

Hopeless Poetics in Ecological Poetry

by

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Dedication

This dedication has been easy to decide on: to Travis Mason—without whom, likely, I would not have written a word—as a small return on a large investment of his time and energy.

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Abstract

In this thesis I theorize hopelessness in contemporary Canadian ecological poetry in contrast to capitalist ideology and activist discourse. Drawing on Tim Lilburn's work, I identify two varieties of hopelessness: despair and penthos. The former is characterized by disappointment, a sense of injustice, and calculations for redress. The latter avoids these states in its hopelessness, and it is characterized by the pursuit of apokatastatic desire: the desire to eliminate human desires in the interest of identifying with other-than-human beings. Penthos is opposed to both capitalist ideology, which is premised on the desire to consume, and the activist impulse, which is closely related to states of despair. Examining Sina Queyras's *Expressway*, the poetry of Don McKay, Rita Wong's *forage* and Sharon Thesen's *The Good Bacteria*, I develop the idea of penthos in the contemporary Canadian iteration of the lyric.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I. The Calamity, The Activist, The Politician, The Poet

The social, economic, and environmental problems associated with global capitalism have become a hallmark of humanity in the Anthropocene, the unofficial name of the current geological epoch. As Canadian poet Don McKay explains, the name “Anthropocene” evokes “the species which has been most responsible for [the epoch’s] character and style” (*The Shell* 9). Because our technological experimentation is so vast and its effects so far-reaching, human power currently exceeds human knowledge (O’Brien 88-9). We have difficulty not only deciding which industrial-technological effects deserve attention but also mitigating these effects. Consider Canada’s controversial backing out of the Kyoto Protocol as evidence of policy disagreement and, say, the fertilizer-driven toxic algae blooms that threaten to “starve” Lake Erie of oxygen (CBCnews) as examples of the inability or failure to control industrial pollution.¹ Political attention to environmental concerns, one might lament, is at best superficial, at worst completely absent, and often results in no significant progress on major issues; industrialization continues while environmental protection suffers deregulation, especially in Canada. In a debate about climate change, Oxford climatologist Myles Allen says “we all agree that most of the current policies are futile. It’s completely insane, the way we’re

¹ Consider also that the usefulness of the Kyoto Protocol itself is a matter of contention (Allen).

approaching this problem” (qtd in Hasan).² Susan Perkins, from the American Museum of Natural History, notes that “it’s often said that we’re undergoing the next big mass extinction right now” (qtd. in Kennedy). It may simply be too late to curb the anthropogenic consequences that we have wrought; if not yet, it soon will be (Allen).

Straightforwardly apocalyptic but vaguely hopeful, David Suzuki describes the state of recent global environmental, political, and industrial debates with a metaphor: “[w]e’re in a giant car going 100 kilometres an hour at a brick wall and we are arguing over who wants to drive” (1). To take Suzuki’s alarming metaphor seriously is to know hopelessness in the ecological discourse of the country and its political management. Suzuki’s metaphor suggests that our impending doom is inevitable. If we sit with this suggestion we might begin to feel hopeless. And yet, the logic of the metaphor suggests an unsaid hope that in the speeding car we’re stuck in there are brakes and someone will find and use them.

² Allen’s point is that effective solutions to climate change are not being pursued. He advocates for carbon capture and storage technology, rather than reduction. The problem, as he poses it, is that of four trillion tonnes of fossil fuels estimated to be available for human use, over the past 250 years “we’ve burned about half a trillion tonnes and caused somewhere between three quarters of a degree and a degree of warming. That’s taken us 250 years. We’ll burn the next half-trillion tonnes in the next 35 years; we’ll burn then *next* trillion tonnes in 30 years, and we’ll burn the next... We’re not going to stop doing this, because fossil fuels are such a fantastically useful resource” (qtd. in Hasan). Adding to the complexity of the issue, environmental activist Mark Lynas both agrees with the futility of common energy solutions and elaborates on the social problems with demanding reduction: “we can’t say to the rest of the world that they have to go backwards. China is putting in as much coal-fired powered plants every six months as we have in the whole of this country; this is a huge, huge problem, but we have to find a way to solve it whilst allowing people the aspirations for growth and the aspirations for solving poverty as a way forward” (qtd. in Hasan).

Generally speaking, in addressing worrying socio-environmental issues Suzuki-style rhetorical strategies simplify issues and articulate them to the widest possible audience in terms of the preeminent political concerns of the day, including nationalism, humanism, and scientific objectivity. Suzuki uses metaphors, it's true, but only as maximally efficient "vehicles" to convey his activism. This vehicular metaphor is, truly, efficient. To stop the metaphorical car is to stop burning metaphorical petroleum, but it's also literally to stop burning petroleum; his metaphorical solution is precisely his literal solution. So, despite the metaphor's drive-by simplicity, it is carefully constructed.³

The effect of the metaphor is to attempt to subvert the prominent political discourse already used by Suzuki's interlocutors: government and industry. Suzuki's metaphor is concerned with valuing human (*your*) wellbeing, and by extension, national decision-making. Despite being a metaphor, Suzuki's analogy also takes the ecological crisis it expresses as scientific fact. Similarly, the corporate-governmental argumentative strategy that justifies the environmental costs of industry takes the "objective" strengthening of the nation, and by extension citizens, as its premise—Canadian Minister of Natural Resources Joe Oliver insists that the reduction of "departments and agencies that can do environmental reviews from [forty] to just three to speed up approvals for

³ Consider its nuances: It uses two simple and familiar images, the car and the wall; its setting is a Hollywood-cliché disaster scene, making it easy to visualize; it implicates its audience in its problematic (using "we" as its grammatical subject); the metaphor suggests, without specifying, a very simple solution to its problem, leaving its audience with the tension of their metaphorical situation (the crash), which calls for them to imagine resolution (press the brakes); it frames the fact of its problem (the wall) as one that transcends debates about the problem (the conversations had in the car); finally, an environmentalist agenda pervades its imagery through implicit connections to North American car-culture, oil sands development, and a requisite shift in cultural momentum.

projects” is “critical to creating jobs, economic growth, and long-term prosperity” (Davidson). Suzuki disputes the conclusion that capitalist economics and environmental deregulation result in long-term prosperity, but his rhetoric takes a similar premise to a different conclusion—namely that we must live sustainably: “what we have is an economic system that has disconnected itself from the real world, and it thinks humans are so great that we can grow forever. Well that is death as far as I’m concerned. It’s suicidal” (2). Suzuki’s argument, like the corporate-government argument, is premised on humanity’s health, and by extension Canada’s long-term health. Both arguments ground themselves in the production of national or human wellbeing, and to some extent conflate the two. Suzuki’s strategy is subversive in a capitalist economy in that it focuses on resisting economic growth whenever unsustainable living is implied, valuing sustainability over economic growth as the champion of human well-being. And it is the production of this well-being—he uses the term “biological capital” (1)—combined with its incompatibility with the current economic system, that grounds his call to action.

In contrast to the eco-poetical responses to issues that incite ecological hopelessness, which are the focus of this thesis, Suzuki’s rhetorical strategy presents only one approach, a decidedly activist approach. It derives from a sense that we need, and have needed for years, to get things done. Eco-poetry, on the other hand, is able to be activist but is not necessarily so, which is to say that it is not necessarily production-oriented. Against Adorno’s famous comment that poetry is “impossible (or, rather, barbaric) after Auschwitz,” which implies the inappropriateness of poetry in the face of hopelessness because of poetry’s frivolity or uselessness, Philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek suggests that “[r]ealistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the

unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds. ... [Adorno's] impossibility is an enabling impossibility," he thinks, since "poetry is always ... 'about' something that cannot be addressed directly" (4), just as horror cannot be addressed directly.

In the spirit of indirection, Canadian poet Stephen Collis positions poetry as the mode of discourse best suited to confront global capitalism, which Collis implicates in ecological crises. For Collis, poetry "occupies a vacuum left by capital" (5). Insofar as poetry exists as a commodity that few actually buy, it, like the blackberry bushes that encroach upon Vancouver's urban space, occupies the gaps and fissures that are the inevitable and forgotten by-products of industrial development. Precisely "because capital does not accumulate around poetry," Collis argues, poetry is able to inhabit "the margins of productive life where it fruits seemingly without purpose or exchange value" (7). And, precisely because of its marginal position in relation to capitalism, poetry represents an ideal form with which to think and write against the capitalist mantra of constant production and economic growth.

"Why be anti-productive?", someone will ask. Motivation for anti-productive divergences from environmental activism comes from a fear that such activism is inclined toward empty or superficial treatment of environmental problems. Writing about the concept of "violence," Žižek points out that "a particular crisis only explodes into media visibility as the result of a complex struggle. Properly humanitarian considerations as a rule," he thinks, "play a less important role here than cultural, ideologico-political and economic considerations" (2). Žižek's claim reminds us that attention to environmental issues is not primarily drawn by the pain caused by those who do damage, but, for

example, who it is that is hurting.⁴ Rosemary Drisdelle, a clinical a specialist in parasitology, suggests for example both that parasites' relationship with their host is misunderstood if conceived as purely negative and that thousands of species of parasites are becoming extinct each year (qtd. in Kennedy). Not nearly as endearing or cuddly as the endangered species that we hear of most often, the manatee or the giant panda, parasites are of little concern to most activists and of almost no concern to the media, but they form an essential part of ecosystems. Lack of concern for them is partly explained by the limits of human attention—we can't reasonably expect environmentalists to focus on *every* endangered species, since there are so many—but it also indicates that the political orientation of environmental activism, taken as a whole, is value-laden.

Underlying focal points in publicized catastrophes betray what Žižek calls a “fake sense of urgency” (5) about violence that pervades the current media and political climate. He claims that because “the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims function as a lure which prevents us from thinking,” he must approach his inherently heart-wrenching topic dispassionately. To try to avoid ideologically fraught analyses of violence, Žižek casts what he calls “sideways glances,” “looking at the problem of violence awry” (3). The subversive nature of his analysis relies on this “sideways” dispassion, which resists the mystification that stalls consideration of the problem.

⁴ It also reminds us that a news story about algae blooms in Lake Erie is as much about environmentalism's threat to farmers (and Joe Oliver's economy) as it is about fertilizers' threat to Lake Erie, for example.

I think of this fake sense of urgency in terms of overload and related (a-)sensitivity. Philosopher Lawrence Blum's uses the term "moral overload" in his discussion of racism:

If our only choices are to label [racial malfeasance] either "racist" or "nothing to get upset about," those who seek to call attention to any racial malfeasance will be tempted to describe it as 'racist.' That overuse in turn diminishes the moral force of the word and thus contributes to a lowering of concern about both racism and other racial wrongs. (2)

Blum wants to refine the vocabulary of racial injustice to mitigate the suspicion "that the word has lost all significant meaning" (1). I am interested in how the urgency of environmentalism results in a similar worry. Generalizing Blum's discussion, what I mean by moral overload is a lack of moral feeling due to overexposure to moral stimulus. I think of this as a form of desensitivity, a learned lack of response to something that would otherwise provoke a strong response.

Related to this is sympathy overload, something more in line with what Žižek refers to when he writes of overpowering horror and a fake sense of urgency. By sympathy overload I mean a disarming excess of sympathetic feeling that obstructs consideration of its source. This often provokes a response of pseudo-sensitivity, a reactive attempt to alleviate the overwhelming feeling (horror, as it may be) with an immediate response. Thus, the fake sense of urgency does not cease to *feel* urgent, but is empty because of its associated lack of thoughtful engagement. Sympathy overload is in some ways the opposite of moral overload, then, but the effect is similar in that neither variety results in genuine sensitivity to the complexities of an issue.

Both forms of overload and (a-)sensitive reactions are at play in much of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals's (PETA) rhetoric: "[Animals] are enslaved, beaten, and kept in chains to make them perform for humans' 'entertainment'; they are mutilated and confined to tiny cages so that we can kill them and eat them; they are burned, blinded, poisoned, and cut in up in the name of 'science'" ("The Issues"). Exemplifying moral overload and desensitivity, a reader can turn away, noticing that the rhetoric attempts to stimulate and play on her sympathies, or ridicule the pulp-fiction vocabulary designed to inspire horror; or, exemplifying sympathy overload and pseudo-sensitivity, another reader might feel the horror of the scene and, wanting to alleviate his sense of disgust, click on the highlighted "Donate Now" button at the top of the page before moving on with his day.

The eco-poetic medium, free from the imperative for immediate action,⁵ can portray crises without the "fake sense of urgency" that might be implicated in the uptake of activist agendas. That said, the tendency, I think, has often been to read eco-poetry as an activist genre, to focus on how it establishes politically effective or subversive frameworks, even (and perhaps especially) when it is hopeless. Environmentally minded critics are apt to read for solutions to environmental crises. Without directly challenging these readings, which recognize some genuinely important work, I'm interested in what happens when we avoid the problems of overload by staying with the hopelessness of eco-poetic evocations. What happens when citizens, like Žižek, aren't affected?

⁵ Eco-poetry isn't the only art form guilty of such inaction. As Lisa Robertson puts it in *The Weather*, "when pushed to the wall, art is too slow" (47).

II. *Lyric Hopelessness*

Specifically, I'm interested in the communication and effects of such hopelessness. It is with these in mind that I understand my subject as a variety of what I'm calling "lyric hopelessness." The qualifier "lyric" denotes poetry as opposed to narrative or political debate, and meditative poetry as opposed to narrative poetry. In conceptualizing lyric hopelessness, I align myself theoretically with various Canadian eco-poets such as Don McKay, Jan Zwicky, and Tim Lilburn, who engage with lyric in distinctively ecological ways and whose projects are at once self-consciously futile and attentive to the relationships between the human and non-human. Lyric hopelessness in this context is far removed from the sort of nihilistic despair that results from skepticism about knowledge, truth, goodness, or justice. In his introduction to *Open Wide a Wilderness*, the first anthology of Canadian nature poetry, McKay "considers it fundamental to nature poetry that it be . . . grounded in empirical observation . . . to approach the subject with respect, to acknowledge implicitly that it is comprised of beings as fully individuated as the poet" (*The Shell* 52). Lilburn's literary project is in sympathy; for McKay, Lilburn's "poetry is a practice and a way of knowing, an alternative to the appropriative and possessive epistemology left us by the Enlightenment and our colonial past" (*The Shell* 59). Moreover, Lilburn "pursues a course of contemplative enquiry that seeks to renovate not only the way we see the world but the nature of that seeing" (McKay, *The Shell* 59). As recognition of the fully individuated *being* of the "other" requires an anti-instrumental approach, Lilburn's epistemic stance is at odds with Enlightenment epistemology and colonialist ideology. The lyric, for these poets, is in these senses anti-productive.

Developing the notion of the “lyric thinking,” Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky’s hybrid poetic-analytic philosophical approach engages what McKay identifies as “[t]he shift from an ethos of mastery embedded in the colonial mindset to one of loss” (*The Shell* 75). She calls “for a radical rethinking of the [contemporary] situation and [allows] for a redemptive mode of knowing called ‘lyric’” (75). Adam Dickinson explains Zwicky’s lyric in terms of Freudian primary and secondary processes: Freud distinguishes between the two, noting that primary process “proceeds associatively, paradoxically, and outside of regular time,” while secondary process “mediates this irrational experience to the logical structures of linguistic thinking” (210). A paradigmatic example of primary process is the way a metaphor informs us: associatively, paradoxically, and through juxtaposition rather than linear succession—that is, through contemplation rather than narration. Secondary process, by contrast, proceeds through linguistic practices such as, say, logical argumentation, as in ideal political debate. Lyric thinking draws on the associative logic (if I can call it that) of primary processes, offering, as Dickinson explains, “a resonant, contrapuntal integration of various modes of understanding (physical, intellectual, and emotional) that cannot be summarily reduced to logico-linguistic explanation” (211). Thus “lyric art opposes instrumental apprehensions of the world and instead emphasizes a potential environmental ethic where the world cannot be objectified in terms of utility” (Dickinson 212). Zwicky’s lyric thinking presents, in harmony with McKay and Lilburn’s poetics, a radical way of seeing for which direct experience with the environment is essential. More importantly, lyric thinking is an integrated and subversive way of knowing because it resists politicization by engaging

primary process.⁶ The lyric does not function in terms of logical argumentation; its focus is to communicate an experience through association rather than to convince through argumentation.

The hopeless aspect of the lyric has two facets: despair and *penthos*. These can be understood in relation to desire, which I'll briefly say something about before characterizing the role of despair and *penthos* and outlining my use of lyric hopelessness. Desire can be defined in two conflicting ways. On one hand, there is desire as Deleuze and Guattari characterize it—desire as oriented in capitalism—and on the other, there is what Lilburn describes as *apokatastatic* desire, which is the opposite of the former, requiring the stripping of the self rather than the acquisition of things.

In her analysis of Sina Queyras's *Expressway*, Erin Wunker provides a gloss on desire in the Deleuzian, capitalist-oriented sense. "Capitalism," she writes, "transforms the revolutionary potential of individuals into a desire to be led" (41). The "reformulation" of desire under capitalism produces a "contemporary concept of desire" as "appropriated and re-formatted by the capitalist system": "rather than allowing an individual the revolutionary pleasure of his/her own desire, under a capitalist system desire is stripped of its revolutionary potential and constructed as a lack: desire is always conceived as being for something outside one's grasp. Deleuze and Guattari name this reformulation *desiring-production*" (42). I read this mode of desiring as intimately related to consumerism, as the consumerist fixates on obtaining commodities. The ends of

⁶ At least, politicization as we know it. Dickinson notes that Zwicky conceives primary process as not necessarily an a-political mode of thinking, but rather one that is incompatible with the demands of standard political engagement (211).

consumerist desire are set by the capitalist system. Not coincidentally, environmental activism, insofar as it is limited to donation or a series of symbolic gestures (buying “green” lights and blue recycling bags), seems to function in the realm of consumerist desire as well.

Apokatastatic desire is converse to desire’s consumerist manifestation. Whereas the consumer’s desired end is always more stuff—one desires to obtain something, obtains it, and promptly sets about desiring to obtain something else—Lilburn writes that “[d]esire impoverishes: desire is a thinning, but this is because untruncated delight is apokatastatic; its telos is true home, the community of all things, and one arrives there, if at all, less” (*Living* 72). Desire, for Lilburn, involves relinquishing the impulse to own or appropriate. It is thus the opposite of this impulse, as it seeks poverty on the way to apokatastasis, that is, a return to a sense of evenness with all other things in the world. Apokatastatic desire, then, relinquishes the impulses of consumerist desire on the way to connecting with those elements of the world that don’t occupy the capitalist system. This connection repositions humans in a narrative of progress tied to economic growth.

Another distinction between the two is that consumerist desire takes aim, preferring clarity in its ends (I want *that* mobile phone; or I want *this* ice cream cone), while apokatastatic desire is more “intimate and outlandish; at full stretch, it arrives at strange satisfactions that come into view only partly along the way that desire picks out, desire’s meanderings to these seemingly a matter of war, loss and the disappointment of others” (Lilburn, *Living* 72). The satisfactions of such desire as Lilburn identifies them are unknowable and contrary to preconceived notions of satisfaction: in other words, not to be accounted for ahead of time.

Whereas the consumer's desire is the pursuit of truncated delight, the pursuit of Lilburn's untruncated delight ideally ends in the elimination of desire, and poetic attention becomes a way to approach such elimination. McKay understands attention as key to the wayward satisfactions of desire's unforeseeable satisfactions. He describes "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" (*Vis* 26). In the pursuit of untruncated delight, poetic attention, readiness, enables apprehension of the "strange satisfactions" that are "along the way that desire picks," yet agrees with desire as impoverishment, since poetic attention is not possessive. Hence, the satisfactions of apokatastatic desire require a state of poetic attention for Lilburn, rather than a mode of preconceived direction.

One familiar conception of the trajectory of desire in this sense has nirvana at its end point, where one rids oneself of the appropriative desire to obtain things and instead simply exists in the world alongside all other existing things, and as Jan Zwicky notes in conversation with Lilburn, "[t]o breathe; to look; to sing to the distance —is suddenly, paradoxically to be at home . . . This is not even a secret: meditative traditions in all cultures tell us the only path to security is letting go, the only relief for suffering is to enter it" (qtd. in Lilburn, "Contemplation" 143). Desire, in this sense, suggests what McKay calls "wilderness," where "we sense ourselves to be, not masters of creation, not technological wunderkinds, but beings among beings" (*The Shell* 91). In these senses desire is, as Lilburn puts it, "apokatastatic," concerned with return home.

Apokatastatic desire is inevitably frustrated by its unattainability: "[d]esire comes to sorrow because it cannot have what it wants in the way it has come to anticipate

appropriation” (*Living* 81).⁷ This sorrow, however, is not undesirable: “[t]he sorrow that desire arrives at, penthos, said the old monks, was the goal of the contemplative life” (81). Here we come to the distinction between despair and penthos as possible responses to frustration: “[the monks] insisted though that this [sorrow] was not despair. . . . The difference between penthos and despair is that the latter entertains all sorts of anticipations yet is disappointed in each, while the other refuses all images anticipation suggests to it, yet remains erotic, reaching, within this refusal” (81). Disappointment appears as an affective state which differentiates despair and penthos. If “[d]espair is the abandonment of desire” (81), it is yet not the sort of abandonment that might result in a state of nirvana. No, “[h]ere is grievance, a sense of injustice, calculations for redress, hopelessness” (81). Despair, then, is characterized not only by disappointment, but by a futile fixation that the disappointment be justly reckoned with and, by extension, an attachment to that disappointment. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Kierkegaard thought that to despair was “to let one’s life depend on conditions outside one’s control”

⁷ The poetic vocation is by this same frustration also doomed to fail; poetry does not necessarily aim to represent the world in terms of its truth. As Lilburn points out, “[m]etaphor does not tell the truth, but it can make truthful promises” (*Living* 80). Lilburn understands Socrates’s “assembling of images to evoke the beautiful and the good,” which are ineffable, in terms of the effective pursuit of the good life: “If you allow the beauty I have limpingly hinted at to lure your desire, [urges Socrates,] your eudaemonic craving will be satisfied. The world may be misspoken in the Socratic image, yet the soul is well led, well shaped” (80). Hence, poetry as the cultivation of a heightened sensitivity to the world may succeed, even as poetry fails to describe its subject as it is. The irony of poetry is that it uses language, yet at the same time, as McKay puts it “[p]oets are supremely interested in what language can’t do” (*Vis* 32). As language users, the poetic vocation is penthic in that on some level it must fail to describe what it wants to describe, but this hopelessness is not a deterrent to the attempt.

(McDonald) since to despair is to be consumed by disappointment in something that cannot be changed.

On the other hand, while “[p]enthos has no hope either, . . . this absence isn’t crushing loss; it is poverty. Revelation aside, penthos has nothing other than the momentum and queer vector of eros” (82). Penthos, then, is a state of hopelessness that maintains and arises from apokatastatic desire, where despair resists apokatastatic desire by resisting poverty. Penthos is a sorrow that does not involve disappointment or calculations for justice and redress. Thus it circumvents Žižek’s “false sense of urgency” by contemplating problems through the lens of desire and its “unanticipatable meanderings” (Lilburn, *Going* 176). If we are not disappointed by our inevitably frustrated desire, if we remain “erotic, reaching,” we move toward the sorrow that is penthos. In the state of penthos, while we’re hopeless, we still desire. In penthos we accept the inevitable failure of our pursuit of “untruncated delight,” but are not consumed by this failure or crushed by our loss of hope.

In the lyric, penthos functions as a mode rather than as a theme or organizing principle. That is, I do not think of lyric penthos as something that functions to exclusion off despair, or even activism, as I explain in my fourth chapter. Poems can be alternately penthic, despairing, or even activist, although penthos is defined in contradistinction to despair, and although I maintain that penthos resists activism.

In the second chapter I examine Sina Queyras’s *Expressway* with an eye to how its lyric hopelessness resists capitalist ideology and encourages the pursuit of apokatastatic desire. I examine the collection with reference to its poetic aims and its use of lyric thinking. The collection’s poetic aim, as it reports, is “to [momentarily reveal] a

tiny fracture in human existence” (67). This aim, I argue, is too humble to be construed as an activist poetics; instead, I identify it as apokatastatic and penthic. The figure of the expressway in the collection is in constant flux, and I identify two of its aspects, the commercial and the subversive, that correspond to the consumerist desire and apokatastatic desire, respectively. The subversive aspect of the expressway is defined by its pervasive ambivalence, and this functions as a foil to the dynamism of its commercial aspect; that is, the ambivalence implicated by apokatastatic desire is antithetical to capitalist ideology.

Rather than this translating into a political impetus, however, its function is to erode the sense modern human identity, as defined by capitalist ideology. The contrapuntal interplay of the utopic and the despairing in the collection exemplifies this. In its utopic visions, the collection imagines the human condition so altered from its modern condition that the distance between the present and utopic future inspires hopelessness in the speaker. Also, though, this reimagining of the human is apokatastatic, envisioning the human much closer to “the community of all things” (*Living* 66) than humanity’s present hermetic condition, surrounded by the capitalist ideology. In imagining the human in this way the poem accomplishes its poetic aim, but its aim is penthic, grasping at something hopelessly out of reach. In this light, I read the collection’s closing call to “go forth and do” not as a characteristically activist call to action, but as an intentionally ambivalent imperative, the effect of which is to encourage meditation on the modern human condition rather than to do something, anything.

In my third chapter I discuss Don McKay’s use of humour as a tool for defamiliarization. McKay uses of humour in ways that resist despair to approach subjects

that normally inspire hopelessness. In the first section of the chapter I talk about McKay as a humourist, recognizing that reading hopelessness into his poetry is counterintuitive for this reason, but arguing that his humour can approach hopeless topics because of its use of defamiliarization strategies. I then discuss the functions of humour, discussing first the ways that activist discourse enables humour that relies on moral and sympathy overload, and then turning to argue that McKay's humour avoids overload by using lyric penthos to urge humility in human attempts to know. Finally, I examine treatment of death and appropriation as they relate to capitalist ideology. McKay defamiliarizes and deflates human appropriative tendencies that relate to capitalism even at the extremes of appropriative acts, urging that the power relation between the human and other-than-human cannot be a one-way exchange, but seeking to shift the reader's perspective rather than making an argument for political change.

In my fourth chapter I look at Rita Wong's 2007 collection *forage* and Sharon Thesen's 2006 collection *The Good Bacteria*. Examine how Wong's poems feature modes of activism, despair, and penthos at once; that is, even as Wong she rants against capitalism, specifically agri-biz and its use of genetically modified organisms, she is concerned with mutations of language reveal language's contingency; this revelation, in turn, is indicative of the contingency of human identity and thought. On the other hand, Thesen's work looks at the absurdity of quotidian concerns in the face of environmental catastrophe. Thesen's work, concerned with the rise of antibiotic resistant bacteria, far from working in conjunction with an activist impulse, invites destruction as a parody of the concerns of industrialized human beings; at the same time as parodying this unaffected momentum toward destruction, though, she embraces apokatastatic: the

levelling off of the humanity in accord with other-than-human status through destruction.

Expressing her speaker's embrace of destruction without misgiving, her lyric is essentially penthic.

Chapter 2: Sina Queyras's *Expressway*

“*You have come to the end of / the sound stage, they say, you have hit a brick wall*”

—Sina Queyras, *Expressway*, “Three Dreams of the Expressway” 88

“Is a rotten compromise really worse than capitulation or no decision at all? Possibly.”

—Kenneth Weisbrode, *On Ambivalence* 50

I. Introduction

A poet who has been concerned with the interplay of various modernist poets, as she is in her 2006 collection *Lemon Hound* (Larson), Sina Queyras is very much concerned with the dynamics of the modern condition. Her 2009 collection of interrelated poems, *Expressway*, extends this interest, exploring the themes of capitalist ideology, modern life, and poetics. An analysis of any collection that takes a noun as its title does well to begin with a definition. In the case of *Expressway* this would seem a simple task. The expressway is an invention familiar to all in the modern world. In the common conception, it is any sizeable stretch of pavement that serves as route for masses of motorized vehicles to travel long distances quickly, a kind of supersized highway, the like of, for example, the I-95 or the Trans-Canada. “Expressway” is also a compound noun, as in “a way of expressing.” The verb, “to express,” has various definitions, one of most common being “to represent in language; to put into words, set forth’ (“express, v.¹”). “Way,” on the other hand, is a “course of travel or movement” or “a path or course

of life” (“way, n.¹”). *Expressway* is about a type of movement or way of life that is intimately connected with the road, conveyed through linguistic representation. The editors of *The Influency Salon*, in their introduction to an issue on *Expressway*, point out that the collection attends to “lyrical critique of the road and its dominion over modern life, . . . that these virtual and actual superhighways aren’t just products of contemporary consciousness but serve as its formative agents as well” (Casady et al.). Thus, Queyras has in mind something more expansive, less concrete, and more problematic than just white lines, concrete, and cars.

The expressway is figured as a multi-faceted entity in the collection. Its definition is not fixed; rather the expressway is imagined in its different forms. Queyras characterizes the various items found on its shoulders (“empty things multiplying underfoot” [22]) and used up in its lanes (notably, a hill of tires [87]), linking the expressway to consumerism and waste. Her poems avow that the expressway is infinite, that “the slither of pavement is endless” (34); that it is “no longer carrying but being / us, us moving everywhere” (64); and that “it is the future . . . is the market” (65). These descriptors are destabilized in the course of the collection, however, as one of the speakers is told that her belief in the expressway-as-future is “wrong” (69), implying that the expressway is not infinite, that “we” and the market are not the future. While one speaker aligns the expressway with capitalism as a monumental force, another confidently rejects the inevitability of its power. In implying that “we” are not the future, the collection also imagines different forms that humanity can take. The collection suggests that the expressway is an agent that “smooth[es] each nuisance of wild” (6); hence the collection is also concerned with the interaction between the expressway and the wild,

and by extension the interaction between the human and the wild. This relationship is figured as a destructive one. This destructive interaction between the expressway and wilderness is not figured as necessary to the existence of the expressway, however; the utopic modes of the poem figure the relationship between the expressway and the wild as harmonious. *Expressway* approaches its concerns—consumerism, the future, the modern human, the wild—from various points of view.

In *Expressway*, “[t]he classical, inward, expressive, voice we ally with the ‘ego’ is fractured and in its place is a composite voice in flux” (Casady et al.). This flux relates to what Erin Wunker calls the “reoriented lyric” of expressway, which “allows the poet to step aside” (42). She explains that one poem, “Crash,” “in its formatting, refuses to grant subjectivity either to the victims or the speaker” (43). Instead of the traditional “three-way intersection of speaker, listener, absent object of desire” (44), the “[r]eader and speaker are together, driving on an endless highway, or being surrounded by it, or simply walking beside it” (44). What drives the collection’s viewpoint is the expressway itself rather than the traditionally situated speaker.⁸ Noting that there “is no unified lyric voice in the text where there is only an a-relational and unsituated consciousness, a driving/driven consciousness” (Casady et al.), we can identify that such flux is characteristic of the expressway itself; thus, we can understand *Expressway* as enacting a contrapuntal investigation of itself by moving through the various subject positions associated with it.

⁸ Wunker is particularly concerned with *Expressway*’s resistance to the romantic, sexist orientation of the traditional lyric.

In this way *Expressway* interrogates the lyric and its capacity to respond to contemporary economic and environmental concerns. Wunker explains that to “interrogate the lyric as a poetic form one must also interrogate binary oppositions of subject/object, human/inhuman, cultivated/wild” (42). To Wunker’s list of binaries in *Expressway* I would add the commercial/subversive and despairing/utopian. Such binaries are not necessarily exhaustive; that is, cultivation, for example, does not appear untempered with wilderness. As Stephen Collis points out of the blackberry bushes that thrive in Vancouver “even into the centre of the city,” “[t]hey mark lulls and failures in capital, the moments of decay and depreciation after industrial production and before gentrification” (2). *Expressway*, an ambivalent text, brings this point to the fore by interrogating binaries and imagining them at their limits—imagining cultivation as cultivated as it can be or, on the other hand, utopia, before troubling the existence of such an extreme.

Such binary interrogation takes the form of lyric thinking, in Zwicky’s sense of the term. Lyric thinking requires counterpoint. Dennis Lee, discussing Zwicky’s *Lyric Philosophy*, comments that “as we listen to both sides of the counterpoint, a shape begins to emerge from the welter” (28). In exploring these binaries it is necessary to make some terminological distinctions; the expressway itself is treated ambivalently in the collection, but we can identify distinct modalities in more or less discrete sections of the collection. I’m specifically concerned with the collection’s treatment of the expressway as “postindustrial global capitalism unleashed” (Wunker 45), which I will call the commercial expressway, and treatment of the expressway in a more utopic mode, which I

will call the subversive expressway. In this chapter I'm concerned with identifying what we learn from these contrapositions of binaries..

I look at these contrasting modes of the expressway in the first section of this chapter with reference to the poems "Cloverleaf Medians & Means" (16-21) and "Murmurings, Movements or Fringe Manifesto" (64-7). In this section I identify the ambivalent logic of the collection as antithetical to consumerist and activist impulses alike. Emerging from the contraposition of these logics is not only a deep consideration of the dynamics of both capitalist and subversive logic, but it is also an introspective consideration of ourselves as modern humans. The purpose of an expressway is to move things. As the collection urges that "we" are one with the expressway, ambivalence forces a stop in the imperative to act that is characteristic of the modern human. Hence, ambivalence also works in the pursuit of apokatastatic desire, by undermining *Expressway's* conception of the human-as-expressway.

Out of the contraposition between the binaries of the expressway, I argue, comes a penthic attitude toward the question of what to do about the expressway. This is my concern in the second half of this chapter. In this part of the chapter the human/inhuman binary is interrogated and destabilized. In the utopic mode of "Endless Interstates" (27-35) a distinction arises between types of humans, again evoking apokatastatic desire; that is, the poem conceives of twenty-first century humans in opposition to humans coexisting with other life forms. Presenting a vision of the subversive expressway, this utopic section presents an alternative to a "toxic" mode of human existence in which human beings need to stop acting appropriatively; at the same time, this transition is such that when it is made humans cease to be human; in the same way that pursuit of apokatastatic

desire is hopeless, the actualization of this vision is hopeless. The despairing aspects of the poem use grim realism as a foil to its utopic mode. The contrast of the utopic and the despairing leaves the reader ambivalent, resulting in a state of penthos that maintains hopelessness of the vision offered but grasps at it nonetheless. By depicting the utopic transition from being human to being something inhuman, the poem suggests apokatastatic desire; by undercutting this utopic vision, though, the poem is penthic.

II. Expressway and Ambivalence

Considering the flux of the collection's voice, *Expressway*'s argument is unsurprisingly an ambivalent one. While the collection's opening section begins with an epigraph by Wallace Stevens—"Wait now; we have no rememberings of hope" (5)—its closing section ends with the imperatives to "[g]o forth and undo harm. / Go forth and do" (98). While the line from Stevens is mired in despair—waiting for hope to come back, making calculations for redress—these closing imperatives seem to require hope. The closing imperatives read as encouraging pseudo-sensitivity among readers: do something; do what you can; i.e., do what's easy; it doesn't matter *what* you do as long as you do *something*. The imperative also seems to be undergirded by an intentional naivety, though, evoking the utopian in their pretense to simple solutions. The closing lines' call to "go forth and do" are intentionally unclear, employing one of the vaguest verbs in the

English language, “to do.”⁹ “Do what?” we might wonder. And anyway, how do we act without hope? These questions I take to be the central problematics of *Expressway*.¹⁰ This ambivalence effects a form of lyric thinking in the collection, where the importance of the two aspects arises from their juxtaposition. In this case, that importance is to stall the impulse to act and encourage deep consideration of the debate itself. In wondering what to do we are forced to consider possibilities rather than act on them.

Consider the metaphors the collection uses to imagine an off-ramp from the troubles of the expressway: the fancy and the dream.¹¹ It is no coincidence that these are metaphors of inaction: it is not clear that the visions they contain are meant to be realistic possibilities, and this lack of clarity suggests that they are penitential rather than hopeful, envisioning utopia while rejecting it. Framing these poems as dreams and fancies is, perhaps, the outcome of Queyras’s frustrations with *Expressway*, as she reports “[f]eeling very trapped by the sort of limited ability to be optimistic and realistic” (Queyras,

⁹ “To do” often functions as a placeholder for other verbs. The questions “What do you do?”, for example, asks for another verb in its answer, “I invest” or “I protest.” To ask someone to “do something” is not to specify any action at all, only that *some* action should be taken.

¹⁰ Adding to the ambivalence, even while the collection seems critical of contemporary car culture, it is dedicated, in part, to “all the road builders. And those of us who watched it unroll” (101). Does this dedication smack of complacency with the expressway’s destructive tendencies? Does it praise such destruction even? Probably not, at least not straightforwardly, but the dedication, among other things, forces us to conclude that *Expressway* presents a conflicted view of its topic.

¹¹ Not every “fancy” is a utopian fancy; in fact some of them are better described as despairing (the second, for example: “*Ill-gotten gains, word. Loss. Dig hard enough, fast enough, you’ll find meaning. Though I don’t expect you will do*” [emphasis original; 23]). Others occupy a middle space between despair and utopia, where the lyric is at times penitential (the third, for example: “*I am tired of the tyranny of the optimistic!*” [emphasis original; 36]).

“Audio”). Her attitude here, trapped between two conflicting desires, is a textbook case of ambivalence. Kenneth Weisbrode thinks of the effect of ambivalence in terms of mediating structures of language that “perform as an inhibitor cell in the social personality” (29). Using an apt metaphor for this discussion, he writes of ambivalence as a yellow light at an intersection: “[a]mbivalence may not be so bad after all. Yellow lights do not incapacitate us; they merely help us get where we are going safely. When we slow down we look around, contemplate, and create” (29). *Expressway*, I argue, uses ambivalence to just this effect; I would stipulate, however, that where we are going and whether we can get there safely remain open questions.

There is reason to worry about pervasive ambivalence in modern society, but *Expressway*'s engagement with ambivalence works differently than ambivalence in consumerism. Weisbrode characterizes the ambivalent state: “[b]etween wanting and doing—desire and action—lies ambivalence” (5). He echoes Queyras's identification of the expressway with “us” when he notes that “[a]mbivalence lies at the core of who we are” (1). By “we” he means citizens of consumerist culture. He worries about pervasive ambivalence in “‘the millennium generation.’ . . . [With] infinite choices for one's attention on the internet and elsewhere . . . , [with the ability] to communicate simultaneously to multiple people and to commit . . . to none of them if we choose . . . , we can repeat, indiscriminately, to all offers, ‘I'm not sure, I'll have to see’” (46). Having too many choices results in ambivalence that worries Weisbrode, and *Expressway*'s “Progress” reiterates his worry: “[m]ultiple choice offers no room for thinking, only choosing” (62). As in *Expressway*, Weisbrode claims that technological connectivity is a fraught matter: “[e]ach decision [to respond with uncertainty] may be perfectly rational;

the cumulative effect is not” (46). *Expressway* articulates a concern with ambivalence that matches Weisbrode’s discussion up to this point.

Here Weisbrode’s reading of ambivalence and my reading of *Expressway* diverge, though. Despite its dangers, ambivalence works in *Expressway* in at least two ways that are quite rational: first, ambivalence is employed as a foil to the apparent certainty of consumerism; second it is employed as a way of downplaying the dominance of the human perspective. While Weisbrode identifies cultural debilitation by pervasive ambivalence as a major danger to society, ambivalence in *Expressway* takes the form of a threat to the logic of the expressway as an emblem of capitalism, which demands movement and choice. Capitalist ideology is as antithetical to ambivalence as it is to apokatastatic desire. Marshall Berman writes that the “innate dynamism of the modern economy, and of the culture that grows from this economy, annihilates everything that it creates—physical environments, social institutions, metaphysical ideas, artistic visions, moral values—in order to create more, to go on endlessly creating the world anew” (288). The commercial mode of the expressway refuses ambivalence, always seeking to produce and consume. Ambivalence in *Expressway* works against its commercial modality, though. Whereas Weisbrode worries about the multiplicity of choices stalling commitment to any choice, Queyras is more concerned with how this multiplicity carries an imperative to act rather than think. Here an overlap in the rationale of consumerism and activism appears. Connected to the activist imperative to *do* is the commercial imperative to consume—ambivalence foils both of these impulses by insisting on extended consideration that halts the momentum of consumption and the imperative to act.

This stoppage, though, is not without its own potentially harmful consequences. Ambivalence can be self-destructive because it “is something more subtle, and more devastating, than human frailty. Weaknesses can be remedied. Ambivalence comes, rather, from too much ambition” (Weisbrode 1-2). The implication here is that ambivalence is a volatile state of mind for which there is no remedy. Noting that the expressway’s literal and conceptual sprawl represents an abundance of ambition, with its “being / us” (*Expressway* 64) and “[i]ts indiscriminate will to connect” (65), we might say of the expressway’s supersized ambition what Weisbrode implies of cultural ambivalence—it may be an illness without a remedy. If the metaphor of the expressway, as Wunker suggests, has as its tenor “postindustrial global capitalism unleashed” (45), over-ambition that results in cultural ambivalence (and in Suzuki’s car metaphor, which we saw earlier) is a cognate of the expressway that presents its destructive capacity.

On the other hand, ambivalence is self-destructive in *Expressway* in more nuanced ways. Its destructive capacities are exploited in the pursuit of apokatastatic desire. Wunker describes the process of “getting the self out of the way” (Carson qtd. in Wunker 48) as “decreation,” “a neologism coined by Simone Weil to articulate her attempt to ‘undo the creature’ in herself” (48). The displacement of the speaker by the expressway’s lyrical drive, a decomposition of “the boundary—however tenuous—between subject and object” (48), qualifies an example of decreating the lyric.¹² Essentially an ambivalent act, since in decreation we try to eliminate the self to examine the self, decreation in

¹² Wunker focuses on the syntax of Dorothy Wordsworth’s dissembled journals in the poem “A Time before the Expressway” to make her point about decreation, arguing that the syntax itself defers its grammatical subject (49).

Expressway strips of the self in order to better exist as a member of “the community of all things” (Lilburn *Living* 72)—the human reader experiences the expressway as a bystander of the expressway’s lyric momentum, rather than through a human speaker in control of the poem’s trajectory. Decreation, then, is an essentially penitential pursuit, one in which a person tries hopelessly to get out of the subject position in which she is stuck in.

Hence, *Expressway* capably manipulates ambivalence and is cultivates awareness of and concerned for with its own ambivalence. This awareness contributes to a heightened sense of rationality in the collection. Self-awareness is, in fact, necessary to ambivalence, as it “along with certainty, requires volition and awareness: they depend on sanity, even rationality” (Weisbrode 16). Trapped between incompatible desires, attenuation to rationality happens at a heightened level despite the seemingly illogical posture that is the refusal to make a decision. In the remainder of this section I analyse the collection’s poetics in with reference to its conflicting logics of the commercial and subversive expressway. A logic of ambivalence, I argue, informs the collection’s poetics.

As the collection is ambivalent between regarding the expressway as consumerist space or the expressway as subversive space, I want to be careful in offering an overarching interpretation of the collection’s poetics. One central articulation of *Expressway*’s poetics appears in “Murmurings, Movements or Fringe Manifesto.” This is the second of two poems that feature a dialogue between the interlocutors “A” and “B,” the first poem being “Cloverleaf Medians & Means.” An issue of the trustworthiness of these interlocutors appears here, since the poems stand in contrast to one another in form, tone, and argument. Hence, before getting to the poetics articulated in the second poem, I want to clarify the relationship between the two poems, which will both illuminate the

function of the collection's ambivalence and help establish that the poetics in the "Murmurings" apply to the collection as a whole.

The two poems diverge formally in ways that mark them as an intentional contrast to one another. Firstly, each sequence deploys the interlocutors' voices, "A" and "B," differently. The interlocutors' nominal resemblance to logical placeholders¹³ in the formal logic of analytic philosophy is instructive.¹⁴ The key here is to understand that in formal logic A and B might as well be P and Q or X and Y. "Cloverleaf" orders its interlocutors standardly: A leads, B responds. Whereas placeholders are arbitrarily assigned in formal logic, in "Murmurings" B is the counterintuitive lead and A the respondent. A, of course, always leads B when placeholders are assigned arbitrarily because, all other things being equal, arbitrary assignment follows alphabetical order. Hence, the reverse sequence of A and B is not happenstance. This is noteworthy since in both poems the interlocutors do not disagree with each other after the fashion of Socratic dialogues, but mostly reinforce and enhance each others' statements, both poems ending in the two voices speaking in unison. The ordering of the placeholders and their status as

¹³ We might also note their resemblance to mathematical placeholders, but as formal logic concerns itself with turning propositions into letters for the purposes of argumentative analysis, the link with formal logic presents more options for analysis of the poem.

¹⁴ Other poems also indicate *Expressway*'s concern with logic. "Progress," for example, uses full lines that do not signify anything but syntactically mimic formal logic. A sample of this syntax includes "One is not" ("Progress," 60) (reading it as an existential statement, "not one"; $\neg p$ in formal logic); "This, or this and this ..." ("Progress," 60) (signified: $p \vee (q \wedge r)$); and "Either, or" (a logical connective signified by " \vee ") ("Progress," 60). "Progress," like "Cloverleaf" and the "Murmurings," also employs the logical signifier A.

such show that the poems are concerned with the dynamics of logical argumentation, but the inverted order in the second poem suggests that the two poems operate in terms of distinct logics.

On the subject of inversions, the poems also articulate divergent poetics using antimetabole: “[t]his poem stinks of dynamite” (“Cloverleaf” 17) as opposed to “[t]his dynamite stinks of poem” (“Murmurings” 64). The connection to destruction here is common; however, “Cloverleaf” evokes destruction in “smoothing each nuisance of wild,” while “Murmurings” does so with its ambivalent logic. Placing the antimetabolic lines in the context of the rest of the poems helps convey the difference between these formulations, and the poems themselves. “Cloverleaf” is unsurprisingly concerned with calculation, means and medians being mathematical terms for the average and the middle number in series, respectively; of course the terms are also synonymous with ways of achieving something (means as opposed to ends) and dividing lines (on a highway, say), respectively. “Cloverleaf” is a reference to the expressway’s architecture at perpendicular intersections to allow traffic to exit one expressway to head in either direction on the intersecting expressway, or to turn around and head backward on the original expressway. A cloverleaf, for all its navigational options, offers no route that is not an expressway. Thinking of an expressway cloverleaf as the intersection of expressways, we can imagine A and B standing for the voices of intersecting expressways, which explains why there is very little disagreement between them.

The terminological displacement of a clover’s leaves with a road design should remind us of more significant displacements; this a token of the way that the expressway literally and conceptually “smooth[es] each nuisance of wild” (6). Here is an example of

systemic violence to the other-than-human, one of the “consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek 2). In this example of violence, the land is made *matériel*, a McKavian concept that refers to the appropriation of something’s death, which I explore in further detail in the following chapter. For now, I want to note how the expressway’s cloverleaf at once replaces actual clover (and other flora) and appropriates the name of the now-absent clover. In this way, the cloverleaf is an emblem not only of physical violence, but of conceptual violence as well; displacing a reference to something wild, clover, with a reference to something only human, the expressway.¹⁵

This conceptual displacement is shown on a more systemic level in relation to a preoccupation with calculating. A worker in a toll booth in the first version of “A Memorable Fancy” counts cars in way that suggests that her experience of time is dictated

¹⁵ It is worth noting here that “Cloverleaf” is not strictly a poem of praise for the expressway—I remain ambivalent, cautious, in stating its position on the expressway upon reading the poem’s final lines, “No business. / Remain” (21), which remind us, as one of a handful of interjections in the poem that seems out of place with its general sentiment, that the poem’s description is not necessarily prescription; “Cloverleaf” only attempts to describe expressway-oriented patterns of thought, rather than evaluate them. With converse caution, and although there is certainly a sense of irony in the [denial] of modernity—“not to bring modernity into / the poem”—we should not be too quick to read every bit of expressway-praise as ironic. The logic of the commercial expressway is not necessarily derided here. As Larson points out, the poem speaks to the lure of the road, which it might be hypocrisy to eschew uncritically. Commercial expressway-thought does have its appeals, does give us our modern conveniences; the expressway is, after all, in us. This appeal is central the problem of mitigating the more disastrous implications of the commercial expressway as a symbol of global capitalism. While the poem might remain hopeless about effecting change in global capitalism, and while I will argue that it encourages anthropogenic self-destruction to a degree, it does not, I think, take the comforts of modern society for granted.

by the expressway, and that expressway-related calculation directs her thought: “[t]he roar of tires is the rhythm of my day, the woman said, every fourteen cars a sonnet” (13). Here, not only the worker’s schedule, but her thought patterns too are dictated by the expressway. As the title of the poem “Cloverleaf Medians & Means” suggests the expressway’s transactions with itself, it is also concerned with how the expressway directs thought and desire through its calculating logic. This poem and both of its voices, A and B, represent that register of the expressway that I have been calling the commercial expressway with the mentality of Deleuzian “desiring-production,” in which a capitalist system dictates desired ends, rather than Lilburnian apokatastatic desire, where the satisfactions of desire are unforeseeable. Consumed with a mode of thought that works only in terms of Freudian secondary processes, “the logical structures of linguistic thinking” (Dickinson 210), “Cloverleaf” is a poem the logic of which is lyrical thinking in Zwicky’s sense. Its logic, in other words, is not poetic.

With these goals in mind, A and B in “Cloverleaf” set about discussing “measurements,” “probability,” “surveys, no / lack of suitable data,” and “[t]ransactions,” (16), and so forth; their lines offer praise in unison with the expressway: “A & B: Beautiful, beautiful the road stretching” (20) and “A & B: Beautiful, how the road arched, there, the lift of it, the / off-ramp, beautiful toll, the elbow, beautiful the straight / stretch” (21). If the poem appears in spots uncritically to praise the expressway—and if convictions like “[l]iberty is / defence of fees. The ability to charge a fee, liberty is worth / Charging for (we all agree) and every breath a logical measure” are vaguely unsettling—this is because a commercial mentality can only praise and justify the commercial expressway. “The poem stinks of dynamite,” as the title of collection’s third section

reminds us, “Because Every Road is Made with Dynamite” (25), and because “Cloverleaf” enacts precisely the logic of road-building.

Whereas “Cloverleaf” is concerned with precise calculation and tallying, “Murmurings, Movements or Fringe Manifesto” remains non-committal, its disjunction, “or,” making its nature ambivalent. The poem might be characterized by any of the title’s descriptors. The logic that insists on precision in the former poem stands in contrast to a logic that insists on ambivalence in the latter. Consider that “murmurings” are by definition indistinct, that “movements” here need not indicate destination or purpose, that the “fringe” of anything is necessarily a place at the edge of common knowledge. Consider also that A variously qualifies B’s statements; the pair are unwilling to collaborate with the imperative authority of the corresponding A and B in “Cloverleaf Medians & Means.” This ambivalent logic arises out of lyric thinking in the poem, marking the ambivalent logic of “Murmurings” as also poetic logic. Additionally, the sense of contingency that the ambivalence of the poem engenders suggests hopelessness about the predicament of the expressway. This hopelessness appears also in the poem’s deflationary articulation of its poetic purpose; this purpose, however, is in line with apokatastatic desire in the way that it is self-destructive and subversive. Lacking disappointment in its humble purpose, the poetics of the collection are penthic, and thus content to avoid direct action.

The two voices are collaborative, however; but they function contrapuntally rather than linearly. This excerpt begins “Murmurings, Movements or Fringe Manifesto:”

B: Writing is not a commodity

A: (Unless published).

B: Original is not a commodity

A: (Unless patented).

B: Writing is thinking made visible

A: (Unless it isn't). (64)

Full-stop placement at the end of each line would imply disagreement, but the placement of full-stops every two lines suggests something different. Like A and B in “Cloverleaf Medians & Means” these voices work in tandem. B and A, though, augment each other by undercutting one another. Weisbrode identifies discourse that undercuts itself as having a logic of ambivalence distinct from merely irrational contradiction: “[a] fragmented rationality is not the same thing as its irrational opposite, no matter how many times we change our minds. Introspection and self-criticism are ambivalent activities, but not without reason” (Weisbrode 45). The reason, we discover, is that a “second guess does not overtake its predecessor; it augments it” (45). In the case of the above excerpt, the reader is made to feel ambivalent about what writing and originality are, becoming suspicious of these.¹⁶ The assumption, for example, that a piece of writing or the origination of an idea is or is not disconnected from processes of capitalist appropriation is now untenable, since the status of these things becomes an open question: for any piece

¹⁶ I read these lines as self-reflexive, expressing caution about *Expressway*'s subversive potential as published work that participates to some degree in the commodification of thought. This is, perhaps, counterbalanced by poetry's lack of commercial status: Stephen Collis argues, “certainly we are reluctant to see it as a commodity, as something we would *pay for*. Poetry is just there—abundant and free, springing organically out of neglect, filling the margins or gaps left by other more productive genres” (5). Additionally, perhaps, taking an ecocritical bent, the self-reflexive caution is a reminder that the poetic (at least in terms of nature poetry) is best understood when “grounded in empirical observation” (McKay, *The Shell* 51).

of writing we must ask, is *this* piece of writing “not a commodity”?¹⁷ This ambivalence about commodification is generated by the contraposition of B’s statements against A’s, making the poem an example of lyric thinking, as opposed to merely calculative thinking. That is, the logic of ambivalence emerges here as a poetic logic that subverts the logic of capitalism.

The poem’s ambivalence translates into its emphasis on contingency, since to feel ambivalent is to hesitate in the decision to actualize one of two incompatible possibilities (Weisbrode 11).¹⁸ “Murmurings” foregrounds the syntax of logic that “Cloverleaf” neglects. “Cloverleaf’s” lack of attention to contingency in its calculative logic is suspicious and bespeaks the limitations of the capitalist orientation of time, which is “its incapacity to imagine the future” (O’Brien 89). It also bespeaks a calculated ignorance of consequence; contingency appears in “Murmurings” with an ominous sense of hopelessness that is antithetical to praise of commercialism.

Consider the following series of subordinate clauses that do not finish their thoughts, each “when” after the first denoting a conditional:

B: When a man looks what does he see?

When a man with his hardhat, when a man in boots.

When a man reaches out his hand.

.....

¹⁷ Note that the negation here suggests that our default position is that writing is commodity, indicating that our default position on writing, as everything in capitalism, is that it *is* a commodity.

¹⁸ This supports the claim that *Expressway's* utopic visions are much less concerned with their actualization than with their imagination, but I will come to this later.

When the cars, all of them surround us. (66)

This series of “whens” runs for several lines. As “when” is roughly equivalent in logic to “if,”¹⁹ after the opening question frames each subsequent clause, the subsequent fragments can be understood as conditional statements with incomplete consequents (i.e. “If a man reaches out his hand then he sees...”)—the transitive verb takes no direct object; we never find out what he sees.²⁰ The consequent is left open.

The disappearance of the verb from the consequent marks the shift from open-ended contingency to hopelessness in this sequence. As each “when” phrase distances itself from the question that opens the sequence, each subsequent phrase gains a greater sense of disconnect from the opening question about seeing. They begin to serve instead as subordinate clauses that precipitate an unknown future event (not “he sees *x*,” but “something happens”), until the last line in the sequence makes much less sense in terms of the question of seeing and much more sense as a precipitating condition for an unknown event; that is, “[w]hen the cars, all of them surround us” (66) makes less sense followed by an implied transitive verb (“they *see*. . .”), than with implied ellipses.²¹ Thus, by the end of sequence the incomplete consequent (he sees *something*) in the conditional has disintegrated into an absent consequent (*something happens*).

¹⁹ The thought here is that “when A happens, B happens” is equivalent to saying “if A happens then B happens.”

²⁰ We can imagine this empty consequent emphasizing both the contingency of what people see when they look—following the interlocutor in the third “Memorably Fancy,” “*you delude yourself if you think you see anything / other than what you choose to see*” (37)—and the necessity of the reader’s own imagination. Leaving the content of the consequent open, the lines ask for an imagination that unhinges itself from reality.

²¹ We *might* question what it is that the cars see when they surround us, but the sentence’s action is directed towards its object, “us,” directing the reader’s attention to what will happen to “us” rather than what the cars will see.

This particular antecedent leaves us with an ominous sense of contingency when supplemented with its own echoes in the final lines of the later poem “Acceptable Dissociations”: “the expressway encloses, the expressway round / and around the perimeters like wagon trains circling the / bonfire, all of them, guns pointed” (75). Understood in this way, the conditionals associate contingency with a sense of dread. Hopelessness and the violence of the expressway loom as the sequence ends. In not stating the despairing conclusion, in leaving it open, though, the poem is ambivalent about the implied predicament of humans at the wheels of their cars. This is to say, that while hopeless, and conveying a sense of dread, the sequence remains penthic.

This logic of ambivalence that focuses on contingency, antithetical to the logic of the expressway as expressed in “Cloverleaf,” is also imagined as a destructive force, but it is imagined as a force that effaces the logic of “Cloverleaf,” working subversively. The movement of this logic of ambivalence to the destruction of the expressway is articulated in the trajectory of “Murmurings”:

B: ...

Original is ornery

A: (Of no value on its own).

B: Or, if somewhere in the suburbs?

A: ()

B: This dynamite stinks of poem.

A: One morning thousands showed up and inch

By inch tore up the expressway and carried it off in their beaks. (65)

“Or,” “if,” and a pointed ellipsis-like silence from A precipitate the poem-stinking dynamite, which in turn precipitates the decreation of the expressway.²² Thus, the reason that “Murmurings” is not a “poem that stinks of dynamite” but “dynamite that stinks of poem” becomes clear. Rather than the attributes of the destructive road-building force being translated into a poem, the attributes of a poem, specifically its poetics of ambivalence (or contingency), are translated into the destructive road-building force—this destructiveness is poetic, and this poem is figured as a destructive one. At its extremity, what is at stake in the destruction that is figured here is no less than modern human life itself, with its consumerist mentality and its myriad comforts. Put another way, a focus on contingency through forward looking meditation as enabled by an ambivalent state, the poem urges, would inflict a state of hopelessness that would mean major changes in the way the global capitalist system works—it would essentially mean its demise.

The collection’s aims are not nearly so ambitious or straightforward, however. The destructive aspect of ambivalent logic is given a more realistic aim. “Murmurings” describes its poetics:

The poem refuses to start from a position of safety and
 end in a position of safety having momentarily revealed
 a tiny fracture in human existence, the equivalent of a fly
 (a very small one, possibly a fruit fly even) in the chardon-
 nay, or perhaps even more revelatory, a dose of chemo-

²² This decreation is elaborated on other poems, especially “Three Dreams of the Expressway.”

therapy (but not yours), a glimpse into the abyss (a tiny one, twice removed) and back to the front porch (this could be yours), before the next sip. (67)

The variously deflationary images used in this passage—the fly in the chardonnay, the “tiny” glimpse of the abyss—are mobilized to reveal “a tiny fracture in human existence.” Ambivalent logic is humble in its pretensions to destruction and revelation though: domestic concerns re-enter the scene in short order with “before the next sip,” undercutting the lasting effect of such revelation. This humility sets the collection’s tone apart from activist programs, which demand and expect impactful action.

Still, even as these poetics are hopeless about their political efficacy, they are subversive insofar as they encourage meditation and revelation in the context of capitalist ideology that urges constant movement. The result of such meditation is politically hopeless, but it gestures toward apokatastasis. Such encouragement to meditation is carried through in part by insistence on an ambivalent position, “refusing to start from a position of safety and / end in a position of safety.” On this count, the lyric here is penthic, accepting that the latent, politically destructive capacity of its ambivalent logic will remain virtually untapped, but outlining and encouraging it anyway. Additionally, this lack of safety, the destructiveness implied in the lyric, and the reference to “a fracture in human existence,” indicate apokatastatic desire, stripping the human of human comforts and deconstructing the modern human’s ethos. Hence, the lyric penthos works against capitalist ideology through apokatastasis, not for the sake of politically attacking capitalist ideology, but rather for pursuing apokatastatic desire; the poem is after a way of

seeing beyond human perspective, and though it is bound not to have lasting impact, its gestures toward such a perspective are a rift in the human.

Hence, we can read “Murmurings” as the overriding expression of *Expressway*’s penthic poetics. This conclusion supports Wunker’s argument that *Expressway* reorients the traditional lyric subversively and my claim that the collection’s ambivalence resists capitalist ideology. However, Wunker, less concerned with ambivalence than the collection’s subversion of the Romantic lyric, concludes that “[i]n reorienting the lyric and jamming the traffic between I-you-it, Queyras opens outward, hopefully” (51). Because my account is concerned not only with subverting norms of the lyric that imply injustice, but in avoiding the sense of hopelessness in our ecological predicament, the note of hope is where our accounts diverge. I insist that the collection remains in this sense deliberately hopeless, if penthically so.

III. Utopian Narrative Ends in Despair

An ideological shift is the endgame for ecologically concerned people of all stripes—from practical, intellectual activists such as David Suzuki, philosophers such as Lynn White Jr. and Peter Singer, and prolific Canadian writers such as Northrop Frye.²³

Expressway engages with this activist endgame with ambivalence. Weisbrode explains

²³ See, specifically, Suzuki’s comments on an economic paradigm shift in the interview “No Sacrifice Needed”; See Lynn White Jr. on the connections between environmental attitudes and religious ideology in “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”; see Peter Singer on animal rights as an extension of human rights in “All Animals Are Easy”; and see Frye’s on the need to for greater knowledge of history and temporality in Canadian thought in “Canada: New World without Revolution.”

three basic varieties, citing “the man who invented the term, Eugene Bleuler” (11): “the love-hate relationship, focused upon a single object; the inability to choose (or to imagine a choice) between desires, or needs; and the simultaneous attachment to incompatible or contradictory ideas or beliefs. All tend to blur in practice“ (11). Each of these varieties of ambivalence is brought out in *Expressway*’s contemplation of its subject,²⁴ but it addresses the second of these foremost through its utopic visions, which try (and fail) to imagine practicable alternatives to consumerism. This feigned break from ambivalence is the focus of this section. These utopic visions are undercut by a variety of sober realisms that are scattered throughout the book. This undercutting is itself anticipated by the collection’s deflationary poetics. Hence, the collection oscillates between the despair represented in its realisms and the utopic vision that, the collection’s poetics anticipate, will fail to be actualized. Thus, the collection insists that the realistic present is the logical antecedent only to some ominous and unknown consequent, and not an ecological utopia.

The tone of *Expressway* shifts after the speaker “she” meets a cynical interlocutor in the second “Memorable Fancy,” which immediately follows “Cloverleaf Medians & Means.” After the disheartening poems that precede it, “Endless Interstates” begins with some reprieve from discomfort and despair. The first poem of the section “Because

²⁴ The attachment to contradictory beliefs we have seen already in the definition of the expressway as both future and not future, for example, and the love-hate relationship is perhaps most easily seen in the collection’s contemplation of freedom: whereas the expressway as an emblem of movement connotes freedom, which we idealize, as an emblem of modern consumerism it connotes an undesirable commercial trap, and it troubles the notion of freedom itself as it relates to the free market. See for example the poem “Progress,” which intones that “Freedom is to confuse” and offers “After all, freedom” (61) as an intentionally empty argument to justify capitalist practices.

Every Road is Made with Dynamite,” this poem begins utopically. Despite this, the speaker feels the need to apologize for the utopic vision’s implications because she senses that they are socially unacceptable. The poem is an enactment of *penthos*, then, as it envisions while admitting the failure of the vision, and the hopelessness of the present moment. Hence, while *Expressway* imagines a better future it remains skeptical about the actualization of that future. Despite this skepticism, the poem points to divergent conceptions of the human, encouraging the reader to rethink what it means to be human through a sense of wilderness, where, as McKay would have it, we are not “masters of creation” (*The Shell* 91).

Reconceiving the human is effected through lyrical juxtaposition of the utopic and the despairing aspects of the poem, with the implied ambivalence between Queyras’s optimism and realism forcing the reader to pause. Again, this pause is antithetical to the dynamism of capitalism. Susie O’Brien’s parses this dynamism in terms of how it organizes time: “[Corporate Time] operates according to the imperative of economic productivity . . . [,] exercises a managerial function . . . [, and] insinuates itself into the consciousness of its mostly involuntary subscribers on a minute-by-minute level” (87). O’Brien writes that “Corporate Time does not provide any remedy to the problem of a deteriorating environment” because of its necessarily short-term calculation strategy (89). “This points to the biggest limitation of Corporate Time,” she argues, “which is its incapacity to imagine the future” (89). Ambivalence about what to do in *Expressway* refocuses time as an ideological structure of human life, and the urgency of crisis is consequently deflated. One alternative to Corporate Time is a sense of “deep time,” in which “we give up mastery and gain mutuality” (McKay, *The Shell* 24) by “making the

present a temporal unit among other epochs, periods, and eras” (23). As “Endless Interstate” undercuts its utopic vision of the future, it reminds us that change happens over extended periods of time that the human mind has difficulty comprehending and encourages an approach to the future that utilizes poetic attention instead, remaining open to unsuspected satisfactions along the way to apokatastatic desire.

Starting “Endless Interstates,” we read that “they go down to the expressways . . . to pick / beans and trim tomato plants” (26) and the reader’s inner gardener is by now sighing in relief: surely “they” are really some future “us”? But what is this trimmed expressway that gives sustenance beyond sustained movement and commercial desire? What is it “by the glass-pickers, the Geiger counters, those / guarding toxic wastes” (26)? This seems a definitive vision of the expressway divested of commercialism, and the pervasive ambivalence of the collection is momentarily suppressed. We have a description of life more in line with apokatastasis. Moreover, the course from the present to the utopic future is sketched: the subversive expressway is an evolution of the commercial expressway, constructed in and with its detritus, complete with a future that promises “new varieties of / Plant life, sustainable abundance” (26) amidst that guarded toxic waste. Utopic hope lures the reader here.

Expressway’s incessant enjambment does carry the hopeful reader through the trinity of encouraging rhymes in the first tercet, with “baskets in *hand*,” “watering *cans*,” and “tomato *plants*” (emphasis mine 26), merging organic human agency with the flourishing of other-than-human life. The next sentence, though, adds the remembrance of “children in back seats, pinching, twitching, / *Sand* in their bathing suits” (emphasis mine 26), packing into the aural trajectory that slight itch and discomfort associated with

the poem's days gone by. We are soon brought back hopefully to the poem's present in rhyme and half-rhyme to "[p]lant life, sustainable abundance" (emphasis mine 26).

Again, however, this sense of relief is not to last, as in the penultimate sentence and the end of this sequence of tonal resonances we find disquieting half-rhyme and rhyme:

... the night
 Watchmen with their *machine* guns,
 Keeping the *humans*
 Out. . . . (emphasis mine 27)

Add to this anti-human finale a corresponding resonance between "toxic wastes" (26) and "humans, the intoxicated," and despite the temptation to think of that "hand" in the first tercet as metonymy for human agency, humans are somehow other to this vision.²⁵ The watchmen are set in opposition to the human here, suggesting that the gatekeepers of this utopia are in some sense anti-human.

"They" is not "us," not here, not now. Humans are intoxicated, toxic. Our location in the poem, as contemporary readers, is dubious. The poem presents a post-human vision, but in one specific sense. *Expressway* insists on alternate ways of being human that defy the conception of humanity as ruled by their ambition and unending desire; "they," (not "us," remember) "go down . . . and are content / To have the day before them, are content to imagine" (26). As contentedness stands in opposition to

²⁵ One part of this othering is, perhaps, a recognition of the relationship that North Americans have to discourse about toxicity. Greg Garrard points that "according to some ecocritics . . . toxic discourse and pollution anxiety themselves perpetuate a harmful distinction between nature, seen as wild and pure . . . , and the toxic taint of humanity" (15). We might read Queyras's lines as also recognizing the ways that the notion of toxicity separates the human from the other-than-human; thus the idea of toxicity is itself part and parcel of industrialized humanity and is to be equally guarded against.

commercial desire, the human on the subversive expressway has necessarily moved past the consumerist momentum of the commercial expressway to embrace something more like apokatastasis. The humans in this vision have “sustainable abundance,” which implies sensitivity to the complexities of the more-than-human; such sensitivity and sustainability are fundamentally at odds with capitalist dynamism in which all products and social structures “made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms” (Berman 99). Living organically with the world, without modern humanity, the inhabitants of this utopia are much nearer Lilburn’s “community of all things” (*Living* 72).

As *Expressway* imagines a subversive expressway, then, it imagines a version of humanity that is antithetical to the humanity as it presents itself in capitalism. This humanity is necessarily anti-human, in some senses. The paradox here can be more clearly understood and resolved considering some reflections on “man” in *Expressway*’s “Proverbs from Hell:” “Where man is, nature is bereft. / Where nature is not man, is not unknown. / Where nature is not natural, man is not man” (97). These lines correspond roughly to the moral, epistemic, and ontological connections between “man” and “nature,” respectively. Again, logical equivalents of these passages are instructive for our readings of the anti-human utopia. The first line is equivalent to the statement, “If nature is not bereft, man is not.” The lines can be read two ways, corresponding to an existential or transitive reading of “is.” Reading the “is” existentially, we understand that man does not exist where nature is not bereft; man *is not*. Thus, man is kept out of the envisioned utopic integration of human and non-human life, where nature is clearly not bereft. On

the other hand, understanding the repeated “is” as a grammatical link between two subjects, “nature” and “man,” and one common subject complement, “bereft,” we can read the lines with an implied “bereft” after the transitive “is:” “where man is [bereft], nature is bereft” (97), and, equivalently, “if nature is not bereft, man is not bereft.”²⁶ Combining the two readings of the line, even as “man”²⁷ and “nature” are essentially incompatible with one another in post-Enlightenment thought, paradoxically the status of man and nature are sensitive to one another.

This dependence carries into the next two lines, and the second line, especially, is inflected by the possible readings of the first. Relatedly, the line is ambivalent about what it is that is “not unknown” as I read it, the syntax leaving the matter open with an absent subject in the independent clause: “Where nature is not man, [*something*] is not unknown.” Is it “man” or “nature” that might be “not unknown” where “nature is not man”?²⁸ Keeping in mind that “man” is incompatible with nature (as per my first reading of the preceding line), the second line’s absent subject might be nature: nature is “not unknown.” Thus, the absence of man becomes a prerequisite for knowledge of the natural. On the other hand, if the bereavement of “nature” indicates the bereavement of “man” (as per the second reading of the preceding line), the dominance of “man” over nature—that

²⁶ This is an example of a standard logical conversion, *modus tollens*.

²⁷ The use of “man” as a stand-in for human is conspicuous here. Noticing the dual readings of these lines, I suggest that this diction is a nod to the mutually reinforcing interplay of patriarchal structure and corporate structure in the reading of these lines that posits man as incompatible with nature.

²⁸ The double negative here can also be given an equivalent—what is “not unknown” is known. I resist this particular equation because the connotations differ significantly. It seems to me that the phrasing “not unknown” retains an amount of uncertainty that suggests something like “known but not fully known,” whereas the elimination of the double negative does not suggest this epistemic uncertainty.

smoothing of wild nuisance where, say, nature is *only* man—results in an epistemological lacuna in knowledge about man. The logical equivalent of the conditional in this line clarifies its second reading: “either nature is not [only] man or [*man*] is unknown;”²⁹ that is, man is unknown where man subsumes nature. In other words, and again paradoxically, the relative submission of “man” to nature becomes a prerequisite also for knowledge of “man” himself.

Adding human ontological dependence on nature to epistemic dependence, the final line paradoxically insists that under the condition that “nature is not natural,” “man is not man.” Provisionally to resolve the final paradox implied in the three lines, the poem requires independent conceptions of the human. Let us follow the poem’s diction and call one conception of humanity “man”; with all of the patriarchal and capitalist baggage associated with the term, this can stand for the modern orientation of the human to the commercial expressway. Let us call the other conception *Homo sapiens*. This latter designation places the human on equal terminological footing in a system of classification, while the former carries connotations of utter superiority (“the dominion of man”). Hence, the former is commercially oriented, whereas the latter is apokatastatically oriented. Understood in this way, we can resolve the paradox of the above lines as follows: “where man is, nature is bereft,” but “if nature is not, *Homo sapiens* are not bereft”; “where nature is not man, [nature] is not unknown,” but “either nature is not [only] man or *Homo sapiens* are not unknown”; “where nature is not natural, man is not

²⁹ This is a combination of logical conversions, “Implication” and “Double Negation.” By implication “if A then B” becomes “either not B or A” (“either [not] man is not unknown or nature is not only man”). By double negation, “not not B” becomes “B” (“not ‘man is not unknown’” becomes simply “man is unknown”).

Homo sapiens.” In encouraging this distinction between man and *Homo sapiens*, aligning *Homo sapiens* with contentedness and sustainable existence, the poem both encourages apokatastasis.

This understanding not only emphasizes Queyras’s attentiveness to gender issues in *Expressway*, insisting on different conceptions of the human,³⁰ but also allows us to hold both readings of the previous two lines and to understand the division of “us” and “them” in “Endless Interstates.” Dominated by an industrial and patriarchal ideology premised on dominion rather than cooperation—as Northrop Frye puts it, “the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it, that feels no part of it, that splits its own consciousness off from it and looks at it like an object” (437)—“man” is put out of touch with humanity as “*Homo sapiens*,” the less hermetic, more organically responsive variety of human being. Biblical spiritual superiority is reversed as man is associated with toxicity and intoxication, whereas *Homo sapiens* by definition holds communion with the organic.³¹

In its anti-human sentiments, then, “Endless Interstates” is premised on the organically hermetic humanity of the commercial age. Its vision, if narrated in the present tense, is given from a future standpoint in which *Homo sapiens* have an entirely different orientation to the world than present-day humans. The problem that looms here

³⁰ There is much to be said on account of *Expressway*'s treatment of gender issues, the full extent of which falls beyond the scope of this chapter. For further discussion see Wunker.

³¹ If this smacks of animism it is not by coincidence. While I am not espousing animism as a viable religious orientation, animism serves as a model of orientation to wilderness that posits an alternative ontology of nature, the result of which is a necessarily less hermetic relationship with the other-than-human (Frye 437).

for those aspiring to make the vision a reality is familiar in utopic discourses. We are offered precious little advice on how to get from where we are to the envisioned prosperity, and are offered little assurance of any method's effectiveness. What's more, the paradoxical lines of "Endless Interstates" indicate a self-consciousness about the fact that this problem may well be an intractable one. The implication that the new and improved expressway of the poem is an extension of the commercial expressway of an age gone by loses its hopeful lustre. The poem suggests that man, facing a moral, epistemic, and ontological deficit, has no interest in attempting the transition.

The final note of despair in this poem comes in the form of an apology and an understated commentary on what is to come. "I am sorry for this vision, offer," (27) the speaker intimates, recognizing the offence to her modern human audience; her readers are precisely the depraved humans that she has said must be kept out by "[w]atchmen with their machine guns" (27). The apology is indicative of the volatility of subversive ideas. A few pages later in "Endless Interstates," the speaker reports again on the toxicity of the human, affirming her skepticism of present humanity when she writes, "[t]his is a country that has accepted death / As an industry, it is not news" (29), but here she offers some explanation of the apology: her view is an unpopular one: "[s]he has been warned. / Her ratings sag" (29). Yet it is not only unpopular; as the warning indicates, it is dangerous. Again, amidst the utopic current of the third of "Three Dreams of the Expressway," "Renewal," she writes that "[i]n this country / "What I'm saying is another language, / In this country I could be deported" (92). The speaker apologizes for her utopic indiscretion, then, not only because it is unpopular, but because it is so unpopular it carries dire consequences. Within the framework of man vs. *Homo sapiens* deportation from the

country of man might seem desirable, but again, the problem arises that there is no present alternative way for the speaker to live. The condition of the speaker here, mired in ambivalence between her utopic impulse and her pervasive sense of its futility, is hopeless.

Thus, the first poem in “Endless Interstates” ends in despair. Even the comfort of coffee, offered to the reader as a comfort that accompanies the apology is undercut. The speaker offers “you coffee, hot while there is still / Coffee this far north” (27), emphasizing the contingency of this simple amenity while implying its end. This undercutting contingency is extended from the eventual absence of simple pleasure to breakdowns of human connection—“while there is still news / To wake up to” (27)—and finally the ecological cycle that structures human life—“[While there are still] seasons / Vaguely reminiscent of seasons” (27). The last line, as a monostich in a poem full of tercets, has an extra sense of finality to it, as it stands alone in the white space of the page, a sonnetesque volta that retracts the conviction that there will be future seasons to wake up to. The apology is offered, but the concern that prompted the indiscretion stands, the speaker insists. In this way, what begins as utopic vision ends in an affirmation of the inability to have conviction in alternative possibilities in the context of the commercial expressway and an insistence that the problem of the expressway’s interaction with the wild is inevitable, with inevitable consequences.

Read as a contrapuntal lyrical exercise, though, not as a narrative progression from utopic imagination to despair in current circumstance, the poem is penthic, rather than despairing. The speaker, like the collection, oscillates between utopic vision and despairing sobriety, and while the cumulative effect is hopelessness, I think, it is not

crushing. Rather, in *Expressway*, despair functions as a check on the utopic, resisting capitalist ideology through its ambivalence between the two. Hesitation between identifying with either the utopic or the despairing creates ambivalence, which, in turn, invites the reader to meditate on the comparative discourses. The poem is not after hope, but seeking to “momentarily [reveal] a tiny fracture inhuman existence,” refusing “to start from a position of safety and end in a position of safety” (67), it is deliberate about its ambivalence, and its closing call to “go forth and do” (98) is a penitential call to imagine alternatives to capitalist ideology even in the face of hopelessness. This momentary revelation, especially insofar as it functions by considering the human divested of humanity in its utopic visions, is penitential in its movement toward apocalyptic desire. Comparing its insight to a fly in the chardonnay, the poem, I argue, is too humble for hope.

The vagueness of the closing call to “go forth and do,” finally, stands in stark contrast to activist calls to action which tend to both foreground the violence they mean to rectify (the enslavement of animals, say) and specify the necessary action of their audience (*donate now*). The lack of safety in the collection’s final lines plays out in that it offers no chance for the reader to be pseudo-sensitive, donating five bucks and moving on with his day. Rather, using a poetics of ambivalence, and using the voices of the expressway contrapuntally, the poem is an invitation to grasp at how these discourses function and consider one’s place in industrial and ecological world, imagining utopic solutions as a practice or a way of coming to insight, rather than in the hope of solution.

Chapter 3: Don McKay and Humour

“The natural world is either in decline or gone, depending on your degree of pessimism”—McKay, “The Appropriate Gesture” 174

I. Introduction

Reading hopelessness into Don McKay’s poetry is on first blush counter-intuitive, as critics often point out how humourous his work is. In an interview with McKay, Ken Babstock tells him, “[s]omething that strikes a reader almost immediately when reading your work is its sheer playfulness of imagination.” Babstock goes on to ask, “[a]re you having as much fun composing, as the poems themselves seem to be having?” (“The Appropriate” 173). McKay answers “not . . . initially because there’s this hope . . . you’re trying to get it right” (173), but the interview’s subtitle, “Regular Dumb-ass Guy Looks at Bird,” should indicate the kind of playfulness associated with his poetic voice. This is partly because of his use of the vernacular, a sharp contrast to much activist discourse, which might (and should) cry out “Save the Spotted Owl!”³² Though McKay is sensitive to the plight of endangered species—he ends the audio recording *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, for example, by naming extinct birds followed by poignant silence—the speaker in

³² The spotted owl is on Canada’s endangered species list (David Suzuki Foundation, “It’s Getting Harder”).

“But Nature Has Her Darker Side” awakes in the night with the more common Great Horned owl on his mind and his “pecker pointing to the north star” (40).

Sexual longing, which McKay says “is involved with possession and ownership (“The Appropriate” 177), is in this poem at once humourous, sado-masochistic, and apokatastatic. The poem figures the Great Horned owl as predator of humans: “As we know,” the speaker intones sardonically, “owls eat their prey entire, including jeans, boots, wallet, watch, and delicate intelligence. Later they disgorge the indigestible bits in neat pellets, which are saved and used to build the parthenon of nature’s darker side” (39).³³ The speaker’s longing, while appropriative, is apt to be consumed in this slightly surreal version of *Hinterland Who’s Who*. At the same time, the owl’s “victims have no warning but the sense that *something’s missing*, in which they fall” (40). The speaker longs for what’s missing, and to gain it his humanity must be consumed. His desire to gain something by being consumed is a paradigmatic example of apokatastatic desire; his appropriative longing for his predator is penthic, since the predator in the poem cannot be appropriated, and in longing for self-destruction the speaker really longs to become part of “the community of all things” (Lilburn, *Living* 72), a silent tribute to nature’s darker side, which is here associated with divine wisdom and inspiration.

In the next section of this chapter, I identify defamiliarization by way of humour as an approach that reconciles McKay’s use of humour with the hopelessness implied in some of his subjects. In the final of this chapter section, I discuss the functions of humour, noting that there are dangers in using it to deal with topics that seem to require serious

³³ The parthenon was dedicated to the goddess Athena, whose province was, among other things, wisdom and inspiration.

treatment. While activist discourse enables humour that relies on moral and sympathy overload, McKay's humour avoids this by using lyric penthos to urge humility in human attempts to know. In the final section of the chapter, I look at themes of death and appropriation in relation to hopelessness, capitalist ideology, and McKay's work, claiming that McKay's treatment of these issues with humour, again, defamiliarizes and deflates the sense of dominance that characterizes capitalist treatment of these issues.

II. Humour and Hopelessness

Add to such playful phallic indiscretions as we find in "But Nature Has Her Darker Side" a labourer's penchant for a well-placed cuss word, and McKay's reputation as a poetic humourist is easy to understand. Take, for example, the profanity of "Meditation on Shovels," intoned with a pace and sentiment recognizable to anyone who has spent time digging:

[. . .] as we
 stab pry heave
 our grunts and curses are their music.
 What a (stab) fucking life, you dig these
 (pry) dumb holes in the ground and (heave) fill
 them up again until they (stab)
 dig a fucking hole for you. (47)

As David Lodge points out, "[h]umour is a notoriously subjective matter" (111). Getting a laugh depends on the various standpoints of those listening. Someone might laugh at

this passage out of recognition of digging's supposed banality as contrasted with the familiar mental and physical intensity of the act combined, say, with the felt strain of the body that inspires the repeated invective. The repeated "fucking," and its placement and onomatopoeic resonance with the sounds of digging (the *ffffffck* of the shovel's stab) suggests that this poet knows the act of digging. The description is funny, partly, because it reveals a contrast in the banal conception of shovels and the intense feel of their use.

McKay's use of the vernacular and cussing, and his concern with the banal in "Meditation on Shovels," have theoretical connections with the dynamics of humour, which help to ford the gap between McKay's hopelessness and his humour. In her analysis of McKay's "comic anthropocentrism," Sophia Forster understands humour as the enabling aspect in the genre of comedy. She presents comedy as it contrasts with tragedy: "While tragedy ultimately presents a triumph of human understanding and knowledge, comedy, in its deflationary attitude toward humanity's pretensions, investigates the options for living in a suspended state of provisionality or contingency" (109). Forster draws on Joseph Meeker, who argues that tragedy "imitate[s] man insofar as he is a creature of suffering and greatness" (Meeker qtd. in Forster 109). Comedy, on the other hand, "imitates man's stupidity and ignorance and emphasizes the triviality of human passions by reducing them to the level of street-corner disputes" (109). Paul Lewis explains that the role of humour is to perform a "cognitive trick": "a quick delightful refusal to take potentially dangerous or puzzling incongruities seriously" (qtd. in Forster 112). This poem, as Meeker points out, results in a deflationary look at human passion as it scales inordinately to his activities: the worker is affectively overcome by the banal.

At the heart of such incongruity is defamiliarization, which David Lodge parses as “the usual English translation of *ostraneie* (literally, ‘making strange’)” (53). Citing an example of ridicule that Victor Schlovsky uses to illustrate that “the essential purpose of art is to overcome the deadening effects of habit” (53), Lodge draws attention to

a passage where Tolstoy effectively ridicules opera by describing a performance through the eyes of someone who has never seen or heard an opera before (e.g., “Then still more people came running out and began to drag away the maiden who had been wearing a white dress but who now wore one of sky blue. They did not drag her off immediately, but sang with her for a long time before dragging her away”). (53)

In this passage from Tolstoy, opera is approached from a perspective that exposes the absurdity of its conventions, incongruous with its status as high art. In a final note on defamiliarization, Lodge concludes that it is synonymous with “originality,” since what we mean “when we say that a book is ‘original’” is not, “usually, that the writer has invented something without precedent, but that she has made us ‘perceive’ what we already, in a conceptual sense, ‘know,’ by deviating from the conventional, habitual ways of representing reality” (55).

When McKay’s humour defamiliarizes human habits and habitation, in some way revealing their absurdity, it exhibits apokatastatic desire; that is, “it is intimate and outlandish; it arrives at strange satisfactions that come into view only partly along the way that desire picks out, desire’s meanderings to these [satisfactions] seemingly a matter of war, loss and the disappointment of others” (Lilburn, *Living* 72). Christopher Levenson comments on “McKay’s free-ranging gift for metaphor—the kinds of bizarre

analogy that [McKay] pulls off time and again—that conveys to the reader a sense of liberation about language itself: one is caught up in the fascination of entering a quirky, original mind at work” (51). Such critical commentary stacks well with the outlandishness of apokatastatic desire. Furthermore, satisfaction in humour that deflates our pretensions to greatness displaces other satisfactions derived from feeling great. Finally, in deflating human pretensions to greatness, humour expresses skepticism about the potentiality of those pretensions; they are hopeless, it urges.

III. Humour and Activism

Humour can have damaging effects when the topic in question seems to require serious treatment. At worst, humour denies a topic’s severity. Implied prohibitions among conscientious people on joking about certain topics suggest as much. McKay is hardly in danger of such offense through his use of humour, but his poetic humour must fall somewhere along a continuum of problematic and unproblematic humour. McKay’s humour does deal with topics that inspire hopelessness (death and irreversible appropriation of the other-than-human, for example), so it is worth locating McKay on this continuum.

Consider a meme that shows an image of baby seals at a dance club and reads, “Stop clubbing, baby seals.” A subtext under the title reads “Once again, punctuation makes all the difference” (presidential). The meme works its humour on a variety of levels. It endears with the inherent cuteness of the little animals and uses the absurdity of the setting to achieve part of its humour. The punned message is inessential to the

humour, and the potential for the underlying concern of the message is lost. On the other hand, the humour here arises from the pun, a subversion of the activist slogan, “stop clubbing baby seals.” This is turned into an absurdist slogan about stopping seals from dancing at a club; the transformation, nominally supposed to underscore a point about the semantics of comma use, simultaneously draws attention to seal hunting in Canada’s north (assuming one is already aware of the practice).

The humour here, however, distracts from the severity of the source material, even as the joke references that source material. On a page featuring a short news clip entitled “Canada’s Shame,” the animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) reports that

Each year, the Canadian government gives hunters the green light to bludgeon to death hundreds of thousands of baby harp seals. . . . The *Christian Science Monitor* wrote [of the hunt]: “The few terrified survivors, left to crawl through the carnage. The shouted obscenities and threats from the sealers, gunfire cracking ominously in the distance. The pitiful cries of the pups; the repellent thuds of clubs raining down on soft skulls. Sealers’ laughter echoing across the ice floes.” (“Canadian Seal Slaughter”)

Suddenly, if only for a few a moments, the meme might seem less funny, and the semantics of comma use utterly superfluous. Of course, environmentalists, like feminists and other activists, often face the charge of humourlessness. This, too, makes McKay’s nature poetry an uneasy fit in the ethos of environmentalism. His humour, though, is distinct from that variety of humour that trivializes environmental issues. McKay is concerned with many of the same issues that environmentalists are concerned with, but

his approach resists the despair implicated in environmentalist's sorrow: the disappointment and the demands for redress are absent.

It is worth reflecting a little further on the dynamics of humour at play in the meme before returning to McKay's poetry. The humour of the meme is not so remote from PETA's report and rhetoric. Meme's are inherently meta-humorous, since they rely on their audience's familiarity with an image, phrase, or sentiment. The use of cuteness, the call for boycott, and the form of the protest slogan ("Stop *x*") are parodied here as elements of a familiar activist trope. The cultural dispersion of the activist message creates this familiarity, which in turn enables the message's suppression. Insofar as the meme is funny, the alarmist rhetoric of activists is ineffective, even counterproductive.³⁴

The meme's humour is damaging if one considers the interests of baby seals (minimally their interest in not being clubbed to death) to be a matter of morality. Certainly prominent thinkers such as Peter Singer, who argues that the logical extension of minority rights movements is animal rights, would consider it so ("All Animals Are Equal"). Even avid hunters and ethicists such as Aldo Leopold, who might disagree with animal rights movements, and considering be inclined to foreground the well-being of biotic systems over individuals,³⁵ would consider the seal hunt, and thus the joke, a moral affront ("The Land Ethic").

³⁴ To admit this is to note other avenues of attention to the other-than-human should be pursued, rather than to say that activists should quit their efforts.

³⁵ In ethical debates, animal rights activists and environmentalists are sometimes at odds, as it is arguable in the best interest of biotic systems for individual animals to come to harm. For more on this see Sagoff.

The relationship between the meme and activist discourse, though, is fraught; in this case the prevalence of the source material, PETA's rhetoric and message, actually sets the conditions for the meme's existence and success, moral overload and desensitization. The urgency of the message "stop clubbing baby seals" results in Žižek's "false sense of urgency" that is easy to exploit. In terms of what I have described as sympathy overload, the overwhelming sense of sympathy evoked by the harrowing descriptions that boycott ads use—complete with the enthymematic and accusatory form of PETA's rhetoric: for example, "*anyone* wearing the fur of minks, rabbits, foxes, or any other kind of animal *is responsible* for creating a demand for fur, which pushes Canadian hunters to club more seals each year (emphasis added; "Canadian Seal Slaughter")—disarms the ads' audience and obstructs deeper consideration of the issue. Additionally, PETA, in its petition-signing and donation calls cultivates pseudo-sensitivity, where the systemic problem can be superficially alleviated: the felt disconnect between the human and the other-than-human that seal clubbing might arouse. Donate: you'll feel better. Sign a petition: you're doing your part.

Again, my claim here is not that people should stop signing petitions or making donations, but that activism focuses on "subjective violence," the nasty in-your-face kind that is a superficial symptom of deeper problems. Treatment of the issue that encourages sympathy overload and a response of pseudo-sensitivity amount to surface level treatment and understanding. With the understanding that deeper solutions are not readily available—ideological change is not something one can easily set a program of action for—the question of what to do as an activist is one that can only be answered by an activist with despair, disappointment and a sense of the injustice of it all. The sympathy

overload too commonly associated with PETA's condemnation, though, results in the moral overload that allows it to be funny, which is to say trivialized. The problem of systemic violence remains.

Humour, then, might not only suppress the importance of its subject, but such suppression might be a precondition of the humour. On the other hand, serious discourse can be grave to the point of counterproductivity. Both humour and gravity potentially result in their own, related forms of a-sensitivity. Envisioning the humours and serious modes of engagement with a topic at either end of a spectrum, I'm imagining that there is a golden mean located somewhere between suppressing a topic's seriousness with humour, and losing its gravity to sympathy overload or moral overload, pseudo-sensitivity or desensitivity. Necessarily a melding of opposites, this mean might be thought of as sincerity in conversation with mild distraction. In McKay's work, it means approaching topics without attaching urgent moral imperatives to them, opting instead to encourage a sense of humility.

In contraposition to the effect of humour in the meme, there are positive effects of humour to consider. To laugh is to be entertained, so humour has a plain appeal; this appeal is no doubt part of the reason that McKay is held in some esteem among Canadian poets (and readers). The most obviously positive aspect of humour for consideration of an ecological topic is the potential to enjoy that topic. We are, perhaps, endeared to both sparrows and Blackburnian warblers when McKay comments on and extends Leonard Cohen's identification of sparrow bellies with a woman's "small breasts" in "Beneath my Hands." McKay's poem "'The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows,'" the title of which

is a variation on a line from the first stanza of Cohen's poem,³⁶ is worth repeating here in full:

Some things can't be praised enough, among them
 breasts and birds
 who have cohabitated so long in metaphor
 most folks think of them as married.
 Not only that, but
 when you slide your shirt (the striped one) off
 the inside of my head is lined with down
 like a Blackburnian warbler's nest,
 the exterior of which is often rough and twiggy
 in appearance.
 And as the shirt snags, hesitates, and then
 lets go, I know exactly why he warbles as he does,
 which is zip zip zip zip zeee
 chickety chickety chickety chick.
 The man who wrote "twin alabaster mounds"
 should have spent more time outdoors
 instead of browsing in that musty old museum where
 he pissed away his youth. (25)

³⁶ The line in Cohen is from *The Spice-Box of Earth* reads the "the *upturned* bellies of fallen breathing sparrows" (emphasis mine).

The use of humour here—the birder’s goofily amorous “zip zip zip zip zee / chickety chickety chickety chick,” to mention one aspect—complements another oft-noted aspect of McKay’s work, his birder’s eye and ear;³⁷ in critical parlance, his sensitivity to the “other.” I will consider this attention to the other in more detail later; for now note the close attention to the nest and song of the Blackburnian warbler, the other-than-human, that fixes through humour a rudimentary method of ornithological identification in the reader’s mind. The quirkiness of the metaphor—man confronted with breasts is bird-brained³⁸—enhances the appeal of ornithology by making bird-study sensual while also giving an elementary lesson on the characteristics of Blackburnian warblers’ nests and song.

McKay’s humour, then, allows his poetry to fulfil Sir Philip Sidney’s ideal of the function of poetry “to instruct and delight” (25). Associatively linking birds to the sensual, McKay encourages a variety of apokatastatic learning that is in line with the whimsical path of desire, encouraging the reader to become imaginatively intimate with the unsuspected ways that the human and the avian might overlap by conflating the experiences of the avian and the human; deflating the speaker’s intelligence in the poem, defamiliarization of the man’s brain works in typical McKavian fashion to “bridge ideological gaps between humans and nonhuman” (Mason 29). Additionally, the focus

³⁷ Travis Mason discusses “The extent to which McKay attends to specific birds in the field” (7) with reference to another poet, John Clare; Clare and McKay share “intense engagement with the natural world, ... respect for the local environment as an autonomous realm” (McKusick qtd in Mason 9).

³⁸ John Utton points out in his short review of McKay that the title of the collection from which this poem comes, *Birding, or Desire*, uses “birding” in its literal sense, “the term of bird-watching, [but it] also suggests the state of *being* a bird” (36).

on firsthand experience is emphasized, again through humour, in the derision the speaker feels toward the man who wrote “twin alabaster mounds.” For McKay, like Lilburn, the “strange satisfactions . . . along the way that desire picks out” (Lilburn *Living* 72) are in no small part experiential.

As the human inevitably fails in pursuit of apokatastatic desire, McKay does not take the poem’s conflation seriously. Rather, in his wayward attempt to understand the connection between avian and the human through metaphor, he consciously takes aim at wilderness, which he inevitably misses. Travis Mason identifies the dynamics of metaphor, wilderness, and poetry, as integral to McKay’s poetics (36). For McKay, metaphor is “the place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of re-presenting the world” (*Vis* 85); wilderness is “the placeless place beyond the mind’s appropriations” (87); and “a poem, or poem-in-waiting, contemplates what language can’t do: then it does something with language—in homage, or grief, or anger, or praise” (87). According to Mason, “each [of these words], newly understood, enables engagement with the world that neither recapitulates nor reaffirms a colonial relation to the world through language” (36). The metaphor, using humour to deflate its pretensions to accuracy, is a penitential grasp at wilderness through poetry; at the same time it is a reminder of the residual wilderness of language, which poetry via metaphor is able to express. McKay writes that there is a claim to be made for

the sheer muscle required to speak a lie in the interests of truth, and leap between two distant regions of experience. One metaphor for the excitement of metaphors is to say that they are entry points where

wilderness re-invades language, the place where words put their authority at risk ... Their very excess points to a world beyond language. (*Vis* 85)

Humour becomes an ideal penththic mode of the lyric, as its failure to apprehend the other-than-human other is exactly what provides a sense of that other. The hopeless task of representation has purpose here. The value of this attempt lies in the humbling effect it has on the self-conscious language-user. This model of understanding the other-than-human plays with but resists the impulse to systematize knowledge of the other-than-human, and because of this “The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows” ends up conveying as much about the clumsiness of the impulse to know as it conveys about birds or sensual desire. This humbling of the human is a token apokatastatic desire, read in McKay’s terms as a place of human evenness with the more-than-human, or a sense of being only “beings among beings,” as he would have it (*The Shell* 91).

As it humbles the speaker, the poem presents an unsurprising divergence from traditional lyric poetry. The humour in “The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows” is also achieved in the poem through implicit contrast with the traditional orientation of the lyric (not to mention Cohen’s earnest address to a lover). Our bird-brained speaker is in a state of mind opposite to Sidney in his *Astrophil and Stella*. Sidney writes, longing for his Stella, and torn between the drives of virtue and love, “Well, Love, since this demur our suit doth stay, / Let Virtue have that Stella’s self; yet, thus, / That Virtue but that body grant us” (“Sonnet 52” 12-4). Sidney articulates an inner tension, working the sonnet form with the best of them, striving turn upon turn in the poem to present the conflict of drives. In just these final lines, the speaker quiet’s Love, which desires “Her eyes, her

lips, her all” (3), and quickly rescinds this quieting, aligning himself with the sensual impulses of Love once more in the final line: “that body grant us” (14).

McKay’s poem urges that all of this is a little bit too articulate, though. Whereas the polish of Sidney’s verse is designed to communicate the conflict of his longing, longing confounds speech for McKay. It is, for him, “A radical unwinding of the heart. e.g. / an angel / calling his dog” (“Longing” 21). I imagine the angel calling his earth-bound dog, the vocal expression failing on a metaphysical level. Longing prompts a response from the one who longs, and poetic longing here is essentially penthic—Auden would characterize the response as one with “the passion of awe” (Zwicky, *Auden* 14), belonging to the pre-linguistic primary imagination, which functions essentially like Freudian primary process. The response is futile not only in terms of unrequited love, but more fundamentally in terms of something that language fails at. That is, McKay’s longing is apokatastatic, foregrounding the limits of language and human knowledge.

In Sidney’s poem, on the other hand, sensual longing is too articulate to be authentic: it is difficult to imagine Sidney in the throes of orgasm crying out, “Virtue Awake! Beauty but beauty is; I may, I must, I can, I will, I do” (“Sonnet 47” 10-1). Perhaps, something of McKay’s “zip zip zip zip zee, chickety chickety chickety chick” comes closer. Articulation, McKay’s poem urges, is in no way an able substitute for experience, even while one is moved to express. Thus, the poem grasps penthically to characterize experience.

In sum, one of the functions of McKay’s humour in “The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows” is to fix an emphasis on experiential learning with humorous treatment of it. Distinctive in this learning, though, is that the poem takes penthic form,

fixing the essential wilderness of experience that “elude[s] the mind’s appropriations” (McKay *Vis* 21). Moreover, it is explicitly set against strict book learning, as emblemized by the “musty old museum.” As in *Expressway*, a less certain form of inquiry is encouraged here, resisting the urge to tally, classify, and categorize. McKay is careful not to be anti-analytic, as he discusses the usefulness of field guides and other systematized aids in understanding the other-than-human; the suggestion, rather, is that there is more to understanding than taxonomy. McKay engages with the other-than-human in way that deflates human pretensions to knowledge, cultivating a respect for the other-than-human through his use of humour.

IV. Death and Appropriation

In “Meditation on Shovels,” defamiliarization happens at an existential level. The poem takes an instance of what McKay terms “matériel” and inverts the power dynamic of the human to other-than-human relationship. This move to defamiliarize the relationship between the human and the other-than-human is a common element of McKay’s poetics, interested as he claims to be “in the possibilities for reverse flow in a relationship that has been so thoroughly one-way” (*Deactivated* 18). Matériel, in McKay’s extension of the term,³⁹ refers to “one pole of our relations with material existence” (McKay, *Vis* 20), specifically in terms of a “second-order appropriation” of material existence. The first order is “the making of [a] tool, or the address to things in

³⁹ McKay notes that the term standardly means “military equipment” or “any equipment owned by an institution” (*Vis* 20).

the mode of utility” (20). A tool becomes matériel with “the colonization of its death” or “a denial of death altogether, as in the case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition” (20). Taxidermy is, perhaps, an example of both, as the stuffed animal’s death becomes an object of aesthetic admiration through the denial of its death, its “return to the elements” (20). When he defines the term McKay is specifically concerned with the display of a dead raven: “Shooting the raven was one thing: we all know, each of us, that sinister delight in casual brutality and long-distance death,” he writes, but “Displaying it was another – controlling its death, as well as taking its life. Displaying it declares that appropriation is total” (19). In its death the raven becomes a symbol of the imbalanced power relationship between humans and the other-than-human world.

Abstracting from McKay’s discussion, I understand matérielization as material mastery over a thing through appropriation of its death, specifically a mastery advertised by making this death a symbol of mastery. McKay writes in a section of his long poem “Matériel,” entitled “Fates Worse than Death,” that

. . . Atrocity is dead ones
 locked in sense, forbidden
 to return to dust, but scribbled in it
 so that everyone – the gods,
 the gods before the gods, the enemy, the absent mother
 must read what it is like to live out exile on earth
 without it, to be without recesses, place. (40)

The poem is a description of Achilles dragging Hektor's body around Troy, rendering it an example of *matériel* by playing to an audience: "Watch, / he says," while "drag[ging] the body that cannot stop being Hektor," the way a stuffed coyote, say, cannot stop being a coyote, "watch / this" (40). Making symbols of the dead is a key element of *matériel* that extends it beyond mere ownership or appropriation.

Matérielization is the capitalist activity *par excellence*, but it is a strange one. Where the constant turnover of product is a priority in a thriving free market economy, the denial of something's decomposition is not generally lucrative. *Matérielization* enters capitalism not as a money-maker, but rather as a corollary of the appropriative attitude that sees opportunity for use in everything. It is an activity that gets to "the very nature of capitalism at its purest, the logic of individualist competition, or ruthless self-assertion, generated by capitalist dynamics" (Žižek 96). Two qualities come to the fore as they relate to *matériel*, individualism, which implies a hermetic position relative to the other-than-human, and "ruthless self-assertion," which implies the appropriative attitude at its most extreme. An instructive example that inspires the poem "Matériel," "where [McKay looks] at this military base as land that had become 'matériel.' They just bombed it and bombed it, so it'll never be unchemicaled; it'll never be a pseudo-war site. We deny it the capacity to die" ("The Appropriate" 175). Here, the exercise of strength that is modern war becomes an indelible marker of human power, and its prerequisite is a sensitivity to the other-than-human and the appropriation of its death. There is something of helplessness and hopelessness in after-the-fact reflection on land permanently tainted. There is a palpable confluence of military and economic excess and despair in the notion of *matériel*.

“Meditation on Shovels,” however, uses humour to defamiliarize matériel and offer a foil to the anthropocentrism that posits a one way power-relationship in its appropriative acts. In the poem the banal is humorously intensified by the felt strain of the human body using a shovel to dig a hole, but it is also elevated as it becomes matériel. The poem is concerned with symbology in connection to shovels: “[I]n the Book of Symbols, after Shoes / (Van Gogh, Heidegger, and Cinderella),” the poem reminds us, “they do not appear” (47). I read this poem as offering up shovels—tools that are usually dead trees fitted with a bit of metal—as symbols and exploring their significance as such. The shovel is a tree-made-tool: first-order appropriation by means of removing the wood “from autonomous existence and conscript[ing it] as [a servant]” (*Vis* 20). By juxtaposing it with shoes, a banal item that *does* appear in the book of symbols, and following the metaphor of the shovel as an arrow “patiently pointing down” (“Meditation” 47), the poem offers shovels up for consideration as symbols, and thus ponders an understated second order appropriation; the denial of their return to the elements is emphasized by the implication that they outlive the human, that they point to the grave yet remain standing upon it. That is, the shovels tend not to dig holes that they themselves will end up occupying.

The poem, then, considers the effect of rendering shovels as matériel as a corollary to a global capitalist practice linked to the military industrial complex, both of which are also implicated in the matérielization of the land. Whether or not we should actually consider them so is another matter; given the poem’s status as a meditation, we might consider it a humorous thought experiment, rather than an empirical claim on their

status.⁴⁰ Augmenting the consideration of their symbology, the lyric is concerned with the shovel's point of view. We can read this point of view two ways. First, the poem considers not what the shovels are to humans, but what humans are to shovels: "How well they love us," the poem begins, "our grunts and curses are their music," and later they are "waiting for you to get back to work" (47) as crew bosses might. On this reading the power inversion is clear. We might also read "Meditation on Shovels" as a poem about what shovels are to shovels. They would then be emblemized as the perfect matériel, eager to do their work, unmiffed by their repurposing. This would present them as fully appropriated as tools, devoid of the other-than-humanness that constitutes "wilderness" in McKay's sense, "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (*Vis* 21). This reading lessens the power-inversion somewhat, reminding us that for shovels to do the work they seem so eager to get at, they require human hands. If they are figured as crew bosses, they are still dependent on hands to complete their tasks.

Yet, even as the shovels are evacuated of wilderness, the power relation between the human and matériel remains inverted: they still love our curses, inflicted with "rage for immortality" (*Vis* 20), as McKay writes that matériel is; they yet serve as symbols (if symbols they are) of our imminent mortality. The absurdity of the shovel's perspective is another source of humour, but the privileging of the tool's perspective underscores how

⁴⁰ It is worth noting that matériel is not only a category of things that should inspire dread. More in line with consideration of shovels without the connotations of death, in McKay's "Thingamajig's," where he talks about the process of objectification, after which "[w]e mourn the lost thing, even as we pursue the inescapable human work of objectification" (56). For example, the speaker waxes nostalgic about his "Now retired, four-fifths fetishized" aspen walking stick modified with duct tape and representing "the brotherhood of sticks and bones" (57). A fuller comparison of the shovel on the walking stick lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but the diversity of ways of approaching matériel is importance to notice.

matérialization does not present a one-way power relation. Again, fully attentive to the felt strain of digging, the poem has the shovels “(stab) / dig a fucking hole for you” (47), the pun on “stab” anticipating a funeral. Shovels symbolize the strain of human tools and their relation to both the death of humans and the death inflicted by humans, the “disembodied backbones” of the trees that make the handles “humming / patiently pointing down” (47). Symbolizing the dead tree that is the shovel’s handle, here, does not amount to matérialization in the same way that McKay’s dead raven-as-symbol does, since there is a reverse flow of power as the result of matérialization. The attempt to appropriate the shovel is subverted by the shovel’s relation to human mortality. Rather, in the process of symbolizing shovels, the poem suggests the power of human tools over humans, even in death. Through humour, shovels, and by extension the symbolic power implied by matériel of man over the other-than-human, are deflated.

In “Meditation on Shovels” McKay takes a topic, matériel, that he readily characterizes in ways that evoke despair in the face of ecological catastrophe, and defamiliarizes it through humour. The effect is not to provide palpable resistance to capitalism’s excesses, here, but rather to humble the human by revealing human interrelationships with the other-than-human, even after matérialization. This approach rejects hermetic positioning that is required to produce matériel, suggesting how even in utter appropriation matériel has a complex relationship with the human. The mode of humour that McKay uses to do this in “Meditation on Shovels,” shifting the perspective of the poem to the shovels themselves, has the effect of unsettling human confidence in our dominance and appropriation.

Chapter 4: Shades of Penthos and Despair

“How do you own the world? How do you own disorder?”

—System of a Down, “Toxicity”

I. Introduction

I have examined the ambivalence of lyric penthos in Sina Queyras’s *Expressway*, and in terms of its sideways glances at environmental issues through humour in Don McKay’s work. I now further develop the notions of penthos and apokatastatic desire as they relate to activism and capitalism in contemporary Canadian poetry. Two authors’ works, Rita Wong’s 2007 collection *forage* and Sharon Thesen’s 2006 collection *The Good Bacteria*, develop lyric penthos by exemplifying very different relationships with activism; that is, in Wong’s work lyric penthos functions in conjunction with both despairing and activist impulses, whereas in Thesen’s work it takes on a self-destructive drive. I focus my analyses through related environmental issues that each poet addresses, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and super-bugs, respectively.

II. GMOs and forage

The principle behind GMOs is the insertion of the genetic material of one organism into the genetic makeup of an organism of another species, usually to enhance the latter in some way by producing a new trait in it. A new gene is inserted, producing

proteins that are otherwise absent, which results in the formation of new traits.

Commonly in agri-biz, genes are inserted to create proteins that “kill insects,” and these are inserted “along with an antibiotic resistance gene” (Grignon). According to Environment Canada, “Canada is the third largest producer of genetically modified organisms . . . in the world.” The David Suzuki Foundation provides a concise history of GMOs in Canada:

The first GMO crop (the Flavr Savr tomato) was approved by the FDA in 1994. Since then, [genetically engineered] varieties of corn, soya, sugar beets and canola have become common local crops in Canada. In addition to locally produced crops, GE varieties of cottonseed oil, papaya, squash and milk products are imported from the USA into Canada. In a mere 20 years, GMO ingredients have made their way into most of the processed foods available on Canadian grocery shelves. (David Suzuki Foundation, “Understanding”)

Companies that develop GMOs have been so successful that GMOs are now standard items on grocery store shelves across Canada.

There are compelling reasons for activists to protest against GMOs as they are being developed. Although the biotech industry, especially the company that “owns about 86% of GMO seeds sown globally, Monsanto” (David Suzuki Foundation, “Understanding”), make claims for the safety of GMOs, many scientists are not convinced.⁴¹ Dr. Theirry Vrain, “a former soil biologist and genetic scientist who worked

⁴¹ For discussion of other multi-national companies in agri-biz, and the similarities in their practices see Bowring.

for Agriculture Canada, and was the designated spokesperson to assure the public of the safety of GMO crops” (Grignon), has recently come forward with worries about GMOs. He explains that “every single engineered plant on the planet today has [an] antibiotic resistance gene in it. That gene is in the genome, it’s in the roots, it’s in the soil, and [it] can be picked up by the bacteria in the soil” (Grignon).⁴² The worry about bacteria picking up antibiotic resistance is related to the rise of antibiotic resistant bacteria; I will explore this more detail when discussing Thesen’s work. There is also the likelihood of creating “serious problems for farmers, including herbicide-tolerant ‘superweeds’, compromised soil quality and increased disease susceptibility in crops” (Antoniou, Robinson, and Fagan 8).⁴³ Finally, crowning the tradition of planned obsolescence in the capitalist marketplace, GMOs are made with “terminator technology, in which the seed of pollen [of a plant] becomes infertile” (Grignon). Vrain reports that a major worry is that infertility could spread: “we’re talking famine here”⁴⁴ (qtd. in Grignon). There is much to worry about here.

GMOs have a lucrative business model, designed to create monopoly and oligopoly. GMO companies do not operate on a principle of altruism. Pesticide- and herbicide-resistant GMOs require specialized pesticides and herbicides, but the

⁴² Vrain indicates that this changes soil composition and that antibiotic resistant genes leech into water systems as well (Grignon).

⁴³ Among other possible problems with GMOs are toxicity, associated increases in pesticide use, lack of adequate regulation, and ecosystem disruption (Antoniou, Robinson, and Fagan 8).

⁴⁴ There is irony here, since one of the claims made by supporters of GMOs is that they can be bred to have heightened drought resistance. The actual potential for GMOs to be effectively drought resistance is an issue of some contention (Antoniou, Robinson, and Fagan 83, 100).

“companies that patent GMO seeds are the same companies that develop and patent the pesticides and herbicides to which the unique seeds are resistant” (David Suzuki Foundation, “Understanding”). Monsanto’s brand of these pesticides and herbicides is called “Roundup” and farmers who buy seeds from Monsanto must also buy roundup from Monsanto. In addition to increased use of Roundup over time due to increasing insect and weed immunity, farmers “can’t plant normal seeds for at least seven years after they’ve planted GMO and sprayed heavily with Roundup. The soils become toxic. So [farmers] are more or less enslaved in this new kind of ‘serfdom’” (Engdahl).⁴⁵ Finn Bowring explains this serfdom that

The consolidation of power and concentration of ownership in the life-sciences industry, and the concomitant growth of food chain monopolies, means that many farmers in the industrialised world are being forced into a position of what has been called ‘bioserfdom’, as control over farm-level management and decision-making—which crops to grow, which inputs to use, which buyers to sell to—is usurped by the global economic machine of the multinational, who rapidly remove their profits from circulation in rural communities and transfer them to anonymous shareholders and investors. (111)

Such consolidation has

⁴⁵ This process of toxifying the land through industry and for purposes inexorably entangled with capital gains should remind us of McKay’s matériel, as the land is appropriated in its death and becomes a lasting symbol of the effect of technology and capitalism on the land.

historically been accomplished in three ways: biologically, by making plants produce sterile or agronomically deficient seeds (thus eliminating the farmer as competitor); politically, by persuading government-funded plant breeding research to withdraw from potentially profitable markets for finished plant varieties and limit themselves to germplasm evaluation and maintenance (thus eliminating the government as competitor); and juridically, by extending proprietary rights to cover plants and seeds (thus eliminating smaller firms and competitors). (117)

Notice that the methods of monopolizing are all lawful. The ideology that allows for such a monopoly is an example of systemic violence; the poverty of farmers that results from these allowances can be attributed to agri-biz companies and their actions, but they can rebut that the disadvantage of farmers is circumstantial—they have not, after all, broken the law. Also notice that this consolidation relies on the typically hermetic anthropocentrism of capitalism. The appropriation of the other-than-human at the genetic level, planned obsolescence and patented life-forms, for capital gains is not even a consideration for these companies. In capitalist ideology, of course, a life can without question be owned.

Monsanto's rebuttal is not entirely without merit. The company merely acts in the best interests of its shareholders, as per the market norm, and GMOs do theoretically have their humanist applications. The problem is more systemic than Monsanto's own actions, which is not to relieve the company of responsibility for its ills. Rather, it is important to see that capitalism "pursues its goal of profitability in blessed indifference to how its movement will affect social reality" (Žižek 12). Considering Monsanto's self-image in

relation to the harmful industrial consequences of its actions, we should keep in mind, as Marshall Berman points out, that

the trouble with capitalism is that, here as elsewhere, it destroys the human possibilities it creates. It fosters, indeed forces, self-development for everybody; but people can develop only in restricted and distorted ways. Those traits, impulses and talents that the market can use are rushed (often prematurely) into development and squeezed desperately till there is nothing left.; everything else within us, everything nonmarketable, gets draconically repressed, or withers away for lack of use, or never has a chance to come to life at all. (96)

Monsanto has a good idea, but pursues it with only maximal profit in mind—this mentality and the unavoidability of it in the global capitalist economic system is the deeper violence of the company’s actions. This is to say that the root of the problem here is a way of thinking and not merely the maleficent actions of a corporation; in relation to the other-than-human (and a good deal of humans too), the problem is an ideology that is anthropocentrically hermetic.

Attempting to circumvent and resist this ideology is one of Rita Wong’s primary concerns in *forage*, where she focuses on capitalist practice as it relates to socio-environmental concerns. She describes *forage* as a collection of “impassioned rants against the abuses of power” (qtd. in Carey para. 2). These rants, directed at the likes of Monsanto, are sometimes condemnations of specific industrial and governmental entities, and to this extent they are activist rants. On the other hand, as Christine Kim notices, “[b]y scrutinizing byproducts of the global economy such as genetically engineered food,

overfilled garbage dumps and exploitative ... practices, the speaker underscores the need to examine different kinds of violence and complicity” (167); the poems are also inflected with a sense of the systemic violence reflected in ideology, resulting in reservations about their own political capabilities. Not only is an ideological shift that would substantively change the marketplace unplannable, though, it would involve a “staggeringly complex reorganization of the whole fabric of life” (Berman 83). As the poems implicitly acknowledge that ideology is an intractable problem, they are in some senses penthic, and Wong’s account of the lack of political calls to action in her work supports this reading: she does “not see literature as an ‘instrument’ toward some larger hope for humanity, but rather that the current ecological crisis in which we find ourselves invites creative responses. It calls forth from us resources and knowledges we may not have known we had” (“Watersheds”). Two responses that are identifiable in *forage* are despair and penthos, although only the latter is creative.

Employing tirades against power, Wong’s poetry also evokes a sense of disappointment and the need for redress: despair. Despair and activism blend in her poem “susurrus.” The monotony of time passing without change is expressed in the repetition of the phrase “the days passed” beginning each of the first 18 lines of the poem, and the poem’s ending with three lines of only “the days.” The lines “in fear & uncertainty,” “like constipation” (70), “in endless lists of tasks to do,” and in ritualistic meetings (71), and the implication of *ad infinitum* given by the last three lines’ repetition, smack of despair. In its sense of long-term monotony, there is also a sense of injustice or longing for things to be different in this poem. At the same time, the title of the poem, a reference to low murmuring sounds, suggests that this poem represents what happens in political

susurrus; that is, if each day is passed in politically passive routine, monotony and despair ensue: despair in Kierkegaard's sense of letting "one's life depend on conditions outside one's control" (McDonald). In this reading, monotony and despair appear as the result of quietude: hence, *make noise*, the poem insists. A contrast to the rants of the rest of the collection that foregrounds the consequences of complacency, the poem carries an activist message. This, I think, is the usual relationship between despair and activism: the former motivates the latter.

Wong also works with a sense of time in a self-consciously penthic mode in the collection by encouraging meditative reflection on language. Christine Kim parses *forage* in relation to the utopic: "[i]nstead of striving to move beyond and towards a utopic future, Wong's poems encourage the reader to dwell in the present moment and engage with the residue of the past" (168). The importance of this is that it intensifies the affect of our experience of the present to "limber up our thinking" (Zournazi qtd. in Kim 168), letting

us access more of our potential at each step, [having] more of it actually available. Having more potentials available intensifies our life. We're not enslaved by our situations. . . . Our degree of freedom at any one time corresponds to how much of our experiential 'depth' we can access towards a next step – how intensely we are living and moving. (Kim 168)

Even if we accept Kim's argument that Wong's poetics slows the reader and diverges from utopic impulses, this intensification of experience is not straightforwardly politically useful; it encourages a meditative state that does not require a telos in its "access towards the next step." When such meditation undermines the ways that language structures experience, as it does in *forage*, it is apokatastatic. This is because in undermining the

linearity of language, the lyric here also undermines stability of language as a defining feature of human thought, encouraging an identification between the (supposedly) rational and linguistic human and the (supposedly) irrational and non-linguistic other. At the same time such undermining has a sense of political futility: it is not likely to effect substantive change.

Second, Wong is concerned with mutations of language that undermine standard turns of phrase that shape human understanding. Her diction is resonant; the aural quality of the lyric functions associatively. Her poem “language (in)habits” suggests the ways that language forms and directs thought—habits of language inhabit us, and our language is in, formed by, our habits. The relationship between habit and language mutually reinforces certain ways of thinking and being. “[S]ound becomes wound,” she writes, “bodies slowing & speeding up regardless of what the signal tells us” (34). Her play with language tries to free us from linguistic habits that inhabit our experience of the world. Picking up on this play with language, Aaron Giovannone claims that “Wong alters the phonic and graphic material of words and phrases to undermine their usual signification and the ideologies forming them” (222). Sound is able to open affective avenues of understanding, and Wong’s playful language is liberating; it functions against common aural signals. This play with language is pentic; on a general level it signifies a breakdown in language, playing associatively and contrapuntally with resonant sound so that it engages Freudian Primary Process in the way that Zwicky specifies that the lyric does—understanding issues through this sort of word play reveals a breakdown of language, one of humanity’s defining characteristics, and enacts the stripping of the human that is the goal of apokatastatic desire. At the same time, the poem’s expression

and articulation through language embrace the hopelessness of imagining the human getting beyond language. This lyric is apokatastatic because it seeks to reveal breaks in human orientations to the world, and it is penthic because it embraces its failure to move beyond the human.

Wong's "canola queasy" deals with capitalism and agri-biz monopolies partly by working with language to defamiliarize capitalist rhetoric—it thus works apokatastatically. "[V]ulture capital," a play on 'venture capitalism,' "hovers over dinner tables" (36). This play on words reverses the conception of Monsanto as food provider and figures it as a scavenger looking to steal it instead, as it "covers hospitals [in] a sorrowful shade of canola, what gradient decline in the stuck market" (36). The venture, which involves risk for profit, is displaced with the vulture, which eats only easy prey. Another play on the aural quality of words here, the stock market becomes a "stuck market," reversing the identification of progress with a growing stock market, replacing growth with stagnation.

These lines identify both the subjective and objective perpetrators of violence, in Žižek's terms; that is, they critique not only Monsanto, but the market itself, stuck in its capitalist mode of the reduction of everything to capital. This pointed critique, as directed at Monsanto, seems to have an activist motivation. However, the way that it is made is such that the critique extends to ways that language inhabits the human more generally. That is, the way the poem makes its critique by pointing to and trying to dismantle ideology as it manifests itself in terminology is apokatastatic, since it suggests humanity freed from the human constructs of language more generally; this, of course, is an unattainable suggestion and self-consciously futile insofar as it encourages apokatastasis since it is expressed through language. Thus, although motivated by an

activist impulse to encourage us to abandon capitalism, perhaps, the critique extends to encourage us to abandon the defining characteristics of humanity, and is thus made through lyric penthos.

When the scope of the critique does not extend so far, however, it involves despair rather than activism. Surrounding the poem like a picture frame, a quotation is written out describing an incident in which Monsanto pulled “two varieties of genetically engineered canola seeds” because of “an unexpected gene” (36). The frame pays close attention to scientific critiques of the unpredictable effects of genetic modification (Antoniou, Robinson, and Fagan 15). Paying equally close attention to sociological aspect of Monsanto’s business ethic, the poem is dedicated to Percy Schmeiser, who was “harassed and sued by Monsanto because genetically engineered canola blew into his fields” (“Wong, Canola Queasy” 36).⁴⁶ This dedication is, nevertheless, a moral contrast to the frame. The lack of legal proceedings becomes conspicuous in the frame when we read the dedication, and the point here is one about injustice and redress. Hence, “false prophets”—another pun, which aligns the profits of capitalism with ideology that should be scrutinized—“hawk oily platitudes in rapacity as they engineer despair” (36). The despair here culminates in pointed questions: “how to converse with the willfully profitable stuck in / their monetary monologue? head on collisions create more / energy but who gets obliterated?” (36). Wong poses a dichotomy: on the one hand, conversation with corporations is impotent unless it involves money; on the other hand, violent

⁴⁶ Kim notes that these marginalia, the frame and the dedication, remind us to pay attention to the margins more generally (172).

rebellion has unpredictable casualties. Without a way out of the dichotomy, the reader searching for an effective way to challenge Monsanto's poor practice finds despair.

Regardless, the speaker goes on to rebel in ranting fashion, voicing her dissent to the appropriative practices of capitalism and agri-biz. She blurts, "despite misgivings,"

don't shoot the messy angels with your cell-arranging blasts,

don't document their properties in order to pimp them.

the time for business-as-usual dies with the first colonial

casualty. (36)

The speaker, in schoolyard fashion—"hey bloated monstrosity" (36)—taunts the corporate monopoly. The poem is critical in its firm condemnation and characterization of Monsanto's corporate ills: suing small farmers, distributing unsafe products, vying for corporate monopoly out of a greed principle.

But is the ranting section of the poem hopeful for its critique? It is unclear to me. In emulating schoolyard taunting, the poem is self-conscious about its lack of efficacy against the bully of the market. It might annoy, but it will not effect change. And what of the speaker's misgivings in speaking out? Wong's choice of diction, "blurt," suggests a spontaneous outcry, in disappointment, against injustice. In short, even the outspoken aspect of this poem suggests a queasy despair. The poem's protest is a response to the affective sickness the speaker feels in contemplating the ills of Monsanto, rather than a protest that genuinely hopes for results. While the poem pays too much attention to systemic problems to be pseudo-sensitive, falsely urgent, it does draw near pseudo-sensitivity via sympathy overload, aligning itself with activist rhetoric.

The poem showcases the relationship between activism and despair, where the latter motivates the former. Despair is the impetus for a reactive politics, albeit politics with misgivings. However, despair seems to override activism: underlying the hope that the rants will have some efficacy here is the misgiving that they will not. In a moment of pause that momentarily shifts the tone of the rant, the speaker urges, “reclaim the long now” (36). This pause in the midst of rant is an injunction against the monotonous passing of time in “susurrus.” It is also an injunction against the capitalist system, though, as embodied by the requisite near-future oriented sense of time. The call to “reclaim the long now” is an example of what Kim identifies when she writes that *forage* “[works] to undermine the future-oriented cultural logic of globalization by working through the affective potential of the present” (168). In its misgivings about its rant, and its rejection of both the pause of susurrus and the incessant momentum of capitalism, though, the poem is ambivalent about its activism.

This ambivalence, as it does in Queyras’s *Expressway*, suggests a penthic impulse in Wong’s lyric. Mired in despair, it is an understatement to say the poem is deeply disappointed with the injustice of Monsanto’s business ethic, and the rant does sound like activism, but in the poem’s play with slippages of language, the poem starts to strip down the human habitation of language, revealing language to be a manipulable, not static, mode of understanding corporate interaction in the world. We see the venture capitalist—who makes her money by buying large shares in companies without enough money to grow quickly on their own, thereby establishing monopolies between a variety of start-up companies—as a vulture capitalist, a kind of scavenger. We also see that such a perception of investors is a matter of language or position: the fixedness of the category is

compromised and a subversive understanding arises through slippages of language. Because this subversive understanding is an admission of the constructedness of the human psyche—the way that language inhabits us—it is at once a small step toward being uninhabited by language.

This aspect of the poem is executed without misgiving; while the poem is hopelessly bound up with language, it strives to free itself from the constraints of language, trying to evade the linguistic frame that agri-biz tries to establish for itself, evoking associative thought to undermine and understand. This is not to say that Wong challenges capitalism in any substantive way—her misgivings about speech underscore her lack of faith in such an attempt. It is to say that through this hopelessness *forage* tries to reconceive problems in ways that jostle the modern human's viewpoint. In this way we see the penthic in the political; although they are separate impulses in the poem, they derive from a common source, which is language play.

III. Thesen and Superbugs

One major concern about GMOs is their connection to bacterial infection. As weeds and insects develop resistance to herbicides and pesticides, so bacteria can develop resistance to pesticides. Bacteria are far more adaptable than more complex organisms, however, being able to swap genes to acquire resistance without reproduction or contact with an antibiotic. An information sheet from the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health notes that "[i]n recent years health professionals have become alarmed by the increasing number of bacterial strains that are showing resistance to antibiotics" (The

School of Public Health). The sheet goes on to explain that “[t]here is concern that bacteria living in the guts of humans and animals could pick up an antibiotic resistance gene from a GM plant before the DNA becomes completely digested” (School of Public Health). Antibiotic resistant bacteria are, quite literally, a growing concern.

I have often thought that should human civilization crash, it would happen to humanity in much the same way as other species’ populations crash when they pass their environment’s capacity to sustain them. The usual suspects are disease, famine, predation, and habitat loss, but perhaps in the case of humans nuclear or chemical warfare looms as a distinct possibility too. With respect to societal collapse specifically caused by societies “damaging their environments,” Jared Diamond points out that “past collapses tended to follow somewhat similar courses constituting variations on a theme” (6). Among these themes, disease ranks high on the list: “[e]ventually, population decreased through starvation, war, or disease” (6). The possibility of famine is evoked in *forage*. Sharon Thesen’s collection *The Good Bacteria* is partly concerned with death, dealing with disease, specifically bacterial infection, and environmental catastrophe. The collection takes a penitential approach to the self-destructive drive that figures in modern North American civilization, using an implied rise of bacterial “super-bugs” to explore this drive. That is, not only do parts of the collection express hopelessness without regret, but some poems invite self-destruction. This is apocalyptic desire carried to its extreme: McKay asks regarding the experience of wilderness, which “carries us further than any humanism” (*The Shell* 91), “[Is] there not a further recognition waiting in this uninhabited place—that the assurance of our connection to the world, its lifetime guarantee, so to speak, lies not in

our artful inventions but in our deaths?” (91-2). *The Good Bacteria* answers, emphatically—yes.

If in Wong we can see the overlap of the penthic and activist, in Thesen we can see lyric penthos in its most hopeless manifestation, completely divorced from activism. Thesen’s comments on poetry and the inspiration she took from Robert Bringhurst’s translation of Haida myths support such a reading. Thesen writes about these translations in her correspondence with Daphne Marlatt: “[w]hat I love about the epics is the utter absence of concepts of good and evil, the way physical and visual perspectives on events are insisted upon . . . , the magical and transformational nature of life it takes for granted, and the completely unfamiliar rhetorical sense of what is important” (9). Thus, while Wong dabbles in a nexus of activism, despair, and penthos in *forage*, Thesen informs her writing with amorality, and is therefore relatively unconcerned with political activism. Later in the correspondence she solidifies this view of her work: “I don’t think my work is in any intended way ‘political,’ though I do think there’s a continuing note of protest and a sense that life is not only serious, strange, and sad, but also silly and stupid” (13). This note of protest, where present, gives Thesen’s work a sense of despair, but I read this note of protest in relation to the contradictory senses of life she specifies: serious and silly, sad and stupid. These contradictions suggest that we read protest as hopelessness here, or existential ambivalence, rather than a sense of injustice or disappointment.

Death, mourning, and cures are defamiliarized in the first poem of the collection “The Good Bacteria.” The poem is set in the environs surrounding Kamloops, BC, and there are some surreal elements, including ghosts. These ghosts are apparently tired of poems about longing and loss, “[n]o more bloody ghazals! one ghost shouted to another”

(11). The reference to ghazals⁴⁷ raises the question of what might cause such a sense of longing and loss that these ghosts are tired of it—also, why are they ghosts at all? One plausible reading of the scene sets it in the future, after catastrophe has struck, as ghosts reappear following the wholesale purging of civilization in a later section, “The Fire.”

The poem does not directly answer the questions it poses but instead moves to a meditation on penicillin, which the ghosts seem to take with each meal. Thesen writes about penicillin’s effects: “[t]he penicillin killed the good bacteria as well as the bad. / It killed all the bacteria, good and bad, like death or God” (11). In these lines, penicillin is figured as an antagonist. This is not to say that penicillin is vilified, but it is defamiliarized. Usually hailed as the cure for various bacterial infections, penicillin is an ambivalent good here, an indiscriminate agent of death, rather than a tool to facilitate life. Amidst the indiscriminate purging of bacteria, death is defamiliarized. Evoking a line from Don McKay, “death is made up entirely of ecological niches to be” (*The Shell* 93), Thesen reminds us that “death, being a matter of bacteria, is also life” (11).

This series of defamiliarizations, penicillin as death and death as an opportunity for bacterial life is suggestive of the rise of superbugs. Alexander Fleming, the man who discovered the “antibiotic effects of a mould called *Penicillium* on one of his bacterial cultures” (*The Economist*), foresaw the problem of bacterial adaptation to antibiotics. In his Nobel Lecture, “Fleming warned that ‘There is a danger that the ignorant man may

⁴⁷ A ghazal is variety of lyrical poem that was developed by Arabic poets. It “can deal with a variety of subjects. Its main themes have predominantly been love and romance – i.e., the longing for a beloved and the joys of wine, nature, and youth” (Isfahani 1). Along with the presence of ghosts, the invocation of ghazals, as an ancient form of poetry, suggests that the setting of the poem is distant. Furthermore, the ghosts rejection of ghazals suggests a lack longing for what was, joys, nature, youth, etc.

easily underdose himself and by exposing his microbes to non-lethal quantities of the drug make them resistant” (Kessler). The basic problem for contemporary society is to keep ahead of the adaptations of bacteria to antibiotics—what we use to kill bacteria gives rise to stronger bacteria. The scientific journal *Nature* glosses the severity of the problem: “[a]s a rule, high-ranking public-health officials try to avoid apocalyptic descriptors. So it was worrying to hear Thomas Frieden and Sally Davies warn of a coming health ‘nightmare’ and a ‘catastrophic threat’ within a few days of each other in March” (McKenna). I read Thesen’s positioning of penicillin in terms of death-as-bacterial-life in terms of this problematic: the use of antibiotics has a cost.

Hence an apocalyptic scene is set in the first poem, or rather a post-apocalyptic scene. Indicative of this cost, the poem’s central character, “[a] known ghost,” finds that “[h]is stomach burned when he took the penicillin” (11). Meanwhile, “[t]he trees burned all the way to the sky” (11). This repetition of burning imagery, coupled with the repetition of penicillin as an agent of death links ecological purges to bacterial purges. The device of the purge reappears later in the collection, in the sequence of poems entitled “The Fire.” The hyperbolized version of an actual fire “that destroyed over 200 homes and that raged for weeks around [Thesen’s home, Kelowna]” (Holmes 97), the sequence is darkly humorous but bleak, ending with

. . . miles of roots that smoulder
 still in molten maze
 where a bluish haze appears to mark
 the transit of ghosts and giants. (84)

Because the imagery of the penicillin and the fire are so closely associated here, I identify one with the other; more specifically, I identify the fire with the burning process that is the culturing of antibiotic resistant bacteria.

Thinking of “The Fire” in light of both the title of the collection and the mirrored diction of penicillin’s burning, “The Fire” is one possible metonym for good bacteria. In this sequence of poems a character named Mars lays waste to civilization. Understanding fire as one variety of a good bacteria depends on the how we render “good.” It is an evaluative term, but we might render it either morally or practically. A reading of “good” as an exclusively moral adjective is unlikely for a collection that begins by destabilizing images of both death and penicillin, but should we read it so the good bacteria, perhaps, stands in for penicillin itself; again, however, in the contrarian spirit of the first poem, what saves lives here, penicillin, is also what takes lives, culturing antibiotic resistant bacteria—the good is the bad. Hence, even on this unlikely reading, the term “good” is complicated.

Two other readings are more compatible with the defamiliarization we find in the first poem (and Thesen’s interest in amorality): first we might think of it as an adjective that describes performance—good like a finely tuned automobile is good. Second, we might think of “good” in a long-term sense; rejecting the very-near future-oriented sense of time that Susie O’Brien calls Corporate Time—which would consider good only relative to the goodness of some immediate state—we might think of the good bacteria as good in terms of “the emergency of the long term” (96). This deeper sense of time is in line with Thesen’s poem “Prologue” which invokes a sense of deep time:

. . . The trifling,

the nonsensical
 had a short day, relatively
 speaking, relative to history. (59)⁴⁸

Thinking of this good in terms of a deep time, the image of the fire informs that of the bacteria. Fire, like bacterial infection, is part of the ecological cycle of an ecosystem, depositing nutrients and wiping the ecological slate clean as it ravages. In this way, it functions in much the same way that good bacteria does, maintaining an ecological balance. Strengthening the identification of the fire with the good bacteria, as with bacteria the more that forest fires are suppressed the more likely it is for them to flare more severely in future, as dead wood gathers on the forest floor like a growing pile of kindling if it is not burned every so often. Hence, the good bacteria is, perhaps, good at what it does and good in terms of the long-term well-being of an ecosystem. The place of humanity in this scheme of long-term good is ominously suggested in “The Fire” when the speaker suggests, “[w]e shouldn’t be living here / anyway” (81).

The moral nihilism, the transformational, and the alienated sense of importance that Thesen attributes to her readings of Haida myths (Thesen, “masquerading” 9) appear in the “The Fire,” and contribute to the extremity of the sequence’s apokatastatic desire. The self-destructive impulse that runs throughout the sequence is accompanied by various speakers’ concerns, disproportionate to the looming catastrophe of conflagration that threatens them. Because the fire is longed for by speakers in the poem, the burning becomes an act of sheer transformation, rather than one to be lamented, and this

⁴⁸ This section, like many others, seems to be a retrospective look at modern civilization, which we might imagine here as “the nonsensical.”

transformation mimics apokatastatic desire. Comparing traditional Canadian literature on forest fires with Thesen's sequence, Holmes sets "The Fire" in opposition to a fundamental human concept of place: "Thesen's new sequence introduces troubling new elements into the classic Canadian forest fire poetic narrative, specifically, an ambivalence about the very idea of home in our ecologically fraught era" (97). Human concerns, among them the concept of home, are offered up to the blaze. I read this as an enactment of apokatastatic desire, both apocalyptically prophetic in its imagining of the human being consumed and unapologetic in its penthic absence of an ethical position on the matter.

"The Fire" is a sequence of untitled (and unnumbered) poems, each new page marking the start of a poem. Many of the poems that seem to outline human concern read as parody ("Mars / lounges among his rights / his stogie—a burning pine forest" [75]), while others read more meditatively ("[m]y arms feel unattached and threading / even the largest needle / I tremble and miss the eye [76]). I'm concerned here with three poems, a meditative one that aligns Mars's arsonist tendencies and amusement with humanity, and two that parody human attitudes toward the possibility of a bacterial purge.

The first strophe of a poem that opens, "[w]e shouldn't be living here / anyway" (81), ends by displacing humans with Mars: "Mars / is more human" (81). Mars, a roman adaptation of the Greek god Ares, is often associated with war (Gianotta 34), so the destruction of humanity by the god of war is an articulation of self-destruction. In the logic of the poem, we are at war with ourselves, and we are going to win. The second, and last, strophe briefly outlines the similarities between humans and Mars:

His attributes ours, his

accoutrements also:

pool

chariot

barbecue

wrath. (81)

The word accoutrement aligns our simple pleasures with instruments of war, giving a quirky account of the ways we are inclined to war. Mars sits beside a pool in the previous poem as a mock Hollywood producer explaining his plans of destruction to “a sycophant with an iPod” (80), so the pool setting seems to represent a penchant for spectacle, but it also conjures associations with domestic leisure (I’m thinking of the blue dots that are scattered through Toronto’s suburbs when seen from the air). The chariot conjures spectacle again, and war machines,⁴⁹ but also car culture. The barbecue is a little more sinister here, representing again domesticity, perhaps, but also consumption, burning, and fire. Mars’s ultimate characteristic is wrath, the only item in the list that is not symbolic, giving it added emphasis as an irreducible human characteristic. As Mars is both *ubermensch* and the destroyer of humankind, his destructive penchants are humanity’s destructive penchants. This, like the connection between penicillin and super-bugs, speaks of the self-destructive tendencies of the human.

Human attitudes toward such destruction are parodied in a series of poems in “The Fire.” One of the poem’s in the sequence centers on absurd domestic concern, opening with a statement of the speaker’s desire: “I want the house clean / for the fire: to the

⁴⁹ War is another prevalent theme in this section and throughout the collection.

greater / scourging I offer the lesser” (74). In this poem the urgency of domestic concerns are parodied in the context of the all-consuming blaze that is to devour the house:

Windex, floor mop,
sink stopper polished with Vim,
the whole nine yards,
the whole ball of wax. (71)

Mars appears in the poem in relation to “[t]he likelihood / of ‘life,’ what, some weird- / looking worm or germ” (74). A reference to the planet Mars as seen in a telescope,⁵⁰ Mars the pyromaniac is also aligned with the bacterial as one that consumes.

The absurdity of the speaker’s concerns in his domestic work is rationalized in terms of appeasement to Mars, as “. . . the sense of propitiation was there” (74). The only way to make sense of fixation on immediate concerns in the face of looming catastrophe is with a sense that the trivial activities are offerings, the poem urges. “Fire, here is a clean floor,” he offers, “Fire, here is an innocent cushion” (74). There is a sense of absurdity in these offerings, but the significance is greater than that, as in ancient Rome Mars also had connections to ritual sacrifices in the interests of agriculture (Gianotta 35). This affirms the reading of “the good bacteria” in the sense of the long-term good ecologically speaking: the human is purged for the sake of ecological richness in future.

⁵⁰ Holmes identifies the significance of this, partly explaining the attribution of wrath to Mars: “During the Okanagan Mountain blaze of 2003, Mars—the astronomical planet—was close to earth and was consequently huge and bright. All superstition associated with the fiery planet seemed justified. The planets seemed to be revenging Earth, and justly so, since humans have so much contempt for life in general” (100).

This sense of offerings for appeasement is heightened to the point of sheer self-destructiveness later in the sequence as the speaker yearns for the purging. “Go ahead fire,” he urges, “[d]ot with embers the patios / of citizens trying to dine *al fresco*” (79). While this poem maintains a playful tone, it turns solemn in a brief third strophe, where the speaker urges Mars on: “the exhausted and the hold-outs make / them give up” (79). The speaker’s self-destructive urge extends to the ecological as well: “imbue with your stink the fur of the cat / extinguish dwelling places” (79). The dark tone present here soon reverts to humour once again, though, as the poem ends “just go ahead, / you / and your nasty little freaky friend / the wind” (79). Mixing the comic with serious, in this poem Thesen crafts a form of parody that repeats and heightens the parody of the domestic poem. Appeasement becomes a challenge to destroy and an embrace of destruction.

Destruction here, though, unlike in the previous poem, is not only a matter of the trivialities of present concern in the face of looming disaster; rather the grim reality of the demise of “the exhausted and the hold-outs” (79) can be read as a reference to the way that a forest fire might affect those without shelter and those who try to remain alike. The social playing field is leveled in the scourge. Economics cease to matter, but so too does everything else. Again, the tone here is parodic, but rather than making light of human concern, the poem draws out a response to the speaker’s helplessness, a response that is embrace.

For all of the identification of life springing forth from death, “The Fire” does not end with poplar sprouting in the ashen soil. It ends, instead, in hopelessness, as the collection begins in a setting populated by ghosts, still taking their penicillin. Figuring

domesticity as an offering to a “scourging,” and noting the enthusiastic embrace figured as one possible response to a hopeless situation, I read these poems as enacting a variety of hopeless lyric that emphasizes the self-destructive aspect of apokatastatic desire, where the rejuvenative implications of the scourging are beyond the ken of the human. This is perhaps the most starkly violent, if playfully executed, articulation of apokatastatic desire as “a thinning” (72). If we take seriously Lilburn’s claim regarding apokatastasis that “one arrives there, if at all, less” (72), Thesen’s self-destructive poems present hopelessness as the desirable end.

Like McKay, Thesen approaches death by defamiliarizing it and by using humour to mitigate the despair that is a reasonable response to contemplation of death. Because she approaches death with absurdity and embrace, she approaches it penthically. Her Mars character and his leisurely approach to conflagration remind us that in cosmic terms the rise of humanity is a small matter; but in light of Thesen’s figure of scourging as it relates to disease, specifically antibiotic culturing of super-bugs, she also reminds us that humanity can be a force of its own destruction. This self-destructive impulse is what Thesen’s poetry, in its hopelessness asks us to contemplate. Additionally, it asks us to contemplate, amidst the hopelessness, how this might not be such a bad thing, and how the domestic concerns that preoccupy us are trivial.

In their moral nihilism and their urge to self-destruct, Thesen’s poems are anti-activist. Wong’s poems, on the other hand, show how the penthos can in the same poem be evoked alongside activism and despair. Thus, apokatastatic desire is a relatively flexible way of engaging with the problems of capitalist ideology and dynamism.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Lyric penthos is enacted when poets use the lyric to examine our ecological quandary while opting not to dwell in disappointment, the injustice of the world, and calculations for redress—instead, they choose to cultivate hopelessness rather than push for an urgent solution. Importantly, though the penthic state of hopelessness in relation to the affective states does not include disappointment, want of redress, and a sense justice.

Environmental activism, for example, while sometimes avoiding the urge to dwell in disappointment, demands justice and redress, always, and remains optimistic that these will be achieved. The lyric, in its penthic mode, can take hopelessness for granted and consider what else there is to think about in regard to environmental catastrophe, the urban space increasingly encroaching on the wild and acts of permanent appropriation, for example. Lyric penthos does not demand justice, but circumvents the question of justice altogether. Admitting the futility of seeking justice at every move, one forgoes the problem of disappointment.

In ignoring concerns with justice, lyric penthos poses a radical problematic. Lyric penthos as I've explained it seems objectionable, counter-productive to addressing serious contemporary issues. I now want to take some time to address this questionable aspect of lyric penthos. Ethics and politics are not the main purview of this mode of the lyric, which is not concerned with fixed ontologies. Lilburn, meditating on apokatastatic desire, argues that

Ontology points you toward intelligibilities, "presences," your imagination places in the world: the practice this generates is that of the self addressing one of the many hand puppets the imagination wears. Goodness tips

naturally into rectitude, its moral narcissism; perhaps all along it was simply rectitude's finest name. So both systematizing pursuits—the one reaching for an understanding of essence, the other for an ethics—produce solipsistic practices, ways of standing apart from the world. (*Going* 182)

Heeding apokatastatic desire for "untruncated delight"—that is, writing in the mode of lyric penthos—involves casting off even those "hand puppets" that structure our lives and help ensure that people can live together without devastating conflict. Lyric penthos refuses to direct its attention toward these concerns in favour of its focus on examining the human condition in relation to wilderness, as I've demonstrated in my readings of Queyras, McKay, Wong, and Thesen. Because of this attention to concerns that are not obviously politically effective, in a discussion of environmental concerns lyric penthos invites accusations of complicity, if not callousness or uselessness.

I want to say something about the charge of complicity before turning to look at uselessness. One way of meeting this charge is to understand lyric penthos as something *on the path* of apokatastatic desire, rather than something at its end. This is to say both that lyric penthos is not concerned with the satisfaction of an identifiable political, ethical, or ontological view and that the lyric position of lyric penthos is not one that can completely abandon human concern: the failure that characterizes penthos is precisely that which does not allow it to completely escape human concerns. Whereas apokatastasis has arrived at divine poverty, lyric penthos is trying (in vain) to get there. It is not, strictly speaking, amoral. Lyric penthos may fall into the realm of environmental ethics insofar as it resembles, for example, ethicist Lynn White Jr.'s characterisation of St. Francis's environmental view: "[his] view of nature and of man rested on a unique sort of

pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator" (13); pan-psychism, the view that everything in nature possesses divinity or soul, resonates with Lilburn's explanations of longing and apokatastasis after all. He explains human longing:

It's as if we had existed before and in this previous existence had followed the gods along a steep path until we stood with them upon the back of the universe and saw things 'beyond the skies' of such beauty that none can sing them. And it's as if we wish to return to this matchless sight; this is what the reach of [apokatastatic] desire feels like (81).

Like St. Francis's view of nature, desire is premised on a view of the world as imbued with divinity, or an unknowable presence. Lyric penthos is, in this way, located in the province of environmental ethics. However, since it offers no program for ethical action, its concern is not ethical.

Nevertheless, its place in the framework of the tradition of environmental ethics suggests a certain politics. Another way of answering the charge of complicity is to understand lyric penthos as bypassing the common channels to understanding conflict in favour of an alternative (Lilburn might say "feral" or "outlandish") perspective. In avoiding a programmatic position on political issues, lyric penthos enables avoidance of moral overload and sympathy overload, political pitfalls all their own. To borrow from Žižek's analysis of violence, lyric penthos, unlike the despairing, activist, or even capitalist one (surely there is a lyric for every standpoint), avoids "the fascinating lure of . . . directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (Žižek 1). If it is concerned with violence at all, it is concerned with what Žižek

calls objective violence, including both "a 'symbolic' violence embodied in language and its forms . . . [and] 'systemic' violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (1). Concern for the symbolic animates McKay's and Wong's subversions of language; concern for the systemic resonates in Queyras's ambivalence as it invites careful consideration of discourse, and in Thesen's attention to the long-term consequences of systemic violence. Lyric penthos, as a way of heeding apokatastatic desire, both cautions against the impulse to know and resists ready-made political teleologies because its (impossible) telos is to empty the human of human knowledge. Lyric penthos is, perhaps unavoidably, political, but it is so in an outlandish sense; it suggests no certain political vision but critiques politics' tendency to solipsism—that is, its insulation within the constraints of ready-made teleology and discourse that structure and limit the range of politics's considerations.

I have not been making a case for lyric penthos as a way of life in my readings of the poems under discussion; I don't advocate eschewing justice and attempting an utter embrace of poverty, and I do not think Lilburn encourages this either in his discussion of apokatastatic desire and penthic sorrow. Rather, I have been arguing that lyric penthos offers a vantage point from which one can view the world differently than that offered by activist poetics by using the lyric to resist both ideological corollaries of capitalism, such as McKay's matériel, and the urge to production and the consumerist orientation of desire, as in Queyras's evocation of the ambivalent expressway. Lyric penthos is meditative but not hermetic, searching but not appropriative, hopeless but not utterly nihilistic.

McKay writes that "one of the benefits attached to lyric poems [is] that they preserve, in language, peak moments that pass all too quickly in experience" (30). Lyric

hopelessness does exactly this with the experience of hopelessness in the face of environmental crisis. When the sustained moment of lyric hopelessness is affective, it either crushes with its stark reality—resulting in despair that motivates activism—or elicits a mode of *penthos* that resonates with Žižek’s suggested response to violence in the world, namely to “do nothing” (6).

This brings us to the charge of uselessness. Henry David Thoreau, a thinker known as much for his environmentalist rhetoric as for his work on civil disobedience, writes that “[a] man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone” (129). The economic language is apposite to my focus on how lyric *penthos* offers meditative responses to contemporary global capitalism. For his part, Žižek suggests “patient, critical analysis” (6) as an appropriate response to the violence responsible for activist rhetoric. His provocation to “do nothing,” clearly at odds with the majority of politically conscious (some might say morally necessary) responses to current ecological and humanitarian crises, is a strategy complementary to lyric *penthos*. Because, as with violence, the ugly spectacle of environmental degradation is part of the familiar moralizing imagery of popular ecological discourse—and we (mostly) do nothing anyhow—the urge to “do nothing” is paradoxically an urge to do more than most already do, to “learn, learn, and learn” (Žižek 7). In other words, to pause and read and consider underlying causes rather than rushing in to act.

But if lyric *penthos* encourages Žižek’s call to do nothing, what, if anything, does it actually *do*? The first thing lyric *penthos* does is encourage thoughtful engagement with the other-than-human world. Requiring an unapologetic and unthreatening existential crisis of the human being—try to recognize the contingency and insignificance

of your humanness, it urges—lyric penthos bears some of the fruits of existentialist philosophy. Patricia Glazebrook, guest lecturing for an existentialism class I once attended, said something to the effect that the existentialist, recognizing the absurdity of existence, becomes the sole bearer of responsibility for his actions. As I understand this, the existentialist bears the weight of all meaning in the world himself, not able to point to external causes or reasons for life's sufferings and misfortunes—only he can be responsible for his actions. Lyric penthos, in seeking to cast off human constructs and in recognizing that it can only fail in this, encourages a similar weight of responsibility. Humanness is both contingent and permanent for a human being, but recognizing its limitations and trying to get to know these becomes the responsibility of the apokatastatic thinker once she realizes that humanness is contingent.

For this reason, seeing the world without purpose through lyric penthos can, I think, result in a useful alacrity. Again, because apokatastatic desire comes with only incidental satisfactions rather than teleological ones, this alacrity, a version of what McKay calls “poetic attention” (*Vis* 26), is necessary for lyric penthos. In reading poetry attuned to penthos, we can cultivate such alacrity in ourselves. We can afford to let certain things alone while remaining watchful for each momentary revelation of a “tiny fracture in human existence,” as Queyras would have it (*Expressway* 67). This is the first thing that lyric penthos does.

As another consequence of desiring to be inhuman, the hubris of humanity is displaced by humility. The assumption that human beings can control and forecast the entropic dynamics of the world is fundamentally undercut by the admission of processes beyond human understanding. In Queyras's work, humility emerges from the

ambivalence of her utopic visions, which requires a reckoning with humans' inability to shape the force of human development; in McKay's, from his defamiliarizing humour, which reminds us that human appropriative tendencies, even at the limit of matérialization, do not present one-way power relations; in Wong's, from her ambivalent activism and her gestures toward the ways that language inhabits us, which reminds us that our constructs construct us; and in Thesen's, from her parody of the senselessness of quotidian human concerns in the face of catastrophe, which reminds us of human short-sightedness.

I've been critical of activist rhetoric in this thesis, critical of the consequences of their actions (moral overload and sympathy overload) and of the connection between activism and despair. It might seem odd, then, that I conclude with something David Suzuki says as it relates to *penthos*. To conclude thus is, perhaps, to gesture toward lyric *penthos* as a mode of understanding rather than a way of life. In making this gesture, I'm thinking of what McKay says about the urge to make metaphor: "metaphor also springs from a need to confront or contemplate the world and say something, rub up against it with language" ("The Appropriate" 174). In the context of McKay's eco-poetics, this urge to rub up against the world is already a step toward lyric *penthos*, but he goes on to suggest that "[m]aybe the pure gesture – made by a saint or mystic – would be speechlessness" (174). Thoreau and Žižek would likely agree.

Shifting away from his rhetorical analogy about being trapped in a speeding car, Suzuki argues that human beings have fallen out of touch with nature, and that central to re-establishing a connection is the simple act of spending time with other-than-humans. The increasing divide between the human and the more-than-human is just what lyric *penthos* desires to close by attempting to experience the world as other-than-human; as

such, finally, lyric penthos urges us to attempt the appropriate gesture for reasons that Suzuki might identify with; speaking about a David Suzuki Foundation campaign that challenges urbanites to spend time outdoors, he says that “[t]rees are the most important thing to establish a relationship with” (Ghomeshi). Lyric penthos, in heeding apokatastatic desire, might have an imperative after all: go sit under a tree.

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