

Attending Guilt-free Birdspeak and Treetalk: an Ecofeminist Reading of the 'Geopsyche' in the Poetry of Don McKay

by Alanna F. Bondar

But body is the home of a birch wood
whose limbs are unwritten upon paper, listening
motionless

full of dance

(from "Bone Poems" in *Night Field* 29)

Living within a kind of communal North American eco-ennui in which continued scientific warnings of impending ecological doom reveal more symptoms than actual crisis, Don McKay revisits nearly lost primal connections to wilderness in an impossible but necessary attempt to ecospeak within and without language. What makes McKay's form of ecopoetry unique in a North American context is the way in which he resists following the conventional American ecological writers' tendency toward defining nature as feminine in a masculine-encoded system. According to ecofeminist critic Annette Kolodny, American tendencies towards a pastoral impulse that feminizes nature resulted in manifestations of the New World wilderness that are both romanticized and denigrated. McKay, in contrast, resists the privileging of transcendence that effectively erases the human body from wilderness participation, and avoids Romantic gestures that allow for the returned separation of humanity from nature after the weekend wilderness retreat is complete. In this way, McKay also traverses the Canadian colonial inheritance consumed by fellow ecopoets, thus sidestepping manifestations of patriarchal guilt and inadequacy. McKay's poetry shows a transition from earlier (proto)ecological writing, concerned with the translation of wilderness, to ecological writing wherein poetry becomes more focused on the relationship of man-to-nature. Ecocritic Patrick Murphy discusses the difference between the protoecological and the ecological as a means of distinguishing between literature that can be discussed from a contemporary ecocritical perspective—the protoecological—[Page 65] and writing that fits within the parameters of an ecopoetry yet to be adequately defined—the ecological. When I bracket "proto" in "protoecological" I am marking

the difference between protoecological literature as nature writing that remains outside of Buell's boundaries for ecological literature and protoecological literature whose ecological merits may be considered valid but are yet to be determined. Other ecocritics, such as Terry Gifford, have responded to Lawrence Buell's "specific set of obsolescent conventions of the ecologic tradition" which suggest "pastoralism" as an alternative to the pastoral tradition, by proposing a new critical category—the "post-pastoral." By moving from protoecological nature poetry into ecological poetry that is consistent with what critics Buell and Gifford have outlined as necessary for the genre of ecological poetry,¹ McKay shows how his exploration of "poetic attention" fits into the ecocritical category of "geopsyche" when the poet and poet-speaker seek to "live deliberately."

Born in reaction to the modernist and post-modernist movements which aim towards a "sublime escape" by employing theoretical strategies of "metaphysicalism, Frygian Archetypalism, Derridean deconstruction" and other critical approaches that distance the author from the text and the poet from the source, Canadian poets, as D.M.R. Bentley argues, have come to recognize that this emerging project, this attempt to "bring poetry back to earth," is "necessary if poetry is to have a part in reintegrating humanity and nature" (271). Gaile McGregor likewise argues that we are witness to "the emergence of a distinctive and potentially powerful literature" that is struggling to revitalize all of the issues which surround the relationship between human beings and nature (71). Ecocriticism embraces a literary exploration of the human-nature dynamic which—momentarily sidestepping the possible death of our planet—stems from our human-as-animal origins, and is not unlike postcolonial attempts to redefine "altered" races of colonized (largely First Nations) peoples through a decentring and recentring of cultural ideologies. Crossing the constructed divide between human 'civilization' and 'mysterious' nature is a possible and necessary reevaluation of biotic community for sustainable development within and around the home-front.

Self-proclaimed writers of ecological literature such as Don McKay enter into the dynamic of political ecology when they try respectfully to reflect a human-nature paradigm without reducing it to literary tropes, idealized pastorals, or self-defining anthropomorphism. Attempting to bridge what may always remain this impossible gap between humanity and nature becomes the ecopoet's biggest challenge. Nature as "semiotic," Berland [**Page 66**] and Slack argue, is as much a "cultural construction" (22) as civilization itself; nonetheless Diana Relke argues against this general notion that "as the successor to literary modernism, postmodernism confirms the death of nature" (Relke, *Green* 22). The problem, Relke surmises, is that "postmodernism has liberated poets from responsibility for the green biomass that supports human life because that biomass is beyond the reach of accurate linguistic representation" (22). Regardless of seemingly irreconcilable differences between theory and ecological practice, postmodern expression has created an ideological space, "a mode of expression which creates

the possibility of a grass-roots micropolitics in which previously marginalized voices can be heard" (Head 28). Head explains that through a paradoxical process of decentring and recentring, "traditional given hierarchies are overturned—the assumptions on which they are based decentred—and a new, provisional platform of judgement is installed in a qualified recentring. A particular construction of ecological thinking can be shown to be based on this same paradoxical combination" (28). Unarguably, "the construction of political ecology" which includes ecological literature as a voice of ecologism "depends upon a recentring of the enlightened subject, as instigator and agent of change (in ideology and in policy)" (29). Thus, by taking "a position of informed recentring," the literary critic, the ecological writer, and the environmentally minded reader may plot "a meaningful path *through* literary theory" as a means of potentially discovering and reinforcing ecological understanding (29).

Though McKay asserts that he "fails to postmodernize," he offers an explanation consistent with Relke's theories of how postmodernism allows for the emergence of ecological writing. McKay suggests that "before, under, and through the wonderful terrible wrestling with words and music there is a state of mind which I'm calling 'poetic attention' [as] a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess, and it does not really wish to be talked about" ("Baler" 24). The motive for McKay's refusal to consider his own postmodernisms is unclear, but likely stems from a philosophical rejection of a theory that distances author from text. If the author is dead, after all, there can be no relationship between the writer and his biosphere, between man and nature, between the disembodied voice and the experiential being. In other words, language, text, and knowledge should be embraced as 'natural' functions of humanity, but not at the expense of experience that resists logic and categorization. As McKay explains, "the nature poet may (should, in fact) resort to the field guide or library, but will keep coming back, figuratively speaking, to the [Page 67] trail—to the grain of the experience, the particular angle of expression in a face, and ok, to the raven on the baler twine" ("Baler" 24).

Of course, decentring and recentring the writer-subject with regards to his/her ecological position raises the question of how the tenets of twentieth-century ecopoets differ from those articulated by nineteenth-century Romantics. By placing "nature" on a pedestal as the model for human harmony, particularly within social and artistic endeavours, Romantic theoretical and literary impressions of nature popularized the pastoral ideal—that new natural Eden—as the pathway to preexisting Truth and God. Necessarily, this perspective also favoured the individual, particularly the poet-prophet who sought perfection in the natural innocence of primitive man (Frye, *Harper* 403-406). Though the Romantic poet's entry into the wilderness as sacred meditative space might bring moments, however brief, of Truth and mysticism, his privileging of self-enlightenment as the end goal negated an egalitarian wilderness-human dynamic, essential to the ecological mode of thought and its representation. In this way, as Jane Frazier reminds us, nature is

not "transcended; its value is inherent" (Frazier 16). The ecopoet needs to "reconceptualize[] this relationship, and the human responsibility for maintaining and supporting the ecosystem in which we exist" (13). In so doing, the ecopoet shifts from temporary wilderness excursions, wherein a dichotomy between civilization and wilderness is reinforced, to on-going and daily experiences of cooperation, reverence, and respect for nature and self-in-nature within one's own bioregion. As Patrick Murphy points out, "Thoreau...did not inhabit Walden Pond the way that Mary Austin lived in the California desert or the way that Simon Ortiz hails from Deetseyamah"²(43).

This ideological shift is what Murphy theorizes must occur for reconceptualizing the human-wilderness dynamic in more ecological terms; he suggests a dispensing with the ideological models of the aggressor/victim or self/other paradigm and an embracing, instead, of the idea of "anotherness" (40-51). Murphy asserts that the concept of "other" has been a "valuable tool in psychoanalytic and feminist literary theory and criticism but the 'Absolute Other', founded upon notions of permanent incompleteness and prematurity, communicative incommensurability and binary constructs, is, however, largely an illusion" (40). He argues that:

its continued acceptance is a dangerous reification that protects much of the Western dominant hierarchical power relations that its use has been designed to dismantle. Ecology and ecocriticism indicate that it is time to move towards a relational model of 'anotherness' and the conceptualization of difference [**Page 68**] in terms of 'I' and 'another', 'one' and 'another', and 'I-as-another.'
(40)

In this way, "the ecological process of interanimation—the ways in which humans and other entities develop, change and learn through mutually influencing each other day to day—can be emphasized in constructing models of viable human/rest-of-nature interaction" (42). As Jonathan Bate points out in *Romantic Ecology*, reading Wordsworth metaphorically at the expense of the referential compromises an ecocritical perspective, since protoecological poems may contain symbolic meaning but they must also be taken literally—that is, be about nature (Bate 5). Other ecocritics agree that on-going goals ought to include "a better science of nature, an improved understanding of the natural world's complexities and energies, and a deeper analysis of human priorities" (Frazier 24). Clearly, writing nature from an ecological perspective requires re-estimations of ideological models of nature, to "facilitate[] the generation of a different paradigm for conceptualizing environmental writing that focuses on relational inhabitation as a fundamental world-view" (Murphy 43).

From an ecofeminist perspective, the notion of the Romantic poet-prophet is further problematized by the Romantic poet's "potently male" ego (Mellor 8). This "anthropocentric self-trust in ingenuity" (Frazier 31), according to Anne Mellor,

manifests a "poet-savior" who:

engage[s] in figurative battles of conquest and possession and at the same time [is] capable of incorporating into itself whatever attributes of the female it desired to possess. In effect, the sublime Romantic ego defined itself as god the father, the creator of that language "which rules with Daedal harmony a throng / Of thoughts, and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were."
(Mellor

7)

From a feminist perspective, the Romantic poet who wills to power becomes a passive-aggressive colonizer of sorts, and thus is stripped of his 'authority' within feminist discourse. Resisting patriarchal or colonial guilt is the point at which ecocriticism and ecofeminism meet for the male ecopoet; he needs to revisit intention, attention, and the corresponding expression of encounters within wilderness, particularly those that sustain the myth of the logic of dualisms and a self divided from wilderness 'other.'

"Living deliberately" or "coming home" for the ecopoet means deviating from the Romantic poet's self-absorbed nature-tourist "desire[] to be spoken *to*, inspired by the other so that perception travels into language (or side show) without a palpable break" (*Vis* 27). For McKay (though he [**Page 69**] apparently fails to postmodernize), "poetic attention is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness; it leads to a work which is not a *vestige* of other but a *translation* of it" (*Vis* 28, "Baler" 24-5). Valuing the other's wilderness, then, is contained within a process of "poetic attention" ("Baler" 24) that renders the ecopoet open to a certain unnamed and unnamable primal space of remembering. In his critical writings, McKay describes the moment of attentive wilderness connection as a poetic encounter that occurs only moments before the poetic mind "acknowledg[es] some extra-linguistic condition as the poem's input, output, or both" (24). Through willingness, and awareness, such events become available to the poet—like a glimpse or a half-remembered dream. They offer a space, fleeting, but full of possibility. McKay states that "here is also the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism. ...we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to glimpse something's autonomy—its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being" ("Baler" 21).

This process of "attending," or "living deliberately" is clearly described as an ongoing process of 'othering' that transforms those divisions between self and other into a kind of unity, found through profound identification with wilderness. Other ecological writers, particularly in the American tradition, call this process home-coming or home-making, as a revisionist strategy of defamiliarizing neighborhoods in order to return ecological awareness, health, and well-being to the backyard caretaker. As American environmental writer and ecocritic Gary Snyder maintains,

"nature is not a place to visit, it is *home*—and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places" (Snyder 7). McKay suggests that, "home makes possible the possession of the world, the rendering of the other as one's interior" ("Baler" 22). He explains:

To make a home is to establish identity with a primordial grasp, yes; but it is also, in some measure, to give it away with an extended palm. We might try to sum up the paradox of homemaking by saying that the inner life *takes place*: it both *claims* place and acts to *become* a place among others. It turns wilderness into an interior and presents interiority to the wilderness. (22)

"Poetic attention," McKay asserts, is "a form of knowing which counters the 'primordial grasp' in home-making, and celebrates the wilderness of the other" (24). Murphy likewise theorizes this unnamed and unnamable creative and ecologically-minded poetic process that recognizes the importance of coming to "anotherness" as a pursuing of the "geopsyche." "Poetic [Page 70] attention"—"based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness" (25)—can result in ecological poetry.

Desiring the impossible possibility of non-linguistic experience, McKay attempts to reflect a human-nature connection through language (anthropomorphic, onomatopoeic or otherwise). Critics responding to his poetry, however, debate whether McKay's poetry speaks a kind of newspeak or, as I have elsewhere described the poetry in McKay's *Birding, or desire*, a kind of metalanguage; does it employ successful metaphor, as Kevin Bushell claims, that bridges the human-nature divide; or does it fail to bridge the gap, since language, Sophia Forster sensibly argues, is always translation? McKay believes that the impossible but necessary translation inherent in the process of "poetic attention" (*Vis* 29) is a necessary step to bridging any gap, whether cultural, linguistic, or between human and nature. Anthropomorphism, he asserts, is mandatory for nature poets; however, like the ecofeminist argument for a "practical essentialism" (King 23)—that revisiting of the female-nature dynamic outside of a masculine-encoded paradigm—McKay calls for a reconsideration of the negative aspects of mirroring animals or natural elements. He suggests that "nature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully. It performs the translation which is at the heart of being human, the simultaneous grasp and gift of home-making" (*Vis* 29). In this way, McKay suggests and renews manifestations of a traditionally narcissistic anthropomorphism. Furthermore, his practising of reverse anthropomorphism (that is, the giving of nature's attributes to himself and, notably, not to the female-other) confirms McKay's tendencies to move away from deep ecological principles and lean more towards ecofeminist philosophies. In other words, by choosing an ecofeminist approach, McKay is able to explore revisionist strategies that dismantle traditional dichotomies, and instead seek a wilderness connection unencumbered by guilt and fear. Thus, McKay's revisionist poetry creates the philosophical space and psychological openness required to

dissolve the distance between self and "radical otherness" (29). His poetry seeks an understanding of a man's place in the biosphere: it is geopsychic. Whether McKay fails or succeeds in "translating" the wilderness is really of no consequence, since McKay is not one who practices shallow ecology, but one who "create[s] an organic poetic structure, root, blossom, and bole, that clasps you and never releases, so that you know not only the grab of that structure but your indissoluble relationship with it" (Dragland 886).

If we consider Murphy's contention that "nothing human is intrinsically 'strange,' but rather needs to be recognized as 'strange-to-me,'" then an [Page 71] "ethics of answerability" can rightfully be grounded in differences "of perspective or degree[s] of recognition and identification rather than [limited to] a condition of being" (Murphy 41). Ultimately, Murphy calls for a collective healthy geopsyche in which a reorientation of the concepts of 'other' and 'otherness' opens the possibility for "the condition of 'anotherness,' being another for others" (42). In this way:

the ecological processes of interanimation—the ways in which humans and other entities develop, change and learn through mutually influencing each other day to day—can be emphasized in constructing models of viable human/rest-of-nature interaction. Inhabitation as a dominant feature of much nature writing might, then, be emphasized over traveling through, visiting or 'going-out-to-experience-nature' approaches.
(42)

Despite Murphy's theory of "anotherness," "otherness," I would argue, is still not entirely outdated or useless, since it maintains an important political paradigm through which voicelessness, addressed in such theoretical milieus as post-colonialism, feminism, and feminist psychoanalysis, can be emancipated, and the experiences and perspectives of the oppressed can be legitimized. For the purposes of ecofeminism and ecocriticism, however, Murphy's plea for a theoretical shift in the literary critical perspective of "othering" to "anothering" pragmatically circumnavigates the most fundamental tenet—the myth of the logic of dualistic thinking—in ecofeminist philosophy.

Embracing 'anotherness,' given the Canadian colonialist history of the masculine-encoded garrison mentality that pits human against nature, makes becoming an equal member of any biotic community more challenging for the male poet. Thus, Canadian male poets emerge into the ecological scene through an initial, and sometimes continued, displacement in trying to live, as former enemy-inhabitants *with* the wilderness. Taking on a speculative guilt, most Canadian male ecological poets express through their poetry confusion, discomfort, dis-ease, hesitancy, self-loathing, historical embarrassment, paralysis, and apology for their continued cultural position as the dominant gender and race.³ A maintained masculine position in Western culture still tolerates types of control that place

women, animals, and the wilderness-other in positions of powerlessness, of inactivity, of use as objects for the male gaze consumption. The undertone of Tim Lilburn's essay "How to be here," for example, is a kind of apologetic lament for the primal, guilt-free man. In a 1997 interview with Darryl Whetter, Lilburn admits to this "necessary apology" (142) for the colonialist's disregard for engaging with wilderness respectfully. As a man of [Page 72] European descent, living in Canada—a site of Aboriginal and wilderness erasure—Lilburn retains fear of colonizing tendencies inherent in cultural practice, language, and systems of 'knowing.' Herein, the wilderness serves as a kind of second chance at redemption, wherein he may now serve as servant, as nurturer, as caretaker, as translator, as friend—without the tendency to manipulate, exploit, destroy, or control—"[a] place that seems frail; the merest invention could make it disappear" ("How" 167). Ultimately he asks, as all ecological writers do, "how to know this land without vanquishing it?" To resist colonial inheritance associated with patriarchal conquest, "othering," exploitation, and destruction, the male ecopoet must position himself, politically and psychologically, within ecofeminism; failure to recognize ecofeminism as an important component of the encompassing 'androgynous' environmental movement of deep ecology results in ecological literature that struggles with defining man-as-ecologist.

In *BIRDING, or desire* (1983), and *Sanding Down this Rocking Chair on a Windy Day* (1987), McKay asserts a one-on-one positioning with nature-as-exotic-other. In these earlier collections, nature exists as a translatable thing, manifest in a division between self and wilderness, made evident through McKay's dense metaphor and his style of layering text with the semiotics of cultural codes—particularly formal poetic and musical forms. Birding, then, as a metaphor for creative process in McKay's earlier works attempts a meta-language as the key to creation-as-metamorphosis (Bondar 25-7). Birding, or "attending," however, in McKay's later works—*Night Field* (1991), *Apparatus* (1997), *Another Gravity* (2000)—reveals a poetic strategy less interested in intellectual pursuits and more interested in the 'thisness' of nature itself, of articulating the nature-self and the human-wilderness bond outside of the pressures to 'capture' or to do more than 'wing it,' when translating moments of profound wilderness connection.

In "Identification," for example, McKay expresses this unending intellectual frustration by sliding from one possible meaning to another equally inadequate explanation, linked by the word "because." The poet-speaker suggests:

I write it down because

I write it down because of too much sky
because I might have gone on digging the potatoes
never looking up *because*

I mean to bang this loneliness so speech you [Page
73]

jesus falcon

"contact with a lost, original world, free from ontologically insular and physically threatening forces of industrialization and technology" (Frazer 16). Their aim, she suggests, is "to lament [nature's] disappearance in the modern age" (16). Ecological "origin poetry," as Frazier defines it, is an "opportunity for recovery" in a poetics which divides a "lament or longing for a lost, original world while emphasizing our present ideological distance from it" (42). Frazier adopts within ecopoetry the tenets of a post-pastoral movement, those that hope to find "pure" philosophical and moral roots for a polluted aesthetic. Additionally, Frazier asks us to consider the division between myth and origin and the ways in which "myths circumscribe origin." Through myth, she argues, "the narrator may experience a regeneration of language and of life" (38). Admittedly, however, there can be no clear delineation between myth and origin. As D.M.R. Bentley asks, "can there, should there, be a new mythical pattern for the poet of the ecological age? A returned Ulysses? An integrated Pan? A naturalized Hercules" (Bentley 271)—questions we have yet to answer.

The American ecocritical tradition of origin poetry laments the disappearance of nature in the modern age and attempts, through a disembodied narrator, to join a kind of timeless "transpersonal union" (Frazier 27). However, ecofeminists contest writing that ignores the human body in search of nature, thus constructing the supposedly unmarked body "as innocent and unpoliticized," and making it "raceless (white), genderless (male), sexless (heterosexual) and classless (middle class)" (Legler 72). Legler suggests that "most American nature writers simply pretend not to have bodies at all: They appear solely as disinterested...recorders of information, or as enthusiastic...appreciators...[of] almost anything other than active, interested human organisms" (72). The goal, instead, for ecofeminism is to make "the *body* explicit" (73). It is noteworthy, then, that McKay endeavours to (fore)ground his own marked physical presence in biotic community. He succeeds—particularly in his later works, *Night Field* (1991) and *Another Gravity* (2000)—in circumnavigating the myth of the logic of dualisms which, according to (eco)feminist theory, serve to maintain certain masculine-encoded hegemonies that restrict fair consideration [**Page 75**] for the equality in difference of women, minorities, animals, and nature. Furthermore, by making his own existence, his own body, explicit, the poet-speaker becomes a figure readily able and willing to reinvent the Cartesian man, not praised solely for thinking, but for being responsible for earth-care. McKay's resistance to the American environmental literary tradition of spiritual wilderness quest and the Romantic poet's tendency to privilege nature as a path to transcendence through the innocence of the primitive man further suggests a movement away from self-enlightenment as the end goal. Instead, he embraces the good (his dog Sam), the bad (the accidental death of a sparrow on his garage floor in winter), and the ugly (a dead raven killed as an act of human violence and strung up like a trophy by the side of the road) as ways of recognizing the earthbody and non-romanticized nature.

Like the ecofeminists who call for a "practical essentialism" (Sturgeon) as a

means of revisioning the female-nature link from a feminine perspective, so McKay investigates origin poetry that resituates the body *within* wilderness. In other words, the primal man, seen as the quintessentially untouched "Adam" of humanity in the American ecopoetic tradition, gets dirty, camps in the woods, amasses scratches, bites, and bruises. The prelapsarian memory, then, carried within us through the collective unconscious manifests itself, for McKay, in the translation of poetry that seeks to connect with animal instincts, migration patterns, "birdspeak," cycles of life and death, prehistoric references, and alternate realities. McKay's multifarious avenues serving the quest for 'poetic attention' suggest an open-mindedness not limited to commonplace ideologies or standardized epistemological practices. In later collections, for example, McKay moves into the life of bones and ghosts as a means of defamiliarizing constructed notions of life's mysteries; these psychologically graspable items thus become the original site of other possible discoveries, realities, newspeak. Finding one's way home, for the poet-speaker, is not simply that path between the weekend wilderness spot and the cushy living-room recliner. Longing and lamenting for prelapsarian man is a waste of time for McKay: he moves instead into a geopsychic exploration of otherness, in which he himself moves, speaks, and migrates through home, garage sales, hikes, wilderness excursions, pseudo-wilderness cottage visits, and agricultural settings, as ways of inscribing non-destructive human activity into a biotic community—that embracing biosphere that considers all sentient and perceived non-sentient members in respectful partnership.

In contrast to the tradition of the American nature or ecological poet, McKay does not lament for a time when man and animal were kin; instead, [Page 76] he situates his own poetry of origin as a kind of prelapsarian state of language, experience, thought, and emotion, found in moments of transition between states of consciousness or states of existence. In this way, origin poems for McKay seek metamorphosis, and tend to express sorrow only when messages and meaning from altered states of consciousness are lost, or partially remembered. McKay's dreams-remembered, bones from pre-historic to present-day, driftwood as the bones of trees, and ghosts, become evidence for epistemological quests that examine the human-nature link. Microcosmically, bones internally housed in the body become external tools for exploring the present and future connection to the living. Just as ecofeminist theory asserts that the body is microcosm to the greater macrocosm of the fragile planet Earth, so for McKay, human bones, dog bones, bones in the backyard, bones stumbled upon by mistake, dinosaur bones, bones in his own body are to biotic community what geological formations are to the planet.

Quintessentially eco-origin-poetic, because of its connection of an ancient birth-water mythology to a contemporary camping experience, "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River" (*Night Field* 3) establishes the poet-speaker in the mythically appropriate place for a moment of enlightenment that occurs between sleep and waking. This prose poem begins with a material object, connected to the emotional dependence a human being might have with articles associated with home and

comfort—"[his] favourite flannel shirt." As a piece of clothing, this shirt establishes a division between the poet-speaker and the world of animals—a "birdsong" he hopes to witness. In "sleep," the first word of the poem, the poet-speaker's quest becomes possible, wrapped in the unraveling of his shirt—"birdsong happens in the holes...each song makes a tiny whirlpool. One of them... hangs its teardrop high in the mind, and melts: it was, after all, only narrowed air, although it punctuated something unheard, perfectly." Time is limited, however: the transition between sleeping and waking is short—"in thirty seconds the naming of species will begin." Dreams, even those perfectly remembered, suffer the same losses of meaning as translations of poems between languages. The mind itself, as un-divorceable as a man from his favourite flannel shirt in cold weather, searches for meaning in its waking, asking "what sort of noise would [it] make, if it could, here at the brink?"

In a similar sort of comparison, McKay ventures to consider, in "Load," the thin line of difference between human (self) and dog (Sam), having experienced a connection with his dog who "would bestow one large paw on [his] foot, / as if to support [his] body / while its mind was absent—mute [Page 77] / commiseration, load to load, a message / like the velvet heaviness which comes / to carry you deliciously / asleep" (*Another* 10-11). McKay extends this consideration, this anthropomorphism to "a White-throated Sparrow" "met" "one morning / on the beach at Point Pelee." By ending what is to most Westerners an easy anthropological leap between a person and his/her pet with the word "asleep" (the only one-word line in the poem), and by starting the next idea with the introduction of an indented "One morning," McKay consciously shows both a division from and a connection to two different species common to his home-front—his dog and a sparrow. The poet-speaker makes a greater anthropological leap when he *meets* (not observes, sees, notices, or encounters) a foreigner who has just flown in from "across Lake Erie." "Attending" the bird anthropologically, McKay's poet-speaker becomes involved in an intricate description of how the bird managed to fly such a great distance without a break, and, if a human being were to fly, which of these muscles would be employed. This description of flight is as exhausting to reader as the actual flight of a sparrow across Lake Erie. Ultimately, the poem becomes a powerful commiseration over the "load" or weight of existence, both physically and psychologically. In a final near-stanza-break, McKay—who has moved structurally from "asleep" to desire—"want[s] / very much to stroke it, and recalling / several terrors of my brief / and trivial existence, didn't." "Load" serves to foreground the embodiment of physical existence, and how that existence in and of itself establishes profound connections between species.

Grasping for "anotherness" through metamorphosis instead of language, McKay's more recent works—*Another Gravity* and *Night Field*—begin blending mind-body-spirit unity with experience, observation, fact, and myth in ways that make distinguishing categories of knowing difficult. "Luna Moth Meditation" (*Another* 39) demonstrates how "moth" is at once actual ("struggling

out the door") and contained within mental marathons filled with personal connection ("scrap of wedding dress symmetrically ripped / and sent back, cruelly) and mythical significance (Orpheus). Therefore, moth is at once myth, insect, man, instrument of ritual, metaphor: there is no separation between the internal and external, "taking wing, wing / taking," the metaphor and the man from the moth. In "Dark of the Moon" (*Another* 7-8), McKay's poet-speaker again witnesses a spontaneous and unexpected lesson from the wilderness, but his response this time deviates from an earlier response in "Identification" (*Birding* 91). This poem, like "Identification," is grounded in a mundane state of urban reality: "the hydro wires / are hydro wires, the streets are streets, the houses / full of television"; however, this time, losing one's way is as important a [Page 78] lesson as finding it, particularly when learning to resist colonizing urges, such as the need to order, control, name, or assign meaning to an experience. In "Identification," controlling, defining, writing it down take precedence over experiencing the moment. Ironically, as the poet-speaker explains:

I lose my way—the way I know like the back
of my own hand—which is busy fending off
the clutchings of the spruce—the very spruce I planted
forty years ago—and wind up
besnaggled in the dark and many-needed wood
which is mythless
which is pathless
which is mine.

(8)

The poet-speaker's torment between the reality of the (be)wilderer encounter and the mind's tendency to give a subjective account of the experience becomes the battle. By making dual-purpose "many-needed wood," McKay suggests a complexity in submitting to intellectual pursuits and the letting go of them in order to experience a different sort of consciousness. Ultimately, McKay's final line—"which is mine," the third descriptive of the small self-planted spruce-woods—both lulls the reader into a kind of meditative *jouissance*, as a result of the change to an easier rhythm within anaphora, and dismisses that lulling of the reader into mindlessness. To return to ownership, in other words, after dismissing the human instinct to control and capture, is both shocking and puzzling. Could it be that McKay warns against falling too close to another wilderness-consciousness that, mythologically, has been described, to borrow a phrase from Atwood, as "a sort of icy and savage femme fatale who will drive you crazy and claim you for her own" (19)? After all, to fall, defenseless, into the mysterious unknown darkness of the wilderness has many negative mythological consequences: one may descend into utter 'bush' madness; one may become a changeling, a wilderness-clone returned to civilization to serve as a spy after sleeping a night alone in the woods; or a girl may become the French-Canadian *loup-garou*, as explained in Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Frogmoon* (31-2), if her naked body is seen by the moon.

Stories of human-animal mutations, particularly those transformations that occur at night, imply a cultural fear of wilderness and the human-wilderness link completed only in nightmarish vision. [Page 79]

McKay's most powerful articulations of an inarticulate connection between self and wilderness appear when metamorphosis is associated with meditations so meaningful they transform anthropomorphism for self-gain into what I have called practical anthropomorphism. No reader of ecological literature can resist seeing the geopsyche clearly achieved in McKay's "Bone Poems" (*Night* 27-35). Herein, the reader will understand the complex significance of bones—as the structure of the living body and as evidence of the life-death transition zone, more concrete than McKay's ghosts: he ultimately makes bones manifest as metaphors for the presymbolic and prelinguistic. The poet-speaker explains in Part II of "Bone Poems":

Of all your secret selves, it is the most remote, communicating in the intimate, carrying timbre of glaciers and French horns. Its unheard hum arrives at inner ear without passing the receptionist. Mostly we are tuned to the heart (passion, drugs, intrigues, attacks), but it is through the bone self that the deaf hear symphonies, that mothers know beforehand that their children are in trouble, and that we maintain our slender diplomatic ties with the future and the dead. Bones attend to deep earth, while your heart is learning, year by year, to listen to your watch. (30)

Through a dense complexity of personification, metaphor, and philosophical musing, McKay sets "bones" as the meeting point of mind and matter, of life and death, of humanity and nature, and not as opposing forces, or places of constructed difference. In this realm, "treespeak" is not only possible, it is customary.

In "Bone Poems," the marked body, made explicit by McKay's title, transforms itself imaginatively into a kind of ecological magic realism. Existence—between heaven and hell, between "clouds" and "their fallen brothers, the bears: brown, black / cinnamon and grizzly" (29)—redefines constructed divisions, much touted by ecofeminists, as a site of revision. McKay foregrounds the natural body, in spite of its place in social and cultural history as a site of degradation, as a starting point for re-inscribing the self into the biosphere. McKay does not appropriate that feminist voice, however, which often strives to (re)create the body as the place of celebrated beauty, desire, and creation. Instead, the body, reconsidered through the geopsyche, becomes "the home of a birch wood / whose limbs are unwritten-upon paper, listening / motionless // full of dance" (29). By personifying wood and reversing it to blend human form with the tree, McKay begins to undo ideological constructions that falsely divide the mind from the body and spirit. This body commiserates with the birch wood as a site [Page 80] of exploitation and destruction (that is, paper); when it is left standing, as "unwritten-upon paper" and in its state of undisturbed possibility, the metamorphosized earthbody can be "listening / motionless // full of dance."

Likewise, in Part IV of "Bone Poems," antlers, as a kind of bone, become an imaginative tool for practical anthropomorphism that celebrates an environmentalist's longing to "deerspeak" as the origin of belonging. Herein music is poetry is dance is growth is born instinctually in bones: we ritualize to gain access to lost or mysterious arenas of wilderness. In order to "lose ourselves in forest," the poet-speaker suggests, we must join the animals, "wearing our lawn rakes fanned above our heads, tines // turned toward its darkness, / listening for the lost arpeggio" (32). Human imperfections, or the failure to civilize, fall under reconsideration when they are understood in light of the possibility that the "savage pianist" through "brilliant / failures thrown out each December" might find a different, less socially acceptable avenue to certain truths, by "annually growing hands / that stretch three octaves reaching for the loon's cry fingers." The poet-speaker envies the savage-pianist-as-social-misfit because of his ability to lose himself completely in primal origins of sound, music, and instinct. His ultimate expression of this discovery is one that speaks of awe and of respect, regardless of its mild blasphemy. He begins this poem expressing it, nearly wordless, ironic because of its reference to an animal trafficked as a farmed food source, and clumsy: "Holy Cow." There is no apology, as I have come to expect from male ecologically-minded poets in my fifteen-year search for an emerging ecological literature in Canada. Hunters, imperialists, and patriarchs—as stereotypical figures that burden the current ecopoet with guilt—emerge disarmed through the "savage pianist" as representative of cultural elitism.

Resisting the colonizing tendency and the appropriate male guilt created by centuries of acting and feeling and justifying superiority over women, racial minorities, animals, and nature is a "Slow Landing" for McKay (90). Readers of McKay's poetry over the years know nature-connections move through rivers, appear overhead, become annoying as a dead sparrow in the middle of winter on the garage floor. McKay admits wanting "to place himself, in language, where language has no purchase, where the only writing is the writing of the glaciers on the rocks the only thinking is the river slowly knowing its valley" (*Lependu* 47). McKay's poet-speaker in "Sometimes a Voice (2)" (*Another* 59-60) longs for a non-linguistic expression for the inarticulate. Despite McKay's theoretical explanations concerning the mind's organizing linguistic tendencies to **[Page 81]** "translate" wilderness experience, his poetry speaks of moments, however brief, wherein wilderness becomes recognizable on an instinctual level—in the heart, in the soul, and not in the mind at all. According to Dragland, "wilderness is experience first, for McKay, and then it is an idea...[it] is his word for this unworkable untamable." It is McKay's commitment to poetry, and to saving wilderness, to loving life and the living, that grants a particularly magnanimous voice to the inarticulate human-wilderness connection so needed in this time of ecocrisis. McKay's journey through his collections of poetry shows how Canadian ecological poetry can aspire to reveal and revision a necessary geopsyche that casts off divisions between self/other, civilization/wilderness, body/mind, human/animal, male/ female, and strives for "anotherness." For McKay there are no Truths, no conclusions to be

made, unless they exist in brief moments of revelation found in practical anthropomorphism, "in the hush of invisible feathers as they urge the dark, / stroking it toward articulation" (*Another* 3).

Notes

1. Briefly stated, tenets central to the ecopoetic project—according to ecocritic Lawrence Buell—demand that the nonhuman environment must exist in the text: 1) as more than mere landscape; 2) treated with awe and respect, without privileging human interest as exclusive; and 3) understood as process rather than as a constant. Thus "deliberate" ecocritic and poet Matthew Cooperman adds that ecopoets must be responsible for revisionist mythmaking and a revisited human-nature paradigm in which they acknowledge: 1) a concern for the 'other'; 2) the physical body; 3) Western dualistic ideological constructions as inherently destructive; 4) experience of the world as "intersubjective," minimalizing the separation between space and place; and 5) an environmental ethic that works "towards sustainable, cooperative, and environmentally material practices." While many of these tenets raise at least as many questions as they answer, they offer a framework with which to differentiate "nature" poetry from what is now emerging as ecopoetics. Terry Gifford offers a more condensed grounding of the term with the following six characteristics of writing that might be considered "post-pastoral": 1) awe leading to humility; 2) recognition of the creative-destructive universe; 3) the inner replicated in the outer; 4) culture as nature/ nature as culture—the imagination as our tool for healing our alienation from nature; 5) consciousness as conscience as responsibility; and 6) exploitation of the planet paralleling that of people— both needing to be addressed together. What all of these approaches attempt to identify is the emergence of a new kind of writing and criticism that the post-pastoral must necessarily recognize. Though vague, these suggested criteria, notably isolated within an emerging sub-genre of literature and literary criticism, allow in their seeming indecisiveness for new ways of relating, respecting, and identifying with nature, animals, and biotic community in general. Thus, these tenets call for an ecological consciousness that goes beyond nature writing or the pastoral, with a sensibility that is more radical, more **[Page 82]** political, and, most importantly, more engaged with the environmental crisis of the contemporary world. [\[back\]](#)
2. Murphy cites these particular authors because of their popularity among ecocritics and readers of American ecological literature. Conforming to what is currently considered the standard of American ecological writings, both Austin (author of *The Land of Little Rain*) and Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz (author of *Woven Stone*) present their respective regional environments

in ecologically sensitive forms of literary realism, wherein their commitment to these regions means living, sacrificing, and experiencing the ecosystems without returning to urban comforts. [\[back\]](#)

3. For further investigation into this struggle for Canadian male ecological poets, I would suggest: 1) the radical eco-propaganda poetry of James Strecker; 2) M. T. Kelly's post-pastoral poetry, in *Country You Can't Walk In*, that recognizes a primal understanding of nature's violence but expresses disgust for senseless male violence against animals; 3) the more accomplished poetry of John O'Neill, who in *Love in Alaska* and *Animal Walk* shows a tension between the primal animal hunter-survivor and the environmentalist who has access to the grocery store; and 4) the constant indecision, sorrow, and frustration paired with the desire for erasure in Tim Lilburn's wilderness-awareness quest poems. Applying ecocritical theories to any number of earlier Canadian male "nature" poets, particularly those writing after the emergence of ecological theories into popular consciousness in the late 1960s and 1970s, may reveal a larger body of (proto)ecological writing. Obvious choices would include Joe Rosenblatt, Robert Kroetsch, Christopher Dewdney, Dennis Lee, bill bissett, Leonard Cohen, Tom Marshall, Alden Nowlan, and D. G. Jones. [\[back\]](#)

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