

Rocking Cosmopolitanism: Don McKay, *Strike/Slip*, and the Implications of Geology

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A LIST OF CANADIAN POETS OF THE LAST HALF CENTURY whose work exemplifies cosmopolitan tendencies would likely not hold Don McKay's name at the top. Critics of his ten poetry collections and two essay collections have chiefly understood McKay's work within the context of ecopoetics and post-Romantic thinking (see, for example, Alanna F. Bondar, Adam Dickinson, and Sophia Forster). This is understandable; however, his poetic and non-fictional meditations on non-human nature, and especially geology, have provocative implications for contemporary cosmopolitanism discourse and suggest an unexplored link between two scholarly fields pertinent to his work. In order to elucidate these broader implications of his writing, and to thereby balance the current critical appraisal of McKay as nature poet par excellence, a view that risks underestimating those broader implications, it is first necessary to clarify the salient characteristics of cosmopolitanism.

At present, there is little scholarly consensus on what cosmopolitanism entails—does it describe a mere familiarity with world cultures; does it describe the real experience of postnationalism, of international travel and migration; is it primarily an aesthetic, an ethic, or both? Besides this semantic difficulty, however, the more obvious reason for McKay's position

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on my hypothetical list of cosmopolitan poets is that, unlike some others such as Irving Layton, Gary Geddes, and Michael Ondaatje, McKay rarely takes a sustained look at other (human) cultures in his verse. It is rare that he publishes poems that start and end in a “foreign” culture, and instead of populating his work with fleshed-out humans, he more often focuses on the natural world, self identifying as a nature poet in essays like “Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home and Nature Poetry” and “The Bushtits’ Nest” (*Vis à Vis* 2001) and in his 2001 interview with Ken Babstock. The question then becomes whether nature poetry necessarily precludes a sophisticated engagement with ideas from around the world and, more specifically, relevance for cosmopolitanism discourse. When McKay’s poet-speaker explores his interaction with the otherness of nature, grappling with challenging epistemological and ontological issues, does the absence of other in-the-flesh people in the poem negate the mental expansiveness displayed? The answer, of course, is no. In fact, McKay’s poetics, especially as it is focused in his recent collection, *Strike/Slip* (2006), winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize, offers a valuable reconception of global connectivity based on a shared link to geology, a link that cuts across (or beneath) cultures and which is mutually supportive of his ethics of appropriation.

The task of identifying the implications of McKay’s poetry for cosmopolitan discourse, aside from what might appear as his “un cosmopolitan” content, is also complicated by his consistently ironic and playful tone (see Forster) and by his “self-effacing poetic persona” (Cook ix). This trademark humility, playfulness, and eschewing of appropriation is identified by numerous commentators on his work, such as Brian Bartlett, Kevin Bushell, Méira Cook, Forster, Ross Leckie, Travis Mason, and McKay himself, and it makes difficult the isolation and generalization of his philosophical positions from his poems. Typically, his self-conscious poet-speakers either attempt to limit impositions on the world observed, which includes limiting any prescriptive philosophizing, or else they fail in their appropriations in such a way that McKay’s disapproval becomes clear. The poet, writes Travis Mason, “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” (88). This reverence and humility, often conveyed through self-deprecating humour, may also explain why McKay is hesitant to explicitly extend the implications of his ecological ethics to the realm of human interaction. Yet, close reading of his poems, especially those in *Strike/Slip*, and his essays reveals that his ideas can change the way we understand the interconnection of diverse cultures, and therefore the

concept of cosmopolitanism, by providing a spatial conceptualization of that connection and an ethics.

The resurgence of interest in cosmopolitanism in the last twenty years was prompted by rapidly advancing information technology and rapidly increasing human-induced environmental damage, both of which continue to force diverse cultural groups to rethink their interconnectedness. The phenomena of global terrorism and the proliferation of transnational corporations are also responsible for causing a renewal of interest in cosmopolitanism. Hence, theorists like Amanda Anderson and Jacques Derrida call us to look again at the concept and see what can be learned by tracing its impulses back to earlier philosophical approaches to theorizing multiculturalism and human interconnection generally. Anderson puts the theory in its simplest terms: “[C]osmopolitanism endorses reflective distance from one’s cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity” (267), and her definition is in keeping with the entry for “cosmopolitan” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Belonging to all parts of the world; not restricted to any one country or its inhabitants.” Common to most definitions is the idea of connections across cultural barriers, connections of varying depth and duration, and for diverse purposes. The concept has also historically been associated with travel and aestheticism—with the trade in “foreign” goods, orientalism, and the young Englishman’s grand tour, for instance—but the theory reduced to such does not sufficiently explain how interest in other cultures translates into real-world politics or how cosmopolitanism affects the disadvantaged.

The problems that plague theorists of cosmopolitanism centre on elitism, appropriation, and the loss of the local in the global. In order for cosmopolitanism to become a coherent and viable set of ideas upon which to base legislation, theorists must address these three issues. Anderson notes that “cosmopolitanism ... typically manifests a complex tension between elitism and egalitarianism. It frequently advances itself as a specifically intellectual ideal, or depends on a mobility that is the luxury of social, economic, or cultural privilege” (268). In a similar comment on elitism, Gilroy further argues that the practical applications of what he terms “armored cosmopolitanism” often result in imperialistic military and economic interventions (60). Gilroy, Derrida, and others urge us to look at the elitism inherent in cosmopolitanism at the level of access to education and travel and also to extend the discussion to the most fundamental level of human rights. Mike Featherstone, however, cautions us not to oversimplify the issue of elitism as simply a matter of “have and

have not” nations: “[J]ust as there are ‘information rich’ nations on a global level there are also ‘information poor’ ones[, and] within localities there are clear differentials, with the wealthy and well-educated most likely to have access to the new forms of information and communications technology” (117). Cosmopolitanism is about connections between people across distance, but information technologies—from books to telephones to the internet—only connect the privileged to any significant degree. Though headway is being made in expanding their availability, the more recent and costly information technologies remain largely inaccessible in many of the world’s poorer communities (UN 5), leaving a large proportion of humanity cut off from the rich experiences offered by cosmopolitan exchange.

The issue of cultural appropriation—the authorized or unauthorized “use of something developed in one cultural context by someone who belongs to another culture” (Young 5)—also plagues cosmopolitanism’s articulators. The discourse shares with postcolonialism a concern over exploitative appropriation of the cultural artifacts, language, or rituals of other social groups, especially of those in a position of relative powerlessness. For example, when a cosmopolite visits another culture and returns bearing new words, foods, or artistic forms, do those cultural products invariably become perverted once removed from their “proper” setting? Does colonialism’s history of such appropriations inevitably taint all future encounters? James O. Young argues that not all appropriation, at least artistic appropriation, is negative; rather, such exchanges, conducted with due respect, can be productive of mutual understanding and of valuable new cultural products (152).

But, even when conducted with the best of intentions, does appropriation on a mass scale entail the complete dissolution of local culture? Many theorists have doubted the ability of a distinct local culture to maintain its unique quality when faced with sustained touristic and/or economic exchange. Featherstone, for instance, warns that it is where “the international economy and communications networks will produce ... homogenizing effects in other areas of national societies that we run into problems” (115). He acknowledges this threat but clarifies that “in many cases it may be that various forms of hybridization and creolization emerge in which the meanings of externally originating goods, information and images are reworked, syncretized and blended with existing cultural traditions and forms of life” (117). Bill Ashcroft makes a similar claim: “[L]ocal culture is not simply a passive recipient of global influences[;] the appropriation of global forms can be instrumental in the construction of local identity” (162). While these claims are partially true, a threat remains when the

global trend is increasingly toward American cultural and economic domination. Neither Featherstone nor Ashcroft convincingly locates the line where too much appropriation in either direction results in the loss of local culture. Voicing similar reservations, theorists like Derrida and Gilroy remain unconvinced of the resilience of less powerful cultures to the encroachments of the more powerful.

With these cruxes in mind it is reasonable to ask, in the context of the global development and exchange of natural resources, what nature poetry such as McKay's can teach us about ways to approach the other, ways of circumventing or minimizing the problems that arise from cosmopolitanism. McKay's poetry offers a useful way of thinking about the other, and while he discusses otherness largely in terms of the non-human his ideas have applicability for human interactions. He explains in essays and dramatizes in poetry how a subjectivity shaped by humility and close attention can best encounter otherness—a process of encountering that is realistic about its limitations and is likely to succeed in mitigating human conflict and encouraging stewardship of the earth. Moreover, his intense and prolonged imaginative interaction with geology in *Strike/Slip* offers both strong evidence of our common link to the earth and a useful way to conceptualize that bond, what I call a spatial conception—a metaphorical and/or a physical model for understanding humanity's interconnectedness, an idea that can be easily held in mind because it has a spatial component which can be used as the basis for further thought. In the case of *Strike/Slip*, the spatial conception is that of the earth's mantle connecting diverse animals, plants, and human communities, providing a common bedrock from which even the most rarefied of our cultural products and practices ultimately and literally originate.

We need only look to Karl Marx's spatial model of social structure to realize that such conceptualizations can have profound real-world effects, insofar as they form a foundation upon which to build other ideas that can be enacted in the political arena. In his introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), he famously identifies "the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (20). His language suggests architecture—of foundations and erections, especially insofar as the cultural emanations of the superstructure are more ephemeral. This visual conception is pedagogically useful, though numerous commentators stress that discussions of base/superstructure can quickly become reductive (see, for example, Raymond Williams).

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Spatial models of society like the Marxist and earlier models, such as the great chain of being, which was derived from Aristotelian and Platonic thought and elaborated by Christian theologians in the Middle Ages (O'Meara 15–27; Lovejoy 25), imply an ethics. While scholars are divided on whether or not Marx's critique of capitalism was essentially a moral one (Reiman 143), the superstructure/base model suggests that cultural institutions are expendable in the service of emancipating the proletariat whose labour drives the economic base. Likewise, the great chain of being model entails morality, especially the subordination of each link to the next higher one (Lovejoy 59–66). In both of these cases, the ability to conceptualize social formations spatially serves a pedagogical function and, thereby, a political one. Arthur O. Lovejoy, for example, notes of the great chain of being that it “was to have consequences of great historical moment” (61) in everything from monarchical succession to the natural sciences. McKay's poetics, therefore, though offering a more exploratory, meandering tack in addressing issues of social connectivity, can provide a similarly suggestive spatial conception.

His work also offers a practical ethics of appropriation. Many theoretical problems in the field of cosmopolitanism centre on exploitative appropriation, but McKay's poetry and philosophical writing offer a strategy for mitigating the negative effects of the phenomenon, especially the appropriation of the natural world. Because of the playful tone of many of his poems, it may seem that he does not revere the natural world he describes. Yet, for him the appeal to humour does not entail irreverence but is rather an attempt to deflate the poet's own pretensions and those inherent in language itself, thereby minimizing any appropriation of the natural world, of wilderness (see Bushell, Cook, Forster, and Mason). But when McKay, in his essay “Baler Twine,” defines wilderness he does not mean only

a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations. That tools retain a vestige of wilderness is especially evident when we think of their existence in time and eventual graduation from utility: breakdown.... In such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to glimpse some thing's autonomy—its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being. (21)

The designation “nature poetry” is sometimes used in the pejorative sense (as in “mere” nature poetry) in order to trivialize the content as flowery

and indulgent (see “Baler Twine” 25), but McKay explores much more than just animals, plants, and so-called “wild” spaces. Wilderness is present in tools and chattels, and even in the human body, the part that will respond involuntarily to sexual stimulation or hunger. Reverence for the wilderness of the other leads directly to a limitation of appropriation and to self-awareness about the limits of such a gesture. Humour and metaphor, both of which offer freer modes of thinking about the other than, say, science offers, allow the poet to develop a worldview “that considers all sentient and perceived non-sentient members in respectful partnership” (Bondar, “Attending” 76). It is not the wilderness of the other but the poet’s own inevitable limitations in encountering the other that become the butt of McKay’s jokes. The “check this out” candour and humorously unexpected list of metaphors for pebbles (for example, a “kidney stone once / passed by Apollo”) in the poem “First Philosophies” (26) are good examples of this type of purposeful play.

Furthermore, the fact that McKay leaves the borders of wilderness indefinite suggests the possibility of applying his ethics and aesthetics to the realm of human interaction. Of course, he does not advocate reducing the racial or cultural other to the level of mere wilderness, a position that would echo eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial discourse, but his respectful approach to otherness is naturally transferable. Mason, taking a cue from Bruno Latour, emphasizes the link between McKay’s humility toward the more-than-human and his involvement in creating a poetic and environmentally responsible human community. He argues that McKay’s poetry forces us to “slow down and pay attention to the myriad connectivities we might not be compelled to notice,” to “mak[e] connections between poetry and science, between nature and culture” (93). Put succinctly, a philosophical stance characterized by humility and deep attentiveness, and which respects the wilderness quality of the human body, cannot be limited by the subjective boundary between the human and the “more-than-human” but is also relevant in the realm of cosmopolitan exchange.

McKay calls his approach to encountering alterity “poetic attention”: “[I]t’s 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. To me, this is a form of knowing which counters the ‘primordial grasp’ in home-making, and celebrates the wilderness of the other; it gives ontological applause” (“Baler Twine” 26). In thinking through the self’s relation to the other, McKay also makes a distinction between first- and second-order appropriation: the first is the recurrent use of natural resources, such as in fishing

or farming. McKay likens first-order appropriation of natural resources to Martin Heidegger's concept of "nature [in] standing-reserve" (19), which Heidegger develops in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954). Second-order appropriation, on the other hand, is the transformation of natural resources into what McKay calls "matériel" (20), which entails a permanent usage, denying the natural other the dignity even of death, of de- and recomposition. This second form of appropriation is the worst because it denies the wilderness within the natural; it disrespects the otherness of the other. McKay urges us to minimize both forms of appropriation, even to the point of changing the way we use language so as not to "pin down" the other's otherness.

An expected rebuttal of this approach is that all language entails appropriation and so, for that matter, does experiencing through the senses. McKay's answer, however, offers a practical way to mitigate this negative aspect of interaction, one that can be applied in day-to-day encounters with nature and with other people or cultures. We cannot fully escape our own expectations, projections, or appropriations, but we can actively minimize them and accept our limitations, making of them "a gift from home" (31). We can also, like the poet who pushes language to near its breaking point, celebrate and embrace the unknowability of the other. Instead of attempting mastery of the other's difference through technologies like language or machinery, we can celebrate the other's autonomy and by stretching our categories of perception come as close as possible to understanding fully. Such humility, writes J. Scott Bryson, is one of the hallmarks of ecopoetry in general, which treats "the presence of the non-human as more than mere backdrop, [strives for] the expansion of human interest beyond humanity, [and develops] a sense of human accountability to the environment" (5).

In his essay "The Bushtits' Nest," McKay expands on the proper way to approach the other, stressing that it is not "sufficient simply to leave the other alone, to take a hands-off position" (96). The reason is that an active encountering "acknowledges a responsibility, a limitation of the freedom of beings in favour of the other" (97). In expounding these views, McKay acknowledges debt to Emmanuel Levinas's thinking about the other and adapts that philosopher's concept of "envisaging":

So here's how I'm reading the Face: it's an address to the other with an acknowledgment of our human-centredness built in, a salutary and humbling reminder... Homage is, perhaps, simply

appropriation with the current reversed; “here,” we say to the thing, “is a tribute from our culture.” (“Bushtits” 99)

This theory incorporates Levinas’s thoughts on encountering the other articulated in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (1991), but McKay takes issue with Levinas’s idea that, “in the dimension of culture opened up by knowledge, in which the human assimilates the inhuman and masters it, the meaningful is affirmed and confirmed as a return of the Same and the Other to the unity of One” (*Entre* 184). In McKay’s vision, we can never achieve that perfect unity (or we cannot know that we have achieved it) except in death, and instead of attempting to master the other we should celebrate the aspects that inevitably elude our appropriating grasp. He puts it another way in his interview with Babstock:

The more I got serious about being a quasi-naturalist the less happy I became with the Aeolian harp idea, you know, that nature is playing through you and translating itself into language. And the more I became a sort of crude phenomenologist, the more I had to acknowledge the separation in the act [...] and the inevitable reduction that language involves ... while still making some pretty elaborate linguistic gesture. (171)

Unlike the Romantic poets, then, McKay does not believe in even fleeting unity with the other as appears in poems like Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” and Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.”

The second concern of cosmopolitanism theory that McKay’s writing resolves is the need to spatially conceptualize our link to other cultures. Because it has so often been described in abstract terms, it is difficult to “feel” and therefore act upon cosmopolitan interconnection; an acceptable spatial conception is therefore of great utility in helping people to feel and understand that interconnection. Like Marx’s model of societal organization, and like the great chain of being, which had real-world encodings in early modern Europe, a spatial concept of cosmopolitan interconnectedness would mean more than philosophy for its own sake. McKay’s *Strike/Slip*, in its engagement with geology and the mineral world, offers a different way to understand our bond with other cultures, a bond based upon our shared dwelling upon the earth’s crust. In the model suggested by many of these poems, all humans are linked by dwelling upon a contiguous mineral crust, from which different sorts of plants, fauna, and, ultimately, human cultures emerge (and we must include McKay’s

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poems under this last category). Some creatures that emerge may have different abilities or dwell in more resource-rich domains, but they are still radically equal because of their origin in and dependence upon the same earth, because of their physical, elemental link to it. Moreover, unlike the Marxist base/superstructure or great chain of being models, this geological groundedness is not merely metaphorical: it is literally true and is based in hard science. Also, unlike the tenuous connections provided by travel and information technologies, it is palpable and enduring. Tectonic shift, carbon and water cycling, and evolution: these processes will outlast the human race, and because the geological model emphasizes a common origin it encourages a greater degree of humility than do the alternatives. This can help limit elitism. Scientists Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan underscore our commonality with the mineral: “In the universe life may be rare or even unique. But the stuff of which it is made is commonplace. More and more inert matter, over time, has literally come to life” (*What Is Life?* 25). The so-called hard sciences, which McKay regularly consults (see, for instance, his comments in “Ediacaran and Anthropocene” 9), are quite clear on our common physical link to the mineral world, even if they are uncomfortable philosophizing on what some call the “ontological leap” that separates humans from other animals and from non-human nature in general.

Beyond the physical connection, a much deeper cathexis vis-à-vis the mineral world, one that blurs the line between the living and the non-living, has factored in much of human history. In her essay “From Veneration to Exploitation: Human Engagement with the Mineral World” (2004), cognitive archaeologist Nicole Boivin notes that deep, even spiritual engagement with the mineral world has been central to human society since prehistoric times. She also notes that, “at present writing, the power of the mineral world is difficult to ignore. Current global politics are dominated by conflicts that, regardless of stated claims, often have much to do with mineral resources.... Minerals remain irrevocably linked to power, wealth and both local and global inequality” (1). She also claims that, to most contemporary Westerners, the mineral world is only thought of in terms of commodity,

but for many people around the world, minerals are alive.... People in many other societies do not necessarily recognise such a firm distinction between mineral and non-mineral, animate and inanimate. This blurring of boundaries means that minerals in many societies are attributed with qualities and

properties that most people in Western societies accord only to humans, animals, plants and/or the divine. (4)

This blurring of the line between sentience and non-sentience dovetails with McKay's definition of wilderness: whatever "elude[s] the mind's appropriations." In many cultures past and present, then, the concept that birds, plants, and people are emanations from the bedrock of the earth's crust would not entail any logical impossibility due to the problem of sentience, that humans can think and rocks (as far as we know) cannot.

Our link to the mineral is literally elemental (Margulis and Sagan 24–26): in general, all life on earth is made of the same chemical elements as are the earth's minerals and a full acceptance of that link implies an ethics. Of course, we cannot stop using natural resources altogether (which McKay freely admits in "Baler Twine"), but such a holistic view of the earth encourages greater stewardship of those resources, both living and non-living, and, by extension, greater social responsibility. In other words, to pollute a river or to contaminate bedrock with deposits of nuclear waste implies maltreatment of others because of humanity's physical link to the mineral. This common link also encourages us to see that the right to exploit resources is shared by all communities, regardless of their expertise or means of production. The world's oil and ore, to take two currently important examples, are the inheritance of more than just those who can finance a refinery or a mining operation. The ethics of our interactions with the mineral, animal, and human realms, in other words, cannot be disentangled.

McKay only tentatively suggests the sentience of the mineral, but when he encounters the other, including the geological other, he wonders, "Are we not right to sense, in such meetings, that envisaging flows both ways?" ("Bushtits" 101). And again, in the poem "Après Chainsaw" (*Strike* 50), the human observer senses "*everything* listening at me" in the quiet pause after cutting down some trees (1; emphasis added). Yet how best should we give shape to this experience of communion with wilderness? Boivin claims that we "need to address alternative conceptualizations of the mineral world. As industrial capitalism relentlessly pursues the discovery and exploitation of ever more mineral and other natural resources, contrasting perspectives on the mineral world are brought into increasingly sharp focus" (20). There is a call, therefore, in both the fields of cognitive archaeology and cosmopolitanism for a new way to think about our interaction with the natural environment and consequently with each other. The model suggested by McKay's *Strike/Slip* is just such an alternative that encourages

a more reverent and thoughtful approach to the mineral world and to the people with whom we share it.

Yet, such a modeling of our interconnectivity presents challenges. One reason why theorists have been reluctant to give a fully articulated spatial conception of cosmopolitan interconnectivity is the difficulty of fitting a permanent model to a phenomenon that appears so kinetic and ever changing. Would a model not become obsolete with every major leap in communications technology, for instance? Thus, many theorists have proposed nothing sturdier than a floating, indistinct sense of connectedness, densities of overlapping allegiance, or what Featherstone terms “the relational matrix of ... significant others” (112). Many of these conceptions recall Benedict Anderson’s imagined community but are concerned primarily with interactions across nations.

Scholars such as Gilroy challenge any spatial model that places an elite class of thinkers and artists at a god-like vantage, which would recall the spatial paradigms current in eighteenth-century English civic humanism. In such a model, the elite are symbolically above the common rabble, can communicate with other elites, and the wisdom gained trickles down. The model is traceable to the hierarchical organization of the great chain of being, yet “the universality that comes into view from the cosmic angle,” Gilroy writes, “must submit to the stern ethical tests” of practice (74). The downward gaze of the elite interpreter and knowledge-producer, which has been invoked in numerous cosmopolitan discussions, seems to destroy the very equality and mutual respect that cosmopolitanism should strive to achieve. Of course, it is easier to critique a model than to suggest a better one. Featherstone, for instance, concedes that, “important as the drive for deconceptualization is, there remains the problem of reconceptualization, the possibility of the construction of higher-level, more abstract general models of the globe” (123). The fact that he identifies the superior model as “higher-level” indicates just how difficult it is to escape the hierarchical, top-down conception of cosmopolitanism.

After much deliberation, Gilroy suggests a model that in some ways approximates the vision that emerges from *Strike/Slip*. Following the Copernican revolution and the advent of earth photographs taken from outer space, humans have developed a radically different, humbler sense of identity. Especially in the context of the environmental crisis of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, diverse cultures are slowly awakening to their interconnectedness. Gilroy calls this “postmodern planetary consciousness,” which

relies on a reimagining of the world which is as extensive and profound as any of the revolutionary changes in the perception and representation of space and matter that preceded it. The world becomes not a limitless globe, but a small, fragile, and finite place [...] with strictly limited resources that are allocated unequally. (75)

This is certainly not the trifling cosmopolitanism of the aesthete but “a planetary consciousness of the tragedy, frailty, and brevity of indivisible human existence that is all the more valuable as a result of its openness to the damage done by racisms” (75). Though Gilroy does not explicitly identify humanity’s common tie to geology as the source of this communal vision, his idea that the fate of everyone depends upon the health of the planet dovetails with the geological spatial model that emerges from *Strike/Slip*. Key to both conceptions is from what direction the cosmopolitan impulse originates: Does it emerge spontaneously from common people bonded through a connection to the earth, through education, activism, and art (such as McKay’s poetry), or is it imposed in a top-down fashion, by transnational corporations or governing bodies, for instance? The former direction of influence is superior because it limits elitism and because it does not reduce the cosmopolitan impulse to consumerism.

Turning now to specific examples, we find that almost every poem in *Strike/Slip* invokes the mineral world in some way. Many are informal odes or lyrical explorations of our experiences of rock and the implications of geological time for our brief lives, a time scale that McKay claims “requires a stretch of the imagination, [...] the supreme stretch test” (“Otherwise Than Place” 16). Certainly, the imaginative possibilities inherent in geology emerge in McKay’s earlier work: “Drinking Lake Superior” (1987) and “On Leaving” (2000), for instance, wrangle with similar material, as does “High Noon on the Pre-Cambrian Shield” (1983), in which the poet-speaker dwells on “granite, the last word” (*Birding* 110). However, McKay’s tenth full collection, as announced by its geological title, delivers his most sustained and intensive interaction with the mineral world and the time scales appropriate to it, a shift in McKay’s focus also identified by Dickinson in his review of *Strike/Slip*. Even the first edition’s cover, which is dominated by McKay’s photograph of grey rock, gives pride of place to the mineral and suggests that even sophisticated cultural artifacts like poetry are rooted in rock.

It is worth noting that many of the poems in this collection exhibit cosmopolitan tendencies in more ways than one; besides suggesting a model for human interconnection, they also allude explicitly to other

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cultures. For a self-proclaimed nature poet, McKay spends much of his time invoking diverse human artifacts. “Quartz Crystal” (15), for instance, invokes Johann Sebastian Bach, several musical forms, Pythagoras, and Zen Buddhism. “Pine Siskins” (64) employs three languages, references American composer Charles Ives, and carries the reader to Scandinavia with the humorous lines “as *chez soi* as Danes / eating danishes in Denmark” (3–4). Again, the playful tone of these inclusions complicates any generalizations about the poet’s intentions, but we must recall that play and the stretching of language and logic—as in what Bushell calls McKay’s “high tension metaphor” (66)—allow the poet to approach the other in full admission of the appropriations and limitations inherent in language. Such humorous overtures, argues Méira Cook, are not about mocking the difference of the other; they seek instead to “forg[e] a fertile negotiation with otherness” (xiv). Moreover, the products of other cultures, be they religious or artistic, offer the poet the means to push the reader’s mind further, to stretch the imagination through high-tension metaphor, by means of which, Bushell argues, McKay “stretches language in an attempt to express some aspect of an extra-linguistic realm he refers to as ‘wilderness’” (60). When the poet-speaker likens pine siskins to Danes in Denmark, the reader must accommodate the great distance between what is reductively called the metaphor’s vehicle and tenor, must enter the receptive state of poetic attention.

The poems that deal with the mineral world suggest a model of existence in which even virtuosi like Bach share a common source with all other animate and inanimate existence. The cultural practices and products that have sometimes divided people are revealed as radically connected; these poems rock cosmopolitanism, exposing the enduring link between us all. Moreover, in many cases the poems dramatize the physical process by which animal, plant, human, and cultural artifact emanate from the mineral. And yet, whether the poet expresses this link through subtle word choice or a more direct statement, there is no didactic finger wagging here; instead, through humour, temporal play, and metaphorical virtuosity, McKay makes the reader see and feel the connection to rock and, by extension, to all other life.

Though examples in the collection are plenty, just a few are necessary to illustrate how the poems develop the spatial conception. “Precambrian Shield” (8), for instance, traces the poet-speaker’s thoughts as he considers the origins of the geological formation also known as the Canadian or Laurentian Shield. Alternating between a meditative and a more playful tone, the poem then shifts focus to a remembered wilderness encounter

experienced by the speaker and (presumably) one friend. Finally, the speaker returns to the meditative approach, imaginatively entering a Tom Thomson painting, possibly the famous *Bateaux* composition. The Precambrian Shield, described by the poet as both “ancient and young, oldest / bone of the planet” (1–2), is indeed the first part of North America to permanently emerge from the prehistoric seas. It is therefore a potent embodiment of geological longevity.

From its first lines, the poem invokes time scales beyond human comprehension. The clownish poet figure cannot fathom the astronomical age of the Shield and instead reduces it to just one week. The dignity of the geological formation contrasts sharply with the foolishness of the younger version of the poet-speaker. In the poem’s present he concedes that his earlier self and his friend(s)

were muscle loving muscle, drank
straight from the rivers ran the rapids threw
our axes at the trees rode the back of every moose
we caught mid-crossing put our campfires out
by pissing on the flames. (20–24)

It is significant that the young people depicted in the poem are irreverent and inattentive toward the wilderness that surrounds them. Their impetuosity is underscored by the pace created by the strategic absence of punctuation in the passage. They throw their axes at trees, symbolically participating in the exploitative history of logging; they (presumably in imagination) appropriate the moose as a form of transportation; and they piss on their fire, which entails pissing on both the fuel (wood) and pit (rock). Surely this passage is humorous, but the humour points to the ridiculousness of unthinking, commodifying attitudes to the other. But perhaps most egregious of these lapses is the characters’ remembered inattentiveness. They were surrounded by sublime beauty, and yet they were so preoccupied with themselves that the speaker is left wondering, “Did we even notice / that the red pine sprang directly from the rock[?]” (17–18). Not only are these young people incapable of McKay’s sophisticated poetic attention, they are also incapable of the less-preferable Romantic gaze or even the sober gaze of the materialist.

The reader of “Precambrian Shield” is not alone in recognizing this tomfoolery. The poem’s speaker asks himself twice, “Would I go back to that time?” (9, 32–33), ostensibly referring to the escapades he and his

friend had navigating the “curious and cold” lakes but also referring to the mindset he once had. Like the speaker of Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” who indulges in nostalgia but ultimately praises the perspective of maturity, McKay’s speaker has come to a deeper appreciation of wilderness (though he is much less assertive than Wordsworth in translating his experience). The poet-speaker’s growth is evidenced by the tonal disparity between passages imaginatively engaging with the Precambrian Shield and those in the narrative passages that catalogue past actions. The poet who imaginatively plumbs the “transparent / unintelligible depths” (37–38) of the lakes is certainly in a more reverent relationship with wilderness than the muscle-loving youth who pisses out his fire. The ability to dwell within unintelligibility recalls McKay’s essay “Otherwise Than Place,” in which he encourages the attempt at non-appropriative, pre-rational intercourse with nature. The difference between past and present approaches to wilderness in “Precambrian Shield” is made doubly clear when the poet-speaker paradoxically proclaims that he and his friend(s) had “the wit to be immortal / and ephemeral” (28–29). The paradox is resolved, however, if we consider that the new sense of ephemerality is likely applied in retrospect, with the younger self maintaining delusional intimations of immortality.

The poem’s suggestion is that only the Shield is immortal, and that people, moose, trees, and lakes all emerge from and return to it. Tom Thomson, because of his great artistic talent, could easily be placed on a cosmopolitan pedestal, above the poem’s speaker, but Thomson too emerges from the mineral world and ultimately returns to it. Like the speaker, who dreams of diving for Thomson’s body, we all will eventually fall into the “chaste and dangerous embrace” (10) of the “watching” (36) wilderness. Terms like “sediment ... accumulated,” “*sprang* directly from the rock” (emphasis added), “diving,” “surfacing,” and “plunging” suggest the rise and fall of natural cycles, which eventually subsume and regenerate the human. Yet, the poem’s tone is not one of despair. Rather, there is a sense of propriety, even of pride in returning to the mineral world; there is the humility of poetic attention.

“First Philosophies” (26) develops a similar contrast between the ephemerality of humanity and the relative permanence of geology. As does Descartes in the treatise from which this poem’s title is taken, McKay’s speaker attempts to reduce all reality to first principles, to bedrock. In so doing, he decides first that “everything derives from air” (7), then fire, and finally (perhaps unsurprisingly) rock. As in “Precambrian Shield,” the

speaker here revises earlier, false conceptions of wilderness, arriving finally at this conclusion:

I realize that, yes,
everything derives from rock, rock that,
under these soft auspices,
suffers the insufferable ocean. (23–27)

The cosmogony developed throughout this poem is destabilized by humorous elements, such as the metaphor comparing a pebble to Apollo’s kidney stone and the poet-speaker’s candid expression of wonder in “check this out” (21). “First Philosophies,” however, ends on a more serious and contemplative note, and (as in McKay’s earlier poem, “High Noon on the Pre-Cambrian Shield”) rock is given “the last word” (*Birding* 110), albeit as necessarily mediated by the poet-speaker. The vision of wilderness developed in this poem emphasizes that we are not just linked to the mineral world but that we share a common origin in it. The kinglets and Sitka spruce may have different attributes, but they depend upon the same natural cycles of mineral resources. In the same way, all humans share a common origin in and must dwell together upon the bedrock of the earth. The final physical gesture of the poet, that of returning the stone in his hand to the sea—“I toss it, thoughtfully, / back to the surf” (23–24)—physically represents unending natural cycles. The rock begins on shore, is picked up by the poet, considered (becomes stone), and is then thrown into the sea, presumably to wash up once more. The humour developed in this and other poems, far from discrediting the claim that “everything derives from rock,” serves to open readers’ minds to “options for living in a suspended state of provisionality or contingency” (Forster 109). In other words, McKay’s humour, like his metaphor (see Dickinson and Bushell), allows us to conceive of our relationship to non-human nature in a way that accepts the ambiguities that the hard sciences seek to explain away.

The prose poem/mini-essay “Gneiss” (38–39) is uncharacteristically concerned with human affairs, and may therefore appear exceptional to the aesthetics and ethics of *Strike/Slip*. It begins and ends in explicit engagement with human culture—and in a non-Canadian country, no less—opening with an epigraph from a Scottish travel guide and closing with an abrupt shift inviting the reader to join the speaker in touristic contemplation: “Better stop here. Better spend some time” (39), an invitation which ironically aligns the speaker with the tour-guide writer’s more superficial engagement with the landmark. The poet-speaker contemplates

the construction of a circle of standing stones by Neolithic humans, who wished (he assumes) to attain commiseration with the land's forbidding geology—"that some of the rocks that comprised their island should stand up with them against the levelling wind and eroding rain" (38), that rock itself would figuratively and literally bear with them the vicissitudes of a harsh climate.

In spite of its focus on ancient stoneworker and twenty-first-century tourist cultures, "Gneiss" bolsters the claim for the geological basis of human connection and cosmopolitanism. By dramatizing the physical conversion of rock to cultural artifact—"they insisted that rock be stone"—McKay provides a more concrete example of how the stuff of cosmopolitanism ultimately emerges (in this case literally rising up) from the geological. Indeed, the piece is peppered by language that suggests physical rising: "should stand up," "getting up," "levered into the air." The poem meditates on the way Neolithic humans reproduced their own image in rock and were left "reading the earth-energy they had levered into the air," and, millennia later, the tourist is left pondering the gesture at a further remove. In other words, the stone circle is no different in kind from the other cultural items mentioned in the prose poem/essay: the fugue, automobiles, high school, Münch's *The Scream*, or the piece of writing called "Gneiss" itself. The only difference is the directness of their link to geology. Moreover, the image of the stones standing with and like the stone-age builders and the image of one builder running a reverent hand over one of the stones—"whorled fingertip to gnarled rock"—suggest the radical unity of the human and the mineral, an idea made explicit in other poems from the collection such as "Petrified": "You are the momentary mind of rock" (4).

This radical, physical connection to geology, of course, allows for respecting the wilderness of the non-human, that "capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" ("Baler Twine" 21). Science can tell us that our bodies share common elements with the mineral crust, but it cannot tell us the ethical or aesthetic significance of that fact. McKay's poet-speakers constantly encounter the limitations of human understanding vis-à-vis non-human nature, but, as McKay makes clear in his essays, we must embrace those limitations to our understanding (see "Baler Twine," for instance). Humanity's radical connection to geology is not contingent on its complete understanding of that connection any more than an infant's need to breathe, drink, or eat is contingent on an understanding of cellular biology. Our attempts to encounter the "real" stone circle will always be mediated by human language and concepts, which in "Gneiss"

are suggested by a catalogue of cultural artifacts (for example, Münch's painting, the weather network, the travel guide), but we must accept our failure to fully understand, while remaining open to the radical connection we can never hope to adequately articulate. The stone circle of "Gneiss," then, is indeed "the circle of connection" (38), but one that gently mocks our ability to fully express that connection.

The terminal sequence of *Strike/Slip*, "Some Last Requests" (71–72), also gives rock the last word, and like "Precambrian Shield" it invokes death but takes solace in the endurance of wilderness and in our return to it. Key to this diptych is the distinction, developed throughout the collection, between stone and rock. While rock is the mineral substance in its natural, untouched state, involved in cycles of erosion, stone is rock put to use, appropriated by the mind, thought-thickened. Thus, Apollo's kidney stone in "First Philosophies" is indeed stone, as is the tombstone evoked in the first poem, "Of stone," of this diptych. The poem acknowledges the needfulness, and indeed the joy, of appropriating nature for the purpose of home building (an idea McKay develops in "Baler Twine") so long as the wilderness of the other is respected and accepted. When taking is taken too far, as in what McKay calls second-order appropriation, the natural other is denied all wilderness, is abstracted from natural cycles; it becomes mere "matériel." McKay gives the nuclear test site as example for this second type of appropriation: the bombsite is no longer natural; it is reduced to a mere sign of the bomb-maker's power. Another example of second-order appropriation could be a tombstone, which we hope will forever remain the signpost to our final "house."

If "Some Last Requests: Of Stone" is the poet's last will and testament, then we find him grasping at wilderness until the end. The piece begins with the request "that oblivion be tempered / with remembrance and the limestone step be worn" (1–2). This homely vision would indeed be a comfort to the dying: that a life lived would leave a mark. This desire is made clearer when the speaker begs his tombstone to "carry my name a little further on / / till it gets past missing me" (8–9). As occurs in so many of McKay's poems, the poet here explores the ineffectiveness of language. The speaker's name stands in synecdochically for all language, which he is attached to but ultimately attempts to relinquish. At last, language is dismantled and fed, "phoneme by phoneme, / / to the hawk scream it so badly mimicked / with its last long I" (12–14). The link between language and egocentrism is emphasized by the speaker's name's last word—"I." Therefore, though the poem is ostensibly an apostrophe to stone, the

While rock is
the mineral
substance in
its natural,
untouched state,
involved in
cycles of
erosion, stone is
rock put to use,
appropriated
by the mind,
thought-
thickened.

true addressee seems to be the wilderness that remains in the stone, its indelible “rockness.”

The second half of the diptych, “Of rock” (72), collects many of the preoccupations of *Strike/Slip* and leaves rock and wilderness, finally, in the reader’s mind. The playfulness here is not as pronounced as in some of the collection’s earlier poems, but it remains in order to emphasize that the speaker’s inevitable return to the cycles of wilderness is not something to be feared but is presumably a release from pain and estrangement. The poem begins with a question that recalls “Of stone”:

that you teach me, as they say,

(insincerely) in the love songs,

to forget.

That my words should kiss

their complex personalities goodbye and sink

into Loss Creek. (1–6)

Again, the speaker seeks to transcend the limitations and appropriations of language. Even more explicitly anticipating the dissolution of the ego, he asks that his “thoughts / ... fray into the weathers they have long / loved from afar” (11–13), and the subtle pun on weather/whether suggests the provisionality of the speaker’s relationship to death. *Strike/Slip* teaches that everything comes from rock, and in this last poem of the collection everything returns to rock. Yet, this is not a cause for lament; there is indeed a bittersweet quality to the apostrophe, but there is also a sense of anxiousness for unity with wilderness, for being without the need of even open-handed appropriation.

This manner of approaching otherness suggests the possibility of a cosmopolitanism of respect, self-awareness, and equality. If we approach problems of multiculturalism with the same open-handedness, informed by our common mineral origin, then many conflicts could be avoided. Moreover, this geological model of cosmopolitanism encourages stewardship of the earth, a practice that benefits both it and the people who inhabit it. Admittedly, the view developed in McKay’s poetry would need more systematic working out before it could offer realistic solutions to many of the problems plaguing the global community. And, unfortunately, simply knowing that we are connected in the mineral world does not force anyone

to change his or her negative behaviours, as the recent unheeded chorus of warnings about climate change should make clear. But, as Sir Philip Sidney reasoned in *The Defense of Poesy* (1595), where the philosopher's dry dogmatism fails to mobilize virtuous action, the artist's creative work can dramatize issues, to make us feel, then hopefully to act on those feelings. The spatial conception that emerges from McKay's *Strike/Slip*, therefore, combined with his ethics of encountering the other developed especially in his essays, gives us both feeling and dogma and offers a solid foundation upon which to base further cosmopolitan thought and action.

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