

An Astonishing Symphony of Voices: Birdsong in the Poetry of Don McKay

by

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ABSTRACT

Numerous scholars have observed that Don McKay's poetry is profoundly musical and particularly attentive to the sounds of birds. However, it has not been examined how musicology can illuminate McKay's use of birdsong. This thesis addresses McKay's representation of birdsong by drawing upon musicology, acoustic ecology and ecocriticism. The first chapter examines McKay's metaphoric and mimetic representations of birdsong. The second chapter explores how McKay uses birdsong to create acoustic spaces within the text. The third chapter probes McKay's treatment of the physiological processes behind human and avian vocalizations. By defamiliarizing and pushing the boundaries of our language, McKay exposes the epistemological limitations of human language and challenges the species boundary. My hope is that extended attention to the musicality of McKay's poetry will allow for a fuller appreciation of his treatment of bird vocalizations as songs that extend human language and explore what it means to be human.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years Don McKay's poetry has received a great deal of attention. A number of scholars have commented on his ability to transform readers' perceptions of nature through his inventive use of metaphor. Others have foregrounded his use of humour, his interest in the species boundary, his engagement with the natural world, and his application of ornithology and other scientific discourses.¹ Some scholars and reviewers have also commented—albeit briefly—on the musicality of McKay's work. For example, with reference to McKay's collection *Another Gravity* (2000), Barbara Colebrook Peace claims that the “music of the poems, with its pauses—‘slow, slow jazz’—alternating with swift, flowing multiple lines of enjambment... offers us by turns the change to hover, glide, waft, soar, and tilt” (113). *A New York Times Book Review* calls the poems in *Strike/Slip* (2006) “exuberantly musical...and ecological in the fullest sense of the word” (Brouwer). Given McKay's enduring interest in thematizing and reproducing birdsong² within his poems, this attention to the musical aspects of his work is not surprising. What is, perhaps, surprising is that no one has asked how musicology

¹ For a discussion of McKay's use of metaphor see, for example, Coles, Bushell, Cook and Bartlett. Levenson and Babstock are two of the scholars who consider humour in McKay's work. Fisher examines his attention to the species boundary. Mason explores McKay's eco-poetics and engagement with scientific disciplines.

² Ornithologists distinguish between songs and calls: “songs tend to be long, complex vocalizations produced by males in the breeding season” (Catchpole and Slater 10; Saunders 16), whereas, “calls tend to be shorter, simpler and produced by both sexes throughout the year” (Catchpole and Slater 10). In many of McKay's poems the gender of the bird and time of year are unspecified; therefore, it is difficult to say with certainty that the vocalization being described is a birdsong rather than a birdcall. When bird vocalizations are represented onomatopoeically, it is, perhaps, possible to discern the type of vocalization by referring to a book such as *The Birds of Canada*; however, the nomenclature remains challenging. Because of McKay's repeated use of the title “Song for the Song of” and to underscore my interest in music, I am using the term “birdsong.”

and musical interpretations can illuminate McKay's use of birdsong. Drawing on musicology, acoustic ecology and ecocriticism, this thesis seeks to address that gap in current scholarship.

In "Singing with the Frogs" (2009) Robert Bringhurst acknowledges and begins to develop a dialogue between music and literature by exploring the literary applications of the musical term "polyphony." Polyphonic poems, like polyphonic music, contain "two or more interrelated but independent statements" (265). The "coequality" of the statements results in a combination that "exceed[s] the sum of the parts" (265). Thus, polyphony is the "cohabitation of voices." I want to suggest that McKay's poems can usefully be read as examples of "polyphony," firstly because of his persistent interest in representing the multiplicity of voices that exist in nature,³ and secondly because his poems function as spaces in which both human and avian vocalizations overlap and fuse, resulting in both harmony and dissonance. Also, his poems might be called polyphonic because they draw on a range of discourses, including scientific texts, ornithological fields guides and musicology.

McKay is a self-acknowledged "nature poet," and recognizes that this title brings with it a host of stereotypes, including trite devotion to nature, earnestness, and a tendency for melodrama (*Vis à Vis* 25-26). However, for McKay, nature poetry manifests a relationship between the poet and nature that is unlike other forms of poetry. Rather than suggesting that nature "plays through" the poet and translates into language,

³ The recording *Songs for the Songs of Birds* features McKay reading his poems alongside bird vocalizations and other ecological sounds. The resultant layers of acoustic material are, in the fullest sense of the term, polyphonic. Also, the poem "Listen at the Edge" is an example of a poem that foregrounds the polyphony of nature by representing the multitude of sounds and animal vocalizations that are perceived at nighttime, when vision is limited (*Birding* 123).

an approach that McKay describes as “aeolian harpism” (Babstock 171; *Vis à Vis* 25), McKay suggests that nature poetry acknowledges a separation between the poet and the natural world. This separation has much to do with the poet’s dependency upon language and “the inevitable reduction that language involves” (Babstock 171). Metaphor in particular is a “place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of representing the world. Their very excess points to a world beyond language, even while it cuts a fancy linguistic figure” (*Vis à Vis* 85). As such, the nature poet’s relationship with language is paradoxical. Despite his admiration for the natural world, he is a “citizen of the frontier, a creature of words” who uses words to gesture towards what he cannot adequately articulate in language (87): “A poem, or poem-in-waiting contemplates what language can’t do: then it does something with language—in homage, or grief, or anger, or praise” (87). Thus, McKay suggests that nature poetry—unlike aeolian harpism—explores the “epistemological dilemma” that results when language is used to represent the untranslatable (30).

Also, nature poetry reveals the “wilderness” of objects that are typically associated with domesticity and human culture, such as a car,⁴ a cello⁵ and a piano⁶ (*Vis à Vis* 26). “Wilderness” is a term re-purposed by McKay to refer to “the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations... [a] momentary circumvention of the mind’s categories to glimpse something’s autonomy” (*Vis à Vis* 21). It is a form of defamiliarization that interrogates our relationship with our surroundings and destabilizes our sense of control over material objects and the natural world. This is significant here,

⁴ “Ode to My Car” (*Apparatus* 62).

⁵ “Another Theory of Dusk” (*Field Marks* 27).

⁶ “Glenn Gould, humming” (*Apparatus* 9).

because the inclusion of birdsong in McKay's poetry results in an extension of language that creates an experience of linguistic "wilderness." The translation of birdsong into a language we can understand, whether poetical or musical, simultaneously draws avian others inwards by incorporating their songs into a human text and also gestures outwards by evoking the real-life birdsong that inspired the poem, which defies language. I argue that the double trajectory of this gesture articulates the edges between our language and the aural communication of birds, which challenges our sense of the species boundary.

The species boundary is not meant to indicate a scientific distinction between individuals who can produce viable offspring. Rather, the term "species boundary" refers to the *discursive construction* of a boundary between humans and animals. This boundary is often built upon the possession of speech, self-awareness and tool use (Huggan and Tiffin 139; emphasis in original). McKay's interrogation of the species boundary is significant because it prompts a critical examination of how we perceive and orient ourselves, as humans, in relation to other animals. Because human epistemology, subjectivity and the species boundary are all formulated through and contingent upon language, the incorporation of birdsong into distinctively human linguistic and cultural practices, such as poetry and music, blurs the anthropocentric ideas upon which the species boundary depends. However, the incorporation of birdsong into poetry, like other forms of "speaking for" animals, is, as Janice Fiamengo observes, "double edged" because it is both "an exploration of the radical otherness of the animal and an intensely human, and human-centered endeavour" (2). McKay suggests that through "poetic attention," nature poetry—and the representation of birdsong therein—does not avoid anthropocentrism, but "enact[s] anthropocentrism thoughtfully." Through this

“thoughtfulness,” nature poetry acknowledges and values otherness; it performs an act of translation and homage, but not appropriation (*Vis à Vis* 28): “Though we may devote attention to the screech owl or the cat-tail moss, we are inevitably translators of their being, at least when we come to representation” (*Vis à Vis* 99-98). According to McKay, this act of translation “is at the heart of being human” (*Vis à Vis* 29). Therefore, McKay explores human subjectivity through the representation of birdsong.

This thesis considers how McKay’s poetic representation of birdsong destabilizes human language⁷ and how these representations undermine the discursively constructed species boundary. In doing so, it addresses three aspects of McKay’s representation of birdsong. The second chapter suggests how McKay’s use of figurative language explores the extent to which language fails to convey the sound and meaning of birdsong. The third chapter explores how McKay uses birdsong to create acoustic spaces that operate within and outside of the text, resulting in a perception of space that is based upon environmental acoustics rather than human-oriented visual boundaries. The fourth chapter addresses McKay’s treatment of the physiological processes behind human and avian vocalizations, breaking down the perceived biological boundaries between humans and birds. Throughout I have sought to complement and extend the discussion of McKay’s poetry with excerpts from Canadian compositions by Elma Miller, Suzanne Hebert-Tremblay, Ian Crutchley, Quentin Doolittle and Michel Gonneville. My hope is that extended attention to the musicality of McKay’s poetry will allow for a fuller

⁷ Throughout this thesis “language” refers only to the English language, and “music” refers only to Western European music. Other languages and musics may have a different relationship with birdsong, and it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss multiple languages and musics.

appreciation of his treatment of bird vocalizations as songs that extend human language and explore what it means to be human.

CHAPTER 2 LINGUISTIC WILDERNESS

The birds that populate Don McKay's poetry are often described mid-song, and the musicality of their songs is part of what McKay calls an "extra-linguistic condition" recognized by nature poetry (*Vis à Vis* 24). In fact, McKay claims that "the first indicator of one's status as a nature poet is that one does not invoke language right off when talking about poetry, but acknowledges some extra-linguistic condition as the poem's input, output or both" (*Vis à Vis* 26). The extra-linguistic musicality of birdsong draws McKay's poetry more closely towards music; birdsong cannot be translated into words, and likewise "music is a language which we speak and understand but cannot *translate*" (Hanslick qtd in Bowie; emphasis in original). Because birdsong cannot be translated into text, when it is represented metaphorically or mimetically, as it is in McKay's poetry, language is revealed as inadequate, and there is a resultant linguistic gap. Through this linguistic gap the reader experiences lingual wilderness, which probes the species boundary and the limitations of human language. In other words, McKay's poetic language destabilizes human cognition rather than enforcing human knowledge, and this destabilization acknowledges a natural world that is beyond human comprehension.

McKay's thoughtful poetic translation of birdsong is emphasized through his use of the term "song." The evocative phrase "Song for the Song of" is used for several poem titles as well as the title of an audio recording of McKay's poetry. McKay describes the poems as an "attempt to do something in language that is an appropriate gesture of homage to the songs of birds" (*Songs*). Thus, the title "Song for the Song of" creates a gesture back towards a birdsong that exists in the physical world, beyond the pages of the

poem. The recurring title also highlights the musicality of his poems and draws a more explicit connection between McKay's poetry and the musical qualities of birdsong.

Since songs are primarily a vocal medium, the title "Song for the Song of" creates an affinity between human poetic utterances and birdsong based on their physical origins in the vocal chords. It is also important to note that vocal music is often textually dependent.⁸ Rather than title his poetry as a collection of sonatas or a symphony, which immediately suggests a textless instrumental work and the non-verbal quality of birdsong, the title "song" draws attention to the textual component of the poems. The text in McKay's "songs" is a means of inserting the human voice alongside the birdsong. This allows for a direct juxtaposition of the human voice and the bird voice. Although "Summer at Leith" isn't evocatively titled "Song for the Song of," it is included in the recording *Songs for the Songs of Birds* and thereby coloured by the title of the collection. "Summer at Leith" paints a gentle picture of a calm summer afternoon in a family home. When a bat flies down the chimney, the family experiences wilderness, a moment in which they realize that they do not control their house or its contents. The vocalizations of the family, in reaction to the bat, echo throughout the remainder of the poem. The enjambment animates the whip-poor-wills and the metaphor likens the song of the warbler to the delicate and domestic act of embroidery:

Sometimes, if a bat
Flew down the chimney, evenings would erupt
In harmless panic, laughter, shrieks,
Kids and uncles flailed with anything

⁸ The beginning of the *Grove Music Online* entry on the term "song" states that a song is "a piece for voice or voices" (Chew).

That came to hand

.....

Whip-poor-wills, then

Waking on the porch

Embroidered by a warbler's soft motifs. (*Camber* 51)

The juxtaposition draws the boisterous human vocalizations and the soft warbler's song together: the cries of the children are within the domestic walls of the home that is invaded by the bat; the warbler's song weaves its way along the porch, an in-between space. Both sounds exist on the fringes between the domestic and the wild.

Similarly, in "Chickadee Encounter" the energetic voice of the chickadee opens the poem and the bird's presence interrupts the speaker's lethargic, self-reflexive contemplation:

ok ok ok ok

here they come, the tidbits, the uppers,

animating the bramble,

whetting the details. Hi,

I always say, I may be glum or dozy, still

hi, how's it going, every time they zip—

drawing that crisp invisible lilt from point to point—up

to check me out. (*Apparatus* 10)

The pronouns indicate that the speaker is focusing on herself; however, the interruptions of the chickadee draw both the speaker and the reader's attention from internal reflection

to poetic attention, and the “thirsts of poetry,” or the poet’s voice, pour in (*Apparatus* 10). The shift to poetic attention results in a prayer for the chickadee and its song:

zippers, quicklings,
may you enherit the earth, may you
perch at the edge of the shipwreck of state,
on the scragged uneconomical alders,
and chat. (*Apparatus* 10)

The poem, which begins with birds interrupting the speaker’s contemplation, ends with an elevation of the chickadee’s voice that celebrates the chickadee’s chattering song.

McKay’s use of the term “song” also acknowledges and privileges the sensory experience of hearing. In fact, many sightings of birds begin with hearing a birdsong and following it to its source; during a sighting the birder may never see the physical bird, but records the experience of hearing the bird as a sighting (Mason, *Ornithology* 171). The birder’s substitution of seeing for hearing privileges the visual experience over the acoustic experience. This hierarchy is disrupted by poetry that is very concerned with representing sound, despite being a primarily visual medium. In fact, “McKay’s writing... provides ample opportunities to consider listening an act as revealing as seeing” (Mason, *Ornithology* 203). For example, “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush” opens with an extensive description of a single note:

In thin
mountain air, the single note
lives longer, laid along its
uninflected but electric, slightly

ticklish line. (*Apparatus 26*)

This description is followed by musical attention to the space between pitches. “A close / vibrato wak[es] up the pause” between notes, and in the silence between notes the reader “realiz[es] the wilderness / between one breath / and another” (*Apparatus 26*). However, other than the title, the poem never mentions the bird that delivers the admirable song; the poem focuses solely upon the sound of the birdsong, and the experience of hearing the Varied Thrush.

“Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush” is also included in the recording *Songs for the Songs of Birds*. The inclusion of the poem in the recording extends the textual material; a recording reproduces the acoustic form of birdsong, whereas textual versions of birdsong can only evoke sound. Thus, the acoustic version of the poem further challenges the preference for the visual over the aural by transforming a visual, textual poem into sound; the transformation is profoundly revealing. In the brief expository commentary preceding the poem, McKay describes the song of the Varied Thrush as “not complex. It’s a single note” (*Songs*). He then proceeds to read the poem in a monotone voice, reflecting the single note song of the Varied Thrush. The inflection captured by the recording is not present in the textual version of the poem. Thus, in conjunction with the recording, the text of McKay’s poetic songs function like a musical score that is fully realized when the poet transforms it into sound. Furthermore, the recording adds another dimension to McKay’s use of the term “song” because through the audio version, the poetic songs adopt the acoustic medium of a musical song.

However, the term “song” is problematized by the question of whether or not birdsong can be considered music or a “song” because “song” is a human musical

category. Whether or not birdsong can be considered music is a highly contentious question, often debated by musicologists and zoomusicologists.⁹ Arguably, when humans hear birdsong—or any animal vocalization—as music, hearing the vocalization as music could be considered an act of anthropocentrism that defines animal sounds according to human categories. It is not my intention to solve this rift, but to acknowledge that once we take into consideration zoomusicological and musicological attitudes towards animal vocalizations, McKay’s use of the term “song” becomes more complex and can be understood to address the limitations of human language. Specifically, the repeated use of the title “song” suggests that one of the only ways humans are capable of discussing and describing the sounds of birds is to use a distinctly human marker—song—which emphasizes the similarity between birdsong and human song.

This similarity is deep rooted, as humans have long derived musical inspiration from birdsong. Also, for both birds and humans, language is a cultural acquisition that is learned through imitation. An English sparrow raised in a cage with a canary will learn the song of the canary; just as a human child, regardless of her hereditary background, will learn the language of their parents (Saunders 86). Therefore, McKay uses “song” as a “marker of cultural tradition [that works] across species boundaries” (Mason, *Ornithology* 190), despite the human category implicit in the term “song.”

Ultimately, by titling his poems “Song for the Song of” McKay indicates that the speaker hears birdsong as music, and the poems are a reaction to the aesthetic experience of hearing birdsong. According to Roger Scruton, in order to use language to articulate

⁹ Zoomusicology is defined by Dario Martinelli as the study of the “aesthetic use of sound communication among animals.” The definition avoids the term *music* and opts for *aesthetic* since experts “acknowledge aesthetic sense in animals.” Also, the term *aesthetic* is assumed beforehand in a definition of *music* (6).

the experience of hearing music, “we must have recourse to metaphor, not because music resides in an analogy with other things, but because the metaphor describes exactly *what* we hear, when we hear sounds as music” (Scruton 96; emphasis in original). Rather than rely on literal descriptions of birdsong, McKay uses metaphor in an attempt to express in language an indescribable, musical sound.

McKay capitalizes on the defamiliarizing potential of metaphor to reveal birdsong to the reader. A metaphorical claim states that “x is y,” but the knowledge that “x is not y” must also be present for the metaphor to operate: “What is important for understanding the ontology of metaphor is not that the ‘is not’ be fully implicit, not that it be strictly implied, but that it be there” (Zwicky 5). The unspoken “is not” of metaphor draws two disparate objects of metaphoric comparison together. The result is what Kevin Bushell calls a “high-tension” metaphor, which operates by exploiting the tension between the objects being compared (43-44). The “high-tension” metaphor twists the reader’s perceptions by revealing simultaneously both the similarities and dissimilarities between the two objects (Zwicky 4). This creates a fluid and flexible space within the metaphor that is full of “imagistic torque” (Cook xiv). This “torque” is recognized by Méira Cook, who argues that “McKay’s metaphors breach decorum, logic, convention, and expectation, . . . instead forging a fertile negotiation with otherness, the non-human, the extra linguistic, what McKay has named the space of ‘wilderness’”(xiv).¹⁰

The “space” of wilderness between the two objects of metaphoric comparison “points to a gap in language through which we glimpse the world” (Zwicky 10). This gap

¹⁰ Like Bushell, Zwicky and Cook, Roger Scruton suggests that “The success of figurative language consists precisely in bringing dissimilar things together, in creating a relation where previously there was none” (83).

is where language ceases to be able to express the sounds of birds. The failure of language creates an experience of wilderness because human knowledge and understanding is largely contingent upon language; we cannot fully understand or possess that which we cannot articulate linguistically. In other words, as McKay has argued, the linguistic gap of wilderness created by metaphor “elude[s] the mind’s appropriations” (*Vis à Vis* 21). In “Barbed-Wire Fence Meditates upon the Goldfinch,” the speaker recognizes that human knowledge and a sense of possession are constructed through language: “We make the meadow meadow, make it / mean, make it yours” (*Camber* 26). However, these words are spoken by the fence, which suggests that the meadow is also constructed through posts and barbed wire, a human construction that is akin to language in its ability to define and categorize the meadow. Despite the compartmentalization created by the fence, the poem acknowledges the wilderness of the fence posts, before they were appropriated for human usage:

But till the last

Insurance policy is cashed in we will

Never be immune to this

Exquisite cruelty:

that the knots in all our posts remember limbs

they nested and were busy in and danced *per*

chic-o-ree their loops between,

that the fury of their playfulness persists

in amputated roots. (*Camber* 26)

Ultimately, McKay's metaphors reach towards the extra-linguistic to describe a sound that humans encounter on a daily basis, while leaving space for the inexpressible.

The presence of the inexpressible in McKay's metaphors moves his poetry closer towards music. According to Andrew Bowie:

[v]erbal language differs from music because the referential and pragmatic 'bound' aspect tends to dominate. However, in metaphor this aspect is relativized: a metaphor can make us notice new aspects of the world, even if we cannot say what the metaphor means beyond its literal meanings. This brings verbal language closer to the ways in which music brings to our attention what we may not be able to state in words. (Bowie)

Although metaphor brings poetry closer to the condition of music,¹¹ the high-tension metaphors utilized so effectively in McKay's poetry are far less frequent in music because metaphor is dependent on text to create clear referents.

In McKay's poetry the referents that juxtapose each other to form a high-tension metaphor are clearly stated. For example, "Vespers"¹² describes the song of the nuthatch as "bold empty headlines from the mineral world" (*Strike/ Slip* 53), and in "Hiking with my Shadow" the speaker's shadow becomes a puddle, a hunchback and a baby grand piano (*Strike/Slip* 51). Contrastingly, in "Sturnus Vulgaris," the second movement of Ian

¹¹ One of the most famous quotes from Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* is "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (Pater 86). However, according to Patricia Herzog, Pater gives little explanation of what he means by "music." Herzog argues that Pater attributes the perfect melding of matter and form to absolute music that "contains nothing extraneous to the medium of music itself" (Herzog 126). Bowie's statement that the linguistic gap of metaphor moves poetry closer towards the inexpressibility of music creates a paradox because the linguistic content of metaphor separates poetry from absolute music and, by extension, non-linguistic birdsong.

¹² Vespers are sung during the evening service of the Divine Office. McKay's title suggests that the evening song of the nuthatch is both musical and spiritual.

Crutchley's *Wood Point*, repetitive statements consisting of staccato,¹³ microtonal variations in pitch suggest a starling's claws upon pavement; however, there are no clear referents that create a metaphor between the music and "claws on pavement" (fig.1).



Figure 1. Crutchley, *Wood Point*, "Sturnus Vulgaris" bars 9-13

The substitution metaphor, in particular, is a metaphor form that does not often occur in music. A substitution metaphor operates by using A and B as the objects of comparison, whereby the literal meaning of B "functions as a clue to the intended meaning" of A (Krantz 351). For example, in McKay's "Feathers," "the mystery of feather is the womb of song" (*Another Gravity* 48). This metaphor draws together the "mystery of feather" and a womb. Since the literal meaning of womb is the site of conception and gestation that eventually gives way to birth, one of the metaphor's claims is that song is conceived in "the mystery of feather," develops and then is "born" into the world. This type of metaphoric reference does not occur often in music because it hinges upon clear referents. Although, the "mystery of feather" is a complex and enigmatic referent, it is more specific than a musical note.

To compensate for the lack of referents in non-linguistic music, composers often include text as part of the score. The interaction between the music and text "establish[es] a context which has a function much like that of the literal frame in a linguistic

¹³ An articulation marking that indicates the notes should be played short and detached.

metaphor” (Kantz 352). In *La Nuit S’ouvre*, Elma Miller uses extensive, descriptive notes throughout the score. The text, in conjunction with the score, creates metaphors for visual elements such as colour, wind, bird flight and other environmental phenomenon. The “imagistic torque” and acoustic component of Miller’s metaphors invites comparison with McKay’s metaphors for environmental sounds. The metaphors throughout *La Nuit S’ouvre* are what Daniel Putnam calls “second order metaphors” because the composer uses linguistic content to indicate that a particular section of music should be conceptualized as a babbling brook or bird in flight (104).

To illustrate, Miller uses text—“an owl taking flight”—and the familiarity of an arpeggio to metaphorically indicate the progression of an owl’s flight. However, despite its familiar structure, the arpeggio is defamiliarized through accidentals and atonality. The accelerating tempo and increasing dynamics also contribute to the overall impression of defamiliarization by creating a disconcerting sense of urgency and forward direction (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Miller, *La Nuit S’ouvre*, bars 34-41

The metaphor for the owl's flight is disrupted by the insistent A flats that mimetically suggest the owl hooting. The apex of the scene offers a moment of vivid "wilderness" by exploiting extended techniques to push the sound of the clarinet towards a lifelike imitation of a birdcall.

The vividness of the "wilderness" in *La Nuit S'ouvre* is similar to the "wilderness" reflected in McKay's "Song for the Song of the White-Throated Sparrow." The opening lines of the poem expose the limitation of the speaker's mind as he is unable to grasp the sound of the birdsong:

Before it can stop itself, the mind
has leapt up inferences, crag to crag,
the obvious arpeggio. Where there is a doorbell
There must be a door— a door
Meant to be opened from inside.

Door means house means— wait a second. (*Another Gravity* 33)

Thus, the speaker's leaping inferences are suddenly halted by the realization that there is a world beyond human comprehension.

The quoted passage also contains a series of high-tension metaphors: the leaping inferences become mountainous crags, which are then associated with the individual notes of the arpeggio, diminutive black points on a page. Both Miller and McKay exploit the familiar and unfamiliar by placing the well-known, human structure of an arpeggio upon the owl's flight and the song of the White Throated Sparrow. "The obvious arpeggio" beckons to the reader, and the reader recognizes the term as a broken chord with lowered or raised notes indicative of tonality. Ultimately, both the speaker and the

reader can grasp the arpeggio, and its familiarity leads to other conclusions: The sound of the arpeggio becomes a doorbell and an indicator of “home.” In fact, the first two notes of the Chipping Sparrow’s song create the interval commonly heard in a doorbell (Mason, *Ornithology* 184). The term “arpeggio” is the only point at which the speaker attempts to explicitly describe the sound of the birdsong. However, the reader is faced with the jarring realization that the door and doorbell do not lead to an anthropocentric dwelling of wood and laminate floors, but a threshold of air that is independent from human categories. Human language falls short, and the linguistic act of naming the sky is exposed as a fleeting attempt at homemaking.

Miller provides an additional linguistic framework for the music through the descriptive title *La Nuit S’ouvre*; however, the title does not create a sustained metaphor throughout the piece, but a suggestion of what the music depicts. Musicologists refer to this suggestion as “expression.” In other words, “expression” refers to the relationship between non-linguistic music and what it conveys to the listener (Boghossian 49). Because musical expression is culturally dependent—the predominant description attributed to an ascending major scale in Western tonality is “joyful,” though not all cultures consider a major scale “joyful”—the meaning of a musical passage is not as stable as the linguistic referents of poetry (Boghossian 53). To illustrate, Roger Scruton uses Smetana’s “Vltava” as an example of a piece that is not a literal representation of the Vltava river at night. Rather, the music “wears a certain expression” so that adjectives, such as “shining,” “silken” and “shimmering” are appropriate descriptions of the music. Therefore, “Smetana’s music *expresses* the shining and silken qualities that we hear in it” (Scruton 141; emphasis added). The “expressive power” of Smetana’s “Vltava” lies in its

“ability to compel” descriptors that operate metaphorically because the music is not “*literally* shining or silken” (141; emphasis in original). These metaphors exist in a state of tension that simultaneously “demands an explanation and also refuses it, since an explanation would change it from a metaphor to a literal truth, and thereby destroy its meaning” (141).

McKay’s poetic tributes to birdsong can be read as exercises in musicological expression. Just as Scruton attributes the descriptors “shining,” “shimmering” and “silken” to Smetana’s “Vltava,” McKay describes the song of the Varied Thrush as an “uninflected but electric, slightly / ticklish line” (*Apparatus* 26). Moreover, the multitude of metaphors in McKay’s poetry reflect the “expressive power” of birdsong; they are fluid, spacious and resist explanation. “Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush” claims that the “ear inhales” the evening and the Wood Thrush’s song (*Another Gravity* 27). The metaphor draws upon the corporeal similarities between the ear and the lungs; both are open orifices that lead to larger chambers. The metaphor also capitalizes on the impalpable, atmospheric quality of air and sound waves, suggesting that sound is as indispensable as air; yet, it is difficult to explicate such an earnest and complex claim. Similarly, the speaker of “Drag” states that the Horned Lark “is imagination” (*Another Gravity* 6). The concept of imagination is endless. Thus, the complexity and enigmatic, abstract referents that comprise the metaphor make it extremely resistant to explanation, but it fits the Horned Lark and his “brief lilt” (*Another Gravity* 6).

However, Travis Mason asks, “Of what use is an accurate aural metaphor if it leads us away from the physical world by imposing inaccurate, inappropriate meaning on a moment, a species, a sound?” (*Ornithology*, 177) He answers the question by turning to

McKay's "Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow." The poem suggests that the readers seize the metaphorical interpretations of the Chipping Sparrow's song and

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

For we shall be changed. (*Strike/Slip* 25)

The final line indicates that "metaphors serve to describe the poet more than they do the sparrow" (Mason, *Ornithology* 178), and the pronoun "we" unites the poet, speaker and reader, all of whom have the potential to be altered by engaging with the poem (*Strike/Slip* 25).

Similarly, in his discussion of McKay's "Fridge Nocturne," Bushell observes that in McKay's poetry the "natural setting is depicted in a highly metaphoric idiom that underscores subjectivity as it attempts to express the sensorial and cognitive processes of the self receiving an ever-encroaching world" (49). Indeed, "Song for the Song of the White Throated Sparrow" shows a self-conscious focus upon the speaker. The speaker realizes that the metaphors she automatically concocts are distanced from the original sound of the birdsong. Consequently, in an attempt to better understand the bird, the speaker has moved herself figuratively further away from the bird. This distance reaffirms the sense of "wilderness" that results when human language endeavours to categorize the natural world.

The distance¹⁴ between the artistic representation of birdsong and the original sound presents an inevitable and challenging conundrum. Undoubtedly, a metaphor describing the sound of a bird is a circuitous route to birdsong. Mimesis, on the other hand, is a direct imitation that offers an alternative means of representing birdsong. McKay's poetry positions the act of listening "on a threshold between human language and the more-than-human song the poet can only gesture towards onomatopoeically," but never fully capture (Mason, *Ornithology* 209). Thus, McKay's onomatopoeic renditions of birdsong lie on the fringes of human language and contain an extra-linguistic gap that is markedly different from the linguistic gap of metaphor.

Metaphor offers concrete referents with "imagistic torque" that invites the reader to reckon with the limits of their knowledge; mimetic representations of birdsong, on the other hand, do not contain clear referents. The extra-linguistic gap of mimesis is particularly evident when the speaker of "The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows" experiences a moment of heightened sexuality and a sense of affinity with the Blackburnian Warbler that only the warbler's voice can adequately articulate. Even though the speaker claims to "know exactly why" the warbler calls out, the meaning of the mimetic passage—"zip zip zip zip zee / chickety chickety chickety chick"—is unknown to the reader (*Birding* 93). This creates an incongruity between what the speaker claims to know and the referents that are offered to the reader because syllables like "zip, zee and chickety, chick" do not have any referents. The surrounding language may give the reader an indication that the song is a mating call, but any sense of concrete

¹⁴ Travis Mason suggests that McKay "simultaneously pays homage to avian singers and measures the distance—the difference—between their songs and his literary response to them (*Ornithology*, 172). This point will be discussed in more detail on pg 30.

meaning is elusive and slippery. Thus, the lack of referents creates an inexpressible linguistic gap, and the inadequacies of human language become glaring; for a brief moment the syllables are part of poetic language and simultaneously beyond the reader's comprehension.

Interestingly, phonetic descriptions of birdsong often serve as the labels humans use to identify the animal. For example, the names Peewee, Chickadee, Bobolink, Chewink, Veery and many others, are all derived from an attempt to phonetically represent the birds' songs (Saunders 135). McKay recognizes this when he acknowledges that rather than acting as a gateway, naming asserts a "centralizing and reductive influence" and "signals the terminal point of our interest" (*Vis à Vis* 84). The birdwatcher checks the bird off his list and moves on.

The compulsion to categorize, indicative of naming, is subverted by the lack of text, and vague descriptive title of Suzanne Hebert-Tremblay's "Oiseaux de nuit" (ex 3); the lack of text allows the birdsong to be free of human categories. The result is a musical work that recreates the experience of hearing birdsong in a natural habitat and being unable to label the bird and its song. The same lapse in human cognition is depicted in McKay's "The Many Breasted Warbler." The poem opens with mimetic versions of birdsong:

All day tiny scratches tsip

tsip tsip

tseet

entice him from the trail. (*Birding* 103)

The speaker struggles to identify the birds, are they “Black and white, Yellow / possibly Bay breasted warblers, Redstarts?” (*Birding* 103). Unable to reach an answer, he marks them in his notebooks as question marks. The naming and identification of the bird functions as the “terminal point” of the poem; the speaker identifies the singer as a Yellow Warbler (*Birding* 103). The “reductive influence” that McKay observes is also reflected in the synecdoche of naming, which substitutes the birdsong for the bird; just as hearing birdsong is considered a “sighting,” birdsong has come to stand for the animal itself.



Figure 3. Hebert-Tremblay, “Oiseaux de nuit,” bars 13-19

Once an imitative bird name, or word, is accepted into language, it shapes our perception of the bird’s song: “Suppose the first man to apply ‘caw’ to the Crow’s note had instead applied ‘taw.’ Then we should all have been taught from early days that the Crow says ‘taw’ and we would hear it that way” (Saunders 137). McKay plays with bird vocalizations that have been accepted into our language by blending them into his poetry. In “Song for the Song of the Common Raven,” McKay dissects the song of the Common Raven, and juxtaposes the familiar *croak* with more unusual onomatopoeic words, *curruck* and *tok*: “You can hear that smoke-and-whisky brogue- / *croak*, *curruck*, and (swallowing the syllable) / *tok*” (*Strike/Slip* 27). Similarly, “Sometimes a Voice (2)”

describes an anthropomorphized voice: “It curls up in its cave / and will not stir. Not for the gentle quack of the saxophone, not for raven’s far-calling / croak (*Another Gravity* 59). McKay reanimates the familiar terms “quack” and “croak.” Specifically, he draws the reader’s attention to the musicality of the words by connecting “quack” to the saxophone and creating a parallel between the musical sound of saxophone and the utterance of the raven. The connection to the saxophone also highlights the aural origins of the words,¹⁵ origins that are easy to forget since words like “quack” and “croak” are so well integrated into human language.

The representations of bird vocalizations found in birding books is another form in which birdsong has been absorbed into our language and shapes our perceptions. McKay reflects the exchange between textual representation and the bird watcher’s perception of birdsong when he cites *The Birds of Canada*. For example, McKay’s detailed description of the Red-winged Blackbird’s various songs are drawn directly from *The Birds of Canada*. The ornithological text states that the song of the Red-winged Blackbird “is a gurgling, cheerful *konk-ke-ree*, the first syllable lowest in pitch, the third syllable highest, prolonged, and usually trilled” (548). McKay writes, “You would know the end before the end / would understand the Red-winged blackbirds calling / konkeree konkeree the sexual / buzz” (*Birding* 92). The blackbird’s exclamation when startled is described by the *Birds of Canada* as “a down-slurred *tee-err*” (548). McKay’s poetic description is more elaborate, but captures the falling pitch of the blackbird’s cry by describing it as a “silver / falling whistle hanging from the top spine of the spruce / like tinsel” (*Birding* 92). By drawing the onomatopoeic depiction directly from a birding

¹⁵ According to the OED, the etymologies of “croak” and “quack” are imitative.

book, McKay adopts the register of an ornithology textbook, blurring the line between poetry and ornithology, inviting the reader to consider the scientific implications of McKay's poetry. In *Songs for the Songs of Birds* McKay claims that the poem "Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush" "comes to the rescue of natural history, which has dismissed the song of the Varied Thrush as unmusical (*Songs*).

The overlap between McKay's poetry and the scientific catalogue found in an ornithology textbook is evident in "Field Marks (2)," which contains a record of the birds encountered by the speaker. The speaker is self consciously aware of himself as a bird watcher and attempts to adopt the scientific register of an ornithological text by omitting the figurative language of poetry from his record; however the undeniable poetry of bird watching is revealed to the reader through the poet:

Later on he'll come back as the well-known bore

and read his list (Song sparrows: 5

Brown thrashers: 2

Black-throated green warblers: 1) omitting

all the secret data hatching on the far side of his mind:

that birds have sinuses throughout their bodies

and that their bones are flutes

that soaring turkey vultures can detect

depression and careless driving

that every feather is a pen, but living,

flying. (*Field Marks* 18)

The exchange between the scientific and the poetic in “Field Marks (2)” also reflects a feature of ornithological writing, which straddles the line between scientific and poetic language. Onomatopoeic descriptions are subject to a certain amount of artistic nuance, and therefore, are both poetic and scientific. For example, Richard Hunt phonetically notates the Olive-sided Fly Catcher’s call with the syllables “pui peee-veur” (Hunt 203), while Aretas A. Saunders writes the same call as “whit-whee-deah.” Saunders remarks that discrepancies between his version and Hunt’s version are due to subjective perception and, consequently, lack scientific rigour (136).

McKay captures the idiosyncratic aspect of mimetic representation, noted by Saunders, when he represents the Warbler’s song as “teetsa teetsa / weesee weesee weesee” (*Birding* 103). *The Birds of Canada* contains a modified, but similar version of the call: “tzee tzee tzee tzee tzee setta wee see” (466). Though both representations give a strong sense of urgency and pronounced rhythmic contours, the uniqueness of each version results in disconnected, unstable representations. Considering that McKay has read *The Birds of Canada*, the decision to diverge from the standardized representation in the birding book exacerbates and draws attention to the instability and consequent extra-linguistic gap of mimetic versions of birdsong.

To create referents and describe the rhythm and pitch contours of birdsong, some ornithologists attach lyrics to the song. The phrase “Spring o’ the Year” is intended to describe the Meadowlark’s song, while “very very pleased to meetcha,” imitates the song of the Chestnut-sided Warbler, and “Old Sam Peabody” is the famous phrase attributed to the White Throated Sparrow (Saunders 135). Obviously, these phrases are not accurate;

instead, their referents are based upon the conventions of human conversation and directed towards an anthropocentric understanding of birdsong.

The lack of precision in phrasal and onomatopoeic representations of birdsong reveals one of the fundamental differences between human language and birdsong: the presence of vowels and consonants. McKay's poetry, and numerous bird watching guides, rely on vowels to create a sense of pitch variation:

A purely musical note really has no vowel sound. The impression of the vowel sounds is caused by difference in pitch. The high-pitched notes sound like a long "e," and from these they grade down to the broader vowels on the lower pitches. ... Some birdsongs are like speech; one may easily hear the consonant sounds in them. Others are purely musical and can no more be expressed by phonetics than can the music of a violin. (Saunders 136)

The impression of consonants given by mimetic representation is equally problematic. Saunders observes that it is difficult to discern which consonant sound should be attributed to the "explosive" sounds in a bird call, such as "z" and "s," "th" and "f" (137). In order to translate birdsong into human language, one must ignore a fundamental aspect of our language: the difference between vowels and consonants. Thus, mimetic representations of birdsong expose an impassable rift between human language and bird vocalizations. Moreover, the translations articulate the limitations of language, which simply does not function without vowels and consonants.

In order to solve the challenges faced by purely poetic renderings of birdsong, many birding books adopt an extremely complex method of annotating birdsong that combines onomatopoeic syllables with notes on a staff, spectrogram analysis, and

descriptive captions (Hartshorne 78). These modes of representation are noticeably not adopted by McKay, who favors mimesis and metaphor; however, birdsong is more accurately represented by the combination of methods in birding books. McKay's choice of purely linguistic representation shows that his versions of birdsong are not intended to be authentic or exhaustive. The fact that birding books resort to so many modes of representation reveals that despite best efforts, birdsong lies beyond human comprehension.

Musical notation has also been identified as an advancement beyond phonetic descriptions and connects more immediately to the acoustic qualities of birdsong than text on a page (Saunders 137). Like human music, birdsong contains rhythmic patterns, accents and complex musical gestures such as acceleration, retardation, crescendos and diminuendos (Saunders 90). Some pitch intervals are the same as those found in human music, particularly in simple songs. For example, the Wood Thrush usually sings the three notes of a major chord. However, the pitch variations in birdsong are more varied than the Western modal system. The Prairie Warbler sings nine to eleven notes; each note is pitched slightly higher than the preceding one, resulting in microtonal inflections. By the time the Prairie Warbler is finished singing, the final tone is anywhere from two and half to three tones higher than the starting note (Saunders 91). Thus, despite the similarity between music and birdsong, musical notation has its limitations. Rather than exploring the limitations of spectrogram analysis and musical notation, McKay's evocation of sound through language alone, focuses the reader's attention on the limitations of language and draws attention to the ways in which language, specifically, cannot articulate birdsong.

A recent study observes that both language and music are processed by the same structures in the brain and present similar brain wave patterns; linguistic referents, and musical patterns are all retained in the temporal lobe. The frontal lobe learns the “rules that underlie both language and music, such as the rules of syntax in sentences and the rules of harmony in music” (“Music And Language”). Thus, when listening to music one recognizes familiar musical patterns in the same way as linguistic patterns. However, many compositions inspired by birdsong make use of extended techniques,¹⁶ and the resultant sounds contain no referent¹⁷ and cannot be categorized. For instance, “Oiseaux de nuit” utilizes quarter tone trills to imitate birdsong (fig 4); however, it is a translation that defies the conventional boundaries of musical communication, and results in a referential gap, like the one experienced by readers upon viewing a series of syllables—zoozeezoozoozee—(Camber 85). Thus, McKay’s mimetic interpretations of birdsong are the linguistic equivalent of musical extended techniques.



Figure 4. Hebert-Tremblay, “Oiseaux de nuit,” bars 26-28

Another element that creates “wilderness” in musical representations of birdsong is continually shifting meters. The term metaplasm, coined by cultural anthropologist Donna Haraway, is useful for understanding the similarity between metrical shifts in

¹⁶ Non traditional techniques. E.g., humming into the instrument, multiphonics, flutter tongue ect.

¹⁷ Neubauer identifies several common, reoccurring musical gestures that function rhetorically and referentially (35). For example, a narrative of ascent is often illustrated with ascending notes. In Quenten Doolittle’s *Phoenix*, the ascent of the phoenix into the sky is supported by a series of ascending pitches (fig 8).

music and birdsong in poetry. Metaplasm is a form of linguistic play. It is “a change in a word ... by adding, omitting, inverting, or transposing its letters, syllables, or sounds” (Haraway qtd in Mason, *Ornithology* 172). It is “equal parts anagram, palindrome, and pun” (172). Continually shifting meters are an attempt to stay authentic to the rhythm of birdsong, rather than alter the birdsong to fit a conventional time signature (fig 5). This attempt at authenticity continually gestures outside of the poem, drawing attention back to the original birdsong.



Figure 5. Hebert-Tremblay, “Oiseaux de nuit,” bars 26-28

The ever-changing, awkward time signatures in “Oiseaux de nuit” are like the linguistic slippages of metaplasm. Metaplasm reveals the joints of language, the difference between “abide, abode; listen, glisten; underneath, underearth; loop, pool; earth, hear; owning, knowing” (Mason, *Ornithology* 172). Thus, “McKay simultaneously pays homage to avian singers and measures the distance—the difference—between their songs and his literary response to them” (172). Similarly, shifting time signatures measure the distance between the rhythmic conventions of Western music and birdsong.

The parallels between onomatopoeic representation of birdsong in poetry and mimetic interpretations of birdsong in music are rooted in two problematic assumptions:

Phonetic description is based upon the assumption that bird songs are like human speech, and therefore pronunciation sounds are the important factors. Musical notation is based upon the assumption that bird songs are like music, and therefore pitch and time are the important factors. Neither assumption is altogether true. (Saunders 137)

McKay's collection of poetry *Songs for the Songs of Birds* avoids both these assumptions. In the audio version of "The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows," McKay's emphatic declaration of "I know exactly why he warbles as he does / which is zip zip zip zip zee/ chickety chickety chickety chick" (*Birding* 93) is immediately followed by a loud, fluttering birdsong with rhythmic accents that closely resemble the dactyls of "chickety chickety chickety chick," but are far more rapid and virtuosic.

The recording positions McKay's poetic language directly alongside bird vocalizations, creating layers of sounds that are both poetic and musical. The listener hears both metaphoric and mimetic representations of birdsong alongside field recordings of birdsong. The result is a tribute to birdsong that defies explication. Ultimately, McKay uses metaphor and mimesis to draw birdsong into human language and stretches language towards birdsong. Of metaphor McKay says, "one metaphor for the excitement of metaphors is to say that they are entry points where wilderness re-invades language" (*Vis à Vis* 85). Ornithologist Charles Hartshorne expresses the comparable limitation of mimesis when he claims that "syllables are grotesque makeshifts where the more musical songs are concerned, just as musical notation is a makeshift for the noisier songs" (80). McKay perfectly captures the limitation of language when he describes the ear "inhaling" the sounds of the evening. "Only the offhand" linguistic response is "acceptable," and poetry is revealed as inadequate, it "clatters." Even the sound of the poet's heart pales in comparison to the soundscape of the evening; it is an "old contraption pumping iambs" (*Apparatus* 27). The clattering of language and musicality of birdsong so aptly expressed by McKay causes the reader to listen and realize the wilderness in everyday sounds.

CHAPTER 3 ACOUSTIC SPACIOUSNESS

In *The Aesthetics of Music*, Roger Scruton observes that spatial metaphors are essential to how humans perceive acoustic experiences, particularly music. For example, when we discuss music, we describe pitches as high and low; we perceive melodies to move upwards and downwards (Scruton 92-93). My previous chapter discusses how McKay uses metaphor and mimesis to describe the acoustic properties of birdsong. This chapter will consider how McKay's use of birdsong offers a means of perceiving space according to sound, thus creating a spacious, poetic soundscape that engages the readers' aural facilities in the primarily visual medium of poetry and evokes a soundscape that exists beyond the text.

Soundscape refers to "an environment of sound" (Truax 126). In other words, a soundscape consists of all the acoustic stimuli in a particular space. Each stimuli within the soundscape is known as a sound event (126). For example, the sounds of cars, birds, pedestrians and waves are all sound events within the soundscape of downtown Halifax. These sound events acquire meaning through the social and environmental context of the soundscape (126).

The term soundscape highlights the spatial aspect of an acoustic environment by suggesting a "landscape" of sound. Acoustic Ecology adopts geographical and spatial terms such as "acoustic horizon," "background noise," and "sound field"¹⁸ to describe

¹⁸ Acoustic Horizon: "The farthest distance in every direction from which sounds may be heard" (Truax 2). Like a visual horizon, an acoustic horizon defines the borders of a geographical space and our relationship with that space.

acoustic phenomena. Furthermore, the term “acoustic space” is used to describe “the perceived area encompassed by a soundscape....Every sound brings with it information about the space in which it occurs....With environmental sounds, loudness and the quality of reverberation determine the kind of space that is perceived, enclosed or open, large or small” (Truax 4-5).

The information that one gleanes from attentiveness to the surrounding soundscape offers a different experience of the environment than focusing on visual landmarks. Visual experience in relation to geographic space is extremely limited. It is restricted by the viewer’s eyesight, and solid objects, such as skyscrapers, telephone poles and cars, can divide a visual scene. Although a visual scene can change rapidly, visual objects have the potential to be longer lasting than a sound event because a sound event begins to decay immediately after it is produced. Also, sound events within a soundscape never recur because “no sound can be repeated exactly... and a sound heard once is not the same as a sound heard twice, nor is a sound heard before the same as a sound heard after” (Schafer, *Voices* 166). Thus, soundscapes are perpetually shifting and changing. Also, a single sound can simultaneously relate to space in multiple ways. Sound can pierce through a space; it can animate a space and even transcend fixed boundaries that visually compartmentalize a space (42).

Background Noise: Sounds that the listener is not focusing on (Truax 12). The term “background” suggests visual, spatial orientation; a sound in the foreground and sounds in the background.

Sound Field: There are two types of sound fields, “free fields” and “diffuse fields.” (Truax 117). A free field is a sound environment in which sound is not effected by obstacles, boundaries or reflective surfaces (52). A diffuse field contains many surfaces that reflect sound (35).

In fact, auditory space has no absolute boundaries; it is dynamic and fluid. When a sound meets with an obstruction—a building, a mountain, or a tree—the result is a series of reverberations, echoes, or “shadows” (Schafer, *Voices* 31). While the eye “focuses, pinpoints [and] abstracts, locating each object in physical space, against a background, the ear... favours a sound from any direction” (Carpenter qtd. in Porteous 49-50).¹⁹ Thus, acoustic spaces or soundscapes are limitless. According to Marshall McLuhan, “until writing was invented, we lived in acoustic space...boundless, directionless, horizonless, the dark of the mind, the world of emotion, primordial intuition” (McLuhan qtd. in Porteous 47).

McKay’s attentiveness to ecological sounds allows the features of the soundscape—the perpetually shifting sound events and the fluid borders of an acoustic horizon—to permeate the visual experience of reading poetry. Moreover, McKay successfully creates acoustic spaces within his poetry that in turn evoke three dimensions of geographic spaciousness, resulting in a spatial experience that transcends the visual limitations of poetry. Birdsong, in particular, is a sound event that receives a great deal of attention from McKay. He uses bird vocalizations that mark territory and songs for flying and migration to evoke verticality and horizontal space. In both cases, McKay’s representations of ecological sounds explore the acoustic spaces between pitches that are present whenever music is evoked. The space between pitches is used to enhance the representation of geographical space since geographical space is often represented musically through the acoustic space of wide intervals and sparse textures (Parsons 13).

¹⁹ R. Murray Schafer quotes the same passage from Carpenter in *Voices of Tyranny Temples of Silence* (29-30).

McKay's treatment of ecological sounds results in an avian soundscape in which humans are situated as "others." Rather than depict a familiar, anthropocentric, visually oriented landscape, McKay defamiliarizes the reader's sense of space by depicting space acoustically through birdsong. Yi-Fu Tuan observes that without sound human's sense of space narrows (Tuan 9); however, in contemporary society we rely heavily on sight as a means of perceiving our surroundings. Our reliance on sight leads to a perception of space that is "bound and static, a frame or matrix for objects. Without objects and boundaries space is empty" (Tuan 9-11). But, in McKay's soundscapes birds announce their presence through song even when they cannot be seen through the trees, and make the reader aware of the physical and acoustic space occupied by the bird. Thus, space, in McKay's poetry, is depicted through ecological noise, and is not restricted to human made noise and visual cues.

Ecological noises often falls beyond the comprehension of human language and understanding. Consequently, the subjectivity of the speaker/poet persona in McKay's poetry is rooted in an auditory experience of the environment: "We are always at the center of auditory space, listening out with the ear" (Schafer, *Voices* 164).²⁰ The outward trajectory of the ear is fundamental to the concept of a soundscape because the individual receiver is at the center of the soundscape, unlike a soundfield, which derives its center from a sound source (McLuhan qtd. in Porteous 50). Therefore, a soundscape is built upon the relationship between the receiver and the environment (Truax 126).

²⁰ "Auditory space is very different from visual space. We are always at the edge of visual space, looking in with the eye. But we are always at the center of auditory space" (Schafer, *Voices* 164).

McKay's focus on subjectivity reflects a listener-centered soundscape and foregrounds the relationship between the receiver and her environment. For example, "Listen at the Edge" depicts the speaker sitting by firelight at the center of a complex soundscape. Her ears "are empty auditoria for / scritch scritch rr-ronk the / shh uh shh of greater anonymities" (*Birding* 123) that cannot be captured by text. The pronoun usage throughout "Listen at the Edge" describes the sounds in relation to the listener, who is the center of the soundscape. She is instructed to listen "while they peck like enzymes, eat / the information from our voices" (123). Rather than position the listener far away from the sounds, hearing them in the distance, the ecological sounds surround the listener, filling the "empty auditoria" of her ears. Despite being the center of the soundscape, the listener is left with a sense of her own anonymity within the vastness of the soundscape.

The soundscapes, within McKay's poetry, are constructed, artistic representations. The term soundscape may refer to a tangible environment—a field near a river—or an "abstract construction" such as a poem or musical composition. Elma Miller's *La Nuit S'ouvre* represents a soundscape at dusk. When an audience listens to the piece, they experience the constructed soundscape of *La Nuit S'ouvre*, not the original soundscape that inspired the piece; however, by creating a sense of geographic spaciousness, the work effectively pays homage to the original, environmental soundscape. The piece contains multiple vignettes of ecological noise; it opens with depictions of "hazy, heavy air," "falling leaves," and "deep shadows," which characterize the atmosphere surrounding the birds and other animals (Miller 1). The piece alternates between representations of birdsong and insect stridulations; it also draws the background

environmental noise of wind and air to the forefront of the piece, giving the impression of a large geographic space.

McKay's poems are inspired by specific soundscapes; however, because the poems are representations of soundscapes, they are cultural constructions, like *La Nuit S'ouvre*. Nevertheless, the reader experiences a corporeal sensation akin to hearing when reading the text. Dennis Lee uses the example of "hearing" a favourite song in one's head to illustrate the way in which poetry creates a sensation, like hearing, without "physical prompting" (199). Therefore, upon reading McKay's vivid descriptions of a soundscape, the reader experiences the poetically constructed sound events that McKay describes.

For example, in "Drag" McKay highlights one aspect of the soundscape, the call of a Horned Lark, just as Miller directs the audience's attention to specific sound events in the soundscape, such as the call of an owl. Therefore, McKay and Miller guide the reader and listener's experience of the soundscape. More importantly, in "Drag" the lilting call of the Horned Lark in the distance draws attention to the geographic space between the speaker and the Horned Lark; a space consisting of roadside gravel and a field. The geographic distance between the speaker and the bird underscores the poem's larger discussion of the biological difference between the speaker and the bird, who are separated by a sense of the species boundary. The speaker desires flight; however, unlike the Horned Lark, she battles aerodynamic drag, which opposes the motion of flight; she describes drag as clothes on the "nakedness of speed" (Camber 164). The lilt of the Horned Lark brings upon the realization that the speaker is laden with memory, "which / though photogenic and nutritious, rich / with old-time goodness, is notoriously / heavier than air" (164). She is not a fluid object of imagination like the Horned Lark, and her

memories weigh her to the ground so that she cannot fly. Thus, the geographical space between the speaker and the bird, combined with the references to human memory, illustrate the biological distance between birds and humans, a theme that is explored throughout McKay's poetry.

Another means by which sound can create a vivid sense of geographic spaciousness is through contrasting dynamics: a birdsong in the foreground and one in the distance. For example, the opening of Suzanne Hebert Tremblay's "Oiseaux de nuit" contains a flourishing birdcall with a dynamic marking of mezzoforte.²¹ The same birdcall is stated immediately afterwards with a marking of pianissimo.²² The contrasting dynamics give the impression of one bird in the foreground being echoed by another bird in the distance, thereby creating a sense of the space between the birds and the lush surrounding forest (fig 6).



Figure 6. Hebert-Tremblay, "Oiseaux de nuit," bars 26-28

The same device is found repeatedly throughout *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, in which multiple layers of sound—McKay's voice and various bird vocalizations—creates a vast acoustic environment. For example, the recording contains several poems devoted to aerodynamics. The track that introduces the section on aerodynamics opens with a soft twittering birdsong in the distance. The loud, explosive cry of a crow increases in volume as the crow moves closer to the listener, and the sound of a barking dog originates from a

²¹ mf (mezzo forte): half loud or medium loud volume

²² pp (pianissimo): very soft volume

fixed position on the ground (*Songs*). Thus, the track conveys three spatial dimensions: length, width and height.²³ In fact, all the tracks contain an element of spaciousness by virtue of the space, or interval, between the pitches in McKay’s voice and the pitches in birdsong.

The space between pitches²⁴ is a place with endless possibilities. McKay acknowledges the space between pitches as a place of conceptual spaciousness with infinite meaning, a “newly minted interval” full of wilderness (*Apparatus* 26). The space between pitches is where sounds resonate, evolve and interact with one another. It is within this space that we perceive the distinction between pitches, which is visibly manifested by spaces between notes on a staff (fig 7).



Figure 7. Hebert-Tremblay, “Oiseaux de nuit,” bar 24.

The typography of “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush” recreates the visual representation of notes on a staff by double spacing between each line. This textual representation of a musical interval registers a tension between the visual medium of poetry and the sound event that the text is representing. The typographical spacing also visually suggests the atmospheric spaciousness of “thin mountain air” (*Apparatus* 26).

²³ In *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*, Eric Clarke observes that varying dynamics can indicate “an unstable physical location” (53). In *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, the varying dynamics indicate multiple physical locations; some are stationary (the barking dog) and others are in motion (the flying crow).

²⁴ In musicology, the term “pitch” refers to a tangible sound; whereas, a “note” is the visual representation of that sound in a score.

The space between the pitches of the interval described by McKay strengthens the depiction of atmospheric spaciousness because the acoustic spaciousness of wide intervals and sparse musical textures²⁵ are often used in Canadian music to illustrate open geographical spaces and unpopulated land (Parsons 13), like the mountainous landscape in “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush.”

The multiple forms of spaciousness in “Drag” and “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush”—geographical distance that illustrates the distance between species and geographical space enhanced by the acoustic space between notes—are all present in “Midwintering.” However, the poem extends the meaning of the space between notes by using the descending direction of the minor third in a chickadee’s song to direct the reader’s attention downwards towards the ostinato²⁶ of a river pulsating beneath a sheet of ice:

Listen: inside the deeper
shadow of cedars, chickadee
has shifted from his trademark into
wistful- two notes in falling
minor third performs the soft drop from her collarbones
toward the south:
underneath its ice
ostinato, river has been running

²⁵ The musical texture depicted in “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush” is a “thin” texture because only one melodic line is represented, the song of the Varied Thrush. A thick texture would contain many simultaneous sounds.

²⁶ “Ostinato” is an Italian term that literally means “persistent.” In music the term refers to a repeating pattern.

running. (*Camber* 46)

The ostinato of the river is an iterative sonic presence; it complements the intervallic chickadee song and measures the frequency of the “trademark” cry before the shift to the “wistful minor third.” Moreover, the poem contains the acoustic space within the interval of a minor third and the lengthy geographic space of a river. Since the poem is a text, limited to the page, the poetic soundscape creates a dimension of the poem that exists beyond the boundaries of text both geographically and acoustically.

Another way to conceptualize the geographic spaciousness of McKay’s poetry is to consider birdsong as a marker of territoriality. Steven Feld observes that various bird species inhabit specific geographical areas and altitudes (61). R. Murray Schafer similarly observes that every area of the earth has a unique “bird symphony” based upon the population of birds that reside there (*Soundscape* 31). These unique symphonies create a global map that subverts the artificial boundaries created by humans.

One of the strongest theories for birdsong as a marker of territoriality claims that male birds arrive during the spring and choose an area to live (Saunders 101). The bird sings a territorial song that is “loud [and] distinctive” from a high perch (Mouseley qtd. in Saunders 38). The territorial song serves a dual function by keeping other males away and attracting females who are searching for a mate (Saunders 101). The dual function of the territorial song is reflected in McKay’s “Song for the Song of the Common Raven,” in which the “smoke and whisky brogue” of the raven remembers, but never speaks of, a violent history:

Of its brutal

seismic histories, its *duende*,

it says nothing. Nothing of the flowing and bending of rock,
of the burning going down and coming
up again as lava. (*Strike/Slip* 27; emphasis in original)

The poem adopts the traditional view of the raven as a messenger who reports from the Devil to men who have lost their souls (Rowland 144). According to Beryl Rowland, the raven's cry has been described onomatopoeically as the Latin phrase *cras! cras!* When translated, the phrase means "Tomorrow! Tomorrow!" Because of the raven's ominous voice and the association with the phrase "Tomorrow! Tomorrow," the call of the raven is often connected to the cry of a sinner who is afraid of death and perpetually claims that he will repent tomorrow. This inauspicious meaning, attributed to the raven's call, was so common that St. Augustine stated, "when you make a voice like the raven you destroy yourselves (sic)" (Rowland 146). Therefore, human imitation of the raven's song was associated with eternal damnation.

In "Song for the Song of the Common Raven" McKay offers two possible meanings for the raven's hoarse call. The first: "Watch your asses, creatures / of the Neogene"²⁷ is a territorial call that warns others to stay away from the raven's territory (*Strike/Slip* 27). The translation also alludes to the ancestral history of birds, which evolved from reptiles and flourished during the Cenozoic period, the "age of birds and mammals" (Gill 28), thus evoking immense temporal spaciousness. The second translation, provided by McKay, claims that the raven's call means "Baby bring it on," reflecting the biological purpose of the territorial call as a song that attracts a mate. Thus, the poem recognizes the two purposes of the territorial call identified by ornithologists

²⁷ Neogene: The later part of the Tertiary period, 23-1.64 million years ago (*Neogene*).

and marks the territorial boundaries of the raven represented in the poem. The marking of these boundaries, in turn, evokes a sense of the geographic space or territory within the boundaries.

According to Louis Mackendrick, “Territoriality” uses the territorial nature of the Red-winged Blackbird to “explicitly and cynically” inculcate human’s destructive territorial impulses (41). The chattering “konkeree” of the Red-winged Blackbird resounds as they build their nests, “signaling the outlines of their small and shifting, kingdoms / to others who are signaling / the outlines of their small and shifting kingdoms back” (*Sanding Down* 89). The bird vocalizations create acoustic borders that, unlike the rigid lines upon paper found in a visual map, fluidly map the landscape and change to accommodate the multitude of creatures living in the area. McKay envisions the creek bank as a “living map”:

Each kingdom is a pulse, shrinking and expanding
in concert with its neighbors as their patterns intersect
and overlap, a jigsaw puzzle
with each piece beating like a heart. (*Sanding Down* 89)

The living map exists free of the restrictiveness of enforced human borders, and the areas reflect acoustic divisions that are flexible and overlapping, unlike visual borders, which are absolute.

The harmonious and flexible boundaries of a land mapped by sound are also discussed in Bruce Chatwin’s research on Australian Aboriginal songs and Steven Feld’s research on the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea. Both cultures have a unique perception of landscape that is rooted in an attentiveness to sound. According to

Australian Aboriginal creation myths, the ancestors sang the land into existence.

Ancestral songs function as a map and “an aborigine on a traditional ‘walkabout’ [could] follow a songline, along which he or she would find both sacred sites” and people with whom she shared a common ancestry (Porteous 48). Thus, “in theory at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung” (Porteous 48). Similarly, the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea demarcate various spaces according to the songs of birds that are eating, nesting and perching in the area (Feld 61).

Unlike the Kaluli and the Australian Aboriginals, the humans in “Territoriality,” are not aware of the fluid mapping performed by the Red-winged Blackbirds. The humans destroy the land by building missile silos, and McKay uses a similar repetitive poetic structure in the first and fourth stanzas to draw a parallel between the Red-winged Blackbirds’ territorial activity and humans’ destructive, territorial assertions:

With others it is different.

They dig inverted silos in their land
and stock them with extinction, sheathed
hair-triggered negative
erections, aimed at the enemies who dig
inverted silos in their land
and stock them with extinction, sheathed
hair-triggered negative
erections, aimed at their enemies who dig. (*Sanding Down* 90)

The promise of new life so optimistically depicted in the section on the Red-winged Blackbird is starkly contrasted with the impotent and violent actions of humans. The humans in “Territoriality” do not perceive the land as a flexible soundscape, but as a landscape that can be visually divided and conquered; they use sight to aim their missiles at each other rather than listening and modeling their behaviour upon the harmonious coexistence of the animals in the area.²⁸

In addition to the territorial birdsong, birds create a sense of vertical spaciousness because they fly and nest at varying heights (Feld 61). In *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, McKay describes a hike in the mountainous wilderness of Strathcona Provincial Park. As he walks he notices that at different altitudes he is “accompanied” by the song of a different thrush; first the Swainsons Thrush, then the Varied Thrush, and the Hermit Thrush at the highest altitude of the hike; finally, in the car park, McKay hears the song of the most common thrush, the robin (*Songs*). Consequently, the poem is entitled “Ascent with Thrushes,” and the successive birdcalls create the sense of increasing vertical spaciousness within the poem.

The vertical spaciousness in McKay’s poetry is inseparable from birds’ ability to fly, and as Mason writes, quoting W.J. Brown, McKay’s posits both avian flying and human bipedal movement as means of moving through space:

Bird flight represents the locomotive antithesis of what mammalian bipeds have achieved and, as such, introduces an ancient nostalgia for, or memory of, what might have been. ‘It must have seemed to early man [sic], earth-bound and

²⁸ I do not mean to suggest that violence does not occur between animals; however, violence between animals rarely leads to the kind of destruction perpetrated by human warfare.

leaden-footed, that these graceful passages through an element he could not master were the epitome of all he could never be.” (*Ornithology* 124)

Moreover, walking is the human equivalent of bird flight; it relies solely on the body and does not make use of extraneous devices such as a car, bike or plane; correspondingly, bird flight relies solely on the anatomy of the bird. Mason observes that the act of walking reoccurs throughout McKay’s poetry as a part of the process of bird watching (*Ornithology* 124). McKay’s *Night Field* opens with the depiction of a hike, an act of walking “that is both emblematic—of the poet’s moving through the world, of the cadences of human locomotion (in concert) with his immediate environment—and pragmatic. Birders must get to the field (usually by car) and, once there, be able to get around quietly and efficiently. The act of birding requires an act, sometimes many acts, of walking” (Mason, *Ornithology* 124).

Susan Elmslie observes that the journeys conducted by McKay’s speaker are excursions in which the excursionist ventures away from himself by turning to the woods “to see the world afresh” (82). However, a return to the starting point is a “noticeable motif” in excursionist writing, and the return indicates a “renewed perception” of the self and the world that both the poem’s speaker and reader experience by engaging with the poem (Elmslie 81). Therefore, the records of walking and birding within McKay’s poetry recall the distance that both the birdwatcher and the bird have traversed. More importantly, the poetry signals a journey towards an awareness of self through an interaction with geographic space and the birds that populate the area.

McKay’s hiking birder is attentive to the surrounding soundscape and therefore the resultant poems are records of a soundwalk. A soundwalk is a form of “active

participation in [a] soundscape” that encourages participants to think critically about the sounds they are experiencing. Because of the active nature of a soundwalk, the participant must also be aware of the sounds they are contributing to the soundscape, such as the sound of their breath and their footsteps on the ground (Truax 130). In the recording of “Field Marks (2)” in *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, McKay draws attention to the sounds that the birder contributes to his soundscape by including the sound of footsteps against dry leaves and twigs as he walks through the forest. In the recording, McKay imitates a few bird vocalizations, which overlap with the songs of birds in the nearby area (*Songs*). Thus, he is as much a participant in the soundscape as he is an observer.

In “To Speak of Paths,” the speaker describes the various paths that are created by the senses, each sense enticing him in a different direction:

One gestures to a blue
fold in the hills, meaning
follow your heart. Another scrawls
follow your nose into the raspberry canes. (*Camber* 113)

The path proffered by the raspberry canes is part of a smellscape, a spatial concept used to describe olfactory environments (Porteous 25). McKay acknowledges the olfactory experience when he describes the birder’s eagerness to engage with the natural world as a desire “to become a dog’s nose of receptiveness” (*Birding* 75). The overlap between smellscapes and soundscapes is evident in the theoretical terms used to discuss the

concepts,²⁹ and McKay conveys this overlap when he likens the alertness of a birdwatcher's ears to an Irish Setter's nose (*Birding* 15). The various paths offered to the hiker in "To Speak of Paths" include a path, or soundwalk, that speaks to "the third and fourth ears" and is felt "vestigially, in the feet" (*Camber* 113), thus linking the acts of hearing and walking.

Undertaking a soundwalk as a means of moving through, and engaging with, geographical space is also illustrated when the scratching "tsip / tsip tsips / tseet" of a Many Breasted Warbler "entices" a birdwatcher from the trail (*Strike/Slip* 103). The speaker's divergence from the path reflects the formation of a new trail, a soundwalk path based upon birdcalls, rather than the well-trodden, visually-oriented path.

Poems such as "Ascent with Thrushes," "To Speak of Paths" and "The Many Breasted Warbler" function as poetic records of soundwalks and, therefore, are a form of map; despite lacking the referential specificity of a geographical map that is meant to be followed, the poems are soundwalk maps in so far as they are textual records that highlight the acoustic features of a landscape. In the case of "Ascent with Thrushes," if we listen to the audio book, we know the poem refers to a hike in Strathcona Provincial

²⁹ The theoretical terms used to discuss smellscape are derived from the vocabulary of soundscape studies in Schafer's *The Tuning of the World*: "A basic spatial vocabulary can be derived from soundscape studies. Soundscapes consist of sound events, some of which are soundmarks (compared to landmarks). Similarly, smellscapes will involve *smell events* and *smellmarks*. 'Eyewitness' is replaced by 'earwitness' and 'nosewitness' "(emphasis in original) (Porteous 26). Also, sounds and smells have similar non-tangible characteristics. Both are temporally limited: sounds and smells dissipate quickly, unlike visual objects, which can remain in the same state for years. Furthermore, "individual smells are often difficult to describe or name, even though [they are] instantly recognizable. This verbalization difficulty is known as the 'tip-of-the-nose problem" (Lawless and Engen qtd. in Porteous 26).

Park (*Songs*). However, the locations that inspired “The Many Breasted Warbler” and “To Speak of Paths” are undetermined. Rather than guide the reader through a specific soundscape, the poems reveal the wilderness of an unspecified landscape, thus inviting the reader to adopt an attentiveness to sound regardless of their specific geographic location.

Significantly, the birdwatcher—or soundwalk participant—is limited to walking upon the ground and cannot traverse the vertical space that birds occupy. McKay’s birder often gazes upwards and marvels at birds’ ability to fly. In fact, McKay describes his poetic examinations of aerodynamics as “standing and watching birds fly, gawking” in wonder at their flight (*Songs*). Thus, McKay uses flight to “direct attention upwards” (Dawson 69). He contemplates “snow geese, swans, [and] song birds / navigating by the stars and earth’s own / brainwaves” (*Camber* 178). The upward gaze of the poem creates an element of vertical spaciousness within the text.

Even if a bird’s flight is not immediately visible to the birdwatcher below, the sound of birdsong is indicative of flight since almost all species of birds have a song that is only sung while flying. There are a number of different types of flight singers. The “sporadic singer” either “indulges in song while flying from tree to tree” or sings in flight only during specific seasons. There are others who sing consistently when flying; in some cases, they spend the majority of their time flying and, as a result, do not sing from a perch (Saunders 39). The warblers that McKay frequently mentions in his poems sing when flying between trees (39).

For example, in “Concerto for Violin and Orchestra,” the warblers’ sing as they fly from tree to tree and build their nests:

Fresh
news from the many nesting
warblers, gathering their twigs
twittering under a sky in which the only troubling speck

is the Red tail
musing, moving among parts of air. (*Birding* 119)

The warbler's singing effectively illustrates the verticality of the trees and draws attention to the space between the trees and sky.

Also, the opening lines of the poem depict a poised violinist ready for his entrance,³⁰ listening like a hunter to the thirty-second notes of the orchestral part. Throughout the poem the violinist, orchestra, conductor and birds are blurred together. The result is a jarring juxtaposition of human "culture"—the efforts of the musicians—and animal "culture"—the instinctual actions of the warblers and the Red tail. Before the violinist begins to play, he is in "full possession" of his violin, and McKay reveals the violin as matériel, an object of appropriation.

Matériel, according to McKay, is an "instance of second-order appropriation" (*Vis à Vis* 20). The first appropriation occurs when an object is made into a tool. When objects are made into tools they are removed from "autonomous existence and conscript[ed] as servants" (20). The act of tool making, he suggests, defines humans, and a "person without tools is... at the risk of slipping below the ranks of human" (*Field Marks* 51).

³⁰ Entrance in the musical sense is when a musical part that has been previously silent begins to play, thereby, entering the music.

Therefore, we are, in a sense, dependent upon tools for our sense of subjectivity and “tools may be said to operate us” (52).

In order to move from tool to matériel, the object must undergo a second appropriation:

This second appropriation of matter may be the colonization of its [the object’s] death, as in the case of the raven,³¹ the nuclear test site, the corpse hung on a gibbet or public crucifixion. On the other hand, matérialization could be a denial of death altogether, as in the case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition, their return to elements. (*Vis à Vis* 20)

Within the forest, the body of the violin is revealed as appropriated wood, and the sinews of the instrument are literally the organs of an animal, refashioned into the tailgut of the violin,³² denied decomposition by layers of varnish and preservatives.

McKay claims that musical instruments, tools of art, contain an “illicit, delicious desire” to reveal their animality, a “primal otherness” (*Field Marks* 52). The evidence for this desire, according to McKay, “is that the tool seems less of a tool, and more of a medium.... it slides towards the message-bearing, border-crossing” (52). In “Concerto for Violin and Orchestra” both the violin and the human subject connected to the violin yearn for animality. The violin acts as a “border-crosser” moving between the culture of classical music and the wilderness of the natural world; the violin also facilitates the release of the violinist’s inner animal. Consequently, the Red tail and the violinist dissolve into each other:

³¹ McKay’s *Vis à Vis* opens with a narrative recounting his discovery of a mutilated raven’s corpse: “a piece of baler twine around one leg, wings spread. There was a huge shotgun hole in its back just above the tail, which was missing altogether” (18).

³² Modern violins often have a tailgut made of nylon or wire (Boyden).

the orchestra
swell[s] up to meet him, the conductor's elbow
cocked to drive the hunger
home to the small upsurging

flesh in the grass he flashes in
with brisk efficient strokes he seizes it
and eats it

shrieking into melody. (*Birding* 119)

The revelation of the violin as matériel and as a tool that yearns for wilderness marks a shift in the poem. The violin's "tortured" state is contrasted with the loose "rustling" of the woodwinds, which refers to both the orchestral instruments and the warblers in the trees. The poem proceeds to focus on the vertical space evoked by the warbler's calls and the distance traveled by the Red tail who "mov[es] among paths of air" (*Birding* 119). Moreover, the likening of the earth to a sliding menu suggests the speed of the Red Tail's flight and the distance he is able to cover; beneath the Red tail, the earth is reduced to a printed piece of paper. Thus, the geographic distance of the Red tail's flight combines with the verticality of the trees and the warbler's nesting songs to convey multiple dimensions of space within the poem.

Like McKay, Quenten Doolittle also uses a combination of birdsong and flight to represent three-dimensional space. Doolittle uses rapid, ascending arpeggiated figures labeled "yodeling to the peaks" to convey the whimsical song of the phoenix and the sound transpiercing the landscape and sky, traveling a great distance from the mouth of

the phoenix to the peaks of the mountain. The call of the phoenix is surrounded by passages labeled “I dazzle and soar” and “I pierce the sky,” suggesting a bird who sings while flying, like the warblers in “Concerto for Violin and Orchestra.” Doolittle’s word choice indicates a flight of mythic proportions that surpasses mountains into the upper reaches of the atmosphere, penetrating the sky. The ascending passages emphasize the vast vertical distance covered by the phoenix’s flight (fig 8).³³



Figure 8. Doolittle, Phoenix, bars 5-6

The spatial metaphors and musical terminology used to discuss Doolittle’s

Phoenix reveals that a similar series of spatial metaphors, in conjunction with musical

³³ It is worth noting that my description of the passages as ascending, and therefore suggestive of flight, makes use of a well-worn metaphor that describes sound according to spatial concepts such as ascending and descending or rising and falling (Scruton 92-93).

terminology, are used in McKay's "Kestrels" to elucidate a parallel between the motion of flight and the motion of music:

beat
con brio out across the field and
hover
.....
sprung rhythm and
surprises, enharmonic change directions
.....
missing bits
of time
.....
to have a repertoire of moves so clear their edge is
the frontier of nothing. (*Camber* 29)

The term "con brio" describes the vigorous, spirited beating of the bird's wings as it flies across the field and likens the character of flight to music. The comparison relies on the reader's perception of music as forward motion through space,³⁴ like flight. Also, the poem shows a correspondence between the surprise and flexibility of poetic sprung

³⁴ Eric Clarke notes that the relationship between music and motion has been extensively discussed, dating back to Classical Greek writings on music. Clarke argues that "the relationship between music and motion is a fundamental aspect of music's impact and meaning" (Clarke 64). Musical "motion" is frequently associated with rhythm and tempo. The most basic terminology for tempi rely upon metaphors for movement such as "slow" and "fast": however, the conceptualization of music as a form of motion is problematic because the type of "space" through which music moves is not specified; nevertheless, the sound that is produced by music does literally move through "space" since sound waves move, very quickly, through the air.

rhythm and musical enharmonic shifts. An enharmonic “change in direction” occurs when an enharmonic equivalent acts as a pivot that changes the harmonic direction of the piece. For example, in the first movement of Brahms’s Sonata No 1, Op. 120, the development opens in Aflat major. The Aflat then functions as G#, its enharmonic equivalent; the G# acts as the dominant of c# minor and turns the key to c# minor (fig 9). Enharmonic shifts are characterized as changes in harmonic direction that are unpredictable; this unpredictability can be associated with spontaneity and corresponds with McKay’s description of the kestrel’s capricious flight.

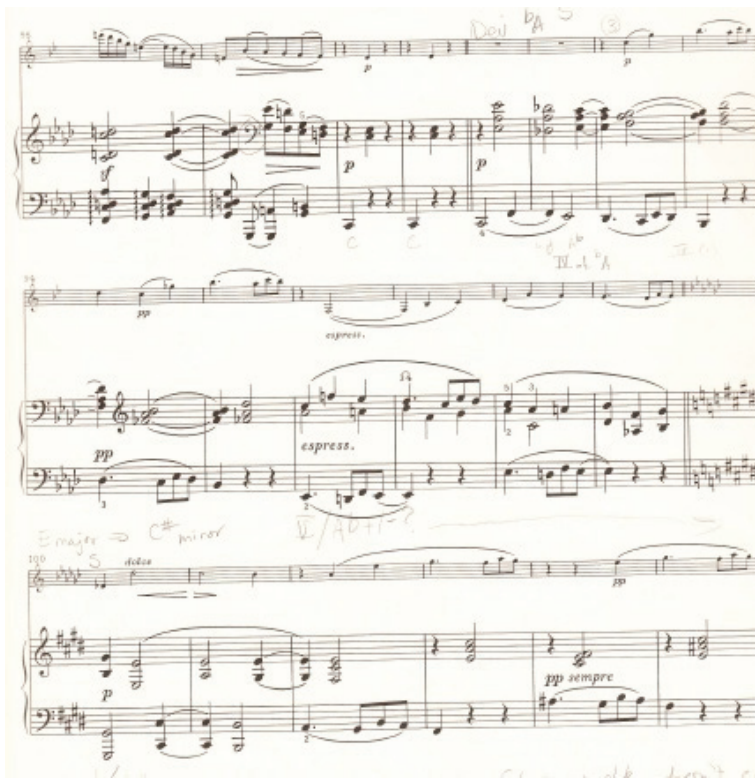


Figure 9. Brahms, Sonata No. 1, Op. 120, bars 86-104

The spatial metaphor that describes an enharmonic shift as a “change in direction” is a commonly used metaphor that capitalizes on the idea of a musical score as a landscape (Iwaki qtd. in Knight) or music as an “aural landscape” (Sternberg 437). The structural

elements of harmony function as a path that guides the listener through the music, like the path in the air created by bird flight. It is this similarity that McKay draws upon when he describes the sudden changes in the Kestrels' flight path as an "enharmonic change in direction" (*Camber* 29).

The distance and verticality that flight can create is more pronounced in McKay's poetry when the flight is related to migration. Migration creates a specific type of spaciousness within a poem due to the size of the geographical area that it brings to mind; flight may evoke a bird's territory while migration evokes a long migratory path.

Migration offers particular fascination to humans because of the sheer distance birds often travel. The arctic tern travels from the Canadian Arctic Circle to Antarctica in two months (Gingras qtd. in Mason, *Ornithology* 104). In "Load" the bird's exhaustion reflects the immensity of its journey and brings to mind the strength needed to perform such an incredible journey (*Another Gravity* 10). McKay's *Birding, or Desire* includes a section entitled "Migratory Patterns," and through the individual variation of birdsong "it is possible to recognize the individual bird and prove fairly conclusively its return to a locality year after year" (Saunders 34). Thus, the return of birdsong every year and the consequent changes in the soundscape represent a cyclical journey away from home and back to home.

A cyclical, migratory impulse is reflected in McKay's "Homing," which "offers bird migration as a subtle indication of the twin desires of flight and home" (Mason, *Ornithology* 102). The Yellow Warbler's flight reflects the distance the bird has traveled "from (a) winter habitat in South America to nest here / in the clearing," and the magnetic attraction of home (*Another Gravity* 20). The speaker states that if the Yellow Warbler

were caught and released, it would fly “a thousand miles away” and return within a week because “home is what we know / and know we know” (20).

Similarly, Michel Gonneville’s *L’oiseau du Cri à la Quête des Ailes* depicts a circular migratory impulse and when read alongside “Homing” and “Meditation on a Small Bird’s Skull,” sheds light upon the acoustic dimensions of the poems that are not fully explored because the poems exist only as text on a page. Particularly since “Homing” and “Meditation on a Small Bird’s Skull” are not part of *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, their acoustic properties are not fully exploited. *L’oiseau du Cri a la Quete des Ailes* depicts a migrating “goose dreaming of a final flight that, after a low pass over the earth, would lead it beyond the clouds to the cherished stars it contemplated from below” (*Societe*). Gonneville’s goose is very much like the Indigo Buntings in “Meditation on a Small Bird’s Skull” who “gaze into the stars and the stars / gaze back into them” (*Night Field* 22). Both the goose and the Indigo Buntings contemplate the stars and measure the distance between themselves and the celestial bodies.

Gonneville’s work, like “Kestrels,” posits a connection between flight and musical movement: “The music is replete with beating wings, gliding patterns and cries that play on registral leaps” (*Societe*). Long, iterative patterns with steady motion towards the upper register suggest the beating of wings, and the rests prolong the moment of silence that occurs when the wings meet the body, between the beating of the wings. Thus, the music underscores the distance the goose is traveling by literally measuring and elongating time through repetition (ex. 11). The gliding patterns suggest gradual vertical movement because within the glissando every pitch is voiced, albeit blurred together (ex. 12). Registral leaps, on the other hand, indicate a more abrupt vertical movement since

the notes within the interval are not sounded; also, the distance between the notes illustrates, both visually and sonically, the vertical space that is being traversed (ex. 13): “It is as though, even in mid-flight, the goose [is] continually casting an eye above and below, measuring the path taken and the distance ahead” (*Societe*) thus remembering home and desiring distance from home through migration.



Figure 10. Gonneville, *L’oiseau du Cri à la Quête des Ailes*, bar 16-19

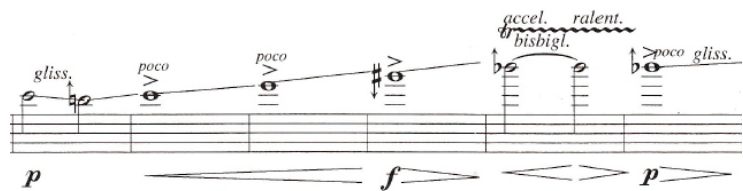


Figure 11. Gonneville, *L’oiseau du Cri à la Quête des Ailes*, bar 173-178



Figure 12. Gonneville, *L’oiseau du Cri à la Quête des Ailes*, bar 166

The simultaneous draw and pull away from home represented by migration is also expressed in “UFO,” which opens with the claim that “leaving home loves homing” (*Another Gravity* 54). The recording of “UFO” acoustically represents this claim through a lack of birdsong; birds—and other unidentified flying objects that “tweak the heart to its longing”—have left home and are noticeably absent (*Songs*). Bird vocalizations do not

fill the pauses in McKay's speech; nor does they reverberate at the beginning and end of the track, as they do throughout the rest of the recording (*Songs*).

The absence of birds in the sky creates a sense of spaciousness by drawing attention to the empty space. A further example occurs in "Identification," which depicts a "hawkish speck" that flies very swiftly, and the speaker scrambles to find her binoculars, ultimately identifying the hawk as a Peregrine falcon; the Peregrine pauses and when motion ceases it vanishes. McKay registers the vanishing of the Peregrine with typography, leaving a large empty space on the page. Since the Peregrine makes no sound, the speaker relies only upon her visual perception, and the lack of the bird's presence creates a vacancy in the air that is just as significant as the bird itself. The emptiness of the sky indicates a missed opportunity for the speaker, who writes down the name "Peregrine" because there is "too much sky," an overwhelming sense of distance (*Birding* 91).

The fact that the speaker almost doesn't see the falcon causes her to realize her own loneliness, and her voice becomes an inarticulate cry, like a birdsong. Her sinuses are "weary hoses" that "stretch and grow" becoming a "catacomb," and her voice "yodels into stratospheric octaves" (*Birding* 91).³⁵ Through his reference to the stretching of the sinuses, McKay resorts to a form of comparison that is subtler than metaphor: homology (Fisher 57). Homology is a biological term that describes "similarity resulting from common ancestry" (Campbell and Reece qtd. in Fisher). "Homology can serve as a literary term in order to describe comparisons that exist not by virtue of poetic invention but because of biological connection...homology presents similarities that are the product

³⁵ Quenten Doolittle also observes a similarity between birdcalls and yodeling; his phoenix "yodels to the peaks" (fig 8).

of evolution, the result of a shared genetic history” (Fisher 57). The homology of the speaker’s stretching sinuses draws attention to the similarities and differences between human vocal production and birdsong production: both humans and birds emit sound through the oral cavity, but an avian larynx does not contain vocal chords like a human larynx. Birdsong comes from an extremely complicated organ called the syrinx, which is located in the body cavity (Gill 223). The change in the speaker’s sinuses that allows her to voice a “yodeling” birdsong articulates the species boundary by illustrating one of the anatomical differences between humans and birds. Furthermore, the homology of the anatomical reference reminds the reader of the evolutionary history of birds, and recalls a vast avian soundscape that predates humanity. This prehistoric acoustic environment can only be glimpsed through the page and stands in contrast to our contemporary soundscape, which is littered with countless destructive sounds, such as the roar of engines and missile silos.

Ecological sounds contribute a great deal to our perception of space; however, as scholars of Acoustic Ecology have noted, modern soundscapes are littered with noise pollution,³⁶ and in recent years our global soundscape has not improved (Schafer, *Voices* 8). R. Murray Schafer describes the unpolluted, natural soundscape as a place filled with “interactive messages...where there is always a time for sounding and a time for listening.” The few spaces in the world where one can experience natural soundscapes are

³⁶ Noise pollution: “A recent term used to suggest the destructive effect of excessive sound...Although there is evidence that exposure to certain modern environmental sounds may pose a hearing risk, it has been more difficult to set limits on environmental sounds, though many countries and cities have attempted to do so, particularly for technological noises such as automobiles, air conditioners, etc.” (Truax 83).

“Temples of Silence” filled with exuberance and reverence (8). Of his own extensive study of soundscapes Schafer says:

Now I wish to speak of sounds.

The world is full of sounds.

I cannot speak of them all.

I shall speak of sounds that matter.

To speak of sounds, I make sounds. (*Voices* 161)

Like Schafer, McKay observes his own poetic noise and contemplates “various listening devices” such as “long-lived dithyrambic celebrations,” “blank verse” and “quick imagistic takes with lots of silences” that he might send into the world (*Field Marks* 54). His explorations lead to vivid depictions of acoustic spaces that exist beyond the boundaries of the text. The resultant poetic soundscapes call attention to the ways in which sounds contribute to an overall sense of geographic space. Thus, McKay invites the reader to venture outdoors, engage with the acoustic environment and realize the wilderness in familiar landscapes. The revelations offered through awareness of acoustic space are most compactly expressed by R. Murray Schafer’s observation that “we have no earlids...sound gets to places where sight cannot” (*Voices* 163). When one is attentive to the surrounding soundscape “the whole body will become an ear and all sounds will come to you, the known, the unknown, the sweet, the sad and the urgent” (167).

CHAPTER 4 WIND AND SONG

According to McKay, humans are fascinated with birds because birds “are intimate with the air and we see that intimacy in both their songs and flight” (*Songs*). Although humans are dependent upon air, we tend to be unaware of it unless we are subjected to pollution, excessive wind or lung problems, such as emphysema. “Birds make us aware of air....They articulate the very atmosphere around us” (*Songs*). Barbara Colebrook Peace observes that “air” and “breath” are two of the most frequently occurring words in McKay’s *Another Gravity* (115). However, despite the frequency of the words and McKay’s explicit claim that birdsong makes us aware of the air, the implications of McKay’s focus on air and breath, in relation to birdsong, have not been explored. McKay’s attention to breath and air probes the species boundary by pointing to a fundamental similarity between humans and birds, and by underscoring our shared dependence on air to fuel our bodies and our voices. With these things in mind, this chapter will examine McKay’s poetic treatment of breath and air.

The species boundary is a discursively constructed sense of differentiation between humans and animals. It is often based upon the possession of speech, self-awareness and tool use (Huggan and Tiffin 139). In recent years scholars have been critically examining the construction of the species boundary and seeking to destabilize its underlying assumptions by examining the status of animals and how they are represented in literature. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin observe that “our training in ‘reading’ animals, from childhood on, tends to ensure that we interpret texts of all kinds about animals anthropocentrically, trapping them in distinct representational categories”

(139). I argue that one of the ways in which McKay's poetry breaks down these categorizations and interrogates the species boundary is by exploring the shared act of breathing, the biological process that enables human song and birdsong.

McKay's descriptions of the anatomy and physiology of both birds and humans are scientifically grounded and represent an awareness of the biological similarities and differences between birds and humans. For example, "Close-up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk" classifies the hawk as belonging to the *accipiter* genus and contains a detailed representation of the hawk's anatomy, including the round wings, fine talons and the lines upon the breast. The lines along the breast indicate that the hawk in the poem is a young bird, at least one year old (Godfrey 137). This detail demonstrates McKay's faithfulness to ornithological accuracy. Similarly, "But Nature Has Her Darker Side" claims that "because the feathers of an owl are soft and fluffy he is able to fly silently, caress[ing] the air" (*Birding* 120). Ornithologists have observe that the softer feathers throughout the owl's body enable silent flight, and that the soft, downy feathers on the facial disk³⁷ near the ears are open, rather than tightly packed, allowing for "the maximum amount of sound" to pass through the feathers to the ears (Johnsgard 37). Thus, McKay's description is attentive to morphological details, and acknowledges sources of information and experience that lie outside the realm of poetry.³⁸

³⁷ Facial disk: distinctive feathers that surround the eyes, beak and ears of the owl, creating a disk like shape (Johnsgard 37).

³⁸ In *Vis à Vis*, McKay claims that the nature poet should "resort to the field guide or library, but will keep coming, back, figuratively speaking, to the trail—to the grain of experience" (27). Accordingly, his poetry recognizes outside sources, like the field guide, and combines the knowledge gleaned from the field guide with the experience gained through bird watching.

Like the descriptions of birds in “Close-up on a Sharp-Shinned Hawk” and “But Nature Has Her Darker Side,” McKay’s scientific accuracy also extends to his representations of human physiology. His poem “Deep Vein Thrombosis” opens by contrasting the free flowing waters of Okeanos³⁹ with an unidentified being who snags the poet’s thoughts like a “red kite / in a leafless tree” (*Camber* 62). The unidentified being lingers in the poet’s mind, like a kite snagged in a tree; however, the snagging of the red kite upon the tree is also an apt description of the biological processes that result in Deep Vein Thrombosis,⁴⁰ the condition specified by the poem’s title. The snagging of the red kite upon the tree is paralleled with a thrombus clinging to the sidewalls of deep vein and threatening to dislodge, resulting in a pulmonary embolism.⁴¹ The threat of the pulmonary embolism is registered in the “dreadful caesurae” that punctuates the gauche, left-footed pigeon dance performed by the unidentified being. This poem clearly demonstrates the flexibility of McKay’s poetry, which operates on multiple figurative levels without losing sight of the physiological and anatomical facts that underlie the poetic images.

Therefore, in order to understand McKay’s treatment of breath and air, it is necessary to recognize the physiology of sound production that operates in the background of the poetry. Humans breathe and produce sound through the larynx (*Sulica* 817). The larynx has the dual function of protecting the airway when swallowing and

³⁹ Okeanos: A classical mythological figure who controlled the ocean. He is named after the mythical river Okeanos, which circles the world and connects the world’s water supply (“Oceanus”).

⁴⁰ Deep Vein Thrombosis occurs when a blood clot, known as a thrombus, forms in a vein that is deep below the surface of the body (Royal Society).

⁴¹ If the thrombus dislodges it can travel through the bloodstream to the arteries that supply the lungs with blood. The thrombus blocks the artery, resulting in a loss of blood flow to the lungs (Royal Society).

modifying the shape of the resonating tract to allow vocal production (817). At birth the human larynx sits higher in the pharynx to allow for simultaneous sucking and breathing; it lowers with age allowing for “increased range and complexity of phonation by engaging the mouth and tongue in modification of sound” (Sulica 821). However, the lowered position of the larynx in adults increases the risk of choking and aspirating foreign materials into the lungs: “That evolution has obviously favoured such an arrangement [despite the dangers of aspiration and choking] hints at the biological advantages of complex phonation” (Sulica 821). Therefore, we sacrifice the integrity of our airway for the ability to produce complex vocalizations. This biological fact supports the symbolic claim that speaking and singing are as vital as breathing.

In order to produce sound the human larynx functions in conjunction with the larger respiratory tract, which provides the air that fuels phonation (Sulica 822). Vocal production requires “three basic components: a power source, a vibratory source and a resonator” (Courey 896). Vocalizations occur when air is exhaled creating a “power source,” and the accumulated air pressure pushes apart the vocal folds. The vocal folds oscillate to produce sound and, therefore, are a “vibratory source” (Sulica 818; Courey 897).

“To Speak of Paths,” reflects the biological necessity of both a power source and a vibratory source in order to produce sound. Throughout the poem the speaker directly addresses the reader and guides her through a hike along a lake and near a waterfall (*Apparatus* 7). In a moment of heightened awareness, as the reader’s “eye drinks” in her surroundings, she wishes to speak but cannot; her tongue transforms into an alder twig, and she must wait for the wind in order to speak (*Apparatus* 7). When McKay describes

the reader's tongue turning into an alder twig and waiting for wind, the alder twig functions as a vibratory source, and the wind as a power source; the rush of the wind against the alder twig causes the twig to vibrate and results in a rustling sound. The action of the wind against the twig parallels the movement of air against human vocal chords, which allows the reader to speak. The figurative transformation from human to plant combines the rigidity of a scientific fact—without power and vibratory sources there can be no sound—with the flexibility of figurative language. The combination of the scientific and the figurative challenges the species boundary by demonstrating that humans and plants are equally dependent upon air to produce vibrations and sound.

Birds, like humans, have a larynx; however, the avian larynx only serves its original biological purpose of protecting the respiratory tract. Therefore, birdsong production reveals a fundamental difference between humans and birds: the human larynx serves the dual function of protecting the airway and participating sound production. Nevertheless, birdsong production is dependent upon on air, just like human vocal production.

Birds produce songs through the syrinx, an incredibly complex organ located in the body cavity (Gill 221). Like human vocal production, birdsong is the result of complex coordination between the thoracic and abdominal respiratory muscles, the trachea, syrinx, oral cavity and bill. Sound is produced when contractions in the thoracic and abdominal muscles force air up and out of the lungs. The pressurized air vibrates as it moves through the syringeal passageway, resulting in birdsong. McKay draws upon this fact in “Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River,” which describes birdsong as “narrowed air” (*Camber* 85). Since air does indeed “narrow” as it passes through the

syrinx and is pressurized to produce birdsong, knowledge of how the syrinx functions informs McKay's poetic description of birdsong as "narrowed air" (*Camber* 85). Thus, McKay's physiological and ornithological accuracy reveals that breath and airflow are as crucial to birdsong as they are to human vocalization and inseparable from the resultant sounds.

As the discussion of human and bird physiology shows, breath is a fundamental biological similarity between birds and humans. In "Feather" McKay acknowledges this similarity and explores the connection between air, song and listening. Susan Fisher's reading of "Feather" posits that through "listening" and "attention to the air" the amphibious ancestors of birds are inspired to fly (59). The scales of dinosaurs evolve into feathers and musical scales, enabling flight and song (59). In fact, feathers give birth to song; they are described as "the womb of song" (*Another Gravity* 48) and they are not peculiar to birds: in the final stanza, the caress of the speaker's lover causes his skin to "bloom" and connects him to the evolutionary chain of dinosaurs and birds (48).

The ancestral history that connects the dinosaurs, birds and humans forms a homological comparison⁴² in "Feather" that is "not a mere fancy of the poet, but a biological fact: 'all tetrapods, the vertebrate branch consisting of amphibians, reptiles (including birds) and mammals, possess the same basic five-digit limb structure'" (Cambell and Reece qtd. in Fisher 59). Also, the origin of the human larynx, which produces vocalizations, can be traced back to our amphibious ancestors who needed the larynx to protect the airway from water. The larynx only later developed into a tool for vocalization (*Sulica* 817). In "Feather" both the bird's song and the poet's love song

⁴² Homology results in comparisons that are based upon structural, biological similarities, a connection to our shared "deep ancestral past" (Campbell and Reece qtd. in Fisher 57).

originate in the dinosaurs' "attention to the air" (*Another Gravity* 48). By "attention to the air" McKay does not mean that dinosaurs merely observe the air. Rather, the "attention to air" practiced by the dinosaurs is indicative of the biological dependence upon air that connects dinosaurs, birds and humans.

The title "The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows" in McKay's collection *Birding, or Desire*, is borrowed from Leonard Cohen's poem "Beneath My Hands" (*Songs*), which describes a woman's breasts as "bellies of breathing fallen sparrows" (65). McKay's poem explores Cohen's metaphor and builds upon the sexual theme of "Beneath My Hands." Even though McKay's poem doesn't discuss sparrows, the title draws attention to the breathing of the "fallen" sparrows; the energy of their breath indicates that they are very much alive and connects breath to the biological necessity of sex and sexual desire, which are explored throughout the poem. The sexual desire of the Blackburnian Warbler is paralleled with the sexuality of the speaker, resulting in a correlation based upon the need to procreate. While the Blackburnian Warbler's mating call is represented as "zip zip zip zip zee / chickety chickety chickety chick," the poet's mating call is the poem, "The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrow," which uses pronouns to directly address his love interest. Thus, the poem connects the rhythmic breathing of the sparrows in the title to the larger cycles of procreation and birth, which affect humans and birds equally.

On the other hand, McKay explores the sonic implications of respiratory disease and death in "Shoot Down the Wendy Bird," which depicts a woman struggling to

breathe in a hospital while the speaker reads.⁴³ The “drum roll” of the woman’s heart accompanies the reading and is a consistent reminder of her bodily functions and mortality (*Air* 10). The poem contains a detailed description of the sounds that result from the woman’s inability to breathe. Her attempts to breathe are “her most difficult exploit[s]” and the speaker “feel[s] the effort of the breathe [sic], the / indrawn / arrow, the hissing, the opening door” (*Air* 10). The “opening door” depicts both the glottis of the larynx opening to allow air into the lungs and the opening of the hospital room door (*Air* 10).

The physiological complexity of breathing, and the effort required to pull air in and out of the lungs, is encapsulated by a single phrase at the end of the second stanza: “the lunging act” (*Air* 10). “Lunging” suggests the physical actions of the lung and the forward thrust, or lunge, of air as it expelled from the lungs. Within the larger context of the poem, “the lunging act” suggests a lunge, or leap, from one state of being to another, from life to death as breathing ceases. The third stanza opens with the word “later” signaling a pause and the passage of time since the woman’s “lunging act.” The stanza focuses upon the fear experienced by the speaker who witnesses the strained breathing before the woman’s passing:

Later, we surge on humming nerves
exploring (were you scared? Not really)
The forests in us fear has opened up

⁴³ The phrase “shoot down the Wendy-bird” is an allusion to *Peter and Wendy* by J.M. Barrie.

Shooting the rapids of Vinland.⁴⁴ (*Air* 10)

However, the speaker is significantly removed, or enough time as has passed, for him to reflect upon his fear and sense of mortality.

The respiratory problems explored in “Shoot Down the Wendy-Bird” are also addressed in “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow.” However, the poem paints a grim picture of humans’ destructive tendencies by comparing the “death rattle” of “phlegm-clogged / fucked up throats” to the rhythmic “t-t-t” of an automatic rifle (*Strike/Slip* 25). The poet and the reader are depicted as “dumb,” or voiceless, due to the phlegm in their respiratory tracts. They are only able to “gargle” a song; however, they are also “dumb” in their ignorance and destruction of the natural world. McKay suggests that we can pass through the “skull-capped / bright-eyed sparrow in the spruce” (*Strike/Slip* 25) and enact a change within ourselves that rectifies our stuttering and destructive “automatic rifle fire” (*Strike/Slip* 25). The “passing through” the sparrow also suggests, at a figurative level, that through poetry the reader, speaker and poet are crossing the anatomical boundaries between themselves and the sparrow. McKay is very specific in his physical description of the Chipping Sparrow, referring to the unique red coloured skullcap that adorns the bird’s head (Godfrey 507). This detail enhances our sense of the physical difference between the bird and ourselves. The poem is able to transcend these differences by offering the possibility of journeying through the sparrow and seeing the world with new eyes.

⁴⁴ Vinland is an unidentified area along the north east coast of North America, discovered by Vikings in c. 1000 (“Vinland”). The much speculated location of Vinland adds a dimension of mystery to McKay’s poem, suggesting an imagined, internal landscape with no specific geographic location that “fear has opened up” (*Air* 10).

The phlegm depicted at the beginning of “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow” renders the poet and reader voiceless, but also evokes the song of the Chipping Sparrow, which consists of rapid oscillations between two pitches (Godfrey 507; Hartshorne 108). Ornithologist L.I. Davis describes the extremely rapid repetition of two frequencies as a “rattle” (Davis qtd. in Hartshorne 89), which corresponds with McKay’s description of the sound in “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow” (*Strike/Slip* 25). The title and McKay’s commentary in *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, indicate that the poem is a homage to the song of the Chipping Sparrow, but the poem also suggests that the bird, poet and reader are all “gargl[ing] into song,” highlighting the biological similarity of sound production as air is forced through the syrinx—in the case of the sparrow—and through the “phlegm-clogged” human larynx. In addition, the “gargling” phlegm demonstrates that despite being a dominating and destructive species, humans are vulnerable to respiratory disease. McKay reflects this vulnerability by subjecting both the speaker and reader to excretions in the throat that impede the ability to vocalize and move the sound of the human vocalization closer to the “gargling” sound of a Chipping Sparrow. Moreover, the inefficiency of the human’s “phlegm clogged” voice contrasts the purity of the “bright-eyed sparrow in the spruce,” who, unlike the human, is not hindered by his “gargling song.”

As demonstrated by “The Bellies of Fallen Breathing Sparrows,” “Shoot Down the Wendy-Bird” and “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow,” breath is connected to procreation, birth, disease, and death for humans and birds; but at a different level, breath signals the birth and death of sound. McKay describes the lungs as a cavernous dwelling in which the voice “huddles” (*Another Gravity* 59) and as “the womb of the

voice” (*Apparatus* 66), a place that gives birth to song. McKay’s descriptions are both poetic and physiologically attentive, considering the biological processes that give rise to vocalization. Arnold Jacobs, a tuba player with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and extremely influential pedagogue, recognizes a relationship between the lungs and sound that is similar to McKay’s image of the lungs giving birth to song. Arnold conceptualizes his approach to music as “Song and Wind.” “Song” describes the mental and communicative processes needed to convey a musical message to the audience; however, “song” cannot exist without a fuel source. In other words, “You cannot get anywhere without *wind*” (Fredericksen 139; emphasis in original).⁴⁵

Arnold and McKay are keenly aware of the importance of breath, and both acknowledge the biological fact that song is not possible without breath. This fact may appear self evident, but by diligently practicing Arnold’s exercises, musicians utilize their lungs in a new way. The lungs are stretched, and as they expand in new directions within the chest cavity, the lungs are defamiliarized. These new sensations give rise to an understanding of the lungs as a physical unit that occupies an expansive space within the chest cavity; it is a physical unit that is self-contained, but intricately connected to the surrounding musculature and respiratory tract. This awareness creates a relationship between the subject and the lungs that is different from the instinctive act of breathing, to which one pays little attention. For example, when one struggles to complete long phrases, such as the following measures in *La Nuit S’ouvre*, in which there is no suitable place to breathe without disrupting the music, the failure of the lungs is like a betrayal from within the performer’s body (fig 13). On the other hand, a phrase may appear to be

⁴⁵ By “wind,” Arnold means breath, not meteorological wind.

physically impossible to play without stopping the sound to breathe. When such a phrase is conquered the endless potential of the lungs is realized. Likewise, the diseased airways in “Shoot Down the Wendy Bird” and “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow” demonstrate the fragility of the respiratory system and defamiliarize the instinctive acts of breathing and producing vocalizations that we often take for granted. On the other hand, McKay’s metaphoric descriptions of the lungs as a dwelling for song (*Another Gravity* 59) and as a womb that gives birth to song (*Apparatus* 66) create a sense of reverence and respect for the lungs and an awareness of their necessity for sustenance and foremost role in vocal production.



Figure 13. Miller, *La Nuit S'ouvre*, bars 133-137.

The fact that songs cannot be produced without breath is relevant to *Songs for the Songs of Birds* because the sounds in the recording are fueled by the poet’s breath and the respiration of the birds featured in the recording. Because the bird vocalizations are drawn from field recordings, it is difficult to hear the birds breathing; however, breath is implicit because birdsong cannot exist without respiration. McKay’s breathing, however,

interjects, becoming part of the poetry and fuelling the recitation. In the recording of “Alibi,” for example, McKay’s inhalations are extremely audible. As the intensity of the poem increases so does the frequency of McKay’s breathing, creating a sense of rising urgency (*Songs*). The breaths do not correspond to the punctuation or line breaks in the poem, nor are the phrases long enough to necessitate breathing. Thus, the sound of breathing serves a poetic function beyond emphasizing the grammar and structure of the poem. The breaths are expressive; they increase the emotional intensity of the recitation and contribute to the overall musicality of the poetry.

Throughout *Songs for the Songs of Birds* there is noticeable contrast between McKay’s breathing patterns when he is speaking extemporaneously to give the listener information about the poem, and when he is reading the poem off the page. The variations point to the different function of breath in colloquial speech and poetic recitation. When speaking colloquially it is perfectly acceptable to pause and breathe. When McKay speaks in an improvisatory fashion, the breaths are shallow and irregular. His breaths are not dictated by rhythm or form; a breath is simply taken when air is necessary to fuel the rest of the utterance or functions as an expressive interjection. In contrast, during a poetic recitation breathing has to be carefully timed so as not to disrupt the rhythm and overall contours of the poem. This difference is particularly evident in the final lines of “Alibi” in which McKay does not breathe during the last two lines, resulting in a sense of forward momentum that drives the listener towards the end of the poem (*Songs*). Therefore, McKay’s audible breathing throughout *Songs for the Songs of Birds* is an important part of the overall aesthetic of the recording.

In musical performances breaths are carefully timed and measured to fuel the sound without disrupting the phrase. As demonstrated by the various exercises developed by Arnold Jacobs, musicians go to great lengths to develop proper breathing techniques and breath control. Even though the combination of McKay's voice and birdsong throughout *Songs for the Songs of Birds* results in a very musical recording, the recording works against the practice of masking audible breathing.⁴⁶ McKay's breaths could have been removed during the editing process, but they were not. Thus, the recording acknowledges the visceral, physical processes that give rise to sound.

Moreover, McKay's poetry celebrates the act of breathing by suggesting that when the human voice is used as an instrument, breath takes on a life of its own and reveals its animality. For example, "Wings of Song" personifies the breath of the reader; the breath is alive, containing another "breath / breathing inside it" (*Another Gravity* 47). The personified breath "steps / boldly into lift," taking flight in the form of song, suggesting a kinship between sound waves traveling through the air and bird flight. When the voice ceases, the breath "folds back into [the] air" from which it originated. Thus, the poem acknowledges the origins of song in air and breath. Furthermore, the speaker of the poem observes the personification of the breath and sees the resultant vocalizations as an unidentifiable companion. He asks, "Shall we call this angel / Shall we call it animal, or elf?" (*Another Gravity* 47). The primal quality of the human voice in "Wings of Song"

⁴⁶ Depending on the style of music, producers will often edit out the sound of breathing if it is "obtrusive." On the other hand, sometimes breathing is included or even enhanced as part of the overall "effect" of the recording. Depending on the preferences of the producer, breath sounds in voice over narrations or spoken word recordings, like *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, may be considered distracting or aesthetically undesirable (Bowey). This practice is interesting because breathing is essential to vocal and wind instrument sound production and therefore is implicit in the sound even if it is edited out of the recording.

draws upon McKay's claim that musical instruments contain energy that lies "outside the human sphere" (*Field Marks* 52). The human voice, like any other instrument, becomes a tool that longs to release its inner animal (*Field Marks* 52).⁴⁷ The act of singing is initiated by the internal "lift" of breathing. The "lift" of breathing suggests not only the rising and swelling of the lungs upon inhalation, but also the transformation of the voice through song; the voice "lifts" into a new state of being that is primal and wild. Thus, breath and song enable the human voice to reveal its untamed instincts and take flight like a bird.

Even when McKay's poems are represented only as text upon a page and are not recitations contained in *Songs for the Songs of Birds*, the poetry originates in the act of breathing. McKay's poems are textual representations of bird vocalizations that are produced by the biological processes of breathing and vocalizing. In other words, the textual versions of McKay's poems are manifestations of sounds that are produced by acts of breathing that exist outside of the poems. Perhaps it goes without saying that the poems would not exist without the poet's breath, which is fundamental to life. Thus, breath is not only a biological necessity, but also acts as a catalyst for all utterances, human and avian, poetic and musical.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ A more in depth discussion of "The Shell of the Tortoise" and the animality of musical instruments is contained in Chapter 2.

⁴⁸ Reading breath as a catalyst for poetic utterances threatens to counter McKay's repudiation of Aeolian Harpism in favour of "poetic attention." However, my argument modifies rather than contradicts Aeolian Harpism by acknowledging the physiological fact that the poet's voice is animated by air. Therefore, even though nature does not "play through" the nature poet as it does with the Romantic poet, the nature poet's voice is, in a sense, nevertheless strummed by air and brought to life by breath.

In “Streaks of Bird Music” the biological processes that lead to birdsong and in turn lead to poetic inspiration are clearly illustrated. By showing the origins of birdsong in the visceral processes of breathing and singing, the poem works against the notion of “romantic inspiration.” In *Vis à Vis*, McKay observes that the romantic poet “desires to be to be spoken to” (27; emphasis in original). In other words, the romantic poet’s goal is not to celebrate the other, but to receive inspiration from the other. Therefore, the poetic product is a “celebration of the creative imagination in and for itself” not an elevation of the other (*Vis à Vis* 28). This is evident in the fact that poets often describe birdsong reaching their ear, but make no mention of the underlying mechanisms that give rise to song; consequently, the focus of the poem is the poet receiving birdsong, not the bird itself. For example, the mournful final lines of Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” place far more emphasis upon the emotions of the poet after hearing the nightingale than on the nightingale who is singing:

Adieu! Adieu! They plaintive anthem fades

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,

Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep

In the next valley-glades:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep? (881).

In contrast, the birdsong in “Streaks of Music” is not performed for the poet. The poem opens with the words “erasure: / waits / for the next call” (*Birding* 97), which indicates that the focus of the poem is not the poet receiving the birdsong. Rather, he must wait patiently to hear the next song because birdsong exists whether humans hear it or not.

The poem proceeds to describe pitches that are “air bunched / shaped by body and released / cleanly through a ruthless beak.” This description corresponds with the physiological processes described by Lucian Sulica. Because air consists of gases, it changes shape as it moves through the respiratory tract, up into the oral cavity and out of the beak. The description of the air as “bunched” is particularly accurate since air is reshaped in the clusters of alveoli in the lungs (Sulica 823). The second stanza sensually describes the birds’ song as a glimpse of “the true / obscenity of opera: lips” (*Birding* 97). The physicality of the singer’s lips reminds the reader that despite the virtuosity of the song, the opera singer is only human. McKay challenges the distinction between the opera singer and the bird by fluidly transforming the bird’s beak into human lips, exploiting the complex, biological similarity of birdsong production and operatic vocalization. The third, and final stanza, explores the writing process of the poet as he arrives home with thoughts of swallows shrieking in his head. He takes a pen to a paper and “stabs each / member of his alphabet,” illustrating a strained physical response to hearing “bird music,” which contrasts the effortless physicality of the bird as the air is “shaped by [its] body and released” in the form of a song (*Birding* 97). Rather than celebrating the poet, the poem applauds the bird. The poem also clearly demonstrates a progression from air to birdsong, to poetic inspiration; however, the origins of the song in the “bunched air” of the bird’s lungs indicates that the song began long before encountering the poet’s ear. The song originated in the bird’s lungs, and its purpose lies beyond poetic inspiration.

In McKay’s poetry, and in the material world, breath propels the beginning of human and avian vocalizations; however, breath is also involved at the end of an

utterance. Sound production is propelled by exhalation. When air ceases to move—either because the speaker has chosen to stop vocalizing or because the air supply has been depleted—the voice is silenced. In this manner, breath signals both the beginning and the ending of a vocalization. For example, in “Hush Factor” the soft fricative “sh” in the word “hush” is repeated throughout the poem and recreates the physical sensation and sound of air being forcefully expelled from the lungs. The “thickened sibilance” (*Field Marks* 46) described by McKay results from the friction of the air interacting with the tongue blade and alveolar ridge to create the rushing sound of “hush” (Hardcastle). The expulsion of air at the beginning and ending of the word “hush” results in a depletion of air (*Field Marks* 46). Since sound cannot exist without air, the physical depletion of air required to vocalize the word “hush” reiterates the meaning of the word, and assists in the “sudden death of sound” that follows when the word “hush” is uttered (46).

The cessation of airflow that signals the end of an utterance is followed by silence, and this silence manifests itself within McKay’s poetry as blank space. To illustrate, McKay’s “Deep Midwintering” begins like a fairy tale: “Once upon a time the sky’s / eternal silence broke up into bits” (*Strike/Slip* 65). However, unlike a fairy tale, the poem is enigmatic and never truly gives the reader a clear picture of who or what has broken the “eternal silence.” The creature that breaks the silence is, “not wing / though it flies, nor spirit / though it isn’t and it is, nor song / though it could be said to sing / inaudibly” (*Strike/Slip* 65). When the mysterious creature ends its flight and “settles on the earth,” the “eternal silence” resumes (*Strike/Slip* 65). McKay uses metaplasm to describe the silence as “tangible, depthed, an unbreathed / breath” (*Strike/Slip* 65). The word “breath” is isolated; it is the only word on the line and is

surrounded by white space. In the blank space upon the page, the reader is left to revel in the paradox of an “unbreathed breath.”

The proximity of the blank space to the word “breath” causes the reader to pause and breathe. Consequently, the blank space invites the reader’s breath, and the rhythms of their body, into the poem. The interpretation of blank space as a cessation of sound that allows ambient noises, such as breathing, to become part of the poem can be understood by turning towards the compositions and writings of John Cage.

One of Cage’s most famous works is “4’33” which consists of four minutes and thirty three seconds of “silence;” however, the piece reveals that there is no such thing as silence. Even within a sound proof room our bodies produce countless sounds such as the sound of respiration, the pulsating of the heart and the churning of our digestive system. All of these noises create a biological soundscape that “as organisms living in air we cannot avoid” (Saldanha 238). Also, in Cage’s “4’33” all the sounds in the performance space become part of the music including the rustling of programs, feet shuffling, the occasional cough and the hum of the air conditioner. Cage’s innovative ideas regarding silence and music continue to be extremely relevant and influential.

Like Cage, Elma Miller capitalizes on the potential of “silence” in *La Nuit S’ouvre* when the clarinetist is instructed to observe “silen[ce] as if listening” (fig 15). The passage in *La Nuit S’ouvre* effectively reverses the roles of the clarinetist and audience. The performer turns outwards and listens to the audience; simultaneously, in an oppositional gesture of listening, the performer turns inwards to hear biological sounds, particularly the movement of the vast amounts of air, surging into the lungs and the sound of her heart beat. All these sounds become part of the performance. The blank spaces in

poems such as “Deep Midwintering” function like the moment of “silence” in *La Nuit S’ouvre*: the blank space is a place where the words pause and the soundscapes that exist internally and externally, in relation to the reader, pour in and become part of the poetic experience.

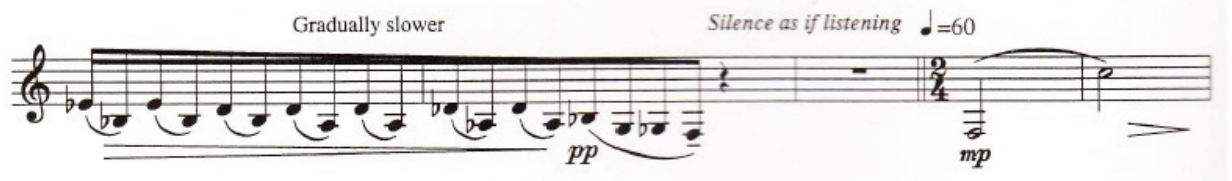


Figure 14. Miller, *La Nuit S’ouvre*, bars 87-90.

However, the presence of biological and ambient sounds in the “silences” of poetry and music does not fully resolve the challenges presented by blank space upon a page. In a 1959 lecture entitled “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage conducts an in depth discussion of “silence” and its significance. The lecture is later printed in *Incontri Musicali* (1959) and published in a book by Cage entitled *Silence*. The lecture has a complex rhythmic structure consisting of measures that comprise larger units, and the text is oriented on the page in vertical columns⁴⁹ to “facilitate rhythmic reading”; however, a note is also included stating that attempting to remain faithful to typography of the lecture may result in an “artificial” reading. Rather, it should be read “with the

⁴⁹ “There are four measures in each line and twelve lines in each unit of the rhythmic structure. There are forty-eight such units, each having forty-eight measures. The whole is divided into five larger parts, in the proportion 7, 6, 14, 14, 7. The forty-eight measures of each unit are likewise so divided. The text is printed in four columns to facilitate a rhythmic reading. Each line is to be read across the page from left to right, not down the columns in sequence” (*Silence* 109).

rubato⁵⁰ which one uses in everyday speech” (109). Cage attempts to resolve the difficulty of translating typography into sound by incorporating musical structures in to the printed version of the lecture. Though, by Cage’s own admission, the typography falls short, and the spaces upon the page are challenging because although blank space may manifest as “silence,” it is not empty, as Cage, Miller and McKay all demonstrate.

Even if the reader “hears” McKay’s poems internally⁵¹ and does not read aloud, the spatial notation is difficult to interpret because there is no indication of how long the reader should pause in the absence of text. In a discussion of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s use of typography, Wanda Strauven observes that since typographically complex poems are difficult to interpret purely as text, the reader is invited to “look for sensation rather than for sense...reading becomes hearing or even feeling and smelling (Strauven 279).

Marinetti’s typography is considerably more complex than McKay’s, incorporating various typefaces and ideograms (Strauven 278); however, the idea that blank spaces encourage the reader to engage her entire body with the poem allows the human body to be present alongside the avian bodies featured so prominently in McKay’s poetry. For example, “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush” revels in the sound of a thrush’s song. The entire poem focuses upon two notes, stretching the sensorial experience of hearing a birdsong, which in actuality lasts only a few seconds (*Apparatus* 26). The elongation of the aural experience is combined with blank spaces between the

⁵⁰ Rubato: departing from the written rhythm by elongating or shortening notes. Rubato is often used to enhance the emotive or expressive content of the music.

⁵¹ Dennis Lee suggests that poems can be “hear[d] out loud on the page” through the body: “Body music is the inner experience of kinaesthetic rhythm” or an internal, visceral sensation in the muscles that occurs when “reading a poem or listening to music” (212-14).

lines of poetry, and the blank spaces extend the reader's visual interaction with the poem. The final lines of the poem fuse the body of the reader and the bird together, stating that "in this newly minted / interval you realize the wilderness / between one breath / and another" (*Apparatus* 26). The lines refer simultaneously to the bird's breath, which gives rise to song, and the reader's breath, which resonates in the blank spaces upon the page. Thus, the reader's breath is engaged in the poem alongside the bird's breath. Consequently, the act of breathing is defamiliarized and the reader views her breath and the birds' breath in a new light.

Since both humans and birds literally send their voices out into the world as a means of communicating, and the resultant sound waves interact with the air outside of the body, breath is a fundamental example of the interior becoming the exterior. This transference of breath is reflected in McKay's "The Acoustics of the Conical Tube." It is evident from McKay's quote of Anthony Baines' *Woodwind Instruments and Their History* that he has studied the acoustics of the alto saxophone that is described throughout the poem. The speaker claims that "the sax isn't going to transform your breath like other instruments, but magnify it, reaching back down your throat to amplify its possibilities, giving prominence to neglected dialects like the honk, the cough, the hum, and even (Archie Shepp)⁵² the last gasp" (*Apparatus* 65). The saxophone functions as a transitional space between the air in the lungs and the external world. According to McKay, the sax operates in the "idiom of breath," and its connection to our respiratory system "addresses" our sense of mortality (*Apparatus* 65). The final lines of the poem

⁵² Archie Shepp: An "American jazz tenor and soprano saxophonist, playwright and teacher." b.24 May 1937. Known for his belief that free jazz is a "medium of political expression" (Kernfeld).

state, “when the wind blows (Lao-tzu) there is only wind. When the sax blows there is only wind and the whole goddamned human condition” (*Apparatus* 66). These lines suggest that breath alone does not raise mournful thoughts about the human condition; but, when breath is “magnified” through the saxophone, the wail of the sax, and its intimate connection with our lungs, reveals the human condition.

However, McKay does not suggest that the transformation from atmospheric air to inhaled air and finally external breath produces an abject response.⁵³ Breath is indeed “waste;” when we exhale, we release carbon dioxide and nitrogen, but through vocalization—and birdsong—air is given a new life so that it is no longer a waste product. In “Acoustics of the Conical Tube” the breath rushing through the saxophone may remind the reader of his “father’s phlegmy old Chev,” but it also evokes, for birders, the sound of a “Trumpeter Swan over miles of high prairie” (*Apparatus* 66). Moreover, the birth of song through air is acknowledged throughout McKay’s poetry, particularly the description of the lung as “the womb of the voice” (*Apparatus* 66). Even though human and avian songs are fueled by the expulsion of air, songs are admired rather than reviled. Additionally, in “Sometimes a Voice (1),” the speaker claims that a voice will “harken back to breath, or even farther / to the wind, and recognize itself / as troubled air, a flight path still / looking for its bird” (*Another Gravity* 3). Thus, song is celebrated as “troubled air” that cyclically returns to its roots, and the breath that gives rise to song does not linger as an offensive fume.

The transfer of air between the body, and the external world has added significance for the birdwatcher/poet figure in McKay’s poetry, who eagerly searches for

⁵³ According to Julia Kristeva, the expulsion of waste and bodily fluids “disturbs identity, system [and] order” resulting in abjection (4).

birds and wears conspicuous binoculars like “extra eyes around his neck” (*Birding* 72). Barbara Colebrook Peace observes that reoccurring throughout *Another Gravity* is the sense of “taking in a breath and letting it out quietly so as not to disturb a bird or any living creature” (115). The soft, methodical sense of breath control in *Another Gravity* illustrates that breath is not something that merely disappears when it is released from the body; it affects the environment around us. Likewise, the transformation of breath into birdsong does not dissipate into the air, but has a profound impact upon the birdwatcher/poet and gives rise to poetry.

In fact, McKay suggests that the transference of breath from the inside of the body to the external world is connected to the concept of “home.” The poem “Homing” dissects the vocalization of the word “home,” and metaphorically ties the movement of air through the oral cavity to physical movement within a dwelling. The poem states that breath “opens to a room of its own (a bed / a closet for the secret self), then closes / on a hum” (*Another Gravity* 19). The closure of the lips to produce the humming “m” sound at the end of “home” is equated to a closing door. Within the utterance of the word “home,” somewhere between the aspirated “h” that opens the door and the “m” that shuts the door, a heightened awareness of the self is available.

The “m” sound that McKay observes at the end of the word “home” is, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, one of the simplest sounds we can produce (25). When it is vocalized it

resounds previous to the voice, inside the throat, scarcely grazing the lips from the back of the mouth, without any movement of the tongue, just a column of air pushed from the chest in the sonorous cavity....I give my death rattle and wail,

death agony and birth...where the polyphony that rises from the bottom of the belly is resolved and amplified, a mystery or emotion, the substantial union of body and soul.” (25)

Ultimately, Nancy claims that the resonance of air within the body creates a sense of self or “being” (25). R. Murray Schafer also observes that when one emits the “m” sound, air is expelled from the lungs and vibrates within the body. Therefore even though “you have said nothing. You have said everything....The reed in your body has informed you. You are alive” (*When Words Sing* 1). Thus, breath is physiologically and symbolically connected to the utterances that define our sense of existence. In McKay’s poetry, the utterances that define us are both avian and human. The commonality of humans’ and birds’ dependency upon air, as a source of fuel for our bodies and our songs, is another way in which McKay explores the species boundary, and this exploration defamiliarizes the act of breathing, which is often taken for granted or unacknowledged. The physiological accuracy of McKay’s poetry recognizes that when breath is transformed into a song, it is a gift to the external world from deep within the interior of the body.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Too often, we, as students, teachers, or scholars, tend to treat poems as textual artifacts, paying little attention to their orality and aurality. McKay, on the other hand, celebrates the aural, sometimes even favouring the “music” of poetry over the meaning that is conveyed. In an interview with Don McKay, Ken Babstock remarks, “I have to confess to concentrating more attention on what I’m hearing in a line than to what the line might actually be saying.” To which McKay responds, “if you’re going to have an imbalance I think that’s the right one to have, isn’t it? I find most beginning poets want to say something and they’re worried about getting the statement out there and not really hearing that music (Babstock 169). In “Alibi” McKay foregrounds the act of hearing, and both sound and silence herald the poem’s larger inquiry into human identity and spirituality:

Because the swallows had departed from the cliff,
over and over,
the soft knives of their wings tasting the river mist as they
went wherever it is
they went, because
with the air free of their chatter we could hear ourselves
think. (*Field Marks* 36)

Although McKay points out that the absence of the swallows’ chatter leaves us with the ability to hear ourselves, it is also true that the silence is shaped by the preceding birdsong. In other words, silence cannot exist without sound and vice versa. Considering

McKay's interest in birdsong, the absence of the birds in the sky, in "Alibi," becomes just as significant as the birds themselves; the poem resonates with the remembered chattering of swallows. In particular, the swallows' calls are brought to mind in the notes that the speaker leaves for the birds, which are "full of love and envy / and lament" (*Field Marks* 36). In musicology the term "notes" refers to the visual representation of sound in a written score, while "pitch" refers to the actual sound. In the context of the poem, "notes" can be interpreted to signify a written text, a musical score or the pitches of a song; but the bird never replies to these forms of tribute, at least not in a language that the poet can understand. The unanswered tributes lead to the realization that "we need / an earth with ears to hear the long dread / carpentry of history" (*Field Marks* 36). When McKay offers the reader an "earth with ears," he reminds us of the necessity of being attentive to our environment. And, although he contends that the absence of swallow song might allow us to "hear ourselves / think," he repeatedly demonstrates that the representation of birds and birdsong can help us to "think" our place in the world.

With these things in mind, this thesis has sought to not only address McKay's poetry as text, but acknowledge its roots in, and its celebration of, sound. Michael Bull and Les Back observe that "in the hierarchy of the senses, the epistemological status of hearing has come a poor second to that of vision... 'knowing the world through sound is fundamentally different from knowing the world through vision'" (Smith qtd. in Bull and Back 1). "Alibi," like so many of McKay's poems, acknowledges this difference in perception by celebrating aurality.

The reoccurring descriptions of McKay's poetry as musical, such as Barbara Colebrook Peace's claim that McKay's poetry contains a "complex music" (113), which I

mentioned in the Introduction, raise the following question: what does the adjective “musical” and the term “music” mean in relation to McKay’s poetry? That his poetry is considered “musical” suggests more than the obvious similarities between the structure, rhythm and sound of music and the comparable features in poetry. In fact, McKay does not distinguish between music and poetry, but sees them as deeply entwined. In the interview with Babstock, he claims that poetry is “written *with the ear*It has to be called music—whether vernacular music or what have you” (168; emphasis in original). As my analysis of “Alibi” demonstrates, McKay’s poetry is “musical” in part because it is attentive to sound: in a medium that privileges visual acuity, McKay chooses to foreground aurality and the act of listening. For McKay, the linguistic act of poetry is inseparable from the act of listening; poetry “knows the world is, after all, unnameable, so it listens hard before it speaks, and wraps that listening into the linguistic act” (McKay qtd. in Bringhurst 270-71). In addition, the “sheer beauty” of McKay’s imagery engages both the visual and the aural, and McKay “constantly asks for a reach on the part of the reader; in listening, we often feel a pleasurable, sensuous stretch of ours ears” (Peace 113). Through this “stretch,” McKay employs the characteristics of music and produces an aesthetic response that is like that of listening to music.

The frequent use of the term “music” in reference to McKay’s poetry also implies that literary critics utilize “music” as an overarching term to compliment McKay’s poetry. For example, in a review of *Birding, or Desire*, John Oughton employs “music” as an all-encompassing term that describes both the linguistic and sonic beauty of McKay’s poetry: “Sometime recondite, often free-flying, McKay’s poetry is not for everyone. But those who savour the music of words and admire a poet who honours his

roots, yet writes out into the world rather than into himself, will prize this book” (38). For Peace, the term “music” seems to be a way to describe the untranslatable; the poems contain a “complex,” yet undefined, “music” (113). Thus, attributing musicality to McKay’s poetry suggests a kinship with music in that both media have the potential to convey emotions and ideas that lie beyond the grasp of language; After all, “the languages of music, like the languages of literature, have grammars, but the languages of literature have dictionaries too. No lexicon or thesaurus will tell you the meaning of C-sharp.... Music is what literature becomes when it escapes from under the dictionary; literature is music that must wear that web of reference and that weight of definition almost everywhere it goes” (Bringhurst 269). But, through vivid figurative language, McKay’s poetry is able to escape from beneath the “weight of definition” and convey the inarticulable.

For me, the claim that McKay’s poetry is “musical” is not taken lightly and is worthy of investigation; “musical” is not simply an adjective that can be utilized frivolously and then disregarded. My goal has been to bring my musical knowledge to bear upon McKay’s poetry in hopes of elucidating the relationship between music and the poetic representation of birdsong. In doing so, it has been informed by Robert Bringhurst’s suggestion that “all the arts are specialties, but all the arts are one. No branch will fruit for long when it is severed from the tree” (265).

In my attentiveness to birdsong and musical references, I have observed that McKay’s descriptions of sounds, while remarkably poetic, are musically accurate. The scientific precision of McKay’s poetry has been observed by Travis Mason who claims that “more accurate knowledge of bird names, behaviours, habitat—in short of avian

ecologies—enables more accurate metaphors, more precise attempts at thinking about what it means to be human, about how to live carefully and humbly in the world we share with others” (*Naming*, 28). Just as scientific accuracy extends the reader’s consideration of ecology, so to does the accurate use of musical terminology invite the reader to reconsider their acoustic environment, which is another form of space that we share with other beings.

McKay’s poems that address and incorporate birdsong are also situated within a tradition of representing birdsong that is both poetic and musical, thereby transcending disciplinary boundaries. The works by Miller, Hebert-Tremblay, Crutchley, Doolittle and Gonneville, referred to throughout this thesis, are all linked by their significant representation of birdsong and instrumentation for solo clarinet. There is considerable precedent for using the clarinet to imitate birdsong, including Beethoven’s hugely influential Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68 and “Abime D’oiseaux” from Messiaen’s *Quartet pour le Fin de Temps*. Thus, Canadian composers writing birdsong in music are participating in a longstanding practice. Likewise, there are numerous catalogues of literary bird references⁵⁴ that stand as further evidence of the inexhaustibility and artistic influence of birdsong. McKay is part of an enduring artistic tradition that connects poetry to music by depicting birdsong. It is also true that McKay’s work connects to early ornithological accounts of birdsong, which are highly poetic (Aretas 134) and taps into the long-observed ornithological fact that “birdsong has much in common with human music and speech, having similar sounds, tones, and tempos. Furthermore, birdsong is

⁵⁴ For example, James Edmund Hartling’s *The Birds of Shakespeare*, Beryl Rowland’s *Birds with Human Souls*, Virginia Holmgren’s *Bird walk through the Bible* and Graeme Gibson’s *Bedside Book of Birds*.

produced by a series of rapid and complex motor activities, much like those controlling the tongue of a person speaking or the fingers of a skilled violinist playing an intricate passage (Gill 219). Thus, McKay's evocation of birdsong bridges the gap between ornithology, poetry and music, and I have tried to move amid these disciplines to establish a useful dialogue between literary criticism and musicology.

McKay's focus on ecological sounds, particularly birdsong, results in a text that finds its roots in the natural world beyond the page and thus returns the reader to "the grain of the experience" (*Vis à Vis* 27). Ultimately, the representation of birdsong evokes the mystery of a world beyond human language and cognition, a world that McKay enables us to glimpse, but never fully grasp. In the words of R. Murray Schafer, "it is obvious that to whatever extent the birds are deliberately communicating, it is for their own benefit rather than ours that their vocalizations are designed. Some men [sic] may puzzle over their codes, but most will be content to merely listen to the extravagant and astonishing symphony of their voices. Birds, like poems, should not mean, but be" (*Soundscape* 31).

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