

# Aesthetics of the Sublime and Don McKay's Poetics of Deep Time

**K**nown as a bird poet par excellence, Don McKay's ornithological fascination has received more scholarly attention to date than his writing on geological themes. One consequence of this relative lack of attention is that a significant development in McKay's ongoing critique of Romanticism has not yet been discussed in depth: namely, the shifting terms of his engagement with aesthetics of the sublime.<sup>1</sup>

As this essay argues, McKay's poetic engagement with deep time can be interpreted fruitfully in the context of traditional and contemporary understandings of the mathematical sublime. However, McKay's characteristic contradistinction between phenomenological nature poetry and Romantic nature poetry has tended to devalue the contributions that aesthetics of the sublime can make to ecological poetics, and perhaps even to ecological ethics. As such, criticisms that McKay has made of "inadequate notions of the sublime" ("Great Flint Singing" 12) risk diminishing the value of *all* notions of the sublime, including those that appear in his own poetry and prose.

As Travis V. Mason notes in his illuminating study *Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay* (2013), McKay's geological interests are not recent developments, and his publications since *Deactivated West 100* (2005) simply confirm that he has "finally found a way to articulate geopoeetry, something he has been thinking and writing about since his first collection" (219). However, McKay's writing from the past decade certainly places new emphasis on geopoeetry and its significance as a plumb line into the wellsprings of deep time. As Nicholas Bradley remarks in a review of McKay's most recent essay collection, *The Shell of the Tortoise: Four Essays and an Assemblage* (2011), the book evinces its author's "shifting topical

preferences" (536). In much the same way, McKay's engagement with the sublime is not entirely new, and scholars have noted it in works that predate his turn toward geological themes. For example, in *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (1998), Susan Glickman names McKay among a number of poets whose writing seems to demonstrate "a compulsion towards the sublime" (153). Likewise, Ross Leckie suggests in an essay on the poem "Twinflower," from McKay's *Apparatus* (1997), that the poet's characteristic use of metaphor engenders "contemporary moments of the sublime" (142). Significantly, both Glickman and Leckie perceive elements of the sublime in McKay's distinctive definitions of "wilderness" and "poetic attention," and so McKay's more recent writing presents opportunities to not only revisit and extend those familiar concepts, but also to gain a more textured understanding of his phenomenological poetics.

### **Naming the Sublime in Canadian Nature Poetry**

Given its spatial constraints, this essay looks primarily at the four essays and "assemblage" that appear in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, and at select poems from *Strike/Slip* (2006) that are especially germane to this discussion. However, as all of the essays in *The Shell of the Tortoise* had former lives elsewhere as lectures, introductions, or afterwords, it is worth considering their literary and cultural significance more expansively. Among other things, this provides an opportunity to consider how McKay's engagement with aesthetics of the sublime stands in relation to the Canadian nature poetry tradition that he has helped to frame. For example, one of the essays that appear in *The Shell of the Tortoise* is "Great Flint Singing," a minimally revised version of McKay's introductory essay to the anthology *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems* (2009). Although it would be difficult to quantify McKay's influence in contemporary Canadian nature poetry and its concomitant scholarship, Nancy Holmes' editorial Preface to the anthology offers an illustrative example. Holmes writes that "Great Flint Singing" was one of the influences that informed her selection of the anthology's contents, and that McKay's words made her "search out and appreciate certain kinds of poems, poems that refer in some way to what is 'inappellable'" (xvi).

Significantly, McKay's discussion of the inappellable in "Great Flint Singing" stems from his reading of Duncan Campbell Scott's "The Height of Land," a greater Romantic lyric in which McKay perceives a poetic recognition of an "inappellable Something as a pristine other that addresses a companion 'inarticulate part' in our species" (4).<sup>2</sup> McKay's discussion of the poem is

complex, and any summary of it here could only be reductive. What is clear, however, is that McKay's words on the "inappellable" in "Great Flint Singing" resonate with a near-contemporary reflection on "wilderness" that appears in his chapbook *The Muskwa Assemblage* (2008). In the chapbook, McKay ventures tentatively that the experience of "wilderness" is one in which "something speaks inside us, something we feel called upon to name, to say sublime, or wilderness or mystery. Some resonance reaches inside us to an uninhabited place."<sup>3</sup> Compare this to McKay's conclusion in "Great Flint Singing" that for Scott's lyric speaker in "The Height of Land," "deep speaks unto deep, the outer inappellable to its inarticulate equivalent within" (4).

The musings on "wilderness" that appear in *The Muskwa Assemblage*, which subsequently became the titular "assemblage" in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, represent a considerable extension of McKay's well-known definition of "wilderness" as "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (*Vis* 21). The earlier, now iconic definition appears in the essay "Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home, & Nature Poetry," but in neither the original essay of 1993 nor the revised version that appears in *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* (2001) does McKay postulate a companionably elusive part of the self—some "inarticulate" or "uninhabited" place in which "wilderness" might resonate—as he does in *The Muskwa Assemblage*, *The Shell of the Tortoise*, and *Open Wide a Wilderness*.

Why is this significant? In *Open Wide a Wilderness*, McKay discusses a number of differences between Romantic and phenomenological approaches to nature and nature poetry, and compares aesthetics of the sublime unfavourably to phenomenological attention to things themselves. "Although we may be moved by the sublime to revere spectacular elements in the natural world," he writes, "one reasonably suspects that we are in part revering our own emotion" ("Great Flint Singing" 15). Conversely, he argues, "acts of close attention . . . foster intimacy" (15). Long-time readers of McKay may find that the nominal phrase "acts of close attention" resembles the phrase "poetic attention," another of the foundational concepts that McKay develops in "Baler Twine." Intimately related to "wilderness," "poetic attention" is, for McKay, "a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess" (*Vis* 26). As a simultaneously aesthetic and epistemological mode, it is "a form of knowing" that "celebrates the wilderness of the other" (26).

"Wilderness" and "poetic attention" are the conceptual cornerstones of McKay's phenomenological poetics, and yet they also inspired Glickman's and Leckie's perceptions of sublimity in McKay's work. In Glickman's view,

McKay's poetry demonstrates an imaginative engagement with "wonder" that produces "a new sense of connectedness," which "comes about not in spite of but *because of* the ungraspability of the natural world" (152-53). She also suggests that "something of the sublime" is at work in the definition of "wilderness" that McKay develops in "Baler Twine" (196). Likewise, Leckie's discussion of "contemporary moments of the sublime" in McKay's poetry draws explicit connections between sublimity, "wilderness," and metaphor (142). Although McKay tends to contrast his "poetic attention" with the egotism of Romantic aesthetics, his phenomenological poetics is rooted in a conception of "wilderness" that bears at least some relation to historical conceptions of the sublime, so much so that McKay's own *Muskwa Assemblage* gestures to possible connections. With this in view, McKay's discussions of phenomenology and Romanticism in *Open Wide a Wilderness* suggest an opposition that is not as fundamental as it might appear.

In the anthology, McKay offers manifold criticisms of Romantic aesthetics of the sublime. On the one hand, they are self-aggrandizing: there is "a tendency in all Romantic writing to convert natural observations into rocket fuel for the spirit and lose a sense of their inherent value" (14). On the other, they are dilettantish. A lengthy discussion of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805) illuminates this point: McKay writes that "there is a wisdom to Wordsworth's handling of raw wilderness. In carefully controlled doses it produces the experience of the sublime, with its delicious call note of terror" (10-11). Notably, McKay's reading of *The Prelude*'s "stolen boat episode" collapses a distinction that philosopher Guy Sircello has made between "*experiences of the sublime*" (what young William undergoes as he passes a cliff while rowing on a lake at night) and "*sublime discourse*" (the adult poet's attempt to communicate his experience in "language that is or purports to be more or less immediately descriptive or expressive of sublime experience") (Sircello 541; see also Brady 11).<sup>4</sup> McKay's reading of the poem suggests that the poet's childhood experience was not *itself* sublime, but simply terrifying, whereas his literary "handling" of it is what produces "the experience of the sublime." That is to say, in McKay's reading, Wordsworth's sublime is an inalienable artefact of authorship, an aesthetic product of the "domesticating function of the mind" (11).

McKay's definition of "wilderness" names an ungraspable excess and "autonomy" (*Vis* 21, 97)—a "rawness" or "alien being" that seems akin to concepts such as *duende*, *phusis*, *Tao*, and *mysterium tremendum*, among others (21; see also *Open Wide* 18). Whereas in *The Muskwa Assemblage* he seems to concede that conceptions of the sublime may gesture in these

directions as well, his writings typically suggest that Romantic poetry tends not to respect “wilderness” for what it is. In “Great Flint Singing,” McKay compares Wordsworth’s “handling of raw wilderness” to *failed* attempts to do so, using Earle Birney’s “Bushed” as a prime example. McKay suggests that “Bushed” may be read in one of two ways: either as “a sort of cautionary tale for those who would live alone in wilderness armed with inadequate notions of the sublime,” or as a poetic representation of a visionary disintegration of the self (12-13). In both readings, Romantic aesthetics of the sublime are revealed to be insufficient, and so McKay’s commentary on “Bushed” adds to his manifold criticisms. In the first instance, Romantic “notions of the sublime” are “inadequate,” and even irresponsible: they leave adherents unprepared for nature’s dangerous realities. In the second instance, they are impediments to authentic visionary experience: by sublimating “wilderness” rather than letting it destabilize the self, adherents rob themselves of opportunities for ecstatic engagement with the world.

That the title “Great Flint Singing” is lifted from the final line of Birney’s poem suggests the degree to which McKay’s thoughts on the Romantic sublime shape not only the essay, but also his perception of Canadian nature poetry more generally. However, McKay’s comments on Romanticism throughout the essay tend not to discriminate between various forms of Romantic engagement with the sublime, and they leave unexplained the phenomenological, ontological, and ethical significance of the “inappellable,” whether as an external force or as an “inarticulate” or “uninhabited” part of the poet himself. As such, McKay’s critique of “inadequate notions of the sublime” is so general that it risks dismissing as inadequate all notions of the sublime, including those that appear in his own poetry and prose.

Despite the legacy of what Keats with some annoyance called the “Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” (Weiskel 49), McKay’s own excursions into geopoetry indicate that attending to the experiences of a human mind at work is not so solipsistic an exercise as it might at first appear. Indeed, it may be very useful for an environmental poetics that seeks not simply to point to nature or “wilderness” as such, but also to expose the imaginative failures that make environmental degradation and injustice part of the status quo.

### **Things and Consciousness in McKay’s Phenomenological Poetics**

In his Introduction to the poetry anthology *The New Canadian Poets: 1970-1985* (1985), Dennis Lee suggests some ways of determining a poem’s “phenomenological” stance. In his usage, a phenomenological “impulse” is

one that provokes the poet “to make the poem recreate a two-way process, in which the world is known by consciousness and consciousness knows the world” (xliii). This definition is clarified later when Lee discusses a poem by McKay, and argues that it “contrives to give us both the world and consciousness knowing the world” (xlv). “Consciousness adheres as faithfully as it can to the specificity of the world,” he adds later, and, in this regard, phenomenological poems both “enact the phenomenological texture of conscious experience” and are invested with “the intricate cross-pressure of observer and observed—a consort which apparently wants to be celebrated as an imperfect marriage, a willing yet perpetually incomplete union” (xlvi). The McKay poem that Lee offers as an example is “I Scream You Scream,” from *Birding, or Desire* (1983). The poem begins:

Waking JESUS sudden riding a scream like a  
train braking metal on metal on  
metal teeth receiving signals from a dying star sparking  
off involuntarily in terror in all directions in the  
abstract incognito in my  
maidenform bra in an expanding universe in a where's  
my syntax thrashing  
loose like a grab that like a  
look out like a  
live wire in a hurricane . . . (50)

The poem performs the bewilderment of a sleeper who is woken in the night by some incomprehensible, at-first-unidentifiable sound, which he finally recognizes as a pig scream from a neighbouring farm. As the sleeper's thoughts jostle one another, the poem's interrupted syntax and series of associative similes create a jumble of images that range from the industrial to the cosmic to the domestic to the atmospheric, depicting a consciousness struggling to understand a scream that comes lancing through the night. In these lines, Lee hears the “churning” of the speaker's consciousness “as it passes from deep sleep to wide-awake in half a second, riffing through a series of preposterous associations in an attempt to place the sound” (xliv). For him, the poem's phenomenological project brings “consciousness and the world . . . into sync” (xliv).

Despite the consonance of “I Scream You Scream” with Lee's perception of phenomenological impulses in poetry, McKay's poems frequently take a very different phenomenological stance. Rather than foregrounding interactions between human consciousness and things in the world, many attempt to focus instead on the beings of things themselves. *Apparatus*

contains a number of compositions that McKay has called “thing” poems, each one intended to “perceive the wilderness of a thing” (“Apparati” 18), and, arguably, to provoke readers to see that “wilderness” as well. As McKay states plainly in *Vis à Vis*, the experience of “wilderness,” through defamiliarization, is “often arranged by art” (21).

Notably, McKay’s iconic definition of “wilderness” in *Vis à Vis* (in which a significant section of *Apparatus* reappears) owes much to the Levinasian concept of the “Face.” The Face, as McKay describes it, conveys “the other encountered in a relationship of address and discovered to be quite untranslatable into systems of sameness and linguistic organization: it is foreign-ness that remains foreign, always exceeding our categories of knowing” (97).<sup>5</sup> For McKay, perceiving “the wilderness of a thing” often means recognizing its Face as well. Here we might reflect again that in “Great Flint Singing,” McKay suggests that the value of empirical observation is its implicit acknowledgment that nature is composed of “beings as fully individuated as the poet” (16).

The section of *Apparatus* that reappears in *Vis à Vis* is “Matériel,” a suite of poems that range from reflections on the Old Testament Cain and the Homeric Achilles to modern-day clear-cuts and bomb sites. McKay discusses the title “Matériel” in a 1998 interview with Karl Jirgens, where he explains that his adoption of the military term reflects a category of appropriation in which “we not only take the life of something, such as the life of a tool which you might use for a whole lifetime, but we also own it in death” (16). In military terms, the word “matériel” refers to whatever is not personnel; however, McKay states,

We’ve all heard those stories about army personnel who go out and get sunburnt and get penalized because they’ve damaged army property. . . . That idea of ownership in its manic phase, right down to the body. You don’t just own the guy’s life, but after death, and your [*sic*] going to mill his bones, or you’re going to hang them on a cross, or you’re going to make an example of them where they’re going to be part of some semiotic system they can never ever leave. (19)

McKay’s concern for the ways in which human beings appropriate the lives and deaths of others is inextricably related to his views on both language-use and aesthetic representation. In this regard, his phenomenological preoccupations mark a crucial difference between his ecological ethics and poststructuralist linguistic theory as he understands it. In his interview with Jirgens, he observes: “I know that language is powerful and that in some ways the mind is controlled by it or inhabited by it. I realize that, but in some

ways it is healthy for us to remember that it [language] is a tool. To think of it that way, give language back its humility, especially in the current times, when everything threatens to become language. You know, the whole post-structural thing" ("Apparati" 16). Similar to his apprehension that things can be forced into semiotic systems that they "can never ever leave" is McKay's concern that poststructuralist theories of language turn the elements and creatures of the world into lifeless semiotic signs. For precisely this reason, Levinas's insistence that the Face of the Other is "quite untranslatable," as McKay puts it, is crucial to his definition of "wilderness" and to his phenomenological poetics more broadly. With this in mind, it is possible to see how, insofar as McKay considers the Romantic sublime to be a mode of "handling raw wilderness," the aesthetic would seem to appropriate "wilderness" as a tool for building poems that prove the power of the poet rather than the world.

Although McKay's thing poems may downplay the role of the consciousness that observes and "comes to know," his recent engagements with geopoetry cannot do the same. Intriguingly, Lee's description of phenomenological poems as "enact[ing] the phenomenological texture of conscious experience" (xlvi) applies more suitably to McKay's geopoetic engagement with aesthetics of the sublime than it does to the thing poems that McKay himself would call phenomenological.

### Reviewing Some Conceptions of the Sublime

From its classical origins as a rhetorical mode that orators used to move their listeners, over the course of hundreds of years the sublime underwent a conceptual shift, becoming less a practical method than a complex cognitive, affective, and aesthetic experience (Monk 10-12). Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) and Kant's *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) were particularly formative for popular conceptions of sublimity that developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, and both can illuminate McKay's poetic and critical engagement with aesthetics of the sublime.

Burke's *Enquiry* has been said to have presented "a more troubled, violent sublime" than had previously been considered, in which "a cluster of negative, heart-stopping emotions—fear, terror, astonishment—are involved" (Brady 23-24). Notably, both the "stolen boat episode" in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and McKay's interpretation of it in "Great Flint Singing" owe something to Burke's conception of the sublime. By contrast, Kant's *Critique of Judgement*



has been said to constitute “a synthesis, a reinterpretation, and a deepening of the kaleidoscopic aesthetic of the eighteenth century” (Monk 5). McKay’s own sublime discourse in his discussions of deep time shares a number of correspondences with what Kant called the mathematical sublime.

Before turning to Kant, it is worth noting that philosopher Sandra Shapshay has made a distinction between “thin” and “thick” sublimes that can help to nuance the relationship between McKay’s own poetry and his critical estimation of Romantic aesthetics of the sublime. Shapshay characterizes the “thin sublime” as “a largely *non-cognitive, affective arousal*” that is “roughly equivalent” to the Burkean sublime (181). This seems to be what McKay has in mind in “Great Flint Singing” when he critiques “the experience of the sublime, with its delicious call note of terror” (10-11). On the other hand, Shapshay’s “thick sublime” includes, “*in addition* to this affective arousal, an *intellectual play with ideas* involving especially ideas regarding the place of human beings within the environment” (181). “Aesthetic-cognitive play,” Shapshay argues, may be the source of insight into relationships between human beings and the environment (189-90) — a position that is not only consonant with McKay’s own geopoetry, but also suggests further that sublime experience need not be a wholly “domesticating” activity.

Thinkers before Kant had described forms of sublime experience that share similarities with Kant’s conception of the mathematical sublime, and some had even developed theories of the “temporal sublime,” in which conceptions of “eternity” and “things remote in time” could be experienced as sublime (Brady 36-37). Although Kant’s own writings on the mathematical sublime do not consider the far reaches of deep time as possible causes of sublime feeling, subsequent theorists have explored correspondences. Unlike the dynamical sublime, which Kant associates with might, his mathematical sublime is associated with magnitude, and is reflective of the limitations of the human imagination. For Kant, experiences of the mathematical sublime are characterized by “a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason” (106). Kant’s theory suggests that overwhelmingly large or vast entities give rise to reflections on totality and infinity. In essence, experiences of the mathematical sublime consist in feeling one’s imagination fail spectacularly (for Kant, the imagination is

limited to sensible knowledge), while at the same time realizing that human reason has *supersensible* powers: “where imagination fails to take in the sensible particulars of such vast magnitudes, we are made aware of reason’s capacity to provide an *idea* of the infinite” (Brady 59-60).

Kant was not the first to conceive of sublime experience “as an aesthetic response involving an exploration of the experiencing subject” (Brady 46), but his emphatic focus on cognitive experience did represent a significant shift. As Thomas Weiskel details in *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976), in Kant’s mathematical sublime as well as in his dynamical sublime, “sublimity is properly predicated of the subject and its supersensible destiny (*Bestimmung*) and not of any object. A natural object seems sublime only by virtue of a certain ‘subreption’ whereby we substitute ‘a respect (*Achtung*) for the Object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self—the Subject” (38). In *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (2013), philosopher Emily Brady concedes that Kant’s “emphasis on the human mind and freedom as sublime . . . seems to leave much less room for attributing the sublime to the external world” (6); however, she resists this reading and insists that, for Kant:

Sublime feeling is not at nature’s expense, for appreciation of starry skies, raging seas, and vast deserts is at the very heart of the experience: *they* enliven and expand imagination. Such appreciation has a moral inflection, and our admiration for nature is thus analogous to respect for the moral law. In these ways, then, Kant presents a theory of the sublime that reaches across nature, humanity, and the connections between them. (88)

Brady’s reading of Kant goes against the grain of common approaches, as does her reading of the “Wordsworthian or egotistical” sublime in later sections of her study (100-107). Weiskel’s analyses in *The Romantic Sublime* provide useful points of contrast. Weiskel characterizes the Kantian sublime as “negative,” which is to say “dialectical”: in it, “[t]he imagination’s inability to comprehend or represent the object comes to signify the imagination’s relation to the ideas of reason (23; see also 28-31). By contrast, the “Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” is a “positive” one “that in the end would subsume all otherness, all possibility of negation” (49). To put this in Levinasian terms, it might be said that the Kantian and Wordsworthian sublimes, in Weiskel’s explication, aspire to totality rather than to recognitions of infinity.

Brady accepts Weiskel’s analyses up to a point, but makes the case that the humanism and apparent egotism of the Kantian and Wordsworthian

sublimes can nevertheless accommodate ecological ethics. Connecting Kant's primary interest in the supersensible power of human reason back to his broader concern to discover the grounds of human freedom and morality, Brady argues that contemporary readings of Kant "might propose that in becoming aware of our moral disposition, we are gaining an awareness of having the capacity to act in moral ways toward natural things, that is, to act toward them on a basis of morality and not mere self-interest. So, the sublime could actually prepare us *in particular* for acting morally toward natural things or treating them with moral consideration" (86).

With these contrasting interpretations in mind, the necessity of pursuing further more nuanced thinking about the role of sublimity in McKay's poetry and criticism is clear. In "Baler Twine," McKay writes that "Romanticism, which begins in the contemplation of nature, ends in the celebration of the creative imagination in and for itself" (*Vis* 28). The sequence he describes seems closely akin to the one that Weiskel identifies in the "Wordsworthian or egotistical" sublime, which "in the end would subsume all otherness, all possibility of negation" (49). Even by comparison, the mathematical sublime might not seem like a strong alternative, if as in Weiskel's reading it can only end in respect for "the idea of humanity in our own self" (38). However, Brady's reading of Kant suggests that discovering and appreciating the self's supersensible faculty bears some relation to learning moral treatment of others. By becoming aware "of reason's capacity to provide an *idea* of the infinite" (Brady 59-60), are we better equipped to recognize what both Levinas and McKay would call the "infinity" of the Other? It would take a longer essay than this one to answer that question, but it is worth reflecting again on that "inarticulate," "uninhabitable" part of the self that McKay speaks of at various points throughout *The Shell of the Tortoise*. What allows the "wilderness" or the "infinity" of others to resonate, or to be recognized at all?

### **"Sublime Discourse" in *The Shell of the Tortoise* and *Strike/Slip***

In the essay "Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time," McKay reflects on the work of Harry Hess, the twentieth-century geologist who coined the term "geopoetry," and whose speculations led to confirmed knowledge of plate tectonics (*The Shell* 10). As McKay explains, Hess needed "to induce his readers (mostly other geologists) to suspend their disbelief long enough for his observations about seafloor spreading, driven by magma rising continuously from the mantle, to catch on. He needed

his audience, in the absence of much hard data, to speculate imaginatively, as if reading poetry" (10). McKay goes on to argue that this "practice of geopoetry," comprising as it does a suspension of scientific disbelief and the play of imaginative speculation, remains relevant today, as it "promotes astonishment as part of the acceptable perceptual frame" (10). In the essay, McKay considers what it feels like to consider the lives of creatures who lived millions of years ago, and writes, "one can't help feeling one's thinking stretch as it takes on these remote possibilities" (14)—a description that resonates with traditional conceptions of the mathematical sublime. As it appears in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, "Ediacaran and Anthropocene" concludes with the following manifesto: "Inhabiting deep time imaginatively, we give up mastery and gain mutuality, at least for that brief—but let us hope, expandable—period of astonishment" (24).

McKay's own sublime discourse tends to disassociate the feelings of awe and terror that the Burkean sublime conjoins. Leaving terror by the wayside, McKay focuses more often on awe and its correlatives: astonishment, wonder, and "gawking" in particular. *Strike/Slip* opens with a poetic diptych comprised of the poems "Astonished –" and "Petrified –," and "Astonished –" begins as follows:

astounded, astonied, astunned, stopped short  
and turned toward stone, the moment  
filling with its slow  
stratified time. Standing there, your face  
cratered by its gawk,  
you might be the symbol signifying eon. (3)

The poem begins in the throes of sublime experience. The subject of the poem is "astonied" and "turned toward stone," gawking in contemplation of the earth's more-than-ancient age:

. . . Somewhere  
sediments accumulate on seabeds, seabeds  
rear up into mountains, ammonites  
fossilize into gems. (3)

"Someone / inside you," the poem concludes, "steps from the forest and across the beach / toward the nameless all-dissolving ocean" (3). Notably, this version of sublimity relies upon scientific knowledge: the subject's awareness of deep time occasions the mathematical sublime. Moreover, in this experience some aspect of subjectivity seems to move towards disintegration in the "all-dissolving ocean."

In “Literature and Geology: An Experiment in Interdisciplinary, Comparative Ecocriticism” (2013), Mason reads “Astonished –” as the dramatization of an attempt to “domesticate” and “control” overwhelming experience (484). By contrast, he reads “Petrified –” as a performance of “vertiginous response” to experience that cannot be domesticated or controlled by art (485). Whereas I understand both poems to be engaging, at base, with the mathematical sublime, Mason makes the compelling suggestion that McKay’s geopoetry aligns astonishment with “eternity” and petrification with “infinity” (484). In McKay’s writing, eternity is “thinkable infinity”—that is, infinity that has been scaled down and made cognitively manageable through its containment within “a narrative shape” (*The Shell* 133). Significantly, McKay sets the two concepts in opposition in precisely the same way that he juxtaposes Romantic aesthetics of the sublime and the experience of going “bushed” in “Great Flint Singing.” Thus, Mason’s readings provide us with another opportunity to consider how sublime experience, visionary experience, and artistic representation relate to one another in McKay’s poetry and prose.

Consider too the poem “Devonian,” which appears in both *Strike/Slip* and *The Shell of the Tortoise*. This lyric, which Lee might easily classify as a phenomenological poem, dramatizes a mathematically sublime experience in which the poetic imagination is faced with something too huge to be taken in whole:

Then someone says “four hundred million years” and the words  
tap dance with their canes and boaters through  
the spotlight right across the stage unspooling out the  
stage door down the alley through the dark  
depopulated avenues (for everyone is at the theatre) toward  
the outskirts where our backyards bleed off into  
motel

rentall

stripmall . . .

.....

—four

hundred *million* years, yes, that’s a long  
long time ago. (14)

In the essay “From Here to Infinity (Or So),” McKay explains that “Devonian” was an attempt “to catch something of the disorientation of deep time” through “the loss of narrative structure” (*The Shell* 125). In the middle section of the poem, which is omitted here, the tap-dancing words “four

hundred million years” continue to move out into the outskirts, where they eventually “slur” into a flurry of sand or snow that is viewed as if through headlights on a highway (*Strike/Slip* 14). In this light, the words appear as “the dried-up / memories of water how the waves were how / the light that fell so softly through the depths was,” and although they call up images of the Devonian period, the poem’s audience members are “still staring at the empty stage” when the poem ends, having achieved little more than a kindergartener’s sense of deep time as being “a long / long time ago.”<sup>6</sup>

The conscious activity being dramatized in these poems stops short of a final phase in which the subject of Kant’s mathematical sublime would move from the unpleasant feeling that his imagination has failed to the much more exciting realization that his reason can cover his losses (Weiskel 23-24). McKay’s sublime discourse refuses a moment of sublimation or synthesis: instead, it rests content in an imaginative failure that seems to insist upon rational failure as well.

### Thinking the Sublime Forward in Time

In “From Here to Infinity (Or So),” McKay argues that metaphor “renders the infinite tangible, but it also infinitizes the here and now” (*The Shell* 129). Connecting this thought to Levinas’ writings on infinity, McKay goes on to argue that metaphor has “a paradoxical power to alter the nature of understanding” (129-30). In the spirit of such geopoetry, I will conclude this essay with a speculative imagining of my own. Whereas McKay’s geopoetry explores temporal extensions that move backwards into deep time, many current environmental crises can only be imagined through temporal extensions *forward*, as Rob Nixon demonstrates persuasively in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Sublime discourse and “talk about the sublime” may prove useful for those who would work to make visible the complex and sometimes imperceptible consequences of climate change and environmental degradation and injustice. As Kant argues in *The Critique of Judgement*, “[t]he sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense” (98). Recognizing and cultivating this faculty may seem overly humanistic if one’s goal is to appreciate nature or “wilderness” as such, but aesthetics of the sublime may be effective tools for making “slow” and invisible violences available to thought.

As Jennifer Peeples argues in an essay on the “toxic sublime,” “individuals often attend to environmental problems not because they are the most

dire, pressing, or dangerous, but because they are the most evocatively articulated” (374). Somewhat similarly, Nixon argues in *Slow Violence* that a major difficulty in communicating the effects of climate change and environmental degradation “is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects” (3). Thus, Nixon argues, environmental violence “needs to be seen—and deeply considered—as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time” (8).

As McKay’s own engagements with geopoetry and deep time demonstrate, aesthetics of the sublime need not be egotistical, and foregrounding the activities of an aesthetic imagination at work need not be solipsistic. Contemporary debates about environmental degradation and injustice are being waged in the realm of the imagination as much as in the realms of the scientific and sociological. Through artistic grappling with tensions between incomprehensible and yet *conceivable* forms and data, the cognitive “dissonance” (Peeples 377) that characterizes sublime experience, and that sublime discourse aims to communicate, may be a powerful way of articulating the conditions that enable slow violence and its accretively overwhelming effects.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Jesse Patrick Ferguson has written the only scholarly article to date that focuses exclusively on McKay’s geopoetics, and it does not consider McKay’s engagement with aesthetics of the sublime. In *Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay* (2013), Travis V. Mason briefly suggests a relation between “astonishment” and the sublime in McKay’s work, but the suggestion is not developed in depth (249). In comparison, Mason’s discussion of sublimity in “Literature and Geology: An Experiment in Interdisciplinary, Comparative Ecocriticism” (2013) is more fully developed (see 482-83); however, the topic is not the primary focus of the essay, nor does the essay focus exclusively on McKay’s geopoetic work.
- 2 My citations refer to the original in *Open Wide a Wilderness*.
- 3 *The Muskwa Assemblage’s* pages are unnumbered. See also *The Shell of the Tortoise* (91).
- 4 Sircello also identifies a third category, “talk about the sublime,” which is “reflective or

analytic discourse that takes as its subject matter primarily sublime experience or sublime discourse, but also itself or other talk about the sublime" (541). In this paradigm, many passages in *The Shell of the Tortoise* are "talk about the sublime."

- 5 In *Vis à Vis*, McKay refers primarily to Levinas' work in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998).
- 6 One might compare this to McKay's comments on the revised 1850 *Prelude* in "Great Flint Singing," where he suggests that Wordsworth's addition of the phrase "a huge peak, black and huge" "dramatically humbl[es] his own finely cadenced medium to the status of a kid saying 'it was big, really really big'" (11).

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