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NAMING AND KNOWING IN DON MCKAY'S POETRY

> "Must we study Roger [Tory] Peterson's bird books in order to read literature?" I am tempted to reply: Yes, that would be a very good thing indeed, and not just for nonfiction but for fictive genres as well.[1]
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> [O]ne should never construct sentences with "the animal" as the subject. [Oskar] Heinroth used to interrupt such sentences with the mild and friendly interjection: "Are you referring to an amoeba or a chimpanzee?"[2]

AMONG DON MCKAY'S MANY STRENGTHS as one of Canada's most significant poets and thinkers are two contradictory features that often work (and play) together in his poems: McKay's "gift for metaphor"[3] vies with a persistent uneasiness regarding the supposed authority of human language to produce objective knowledge. As a result, his poetry often speaks to a desire for an ecologically attuned mode of thinking, and it draws upon both symbolic and scientifically accurate language to celebrate the phenomenological world while simultaneously admitting the impossibility of ever fully knowing the species and objects it describes. Focusing on these elements of McKay's work, this paper argues for an ecocriticism that has the capacity to measure the distance between (poetic and scientific) language and the phenomena it variously describes, celebrates, and eulogizes. Such an ecocriticism would manoeuvre necessarily between and among various disciplinary approaches to the physical world while accommodating a complex set of challenges to anthropocentric conceptual

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[1] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1995), 97.

[2] Konrad Lorenz, *The Natural Science of the Human Species: An Introduction to Comparative Behavioral Research. The 'Russian Manuscript' (1944–1948)* [*Die Naturwissenshaft Vom Menschen: Eine Enfuhrung in Die Vergleichende Verhaltensforschung. Das 'Russische Manuskript' (1944–1948)*], trans. Robert D. Martin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 260.

[3] Don Coles, "A Gift for Metaphor," in *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, ed. Brian Bartlett (Toronto: Guernica, 2006), 55–58.

models of the universe. One of the ultimate goals of this approach is to impel literary critics to spend more time listening to what the sciences have to say about natural phenomena, to be sure; but attempting an ecocriticism open to interdisciplinary and interspecies voices invites charges of, at best, academic dilettantism and, at worst, disciplinary ineptitude. In other words, the specificity an ornithology textbook provides regarding, say, the skeletal structure of indigo buntings—the subject of McKay's poem "Meditation on a Small Bird's Skull"—represents at once a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities and a set of risky propositions. Even though ecocriticism has more or less arrived as a valid and vital sub-discipline (predominantly) within English departments, the application of scientific knowledge to the reading of poetry remains, for some, a fringe activity.

There might be good reason for such suspicion of cross-disciplinary work. In "Meditation on a Small Bird's Skull," McKay offers a warning to the literary-minded critic who decides to cross disciplinary and phenomenal distances to get closer to the world outside the text, to pick up and hold, as it were, a small bird's skull:

> If, like me,
> you feel the urge to stick the sharp end
> in your ear
> (hoping for some
> secret of the air)
> be careful.
> We are big and blunt and easily fooled and know few
> of the fine points of translation.[4]

In a few brief lines, McKay manages to turn the warning into one against human foolishness, while maintaining a sustained critique of language, poetry, and metaphor. The gesture of "stick[ing] the sharp end" of a bird's skull into his ear functions as a reminder to check poetic symbolism with a modicum of humility (itself tempered by equal doses of ornithological and experiential knowledge); it is also a reminder that we humans have a lot to learn from the material world. McKay's self-deprecating voice here implicates his readers. He challenges us to identify as big, blunt instruments that are fooled easily. One response to his challenge, I suggest, is to turn to ornithological literature for assistance with learning some of the "fine[r] points."

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[4] Don McKay, "Meditation on a Small Bird's Skull," in *Night Field* (Toronto: McClelland, 1991), 22.

Ecocritics typically, though not always, feel comfortable including field guides and science textbooks (not to mention the occasional bit of "field work") into their research and writing. In this way, ecocritics are not so different from another group of scholars, New Historicists, who have developed strategies for applying knowledge gleaned from the minutiae of daily life to historical and literary analysis. Consider, for example, how the following comments about intertidal zones from a biology journal might inform a poetic passage about intertidal zones:

> A)
> [L]argely because of the steep gradient in thermal and desiccation stresses that is presumed to occur during low tide, the rocky intertidal zone has long been a model system for examining relationships between abiotic stresses, biotic interactions, and ecological patterns in nature;[5]

> B)
> At ebbing, the abandoned pier reveals
> turmoil, seven purple starfish
> spread-eagled against the creosote,
> barnacles, mussel-clusters,
> clutching like 4-year-olds
> in front of a stranger, touch and cold
> exposure straining them, the seize
> of sun, the lap of stippled ocean.[6]

While passage A) clearly communicates the significance of low-tide observations in determining ecological patterns, it does not combine such discursive elements as aesthetics, pathos, and politics, all of which scientific discourse has a tendency to exclude.[7] Passage B) takes a different tack, one that demonstrates the common depiction of intertidal zones as metaphors for change and transition. New's lines about exposed barnacles and starfish—both evidence of common ecological turmoil—include the "literary" elements excluded from the more scientific prose. Biotic (mussels, 4-year-olds) and abiotic (clamshells,

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[5] Brian Helmuth, "How Do We Measure the Environment? Linking Intertidal Thermal Physiology and Ecology through Biophysics," *Integrative and Comparative Biology* 42 (2002): 837–45.
[6] W.H. New, "Bird Landing,"in *Riverbook & Ocean* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan, 2002), 58.
[7] John T. Battalio, *The Rhetoric of Science in the Evolution of American Ornithological Discourse*, ATTW Contemporary Studies in Technical Communication 8 (Stanford: Ablex, 1998), 81.

pier) coexist to reveal ecological patterns in a nature that includes humans and nonhumans alike. New's poem readily assumes the intertidal zone as an important system for examining both metaphorical and ecological relationships.

What New does with the intertidal zone in his poem, McKay does with birds in many poems. Where others have suggested that McKay "uses" birds and the act of birding in order to examine the desire for exploration or to contemplate notions of home, I argue that McKay resists *using* birds. Rather, he uses his faulty words, field guides, and patient "attention to detailed observation and acutely precise comparisons"[8] to get closer to the world that persists without his words. Proximity inflects specificity, I suggest; specificity, in turn, inflects the poet's and the ecocritic's relation to the more-than-human world.

The desire for scientific or taxonomic accuracy, however, will not always reward the ecocritic with an entirely valid reading; the poem or book itself is likely to invite such investigation while determining the degree of ornithological perspicacity beyond which the ecocritic risks the rather uncritical, derivative act of merely applying a different species of theory. The outward expression of scientific curiosity, or of a willingness to attend to the world via the distinctive perspectives offered by sciences, literatures, and direct experiences, which compels the critic to get out of the office and into the field and/or field guide is theory enough. Far from turning poetry, or the study of poetry, into a science or pseudo-science, more accurate knowledge of bird names, behaviours, habitat—in short of avian ecologies—enables more accurate metaphors, more precise attempts at thinking about what it means to be human, about how to live carefully and humbly in the world we share with others. An early poem by McKay, "'The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows,'"[9] effectively and humorously examines the results of too much book learning. Addressing his lover, the speaker begins:

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[8] Susan Elmslie, "Got to Meander If You Want to Get to Town: Excursion and Excursionist Metaphors in Don McKay," in *Don McKay: Essays on His Work*, ed. Brian Bartlett (Toronto: Guernica, 2006), 89.

[9] The title is taken from Leonard Cohen's "Beneath My Hands," but McKay has transposed the two modifiers. Cohen's poem begins "Beneath my hands / your small breasts / are the upturned bellies / of breathing fallen sparrows" (16). The transposition was not rectified when the poem was reprinted in *Camber: Selected Poems, 1983–2003*, nor when it was recorded for *Songs for the Songs of the Birds*.

> Some things can't be praised enough, among them
> breasts and birds
> who have cohabited so long in metaphor
> most folks think of them as married[10]

A tacit acknowledgement that birds traditionally inhabit poetry for purely symbolic reasons, the poem's opening makes no pretensions to ornithological specificity. This is less a nature poem than a poem about nature poetry. Instead of offering observations of birds in situ, the speaker brings recollections from the field into the bedroom. When he witnesses his lover doff her shirt, he claims that the inside of his head "is lined with down / like a Blackburnian warbler's nest, / the exterior of which is often rough and twiggy / in appearance." Here the specificity with which McKay names a bird simultaneously acts as self-deprecating gesture—if the exterior of the nest is rough and twiggy so, by analogy, is the exterior of the speaker's head—and shifts the traditional sexist link between birds and women (more accurately, girls) to align birdness with a man. This poem stands up as an early manifesto for the precise application of metaphor. In closing, McKay reflects on the history of a specific erotic comparison:

> 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.

Poets make metaphors out of materials and experiences that are near-to-hand, familiar, knowable. When writing about something as personal and sensuous as love and companionship, the material offered by museums and sculptures might not provide the most accurate metaphors.

McKay exhibits highly practiced skills with metaphor and his images are well-chosen from a birder's repertoire of names and field knowledge, but he also cultivates a distrust of metaphor. In addition to exclamations in his prose work regarding the impossibility of full congruence between word and world, McKay occasionally resists metaphor in his poetry. In "Night Field," a three-part poem about the destructive rituals associated with clearing house and moving, the middle section recounts a peculiar narrative: McKay

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[10] Don McKay, "The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows," in *Birding, or desire* (Toronto: McClelland, 1983), 93.

describes an ominous painting given to the nameless main character "by his godparents a few years / before his godmother died," but the gesture of the gift itself is "so loaded it occupied his / mind like a cathedral."[11] Though he spends countless hours "gazing into the field" depicted by the painting's dark colour spectrum and "tilting his head this way and that way," he is unable to visualize "a field with a monster in it," which everyone else claims to see. After considering the possibility that the painting is an outsize "Rorschach test" (thus associating what is seen or not seen with the viewer's subconscious), we eventually read that "the old woman is an old woman, the dog is a dog, the field is a / field, and the monster who will laugh and steal the silver thread / of meaning from a life is never there when he's looking."[12] By deviating from his litany of equations when he gets to the monster, McKay effectively returns to the notion introduced at the beginning of the poem's second part: gestures are themselves loaded with meaning, and life (in this case the life of his godmother, whose death, others in the poem believe, "the monster" portends and mocks) is the ultimate gesture. Perhaps the poet is trying on things' names for a change, testing the accuracy of nomination, rather than demonstrating a simple distrust of metaphor, although I am not convinced they can be separated. Merely knowing a name and choosing persistently to rely on its inherent accuracy combine to prevent metaphor, which in turn prevents an understanding of the way humans construct meaning through language.

According to poet Tim Lilburn, we should "know the names for things as a minimum,"[13] but we must also be aware that such knowledge has the potential to congeal into mere self-knowledge. We humans are the ones, after all, who have chosen the names. It becomes important, then, for the ecopoet and the ecocritic to acknowledge their own epistemological limitations, to realize that, as Lilburn writes elsewhere: "The world is its names plus their cancellations, what we call it and the undermining of our identifications by an ungraspable residue in objects. To see it otherwise, to imagine it caught in our phrases, is to know it without courtesy, and this perhaps is not to know it at all."[14] Knowing is always inflected by what we do not know, things by what they are not. The same goes for things as symbolic entities. In "Dark of

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[11] Don McKay, "Night Field," in *Night Field* (Toronto: McClelland, 1991), 39.
[12] McKay, "Night Field," 40.
[13] Tim Lilburn, *Going Home: Essays* (Toronto: Anansi, 2008), 182.
[14] Lilburn, *Living in the World As If It Were Home* (Toronto: Cormorant, 1999), 5.

the Moon," McKay encounters moon as metaphor and writes of a moment when the speaker somehow misses the moon's metaphorical significance:

> Once past the street lights I miss it,
> "poised" at the spruce tip, "floating"
> in the pond, the way it gathered longing into moths
> and kept reality from overdosing on its own sane
> self. It seems the dead,
> who would otherwise by dressing up in moonstuff, blending
> with the birch to be both here
> and not here, lose interest in us and descend
> below the reach of roots. The hydro wires
> are hydro wires, the streets are streets, the houses
> full of television.[15]

Here is a lyrical "I" aware of the potential for metaphor to lapse into cliché; the scare quotes around adjectives imply an easy, self-conscious simultaneity. More importantly, though, this poem acknowledges an important relation between the physical world and the world of metaphor. Its title refers to the last three days of the lunar cycle just prior to a new moon—"that no moon we call new," as McKay eloquently puts it at the end of "On Leaving"[16]—when the sky is darker than usual because of the moon's near complete absence from view. Without the moon, the symbolically absent—"the dead"—have no moonstuff in which to dress up, no borrowed light with which to insinuate presence where absence persists. In this case, the word "miss" also suggests nostalgia for metaphor. Without the moon casting its reflected light upon the world, things remain what we have named them, and other sources of light, namely televisions, command more attention than they would under other circumstances.

A poem by Margaret Avison—a favourite poet of McKay's—illustrates the extent to which getting the name wrong constitutes, at best, a lack of decorum. In her Governor-General's Award-winning collection *No Time*, Avison footnotes "The Butterfly" to explain an error she made in an earlier version. She made the revisions (and offered a note on the correction), she says, because she "ha[d] learned that 'moth' and 'butterfly' are not interchangeable terms (as [she] had written them in ignorance in the earlier version)."[17] In

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[15] McKay, "Dark of the Moon," in *Apparatus* (Toronto: McClelland, 1997), 7.
[16] McKay, *Apparatus*, 70.
[17] Margaret Avison, *No Time* (Hansport, NS: Lancelot, 1989), 66.

the original version of the "The Butterfly"—written in 1943 and published in 1960—Avison concludes with the following stanza, in an attempt to describe the effect of the butterfly, which the narrator sees "suddenly" amidst a storm:

> The meaning of the moth, even the smashed moth, the
> meaning of the moth—
> can't we stab that one angle into the curve of space
> that sweeps so unrelenting, far above,
> towards the subhuman swamp of under-dark?[18]

In the revised version, Avison changes the final stanza to reflect her newfound knowledge of the difference between a butterfly and a moth:

> The butterfly's meaning, even though smashed.
> Imprisoned in endless cycle? No. The meaning!
> Can't we stab that one angle
> into the curve of space that sweeps beyond
> our farthest knowing, out into light's
> place of invisibility?[19]

Whereas in the first version—inaccurate naming notwithstanding—the repetition of the monosyllabic moth in the first two lines creates an undesirable aural effect, in the latter version the singular butterfly followed by a question, a negation, and a resounding imperative emphasizes a meaningful relation between speaker and butterfly.

Avison, a poet presumably more devoted to Christian-based religiosity than to specific environmental concerns and details, nevertheless feels compelled to make the terms of her metaphor more biologically accurate. Despite the anthropocentrism inherent in her language-centred vocation, Avison insists on acknowledging a correlation, a contiguity, between her words and the physical world. That she should go so far as to revise—and call attention to the revision of—the already published poem strikes me as significant: the poet's desire for metaphorical accuracy is necessarily linked to a desire for scientific accuracy, at least in so far as taxonomy represents an

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[18] Avison, "The Butterfly," in *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, ed. A.J.M. Smith (Toronto: Oxford U Press, 1960), 354.
[19] Avison, *No Time*, 66.

extension of scientific thinking. The shrinking distance between metaphorical and biological knowing enables an environmental criticism aware of the dangers of simple taxonomic accuracy and the importance of knowing—the names of things, physical laws, ecological dynamics. Despite having gained some basic knowledge regarding the identification of moths and butterflies, however, Avison stops short of engaging the field of lepidoptery as fully as she might have. The species of butterfly (of which there are approximately 15,000 worldwide and 700 in North America) appears not to be significant to a reading of the poem; such insignificance inflects a reading of the poem's attention to the natural world. The *metaphor* might be more precise, but the lack of specificity prevents "The Butterfly" from achieving the same degree of accuracy—taxonomical, biological, ecological—that McKay's poems often do.

In a review of *Birding, or desire* (1983), Robert Bringhurst identifies in McKay's writing a "precision of observation" that distinguishes him from his antecedents.[20] Referring to Wordsworth as a poet whose "vision of the natural world was full of rapture instead of detail," Bringhurst emphasizes what has become a characteristic of McKay's poetry since the publication of *Birding, or desire*, namely species specificity.[21] In a published dialogue between Bringhurst and Laurie Ricou about Bringhurst's poem "Sunday Morning," Ricou aligns Bringhurst with other poets "who, like Don McKay, don't say 'tree' and 'bird,' but white pine, red pine, loon, or Blackburnian warbler."[22] The significance of such specificity rests neither in the intrinsic power of nomination and taxonomy nor in a careless deference to the conventions of scientifically objective, reductionist discourse. Unlike Avison's footnoted corrective, Bringhurst's attention to a specific tree—bristlecone pine—enables readers to "discover a story" by "show[ing] a way to think about things" that requires intimate and accurate knowledge.[23] The astute reader, Ricou implies, takes "time, outside the reading of the poem itself, to find out about" its subject. The extra-textual, often extra-curricular effort reveals "some of the implicit patterns in the poem,"[24] in turn: if the poet has

[20] Robert Bringhurst, "The Antithesis of Rape, Which Is Not Chastity: The Voice of Don McKay," in *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, ed. Brian Bartlett (Toronto: Guernica, 2006), 30.
[21] Bringhurst, "The Antithesis of Rape," 30.
[22] Robert Bringhurst and Laurie Ricou, "Robert Bringhurst's 'Sunday Morning': A Dialogue," in *Inside the Poem: Essays and Poems in Honour of Donald Stephens*, ed. W.H. New (Toronto: Oxford U Press, 1992), 96.
[23] Bringhurst and Ricou, 97.
[24] Bringhurst and Ricou, 97.

stepped outside, the search for pattern *inside* the poem requires the literary critic to pay attention to more than language and linguistic conventions by also stepping, sometimes quite literally, outside the poem.

Ecocritical concern for environmental issues can gain credence and imaginative power from specific scientific knowledge (ecological, botanical, evolutionary) that helps make such concern meaningful in the long term—namely, by providing readers with a specialized, critical vocabulary and theoretical contexts to make collaborative discourse/research possible. Knowledge of the science of ecology is useful since, as Barry Lopez argues in "Landscape and Narrative," "[o]ne learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it—like that between the sparrow and the twig."[25] The emphasis on relationality supports ecologist Charles Krebs' definition of ecology as "the scientific study of the interactions that determine the distribution and abundance of organisms."[26] Even in its more popular usage, which is only marginally related to the scientific term, ecology implies a worldview that privileges interaction and interconnectedness.[27] Vocabulary might not be all; or, as Phyllis Webb puts it in "Imperfect Sestina," "there may be more to a bird than its name."[28] But strategies for naming and knowing are essential aspects for any ecological, and hence ecocritical, project. Lopez's sparrow, though it could be any number of sparrow species, is significantly not a chickadee, or a junco, or a crested myna—or a butterfly. To notice "relationships" requires some knowledge of identities and behaviours; for the non-scientist, it requires some knowledge of science.

But I am not overly concerned with the mimetic function of McKay's poetic language. While one might usefully debate how realistic the description of a western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) is, for example, by considering its size and geographical distribution, no amount of physical description can reproduce, mimetically, the ecological interactions between western red cedar and western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*), northern flickers (*Colaptes auratus*), and Coast Salish people who build totems and canoes. I do not go so far in my ecocriticism as nineteenth-century American naturalist John

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[25] Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Scribner's, 1988), 61.
[26] Charles J. Krebs, *Ecology: The Experimental Analysis of Distribution and Abundance*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper, 1994), 3.
[27] David Keller and Frank Golley, ed., *The Philosophy of Ecology: From Science to Synthesis* (Athens: U of Georgia Press, 2000), 2.
[28] Phyllis Webb, *Wilson's Bowl* (Toronto: Coach House, 1980), 72.

Burroughs, who "credit[s] the true poet with greater insight into nature than naturalists" and "seeks to expose poetry's lapses of accuracy" by correcting "factical," primarily "ornithological and botanical" mistakes "committed [by poets] for the sake of melodic or imagistic euphony."[29] If I do point out mistakes, as I do with Avison's poem, it is to provide a set of practices against which McKay's species-specific poetry works. I am less interested in correcting supposed lapses in accuracy than I am in identifying the poet's attention to and attempts at accuracy by way of proximal knowing informed by field guides, textbooks, and experience. Scientifically inaccurate metaphors do not necessarily make for bad poetry. But they do not make for ecologically sound poetry either; they do not make for poetry that invites readers into a knowledgeable relation with the environment. That Don McKay gets so many things ecologically and biologically right raises important questions about the roles of literature and literary criticism in thinking about the environment and how humans interact with it: Will the imagination become a diminished requirement for good—that is, environmentally sound—writing? If field guides and science textbooks explain ecological and taxonomical relationships and details, does it ultimately matter whether or not a poet has spent time in a particular place before she writes about it? How can poetry that achieves a high degree of ecological accuracy impel readers to drop the book and get outside themselves? How can recognising the names of birds, trees, rivers, peoples, represent anything other than acts of linguistic imperialism?

In his essay "Going Home," Lilburn suggests that, as humans, "[w]e should learn the names for things as a minimum—not to fulfill taxonomies but as acts of courtesy."[30] According to Neil Evernden, "The act of naming may itself be part of the process of establishing a sense of place."[31] This process, though, is problematic for "creatures [who are] in a state of sensory deprivation" such as humans in an urban environment seem to be, bombarded by "the advertisers who promise an easy surrogate, a commercial sop to [our] need for place."[32] Evernden is concerned with our reductive construction of natural space as commodity, but he allows for the possible coexistence of natural and urban spaces via metaphoric association. Acknowledging humans as both

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[29] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 88.
[30] Lilburn, *Going*, 182.
[31] Neil Evernden, "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: U of Georgia Press, 1996), 101.
[32] Evernden, 100–01.

natural and cultural beings represents an important argument in favour of the courtesy of which Lilburn writes. As McKay argues in *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness*, "it is as dangerous to act as though we were not a part of nature as it is to act as though we were not a part of culture."[33] I am not sure whether McKay's "we" is meant to refer to a human collective or a nature-poet collective since, at times, he makes reference to "[t]he nature poet [who] may (should, in fact) resort to the field guide or library, but will keep coming, back, figuratively speaking, to the trail—to the grain of the experience" (27). The trail that leads through some typical wilderness to some familiar notion of home—a log cabin by the river, a sport-utility vehicle in a parking lot, an outhouse among a grove of birch trees—moves *us*, back and forth, along the edges of disparate worlds and ideas.

To speak of nature poetry that is not, as American poet Galway Kinnell suggests in an interview, simply "a matter of English gardens, of hedgerows and flowers" but that "include[s] the city too"[34] is to speak of an ecopoetry that recognizes naming's artifice, a recognition McKay desires and that is in part "governed by … an attempt to preserve, in the physique of language, a vestige of wilderness" (63). In support of Kinnell's notion of an inclusive nature poetry, McKay's idea of wilderness is an openly transgressive one by which he "want[s] to mean, not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (21). That is, any thing viewed out of its traditional context—usually vis-à-vis its usefulness to us—retains traces of wilderness: "a coat hanger asks a question," says McKay, "the armchair is suddenly crouched" (21). Wilderness is not, as some critics suggest, a synonym for wild or wildness; the stories McKay tells, and to which he listens, are not simple analogues for Western canonical stories "immersed in the sensuous, creaturely, and indeterminate realm of wildness."[35] Wilderness is place made personal and public all at once—and then unmade again in an instant through the breakdown of utility. The word "wilderness" preserves a tentative uncertainty, as though McKay is reluctant to articulate a term—wildness—with links to primitivism and, thus, which occupies one side of a simple dichotomy: wild, er, ness. Such defamiliarizing

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[33] Don McKay, *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* (Wolfville: Gaspereau, 2001), 30. Where feasible, further page references to this work will appear in parentheses within the text.
[34] William Packard, *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews From the New York Quarterly* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), 107.
[35] Trevor Herriot, *Jacob's Wound: A Search the Spirit of Wildness* (Toronto: McClelland , 2004), 218.

tactics seek to bridge ideological gaps between humans and nonhumans and epistemological gaps between what early Canadian (eco)critics would have called baseland and hinterland,[36] effectively positioning *us* alongside and within a "natural" pattern of existence while at the same time positioning nature within a "cultural" one.

To name is not necessarily to tame, then. Wilderness persists in the act of naming because language is not capable of telling the whole story. McKay addresses the wilderness inherent in names in the prose piece "A Small Fable," in which he reimagines the biblical tale of Adam naming the world. McKay's Adam resembles the speaker of "Nocturnal Animals,"[37] awake in the middle of the night to work through a prevailing mood of doubt. Though he goes to bed after naming all day content with a "sense of an inexorable order inexorably ordering."[38] Adam wakes up conscious of a potential "slippage in the belts and snaps, a little play between 'Cooper's hawk' and the bird with the fierce orange eye and the talons like sharpened knitting needles" (90). The doubt pervading Adam's sleep stems from the realisation that each name inadequately, incompletely, described its concomitant creature. Screech owl, in particular, gives Adam crepuscular pause: "*Screech* owl? What had he been thinking?... Anyone could tell you that a screech was an *ascending* scream ... But the owl's voice fluttered down, a heart sinking" (90). Spurred by this realisation, Adam considers other names, recalling them now "with a new critical eye and ear, feeling their clunkiness, their prefab quality: ring-necked duck, common loon: they lay there like shucked cocoons," particularly when viewed in the dark of night (91). If, by confronting the arbitrariness of naming within a Western Judeo-Christian paradigm, McKay questions the assumed power of an entire epistemology, he also implicates himself in the practice of inaccurate nomination, at best, and the whitewashing of ecological devastation and human displacement, at worst. Language, whether poetical or scientific, decorative or instrumental, reflects a residual human desire to fix in place, to imbue with properties sufficient to inspire nostalgia, memories meant to recollect—in tranquility, natch—what is no longer useful.

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[36] D.M.R. Bentley, *The Gay]Grey Moose: Essays on the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry 1690–1990* (Ottawa: U of Ottawa Press, 1992). In this early example of ecological literary criticism in Canada, baseland is roughly equivalent to metropolitan/urban, and hinterland is roughly equivalent to rural.

[37] *Birding, or desire*, 49.

[38] *Vis à Vis*, 89.

Naming inhabits McKay's poetics as vexed linguistic act precisely because it is vexed and because as a poet he occupies the role of namer uneasily. It is no coincidence that McKay's Adam has "a cigarette and a cup of coffee" to accompany the sleeplessness experienced by many McKavian speakers (90). The uneasiness with identifying himself as a namer extends from McKay's destabilizing of nature and wilderness. The world of plants and birds includes objects that have been abandoned by people—a creek "articulates a shopping cart, / the cliché in its throat;"[39] "the Vulcan 0-4-0 saddle tank locomotive" is rumoured to be on a "ridge turning into a humped hill or tumulus;"[40] wildflowers reclaim abandoned railway tracks.

In "Abandoned Tracks," the third in a series of eclogues, the speaker identifies plant species in pairs and in relation to an aspect of the built environment, emphasizing that no single organism has dominion over any others. Having been abandoned, the railway tracks invite hikers to "walk the ties" and experience "their awkward / interval[s],"[41] spaces measured with the movement of trains in mind, not of upright mammalian bipeds. The awkwardness indicates the lack of ecological foresight involved in such a human endeavour as building a railway, a mode of transporting people, raw materials, and goods within a network of industrial economies (56). In the poem's present time, however, species that would have had little opportunity to thrive while the tracks were in use have begun to reclaim the narrow swath the tracks still occupy: "Cow Vetch and Mustard get in the way / and hide the ties"(56), for example, while yellow warblers articulate their "pointillist attention / in the Rock Elm"(57). Complex webs of interaction revealing "So much intricate tenacity" take place with implications far beyond the space of the tracks. The poem is partly about botanical and avian tenacity over time, about the capacity for plants and birds to overcome human intervention and adapt, as they often do prior to abandonment and breakdown. McKay uses two examples, like parallel tracks, to symbolise tenacity: one is a story of his dog, Luke, that was hit by a train—the "spot is occupied by Bladder Campion now"(57)—and survived; the other story documents the life-cycle of Monarch butterflies that will "feed and flit and pollinate their hosts, / by accident, and

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[39] Don McKay, "Inhabiting the Map," in *Sanding Down This Rocking Chair on a Windy Night* (Toronto: McClelland, 1987), 103.

[40] Don McKay, "Five Ways to Lose Your Way," in *Deactivated West 100* (Kentville: Gaspereau, 2005), 85.

[41] McKay, *Apparatus*, 56. Further page references to this work will appear in parentheses within the text.

after an infinitude of flits / wind up precisely in one Mexican valley" (58). Once again, McKay's fealty to specificity pays homage to the tenacity and precision of nonhuman intelligence represented by those two stories—naming the weed that occupies the site of Luke's accident and recounting the migratory precision of Monarch butterflies, in other words, celebrate the evolutionary wisdom of accident and tenacity. "Abandoned Tracks" is also about humans' relative insignificance, the land's ability to continue the process of breaking down and reclaiming space for itself. The poem ends with an inversion of human intention: "Everything the tracks / have had no use for's happening / between them" (58). The exclusivity of the tracks—their one-track mind, as it were—makes the inclusivity of the surrounding habitat that much more compelling. The tracks might not disappear for another half a million years, give or take, but they have been reclaimed, because of their uselessness, for wilderness.

To continue naming in the face of its limitations is to grasp at specificity on the verge of inaccuracy: no name can express the totality of a thing. But naming can express relations between things named, and McKay often writes about naming in his poetry to engage an ecological view that includes cultural as well as natural phenomena. If ecocritics are themselves to engage this ecological view, I suggest, their work can be enriched with an understanding of species' names and, by extension, their ecologies.