ORNITHOLOGY OF DESIRE: BIRDING IN THE ECOTONE
AND THE POETRY OF DON MCKAY

by

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I develop a vocabulary and a strategy for reading birds and ecology in Don McKay's poetry. Stressing the importance of understanding such sciences as ornithology and ecology when adopting an interdisciplinary ecocriticism, I posit science textbooks, field guides, and extra-textual experience as valid intertextual referents. At base, my dissertation follows McKay's taxonomical and ecological specificity and argues that such accurate knowing, combined with an awareness of its epistemological limitations, invites readers to reconsider human-nonhuman relations. Individual birds populating McKay's poems exist both as birds that live independently of human language and as symbols of a human desire to name and know the world without possessing it.

I begin by highlighting the need for sustained critical work on Don McKay, a poet whose work—long admired by awards juries and fellow poets—has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves. After outlining the risks involved for literary critics who linger in the ecotone between disciplines, I make an argument for taking seriously the "eco" in ecocriticism by linking the philosophical concerns of the historic science-and-literature debate to the methodological concerns of contemporary ecocriticism. Focusing on two biological aspects of avian ecology—flight and song—I then examine how they function in the English literary canon and how McKay resists the canon by redeploying certain conventions by inflecting them with his "poetic attention" and species specificity. Reading flight in McKay's poems, I demonstrate how McKay provides a strategy for recognizing a human desire to fly as an anti-ecological version of the will to power; reading birdsong, I develop a way of measuring phenomenological distances between poet and bird, language and world. Between chapters, I include what I am calling Ecotones, fictional accounts of a literary critic struggling to enact the interdisciplinary ecocriticism outlined in this dissertation. Each Ecotone—Field Marks, Field Guides, Field Notes—focuses on different versions of "field," highlighting the intellectual risks and benefits associated with occupying a space between. Finally, since McKay is a living writer at the most prolific phase of his career, I conclude by suggesting how future studies of McKay's work, including on what he calls "geopoetry," might productively benefit from the strategies I develop here.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A = Apparatus
AG = Another Gravity
AOS = Air Occupies Space
B = Birding, or desire
DW = Deactivated West 100
LS = Long Sault
NF = Night Field
SD = Sanding Down this Rocking Chair on a Windy Night
S/S = Strike/Slip
V = Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness
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In memoriam

Evelyn Beatrice Mason
1914-2004

∞

Vincent Corbet Lewis
1920-2006
what dew yu write abt abt
treez n birds n nature I sd
    yu ar an idealist she sd
iuv bin thru that

—bill bissett
BEGINNINGS

Introducing Don McKay’s Avian Poetics:

Science and Literature, Ecocriticism, and Risk

Scientific ideas and writing are often of most value within literature precisely where the risks of translation are great.—Gillian Beer

Perhaps that old pair of antagonists, science and poetry, can be persuaded to lie down together and be generative after all.—William Rueckert

The greatest enterprise of the mind has always been and always will be the attempted linkage of the sciences and humanities—Edward O. Wilson

Part One: Don McKay in the Ecotone

Since 1973, Canadian poet Don McKay has published eleven books of poetry and two collections of essays about poetics and nature, yet very little had been written about his work when I undertook this project. That changed, of course, once I began researching and writing, once McKay began to achieve recognition beyond a community of writers and editors, and to garner interest from a growing cohort of scholars with environmental interests and poetical affinities. Between the moment I decided to write a dissertation about Don McKay and the moment I finished writing it, much new material has become available, and I am happy to have been able to incorporate most of it to varying degrees: since 2003 McKay has published two collections of selected poems and two new collections (one poetry, one prose); poet and critic Brian Bartlett has edited a collection of essays on McKay’s works; and several graduate students have included McKay in their theses and dissertations about environmentally conscious literature in Canada, ecocriticism, and ecopoetics.¹

Writing a dissertation about a living writer who has entered the most prolific phase of his career poses challenges far different from those facing students writing about, say, Charles Dickens. McKay has also been nominated for numerous awards since 2003, including three
times for the international Griffin Poetry Prize established in 2001. As I complete my dissertation, McKay has been awarded the 2007 Griffin prize for Strike/Slip; according to the judges’ citation, "[t]he poems confront the strangeness and inadequacy of using language to address the point at which language fails . . . and suggest that in such an unsettled state we might truly pay attention" (n.p.). These qualities are evident throughout McKay’s oeuvre; in the following pages, I develop a way of thinking about McKay’s paradoxical relation to language and his desire to pay attention. For all this recent critical attention, however, this is the first book-length study of prominent aspects in McKay’s body of work. Bartlett’s collection, part of Guernica Press’s Writers Series, while comprehensive and timely, consists entirely of previously published pieces, that in some sense indicate the lack of sustained critical attention to McKay in Canada. Of the fourteen pieces included in Don McKay: Essays on His Works, nine have been previously published as book reviews, though most have been revised for inclusion in the book; moreover, of the sixty items included in the book’s list of secondary sources—ostensibly to be used by scholars interested in writing about McKay’s corpus—forty-four are reviews, one is a response to a review, two are encyclopaedia entries, two are M.A. theses, one is a newspaper article announcing McKay’s first Governor General’s Award for Poetry, and one is a brief nostalgic note about the out-of-print Lependu. That leaves a scant nine academic articles covering an impressive writing career. Given this dearth of critical attention to Don McKay’s oeuvre, it was appropriate, in 2003, to attempt a focussed, single-author study. In 2007, this project is even more timely. Though I do not want to give the impression that the field of McKay studies remains as lonely as it once was, only three academic articles have appeared since 2003 (in addition to Bartlett’s collection, theses, and dissertations): Adam Dickinson’s “Lyric Ethics: Ecocriticism, Material Metaphoricity, and the Poetics of Don McKay and Jan Zwicky” and

The strategy of approach I use to frame my reading of nature and, more specifically, birds in McKay’s poetry, namely ecocriticism, has been struggling to achieve the status of a bonafide critical, theoretical, and pedagogical genre, especially in Canada. This dissertation proposes an interdisciplinary ecocritical approach to Don McKay’s poetry. My strategy positions McKay’s attention to biological and ecological specificity within a tradition of English-Canadian writing about nature that goes back at least as far as Alexander Mackenzie’s account of his travels across the continent. If Northrop Frye’s focus on Canadian poets’ “terror in regard to nature” (830) and Margaret Atwood’s claim that “Canadian writers as a whole do not trust Nature” (49) indicate what Christoph Irmscher identifies as “stubbornly anthropocentric rather than ecocentric” models of Canadian identity formation, then McKay’s poetry and poetics operates in contradistinction to them. Not explicitly concerned with questions of national identity, McKay articulates a desire to reconsider the way humans relate to, and write about those relations to, the other-than-human world. This desire is most clearly and concisely articulated in the essay “Otherwise than Place”: “What interests me right now,” he writes, “are the possibilities for reverse flow in a relationship that has been so thoroughly one-way. The saga of place has involved colonization, agriculture, exploitation, land use, resourcism, and development, sustainable and otherwise. ‘What we make,’ Helen Humphreys observes, ‘doesn’t recover from us’” (DW 18). Without claiming to know precisely how to enact such a reversal, McKay offers “meditative medicine” (19), ways of
attempting the world rather than ways of owning the world, ways of listening to many voices, stories, songs, rather than ways of telling the same old story and enforcing the same old binaries: science/literature, nature/culture, baseland/hinterland, texts/lumps—I see in McKay’s poetry a desire to undermine the uninflected authority of such conceptual models of the universe by lingering in the ecotone between categories, disciplines, and genres.

Ecologists define ecotone as a “zone of transition between adjacent ecological systems, having a set of characteristics uniquely defined by space and time scales, and by the strength of the interactions between adjacent ecological systems” (di Castri et al. qtd. in Küppers 286). Literary critic John Elder elaborates on ecotone’s potential function within environmentally conscious criticism, paying particular attention to the way an ecotone partakes “of some of the physical attributes of each constituent environment and harbour[s] some of the creatures from each as well. Within such a meeting ground, ‘edge-effect’ prevails, in a diversity of species that exceeds those of the separate ecosystems as well as the relative density of individual organisms” (Reading 21). In other words, the ecotone is a “special version of edge” that operates tropically—as a linguistic and literary trope—as “the site of artistic activity” (Ricou Arbutus 144) and ecologically as the site of interaction, overlap, and biodiversity not seen in other systems.

The metaphor works best when it isn’t forced, when it isn’t so far removed from the pre-linguistic, from, in this case, the ecological paradigm where it was first developed as a useful strategy of approach to evolutionary processes in nature. In a similar way, ecocriticism works best when critics pay as much attention to the world poets write about as they do to the words poets use. Poets’ attention to the names of things asks for a similar attention on the part of discerning readers; a white-throated sparrow does not simply appear in McKay’s “Drinking Lake
Superior” (SD 96) any more than the Tantramar Marshes happen to be the setting of Charles G.D. Roberts’ “The Tantramar Revisited” (74-77). Both are present to invest their respective poems with specific referents that exist inside and outside the textual world; the taxonomic and geographic specificity reflects a proximity to the natural world, an intimate knowledge, which combines with a lyric aesthetic to give the poetry an immediacy. More than simply autobiographical decisions that posit the author in a geographical location at the time of writing, especially in the case of McKay’s poetry, such choices represent acts of autobioregionalism: setting informs content, “[t]he nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Buell Environmental 7). Setting is content and attention to the former (by way of field guides, scientific monographs, and amateur observation) reflects and modifies attention to the latter (by way of close reading, contextualization, and comparisons to other texts). In my dissertation, I pursue the hypothesis that ecological knowledge can significantly shape the process of reading poetry in the same way historical, political, and cultural knowledges can.

By positioning my work deliberately in unfamiliar territory and destabilizing the comfortable, disciplined practice I have developed over years of specialized, academic training as a literary critic, I am embracing the principle of risk-taking that informs much interdisciplinary research. Dana Phillips articulates a version of risk when worrying there might be “a danger that those who, like [him]self, are interested in ecology, but whose training is not scientific and who must cope with an entirely different set of difficulties, will gloss over or minimize the significance of the problems ecologists face in understanding the natural world” (51). Phillips is recapitulating Matthew Arnold’s warning in “Literature and Science” that “[a] man of letters, it will perhaps be said, is not competent to discuss the comparative merits of
letters and natural science as means of education. To this objection I reply, first of all, that his incompetence, if he attempts the discussion but is really incompetent for it, will be abundantly visible; nobody will be taken in; he will have plenty of sharp observers and critics to save mankind from that danger” (488). For Arnold, the risk is two-fold: the risk of failure followed by the danger of being caught out. His plan for dealing with the danger is to approach a discussion about the natural sciences with a “tone of tentative inquiry, which befits a being of dim faculties and bounded knowledge” (493). I, too, undertake an interdisciplinary study of McKay’s poetry adopting a “tone of tentative inquiry.” I modify my tentativeness, however, with the understanding that ecocritics in Canada are becoming increasingly open to multiple strategies of approach; and I embrace the risk of failure because failure inheres in poetry’s attempt to enact change. As David Gilchrest asks in *Greening the Lyre*, “what can poetry really hope to accomplish in the face of environmental devastation and extraordinary rates of extinction? How can an art that is considerably marginalized in the public sphere alter the bearings of a culture bent on destruction?” (146-47). My provisional response to Gilchrest by way of this dissertation on the poetry of Don McKay, is that poetry is capable of modelling a process of thinking our human relation to the nonhuman world. While I remain optimistic about poetry’s capacity to inform environmental justice movements, for example, I am also aware that, as Tim Lilburn says in an interview, “failure runs through the project of intent” (“Provisional” 177). Failure as part of an epistemological, interrogative process, though, leads willing participants in potentially fruitful directions. Chip Taylor, a lepidopterist studying migratory behaviour of monarch butterflies, puts it succinctly when talking with Sue Halpern, author of a book about monarch migration: “Failure tells you where to go next” (99).

My dissertation engages ecology’s focus on “the interactions that determine the
distribution and abundance of organisms” and teases out the precariousness of those connections; the edges between all things are serrated, ready to tear, or be torn, at any moment. Much ecocritical discourse does not attend to this edge, to its messy lines, its perforations, serrations, latches, and hesitant conjunctive “ands.” Writing about changes in plant physiology in hedgerow ecotones, ecologist Manfred Küppers effectively blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, implicating humans as potentially important factors “responsible for generating ecotones” (286) and opening a space for ecotones as a model for interdisciplinary research. By extension, for writer Chris Anderson, “the ‘edge effect’ has meant a greater variety and density of experience, a multiplying of perspectives. Life is fuller here on the edge,” he writes, “and harder. There's more beauty and more tension, greater solitude and greater obligation” (xv). For Paul Shepard, similarly, “‘edge effect’ is rich not only because it includes passage by the creatures of adjacent habitats, but also its own fauna, and is therefore perceptually enriching as well” (67). Risk affords possibility. John Elder’s Imagining the Earth, in which Elder reads such environmentally conscious authors as Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, is a foundational work of ecocriticism that leaves explicit edginess to the works under scrutiny. Elder’s later book, Reading the Mountains of Home, is a more fully realized work of ecocriticism foundationalal for the way Elder focuses attention on a single poem—Robert Frost’s “Directive”—and a single place—the Green Mountains of Vermont—through the lenses of both literary criticism and local geology. Reading is a work of criticism that follows a path outward from the singular to the interconnectivities of ecological thought and environmental praxis.

Risk-taking is important to my ecocritical project for at least two reasons: First, following from my ecological and critical foregrounding of ecotones, I recognize risk as a constant part of the struggle for survival in the more-than-human world. An organism’s ability to adapt to the
dangers imposed by an ecotone’s unique composition depends upon its ability to use available resources and survive long enough to reproduce, thereby passing on the favourable traits and behaviours which will likely appear more frequently in the next generation and generations to come. Risk in this scenario, as in the case of interdisciplinary and collaborative research between science and the humanities, is worth taking because of the potential for reward: evolution through natural selection and the promulgation of the species. Second, I acknowledge the risk of being wrong when I attend to texts, projects, and materials using unconventional theories, strategies, and methods in which I am far from an expert. I argue that the risks—intellectual, academic, and professional—are worth the rewards of constantly challenging research and, by extension, of a more fully developed environmental awareness that recognizes the benefits to the environment of both scientific and literary research and writing.

**Part Two: Naming Accuracy**

In her Governor-General’s Award-winning collection *No Time*, Margaret Avison footnotes one of her poems in order 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)” (66). In 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? (1960: 354)

In the revised version, Avison changes the final stanza to reflect her new-found 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? (1989: 66)

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, in this case the world of butterflies and moths. 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. The 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 degree of accuracy—taxonomical, biological, ecological—that McKay’s poems do.

In a review of *Birding, or desire*, Robert Bringhurst identifies in McKay’s writing a “precision of observation” that distinguishes it from McKay’s Romantic antecedents (“Antithesis” 30). Referring to Wordsworth as a poet whose “vision of the natural world was full of rapture instead of detail,” Bringhurst articulates what has become a characteristic of McKay’s poetry since the publication of *Birding, or desire*, namely species specificity (30). In a dialogue between Bringhurst and Laurie Ricou published in *Inside the Poem*, Ricou picks up on Bringhurst’s earlier assessment and uses it to mark a significant distinction between different types of contemporary poets. The dialogue, taking as its subject Bringhurst’s poem “Sunday Morning,” is not conventional literary criticism but a discussion of, among other things, trees and birds, specifically bristlecone pine, *saxifraga punctata*, ravens, and white pelicans. Ricou aligns Bringhurst—the Bringhurst of “Sunday Morning,” at least—with other poets “who, like Don McKay, don’t say ‘tree’ and ‘bird,’” but white pine, red pine, loon, or Blackburnian warbler” (96). 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 (97). 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, in turn, reveals “some of the implicit patterns in the poem” (97): if the poet has 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.

However, the *eco*, the ecology, has often been left out of ecocriticism in favour of attempts at environmental concern minus the specific scientific knowledge (for example, ecological, botanical, evolutionary) that enables readers to make such concern meaningful in the long term, that is, by providing readers with a specialized 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” (*Crossing* 61). 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” (3; *emphasis added*). Vocabulary might not be all; or, as Phyllis Webb puts it in “Imperfect Sestina,” “there may be more to a bird than its name” (*Wilson’s* 72). 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 species of sparrow, 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 as Dana Phillips argues in his preface to *The Truth of Ecology*, “though the field has been described as an interdisciplinary one, ecocriticism has been lamentably under-informed by science studies, philosophy of science, environmental history, and ecology” (ix). Patrick D. Murphy provides some context for Phillips’ critique when he claims, three years earlier, that “[m]any ecocritical essays and analyses . . . display little working knowledge of contemporary critical and literary theories and tend to downplay the degree to which literary criticism constitutes a theoretical
discourse” (17-18). Murphy goes on, effectively anticipating Phillips’ desire “to cure ecocriticism of its fundamentalist fixation on literal representation” (Truth 7), to suggest that ecocritics “represent themselves as being antitheoretical because they oppose abstraction” (18). For all that Murphy purports to further the study of “nature-oriented literature,” though, he does little to advance ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary endeavour. Phillips likewise, for all that he calls upon ecocriticism to inform itself with the science of ecology, undermines the possibility by shifting his critique from ecocriticism to ecology proper. Ecocriticism has eschewed theory, ergo it has no literary critical use. So the story goes.

While I agree that ecocriticism has been under-informed by the science of ecology and by a literary theoretical framework necessary for mainstream academic acceptance, I do not agree that ecocriticism has been completely devoid of either science or theory. In the “Preface” to The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism, editors Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth “characterize theory as discussion and debates about basic definitions, as the search for necessary and sufficient foundations for evaluating critical practice, [and] as the self-reflexive process of making explicit underlying social, historical, or ideological interests and presuppositions” (ix). The study of literature, then, (as defined broadly and inclusively by no less than Matthew Arnold, below) is, by definition, theoretical. Likewise, the study of literature that focuses on the natural world with 1) an awareness of both “the abject thinness of language” and its paradoxical necessity (McKay 64) and 2) the “belief in an external world independent of the perceiving subject [which] is the basis of natural science” (Einstein 60), whether filtered through conventional theory or not, is also, by definition, theoretical. The belief to which Einstein refers, however, is a controversial one, to say the least, and one that has provoked a good deal of debate so far as the possibility—and value—of realism in literature is concerned.
In his critique of Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*, Phillips questions the practicality—and the sanity—of Buell’s desire for a redirection of the academic gaze outward from the text. Making reference to a “grove of second-growth white pines” that Buell claims “can be found in the pages of American literature” (5), Phillips says that “textual functions . . . is [sic] surely what the trees must be, and can only be . . . . It seems not so much naïve as occult to suppose otherwise” (6). Perhaps. And so the questions remain: How does one write or read about something (a white pine, a white whale, a white-throated sparrow) without defaulting to a symbolic, metaphoric, allegorical version, thereby attracting criticism for an anti-imaginary punctiliousness? How can a literary critic not take seriously J.M. Coetzee’s alter ego, Elizabeth Costello, who says in *The Lives of Animals*: “‘When Kafka writes about an ape, I take him to be talking in the first place about an ape; when [Thomas] Nagel writes about a bat, I take him to be writing, in the first place, about a bat’” (32)?

Or, perhaps not. One critic Phillips leaves out of his discussion is Joseph Carroll, whose *Evolution and Literary Theory* influences Glen Love’s *Practical Ecocriticism*, mainly for its “support of the tradition of interdisciplinary study, which recognizes the influence of an external world on the mind of the writer” (7). Arguing for “the relevance of biology to literary theory” by way of Darwinian evolutionary theory (1), Carroll recalls proponents of the New Criticism who do “not deny that literature is influenced by and refers to a world that exists independently of the literary text” (55). Clearly, a return to New Criticism, purely and simply, is not the answer: both Buell and Phillips decry such a move (albeit for different reasons: Buell, according to Phillips, wants nothing to do with theory while Phillips feels ecocriticism should embrace contemporary literary theory). But since the life sciences specialize in studying “a world that exists independently of the literary text,” I suggest much of what has been done in the area of
science and literature provides a useful starting point to considering how the scientific knowledge or method can inform ecocritical theory.

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 redcedar (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 redcedar and western hemlock (Tsuga heterophylla), northern flickers (Colaptes auratus), and Coast Salish people who build totems and canoes. I do not go so far as nineteenth-century naturalist John 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 “factual,” primarily “ornithological and botanical” mistakes “committed [by poets] for the sake of melodic or imagistic euphony” (Buell Environmental 88). I am less interested in correcting supposed lapses in accuracy, though such corrective measures might occasionally be warranted, as in Avison’s revision of “The Butterfly,” than I am in the poet’s attention to and attempts at accuracy by way of proximal knowing. The choice of “an obscure poet from Kansas” to “imagin[e] yews and nightingales” as part of the Kansas landscape—whether intentionally or not—despite the ecological inaccuracy, does not in itself make bad poetry. But it does not make ecologically sound poetry either. That Don McKay gets so many things ecologically and biologically right, though, raises important eco- and biocritical 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?

In his essay “Going Home,” Tim 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, for musical reasons” (184). According to Neil Evernden, “The act of naming may itself be part of the process of establishing a sense of place” (101); 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” (100-01). 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, for the crossing of “the mind’s appropriations” (McKay V 21), or interiority, with what exists beyond, even prior to, our cultural acquisitions. He cites Northrop Frye’s famous essay: “the motive for metaphor... is a desire to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it” (Frye 11; qtd. in Evernden 101). While Evernden wants to use Frye’s quotation to support an ecological literary criticism that recognizes the importance of the world as it exists outside human language, his ellipses elide Frye’s reference to Wallace Stevens, whose poem provides the title for Frye’s essay. Frye’s point, it seems to me, is to warn his fellow critics to be “careful of associative language” that attempts to “describe this world”—“the objective world, the world set against us”—without “logic and reason” (10-11). Contrary to Evernden’s ecocritical worldview, Frye argues that “literature belongs to the world man constructs, not to the world he sees; to his home, not his environment” (8), effectively enacting a separation between what Linda Hutcheon identifies as “the world that we construct” and “the world of nature” (“Eruptions” 154). In other words, to say my environment is my home
is to use a metaphor since environment is the world we see and home is the literary world we construct. Frye seems to be supporting a disjunctive worldview that reinforces such typical binaries as human and animal, culture and nature. But, 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” (30). 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—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” (Packard 107) 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” (V 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” (Herriot 218). Wilderness is place made personal and public all at once—and then unmade again in an instant through the breakdown of utility. 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 tactics seek to bridge ideological gaps between humans and nonhumans and epistemological gaps between what early Canadian ecocritics would have called baseland and hinterland, effectively positioning us alongside and within a “natural” pattern of existence while at the same time positioning nature within a “cultural” one. Poets and, to a lesser extent, ecocritics are in a position to rethink the historically colonial position they, in the West at least, have occupied for centuries: “The more we conquer nature,” writes Kinnell, “the more nature becomes our enemy, and since we are, like it or not, creatures of nature, the more we make an enemy of the very life within us” (260). One way of conceptualizing the importance of taxonomical accuracy when talking and writing of things in the world is metaphorically: relationships are built upon recognition and mutual respect, and to build a strong relationship is to be courteous, to enter “the realm of decorum” prepared to accept responsibility for human actions which lead to environmental change and, potentially, catastrophe (Lilburn 184). But metaphor is not the only way of conceptualizing this dynamic.

I am interested in how the field guide informs McKay’s observations of the natural world and in how the particular things field guides purport to explain—the flora and fauna that live outside language—occupy, inhabit, and modify McKay’s poetry. As a reader, a literary critic, and an ecocritic, I am aware that a knowledge of species specificity in McKay’s work is important for a number of reasons, which I explore in the chapters that follow. In Chapter One, I argue that ecologically attuned poetry that invites readers along an intertextual route of referents
can be considered both realistic—that is, to be referring to something in the external world—and symbolic—that is, to be representing something which is of inherent intellectual value to humans. Similar to the way that history, anthropology, geography, and other modes of knowing that exist outside of given literary texts have come to function as significant context when reading literature, science can operate as a valid intertextual and referential context in literary criticism. In Chapter Two, I investigate how the science of bird flight problematizes the Romantic connection between flight and Truth, tracing McKay's understanding of aerodynamics in general, of bird flight more specifically, and of humans' various attempts to defy gravity. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how McKay enacts a listening on the page, unsettling the long-standing relation between lyric poetry and birdsong by examining birdsong from an evolutionary biology perspective; I argue for a lyric humility necessary as a counterbalance to the unavoidable anthropocentricity of poetry. In order to practice the risk I put forward as evocative ecocritical strategy, I also include three Interchapters, or Ecotones that develop a narrative out of the challenging process literary critics face when stepping out of the office and into the field. I write these Ecotones—Field Marks; Field Guides; Field Notes—about a nameless critic, in the third-person, for two reasons: 1) to unsettle the authority of the critical ‘I’; and 2) to suggest a creative mode of academic inquiry complementary to more traditional modes of criticism.

Part Three: History of the Science and Literature Debate

Before literary critics began engaging in discussions about the role science might or might not play in developing an ecocritical theory, scientists and philosophers were concerned with the differences between science and literature in a broader sense. Thomas Henry Huxley and Matthew Arnold in the Victorian period, and C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis in the mid-twentieth century, have all been influential, if unwitting, participants in the growing discourse of
One of the earliest public intellectual debates between science and literature, broadly speaking, was sparked by Huxley's lecture, "Science and Culture," in which he challenges those opposed to the introduction of physical sciences into "ordinary education," that is, the classics and philosophy. Huxley's sardonic riposte to classical scholars and the "practical men," of whom few apparently remained in 1880, and who think "that science is speculative rubbish[,] that theory and practice have nothing to do with one another," culminates in Huxley's expression of two convictions he holds very strongly: "The first is, that neither the discipline nor the subject-matter of classical education is of such direct value to the student of physical science as to justify the expenditure of valuable time upon either; and the second is, that for the purpose of attaining real culture, an exclusively scientific education is at least as effectual as an exclusively literary education." Not surprisingly, Huxley's invocation of culture, and real culture no less, is simultaneously an invocation of—and an invitation to—Arnold, the avatar of contemporary anglophile culture. Huxley posits Arnold's oft-quoted definition of culture—as that which seeks "to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere"—as an anti-scientific sentiment and "strongly dissent[s] from the assumption that literature alone is competent to supply this knowledge" of which Arnold writes. "That the study of nature," Huxley asserts, "should have any bearing on human life was far from the thoughts of men thus trained" in the Arnoldian sense of culture. Accordingly, the nature/culture divide is aligned with a science/literature divide the full complexity of which, though compelling, falls beyond the scope of my current focus on birds and poetry.

Arnold wasted little time fashioning a public response to Huxley's argument, delivering "Literature and Science" as the Rede Lecture at Cambridge in August, 1882 and revising it to take on a lecture tour of America (1883-84). Calling for an agreement "about the
meaning of the terms” he and Huxley use (490), Arnold aims to describe what is meant by 
literature: “Literature is a large word; it may mean everything written with letters or printed in a 
book. Euclid’s Elements and Newton’s Principia are thus literature. All knowledge that reaches 
us through books is literature. But by literature Professor Huxley means belles lettres” (490). 
Whereas Arnold allows that the division between science and literature is not a universal one, 
Huxley, in his attempt to elevate scientific education to the status of the classics, reinforces the 
divide. Eighty years after the Huxley-Arnold debate, C.P. Snow resurrects the claim about how 
“traditional culture, which is, of course, mainly literary,” is divided into what he terms the “two 
cultures.” “The separation between the two cultures,” he states, “has been getting deeper under 
our eyes; there is now precious little communication between them, little but different kinds of 
incomprehension and dislike” (1). As recently as 2001, books are being published that revisit and 
reinforce C.P. Snow’s infamous division, in spite of the fact that Snow himself reneged on his 
dichotomous impulse in 1963 to allow for the possibility of a “Third Culture,” and in spite of 
F.R. Leavis’s adamant rebuttal, published as “Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow.” It 
suffices to say that the debate still continues, even while some ecocritics insist that the 
boundaries between disciplines are, like those in ecological systems, membranous and 
permeable.

Part Four: Ecocriticism

In 1978, G.S. Rousseau wrote about science and literature as a distinct field of research. 
That same year, William Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism in “Literature and Ecology: An 
Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Rueckert’s experiment—as important as it remains—has been 
more influential for what it says vis-à-vis a potential merging of literature and ecology than for 
how it defines the problems “of keeping the human community from destroying the natural
community, and with it the human community” (107). Or rather, form and content in his essay represent different versions of how: in the first instance (that has stood the test of time), the how is in the tone of the piece—a tone of sentimental and not-too-scientific posturing; in the second instance (that has largely been ignored these past thirty years or so), the how is in the form of the piece—an admittedly experimental form that gestures toward the process(es) of attending to an interdisciplinary project to bring together literary criticism and the life sciences, particularly ecology, (evolutionary) biology, botany, and ethology. The form of Rueckert’s experiment is paratactic, employing as it does a series of loosely connected ideas marked by such headings as “Energy Pathways which Sustain Life,” “Poems as Green Plants,” and “Teaching and Critical Discourse as Forms of Symbiosis.” Following from Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology—“Everything is connected to everything else”—the connections between sections in Rueckert’s essay are implicit. The meanings of the connections, though, require input from the reader in a way that is unconventional for literary criticism: Rueckert desires a collaboration with the reader. In this desire, Rueckert demonstrates more of an ecocritical tendency than Joseph Meeker’s The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology, widely considered an early instance of ecocriticism, though it predates Rueckert’s coinage. Meeker is more interested in studying biological themes and how they influence “the ecology of the human species” (9) than he is in studying anthropocentric themes and how they influence the ecology of, say, ground-nesting waterbirds in threatened wetlands.

It was not until the publication of The Ecocriticism Reader in 1996 that ecocriticism was proposed to be a legitimate academic sub-discipline, though Cheryll Glotfelty claims in her Introduction to the anthology that “ecocriticism as a critical approach . . . predates its recent consolidation by more than twenty years” (xviii). In the decades leading up to the publication of
The Ecocriticism Reader, and in the years since, numerous anthologies and studies have appeared. Some look to canonize decades of nature writing: Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition (1991); The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture (1995); Reading under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism (2000); A Century of Early Ecocriticism (2001); A New Theory for American Poetry (2003). Others aim to expand the boundaries of ecocriticism to include studies of cultural theory, film, and texts not typically considered environmental or ecological: Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature (2000); Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism (2001); Milton and Ecology (2003); Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics (2004). The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003 is perhaps the most adept at tracing ecocriticism's scholarly development by reprinting articles from ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature and Environment. However, other texts are important for the definitions of ecocriticism they offer, including the following key definitions:

Cheryll Glotfelty: Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its readings of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xviii)

Karen Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace: A viable ecocriticism must continue to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures. . . . [E]cocritics should continue to strive for interdisciplinarity and, in particular, continue to turn to existing scholarship in
areas such as environmental history, cultural and political geography, American studies, regional and urban studies, and landscape architecture for their insights into the relationship between natural and cultural environments. (4-5)

Lawrence Buell: 'Ecocriticism' might succinctly be defined as study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis. (Environmental 430 n.20)

Laurie Ricou: Ecocriticism attempts to integrate the examination of text and language with the science of ecology. (“Ecocriticism” 324)

Glotfelty's “simple” definition still remains a touchstone because of all it can include; however, the shift from “physical environment” to “earth-centred” is troubling. An earth-centred approach to literary studies, while worthwhile, is limited, in my mind, to a geologic, perhaps geographic, focus with little space for floral and faunal inhabitants of earth. (Such “earth-centred” texts as Elder's Reading the Mountains of Home and, as I discuss in much more detail in my conclusions, portions of McKay's latest essay collection, Deactivated West 100, however, demonstrate an inclusiveness I think Glotfelty would prefer.) Similarly, I second Armbruster and Wallace’s call for a more interdisciplinary approach, but I am confused, and somewhat disappointed, by the disciplines they privilege since none of them is scientific. Ricou’s definition, similar to Glotfelty’s in the relative heft of its simplicity, is the only one that mentions ecology as a science. In Ecocriticism, published under the aegis of Routledge’s New Critical Idiom series, Greg Garrard effectively traces the origins of ecocriticism to the beginnings of “modern environmentalism,” namely Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring in 1962.23 A well-researched, well-written treatise on the environmental dangers of chemical pollutants—chiefly DDT—Carson’s book is an example of ecocriticism according to Garrard because of “the
rhetorical strategies, use of pastoral and apocalyptic imagery and literary allusions with which Carson shapes her scientific material” in order to make *Silent Spring* “amenable to a more ‘literary’ or ‘cultural’ analysis” (3). Such a ‘literary’ massaging of her scientific material—most of which has been retrospectively confirmed—is necessary because students and scholars in the humanities have a hard time assessing scientific data “on their own terms,” because “scientific problems seem to require scientific expertise” (Garrard 3). Garrard appears to ignore, or be unaware of, Dana Phillips’ critique of ecocriticism’s lack of science when he claims that ecocritics, though they “may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in [the science of] ecology . . . must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ‘ecological literacy’ as far as possible” (5). The strength of Garrard’s modal auxiliary (*must*) seems a bit strained here, especially since, as he suggests, “ecocritics remain suspicious of science as wholly objective and value-free” (10). Unfortunately, the suspicion, as both Love and Phillips will attest, tends to outweigh the modal priority of getting the science right: The suggestion that American studies be a prerequisite points to another problem I have with these definitions: all but Ricou are American critics writing from a predominantly American, though also British, perspective.

**Part Five: Canada’s Fledgling Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism in Canada has been notoriously slow to develop, a result of Canadian literature and scholarship being produced in the shadow of European and American writing; also, as Laurie Ricou suggests in “So Big about Green,” “[p]erhaps Canadians’ writing of the land as adversary inhibits eco-criticism” (3). Ironically, Ricou suggests that “Canadian literary studies, with their long-standing interest in nature, wilderness, and landscape, might be said to have always been ecocritical” (“Ecocriticism” 324). Some of the studies Ricou is most likely
referring to include texts not typically labelled as ecocritical, such as D.G. Jones’ *Butterfly on Rock*; Dennis Lee’s *Savage Fields*; W.H. New’s *Land Sliding* and *Borderlands*; and Ricou’s own *Vertical Man/Horizontal World*. Susie O’Brien begins her important essay, “Nature’s Nation, National Natures? Reading Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context,” by acknowledging, and lamenting, the absence of Canadian writers and literature in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. “Is it that the Americans are at the cutting edge of literary criticism and we just have not arrived there yet? Or is there a substantial body of what might be called ‘Canadian ecocriticism’ lurking under names other than ‘Canadian’ or ‘ecocritical’? Or might there be something peculiarly American about ecocriticism, something that, for all its globalist connotations, cannot survive north of the 49th parallel?” (18). As Diana M.A. Relke reminds us in *Greenwor(l)ds: ecocritical readings of Canadian women’s poetry*, “Ricou was, of course, alluding to Northrop Frye’s impression that ‘a tone of deep terror in regard to nature’ has always been a unique characteristic of the Canadian literary imagination” (206; Frye 830). Frye’s impression, along with his infamous “garrison mentality,” is similar to C.P. Snow’s construction, nearly a decade earlier, of the ‘two cultures’ in that, despite Frye’s powerful presence and contribution to literary criticism—and not just in Canada—“not all the critics who followed Frye’s lead saw Canadian writers as endorsing the view of nature as a terrifying ‘other,’ opposed to human consciousness” (Relke 207). While such a claim, as Relke herself admits, is hardly provocative, the so-called “othering” of nature persists, and because it persists, ecocritics in Canada might do well to remember Frye’s foundational *conclusion* regarding Canadian literature and its influence on generations of writers. I choose this word carefully here; I find it interesting, as an ecocritic and a Canadianist, that Frye’s most lasting contribution to Canadian literary studies comes in the form of a conclusion, namely to Carl F. Klinck’s *Literary History of Canada*. Concluding Canadian literature in 1965
strikes me as premature, although to be fair, Frye wrote a second “Conclusion” in 1976, in which he modifies his earlier view of Canadian poetry as so much “metrical doodling” to admitting a degree of “extraordinary vitality and morale” (qtd. in Hutcheon “Field” xiii). Most notable among writers influenced by Frye’s thinking, Margaret Atwood wrote *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Atwood, a Frygian through and through, has herself influenced generations of Canadian and international writers and critics. Her idea of “survival,” as an extension of Frye’s “garrison mentality,” has received its fair share of criticism; by extension, her thematic strategy triggered a riposte over a decade later when Frank Davey published “Surviving the Paraphrase” in *Canadian Literature*. Davey, though, was concerned more with a particular style of literary criticism that seemingly denied a theoretical approach than with an overtly ecocritical/environmental ethic. Ecocritics in Canada would do well to avoid perpetuating a view of nature—whether through an ecocritical lens or not—that ignores humans as natural as well as cultural beings by moving beyond a critical reliance on place and embracing, and doing, more of the science on their way to attempting the world.

Many Canadian works of criticism that could be considered ecocritical are interested in literature of place. But place carries little metaphoric significance if it is not posited within a greater ecological framework. As Laurie Ricou writes in *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*,

> Reading the place bounded by the salmon story recognizes a region that is both salt water and fresh (and has a life both in and out of water), of rain forest and desert, of metropolitan centre and hinterland inter-dependent. Salmon ecology is a complicated mutually sustaining transaction among animal, plant, water, atmosphere, world. At its best, the human element of a salmon economy integrates with this cycle: at least, art and literature model this integration. (104-5)
In Ricou’s “Salmon File,” as in much of his ecocritical work, narrative includes oral tales, written stories/poetry, biology, and ecology; that “sockeye average 15 per cent body fat reserves” at the beginning of their upstream migration only to have “almost all this reserve . . . used up during the upriver journey to spawn” is key information for Ricou’s reading of salmon stories (109). It is key information for anyone paying attention to the natural and cultural interconnections of literature and, as is the case with many Indigenous stories, orature. Such ecological knowledge places salmon within and along(side) a living matrix of biological and narrative connectivity for which a focus on place alone—or, more accurately, on humans’ relation to place—does not allow. In contrast to previous “critical models of Canadian identity,” which as Christoph Irmscher argues have “focused not on the environment . . . but on its human inhabitants” (95), Ricou’s ecocriticism is more inclusive both theoretically and politically. Various First Nations’ narratives and knowledges regarding land and environment, which have often been marginalized in academic discourse, are as central to Ricou’s reading of the Pacific northwest as Euroamerican novelists from Vancouver or Portland, Haida Gwaii or Lopez Island. 24 I take such an ecocritical strategy as a model for my own reading of and writing about McKay’s work.

Part Six: Why Birds, or Putting the Avian in McKavian

These histories of science and literature crossovers and of ecocriticism (both generally and in Canada) inform the evolution of my reading strategies, especially as they have developed with respect to McKay’s writing about birds. His method of attending to “the possibilities for reverse flow” is shaped by the years he has spent bird-watching, an activity “which in [his] experience involves a mental set nearly identical to writing: a kind of suspended expectancy, tools at the ready, full awareness that the creatures cannot be compelled to appear” (“Some
Remarks" 858). At times throughout my thesis, I find it necessary to refer to a poetics or aesthetics as uniquely McKay's, that is, to render McKay as an adjective. For most writers, the adjectival form rolls off the tongue without the need to qualify the inflection: Derridean, Dickensian, Whitmanesque, even Frygian, have entered the critical vocabulary. For McKay, however, the inflection is slightly more complicated, if only because McKay's poetry has just recently begun to gain critical attention on a national scale. Since McKay sounds and looks like Frye, I tried the adjective McKagian for a spell; it didn't last. McKayesque sounds okay, but it looks horrendous. I finally settled on McKavian: the 'v' does for McKay what the 'g' does for Frye; and, as if I need to make it clearer, I like the "avian" echo—its musicality and precision given McKay's interests in birds and birding.

But why write a dissertation about birds for a degree in English literature? Critic John Rowlett offers a fairly typical set of reasons for humans' historical interest in birds and calls on ecocritics to elaborate:

For anyone interested in ecological criticism and theory, the class Aves composes an especially rewarding group of natural creatures to inquire into since, like us, they are found in every waste and wilderness of every continent; they extend every ocean to the sky. They enliven every doorstep, and are known—to some extent—by all humans. Birds have always provided food for thought as well as for the table, and, as any birder of taste knows, they have inspired a range of aesthetic responses. For some time now, they have constituted a subject of study in their own right, serving as a pleasurable means of examining questions in ecology, ethology, biochemical systematics, and evolutionary biogeography—and as a rather less pleasurable means of measuring the health of our environment. (631)
Birds are often considered to be unequivocally “other” than humans, not to mention other earth- or sea-bound creatures. Leonard Nathan, in *Diary of a Left-Handed Birdwatcher*, cites Donald Culross Peattie to explain why: “Man feels himself an infinity above those creatures who stand, zoologically, only one step below him, but every human being looks up to the birds. They seem like emissaries of another world which exists about us and above us, but into which, earth-bound, we cannot penetrate” (qtd. in Nathan 11-12).

In addition, Nathan also tells a story, an origin story of sorts, to account for the particular affinity between poets and birds. He tells the story of Vālmiki, the great Indian sage who “utters a terrible curse” on a hunter whose arrow has killed a male Krauncha bird in the midst of a mating ritual. The sage utters the curse, it seems, in the form of a “well-turned couplet” and, as a consequence, invents poetry; Vālmīki, in other words, is simultaneously the first poet and the first birdwatcher (15-16). Nathan’s story follows his claim that “poetry and birds have been associated since the beginning of civilization, probably before. . . . [A]ncient poets put birds into their poems not just a symbols for human feelings but also as authentic forms of otherness. . . . Birds enter poems to mediate between us and the world” (15). Unfortunately, in this instance, Nathan seems to assume that “we” and birds are not part of the world. Although birds often represent for McKay “authentic forms of otherness,” he tends not to make assumptions regarding humans’ superior place in the world, despite the obvious differences. In the chapters and interchapters that follow, I argue for a particularly McKavian way of thinking the relation between humans and the more-than-human world. By focusing on specific birds McKay writes about in his poetry, and by attending to field guides as well as literary criticism, I demonstrate McKay’s role in a tradition of Canadian nature writing and his influence on Canada’s fledgling ecocriticism.
ECOTONE ONE

Poetry’s landscape is an ecotone where human and natural orders meet.—John Elder

Field Marks

Knowing, not owning:
being, not having,
the rags and the blisters
of knowledge we have.—Robert Bringhurst

During the following half century [between 1934 and 1990] the binocular and the spotting scope have replaced the shotgun.—Roger Tory Peterson

It’s an almost stereotypical way for an English graduate student to begin the day: with coffee and a newspaper. This day, it is a quietly patient routine he hopes will translate effortlessly to time spent in the field: quietly patient routine as metaphor—no, not just metaphor, but strategy—for living every day in the world. As a student of literature, he (the birder-critic; let’s call him BC) understands that field work inheres metaphorically in the process of close reading, a process distinct from the act of theorizing critical strategies of approach and analysis. The difference between close reading and theorizing is, he admits, a difference in degree and not in kind; he is all the more aware of this distinction for having shifted his research focus from the postmodern implications of Canadian historiographic metafiction to the ecological implications of Canadian poetry. The latter interest has, almost by necessity, become a compulsion to resist categorizing himself as a particular kind of scholar—to being categorized, labeled, lumped in with a group of like-minded academics—by insisting on the permeability of disciplinary and epistemological boundaries. Over time, BC has come to realize the boundaries more closely resemble, not permeable cell walls, but intertidal zones, riparian buffer strips, and forest-clearcut edges: what ecologists call ecotones, areas where two ecosystems meet at their edges and create a third ecosystem with shared and distinct characteristics. Literary criticism, then, resembles
Northrop Frye understood field work’s metaphorical power when he wrote the preface to his collection of *Essays on the Canadian Imagination, The Bush Garden* in 1971. For Frye, who built a reputation writing about “world literature” and addressing “an international reading public,” the annual review essays he wrote for *The University of Toronto Quarterly* during the 1950s were “an essential piece of ‘field work’ to be carried on while [he] was working out a comprehensive critical theory,” namely his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Bush xxviii). The poetry being written in Canada while Frye was teaching at the University of Toronto became a field through which Frye could, as it were, walk; his proximity to that field, his closeness to living poets and a specific, albeit geographically diverse, place—the political entity called Canada—inflected the drift of his critical works thereafter.

BC likes to think that Canadian poetry is to Frye’s criticism as birds are to BC’s ecocriticism: “it is with human beings as it is with birds: the creative instinct has a great deal to do with the assertion of territorial rights” (Frye *Bush* xxi). Moreover, it is with the study of patterns in poetry as it is with the recognition of patterns in the field: “There is order in the universe, and birds are no exception. All the minutiae of variation (appearance, behavior, occurrence, etc.) fit into predictable patterns [which with experience] coalesce into a framework of knowledge” (Sibley 10). Margaret Atwood recapitulates both Frye’s avian metaphor and the field guide author’s emphasis on pattern recognition in her foundational and since controversial *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, which “attempts one simple thing. It outlines a number of key patterns which [Atwood] hope[s] will function like the field markings in bird-books: they will help you distinguish this species from all others, Canadian literature from the other literatures with which it is often compared or confused” (19). Pattern recognition
is an important step in identifying and then talking about birds and literature. As much as BC appreciates both Frye's and Atwood's avian references, he recognizes in them the beginnings of a pattern that literary critics in Canada were quick to dismiss as too simplistic and reductionist. If he is going to accomplish anything useful with his dissertation, he will have to avoid the pitfalls of thematic criticism without dismissing it outright and engage an experiential criticism that flourishes in the space between thematics and theory, words and worlds.

In order to understand how a poet's proximal relation to birds inflects his poetry about birds, BC decides one day to take up his binoculars; to find a portable field guide, and to spend some time outdoors. Reading Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood is all well and good—and necessary if BC is to satisfy the University's requirements for an advanced degree in Canadian literature—but an extra-literary approach to contemporary Canadian poetry is also necessary to attempt an ecological literary criticism that recognizes ecology as both a science and a metaphor. On the one hand, poets privileged enough to spend time birding (and to write about birds and/or birding) tend to acknowledge in their very language their own linguistic, and therefore human, limitations. On the other hand, birding might be one of the most democratic of outdoor activities. Everyone is a birder, whether one lives in country or city, farmland or suburbs. One of the stranger examples of this tenet—bordering on the surreal—is the collection of observations made by American soldier Jonathan Trouern-Trend while he was on a tour of duty in Iraq, called *Birding Babylon: A Soldier's Journal from Iraq*. An early entry provides a glimpse into the surreality: “Birding was limited due to being surrounded by thousands of coalition troops coming from or going to Iraq.” A month later, Trouern-Trend recounts having “to go everywhere in body armor and helmet, so Saturday was a day for birding in ‘full battle rattle,’ weapon included, of course.” Thinking about the incongruity of these images while trying to identify which species of
warbler has landed in the cedars along the pond’s south edge, BC is thankful the only “battle rattle” he sports consists of binoculars, camera, pen, and paper.

Back home, BC picks up Beryl Rowland’s *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* and reads the preface while his photos upload from the camera. He reads about how “Emily Dickinson was able to confront a bobolink or robin at eye level as it happened along the path in her Amherst garden, and appreciate both symbol and fact simultaneously” (vii). Despite living in an apartment without access to a garden, BC desires precisely that simultaneity Dickinson was able to appreciate and translate into poetry. The simultaneity of “symbol and fact” permeates his dissertation about birds in Don McKay’s writing, while BC struggles to articulate the significance of such avian tension. Because, as Rowland suggests, “we rely more and more [for our delight in birds] on memories and traditions derived not from life but from books” (viii), BC intends to rely less on books than he would have before he began reading McKay’s poetry.

By combining the literary with the extra-literary, he feels he can get closer to the birds, trees, and rivers he reads about, much the way biographies help readers get closer to the authors they are about, and historical context brings readers into proximity with a literary time. But, as Leonard Nathan has noted, “Field study requires hard labor, a willingness to sit a whole bitterly cold day on some icy ridge waiting for something to happen” (127); BC is used to sitting all day—but usually in climate-controlled offices and libraries. With field work, you hope “the willingness and waiting sometimes pay off with a special thrill. You feel it when you see knowledge—even small bits of it—fill in the empty slots of your ignorance, when data begin to assemble themselves into a pattern” (Nathan 127). Patterns interest BC immensely; he has been thinking a lot about how the literature he’s been reading lately is concerned with patterns, with
recording them rather than with solving them. BC had recently read a novel set in turn-of-the-century England; one of the characters, George, is urged by his sister, Maud, to take up birdwatching, and he measures the benefits against the "hard labor" noted elsewhere:

He stuck at it dutifully for a few months, but in truth he had trouble following a bird in flight, and the ones at rest seemed to take pleasure in being camouflaged. Additionally and alternatively, many of the places from which it was deemed best to watch birds struck him as cold and damp. If you had spent three years in prison, you did not need any more cold and damp in your life until you were placed in your coffin and lowered into the coldest and dampest place of all. That had been George's considered view of birdwatching. (Barnes 329)

Prison had not been part of BC's life thus far so, while the comparison might be apt, it wasn't enough to deter him from undertaking to bird. And, though Vancouver can hardly be said to threaten with bitter cold and icy ridges, it has its share of cold, rainy days that might give even the most ardent birder pause. But birding has the capacity to bring readers into closer contact with the world and its inhabitants. In a published dialogue with British Columbian writer Robert Bringhurst about Bringhurst's poem "Sunday Morning," Laurie Ricou argues convincingly "that the poem is to the critic as the bird is to the ornithologist.... The birder-critic, who must pay close attention to the nuances of marking, has first to be quietly patient" (93). BC progresses, stepping away from the text and into various fields, from recognizing field marks and using field guides to eventually becoming a writer himself and making field notes.

Back in his living room with his coffee and paper, something catches BC's attention. Maybe it's because that morning, Thursday 28 September 2006, he was planning to step out of the office and into an actual field to observe birds instead of just reading about them. A headline
in the *Globe and Mail*’s Review section—“Birdman of B.C.”—initiates a process he hadn’t planned to undertake. The article, a fairly straightforward Q&A with Vancouver author and artist, Douglas Coupland, wasn’t really about birds. But something in the interviewer’s final question, the only question that included any mention of birds, resonates. Leah McLaren recounts the last time she met Coupland, when he was “taking a case of peanuts home to feed the blue jays” (R2). That morning, he—the birder-critic—accomplishes a task of epiphanic proportions. He recognizes an error in nomination, a failure in taxonomy. Douglas Coupland, you see, lives on British Columbia’s west coast. Blue jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*) do not. 

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, “The western edge of the range stops abruptly where the arid pine forest and scrub habitat of the closely related Steller’s jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) begins” (“Blue Jay” n.p.). Coupland feeds Steller’s jays on a regular basis, not eastern blue jays. Is the mistake McLaren’s, BC wonders, or Coupland’s?

The Steller’s jay was the first west-of-Alberta species BC came to recognize. Having grown up in Southern Ontario, the birds of his childhood and, as a result, of his imagination were mourning doves, grackles, cardinals, and blue jays. Once in Vancouver, though, those birds came to occupy a portion of his consciousness reserved for nostalgia, at best, and narrow-minded assumptions regarding the primacy of originary experience, at worst. He recalls some favourite lines from one of John Thompson’s ghazals: “Absence makes what / presence, presence” (135). Mourning doves gave over to rock doves (pigeons), grackles to northwestern crows, cardinals to starlings²⁶, and blue jays to Steller’s jays. Of the four new species in BC’s expanding worldview, only the crows and Steller’s jays were native to British Columbia; only the Steller’s jays were not a ubiquitous presence. Perhaps it was this refusal to be ever-present that drew BC to these crafty, loud versions of blue jays. Crows and jays are among the most common of bird families,
the Corvidae, which also includes ravens, magpies, and other jays; they are found worldwide, except for South America, Antarctica, and some islands (Peterson 252). Northwestern crows (Corvus caurinus) differ from American crows (Corvus brachyrhynchos) in at least three ways: they are slightly smaller, have faster wingbeats, and, as their common name suggests, occur along “the narrow northwestern coast strip” of North America (252).

BC understands, without much in the way of research or field work, why pigeons, starlings, and crows are so successful and so, well, present. Ironically, intelligence—at least in the way humans understand intelligence—doesn’t seem to have much to do with ubiquity in Vancouver. Crows and starlings have both demonstrated certain intellectual capacities previously thought to be the sole domain of primates, if not of humans—New Caledonian crows can actually make tools (cf. Weir, Chappell, and Kacelnik), and starlings have the capacity to recognize recursive linguistic structures (cf. Gentner, et al.)—but feral pigeons seem about as unintelligent as an avian species can be when placed in a human-centric paradigm. Steller’s jays exist somewhere in between. They might not be as intelligent as crows or as sweetly linguistic as starlings—their “harsh ‘shaar,’ and rapid rattling ‘shek, shek, shek, shek’” (“Steller’s” n.p.) are not likely to inspire the next Mozart—but they exhibit a jouissance possibly a third of the way toward ravenhood. In fact, Steller’s jays look like they’re wearing a hood of raven (or crow) feathers (Fig. 1).

Around the same time BC arrived in British Columbia and began replacing the memories of eastern birds with the experiences of western ones, Don McKay was publishing essays about his experiences as a migratory poet-birder. For McKay, “bushtits were one of the first west-of-the-Rockies species” he encountered (V 83). The encounter was significant enough to inspire an essay, “The Bushtit’s Nest,” about the relations among metaphor, wilderness, and poetry,
because McKay, a well-known birder, was unable to identify the birds when first asked—"which was socially embarrassing, but at the same time exciting, since the details of their presence . . . could occur without the centralizing and reductive influence of the name, which so often signals the terminal point of our interest" (V 83-4). In McKay's poetics, each of these familiar words—metaphor, wilderness, poetry—means differently; each word, newly understood, enables an engagement with the world that neither recapitulates nor reaffirms a colonial relation to the world through language: metaphor is "the place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of re-presenting the world" (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). BC likes that McKay simultaneously loves and distrusts language, admires the way he finds comfort in the inevitable failure of his, and all, naming.

BC's quiet patience includes a willingness to fail, a willingness to get lost in the literal as well as the figurative sense. He is not truly a birder, you see; he has been trained as a literary critic. The poem, or the novel, is his field, not the forest, or the riparian buffer zone. All this has changed, however, as BC has begun working at the intersections of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. Reluctant simply to enter the realm of "pure spondaic" theory (McKay D 88), BC made the decision to take seriously American ecocritic Lawrence Buell's call for a literature, and a criticism, that leads readers back to the physical world rather than away from it (Environmental 11). The birder-critic is willing to acknowledge, and to embrace, the limitations of language, of knowledge, of naming. The postcolonial world of the west coast invites an especially rigorous introspection in part because "there is nowhere on the planet left to go" (Gaston 37). With no more land to conquer to the west of what has already been claimed and/or embroiled in legal
battles for ownership, and with the current state of global environmental crises, perhaps the west-coast poet is turning his gaze to the local, the familiar, the edge of known geography and ecology—and literary criticism. The North Pacific Coast, like all coastal regions BC can think of, provides rich metaphorical possibilities for poetry, the landscape of which, as John Elder has written, "is an ecotone where human and natural orders meet."

Colonialism might not be over, might not be exactly post, but the geographical, westward expansion of colonial desires has ceased. The quiet patience BC is cultivating, which is characterized by the poet who pays "close attention" to his surroundings, namely birds, rocks, and trees, seems at odds with much of what might be called a colonial aesthetic. Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz "finds that the boundary between categories and reality is more complicated than he previously thought" (Morris 50). He didn't come to this conclusion—this epiphany—in the inner world of his poetry, or while traveling throughout Europe, the Old World. He reached this epiphany after having moved "to the shores of California in middle age," into a "strange, new intoxicating environment [that] leads him back to close observation of natural life forms" (Morris 50). More specifically, "he is struck by the similarity of the Steller's jay of the American [and Canadian] west coast to the species of jay in his native Poland" (50) after hearing "Jays screech outside the window" and recognizing "the cries, the thievishness, the audacity" common to all jays (Milosz 20). "Jayness is a human construct, but it also exists" (50); so writes David Copland Morris in response to Milosz's reflections on the "amazing," paradoxical ontology of being a jay by not being aware of being a jay.

This discussion of avian ontology reminds BC of similar ruminations by McKay, albeit in a more sweeping statement about birds in general, about birdness. Reflecting on bushtits—on their gourd-shaped nest hanging precariously over his driveway, on their status as "'creatures of
the air' not only because they fly through it, but because it comprises so much of their bodily
presence”—McKay writes that “birds do not need a Lao-tzu [author of the Tao Teh Ching] to
remind them of the non-being their lives depend on” (V 103-104). Don Stap refers to avian
physiology to explain birds’ ethereal existence and describes a Bewick’s wren who was in the
midst of repeating “a complex series of notes with precision and force”: “Each time he sang, the
wren expelled air from his respiratory system with extraordinary efficiency. Nearly 100 percent
of the air passing through a bird’s vocal cords is used to make sound. Humans use only about 2
percent” (73-74). In his statement about the non-being of avian existence, McKay both
acknowledges a human need for textualized meaning and an avian proclivity to mean textually.
Bushtits become a living, breathing Lao-tzu from which BC might learn a little something about
the world and his place in it. Identifying a bird—“Ah, bushtits’: check, snap. Next topic”(V
84)—tells BC as much about himself as it does about the bird. Field marks place BC in relation
to an invented system of knowledge and the objects of that system.

But what is the relationship between identifying features—field marks—and the words
we use to name birds? “The bird ‘student,’ too,” writes Thomas Gannon, “indoctrinated into
Peterson’s ‘field mark’ revolution, is thus armed with a set of visual and verbal signifiers that
determine the scope of his/her interpretations of these new-world ‘aborigines’ with feathers and
wings” (Gannon n.p.). BC is not terribly interested in participating carelessly in a Foucauldian
narrative of order; as much as they exist as parts of individual birds, field marks are tools for
identifying avian species. They are but one tool of many that birders have to employ in the field
or in the office.

Again, BC turns to McKay for some advice: “The small measure of congruence evident
with the onomatopoeic chickadee disappears entirely with ring-necked duck, a beautiful diving
duck whose neck ring is all but invisible unless you’re holding the bird in your hands” (McKay V 64). While BC was hiking around Sasamat Lake in Port Moody, B.C., recently, other hikers gathered on a footbridge, clambering to identify a small gathering of black and white ducks. Most wanted to name them ring-necked (*Aythya collaris*), but no one could see, really, even with high-powered binoculars, a subterminal ring on the beak (a field mark used in identifying males). Proximity inflects specificity, sometimes to a degree that is not particularly useful. American critic Dana Phillips complicates the congruence evident in the chicakdee’s onomatopoeic name by imagining a novice birder attempting to identify a particular species of chickadee. Phillips notes that “establishing the identity of black-capped as opposed to Carolina chickadees can be surprisingly complicated” (178) in spite of the illustrations and descriptions—including field marks—Roger Tory Peterson’s field guides provide. In the end, “the birder is confronted with a variety of interpretive options” (178); in the end, Peterson’s (or Audubon’s or Sibley’s) “stylized images” cannot enable, in each instance, the proper identification of a bird: “the birder will have to engage in a lot of back-and-forth between text and world, and world and text, and between stylized image and bird, and bird and stylized image, if she really wants to know what kind of chickadee she saw” (179). Phillips refers to the green-backed heron, which used to be called the little green heron, even though it is not little or “green all over, as the name implied” (180). The new name, while it is not “especially descriptive,” “seems arbitrary and yet it is perfectly accurate” precisely because the bird does have a green back and other characteristics not included in the name (180).

So, why is naming such an important aspect of birding and of poetry? After reading McKay and considering the differences between blue and Steller’s jays, BC finds the act of naming itself less compelling than contemplating the implications of a human desire to name and
to know. But to arrive at such a position, one must first establish a useful repertoire of names and be able to identify field marks. It’s like Francis Ford Coppola directing Dennis Hopper, who hadn’t learned his lines (but had apparently done a few in his trailer) prior to shooting *Apocalypse Now: memorize your lines first; then you can forget them.* For poets this is akin to mastering the grammar so as to create meaning at the edges of linguistic order; for ecopoets, to undermining the unquestioned authority of anthropocentric language and knowledge. Scott Bryson illuminates the paradox a little, claiming that for ecopoets “Ignorance is exalted over conventional knowledge, which is usually connected with the *acquisition* of wisdom,” with the collection of empirical data at the expense of other ways of knowing (105). Bryson’s “ignorance,” thinks BC, informs a humility that encourages an understanding of the world *qua* the world. But humility with McKay is not prizing ignorance so much as following a trail of ecological referents to get closer, maybe getting lost in the meantime because of a lack of knowledge (perhaps an ignorance) that is inevitable, though not necessarily “prized.” We can know via biology, ecology, and ornithology. The question remains: So What? What will we do with such knowledge, knowing? Folding the paper and putting his mug in the sink with the rest of the breakfast dishes, BC sets out for a walk. So, he thinks, let’s find out.
CHAPTER ONE

Science and/as Intertext, Naming and/as Knowing

'Geoffrey Chaucer made conventional use of bird imagery,' intones the teacher who knows something about Chaucer and somewhat less about birds.—Michael Jenied, Chaucer's Checklist

I feel fortunate to live in a time when a growing number of scientists are increasingly inclined to consider the work of poets, and vice versa.—Gary Paul Nabhan, Cross-pollinations: The Marriage of Science and Poetry

Part One: Dividing Desires

Monty Python ran a sketch in 1973 that begins with John Cleese in rural England talking to the camera: “Was Sir Walter Scott a loony, or was he the greatest flowering of the early nineteenth-century romantic tradition?” he asks before another man (Michael Palin) steps into the shot, points to the microphone, and asks to borrow it. Immediately, the second journalist begins his own documentary: “These trees behind me now were planted over forty years ago, as part of a policy by the then Crown Woods, who became the Forestry Commission in 1924.” The rest of the sketch moves back and forth between these two “rival documentaries” as each journalist attempts to get a hold of the microphone and keep it away from the other long enough to utter a few meaningful sentences. The following exchanges between Cleese and Palin result in some physical comedy and nearly Dadaist comedy stylings the Pythons are known for. It ends with a Hollywood-inspired car chase, bullets flying from Palin’s documentarist who hangs from the side of a 1930s gangster car. In mere minutes, the sketch that began with a believable, albeit improbable, difference of opinions, ends with the sound of a car crash as the rival documentarists speed around a corner. Ecocritics are likely to find what is probably an unintended level of comedic tension in this sketch. This sketch dramatizes a neat rivalry between different academic disciplines that ecocritics see as complementary. Even though the “forty thousand acres of
virgin forest” each man stands before was at one point “Sir Walter Scott's country,” the two narratives—one about trees and one about a literary icon—cannot coexist peacefully in the Python's world. “Rival Documentaries” is as good a metaphor as any to describe the practical resistance to truly interdisciplinary research. Granted ecocriticism’s story does not include—at least not yet—a car chase, but the difficulties remain analogous.

Generally, contemporary bird poetry, like other categories of nature writing, tends to retain both a sense of natural history and an increasing knowledge about the sciences of ornithology and ecology by way of the environmental movement and a range of well-written books by such scientists as Rachel Carson, Stephen Jay Gould, and David Suzuki. More and more texts are being published that enable interested writers and readers to consider histories, questions, and problems pertaining to topics in science (evolution, genetics, the environment), in general, and particular species of fauna and flora, more specifically.28 Popular writing about birds, for example, has undergone a marked shift that, in part, influences the market growth of popular science literature. Less than a hundred years ago, the distinction between popular science writing and “hard” science was far less pronounced than it is today: popular works nowadays tend to engage the reader in personal narrative while academic science, as with most academic writing, tends to address an audience with a minimum degree of shared knowledge. In short, “hard” science tends to be “harder” than it was a hundred years ago.

In The Rhetoric of Science in the Evolution of American Ornithological Discourse, John Battalio claims that “amateur discourse, as represented by natural history writing, has persisted as a legitimate form of writing by ornithologists at least through 1970, much longer than would be expected, given the continuing professionalization of American ornithology during the twentieth century” (72).29 My point in quoting a rhetorician and historian of science is that
ecocritics need not (necessarily) turn to “hard,” or what Battalio calls “experimental,” science when seeking contextual support. The popular scientific discourse—including key works of environmentalism—represents one direction in the evolution of the sciences, despite the seemingly widening “gap between those advocating the preservation of nature, and science, technology, and business advocating progress and profit” (Battalio 158). The distinction Battalio draws is too neat between amateur ornithologists who have been influenced more by Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner—whose books criticize science that is complicit in environmental degradation—and professional ornithologists whose research informs a particular social, capitalist agenda. Indeed, it seems as arbitrary as the distinction between literature and science, which I discussed in my Introduction; but Battalio provides ample statistical evidence to support his argument that as scientific research practices evolved, some individual scientists took the opportunity to apply their research for financial gain. Between 1910 and 1990, for example, observations and measurements conducted in the field were replaced at a more or less steady rate by laboratory work and theoretical discussions in scientific journals (72-77). In other words, literary critics are not the only academics to whom the imperative to get out of the office (or lab) and into the field might apply. Because theoretical science discourse is often as difficult for outsiders to comprehend as literary theory can be, the work of Carson, Commoner, E.O. Wilson, and their ilk, are valuable additions to the ecocritic’s library. But the increasing sophistication with which such authors translate the “hard,” theoretical science, while inviting and refreshing for the non-specialist, must be taken with a healthy dose of scepticism, too. They are, after all, translations, and all translations pose potential problems that are best approached by getting closer to the source material. As McKay has it in “Remembering Apparatus: Poetry and the Visibility of Tools” (V 50-73), “the translator’s real power lies in her humility,” which “includes
not only reverence for the source, but a remembrance of language as apparatus” (63).

One goal of my dissertation is to position Don McKay’s ecologically aware poetry as a model for getting closer to his source material, including field guides, scientific writing, and, of course, birds themselves, while remembering that language is a necessary apparatus for poetry. Despite the presence and development of ecocritical studies, however, not much has been published about how to do ecocriticism in a rigorously interdisciplinary way. Far less has been published that actually does it. In this chapter, I develop an interdisciplinary, ecocritical theory of science as valid intertextual and referential context in literary criticism, in much the same way that history and psychology, for example, are understood as necessary intertextual referents for New Historicist and psychoanalytic approaches. After modifying Linda Hutcheon’s notion of “history and/as intertext,” I provide a brief overview of birds in literature and criticism. In addition to Leonard Lutwack’s aptly titled *Birds in Literature*, others deal with birds in the works of such writers as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Robert Penn Warren, and Jorie Graham. I then look at the paradoxical role of language as straightforward, communicative, denotative medium and as problematic, metaphorical, connotative medium. While such a discussion of the dual role language plays acknowledges differences between scientific and poetic writing, it also informs the ornithological desire of my dissertation’s title. When language breaks down in its attempts to name the world, as when a car breaks down, or a computer’s hard drive fails, we often, according to McKay, “sense the enormous, unnameable wilderness beyond” the breakdown, “a wilderness we both long for and fear” (V64). Like all desire, this species of longing requires the potential for unattainability in order to qualify as desire. The desire, for example, to attain knowledge of the world inheres in the human practice of naming. Naming simultaneously succeeds in providing common frames of reference for communities of like-minded people and fails to
describe/define what is named satisfactorily. Though neither scientists nor poets are capable of naming with complete accuracy, I argue in this chapter that attention to species specificity and ecological accuracy—which reflects the desire for a common frame of reference, for creating a community of science and literature scholars—compels readers and critics to get closer to the birds about which McKay writes.

My dissertation, too, responds to Neil Evernden’s call, in “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy,” for an intervention by arts and humanities professionals in the environmental movement. Evernden points toward a “deep ecological movement” —beyond what he identifies as the limited “shallow ecological movement” advocated by those in the environmental sciences—“that concerns itself with the underlying roots of the environmental crisis rather than simply its physical manifestation, [and] demands the involvement of the arts and humanities” (102). Nearly twenty years prior to Evernden’s invitation to the arts, William Rueckert, in his pioneering essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” initiated critical debate on how fiction and, to a lesser extent, poetry can participate alongside nature writing and scientific study in a discourse concerned with earth’s natural environment and its preservation. Nature writing represents an in-between zone or “vital edge,” according to John Elder: “On one side is the literary scholarship that has largely confined itself to . . . declaring texts to be no more than self-referential webs of words. On the other side stretches the domain of academic science” (vii). The sides are never quite so discrete as Elder suggests, of course, but his hyperbole enacts an effective rhetorical flourish designed more to illuminate the “vital edge” than to castigate either discipline. In a recent online journal dedicated to avian conservation and ecology, editors Thomas D. Nudds and Marc-André Villard write that “Science is not, indeed, cannot be, the heartless pursuit of objective truth. It is, in fact, a creative human endeavour, and
thus subject to all the same foibles as any other human endeavour” (1). In their attention to the creative aspects of scientific research and writing, Nudds and Villard reflect a small trend in science journals, if issues of *Nature* and *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* over the past five years are any indication.30

**Part Two: Science and/as Intertext**

Most book-length studies of birds in literature incorporate at least a secondary or tertiary interest in correctly identifying bird species in literary works. Typically, some knowledge of bird behaviour and habitat, usually provided by natural history rather than an ornithological text, is necessary to such sleuthing. Science, in other words, can operate as literary intertext inasmuch as knowing or “getting” certain scientific references would open up an understanding/interpretation/analysis of a literary text. A number of ecocritics have similarly argued for positioning science in a more creative role vis-à-vis literary environmental criticism. Ursula K. Heise provides perhaps the most comprehensive rationale. She writes:

> Due to its epistemological power as well as its pervasive cultural influence in the West and, increasingly, other parts of the world, the scientific description of nature [...] should be one of the cornerstones of ecocriticism, one that is usefully confronted and compared with literary visions of the environment. This confrontation enables not only an assessment of how scientific insight is culturally received and transformed (rather than ‘constructed’), it also allows the critic to see where literature deviates—or, in some cases, wishes or attempts to deviate—from the scientific approach in view of particular aesthetic and ideological goals. The text thereby becomes a place where different visions of nature and varying images of science, each with their cultural and political
implications, are played out, rather than simply a site of resistance against science and its claims to truth, or a construct in which science is called upon merely to confirm the inherent beauty of nature. (n.p.)

Heise’s focus on science as a descriptive discipline that is both comparable to and different from literature as a descriptive art is key to developing ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary practice. Furthermore, the confrontation she alludes to resembles the risk endemic to interdisciplinary ecocritical concerns, which Gillian Beer describes when she writes that “Scientific ideas and writing are often of most value within literature precisely where the risks of translation are great” (52). Five years after Heise’s contribution to the centuries-long debate over what C.P. Snow labeled the two cultures, David Gilcrest notices that, although “the ecological poem may make use of the precise grammar of ecological science more often than not [it] reflects a more general sense of ecology” (16). In order to push for more than a general sense of ecology in reading ecocritically, I look to Linda Hutcheon’s influential essay about postmodern historiographic metafiction, “History and/as Intertext,” as a model of thinking about science as an intertextual trail of referents.

Hutcheon’s essay was part of a landmark collection of essays on Canadian literature, *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*, that was responding, in part, to Frank Davey’s “Surviving the Paraphrase.” As the collection’s sub-title indicates, Hutcheon’s essay played a significant role in developing a theoretical approach to Canadian literature as distinct from what Davey identified—and critiqued—as thematic criticism. “History and/as Intertext” represents Hutcheon’s attempt to recognize the paradoxical nature of postmodern theory and to apply it—paradox and all—to works of historical fiction by Canadian writers. The slashing of “and” and “as” in her title, then, enables a reading both of history as “ontologically
separate from the self-consciously fictional text (or intertexts) of fiction” and of history “AS intertext” whereby “[h]istory becomes a text, a discursive construct upon which literature draws as easily as it does upon other artistic contexts” (169-70). In literary critical terms, science is to ecocriticism what history is to postmodernism.

Much of what Hutcheon and her predecessors have to say about reference, about the writing of the past, resonates with similar ecocritical concerns about the representation of nature. When Hutcheon makes the commonsense distinction that “what history refers to is the actual, real world; what fiction refers to is a fictive universe” I hear Lawrence Buell calling for a return to the physical world in his now-infamous question in the preface to *The Environmental Imagination*: “Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?” (11). When she acknowledges that “the past, obviously, did exist,” but contests “our ability to know that past by any other means than textualized, interpreted ‘reports,’” I hear Leonard Scigaj in *Sustainable Poetry* who writes: “language is often foregrounded only to reveal its limitations, and this is accomplished in such a way that the reader’s gaze is thrust beyond language back into the less limited natural world that language refers to.” And when she asks, “How exactly does language hook onto reality?” I am reminded that Hutcheon herself wrote an article about Canada’s historical relations to colonialism and modernism, “Eruptions of Postmodernity: The Postcolonial and the Ecological,” in which she asks, among other things, “how does one deal with what [Northrop] Frye himself called ‘the tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it’ (Bush 200) without that act of integration being considered a violation, an imposition, a colonization of nature?” (155).

Clearly, though, one cannot simply replace “history” with “nature writing” or “the past” with “the physical world” in the preceding excerpts. Perhaps some such term as ecographic
metapoetics would suffice? But, if science produces texts more closely bound to the physical world, much as history produces texts more closely bound to the past, why not look to science for intertextual insights the way literary critics have been looking to historical documents? Why not follow an intertextual route of referents from birds in Don McKay's poetry back to ornithological monographs. For Scigaj, what I am suggesting aligns itself with what he articulates as ecopoetry's interdisciplinary preoccupations, its "referential concern with environmental context," which leads to "the reverse of the free play of différance" (37). Echoing Derrida, Scigaj calls "this process ... référence, from the French verb se référer, which means 'to relate or refer oneself to'" (38). In his first collection of essays, McKay suggests that "The nature poet 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). I suggest that if the poet refers himself to the field guide, the critic should too.

Laurie Ricou's collaborative essay (with Robert Bringhurst) in *Inside the Poem*, published in 1992, coincides with the formation of what was eventually to become the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). After rereading "Saxifrage punctata, Raven"—Ricou's contribution to "Robert Bringhurst's 'Sunday Morning': A Dialogue"—with Hutcheon and intertext on my mind, I realized someone was already doing what Heise and Phillips claim has yet to be done with any degree of consistency. Ricou, beside and by way of Bringhurst, offers another model from which to work. "[T]he poem is to the critic as the bird is to the ornithologist" (93). In this, Ricou is echoing, albeit implicitly, remarks made four years earlier by McKay about bird-watching as an activity "which in [his] experience involves a mental set nearly identical to writing" ("Some Remarks" 858). Ricou, too, turns his critical attention to influential field-guide publisher Roger Tory Peterson, according to whom...
“birding is also a way to know trees and rocks and seas and all that weaves itself into habitat” (93). Birding enables a more comprehensive ecological mode of knowing despite the necessary focus on creatures that can weigh as little as one-tenth of an ounce. Nature writer David Quammen captures this paradox in a brief homage to poet Jim Harrision. For Harrison, birding “implies paradoxically a seizure, a connection, a participatory relationship that nevertheless doesn’t violate the bird’s tetherless untouchability” (182). For most poets and critics searching for ways to read and write about birds as birds, a similar paradox applies; birds’ untouchability is part of what makes them so vital as subjects for poetry and so indispensable as living members of the physical world.32

McKay articulates a version of the “bird’s tetherless untouchability” by incorporating his amateur-birding observations and a scientific knowledge into his verse. When the speaker in the poem “Load” (AG 10), for example, sees “a White-throated Sparrow” on the ground “exhausted from flight,” he thinks

of the muscles in that grey-white breast,  
pectoralis major powering each downstroke,  
pectoralis minor with its rope-and-pulley tendon  
reaching through the shoulder to the  
top side of the humerus to haul it up again;  
of the sternum with the extra keel it has evolved to  
anchor all that effort[.] 

The biological information about the sparrow in these lines does not serve to express the poet’s mastery over the avian world, to know the bird, but to contemplate this sparrow’s mastery over the air, a mastery that, like all knowledge, is limited and temporary. The metaphoric touches are almost as delicate as the exhausted bird recovering from its flight over Lake Erie, despite the heaviness one typically associates with ropes and pulleys, with anchors. Incidentally, the scientific literature also uses the pulley metaphor to refer to flight morphology in birds (Fig. 2).
The metaphoric paradox in the poem pays homage to the phenomenological paradox of bird flight—namely that creatures weighing less than an ounce routinely fly across such vast distances, crossing political and bioregional boundaries as effortlessly as humans would like to. I am less interested in whether this poem successfully represents bird flight (metaphorically) or presents bird flight (realistically) than I am in whether and how the poem succeeds in both cases. Its vocabulary, the result of ornithological research, demonstrates a reputation McKay has been developing as a “sharp-eyed and unselfishly meticulous” poet who uses language with “precision” and “exactitude” (Bartlett “Dog’s” 124). The names of muscles and bones are not common in field guides; so while “McKay’s avian precision moves from bird-guide delineations to metaphor” and “from metaphor to fieldguidisms,” his desire for precision takes him to scientific literature as well (Bartlett 124). The results are, as Brian Bartlett suggests, simultaneously fastidiously descriptive, metaphorically deft, and fully aware of “the pretensions of accurate description” that seeks to cover “the distance between language and bird” (125).

Such results fly in the face of certain claims that scientific discourse has no place in the world of poetry. American biologist and poet, Gary Paul Nabhan, for instance, recalls early criticism he received from colleagues with whom he shared some of his poems: “If you squander all your time reading poetry,” one mathematics teacher admonished me, “you’ll never be able to master the rigors of science”; “Your poetry will become even more unintelligible if you continue to burden your free verse with the weight of scientific terms” (11). A scientist first and later a published poet, Nabhan eventually follows different advice, namely to “use metaphor as well as technical precision” in his writing (12). Poetry and science both offer ways of looking at the world; if the former has a unique ability to examine humans’ relation with the phenomenological world by bringing us closer to it via metaphor, the latter has the benefit of engaging more
directly with the phenomenological world. Between them, metaphor and scientific observation—Nabhan’s “technical precision”—provide an intertextual base from which to consider how to think and write human-nonhuman relations.

But, for all McKay, his speaker, and the birder-critic use “Load” to get in touch with white-throated sparrows, the birds remain essentially and significantly untouchable. The poem’s concluding confession reinforces this distance: “I wanted / very much to stroke it, and recalling / several terrors of my brief / and trivial existence, didn’t” (169). The poet resists the desire to know the bird materially. The science that explains the bird’s presence, accomplishment, and exhaustion compensates here for the poet’s lack. The bird that remains untouched in verse persists in being a bird—who can be known, but not to the point of ownership. After all, as Gillian Beer warns in her contribution to One Culture, “Knowledge is not a solution [and] the power to perceive connections may itself be a trap which has no issue” (50). But the possibility of entrapment—the “risk of translation” Beer outlines—“allows the poet,” by way of “scientific and technical knowledge,” “to contemplate with fresh intensity” questions that poets have been contemplating for centuries (52). Although she does not make an explicit connection to the science of ecology in her article, Beer’s emphasis on the obstinateness of linguistic and epistemological connectivities echoes the difficulties ecologists face in attempting to understand—and then to explain—connections/relations in the ecosystems they study. Simultaneously, Beer offers language as a metaphorical ecology that is necessary for scientists to recognize “multiple simultaneous levels of event and meaning” by having “recourse to the linguistic dexterity, and . . . instability of reference” common to literary language (56). Such multiplicity is important for both scientists and poets to resist or “outwit the tendency of description to stabilize a foreknown world and to curtail discovery” (56). Carefully realized
metaphor, in other words, is a way of articulating an attention to, and engagement with, the world represented in scientific as well as poetic writing *because* of its instability. As McKay argues, “With a metaphor that works, we’re immediately convinced of the truth of the claim *because* it isn’t rational. The leap always says . . . that language is incommensurate with the real, that leaps are necessary if we are to gain a sense of the world outside it” (69). While I do not recommend leaping as the best way for critics to get outside and follow McKay’s route of scientific and natural referents, the risk inherent in leaping—whether over a stream or across a brain synapse—supports an ecocriticism inflected by interdisciplinarity.

Beer and McKay acknowledge and privilege a risk-taking inherent in language use, especially vis-à-vis the world outside language, a world that poststructuralists have a hard time admitting exists at all. Beer’s and McKay’s observations both challenge the dependence of ecocritics on mimetic realism that Dana Phillips identifies and explains away as so much sentimental and uncritical proselytising.

Knowing (not owning) opens up a route of referents that enables fresh readings: “In literary criticism directed chance arises from the intertext of the critic’s repertoire of poetry and the corollary reading the critic makes” (Valdes & Guyon 30). “*Intertextuality* as a theoretical concept of course encompasses far more than just source criticism or the study of allusion” (Hubbard 7), but critics and theorists have tended to devote intertextual analyses to “cultural phenomena, particularly literature and visual art” (Banting “Angel” 69). In *The Pipes of Pan: Intertextuality and Literary Filiation in the Pastoral Tradition from Theocritus to Milton*, Thomas K. Hubbard examines intertextuality’s development from Julia Kristeva’s coinage (in *Desire in Language*), by way of Bakhtin’s dialogism, to other French theorists’ refinements. Gerard Genette, for example, prefers “transtextuality” to refer to a movement between literary
texts and provides a list of subclasses of intertextuality in *Palimpsests*:

1) "intertextuality" proper, actual citation of a subtext;

2) "paratextuality," a text's relation to its own apparatus;

3) "metatextuality," commentary or criticism of a subtext, whether explicit or implicit;

4) "hypertextuality," adoption of a subtext as a foil, as in imitation, adaptation, continuation, or parody;

5) "architextuality," relations not to a specific subtext but to a generic convention or type of discourse. (in Hubbard 8)

Genette's and Hubbard's discussions of intertextuality reinforce Canadian ecocritic Pamela Banting's claim that most critics consider intertextuality solely on the basis of its, and the text's, relation to culture and cultural tropes. Text presupposes itself as active referent; text begets text in a culturally (pre)determined world of texts. Authorial agency is rendered moot and readers' agency is rendered mute. Genette's five subclasses rely upon overt constructions of text and textuality (ostensibly by an author) and could just as accurately be called variations on the theme of allusion, a quirk that is all fine and well, but that, in the end, eludes and elides a given reader's chance intertextual discoveries based on her personal reading histories, on relations, in other words, that an author—a text—cannot anticipate. Without allowing for some sense of unconscious, serendipitous encounters between texts and readers' histories, intertextual theory risks privileging a particular trail of referents by focusing only on texts that are apt to be well-known by a wide audience. The act and the process of reading thus risks becoming, if it has not become already, a passive mode of engagement with preexisting literary and cultural ideals. Passive reading, in this case, closes off the possibility of interdisciplinary authors and astute
readers challenging interdisciplinary boundaries. The route of referents conventional intertextuality offers, in other words, is a well-worn path back to some canonical text or ideology. The trail of referents McKay articulates relies simultaneously on readers’ knowledge of generic conventions and on their ability to recognize the call to step away from the poem and peer into potentially unfamiliar texts and trails.

What are we to make of Leonard Scigaj’s claim, in Sustainable Poetry, that ecopoets “seldom write poems that demand particular knowledge of the technical intricacies of scientific theory” (12)? If ecopoetry “treats nature as a separate and equal other and includes respect for nature conceived as a series of ecosystems—dynamic and potentially self-regulating cyclic feedback systems,” as Scigaj claims “we need” (5), why wouldn’t ecocritics encourage a literature—and a discourse on that literature—engaged intertextually with “particular knowledge,” “technical intricacies,” and “scientific theory?” Ecopoets strive for particularity as a way of getting at the core of a problem, a kernel of wisdom approximating—becoming proximal to—truth or a set of truths. As Nabhan claims, “the technical lexicon of the sciences [is] sufficiently precise to describe just about any phenomenon that we wish to record” and “many poets [are] sprinkling scientific terms into their writing because of [this] very precision” (60). And yet, despite the advancing successes of scientifically precise language, a metaphor remains necessary if poetry—eco, sustainable, and otherwise—hopes to enact a productive, ecotonal link between humans and nonhumans. Relying too strictly on the science, like emphasizing realism at the expense of imagination in ecocriticism, “threatens to marginalize lyrical approaches to the natural world that provide an alternative way of thinking ethics, a way that points to a political activism, but not in the terms of any systematic methodology” (Dickinson “Lyric” 17). Adam Dickinson, whose interest in “alternative ways of thinking” tends to be ethical, stops short of
endorsing a readerly interrogation of the scientific language that informs McKay’s poetry, in
spite of the fact that those poets—Alison Hawthorne Deming and Richard Shelton for Nabhan,
Don McKay for me—who handle “biological facts well in their writing” also offer “an altogether
different way of making sense of the world, one perhaps complementary to that of the
conservation biologist” (Nabhan 68). I agree with Scigaj’s claim that ecopoets do not “demand”
particular knowledge. McKay, however, invites readers to reduce the distance between the
written word and the world that is written because of the alternatives such proximity elicits for
attempting the world.

Not everyone is as convinced as I am “that the goal of environmental poetry is, as [David
W.] Gilcrest states, to put us in closer proximity to the natural world” (Dickinson “Lyric” 38). “If
that were the case,” asks Dickinson in his unpublished dissertation, “wouldn’t one be better
advised to simply go out into the woods?” (38). I want to answer Dickinson’s rhetorical question
with a resounding “Yes!” but I recognize, 1) its rhetorical nature and 2) that such an answer
would align me rather unfavourably with Lawrence Buell, whose own rhetorical question—
“Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?” (Environmental
11)—has got the American ecocritic into some hot ecowater for its apparent reification of
realism.34 Instead of my singular affirmative response to Dickinson’s question, I offer an
extension of it and of Dickinson’s own argument “that any relationship metaphor has with
‘reality’ comes from its articulated ontological ambivalence, or resonance between the ‘is’ and
the ‘is not.’” (37). Can one not have the ‘is’ and the ‘is not’ of metaphor and proximity,
especially as the latter is rendered by scientific knowing and technical precision? Is truth, which
McKay argues might best be approached by way of metaphor-as-lie, not a closeness to
something beyond the human? Moreover, if ecopoetry and ecocriticism imply a practical relation
to the physical—environmental activism, for example—realism might not be such a bad approach. Dickinson, though, focuses less on how ecopoetry represents the real world and more on the potential for ecopoetry to model ways of attempting the real world. He writes:

I think the goal of environmental poetry is to be generative: it is to enact lyrical thinking that is not limited by systematic logic; it is to make an issue of the unquestioned reality of materiality; it is to think of things and our relation to them otherwise than as single language-games. Poetry cannot give us access to the natural world as such, but it can offer us a model of attention to the material metaphoricity of bodies or things; it can provoke us to think the materiality of the natural world in ways not contained by systematic language. (38-39)

The access of which Dickinson speaks might be unattainable; however, science’s relative proximity to the material world it studies, names, and attempts to explain, improves the possibility of access by “reduc[ing] our level of ignorance” (Love Practical 47). The provocation to think is an invitation to seek a way of knowing the world beyond the poem, the book, the office. Proximity, in other words, provokes movement away from text and toward the material world; so, the tension between metaphorical knowing and scientific knowledge instigates in the careful reader a desire to step out. This tension in McKay's writing represents a literary inverse of physical scientists’ gradual retreat from the field to the laboratory, which Battalio acknowledges in his study of ornithological rhetoric.

The interdisciplinary stage has been set from early on if ecocriticism “urges its practitioners,” as Glen Love suggests, “into interdiscipinarity, into science,” if literature already “involves relationships, and ecological awareness enhances and expands [a] sense of interrelationships to encompass nonhuman as well as human contexts” (Practical 47). For
Banting, intertextual information in Thomas Wharton’s *Icefields* has the potential to immerse readers “in the geology, history, natural history, and oral history associated with the [geographic] area” around Jasper, Alberta, where the novel takes place. Banting’s reading of *Icefields* cannot depend upon a preexisting knowledge of glaciology if she is not a glaciologist. First, Banting, as reader, must follow the compulsion “both to immerse [her]self in books about the history, geography, geology, and literature of the Rocky Mountains and the archival documents and photographs at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies and to travel to the ‘actual’ setting around Jasper, Alberta, to learn firsthand about the glaciation, fluvial patterns, trails, plants, and animals of the area” (67); second, she must “take the next step and surrender the notion of the exclusivity of the human subject as author or scriptor” (70), and allow instead for the possibility of, in the case of Wharton’s first novel, the landscape as both scriptor and script(ed). To consider such a possibility seriously is to consider the metaphysical alongside the physical aspects of interdisciplinary research. Banting’s reading implicates far more than a community of literary critics. It suggests that the act of reading cuts across numerous daily and professional activities, from the obvious act of reading literature—for pleasure, in a classroom, at a conference—to the process of reading the physical world as if it were a text. Interdisciplinarity comes into play precisely because different languages—the language of literary theory, for example, or the language of avian physiology—are needed to contemplate, understand, and articulate different approaches to the world. If we insist on reading the land as text, “the suggestive scrawls and traces” left by “the sinuous calligraphy of rivers winding across the land” and “the black slash burned by lightning into the trunk of an old elm” (Abram 95), we would do well to acknowledge what might be lost as well as what might be gained in enacting the translation. The lack in this case—lack of utter control, lack of linguistic accomplishment—might result in achieving an
awareness of said lack. We would do well to learn as much as possible about the “texts” we feel compelled to read, just as we would do well to consider ourselves as “texts” to be “read” by the natural world.

From an evolutionary point of view, such a reversal of anthropocentric epistemology is possible if we consider human evolution in relation to other species with which we have apparently coevolved. Michael Pollan makes an intriguing case for coevolution in *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World*. Presenting four chapters in which he pairs a plant with a human desire—sweetness/apple; beauty/tulip; intoxication/marijuana; control/potato—Pollan essentially argues that each of “these plant species have found that the best way” of fulfilling the evolutionary imperative to reproduce “is to induce animals—bees or people, it hardly matters—to spread their genes” for them “by playing on the animals’ desires, conscious or otherwise” (xv). As a consequence of human desires having become “simply more grist for the evolutionary mill,” he proposes, “it makes as much sense to think of agriculture as something grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees” (xxi). Pollan’s coevolutionary proclamation is of interest to my argument for the way it purports to humble human vanity vis-à-vis the natural world while positioning humans unquestionably within the natural world. McKay attempts a similar revisionary philosophy in “Otherwise than Place” in which he wonders what would happen if “we tr[ied] to define place without using the usual humanistic terms—not home and native land, not little house on the prairie, not even the founding principle of our sense of beauty—but as a function of wilderness” (*DW* 17). As I mention in my introduction, McKay cultivates an understanding of wilderness as both the typical “set of endangered spaces” and “the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations” (*V* 21). A (re)definition of place as a function of wilderness, then, “would involve asking, for example, not ‘what’s the beach to me?’ but ‘what
am I to the beach?" (D 17).

According to Leonard Scigaj, Karl Kroeber "affirms that literary criticism ought to seek its theoretical models not in language theory or the aesthetics of consciousness but in the physical sciences, especially biology.\textsuperscript{35} By studying the physical sciences one can gain an adequate grasp of nature as an equal other, the necessary referential context where all poetic meditations occur" (14). Moreover, "Carolyn Merchant, in the preface to her 1990 \textit{The Death of Nature}, also suggests that the proper models for environmental inquiry and literature should come from referential reality—the physical sciences" (15). So, ecologically oriented literary critics might have good reason to keep up to date on those aspects of the physical sciences pertinent to the texts they are reading. After reading Christopher Dewdney’s \textit{Natural History}, for example, my corollary reading might be an article in the latest issue of \textit{Sedimentary Geology} as well as Julie Cruikshank’s \textit{Do Glaciers Listen?: Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination}. After reading John Clare’s "The Pettichap’s Nest," I feel compelled to research the ornithological literature (monographs, articles, letters) about Pettichap nest-building behaviour, or to record observations of the nesting habits of some local avian species. The resulting ecocriticism serves as a strategy for developing an ecological criticism relevant to other literary texts, as well. McKay’s poem “\textit{Sturnus vulgaris}” reminds me of a recent article in the \textit{New York Times} about avian intelligence, and the \textit{Times} article leads to a recent study in \textit{Nature} about European starlings’ ability to comprehend “recursive, hierarchical embedding of language units” (Gentner et al.). Such routes, or trails of referents that lead readers literally back to the physical world are significant aspects of much ecocriticism, in much the way an understanding of biology, evolution, or ecology is significant. For the most part, though, such aspirations tend to suffer under the substantial weight of interdisciplinary research and its attendant professional
risks. Once the risks of following the trails are identified, enough ecocritics will be willing to search out the rewards, if not of any real conclusions, then at least of entering the ecotone.

Lawrence Buell builds upon his notion of environmental representation (his preferred term to “realism”) in the third of his trilogy of ecocritical texts, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, by emphasising “a certain kind of environmental referentiality” (32). This referentiality, inspired in part by Scigaj’s “neo-Derridean theory of *référence*” (39), inheres in the “conviction that contact (or lack of contact) with actual environments is intimately linked . . . with the work of environmental imagination, for both writer and critic” (31). This impulse to get out of the office and into the field, as I demonstrate, is an integral component of the type of ecocriticism I would like to see grow. Over a century before ecocriticism consolidated into a relevant critical idiom, Wordsworth urged readers to get “Up! Up!” and “quit your books” in “The Tables Turned: An Evening Scene”—

Books! ’tis a dull and endless strife,  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,  
How sweet his music; on my life  
There’s more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the thrrostle sings!  
And he is no mean preacher;  
Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your teacher. (166)

I have chosen two stanzas that use particular birds to entice the speaker’s “friend” outdoors because they nicely correspond to the avian aesthetic I wish to highlight in environmental literature; they also enact a correlation between birds—in this case birdsong, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three—and extra-textual wondering/wandering. Granted, Wordsworth’s reasons for deferring to the linnet (*Fringilla linota* Linn.), whose song according to Thomas Bewick “is lively and sweetly varied” (119), and the thrrostle (or song thrush, *Turdus*
philomelos), which is according to John Clare "the Thrush celebrated for its fine song" (Robinson and Fritter 26), have more to do with a belief in a Transcendental Nature to which the Lyric "I" reaches than confidence in the scientific observation. In his posthumously published book, The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending the Gap between Science and the Humanities, Stephen Jay Gould picks up on this very tendency of Wordsworth's "beautiful, but tragically flawed verse" (106). Isolating the penultimate stanza—"Sweet is the lore which nature brings, / Our meddling intellect / Distorts the beauteous forms of things. / We murder to dissect"—Gould counters with a defence of the scientific method: "I would only say to the poets that science must dissect as one path to understanding, but never to destroy the beauty and joy of wholeness" (106). Nevertheless, the poem's central thesis supports a readerly agency "That watches and receives" and is critical of biology and poetry in equal measure. "Enough of science and of art," Wordsworth writes; put the books away for a while and work to develop an attentive discourse with the physical world.

**Part Three: Birds in Literature**

*Humans developed in a world full of birds.*—Graeme Gibson

"Few poets," writes Leonard Lutwack, "fail to respond to birds" (xii); that is, nearly every poet in the English language has written about birds in some way. As a result, a sustained critical analysis of this phenomenon might seem an obvious and easy project; and yet, Lutwack's *Birds in Literature* is the most singular effort to date that records the various (mainly symbolic) roles of selected literary birds. At times Lutwack, "a longtime and knowledgeable birder as well as literary critic, is content to ignore [a] bird's specific identity" or to resist pursuing an ornithological reading in favour of a symbolic one (Rowlett 635). When citing Saint-John Perse, for example, Lutwack is quick to offer an ornithological reading of Perse's observation that,
"most ardent for life of all our blood kin, the bird is he who bears hidden in himself, to nourish
his passion, the highest fever of the blood. His grace is that burning. Nothing symbolic about
this: it is simple biological fact" (x). Lutwack responds, simply and knowledgeably: “Birds have
twice the amount of sugar in their blood as mammals” (x-xi). Intermittently throughout his book,
Lutwack offers such ornithological qualifiers as explanations, as in the passage above, or as
correctives, as in the following passage regarding Chaucer’s Parlement of Foulys: “In the garden
is a temple where the goddess of nature is holding a convocation of birds on Saint Valentine’s
Day, the occasion ‘whan every foul cometh there to chese his make.’ February is too early for
some birds to mate in England,” Lutwack astutely observes, “but the poet is less interested in
birds than the people they represent” (189). Birds for Chaucer are “a literary convenience for the
poet to handle a serious subject freely and amusingly” (189). By paying attention to Chaucer’s
anthropocentric tendencies, I hope to acknowledge an avian literary history, to suggest that early
poetry, replete with poetic license and symbolism, maintains an important position in the
development of literary ecology, even if such poems as Parlement of Foulys and The Owl and
the Nightingale have little to do with actual birds. As Susan Fisher writes in her article about
metaphor and homology in McKay’s poetry, “[u]sing animals symbolically does not seem a
terribly reprehensible activity, but perhaps it is a dangerous mental habit, a way of thinking that
permits more overt forms of exploitation” (50). Chaucer has been established as an influential
writer in a Western literary tradition, and his way of thinking, while not explicitly dangerous, has
informed the way we think about the world, including human-nonhuman relations. In his
anthropocentric tendencies, Chaucer is not alone.

Others have written books that focus on particular authors’—such as Chaucer and
Shakespeare—“use” (again mainly symbolic) of birds in their work. Though parenthetical,
mainly symbolic is the operative modifier in the previous sentence, and use is the operative noun. The use of birds as symbols in poetry is interesting so far as it goes; I am more interested in how poets attend to or write of birds whose presence does not immediately and conventionally invoke trite imagistic, allegorical readings (which is not to suggest all allegorical, symbolic readings are conventional or trite). The pursuit of the birdness of poetical birds is not a simple undertaking; when Lutwack claims that “not all facts can be dealt with imaginatively; poets would be hard put to find in the articles of a professional ornithological journal much material that they could use in their writing” (19), he echoes Gary Paul Nabhan’s early detractors and late-eighteenth-century writer John Aikin who argues, according to John Rowlett, that “the new [c. 1777] knowledge emerging from the study of natural history could serve descriptive poets admirably in achieving novelty in imagery and language,” but “‘every part of natural history does not seem equally capable of affording poetic imagery’” (625). I disagree. Or at least, I agree that poets would be hard put, but I disagree that such a challenge should in any way prevent poets from putting ornithological fact to use in their poetry. The bird poem and the birder-critic extend logically from what are becoming orthodox discussions of ecopoetry by ecocritics.

So, in contrast to Lutwack’s and Aikin’s claims, and following from Hutcheon’s model of intertextuality, I share Rowlett’s desire to illuminate “literature by ornithological knowledge” (639). I base my argument, as the first part of this chapter makes clear, on the premise that science and scientific literature can and do influence poetry and the reading of poetry. James Edmund Harting’s The Ornithology of Shakespeare, first published in 1864 and subtitled A critical examination and explanation of bird life in Elizabethan times as reflected in the works of Shakespeare, is an example of a study of literature “by ornithological knowledge” that relies much more on an older method of natural history, such as that practised by Gilbert White, than
on contemporary biology. Harting introduces his study with an overview of Shakespeare’s credentials as “both a sportsman and a naturalist” (2) before arranging the birds “into certain natural groups, including the foreign and domesticated species” (viii). Despite his claim that “it would be absurd to look for exactness in [such] trifles” as the green eyes Juliet’s nurse attributes to eagles—a “supposition” that “must be regarded as poetic licence”—Harting grounds many of his observations in ornithological knowledge (25). “The awe,” for example, “with which [the owl] is regarded by the superstitious, may be attributed in some measure to the fact of its flying by night” (85). While the fact of owls’ nocturnal behaviour is based more in natural history than experimental science in the contemporary sense, such repeatable observations in nature represent an early scientific method. Harting also alludes to other observations (both amateur naturalist and ornithological) in assessing the veracity of Shakespeare’s birds. He refers to such prominent and influential British ornithologists as W.B. Tegetmeier, William Yarrell, and Francis Willughby, whose Ornithology, published in 1678, was “the most comprehensive seventeenth-century handbook on birds, [and] contained the period’s best avian classification system” (Battalio 27). However, the lack of what today is considered scientific knowledge in the book (verifiable knowledge derived from manipulative and repeatable laboratory experiments), can be attributed to the ornithology of the time, which consisted mainly of natural histories and field experiments.

Michael Jeneid’s “gambit” in writing Chaucer’s Checklist is similar to mine in putting forward an eco (avian) criticism with a difference: “that Chaucerians will gain a deeper appreciation of their preeminent medieval poet by paying close attention to his birds and seeing how effectively they have been used in some of the world’s greatest literature” (3). My project differs from Jeneid’s, though, in the way it seeks to develop an appreciation of birds, minus the
possessive ("his birds"), Don McKay writes about, and birds' complex (inter)relations to an ecological knowledge, and an ecology of knowledge.39

In the introduction to his translation of the medieval poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Neil Cartlidge comments on past critics’ desire to allegorize the poem without ample evidence. Several critics, according to Cartlidge, argue “that the contrast between the Owl and the Nightingale should be read not as an encounter between two figures of strictly definable significance but as the dramatic expression of two fundamentally different attitudes to life, the one pious, sober and pessimistic (that is, the Owl’s) and the other irreverent, light-hearted and optimistic (the Nightingale’s)” (xvii). Cartlidge himself desires a more restrained, less anthropocentric reading: “Critics who assume that the birds must be figures of something else are making the mistake,” he continues, “of taking at face value the birds’ own seeming conviction that they are by nature significant to humankind” (xviii). However, Cartlidge has no qualms arguing that “The birds themselves are best regarded as comical figures, if only because they hardly deserve our serious respect” (xxiv). Such a reading depends to a great extent on aligning the Owl and the Nightingale with “most of the characters in medieval beast-literature,” a genre that most certainly informs the poem (xxiv).40

While the names of some birds elicit allegorical associations (owls are wise, nightingales are emotional) and others need to be identified from clues in the poem (Chaucer’s *waryangle* [shrike], Hopkins’ windhover [kestrel]), naming is still an important critical function. Part of the process of learning the names for things—not, as Lilburn has it, “to fulfill taxonomies but as acts of courtesy”—“will be being quiet, useless, broken maybe” (“Going” 184). The naming will almost always be human, yes; but once a birder-critic has a name for Hopkins’ “dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,” his heart, too, might stir “for a bird – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!”
(30), even if the name, like so much metaphor, is “a lie in the interests of truth” (McKay V 85). In his study of birds in French fiction, James Walling admits that “[s]uch quibbles do not, of course, detract from the psychological truth or aesthetic merit of the narrative and, although few authors would knowingly impart inaccuracies, they could also point out that they are writing not for specialists but for the average reader” (5). The birds that inhabit the pages of fiction under investigation in Walling’s text are there in order to “bring, for example, local colour to what is essentially regional literature,” to illuminate the psychological, rather than ecological, motivations of the characters; “The accurate depiction of the numerous bird species resident, for example, in Sologne or La Brenne provides a colourful and detailed backcloth to the action and helps us to enter the minds of those protagonists” (2). The bird poetry McKay writes is more likely to open readers up to the ecological relations between humans, birds, and other (avi)fauna and flora that make up a particular bioregion or ecosystem, rather than characters’ psychological state.

Part Four: Desiring Languages

I heard the blackbird in the dell
Sing sweet—could I but sing as well,
I thought, until the bird in glee
Seemed pleased and paused to answer me.—John Clare

Since the Arnold and Huxley debate in the nineteenth century, most humanists have resisted the difficulties involved in learning how science works outside of cultural relativism and rhetorical studies. As a literary critic who has fulfilled the bare minimum of science requirements in his post-secondary education, I know how difficult it can be to start questioning established methodologies and objectives. Like Arnold, but unlike Huxley, I am not a scientist. Interestingly, though, I am drawn to the approach Arnold admits to adopting in his discussion about the natural sciences, which I mention in my introduction. Such humility—implied by Arnold’s “tone of
tentative inquiry, which befits a being of dim faculties and bounded knowledge” (493)—is perhaps a defining quality of a scholar(ship) awake to intersections between literature and the sciences, particularly when the sciences involved are the natural sciences (biology, ecology).

Ecocritics who complement the observational, the experiential, and the literary with references to field guides, experiments, and participation enact a version of “attempting the world” (my way of expressing one’s attempt to understand, comprehend, explain, live in, sustain, and respect all the nebulous aspects of the physical world41). Consequently, such ecocritics stand a better chance of conveying their attempts of the world by undertaking McKay’s suggestion that the “nature poet” should “resort to the field guide or library” and “keep coming, back, figuratively speaking, to the trail” (V 27). The coming back is figurative in McKay’s formulation while the trail is rendered at once literally, to privilege experience, and metaphorically, to trace the origins of experience. The simultaneity of McKay’s statement problematizes the categorical and dichotomous construction of the world reinforced by the impermeability of disciplinary boundaries erected between two so-called cultures.

If science and literature exist as two cultures, however, a bridge is necessary for negotiating or reconciling them; despite David Wilson and Zak Bowen’s claim that their book, Science and Literature: Bridging the Two Cultures, offers no “definitive answer to bridging the gap,” the perpetuation not only of the two-culture debate but of the metaphor of bridge-building serves to stifle creative and open interdisciplinary research and discussion.42 So much of what passes for interdisciplinary criticism purports to “cross boundaries” between similar “disciplines,” like a bridge over a pond the other side of which one could just as easily reach by walking around. And yet differences between these two domains do exist; I do not intend to suggest an easy congruence. Nor do I believe in an Edenic past, described by Albert Goldbarth in
The Measured Word: On Poetry and Science, when “the sciences and the arts were at peace, were one” prior to succumbing to a momentous shift circa 1827 (ix). Goldbarth notes the significance of this year by recording three key moments: 1) a meeting between Wordsworth and Sir Humphry Davy, “neither side with a key to the other’s tongue” (x); 2) the death of William Blake, whose “poems and paintings exhibited a heated, lifelong grumble against the work of Newton, its logic, its willingness to explore by ruler and callipers,” and yet whose vision, ironically, “was arguably an experiment in cosmology” (xi); and 3) the supposition that “scientists turn[ed] their back on the practitioners of art of their day” (xi). I would like to suggest that, in much the same way John Battalio argues natural history developed into differing scientific practices, the back-turning to which Goldbarth refers instigated (or was at least an instance of) a divergence of praxis; that is, while scientists and artists interested in the natural world follow different modes of inquiry and use different names for the objects/subjects of their inquiry, the basic act of naming on the way to knowing, however imperfectly, remains the same.

I began my introduction by questioning the precision of Margaret Avison’s naming in the poem “The Butterfly” and by suggesting that lack of specificity inhibits a certain standard of scientific poetry. Getting the names right might not be enough, but it makes a difference to how ecological relations mean in poetry in part because, as Alison Hawthorne Deming argues, “[b]oth the evolutionary biologist and the poet participate in the inherent tendency of nature to give rise to patterns” (185). Patterns are notoriously difficult to recognize and establish if particular elements are not identified correctly. McKay’s poetic attention in a poem such as “Twinflower” (A 4-5) resembles an Arnoldian approach to science in that both acknowledge a desire to know while admitting limitations. In his essay about “Twinflower,” Ross Leckie refers to McKay’s poem as both an “analysis of desire” and a “problematic of naming” (128, 131) and suggests that
attention “is needed because the world is that place that is so difficult to know and articulate” (129). According to Leckie, the poem’s “tone of inquiry leads the reader to think abstractly” about his relation to the twinflower (*Linnaea borealis*), particularly the desire to identify and name it accurately. Leckie’s “abstract” thinking replaces Arnold’s “tentativeness” in the phrase “tone of inquiry,” effectively recapitulating a humility in the face of the poet’s desire to name and to know by way of scientific information.

McKay’s speaker in “Twinflower” walks “accompanied by [his] binoculars and field guides,” able to identify the flower when he sees it, which he does when he least expects to; suddenly, “there they are, and maybe have been / all along, covering the forest floor: a creeper, a shy / hoister of flags, a tiny lamp to read by, one / word at a time” (5). The litany of names the speaker attaches to the twinflower upon seeing it points both to the power of metaphor to give “multiple names to each thing” (Leckie 143) and to the limitations of human linguistic response. The metaphorical naming contrasts sharply with the twinflower’s Latin binomial, which we learn from the speaker is *Linnaea borealis*, after Carolus Linnaeus, deviser of the most influential system of scientific naming. McKay’s metaphors, though desirous of achieving precision, highlight the narcissism with which Linnaeus appropriated the tiny flower and asked it “to join him in his portrait / . . . / to branch and nod beside him / as he placed himself in that important / airless room” (5). But if the list of metaphorical names functions as a “critique only of a certain kind of systematizing arrogance” (Leckie 136), it also serves to recognize the speaker’s complicity in longing “to find them in the field guide” after which “the bright / reticulated snaps of system will occur / as the plant is placed” within a category that includes other, similar plants (5). “Twinflower” articulates one aspect of the difficult-to-know world, offers ways of knowing that simultaneously impose human system on the natural world and acknowledge the problems
of doing so. The flower might remain, as Leckie suggests, “itself, a flower encountered on a walk in the woods” (144), despite attempts to appropriate it—via Linnean taxonomy and McKavian metaphor—but it also represents a human desire to uncover the unknown.

In spite of this human desire to uncover the unknown and to achieve linguistic specificity, both scientists and poets revel in the unknown. Deming describes this paradox as a “beautiful particularity and musicality of the vocabulary,” even if poets and scientists tend to use language in distinctively different ways (185). If scientists use words with as much precision as possible to articulate something of the unknown, poets use language that is deliberately imprecise, or rather, so precise and compact as to invite more than one meaning. In 2001, Irish poet Maurice Riordan contributed a short essay to *Nature* about how “science supplies poetry with a register of words outside common usage” (457). For Riordan, who has edited two anthologies of science-related poetry, scientific language has the potential to “exist in a state of sensitive relationship with everything else in a poem” and, when successful, to “increase[e] the surface tension of the language” as “part of the poem’s imaginative exertion,” which he calls language’s “promiscuous agility” (457). This agility prevents, or at least discourages, poets from writing “earnest, educative poems about science” and encourages instead imaginative engagement “with words and ideas that derive necessarily from a materialist model of the world.” Most significant for my argument about the role of scientific naming on the way to ecopoetic knowing is Riordan’s claim that poetry engaged with a scientific view of the world “produces a version of reality at odds with orthodox thinking” (457). As a response to a section of John Donne’s “The Second Anniversary,” Riordan’s language cannot escape religious connotations; however, the idea of poetry such as McKay’s producing a version of reality at odds with orthodox thinking anticipates McKay’s own desire to articulate the “possibilities for reverse flow in a relationship that has
been so thoroughly one-way” (D 18). Whether the relationship is spiritual, ontological, ecological, or political, the contemporary ecopoet’s challenge to it retains epistemological, and I might add pedagogical, urgency.

McKay is not a scientist. His poems are not validated by the “facts” I as a reader can uncover. However, he betrays a scientific mind in a recent essay by revealing a list of ideal companions for an afterlife canoe trip, including Rachel Carson, Stephen Jay Gould, David Suzuki, and Roderick Haig-Brown. If this list of desirable afterlife companions is any indication, and I think it is, his poetry works to get past the nature-poet stereotype, the Romantic vision of Man passively observing, describing, and ultimately constructing Nature. The hypothetical canoe trip represents for McKay an opportunity to go back in his writing career and give “full attention to birds, animals, plants, and lichens, not to mention the eloquent glacier-inscribed granite itself” (“The Shell” 56). In Strike/Slip, McKay’s 2006 collection, he contemplates a similar return, minus the hypothetical companions, in “Precambrian Shield” (8-9), a nostalgic poem about canoe trips during the speaker’s earlier life in Ontario. Responding to the question “Would I go back to that time,” the speaker says:

Not unless I was allowed,
as carry-on, some sediment that has since
accumulated, something to impede the
passage of those days that ran through us
like celluloid. Excerpts from the book of loss.
Tendonitis. Second thoughts. Field guides.
Did we even notice
that the red pine sprang directly from the rock
and swayed in the wind like gospel choirs?
Not us. (8)

Here the language of botany and geology occupy the same poem as nostalgic metaphor. Just as “[b]otanical nomenclature is an art of transmission that makes a certain kind of science possible” (Daston 155), so scientific knowledge represents an art of understanding that makes a certain
kind of poetry possible. The naming of red pine adds as much poignancy to the passage as references to the ethereal “book of loss” and “gospel choirs,” the point being that the speaker and his fellow canoeists were not paying attention to the ecology of the region through which they yearly paddled, and hence would have been unable to discover accurate metaphors about the experience. The turn to rock in this poem reflects McKay’s shift to geopoetry in both Strike/Slip and Deactivated West 100. Though the attention and specificity McKay desires in his geopoetry is similar to the attention and specificity he desires in his ecopoetry, there are crucial differences in the way he positions human intelligence—including imagination—vis-à-vis geologic time. Despite the differences, though, which I explore further in my concluding chapter, McKay’s geopoetry represents an extension of his interest in the scientific as well as the experiential and the poetic.

By attending to the science of geology, for example—even if only nominally, by appropriating some of the lingo—McKay performs in intertextually similar ways as such writers as Dionne Brand, who attends to the theory of diaspora, and Anne Michaels, who attends to the psychology of trauma. In other words, McKay’s poetry is informed by extra- and intertextual allusions careful readers are apt to identify and research. McKay’s poetry differs, of course, from Brand’s and Michaels’ in that his is both unapologetically Romantic in the way it allows for—and seeks out—members of the world outside language and unavoidably anthropocentric in the way it engages a scientific, objective world based on observation and experiment. But, as he does with “Twinflower,” McKay uses poetry as a “critique of the Romantic idea of the sympathy of all things” and revises the Romantic paradigm, rather than simply repudiating or rejecting it (Leckie 127-28). While McKay’s project is neither to support scientific practices uncritically, nor to challenge them, much of his poetry enables readers to do both should they choose to follow
the trail of referents he blazes. The information science provides—information about how three types of faults are produced by differing tectonic movements, for example—sprouts along the edge of a trail I follow from the poem “Stress, Shear, and Strain Theories of Failure” (S/S 33) to The Geology of Southern Vancouver Island.

Named for an early geologist’s application of a physics theory (about the potential failure of tensiles, ductiles, and brittles relative to the amount of stress exerted on them) to tectonic forces, “Stress, Shear, and Strain Theories of Failure” demonstrates McKay’s metaphorical skills as well as his ability to integrate language and concepts from the hard sciences. For a poem that announces itself as a sonnet with the line “This sonnet hereby sings,” “Stress, Shear, and Strain Theories of Failure” accomplishes much more than its glib self-naming suggests by testing the limits of a traditional lyric form against a subject—the earth’s crust—that defies simple definition. Though it contains fourteen lines, this sonnet does not adhere to a strict metrical pattern or rhyming scheme, and it is about love, that traditional lyric subject, only in the sense that the poet might, in writing the poem, be making a humble gesture in homage to earth’s “chthonic shear.” The poem might have been called “Song for the Song of the Failing Lithosphere” for the way McKay plays on the tensions between fault (“The earth-engine / driving itself through death after death. Strike/slip, / thrust, and the fault called normal, which occurs / when two plates separate”), failure (as in the theories of the title), and (human) failing (“Let us fail / in all the styles established by our lithosphere”). The sonnet sustains McKay’s suspicion of language, metaphor, and poetry, all of which he argues elsewhere fail necessarily yet instructively.

The traditional sonnet here fails in its attempt to contain the shifting dynamics of the “earth-engine.” Beginning the first line with three trochaic feet followed by an appropriately
placed catalectic to echo the linguistic “lift,” the next three lines attempt to settle into an iambic pentameter but struggle under the “stress shear strain” of metapoetic humility and attention:

They have never heard of lift
and are – for no one, over and over – cleft. Riven,
recrystallized. Ruined again. The earth-engine
driving itself through death after death. Strike/slip,

Significant for giving the collection its title, this poem challenges conventional wisdom—“orthodox thinking” as Maurice Riordan has it—regarding both lyric poetry and lay geology. The rhythms “clatter,” as McKay suggests poetry does in an earlier poem, and the earth itself splits and shifts, as the repetition of “death,” the synonymous “cleft” and “riven,” as well as “recrystallization” and “ruined again” indicate. In choosing to resist the sonnet form, McKay does not suggest he has somehow found a way not to participate in the colonizing force of the English language. His poems reveal a complicity he feels as a member of North American society and as a poet. It is good “meditative medicine,” McKay writes, to consider otherwise-than-place (DW 19); in other words, it is instructive to consider our relation to the world in ways that reveal, at the very least, our inadequacies as a species, and at the very worst, our arrogance and our violence.

I have devoted a good deal of space to McKay’s poems that pay attention to organisms other than birds in order to position his poetry within a larger historical, critical context of science and literature, to show that science functions as intertext in poems that feature twinflowers, saxifrage, red pines, and quartz, as well as varied thrushes, ravens, goldfinches, and peregrine falcons. In “Identification” (B 91), for example, McKay writes about a moment when someone digging potatoes happens to see “a hawkish speck / above the cornfield moving / far too fast” to enable a positive identification. The speaker names the speck which has quickly “stooped and / vanished / Peregrine,” admitting that he writes it down “because [he] might have gone on
digging the potatoes / never looking up” and “because / such clarity is rare and inarticulate as
you, o dangerous / endangered species.” Alanna Bondar suggests that the speaker, since he does
not have time to get his binoculars and identify field marks, “forces meaning onto the situation”
(25) by naming the bird “Peregrine.” If the repetition of “because”—it appears six times in the
poem as part of the phrase, “I write it down because”—functions, as Bondar claims, as “a
vacillation in meaning, an attempt to pinpoint the reason why he writes down ‘Peregrine’ when
he is not sure he even saw more than ‘a hawkish speck’” (24-25), then the poem’s title refers
more to the speaker than to the bird: the act of naming identifies the poet-speaker as someone
who is satisfied with the “bright / reticulated snaps of system” that inevitably occur, as they do in
“Twinflower” when the speaker is able to place the twinflower “among the honeysuckles” (A 5).
But the naming in “Identification” remains tentative, and the upper-case italics, furthermore,
articulate the speaker’s hopeful desire to have seen a rare, endangered species. I think he is
attempting to pinpoint the reason why he writes down anything at all. The impetus to “write it
down” reflects more a desire for a moment of clarity that might enable the peregrine falcon to
recover from its endangerment than it does the satisfaction of having guessed the identity of a
distant “hawkish speck.” Identification, this poem suggests, is a process; the identity the speaker
ultimately settles on and writes down simultaneously reveals a human desire to name and the
potential danger of such a desire.

**Part Five: Naming | Knowing**

In “Landscape, Untitled,” John Moss argues that “the poet merges the experience of
things and things themselves” “through words” (66). Of course, the poet’s primary dilemma then
becomes deciding which words will enact a successful merging of experience and things. I have
been arguing that if the poet writes about ecological relations, as Don McKay does, then field
guides and scientific texts provide an ample, species-specific, and ecologically accurate vocabulary. “If appropriate language is not at the poet's command,” according to Moss, “then the world from his or her perspective and for those who share it is quite literally beyond comprehension” (66). For McKay, no language, no word, seems appropriate enough; he is searching for the “appropriate gesture” that approximates a merging of things and their ideas (“Appropriate” 44-61). East-coast writer, John Steffler echoes Moss’ claim regarding poetry’s interest “in human experience, in capturing what feel like the important moments in being both human and part of the world” (49). In expressing the merging Moss refers to and capturing the moments Steffler refers to, “poetry’s basic method might seem not very different from that of science. Both involve observation, analysis, and some form of expression or reporting,” according to Steffler (49). I agree with Steffler’s basic argument regarding the similarities between science and poetry, but I take issue with his use of the term “method”: poetry has no method like the scientific method. However, both science and poetry need to use language to communicate their observation and analysis.

American poet Alison Hawthorne Deming usefully points out a key difference in what scientists and poets expect from language. Despite many similarities in how metaphor and narrative are used to help articulate “the unknown, to develop an orderly syntax to represent accurately some carefully seen aspect of the world,” scientists have a tendency to count on the uncomplicated specificity of words’ meanings (188). Deming cites Miroslav Holub, an immunologist and poet: “For the sciences, words are an auxiliary tool” (188). Consider, for example, the following comments about intertidal zones, one from a biology journal and the others from poems: “largely 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” (Helmuth 837);

December, it’s dark when the water’s out
but today is June: sun heats
the pavement of clamshell and pools
a tiny shadow at her feet. Her step
on the mudflat sends the shy heron
flapping and *gronking* over the headland.

Did she think she could walk here
with no disturbance? (Wheeler, “The Tide” 56)

and

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. (New, “Bird Landing” 58)

While the former passage 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 propensity to exclude (Battalio 81). In the second passage, Laurie Ricou’s comments regarding the intertidal zone as “an ideal metaphor for a place in constant transition . . . . a place of deposition, of layering, of a mix of communities, of crevices and hidden pools” rings true (*Arbutus* 142). Wheeler’s heron, flapping at the poet’s disturbance, and New’s exposed barnacles and starfish, evidence of common ecological turmoil, include the “literary” elements excluded in the more scientific prose. Biotic (heron, mussels, 4-year-olds) coexist with abiotic (sun, clamshells, pier) and reveal ecological patterns in a nature that includes humans and nonhumans alike. These poems readily assume the intertidal zone as a “model system for examining [ecological] relationships.”
During a typical debate between Leonard Nathan and his ornithologist, Lewis, Nathan essentially reinforces Deming’s and Holub’s comments regarding differing uses of language by scientists and poets. Nathan sees a turn toward abstraction in scientific language, toward birds as an example of race, species, genus, ultimately as confirmation of natural law. [Scientific] language is constituted to do that. But there’s another language, dedicated to articulating the sense or feel of an experience. In order to perform that task, it must sometimes break with straightforward language, resort to violations of grammar, syntax, and logic; it must exploit devices like hyperbole, understatement, paradox, oxymoron, irony, strong patterns of meter and rhyme— (127)

The information scientists are attempting to communicate is ill-served by such structurally reflexive strategies as Nathan lists. If studies demonstrate aggressive behaviour in red-necked grebes relative to other species of grebe, it behoves the scientist to write “Red-necked Grebes are fierce, and in the breeding season they attack all other grebes entering their territory” (Fjeldså 57) rather than some such attempt as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Red-necked Grebes</th>
<th>attacking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attacking</td>
<td>attacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protecting their</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>territory during</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breeding season</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My attempt at versifying the data might be laughable—okay, it is laughable—but hypothetically it should communicate the same thing: red-necked grebes are fierce (hence the repetition) and territorial (hence the visual spaces surrounding “attacking”) during breeding season. But, the poor quality of my verse notwithstanding, the information gains nothing from the structural inconsistencies. Perhaps we can attribute the difference between Jon Fjeldså’s version and mine
to the different formal conventions of prose and poetry, though prose fiction writers have
produced structurally experimental work. The differences do not necessarily assume a valuation
of either linguistic strategy. However, Fjeldså succeeds in communicating something about grebe
aggression succinctly.

One aspect of creative language use Nathan does not address is metaphor. As I have just
discussed, metaphor is an important component of both scientific and literary writing. In *Wisdom
& Metaphor*, Jan Zwicky connects metaphorical and scientific ways of thinking by introducing a
mathematical analogy:

> Understanding metaphor is like understanding a geometrical truth. Features of
> various geometrical figures or of various contexts are pulled into revealing
> alignment with one another by the demonstration or the metaphor.
> 
> What is ‘revealed’ is not that the alignment is possible; rather, that the alignment
> is possible reveals the presence of already-existing shapes or correspondences that
> lay unnoticed. To ‘see’ a proof or ‘get’ a metaphor is to experience the
> significance of the correspondence for what the thing, concept, or figure is. (L36)

Yet while metaphor importantly, if inconspicuously, populates scientific writing it also has the
ability, in the service of a poet such as McKay, simultaneously to describe and question the
accuracy of description. This ability is precisely what Brian Bartlett refers to when, discussing
McKay’s shift from “fieldguidisms” to metaphor and back, he writes that “[d]escription in Don
McKay’s poems isn’t limited to pictorial details” (124). By way of example, Bartlett quotes a
line from “A Morning Prayer Ending with a Line Borrowed from the Holiday Inn” (*B* 59). “A
treeful of starlings, speckled and / oily as comic book germs or high school wiseguys” is,
according to Bartlett “more idiosyncratic and exact than a treeful of gaudy, iridescent starlings”
(124), a bastardization of McKay's lines that resembles my own attempt to versify grebe
behaviour ecology.

*Birding, or desire* is the book that put McKay on the literary map after he had published
four collections, each of which contributes poems to the 1983 collection. Many of the poems in
*Birding, or desire* attend overtly to naming and identification while the speaker is birding. The
collection opens with "Field Marks," and section three begins with "Field Marks (2)," each poem
referring to the system of bird identification made popular by Roger Tory Peterson in his
celebrated *A Field Guide to the Birds* and "widely regarded as the most efficient and most
effective way to identify birds under the poor conditions, such as color-obscuring glare, often
encountered outdoors. A field mark is any distinctive feature setting one species of bird apart
from others, especially its near congener: barred tail feathers, eyebrow ridges, a curved bill, an
unusual flight pattern, and so on" (Phillips 173). In the first "Field Marks," McKay provides an
abbreviated, ontological field-guide entry for the poet-birder: "just like you and me but /
cageless, likes fresh air and / wants to be his longing. / Wears extra eyes around his neck" (*B*)

The poet-birder here is restless, full of desire for identifying birds and for an unidentified
woman, the "shape and texture of" whose thighs he "spends days attempting to compare" to "a
snowy egret's neck" (15). Ending with "He wings it," a line hovering on the verge of cliche,
"Field Marks" fits a McKavian world full of birding and desire, ecological and linguistic edges.

"Field Marks (2)" offers a more extended version of the poet-birder. In both poems McKay is
characteristically self-deprecating: while in the first poem he is an unimpressive egghead, in the
second he is "Distinguished from the twerp, / which he resembles, by his off-speed /
concentration: *shh:*" (75), the mildly pejorative "twerp" resonating also with onomatopoeic calls
and songs of songbirds. Resemblance to the "twerp" indicates a strategic humility on the part of
the speaker, one that McKay cultivates in his writings about the limitations of language.

Moreover, in attempting “to become / a dog’s nose of receptiveness” (75), the speaker embodies a theriomorphic proclivity evident in much of McKay’s work. Not only does the metaphor provide “a more familiar directness” (Bartlett 124) in spite of its obvious unreality—a human is not a dog’s nose—it also implies respect for the unique physical (and intellectual) abilities of nonhumans.

This entry on the poet-birder combines a respectful acknowledgement of nonhuman intelligence and (inherent) value with McKay’s interest in what he calls, in “Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home & Nature Poetry,” “poetic attention.” A coinage in which McKay “feel[s] the falsity (and in some way the transgression) of nomination,” poetic attention is “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” (V 26). McKay here recalls Bringhurst’s repetition, in “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus Et Oreamnos Deorum,” of “Knowing, not owning,” and the movement toward “Sharpening, honing / pieces of knowledge, / pieces of earth” that Bringhurst’s poem articulates (Calling 154-55). Knowing, though, requires a genre of attention, especially by the birder, that can be, or can seem to be, didactic and boring—

Later on he’ll come back as the well-known bore
and read his list (Song sparrows: 5
Brown thrashers: 2
Black-throated green warblers: 1) omitting
all the secret data hatching on the far side of his mind:

that birds have sinuses throughout their bodies,
and that their bones are flutes
that soaring turkey vultures can detect
depression and careless driving
that every feather is a pen, but living,

flying (B 75)
Bartlett suggests that this poem, because of its attention to attention and its interest in listing, “speaks for many poems” in McKay’s corpus. In my reading, the list is key because it shows the birder making his field notes; but the shape of the list, its epistemology, is not as important as what the poet-birder does with it and what the list enables beyond identification and classification. The birder’s list here becomes parenthetical, unlike the listing of “bindweed, spiderweb, sumac, / Queen Anne’s Lace” found earlier in the poem. While he omits “all the secret data hatching on the far side of his mind,” he also includes the secret data, a literary choice in keeping with Bartlett’s claim that the list is “a common, poetic device to evoke multiplicity” (“Dog’s” 133). The “secret data” hence gestures tellingly toward a poetic style attuned specifically to the biologies and ecologies of the birds themselves. Granted, the scientific—“that birds have sinuses throughout their body”—slides effortlessly into metaphor—“that every feather is a pen”—but the transition, indeed the translation, avoids simplicity. In numerous poems, Bartlett suggests, “McKay’s avian precision moves from bird-guide delineations to metaphor” and “from metaphor to fieldguidisms” (124); the field guide represents one intertextual referent toward which a McKavian trail might lead. It also offers a particularly interesting example, especially in the case of bird books, of biological, ecological specification meeting metaphorical, representational description.

The desire for scientific or taxonomic accuracy 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 birder-critic 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 field guide is theory enough. Far from turning poetry, or the study of poetry, into a 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 be here” and to live in the world “as if it were home” (Lilburn Living 1).

While McKay exhibits highly practiced skills with metaphor and his images are well-chosen from a birder’s repertoire of names and field knowledge, he also cultivates, as I have said, distrust of metaphor. In addition to essayistic exclamations regarding the impossibility of full congruence between word and world, McKay occasionally resists metaphor in his poetry. In “Night Field” (NF 38-41), for example, a three-part poem about the destructive rituals associated with clearing house and moving, the middle section recounts a peculiar narrative. McKay writes in the second part about an ominous painting “given to him [the nameless main character] by his godparents a few years / before his godmother died,” the gesture of the gift itself is “so loaded it occupied his / mind like a cathedral” (NF 39). Though he spends countless hours “gazing into the field” depicted by the painting’s black, “spectrum of purples / and bronzes” with “a tuft or / tussock of straw in its lower middle,” “tilting his head this way and that way, trying this combination of straws and blackness,” he is unable to see a “monster,” or “a field with a monster in it,” that 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.” By deviating from his litany of equations when he gets to the monster, McKay effectively returns to the notion introduced at the beginning of part two:
gestures are themselves loaded with meaning, and life (in this case the life of his godmother, whose death others in the poem feel "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 prevents metaphor, which in turn prevents understandings of the way humans construct through language, and of the ways nonhuman biota (and abiota) make meaning, too.

Léslie Marmon Silko writes about how, in Pueblo culture, "The squash blossom is one thing: itself" and "a bolt of lightning is itself, but at the same time it may mean much more" (28). Adam Dickinson offers a similar version of this simultaneity of meaning when he writes of metaphoricity as both the is and is not of a thing: "metaphor, as the crossing of contexts, as the site of an ecological complex, depends on non-metaphor, it depends on the distinctness of things in their language-games" (30). Thus, when "[r]epresented only in its intrinsic form, the squash flower," for example, "is released from a limited meaning or restricted identity. Even in the most sophisticated abstract form, a squash flower or a cloud or a lightning bolt [becomes] intricately connected with a complex system of relationships" between ancient Pueblo people and "the populous natural world" (Silko 28). Though we should "know the names for things as a minimum" (Lilburn "Going" 184), 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 in the essay, "How to Be Here?": "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” (5).

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 the Moon,” McKay encounters moon as metaphor and writes of a moment when the speaker, the supposedly “monolithic, anthropocentric lyrical ‘I’” (Dickinson 33), 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. (A 7)

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” (McKay A 70)—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 “mooonstuff” in which to dress up. In this case, “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 normally.

McKay’s persistent uneasiness with the supposed authority of human language to produce uninflected knowledge speaks to a desire for a responsible thinking, especially with
respect to humans’ relations with the nonhuman world, which I believe ecocriticism has the
capacity to support. Such an ecocriticism would, as I have argued in this chapter, manoeuvre
necessarily between and among various disciplinary approaches to the physical world while
accommodating for a complex set of challenges to anthropocentric conceptual 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 may also be “the death of distance
and its children” (McKay NF 22). 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” (NF 22)—represents at once a multiplicity of interpretive
possibilities and a set of risky propositions, especially when we consider the entrenched
disciplinary structure of academia. McKay offers a warning to the literary-minded critic who
decides to cross disciplinary and phenomenal distances to get closer to the world outside 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. (NF 22)

In a few brief lines, McKay recalls “all the secret data hatching on the far side of his mind”
desired by the birder-poet and anticipates the respectful decision in “Load,” ostensibly by that
same birder-poet, not to touch a white-throated sparrow recovering on the shore of Lake Erie. He
also manages to turn the warning into one against human foolishness, effectively maintaining a
sustained metacritique of language, poetry, and metaphor. The gesture of “stick[ing] the sharp
end” of a bird’s skull into his ear is as “loaded” as the gift of the painting in “Night Field,” but the reminder here to check the symbolism with a modicum of humility (itself tempered by equal doses of ornithological and experiential knowledge) is also a reminder that we humans have a lot to learn from the material world.

By extension, ecocritics have a lot to learn from field guides, science textbooks, and time spent in the field. The routes, or trails of referents that McKay’s poetry invites readers to explore invite a postmodern scrutiny of “the word/world relationship” in much the same way Hutcheon’s postmodern theory of science and/as intertext does (182). Though McKay’s poetry that seeks out a proximal relation to the world does so by scrutinizing the word/world relationship, it also, unlike most postmodern thought, affirms a world that exists beyond language. McKay’s referential poetry also resembles Hutcheon’s theory in the way both models privilege complexity and involve “overlap and overdetermination, a zigzagging ‘route’ more than a static model of reference” (Hutcheon 181). According to Bondar, “McKay uses birds and birding as a means of examining the desire for movement and for exploration into the unknown in the hope of satiating curiosity and intellect” (“Every” 17); Nicholas Bradley claims that McKay “uses birds in order to contemplate the individual’s relation to home” (“Ecology” 156). I argue that McKay does not “use” birds, but rather that he uses his faulty words, field guides, and patient “attention to detailed observation and acutely precise comparisons” (Elmslie 89) to get closer to the world beyond language. Proximity inflects specificity; specificity inflects the poet’s, and the ecocritic’s, relation to the more-than-human world.
ECOTONE TWO

*Birding and other forms of nature observation seem to be a symptomatic response to the disjunction between human life and nature typical of modern societies.*

—Andrew Durkin

Field Guides

*He would be a bird book full of lavish illustrations with a text of metaphor.*—Don McKay

*Because it is an ecology unto itself.*—Steve McOrmond

As a literary critic interested in how his work might effectively participate in environmental, ecological, and (related) political discourses, BC often feels like the stereotypical environmentalist defended by historian Richard White. Responding in part to a bumper sticker with the offensive rhetorical question, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living,” White challenges those intellectual, philosophical approaches to environmentalism that consider work—specifically physical labour—in opposition to conservation. Most environmentalists, offers White, “equate work in nature with destruction. They ignore the ways that work itself is a means of knowing nature while celebrating the virtues of play and recreation in nature” (171). This resistance to physical labour—farming, fishing, logging—not only ignores certain ways of “knowing nature” but presumes a particular way of knowing to be more important than others. It also assumes, rather arrogantly, that no farmers, fishers, or loggers work in a sustainable manner on a local scale. Like White, who admits “not hav[ing] to face what [he] alter[s]” because of his urban, academic position, the birder-critic (BC) consequently “learn[s] nothing from” the physical world beyond his office walls, beyond words on the pages he reads daily, and beyond his own supposedly limitless imagination (184). But that is changing as BC spends more time walking around his Vancouver neighbourhood listening to, looking for, and learning from field marks. He also turns to bird books that are “written to instruct the novice,”
aware that “a minimum degree of assimilation to the work of birdwatching is required” (Law & Lynch 285). Birding occupies a space between physical outdoor labour and imaginative indoor work.

Except for the familiar birds—crows, rock doves, starlings, and Steller’s jays—BC has a hard time identifying a number of species he sees and hears on his walks. He saw a hawk one morning bathing in Tatlow Park. It looked odd standing in the water, dipping its head into the creek before lifting and tilting its neck so the water trickled down its back; it looked, as hawks seldom do, like a giant sparrow having a dust bath. It looked vulnerable—as hawks seldom do—and yet there was no murder of crows chastising and chasing as there usually is in the park. Was it a Cooper’s hawk or sharp-shinned? And what is that tiny brown bird that seems always to be perched on top of a bush singing a song fit for a bird ten times its size. It looks a bit like a pointy-tailed chocolate Timbit. Feeling he has come to know these birds in such a way that scientific names are unnecessary, BC nevertheless resists naming them himself, resists the urge to resist entering a community of names and namers. His curiosity about where they’ve come from—whether they’re year-round residents or fall migrants—sends him to a field guide. For guidance. He recalls David Wagoner’s question after reading a posted warning, “Do Not Proceed Beyond this Point without a Guide” (170)—

Why should I take a guide along
To watch me scaring myself to death?

Unwilling simply to open a book and search, though, BC finds an article about birdwatching behaviour in humans. Sociologists John Law and Michael Lynch write that field guides operate on “a set of commitments: that bird species exist in nature; that they can be identified and indexed on the basis of sensory (mainly visual, but also audible) evidences; that separate species can be represented in paradigmatic illustration and described in texts” (277). In this context, field
marks operate as components of a deliberate representational strategy: guides employ “a tacit ‘picture theory’ of representation: an idealization of the potential correspondence that can be achieved between a representation in the text and the ‘bird in the field’” (Law & Lynch 277-78). As a novice, BC remains aware that he must to a certain degree rely upon the authority of the guide, in spite of his tendency to distrust the authority of the written word. Despite the unavoidable incompleteness of field guides—they cannot list “every species or variant that might possibly be seen”—that is, “the text remains authoritative in the hands of the novice unless strong external grounds are found for denigrating its completeness or adequacy” (Law & Lynch 277). Walking into the field with a guide does not guarantee instant access. But time spent in the guide necessarily informs time spent in the field. Both have the capacity to inform time spent in a poem.

Before heading out to Jericho Beach in search of migrating warblers, BC picks up Sue Wheeler’s *Habitat*. In the collection’s opening poem, “Understory” (11), which is dedicated to Don McKay, Wheeler responds to McKay’s avian-inspired writing with the following:

To walk out of the field guide 
and listen. To wait 
for the world to approach with its dapple and hands.

There’s an understory here, shades 
of meaning, tale told by a rock 
signifying everything.

To open the grammar of being seen 
and let the creatures name you.

Wheeler’s infinitives coupled with the poem’s title (which appears in the poem between two vague markers of place: there, here) reflect a tentativeness BC wants to emulate. The listening. The waiting. The birding. The ontological shift when he allows himself to be named in a language he will never understand. BC keeps coming back to McKay’s most recent collection of
essays on place, wilderness, and poetry, in which McKay reveals an interest in “the possibilities for reverse flow in a relationship that has been so thoroughly one-way.” (D 18). Reverse flow represents a complex postcolonial, environmental relationship, a conscious willingness to admit complicity and desires yet still manage to work (against the mainstream) toward a more equitable relation to other humans and nonhumans. BC is an actor in the saga of place even as he resists complicity by learning the names of things in place. McKay’s reverse flow echoes Lilburn’s notion that humans in a new place “should learn the names for things as a minimum” gesture, “as acts of courtesy . . . entering the realm of decorum” (“Going” 184). One does not respectfully engage in a dialogue with another person and begin, “Hey, what’s-your-name! Let’s talk about this land you claim belongs to your ancestors.” The saga of place can take place in the realm of decorum. BC is convinced he can start, as ecopoets and interdisciplinary ecocritics have started, by learning the names for birds, trees, winds, and the people who live and have lived along this coast.

Recapitulating a colonial expansion westward, BC moves through rainforest toward coast and waves; salal and Oregon grape border the trail, interrupted by “illegitimate, superfluous,” occasional yet persistent bursts of Himalayan blackberry, an introduced *Rubus* cultivar courtesy of famed horticulturalist, Luther Burbank (Robertson 125). Arbutus trees point nakedly toward sun and waves. He is looking for a bird-poem, a hybrid creature like himself. But what does it mean to be walking like this? Like Wordsworth walking the Lake District in an earlier time, “imaginatively and physically” BC “is always moving around”—unlike Wordsworth, BC considers his relation to the natural world with a healthy dose of humility. If “motion is,” as John Elder claims, “the integrating dimension of a quest” (*Imagining* 137), BC sees his walking, his moving through the landscape, as a participatory gesture. Otherwise, the quest is likely to
become a conquest, recapitulated colonial expansion to become postcolonial, as it were, thus reaffirming a continuing presence of colonial thought. As if in response to a poet’s bird-word playfulness, birds become participial modifiers, gerunds, continuing actions in the present—meaning, birding—and to look at them thus becomes a way of looking at and of knowing “trees and rocks and seas and all that weaves itself into habitat” (Bringhurst & Ricou 93). BC moves from the specificity of recognition and nomination—Steller’s jay, check—to an inclusive consideration of linked entities and of a process of connection between this Douglas fir, that spotted owl, and his own desiring gaze. The task is difficult, but as Gabriele Helms suggests, “the interconnectedness of all the environment, of the human and the nonhuman world, its interdependence and mutual implication, make it possible for the [birder-critic] to come to an answer to her/his own impatience and frustration” (51-52). The answer often rests unobtrusively in a space, in a moment, between not-knowing and knowing; BC necessarily hesitates, delays the action of naming in order to pay homage to the named.

Leafing through some papers on his desk, BC comes across the following epithets from Ricou’s “Field Notes and Notes on a Field”: “The typical guidebook formulation defines gross characteristics” (24); “It gives basic information, often in sentence fragments, for the identification of species” (24); “Slight shifts in a repeated formula signal a thematic development” (25). If BC fails, perhaps it is the fault of the field guide. Perhaps, looking at a bird he cannot name, “he recognized that it was like the other one but he forgot what its name was” (Law & Lynch 272). As Law and Lynch would have it, such failure is a result of what Wittgenstein calls “aspect blindness”—BC suffers “not from a defect of eyesight or an inability to see or optically resolve birds in the field, but rather from an inability to collect and re-collect species identifications” (273). Like the poet-birders whose work he has encountered, BC is not a
particularly good birder. He can be, however, quite an adept critic in spite of and perhaps because of his failure at birding. Or at \textit{professional} birding. Instead of mitigating the failure that results from consulting field guides and “encounter[ing] innumerable frustrations, uncertainties, and quandaries” (Law & Lynch 291), BC acknowledges the value of such failure. And he might, as poet-birders often do, end up writing about it eventually.

But how is it possible to represent birds as birds in the pages of literature, or in a poem? How is it possible for the birder-critic to negotiate the layers of representation and, in reading McKay’s “Song for the Song of the Common Raven” (\textit{S/S} 27), for example, write about actual ravens? One answer, an easy one, is: It cannot be done. Even field guides, with their ostensible “capacity . . . to put the reader or viewer in touch with the environment” with their “stylized images” and mimetic representations, necessarily fail to achieve scientific or literary realism (Buell 97). BC is not interested in debating how real things are in themselves, though. Reality he takes for granted; but he understands his experience of the real, how he perceives things, removes him from their experience in the world. Helms puts it this way: “From a constructivist point of view, I do not deny the existence of an ontological, non-textual reality; what I deny is the possibility of making a statement about its ‘real’ nature” (45). BC feels impoverished by the proximity he seeks, not by the birds. BC wants to know more about the birds because he is relatively new to this place, their home. His presence alone informs an ongoing history of colonial presence; and it also inheres in an even older history of humans’ misunderstanding and destruction of the more-than-human world. Familiarity on the way to recognition, then. He is learning that “users of [all] guides will encounter innumerable frustrations, uncertainties and quandaries. Such ‘troubles’ are typically experienced by committed birders as temporary problems arising within a personal and situational relationship to ‘reality’ – problems with
perspective, acuity and luck” (Law & Lynch 291). Knowing includes being known: but the moment of recognition, of realization, is constantly changing. Familiarity takes time. BC longs to achieve the familiarity expressed by P.K. Page in “Only Child” (Planet 114-16), a poem about a mother (a “noted naturalist”) and “her very affectionate and famous son.” The son, neither interested in learning Latin binomials nor in knowing the common names for the birds he and his mother encounter, nevertheless gains a familiarity through proximity afforded by walking with his mother; “he knew / them by their feathers and a shyness like his own” (114). His guide is polymorphous. His guides are.

In his critical appraisal of ecocriticism, Dana Phillips analyzes Roger Tory Peterson’s field-mark system of bird identification, what Buell identifies as “highly abstract renderings that have proved, in the experience of veteran birders, to enable the student to identify the originals more effectively than would a denser mimetic image, such as a photograph in the Audubon Society field guide” (Environmental 97). Responding to Buell’s description of Peterson’s field-mark system, Phillips criticizes Buell’s “assumption that the images in the Field Guide have something of crucial importance to do with ‘originals’” (174). Buell’s use of the term “original” is problematic, to be sure; however, BC has little ethical difficulty taking Buell to be referring to a bird or species of bird that existed prior to any representation, image, or description, whether mimetic, abstract, or verbal. While Phillips and Buell agree on the irony implicit in Peterson’s Field Guide being “not only mimetically parsimonious, but visually impoverished, too, and deliberately so” (Phillips 174), they disagree on the value and success of such an aesthetic. Phillips remains unconvinced of the guide’s ability to put its reader “in touch with the environment” since Peterson’s “merely adequate” images, which require the “birder to become a reader,” push the birder to consider “another image, and yet another, while returning, now and
again, to the environment for fresh impressions” (178, 179). In other words, Buell privileges a 
too-simplistic version of literary realism that Phillips seeks to complicate:

Every transaction entails further action: the birder will have to engage in a 
lot of back-and-forth between text and world, and world and text, and between 
stylized image and bird, and bird and stylized image, if she really wants to know 
what kind of chickadee she saw. I think it is precisely this going back and forth 
between text and world, and between nature and culture . . . to enable 
[identification], which gives a notion like getting ‘in touch with the environment’ 
whatever worth it may have. (179)

It is also such back-and-forthing, BC thinks, that Buell would privilege as a way to lead readers 
back to the physical world and not away from it (Buell 11). Phillips’ acknowledgement of a 
world that exists independently of text is promising, in spite of his sustained and bellicose 
critique of both ecocriticism and the science of ecology. That he uses chickadees and Peterson’s 
Field Guide to Birds to do it is significant for another reason, namely because it illustrates the 
central importance birds—*real* birds—have in the ongoing problem of environmentally 
conscious literature and criticism.

Yet for all that BC wants to demonstrate how learning about the biology and ecology of 
birds can help to develop a less anthropocentric model of critical inquiry, Ricou reminds that 
“something in us resists a guide. Hence the sometimes hectoring tone, as the poet-guide has to 
persuade his companion to see it his way. We would rather go it alone” (Field 22). If the poet is 
guide, BC must learn how to read the guides, must learn nuances of the genre. In contrast, 
Andrew Durkin notes that the typical “‘consumer’ of a [field] guide is not a reader in the usual 
sense but a user”; not until “the establishment of a reciprocal relationship between the technical
means to produce well-illustrated, relatively inexpensive books on an enormous scale . . . did the
bird guide take on what might be called its modern paradigmatic form,” of which Peterson’s
Field Guides are most representative (5).

to “read the ‘field’ of Dungeness Spit” in David Wagoner’s poem. “Pause there, and listen to the
echoes of local knowledge. […] The best plan is to alternate routes” (19). For the birder, or the
birder-critic reading McKay’s poems, the impulse is necessarily different. Land(scape) is not the
initial ground of the poetry; air and air’s denizens are. Granted, McKay walks myriad trails; but
often their specificity is less significant than birds’ identities. BC knows that “a cardinal /
whistling in the poplars” and “bleeding into the trees” (“Longing:” B 79) does so not in Victoria,
B.C., where McKay currently lives and works. But even if the poplar referred to is Populus
balsamifera L. (balsam poplar)—the likeliest candidate since other potential poplars (based on
the common names BC finds in his field guide: white, Lombardy) are introduced, naturalized
trees—BC cannot determine whether the poem takes place in Ontario or New Brunswick. To get
closer to that truth, he must consult extant biographical data and surmise that, since McKay
wasn’t living in New Brunswick at the time Birding, or desire was published, the cardinal is
whistling in the poplars somewhere in southern Ontario. If ecologically precise poetry can invite
readers into closer proximity to the outside world, surely setting takes on great significance. In
the end, though, this brief lyric poem doesn’t provide any “echoes of local knowledge.” There is
no field to read, in part because of the poem’s brevity, in part because the poem does not
recount/describe a field or a route through a field. In its lyric simplicity, “Longing:” provides a
variation on its title, equates that cardinal whistling in a poplar with “an angel / calling his dog,”
both of which are examples of a “radical unwinding of the heart” (B 79). Love is rough terrain,
and the lyric has historically offered a guide to love’s many contours. But is lyric poetry capable of functioning as a field guide? On its own the lyric seems ill-suited for guiding readers through real-world terrains.

Jan Zwicky defines “lyric insight” as “thisness, the whole grasped in the particular” (Wisdom 70). In this sense, lyric offers McKay a particularly suitable mode of “ontological attention” as he writes about “this porch, this laundry basket, this day” (Wisdom 52), about horned larks (“Drag”), common snipes (“The Wolf”), and snowy egrets (“Field Marks”). Elsewhere Zwicky suggests that “Lyric humility is isomorphic to ecological humility” and “The awareness that lyric intuits, and that lyric thought attempts to render, is ecological in form” (“Brinthurst’s” 110). Such metaphorical possibilities, though, suggest poems themselves are “ecosystems, precariously adjusted to the surrounding biomass” (Rasula 7). If BC can manage to negotiate the terrain of an ecopoem—by consulting field guide entries and making trips to science libraries—then listening to the world outside will become easier and more meaningful. As John Elder writes, “poetry is in ecological terms the edge between mankind and nonhuman nature, providing an access for culture into a world beyond its preconceptions” (210). The access Elder writes of, as BC sees it, is attainable only when he puts the poem down (or stuffs it in his pocket) and straddles the ecotone between “mankind and nonhuman nature.” Poetry is not enough on its own; nor is science or a life lived either indoors or out. As with the biosphere, diversity is perhaps key.

What other guides might we turn to? While Lilburn claims Euroamericans are not quite capable of being “autochthonic” the way, say, Cree people in Saskatchewan or Haida in British Columbia are (“Walking” 45), BC wants to keep an ear tilted toward available stories, available strategies for attempting the world. There is a danger, though, he realizes, in the way simply
“speak[ing] of Native Americans in relation to place, earth, land, or any other geographic location courts cliché,” but as Kathryn Shanley argues, “the definition of ‘indigenous’ entails place” (137). During one of his visits to a library across campus—the First Nations House of Learning, or Xwi7xwa Library—BC encounters Leroy Little Bear’s foreword to Native Science. To “the Native American mind,” Little Bear suggests, land’s significance goes beyond mere affinity or identification with Nature as stereotypical constructions of Indianness would have it. BC has come to a stark realization regarding the emergence of a North American environmental consciousness. Though in the academy and in literature it represents thoughtful responses to centuries of abuse both Euroamericans and Natives have perpetrated on the earth and its inhabitants, the colonization of the Americas by European settlers effectively upset(s) the precariously balancing dynamism theorized and practised by the continent’s First Peoples, a dynamism that emphasizes respect for, and participation with, the natural world—a dynamism developed and maintained across generations through the act of storytelling. Indigenous communities, even in the seemingly mundane, domestic act of cultivating their gardens, BC learns once he gets past Little Bear’s foreword, express by way of an “attitude of reverence for their food plants . . . the central foundations of Native science—participation and relationship” (Cajete 132). Despite current consensus that acknowledges Native North Americans’ role in unsustainable hunting practices and the extinction of “four-fifths of all large vertebrates in North America” (Glavin 123), Western scientists—and Western literary (eco)critics/academics—who refuse to acknowledge the parallels between Indigenous and Euroamerican cultures, refuse to acknowledge and consider the efficacy of “participation and relationship” in the development of their theories, including ecocriticism, refuse to acknowledge their own complicity in the world’s ill health. Stories that are of a particular place, that are chthonic, can still tell us something about
how to live in the world. “Unless the cultural/ecological context of a relationship is understood,” however, “one cannot fully comprehend a particular Indigenous technology” (125). BC wonders at the seemingly innocuous slashing together of culture and ecology in Cajete’s phrasing; surely it’s a significant typographical and theoretical decision, as if to say, culture can be defined in terms of a particular geographic region and the practices of a particular tribe living in that region, but the cultural practices are not exclusive of a broader ecology.

Cajete endorses Native science as “a metaphor for a wide range of tribal processes of perceiving, thinking, acting, and ‘coming to know’ that have evolved through human experience with the natural world”—

To gain a sense of Native science one must participate with the natural world. To understand the foundations of Native science one must become open to the roles of sensation, perception, imagination, emotion, symbols, and spirit as well as that of concept, logic, and rational empiricism. (2)

Cajete’s emphasis on participation, irrespective of the role of storytelling, reminds BC of Lawrence Buell’s call for literature to lead readers back to the physical world rather than away from it (Environmental 11). Native science, as Cajete has it, sounds like a version of ecocriticism that values participatory observation and scientific methodology. For now, though, BC will stick to hiking around outside with his field guides and keeping Ecology and Ornithology to hand when reading poetry inside.
CHAPTER TWO

‘Shades of pause / and spill’: Flying, Trying, Birding

Wherever they were – at the bar, in the relative’s shack, or in Sumner’s parlour – they would eventually find themselves plotting the next stage in their plans to build a flying machine.—Jack Hodgins

It might seem that home is the moment of passage from ontological to epistemological dwelling, the place where knowledge as power begins.—Don McKay

Part One: Up in the Sky! It’s a Bird! It’s a Plane!

Home and flight represent what seem at first glance to be opposite human desires. The desire for home is a desire for a safety, for a comfortable dwelling that McKay claims, among other things, “makes possible the possession of the world” outside (V 23). Home, according to McKay, “is the action of the inner life finding outer form; it is the settling of self into the world” (22). A space to feel safe in, then, offers a space to make the self familiar by comparing it to the world outside. The desire for flight, on the other hand, is a desire for no place and all places, for the ability to leave home—the earth—and the freedom to return when necessary. As McKay’s idea about the possession of the world implies, both desires have the potential to manifest humans’ worst pathologies vis-à-vis our place in the world. Although I devote this chapter to McKay’s poems about bird (and a human desire for) flight, I recognize his interest in notions of home as a perhaps unattainable “existence apart from wilderness” (25). Desire itself, as the title of my dissertation indicates, posits home-making and flight side-by-side in McKay’s poetry and poetics.

In Another Gravity, “Homing” (19-20) offers bird migration as a subtle indication of the twin desires of flight and home. The speaker remembers home before it settles pragmatically into “real estate and its innumerable / Kodak moments,” and he identifies home as “the first cliche”
(19). Cliché in this case connects home to both the process of writing (following from the term’s original meaning as a stereotype, or copied block used in printing) and the repetition of events in memory such that “things should happen / twice, and place / share the burden of remembering” (19). The speaker succinctly articulates the paradox of home—the impulse to stay until ready to leave followed by the desire to return—while implying a historicity of home with the lines, “Abide, / Abode” (19). Following this articulation, the speaker recalls a plate his parents bought on their honeymoon; it has a “hand-painted habitant / sitting on a log,” having “paused to smoke his pipe, the tree / half cut and leaning,” and a “bird, / or something” hangs overhead (19). He then, reminiscent of Keats’ speaker in “Ode on A Grecian Urn,” offers an interpretation of the scene, which ignores the habitant and focuses on the leaning tree pointing to home (and beyond) and “the smudged bird” (19-20). According to the speaker,

   it’s a Yellow Warbler who has flown
   from winter habitat in South America to nest here
   in the clearing. If we catch it, band it,
   let it go a thousand miles away it will be back
   within a week. How?
   Home is what we know
   and know we know, the intricately
   feathered nest. Homing
   asks the question. (20)

The question posed by the act of homing—How?—seems more important than the answer, especially when we consider the convoluted response McKay provides in the poem’s final strophe. If the response is convoluted, though, I suggest it is so because migratory behaviour, which he is talking about without naming, itself remains largely unexplained by ornithologists. Although birds are not the only organisms that migrate—whales, butterflies, and caribou are others—many avian migrations defy simple explanation. The ability to fly plays a significant role in humans’ fascination with bird (and monarch butterfly) migration because of the immense
distances some birds can travel, only to return “home” to mate, build a nest, and raise their young. The arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*), to use an extreme example, travels south from Canada’s Arctic Circle “at the end of summer, crosses the Atlantic, turns south along the coasts of Europe and Africa, to reach the Antarctic two months later. All told, it is a 15,000 mile (25,000 km) return trip” (Gingras 149). Although a week is a relatively short time for yellow warblers (*Dendroica petechia*) to travel a thousand miles, this species does travel extensive distances from South America to North America in spring (Lowther et al. n.p.). That McKay thinks and writes an idea of home, including the desire to return, through migratory bird behaviour suggests a connection between the desire for home and the desire for flight, the latter of which he contemplates in more detail elsewhere in *Another Gravity* and other collections. But McKay is not the only writer to think this connection.

In *Innocent Cities*, west-coast writer Jack Hodgins, too, combines a concern for problems of home and home-making with the human desire to achieve flight. Logan Sumner, the novel’s protagonist and inventor of a flying machine, is “one of the few who’d been born” (286) in mid-nineteenth-century, and hence “innocent,” Victoria, British Columbia, yet he rarely feels at home there. As an adult, Sumner finds himself in the ironic position of having to construct home in a space that is reconfigured on all sides by inhabitants from elsewhere who, seeking the comforts of home, inscribe bits of their remembered pasts and imitations of the places from which they arrive on the landscape of the west coast. The narrator, by way of recognizing Sumner’s position relative to the newcomers around him, writes that,

> because he had grown up here when the island was still a colony and the city not much more than a palisaded fortress of exaggerated dreams, he moved through the landscape as though it did not even register itself upon his sight. In this way
he was unlike most of the population of newcomers who still regarded the crashing waves and the giant coniferous trees and the wild green forest undergrowth with expressions of alarm, amazed that the monstrous elements of their adopted home had not yet been reorganized into tidy European gardens or reduced to familiar stretches of horizontal California desert. (xiii)

From an ecocritical perspective, Sumner’s position vis-à-vis the uncultivated landscape of Vancouver Island seems consciously to rebuke traditional evocations of a Frygian garrison mentality. The word “palisade” might not be the complete opposite of “garrison,” but I have difficulty thinking of another word that more succinctly invokes Frye’s term while simultaneously, yet subtly, posing a challenge to its validity in constructions of Canadian identity, literary and otherwise. While “palisade” refers to a fenced enclosure made of wood (and, later, of metal railings), it also suggests in horticultural terms, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “an espalier; a row of trees or shrubs clipped to form an ornamental hedge.”

The “colony” of Sumner’s youth, far from building defences against the “wilderness,” was safely ensconced behind a living forest wall, ostensibly safe from other Europeans. Hodgins reinforces this notion in two ways: by setting the novel in 1881, approximately a decade prior to the construction of Fort Rodd Hill—a military structure ostensibly more in keeping with Frye’s “garrison”—and by introducing Sumner’s tendency to “lift a forearm to his nose and inhale the scent: western red cedar, hemlock, Douglas fir” (xiii). The specificity with which Hodgins writes Sumner’s relation to Victoria narrates a familiarity and a connection to home that is unique to one of the only people to have been born in that place.

Highlighting the importance of landscape in constructions of home and Sumner’s comfort with “giant coniferous trees” (indicated by his ability to move through them without necessarily
being conscious of them), the narrator introduces one of the paradoxes of home that plagues Sumner throughout the course of the novel. Convinced that the only way to construct home is to inhabit a space that is away from home—embracing the creativity that is inspired by absence—he desires to go elsewhere himself. This desire, while not strictly speaking ornithological, involves at least two attempts by Sumner to distance himself from Victoria by distancing himself from the earth. In the first instance, he decides to purchase a headstone next to his late wife’s and engrave it with a running commentary on his opinions of life. Sumner’s “purchase of the second stone was considered by some to be an eccentric and even morbid act,” but not so eccentric and curious as his discovery that “[w]ithin six months of the funeral . . . the original words were inadequate” (4). The granite face must change as often as Sumner’s opinions and understanding of the world around him in order for him to feel comfortable in his world. The only way for Sumner to resist the permanence of history is to change it, to keep moving, essentially making history as he records it. Because his medium is stone, though, the changes consist primarily of additions resulting in a physical manifestation of his autobiography that inches farther from ground and closer to sky.

In his second attempt to distance himself from Victoria, and the one more pertinent to this dissertation, Sumner repeatedly attempts to invent a flying machine. The flying machine functions both as a connector of land and sky (as well as sea and sky), much as his gravestone does, and, in a meta-metaphorical way, as a representation of a bird, which the machine resembles in the majority of its manifestations. The bird as a symbol of connection between earth and sky occurs throughout the novel in both Victorias—the innocent cities of the title are Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and Ballarat, Victoria, Australia. In fact, birds populate the novel in numerous manifestations; yet each manifestation tends to suggest betweenness,
impermanence: Mr. Horncastle’s hotel is called The Great Blue Heron—“Why was the hotel named for this great awkward bird? Simple. ‘You’ve seen him. Stands at the side of the water. Waits for his dinner to come to him.’ What else were any of them doing here, he challenged his listeners to tell him. Waiting for the next boom” (34); a drifter who builds a shack in the hollow of a tree is called Mr. Hawks; and Kate Jordan, before leaving Ballarat, Australia, fed up with the hordes of cockatoos “laughing” at her from eucalyptus and blue gum trees, would fire a musket at the birds from her verandah, forcing those not willing to “risk the alternatives” to choose “immediate ascension into some other sphere” (83-84). The birds in Hodgins’ novel function less ecologically than symbolically; despite the accuracy with which Hodgins names them, they tend to represent an ontological liminality, which Sumner desires.

Intermittently throughout the novel we get a glimpse of the flying machine’s progress. Sumner himself has little to do with its construction beyond financing it; Zak, his Native friend, is the one charged with designing the machine, which goes through myriad versions before it finally succeeds—and fails. Zak studies the designs of George Cayley, whose Old Flyer reportedly lifted a ten-year-old boy in 1849 (Gibbs-Smith 47; Fig. 3), and da Vinci, whose design problems Zak discovers after “closely examining the feathers, the bones, the joints of a dead willow grouse’s wing, looking for its secret” (107). As successive attempts to become the first people to build a flying machine able to stay up “in the air for more than just a few seconds” (332) fail, Sumner eventually relents in his desire to study more books while Zak figures it out for himself (181). While the first few versions of the machine resemble a dragon-fly, the final version, the successful one, is christened the “Blue Heron”—not that it necessarily looks like a heron. To make a successful flying machine, Zak “ignored the impossibly intricate plans drawn up by” Sumner, “who had studied too many European failures in books and magazines”; instead,
Zak takes "the lead from his own people," constructing "the frame for his great raven" out of wooden strips from a tree he had found and split himself (329). Historically, "[t]he key innovation of the Wrights' [successful] design," according to David Alexander, "was inspired by birds: the Wrights observed that gliding birds turned by twisting their wings lengthwise" and "were the first inventors to realize that aerial banking is not a byproduct of a turn (as in ships) but rather what causes the turn" (290).

In the end, Zak's machine does fly; it carries Chu Lee—along with the opium he is planning to sell for his uncle—across the ocean toward the American side. Before he can land or turn around, however, American police, acting on a tip, shoot the machine out of the sky, succinctly ending Sumner and Zak's brief achievement. Hodgins implies that the human desire to fly risks crashing under the weight of the technology we have developed to satisfy it; paradoxically, he also implies that the desire for home outweighs the desire to achieve flight. Perhaps it takes a novel to reach such a conclusion, while it takes poetry to explore the desire to fly, by way of close attention to the physics of flight and avian movement, without crashing to the sea like Icarus (whom I discuss later in this chapter).

Part Two: Theories, Metaphors, Homologies

That birds and crocodiles are each other's closest living relatives was a consensus view long before the advent of DNA sequencing, as was the conclusion that reptiles (including birds) are more closely related to mammals than they are to amphibians.—Harry W. Green

In the following two chapters, I examine how McKay "esteem[s] flight" both "a physical [and a metaphorical] triumph" and acknowledges the biological value of bird song in his poetry and prose. Before moving to this discussion, though, I want to work through some of the extant critical theory in Canada that questions the value of an approach to literature framed by geography, biology, and ecology. I am aware that a study focused on bird flight in the poetry of
Don McKay might be construed as too thematic, and that thematic criticism is precisely what suffered the greatest attack, in Canadian literature circles, in the wake of Frank Davey’s “Surviving the Paraphrase.” Focussing on D.G. Jones and his critical study of “themes and images in Canadian literature,” *Butterfly on Rock*, Davey identifies a common “fallacy of literary determinism” and calls into question the extent to which an author’s work can—and should—be explained by “reference to the geography and climate of the country, to western intellectual history, to his culture’s religious heritage” (6); one might reasonably add bird flight and song to geography and climate. While I support Davey’s distrust of determinism, literary and otherwise, I remain unconvinced that what he calls thematic criticism espouses a geographic determinism such as Frye implies “with his reference to the ‘bleak northern sky’ and to the St. Lawrence River’s swallowing of travellers into an alien continent” (6). I disagree with Davey’s argument that place—and by extension specific considerations of biotic and abiotic inhabitants of place—does not influence the production of a text in some way(s).

In his study of the Confederation Group of Canadian poets, D.M.R. Bentley devotes much space arguing for American naturalist John Burroughs’ influence on the Confederation Group, particularly Charles G.D. Roberts, Archibald Lampman, and Bliss Carman. Bentley credits “a synchronicity born of both environmental similarities [between Burroughs’ New England and New Brunswick] and of Burroughs’ influence on the Confederation group” for “a great many flora and fauna of New England,” that Burroughs himself describes in such pieces as “Nature and the Poets” and “Birds and Poets,” as potentially rich materials appearing in the Canadian poets’ work (148). Bentley finds much support for his thesis in *At the Mermaid Inn*, a weekly column Wilfred Campbell, D.C. Scott, and Lampman wrote for the Toronto *Globe* (1892-93). If the synchronicity Bentley refers to implicitly suggests the Confederation Group
was influenced more by American writing than by other Canadian writing—Campbell’s column for 16 July 1892, for example, fails to mention any Canadian writers—it also points to an early instance of a bioregion taking precedence—even if unconsciously—over political regions. Indeed, as Bentley notes by way of introducing Burroughs as a key influence, the commingling of political and bioregional forces is in keeping with the commonalities “in terms of their scenery, climate, atmosphere, flora, and fauna” between “the northeastern states, the Maritime provinces, and the southeastern portions of central Canada” (147). Despite the way this part of Bentley’s argument avoids clarifying the problem of the group’s “geographical diversity” (5), in Bentley’s estimation, the Confederation Group’s turn to the specific, local environment as material for their poetry enables an outward-reaching engagement with literature and thought beyond the local. Considering the dearth of Canadian guide books on birds in the nineteenth century, such outward gazing is hardly surprising; I am not sure, however, why such Canadian texts as Roughing it in the Bush, The Backwoods of Canada, or even Alexander Mackenzie’s Voyage through Montreal were not consulted. Perhaps the Confederation poets did consult such texts, but the evidence does not support that possibility.

For McKay and many ecopoets, place and its inhabitants, that is “the nonhuman environment,” function “not merely as a framing device but as an active presence, suggesting human history’s implication in natural history” (Buell Future 25). Lawrence Buell and Robert Kern both consider some degree of “environmentality as a property of any text” (Buell 25) and operate under “the assumption that all texts are at least potentially environmental . . . in the sense that all texts are literally or imaginatively situated in a place, and in the sense that their authors, consciously or not, inscribe within them a certain relation to their place” (Kern 259). These claims are not claims in support of literary or geographic determinism, but they express the
primacy of thinking the relations between author/text and place/nonhumans. In the case of those texts more obviously attuned to an ecological poetics, I would change the phrasing to “literally and imaginatively,” so as to enable the flexibility and complexity of both literal and metaphorical readings. In order to avoid an ecological universalism that might result from the reading of every text as (potentially) environmental, though, I stress the importance in my reading of McKay’s poetry of ecological and species specificity, which impels readers along a trail of scientific and experiential referents.

William van Peer makes an anti-metaphorical claim that “[t]here is no point at all in talking about quantum mechanics ‘as if’ its insights could be applied to our everyday macro world. Making analogies in this respect is not only to profoundly misunderstand such theories, it is also highly misleading and therefore confusing, and potentially undermining to a rational approach to the world” (41). Although I concur with van Peer’s desire for precision when making analogies/metaphors, it is useful to remember that scientists (including and perhaps especially physicists) talk in metaphor and that all “metaphor, and its related figures” make “a claim for sameness which is clearly, according to common linguistic sense, false” (McKay V 68). As Jan Zwicky puts it in Wisdom & Metaphor (on a page facing the Oxford English Dictionary’s entries for Analogy and Analogon): “To understand a metaphor is to recognize that if one context or conceptual constellation is laid over another, just so, aspects or outlines will spring into focus, a common pattern will be discernible—one that makes a difference to our grasp of the individual constellations or contexts separately” (Left 24). Zwicky argues not to avoid the risk of imprecision or irrationality when making analogies, then, but by taking the risk in a thoroughly self-conscious manner—“just so,” as it were—to open the possibility of congruence, commensurability, consilience between two seemingly dichotomous ideas, images, disciplines.
By consilience, I refer to sociobiologist E.O. Wilson’s notion of a unity of knowledge vis-à-vis the natural world. I also acknowledge Wilson’s earlier theory of biophilia, that is humans’ intrinsic affinity with living beings, and I applaud his attempts, as a scientist, to downplay historic differences between the disciplines:

The role of science, like that of art, is to blend exact imagery with more distant meaning, the parts we already understand with those given as new into larger patterns that are coherent enough to be acceptable as truth. The biologist knows this relation by intuition during the course of field work, as he struggles to make order out of the infinitely varying patterns of nature. (Biophilia 51)

While my project is not as expansive as Wilson’s, which looks to large patterns “coherent enough to be acceptable as truth,” my fealty to the process of identifying patterns and attempting the questions they raise does not necessarily prevent me from desiring coherence and truth, though such notions are considered déclassé in literary criticism. If the biologist recognizes the relations between old and new patterns of meaning—even if the meaning itself remains uncertain—and employs the scientific method (hypothesis) in her struggle, perhaps the poet (and in his small way, the ecocritic) employs metaphor in an analogous way to test the limits of relational thinking, meaning, and living. This analogy helps to explain how McKay’s “gift for metaphor” (Coles 42) coexists with his proclivity for species specificity; moreover, as Kevin Bushell reminds in his essay on McKavian metaphor, meaning “generates from relationships, both in the world (experience) and in language (metaphor)” (38). To modify and extend Wilson’s phrase, then, the role of the ecocritic (interested in following scientific and experiential trails of referents) is to extrapolate how more precise metaphors and more accurate naming elicit a complex and proximal relation between humans and the nonhuman subjects of poetry, between
metaphors of flight as transcendence and the physics of flight.

Perhaps more than any other area of biological study, ornithology has a history informed by both professional biologists and interested, devoted amateur birders whose field notes and participation in bird counts and banding studies “have greatly increased our understanding of bird biology” (Perrins and Birkhead 1). Such a historical development accords nicely with E.O. Wilson’s claim that “Science is not just analytic; it is also synthetic,” that “It uses artlike intuition and imagery” in the process of thinking about the world and humans’ relations to the world (Biophilia 54). In developing his theory of biophilia—the theory that humans have an innate affinity with all living things—Wilson goes so far as to suggest that, eventually, “The excitement of the scientist’s search for the true material nature of the species recedes, to be replaced in part by the more enduring responses of the hunter and poet” (55). I would like to pause for a moment and consider Wilson’s “and,” both as it functions to join two seemingly irreconcilable designators—“hunter” and “poet”—and as it problematizes a relation—hunter “and” poet—within a larger ecocritical project I am attempting in these chapters.

In the “Introduction” to One Culture: Essays on Science and Literature, series editor George Levine complicates the divisiveness of “science and literature” by devoting a considerable amount of space to the difference “announce[d], through the ‘and’” (6). Building upon, it would seem, G.S. Rousseau’s notion—in “Literature and Science: The State of the Field”—that the “and” conjoins far more than it separates, Levine writes: “‘And’ implies relationship, of course, but (para)tactically refuses to define it. The ‘and’ also intimates the oddity of the relationship: what can the two have to do with each other? It implies, moreover, that in spite of the conventions of literary hostility to science, and of scientific indifference to literature, the relationship matters” (6). Levine’s doubling of “and” into both tactic (strategy)
and parataxis is interesting for the space it leaves for readers to engage with the relation between—in this case, the relation between science and literature, writ large. The implication presented by Levine’s parenthetical compounding is that “science” and “literature”—as they are typically conceived of in these debates—are analogous to related but dissimilar clauses in a sentence, and that the “and” simultaneously connects and divides in ways it would not under normal grammatical conditions. It acts, that is, as parataxis, as a semi-colon or a full-stop rather than as a conjunction. In his dictionary of literary terms, Chris Baldick offers an example of parataxis in literature—where “the relationship between one statement and the next is not made explicit” (161)—from Henry David Thoreau’s influential Walden. That Baldick chooses one of the foundational texts of nature writing—that strange amalgamation of non-fictional memoir and natural history—is fitting when considering Levine’s meditation on the edge of “and” alongside Wilson’s (para)tactical insinuation regarding the environmental impact of hunters and poets. If the interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism is perpetually in question, as I have indicated elsewhere, the relation between hunters, birders, and poets is more so.

The practice of poetry is in many ways, and paradoxically, the most amateur of professions. John Burroughs argues that “poets are the best natural historians, only you must know how to read them. They translate the facts largely and freely” (Birds and Poets 22). Louis Halle makes a similar argument when he ends The Appreciation of Birds with the claim that “in the flight of a bird is a whole philosophy, if only we could read it right” (125). And, in his “Foreword” to David Alexander’s Nature’s Flyers, biologist Steven Vogel opines that in flight birds “are telling us something, but they give only the text and leave to us the deciphering of the subtext, the mechanisms beneath the phenomenon” (xiii). The project of interdisciplinary, experiential ecocriticism requires that ecocritics learn how to read in ways for which the
academic profession has not adequately prepared us. The capacity to read across disciplines often seems anathema to the academic imperative to specialize and professionalize. Writing in the afterword to *Fiddlehead Gold: 50 Years of The Fiddlehead Magazine*, McKay, a former editor of the journal, writes of poets like himself: “We can get so hooked on being ‘professional’ (don’t forget your SASE) we can forget that being amateur, in the deep sense, is what it’s all about” (235; *author’s emphasis*). The deep sense McKay writes of is the meaning of “amateur” that is often ignored in favour of the more common one, opposite to “professional,” namely that of a person who practices something for the love of it, someone whose inexpertise contains, alongside the risk of failure, the potential for genuine insight. For this reason alone, it is not surprising that birds and poetry are as historically connected as they are and, by extension, that bird-watching and poetry are connected. In *Lifebirds*, George Levine traces this connection in a personal memoir. The book is interesting for what Levine has to say about the bird-poet connection and for the book’s status among a particular nascent genre of the personal essay, namely the poet/academic writing of his (he is invariably male) failure as a birder, of his role as perpetual amateur. Moreover, this genre of writing—to which I would add Leonard Nathan’s *Diary of a Left-Handed Birdwatcher*, McKay’s *Vis à Vis*, and Chris Cokinos’ *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*—is interesting for the way birds are reconsidered on the page even as they exist off the page:

Making birds primarily a means to an end would be a betrayal of the birds, of how I experience them, and of my sense of what birding is about. I hope and more than hope that what I am writing affirms the importance of birds as birds, of birds as part of an enormous non-human world which we cannot afford not to engage, about which we cannot afford not to think and imagine, from
which we cannot afford not to take pleasure, which means taking risks. (Levine 6)

Even if the risk only entails being ridiculed or scorned for emphasizing "the importance of birds as birds" in addition to symbols, it is a risk worth taking so that critics might question what has become a default mode of reading symbolically, as J.M. Coetzee's alter ego, Elizabeth Costello, might say, in the first and only instance.

Even though ornithologists have clarified many of the particulars/mechanisms of bird flight that remained unexplained for, and thus unavailable to, earlier poets, "the wonder continues everlasting" for scientists and poets alike (Halle 123). All flight, not only avian, is a seemingly impossible accomplishment that depends on fundamental contradictions of ratios, namely weight:lift and thrust:drag. To render the evolutionary biology of the matter simply, birds' wings are airfoils. According to Bernoulli's principle, pressure is lowest where velocity is greatest: the shape of a bird's wing (an airfoil) means that air flowing over the top of the wing must travel further than air flowing under the bottom, which causes the top air to speed up, or increase its velocity; therefore, the low pressure over the top of the wing creates lift to counteract gravity (Fig. 4). For level flight, lift must be equal to the bird's weight (Gill 98) and to achieve altitude and distance, birds must either expend energy by flapping (to produce enough thrust to help produce lift) or take advantage of vertical airflow, or "currents that can minimise the effects of gravity," such as convection, orography, and turbulence (Elkins 43-51) in order to maintain lift by essentially falling and letting gravity move them through the air without losing too much altitude. In order to exploit these air currents, though, birds have had to develop highly specialized skeletal and wing structures: lightweight, hollow bones, a keeled sternum; the form of wings in relation to individual feathers; and the ability to control direction, speed, and altitude by way of specialized tendons and muscles are all examples of evolutionary adaptations for flight
in birds (Fig. 5). To render avian wings as airfoils, however, is a necessarily reductive move in the history of aerodynamic theory. As Louis Halle writes, in flight the shape of birds’ wings is not fixed but “constantly changing in response to the constantly changing pressures of the air through which it moves, or to suit changes in course or speed... No one shape is quite retained for more than a moment” (108). Such movement translates well into the poet’s repertoire of “fancy linguistic figure[s]” (V 85)—metaphor, cadence, onomatopoeia—even as he struggles to write birds that “are complete in themselves, free of apparent ambitions beyond flying, eating, reproducing, protecting territory, and singing” (Oughton 36). Airplane wings might remain necessarily rigid, but that doesn’t mean McKay’s verse must also retain unmovable (unflappable) shape and rhythm.

Despite the obvious biological differences between humans and birds, some similarities do exist, at least from an evolutionary perspective. Margaret Nice has recorded developmental characteristics of baby birds at hatching and made some interesting observations. From her observations, Nice produced a range of conditions from superprecocial to altricial based on down (present or absent), eyes (open or closed), mobility (ambulatory or nestbound), parental nourishment (no or yes), and parental attendance (minimal or essential) (Fig. 6). Like human babies, “[a]ltricial birds are naked, blind, and virtually immobile when they hatch and thus are completely dependent on their parents” (Gill 432); the more altricial characteristic a bird exhibits, the more likely it seems to “get noticed in literature,” according to Lutwack’s list. While the notion that an evolutionary affinity determines which birds McKay writes about is admittedly far-fetched, I cite Nice’s observations as a way of introducing Susan Fisher’s argument that McKay writes beyond metaphorical relations to compare humans and birds via homology. The biological evidence provided by Nice might not explain the symbolism of certain
birds, but it suggests an affinity with humans which, although ironic considering the size
difference between the most altricial of birds, provides an extra-literary reason for poets’
fascination. Fisher cites a number of McKay’s poems in which she identifies a comparison based
on Neil Campbell and Jane Reece’s definition of homology as “similarity resulting from
common ancestry,” which includes mammalian bone structure and, in the broadest sense, DNA
(448). Though homology is a term from biology, Fisher appropriates it “as a literary term in
order to describe comparisons that exist not by virtue of poetic invention but because of
biological connection” (57). 

Despite humans’ resemblance at birth to recently hatched altricial
birds, the homologous aspects of McKay’s poetry relevant to my discussion of bird flight have
more to do with the desire to fly than with biological or evolutionary similarities between people
and birds since humans are physiologically incapable of flying. While Fisher’s argument that
“McKay’s knowledge of evolution and phylogeny enables him to write about other creatures
homologically” as a strategy to circumvent “the distancing tropes of analogy and metaphor, or
simile” (57) supports my argument that McKay’s ecological and ornithological precision invites
readers into closer proximity to the more-than-human world, I maintain that the efficiency of
McKay’s metaphorical precision in concert with his extra-literary specificity achieves the same
goal.

My interest in the trails of referents that bring readers and the physical world into closer
proximity is partly a response to the critical focus on McKay’s metaphorical acuity. Flight for
McKay sometimes means flight; in some poems about raptors—birds whose size and frequent
use of thermals make them relatively easy to view on the wing compared to, say, warblers—
neither metaphor nor homology alone suffice to articulate the poet’s awe in the face of the birds’
aerial achievements. Sometimes a meditation on birds’ aerial capabilities, though expressed in
human language and therefore necessarily anthropocentric in some sense, is necessary to write poetry about birds’ aerial capabilities. George Levine makes a salient point that is helpful in contemplating raptors in, and outside of, poetry. Referring to the sharp-shinned hawk, “common enough in most places [but] not everyday occurrences for” non-birders, Levine meditates on his experience with hawks in general: “Hawks continue to feel to me like birds that mark a radical distinction between the domestic, the urban or suburban, and the ‘natural’” (74). Levine’s observation suggests that hawks elicit a mixture of familiarity (which they share with more “urban” birds) and a particular sort of awe (which tends to be reserved for birds of prey). Levine reinforces the different awe-inspired reactions to different birds: “I love hummingbirds almost as much as I do hawks, but hawks in their size and power and apparent calm, as they soar or hover or gyre into an ultimately invisible distance, inspire an awe and envy that smaller birds can’t” (71). This difference, attributable to the fact that larger birds are typically easier to spot, whether roosting, soaring, or feeding, than much smaller birds, implies a homologous relation based, not on physiognomy, but on behaviour, or psychology. The appearance of power and calm, in other words, draws humans to birds of prey as symbols of strength.

Others, too, have afforded birds of prey a special status in their observations and poetry. According to David Quammen, “birds appear frequently throughout [Robert Penn Warren’s] early and late poems. Herons, owls, geese, gulls, crows. These birds are not decorations. They are not merely symbolic” (186). Like most birds appearing in McKay’s poetry, they are symbols with real-world counterparts whose biological attributes provide ecological information both within their habitats (outside the text) and among ecocritical discussions (inside the text). Warren’s poetic “attention,” though, “was especially captured by hawks,” so much so that “one critic discussed the fact in a review” (186). In Reading the Mountains of Home, John Elder
brings the awe Levine mentions into close contact with the written word, acknowledging the impact of W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" on Elder's own relation to the Green Mountains of Vermont. "I always like remembering Yeats’s term 'gyre' when I watch falcons wheeling above this ridge of the Green Mountains," Elder writes; "It's a sharply angled word, conveying the tilts and accelerations within their circling flight. A slow, floating curve can suddenly warp downward at Mach speed when a falcon glimpses prey" (153). Unlike the "mere anarchy" Yeats alludes to in his poem, however, the falcon's shift to mach speed suggests a degree of control—four or five degrees, say, from chaos—to which humans can only aspire: falcons that "lack all conviction" (Yeats 294) will not survive long enough to produce offspring since lack of conviction is not a trait likely to confer an evolutionary advantage. While this reading does not remove the possibility that Yeats' falcon is symbolic of a world progressing more and more toward anarchy, it does emphasize the importance of precision in the metaphor. The poem would not likely have the same impact if the falcon was "flapping and flapping in the widening gyre."

With all flight, necessary contradictions must be achieved, as when another species of diurnal raptor demonstrates its aerial hunting technique in McKay's "Migratory Patterns" (B 69-72):

the osprey in full scalloped stretch above the creek that buckled, folded in his flight becoming plummet, turned into the very gravity each feather is the delicate repudiation of:

Slightly larger than North America's largest falcon (gyrfalcon, Falco rusticolus), osprey (Pandion haliaetus) are nevertheless agile and dextrous; they hunt fish by hovering over rivers or lakes before plummeting, often feet first, into the water to capture their prey. McKay's observation that the osprey "becom[es] / plummet [and] turn[s] into" gravity, while echoing the
cliché that what goes up must come down, simultaneously invites metaphysical contemplation of seeming (ontological) metamorphosis and alludes convincingly, if metaphorically, to at least one ecological (and evolutionary) relation—between fish and raptors—resulting from the osprey’s specialized flight capabilities. His description of feathers as “delicate repudiation[s] of” gravity likewise impels me to consult my field guide’s section on “Bird Topography” to learn more about feathers; once I realize Sibley’s topography, which details individual head, body, and wing feathers, reveals little of feathers’ structure, I turn to Frank Gill’s *Ornithology* textbook and learn that “Feathers consist mainly of keratin, an inert substance of insoluble microscopic filaments embedded in an amorphous protein matrix” (65). In other words, barbs (“filaments”) branch laterally from the rachis (the portion of shaft distal to the body) to create the “flat vane” we recognize as a feather; the hollow base of the shaft (that “amorphous protein matrix”), sometimes called the quill, “anchors the feather below the surface of the skin” (Gill 66). Feathers represent an important evolutionary adaptation insofar as they are, in addition to specialized muscles, tendons, and bones, necessary for flight; insofar as human hair and nails consist of a type of keratin, feathers symbolize human contact with the Divine because feathers play a crucial role in flight and, like hair and nails, they “endure after the bird’s death and therefore often stand for the continuity of life” (Lawrence 9).

According to Bernd Heinrich, “Birds’ feathers . . . may have originally evolved from scales as a sun shield or as insulation from either heat or cold. It was then possible for them to be further modified as structures for flight, for tools in sexual and other signalling, and—in sand grouse and ravens—for transporting water to the young” (*Ravens* 78). From an evolutionary perspective, then, feathers may indeed represent a “continuity of life,” while from an ecological perspective they confer numerous advantages to enable such continuity (reproduction). In *Diary*
of a Left-Handed Birdwatcher, Leonard Nathan tells of an encounter he has with Lewis, his ornithologist. Nathan offers this encounter as a way of insinuating himself, and his poetical tendencies, into a conversation about the seeming physical impossibility of flight. After picking up a feather, Lewis gives it to his friend and tells him he holds in his hand a natural miracle. “So light is it that, if I turn my eyes away,” Nathan writes,

I will know it’s there only because of a sensation of softness. It’s all grace in and of itself. But the license I permit myself I won’t permit Lewis, and I say, ‘If you mean by miracle the suspension of natural law, isn’t that a contradiction?’

Lewis shrugs and says, rather brusquely, ‘Forget that. That’s small potatoes. The serious miracle is that there is any law at all.’ (122).

Science might not be the study of miracles, and memory might not be, as McKay writes in the poem “Drag” (AG I1) “heavier than air.” As McKay also writes in “Drag”: “But, however, / on the other hand.” Drag, it would seem, wants to impede forward momentum; and yet without drag, flight would be impossible. It reminds me of another natural law that might be a miracle, namely Isaac Newton’s contention that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Lewis and other ornithologists tend to agree about the evolutionary significance of flight to birds, acknowledging that “the ability to fly is the key adaptation that has made birds [as] successful [as they are]” (Hedenström 415).67 Literary critics, if I can risk a dichotomy for the purpose of illustrating competing propensities, tend to agree about the significance of flight to humans, more specifically to poets. Recapitulating the evolutionary explanation for poets’ interest in flight, but with a more socio-cultural bias, Leonard Lutwack claims that flight and song are “the qualities [poets] most admire in birds, for it is to these powers that birds owe their remarkable survival in the vast and varied environment[s] they inhabit” (Birds 45). Discussing
contemporary American poet, Jorie Graham’s “ongoing negotiations with the world and with poetry,” Willard Spiegelman likewise argues that “the appeal of birds to poets needs little explaining. Both as metaphor—bird as idealized natural singer, unfreighted by language and consciousness—and as metonymy—bird as substitute for the soul and its wish for flight—members of the avian kingdom [sic] could sustain a poetic taxonomy equivalent to one devoted to flowers” (“Jorie” 219, 222). Lutwack, more aware than Spiegelman seems to be of ornithology’s place in literary studies (or, at the very least, aware of the value of natural history to literary studies), nevertheless maintains a dichotomous view of the ways poets and scientists think about flight: “The ability of birds to fly has inspired both scientists and poets, scientists esteeming flight a physical triumph of the first order and poets seeing in flight a powerful symbol of the transcendence they wish to achieve in their writing” (Lutwack 45-46). Neither Lutwack, in his comprehensive study of literature in English, nor Spiegelman, in his focussed critique of a contemporary American poet, worry the ease with which birds, generally speaking, have been “treated.” The language of avian “powers,” of animals “unfreighted by language and consciousness,” and of surrogate “souls” for poets existentially bereft of meaning betrays a Romanticism they do not address candidly in their criticism.

**Part Three: Flight | Truth**

*The expansiveness gained by poetry's incorporation of scientific insight propels the human perspective beyond earth's gravity. But from the vantage of space, earth itself becomes a radiant particular of decay -- a crystal, a seed. Poetry and science, nature and culture, all are included within such an oscillation.*

—John Elder

Flight fascinates humans, I think, because from an evolutionary perspective we selected traits amenable to walking, not flying. Bird flight represents the locomotive antithesis of what mammalian bipeds have achieved and, as such, introduces an ancient nostalgia for, or memory
of, what might have been: “It must have seemed to early man [sic], earth-bound and leaden-footed, that these graceful passages through an element he could not master were the epitome of all he could never be, the incarnation of that finer part of himself which he felt to exist yet could never define” (Brown 4). Mircea Eliade identifies such a “nostalgia for flight” (480) as “an essential element in human consciousness” (Lawrence 156). Rebecca Solnit examines the flip side of the evolutionary story: “The list of what we eventually got from bipedalism is long and alluring, full of all the gothic arches and elongations of the body. Start with the straight row of toes and high arch of the foot. Go up the long straight walker’s legs to the buttocks, round and protuberant thanks to the massively developed gluteus maximus of walkers, a minor muscle in apes [and absent entirely in birds] but the largest muscle in the human body” (35). McKay writes more about pectoralis than he does about gluteus, but the latter does have its place, usually accompanied by an unexplained sadness. He names pectoralis, to be sure, as in “Load.” At the beginning of Night Field, McKay portrays a hike that is both emblematic—of the poet’s moving through the world, of the cadences of human locomotion (in concert) with his immediate environment—and pragmatic. Birders must get to the field (usually by car) and, once there, be able to get around quietly and efficiently. The act of birding requires an act, sometimes many acts, of walking.

The act of birding is implicit throughout much of McKay’s poetry, and the act of hiking is often explicitly presented in his books as a way to birding. An early poem in Night Field is “Black Spruce” (7-13), a short journal of the speaker’s hike around rocky Lake Superior. Anticipating the flight poems of Another Gravity the way a camel must anticipate water on the third day of travel, McKay writes:

Eventually the pack becomes your hump, the weight of your food
and the weight of your clothing
and the weight of your shelter
and the weight of your forgetfulness of all
of the above.

Added to the sad
dumb sadness of your ass as it tries
to reconstrue itself as muscle,
lifting your life up,
over another ridge. (NF 7)

The hiker’s ass, having yet to “reconstrue itself as muscle” for the walk, doesn’t deserve the

Latinate *gluteus maximus.* Its sadness compounds as the weight of survival gear conspires with

gravity to keep the hiker on firm ground, inclining—in both senses of the word—toward a ridge,

“belly-smooth red-brown rock,” from which to take in Lake Superior “in a single glance” (12).

In addition to drawing attention to the human need to carry extra weight in the form of a pack

full of survival gear, the repetition of “and the weight” adds a further sense of gravity, of

gravitas, to the proceedings, perhaps anticipating the other gravity McKay will explore nearly a
decade later in *Another Gravity.*

McKay recognizes gravity as the main physical impediment to flight while

simultaneously acknowledging how gravity functions in important biophysical and mythological

ways, including in the act of flying. The poems in *Another Gravity* reflect ecological relations

between sanderlings and intertidal zones; horned larks and memory; sharp-shinned hawks and

Robert Creeley. These interconnections support Ricou’s observation, which he makes after

reading Roger Tory Peterson’s field guide, that in addition to providing access to specific birds

“birding is also a way to know trees and rocks and seas and all that weaves itself into habitat”

(“Robert” 93). *Another Gravity* also demonstrates McKay’s understanding of the physics of bird

flight and indicates a linguistic precision interested as much in naming specific birds as in

naming the processes and mechanics involved in achieving flight, as in the poems “Lift,”
“Drag,” “Load,” “Angle of Attack,” “Camber,” “Glide,” “Hover,” “Feather,” “Hang Time,” “Plummet,” and “Turbulence.” While individually McKay’s poems “about” flight in *Another Gravity* make only passing references to the scientific literature—there is a keen amateur’s take on the complexities of physics and aerodynamics—taken together they imply a sophisticated ecological poetics in which the language of image and metaphor is as welcome, and as powerful, as the language of avian aerodynamics. Just as lift alone is not capable of making a bird achieve flight, the poem “Lift” on its own does not fulfill an ecocritical desire for interdisciplinary, extratextual meaning. The collection as a whole requires opposing forces—in the guise of poems—in order to achieve metaphoric flight and articulate an accurate discussion of the physics of flight. As if to illustrate this point, “Lift” ends with the speaker waiting for something to unfold, “Something quick. / Something helpful to the air,” something akin to a force perpendicular to a wing’s motion in the air, perhaps, in concert with other forces.

I have already described how McKay articulates the contradictory impulse of drag in the poem of that name. Following as it does directly after “Lift,” “Drag” begins, fittingly, with a conjunction that also suggests difference: “But, however, / on the other hand” effectively communicates the force—drag—parallel with but opposite to the direction of movement—thrust (6). Similarly, the poem “Camber,” with its opening lines invoking “That rising curve, the fine line / between craft and magic where we / travel uphill without effort” might do little to mimic, even in poetic form, the upward convexity of an airfoil. In combination these poems communicate an attention to the natural world and an engagement with a discourse about the natural world. The connections between poems metonymically reflect aerodynamic relations between a wing’s angle of attack—the angle a wing makes with its direction of movement—and lift: as the angle of attack increases, so, too, does lift. However, cambered wings, much more
common than symmetrical wings among birds, produce “lift at zero angle of attack.” In the poem “Angle of Attack,” McKay writes of the need for both the physiological suitability offered by wings’ “rising curve” and the learning curve necessary to develop an understanding of how to create lift, how to “live / next to nothing, / and with art”:

> You may openly endorse the air, but if you can’t be canny, and, come to that, apt, chances are you won’t get off the ground.

“You” in this context succeeds both as address to a bird as subject and as gesture to bring readers closer to the physical world. Both the canniness and the aptness, moreover, that the speaker identifies as necessary to “get off the ground,” recapitulate the familiarity and accuracy that come with a poetry attuned to species specificity and precise ecological knowing. One species of bird that McKay seems to think supremely apt for, and canny in regards to, flight is the swallow. Indeed, as they spend the majority of their lives on the wing, swallows do not have difficulty getting off the ground.

Notoriously skilled for their aerodynamic acrobatics, swallows in particular have presented poets with a way to pay homage to avian acrobatics without allowing the diminutive birds—“they are / too small to play in the NHL” (B 85)—to stall in midair as symbols of Transcendence or Truth. W.J. Brown cites the naturalist, Sir William Beach Thomas, who claims that “One of the sights that never grows stale, flat, or unprofitable is the flight of the bird: the slow sail of a gull, the muscular dash of a pigeon, the smooth speed of the swallow’s circles” (3). In “The Blue Swallows,” Howard Nemerov has “the mind in its brain” consider swallows’ smooth speed and witness “the swallows’ tails as nubs / Dipped in invisible ink, writing . . .” (397; ellipses in original); but the speaker wants to resist the modernized augury by which the
mind systematically interprets the swallows' flight patterns. "Poor mind," the speaker asks sympathetically, "what would you have them write? / Some cabalistic history / Whose authorship you might ascribe / to God? to Nature? Ah, poor ghost, / You've capitalized your Self enough" (397). Such capitalization represents an egoistic poetic tradition that ascribes authority to humans and human-made entities/deities. Nemerov comes close to undermining his commentary with the near-apostrophic "Ah, poor ghost," but the decision to use Ah instead of Oh retains enough residual apostrophe to be effective as critique while simultaneously signalling the mind's (in its brain) moment of recognition as if to say, Ah, yes, but . . . ; McKay employs the same interjection in "The Bushtits' Nest" when discussing "the centralizing and reductive influence of the name, which so often signals the terminal point of our interest. 'Ah, bushtits': check, snap. Next topic" (V 84). By way of connecting ideas between essays, McKay discusses apostrophe in the preceding essay from the same collection.

In "Remembering Apparatus: Poetry and the Visibility of Tools" (V 51-78), McKay articulates a distinction between language and poetry, arguing that the latter "comes about because language is not able to represent raw experience, yet it must" (65). Whereas language is a naming that confers a knowable sense of identity (think of Adam's task), poetry as McKay has it "is only a listening," which "introduces the unnameable (that is, wilderness under the sign of language) into nomination" (66). The paradox is not easily negotiated, to be sure, but one way to understand it, perhaps, is to think of how much walking poets do while composing poems, and consequently how many poems include a speaker on a walk: walking becomes, in a McKavian sense, "both a recognition of the spiritual [and, I would add, ecological] importance of connection with the earth and the political importance of being open, of being on foot" where "we are able to imagine and accord between poetry and ecology" (Burnside 100, 105). Within
the poem that seeks to record an engagement with the earth, the figure of apostrophe becomes an "address to the subject which returns to Adam's task in a wholly different frame of mind. The 'o' which sometimes precedes apostrophe, and is always implicit in the gesture, might be described as the gawk of unknowing. . . . In poetry it is the gesture loaded with lightness, an opening into awe. It says 'this is for you, not just about you'" (McKay V 66). I imagine the lightness with which apostrophe is loaded refers simultaneously to the opposite of an earnest human desire to own the world and to an avian lightness that enables birds to fly.

For McKay, if God is involved at all, he is aware of the ecological significance of swallows' aerodynamics. In the second section of "Swallowings" (B 83-87), a long poem of five economical sections, McKay imagines that

After God invented the swallow he sat back satisfied.
At last,
the aeronautical bird.
This, he thought, is going to be one hell of a surprise for them mosquitoes. (84)

Aeronautics: The science, art, or practice of sailing in the air; aerial navigation. With a single modifier, McKay addresses the interdisciplinary, ecocritical potential of birds and poetry, and in these six lines he accommodates, if not exactly an evolutionary poetics, an ecological poetics. As primarily linguistic, intellectual creatures obsessed with meaning-making, humans have often focused on what bird flight means to humans socially, culturally, and personally. While part two of "Swallowings" emphasizes the impact of swallow behaviour on mosquitoes, one does not need to have portaged in Algonquin Park mid-August to appreciate how swallow behaviour might affect human life, too, by keeping mosquito populations in check.

Nemerov's poem deals more explicitly than McKay's short sequence with a particular human response to the flight of swallows. In "The Blue Swallows," the mind has yet to realize
that the time has come

To waken, yawn and stretch, to see
With opened eyes emptied of speech
The real world where the spelling mind
Imposes with its grammar book
Unreal relations on the blue
Swallows. (397)

The mind’s eye, synaesthetically bereft of speech, gains the capacity to observe the real world and the relations at work (and at play) in the world. That swallows help control mosquito populations constitutes one example of a real-world relation in stark contrast to—though neither mutually nor necessarily exclusive of—the “Unreal relations” imposed by the grammatical mind searching the sky for auguries. If Western culture has largely moved away from the wisdom imparted by augurs, the figure of the poet has, since the beginnings of the Christian era, adopted a similar role, albeit in print. Nemerov, aware of this barely perceptible shift in symbolic observation, dispenses with the barely perceptible irony of the near-apostrophe in the poem’s final strophe: “O swallows, swallows, poems are not / The point. Finding again the world, / That is the point” (397). Despite the blatantly conventional apostrophe in the first line, Nemerov successfully uses the Romantic convention against itself by carefully ending the line after the negative “poems are not,” which follows the doubly named “swallows, swallows.” In order to find the world again, to get closer to it, the poet implies paradoxically that he must eschew poetic convention and the “unreal relations” imposed upon it by language.

And if finding the world—ostensibly the “real world” mentioned earlier—really is the point, that is not to say poetry has no role to play in the finding. Rather, some combination of real and unreal relational strategies—akin, perhaps, to Wordsworth’s extra-textual project in “The Tables Turned”—presents ample opportunity for ecocritical attempts of the world.

Consider Part Four of “Swallowings”—a title that invokes a gastronomical act integral to both
mammals and birds—in which the poet observes that “Under a Red tail’s wing, we are all / on the same plate / slowly rotating,” prone in our slowness, our terrestrial life, to be swallowed. The swallows, on the other hand, can escape the same fate: their defence is flight, their wings “snickersnacks”\(^{72}\) that “cut and thrust carving smaller” spaces in air (Fig. 7).\(^{73}\)

**Part Four: Lonely as a Clod**

> [Walt Whitman's] treatment of the bird is entirely ideal and eminently characteristic. That is to say, it is altogether poetical and not at all ornithological.—John Burroughs

John Burroughs' comment regarding Whitman's “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” gets, I think, to the heart of my dissertation. In treating the bird, a mockingbird, “entirely and eminently” in terms that are “not at all ornithological,” Whitman essentially uses an imagined instance of seeing a bird to relate the moment a young boy's poetic inspiration is born. In his reading of the poem, Leonard Lutwack allows that Whitman's description of the “nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown” is “ornithologically sound” (67), contrary to Burroughs' criticism; however, Lutwack also claims that “sighting a pair of breeding mockingbirds on Long Island would have been a very special event, since that species rarely nested north of Maryland in 1859 when Whitman wrote the poem” (67). Whitman's poem, though, as Burroughs implies, is more about a boy learning “that he is capable of ‘translating the notes’ of the mockingbird” (Lutwack 71) than it is about the nesting behaviour of mockingbirds; indeed, the specificity Whitman employs in this poem seems out of keeping with “a bard who,” according to Burroughs, “habitually bends his ear only to the musical surge and rhythmus [sic] of total nature, and is as wont to turn aside for any special beauties or points as the most austere of the ancient masters” (17). Not only do I argue that McKay habitually bends his ear to specific rhythms in nature—more on listening in Chapter Three—but also that he incorporates in much of his verse a
critique of the “ancient masters” whose responses to “total nature” Whitman seems to have adopted.

In *Birding, or desire*, McKay seems well in line with George Levine’s position vis-à-vis hawks in general and writes a poem about a specific bird as evidence with “Close-up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk” (22). Weighing a scant 140g (compared to the osprey’s 1600g), the sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) is North America’s smallest accipiter. McKay’s short poem represents an early attempt by a young poet to acknowledge a tradition of nature poetry while avoiding a simplistic recapitulation of Romantic form. Like the more recent “‘Stress, Shear, and Strain Theories of Failure’” (S/S 33), “Close-Up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk” is a sonnet that actively resists its form, albeit less self-consciously and less evidently than the later poem. With fifteen lines instead of fourteen, irregular rhyming, and unconventional metre, “Close-Up” does not immediately reveal itself as a sonnet. By approaching it as one, though, and considering the trochee as an inverted iamb, I want to suggest the opening line’s trochaic pentameter introduces a sonnet with a difference. Even this reading of the opening line requires a bit of a stretch, however, as strictly speaking it contains only four feet instead of five: “Con-cent-rate up-|on her |-at-tri |butes:” I would argue that the colon, syntactically meant to introduce a list of field marks, a measure of the raptor’s identity, functions as the line’s final syllable, a pause or breath before the following lines. This visual tag at the end of line one foreshadows the extraneous fifteenth line, perhaps: the final line fills in what the missing syllable/breath makes possible; it also enacts one of the hawk’s attributes, namely its ability to “impose / silence.” The entire poem is worth quoting so that we may, as it were, consider its attributes:

Concentrate upon her attributes:
the accipter’s short
downy wings, streaked breast, talons fine
and slender as the x-ray of a baby’s hand.
The eyes (yellow in this hatchling later deepening to orange then blood red) can spot a sparrow at four hundred metres and impose silence like an overwhelming noise to which you must not listen. Suddenly, if you’re not careful, everything goes celluloid and slow and threatens to burn through and you must focus quickly on the simple metal band around her leg by which she’s married to our need to know.

Once the sonnet is evoked in the opening line, what follows is a sequence of knowing exercises in poetic style; McKay demonstrates a capacity to write trochees, anapests, Alexandrines, and even an iambic octameter, as if to show he can do it without capitulating to the traditional protocol. In fact, the only line that McKay writes in iambic pentameter, the standard sonnet metre, is the final, extraneous line. In addition to proving wrong Richard Greene’s claim, in a review for *Books in Canada*, that he is merely “a poet of considerable gifts, which are, in general, badly deployed” (27), McKay develops a poetic style, what I call McKavian, that attends in equal measure to rhythm and cadence—of human language and avian ecology—and the dangers of humans’ desire to know. In the process, he reveals a valid reason for his persistent distrust of rigidly structured verse by drawing a direct connection between the strictures of the English sonnet and a human “need to know.”

Of utmost importance to a McKavian exercise in un-sonnetting the sonnet, of course, is the simultaneous homage to the form and to the bird specified in the title. Not “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day,” then, but “Shall I compare thee to a baby’s x-ray.” To be sure, roundish wings and streaked breast are field marks that aid in identifying sharp-shinned hawks, and yellow eyes are characteristic of juveniles. This list of attributes introduces the theme of ownership residing in that final, regularly metred line. The verb “married,” describing the
relationship between hawk and human, modifies our reading of the “simple metal band around her leg” to suggest a wedding band, effectively reaffirming the poem as sonnet, a form traditionally associated with protestations of love. The end-rhyming of “slow” and “know” in the poem’s second part—the caesura implies a turn in the sonnet which the word “Suddenly” reinforces—presents a complicated relation between the speed and knowing. One attribute of the hawk that McKay does not name here but associates with the osprey in “Migratory Patterns,” nevertheless occurs in the poem’s opening lines: its speed. The anapestic feet of “the accipiter’s short / roundish wings, streaked breast, talons fine,” in addition to drawing attention to the form’s unnatural requirements by forcing two syllables out of “streaked,” enacts the accipiter’s sudden plunge as if it were diving for “a sparrow [it spotted] at four hundred metres,” as surely as the spondaic “blood red) can spot” echoes the harsh reality of the raptor’s killer instincts. The paradoxical turn in the poem from speed to everything’s suddenly going “celluloid and slow” resonates with Bartlett’s observation that in general a tension between quickness and slowness measures McKay’s lines, that “in McKay’s world . . . on-the-go speeds alternate with slow momentum” (154). The subject of “Close-Up on a Sharp-shinned Hawk” determines this productive, suggestive tension in the poem: if birding means watching creatures that are apt to move before birders have a chance to get a satisfying glimpse, it stands to reason that some combination of quickness and patience will enable the most satisfactory encounters. According to The Sibley Guide to Birds, “sightings of accipiters are often very distant or very brief, and many birds go unidentified” (113). “Close-Up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk” shows the potential violence and danger in the ongoing practice of identifying birds; but it also demonstrates two stylistic qualities that Bartlett identifies as “exactitude” and “quickness” in his essay, “A Dog’s Nose of Receptiveness: A Calvinoesque Reading of Don McKay.” This McKavian unsonnet, in
its precise account of a specific bird, shows "what it means to be at once attentive and energetic, provoking and exhilarating" (Bartlett "Dog's" 155).

In poems such as "Close-Up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk," in which McKay demonstrates a simultaneous capacity for and distrust of a dominant tradition in western verse, McKay risks accusations from reviewers such as Greene that he writes "rambling and incremental" (27) poetry in glib apposition to canonical masterworks. Glen A. Love argues that "Much of what it means to be a western writer is to risk the contemptuous epithet, nature-lover" ("Revaluing" 233). While Love's reference to "western writers" necessarily considers certain elements of frontierism and biogeography key to writing about place and humans' relations in and with place—that is, Love is referring to primarily American writers living in the USAmerican west—I extend the meaning to include all writers who write what is likely to be labelled "nature writing," since the "contemptuous epithet, nature-lover" is hardly the domain of western American writers. "The risk" Love alludes to, moreover, "is worth taking . . . if it focuses attention on what appears to be nothing less than an ecologically suicidal path by the rest of culture" (233). The risk is worth taking if for no other reason than to play the fool in attempting to assuage by way of close attention any form of environmental degradation. McKay, who incidentally moved to the west coast in the mid-1990s, puts it this way in Vis à Vis:

Admitting that you are a nature poet, nowadays, may make you seem something of a fool, as though you'd owned up to being a Sunday painter at, say, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. There are some valid reasons for this. At present, "nature" has been so lavishly oversold that the word immediately invokes several kinds of vacuous piety, ranging from Rin-tin-tinism to knee-jerk environmental concerns. . . . It has been . . . Lorne Greened. (25-26).
One response to "nature" that does not invoke "vacuous piety," is on display in Munro Beattie’s critique of Canadian poetry from 1920-1935 in Carl Klinck’s *Literary History of Canada*. Clearly unmoved by Canada’s poetic accomplishments during this time, Beattie complains that "[w]orst of all, the versifiers of this arid period, having nothing to say, kept up a constant jejune chatter about infinity, licit love, devotion to the Empire, death, Beauty, God, and Nature. Sweet singers of the Canadian out-of-doors, they peered into flowers, reported on the flitting of the birds, discerned mystic voices in the wind, descried elves among the poplars" (235). Although such obvious scorn for nature poets is less common in print today, the difficulty ecocriticism has faced establishing itself as a bonafide sub-discipline attests to an undercurrent of disdain for the "jejune chatter" of such poets as Don McKay and the critics who devote a lot of space to "the flitting of birds" instead of to the flitting of words. I have heard more than one postmodern critic refer to ecocritics, or critics interested in the health of the earth, as Earth Critters.

McKay’s poetry has not always demonstrated precise and consistent attention to birds and the rest of the natural world. Coincidentally, McKay’s first book, *Air Occupies Space*—a fairly conventional collection of brief lyric poems that, although not informed by the ornithological or ecological precision of his later books, exhibits a predilection for nature poetry—was published in 1973, the same year Frank Davey published *From There to Here*. Davey claims with the publication of this book to have "helped begin the history of the word ‘postmodern’ in Canadian literature" (*Canadian* 245). The books that followed *Air Occupies Space*—*Long Sault* and *Lependu*—mark a shift from a conventional nature poetry to what Davey calls in *Reading Canadian Reading* “the textual violences of surrealism and Dada” expressed in McKay’s long poems (134). While Davey does not explicitly denounce the poetry McKay writes after 1980—after, that is, his surrealist long poems—75—I find it telling that he continues to refer to
Long Sault, published in 1975, when citing McKay in 1988’s Reading Canadian Reading.

Granted, Davey only refers to McKay in the chapter called “Recontextualization in the Long Poem” (123-36), so the lack of reference to Lightning Ball Bait, Birding, or desire, and Sanding Down this Rocking Chair on a Windy Night is understandable; however, Davey leaves McKay entirely out of his 1994 book, Canadian Literary Power, despite the publication of the award-winning Night Field in 1991. By contrast, D.M.R. Bentley mentions McKay, albeit briefly, in his 1992 study of ecological poetry in Canada, The Gay/Grey Moose, noting that the postmodernism Davey associates with demonstrates an awareness “of the ideological implications of critical theory” as it relates to “the ecological thrust of much of the original Tish work” (284). Critics should not find it surprising, observes Bentley, “that such poets as Don McKay, Andrew Suknaski, Anne Szumigalski, and Brian Dedora, whose roots lie in the same Black Mountain soil as Tish, are responsible for some of the most ecologically sound poetry being written in Canada today” (284). By the time Bentley published his book, however, McKay had distanced himself from whatever influence the Black Mountain movement had on his development as a poet.

I suspect McKay’s “reasons for failing to postmodernize,” which he attributes to an empirical “state of mind” he calls “poetic attention” (V 26), stems partly from his increasing proximity to the natural world. He admits, for example, in his interview with Ken Babstock, that he experienced “a definite breakthrough . . . with the love of landscape. In terms of recognizing [himself] as a linguistic creature. . . . And then the birdwatching, that was the major heave, acknowledging that [he] was hooked” (49). If McKay apprenticed with a postmodern poetic style that was in fashion at the time he began publishing and teaching, a time that coincided with a sea change in the way Canadian literature was perceived and studied in the years following Frye’s “Conclusion” and Atwood’s Survival, his ecological voice, the voice that has been developing
steadily since 1980, continues to enact a movement away from the postmodern, poststructuralist notion that the world exists only because humans speak it into existence.

While McKay’s evaluation of “nature’s” current tropic overuse and subsequent vacuity does not reflect risk in the sense that Love proffers, in *Vis à Vis* McKay concerns himself with envisaging the edge “between poetic attention and romantic inspiration” (27). Risk is inherent in McKay’s formulation of nature poetry precisely because he calls for a recognition—a re-cognition—of the role language *plays*: “as nature poet . . . one does not invoke language right off when talking about poetry, but acknowledges some extra-linguistic condition as the poem’s input, output, or both” (26). Though he is well aware of being “locked inside words,” McKay keeps “returning to a non-existent point of permeability between [himself] and the non-human others with whom [he] share[s] the world” (Dragland 882). The extra-linguistic condition McKay refers to is a physical, material world that exists without the need of human awareness or articulation. That is, neither the Douglas-fir growing outside my window nor the golden-crowned kinglets flitting through its branches require my imagination or my pen to exist. This is a risky statement to make for one invested in studying the language arts because it seems to privilege realistic depictions of the natural world over imaginative ones. I argue, however, that the risk is worth taking because current preference for imaginative, or rather linguistic, constructions of the world contributes to an egotism and anthropocentrism that are systematically denying humans’ role in environmental degradation.

Bentley’s position in his “Preamble” to *The Gay Grey Moose* reinforces the need to take such risks. As he reports, “little attention has been paid of late [as of 1992, that is] to the equivalences between Canadian poems and the external world of which they are in their very nature as analogous representations, cultural artifacts, and human productions, an integral and
inescapable part" (10). If "poems are not possible without matter: the matter of which they treat, the matter upon which they are inscribed, the human matter that creates and apprehends them" (10), then matter should rightly be a valid and compelling source of inquiry. The debate between Lawrence Buell and Dana Phillips, which I discussed in Chapter One, deals with some of the problems that arise once poets and critics start looking to the extradictionary, to the real/material world for insight into poetic ideas. More recently, critic and poet Adam Dickinson continues to tread lightly upon this risky proposition: "A significant problem with realism in ecocriticism is that it presumes an unquestioned association with materialism. The materiality of the referential world is literally assumed in the reality of the ‘ecopoem’ (indeed, it is asserted as the proper focus of our attention, according to ecocritics)” (Dickinson “Lyric” 41):

The claim that the realist text is able to point outside of language and that its primary concern is this outside assumes and reinforces the material link between reference and object within language itself—it makes of non-language, or the extra-linguistic, a knowable and presentable object in literal language. Lyrical approaches to materiality, however, in their very dependence on figures and metaphoricity, emphasize the insufficiency of language to fully present matter, or to discretely distinguish a Wittgensteinian ‘language-game’ (a specific context of linguistic interaction) that escapes language. Metaphor does not make the thing literally present, but it gives us a way to stand in relation to a substantiality that is not measurably accessible. (41-42)

My response to Dickinson’s convincing dissertation on lyrical metaphoricity in this instance focuses on his own metaphorical turn: does this “way of stand[ing] in relation” not require an actual place in which to literally stand? Ultimately, the relationality Dickinson is speaking of,
which rightly becomes articulated by way of material metaphoricity, requires actual things to which poets and critics can “stand in relation”—otherwise, it’s all a bunch of hooey: ethereal, theoretical, hypothetical claptrap. Clearcutting forests impacts ecological dynamics at a rate with which most nonhuman species cannot keep up. Poetry and language have nothing to do with it. But they can have something to do with how we literally stand in relation to trees, birds, and, yes, even clearcuts.

McKay’s response to the assumption that language constitutes the matter of reality comes prior to Dickinson’s argument, and it comes in the form of a reimagining of traditional, namely Romantic, nature poetry, as my readings of “Close-Up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk” and “‘Stress, Shear, Strain Theories of Failure’” attest. Not surprisingly, McKay’s poetic critiques of Romantic verse often directly respond to some of the most famous poems about birds in flight, of which there are many. Shelley, in “To a Skylark,” has the bird flying “Higher still and higher” “In the golden lightning / Of the sunken sun / O’er which the clouds are bright’ning” (ll. 6, 11-13), while Keats, in “Ode to a Nightingale,” imagines his bird a “light-winged Dryad of the trees” (l. 7) in sharp contrast to the poet trapped in “embalmed darkness” (l. 43). But these poems, like Avison’s “The Butterfly,” are more about what the nonhuman means to the human, indeed, to be human. “Poets,” according to Beryl Rowland, “have always envied the divine power of the bird, and some, such as the Romantics, believed they could acquire it for themselves” (xv). Critics, by extension, often identify “the association of flight with the power of poetry to discover truth,” a Platonic argument that follows from what Lutwack calls a “shamanistic identification with flying birds that enables human beings to make their escape from earth and move through space and time like gods” (52). I do not wish to set aside, once and for all, the rich tradition of symbolism and metaphor that continues in poetry to this day and
to stifle the ability of poets and critics to imagine. I do, however, want to highlight Ricou’s
inability to “just listen to [some] poems and be satisfied” because he feels compelled “to find out
about persons, places, and things” evoked by the poet. This strikes me as a useful inability, one
that is likely responsible, at least in part, for the development of ecocriticism and that is
necessary for ecocriticism to continue moving forward in an interdisciplinary mode of study.

Lutwack also effectively dampens the dream of the speaker in Keats’ ode by referring to
Daedalus and Icarus, who have proven, ostensibly, “that the exercise of the imagination is not
free like the flight of a bird, but uncertain and full of perils” (53). A sharp-shinned hawk’s wings
will not, having flown to close to the sun, fall off because the wax holding them together melts,
but bird flight is not particularly free; it frees birds (that can fly) from earth, though they are still
restricted by gravity; and it is also full of such real perils as hunters (avian and human), poor
weather conditions, airplanes, lighted windows along nighttime migration routes, and gravity.

The first of five poems that make up section five of McKay’s *Sanding Down this Rocking
Chair on a Windy Night*, “Styles of Fall” (67-71), focuses on the dangers of gravity while
alluding to another well-known poet. “Buckling” evokes “The Windhover,” Hopkins’ famous
poem about a kestrel whose aerial achievements recapitulate Christ’s divinity on earth. “Even the
windhover makes mistakes,” McKay’s poem begins: “some slight / miscalculation and he’s prey
/ to ordinary cats, trailing a slate blue wounded wing / beside the porch” (67). The poet wonders
how to reconcile Hopkins’ unflagging appreciation of “morning’s minion,” the “dapple-dawn-
drawn Falcon” identified by critics and birders alike as a kestrel (likely *Falco tinnunculus*,
though possibly an American kestrel, *Falco sparverius*). Leonard Nathan refers to Hopkins’
poem when trying to determine what to name the experience he feels while birding and
identifying species, an experience he eventually comes to name “epiphany” (11). The scene in
Nathan’s book is brief. He prefaces a reading of the sonnet’s octave by acknowledging his “stubborn, inveterate habit” of “going to books first in search of answers,” in this case of “going to a poem where a bird is gorgeously celebrated” (9). After stopping at—or rather having been “brought to a hard stop” by—the octave’s closing lines, “My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird,” and their seeming fidelity to Nathan’s conception of ornithological epiphany, Nathan dismisses the poem’s Christian overtones and claims not to have any “license to suit its meaning to [his] own faith,” namely a faith in secular attempts at poetic truth (10). While Hopkins’ natural theology remains integral to understanding how his sprung rhythm functions to move the poet—and ostensibly the reader—closer to God, one does not have to be a Jesuit priest to appropriate meaning, whether spiritual or poetical, from Hopkins’ poetry.

McKay introduces this very difficulty in “Buckling” when he wonders, “How can we call up Hopkins and / reverse the charges” (67). In other words, how can the poet uninterested in the Christian overtones of Hopkins’ verse—in the fact that Hopkins dedicated the poem “To Christ Our Lord”—isolate and magnify Hopkins’ enviable style of species specificity, a style most noticeable in his compound adjectives? Reading “The Windhover” as a sonnet—some critics consider it a great poem rather than a great sonnet—requires the reader to identify the turn, the point in the poem when the problem set up in the opening lines is addressed, if not resolved. In conventional sonnets, the turn typically either follows the opening octave (in the Italian form) or precedes the closing, rhyming couplet (in the English form); in “The Windhover” (neither Italian nor English), the turn occurs in line ten, signalled by the capitalized “AND” which follows an emphatic “Buckle!” By echoing this turn in the title “Buckling,” McKay draws attention to the eleven previous lines and their hyper-specific description of the falcon in flight, effectively deemphasising the Christian metaphor: prior to the turn, the falcon is itself, a “thing” that
nevertheless represents “Brute beauty and valour and act” while after the turn the falcon becomes the speaker’s “chevalier,” addressed in the second-person “thee,” which also reminds that the poem is dedicated to Christ. Like the swallows in “Swallowings” that are “real” swallows, the kestrel in “Buckling” is real in the sense that he, as the poet refers to the bird, is fallible and “fading” toward death; the only thing the poet can do is “feed him stale coke” so that the “quick lift of caffeine revives him briefly.” McKay’s poem, no less than Hopkins’, is about relationship; but in the former the relation is more directly between human and kestrel—the bird does not act as intermediary. This fundamental difference between the two poems implies an important stylistic choice in the poet-birder’s quest to get closer to the physical world by way of language. Nathan concludes that time in the field can replace religious faith for the secular reader who dismisses the liturgical qualities of “The Windhover” because he realizes the poem’s explicit Christianity prevents him from fully engaging with it. “Perhaps,” Nathan writes, attempting to understand how to reconcile his near-ecstatic devotion to Hopkins’ poem with his own professed secularism, “I need to be out in the field.” The field offers myriad ways into such species-specific poems as “The Windhover,” “Buckling,” and “Close-Up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk.”

In the poem preceding “Styles of Fall,” “Without a Song” (SD 61-63), the poet intones that “once / lyric poetry was naturalism,” implying a less problematic relation between word and world once existed:

Unembodied tongues –

simoon
chinook
sirocco
pindar
harmattan
mistral
and others we only know as
McKay’s commentary on the Romantic connection between flight and Truth in these lines simultaneously bypasses the Romantic tradition by parenthetically glossing “Unembodied tongues” to suggest not the voices of poets but the voices of the earth’s atmosphere. Simoon, chinook, sirocco, harmattan, and mistral are all types of wind from around the globe, while Pindar appears to be McKay’s sly reference to the Greek poet, whose classical odes—irregular in length of line and stanza, in prosody, and in rhyme patterns; indicative of a series of movements back and forth across a stage—would also seem to be under scrutiny in McKay’s ecological poetics. McKay writes a meteorological specificity, incorporating a critique of Shakespeare’s rhyming scheme and generalization from Amiens’ song in As You Like It (2.7 174-93): “Blow, blow, thou winter wind,” quotes McKay’s speaker before adding “(with a long i) not / unkind, but / dangerous as an alien” (61). The naming of winds (with a short i) enables a more inclusive (one might say more global) understanding of weather, especially as it affects bird flight and migration. A winter wind for residents of La Cote D’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, and Cameroon, for example, consists less of the coldly negative and negatively cold qualities Shakespeare assigns to “thou winter wind.” The intricate ecologies these winds express include avian ecologies, particularly during migration when the distribution of species is affected directly by weather and climate.
Part Five: Migration

*Migration is a widespread biological phenomenon, not simply a trait characteristic of a particular taxon.*—Bairlein and Coppack

One does not have to be an ecocritic to see the rich metaphoric possibilities afforded by literature about migration—movement, return, diaspora—whether one defines migration “as an annual return movement of populations between regular breeding and non-breeding grounds” or “as a syndrome of behavioural and other traits that function together with individuals” (Dingle 212). In her discussion of excursion and excursionist figures in McKay’s poetry, Susan Elmslie argues for a slippage between the real (the physical world) and the imagination by suggesting that excursion—that is, getting out or “straying from formal and linguistic conventions”—disrupts language with “formal functions which are designed to rejuvenate language” (83-84). What Elmslie calls McKay’s excursionist figure, or watcher, is an earlier version of what I am calling the birder-poet; “the main function” of both figures, who, as Elmslie claims, “embody longing and curiosity, is to restore our perceptions of the world” (84). Even these perceptions, once restored, have a tendency to engage both the ecological and the imaginative. As Terry Tempest Williams writes in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, “One can think of migration as merely a mechanical movement from point A to point B, and back to point A,” but one might also think of migration as birds’ “ancestral memory, an archetype that dreams birds thousands of miles to their homeland” (192-93). In addition to “the motif [sic] of flight and migration serv[ing] as an elaborate metaphor for the poetic process” (Bondar “That” 14), flight and migration, as I hope this chapter has thus far shown, inhabit McKay’s poetry as real problems to be taken seriously in humans’ ongoing estimation of our place vis-à-vis the earth.

The most obvious antecedent, in a Canadian literary context, to McKay’s interest in avian migration is Fred Bodsworth’s *The Last of the Curlews*, a short novel that follows a single male
Eskimo curlew (*Numenius borealis*) on his migratory flight south to the Yucatan coast and on his return north to Canada’s Arctic (Fig. 8). Bodsworth’s narrative effectively follows the bird and records in unsentimental prose the male’s unrequited physiological desire to mate; in other words, Bodsworth’s prose closely attends to ornithological and ecological details and patterns without imposing too many human attributes on the birds. He acknowledges, for instance, the integral role weather plays in migration, noting that the curlew’s movements, during his nine-month migration, are decided by “the cosmic forces of nature and geography—the winds, tides, and weather. Winds determine[] the direction the birds would fly. Tides and rain fall, by controlling the availability of food, determine[] each flight’s goal” (98). Bodsworth’s book, what I have been calling a novel but is also a natural history, succeeds, in my mind, because of its sparse narrative and informative, yet not overly didactic, details of a vanishing species’ clandestine behaviour.

Norman Elkins corroborates and extends Bodsworth’s observation regarding bird behaviour in a meteorological context: “The amount of foraging and hunting that diurnal species can accomplish is controlled by daytime light intensity, which may be modified by meteorological factors such as thick cloud” (56). Other climatic factors, such as wind direction and speed affect “the initiation and maintenance of migration” as well as “the performance of the migrant in flight” (Elkins *Weather* 131, 126). In *Birds in Fall*, American author Brad Kessler explains a “behavior, known as *zugunruhe*, or ‘migratory restlessness,’ [which] has long been observed by bird biologists” in terms of anticipation and eventual acquiescence, weather permitting: “Their disquiet builds for weeks, until finally an evening arrives in September when the skies clear and the wind bears down from the north. When the sun drops precisely six degrees below the horizon, thousands of birds pour into the sky, triggered by a signal not yet completely
understood” (23-24). Kessler’s deployment of avian migration as operating metaphor in a novel about loss, and the process of coping with loss, functions on at least two levels: to introduce the notion of return that inheres in migratory patterns; and to embrace, I think, humans’ affinity with birds, their animality. Bereft of her husband, ornithologist Ana Gaulthreaux seems to exist in a permanent state of zugunruhe, poised on the edge of leaving and having been left behind.

In “Leaving” (B 25), McKay connects wind to migratory monarch butterflies “massing on Point Pelee, / hanging in their thousands, wings folded.” Point Pelee, Ontario, the southernmost point of mainland Canada, is renowned for its migratory populations: songbirds in spring; hawks, buteos, and monarchs in fall. Wind becomes more obviously significant to butterflies because of the poet’s association of them with leaves, an association made plausible by monarchs’ physically diminutive appearance—the title punningly invites a reading of the monarchs as preparing to leave on their migration south to Mexico and of the wind making them “look like dun dead leaves.” It is the wind that “stirs some from their branches” prior to “their tiny / minds all reaching south in one long / empty line of poetry across the dark waves of Lake Erie.” The monarchs’ migration fascinates in part because scientists have difficulty fully explaining how these tiny creatures manage to travel such long distances and arrive at the same mountain year after year; bird migration, though easier to explain physiologically, poses similar challenges regarding fuel consumption and navigation. Like an “empty line of poetry” that reveals little of its meaning, migration requires at least a modicum of what Keats termed “negative capability” in order to avoid utter confusion vis-à-vis such seeming contradictions.

Bodsworth’s lack of sentimentality does not preclude moments of comparative anthropomorphism, although such moments accord fittingly with Tempest Williams’ idea of ancestral memory: when the time comes for the Eskimo curlew to begin his return flight,
Bodsworth writes that “The essence of what the curlew felt now was a nostalgic yearning for home” (80). Any “negative” effects of Bodsworth’s anthropomorphism are surely offset by his primary project of checking a larger imbalance as a result of human arrogance. Compare, for example, the anthropomorphism in the final couplet of G.D. Roberts’ sonnet “The Waking Earth,” in which the human soul, amid “Praise for the new life” of spring, “fetterless” “is flown abroad, / Lord of desire and beauty, like a God!” (94). Both Bodsworth and McKay provide ample evidence—extinction and matériel, respectively—for what such godlike behaviour has historically wrought. Recounting the nearly sixty-hour, non-stop flight from the coast of Labrador to the “savannahs abutting the Orinoco,” Bodsworth explains that “in less than three days each bird had lost ten to fifteen percent of its weight,” approximately two ounces of fat; “at the same rate of fuel consumption, a half-ton plane would fly one hundred and sixty miles on a gallon of fuel instead of the usual twenty miles” (73). The remarkable fuel economy adds to our wonderment—and envy—in the face of birds’ aerial abilities, to be sure; nevertheless, such considerable weight loss explains how the white-throated sparrow in McKay’s “Load” has come to be so utterly exhausted, even if its journey across Lake Erie pales in comparison to the curlew’s six-thousand mile migration. (The size difference between sparrows and curlews—17cm, 26g and 30cm, 270g, respectively—helps account for the relative difference in long-distance performance.)

In contrast to Bodsworth’s faithful rendition of the Eskimo curlew’s aerial and migratory achievements, some of McKay’s poems that overtly signal migration as their subject tend to invite symbolic readings in addition to ornithological readings. The three-part “Migratory Patterns” (B 69-72) and “Nocturnal Migrants” (AG 29-30), in particular, enact movement between ecological observation and metaphorical abstraction. “Migratory Patterns” returns to the
same geographic region as Point Pelee, even if the national park is not named. Beginning with
the speaker lying awake at 2 a.m. and experiencing his own version of zugunruhe—he “grieves
early closings everywhere” and wonders, by way of Villon, “où sont les // restaurants nocturnes
d’antan”—the poem shifts to a description of what birders are likely to see while watching
Souwesto skies during fall migration.

weather
tightens and they drift beat soar
and harry south, the Marsh hawk
tilts a rufous breast, a white patch
flashing, stoops upon its prey, pressure, Kestrels,
trim and lethal, Sharp-shins, Red tails,
funnelled by the Great Lakes into concentration, genius
swells toward catastrophe along
Lake Erie, wind in the northwest we watch the blank sky
burst, aboil with, someone breathing christ the Broadwings,
hundreds,
more, soar toward us swift and still and
still without one wingbeat turn
and spiral even higher, climbing in their kettle so far into blue
the eye
is sucked up through the lens into its element
and blinded
pitched past all capacity (69-70)

Once again the poet-birder provides field marks to identify an impressive list of migrating
raptors; he also employs a stream-of-consciousness style that mimics the birds’ literally
unflappable soaring, turning, and climbing. (The entire poem is free of full stops.) Once again,
the speaker finds himself spinning beneath these birds as if on a plate. And once again, McKay
acknowledges the influential role of wind and weather in affecting migratory movements,
suggesting in the process an intelligence at work, consisting of elemental and avian
“concentration,” beyond that which humans can comprehend. The blinded eye reminds me of
David Quammen’s definition of a good poem as “a one-eyed glimpse of a bird in flight” (188). The patterns of the title are, like the “genius” of bird and weather, impossible to know fully and with certainty yet, paradoxically, one-eyed glimpses and dreamlike images help us get closer. The beginning of the poem’s second section, “shifts in seeing, gifts, / suddenly your eyes where your ears had been,” implies an ontological movement toward being bird (another possible permutation of the gerundive birding). The implication might be there, the gesture toward, but, as Méira Cook suggests, “tactfully, reverently, McKay’s watcher never ‘becomes’ bird” fully (x); if he comes close, he is “pitched past all capacity” to complete the imaginative leap Elizabeth Costello has little difficulty enacting.

The gesture toward becoming bird in “Migratory Patterns” seems less egoistic when considering the poem might be taking place during a dream. “Nocturnal Migrants,” too, has the speaker occupying a space between sleep and wakefulness: even when asleep, or on the edge of sleep, the poet-birder wants to be with the birds so much that, on the way to the bathroom, his “bare feet step / into a pool of moonlight,” turn into fish, and “swim off, / up” to join the “night fliers” (AG 29). When he is in his kitchen, “footless,” he thinks about his feet flying “among the night fliers – Snow Geese, swans, songbirds,” and about the way they used to be perceived by “early radar techs [who] discovered / ghostly blotches on their screens” and assumed they were “angels”: McKay might call them “water-souls” (29-30). Ana Gaulthreaux, ornithologist/protagonist of Brad Kessler’s Birds in Fall, provides a biological explanation that would seem to support McKay’s naming: “Birds, like humans, are mostly moisture—they’re ninety percent water—and a flock of finches on a radar screen shows up like a small weather system: one or two green dots. On a night of heavy migration in autumn or spring, a radar screen blossoms with fleeting spectral dots” (115). Despite the obvious differences between birds and humans,
similarities abound beyond the developmental characteristics outlined by Margaret Nice and supported by Susan Fisher. Moreover, this repetition provides at least anecdotal evidence for birds' physiological reality directly influencing an imaginative representation. Birds have the capacity to be both dream and reality, to be ninety percent water and ninety percent yearning. That the numbers do not quite add up, furthermore, points to another way the human mind can be "pitched past all capacity," stretched to the limit.

Migration in McKay's poems functions as a metaphor for movement at the same time it uncovers a human desire to fly as freely as the birds, to move across political boundaries without the concomitant bureaucratic responsibilities. As Malcolm Lowry writes of "the northwestern redwing\(^\text{83}\)" in "The Bravest Boat," "like all birds" it "may feel superior to man in that he is his own customs official, and can cross the wild border without let" (15). More importantly, by reinforcing our status as ground-dwellers whose ecological impact—contributing to global warming, habitat destruction, air pollution—is directly attributable to our own aerial "achievements," McKay's migration poems highlight an anthropocentric hubris that makes the mythical Daedalus and Icarus'—not to mention Sumner and Zak's—daring attempt to defy gravity seem trivial. In the process, McKay effectively enacts a gestural poetics that points toward a world outside language and invites readers to pay attention after they have stopped reading.

**Part Six: Icarus and the Poets**

\[
\text{step outside and let the earth turn} \\
\text{underneath, trapdoors, new lungs, missing bits} \\
of time, plump familiar pods go \\
\text{pop in your mind you learn not} \\
\text{principles of flight but how to fall.} —\text{Don McKay}
\]

*Another Gravity* begins with a poem that is not about birds at all. In fact, of the thirty-two
poems included in McKay’s 2000 collection, only sixteen mention birds by name. The opening poem, “Sometimes a Voice (1)” (3-4), begins in contradiction, which, true to the necessarily opposing forces required to achieve flight, recurs throughout the collection:

Sometimes a voice – have you heard this? – 
wants not to be voice any longer, wants something 
whispering between the words, some 
rumour of its former life. Sometimes, even 
in the midst of making sense or conversation, it will 
hearken back to breath, or even farther, 
to the wind, and recognize itself 
as troubled air, a flight path still 
looking for its bird.

This voice begins as a whisper between the modifier “sometimes” and its verb “to want” and transforms into what McKay identifies in “Baler Twine: Thoughts on Home, Ravens & Nature Poetry” as the Aeolian harp, “which is simply the larynx of natural phenomena” (V 27). Aeolian harpism “converts natural energy into imaginative power, so that Romanticism, which begins in the contemplation of nature, ends in the celebration of the creative imagination in and of itself. [. . .]: it speaks directly to a deep and almost irresistible desire for unity” (27). This is a lyric voice desiring its antithesis even as it longs to retrace its Romantic lineage and return to a prelinguistic time when it inspired lift instead of verse: another gravity. This voice wants to find “its bird,” not its bard. Such subtle distinctions within the poem’s erotic framework are fully in keeping with McKay’s project of unsettling the lyric ‘I’ cultivated by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats (in Chapter Three, I argue for such change on the level of phonemes and syllables, as between “bird” and “bard,” for example, as a particularly McKavian rhetorical trope). But the poem shifts following this rather abstract preface to a more narrativistic version of the voice “as troubled air, a flight path still / looking for its bird.” The speaker recalls a time when he and some friends were “shingling the boathouse roof,” a job that was “all / off balance –
squat, hammer, body skewed / against the incline, heft the bundle, / daub the tar, squat.” The talk
during the tedious hours on the boathouse roof turns, in typically male fashion, to adulthood’s
“labyrinthine perils” which the speaker and his friends are content to avoid for as long as
possible, comforted by a false sense of youthful vigour and immortality. After noticing that “The
roof / sloped upward like a take-off ramp / waiting for Evel Knievel,” Danny, one of the friends,
boasts he can easily clear the “twenty feet or so of concrete wharf” between the boathouse and
“the blue-black water of the lake.” Then suddenly, “amid the squat, / hammer, heft, no one saw
him go”—Danny disappears. The “short flight between the roof / and the rest of his natural life”
resembles the brief flight Zak and Sumner’s flying machine makes with Chu at the helm, except
McKay’s poem contains more gravitas. Danny never returns.

Despite the light-hearted banter deployed “to fray / the tedium of work” that encapsulates
Danny’s boast, the gravity of the situation—the mysterious death/disappearance of a friend—is
reinforced by the image of Danny’s “boots / with his hammer stuck inside one like a heavy-
handed / flower.” Though McKay has demonstrated in other poems his capacity for humour, here
he acknowledges with all the gravity the situation deserves that fatal consequences await those of
us arrogant enough to think we have conquered the air. Flight, then, while clearly operating
metaphorically in a poem such as “Sometimes a Voice (1),” also functions as a real achievement
toward which humans strive. As such, I cannot quite follow Cook’s observation, in “Song for the
Song of the Dogged Birdwatcher,” her introduction to a selection of McKay’s poetry, that “If
gravity refers to what is material in language then flight is all metaphor, all leap and longing, all
air and stare and star” (xi). First, gravity, as Cook herself notes, “is title and technique, the
coefficient of drag, the slow gagged pull of solemnity” which includes the ability—or not—of
bodies to bear both physical and “moral weight, gravity and gravitas” (xi). Gravity is no more the
sole material purview of language than Nature is the sole purview of the Romantics; nor does flight, as I have demonstrated, occupy a wholly symbolic realm within McKay's poetics. The poet's recognition of the biological and ecological dynamics responsible for flight combined with a tradition of flight-as-Truth metaphors ensures an interrogative, observational poetry literally in awe of avian aeronautical achievements.

It takes little work to see "Sometimes a Voice (1)" as a version of the Greek myth of Icarus, the boy who, having been given a set wings to escape the Minotaur's Labyrinth, got cocky and flew too close to the sun melting the wax that held his makeshift wings on. But McKay offers a more direct commentary on the myth: "Icarus" (AG 43-46) begins Another Gravity's fourth section, which also includes "Hang Time" (49) and "Turbulence" (50) and ends with "Plummet" (56). With "Icarus," McKay takes his place in a conversation among other notable poets who have addressed this particular Greek myth, including W.H. Auden, whose "Musée des Beaux Arts" (179) deals ekphrastically with Pieter Bruegel's painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," and Al Purdy, whose "Bruegel's Icarus" (530-32) deals with the painting and with Auden's reading of it. If for Auden Bruegel's painting represents how suffering "takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully / along," for Purdy it represents multiple instances of anonymous death. Though he begins and ends the poem with Icarus, "a scared little boy / a long way from home," Purdy focuses on the "dead body in nearby woods" "off to one side of the painting" which is also ignored by the visible figures in the pastoral scene. In short, neither poet writes about flying; McKay, not surprisingly, makes flight the focus of "Icarus."

Since Icarus is a mythical character who lives on in story and painting, McKay has him endlessly repeating the moment for which he has been immortalized: "Over and over he"
rehearses flight / and fall, tuning his moves” (43). Falling follows flight, for man or boy, in an endless recapitulation of the myth; similarly, story follows physics as McKay imagines Icarus’ feeling at achieving liftoff only to tumble, inexorably, “into freefall.” Icarus “feels resistance gather in his stiff / strange wings, angles his arms to shuck the sweet lift / from the drag” and flies toward the sun before stopping “At the melting point of wax, which now he knows / the way Doug Harvey knows the blue line” (43). Even though Icarus is trapped in an endless cycle of failure not unlike the failure experienced by Sumner and Zak in Innocent Cities, McKay seems uninterested in using his version of the story to proselytize about human arrogance and egoism in the quest to fly. While the farmer in Bruegel’s painting ploughs the field, the ship sails off, and “the poets moralize about our / unsignificance,” writes McKay, “Icarus is thinking tremolo and / backflip” and refuses to apologize (44). Icarus’ success as a flyer exists concomitant with his failure to maintain altitude, a state of existence similar to McKay’s poet-birder. The practice is what’s important, the sense of repetition, “Repertoire, technique,” and style: process instead of product.

In the process of learning how to fly, McKay’s Icarus realizes the value of watching how real birds do it. He finds a spot to watch hawks and other raptors during fall migrations: “Merlins slice the air with / wings that say crisp, crisp, precise as sushi chefs, while Sharp-shins / alternately glide and flap, hunting as they go,” and “Icarus / notices how the Red-tails and Broadwings separate their primaries / to spill a little air, giving up just enough lift to break their drag up / into smaller trailing vortices” (44). Watching is an integral part of his practice because each bird has its own particular style that functions, in concert with physical attributes, as but one variation on the theme of flight. I can see how McKay’s lyric style edges its way, unapologetically, into content, how the observed subject often informs stylistic and formal
concerns, how watching can be articulated on the page as listening folded into speech: “O yellow warblers,” O broadwings, O Icarus (V 66-67). The gift of poetry—sometimes articulated as apostrophe—is often for McKay a “gift of failure” (AG 45); the same is true of the gift of flight for Icarus, who recognizes failure as a gift only after having found a place to sit and watch and “let the marsh-/mind claim his thinking” (45). Like McKay’s birder-poet, Icarus’ “watching is humbler, less appropriative, a thoughtless think/ing” (45). The paradox can surely never be solved which, paradoxically, ensures that willing observers—poets, walkers, birders—will keep trying, “boosting / and balancing each other until they fall off” (46).
ECOTONE THREE

It is too early to tell whether these lines of approach would be adequate for full-fledged thinking.—Dennis Lee

Field Notes

I forget: why are there broken birds behind me; words, goddammit, words.—John Thompson

If to record is to love the world, let this be an entry.—Roo Borson

While a field guide might help with the identification process in the field, often BC finds there isn’t time to flip, find, and identify in situ. The field guide is often of more use after returning from a day in the field. C. Bernstein advises the birder to “[c]ompare your sighting with books only after the notes are made. Having the book at hand during the note-taking will only interfere with the process. . . . The description often is that of the picture in the book, not of the actual live bird seen” (“Details” 2). Once observed, though, identifying characteristics—field marks—have a tendency simply to disappear as memories often do. Something else is needed, BC thinks, to bring marks and guide together: call it “striv[irig] for affirmative praxis” by way of note-taking as Gabriele Helms does (46); embrace Ricou’s argument that “the act of writing, and rewriting, is essentially a mode of thinking” (Arbutus 135). Making notes in the field enables a mode of thinking that destabilizes the written word’s—and hence conventional knowledge’s—imperial authority. Paradoxically, by making notes toward naming, BC engages a “radical process of demythologizing the systems that threaten to define” the natural world, effectively “uninvent[ing] the world,” as Robert Kroetsch would have it (“Unhiding” 394). For BC, having first arrived on the west coast, the idea of making notes was persistently absent, even when he consulted the Sibley Guide to Birds purchased on a whim in Toronto. He made a mental note about the flight pattern of a bird silhouetted against a typical northwest coast sky (grey) and
flying from treetop to treetop, the familiar level flight punctuated by brief flapping, with wingbeats almost entirely below the horizontal plane. Turning to page 351 in the Sibley guide, BC saw the Steller’s and Blue jay side by side for the first time, and saw that conspicuously ravenous hood, too, for the first time—on the page and not in the field. Birds on the west coast of North America—on this geographically last post of colonial presence—bring us, all of us, closer to the observation of natural life forms if we, all of we, so choose to be brought. This last post strikes BC as both a theoretically and a geographically significant marker of newness. Or, not newness exactly, but of the impulse to stop expanding and take a walk in a place newly acknowledged, to turn and look at one’s environment.

Tues 17 Oct,
walking dog after dinner, noticed long line of crows flying east—hundreds, too many to count; is this a usual occurrence?

Wed 18 Oct,
walked dog at same time as yesterday—saw crows again, tho not quite as many—where are they going?

BC still consults books, searching for a key or a legend—some piece of a map he doesn’t yet hold. He reads George Levine: “I take the arbitrariness of naming as part of the pleasure of birding, a continuing revelation of the ways in which ‘nature’ and human conventions and consciousness are always intermingled and never in entirely satisfactory relation” (153). Identifying a particular bird correctly, as McKay suggests, does have “its indisputable satisfactions” as “one of the pleasures of system to which us big brains are addicted” (V 84), but the name addict might be apt to assume his pleasure is more important, ontologically, than it is.

Sitting down in a small clearing, BC recalls reading Martin Heidegger in an undergrad seminar. Heidegger’s reading of Stefan George’s poem “Words” resonates here, albeit in tension with BC’s birding tendencies. George’s poem ends with the line, “Where word breaks off no
thing may be,” a claim for the power of language—Western-European human language—not only to classify and catalogue things in the world but, by naming, to speak things into existence. This is a long way from Lilburn’s sense of courtesy; it’s a long way from the idea of birding as a non-violent participatory activity. As Heidegger writes in his reading of the poem, “Where the word is missing, there is no thing. It is only a word at our disposal which endows the thing with Being” (“Words” 141). If a tree falls in the forest, right? BC comes across an early McKay poem, “Black Spruce” (SD 10), in which the speaker offers a parody—repetition with critical difference—of the pseudo-philosophical question, If a tree falls in the forest, and no one’s around to hear it, does it make a sound?

If the earth moves for two

people screwing does it stand still for the moose?

Of course not, BC says aloud, shaking his head and smiling at McKay’s innovation: it moves for the moose, too. And if it moves for the two people and the moose, it moves for, say, those crows he’s been seeing around sunset each night for the past month.

Other academics—BC has to keep reminding himself that he’s an academic; that he’s supposed to be writing a dissertation from the notes he makes each day in the field and in the office—have been thinking about the relation between words and birds (well, and the rest of the world). In addition to the Czeslaw Milosz bit about jays, BC often returns to a short excerpt by Alberto Manguel, in part because it reminds BC of a bird he doesn’t see in Vancouver:

Outside my window is a cardinal. There is no way of writing this sentence without dragging in its tow whole libraries of literary allusions. The frame of the window and the margins of the page entrap the bird that serves as a sign for any bird, just as any bird serves as a sign for any idea. [. . .] I wonder, corrupt with
reading, if there ever was a moment when this sentence—outside my window is a cardinal—was not an artifice; when the blood-red bird on a steel-blue tree was quietly surprising, and nothing urged me to translate it, to domesticate it into a textual enclosure, to become its literary taxidermist. I wonder if there ever was a moment when a cardinal outside my window sat there in blazing splendour signifying nothing. (qtd. in Gibson 17)

Is every linguistic act an act of appropriation and domestication; are notes gestures of "literary taxidermy," and if so, what are the implications for BC’s research? What about SueEllen Campbell’s distinction between the postmodern conception of signification and the ecological imperative to acknowledge the apartness of the more-than-human world? BC returns to Campbell’s essay, which is in The Ecocriticism Reader, the first collection of essays from thinkers who represent something like a community of scholars to which BC feels he might belong. In one passage, she seems to be responding to Manguel’s wonderment vis-à-vis cardinals as signifiers: “Lacan sees the human being as a text; Derrida argues that everything is text in the sense that everything signifies something else. But ecology insists that we pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world—the nonhuman part—exists apart from us and our languages” (133). Not that ecologists don’t use language, too, and often in far less reflexive ways than poets and critics. But the insistence on paying attention, that’s key. The proximity BC is looking for can never not be informed by language, literary allusions, or even by the biases of supposedly objective scientific research. The extreme alternative would be a complete return to nature where BC could learn from the birds themselves how they think and act. But that would, in a sense, be a way of ignoring human nature as it manifests in human culture. BC gets up and starts walking toward home, hoping to see some
more birds along the way. Pausing to think in the clearing, he was distracted from the act of paying attention.

Days later, more research uncovers some of the mystery of the nightly corridor of crows, which BC has come to assume is heading, en masse, to a roosting site. The first clue arrives when he is next on campus: a few slips of paper from Lisa Szabo, a colleague researching John “Wildwood” Winson for her Master’s thesis, “Wildwood Notes: Nature Writing, Music, and Newspapers,” rest invitingly in BC’s office mailbox. According to Lisa, Wildwood wrote two columns for Vancouver’s *Daily Province* between 1918 and 1954—“Open Air Jottings” and “Along Wildwood Trails.” This particular clue, however, comes not from one of Wildwood’s columns, but from an article by Donald W. Gillingham on 17 November 1923. Commenting in what looks to have been a regular feature, called “Bird Life in British Columbia,” Gillingham remarks that in November, “crows assemble in vast number in the Fraser delta, and one would not be far wrong in saying that crows migrate” (26). If the crows BC has been observing were “migrating” to the Fraser delta, though, they would be heading south, not east. Perhaps, over the years, crows choose different nightly roosting sites. This tidbit from his colleague—some of the best field notes, BC maintains, are those that are gifted by friend and colleagues—compels BC to engage in even more research to find out what these crows are doing, and where they are going. The impulse to research, though, quickly fades, and BC decides to spend a couple of hours looking for birds in Donna Bennet and Russell Brown’s most recent anthology of Canadian literature. One poem catches his attention, which had begun to flag after skimming the excerpt from Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *The Imperialist.* E. Pauline Johnson, notorious poet who performed half of each show as a refined English lady and the other half as a “Mohawk Princess,” wrote a poem called “The Flight of the Crows” (170-71). “The autumn afternoon is
dying o’er the quiet western valley,” it begins, “and far above some birds are flying by // To seek their evening haven in the breast / And calm embrace of silence” (170). Johnson published the poem in 1895; how long has the nightly crow corridor been taking place? BC is happy to see that Johnson, too, wanted to know more than simple observation allows: “Strange black and princely pirates of the skies,” she writes, “Would that your wind-tossed travels I could know!” (170). Far from the “wild lands” that Johnson imagines, however—which, if Gillingham’s information is accurate, might have been the Fraser delta in 1895—it turns out the crows are flying to a roost in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver.

A few days after reading Johnson’s poem, The Vancouver Sun ran a front-page story, “Will B.C.’s crows still come home to roost?” (A1-A2). BC is taken aback at the serendipity of events these past few days, and thankful he can avoid the archives for the time being. According to Larry Pynn, the author of the article, “northwestern crows from False Creek, the North Shore and north Surrey gather at their greatest roosting site in B.C., a spot near Willingdon Avenue and Still Creek, just north of Highway 1,” and have been doing so since “the 1970s” (A1). Pynn’s article deals with the destruction of the roosting site to which the crows fly—the very crows BC has been watching as they perform their evening ritual: “The destruction of the roosting site . . . for development of a Costco outlet and new Keg restaurant has left one researcher concerned and more than a little saddened” (A1). Having read Johnson’s 1895 poem, though, and knowing the tenacity of crows, BC is convinced that B.C.’s crows will find another place to roost in the winter. Having learned where they go each night, only to learn that they can no longer go there because of people’s obsession with cheap stuff regardless of the environmental costs, BC happily lets go of his desire to know and embraces his desire to observe.

Walking his dog the other day, BC heard what he thought was a Steller’s jay; but it might
have been a northern flicker, or a starling in mimic mode. Nevertheless, he made a note on a recipe card—he now carries recipe cards in his pocket, and a pen—for later investigation:

Tues 24 Oct
quick, successive ‘laughs’; descending, harsh.

He knows this is not enough, that there is something missing. The note lacks coherence, it’s too cryptic; and when BC compares it to other notes from the field—notes that share a slight resemblance to notes he makes while skimming journals in the library—he has a hard time piecing a narrative together. He recalls an article from the *New York Times Magazine* that came out in the wake of the ivory-billed woodpecker controversy. Ivory-billed woodpeckers (*Campephilus principalis*) have been considered extinct by most ornithologists since approximately 1940. In 2005, some ornithologists claim to have sighted (and heard) ivory-bills in Arkansas. To support their sighting, field notes would play as great a role as the grainy video and audio files.

But the act of birding, ultimately, is an act of storytelling. For instance, if someone said to you, ‘I saw this cardinal fly out of nowhere with yellow tips on its wings and land on the side of a tree,’ even the least experienced amateur would counter that cardinals don’t have yellow wingtips and don’t cling to trees but rather perch on branches. Each bird is a tiny protagonist in a tale of natural history, the story of a niche told in a vivid language of color, wing shape, body design, habitat, bill size, movement, flying style and perching habits. The more you know about each individual bird, the better you are at telling this tale. (Hitt n.p.)

If birding is storytelling, what writerly activity, BC wonders, cannot be approached as a field in which to take notes? Linda Hutcheon, for example, titles her introduction to the reprint of
Northrop Frye’s *The Bush Garden*, “The Field Notes of a Public Critic.” Notes taken in the field of Canadian literature, however, are likely as far removed from the notes BC tentatively makes as Canadian literature is from a field of daisies. Besides, as Jan Zwicky writes in an essay, “[s]ome things can be known that cannot be expressed in technocratically acceptable prose” (“Brighurst’s” 109); the idea of story, save, perhaps, the improvisational storytelling of many First Nations cultures, seems too linear, too structured to embody the frantic, hesitant notes of a birder as he stands, shivering, just past sunrise watching and listening for signs of avian life, head cocked, mouth slightly agape, pen at the ready.

Leafing through a pile of papers in his office, BC stumbles across another piece of writing by Laurie Ricou, an essay called “Field Notes and Notes in the Field: Forms of the West in Robert Kroetsch and Tom Robbins,” that helps to alleviate the frustration brought on by his incomplete note: “Field notes. The form is the form of absence, defined by what it is not” (119); “Field notes are the unrealized raw material of art, not the achieved object. . . . [They] are fragmentary, cryptic, ostensibly scientific and factual and empirical. This form suits [poets, critics, birders] who despise words, who want to, who must, keep rein on their imagination” (120). The form invites careful observation of a fragmentary world, a world that does not defer to a master narrative, either natural or artificial. No note can ever be entirely factual or complete or accurate because the world and its inhabitants—Steller’s jays, Haida sculptures, black spruces, plastic bags, postcolonialists—are never entirely certain or complete or whole. This note about the descending, harsh notes will suffice until BC gets home. After that, who knows?

In his introduction to Robert Kroetsch’s *Completed Field Notes*, Fred Wah urges readers to “think of ‘field notes’ as temporary, as momentary gestures that interpenetrate possibility. Perhaps even as investigations into the potential for narrative” (xii). Similar to McKay’s corpus
of bird poems, BC's nascent list of birds remains even less "completed" than Kroetsch's field notes, "announced in medias res as continuing" yet, "in its acceptance of its own impossibilities, completed" (Kroetsch "Author's" 251). Where Kroetsch's impossibility manifests in the poet's inexorable reflexivity and self-doubt, in an endless deference to the symbolism of words, BC's failure to know for sure recapitulates a postcolonial desire—BC wants to defer to the authority of schists, shrubs, and shrikes, of terranes, terrain, and towhees, of faultlines, forests, and flickers.

This act of deferring, of accepting the possibility of failure in the process of learning about the field, in the field, positions BC as patient observer, as part of a naming that "will be quiet, useless, broken maybe" (Lilburn 184). Insofar as birding comprises identifying field marks, reading field guides, and writing field notes, its connection to reading literature remains.

As BC opens John Pass's latest collection of poetry, Stumbling in the Bloom, yet another passage from Ricou's essay comes to mind: "The field notes are in prose, but their cryptic factuality . . . keep[s] turning them toward poetry. Here lies the potential and, conversely, the limitation of the form" (120). What else might describe the precise poetry BC identifies with Don McKay's avian aesthetics better than "cryptic factuality?" Ricou's passage comes to mind in connection with McKay because John Pass dedicates one of his poems to McKay. With "Notes on the Note of the Unknown Bird" (107-8), BC recognizes a play on McKay's series of poems with titles such as "Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush" and "Song for the Song of the Common Raven." With his title and the allusion to McKay's "songs," Pass punningly extends the concept of field notes to include musical notes, a connection others writing about field notes haven't, to BC's knowledge, made. BC finds it intriguing that Pass celebrates in this poem the unknowability of the bird—"better not to know," he writes, "Better nameless" (107). While the resistance to name echoes the notion that language equals knowledge, the call, or note,
of the bird is “Not strange,” but “Familiar in dawn waking, early / spring” (107); the poet here acknowledges familiarity, even a degree of proximity, by way of close attention to the

Almost whistle.
Each instance the same and new to itself, singular

as the smallest increment
of thought or query. Plea? Not answering.
A sort of regularity. No rhythm. (And then not missing

a beat the dilemma of attention—the trees (107).

Despite his joy at having stumbled upon this poem, its relevance to his ongoing project, BC is not quite sure what to do with these notes—the poet’s or the bird’s. Surprisingly, he finds himself guessing at the bird’s identity—varied thrush? rufous-sided towhee? starling?—though such nominalization is surely not the purpose of the poem. Or maybe it is; to test the reader’s taxonomical tendencies. If so, BC wonders if he would pass or fail the test. Or if it, like the identity of the unknown bird, doesn’t really matter.

Fri 27 oct, note to self—

those mountains uplifting behind you
aren’t your mountains—
those bushtits, dark-eyed juncos,
Steller’s jays are not your
birds—

you’re all escarpment and shield—
cardinals, grackles, and blue jays—

you have no idea, though you’re starting
to understand—
who you are in this place
is who you were
there—

Another story about birds comes to BC’s attention, in spite of his decision to stop looking for any more stories and to start spending more time writing. Reluctantly, on his way out of the
department office, BC stops to read the latest *UBC Reports*. On the cover, a young student holds a winter wren up to the camera. BC likes winter wrens, but he is prepared to walk away—having enough material to ponder and beginning to think that his research has the potential to provide infinite materials. This story, though, brings his recent thoughts about having been displaced from eastern to western Canada and about field and musical notes together. He takes a copy from the office to read on the bus ride home. "Divided by glaciation during the Pleistocene Epoch 1.8 million years ago," he reads, "winter wrens have evolved into different subspecies with distinct songs and genetic codes" (Lin 1). This information, while certainly interesting from an evolutionary point of view, is not what grabs BC’s attention. The different subspecies have been identified as eastern and western winter wrens, with the former living “as far west as Alberta,” while the latter “inhabit the Pacific coastal belt between Alaska and Oregon” (1). Researchers, it seems, have discovered the long-theorized contact zone where these two distinct subspecies share habitat.

Instead of going home, BC gets off the bus early and heads to the pond at Jericho Beach. Standing on the bridge, he notices only mallards and pigeons in the vicinity. Come spring, while standing on this same bridge, BC will watch barn swallows performing aerial acrobatics in their search for food while red-winged blackbirds sing their territorial boundaries. For now, though, he continues to read. Professor Darren Irwin found the “elusive contact zone” in a town called Tumbler Ridge, BC, with the help of a group of dedicated, amateur birders. The South Peace Bird Atlas Society had recorded the presence of winter wrens in Tumbler Ridge, and Irwin determined after studying the population that there were both eastern and western winter wrens in the area. He was able to make this preliminary determination based on the notes he heard as both subspecies were “singing their own special songs within 100 metres of one another” (1). BC
begins to think that the winter wrens' notes, which form one of the most complex of all
birdsongs (especially considering these diminutive birds resemble pointy-tailed chocolate
Timbits), are so much more important than his notes, which form a fragmented jumble of
incoherent thoughts. But maybe they aren't so different. Maybe, if he can allow himself to think
about ecology as it applies to environmental systems and as it applies to metaphorical systems of
thinking, field notes might perform ecologically. As concise records of relational experience,
some field notes occupy a literary ecotone between the field itself and the poetry they—resonant,
echoic—keep turning toward.

Perhaps field notes keep turning toward poetry because poetry inheres in the things they
record. Everything, not just words, has the potential to be poetry.

When you think intensely and beautifully, something happens. That something is
called poetry. If you think that way and speak at the same time, poetry gets into
your mouth. If someone hears you, it gets in their ears. If you think that way and
write at the same time, then poetry gets written. But poetry exists in any case. The
question is only: are you going to take part, and if so, how? (Brinthurst “Poetry”
160)

BC takes part by taking notes; the wrens take part by making notes. In the field, of the field. He
has enough material now, enough impetus to keep returning to the field with his guides and his
recipe cards. But he also needs to spend more time inside, in front of the computer, reading and
writing. The notes will continue to accumulate; the poetry will continue to speak.

Wed 3 Jan, note re: new taxon, Apsaravis ukhaana

*Distal to the area of the hypotarsus, an ossified tendon lies against metatarsal III.
Semi-articulated pedal phalanges (Figs. 1 and 3) decrease in length distally.*
Fig. 1

a bird remains a bird
until that click of aural re-
cognition when you pit
tititichichichi
versus
chick-a-dee dee dee dee—

listen in the space between
air and call and ear:
Regulidae and Paridae,
songbird and passerine,
kinglet and chickadee—

How far, you wonder,
is the farthest point
from a poem’s defective feet:
what might you find there,
Distal to the area
of the hypotarsus—

what might you find
that hasn’t been found already
wanting,
waiting to hear a stylus scratching an old 45
  articulating static between one song and the next
  the next note hovering ethereal,
an ink stain on the tip of your tongue
from a pen that fills notebooks
with names you don’t want to forget—
Regulus satrapa; Poecile atricapilla—

and when,
because your record player is older than you,
the arm refuses to lift and return,
you are reminded of one whose poetic charms
no longer rise above sameness, whose feet walk awkward
betraying a loss of lateral mobility: an ossified tendon

unbending toward
something like metaphor
that lies against metatarsal III.

Fig. 3 (for L. Ricou)
Get up and out and walk a trail of
*Semi-articulated*
Feathers as light as  
Seen through binoculars

(Get up and out and walk, upright and bi-
*pedal*

Feathers as light as dense-boned  
*Phalacrocorax*
pelagic  
*pelagicus*
cormorant *phalanges*
solid as gravity,
that homeless ecological arc
between method and theory,
field trip and office,
increase and *decrease*—

    in hindsight
    in foresight
    and *in length*—

that song, that leaf, that link
that calls across and places you
centrally and *distally*
    in relation—
CHAPTER THREE

‘Seeping from frontiers of the audible’: Songs for the Songs of the Singers

_Trying to understand the words
Uttered on all sides by birds,
I recognize in what I hear
Noises that betoken fear._—W.H. Auden

_And of course there must be something wrong
In wanting to silence any song._—Robert Frost

Part One: Notes from the Fields

_Poetry is what I start to hear when I concede the world’s ability to manage and understand itself. It is the language of the world: something humans overhear if they are willing to pay attention._—Robert Bringhurst

If bird flight has inspired revolutionary moments in ornithology, physics, and engineering, not to mention poetry, birdsong has perhaps played a greater role in the growth of birding as a popular activity for experts and amateurs alike. There are few places on the planet where humans cannot hear birds singing for at least part of the year (and part of the day). In this chapter, I examine the differing ways birdsong has been interpreted by poets, scientists, and philosophers. Positioning McKay’s writing about birdsong alongside and against the lyric tradition, I argue that McKay’s attention to aural wilderness, particularly birdsong, iterates an attentive relation to the nonhuman world by modelling an active, respectful style of listening. The ability to listen well, as any birder will insist, informs the act of birding: many sightings begin with—indeed, some consist entirely of—hearing a call or a song and locating the source. Unlike field ornithology, though, literary criticism has not developed a theoretical mode of listening to the natural world. Early ecocritics’ preference for “realistic” texts as the best indicators of human-nonhuman relations privileges seeing over other sensory experiences of the natural environment. Masami Raker Yuki acknowledges this historical and theoretical lacuna and
seeks to rectify it in her doctoral dissertation, “Towards a Literary Theory of Acoustic Ecology: Soundscapes in Contemporary Environmental Literature.” My discussion of soundscape and acoustic ecology in this chapter, while indebted to Yuki’s main theoretical tenets regarding acoustic ecology’s capacity to offer “an antidote to the vision-dominant worldview of modern societies” (ii), focuses on how listening functions metaphorically in McKay’s writing as “receptivity to others’ natures and histories” and as “an escape from both egotism in the human realm and anthropocentrism in a broader context” (Bartlett “Two Pianos” 8-9). Rather than reproducing a sonic environment for purely aesthetic reasons, McKay enacts a listening on the page through the combination of form and content, particularly by employing a specific mode of linguistic play cultural anthropologist Donna Haraway calls “metaplasm.” Equal parts anagram, palindrome, and pun—abide, abode; listen, glisten; underneath, underearth; loop, pool; earth, hear; owning, knowing—metaplasm, according to Haraway, refers to “a change in a word . . . by adding, omitting, inverting, or transposing its letters, syllables, or sounds” (20). In several poems about birdsong—from poems in which birdsong can be heard as one sound among many in a constructed soundscape to poems devoted to the songs of individual species—McKay simultaneously pays homage to avian singers and measures the distance—the difference—between their songs and his literary response to them.

In addition to the ability to fly, the mixture of familiarity and strangeness of birdsong “sets birds apart from other animals,” writes Leonard Lutwack in his preface to Birds in Literature, and sounds, to human ears, “almost like speech, even expressive of human feelings, and yet it is a communication stranger than speech and not quite the same as music” (xi). Poets, to be sure, have tended to find the human aspects of birdsong appealing: the connection between the music of the woods and the music of the lyre is an ancient one. The story, recounted by
Leonard Nathan, of Vālmiki inventing poetry after hearing Krauncha birds and witnessing their murder at the hands of a low-caste hunter is one example of the ancient link between birdsong and poetry. The answer to the question of which came first, birdsong or human music, according to Don Stap, “is less important than the question” itself since the long list of references to singing birds in ancient literature—including the Sumerian Tilmun myth and “the oldest secular English music, ‘Sumer Is Icumen In’”—supports the notion “that some kind of relationship exists” (138). Even Donald Kroodsma, one of the leading experts in avian bioacoustics—the scientific study of birdsong—admits to “hav[ing] a shared history” with songbirds “dating back not just 30 years” to Kroodsma’s first recordings of Bewick’s wrens in his backyard “but to the origins of life itself” (Singing 22). In this chapter, I trace some of the more well-known poetic treatments of such singing birds as the nightingale in England and the mockingbird in North America, emphasizing the Romantic tradition that elevates birdsong “to near-angelic status” (McKay “Shell” 53) while examining the different ways birdsong historically connects humans with the avian world.

In her groundbreaking contribution to the early environmental movement, Rachel Carson draws quite explicitly on the omnipresence of birdsong. Alluding to lines from Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”—“The sedge is wither’d from the lake / and no birds sing”—Silent Spring is widely considered an urtext of modern-day environmentalism. In the chapter devoted entirely to the death of birds as a result of air and water pollution (namely DDT, the pesticide Carson focuses on throughout her book), Carson includes reports published in the quarterly Field Notes by “seasoned observers who have spent many years afield in the particular areas and have unparalleled knowledge of the normal bird life of the region” (98). These are people whose daily lives are influenced by the song of birds and diminished by the ripple effects of massive spray
campaigns against the “so-called Dutch elm disease” (Carson 99). For “millions of Americans,” Carson notes, “the season’s first robin” signifies the end of winter; yearly they “listen for the first dawn chorus of the robins throbbing in the early morning light” (99), yet by the late 1950s the robins’ choruses—indeed, the notes of many a field—were being silenced, an indication of more widespread ecological devastation humans were perpetrating on the urban forests. Historically, birdsong has represented more than the coming of spring, and many societies have sold caged birds to people who want to hear pleasing avian sounds year round.

In the February, 2007, issue of the *Walrus* magazine, Larry Frolick contributes a story about a unique pastime in Guyana. Part of the magazine’s “Field Notes” section, Frolick’s story concerns a community of men in Georgetown, Guyana’s capital city, who raise expensive, native songbirds to compete in clandestine nocturnal matches with other birds, mostly seed finches. According to the driver Frolick hires, “people catch them wild, out in the fields down south. And little by little, they train them to sing. Every Sunday they have these races. Only they don’t fly them—it’s about the rackle” (17). The rackle in this case has little to do with the Old English adjective that means hasty, and a lot to do with the songs sung by competing birds every Sunday. The diminutive birds—scientific name *Oryzobourus crassirostris*; common name large-billed seed finch or twa twa; local name “bastard” for being “tough as concrete nails”—represent status in the community and cost upwards of five to ten thousand US dollars: “Dey more valuable den a car!” (18). As a cultural outsider, Frolick cannot get much closer to this practice; his driver will not take him since “they not lookin’ for visitors” (20). He is left to wonder how these birds sing competitively (he is able to hear them sing from cages on the street) and how the competitions unfold amongst human participants. Caged singing birds are nothing new. Beryl Rowland reports that the “century-old bird market off Kalitnikivskaya Street, Moscow [is] an
enterprise entirely praised in the West as one of the few free commercial activities permitted in
the Soviet Union, and imagines a thrush eyeing passersby "sadly from the closely packed
cages of singing birds that daily line the left bank of the Seine in Paris" (174-75). The persistence
of such bird markets from antiquity to the present as a venue for "birders" to procure talented
songsters for personal and home use, and not necessarily for culinary use, implies a more
sophisticated, less-violent relation between the people who purchase the birds and the birds
themselves. These birds are not being forced to fight each other as in cock fights or dog fights;
however, a widespread violence is being perpetrated in ecologies and the environment.

While Frolick's "field notes" are interesting for the intrigue surrounding how the men
involved in the singing competitions are said to "have some secret way of judging which bird
sings the most melodically" (17), they are also attuned to a much bigger, potentially damaging
ecological problem in Guyana. Research by the Iwokrama International Centre for Rain Forest
Conservation and Development supports local Guyanese who fear the native songbird population
is declining, primarily as a result of trapping to sustain the national songbird trade and, by
extension, the clandestine competitions. Birdsong continues to be valued in ways that translate
into financial gain for part of the human population and threaten the populations in the wild. I am
reminded of a scene from the documentary film *Winged Migration* in which a hyacinth macaw
avoids being sold at market by cleverly escaping from its cage while on a raft floating down the
Amazon River. The scene, while focussing on the macaw's escape, cannot but emphasize the
continuing prevalence of the exotic animal trade: various monkeys, parrots, and toucans are not
so lucky as to escape on camera nor, presumably, once cameras have stopped rolling. In *Waiting
for the Macaws, and other stories from the age of extinctions*, Terry Glavin provides some
context that adds to the power of the film's scene, noting that the blue macaws have suffered the
most: “Like the glaucous and Spix’s macaws, the hyacinth macaw is a blue macaw. . . . once common throughout much of Brazil and from Bolivia to Paraguay. During the 1980s, about 10,000 hyacinth macaws were sold in the big-money bird markets of the world. The twentieth century ended with perhaps 2500 remaining outside of cages” (57-58). While the difference between Guyanese seed finches and Brazilian hyacinth macaws lies in the extent to which the latter are commodities destined for collectors beyond South America’s borders, both birds are desired for their abilities to vocalize. “Like all parrots,” Glavin reminds us, “macaws are highly social animals . . . famous for their oddly humanlike characteristics, such as an astonishing capacity for [vocal] mimicry” (57). I find it sadly ironic that this “astonishing capacity” has led to the decline in so many bird populations, especially if I consider the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century proliferation of literature relating to birds and birdsong.

Although one of McKay’s poetic projects invites a radical reimagining of humans’ abusive treatment of the nonhuman world, McKay avoids sentimentality by writing about birds not obviously connected to such devastating practices as pesticide use and the exotic pet trade. The brief “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow” (S/S 25) offers an instructive example of a poem about a bird that holds little symbolic, mythological, or environmental cachet: the chipping sparrow (Spizella passerina) is neither in danger of becoming extinct any time soon, nor likely to win any song races. Though not as recognizable as the ubiquitous house sparrow (P. domesticus), the chipping sparrow nevertheless maintains a healthy population throughout North America and benefits greatly from urbanization and other human modifications. McKay employs numerous imperatives in his poem and offers a rapid-fire variation on the phrase “Let us pray”—

Let’s go. Let’s gargle into song. Let’s.
clear our phlegm-clogged
fucked-up throats let’s stutter our
dumb way into what
comes next.

The contraction of the prayerful “Let us” simultaneously quickens the pace and subsumes an inclusive relation between sparrow, speaker, and readers, though the “phlegm-clogged” stuttering might accurately describe the song of the chipping sparrow. In *The Singing Life of Birds: The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong*, Donald Kroodsma explains that a chipping sparrow song typically consists of “a simple rattle or trill, a single split-second phrase repeated many times over” (315), a description in keeping with McKay’s lyric version: “Take death rattle, take / automatic rifle fire, take t-t-t-t- Tommy Moss / day after day in grade two failing / to finish his name.” None of these metaphors, despite their aural accuracy, resonates in particularly positive ways, and yet the tone and pace of the poem, not to mention its emphasis on the diminutive, relatively little-known chipping sparrow, counters the negativity associated with imminent death, war, and childhood embarrassment and failure. By repeating the imperative “Take,” the speaker reveals the ease with which birdsong can inspire associative thinking; by suggesting what to do next—after having taken these images/sounds as possible metaphors—he reveals an awareness of metaphor’s limitations. In other words, this poem invites me to ask the question: Of what use is an accurate aural metaphor if it leads us away from the physical world by imposing inaccurate, inappropriate meaning on a moment, a species, a sound?

The poem’s speaker addresses this problem by suggesting we take the metaphorical versions of the chipping sparrow song and

wrench them from their torments,
pass them through this skull-capped bright-eyed sparrow in the spruce and into morning’s rah-rah for itself. Let’s go.
For we shall be changed.

The sparrow itself is capable of modifying a human propensity for free-associative thinking that
borders, in the case of written literature, on imposition. McKay rescues this poem from careless anthropomorphism by admitting an incongruence that does not necessarily get him (or his readers) into closer proximity to the chipping sparrow; here, the lie employed by the poet in the interest of truth, and not the song of the chipping sparrow, resembles the memory of Tommy Moss’ failure to articulate his name in grade two. In the extreme, the lie recapitulates a violent human nature evident in the image of automatic rifle fire: these metaphors serve to describe the poet more than they do the sparrow. By ending the poem with a reference to the chipping sparrow’s morning singing, moreover, McKay satisfactorily resorts to accurate ornithological data.

In his research on the chipping sparrow, Kroodsma must rise hours before sunrise to record and observe this particular species’ habit of singing early and of building toward a longer, seemingly more exuberant song: “Before sunrise males sputter brief songs from the ground, up to 60 a minute. Over the next half hour or so the singing rate slows and song length gradually increases, until the ground singing is over and males rise to sing from the trees” (318). One bird’s “first song” after having alighted in a tree is “more than five seconds long, as if all the sputtering [so far that] morning had prepared him for this longer song” (318), as if he has to clear his “phlegm-clogged / fucked-up throat.” It seems as though the chipping sparrow, whose song has also been called a “mechanical trill” (Sibley 485), welcomes the possibilities afforded by the dawn of a new day, as though the repetitiveness of his song were meant to pay homage to the repetitiveness of the circadian rhythm. The idea of being changed, then, and in such an affirmative manner—we shall be changed—challenges my initial reading of this poem as one that does not engage the politics of environmentalism.93

Taken together, the onomatopoeic versions of the chipping sparrow’s song positions
McKay’s poem in a tradition of poems that attempt to reproduce birdsong in words. The death rattle metaphor, unlike the others, implies that the sparrows are near enough to death to experience the gurgling, rattling sound sometimes thought to presage death in humans, the result of oral secretions pooling in the backs of throats. But, since chipping sparrow populations remain healthy, the bird seems to be speaking for humans’ procession toward death. As a warning and an elegy, “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow” recalls a passage from Thoreau’s Walden: “If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business” (351). The resemblance in both subject—environmental degradation and its human consequences—and in style—“let us” versus “let’s”—adds a layer of historicity to McKay’s brief lyric and inflects a Thoreauvian note of elegy with a McKavian note of hope by way of more specific attention, of what Ross Leckie calls an “attentive poetics of epistemology that is responsive to the requirements of the world” (128). Whereas Leckie applies the notion of attentive poetics to the act of naming in McKay’s “Twinflower,” I argue that the act of listening is an integral component of McKay’s poetic attention and his avian aesthetic.

Part Two: Lyric Associations

*Singing and thinking are the stems
neighbor to poetry.*—Martin Heidegger

*A certain form of speech can be an attempt to hear.*—Tim Lilburn

As he does with bird flight in poems that repeat, with an ecologically aware difference, lyric connections between flight and truth, McKay writes lyric poems that acknowledge a tradition of odes that pay homage to birdsong while challenging the anthropocentric thrust of such a tradition. McKay paves the way for shifting the lyrical paradigm to consider such poetical “techniques” as metaphor, rhythm, rhyme, and other verbal flourishes as “sensors, listening
devices like radio telescopes or sonar. It's as though language, which is—so we think—all mouth, were trying to grow ears” (“Shell” 53). In order to conceptualize the possibility of a paradigm shift, I focus on particular instances of McKay’s linguistic manipulation to extralinguistic ends; more specifically, I demonstrate how Donna Haraway’s notion of “metaplasm,” as a term with linguistic and biological implications, operates at the level of poetics by emphasizing McKay’s practice of simultaneous homage and what I call “ohmage.” Where homage is a form of respectful remembrance of and address to another, ohmage is a form of measurement—literally of electrical resistance (ohms) and metaphorically of another’s resistance, conscious or not, to being made into metaphor. Ohmage is homage with the current reversed. In other words, both homage and ohmage position poet and reader in relation to someone, or something, else: while the former acknowledges the fact of the relation, the latter attempts to measure the relation, to articulate linguistically a non-linguistic phenomenal relationality. To develop homage and ohmage as an ecocritical strategy for reading McKay’s bird poems, however, it is necessary to trace some traditional associations of lyric and birdsong in Anglophone poetry, to examine the interactions between the science and the culture of birdsong, and to develop a way of reading soundscapes, as both a theoretical component of ecocriticism and a McKavian translation of the physical, sonic world.

In his entry on “Poetry in Shorter Forms” from W.H. New’s *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, poetics professor and critic Kevin McNeilly acknowledges the etymological history that connects lyric poetry with singing by way of the Greek *lyrikós*. He also acknowledges a trajectory that sees lyric poetry as “a self-sufficient form” that does not require musical accompaniment, paraphrasing Walter Pater’s notion that the lyric “is poetry aspiring to the condition of music” (877). The category of lyric poetry includes such well-known forms as the
sonnet, the ode, and the elegy; while McKay, like many English-speaking poets during the past hundred years, tends not to rely solely on conventional forms, he recognizes the historical significance of formal verse and often pays homage to the traditions at the same time that he employs subtle changes in order to question their prevalence and canonical status. For his part, in *The Ornithology of Shakespeare*, James Harting acknowledges the prevalence, even from his historical vantage of the mid 1860s, of songbirds in English poetry. “If there is one class of birds more than another,” he writes, “to which the poets in all ages have been indebted for inspiration, it is that which includes the birds of song” (123). It makes sense; if poets consider themselves singers, what better animal to associate with than the birds who also sing for a living. Milton, in “To the Nightingale,” apostrophizes the infamous bird, “O Nightingale,” whose “liquid notes . . . close the eye of Day”: “Whether the Muse, or Love call thee his mate, / Both them I serve, and of their train am I” (107). As an apprentice of the Muse and Love, Milton seems to feel an affinity with this particular bird. Milton is not alone in his affinity for the nightingale.

As Leonard Lutwack does over one hundred years later in *Birds in Literature*, Harting devotes a good deal of space to the nightingale as quintessential literary songster, claiming that “by common consent,” the nightingale “stands first” among “all the singers of the woodland choir” (123). Harting cites *The Taming of the Shrew* (“She sings as sweetly as any nightingale”) and *Romeo and Juliet* (“It was the nightingale, and not the lark, / That pierc’d the fearful hollow of thine ear”), as well as *Cymbeline, Titus Andronicus*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, all three of which refer to nightingales as Philomel (124-25). Lutwack reminds of the Greek story of Philomela, who is raped and mutilated (she has her tongue cut out) by her brother-in-law Tereus. After Philomela seeks revenge with the help of her sister Procne by killing Tereus’ son and feeding him in bits to his father, the gods intervene (ostensibly to prevent further bloodshed) and
turn the participants into various birds: “Procne becomes a nightingale, Philomela a swallow, Tereus a hoopoe, and poor Itys [Tereus’ son], reassembled, a pheasant” (1). In the Roman version of the story, the tongueless Philomela inexplicably becomes the nightingale, and that version has most influenced Western writers, including Aristophanes, whose *The Birds* “constitute[s] one of the earliest attempts to represent bird song in language” (Lutwack 8), Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold, who refers to Philomela’s “dumb sister’s shame” in “Philomela,” and John Clare, who observed wryly that Londoners “fancy every bird they hear after sunset a Nightingale” (Robinson and Fitter 42).

In “Wordsworth’s Ear and the Politics of Aesthetic Economy,” Stuart Allen argues that Wordsworth, especially in “The Pedlar and The Ruined Cottage” and *Lyrical Ballads*, reluctantly promotes aural experience over visual experience, constructing “a studied ambivalence towards listening” which represents his “poetry’s resistance to the absence of harmony in the world” (37-38). Allen notes that the Pedlar and the narrator at the end of Wordsworth’s “The Pedlar and The Ruined Cottage,” for example, “sit together while birds sing ‘and other melodies, / At a distance heard, peopled the milder air’” and concludes that “[r]eceptivity to song is a major theme throughout the poem” (40). What Allen refers to simply as birds, however, Wordsworth names: “A linnet warbled from those lofty elms, / A thrush sang loud, and other melodies” (ll. 933-34). Given that these lines end the poem, I argue the value of the song the Pedlar and narrator “receive” is directly proportional to the song’s avian origins. Wordsworth, however, tempers his species specificity by using a verb with obvious anthropocentric implications; these characters do not hear birdsong so much as the birdsong inhabits—anthropomorphically “peoples”—the air and entices those within range to move indoors to “A village inn.” McKay actively resists this self-serving lyric posturing, opting instead for a Heideggerian poetics interested in how language
listens by building upon Heidegger's claim that, although "it is language that speaks," poets respond "to language by listening to its appeal" (Poetry 216). In "Remembering Apparatus: Poetry and the Visibility of Tools" (V 51-73), McKay articulates his own version of language listening, announcing that "[f]or a long time before it becomes a speaking . . . poetry is only a listening" (66). In his poetry, especially in those poems which directly invoke the songs of particular birds, McKay demonstrates how poetry functions as "a listening" by combining, in much the same way Kroodsma does when observing sonograms, visual and oral aspects of language and poetry.

In "Song for the Song of the White-Throated Sparrow," birdsong similarly inhabits the air, but the occupation implies a less anthropocentric effect. Rather than entice the poet-birder indoors, and thus farther away from the song and its singer, the white-throated sparrow's song articulates a version of sky, "a way to pitch a little tent in space and sleep / for five unnumbered seconds" (A 33). While musically the sparrow's song echoes a musical chord whose notes are performed in rapid upward succession—what McKay calls "the obvious arpeggio"—such a comparison is the result of the speaker's hasty "inferences," of a mind that makes metaphorical associations "Before it can stop itself" (33). This self-conscious reflection on the poet-birder's tendency to respond to birdsong metaphorically anticipates the moment in "Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow" when tormenting metaphor passes through the sparrow's voice into a hopeful anticipation of change. The obviousness of the mind's inferences, while unspoken, likely refers to the common onomatopoeic renditions of the white-throated sparrow's song. David Allen Sibley identifies it as a "high, pure whistle sooo seeeeee dididi dididi dididi" (494), and it has famously been translated as Old Sam Peabody Peabody Peabody! and, north of the 49th parallel, as Oh Sweet Canada Canada Canada! The first two notes sound, to human ears, like a
doorbell’s slightly drawn-out ringing, *dinnggg-donngg*, and hence the speaker “leap[s] up inferences”—

Where there is a doorbell
there must be a door – a door
meant to be opened from the inside.
Door means house means – wait a second –
but already it is standing on a threshold previously
known to be thin air, gawking.

Whereas Wordsworth’s characters go inside, McKay’s speaker begins imagining an indoor space before realizing, as he does in “Chipping Sparrow,” the limitations of a metaphor that positions listeners farther away from the physical, outer world. Once he has checked himself, the door rematerializes as birdsong resonating on a threshold between inside and outside. The little tent pitched in midair is a doorway with room for the poet’s imagination, “a nook of reverie,” a listening post—a human nest (V 72). From his listening post, the poet-birder (and the birder-critic) is able not only to enjoy the aesthetics of birdsong, its vocal complexities, but to identify the birds he hears.

In his compendium of bird lore and poetry, *The Bedside Book of Birds: An Avian Miscellany*, Graeme Gibson admits to holding certain “highly Romantic notion[s]” in regards to birds and their songs. Responding to Thomas Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” (Hardy 23-24), for example, in which “An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small” proceeds to sing “a full-hearted evensong” and thus “fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom,” Gibson writes: “All [the speaker] can conclude is that the bird knows something he doesn’t. Despite its decrepit condition, its song is filled with the passionate energy of life; and that, after all, is at the heart of everything, including Hope itself” (305). In nineteenth-century America, John Burroughs wonders, “Shall I ever again be able to hear the song of the oriole without being pierced through and through? . . . Day after day, and week after week, this bird whistled and warbled in a mulberry door, while
sorrow, like a pall, darkened my day” (87-88). Burroughs associates the oriole’s song with sorrow and not joy—contrary to Auden’s claim in “Bird-Language” that other than “rage, bravado, [and] lust,” “All other notes that birds employ / Sound like synonyms for joy” (174)—yet the emotional connection remains. The song itself, “a series of melodious whistled phrases” (Elliott 110), is not particularly sorrowful; Burroughs, though, internalizes it (in his memory) after hearing it often during a time of grief in his life. Other descriptions in Burroughs’ “A Bird Medley” (Birds 83-106) have more ecological significance; after noting the “sweet and musical voices” of sparrows, for example, Burroughs refers to the “white-throat [who] has a timid, tremulous strain, that issues from the low bushes or from behind the fence, where its cradle is hid” (100). His attention is often drawn to individual birds, as with a song sparrow “that was a master songster—some Shelley or Tennyson among his kind” and whose music represents for Burroughs “a simple, but very profound summing-up of life” (101). Such unabashedly Romantic sentiments fit the reading of such poets as Hardy, Hopkins, and Wordsworth, whose birds occupy decidedly symbolic realms, as distinct from ecological ones. I do not want, however, to dismiss an entire tradition of poetry that engages birdsong metaphorically; rather I want to identify a persistent lack of ecological detail among canonical English-language poets that McKay increasingly addresses in his “songs” and, even more elaborately in his “songs for the songs of” series of poems.96

Before turning to a discussion of the science and culture of birdsong followed by an interrogation of the ecological significance of acoustic space in McKay’s work, I want to examine some of McKay’s earlier “songs” that do not acknowledge birds or birdsong in their titles. In “Song for the Restless Wind” (NF 63), “Song for Wild Phlox” (NF 64), and “Song for Beef Cattle” (A 13), McKay alludes to such poems as Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” Keats’
“Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” yet each poem subtly responds to these canonical texts by redeploying the lyric I, that peon of egotistical declaration, in order to consider “respectful modes of interaction” (Bartlett Two Pianos 7). Containing anthropomorphic language enacted as thoughtfully as possible, McKay’s “Song for the Restless Wind” pays homage to an unpredictable force of nature, a “giant” “struggling in her sleep” as if dreaming of a “car chase [that] always overtakes the plot and wrecks it.” Whereas Shelley asks the west wind to “make me thy lyre, even as the forest is” (ll. 57), McKay wonders “Whose idea was it / to construct a mind entirely of shoulders,” effectively anticipating his critique of “Aeolian harpism,” which is crucial to his notion of “poetic attention,” in “Baler Twine” (V 15-33). Instead of portraying the wind as inspirational breath, that is, McKay acknowledges wind’s physical presence, its ability to “shoulder” its way through the landscape without regard for humans; he, too, is inspired enough to write poetry about wind, but he gives credit where credit is due, content to let a more-than-human intelligence—“a mind entirely of shoulders”—elude his own mind’s appropriative tendencies.

“Song for Wild Phlox” and “Song for Beef Cattle” have as objects of praise unlikely species. In “Wild Phlox,” McKay calls phlox a weed, yet ends up writing a singular account of its ecological presence: “Nothing / we ever did deserves / these weeds, which seed themselves / in places we have honoured with neglect.” Depending on how one reads the words “deserves” and “weeds,” the poem can be read as a complaint that since humans have not disturbed a particular area the presence of wild flowers that get in the dog’s fur is unfair; but it can also be read as a reminder that agriculture is not necessary for these “purple, / purplish, blue, whitish” flowers to bloom. As E.F. Schumacher writes in the “Foreword” to The Virtuous Weed, weeds are organisms “whose wisdom we should be humbly eager to understand” (n.p.); at the very
least, we can admit that some things in nature are beyond our ken and our control. In “Song for Beef Cattle,” the only poem of these three that mentions song in any way, McKay offers a more overt critique of industrial agriculture and, perhaps for that reason, takes on a more overtly ironic lyrical tone:

To be whimless, o monks of melancholy,
   to be continents completely
   colonized, to stand
   humped and immune, digesting,
   redigesting our domestication, to be too too
   solid flesh making its slow
   progress toward fast food.

The apostrophic (though lower-case) o, the clunky consonance, and the direct reference to *Hamlet,* all suggest a critical tone that simultaneously challenges a traditional form of “song” and a conventional farming practice. Unlike Romantic songs, “Song for Beef Cattle” is more elegy than ode; it pays homage to a domesticated breed of livestock by highlighting humans’ role in colonizing their bodies through artificial selection and commodifying them through the fast-food industry. Continuing his efforts to challenge the central importance of the self in poetic form, McKay’s songs are nevertheless early indications of what he attempts with some of his “songs for the songs of” poems.

**Part Three: Science and Culture of Birdsong**

*To admit some degree of rationality in animals seemed to entail admitting that animals have immortal souls, while to deny them immortal souls seemed to entail denying them not only any degree of rationality but perhaps even the ability to experience pain and pleasure.*—Angus Taylor

*The study of song learning in birds has begun to alter the long-held image of birds as unintelligent creatures of instinct.*—Don Stap

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In addition to poets, ornithologists and musicologists have long been interested in the sounds birds make. According to well-known recorder of wildlife sounds, Lang Elliott, “[t]he question of why birds sing can be approached from two perspectives: the scientific perspective, which derives from evolutionary biology, and the poetic perspective, which springs from our emotional experience of hearing birds sing” (Music 11). Elliott reinforces the common distinction between scientists’ “attempts to describe bird behaviour free of emotion and anthropomorphic interpretation” and poets’ concerns “with feelings and the effects of bird song on human emotion” (11). According to Lutwack, “The song of birds is especially cherished by poets, probably because it is the only animal utterance with sound patterns just close enough to those made by people to tease us into the belief that bird song is like human language” (46). More accurately, bird song is music, which is not to say that birds do not communicate via song. Some birds produce notes humans cannot hear without visual aid in the form of sonograms or computer software that enables us to slow recordings down, effectively stretching notes out to isolate subtle variations in pitch. Ever since a young German boy recorded the song of an Indian shama with a phonograph, hence producing “the first known recorded birdsong” (Stap 28), technological advances have enabled more and more detailed approaches to understanding avian music. Since the development of the audiospectograph, or sonogram, ornithologists have been able to listen to birdsong in entirely different ways by combining humans’ visual capacity with the limited ability to distinguish sounds. In The Singing Life of Birds, Kroodsma admits that his sense of hearing is “actually pretty pathetic” and that he has “no musical ability whatsoever”; like most humans, however, he has “well-trained eyes, and it is with [his] eyes that [he] hears” (2). As the field of ethology, the scientific study of animal behaviour led by Nobel winner Konrad Lorenz, was developing, so was the sonogram becoming regularized as an instrument fit
for field work that could provide insights into the instinctive and learned behaviours of birds. The visualisation of birdsong opened up the possibility that birds have evolved cultural traits.

While not all birdsong might be more complex than human-made music, scientists are still no closer to determining the evolutionary reasons for the range of vocal abilities from one species to another. Of the birds whose songs McKay pays homage to, chipping sparrows and white-crowned sparrows, for example, each sing only one song while wood thrushes sing twenty songs; and at the far end of the song repertoire spectrum, mockingbirds have 250 songs and brown thrashers an “incomparable” 2,000 or more (Stap 89). Based on years of research, ornithologists can safely say that birds sing and call “to establish territories and to make themselves attractive to potential mates” (Rothenberg 8). McKay addresses the former reason in “Territoriality” (SD 89-91), in which he describes how red-winged blackbirds determine and defend their territories:

they are sewing their imagined patterns
vertex to vertex perching on the spruce tips
and the frayed cigars of last year’s cattails
singing konkeree konkeree
flashing epaulets of red with yellow fringes
hunching forward
signalling the outlines of their small and shifting kingdoms
to the others who are signalling
the outlines of their small and shifting kingdoms back. (89)

Despite the potential distance insinuated by the multiple metaphors—sewing, vertices, frayed cigars—it seems entirely plausible that these birds are imagining patterns with their famous song konkeree, or conk-la-ree. To think otherwise would be to reinforce the idea of birds as “unintelligent creatures of instinct”; though instinct doubtless plays a role, research continues to show that birds are among the most intelligent creatures. “And if,” as McKay writes in “Territoriality,” “we listened for an evening we would learn to hear”—red-winged blackbirds
might not be as demonstrably intelligent as corvids (considered the most intelligent avian group) but their capacity for imagining and maintaining territory requires a keen intelligence we can witness, and to which we can listen, but never fully understand.

The opening section of “Territoriality” describes one aspect of red-winged blackbird’s socio-cultural life; the second and third sections extend that aspect metaphorically to consider the ways humans have taken similar territorial impulses to radically different extremes, namely by “dig[ging] inverted silos” and “stock[ing] them with extinction” (90). Humans in this poem are “others” who construct “hair-triggered negative / erections, aimed at their enemies” (90). The contrasting effects of ostensibly similar instinctive acts cast doubt on the notion that humans with their culture are inherently superior or intelligent, though the similarities do exist. In “Poetry and Thinking” Robert Bringhurst makes a case for the cultural similarities between human and avian life histories by making an appeal to music: “Humans, like birds, are able to make songs and pass them on. Human songs, like birdsongs, are part nature and part culture: part genetic predilection, part cultural inheritance or training, part individual inflection or creation” (163).

Elsewhere he writes of birdsong in a similar fashion. Echoing Saint-John Perse’s literal-mindedness regarding birds’ burning blood, Bringhurst states: “Songbirds sing. That is fact and not a metaphor. Nothing but human arrogance allows us to insist that these activities be given different names. Bird songs, like human songs, are learned. They are cultural traditions” (“Singing” 116-117). The name “song” is a marker of cultural tradition across species boundaries; but so is the notion of arrogance:

Like other creatures, humans are heavily self-absorbed. We frequently pretend (or self-righteously insist) that language belongs to humans alone. And many of us claim that the only kind of human language, or the only kind that matters, is the
kind that is born in the mouth. The language of music and mathematics, the
gestural languages of the deaf, the calls of leopard frogs and whales, the rituals of
mating sandhill cranes, and the chemical messages coming and going day and
night within the brain itself are a few of the many reminders that language is
actually part of the fibre of which life itself is spun. We are able to think about
language at all only because a license to do so is chemically written into our
genes. The languages we are spoken in are those for which we speak. (Bringhurst
Solid 10-11)

In Bringhurst’s worldview—as in his poetics—humans are spoken into being as much as humans
speak the rest of the world into existence. If, as self-absorbed creatures, humans insinuate
themselves into the lives of nonhumans, they will invariably become part of a cultural history not
of their own making. Biologists provide ample support for Bringhurst’s claim that humans are
not the only species with culture: “song does not suddenly spring up fully formed when a bird
becomes mature,” write Catchpole and Slater; “It has a developmental history” (45). Songbirds,
or oscines, have developed complex, musical vocalizations; they “learn their songs in much the
same way children learn to speak,” unlike most suboscines, who, like birds from orders outside
the order Passeriformes, “are born with their vocalizations genetically encoded” (Stap 10). The
cultural life of songbirds, as indeed of other nonhuman animals, undermines a critical desire to
reconsider anthropomorphism by implying that the human characteristics insinuated by the label
anthropomorphism are not entirely human.

Temple Grandin takes Bringhurst’s idea an evolutionary step further when she writes that
“Animals are the originators of music and the true instructors. Humans probably learned music
from animals, most likely from birds”; Grandin goes on to provide “evidence that humans copied
music from birds, rather than reinventing it for themselves: only 11 percent of all primate species sing songs" (278). Moreover, she states, “Birds compose songs that use the same variation in rhythms and pitch relationships as human musicians, and can also transpose their songs into a different musical key. Birds use accelerandos, crescendos, and diminuendos, as well as many of the same scales composers use all over the world” (279).

The notion of intelligence—both human and nonhuman—is integral to an understanding of cultural behaviour among nonhuman groups. Grandin makes reference to a recent experiment involving tool-making and use by a species of crow. Published in *Science* in 2002, “Shaping of Hooks in New Caledonian Crows” (Weir, Chappell, and Kacelnik) recounts the results of an experiment during which zoologists at Oxford “placed a single straight piece of garden wire . . . on top of [a] tube” of food to see how the crows would react; “Out of 10 valid trials (interspersed with seven invalid ones), the female bent the wire and used it to retrieve the food nine times” (981). In a related experiment, researchers published a report in 2005 that has radically altered the way scientists think about the avian brain. While the study, titled “Avian brains and a new understanding of vertebrate brain evolution” (Jarvis et al.), is predominantly about new nomenclature scientists have decided to adopt in discussing avian neurobiology, the shift in nomenclature is the cumulative result of decades of research that suggests birds are indeed more intelligent than we have typically given them credit for. Even more recently, and of particular relevance for my discussion of avian song, biologists at the University of Chicago have conducted research the results of which seriously challenge the latest attempts by such theorists as Noam Chomsky to delineate linguistic capabilities unique to humans. Contrary to the claim that “the capacity for syntactic recursion [the hierarchical embedding of language units within sentences] forms the computational core of a uniquely human language faculty,” Gentner and his
fellow researchers “show that European starlings (Sturnus vulgaris) accurately recognize acoustic patterns defined by a recursive, self-embedding, context-free grammar” (1204).

Given the results of this research on starling intelligence and grammar, the treatment of birds—and by extension other nonhuman animals—in literature is problematic. Critics have tended to consider writing about animals and the natural world, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, in either realist or symbolic terms. South African writer J.M. Coetzee, for example, has recently published works that consider what theorists call “the question of the animal,” namely The Lives of Animals and Disgrace.101 According to Dionne Brand, Coetzee, who has developed a reputation as a master allegorist, seems to have taken advantage of the official end of apartheid in South Africa and begun to write in a realist mode he has not previously produced (see Map 126). Be that as it may, he is still writing literature, and all literature, South African and otherwise, is to varying degrees symbolic. As Nadine Gordimer writes in her preface to a collection of critical articles on Coetzee’s work, “[n]othing is more unreal than the simulation of outward reality; realism, whether in painting or writing, doesn’t exist” (xi). Literary critic and animal rights advocate, John Simons, makes roughly the same argument, but links it more closely to the representation of animals in literature. In “The Animal as Symbol,” he makes a distinction between cultural reproduction and representation and offers the “proposition that the non-human experience cannot be reproduced but only represented” (86). However, reading animals in purely symbolic terms assists in reinforcing a species boundary that has been used for centuries to reinforce cultural and racial boundaries. For example, dogs in Coetzee’s Age of Iron and Disgrace act in symbolic and literal ways to initiate a shift in certain characters’ ideologies that reflects the political shift, albeit an idealistic one, in post-apartheid South Africa. That only white people deal with dogs sympathetically in Disgrace (and, for that matter, Age of Iron)
attests to the contemporary necessity of a re-emerging sympathetic imagination. While it would be easy to suggest that dogs function as symbolic Others for the white people who care for dogs in *Disgrace* and as literal dogs for the black people who kill dogs in *Disgrace*, I argue that dogs function symbolically and literally for all characters in the novel. Historically, white people have treated black people, Jews, and gypsies like animals; indeed, as Tiffin acknowledges,

> The political history of Western racism and its imbrication with discourses of speciesism . . . and above all, perhaps, its metaphorisation and deployment of ‘the animal’ as a derogatory term in genocidal and marginalizing discourses have made it difficult to even discuss animals without generating a profound antagonism in many post-colonial contexts. (32)

Consequently, white people in Coetzee’s fiction have the most to gain, fundamentally and ideologically, from learning to treat all living beings equally with respect to a “consideration of their interests” (Singer 87). But, to extend the notion of the sympathetic imagination as it plays out in Coetzee’s post-apartheid South Africa, the black people who kill dogs and rape the protagonist’s daughter, Lucy also have much to gain from learning to treat all living beings with equal respect. I am talking about a compassion that observes the interconnectedness of all things, both real and imagined, living and nonliving.

> The dynamic conversation between *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals* enacts a conceptually ecological framework first articulated by a character, Mrs. Curren, from an earlier Coetzee novel, *Age of Iron*: “When I write about him I write about myself. When I write about his dog I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog: no matter what the word, through it I stretch out a hand to you” (19). Everything is potentially connected to everything else, and in writing about one thing, Mrs. Curren writes
(reflexively) about herself and reaches toward, connects with, her daughter. In other words, the house not only represents, or symbolizes the dog, but the house is the dog. This realization is necessary if Coetzee, by way of his characters, has any chance of unsettling the political and cultural assumptions that have informed the othering process in the West for centuries. This is admittedly a large project, and far from complete. I have devoted this time to discussing dogs and Coetzee for two reasons: to gesture toward another writer working in another genre from (and about) another country, a writer who is, like McKay, thinking about nonhuman animals in a way that invites respect for humans and nonhumans alike; and to acknowledge, as Linda Hutcheon and Susie O’Brien have, a useful point of congruence between interdisciplinary ecocritical and postcolonial concerns and strategies.

From John Clare, who writes in “The Skylark” (186-87) of young boys’ encounter with the bird and its nest—“O were they but a bird, / So think they while they listen to its song” (187)—to Don Kroodsma, who claims that “the fun part” of studying Bewick’s wrens’ songs in the field “was to think like a wren” (Stap 48), poets and scientists are both engaging the sympathetic imagination in ways that do not necessarily reassert a central human consciousness as the most important consciousness operating in the world. In a Canadian context, Timothy Findley’s magic-realist novel Not Wanted on the Voyage invites, somewhat unexpectedly, an ornithological reading of a peacock. In their influential study, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin argue that Not Wanted on the Voyage operates primarily as a “radical [postcolonial] interrogation of the story of the flood [in which] the great myth becomes a saga of destruction in the name of minority righteousness and the extension of petty power” (97). Citing an early passage from the novel, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin highlight the postcolonial questioning of authority, ritual tradition, and power exerted by Findley’s Noah as a method of controlling
The peacock, still maintaining the display of his tail, now lifted his head very high on his neck and gave a piercing scream.

‘You see?’ said Doctor Noyes. ‘By every sign and signal, my decision [to have Ham perform a ritual sacrifice] is confirmed.’ . . .

‘He’s only calling to his mate, for God’s sake!’ said Mrs Noyes.

‘How dare you!’ Doctor Noyes was livid. ‘How dare you take the name of God in vain. How dare you!’

This sort of rage—more a performance than a reality—was necessary to keep Mrs Noyes in her place. Also, to intimidate the other women, lest they follow her example and get out of hand. (Findley 13)

This performance is also necessary, so far as an ecocritic is concerned, to emphasize Doctor Noyes’s inability—or unwillingness—to read nature in non-symbolic ways. In a novel so famously applauded (and rightly so) for its magic realism, Mrs Noyes’s accurate ornithological response to the peacock’s “scream” stands out in significant ways. Even though she does not have the power to convince her husband of the validity of her observation, she should at least convince readers that one must be careful not to read always and only figuratively. Sometimes a mating call is just a mating call. Mrs Noyes’s corrective, then, signals an alternative way of reading birds in literature, and animals more generally, by raising the question of animals’ roles: Is it possible for a peacock’s mating call to be just a mating call in a work of literature? To borrow from and build upon previous analyses of Findley’s novel, I argue that the answer to that question lies in the paradoxical construction of Dr. and Mrs Noyes’s name: No and yes. 103

While Gordimer and Simons differ on aesthetic grounds—Gordimer, for example, does
not allow for reproduction in her prefatory remarks in the same way Simons does—both recognize the imaginative capacity of authors. Simons believes that culture is *reproducible* because humans have “the ability to use complex language and to communicate complex abstract ideas” about their experiences (86). The recent study that reveals starlings’ capacity to comprehend recursive grammatical structures notwithstanding, in a book called *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation*, Simons’ decision to modify ‘representation’ with ‘only’ seems inappropriate and potentially detrimental to his argument. That is to say, he establishes yet another demarcation between humans and nonhumans by suggesting we have culture and nonhumans do not. As I have demonstrated, avian bioacoustics openly and seriously considers song learning as cultural behaviour: “The general processes of song transmission and cultural evolution are not in doubt, but the details remain to be determined [as of 1996] for many species” (Payne 215). As with human language change, the “cultural evolution [of birdsong] is known directly only when touchstone historical records are available, and . . . attempts to reconstruct the past beyond these records are problematic” (Payne 219). The extensive Bioacoustics Research Program at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology represents the avian equivalent of the Library of Alexandria; but thousands of birdsongs remain to be recorded and analyzed.

Paul Shepard provides an evolutionary explanation for poets’ affinity with birds. In *The Others: How Animals Made us Human*, Shepard argues that human cognition and physiology are the results—at least in part—of *Homo sapiens’* coevolutionary responses to their environment, namely the nonhuman animals with whom they were in competition and cooperation. “It required a good brain,” he suggests at one point, to hold “pattern[s] in mind—marking the creation of an auditory world in which rhythms and musical phrases such as the successive notes
of birdsong are heard as a melody” (16). The ability to distinguish melodic forms of auditoria, for example, helped humans to evolve a particular system of hearing and enabled them to identify species of bird (and, presumably, non-avian species) for various reasons. Similarly, as Grandin suggests, bird song is believed to be responsible for the development of certain human languages, or parts of languages. According to David Abram, Koyukon “names for birds are often highly onomatopoeic, so that in speaking their names one is also echoing their cries”; “the sounds and rhythms of the Koyukon language,” Abram writes, “have been deeply nourished by these nonhuman voices” (147). In the Arctic where the Koyukon live, birds name themselves so that “the whirring, flutelike phrases of the hermit thrush, which sound in the forest thickets at twilight, speak the Koyukon words sook’eeeyis deeyo—‘it is a fine evening’” (148). Even though most active languages do not rely explicitly on birdsong or other natural sounds, the example of the Koyukon reveals a functional link, or overlap, between nature and culture. Such studies as Abram’s and Bringhurst’s inform a paradigm shift that is integral to modifying human relations to the nonhuman world. As I have argued earlier, McKay’s notion of “wilderness” as a “placeless place beyond the [human] mind’s appropriations” contributes to this paradigm shift.

Part Four: Acoustic Ecology and Soundscape

You step outdoors into a soundscape skewed perverted into satire.—Don McKay

The paradigm shift, as I have articulated it above, will likely remain incomplete, incapable of fully encompassing the English language’s preference for visual metaphors. In other words, I am not advocating for a shift in the linguistic paradigm; it is clear from Marshall McLuhan’s discussion of the “role of written words in shifting habits of perception from the auditory to visual stress” in The Gutenberg Galaxy (29) that a linguistic shift has already taken place. I am concerned with a perceptual, or phenomenological paradigm shift that seeks to
acknowledge the sense of hearing—and more particularly of an active listening—as an important sense to be engaged when observing phenomena. If, as Yuki suggests in her dissertation on acoustic ecology, hearing is a “key sense for lowering the threshold of sensory experience which has been raised by our daily existence in human-made environments” (4), listening occupies a threshold, or ecotone, between the desire to understand sounds in the environment and our actions in response to those sounds. Yuki refers to John Daniel’s experience in Yosemite Valley as evidence of hearing as a threshold. In “The Impoverishment of Seeing,” Daniel claims that what he remembers from his early hikes in the valley “is no particular thing [he] saw” but rather “a bird [he] couldn’t see that called from around the next bend” (46), and this aural memory “leads,” according to Yuki, “to a more integrated [sensory] experience” (14). So, the threshold in the case of Daniel’s experience is between the call of an unseen “bird” and his memory of that call (though not, it seems, the bird). In Field Notes: The Grace Note of the Canyon Wren, Barry Lopez offers a variation on this scene.

The opening story, “Introduction: Within Birds’ Hearing,” announces difference by foregrounding the hearing of birds, thereby positioning the narrator of the story as part of a soundscape. Despite a lengthy discussion of soundscape in Field Notes, Yuki does not discuss “Introduction: Within Birds’ Hearing” because, I think, she is more interested in developing an understanding of Lopez’s “tendency to transform the particular into the conceptual” (26). I, on the other hand, am more interested in how writers articulate precise knowledge about specific species (especially of birds) on the way to reimagining human-nonhuman relations. For my argument, Lopez’s introductory story adds depth and breadth to Daniel’s memory of “a bird” calling in Yosemite. Recounting a nameless narrator’s journey west across the Mojave desert toward the ocean, Lopez posits a particular bird’s song, the grace note of a canyon wren, as
saviour. After days of seemingly endless walking, the narrator feels he has “no good day past this one” (10). Desperate, and with bowed head, he feels defeated, until “[i]nto this agony, as if from an unsuspected room, comes a bare cascade of sound” and his “wounds go silent” (10). Recognizing the “falling tiyew, tiyew tiyew, tiyew” followed by “a turn at the end, tew” as a canyon wren (10). Eventually, the narrator, enervated by the familiar notes, “fix[es] its place and move[s] into the night,” until he soon finds himself “standing in water,” not the ocean but the “[h]eadwaters of the Oso,” which is enough to rejuvenate him and provide an optimistic ending to this tale of a difficult journey (10-11). Regardless of whether any bird, recognizable to the narrator or not, would have accomplished the same in similar circumstances, Lopez’s decision to name the bird indicates the importance of such specificity in the work of a foremost nature writer. It indicates a willingness to concede a wisdom to the birds\textsuperscript{105} and to think the relation between humans and nonhumans with a degree of humility and respect.

In keeping with my examination of poetic attention, especially as it functions within McKay’s project of reversing the flow of current exploitive relations humans maintain with the world, I want to consider how McKay constructs and observes soundscapes in addition to landscapes. Studying the “sonic environment of biophysical nature and the acoustic realm of human speech” uncovers “problematic aspects of our tendency to privilege vision and literacy in our relationships with the natural world” (Yuki 5), relationships that McKay claims have been “so thoroughly one-way.” Not surprisingly, birdsong comprises most of the sounds recorded by McKay. The act of listening\textsuperscript{106} as a mode of attention—what Abram calls “auditory attentiveness” (130)—favours a propositional, as opposed to an impositional, relation to the nonhuman world,\textsuperscript{107} contributes to a McKavian desire for proximity, and informs the impulse to move away from the text and into the physical, sonic world. If, as Abram writes, “[I]looking and
listening bring [us] into contact, respectively, with the outward surfaces and with the interior voluminosity of things,” a combination of auditory and visual attentiveness reveals a “complex interplay of inside and outside” (128). Abram’s choice of the term “voluminosity” to describe a sonic, phenomenological capacity implies just such a complexity.

Voluminosity has two meanings, both of which apply to Abram’s use of the term and to my reading of McKay’s soundscapes through Abram’s “auditory attentiveness”: 1) extensiveness of writing; 2) an instance of turning or winding. In either case, Abram’s use is significant, if slightly awkward for the way it suggests a cultural component of the more-than-human world, that is, the capacity for things to engage in a form of writing while acknowledging an interiority reminiscent of a McKavian “wilderness” (“the capacity [. . .] to elude the mind’s appropriations”). The dual sense of voluminosity is on display in the soundscape of “Limestone” (DW 50-52), a prose piece from the long abecedarian “Between Rock and Stone: A Geopoetic Alphabet” (DW 33-73). In “Limestone,” McKay contemplates the phenomena of hearing “waterfalls or rapids break into speech” from inside his tent, functioning in this instance “like a magical ear” (50). Though no birds appear in “Limestone,” the poem effectively constructs a soundscape representative of the “two modes of listening” identified by Yuki in her dissertation: “external and internal” (15). External listening refers to such sounds as birdsong, wind, moving water, rustling leaves, while internal listening refers to the internal life of the listener, to the way sound’s fleeting nature resonates after it has gone; internal listening is related to memory. Both are present in “Limestone” when McKay mentions “the hubbub [. . .] inflected by the accents of the mystery language,” which wake the speaker, and connects the sonic moment “lichened with strange diacritical marks” to the discovery of a fossil while “browsing along a limestone cliff or outcrop” (50-51). The soundscape dominated by the external language of “ordinary water music”
extends to include geological memory represented here by the fossil, “the sudden emergence of a coiled symmetry, an apparent artfulness that calls across the eons, a compelling visual equivalent to being summoned out into the cold air of northern Ontario by one of its middle-sized rapids” (51; emphasis added). Between the water’s linguistic qualities and the fossil’s winding, “coiled symmetry,” both of which call to the speaker—who here becomes a listener—Abram’s voluminosity seems not so mystical as it initially does. The soundscape McKay presents in “Limestone” performs a central tenet of acoustic ecology—namely a reimagining of humans’ exploitive, abusive relation to the physical world—by drawing attention to humans’ “doggedly linguistic” tendency to “naturally process any continuous sound as a language” and thus to reinforce a distal relation to the more-than-human environment (51).

Generally, McKay’s soundscapes, like his poems about specific birds, compel a closer proximity to the outdoors, a proximity in sharp contrast to typical “discussions of the aesthetic value of nature and wilderness,” which, according to John Andrew Fisher, “often work on an abstract level several steps removed from sensory experience” (233). In “What the Hills Are Alive With: In Defense of the Sounds of Nature,” Fisher submits that “the sounds of a bird or a frog, for example, contribute greatly to the soundscape of a particular environment,” yet he wants to avoid privileging “aesthetic attention directed to a bird or frog song type abstracted from any particular environment in which it may occur” because, by filtering out ambient noise, such abstraction ignores “how nature actually sounds” (233). While I can appreciate Fisher’s desire to retain the integrity of represented soundscapes, I have read enough of Lilburn and McKay to know such desire necessarily fails. To expect a literary soundscape to include all ambient noise is a bit like expecting a painted landscape to include all that lies beyond the frame, too. As with any representation, the poet must make certain choices regarding what to emphasize
The proximity enabled by accuracy and specificity more effectively sets in motion a rethinking of human-nonhuman relations than a “realistic” reproduction of a given soundscape (not to mention landscape), even if the latter were possible in written form.

As Fisher claims, though, “[s]ound is a huge and relatively unexplored subject” (233), so it is no wonder “acoustic ecology,” not to mention birdsong, has yet to be extensively theorized in literary criticism. McKay’s writing—in “Limestone” and other pieces—about how humans imagine themselves in relation to place (and its otherwise) provides ample opportunities to consider listening an act as revealing as seeing. In “Approaching the Clearing” (DW 95-110), McKay addresses two well-known literary ideas and brings them together to reconceptualize, yet again, humans’ exploitive relation to place, calling “the clearing [. . .] the wild ancestor of th[e] room of one’s own” (97). Introducing the clearing as both an idea and an actual place often experienced “when walking through the forest,” as “a pool of light where the trees relent, a place that combines seclusion with openness” (98), McKay is quick to emphasize its acoustic and imaginative aspects. Approaching a clearing, for example, “we tend to slow down and shut up”; once we arrive, “we can give our attention to other creatures – kinglets in the fringe, ravens overhead, the spotted saxifrage growing on the rock, or to the granite itself” (98): While “attention” does not necessarily imply listening, his reference to kinglets and ravens, in addition to the voluminosity of rock established in “Limestone,” foregrounds the possibility that “listening dissolves the tyrannical subject of the eye” (Allen 37).

McKay’s clearing is wordless but not silent, contrary to a similar clearing constructed by Archibald Lampman in “In November.” Lampman’s speaker goes “wandering in the woods” and finds “A clearing, where the broken ground / Was scattered with black stumps and briers, / And the old wreck of forest fires” (142). Although Lampman’s clearing seems to anticipate
McKay's attention to clearcuts, there is no sense of human responsibility for the "stumps and briers" in his poem. Moreover, Lampman's clearing differs significantly from McKay's in its eerie silence—"There was no sound about the wood / Save the wind's secret stir" (142)—and its connection to a particular "poetic disclosure," which, according to Ronald Morrison, Thoreau and Heidegger both associated "with a 'clearing' in the forest, [...] in a way that emphasizes the interplay of what stands revealed within the clearing and what remains hidden beyond it" (143). For Lampman, as for Romantic poets more generally, the moment in the clearing represents a transcendent revelation of concealed truth. In my reading of McKay's poetry and poetics, I see the clearing as an ecotone within which the poet might listen for both lyric insight and experiential knowing.

Standing amidst dead mullein-stalks and goldenrod, Lampman's speaker experiences, while surrounded by "thin light," a dreamlike moment of inspiration during which time

A moment's golden reverie
Poured out on every plant and tree
A semblance of weird joy, or less,
A sort of spectral happiness;
And I, too, standing idly there,
With muffled hands in the chill air,
Felt the warm glow about my feet,
And shuddering betwixt cold and heat,
Drew my thoughts closer, like a cloak,
While something in my blood awoke,
A nameless and unnatural cheer,
A pleasure secret and austere. (143)

The secret uncovered by—awakened in the blood of—the speaker is of such an ambiguous, non-specific quality as to be rendered innocuous, yet another version of Aeolian Harpism translating spectral sorts of weirdness into nameless, austere pleasures. The speaker is so idle—despite his inexplicable "shuddering betwixt cold and heat"—that he is incapable of paying attention to his surroundings, especially of listening to the sounds that surely would have animated the "silent
sober place” in which he stands (142). For Lampman, entering the clearing is like entering a church; for McKay, however, “[i]t is as though we ha[ve] entered our own listening” (DW 98). While McKay acknowledges Heidegger’s “understanding of truth as ‘unconcealment’ (aletheia), a condition which, as the word implies, requires a preceding hiddenness” (103), he is not content simply to engage in the act of revealing some ambiguous truth in nature; “once they [nature’s secrets] have been discovered,” McKay writes, “we put them to use for the betterment of humanity” (102). Listening comes into play here as a mode of attention that “resists the privileging of transcendence that effectively erases the human body from wilderness participation, and avoids Romantic gestures that allow for the returned separation of humanity from nature after the weekend wilderness retreat is complete” (Bondar “Attending” 65).

McKay’s poem, “Après Chainsaw” (S/S 50), offers an instructive alternative to the Romantic notions of Lampman’s “In November.” “Après Chainsaw” was initially published as a verse epilogue for “Approaching the Clearing.” As such, it functions as a way out from McKay’s discussion about the clearing as acoustic space and contemporary humanity’s propensity to create “an openness that is too open, defenceless, stripped of shadows, a clearing that is no longer in relation to concealment” thanks to the “donkey engine, the logging locomotive, the chainsaw, and the logging truck,” in short, to “the industrialization of the forest” (107-08). After providing a brief history of the chainsaw, McKay recounts a “time when, thinning out a plantation of white spruce, [he] just kept on cutting past the end of a row, caught up in that snarl of power” having created—a paradoxical term, to be sure—“a clearing that was completely [his]” (109), his own small clearcut. The poem occurs, as its later title suggests, after this incident. The incident itself is remarkable, I think, for the way McKay admits complicity in ecological destruction (in much the same way he does when discussing his use of language
against its own colonizing tendencies) and reminds himself, and his readers, of the dangers of such power. “Après Chainsaw” brings the poet back into a proximal relation with the clearing he has made, returns him to his “own listening”—

   Everything listening at me:
   the stumps oozing resin, the birdsong
   bouncing off my head like sonar,
   the hammered air with its fading
   after-echoes. [...]

   What I want to say is
   somewhere a man steps
   softly into a hemlock-and-fir fringed
   pause. Heart full.
   Head empty. His lost path
   scrawls away behind him. A blue
   dragonfly with double wings zags, hovers,
   zags. A flicker he can’t see
   yucks its ghost laugh
   into the thin slant light.¹¹5 (DW 110)

This clearing is distinctively different from Lampman’s “silent sober place”—the dying stumps are explicit reminders of human violence, as is the air echoing with the chainsaw’s “remorseless” roar (109). Despite the fresh destruction, McKay’s clearing is a soundscape that includes traces of human-made sound and a northern flicker’s “ghost laugh.” More importantly, though, this clearing actively listens to—or “at,” as McKay somewhat awkwardly and synaesthetically has it—the speaker whose reckless actions have impacted the area, a result perhaps of his empty head. That the speaker can recognize that his actions not only affect the surrounding area but elicit a response from the listening/observing environment adds to a McKavian reversal of the exploitative relationship he mentions earlier: he holds himself accountable by showing respect for the desires and the agency of other-than-human beings.

By recognizing the agency of the more-than-human world, McKay effectively responds to Barry Lopez’s complaint that European settlers “never said to the people or the animals or the
plants or the rivers or the mountains: What do you think of this?” (*Rediscovery* 18). If birds are capable of “listening at” him, they are surely capable of responding in some way to such a question as Lopez poses, even if the gesture seems, as McKay suggests when he considers reading “the trail guide to the creature we are regarding,” “both formal and absurd,” except when addressed to people (*V* 65). In “Deactivated West 100” (*DW* 111-17), the final essay in the collection of the same name, McKay attempts to “undo the taxonomical ownership of the gesture,” as he puts it in his interview with Ken Babstock (“Appropriate” 55). Continuing an acoustic ecological approach, McKay writes about a hike along a deactivated logging road where Vancouver Island’s Loss Creek valley meets the Leech River fault: “Juncos jitter in the alders. A varied thrush sends its whistle-buzz to shake and dissolve in the near-echoic air” (115). In addition to the polyphonic echo of the earlier chainsaw echo, drawing a near-parallel between the small-scale damage and the massive clearcutting on Vancouver Island, the birdsong here acts as an ecological marker to remind of the persistent interconnections and diversity. After witnessing a mother bear and her cubs, McKay heads back to his car:

> With a backward glance in the direction of the bears, he climbs down the embankment. So, he thinks, tell me about it. [. . .] Their talk [the columbine and saxifrage in rock crevices] is asyntactical, a small presocratic hubbub. A junco flies past him and under the bridge, tossing comments like pebble-dash; the occasional song of a Swainson’s thrush postulates another stream that flows uphill; far off, and next door to the heart, the subliminal drumming of a grouse.\(^{116}\)
>
> And containing them all, the live silence of the valley, with its edges of acoustic rock and its-core of impacted shadow. (116-17)

The soundscape McKay describes includes the obvious songs and calls of specific birds,
although it is not so inclusive as to achieve the acoustic integrity that Fisher apparently prefers. McKay chooses specific birds to identify, recognizing in the scene a set of acoustic ecological principles—the communicating sounds of dark-eyed juncos (*Junco hyemalis*), Swainson’s and Varied thrushes (*Catharus ustulatus* and *Ixoreus naevius*), and ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*; possibly, McKay is referring to blue grouse, *Dendragapus obscurus*)—framed by the voluminosity of less-obvious elements, such as saxifrage and rock. (One of the more recent additions to McKay’s series of songs, interestingly, is “Song of the Saxifrage to the Rock” (S/S 10), which I examine in more detail in my concluding chapter.) The “live silence of the valley” resonates with Lampman’s “silent sober place” and inflects the earlier, Romantic ideal with an awareness of the various ecological relations taking place, with or without the poet’s presence.

When he turns his focus to the songs of specific birds, paying homage to avian singers in verse, McKay continues the project of attentive listening.

**Part Five: Listening at the Edge**

> by the porch a flock of Cedar waxwings
> has occurred to the cedars like their lost
> tribe, deft and excited, seep
> seep seeping from the frontiers of the audible.—Don McKay

I took the title of this chapter from the final line of “Little Rivers” (*SD* 28) because the poem’s closing moments resonate so clearly with McKavian listening. Presenting an early version of his idea that “[t]he porch is the ear of the house” (*DW* 19), in “Little Rivers” McKay emphasizes the importance of edge-effect when paying attention to the world outside the home. The image of the poet-birder standing on a porch and craning to hear the relatively quiet song notes of cedar waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) fittingly articulates what it means to pay attention in the McKavian sense. Because of the colonial legacies of the English language and

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2 A version of Parts Five and Six of this chapter has been submitted for publication. Mason, Travis V. “Listening at the Edge: Homage and Ohmage in Don McKay and Ken Babstock,” *Studies in Canadian Literature.*
the Western human desire for ownership, the poet-birder and the ecocritic must position
themselves at the edge and crane toward the more-than-human world, which is always only
“seeping from the frontiers of the audible,” and listen. One of McKay’s earlier poems, “Listen at
the Edge” (B 123), succinctly posits listening on a threshold between human language and the
more-than-human song the poet can only gesture toward onomatopoeically. The onomatopoeia,
as metaphorical gesture, is a common recourse for the writers of field guides “when attempting
descriptions of songs and calls,” despite their tendency to consider the language of field guides
and reference books “as clinically awe-free” with their “terse asyntactical bursts of fact” (V 85).
To the contrary, McKay suggests such descriptions—the call of the Swainson’s thrush compared
to “the sound of a drop of water in a barrel,” whoit, for example (85)—are “mini-poems” that
often contain “the point of greatest descriptive accuracy” in their ability to stick in the reader’s
memory; to help him become a better listener (85).

In “Listen at the Edge,” both poet and reader stand “At the edge of firelight” where
every word is shadowed by its animal, our ears
are empty auditoria for
scritch scritch scritch rr-ronk the
shh uh shh of greater
anonymities the little
brouhahas that won’t lie still for type
and die

Despite all the words humans have for birds and mammals, despite “the information [in] our
voices,” plenty of space remains in our imaginations for the actual beings and the songs they
sing, those “little / brouhahas that won’t lie still for type / and die” (123). In this poem, I identify
a strategy to begin measuring a McKavian resistance to the Post-Structuralist orthodoxy “to
doubt—at least in the seminar room—that there is a world which precedes or exists outside the text” (McKay V 62). If McKay, Bringhurst, Zwicky, and Lilburn are listening at all, they are listening to what language represents: “no language is thinkable that bears no relation to the world” (Wittgenstein qtd. in Zwicky 29). Elsewhere, Zwicky extols the role of imagination in seeing what is there, in “seeing-as”; however, “From this,” she argues, “it does not follow . . . that the world ‘exists’ only in our collective cultural mind” (25). The world exists without human language or understanding. We did not construct that yellow poplar or that barn swallow. We named them, and by having so named, we have measured their existence in relation to us; we have interpreted, but we have not defined them.

“Listen at the Edge” ends with a short line describing bird and animal songs as “ohms of speech.” If poetic attention is “a recognition and a valuing of the other’s wilderness,” if it enacts a form of homage vis-à-vis the Other, the metaplasmic shift from homage to ohmage enables poetry to gesture—without fear of failure—toward the eros of measurement, the desire to know, and so to name, the Other (V 28). But because ohmage originates in this context with nonhumans, the current in the human/nonhuman relation is seemingly reversed. However, McKay’s poetics is not as evolutionary as Michael Pollan’s argument, in The Botany of Desire, that “it makes as much sense to think of agriculture as something grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees” (xxi). McKay’s poetics reflects, more accurately, a mode of engagement put forth by J.M. Coetzee’s alter ego Elizabeth Costello in The Lives of Animals, a poetics that “does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead a record of engagement with him” (51). McKay’s record of engagement with nonhumans, for all his respectful observation and homage, is also a record of the poet’s active listening, as distinct from his passive hearing.
McKay extends his understanding of active, ecological listening to the editorial and publication process, recognizing “a quality of attention that is the nerves and sinews of community” he calls “audience” (“Common Sense” 235; emphasis in original). His emphasis on the word “audience” resonates with his emphasis on a poem’s sound and on how it enacts a listening that readers can identify and to which they can attend. A collection of poetry is effectively a soundscape; poetry is “written with the ear. If you don’t hear something, it’s not working” (“Appropriate” 47). And if it is not working—aurally, lyrically, ecologically—it ceases to be of any real use in a public context and fails “to make a place for nature within public life” (Latour 2), that is, in the relations between the world, the text, and the audience.

One of McKay’s projects as poet and editor concerns actively engaging with the tensions between language (poetry) and matter (poetic subjects). More specifically, McKay’s interests, at least as they play out in his own writing, lie in attempting to portray a humble relation between word and world that calls into question the colonial impulse of the (human) writer while simultaneously paying homage to the (nonhuman) others about which he writes. The measure of this relation, the distance between word and world that manifests itself in homage, occurs in a style of word play endemic to McKay’s oeuvre: metaplasm. In The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness, Haraway coopts the term metaplasm to articulate a linguistic mode of rethinking humans’ relation to the nonhuman world and to refer to what she calls, in her own metaplasmic moment, “the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remolding the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (20). Haraway’s attention to linguistic tropes in a book ostensibly about dog training implies a relation between metaplasm and listening toward which McKay gestures in his writing.

I use the term metaplasm in two ways: first, in the tropic sense Haraway acknowledges
(from the Greek, *meta*, denoting change, and *plasmus*, to mould or form), to refer to what I recognize as particularly McKavian movements between, for example, homage and ohmage, grave and gravel, loop and pool, thrush and thresh(hold), material and matériel; and second, in the biological sense Haraway neglects to acknowledge (which botanist J. von Hanstein developed into the German *metaplasma*), which refers to the granular, dead portion of cytoplasm within a cell. This dual sense of metaplasm makes space for both the linguistic and the scientific in McKay's poetry; but, more importantly, McKay insinuates the speakers of the poems under discussion into the spaces between each sense of metaplasm, effectively positioning readers between the two meanings and inviting them (the readers) to consider an active correspondence between the metaphorical and ecological aspects of his poetry.

Integral to this ecopoetical project of measuring the distance between, for example, poet and bushtit, the way one scans a line of poetry or measures electrical resistance, is the poets' production both of poetry and of a listening audience. McKay cultivates the humility necessary to enact both homage and ohmage by carefully mentoring other poets in private as they revise poems that will eventually reach a public audience. McKay's relation to other poets' work, such as Dennis Lee's critical work on poetry and cadence and Ken Babstock's poetry, are prime examples of how poetic lives are informed by and shaped within public culture, particularly that of book publishing and public readings. In addition to following a trail of linguistic and scientific referents in McKay's writing toward an ecological poetics, I am interested in measuring the degree of editorial influence in Babstock's first collection of poetry as a way of determining an ecology of listening. To this end, I borrow from philosopher Bruno Latour a desire to slow things down a bit: "not to save time, to speed up, to synthesize masses of data, to solve urgent problems in a hurry," but rather to spend time, to slow down, to analyze data, to pose urgent questions (6).
Such an approach resonates nicely with poet and critic Brian Bartlett’s recent argument that McKay’s poems “show what it means to be at once attentive and energetic, provoking and exhilarating. Festina lente. [Hurry slowly]” (129).

I consider Acknowledgements public (published\textsuperscript{118}) recognition of private listening. Of all the thanks to McKay I have read,\textsuperscript{119} Ken Babstock’s Acknowledgements at the end of Mean offer perhaps the richest way in to a consideration of editorial presence: “My editor, Don McKay (“UncleLear”), deserves all the credit for transforming a bunch of almost-poems into a book” (83). Babstock signals at least three things about McKay’s editorial relation to Mean when he names his editor “UncleLear.” First, I read this as Babstock’s marking the obvious age difference between McKay (b. 1942) and him (b. 1970) combined with the Shakespearian connotations of King Lear as tragic hero, as madman, as blind poet—as someone, in short, who occupies a place of dubious, because human, wisdom gleaned from decades of reading and experience. Second, and this is perhaps a more fittingly aural signal, I read Babstock acknowledging McKay’s keen editorial ear; he is Uncle Ear, the one who actively listens. Third, I read, or rather I hear, something that requires a trick of metaplasm, the dropping of two letters, the slurring of a tri-syllabic term into a bisyllabic one so that UncleLear becomes, paradoxically, Unclear. That Babstock’s naming communicates all three is germane to my metaplasmic argument: by simply removing the en-space between Uncle and Lear, Babstock simultaneously pays homage to his editor and performs an act of ohmage, effectively measuring the impact—influential and paradoxical—McKay’s listening has had on his first collection.

An editor’s active listening can be both attentive and unclear; the contradiction, the lack of clarity reminiscent of metaplasm in biological terms, functions to help negotiate the tensions between listening with the ear and on the page, between the clarity of editorial attention and the
opacity of linguistic gesture. Haraway has something similar in mind when she uses metaplasm to express an attention to the more-than-human world that resists conventional assumptions about human/nonhuman relations. By extension, metaplasm, in both the tropic and biological senses of the word, enables McKay's notion of matériel to develop as a working—as distinct from fixed—component of his ecological poetics.120

Listening, then, depends upon the poet's ability to remain on the porch, to position himself on the edge between speech and silence, waiting to hear songs of knowing “seeping from the frontiers of the audible.” In “Song for the Song of the Coyote,” the poet “listens in the tent, [his] ear / to the ground” as the coyotes sing to the “thin / used-up light” of the land: “Riverless. Treeless” (9). The coyotes’ song “articulates the buttes and coulees and dissolve[s] / into the darkness which is always listening” and which “Echoes” tremulously in reply (9). The description of the land, according to the coyotes’ song and its echo, is more moonscape than landscape, an otherworldly place “that can only wear its scars, every crater etched”; indeed, the poem opens with an address to the coyotes as “Moondogs, moondogs” (9). As one of the central thematic figures of Another Gravity, the moon represents a McKavian mode of scanning the world that belies the notion of language as a purely human construct. Acknowledging the limits of language while working with language, McKay traces the etymology of “moon,” revealing how humans have developed a syntax of measurement, how something outside the text informs the text. In “New Moon,” (38), he provides a partial etymology: “mene (Gk.) whence menses, month, the first long / measure” so that finally “metre, as measure / enters the sentence” (38). The measurement initiated by the word moon is a measurement informed by cyclical phases of the moon, a measurement of time, the “slow pulse” of which recalls the breathing electric energy of birds, or the pulsing rhythm of a wolf sprinting down the middle of a road, to whom McKay's
and Babstock’s poems pay homage.

This measurement of the distance “between thought and things, or words and world” (Critchley 185)—what I have been calling ohmage—represents phenomenological poetic experience; it functions both as symbolic gesture (metaphor, homage) and as realistic gesture (humility, haecceity). For McKay and Babstock, as for Wallace Stevens, “the poet must not lead us away from the real” (Critchley 186) even as readers, poets, and ecocritics are acutely aware of “the real” as enigma. The paradox is neither debilitating nor simplistic, but rather creative and complex: ecocritics with an eye and an ear to both the phenomenal world in itself and the way in which humans perceive phenomena linguistically are learning to sing, as the wood thrush does, two songs at once when writing about such poetry. When I write of an ecology of listening, I want to invite readers along a trail of referents that include Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology—“Everything is connected to everything else” (29)—as well as some version of the standard scientific definition (the study of the relationships between living organisms and their biotic and abiotic environment).

Part Six: Thrushes, Thresholds

*The thrush’s song contained harmonically unrelated notes that overlapped in time.*—Don Stap

In *Vis à Vis*, McKay argues that “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). His “Songs” in homage to some of the more-than-human creatures that inhabit his poetry reveal a reverence for the song and its singer, and they attempt to respond with an appropriate poetic gesture. But each song is also inevitably an appropriation, albeit one “with the current reversed” (V 99); the poet, aware of the perils of appropriation, pays attention to the coyote or the chipping sparrow and enacts a listening on the page, reversing the popular
ideological current vis-à-vis the environment. Combining his acumen for metaphor with an attention to biological detail that gestures toward natural history, McKay brings readers closer to a particular species and invites them to know that species beyond (perhaps even prior to) its construction as a symbolic entity. Two poems from *Apparatus* exhibit a McKavian enactment of listening: “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush” (26) and “Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush” (27).

In “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush,” the poet listens to “the single note” and observes “its // un-inflected but electric” line; the poet, in turn, renders his own song as a single sentence broken into single-lined stanzas to show not only what he hears but how he listens. The spaces between each line represent the pauses which follow each of the thrush’s single notes and work with the lines themselves to create a ruled look on the page:

once more on a lower or a higher pitch and
in this newly minted
interval you realize the wilderness
between one breath
and another.

In this homage to the varied thrush, the electric energy of the thrush’s breathing is itself a form of ohmage, a way of measuring the thrush’s song and its imprint on the poet’s listening. The addressee (the “you”) is both an implied listener and the varied thrush himself. In the first instance, the listener learns to appreciate the capacity of the thrush’s song to “elude the mind’s appropriations” (*V 21*). In the second instance, the thrush, simply by singing his song, makes “the wilderness / between” breaths real, makes it matter, makes it mean the way barbed wire in another McKay poem makes “the meadow meadow” by creating boundaries between cultivated
and uncultivated land.¹²¹

The poet-birder is not always comfortable with his poetry, however, because he is aware of the problematic interface between language and the world" ("Appropriate" 46). And yet part of McKay’s ecological project attempts to return poet and reader alike to the trail, “to the grain of the experience,” prior to its realization as text (V 27). McKay articulates this paradoxical position perhaps no more clearly and concisely than in “Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush,” when he writes somewhat enigmatically that “Poetry / clatters.” Positioned as it is on the page facing “Varied Thrush,” “Wood Thrush” certainly looks more clattery than the former poem with its full stops (“Varied Thrush” unfolds as one full sentence) and its condensed spacing on the page. Moreover, “the old contraption pumping / iambs” in the poet’s chest “is going to take a break / and sing a little something” instead of relying on the strictures of conventional metre (27). The poet’s iambs here beat as a heart beats and exceed the limits of measurement, as if elastic, plastic, clattery. “The Wood Thrush can sing a duet by itself, using two separate voices” (Greenewalt qtd. in Gill 240), so instead of hearing a single note, the poet acknowledges the avian polyphony and his “ear / inhales the evening.” Subsequently, in the face of such acoustic accomplishments, “only the offhand is acceptable” as a human response (McKay A 27). Reviewing Apparatus in Books in Canada, Richard Greene claims that “[t]o declare one’s offhandedness in a self-conscious manner is an obvious contradiction, and a pretentious one” (27). Greene, it seems to me, is not paying attention in the McKavian sense. If he were to step outside language for a moment and listen, he might realize that the declaration of Poetry’s offhandedness in this particular context is not pretentious at all. Compared to the wood thrush’s vocal abilities, after all, mere poetry clatters at best. Consequently, McKay sets the offhand—the impromptu and distinctively
unpretentious—against Poetry, capitalized here not incidentally as a way to represent and value the more-than-human world with a measure of humility. Far from being idealized by McKay as the best way to represent nonhumans, Poetry is clearly, in its orderly, structured manner, unacceptable. Instead, McKay’s verse, seemingly free yet inflected and infected with traces of pentameter—“The old contraption pumping”—pays homage to the wood thrush’s articulation of a “place / between desire and memory,” a place humans “can neither wish for nor recall” (27). It is beyond human language, and hence beyond such formalized modes of address as iambic pentameter and *Books in Canada* reviews.

More and more poets and scholars are listening to what Bringhurst calls “the language of the world” (“Poetry” 162) and making connections between poetry and science, between nature and culture. One way to continue this work is to slow down and pay attention to the myriad connectivities we might not be compelled to notice. Otherwise we risk ending up like the speaker in Babstock’s “Wolf” who has to “turn in [his] seat to watch / the blur of hind legs” disappear into the poet’s imagination, a missed opportunity for seeing the wolf as a wolf, for a change (53). As Latour argues, “In order to force ourselves to slow down, we will have to deal simultaneously with the sciences, with natures, and with politics, in the plural” (3). The simultaneity and the plurality of Latour’s argument point to a problematics that McKay’s poetry is equipped to negotiate. That Latour neglects to include poetry, or the arts for that matter, in his project of bringing the sciences into democracy speaks volumes of the continuing need for sharing ecological consciousness in social spheres that are plural: both public and private, both literary and scientific, both linguistic and kinetic. It seems to me that McKay, through his listening and his writing, through his editorial and his metaplastic relations, enacts such a plurality while slowing his readers down and offering various trailheads, entrances to paths that lead toward a
clearing, a soundscape, an edge from which they might listen and be listened at.
ENDINGS

‘ode of the earth’: Nests and Geopoetry

*a convenient place to end (though not to conclude).—Don McKay*

Part One: Engaging the Conversation

*for christ’s sake let’s go have a beer
on the balcony instead of—clip clop
I’ll uncap them
and we will. —Don McKay*

In his revised review of *Birding, or desire, “The Antithesis of Rape, Which Is Not Chastity: The Voice of Don McKay,* Robert Bringhurst calls McKay “the English language’s Halitherses,” referring to a seer who appears in Homer’s *Odyssey* (29). Halitherses was, according to Homer, the best “at understanding birds, and he had the skill of putting what they taught him into a language that less observant humans could understand” (29). The extent to which McKay attends to specific birds in the field and on the wing certainly supports Bringhurst’s comparison and, indeed, corroborates many of Bringhurst’s own ideas regarding the poetical capacity of the more-than-human world. If I have invoked Bringhurst more than most other critics in my dissertation, it is with good reason. Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, and Jan Zwicky—all of whom I have turned to throughout—have been engaging with McKay in what Lilburn calls a “five-pointed conversation” for nearly two decades (“Preface” 1). All five writers have contributed to essay collections (edited by Lilburn) invested in poetry and poetics in Canada: 1995’s *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews* and 2002’s *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*. Because of this philosophical connection between contemporary poets, and because these thinkers are engaged in public discussions about ideas pertinent to each other’s work, it remains a challenge not to keep returning to, say, Lilburn
on naming by way of Zwicky’s essay about Bringhurst’s early poems, thus enclosing an argument within a hermetically sealed discourse that is essentially about itself, albeit a fascinating, polyphonic, multilayered discourse.

At one point, fairly early in the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I decided to approach McKay’s poetry from a different direction. I knew I could not ignore the influence of this five-pointed conversation entirely, nor did I want to, but I was also aware that much of what had been done—and what was being done by other readers—focused on one or two aspects of McKay’s writing: his metaphorical dexterity and the philosophical, poetical conversation he has been engaged in, an in-print discussion that includes, by extension, such philosophers as Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Simone Weil. My decision to reconsider my “angle of attack” was informed, in part, by a course I took with Kevin McNeilly, which was based on the Thinking and Singing poets (and included George Elliott Clarke and Anne Carson). After I presented some preliminary commentary about Lilburn and McKay, Professor McNeilly advised me regarding my tendency to use Lilburn’s and McKay’s essays to talk about Lilburn’s and McKay’s poems; the advice—which consisted of an astute, polite warning of the potential for intellectual atrophy as a result of such a circular approach—got me thinking about the challenges of writing critically about poets we admire (and in some cases, poets we know). Professor McNeilly’s warning resonates, I think, with Frank Davey’s claim in Canadian Literary Power that the “combination of independence and complicitous intertwining with older institutions across national boundaries [...] makes the theorizing of contemporary Canadian canonicity so difficult” (76-77). As I modified and extended my critical strategy to avoid, as much as possible, the “complicitous intertwining” of McKay and his close colleagues, it became clear that much of Laurie Ricou’s ecocritical work
was relevant to my reading of McKay. That Ricou is also my supervisor might, I realize, make me seem something of an academic sycophant. At the risk of engaging in a similar mode of circular criticism that Professor McNeilly warned me against, however, I must admit that there has simply been no other critic in Canada who has demonstrated sustained attempts to do the ecocriticism for which I am arguing. I started following some of McKay's trails of avian referents and began to appreciate, and ultimately to argue the value of his poetry as a rich subject for interdisciplinary ecocriticism. Consequently, I consistently stumbled upon early articles and reviews by my supervisor, which happened to support—and to extend—my ongoing argument.

So, while I agree with Bringhurst's assessment of McKay as a modern-day Halitherses, I think a more recent comparison might be fitting. If we consider both his "intense engagement with the natural world, his respect for the local environment as an autonomous realm [which] constitutes the core of his originality as an ecological writer" (McKusick 236), and the extent to which "Birds are essential" to his poetry (Bate Song 156), John Clare might represent a more immediate poetic antecedent to McKay. Both Clare, a self-described peasant born in 1793, and McKay, born into a middle-class family in 1942, write out of a realization "that since the eighteenth century [humans] have radically changed the face of the earth in ways that may not be altogether desirable" and express, if indirectly, concern "that there has been a reduction of both the quality and quantity of natural biosphere resulting in the extinction of untold species of fauna and flora" (Lutwack 233). Clare is often "regarded as the first ecological writer in the English tradition" (McKusick 227), while McKay is, I argue, cultivating a contemporary version of ecopoetry informed by precise knowledge of specific birds and their ecologies. While an extensive comparison of Clare's and McKay's avian and ecological poetics would require another 200 pages (at least), and therefore lies just outside the scope and practical constraints of
my dissertation, I think such a project is worthwhile and one, I hope, which my study of McKay's poetry and poetics might inform.123

Part Two: Nest Eggs

*A thatched cottage is set on the ground like a nest in a field. And a wren's nest is a thatched cottage, because it is a covered, round nest.—Gaston Bachelard*

*We have a proverb according to which men can do everything except build a bird's nest.—Ambroise Paré, “Le livre des animaux et de l’intelligence de l’homme”*

It is late spring as I write: the migrating warblers have passed through British Columbia’s Lower Mainland; the barn swallows have returned to nest under the bridge at Jericho pond; the non-migratory birds—crows, pigeons, red-winged blackbirds, bushtits—have built their nests, laid their eggs, and hatched their chicks; many young birds have begun to fledge; and the Ducks have won the Stanley Cup. This last observation, while it might seem out of keeping with my focus on birds as birds in McKay’s poetry, serves as a segue into a discussion of Clare’s and McKay’s writing about nests. In “Easter 1981” (B 89), McKay asks readers to

think of all the nests and nests in progress up there swaying twig by straw by string by bit of rag
and of our own coagulations from inside
the manic voice of playoff hockey, close-shaved, naked, furred by the tuning up of fiddle and guitar while underneath
the kids are blowing eggs: noises from our rich and slithy pre-existence.

This poem is not remarkable for its specificity with regard to bird species or ecological relations—unlike, say, “A Toast to the Baltimore Oriole” (B 88), in which the speaker toasts the bird’s “good looks and the neat way [it] shit[s]” and “ dedicate[s] baseball” to “the sturdy fragile
woven / scrotum of [its] nest"—but it effectively implies a human ecology that extends homologically—as Susan Fisher would have it—and domestically to include bird nests, playoff hockey, and Easter eggs. Spring brings with it “natural” occurrences, such as nest-building, as well as such “cultural” events as the playoffs and Christian celebrations of Christ’s resurrection. No peasant poet, McKay acknowledges in this poem humans’ cultural and natural existence as “rich” with both middle-class activities associated with holidays and evolutionary connections to our “slithy pre-existence,” out of the fertile muck, as it were. “Easter 1981” succinctly posits the idea of home for McKay on a threshold between domesticity and wilderness, posits the birder-poet, as he writes in “The Bushtits’ Nest” (V 83-106), as “a citizen of the frontier, a creature of words who will continue to use them to point” (87). “The Bushtits’ Nest” is McKay’s most sustained writing about nests, and thus represents another way into his avian poetics and a point of comparison with Clare’s ornithological writing about nests.

Since all birds are oviparous and thus unable to provide the sort of protection viviparous species, such as humans, can provide up until their brood’s birth, they need to find and/or produce suitable nesting sites (Bennett and Owens 68-9). The human search for home, for a sense of home, is wide-ranging and often personal; the search can be literal, spiritual, metaphorical. The avian search for home can be equally multiple. It is when observing bushtits that were, as McKay “inferred later with the help of reference books – probably just beginning to attach leaf matter and lichens to the spider web they use for struts and girders” while attempting “to summon something out of nothing” (102) in the form of a gourd-shaped nest (Fig. 9), that McKay realizes birds’ ontological confidence, that they, unlike humans, “do not need a Lao-tzu to remind them of the non-being [air] their lives depend on” (104). Yet despite the bushtits’ ability to “be next door to nothing,” their idea of home seems to be “closer to a kitchen in
Newfoundland than to a hermitage” (103, 104). The nest-building continues in spite of the car parked underneath it, in spite, that is, of humans’ increasing presence and ownership of natural spaces, and the birder-poet is left to stand, “mildly agog at the prospect of domestication occurring in the natural world” (106). McKay’s description of the nest, though it invokes domestication and human dwelling (a kitchen in Newfoundland), avoids the absurdity Gaston Bachelard suggests accompanies “images that attribute human qualities to a nest” (92).

A French philosopher of science, Bachelard also recognized the potential for correlation between bird nests and human ideas of home when he wrote *The Poetics of Space* in 1958. In Bachelard’s suggestion that the topic of his book might fittingly be called *topophilia*, I hear an echo (albeit anticipatory) of E.O. Wilson’s *Biophilia* that resonates, I think, because of the room Bachelard allows for his phenomenology to inspire reflection on such natural objects as nests and shells. “[E]xtraordinary significance is attached to nests,” he writes, “and a nest is generally considered to be one of the marvels of animal life” (92). In the end, of course, Bachelard is less concerned with the vagaries of ornithology than with his phenomenological relation to the world of objects—“For it is not the task of this phenomenology to describe the nests met with in nature, which is a quite positive task reserved for ornithologists” (93)—just as Chaucer is less interested in birds and more interested in the types of people they represent. Even so, Jonathan Bate finds Bachelard’s poetics quite useful when searching for a lexicon with which to respond to the poetry of John Clare. As Scott Bryson suggests, much ecocriticism is interested in “alternatives that give us a more precise lexicon with which to describe our efforts at finding a home in nature while simultaneously respecting its ultimate unknowability” (West 43). Bachelard’s phenomenology provides for Bate’s inquiry into Clare’s nest poems what reference books and lichenologist Trevor Goward provide for McKay’s inquiry into bushtit nest architecture.
A contemporary of Wordsworth, Byron, and Keats, John Clare has developed a
t“reputation as ‘the finest poet of Britain’s minor naturalists and the finest naturalist of all
Britain’s major poets’” (Robinson and Fitter vii). He kept copious field notes that are reproduced
as John Clare’s Birds, edited by Eric Robinson and Richard Fitter, who note that, along with
having been “something of a pioneer in his interest in bird song” (xiii), Clare “free[d] himself
from those conventional poetical associations of birds where, for example, the nightingale is
symbolic of ruined love and the cuckoo of marital treachery” (viii). Clare’s observations were
apparently detailed enough to enable identification in the field; a historian of Northamptonshire’s
flora, for example, “was able to identify 135 plant species from Clare’s poems and found that no
fewer than forty had not been recorded by earlier botanists” (xix). His field notes are not always
so informative; the entry for pettichap (chiffchaff), for example, contains the briefest of
references to the fact that “it makes a curious nest in low bushes” (50); however, these
observations inform Clare’s poem “The Pettichap’s Nest,” which is considerably more
descriptive:

- that snug entrance wins
  Scarcely admitting e’en two fingers in
  And lined with feathers warm as silken stole
  And soft as seats of down for painless ease
  And full of eggs scarce bigger e’en than peas. (183)

These lines are not without metaphor, but the poet’s fingers feeling around inside the nest
provide specific information which, in turn, enables Clare to make accurate metaphor. The
accuracy of the metaphor determines the proximity of the reader to the world, not while reading
the poem (as perhaps Dana Phillips assumes) but after. If nothing else, the next time I am
rambling across a Northamptonshire field, I will be aware of the pettichap’s nest because of “The
Pettichap’s Nest”—presumably, I will have consulted a field guide of British birds (since neither
pettichap nor chiffchaff are indexed in my North American copy of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*), and I will have seen an image of the bird; perhaps I will have even learned whether or not pettichap eggs are as small as Clare indicates.

According to Bate, "In the poetry of John Clare, as in the vision of Bachelard, a nest is the small round thing which is the natural world’s analogue of the human idea of home" (Bate 157). Following from Bachelard’s interest in “miniaturizing the world” (150), we can think about the nest as a miniature human dwelling, or home. Such an interest in miniature, on such minutiae as a bird’s name, the number of times per minute it beats its wings, what it ate for breakfast, is a strikingly poetic parallel to scientific reductionism. At a time when his contemporaries were attempting to articulate the grandiloquent terror of the sublime landscape, Clare was intensely interested in recording how many eggs Magpies lay (5 to 8 “of a watery green color thickly freckled with brown spots” [10]) and in what they use to line their nests (“twitch and dried roots” [11]). For Bate, the value of Clare’s interest, and of contemporary critics’ interest in Clare, lies in how Clare’s accuracies will help us “to live fully but without profligacy upon our crowded earth” (161). It is surely no coincidence that birds are responsible for the first poem and the first poet (if we are to believe the Indian Vālmīki), for humans’ successful attempts at flying (if we believe the literature on the earliest flying machines), for human music (if we believe Temple Grandin’s claim), and also for what is widely considered to be the first work of environmental writing in North America (Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*). The influence of birds on human life is reflected, too, in the value of all such bird poetry. John Clare and Don McKay are both latter-day manifestations of Halitherses, birders who live on and write from the edge of experience and imagination. As Gabriele Helms writes in concluding her essay, “Contemporary Canadian Poetry from the Edge: An Exploration of Literary Eco-criticism,” “To view ecologically aware poetry as
created in [sic] an edge under the influence of both writers and their environment opens a way for writers and readers to advance the shift from an intellectual anorexia and complacency that prevents holistic views to an increasing awareness of the importance of our environment” (58). The ecotone, as I have argued, is not just an interdisciplinary space from which ecocritics might “strive for an affirmative praxis” (Helms 46), but poetic space occupied by such writers as Clare and McKay.

Part Three: From Bird Nests to Bedrock

As a companion to the geology textbook I propose the fragments of Herakleitos.
—Don McKay

Inside nests birds lay eggs, tiny packages of embryo, yolk, albumen, and other extraembryonic membranes that eventually, if all goes well, transform from an oval mass into a living, breathing bird (Gill 368-70). Despite his interest, as essayist, in the nesting habits of bushtits, McKay does not seem to devote much of his birding time—or much of his writing space—to the discovery of nests and eggs. In “Meditation on a Geode” (NF 16), though, McKay writes about a geode, a type of rock “formed, says my old geology textbook, from the modification and enlargement of an original void. O,” a rock that represents “a tiny ocean in an egg.” This “egg” began forming when “a little animal who lived and / died, got buried in the silt and gradually decayed to nothing, which filled up with [salt] water.” While freshwater life continued outside the limestone shell, inside a slow transformation takes place and gives birth to nothing, to void, and yet it enables an infinite set of imaginative possibilities about the egg:

In which a subtle and irresistible idea, osmosis, unclenches outward against the rock, widening the hole and seeping through the silica until the salts inside and outside balance. And everything (slow gong) crystallizes: animal, emptiness, ocean, gland : ode of the earth.

“Meditation on a Geode” offers an example of McKay, mid-career, inviting his readers along a
scientific trail of referents by combining the language of a geology textbook with the poet’s lateral and abstract thinking (note the floating colon that follows emptiness and anticipates the list on the following line). The poem’s final phrase, “ode of the earth,” succinctly plays on the word “geode”—as a combination of geo, from the Greek word for earth, and ode, a poem intended to be sung or performed—and implies that even abiotic rocks demonstrate an intelligence constantly at work and worthy of our attention. To comprehend such intelligence and to “think the connections between” such objects as geodes, beach stones, and mountains and the forces that contribute to their ongoing formation requires, for McKay “a stretch test of the imagination, including what is perhaps the supreme stretch test – geologic time” (DW16). Although the stretch test inevitably ends in failure, the attempt (and its failure) function alongside McKay’s avian poetics to demonstrate a need for reimagining humans’ relations to the rest of the world, for rethinking humans’ place in a world that is billions of years older than us. But, as McKay asks in “Astonished—” (S/S 3), a poem that recognizes astonishment’s etymological connection to geology, “Are you thinking / or being thought?” The answer, I think, is both.

One challenge that accompanies the benefits of studying a poet in the midst of his most prolific phase is the need to accommodate subtle (or not so subtle) shifts in his poetics while maintaining a focus on the announced topic. In both Deactivated West 100 and Strike/Slip, McKay has begun articulating his geopoetics; that is, a poetry and poetics interested in how geologic forces, and humans’ capacity to comprehend geologic time, facilitate thoughtful responses to the more-than-human world. McKay borrows the term geopoetry from Harry H. Hess, a geologist who developed a theory of plate tectonics. In “Geopoetry” (DW42-43), an entry in the abecedarian “Between Rock and Stone: A Geopoetic Alphabet,” McKay writes about
Hess’s request that other geologists “concede many suppositions in order to entertain the idea that seafloor spreading, driven by magma rising continuously from the mantle, accounts for both the movement of plates and the surprising youth of the ocean floor” (42). “Geopoetry,” writes McKay, was a “concession to sceptics,” a term that acknowledged the speculative nature of Hess’s theory. But in the wake of Hess’s theories having been proven feasible, McKay wonders about the potential for geopoetry’s renewed relevance: “What better term,” he asks, “for those moments of pure wonder when we contemplate even the most basic elements of planetary dwelling, and our words fumble in their attempts to do them justice” (42). For McKay, geopoetry extends the paradoxical notion, examined through his “Songs for the Songs of” series of poems and his unsonnets, for example, that poetry clatters, that words’ “greatest eloquence lies in their failure” (DW 68). It resonates, too, with what McKay identifies in his foreword to A.F. Moritz’s Early Poems as the poet’s “profound anarchism, which denies the usual structures of knowing in the interests of opening a wider, phenomenal, sense of the real” (“Shipwreck” 14). By extension, therefore, McKay has been writing geopoetry for years; but he had not articulated it as a key aspect of his poetics until 2005.

McKay’s poetics, however, have not simply progressed, in neat chronological fashion, from avian poetics to geopoetics. He has not abruptly finished with birds and moved on to rocks. He has, rather, finally found a way to articulate geopoetry, something he has been thinking and writing about since his first collection. While I tend to agree that McKay’s fifth book, Birding, or desire, demonstrates the work of a poet who has found his voice after having written competent but uneven poems for a decade—a vocational progression not uncommon among writers—some of the poems McKay published prior to 1983 show the beginnings of his thinking about the distinction he now makes between rock and stone: In “These Mighty Timbers” (AOS 12), for
example, McKay writes that

rocks
are rocks and are not
just, or quite,
when you feel them, take them home
the granite your hammer chipped
the circling encircling land you hunger,
ever to possess.

Here, in 1973, McKay recognizes the capacity of the land—granite—to elude the mind’s appropriations, though he has yet to develop the lexicon—or “ecolect,” as some ecocritics would have it—to name it wilderness. Having developed his notion of wilderness, McKay is able to return to the vocabulary of rock, which functions in McKay’s poetics much like wilderness does: “What happens between rock and stone,” he writes in “Rock, Stone” (DW 59), is simply everything human, from the modifications necessary to make homes to, at the other extreme, the excesses of ownership and exploitation which submit all ends to ours. . . . [R]ock is as old as the earth is; stone is only as old as humanity.” Human presence and use, in other words, translate rock into stone—stone hammer, gravel, paving stone, tombstone, milestone—the way “place becomes place by acquiring real or imagined borders and suffering removal from anonymity” (DW 18). As McKay’s interest in both domesticity—the desire for home—and wilderness—the inability to acquire home—as well as the title of his abecedarian demonstrate, he remains fascinated with what occurs between various ideas, states, worlds.

Both McKay’s continuing fascination with edges, porches, translation and my call for ecocritics to linger in the ecotone demonstrate at least a vestige of a postmodern resistance to either/or critical strategies. Robert Kroetsch, in “Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy,” points to the growth of postmodern thought in the literary critical world, noting that

[t]he margin, the periphery, the edge, now, is the exciting and dangerous
boundary where silence and sound meet. It is where the action is. In our
darker moments we feel we must resist the blind and consuming power of
the new places with their new or old ideas that now want to become
centres. In our happier moments we delight in the energy of the local, in
the abundance that is diversity and difference, in the variety and life that
exist on any coastline of the human existence. (23)

Kroetsch’s emphasis on the validity of liminal space—“the margin, the periphery, the edge”—in
Canadian writing anticipates an ecocritical preference for edge-effect. Kroetsch posits the need
for a new understanding of texts that have at their heart the exploration and open transgression of
thresholds and borders. He is right in warning against the potential “centring” of places and
ideas, of ideologies that, even in their newness, belie their spirit of “diversity and difference.”
The action he speaks of might not be physical action at all, but rather a mental (and ultimately
artistic) process of movement that sees the artist placing herself in uncertain territories where
(and when) the lines between two or more places interweave aspects of the many places they
touch. But it might also be, as I have been arguing, very physical indeed: the critic crossing the
threshold between indoors and out, between sidewalk and trail, between words and birds.
The west coast of North America has been a good place to live while thinking about McKay’s
poetry and about the ecotone as a valid metaphor for interdisciplinary ecocriticism, though I am
sure living in proximity to any ecotone would provide similar possibilities for observing real-
world edge-effects. Audrey Thomas, whose most celebrated novel, Intertidal Life, is set on
British Columbia’s west coast, makes a strong case for this edge of continent as a particularly
rich and varied place. The protagonist of Intertidal Life, Alice, unhappy with what she sees as the
mellowing out of vegetarian, marijuana-smoking hippies, who seem “as though [they] lie in this
warm bath of benevolence,” compares this political benevolence with “staying in a warm bath too long. . . Your mind gets wrinkled” as well as your fingers (201). The reference to wrinkling as a result of stasis looks back to Alice’s acknowledgement of the “marvelous rocks,” which lie in the intertidal zone, “wrinkled and gray like the skin of old elephants but pocked and licked into fantastic shapes by the force of the winter waves” (8). Ironically, the action of the water moving back and forth between the sea and the shore, over a period of time, causes the ever still rocks effectively to move by changing shape, to retain some of the knowledge, the intelligence, of the waves in the smoothing and wrinkling of their impenetrable skin. The significance of this irony becomes even more evident later in the novel when Alice, according to one of the narrator’s parenthetical asides, wonders: “And what do I want? In which direction, now, do I want to move? Or could I please for the next little while just be a stone, washed by the sea, warmed by the sun, unmoving?” (263). Alice is placed, either of her own volition or that of Thomas’s narrator, within a space that exists along the line between sea and shore, within an intertidal zone. To be a stone is not to be, as she parenthetically suggests, “unmoving,” but rather, as she suggests earlier, to be “pocked and licked into fantastic shapes” by the waves.

McKay, too, uses the influential action of waves upon rocks to articulate a particular relation between himself and the earth. He begins “Otherwise than Place” with an admission: “I keep a rubbing stone in my pocket – a piece of glossy basalt from the west coast of Vancouver Island. It’s become my palm’s companion, always there in moments of stress or boredom, a reassuring weight that’s smoother – thanks to the continual wave action which has kept it rubbing against the other rocks on the beach – than skin” (DW 15). Since McKay has taken a rock from the beach, has appropriated it for his own use as a stress reliever and companion, it has, according to his definition, become stone. Apparently, he has been carrying, or at least
thinking about, rubbing stones since at least the mid-1980s, when he wrote “Rubbing Stone” (SD 27). Again, too early to articulate his geopoetic distinction between rock and stone, this poem nevertheless anticipates the opening of “Otherwise than Place” and “Philosopher’s Stone” (S/S 43-44). After providing a litany of possible names for the rubbing stone—jewel, gewgaw—the speaker recounts how it came into being:

```
this stone slavegirl of the ocean constantly
caressed and beaten rubble
rubble at Pacific’s lip where deep heave
crashes into nonsense this stone
this stone

.................................
whose dead language is catastrophe this stone
living in my pocket as its hermit[.]
```

The odd comparison of the stone to a slavegirl who is both “caressed and beaten” into a “hard / softness” draws attention to human acts of violence that thoughtlessly mirror the catastrophic, paradoxically creative violence the earth perpetrates against itself. It also points to “the birth of eros,” to a human (male) tendency to act on his desires as though they must be fulfilled, as though his desires were all. But the hermit living in the poet’s pocket seeks to modify such anthropocentric ways of thinking the relation to other humans, other creatures, and other intelligence. In “Philosopher’s Stone,” an updated version of “Rubbing Stone,” the poet allows for the possibility that he has been adopted by the hermit who is now, as he says,

```
living in my pocket as its sage, as my third
uncanny testicle, the wise one,
the one who will teach me to desire
only whatever happens (43)
```

As the poet rubs this stone in his pocket—sage, philosopher—so is he being rubbed by the stone. Two modes of intelligence are touching each other, which the poet realizes in the poem’s closing lines: “it turns out / though it can’t be / we both know—” (44). What and how they both know
are different, to be sure; but they can teach each other, too, about desire. This poet learns that
desire does not determine what happens. This poet learns about a species of longing that is
without the desire to possess ("Appropriate" 54). This poet learns.

And just as Halitherses demonstrated a capacity for translating what he learned from
birds, McKay shares through his poetry what he has learned from birds and stones and trees.
More accurately, he shares what he has learned from bushtits and basalt and black spruce and
from the various interactions he has observed. He also, as his species specificity, his humility,
and his distrust of language suggest, gives credit where credit is due, preferring to sabotage what
Keats identified as the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" typical of traditional lyric poetry
by writing in spite of the faults and failings of a poet. Sometimes the proximity afforded by
specificity results in an ironic distancing between poet and subject. A late poem, "Song of the
Saxifrage to the Rock" (S/S 10),\(^{129}\) expresses this irony even as the title announces its link to
McKay's homage to and ohmage of birdsong. Uncharacteristically, McKay writes this poem in
the voice of a plant addressing a rock, rather than the unnamed birder-poet (or watcher, or
excursionist figure) of other poems who often addresses an unidentified listener. Saxifrage, also
called rockfoil, is a fairly common plant native to subarctic, temperate regions. This saxifrage,
though, asks a lot of questions, including one about other plants that have attempted to grow on
the basalt: "How many fingerholds / have failed, been blown or washed away, unworthy / of
your dignified *avoirdupois*, your strict / hexagonal heart?" This song, this homage, sounds like a
love song as the saxifrage lauds "Monsieur Basalt" for being heavier with the past than "the
twentieth century." The saxifrage sounds, actually, quite similar to McKay's humble birder-poet,
especially during the poem's final lines in which it brings together several McKavian ideas in an
attempt to nudge the rock, respectfully, closer toward stone:
Listen, slow one
let me be your fool, let me sit
on your front porch in my underwear
and tell you risqué stories about death. Together
we will mix our dust and luck and turn ourself
into the archipelago of nooks.

More than simply a poet, the saxifrage is a geopoet whose words obviously “fumble in their attempts” to do the basalt justice. Willing to be the fool, to sit half-naked on a porch, the saxifrage must invent words to express its ecotonal position; the reflexive pronoun “ourself” simultaneously reveals the limitations of language and the creative desire to use language against itself as a method of checking its colonizing tendencies. Articulating an ecological relation, the saxifrage also expresses with the term “ourself” an awareness of individual ontology coeval with a group ontology. The self lives contemporaneously with a diverse, polyphonic community of organisms and other non-living matter within an “archipelago of nooks.” This saxifrage sings as if in response to William Rueckert’s question, at the conclusion of his experiment in ecocriticism, about how critics can “move from the community of literature to the larger biospheric community which ecology tells us . . . we belong to even as we are destroying it” (121). Singing is one way; playing the fool is another; doing both, as ravens, those quintessential northwest tricksters, often do, is still another.

In “Song for the Songs of the Common Raven” (S/S 27), McKay adds to his homage/ohmage repertoire of poems and extends some thoughts he has expressed about the poetry of Dylan Thomas, the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Much of what McKay identifies in Thomas’s craft manifests in McKay’s own poetry. Like Thomas, McKay “revels in puns and displaced clichés” and can “afford to be as rhetorical and even pompously oracular as he sometimes is, because the trickster’s tongue is in the poet’s cheek” (“Crafty” 376-77). I do not want to suggest that McKay has built a career attempting to mimic Thomas’s craftiness and
style; my purpose in introducing McKay's own criticism here is twofold: to acknowledge a continuity between his early thinking about the trickster in Thomas's poetry (a continuity that runs parallel to McKay's ongoing avian and geopoetics); and to highlight the possibility that an ecotone—between critical and creative writing in this case—need not observe a temporal proximity. The "smoke-and-whisky brogue" of the common raven resides in the Latin name, *Corvus corax*. In what has become typical McKavian fashion, these birds, despite the poem's title and its place among McKay's repertoire of "Songs for the songs of" various birds, the song of the raven "says nothing" of "its brutal seismic histories" and "conspicuously / does not sing" "of the flowing and bending of rock, / of the burning and going down and coming / up again as lava." What, then, does McKay—modern-day Halitherses, twenty-first century John Clare—learn from these ravens if not about the geopoetry which has formed the earth and informs the poems of *Strike/Slipl*? These ravens say many things, hence the plural "songs" in the title, and yet what they say "is hollowed out and rendered terminally / hoarse." The poet-birder does not reveal what he learns; he only guesses that the raven's messages "might / say 'Watch your asses, creatures / of the Neogene' or might say 'Baby, / bring it on.'" These ravens, older than humanity and wiser—not based on what they symbolize through story and myth but based on their evolutionary history on the west coast of North America—actively resist meaning. They tempt us—critics, writers, humans—to interpret their croaks and barks. They, like most other birds, can handle whatever we have to say, mostly because what we have to say in poems and essays has little or no effect on them. Insofar as our words might, as Susan Fisher suggests, inform "a way of thinking that permits overt forms of exploitation" (50), however, these ravens seem prepared for us to "bring it on."
FIGURES

Figure 1 has been removed because of copyright restrictions. For images of Blue and Steller’s Jays, see the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Blue_Jay.html and http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Stellers_Jay.html)

Fig. 1 Blue jay (left) vs. Steller’s jay (right).

Fig. 2 Pectoral girdle and sternum of pigeon. “The ventrally located supracoracoideus muscle raises the wing by means of a pulleylike tendon.” (From Gill *Ornithology* 96)

Fig. 3 “Rough sketch by Cayley of the first triplane, the ‘old flyer,’ 1849” (From Gibbs-Smith 46)
Lift

Air speeding past a bird's wing causes lift.

For more lift, a bird tilts its wings so the air flowing over it speeds up.

If a wing is tilted too high, the air cannot flow smoothly over the wing tops, and the bird will stall.

Fig. 4 Properties of Lift
(www.paulnoll.com/Oregon/Birds/flight-lift.jpg)

Fig. 5 Flight Muscle Arrangement
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Altricial</th>
<th>Precocial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eyes at hatching</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Absent or sparse</td>
<td>Present</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
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<td>Mobile</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Parents</td>
<td>Self-feeding</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Small (4-10% *of adult wt.)</td>
<td>Large (9-21%)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egg yolks</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain size</td>
<td>Small (3%)*</td>
<td>Large (4-7%)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small intestine</td>
<td>Large (10.3-14.5%)*</td>
<td>Small (6.5-10.5%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth rate</td>
<td>Fast (3-4 times precocial rate)</td>
<td>Slow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 6 Comparison of altricial and precocial modes of development. (From Gill *Ornithology* 432)

Fig. 7 Barn swallow in flight. (Photo by Russ Hansen; courtesy Martha Hansen) (http://www.birdsinflight.net/galleries/gal_2/th/lrg/gal2_3.html)
Fig. 8 Eskimo Curlew Migration. (From Gill, Canevari, and Iversen)
Fig. 9 Bushtit Nest, Vancouver. (photo taken by author; 2 June 2007)
Notes

1 I make reference to two of these dissertations at various times throughout my own dissertation: Nicholas Bradley’s “Ecology and Knowledge in the Poetry of Pacific North America” and Adam Dickinson’s “Lyric Ethics: The Matter and Time of Ecopoetry.”

2 Throughout his career, McKay has been nominated for the Governor General’s Award five times: for Birding, or desire (1983); Night Field (1991), for which he won; Apparatus (1997); Another Gravity (2000), for which he won; Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness (2002, nonfiction).


4 Richard Rorty discusses texts and lumps—“a division which corresponds roughly to things made and things found” (8)—in an attempt to call into question the lazy pseudo-philosophizing of literary theory in the early 1980s. He links, by way of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., texts and lumps to literary criticism and science, respectively, echoing Hirsch’s claim that: “the much-advertised cleavage between thinking in the sciences and the humanities does not exist” (qtd. in Rorty 8).

5 “Ecotone,” though already well-worn as a critical trope, has a way to go before becoming a metaphor as dead as “paradigm.” Thomas Kuhn developed the notion of paradigms in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. When Kuhn’s influential book was published in 1962, he claimed that “it remain[ed] an open question what parts of social science have yet acquired such paradigms [as he put forth] at all” (15). Paradigms and paradigmatic thinking have flourished in the humanities, and we too have borrowed from Kuhn’s scientific model to develop “models from which spring particular coherent traditions of . . . research” (10).

6 I acknowledge that all places contain a diverse array of interconnected species and materials, an ecological qualification that problematizes the notion of a “single” place.

7 “The Butterfly” first appeared in A.J.M. Smith’s foundational Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in 1960, though it was included later that year in Avison’s first book, Winter Sun. In A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, Donna Bennett and Russell Brown include the revised version, replete with Avison’s note. Bennett and Brown also add their own editorial note by providing biblical quotations Avison alludes to in her note and reprinting three lines from the second stanza, which Avison removed for the revised version. They justify this attention to the biblical aspect of the poem(s)—even though no such detailed attention is provided for the changed lines Avison herself notes—by claiming that “Avison’s revision of the original poem goes beyond correcting the ‘moth’ of the first version” (535). This impulse to push a reading of Avison’s poem (and of her revision) “beyond” the nominal correction, beyond, that is, the poet’s focus on the natural, lepidopteral world, strikes me as odd; it implies a resistance to appreciating poetry concerned with accurate knowledge of the natural world, especially if we consider the comment about Avison’s revisions alongside Bennett and Brown’s assessment, in the same anthology, of McKay’s status as a nature, or an eco, poet. McKay’s “intense responses to the natural world,” they write in the bio preceding his poems, “have brought him a reputation as an ecological poet, but it is more than just a depth of appreciation for nature that gives power to his writing” (861).

8 Mia Anderson makes the following statement while pursuing the “the implications of Avison’s struggle with modern astronomy” in Winter Sun: “The artist is notoriously lax about facts, but Avison is practically never scientifically inaccurate, a precision arrived at without recourse to poetic licence. (I mean to exclude her metaphors, façons de parler, from this licence)” (121). Ultimately, Anderson’s article remains within a Christian reading of Avison’s poetry. See also Margaret Calverley’s “‘Service is joy’: Margaret Avison’s Sonnet Sequence in Winter Sun.” For more on the ecological aspects of Avison’s poetry, see Robert James Merrett’s “Margaret Avison on Natural History: Ecological and Biblical Meditations” and Katherine M. Quincey’s “Our own little rollicking orb”: Divinity, Ecology, and Otherness in Avison,” both of which appear in a special issue of Canadian Poetry dedicated to essays on Avison’s poetry (no. 59, Fall/Winter 2006).

9 For an example of a poetry collection that engages the field of lepidoptery more fully than Avison, see a. rawlings’ Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists.


11 For an example of a literary critic—an ecocritic—focusing on the biological and ecological details of a single species, see Michael P. Cohen’s A Garden of Bristlecones: Tales of Change in the Great Basin (1998).
For a reading of evolution in early Canadian poetry, see Gerald Noonan’s “Phrases of Evolution in the Sonnets of Charles G.D. Roberts,” in which Noonan moves away from Desmond Pacey’s and W.J. Keith’s insistence on a Wordsworthian nature poetic as a measure of Roberts’ success as a poet.

As Phillips takes Glen Love to task for his “antitheoretical” stance, Murphy singles him out for his privileging of a type of nonfictional pastoralism (as opposed to the fiction Murphy privileges in his book) in the early stages of developing an ecocritical discipline. Small wonder that Love constitutes a more “positive” touchstone for my approach to ecocriticism as interdisciplinary strategy: that he has been both one of the most adamant critics in favour of ecocriticism and one of the most attacked for his particular biases solidifies in my mind his approach as the riskiest, and thus as the most potentially rewarding.

By conventional literary theory, I refer to a tendency to apply the ideas of theorists—Derrida, Foucault, Butler—to readings of novels, poems, and/or plays that do not necessarily invite such applications. I have in mind a stereotypical critical theorist who can “do” a Freudian analysis of, say, hiccups in any text in which hiccups occur, or who takes on the writerly idiosyncracies of, say, Derrida in an effort to “be” a Derridean critic. While I tend to resist such reading practices myself, I do not dismiss them outright; moreover, I acknowledge the problematic relation ecocritics historically have with postmodern, post-structuralist theory’s claim that there is no world without text. I hope to engage this difficulty, albeit not continuously, throughout my dissertation.

In the first place, though not necessarily in the last place, Coetzee suggests readers stop to consider the real-world correlation between literary animals and the animals they represent. This urging in no way endorses an end to metaphorical reading. Rather, Coetzee’s challenge to the critical tendency to read a text’s interpretive layers enables readers to reconsider animals’ (and, by extension, all nonhuman beings’) place in literature. If the animals themselves, or if human relations with them (whether through ‘realistic’ ethological observation or ‘unrealistic’ dialogue), point toward a repositioning of animals-as-Other, that is, as valid subjects for inclusion in, for example, postcolonial, political, and cultural discourses that have typically been reserved for humans, then perhaps reading strategies are getting closer to building an arc between two seemingly disparate theoretical approaches to literature.

Both Love and Carroll refer to the influence of I.A. Richards in this context; see especially Principles of Literary Criticism and Practical Criticism from which Love derives the title of his book.

One useful area of congruence between scientific and New Critical modes is reductionism. As E.O. Wilson writes in Consilience: “Critics of science sometimes portray reductionism as an obsessional disorder. . . . That characterization is an actionable misdiagnosis. . . . It is the search strategy employed to find points of entry into otherwise impenetrably complex systems. Complexity is what interests scientists in the end, not simplicity. Reductionism is a way to understand it” (54). One might also suggest that complexity is what interests New Critics, insofar as their focus on the ambiguity of modern poetry stems from “a close attention to the language of the text, to show a pattern of formal and thematic features that . . . [arguably] are fundamental to understanding the meaning of the work as a whole” (Searle 530). By way of reductionism, consider the epistemological value of starting with specifics and working outward to consider a host of contextual affiliations: a poem, a plant (Garry oak or purple loosestrife), a bird (pileated woodpecker or house sparrow), a cell (stem or blood).

D.M.R. Bentley bases his argument in The Gay?Grey Moose: Essays on the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry 1690-1990, an example of ecological literary criticism in Canada, on this distinction. Baseland is roughly equivalent to metropolitan/urban; Hinterland is roughly equivalent to rural. Ecology did not enter serious or popular discourse until late in the nineteenth century, despite Ernst Haeckel’s coining of the term oikology (from the Gk. oikos, house) in 1864.

Given at the opening of Sir Josiah Mason’s Science College on 1 October 1880.

The nature/culture debate is nearly parallel (contiguous) to the science/literature debate. Raymond Williams traces the etymologies of both terms in Keywords; Terry Eagleton picks up on Williams’ work, beginning The Idea of Culture (2000) by iterating the problematic yet similar etymological lineage of both terms: “‘Culture’ is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite—nature—is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all” (1; cf. Williams 87, 219). Both Williams and Eagleton acknowledge “culture’s” originary link to the biotic world, i.e., as in the practice of cultivating the soil (whence “agriculture,” “horticulture”), as well as each term’s etymological fealty to process as opposed to product.

Any quotations from “Science and Literature” are here taken from the revised version as reproduced in Buckler (1958).

2007 marks the 45th anniversary of Silent Spring’s publication. Not surprisingly, the anniversary has compelled some in the public eye to vilify Carson for her anti-DDT stance. See, for example, Margaret Wente’s column in the May 24 edition of the Globe and Mail, “Carson’s Toxic Legacy.”
Robert Bringhurst would disagree with me. In a recent review essay, Bringhurst takes exception to the way *Arbutus* has “not carried this vital process [of “taking books and stories, thoughts about books, and thoughts about reading and writing, back into the wild”] through as fully as it might have” (“The Critic” 106). Bringhurst’s desire to see “a deeper sense of personal immersion in the landscape and far more attention paid to the indigenous oral literatures of the Northwest” in Ricou’s book, though, reflects his desire for “the perfect critic” to have written it (106), a desire that surely must remain unfulfilled. “None of us,” he admits, “is going to qualify as perfect by [his] standard[s]” including himself: “The truly perfect critic would know the flora and fauna no less well than the books, and would be fluent in fifty or sixty ancestral languages indigenous to the Coast” (106). Granted, Bringhurst does find a few factual flaws in some of what Ricou writes, but I find his general criticisms ultimately shift from compelling to pedantic. The critique of the book Ricou has produced seems to ignore the process Ricou has attempted, a strategy with ecocritical as well as pedagogical implications.

For a recent example of efforts to enact fruitful collaboration between scientists and First Nations people see McDaniels, Healey, and Paisley.

While European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are now common across North America—thanks to Eugene Scheifflin, who endeavoured to introduce to the New World all the birds mentioned in the works of Shakespeare—and thus not unique to the west-coast, they are not common in BC’s hometown.

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25 “Birder,” as George Levine comments, is “the noun birders use to describe themselves. There is a related verb, ‘to bird,’ which I use a lot, and there’s a participial noun built from that verb, ‘birding,’ which is what most of the essays in this book are about.” (3).

26 Though European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are now common across North America—thanks to Eugene Scheifflin, who endeavoured to introduce to the New World all the birds mentioned in the works of Shakespeare—and thus not unique to the west-coast, they are not common in BC’s hometown.

27 While I am tempted to suggest “Rival Documentaries” anticipates ecocriticism, it actually appeared a year after the 1972 publication of Joseph Meeker’s influential book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. Meeker’s main argument is that the classical genres of tragedy and comedy influence a human tendency toward extinction and survival, respectively. Since comedy recognizes humans’ insignificance—and examines it to comic effect—it most adequately reflects a humility necessary to check our egotistical behaviour, which is in part responsible for environmental degradation. *The Comedy of Survival* has been substantially revised twice since 1972, with different subtitles: *In Search of an Environmental Ethic* in 1980; and *Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* in 1997. For a reading of Don McKay’s poetics by way of Meeker, see Sophia Forster’s “Don McKay’s Comic Anthropocentrism: Ecocriticism Meets ‘Mr. Nature Poet.’”

28 United Kingdom’s Reaktion Books recently began an Animal series consisting of nearly two dozen titles. The books, with such titles as *Ant, Bear, Cockroach, Crow, Falcon, Oyster, Rat, Salmon, Tiger,* and *Whale,* purport to offer an examination of individual species and their cultural and natural place in human history. Other recent books provide historical and cultural context for relatively nondescript birds (*Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World’s Most Revered and Reviled Bird* by Andrew D. Blechman and *Hunting the Wren: Transformation of Bird to Symbol* by Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence).

29 Battalio focuses primarily on *The Auk,* American ornithology’s major journal, and the shifting methodologies and rhetorical strategies in the published articles. Between 1890 and 1930, for example, bird subjects were observed in the field no less than 40% of the time; by the 1970s, however, that number falls to below 5%. In contrast, the use of theoretical systems, mathematics, and complex models increases from 2% in 1890 to 10% in 1970, peaking at 85% in the 1990s (73).


31 As Cheryll Glotfelty notes in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader,* ASLE was formed in 1992 at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association (WLA). Within a year, ASLE had elected its first president (Scott Slovic), hosted its first conference (in St. Collins), and inspired its first journal (*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, edited by Patrick Murphy): “ecological literary criticism had emerged as a recognizable critical school” with “more than twenty years” of “critical approach” informing its “consolidation” (Glotfelty xviii).

32 This approach contrasts sharply with the practice of killing birds in order to identify, categorize, and study them. Beer’s publications include *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) and *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (1996).

33 Realism, of course, is both impossible to achieve and naïve to attempt, according to Dana Phillips and others who criticize an ecocritical emphasis on a world that exists prior to language. Buell, Phillips’ main object of critique, acknowledges the difficulties inherent in attempting “environmental representation” (*Future* 31) while maintaining an interest in the relational tensions between words and world. My own interest in specificity has less to do with McKay’s mimetic propensity (or lack thereof) and more to do with an impulse, situated in a poetry always already
impelled by ecological patterns and biological data, to pay as much attention to the world outside as to the worlds inside texts.

35 As Michael Healey, the scientist on my committee affirms, physics, geology, and chemistry are physical sciences while biology is a natural science.

36 As Edmund Harting’s and Pierre Morency’s books suggest, and Robert Bringhurst’s translations of Haida masterworks reveals, intriguing avian literatures in languages other than English flourish just beyond the edge of my dissertation.

37 Harting titles his introduction “Shakespeare’s General Knowledge of Natural History” and follows in subsequent chapters with: “The Eagle and Larger Birds of Prey”; “Hawks and Hawking”; “The Owl and Its Associations”; “The Crows and Their Relations”; “The Birds under Domestication”; “The Game-Birds and ‘Quarry’ Flown at by Falconers”; “Wild-Fowl and Sea-Fowl”; and “Birds Not Included in the Foregoing Chapters” (xix-xxii)

38 See, for example, Gilbert White’s The Natural History of Selborne (1789) and Thomas Bewick’s A History of British Birds (1826).

39 Ecology of knowledge refers to the bare minimum of information—regarding the senses, weather, food, shelter, danger—all species have in order to survive, or at least to compete for resources. Ecology of knowledge also refers to the wide range of knowledges available to the student/scholar of collaborative research.

40 Cartlidge also acknowledges the role of the beast-fable in forming a context within which The Owl and the Nightingale was likely produced. He supports this hypothesis, in part, by observing that “the birds themselves make use of fables as a tactic in the debate” (xxxiii).

41 The phrase recognizes the “world” as a verb as well as a noun; thus, attempting the world is akin to attempting the rapids, attempting the jump, or attempting the climb, with all the attendant risks such attempts entail.

42 One recent example, other than Wilson and Bowen’s subtitle Bridging the Two Cultures, is Semiotics as a Bridge between Humanities and the Sciences, especially Thomas Sebeok’s contribution. Sebeok privileges the “image of a bridge, envisioning, as it were, a tertium quid, a sort of linking entity or chainlike substance, even of living bodies which army ants sometimes intertwine seemingly to enable, say, silverfish traversing from ‘hereabouts’ to ‘yonder,’ to cross over a chasm” (Perron 76-77). Although Sebeok’s entomological metaphor is compelling at first glance, even he admits its fundamental imprecision since ants do not actually construct bridges to cross over obstacles. Even so, I maintain a bridge is neither the proper metaphor nor the proper structure for the science and literature debate.

43 Goldbarth posits Wordsworth’s claim that Davy’s “scientific pursuits had hurried his mind into a course where I could not follow him” in sharp contrast to the Romantic’s earlier suggestion that “The remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist will be as proper objects of the poet’s art as any” (qtd. in Goldbarth x).

44 A Quark for Mister Mark: 101 Poems about Science (Riordan and Turney, eds. Faber 2001) and Wild Reckoning: An Anthology Provoked by Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (Riordan and Burnside, eds. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation 2004).

45 Of the 81 poems in Birding, or Desire, two are from Air Occupies Space, one is from Long Sault, two are from Lependu, and twenty-six are from Lightning Ball Bait (though the acknowledgements in Birding only claim twenty-five).

46 In Camber: Selected Poems, 1983-2000, “Field Marks (2),” renamed “Field Marks,” opens the collection while the original “Field Marks,” renamed “Field Marks (2),” appears later. This switch, which suggests a renewed favouritism for the birding strategies explored in the original “Field Marks (2),” appears to coincide with McKay’s developing avian poetics between 1983 and 2000. Although Mégira Cook returns the poems to their original titles in her recent selection of McKay’s poetry, she acknowledges their significance by naming the collection Field Marks: The Poetry of Don McKay.

47 W.H. New writes of lists in “Writing Here”: “treasure (or maybe junk) collection goes by other names: bibliophilia, for example, or lexicography, or life writing. I came to understand that it’s the collecting that matters, the making of lists, and therefore the category of use (‘what use is it?’ some people ask, whether of plastic souvenirs, or pearls, or poetry) and to reclaim it for creativity and value” (5).

48 Or forest, or littoral zone, or garden — if only to appreciate interrelations taking place between species; many gardeners likely care very little for the science of plants.

49 Indeed, the majority of published articles on McKay’s writing focus on his use of metaphor (See especially Bushell, Dickinson, Dragland, Fisher).

50 Though it is rare and obscure, abide as a noun means the same as abode: a dwelling place, a place to remain. As a verb, abide means to wait, a meaning which abode, as a noun, also implies, albeit obscurely.
I am tempted to give Jean Chretien and Donald Rumsfeld (or the latter’s speech writer) more credit for their well-known speeches about evidence (“a proof is a proof”) and intelligence (“there are known knowns, and known unknowns”), respectively; perhaps they have both read Don McKay.

This notion of absence, or whiteness, begetting creativity as a method of overcoming absence is borrowed from P.K. Page’s poem “Stories of Snow” (Planet 161-62), which privileges the telling of stories in a snow-laden place, like Canada (although the poem itself, like many of Page’s poems, is set in Brazil). The narrator of the poem states:

In countries where the leaves are large as hands
where flowers protrude their fleshy chins
and call their colours,
an imaginary snow-storm sometimes falls
among the lilies. (161)

In some respect, as one can gather from her title, Page’s poem is about, in part, storytelling. It marks a line (perhaps imaginary) between the obvious, unimaginative “countries where great flowers bar the roads” and “the area behind the eyes / where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies.” There is an irony inherent in Page’s mention of the “silent, unrefractive whiteness” that posits a sound on the other side of silence, reflection on the other side of unrefraction, and colour on the other side of whiteness. Reinforcing this creative irony in Hodgins’ Innocent Cities, Kate mentions in a letter to her sister in Australia that her husband is away for an indefinite period of time: “so,” she says, “I have decided to fill up his absence with writing to you” (219).

In attempting to recommend some books to act as “a companion to the world” during midsummer, Campbell suggests Americans Washington Irving, Donald G. Mitchell (aka Ike Marvell), Maurice Thompson, and John Burroughs; and Norse writer Björnstjerne (111-112).

Foremost among Bentley’s assumptions in his book, though it is hardly his alone, is the assumption that “despite its geographical diversity and lack of a formal manifesto, the group did have a centre, a credo, and a duration,” enough to warrant their historical and critical status as a group (Bentley 5). However, as W.H. New states in A History of Canadian Literature, “[t]hey constitute a ‘group’ more for the purposes of literary classification than for any shared cause, though they were all shaded by the late-Victorian romanticism of Tennyson and the American Transcendentalists” (114).

A glance at an 1865 issue of The Canadian Farmer, for example, reveals the following exchange between a letter-writer and the magazine’s editor: “A WORK ON CANADIAN BIRDS WANTED—‘N.A.P.’ writes as follows.— ‘You would confer a favour if you would inform me, through your valuable paper, if there is any standard work published, in Toronto, on Canadian birds and their eggs, or on the latter only. If so, how can I obtain it? Please answer as soon as possible, as this is the season for birds to build.’

‘ANS.—There is no Canadian work published on the subject alluded to. Audubon’s celebrated work is, however, quite applicable to this country, but it is costly. ‘Wilson’s American Ornithology’ is a cheap octavo work, but we do not know if it is kept in stock by Canadian booksellers” (168).

One hundred years prior to At the Mermaid Inn, in 1792, Alexander Mackenzie wrote about his encounter with unfamiliar, local birds:

I was very much surprised on walking in the woods at such an inclement period of the year, to be saluted with the singing of birds, while they seemed by their vivacity to be actuated by the invigorating power of a more genial season. Of these birds the male was something less than the robin; part of his body is of a delicate fawn colour, and his neck, breast, and belly, of a deep scarlet; the wings are black, edged with fawn colour, and two white stripes running across them; the tail is variegated, and the head crowned with a tuft. The female is smaller than the male, and of a fawn colour throughout, except on the neck, which is enlivened by an hue of glossy yellow. I have no doubt but they are constant inhabitants of this climate, as well as some other small birds which we say, of a grey colour. (134)

In his article about nature writing in The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature, Christoph Irmscher suggests the birds Mackenzie describes are “most likely pine grosbeaks” (95).

Thanks to Mike Healey for suggesting this analogy between hypothesis and metaphor.

According to the University of Wisconsin Press website, the Science and Literature series is closed. In print: The Nuclear Muse by John Canaday; One Culture by George Levine; Natural Eloquence by Barbara T. Gates; Gaston Bachelard, Subversive Humanist by Mary McAlister Jones; Seeing New Worlds by Laura Dassow Walls; The Word of God and the Languages of Man by James J. Bono; Science in the New Age by David J. Hess; Sexual Visions by Ludmilla Jordanova; Fact and Feeling by Jonathan Smith.
I am not marking a distinction between tactic and strategy in the way Michel de Certeau does in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. I am interested in the way Levine’s use of “tactic” interconnects with an interdisciplinary notion of “strategy.”

The passage from *Walden* reads as follows; “I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do. We may waive just so much care of ourselves as we honestly bestow elsewhere. Nature is as well adapted to our weakness as our strength. The incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well nigh incurable form of disease” (266). This strikes me as a good place to stop and consider one way in which birders and hunters are more closely aligned than many contemporary natural historians would like to acknowledge. John James Audubon, among other naturalists, achieved his popular representations of birds by killing them by the hundreds, placing metal wire inside the dead bodies, and positioning them in “realistic” poses. By contrast, the “meditative medicine” McKay prescribes by way of thinking about “otherwise than place,” resembles “[s]omething like a modification of the practice of fishing from trophy hunting to meat acquisition to catch-and-release” (*DW* 19).

Chris Cokinos’s book, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, which I will not discuss in detail, is a natural history of six extinct species of bird (including the recently spotted Ivory-billed woodpecker; last seen in 1935). Cokinos is aware of how important it is to include science as well as material that might be considered to be more conventional for a creative writer: “Perhaps unlike a professional historian and more like the poet I have been, I have found myself drawn to the oddments, the margins, so that a cookbook’s reference to Passenger Pigeon pie looms as importantly in this book as, say, logging statistics. A settler’s account of how Carolina Parakeets in sycamore reminded him of Christmas in Germany—that matters to memory as much as facts of biology” (3).

Penguins have solid bones; some flying birds, such as cormorants and loons, also have solid bones to help them dive underwater for food.

Actually, airplane wings must “give” a little, as well, although pilots of most planes do not have the ability to control a wing’s fundamental shape beyond manipulating flaps and ailerons.

To be fair, Fisher acknowledges that Leonard Scigaj appropriated the term first, in his discussion of A.R. Ammons’ *Garbage* in *Sustainable Poetry*.

I think the critic Quammen means is Harold Bloom.

Given the relatively low number of avian species (approximately 10,000) compared to other evolutionary classes, birds do not seem to be overly successful. Although approximately 5,000 species of mammal exist, approximately 40,000 species of crustaceans, 70,000 species of mollusk, 100,000 species of fungi, 280,000 species of plants, and over 1,000,000 species of insects have been identified.

Strictly speaking, birds are of the kingdom animalia, the phylum chordate (with a backbone), and class aves (bird). Class aves is organized (currently) into 23 orders and over 220 families.

Still, as is a name as much as “Harebell,” “Naked // Mitrewort,” “Pale // Corydalis, Bluebead Lily, Starflower, Butterwort” and “Gay Wings” (9, 11); the hiker does not, despite having access to a “flower book,” resort to the Latinate when identifying these flora.

Thanks to Laura Moss for pointing this out.

According to W.J. Brown, “[t]he art [of augury] died out slowly, as people became more educated, and Christianity helped to kill it” (136). Ironically, environmentalists such as Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* might be closer to the augurs of that past. In lamenting the increasing absence of bird species Carson and her acolytes have been (and continue) observing and predicting the decline of avian and hominoid life on earth.

This is not, as one critic suggests, one of McKay’s neologisms, though it comes close. Snickersnack is the sound made by the “vorpal blades” in Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky.” I suppose turning a neologistic noun into a verb is a form of neologism.

See “L’Hirondelle” (B 29), “Dreamskaters” (B 48), and “Alibi” (A 19) for other references to swallows.

The nearly identical, though slightly larger Cooper’s hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) and the northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentiles*) are the other two raptors in the genus *Accipiter*. Cooper’s weigh 450g; goshawks, 950g. While *Long Sault* and *Lependu* are McKay’s only book-length long poems, he has continued to include shorter long poems in many of his books. These pieces often include passages of prose poetry and occasionally reflect the surrealism identified by Davey. See “Standing Down this Rocking Chair on a Windy Night” (SD 29-44); “Bone Poems” (NF 27-35); “Matériel” (A 37-48); and “Five Ways to Lose Your Way” (*DW* 85-93). Actually, this last poem was published as a chapbook (in an edition of 75 copies) by Jack Pine Press in 2004, prior to the publication of *Deactivated West 100*. The chapbook includes illustrations designed by McKay and Dorothy Field, and comes with a piece of orange tape used by loggers to denote a “Falling Boundary.”
The American Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) series of “After School Specials” began showing an hour-long animated version of Last of the Curlews in 1972. Produced by Hanna-Barbera Productions, it was the first of many “After School Specials” dedicated “to encourage in children a sense of awareness and curiosity about the world they live in,” according to a blurb on the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center website.

McKay returns to Villon’s “classic statement” regarding “the idea of oblivion,” “Mais ou sont les neiges d’antan,” in “Otherwise than Place” (DW 13-31). In characteristic fashion, McKay applies Villon’s question, “which is presumed to be rhetorical” to a hike along “the trail up to the Bow Glacier in Banff National Park” (23). Such a hike would take one “through the boulder field and across the recessional moraine” to the foot of the glacier where, McKay argues, “These neiges are truly vintage d’antan, dating back to the Wisconsin glaciation,” and Villon’s question is rendered “obviously not rhetorical” (23).

Sowestio is the geographic area, Southwestern Ontario, where McKay lived and taught when he began his career as teacher and poet.

This is one of many common names for the red-winged blackbird (Agelius phoeniceus).

Cook mistakenly writes coefficiency when she should have written coefficient. The former means cooperation; the latter, when combined with drag, refers to an equation used to measure “the relative ‘dragginess’ of differently shaped objects independent of size” (Alexander 15). “The beauty of the drag coefficient,” according to David Alexander, “is that it is dimensionless: the numerator and denominator are both forces, so the units cancel” (15). I imagine this dimensionlessness is of immense poetic interest to McKay.

For a discussion of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus as postcolonial allegory in Canadian context, see Eva-Marie Kröller’s “Fear of Flying? The Myth of Daedalus and Icarus in Canadian Culture.”

Subsequent conversations have confirmed sightings of roosting crows just south of Highway 1, as well.

See Jerome A. Jackson’s In Search of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker, updated after the controversial rediscovery.

Field Notes was a quarterly published jointly by the National Audubon Society and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. It is now a section of Audubon Magazine.

I say were being silenced as a concession to the changes put in place to help restore songbird populations following the publication of Carson’s book. All, however, is not well in the avian world, as Bridget Stuchbury makes clear in her latest book, an updated version of Silent Spring, which Wayne Grady calls “a thoroughly researched and elegantly written call to arms” (D10).

Both large-billed and lesser seed finches compete (“ramp” or “race”) in Guyana. The lesser seed finch (Oryzoborus angolensis) is known locally as towa towa. Cf. http://www.iwokrama.org/business/songbirds.htm.
An indication of the political and cultural climate during which Rowland was writing *Birds with Human Souls* in 1978, this reference to the wonders of free-market capitalism resonates with insidious implications given this Moscovian bird market's twenty-first century associations with bird flu. *The Moscow Times* reported in February 2007 that "[v]eterinary workers wearing masks and white protective suits carted off refuse and burned it [...] inside the quarantined section of the popular Bird Market" in response to "an outbreak of the deadly H5N1 strain of avian flu" (Delany 4).

I shall resist the temptation to develop a further connection here between Glavin's phrase "astonishing capacity" and McKay's notion, introduced in *Deactivated West 100* and *Strike/Slip*, of "astonishment" as a contemporary version of the sublime. Much of McKay's later writing shifts from his earlier focus on "wilderness," birds, and eco-poetry—though each is still an integral component of his poetics—to astonishment, rock stone, and geopoetry. I examine this shift in my concluding chapter.

The phrase, "we shall be changed," echoes the biblical verse from 1 Corinthians 15:51,52: "Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

Ratting Books, an audio book publisher from Canada's east coast, has published a collection of McKay’s poems (read by the author) along with snippets of birdsong: *Songs for the Songs of Birds* (2007). Unfortunately, the book was not available by the time I completed my dissertation.

Although “Song for Wild Phlox” and “Song for Beef Cattle” appear in two different collections, they share a connection to Hamlet’s soliloquy, to which McKay alludes in the latter poem:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (1.2, 129-37)

The pun on a dew/adieu takes on a different meaning in a poem about beef cattle preparing for slaughter (decidedly not “self-slaughter”); moreover, the idea of the world as an unweeded garden, which rank and gross things (humans) merely possess, is in keeping with Bringhurst’s notion, oft repeated in McKay’s poetics, of “knowing not owning.”
Beef cattle are usually cross-bred over successive generations to “produce an animal with faster growth rates, heavier carcass weights, an improved ratio of lean carcass meat to fat, maximum fertility, improved lactation, and greater stress tolerance compared to the two contributing base breeds,” as is the case with Beefmaker cattle, raised in New South Wales. Cf. http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/cattle/.

I have deliberately avoided discussing the ways in which McKay, as poet, might be construed as birdlike in his “songs” because the notion of becoming bird, like other arguments, lies just beyond the edge of my dissertation. I am content at this point to acknowledge that these poems, as representative of the non-bird poems of McKay’s repertoire, never add to an understanding of McKay’s avian poetics.

Grandin’s claim also looks back to Paul Shepard’s claim in Thinking Animals, that human song “may even have evolved from the avian example as prehuman groups moved toward group consciousness and cultural diversity” (74).

In The Natural Science of the Human Species, Konrad Lorenz suggests that “one 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?” (260).

This is not to suggest that these texts articulate formulae for (re)solving speciesist, racist, colonial problems; rather, they articulate a mode of questioning categories that remain prevalent in the Western imagination.

Though literary and cultural studies have been taking the question of the animal quite seriously in the past decade or so, birds are rarely considered. In the two special issues of Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature on animals in literature, for example (vols. 39.4 and 40.1), only one article deals with birds. Masood Ashraf Raja’s “The King Buzzard: Bano Qudsia’s Postnational Allegory and the Nation-State,” as the title suggests, reads an international conference of the birds in Qudsia’s Urdu novel as an allegory for “the national and postnational tendencies of the Islamic world in general and Pakistan in particular” (95).

The extent to which this earlier shift can be considered complete is also debatable. Assuming oral cultures are necessarily primitive or birds are not a part of a cultural soundscape, for example, ignores complex questions regarding the persistence of oral storytelling and the possibility that “[h]umans, like birds, are able to make songs and pass them on” (Brinhurst “Poetry” 163).

See also Lopez’s essay, “The Passing Wisdom of Birds” (Crossing 193-208), in which he recounts Spanish conquistador, Hernando Cortés’ destruction of Mexican aviaries in 1519.

See William Gaver’s essay, “What in the World Do We Hear? An Ecological Approach to Auditory Event Perception” for his distinction between “musical listening”—paying attention to the “pitch and loudness” of a sound, for example—and “everyday listening”—“the experience of listening to events rather than sounds” (1). Gaver is interested in developing a way to determine how humans distinguish between these two types of listening, and is particularly curious about how everyday listening functions: how, for example, do we identify the location, size, and direction of a thing—such as a car—that makes a sound?

I borrow these notions from Yuki, who develops them through her reading of Barry Lopez’s work: “If an imposition is an act of refueling what is established,” she writes, “proposition is an effort to break down the established, to disturb the existing systems, and to create a common ground on which to start developing a sustainable relationship with the other. As it is epitomized in the expression ‘What do you think of this?’” proposition involves a physical . . . gesture of listening” (30). In short, the difference between impositional and propositional understanding recapitulates the difference between imposing and proposing ideas.

McKay’s choice of modifier offers a nice contrast to Wordsworth’s use of the verb “peopled” to describe birdsong filling the air.

A notable attempt to complicate the singularity of voice typically at work in conventional poetry is evident in Dennis Lee’s notion of polyphony and in Robert Brinhurst’s innovative polyphonic texts. Simply put—for the sake of concision: Lee’s polyphony is anything but simple—for Lee, “[p]olyphony in writing is the art of orchestrating successive voices across a work”; “It moves from one tonality to another, and on through consecutive voices” (Body 54). Brinhurst offers a slightly more practical definition in “Singing with the Frogs”: it is “singing more than one song, playing more than one tune, telling more than one story, at once” (114). In numerous works, Brinhurst enacts polyphony by utilizing typographic and print technologies to produce text on a single page meant to be read/performe by multiple voices. See especially “The Blue Roofs of Japan: A Duet for Interpenetrating Voices” (Calling 169-79); “New World Suite No. 3: Four Movements for Three Voices” (Calling 181-230); and Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers & Dancers.

See Ronald P. Morrison, “Wilderness and Clearing: Thoreau, Heidegger, and the Poetic,” which offers a good reading of how the clearing functions in nature writing, albeit one that suggests “[b]eing a seer even takes precedence over being a writer” (149).
Note that Lampman also has a sonnet with the same title not discussed here.

This scene both echoes and contradicts a scene in Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada*. Traill names with precision a number of tree species—"pines, cedars, hemlock, and balsam firs"—as she "enjoy[s] a walk in the woods of a bright winter day" (127). Like Lampman after her, Traill notices stumps that "look quite pretty, with their turbans of snow; [and] a blackened pine-stump, with its white cap and mantle" (128). Unlike Lampman, however, who refers to the mullein stalks he sees in the clearing as "hermit folk, who long ago, / Wandering in bodies to and fro, / Had chanced upon this lonely way" (142), Traill writes that Canada "is too matter-of-fact [a] country for such supernaturals to visit. . . . No Druid claims our oaks" (128).

Although the title "Après Chainsaw" does not appear until its publication in *Strike/Slip*, I will use the title when referring to the poem as it appears in *Deactivated West 100*.

Two other poems in *Deactivated West 100* deal explicitly with the logging industry: "Five Ways to Lose Your Way" (83-93), about the poet-speaker getting lost while searching for an old "Vulcan 0-4-0 saddle tank locomotive that rumour has it is up [. . .] on the ridge turning into a humped hill" (85); and "Waiting for Shay" (75-82; *S/S* 19-21), about the Shay locomotive, which was prevalent on the railroads of Vancouver Island and was "Four-fifths animal," the "brand-new neolithic monster for the job" of clearing the land of trees (*DW&l*). For more on logging poetry and the logging industry in general, including a more detailed history of the chainsaw, see the following: Laurie Ricou’s "Woodswords File" and "Afterfile: Woodswords" (117-36, 194-99); McKay’s "Foreword" to British Columbia’s best-known "logger poet" Peter Trower’s *Haunted Hills & Hanging Valleys: Selected Poems 1969-2004*; John Vaillant’s *The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness and Greed*; and David Lee’s *Chainsaws: A History*.

Aside from the adding the title, McKay makes two minor changes to the poem as it appears in *Strike/Slip*: "the hammered air" on line 4 becomes "the bludgeoned air," suggesting in the later version a more insidious action with murderous implications; and the margin at line 17—"What I want to say is"—moves from left-justified to five spaces (or one tab) indented.

This drumming is produced by the grouse’s rapidly beating wings. Sibley’s description supports McKay’s "subliminal" modifier: "this low-pitched ‘drumming’ is often felt rather than heard" (146).

In biological terms, that is, metaplasm refers to the contents of a cell other than the protoplasm, to the dead rather than the living material, to the unclear rather than the clear.

Both "public" and "publication" share an etymological link with the Latin *publicus*, to make public, of the people.

As McKay has benefited from readers attending to his work over the years, so have others benefited from his listening. In his foreword to *Don McKay: Essays on his Works*, Brian Bartlett compiles a list—"far from complete"—of twenty-seven poets who thank McKay in the acknowledgements section of their books, including Ken Babstock, Roo Borson, George Elliott Clarke, Barry Dempster, Sue Goyette, A.F. Moritz, Sue Sinclair, John Steffler, and Anne Simpson (9-10). Looking forward to a time when McKay’s "role not only as poet, but also as editor, mentor, and friend" will inform an "appreciation of McKay’s place in Canadian poetry," Bartlett suggests that McKay "may be the most valued poetry-editor in Canada" (9-10).

*Matériel*, defined as the material portion of art and as a term for the collective machinery and supplies for the army, becomes for McKay an extreme version of death: "Unmortality Incorporated" (*V* 48). Thus, the site of the first hydrogen-bomb test, the Pacific atoll Elugelab, is decimated and has "No shadow. All day / it is noon it is no one. All day’" (48). The metaplasmic play between "noon" and "no one" here recognizes *matériel* as a severe form of biological metaplasm: not simply the dead, granular material that takes on meaning based on its negative relation to life, to protoplasmic transparency, but the human "rage for immortality" that results in the "denial of death altogether, as in the case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition" (*V* 20). This, for McKay, is the supreme marker of Western civilization’s arrogance; it is anti-ecological, anti-poetic.

See "A Barbed Wire Fence Meditates Upon the Goldfinch" (*B* 95), which McKay writes in the "voice" of barbed wire and begins by addressing an ambiguous listener:

More than the shortest distance
between points, we are
the Stradivarius of work.
We make the meadow meadow, make it
mean, make it yours.

Scholarly examples include Scottish poet Robert Crawford’s *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, American ecocritic Glen Love’s *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*, and Canadian ecocritic Laurie Ricou’s forthcoming *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*; poetic examples in Canada
include Adam Dickinson’s Kingdom, Phylum, Don McKay’s Strike/Slip, and angela rawlings’ wide slumber for lepidopterists.

In addition to this historical comparison, I would also like to see McKay’s work compared with more contemporary poets whose avian poetics merit more study: Mary Oliver, Jorie Graham, Robert Adamson.

McKay has written a number of “Meditations” throughout his career, beginning with Night Field: “Meditation on Blue” (NF 14); “Meditation in an Uncut Cornfield, November” (NF 42); “Meditation on Shovels” (NF 47); “Meditation on Snow Clouds Approaching the University from the Northwest” (NF 60); and “Meditation on Antique Glass” (A 61). In his interview with Ken Babstock, McKay acknowledges the influence of Dennis Lee and Al Purdy on his meditations, in which he claims to enact a “process of thinking inside language with a lyric sensibility…Instead of the perfect lyric gesture, the meditation is a little more prosy, a little more moosey-faced” (56).

As McKay also acknowledges, Hess himself borrowed the term from geophysicist J.H.F. Umbgrove, who coined “geopoetry” as “an approbative term for creative speculation” (Oreskes 1038).

Also resonant in this context is Simone Weil’s notion of “decreation,” which McKay glosses in his “geopoetic alphabet”: “Decreation calls for attention to release its grip on fixed principles, to risk radical not-knowing without succumbing to the seductive currents which go by the name of nihilism” (38). The “subduction of one plate under another,” which often results in the melting of ancient rock into magma, represents, for McKay, a “decreative feature of the rock cycle” (38–39). See also Anne Carson’s Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera.


Both James McKusick and Gabriele Helms acknowledge Davies as the originator of “ecolect.” According to Helms, Davies, in Wordsworth and the Worth of Words, introduced “[t]he concept of ‘ecolect’ as a language ‘variation peculiar to a particular household, or kin group’” and McKusick expanded the term in his essay about John Clare, as he “considers the whole earth as the household or home” (47).

This poem reminds me of another of Ken Babstock’s poems in Mean that engages with a McKavian listening and homage/ohmage. Babstock reveals an attention to subtle, slow movement in “To Lichen” (56). Again an observer, the poet describes lichen as “Something’s remains refused / by death, learning to spread” (56). Lichen’s movement indicates the way Lee wants to read free-verse poetry; not as a linear movement but as a dissemination in all directions, a stretching across space and time that also enacts a listening, as in these lines that further describe lichen as “Scrapings off rock’s / inner ear that’s heard epochs / in sound wave striating a sheer / face —” (56). The parallel streaks—striations—of epochal time that lichen articulates while spreading out parallel Lee’s “forward/lateral action” which “occurs when one energy propels the poem down the page— and gets . . . transected, deformed by a series of lateral gusts. . . . The effect is to make us experience two or more energies at once” (216). Outside language, energies are rarely experienced singularly. The “sound wave striating a sheer / face,” furthermore, echoes the wolf’s identification of himself as “scree-slope,” effectively drawing an analogy between wolf and sound wave. Wolf’s howl, as it resonates across the meadow toward the town’s “Storm of sound” (54), echoes “out of the valley” to mingle with “lichen-hooded / granite” (53). Paradoxically, the poet requires language to reveal his attention to what lies beyond language. This paradox further enacts an ecology of listening that incorporates the poem’s aurality, nurtured at least nominally by McKay’s editorial ear, with the poem’s eventual public/published existence.

McKay completed his PhD at the University of Wales (1971).
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## APPENDIX – BIRD INDEX

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* I am basing this entry on the lines “waiting for the black-capped // nothing-at-all to flirt up / perch on my finger.” Both the black-capped vireo (Vireo atricapillus) and the black-capped petrel (Pterodroma hasitata) are unlikely possibilities: the former, while slightly smaller than the black-capped chickadee, resides in Texas and Mexico (Sibley 346); the latter, while geographically proximal to New Brunswick, where McKay was living at the time Night Field was published, with a 16” long with a 37” wingspan (Sibley 35; weight is unknown), can hardly be called a “nothing-at-all.”