eschew definition of a creature's alien being. In doing so, he embodies McKay's theory that, a creature's "wilderness" should be "granted a reprieve from definition, maybe even a lengthy sabbatical from speech" ("Muskwa Assemblage" 482).

By looking at the textual history of Canadian modernist A.J.M. Smith's poem, "The Lonely Land" (1926/1943[11]), readers can see an arc—exemplified by Smith's own revisions—that similarly moves towards unknowing. Smith presents nature in a way that, like Pratt, resists definition. The final version of "The Lonely Land" is an imagist and Group of Seven inspired attempt to depict nature without romanticizing it (Ferns 46). This version attempts to show nature in its most open-handed form, unpossessed by human projections—though, admittedly, Smith's own bias still manifests in the "beauty" (23-24) he sees in nature's "jagged" (1) side. Written in 38 terse lines, this poem details stormy waters and the speaker's response to nature's chaos. The opening lines establish nature's harsher, raw edge:

> Cedar and jagged fir
>
> uplift sharp barbs
>
> against the gray
>
> and cloud-piled sky. (1-4)

---

[11] See above (11n3).

Smith repeats g and r sounds in words like "jagged," "against," "sharp barbs," and "gray." This guttural, throaty consonance creates a sonic image akin to a growl, as if to say: make no mistake, there is a storm here, and it is snarling. This first stanza is chaotic, portraying "pine trees" (10) that "lean one way" (11) and a "blown" bay whose tossed surf "snap[s] / at the whirling sky" (8-9). The second stanza considers a duck call: it is "wild" (12) and "ragged" (13). But the duck's cry drowns in weather that rages; it is "lost" (20) to the speaker "in the lapping of water" (21), swallowed by the storm. In failing to frame the duck's call in this poem, Smith highlights something in this scene that cannot be possessed, something that "eludes the mind's appropriations" (McKay, *VV* 21).

Smith scholar Brian Trehearne points out that the earliest version of "The Lonely Land," first published in a 1926 issue of *McGill Fortnightly*, waxes Romantic in both rhyme and content (*Aestheticism* 235). In this version, Smith presents nature as a place of rest and solace for a weary heart, to which the duck's wild cry provides "relief" (17). In its third stanza, the young Smith imbues and evaluates the land with human standard and value, writing:

> It is good to come to this land
>
> Of desolate splendour and grey grief,
>
> And on a loud, stony strand
>
> Find for a tired heart relief
>
> In a wild duck's bitter cry,
>
> In grey rock, black pine, shrill wind
>
> And cloud-piled sky. (14-20)

This version is not cemented in our national literary memory as the canonical version of "The Lonely Land." By the time this poem was anthologized in Smith's publications, he had edited it

down to the terser, imagist verse with which most readers are familiar. Therefore, this poem's textual history significantly tracks Smith's loss of Romantic tendencies as he dove headfirst into modernist poetics. But for the purposes of this thesis, I am more interested in how these revisions trace a coinciding evolution of Smith's representation of nature, particularly as exemplified in the duck's cry.

In the 1926 version of the poem, Smith romanticizes this animal subject and portrays the bird call through a decidedly emotive human gaze, suggesting nature offers something of central importance: relief to a weary heart. But Smith's edits show a desire to cut that feeling altogether. As Trehearne observes, Smith exchanges the "human emotion" in this early version for "a climactic aesthetic speculation" in its latter form (*Aestheticism* 236). The third stanza shifts and is translated into a more impersonal reflection—withholding an explicitly emotive statement— on the purely "visual quality of the Canadian landscape" (Trehearne, *Aestheticism* 236), in which beauty is dissonant and nature's strength is tangled with its decay: a "beauty / of strength / broken by strength / and still strong" (35-38). In losing human emotion by erasing it from Smith's representation of nature, the duck's cry becomes "lost" (20) altogether, along with the relief it once provided. I believe this shows the development of Smith's wilderness poetics: as he grew in recognition of nature as wholly other, Smith refined his form to underline this recognition, losing any sense of communion with nature for the speaker's "tired heart." And with this loss, the duck's cry forfeits to oblivion too—a loss that underlines an inability to possess the animal in verse, on page, and in mind. Therefore, wilderness in this poem circumvents the human senses in a way that highlights nature's autonomy, what McKay calls "its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being" (*VV* 21). "The Lonely Land" therefore provides a "recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness" (McKay, *VV* 28), anticipating McKay's own articulation in

"Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush" that, in the "interval" (10) between individual bird

calls, "you realize the wilderness / between one breath / and another" (10-12) (qtd. in Mason,

"Listening" 86-87).

MARGARET ATWOOD'S UNMAPPABLE WILD

It is often said that "Can Lit" was born in the 1960s, though many would clarify that

Canadian literature was instead "*re*born" with this new moniker, afresh with "talkative self-

consciousness" (McKay, "GF" 52-53, emphasis mine). Writing at the apex of this rebirth,

Margaret Atwood's poem "Journey to the Interior" (1966) explores the wilderness of the human

self. "Journey to the Interior" is an extended metaphor in which the speaker's exploration of her

psyche is analogous to an experience with raw, undeveloped nature. Though its purpose is

symbolic, the poem's natural imagery is worth considering in terms of what it reveals about

landscape alone. After all, the extended metaphor in this poem is effective because the speaker

"notice[s]" (2) "similarities" (1) between natural wilderness and the alien being of her interior

mindscape. Therefore, the metaphor has weight that merits a reading from either side, and for the

purpose of this project, I will focus on what it reveals about nature's unmappable side, those

parts of it that escape cartographical representation.

The first lines of "Journey to the Interior" indicate the human tendency to be reductive in

how we represent nature. These lines highlight art's limitations in capturing the

multidimensional wild: "the eyes make" the hills as "flat as a wall," suggesting an image of a

poorly done landscape painting (3). But as the speaker moves through this space, the hills "open"

(4) into "endless prairies" (6) and a swampy, "spindly" (7) country. In this poem, "a cliff is not

known / as rough except by a hand, and is / therefore inaccessible" (9-11). In saying this,

Atwood highlights the sociolinguistic construction of nature: we define the cliff in relation to us,

to our soft hands, and therefore can only ever know it on our human terms. Here, I think of P.K.

Page's poem "Cook's Mountains," in which Page explores the "colonization of wilderness"

(McCaslin 117) by meditating on the act of naming, writing ironically:

> By naming them [Cook] made them.
>
> They were there before he came
>
> But they were not the same.
>
> It was his gaze
>
> That glazed each one …
>
> And instantly they altered to become
>
> The sum of shape and name. (1-6, 17-18)

In the same way that Page illustrates how a naming gaze "substitutes sign for reality," making

words "barricades" (McCaslin 117), Atwood suggests that, because of the human's limited

perspective, some aspect of the cliff is veiled and inaccessible. Here, Atwood anticipates

McKay's attempts to shift the definition of place from "home and native land" to "wilderness to

which history has happened" or "land to which we have occurred"—a definition that asks not

"'what is the [cliff] to me?' but 'what am I to the [cliff]?'" (*DW* 17). Therefore Atwood's

representation of the cliff rejects the disposition that privileges the human over the non-human

object, hinting at a way of knowing that exceeds the human mind.

In addition to highlighting nature's inaccessibility, this poem asserts its unmappable

parts. The speaker does not travel "from point to point, a dotted / line on a map" (13-14) but

instead moves in tangles reminiscent of Michel De Certeau's peripatetic walker in "Walking in

the City," zig-zagging to assert some sort of "alternate spatiality" (De Certeau 93). Like De

Certeau's walker—albeit nature-based instead of civic—Atwood's speaker enters wild spaces

that "elude legibility," makes use of "unseen" space and, in turn, productively problematizes the "clear text" of mapped and "readable" topography (De Certeau 93). Atwood's meandering form—ranging in short bursts of three-word lines and two-line stanzas to longer, ambling phrases and nine-line stanzas—reflects the speaker's mode of travel. It is productively free-verse, highlighting the drift of the journey in an uncharted—and *unchartable*—space. Like maps, "words here are as pointless / as calling in a vacant wilderness" (39-40). If language and cartography are pointless, then this metaphorical space in Atwood's poem—described only in gesture—dodges definition. It eludes our cognitive grip, and draws the reader's attention to a space where language holds neither relevance nor power.

CONCLUSION

In their concern with wilderness and the radical other that resides therein, the poems analyzed in this chapter address the human's sense of place in relation to nature. Like McKay's own poetry, these poems do not produce "deeper roots" in the Canadian landscape, but rather, a "more complex sense of being here" (McKay, "GF" 63). By encountering places that teem with McKavian wilderness, Lampman, Scott, Pratt, Smith, and Atwood collectively suggest an encounter with something that cannot be contained by easy, totalizing definitions. In turn, this other—whether an inappellable, undefinable, resistant, or unmappable other—loosens our definitions of place, our conception of natural space, and our confident delivery of names at the brink of language.

"BEYOND THE EDGE" OF CONCEPTION: AL PURDY'S TREMENDUM POETICS

> "Poetry comes about because language is not able to represent
>
> raw experience, yet it must." - Don McKay, *Vis à Vis* 65

Reading place-oriented poetry, McKay suggests an alternate way of relating to place—a paradigm shift brought about by unpossessive poetics:

> Place persistently eludes our grasp, so long as a grasp is what it is. So long as we cling to
>
> the idea of place as something that belongs to us, removed from its mothering wilderness,
>
> we prevent ourselves from ever belonging to it. We remain colonizers and colonials. One
>
> of the ways that grasp is loosened is by the introduction of *time* into what on the surface
>
> seems a purely spatial concept. ("GF" 63, emphasis mine).

The poetry of Canadian heavyweight Al Purdy does just this. By highlighting "deep time,"—also known as geologic time, that which signifies the earth is 4.5 billion years old—many of Purdy's poems subvert any sense of "the immediate and local" in favour of "the prehistoric or infinite" (McKay, "GF" 67, 68). In doing so, Purdy's work embodies a "poetic attention" (McKay, *VV* 26) that anticipates McKay's own poetics—a poetics that has become increasingly interested in deep time as McKay's career has evolved, evidenced by his thematic turn towards geology or "geopoetics" (*DW* 33) in *Deactivated West 100* (2005), *The Shell of the Tortoise* (2011), *Paradoxides* (2012), and the new poems in *Angular Unconformity* (2014).[12] With that in mind, this chapter shows how Purdy similarly invokes deep time to articulate an attention to the

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[12] One only needs to read McKay's short paragraph explaining the title of his Collected Poems *Angular Unconformity* to confirm this shift: "an angular unconformity is a border between two rock sequences, one lying at a distinct angle to the other, which represents a significant gap—often millions of years—in the geological record," which McKay describes as, "a fissure through which deep time leaks into history and upsets its authority" (McKay, *AU* 9).

mysterium tremendum—in other words, the alien otherness—of the natural world, and in doing

so, complicates a human relationship to place by drawing attention to an alternate space beyond

the edge of the categorizing mind.

Before analyzing poems that overtly invoke deep time as the harbinger of mysterium

tremendum, this chapter will discuss the evolution of Purdy's tremendum poetics as a foundation

upon which his interest in deep time is later rhetorically built. First, I map the growth of this

attention from *The Enchanted Echo* (1944) ("Spring Dialogue," "Hibernated Bear," "The

Crocus," and "Things Beyond Reach") to *North of Summer* (1967) ("Trees at the Arctic Circle,"

"Arctic Rhododendrons," "Still Life in a Tent"), pausing along the way to discuss the influence

Dennis Lee had in developing this interest. I then look at the relationship between tremendum

and deep time in poems from *Birdwatching at the Equator* (1981) ("Iguana," "Moses at Darwin

Station," "Adam and No Eve," and "Moonspell") and *Woman on the Shore* (1990) ("On the

Flood Plain") to show how Purdy uses deep time to widen the spatio-temporal scope of an

encounter with a non-human other. I argue that towards the end of his career, Purdy begins to

invoke deep time to interrupt a possessive human gaze, eschewing cognitive appropriation of

something in nature that he sees as wholly other. Through this appeal, Purdy opens readers up to

an alternate cognitive space—a space that begins at the edge of an encounter with the non-human

other—and in doing so, develops a theme in Canadian poetry on which McKay's own gaze-

troubling work will later build.

MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM AND THE SHEER OTHERNESS OF THE WORLD

Sam Solecki affirms that a critical pillar of Purdy's "polyphonic" (Solecki, "Materials"

29) persona is an "Al" who is "interested in the sheer...otherness of the world" (Solecki, "Limits"

98). The poems in which Purdy's speakers are rapt with attention to this "sheer otherness"

exemplify what I call Purdy's *tremendum poetics*. Like McKay's edge poetics, encounters with tremendum often lead Purdy's poems to a limit. In poems that translate encounters with tremendum, the speakers develop an increased awareness of their own cognitive edge, highlighting the unknowability of that which lies beyond the limit of conception. Purdy's tremendum poetics therefore pay attention to a presence that, akin to McKavian wilderness, dwells outside definition: a "spirit.../...beyond the edge of chaos" (Purdy, "The Darkness" 60) or "the rare arrival / of something entirely beyond us" (Purdy, "Time Past/Time Now" 38-39).

In his essay "The Poetry of Al Purdy," Canadian writer Dennis Lee articulates that Purdy's poetry often amalgamates dual dimensions—the comprehensible, tactile present and some incomprehensible alternate space—in an attempt to highlight this "encounter with what theologians call…*mysterium tremendum*—holy otherness" (93, emphasis mine). Purdy scholar Tim Heath picks up on Lee's assertion, extending it to include the Latin phrase's third term— mysterium tremendum *et fascinans*—whose translation emphasizes the *fascinating* character of mysterium tremendum (T. Heath 209). This *fascinans* exemplifies itself in Purdy's work as "intense curiosity" for tremendum (T. Heath 209). Lee argues that, "sensing this holy otherness in the [...] world," Purdy's poems "enter the eternal now" ("The Poetry of Al" 94): an unsituated cognitive dimension, in which multiple spaces and times merge within a poem to highlight the unknowability—and *uncontainability*—of an encounter with tremendum.

Growing up influenced by the Confederation Poets—particularly Bliss Carman—Purdy would have been inspired by a Romantic interest in the sublime (Solecki, "Al Purdy Among the Poets" 110-111). As he matured as a writer, his own interest in sublime encounters evolved, developing its own terms of interest in what Lee calls mysterium tremendum. Like its theological origin, this interest is rooted in some whisper in the natural world that escapes all possibility of

assessment. To be clear, it is not so much the *holy* other that interests Purdy, but the *wholly* other. Like McKay's theory of wilderness, tremendum is "the call of the duende" in the non-human world (McKay, "Muskwa Assemblage," 483). And though his speakers are many in voice and tone, this poetic attention is one of the "central intuition[s]" in Purdy's career (Lee, "The Poetry of Al" 95).

DEVELOPING TREMENDUM POETICS: EARLY SEEDS IN *THE ENCHANTED ECHO*

I believe that Purdy developed this attention over time, slowly refining his tremendum poetics and its related curiosity for wilderness as he matured as a poet. Purdy's first book, *The Enchanted Echo* (1944), shows young signs of interest in the non-human other and the mysterium tremendum that pulses in nature. Surveying these early poems, we can see latent seeds of Purdy's attention to tremendum, though these seeds are often stifled by Purdy's inability to refuse trite anthropocentrism in his depiction of the animal other in particular. Both "Spring Dialogue" and "Hibernated Bear" imagine the animals—sparrow and bear, respectively—as comic, anthropomorphized caricatures. In "Hibernated Bear," the speaker gazes upon a sleeping bear who, in his sleep, "slyly grin[s]" (9) and dreams of "battles grim" (15). In "Spring Dialogue," four birds chirp conversationally with each other, saying things like, "Oh, the world is wide, / Rivers rushing endlessly, ribboned roads beside. / Oh, the world is lovely!" (3-5). Not only is the anthropomorphism in the very fact that these birds are speaking English, but also, in the cliché of the "wide open road." A sparrow could not possibly associate the world's wideness with its transport infrastructure. Even if the ribboning road is a quiet rural highway, it is still a civic space that can only symbolize wideness for the mobile human. The speaker, therefore, possesses and inhabits the bird's gaze in a thoughtless manner, diminishing its otherness in the process. Yet if we look past this problematic rendering of the animal other, we can notice small

signposts of Purdy's interest in tremendum. The sparrow's flight is framed in terms of reaching

"new beyonds" (8) and "vanished kingdoms" (14) that exceed the reach of the poem. Therefore,

"Spring Dialogue," anthropomorphic as it may be, does hint at how the bird might escape the

speaker's gaze, eluding his or her cognitive grip.

Deviating from stark anthropomorphisms, *The Enchanted Echo* opens with two poems

that emphasize the poet's inability to articulate "the sum of living" ("Things Beyond Reach" 4).

"The Crocus" begins with an assertion that humans "burden and oppress" the flower "with

weighty Latin names" (1-2). This anticipates McKay's own ideas about field guide taxonomies[13],

outlined in *Vis à Vis,* in which he says:

> Amateur naturalists trying to identify a plant or animal…frequently experience a sort of
>
> vertigo as they stand, field guide in hand, beside a trail, registering the
>
> incommensurability of the plant's infinitude of parts, processes, and ecological relations
>
> with the tag that attaches it to language and makes it accessible to human intelligence.
>
> [...] Even 'apt' names touch but a tiny portion of a creature, place, or thing. When that
>
> vertigo arrives, we're aware of the abject thinness of language, while simultaneously
>
> realizing its necessity. [...] It is often during such momentary breakdowns that we sense
>
> the enormous, unnameable wilderness beyond it—a wilderness we both long for and fear.
>
> (64)

Understanding the limitations of botanical nomenclature, the speaker in "Things Beyond Reach"

cannot "capture goldenrod" (5) nor "trace a river's course, / And run it through my song—" (9,

10). Here, the poet's gaze is framed as partial and his "pen" (20) perpetually insufficient. Even if

the speaker managed to articulate "a crocus scent" (13) or "the roadside flowers" (19), writes

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[13] Much of McKay's creative writing plays with this idea of the nomenclature of field guides. See his poem
"Twinflower" (*AU* 318) and short story "A Small Fable" (*VV* 89-92) for examples.

Purdy, every spring would bring a new encounter with the limits of articulation. The link here, between spring and otherness, establishes nature as the particular and specific site of encounter with tremendum—that which is "beyond" reach ("Spring Dialogue" 8)—in Purdy's poetics. Therefore, in *The Enchanted Echo*, we see that there is not a clean break between Purdy's early Romantic gaze and his later attention to tremendum. Likely, the latter grew out of the former in part—though at this stage in his career the poet was still developing an eye for encounters with that which is wholly other, perhaps unsure how to articulate it in verse.

"SOME KIND OF FIREWORKS": DENNIS LEE'S INFLUENCE

Reading Purdy's oeuvre, it seems as if the 1960s chart a pivotal development of style and craft: Purdy's form shifted, humour more heavily permeated his verse, and his juvenile tremendum poetics were significantly refined. Though Purdy's poetry explores too many themes to place him alongside Lee and McKay in the group of "new eco-poets" (Holmes xvi)—his poetry is not exclusively nor even predominantly interested in wilderness—many of the ideas explored in Purdy's nature poems intersect and engage with the new eco-poet's impulse to examine and reconsider human encounters with the non-human other. Since both McKay and Purdy developed as writers within the same national literary scene, with some shared peers, and since both their oeuvres express interest in some radical other and in deep time, Purdy's own influences may hold clues to some of the forces that have shaped McKay's wilderness poetics. I therefore want to consider the influence Lee, the "elder statesman" (M. Dickinson, *Canadian Primal*) of the "new eco-poets" (Holmes xvi), had on Purdy's eye for "murmurs of glory" (Lee, "The Poetry of Al" 86), particularly in Purdy's shift away from his early Romantic material.

Letters between Purdy and Lee—co-founder and then editor of the House of Anansi Press, which published Purdy's *Poems for All the Annettes* in 1967—indicate a respectful

working relationship, one in which Purdy solicited Lee's feedback, and Lee returned the favour

by sending his own poems to Purdy for review. In a letter written on May 2, 1971, Lee offers

guidance on an early draft of *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea* (*YA* 177-178). In that same letter,

Lee illustrates a reciprocal relationship by asking Purdy, "can I lay on you half a poem I

wrote...as one of my civil elegies?" (*YA* 178).[14] Elsewhere, Lee advises Purdy on the curation of

Selected Poems (*YA* 205), edits poems in *The Cariboo Horses* (1965) and *The Stone Bird* (1981)

(*YA* 318), and gives positive feedback about *Being Alive* (1978) (*YA* 342). Purdy expresses deep

respect for Lee's edits, saying in a letter dated October 21, 1981:

> I've mentioned in the past that one of the big reasons—in fact the principal reason—that
>
> quite a few of the poems [...] were changed and revised for the better was you. Going
>
> over poems with you, and your comments about this or that, something unclear, could be
>
> better, etc., made the difference. [...] You did start some kind of fireworks exploding in
>
> my brain. (*YA* 342)

These letters indicate mutual influence throughout the 1960s and onwards, one in which they

were not just exchanging edits, but also ideas—ideas that impacted the way Purdy thought,

setting off "fireworks" in his mind (*YA* 342).

Tucked away in the University of Saskatchewan's Al Purdy archive lies an early draft of

Dennis Lee's *Kingdom of Absence*, which shows signs of Purdy having edited it in part, or at

least having scribbled his own marginalia. Lee's *Kingdom of Absence* poems were composed

throughout the early 1960s, eventually published in 1967 (J. Heath 54). The draft version in

Purdy's possession is slightly different from that published in 1967,[15] and most of Purdy's

marginalia seem to be notes-to-self or ideas; he seems to have suggested few edits that made the

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[14] It is quite possible that this is the draft of *Kingdoms of Absence*, which I refer to below.

[15] For example, the section titles are added and the order of the sonnets changes between this archived draft and House of Anansi's 1967 edition.

final cut.[16] In this collection of "43 variations on the sonnet form," Lee contrasts city life in

Toronto with the Muskoka region in Northern Ontario (J. Heath 54). The city is presented as a

"void" (6.14), an "absence" (20.2), an "abyss" (39.14), and "far from being" (17.6).[17] Absence

reigns in the Muskokas too, but this region is also a conduit of encounters with mysterium

tremendum, which offers a kind of solace for the absence:

> How often, in muskoka, bedded down
>
> > at midnight, in the heavy dark, distraught,
>
> constrained by silence, the tough, unsundered
>
> > long and preternatural northern calm,
>
> as a single outboard inched across my hearing,
>
> > fretting the lake, and the early
>
> tremendum
>
> occurred. (36.1-8)

This particular sonnet, like many in *Kingdom of Absence*, dwells in this encounter with the

wholly other, referred to here as "early tremendum" (6-7). Elsewhere, in the eighteenth sonnet,

Lee names this mysterious other, removing any association with theology or religious

inclination, calling it instead "secular tremendum" (18.9-10).

    As in Purdy's poetry, Lee's own tremendum poetics show an interest in the limits of both

articulation and comprehension, or, what Lee here calls "unmeaning" (35.2, 7)—perhaps a poetic

practice that signals his interest in unknowing. Indeed, his speaker says you cannot extract the

divine ("quarry God") from these encounters (35.5-6), but "only the awkward darkness of

---

[16] Since this copy was still in Purdy's possession before it went to the archive, it seems Lee never received a tangible copy of Purdy's notes.

[17] For the purpose of this paper, these citations reference the archived draft version in Purdy's possession. The 1967 publication was consulted for this chapter, but is not cited in text.

unmeaning / lights you on your [...] way" (7-8). Similarly, when the speaker arrives in the Muskokas, the "great constructs of the mind recede" and "time slide[s]" (6.1, 3), not unlike Purdy's signature slip into an "alternate cosmos" (Lee, "The Poetry of Al" 82). Elsewhere, Lee's tremendum poetics manifest as disruptions of the poetic gaze. In 10.9-11, the poet is called a "mortal maker" who must tell lies until death, emphasizing the impossibility of articulating anything completely while also anticipating McKay's claim that metaphor *is* a lie in the interest of truth (*VV* 68). In the twelfth sonnet, the speaker links these lies to the poet's limited and partial gaze, saying ironically, about objects in the Muskokas, that "our gaze / unselve them tenderly and draw them veering / inward towards our own necessities [*sic*]" (12.2-4). This establishes the gaze upon nature as inescapably selfish, emphasizing the inability of the poet to transcend his or her own need or agenda—we lose something of the other's "self" (12.3) when we "draw them" (12.2) into our cognition via our gaze. Here, Lee pities "the makers," the poets, "that they must sustain / the universe within their livelong gaze" (12.7-8). The use of the word "sustain" is ironic. Of course, the universe will unfurl and continue without our poetic attention, without our gaze, without our names for it. Perhaps, then, what Lee pities is any presumption that the gaze is a conduit of truth, that it can ever be anything but partial.

These drafts of *Kingdom of Absence*, as well as the letters, tell us something about Purdy's relationship with Lee. It is likely that, early in his career, Purdy—already interested in something "inappellable" (Scott, "The Height of Land" 52), something mysterious in the natural world—found some resonance with Lee's own interest in tremendum. There are no indications that Purdy ever used this term himself, be it the theologian's *mysterium tremendum* or Lee's *secular tremendum*. However, encounters with something wholly other occur throughout Purdy's work, increasing in nuance from the 1960s onwards. They are breaches in perception, gesturing

at that which is beyond the mind's grip. And as these encounters increase on the page, Purdy's

depictions of the non-human other are portrayed with more openness, more "unmeaning"

(*Kingdom of Absence* 35.2).

FACING THE NORTHERN EDGE: TREMENDUM POETICS IN *NORTH OF SUMMER*

   Spending a summer "lost at the world's edge" (Purdy, "To See the Shore" xvi) on Baffin

Island in 1965 seems to have further shaped Purdy's own poetic attention. In his autobiography

Reaching for the Beaufort Sea, Purdy confirms that his time on Baffin Island was critically

formative, saying that, "from 1965 onwards, life opened up for me" and that "Baffin Island was a

beginning" (*RBS* 190). He further says that, "everything that happened before 1965 was an

apprenticeship" (*RBS* 189). After these self-proclaimed apprentice years, Purdy became more

"curious," more desirous to "go on exploring my own limitations and boundaries" (*RBS* 189).

The poems in *North of Summer* (1967), composed during his time on Baffin Island, reflect this

strengthened curiosity for limitations, and that which lies beyond the limit. Purdy writes:

> At Pangnirtung, where I stayed for the first few weeks, were no great fields or flowers, no
>
> forests dominated the horizon. But tiny flowers were tucked away here and there, patches
>
> of them in wind-sheltered places; and ground willows hugged the land and were nurtured
>
> by the land. All this life, hovering just a few inches above death. [...] I looked at
>
> everything for the first, second and third time, and kept looking. I was insatiably curious.
>
> (*RBS* 190)

For Purdy, the Arctic place redefined his perception of the non-human other in a foreign natural

setting. Here at the northern edge, he cultivated his poetic attention for the tremendum of those

tiny flowers and ground willows. As a result, many of the poems in *North of Summer* present

nature through a disposition that relinquishes control and embraces unknowing, showing a more

attuned poetic attention to tremendum than shown in *The Enchanted Echo*. While deep time is not a strong theme of the poems in *North of Summer*, they significantly signal a representation of nature that resists both language and the human gaze, and instead embraces a radical other.

"Trees at the Arctic Circle" begins in judgment of the tiny "Coward trees" (8) who are "worried about the sky / afraid of exposing their limbs" (14-15). But after looking again, the speaker sees "their pods glow" (27) and notices the tiny veins in their leaves (29). Impressed by the way their "roots must touch permafrost" (39), using "death to remain alive" (42), the speaker relinquishes his gaze. The speaker then sees that "I've been carried away" and "most foolish in my judgments" (43, 45). He has shamefully become "the Pontifex Maximus" (51)—the highest ranking priest in ancient Rome, which literally translates as "greatest pontiff" or "greatest *bridge-builder"* (Smith, *Dictionary* 940, emphasis mine). This allusion articulates something Purdy says in *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea*, that, "from the land there is nothing but a great silence, unless you build a word-bridge"—or translation—"to help you understand a thing that [is] beyond understanding" (*RBS* 238). And yet, in poorly articulating the trees, Purdy's speaker becomes "the Pontifex Maximus / of nullity" (51-52): the highest ranking priest of no importance, whose presumption renders the poem null or invalid. This poem therefore embodies the tension between presumptive, possessive bridge-building and a pseudo-translation rooted in the *beyond*. By the end of "Trees at the Arctic Circle," the speaker-as-poet concludes that, "I have been stupid in a poem / I will not alter it / but let the stupidity remain permanent" (53-55). Formally, the poem ends here without punctuation. This decision shows "Purdy trying to open up the lyric form from within by [...] resisting, even as he points to, its inevitable closure" (Solecki, "The Limits of Lyric" 102). As Solecki articulates, this illustrates an attempt to "destabiliz[e]" any "assertion of order and meaning" by playfully "calling the possibility of meaning … into

question" ("The Limits of Lyric" 103). Furthermore, this formally articulates something Purdy

claims in an earlier poem, "Postscript" (1956), in which he writes: "I say the stanza ends, but it

never does" (1). If the stanza never ends though the words on the page do, this suggests that

Purdy's poetry gestures—or perhaps even leaks into—some space beyond the edges of the poem.

Like "Postscript," "Trees at the Arctic Circle" suggests an open-handed conclusion, one that is

attentive to the presumptive mistakes we can make with language. By ending without

punctuation, this poem turns towards the space suggested in the first line of "Postscript." While

this poem does not overtly describe an encounter with the tremendum of the ground willow, it

does map a poetic attention that embodies unknowing—a critical part of the poet's disposition

towards tremendum. It further articulates a poetic form that might translate these encounters

best—one that is open, fragmentary—and a disposition that affirms that, "the questioning of

reality often begins … with a questioning of the self" (Solecki, "The Limits of Lyric" 105).

"Arctic Rhododendrons" is equally open-handed in its depiction of almost unseen

flowers, represented here as "small purple surprises" (1). An early draft of this poem describes

these flowers as residing "in water-places / where the silence seems / related to the river's

rumble" (4-6). With one small edit—an edit that remains in all publications of this poem—Purdy

clarifies this general silence, changing it to "*their* silence," which underlines the elusive nature of

these rhododendrons: *they* embody silence. However, the floral silence is related to the noisy

current. This emphasizes that silence itself can figuratively flood the attentive ear, symbolizing

wilderness's unyielding tremendum. Or, to quote McKay, an encounter with wilderness can

generate "silence like an overwhelming noise" ("Close Up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk" 9). In this

early draft, Purdy writes:

how extraordinary to be human

> stand in the tumble of water
>
> the lifetime you're living in
>
> and stare at the noisy flower
>
> become a marvellous commonplace [...]
>
> without understanding
>
> the noisy flowers
>
> and walking away
>
> into silence (9-19)

Like the arc in "Trees at the Arctic Circle," this poem maps a satisfaction with unknowing, with not "understanding / the noisy flowers" (16-17). It traces a kind of transformation in the speaker, a transformation rooted in the initial encounter with the flower, and its related silence. Though this is a noisy poem, the speaker ends in silence, "without understanding" (16). However, the speaker seems completely satisfied to conclude in such unknowing. Though these lines change somewhat in later versions of the poem, I am more interested in this original draft. After all, this is the version composed during, or close to, Purdy's time on Baffin Island—therefore, this is the version that contains trace evidence of his shifting perception and the development of his tremendum poetics.

Writing about the impact this year had, Purdy says that he became more interested in "the other self who lives in all of us," a "shadow of the self" he was "trying to get in touch with" (*RBS* 189). Not only was Purdy interested in the tremendum *outside* of the poet, that which dwells in the natural world, but he was also deeply curious about the tremendum within one's own self. This exemplifies McKay's theory that there is also a wilderness within "the far reaches of the self" ("The Muskwa Assemblage" 483) while also echoing Scott's suggestion that

encounters with McKavian wilderness give "the inarticulate part / Of our strange being one moment of release" ("The Height of Land" 53-54). "Still Life in a Tent," another poem in *North of Summer*, retrospectively illustrates the way Baffin Island affected this interest in a wilderness that reverberates in the self. Lying in bed after a pivotal canoe trip with his guide, the auto-biographical speaker says:

> I'm so glad to be here
>
> with the chance that comes but once
>
> to any man in his lifetime
>
> to travel deep within himself
>
> to meet himself as a stranger
>
> at the northern end of the world (94-98)

This affirms Solecki's claim that "the poems in which Purdy deals with [...] radical otherness" also explore "the limits of the self, the cognitive, epistemological, and emotional boundaries that can only be transgressed in imagination and poetic rhetoric" ("Limits" 116).

ENCOUNTERS WITH DEEP TIME: ALTERNATE SPACE IN "ON THE FLOOD PLAIN"

As evidenced by his sweeping oeuvre, Purdy is equally interested in the mundane "as with its murmurs of glory" (Lee, "The Poetry of Al" 86). In fact, when the former is framed within a poem alongside the latter, these encounters with tremendum "register more tellingly" in contrast (Lee, "The Poetry of Al" 99). Take "On the Flood Plain" for example, a poem written later in Purdy's career and published in *The Woman on the Shore* (1990), in which the speaker experiences an outhouse encounter with late night tremendum. This poem takes place at midnight but opens up into the infinite, unsituating itself as it widens in spatio-temporal scope. In "On the Flood Plain," the speaker walks "between house and outhouse" (41) to use the

washroom—a mundane activity, one that even borders on crass—when he encounters something "on the dark lake" (62) that is "beyond your understanding" (47). This poem occurs at what British writers Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts call an "edgeland": where nature and culture co-exist, fraying into each other in a way that troubles distinct categories of either (Farley, *Edgelands* 5). Here, the property frays into wide open plain and icy nature impinges on the domestic homestead, the two "negotiat[ing] and renegotiat[ing] their borders" (Farley, *Edgelands* 5). This edgeland setting is the poem's first signal that, "our categorizing minds might prefer to keep segments of the world in airtight compartments"—ordered by linear time and binary thinking—"but the segments don't cooperate" and often eschew our classifying grip (Lee "The Poetry of Al" 84).

Coming from his house, the speaker is captivated by the invading presence of the stars and ice, which he notes are "far older than earth / primordial as the Big Bang" (14-15). This first signal of deep time—reinforced by the reminder that both stars and ice existed before theories of "Pangaea and Gondwanaland / arrive here in the 20th century" (18-19)—causes the singular moment to expand, both spatially and temporally, while the speaker's mind hangs "like a great silver metronome / suspended between stars" (59-60). The mind here is both situated and not, dangling in unmappable space. As the encounter widens and the limits of the body are transgressed, we glimpse a dimension beyond the brain's limit. In this glimpse, ideas of the infinite bleed into the reader's localized conception of this poem's fixed setting, which challenges our sense of place in this poem. Here on the flood plain "time pours" into the speaker's "cupped hands" (62). This image of deep time spilling into the cupped hands implicates two related images that, read together, suggest the unknowability of this encounter— an encounter that gestures at infinity. This image is first reminiscent of cupped communion

hands, waiting to receive the Eucharist wafer from their priest, which suggests an attempt to commune or connect spiritually with this dark-lake tremendum. And yet, any contained connection is resisted. Instead, time pours like an ever-running faucet, the hands unable to contain more than a fraction of what they're receiving. Here, time floods like the water on the plain itself. It overflows beyond what the hands—and mind—can hold. This image enacts Lee's theory that, in Purdy's poems, "time seems to lock for the speaker, and the physical world is both utterly present and wholly transparent"—highly situated, yet equally unsituated—creating "a window into some ineffable dimension where [the speaker] is at once lost and at home" ("The Poetry of Al" 93). This encounter is therefore a partial bridge towards something inconceivable and infinite, causing the single moment to unfurl into an "alternate cosmos," a term Lee uses to describe a slip into alternate space in "Hockey Players" but which can equally be applied to "On the Flood Plain," among other poems ("The Poetry of Al," 82).

This analysis raises the question: what is the relationship between poetry and deep time? In his essay "From Here to Infinity (Or So)," McKay emphasizes the importance of poetry and its devices as that which helps us comprehend deep time. In particular, he explains the role metaphor has in helping students grasp this concept: the "geological mile, in which human history is represented by its last few inches, and the geological year, with our noble species appearing barely in time to sing *Auld Lang Syne*" are two popular examples ("From Here" 127). These analogies illustrate that metaphor plays a "crucial role" in the "hermeneutics of deep time" because it allows us to better "conceiv[e] the inconceivable" (McKay, "From Here" 128). However, in addition to helping us comprehend tricky ideas, both metaphor and the poem itself—which, as an extended exercise in metaphor, stretches the mind—productively "complicates the nature of understanding itself" (McKay, "From Here" 129).

There is a certain musicality in "On the Flood Plain" that reinforces the role of the poetic mind, which I believe holds an answer to this question posed above. In "On the Flood Plain," sheets of ice tremble in the wind "like some just-invented musical instrument" (36). The ice crystals are "little transparent piano keys / that go tinkle tinkle tinkle" (26-27). The repeated "t" and "k" sounds (li*tt*le, *t*ransparen*t*, *k*eys, *t*in*k*le) in these lines, and the onomatopoeia of "tinkle," reinforce the cadence of a piano—particularly those upper octave keys—for the aurally-attuned reader. As this "music fills the darkness" (52) and "holds me there listening" (53), the reader is also held listening to a pause in metre, a humble reception of silence in the face of this encounter: "—" (54). This pause is a formal way of enacting McKay's paraphrase of Heidegger, who suggests that, "for a long time before it becomes a speaking…poetry is only a listening" (McKay, *VV* 66). Purdy similarly says, in an interview with Gary Geddes, that he has lived his "whole life writing poetry" with "one ear cocked, listening to know" (qtd. in T. Heath, 206) how he can write "experience or perception into a poem" (T. Heath, 206). In addition to symbolizing a listening, this dash is a critical caesura that heralds the conclusion of the poem, in which the speaker deduces that he must discern these encounters with tremendum "from others / that have no significance / so that they keep reflecting each other" (54-56). This affirms Lee's assertion that "murmurs of glory" are elevated against the mundane, giving rhetorical weight to the presence of the crass in Purdy's oeuvre ("The Poetry of Al" 86). As the speaker's mind hangs like a metronome, conducting rhythm and metre, we can associate the speaker-as-metronome with the poet, who similarly orchestrates lyric out of encounters with something "beyond the edge" (Purdy, "The Darkness" 60). This association creates the impression that a secondary but critical part of this encounter with tremendum is the composition of the poem itself—*this* poem—which stems from this moment of outhouse wonder. Poetry, therefore, is that which helps

the speaker discern the "significance" (55) of this moment "from others" (54). Perhaps this poem, then, is about cultivating a "poetic attention" (McKay, *VV* 27) to that which is beyond the edge of an encounter, creating space for poems to "contain eternity" (57) by conducting a lyric that expands from singular situated human experience into some unknown, unknowable beyond—an expansion that lines our imagination with the *unknowability* of an uncontainable tremendum (57). And when a Purdy poem suggests an encounter like this, the reader's task is to "settle onto a wavelength that can accommodate, as they occur, both the consciously rough-hewn textures"—that is, the mundane or the crass—"and the inflections of the incandescent" (Lee, "The Poetry of Al" 99). In fact, as Lee suggests, maybe an Al Purdy poem is "a piece of writing that plays in the space between those boundaries" ("The Poetry of Al" 99).

It is difficult to write about musicality, the natural world, and poetic inspiration without thinking of what Harold Bloom calls "the most prevalent of Romantic symbols" (Bloom 200): the Aeolian Harp, a musical instrument played by wind and thereby symbolic of inspiration passing through the poet (Black et al. 409). But here, as in most of Purdy's poems that encounter nature's wilderness, the ice and stars do not speak *through*, nor *to*, the poet. It is less epiphany than veiled encounter, not unlike Scott's overwhelmed speaker in "The Height of Land" or Lampman's shrouded subject in "Morning on the Lièvre." McKay makes an important distinction between what he calls the "poetic attention" of today's nature poet and "romantic inspiration," saying: "the romantic poet...desires to be spoken *to*, inspired by the other, so that perception travels into language...without a palpable break" (*VV* 27). In aeolian harpism, the poet-as-harp is the "larynx of natural phenomena" (McKay *VV* 27). McKay is sympathetic in his assessment of this old theory, saying that, because it provides the poet with a sense of connection

to the natural world, aeolian harpism *is* a compelling frame for nature poetry.[18] This fantasy both "restores a coherent [sense of] reality" and "relieves us of our loneliness" (McKay, *VV* 27-28). But of course, it is just that: a fantasy. If the long tradition of Canadian nature poetry reveals a move towards acknowledging an other outside language, then our inability to think outside language impedes any ability to *truly* commune with wilderness. Yet if how we think is shaped by our language, then this attention to that which is outside language will slowly shift how we conceive of nature's otherness. We will write about it with less "desire to possess" (McKay, *VV* 26) or even connect with nature and, instead, with greater openness towards unknowing. The poetic attention of the new eco-poet is rooted in this "recognition" of tremendum in nature, and therefore leads to poetry that doesn't produce a Romantic echo or "vestige" of that which is radically other, but rather, an always partial "translation" of such encounters—a translation from extra-linguistic wilderness into fallible words—that resists any claim of a totalizing sign (McKay, *VV* 28). As McKay acknowledges in *Vis à Vis*, we cannot escape language (65-66, 98-99). Yet we can "perform artistic acts in such a way that," in putting tremendum to a system of signs, we treat the translation of wilderness into poetry more like "the way… a linguistic community might honour a stranger by conferring upon her a name in their language" (99). Therefore, McKay calls his poetic attention—an attention I see in Purdy's oeuvre, as well as the work of the other "new eco-poets" (Holmes xvi)—a "*form of knowing*" and a humble "species of longing" that "does not really wish to be talked about" (*VV* 26, emphasis mine). However, perhaps a form of *un*knowing would best articulate this poetic attention to that which cannot be domesticated by any sign.

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[18] McKay further explores these ideas in an essay titled "Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time."

EQUATORIAL ENCOUNTERS: BIRDWATCHING AT THE EDGE OF TIME

To highlight this unknowability of tremendum, Purdy's poems often encounter a spatio-temporal edge—be it the edge of language, animal, or darkness—and tip-toe or plunge into that which lies beyond its limit. By embracing the inconceivability of deep time, many of the poems in *Birdwatching at the Equator* (1982)[19]—composed during a trip to the Galapagos Islands in 1980 (*BE* 8)—call upon an alternate cognitive space in which tremendum dwells and, in doing so, trouble any simple or fixed definition of both the non-human other and the place it occupies.

In the introduction to *Birdwatching at the Equator*, Purdy remarks that his time in the Galapagos offered a better lesson in evolution than any textbook ever gave him, bringing him face-to-face with an abundance of decidedly non-Canadian creatures which provided "a painless and non-didactic lesson in biology" (8). In the poems that record these encounters, Purdy's speakers confront deep time in a way that highlights the tremendum of each alien creature, showing that invocations of the seemingly infinite can interrupt a possessive human gaze of nature's wilderness by troubling easy perception.

The opening poem of *Birdwatching at the Equator*, "Iguana," documents Purdy's response to the tremendum of its titular lizard, saying:

My left eye sees separately

seventy million years in the past

but the right eye sees only

a harmless vegetarian

this spring day in 1980 (8-12)

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[19] Many of the poems in *Birdwatching at the Equator*, which had a limited run, were more widely published in *The Stone Bird* (1981) (which includes "Moses at Darwin Station" and "Moonspell") and *Piling Blood* (1984) (which includes "Iguana" and "Adam and No Eve"). See above (58n11) for an explanation of why I choose to look at *Birdwatching at the Equator* in lieu of these other more widely distributed publications.

Here, Purdy's gaze occupies two temporal spaces—the mesozoic era and the present. This enacts Lee's assessment of Purdy's "signature" move: his "ability to open out into vast perspectives of space and time, then, narrow down to a single moment or image" ("The Poetry of Al" 77). Occurring early in the poem, these lines signal a resistance to possess the animal, as Purdy chooses to trouble his speaker's gaze with invocations of a world before humans. In doing so, Purdy enacts McKay's theory of what happens when we contemplate a history that exceeds our cognitive grip: "our location in place alters, as though our familiar road map had been ripped from our hands and replaced by some window into the inappellable" (McKay, "From Here to Infinity" 116). The speaker could view the iguana through the filter of *his* experience with him— this day in 1980—but chooses instead to remind himself of an expansive past beyond his cognitive grasp as he "travel[s]…in time" ("Iguana" 20). Not only does this widen the reader's understanding of the Galapagos, but it also causes "our temporal location" to shift "from the reliable orientation of a clock and calendar to the wooziness of deep time" (McKay, "From Here" 116).

After mulling over his perception of the iguana—a view that attempts to define the animal on cheeky, human terms, with words like "benevolent" (13), "sultan" (47), "domestic" (34), and "tasty as chicken" (46)—Purdy concludes that he is "a reptile Jehovah" (48). It is important to note that the poem repeatedly uses the names "God" (36, 47, 56, 69) and "Jehovah" (48, 49) for the iguana, invoking a sense of a divine other. Yet instead of making this deity-like lizard accessible to the human brain, Purdy uses these names to emphasize its incomprehensible being. This assessment of "reptile" as "Jehovah" (48) leads the speaker to leap into the unknown, asking, "before Jehovah—what?" (49). This could either mean, "before Jehovah, what was there?" or "before Jehovah, what are *we*?" I believe the poem's question include *both* the former

temporal question, which emphasizes the infinite, *and* the latter spatial proposition. The spatial

proposition draws to mind numerous accounts in the Judeo-Christian tradition where humans

cannot physically stand "before Jehovah" (49) because God's divine otherness—his *mysterium*

tremendum—is too much to confront. (Think, for example, of Yahweh telling Moses that "you

cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" [Exodus 33:20].) The first three stanzas

therefore mull over the various identifications of the lizard, concluding in its unknowable

tremendum.

Having already taken a cognitive step towards unknowability, the speaker then takes a

physical step towards the creature's alien body, attempting to touch the lizard with his foot (51-

52). The speaker's "flesh crawls with the effort" and the reptile opaquely "sways his head,"

expressing indifference at this attempt to connect (55-56). After this encounter, the speaker

determines:

> What can I be but humble
>
> for the reptile and mammal primate
>
> may never touch each other
>
> [...]
>
> and I feel sad
>
> knowing I will never understand him (59-64)

While the speaker's attempt to touch can be thought of symbolically as an attempt to know, in

the end, his gaze is interrupted by an encounter with animal tremendum. As the poem concludes,

the *incomprehensibility* of the god-lizard is highlighted by its *inaccessibility*. Mulling over this

alien being, the speaker repeats that he will "understand nothing" (67) but instead remains

"balanced in the needle's eye" (68) with "the *impulse* to touch God" (69, emphasis mine) as the

"close[st]" he'll "ever come" (70) to the divine. This reference to Matthew 19:24[20] emphasizes the in-between nature of this encounter: the speaker is stuck in the needle's eye—a passage that symbolically leads to God—unable to venture through, only glimpsing the tremendum of the creature in part, one foot in both dimensions. Therefore, resisting "presumption" (58), the poem ultimately rests in the impossibility of knowing, containing, and accessing tremendum, emphasized by the alien presence of both prehistoric time and the divine, which is outside time.

A similar arc occurs in "Moses at Darwin Station," in which a "baker's dozen" of tortoises bask at an ecological centre in the Galapagos "like small boxcars" (1-3). In this poem, the speaker notices one particularly alien tortoise: it is "seven hundred pounds / and 160 years old" (4-5). For the first thirteen lines, this poem wrestles with how to perceive the turtle's otherness. The speaker names him Moses because it "pre-dat[es] Darwin's / *Voyage of the Beagle*,"[21] implying an animal alienness that even evolution fails to fully explicate (6-8). The speaker then frames the tortoise's body as a "huge strongbox" (9), that is, a locked box or vault. By likening its body to a vault, the speaker emphasizes his inability to articulate the animal: like the tremendum in "Iguana," we cannot fully access it. Purdy describes this creature as "impregnable" (12); it cannot be captured, and therefore, cannot be possessed. After this declaration, in which readers might begin to insinuate that this animal otherness cannot be contained via human cognition, the poem shifts gazes. Subtly and suddenly, the human gaze is relinquished and we see the situation from the tortoise's perspective:

> we're shadows to him

---

[20] In Matthew 19:24, Jesus says: "Again I tell you, it is easier for a rich man to go through the *eye of a needle* than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

[21] Incidentally, *Voyage of the Beagle* was composed on Darwin's first visit to the Galapagos (*RBS* 263). Encounters with these same creatures helped Darwin develop his earliest theories of evolution (*BE* 8-10). Instead of discovering these animals like Darwin, these poems perform the inverse: they undiscover, learn unknowability, and encounter tremendum.

two-legged shadows

ungainly whirlpools

of bifurcated motion

[...]

in his optic register (14-19)

Here, the poem's focus shrinks to imagine the tortoise's low-down view. However, this is not an appropriative inhabitation of the animal's gaze. Even in the poet's imagination, the tortoise remains impenetrable, "exploring silence" (23) in a way that eludes ownership, "indulg[ing]" the humans but "barely acknowledg[ing] you" (74).

While the speaker's gaze describes the tortoise with cultural terms—box cars, baker's dozen, strongbox—the humans are imbued with natural terms—whirlpools—implying a degree of porosity between opposing terms of nature/culture or animal/human, the latter of which is emphasized by the presence of Darwin in the poem. This animal/human connection is not meant to diminish the animal's difference, but rather, to open up another dimension of unknowability: that of deep, geological time. After remembering that the tortoise's pre-Cambrian ancestors are "*unrecognizably* / but yet indubitably / my own" (68-70, emphasis mine), the speaker begins to consider the "beginning" (84) of life "on earth" (86) by going back in time like a "lost traveller" (81-83). Here, like in "On the Flood Plain," Purdy widens the temporal scope of a poem that confronts an other, reminding readers of dizzying origins. While bridging these two distinct temporal spaces, Purdy cleverly—perhaps even cheekily—employs "scientific nomenclature" (35) in a further attempt to articulate or define the alien animal. Twice, his speaker calls it "tortoise-*chelonia,*" invoking the zoological term for all turtles and tortoises, intended to order and classify the animal (34, 97). Purdy further uses scientific naming in this poem's description

of evolution: "worm-*annelid* slips the punch" and "fish-*chordata* becomes / a clumsy amphibian" when "the dice turns to snake eyes" (92-96). This ironically conflates modern classification with pre-lingual, pre-Cambrian time, while drawing our attention to the chancy mystery—a game of "dice" (96)—of life at all. While our modern scientific nomenclature exists in the interest of knowledge, of deepening our ecological understanding of this world, Purdy seems to be highlighting its partiality. As discussed in my analysis of "The Crocus" from *The Enchanted Echo,* nomenclature and its related classifying urge can have an inverse effect of order, highlighting instead the unknowable parts of "animal identity" (36) which cannot be inscribed in any field guide. While helpful in their own right, scientific names attempt to control alien identity to the point of domesticating animal otherness in "air tight containers" (Lee, "Poetry of Al" 84); and yet, this poem resists any easy categorization, reinforcing the idea that those "segments don't [always] cooperate" (Lee, "Poetry of Al" 84). In "Moses at Darwin Station," Purdy first recognizes the huge evolutionary distance where man and tortoise shared origins. Yet at the poem's close, the tortoise "brushes off this nonsense / of [...] / scientific theories" (101-103) as merely human imaginings. In doing so, the animal resists any sense of animal/human connection, retains its own sense of tremendum, and remains unyielding. Moses therefore eludes the ecological gaze of Darwin Station, causing *our* gaze to open significantly in scope, invoking the ineffable breadth of geological time and highlighting the tremendum of this "160 [year] old" creature (5).

In "Adam and No Eve," Purdy similarly wrestles with the human mind's ability to articulate the animal's tremendum. Here, Purdy explores an encounter with a "giant yellow-faced tortoise" (2) whose zoological name is "*Geochelone [elephantopus] abingdoni*" (1). This turtle,

another resident at the island's Darwin Research Station, is the last of its species. Researchers are

willing to pay up to ten thousand dollars for anyone who can discover a living mate:

> Man with his symbol-making brain
>
> has said ten thousand dollars
>
> equals one female
>
> but there are millions and billions
>
> of dollars in pockets and banks
>
> but no tortoise in their vaults (32-37)

Here, the tortoise eschews literal possession—she does not reside in any bank—and escapes the

grasp of human cognition. In this poem, Purdy is interested in how we insufficiently measure,

define, and possess nature. The speaker mulls over this tortoise's extinction with wonder and

remorse, invoking the Genesis creation account: "Not again shall mud conceive / or the stars bear

witness / and the lightning flash over chaos" (42-44). With this invocation, an alternate kind of

deep time is invoked: the poetic Judeo-Christian literary account. If at times Purdy directly

mentions the Big Bang or specifically highlights geologic time by naming Gondwanaland, here

he gestures towards deep time in a way that is more subtle, even mystical. As the poem closes,

the female tortoise escapes both human gaze and interpretation, dissolving into darkness:

> —and whatever love may be
>
> weighed and counted and measured
>
> in books [...]
>
> one female tortoise [...]
>
> has taken it with her alone
>
> into the darkness (50-56)

Here, the sought-after animal walks off the edge of perception, into a space where nomenclature and environmental studies cannot exist as conduits of knowledge, ecological protection, nor possession. Like in "Trees at the Arctic Circle," this poem ends without punctuation, creating a similarly open form that resists conclusion and, instead, gestures at some space beyond the page's end. Therefore the female tortoise resides in some sort of alternate space, a space better explicated when read alongside a similar "darkness" ("Adam and No Eve" 56) in "Moonspell."

The final poem in *Birdwatching at the Equator,* "Moonspell," imagines a moonlit encounter with animal tremendum, one in which the trappings of language and the limitations of knowledge do not interfere with our ability to know the alien other.[22] The poem opens by acknowledging the inability of our brains, shaped by language, to understand the animal. The speaker has "forgotten English / in order to talk to pelicans / plunging into tomorrow" (1-3). These opening lines signal this poem's first leap into an alternative cognitive space: one in which the categories of our minds melt in order to know the animal other. Only after shedding language can the speaker learn the "iguana's secret / name" which is "embroidered / on his ruby brain" (7-9). It is significant that this poem occurs in milky "moonlight" (11). Remembering the turtle's gaze in "Moses at Darwin Station," in which the animal sees in "black and white only" (18), we can infer that "Moonspell" takes place in a similar "optic register" ("Moses" 19). Purdy is perhaps imagining this poem to visually enact the "Purkinje effect," wherein most humans become virtually "colour-blind" under moonlight (Cornsweet 145-148). This monochromatic landscape is reinforced by repeated black and white images: "sky milk" (17), "pelicans" (2),

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[22] The positioning of "Moonspell" as the final poem in *Birdwatching at the Equator* is important, as the alternate space articulated in "Moonspell" builds on the encounters in previous poems. The sequence of *Birdwatching at the Equator* is lost in *The Stone Bird* (1981) and *Piling Blood* (1984), as well as in anthologies such as Russell Brown's *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy* (McClelland & Stewart, 1986) or Sam Solecki's *Beyond Remembering* (Harbour Publishing, 2000). For this reason, I have chosen to read the limited run of *Birdwatching at the Equator* instead of the more popular aforementioned works, which also house these poems.

"deep sea" (36), "darkness" (38), "light" (39). Whether a way to forgo human perception, or a reminder of the animal's vision and perspective, this monochromatic space emphasizes a shift in conception. Lacking language and colour, we are no longer in the territory of human brain. Instead, this space appears to be a hinge into tremendum, an imagined bridge towards inarticulable otherness: the speaker "stand[s] in a *doorway*"—not unlike the needle's eye in "Iguana"—and "listen[s]," is "drowning" (14-16, emphasis mine). Here at the edge of perception, Purdy concludes:

> I know I know
>
> my speech is grunts
>
> squeaks clicks stammers
>
> let go let go
>
> follow the sunken ships
>
> and deep sea creatures
>
> [...] into that far darkness
>
> another kind of light
>
> leave off this flesh
>
> this voice these bones
>
> sink down (32-42)

Unlike in "Iguana," it seems as if the speaker has crossed the boundary from here to whatever is "beyond the edge of chaos" ("The Darkness" 60). Like "Postscript," "Trees at the Arctic Circle," and "Adam and No Eve," this poem ends without punctuation—or perhaps "it never does" ("Postscript" 1), choosing instead to "follow the… / deep sea creatures / …into that far darkness" ("Moonspell" 36-39). "Moonspell" therefore begins as an attempt to shake off language "in order

to talk to pelicans" (2) and ends by relinquishing every tool for knowledge, every tool to perceive, descending instead into "something entirely beyond us" ("Time Past/Time Now" 39) where the human gaze holds no weight. However, while this poem plunges into an alternate space—"that far darkness"—in which tremendum can perhaps be known, it can only ever be a partial plunge, an imagined gesture. In imagining this plunge into unknowability, both poet and reader must acknowledge their own cognitive border: we cannot escape language because it is the very thing on which both poem and poet, "shut, too, in a tower of words," rely (Thomas, "Especially" 9, qtd. in McKay, *VV* 29).

In both "Adam and No Eve" and "Moonspell," darkness is a symbol for a space where the categorizing, possessive mind holds no real estate. This suggests that, through poetry, language can *carry* us into darkness and unknowing, illustrating McKay's claim that:

> Metaphor, like the ferry whose etymology it shares (*meta pherein*—carry across) goes back and forth, to and fro. It renders the infinite tangible, but also infinitizes the here and now. …Metaphor by its very nature…bears the germ of infinitosis. And this means that, while it does indeed help us understand, it complicates the nature of understanding itself. ("From Here to Infinity" 129)

Poetry, therefore, helps our minds tune into the wilderness of "the here and now," the mysterium tremendum of all things. By leaping backwards in deep chronological time, Purdy troubles *chronos* time—the Greek word for sequential time which unfolds, linearly, in the physical world—by drawing upon the Greek concept of *kairos*: non-linear time that intersects with the infinite, creating a jolt in time that is divine, appointed, and non-linear.

CONCLUSION

In his writing, Purdy has been praised as someone who "created an imaginative map of Canada," lugging a "preoccupation with the spirit of a place back and forth across the country" (Lee, "Poetry of Al" 99) and "lifting [the] environment to expression" (Solecki, qtd. In Holmgren 143). Indeed, Purdy himself felt he was "mapping the country" (Purdy, *RBS* 238) as he travelled and wrote. As shown in this chapter, Purdy developed an interest in mysterium tremendum throughout his career, increasing in nuance to include invocations of deep time as that which widens the poem's spatio-temporal scope to emphasize an encounter with tremendum. Therefore, by taking journeys in "space-time," Purdy has "placed us in subtler ways as well" (Lee, "The Poetry of Al" 99), mapping a spacious landscape that leaves room for an alternate cognitive space: "that far darkness / another kind of light" wherein tremendum dwells ("Moonspell" 38-39). In embracing the alien being of nature and paying poetic attention to the wilderness therein, Purdy gives the Canadian imagination a sense of place that resists easy definition. In doing so, he anticipates McKay's own penchant to trouble our categorization of place, creating space for that which cannot be contained "on any map" (Melville 65). And as Herman Melville says, "true places never are" (65).

DON MCKAY'S EDGE POETICS: ENCOUNTERS WITH OTHERWISE-THAN-PLACE

> "Poets are supremely interested in what language can't do;
> in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that
> flirts with its destruction." – Don McKay, *Vis à Vis* 32

In the early 1970s, questions of how to relate to the country's space—whether civic, colonial, or wilderness space—began to more acutely shape the conversation of writing Canada. In 1972 House of Anansi published Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, mentioned above (14), in which Atwood conceives of Canadian literature as writing in the margin of an ever-invading wilderness, one increasingly "at risk of oblivion" (qtd. in *ArcPoetry* 2006). That same year, in a talk-turned-essay titled "Cadence, Country, Silence," Dennis Lee suggested that settler Canadians "live in space which is radically in question," a space they don't quite understand, and that "alienation in that space will enter in and undercut [Canadian] writing" (154). These influential texts shaped much of the national literature produced in its wake. It is into this space-oriented literary scene that McKay emerges, publishing his first book of poems *Air Occupies Space*—a title that reminds readers of ethereal space or space unseen—in 1973. McKay's career has since been devoted to questions of how to be a self-titled "nature poet" (*VV* 25-28) in an age of ecological crisis *(VV* 9), how to understand wilderness in a time when the border between nature and culture—terms McKay describes as "disguised categories of language" (*VV* 30)—is increasingly blurred, and finally, how to speak responsibly, even ethically, about the non-human environment and the space it occupies or represents.

Like Purdy, McKay is interested in the spaces that are not down on any map.

Hypothesizing place as a spatial category constructed by the mind, McKay instead expresses a

poetic attention to "the permeable membrane between [physical] place and its otherwise" (*DW*

27). In other words, his poetry pays curious attention to the border between physical material and

what, to use Purdy's words, is "beyond the edge" of our conception ("The Darkness" 60) and

"entirely beyond us" ("Time Past" 39). In McKay's poetry, this liminal membrane is often

shown as a frayed edge, a border that bleeds into otherwise-than-place, "with the flow going both

ways" (McKay, *DW* 31). These edges leak into something that cannot be contained in minds, on

maps, or by language. His poems represent these edges as thresholds where wilderness skirts

between domestication and that which cannot be tamed, leaping between our frame of

conception and some place inconceivable. McKay's poems therefore enact what he calls "the

hinge of translation between place and its otherwise," where an unknowable other flows between

place and beyond, opening "into wilderness" (*DW* 31). In this way, McKay extends the long

tradition of Canadian nature poetry concerned with a wild other by creating an alternate

dimension where this other dwells.

In this chapter, I analyze McKay's edge poetics by looking at a selection of poems that

encounter McKavian wilderness at an edge between speaker and that which is "other-than-

human" (Mason, *OD* 41). I argue that by situating poems *in* borders, and drawing attention to the

porosity of these borders, McKay's poetry challenges appropriative attempts to categorize the

physicality of wilderness, giving wilderness back to obscurity. By situating these poems *at* or

within edges, McKay gestures at an alternate cognitive space to which his poetry ultimately

travels—not unlike Purdy's descent into "that far darkness / another kind of light" (Purdy,

"Moonspell" 38-39) nor his signature shift into an alternate spatio-temporal zone (see Purdy,

"On the Flood Plain," "Adam and No Eve"). By analyzing linguistic resistance—or, alternatively, the breakdown of language—at edges in McKay's oeuvre, I will show how McKay gestures at a "wild" space beyond the edge of our cognitive grip, one that resists being put in the "airtight" category of any signifier, and instead, embodies what Confederation poet Duncan Campbell Scott would call "Something … inappellable" ("Height" 50-52)—something that completely eludes language's colonizing grip. Finally, I will suggest that, by weaving reticence into a body of work that is sharply concerned with humanity's perception of the non-human world, this alternate cognitive space becomes a space where ethics can crystallize: ethics that are neither traditionally environmental nor particularly politically active, but rather, quiet and dispositional, as the subjective perceiving self conceptualizes the non-human other it faces.

"SCRITCH, SCRITCH" AT THE EDGE: GEOPOETRY AS APOPHATIC ATTENTION

McKay's ethics are perhaps best understood as what he calls "geopoetics" with an ethical bent, for they are "an alternative way of thinking ethics, a way that points to potential political action, but not in the terms of any systematic methodology" (A. Dickinson 35). Borrowing this term from American geologist and early plate tectonic theorist Harry Hess, McKay defines geopoetry as a method of learning this world—one that is "speculatory" in the face of unknowability (*DW* 42). In his collection of essays, poems, and creative alphabets titled *Deactivated West 100* (2005), McKay travels down a deactivated logging road in search of a fault line that runs "from end to end" along southern Vancouver Island (McCaslin 124). In the writing that comes from this exploration, he meditates upon the fault line as "a metaphor for the colliding of old and new, human and natural—the 'gap' in human comprehension" (McCaslin 124). In these essays, McKay describes his poetic attention to "the most basic elements of planetary dwelling"—a poetic attention that results in "myself, trying to cobble together this

strange sign system out of the varieties of our dumb astonishment" (*DW*, 42-43). Here, McKay presents an engaged inquisition with the non-human other—in other words, with McKavian wilderness—that resists the fixed totality implied by any name and, instead, returns to silence or "dumb astonishment" in the face of a world that escapes any polished articulation. McKay's poetic attention is, therefore, an attention where words, in his own words, "fumble" (43).

Susan McCaslin describes McKay as an "apophatic" poet: one that follows the "path of negation of names, or 'unknowing,' as…a base" (122). This term has a history of related usage in early Christian mysticism, where apophatic theology admits the inability of language to acknowledge the divine (Gonzàlez 305). Similarly, McCaslin says that McKay is "intensely aware of the limits of language to contain … the numinosity of nature"—specifically, its wilderness—"within the ciphers of language" (122). As mentioned in chapter two, McKay considers poetry to be foremost a listening. He unpacks the significance of this statement in an essay titled "Remembering Apparatus: Poetry and the Visibility of Tools" (*VV* 50-73), where he explains:

> I think this listening involves hearkening both with and beyond language, in somewhat the same way a paddle attends to the river and conveys its energy to your wrist, even as it helps you across. …And when poetry does become speech, it returns to the business of naming with this listening folded inside it. It introduces the unnameable (that is, wilderness under the sign of language) into nomination with the result that all namings, including the poem in which it speaks, become provisional. (66)

McKay's analogy of poetic listening as paddling is particularly apt when one considers the etymological root of metaphor—*meta,* "between" and *pherein,* "to carry," the latter of which is the same root as our English "ferry" (McKay, "Speaker's" 11)—a connection McKay has drawn

in several of his essays on poetics, most recently in a talk-turned-essay titled "The Speaker's Chair: Fieldnotes on Betweenity."[23] Here, he argues that poetry helps us take a "cognitive ferry" (11) towards "the wild presence that surrounds, and sometimes invades, constructed things" (6). And yet, as McKay apophatically illustrates, the poetic attention required to navigate this carrying across—or perhaps, to be navigated by it—is rooted in listening. It requires a naming "without claiming," which means that a poetic phrase that ably crosses shores "wears ears on the outside of the statement" (*VV* 66).

McKay's poem "Listen at the Edge" (*Birding, or Desire,* 1983) is a poem that wears ears. Suggesting that an aural and apophatic attention to wilderness yields a breakdown of language, "Listen at the Edge" begins:

At the edge of firelight

where […]

every word is shadowed by its animal, our ears

are empty auditoria for

scritch scritch scritch rr-ronk the

shh uh shh of greater

anonymities the little

brouhahas that won't lie still for type

and die (1-10)

---

[23] See also *Vis à Vis* 72, "From Here" 129, and above (60).

Here, the ear is not a conduit for putting nature to the "right" words, but rather, a conduit for attention to an empty stage, a stage that symbolizes the silence wilderness enforces—a silence to which the speaker listens. While the speaker grows silent, there is something undeniably audible about the nameless wilderness in this poem, which scritches (6, 14), pecks (13), and ronks (6). Here, wilderness "eat[s] / the information from our voices" (13-14), rendering the speaker completely unable to articulate what hums beyond this particular edge of encounter with a non-human other. Therefore, McKay's aural attention is an attention to a noise beyond the edge of language and, simultaneously, an attention to the speaker's own silence—a silent attention that's playfully marked by the repetition of "shh" as the poet's language breaks down in lines six and seven. In McKay's poetics, wilderness *is* that "little brouhaha" which "won't lie still" for a system of signs that, here, is considered a reduction of something's autonomy. Reminding readers that naming is a taxonomizing act—and therefore colonial in part—Joanna Dawson astutely articulates that poems like these productively "undermine the exactitude of definition [to show] that there is a kind of wilderness in everything which resists transmission," and translation (Dawson 66).

The "scritch scritch" that fills the ear here in "Listen at the Edge" becomes a motif throughout McKay's oeuvre, one that highlights the *unknowability* of wilderness by resisting articulation at its edge. In a later prose poem, "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River" (*Night Field*, 1991), McKay asks:

> And what sort of noise would the mind make, if it could, here at the brink? *Scritch, scritch.* A claw, a nib, a beak, worrying its surface. As though, for one second, it could let the world leak back to the world. Weep. (*NF* 3, emphasis mine)

Scritch, used in both "Listen and the Edge" and "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River,"
therefore signifies the breakdown of language at the brink of an encounter with wilderness. It is
important that this representational term is not a socially-recognized word, but rather a *scritch*: a
word marked as non-existent by dictionaries, an error of type which wants to correct itself to
scratch. And *scritch* actually contains something of a *scratch* within its history as a term; *scritch*
once represented a scratching or scraping sound ("scritch," *int.* and *n.2*, and "scritch," *v.2,* OED
Online)—an angle of meaning that is unpacked by the word "claw" in the following sentence.
Yet, aurally, *scritch* also contains something of a *screech* in it. Etymologically, the origin of
screech is in fact *scritch*, dating back to its first known use in the Middle English text "Owl &
Nightingale" (1300) by John Henry Grafton Grattan in which a *scritch* is a bird call ("scritch,"
v.1, OED Online). With this in mind, readers can intuit that the noise an attentive mind makes at
the brink is both audible *screech* and mystical *scratch*—that which "claw[s]" at the border (or
"surface" [*NF* 3]) between language and wilderness. Here, I am again reminded of McKay's
poem "Close-up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk" *(Birding, or Desire*, 1983) in which the speaker
studies a bird of prey and encounters its "silence like an overwhelming noise" ("Close-up" 9). In
this poem, as in "Listen at the Edge," the speaker encounters his or her own lack of language at
the brink of an encounter with wilderness, signified here as "silence" ("Close-up" 9). If McKay's
poetry wears ears for wilderness, then perhaps poems that listen at the edge are indeed listening
to the audible, overwhelming "silence"—or lack of language—that wilderness generates. It is not
an absence of sound, per say, but an absence of human sense. Because of these encounters,
McKay's speakers grow taciturn: language degenerates as a symbol of solidarity with
wilderness, resisting the more colonizing tendencies of the signifier.

Like "Listen at the Edge," "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River" is situated in a

border: it occurs geographically by a river's edge and cognitively in the threshold between

sleeping and waking. Therefore, its setting is dual, slipping away from the physical into an

alternate cognitive realm. In his essay "Don McKay and Metaphor: Stretching Language

Towards Wilderness," Kevin Bushell affirms the poem's alternate setting, saying it occurs "in

the space *between* sleep and consciousness" (72, emphasis mine). McKay both freezes and

extends the interstitial moment in this poem, choosing to play in the threshold of the poem's

"afterdream" (*NF* 3). Here, the edge between sleep and waking frays: "sleep, my favourite

flannel shirt, wears thin, and *shreds*, and birdsong happens in the holes" (McKay, *NF* 3,

emphasis mine). In this edge McKay emphasizes a significant lack of language, saying that "in

thirty seconds … naming … will begin" (McKay, *NF* 3). Other edges permeate this poem, too,

and McKay stresses the porosity of these edges with little leaks that perforate the text. Therefore

the poem's central "brink," wherein the speaker encounters something that exceeds its signifier

(McKay, *NF* 3), is a porous encounter. This porosity is first indicated by the image of the

shredding flannel shirt through which birdsong invades. A second leak occurs when language

bleeds into the waking mind, "fold[ing]" like a "whirlpool" into "the stewed Latin of afterdream"

(*NF* 3). Third, McKay writes of the "mind…worrying its surface" (*NF* 3). Here, the word

"worrying" plays with its sonic cousin, *wearing*, creating an image of something whose exterior

skin is worn through, and calling to mind the poem's opening image, in which sleep "*wears thin*"

(*NF* 3, emphasis mine). More sonic play occurs as birdsong "punctuate[s] something unheard,

perfectly" (*NF* 3). Here, the "punctuat[ion]" is reminiscent of a *puncture* through which

wilderness might "leak back to the world" (*NF* 3). These sonic word associations enact what

Bushell describes as the role of the prose poet, who "must be rigorously attuned to the sound

quality of language, or, as Robert Bly says regarding this matter, 'the intelligence loses interest, and the game of art collapses'" (Bushell 74). Finally, in "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River," even prose and poetry intersect to insinuate a porosity of form. All of these perforations emphasize the poem's central event, in which the thinking mind encounters that which lies beyond the brink of what can be signed, and something other "leaks back" to the speaker's perception. I argue that the crux of this prose poem is an interrogative—"What sort of noise would the mind make, if it could, here at the brink?" (*NF* 3)—that summarizes McKay's entire "poetic attention" (*VV* 26).

In "Between Rock and Stone: A Geopoetic Alphabet" (*DW* 33-73), McKay theorizes a space beyond this "brink" ("Waking," *NF* 3) or "edge" ("Listen" 1)— a space in which the "scritch" of unknowable wilderness dwells.[24] In this alphabetized series of 26 poems, definitions, and meditations, McKay extends his own definition of wilderness to hypothesize the space wilderness occupies, an alternate cognitive space McKay calls "otherwise-than-place" (*DW* 25). It is *otherwise* because physical place "becomes place by [first] acquiring real or imagined borders and suffering removal from anonymity" (*DW* 18). Physical place is a bordered "spatial category" (*DW* 20) whereas otherwise-than-place challenges all notions of bordered categorization, going back to its original anonymity. And yet, even wilderness sometimes tiptoes out of this oblivion, leaving otherwise-than-place to dance "into the purview of [our] knowledge" (*DW* 18). In doing so, wilderness disrupts our safe, human categories, reminding the human mind of some realm just outside its grip. In a Geopoetic Alphabet entry titled "Oblivion," McKay describes an encounter with wilderness before it recedes into oblivion, saying: "When it goes, I'm guessing, it goes to the rivers no one knows; it goes to the mountains that have not been

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[24] "Between Rock and Stone: A Geopoetic Alphabet" first appeared in *The Antigonish Review* 140 (Winter 2005): 101-126 before being published in *Deactivated West 100* that same year.

named. It chooses oblivion" (*DW* 55). Oblivion, therefore, is a cognitive realm that resists cognition; it lies beyond the constructs of language and the human mind, the latter of which has been shaped by language. Oblivion is "a name for namelessness, the condition of … unknown" (*DW* 20). And if place becomes place by "suffering removal from anonymity" (*DW* 18), oblivion is *otherwise-than-place*.

Embracing a Lee-and-Lilburn-like poetics of unknowing, McKay insists we cannot own, categorize, nor control the "inappellable" "Something" (Scott, "Height" 52, 50) of wilderness, which resides in oblivion. Like Atwood's speaker in "Journey to the Interior," where "words … are as pointless / as calling in a vacant wilderness" (39-40), McKay recognizes the insufficiency—even hubris—of naming any encounter with oblivion, saying, that, when we encounter wilderness "neither it nor the moment should be named" (*DW* 55). And yet, as Scott's speaker suggests in "The Height of Land," that is the very role of a poet: to write experiences with the unnameable, to appeal to tricks of presence and absence in language, to listen to this otherwise-than-place, and to open oneself to oblivion. Both "Listen at the Edge" and "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River" exemplify McKay's attention to the inappellable nature of wilderness, gesturing at an encounter that bleeds into oblivion. In doing so, they exemplify what I call McKavian *edge poetics:* a poetics of liminality that problematize strictly bordered conceptions of the world, thereby challenging the ever-categorizing mind.

POETRY AS A "CROSSING POINT": BETWEENITY IN "PHILOSOPHER'S STONE"

McKay's poem "Philosopher's Stone" enacts McKay's *edge poetics*, playing with the edge of deep time to trouble our perception of stone. First published in McKay's Geopoetic

Alphabet, "Philosopher's Stone" (*DW* 56-57)[25] plays with the border between the human mind—

and its attempts to contain and order—and uncontainable wilderness, appealing to the

unknowability of rock as a way of highlighting the latter. The poem "Philosopher's Stone" is

situated *in* this border between known and unknowable. More specifically, this poem is situated

in the cognitive threshold between rock and stone—a subtle distinction which I clarify below.

Developing a posture towards unknowability in "Philosopher's Stone," this poem removes the

human from its ever-coveted centre, eschews the appropriation of wilderness, and as a result,

gestures at the wild autonomy of rock. From this position, McKay forms a poetic attention that

re-opens itself, or *re*-turns, to wilderness.

Formally, the liminal setting of "Philosopher's Stone" is emphasized by its opening and

closing dash, the only use of the dash in the poem. It begins: "—and when," (1) and ends:

"though it can't be, we both know—" (31-32). This creates the impression that this poem is a

thought between the previous alphabet entry, "Oblivion," and that which follows, "Quick." By

"Quick," McKay here means the archaic noun, stemming from the German word *keck*

("sprightly") and the Greek word *zōē* ("life"). Quick therefore refers to the living, to a life—the

experiential opposite of oblivion. Therefore, this poem is situated somewhere between oblivion

(non-presence or that which is unknowable, beyond space and time) and "the quick of existence"

or "the presence of life" (*DW* 58). In other words, it exists between the named and that which is

unnameable. As a poem, "Philosopher's Stone" is the "pause" between both, where, "by

stratagems of language and mind, the quick and the infinite meet" (*DW* 58). In this sense,

"Philosopher's Stone" rides the wavelengths between wilderness (represented by oblivion) and

all things human.

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[25] This poem can also be found in *Strike/Slip* (2006) and *Angular Unconformity* (2014). However, here, I analyze "Philosopher's Stone" in the context of its order in "Between Rock and Stone: A Geopoetic Alphabet" (*DW* 33-73).

Before analyzing the contents of the poem, it is important to comprehend the distinction McKay makes between rock and stone. At a brief glance, these words seem like synonyms for the same geological object. Yet McKay explains that, "what happens between rock and stone is everything human, from the modifications necessary to make homes to, at the other extreme, the excesses of ownership and exploitation which submit all ends to ours" (*DW* 59). Rock therefore signifies wilderness whereas stone represents a human commodification—or reduction—of wilderness. McKay offers another articulation, suggesting that "rock is as old as the earth is; stone is only as old as humanity" (*DW* 59). Rock, therefore, has a material history that exceeds humans; it is an "energetic mediator" (Ganz, "Exploitation") of deep time. Stone, however, is "rock that's been put to use" (*DW* 59). In "Philosopher's Stone," the titular geological object must travel through this border between rock/stone, losing some of its autonomy in the process. The speaker says to it: "when you *shed your wilderness* and move in, / living in my pocket as its sage, as my third, / uncanny testicle, the wise one" (7-9, emphasis mine).[26] Therefore, the subject of this poem—the pocketed stone—passes between stone and rock, momentarily reflecting the aforementioned "betweenity" in which the poem itself is positioned ("Speaker's Chair" 8).

"Philosopher's Stone" defamiliarizes our perception of the stone, not to make, as Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky would say, "the stone stony" again—but rather, to make it *rocky* (Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" 7). In doing so, McKay gives the stone back to oblivion. To articulate this return, the poem removes agency from the human and slowly gives it to the titular stone, subtly inverting the human/stone power dynamic with the poem's build of layered subordinate clauses. The speaker finds the stone only after having given up the search, having put his gaze to rest:

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[26] Note that there are a few textual variants between "Philosopher's Stone" in *DW* and "Philosopher's Stone" in *AU* (p. 457). In particular, *AU* uses "renounce" instead of "shed" in line seven.

> —and when, after I've wasted a lifetime looking,
>
> picking over eskers, browsing beaches, rock shops, slag,
>
> when, after I've up and quit, you suddenly
>
> adopt me, winking from the gravel of the roadside
>
> or the rip-rap of the trail (1-5)

The stone must reveal itself and, winking, adopt the speaker as its student. This is an inversion of familiar power: typically, the human finds that which is seemingly inanimate and collects it for some self-serving use. With a cheeky wink that implies it was here the whole time, however, this stone "suddenly" puts its wilderness on hold (3) and receives authority to shed its alien being so that it can instruct to "desire / only whatever happens," (11) guiding the speaker to a position that relinquishes control. As the poem continues, McKay shakes off the names we give to stones once they are wrenched from wilderness, inverting human dominion and, instead, opening readers up to rocky wilderness. McKay writes:

> when you cleave,
>
> when you fold,
>
> when you gather sense as *omphalos, inukshuk,*
>
> *cromlech*, when you rift in the stress
>
> of intolerable time. (19-23)

This list of italicized names offers a brief inventory of stone's history as a human tool, referencing three ways that rock has been lifted from anonymity. Each tool represents a different way that humanity appropriates rock for its reign, imposing its own "sense" (21) on wilderness and turning it to stone. *Omphalos* means "navel" in Greek; an omphalos stone represents an ancient Greek idea of the world's centre. *Inukshuk*, an Inuit word that translates to "in the

likeness of a human," is a way-finding structure to help nomads navigate. *Cromlech* is a Welsh term for a stony, megalithic monument: a signpost of its builders' might. The stony subject of this poem must "cleave" (19) or split from its wilderness in order to "gather sense" (21)—or rather, accept its human-made meaning—as these three tools. And yet, once the stone "shed[s] its wilderness" (7), it bears the weight of having been made a tool and cracks open "in the stress / of intolerable time" (22–23). This "rift" (22) represents stone's resistance to human ownership and control, creating a fissure or back-flow from tool into wilderness. Here, McKay purposefully uses what is most often a noun—a rift: a crack, a split or opening—as a verb: the stone "rift[s] in the stress / of intolerable time" (22-23). At first glance, this feels like anthimeria—the use of one part of speech (i.e. a noun) as another (i.e. a verb). However, the use of *rift* as a verb purposefully summons the word's less used geological definition, which *is* in fact a verb, meaning "to form fissures in the earth's continental crust." In doing so, this poem productively problematizes our perception, reminding readers of the agency of rock: it too, is as active as a verb—not just an object, but an "energetic mediator" (Ganz, "Exploitation") of activity. Simultaneously, the word "rift" invokes ideas of deep geological time, because many of our current continents have been formed by a long, inconceivable history of rifting plates. In "Philosopher's Stone," McKay therefore acknowledges these human-centered, utilitarian names for stone but resists them, creating a breach in perspective that widens in temporal scope, allowing wilderness to leak back to our perception of the poem's stone. In doing so, "we gain the gift of defamiliarization, becoming other to ourselves, one expression of the ever-evolving planet" (McKay, "Ediacaran" 24). In defamiliarizing our perception of the poem's titular stone, McKay "does not endorse us as humans" but rather reminds us of our minute creatureliness in the vast context of deep, geologic time.

Like Purdy's poetry, McKay's writing is filled with signposts of this deep time. Its presence in his writing—which is most overt in *Deactivated West 100* (2005), *Strike/Split* (2006), *The Shell of the Tortoise* (2011), *Paradoxides* (2012)*,* and the new material in his collected works *Angular Unconformity* (2014)[27]—is a way of widening the reader's perception of a non-human other, so that readers can view the poem's subject as more deeply other. As mentioned above (33n11), McKay's interest in geology is in fact rooted in his interest in deep time. In particular, McKay is drawn to geologic gaps, fissures, and abysses, because the missing data "represents a significant gap—often millions of years" which "upsets" human authority (*AU* 9). The nineteenth line of "Philosopher's Stone" invokes the presence of this vast geologic history. The speaker has just finished a brief inventory of the narrative history of stone—the "rock that slew Goliath or the stone no one could cast" (14-15)—and a catalogue of its unknowable past—"inscribed by glaciers, …packed with former lives inside you / like a dense mass grave" (18-17)—when the speaker pauses, as if to catch his breath amidst the poem's anaphora of subordinate clauses. Here at a caesura, the speaker breathes, saying: "when you cleave" (19). This is the only line that is offset, creating a visual rift into which white space invades. Structurally, these lines look as follows:

like a dense mass grave;

                        when you cleave,

when you fold (18-20)

Therefore this line, which emphasizes the stone's split from "intolerable time" (23), visually echoes a geologic rift through which deep time "leaks into [human] history and upsets its

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[27] Though more evident in McKay's later work, Travis V. Mason cautions scholars who create a clean break between McKay's early "avian poetics" and his later "geopoetics," saying that, "[McKay] has not abruptly finished with birds and moved on to rocks" but rather, has "finally found a way to articulate geopoetry, something he has been thinking and writing about since his first collection" (see "These Mighty Timbres" in *Air Occupies Space*) (*OD* 219).

authority" (*AU* 9). This poem is therefore a "crossing point" into deep time (McKay, "Ediacaran" 11). And that, according to McKay, is the very function of geopoetry: to "feel one's thinking stretch" not just epistemologically but ontologically too, involving "wonder at the manifold possibilities of being in general, and these beings in particular" ("Ediacaran 14-15). "Philosopher's Stone" therefore gives the reader "wider resonances" of geology, "leading us to contemplate further implications for ourselves" (McKay, "Ediacaran" 15), while simultaneously "counteract[ing] the tendency … to reduce objects of contemplation to quanta of knowledge" ("Ediacaran" 17). In doing so, McKay highlights the wilderness of this encounter at the edge of unknowable rock.

In order to enact both a poetic attention that's open to wilderness—one that elevates the stone, restoring its rockiness, and diminishes the human—the speaker must become a student of aural attention. Whether it is wilderness, otherwise-than-place, or oblivion that one pays attention to, this poem too suggests that the speaker's silence—*listening at the edge*—is the only appropriate posture when encountering nature's raw otherness. In "Philosopher's Stone," the speaker approaches a moment of communion with the pocketed stone but resists naming that encounter. In the final lines, McKay concludes:

> when you speak to my heart
>
> of its heaviness, of the soft
>
> facts of erosion, when you whisper in that
>
> tongueless tongue it turns out,
>
> though it can't be,
>
> we both know—   (27–32)

What do we both know? Enacting the poetics laid out in the previous Geopoetic Alphabet entry, "Oblivion," McKay's speaker resists naming whatever he or she learns. Like Purdy's signature open-handed endings (see "Postscript," "Trees at the Arctic Circle," "Adam and No Eve"), this poem's conclusion resists conclusion. Instead, the speaker listens actively to something in the stone's silence—a silence that "will teach me to desire" (10), one that "whispers" some sense of its wilderness. McKay therefore approaches the wilderness of the philosopher's stone with a deliberate "poetic attention": a "sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess, and…does not really wish to be talked about" (*VV* 27). It is this emphasis on such apophatic poetics that makes the poem's title so ironic. The speaker's attitude is a direct inversion of that which surrounds the mythological philosopher's stone (*lapis philosophorum*), whose power elevates the human by prolonging his or her life and heightening his or her wealth, symbolizing human perfection. In doing so, the legend goes, the alchemist in possession of this stone would achieve ultimate enlightenment. Instead, this poem whittles away at the human hubris in this legend, slowly de-centering the human appropriation of rock, giving stone back to oblivion. This poem therefore suggests, instead, that an apophatic attention to the ineffable—and therefore, to that which is technically beyond any alchemist's grasp—is that which will provide enlightenment. Though, as "we both know—" (32), this enlightenment is like the Taoist's Tao or the Christian's *mysterium tremendum* and cannot be reduced to words. In "Philosopher's Stone," McKay therefore enacts a poetic attention that is a "form of knowing"—one that relinquishes a perpetual tendency to name, to put stone to use (*VV* 27). Acknowledging the unknowability of wilderness, McKay finishes this poem by putting his words to rest, and, in doing so, relinquishes any appropriative attempt, suggesting another way of being in relation to stone: a way of being

that nods its curious head at otherwise-than-place, a place beyond the edge of our conception, and a place where language holds no weight.

TRANSFORMATIVE OCEANIC SPACE IN "FINGER POINTING AT THE MOON"

First published in *Another Gravity* (2000), "Finger Pointing at the Moon" articulates a similar poetic attention, one that uses silence at an edged encounter to gesture at an untranslatable *otherwise-than-place*. In her review of *Another Gravity*, Barbara Colebrook Peace writes:

> McKay in this collection considers our gravity, "the force that earths us," in relationship
> to our potential for flight and the "otherness" of the moon. …This collection is written
> from an extraordinary space, where we find ourselves suspended, "hugely paused, pissing
> off both / gravity and time," in a state between sleeping and waking, where the conscious
> and the unconscious are passionately in love with the natural world. … That the book title
> includes the word "other" is entirely appropriate. Movement toward "the other," which
> we can trace in McKay's work from the beginning, emerges here … as a major theme.
> (110)

Embodying Purdy's characteristic motif, "Finger Pointing at the Moon" connects "the ethereal and the mundane" (Peace, 114). And as Lee says of Purdy, it is the reader's job to ride the wavelength between both ("The Poetry of Al" 99). With that gap in mind, this poem is set somewhere *between* "place and its otherwise" (*DW* 31). The epigraph to "Finger Pointing at the Moon" establishes the poem's gesture at this alternate space. Here, McKay quotes Spanish poet Antonio Machado, who writes: "We come from a hidden ocean, and go to an unknown ocean."

Not unlike the inversion in "Philosopher's Stone," this poem opens with a reminder of human insignificance and the boundlessness of wilderness, saying: *"Everything you think of has*

already happened / and been sung by the sea" (1-2). This line repeats itself later (11-12), thereby mimicking the oceanic roll of the waves in the poem while fulfilling its own statement about recurrence. Like "Listen at the Edge," "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River," and "Philosopher's Stone," this poem is ultimately situated in a threshold. The speaker in "Finger Pointing at the Moon" hikes "along the coast" (2-3) with a group of friends. Even this physical setting signals that this poem is situated at an edge, where ocean meets land. Highlighting the liminality of this situated edge, the borders in this poem bleed into each other, thereby troubling neat groupings of intact categorized spaces. Here, McKay emphasizes the "back-drag" (18) of the tide, where water washes over "the beach" (19), thereby problematizing easy identification of water's beginning and land's end. Furthermore, McKay writes that "each wave, / having travelled incognito through its ocean, / surges up to rush the rock" (15-17). As a result, the trail is "so wet" that it is mostly "washouts" (4-5). In these lines, ocean meets trail to drag land back into its watery self, and trail concedes to this pull by leaking into ocean in turn. The washout in this poem forces the hikers to circumnavigate, negotiating a new route on the fly—the washout "forc[es] us / to find fresh ways" (5-6)—which reminds readers of McKavian poetics, the aim of which is to challenge common ways of thinking and relating to wilderness. Therefore the speaker's physical re-routing signals a kind of cognitive adjustment itself: a re-wiring of the brain's conception of this edged space.

Not only are the hikers in the poem at the edge of land, but they are also situated in a threshold of silence/sound, between a quiet "hush" and the loud "boom of surf" (3). More critically, in this poem, humans are silent—there is no speech—while the surrounding environment has an overt auditory quality: the sea sings (2), the "surf" is "soundtrack" (10-11), and water "clicks the stones … / on each other, a death rattle that is somehow soothing,

somehow / music, some drum kit from the far side of the blues" (19-22). This instance of the speaker's silence as he or she confronts a loud landscape further exemplifies McKay's aural attention to wilderness at the edge of an encounter with the non-human other—his attention to "silence like an overwhelming noise" ("Close-up" 9).

I imagine that this poem really *did* begin as a listening. McKay expresses the productive purpose of his speaker's silence as he moves the speaker into an imagined and alternate watery space where words "fail" (48):

I think we come here so our words

can fail us, get humbled by the stones, drown,

be lost forever, then come back

as beach glass, polished and anonymous,

knowing everything. Knowing everything they

think of has already happened, everything they think of has

already happened and been sung, knowing

everything they think of has already happened and been sung,

in all its tongues and metres, and to no one,

by the sea. (47-57)

The poem ends here, as McKay's speaker plunges into the silent periphery between word and wilderness: simultaneously lost, drowned, *and* transformed—returning as quiet, enlightened ("knowing everything" [52]) beach glass. The implication here is that there is no signifier to convey this encounter with wilderness—though perhaps something akin to wonder or "dumb astonishment" (*DW* 43) would suffice. However, these lines simultaneously suggest that some sort of knowledge without signifiers is possible, if we lose ourselves. This poem thereby enacts

what Mason calls "McKavian resistance to the poststructuralist orthodoxy 'to doubt—at least in

the seminar room—that there is a world which precedes or exists outside the text' [*VV* 62]"

("Listening" 85-86). Therefore, "Finger Pointing at the Moon" critically enacts McKavian

wilderness poetics, in which the poet must wield words in a way that puts "their authority at risk"

(*VV* 85), setting "ownership … aside" so that appropriation of the non-human other "can turn

inside out" and both poet and reader can glimpse an "opening" in language towards the

unsignable other (*VV* 31). It is only at this point, McKay suggests, that we can abandon "the

centralizing and reductive influence of the name, which so often signals the terminal point of our

interest" (*VV* 84).

  In "Finger Pointing at the Moon," McKay gestures at the role poetry plays as an

"opening" (*VV* 31) in speaking the unknown. As his hiker navigates a new route—"Off balance, /

I'm trying to hop from stepping stone to stone"—he has a "flash back" and is seemingly

transported:

> forty years to my friend's
>
> younger sister sitting in the boat,
>
> trailing her fingers as we row out to the raft, how she gazes,
>
> pouring herself into water as its depth
>
> pours into her. (24-28)

Here, the poem shifts into another kind of alternate space: memory. This shift underlines the

poem's wider slip into an alternate realm in lines 47-57. While seated in the remembered

space—a space "lit / by its own small moon—a snowberry, / a mothball, a dime—which

regulates its tides / and longings" (32-35)—the speaker paddles in a boat, as if taking a

"cognitive ferry" (McKay, "Speaker's Chair" 11) from one "hidden ocean into [another]

unknown ocean" (McKay, "Finger" 37). Like memory, poetry can only ever be a finger pointing at that which regulates it—something other that is here symbolized as the moon. Memory is always an index of a past occurrence to which one can never return: a gesture. In generating a memory, we generate an alternate space: one that is both embodied and cognitive, both physical and not. And here, memory is regulated like the tide—"lit / by its own small moon"—coming and going as if guided by some other force. Just as memory points to the unknown force that guides it, this poem is a finger pointing at the encounter with wilderness which inspired it, gesturing at the alternate space—the "unknown ocean" (37)—in which this wilderness dwells, and to which the speaker travels in lines 47-57. This poem is not asking its readers to confuse the finger with that to which it points, but instead, to consider its gesture. As McKay's speaker sits in memory, he considers just this: the gesture of memory, of language, of the poem itself. He writes:

> … I will need a word
>
> to float there, some empty blue-green bottle
>
> that has lost its label. (38-40)

Because of his interest in Wittgenstein and language—articulated in *Vis à Vis: Fieldnotes on Wilderness and Poetry*[28]—I cannot read this poem, and these lines (38-40), without thinking of Wittgenstein's analogy of linguistic limitation as a glass bottle in which a fly is trapped. In this metaphor, the fly perceives it is trapped because it perpetually focuses on the structural limits of the glass walls in which it is encased (Kenaan 56). By fixating exclusively on these limits, it continually (and literally) crashes into them, and the fly's attention is distracted from ever perceiving the bottle's real exit through the opening in its neck (Kenaan 56). For Wittgenstein's

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[28] See *VV* 97.

fly, the "possibility of freedom can only open up—the way out of the bottle can only show itself—when the fly relinquishes the project of overcoming or transgressing its structural limits" (Kenaan 56).

Here, McKay's speaker acknowledges that the "word" (37) is a limit: a "bottle" (38). And yet, it is a "bottle" that has "lost its label" (39)—perhaps a symbol of the way in which words can be used without possession, without desire to name, taxonomize, nor control the other they encounter. For McKay, poetry too functions like the exit in the bottle. As mentioned above, if "ownership" of both language and other is "set aside," the poet can glimpse an "*opening*" in language towards wilderness (*VV* 31, emphasis mine). To be sure, a poem cannot "transgress the boundaries of…language" (Kenaan 55), but, by paying attention to the significance of linguistic limits—symbolized in McKay's work by the recurrence of linguistic resistance and aural attention at an edge—McKay can play within the structures of language, thereby freeing his lyric "from the position" that views the "effect of language's limits" to be totalizing, fixed and "impenetrable" (Kenaan 55). Only then can poetry articulate unspeakable wilderness—and even then, it is an articulation that will always be partial, always be gesture.

It is critical that McKay's speaker is freed from the strictures of language right after "we lose the trail entirely, / or it feeds us to the rainforest" (40-41). Here, at the crux of the poem, McKay connects a loss of human control to the speaker's shift into an alternate space which signifies a total loss of language (a space where "our words / …fail [47-48]), occurring *between* place and other. In transporting the speaker here, these lines articulate an opening towards otherwise-than-place, or oblivion, and the wilderness that dwells within. In "Finger Pointing at the Moon," McKay's word-as-bottle connects significantly to the "beach glass" (50) that his speaker and company "come back / as" (49-50): "polished and anonymous" (50). Whereas the

speaker needed a word—symbolized as a glass "bottle" (39)—to help him float through memory, this need fractures when the speaker enters this alternate, transformative space. As the speaker "drown[s], / [is] lost forever," and returns as "beach glass" (49-51), the image of the word-bottle smashes into several tiny blue-green fragments, creating multiple fissures, or openings, in Wittgenstein's bottle. Therefore, this poem "flirts with [the] destruction" of "language" (*VV* 32) by rooting its openings, somewhat paradoxically, in the space of unknowing—in what McKay calls oblivion or otherwise-than-place. Yet this is a productive destruction: one that makes the speaker humble, anonymous, and enlightened in this new, non-linguistic space.

This step towards a watery, alternate space without words reoccurs in one of McKay's later poems, titled "Astonished—" (*Strike/Slip,* 2006). In "Astonished—" the speaker directs his lyric to an unidentified addressee in the second person: "you" (6, 7, 10, 14, 16). This addressee is "astounded" by some unnamed referent, though the imagery of "sediments" (8), "seabeds" (8), "mountains" (9), "ammonites" (9), "fossil[s]" (10), and "gems" (10) indicate that the addressee has encountered some form of deep geologic time. Here, the addressed subject "turn[s] toward stone" (2), and the poem widens in temporal scope: "the moment / filling with its slow / stratified time" (2-4). After this encounter, the speaker describes "you" (14) as "Astonished / ...and anonymous" (13-14). Whereas in "Finger Pointing at the Moon," McKay's speaker addresses an anonymous "we" (40, 42, 47), in "Astonished—" the speaker addresses the aforementioned "you" (6, 7, 10, 14, 16). Both McKay's use of "we" ("Finger") and "you" ("Astonished—") invites readers to identify with the process of astonishment described in each poem. Here, in "Astonished—", the addressed subject encounters something elusive that stuns "you." McKay writes that, as a result of this encounter, "Someone / inside you steps from the forest and across the beach / toward the *nameless all-dissolving ocean*" (15-17, emphasis mine). The connective

tissue between these two poems—"Astonished—" and "Finger Pointing at the Moon"—

manifests in the repeated use of a languageless ocean as a symbol for oblivion. In each poem, the

speaker moves the reader towards this space without names, and something of the speaking-self

dissolves. By dissolving his speaker and addressee as such, McKay performs his signature

"reverence in reaching toward the other": a "practice" that readers are "invited to experience"

alongside the speaker (Peace 115). Peace suggests that in reading poems like these, readers too

"undergo metamorphosis," themselves becoming that "which is always listening," and perhaps

breaking open towards unknowing as well (116). In these poems, McKay transforms his readers

into something more "anonymous" (50) and "humbled" (48)—a transformation that will impact

how readers conceive of the wilderness around them. Here, McKay enacts a critical function of

geopoetry or wilderness poetics, which he explains is to "give up mastery … at least for the

brief—but let us hope expandable—period of astonishment" ("Ediacaran" 24). Therefore in both

"Astonished—" and "Finger Pointing at the Moon," McKay illustrates a poetic experience that is

interstitially between word and wilderness, one that breaks open towards otherwise-than-place

"so that our words can fail us" too ("Finger" 47).

"BEYOND THAT LINE": THE WILDERNESS OF CULTURE

      While Canadian nature poets have addressed an untranslatable other since the

Confederation Poets, McKay extends this tradition to emphasize not only an alternate space, but

also a wilderness "in *everything*" that "resists transmission" (Dawson 66, emphasis mine).

Wilderness, he explains, does not just reside in nature, though that connection is easily made

because of the long history of viewing nature as feral, wild, and untouched. McKay's

contemporary emphasis challenges dyadic notions of nature/culture—as if each were not just a

"disguised categor[y] of language" (*VV* 30)—to show the way this dividing line is increasingly

blurred, and the way that even cultural artifacts retain their wilderness, resisting categorization and in turn, resisting us. In his essay "Remembering Apparatus" (*VV* 51-73), McKay suggests that even tools—the epitome of cultural artifact—"exceed the fact of their construction and exemplify an otherness beyond human design" (57, also qtd. in Wheaton 122). In her review of *Vis à Vis*, Margo Wheaton suggests McKay's poetry articulates that, "mystery and wilderness, despite all of our attempts of ordering the world, are entirely in the ascendant, asserting themselves at every moment: 'the wilderness is not just far away and dwindling, but implicit in things we use every day, as close at hand as a flat tire or a missed step'" (Wheaton 122).[29] Take, for example, McKay's poem "Fridge Nocturne" (*Birding, or Desire,* 1983)—a short poem in which "you" (2) are up "late" (1). The speaker instructs you to "listen to your fridge, the old / armless weeping willow of the kitchen" (4-5). This example of catachresis stretches the reader's mind, causing her to "criss-cross" (Dragland, "Bewildering" 883) unlike objects by cognitively carrying nature across to culture, and vice versa, thereby showing the similarities between the two categories of the mind. Here, the fridge is also part river: it produces a "humble murmur" (6) akin to a stream's current that transports you to "the river you're far from, the Saugeen, the Goulais / the Raisin" (7-8). Interpreting this poem as that which destabilizes intact categories of nature/culture, revealing a wilderness in both, Kevin Bushell writes that "metaphor acts for McKay as a springboard into wilderness, which is never really entered but only glimpsed" (71). He continues, saying that:

> In "Fridge Nocturne," the metaphor of fridge as willow attempts to defamiliarize both
> fridge and willow in order to apprehend some aspect of their alien beings. Metaphor in
> this instance, we might say, helps us circumvent the mind's categories, to see beyond the

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[29] Here, Wheaton quotes a passage from McKay, *Vis à Vis* 57.

surface significance of things to an extra-conceptual level. McKay's metaphor helps us

glimpse an essential yet incomprehensible relationship between fridge, willow tree, and

speaker at a particular moment in time. (71-72)

McKay affirms that in poems that deal with tools, he highlights some aspect of their alien being,

because art's function is "to provide safe defamiliarizing moments, when the mask of utility gets

lifted and we waken to [its] residual wilderness without the inconvenience of [a tool's literal]

breakdown" (*VV* 58).

McKay's poem "Porch" (*Paradoxides*, 2012) opens by similarly hinting at the wilderness

a tool retains. Here, his speaker watches a tractor "one farm over" that "coughs and quits" (1-2).

This evokes McKay's own thoughts on the wilderness of a tool from his essay "Baler Twine," in

which he says:

That tools retain a vestige of wilderness is especially evident when we think of their

existence in time and eventual graduation from utility: breakdown. To what *degree* do we

own our houses, hammers, dogs? Beyond that line lies wilderness. We probably

experience its presence most often in the negative as dry rot in the basement, a splintered

handle, or shit on the carpet. But there is also the sudden angle of perception, the

phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism.

The coat hanger asks a question; the armchair is suddenly crouched: in such

defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of

the mind's categories to glimpse some thing's autonomy—its rawness, its *duende*, its

alien being. (21)

Witnessing this breakdown in the agricultural tool, McKay's speaker begins to think about "Lao

Tzu" (7) who, so the Chinese legend goes, leaves culture "for wilderness" (8). In this story, or

the speaker's memory of this story, Lao Tzu "pause[s] at the border" (9) between "community" and "wilderness" (8). Here, "the thin line / between lost past and dim future opens / into an evening and a porch / on which to rock and listen" (11-14). As the "thin line … opens," the border Lao Tzu crosses becomes elusive: it becomes, metaphorically, "an evening *and* a porch" (13, emphasis mine). This image troubles neat categories: where does the porch end and the evening begin? Any porch is an exchange of shared space, where nature leaks into cultured property—the edge of a home—and vice versa. This image further connects Lao Tzu's crossing to the speaker's own position between nature and culture, as this poem is mostly situated on the speaker's porch. Remembering McKay's belief that poetry is a listening, these lines enact the silence that McKay so often displays at the "border" of wilderness. Here, the threshold space is a porch where one should "rock and listen, listen and rock" (14-15). In this poem, then, McKay's speaker listens to wilderness at multiple edges, all of which are productively blurred: the arbitrary edge between Tzu's community and its wider wilderness, and the liminal space of the speaker's porch.

This reading of "Porch" is strengthened when read alongside another edge poem, "Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush" (*Apparatus*, 1997). In "Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush," McKay's speaker listens at an edge which is represented similarly. He writes:

> For the following few seconds, while the ear
>
> inhales the evening
>
> only the offhand is acceptable. Poetry
>
> Clatters. (1-4)

Like in "Listen and the Edge" and "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River," the speaker here confronts some alien being—likely the titular birdsong—and language "clatters" (4). This

encounter lands him in "a place / *between* desire and memory, some back porch / we can neither wish for nor recall" (8-10, emphasis mine). McKay therefore uses the porch as a symbol of two types of encounter: language and wilderness ("Song"), and culture and wilderness ("Porch"). Reading "Porch" alongside "Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush," readers can infer that the McKavian porch is a symbol for the breakdown of categories, opening into an alternate *between* space which retains its autonomy and anonymity. In "Porch," the speaker's ear similarly "inhales the evening" ("Song" 2) as he listens to the "tree frogs chant … / as though composed by Philip Glass" (5-6). He becomes fascinated by one particular frog—"a translucent elf from some outer space, / splayed, finger pads extended, / on the porch screen" (22-4). He longs to capture this alien creature in memory by means of photograph and therefore slips inside "to fetch the camera" (29). However, when the speaker returns, he observes: "when I got back it was gone" (29-30). Therefore, in "Porch," wilderness cannot be captured—neither by its opening tool, which breaks down, resisting human utility, nor by the camera that documents the alien frog. In marrying these wild evasions, McKay shows that wilderness knows no bounds: it pulses in both nature *and* culture, simultaneously challenging the division of our linguistically-constructed world into these very categories in the first place.

CONCLUSION: THE POEM THE MIND MAKES IN APPREHENDING THE OTHER

If the question posed in "Waking at the mouth of Willow River"—"what sort of noise would the mind make, if it could, here at the brink?" (*NF* 3)—summarizes McKay's poetic attention, then his poetry enacts the answer to this question: the noise that the mind makes at the brink is a breakdown of language. Or, rather, the noise the mind makes is *poetry* wherein language fails at the edge of an encounter with the non-human other, gesturing at an alternate space dubbed oblivion, and thereby allowing wilderness to "leak back" to the reader's

perception. McKay's poetry expands Canadian literary conceptions of wilderness as radically other, adding a contemporary emphasis that appeals to an alternate cognitive space—an "otherwise-than-place"—that exceeds all attempts of categorization. Wilderness, therefore, is shown to be *wholly* and *entirely* other. Adding his contemporary emphasis on aural attention at the edge of an encounter, McKay's poetry resists a sense of ownership over wilderness and chooses instead the breakdown of language at the edge. In doing so, McKay's poems go where humans cannot, dwelling instead in the liminal edge of our cognitive grip, where language and wilderness meet.

As this chapter shows, McKay gives new articulation to a kernel that has slowly bloomed in Canadian nature poetry, drawing our attention to practices of unknowing and unnaming, and troubling the easy categorization of that which is radically other: the mysterium tremendum of this world, its wilderness, its alien duende. As Travis V. Mason points out, in doing so, McKay's poetry "undermine[s] the unquestioned authority of anthropocentric language and knowledge in order to elevate the standing, in ethical terms, of other-than-human-beings" (*OD* 41). Therefore by situating poems *in* borders, and drawing attention to the porosity of these borders, McKay's poetry challenges appropriative attempts to categorize the non-human world. In giving wilderness back to obscurity, McKay's work points towards what Canadian poet and scholar Adam Dickinson calls "an environmental ethic at work in lyric apprehensions of materiality" ("Lyric Ethics" 35)—one that not only elevates the other, but also transforms how we conceive of its wild, unspeakable being.

CONCLUSION

This study has, from the outset, treated nature as a category of the mind through which "wilderness" (*VV* 21) is glimpsed. As shown in chapter one, the Canadian nature poet's confrontation with McKavian wilderness, tremendum, or the ineffable is often tied to an encounter with nature.[30] As evidenced by the presence of *mysterium tremendum,* apophatic theology, and the *via negativa* in the poetics of its nature poetry, Canada's "new eco-poet" (Holmes xvi) consistently borrows concepts and terms from mystic traditions to inform his or her attention to that which is wholly other and unknowable in the material world of nature, and its contents. The natural world and mysticism are therefore entangled in the nature poet's articulation of an unnameable other. This illustrates that the poets studied in this project create work "where materialism and mysticism, those ancient enemies, finally come together, have a conversation in which each hearkens to the other, then go out for a drink" (McKay, "Ediacaran" 11).

As Lee himself says, encounters with *mysterium tremendum*, "the encounter with holy otherness," is "most commonly approached ... through [an] encounter with the land" ("Rejoinder" 33, qtd. in Northrup 177). Yet as ecocritical theory in the Anthropocene moves into a theoretical position that rejects the category of nature[31]—positing that nature and culture are enmeshed and entangled in each other as non-dyadic spaces, mutual sites of production, and categories of the mind—today's Canadian eco-poet will likely follow the lead of McKay, who sees wilderness in both tool and tulip. This suggestion builds on Nicholas Bradley's argument in his essay on Lee's *Civil Elegies* that both "urban spaces *and* damaged ecosystems" should "be

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[30] However, a full reading of Atwood's "Journey to the Interior" also illustrates a wilderness of the self, anticipating McKay's belief that some "wilderness or mystery" exists "inside us," in some "uninhabited place" within "the far reaches of the self" ("Muskwa Assemblage," 482-3).

[31] See Slavoj Žižek's "Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses" (*Sustainabilities,* ed. Paco Barragan, Edizioni Charta: 2008) and Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007).

included in any study of representations of nature in Canadian writing" (Bradley 15, emphasis mine, qtd. in Mason, "Listening" 78). Therefore, a further investigation of poems that represent unnameable subjects would include a more rigorous study of Canadian writing that, like McKay's own oeuvre, blurs the binary between "natural" and "cultural" spaces. In doing so, a continuation of this research would show that post-nature writing can still appeal to a "wilderness" (*VV* 21) in depictions of its environment, thereby maintaining a marriage of the mystic and the materialist. In fact, as the edges of constructed things—whether buildings, city limits, or national parks—wear and bleed in the physical world, I believe we will continue to see more Canadian poetry that, following McKay's own edge poetics, appeals to porosity. If this trend continues, future writing will continue to productively problematize traditional conceptions of *all* space: civic, industrial, feral, and in-between. And as non-human matter—whether natural, cultural, or an enmeshment of both—gains more attention in literature and literary criticism, it will be crucial for ecocritical studies to remain engaged. In doing so, scholars such as myself, who possess an interest in intersections of unknowability and matter, and wilderness and language, can continue to resist anthropocentrism, thereby undermining established systems of human power over the non-human other, and all the unknowability it carries.

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