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Abstract

It might seem odd to claim birding as a postcolonial reading strategy, as a strategy of approach to the text and the world that implicitly questions power structures and political injustices. Pre-eminent American ornithologist John James Audubon, after all, infamously slaughtered hundreds of avian specimens in the interest of preserving and identifying, through image, unique features for classification. Is it possible, after such a history, for the act of birding to be fairly neutral? Can birders avoid charges of ownership, especially considering the privileged economic, class requirements typically associated with the practice? I think they can, but not without acknowledging their complicity in a historical and an ongoing cultural and ecological imperialism.

TRAVIS V. MASON

West-Coast Birding as Postcolonial Strategy: Literary Criticism in the Field

SETTING THE ECOTONE

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

It might seem odd to claim birding as a postcolonial reading strategy, as a strategy of approach to the text and the world that implicitly questions power structures and political injustices. Pre-eminent American ornithologist John James Audubon, after all, infamously slaughtered hundreds of avian specimens in the interest of preserving and identifying, through image, unique features for classification. Is it possible, after such a history, for the act of birding to be fairly neutral? Can birders avoid charges of ownership, especially considering the privileged economic, class requirements typically associated with the practice? I think they can, but not without acknowledging their complicity in a historical and an ongoing cultural and ecological imperialism. On the one hand, poets privileged enough to also bird¹ (and write about birds and/or birding) tend to acknowledge in their very language their own linguistic, and therefore human, limitations. On the other hand, birding might be one of the most democratic of outdoor activities. Everyone can be a birder, whether one lives in country or city, farmland or suburbs, industrial or developing nations.

By now, postcolonialism has been defined so many times the term itself has begun to lose currency in literary and cultural theory. I understand how repetitive definition and redefinition produces in some critics a vigilance that cancels out others' complacency, leading to a dead dialogue. For me, though, postcolonialism — the term and the strategy — designates something that cannot be contained by an author's biographical status, or the politics surrounding the publication of her next book. For me, postcolonialism means a way of reading the world that is patently self-conscious and reflexive, ironic, stubbornly anti-authoritarian; it also prefers process to product and seeks to make meaning out of the former, to enact a mode of thinking about the world that attempts to bring readers into closer contact with the world — and its inhabitants. Birding has the capacity to do something similar. I am interested in how the literary critic, when reading a poet who has clearly done his research on, for example, birds, trains himself to read the science and the birds themselves. What follows is an account of a birder-critic's attempts to put into practice the theoretical process of stepping out of the text and into the field, of paying close attention in and to various fields.

FIELD MARKS

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

*During the following half century [between 1934 and 1990] the
binocular and the spotting scope have replaced the shotgun.*

— Roger Tory Peterson

It has become a common way for him to begin the day: with coffee and a newspaper. This day, it is a quietly patient routine he hopes will translate effortlessly to time spent in the field: quietly patient routine as metaphor — no, not just metaphor, but strategy — for living every day in the world. As a student of literature, he (the birder-critic; let's call him BC) understands that field work inheres metaphorically in the process of close reading, a process distinct from the act of theorising critical strategies of approach and analysis. The difference between close reading and theorising is, he admits, a difference in degree and not in kind; he is all the more aware of this distinction for having shifted his research focus from the postmodern implications of Canadian historiographic metafiction to the ecological implications of Canadian poetry. The latter interest has, almost by necessity, become a compulsion to resist categorising himself as a particular kind of scholar — to being categorised, labelled, lumped in with a group of like-minded academics — by insisting on the permeability of disciplinary and epistemological boundaries. Over time, BC has come to realise that the boundaries more closely resemble, not permeable cell walls, but intertidal zones, riparian buffer strips, and forest-clearcut edges: what ecologists call ecotones, areas where two ecosystems meet at their edges and create a third ecosystem with shared and distinct characteristics.

In order to understand how poets' proximal relation to birds inflects their poetry about birds, BC decides one day to take up his binoculars, to find a portable field guide, and to spend some time outdoors. Reading is all well and good, but an extra-literary approach is necessary to attempt an ecological literary criticism that recognises ecology as both a science and a metaphor.

By combining the literary with the extra-literary, he feels he can get closer to the birds, trees, and rivers he reads about, much the way biographies help readers get closer to their subjects and political history brings readers into proximity with events recounted in fiction. Birding's capacity to bring readers into closer contact with the world and its inhabitants is on display in a published dialogue between Robert Bringhurst and Laurie Ricou about the former's poem 'Sunday Morning'. Ricou argues convincingly 'that the poem is to the critic as the bird is to the ornithologist.... The birder-critic, who must pay close attention to the nuances of marking, has first to be quietly patient' (93). BC progresses, stepping away from the text and into various fields, from recognising field marks and using field guides to eventually becoming a writer himself and making field notes.

Back in his living room with his coffee and paper, something catches BC's attention. Maybe it is because that morning, Thursday 28 September 2006, he is planning to step out of the office and into an actual field to observe birds instead of just reading about them. A headline in the *Globe and Mail's* Review section — 'Birdman of B.C.' — initiates a process he had not planned to undertake. The article, a fairly straightforward Q&A with Vancouver author and artist, Douglas Coupland, was not really about birds. But something in the interviewer's final question, the only question that included any mention of birds, resonates. Leah McLaren recounts the last time she met Coupland, when he was 'taking a case of peanuts home to feed the blue jays' (R2). That morning, he — the birder-critic — accomplishes a task of epiphanic proportions. He recognises an error in nomination, a failure in taxonomy. Douglas Coupland, you see, lives on British Columbia's west coast: Blue jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*) do not. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 'The western edge of the range stops abruptly where the arid pine forest and scrub habitat of the closely related Steller's jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) begins' ('Blue Jay' n.p.). Coupland feeds Steller's jays on a regular basis, not eastern blue jays. Is the mistake McLaren's, BC wonders, or Coupland's?

The Steller's jay was the first west-of-Alberta species BC came to recognise. Having grown up in Southern Ontario, the birds of his childhood and, consequently, of his imagination were mourning doves, grackles, cardinals, and blue jays. Once in Vancouver, though, those birds came to occupy a portion of his consciousness reserved for nostalgia, at best, and narrow-minded assumptions regarding the primacy of ordinary experience, at worst. He recalls some favourite lines from one of John Thompson's ghazals: 'Absence makes what / presence, presence' (135). Mourning doves gave over to rock doves (pigeons), grackles to northwestern crows, cardinals to starlings², and blue jays to Steller's jays. Of the four new species in BC's expanding worldview, only the crows and Steller's jays were native to British Columbia; only the Steller's jays were not a ubiquitous presence. Perhaps it was this refusal to be ever-present that drew BC to these crafty, loud versions of blue jays. Crows and jays are among the most common of bird families, the *Corvidae*, which also includes ravens, magpies, and other jays; they are found worldwide, except for South America, Antarctica, and some islands (Peterson 252). Northwestern crows (*Corvus caurinus*) differ from American crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) in at least three ways: they are slightly smaller, have faster wingbeats, and, as their common name suggests, occur along 'the narrow northwestern coast strip' of North America (252).

BC understands, without much in the way of research or field work, why pigeons, starlings, and crows are so successful and so, well, *present*. Ironically, intelligence — at least in the way humans understand intelligence — does not seem to have much to do with ubiquity in Vancouver. Crows and starlings have both demonstrated certain intellectual capacities previously thought to be the sole domain of primates, if not of humans — New Caledonian crows can actually

make tools (cf. Weir, Chappell, and Kacelnik), and starlings have the capacity to recognise recursive linguistic structures (cf. Gentner, et al.) — but feral pigeons seem about as unintelligent as an avian species can be when placed in a human-centric paradigm. Steller's jays exist somewhere in between. They might not be as intelligent as crows or as sweetly linguistic as starlings — their 'harsh "shaar", and rapid rattling "shek, shek, shek, shek"' ('Steller's' n.p.) are not likely to inspire the next Mozart — but they exhibit a *jouissance* possibly a third of the way toward ravenhood. In fact, Steller's jays *look* like they're wearing a hood of raven (or crow) feathers.

Around the same time BC arrived in British Columbia and began replacing his memories of eastern birds with the experiences of western ones, Don McKay was publishing essays about his experiences as a migratory poet-birder. For McKay, 'bushtits were one of the first west-of-the-Rockies species' he encountered (2001 83). The encounter was significant enough to inspire an essay, 'The Bushtit's Nest', about the relations among metaphor, wilderness, and poetry, because McKay, a well-known birder, was unable to identify the birds when first asked — 'which was socially embarrassing, but at the same time exciting, since the details of their presence ... could occur without the centralising and reductive influence of the name, which so often signals the terminal point of our interest' (2001 83–84). In McKay's poetics, each of these familiar words — metaphor, wilderness, poetry — means differently; each word, newly understood, enables an engagement with the world that neither recapitulates nor reaffirms a colonial relation to the world through language: metaphor is 'the place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of re-presenting the world' (85); wilderness is 'the placeless place beyond the mind's appropriations' (87); and 'a poem, or poem-in-waiting, contemplates what language can't do: then it does something with language — in homage, or grief, or anger, or praise' (87). BC likes that McKay simultaneously loves and distrusts language, admires the way he finds comfort in the inevitable failure of his, and all, naming.

BC's quiet patience includes a willingness to fail, a willingness to get lost in the literal as well as the figurative sense. He is not truly a birder, you see; he has been trained as a literary critic. The poem or the novel is his field not the forest or the riparian buffer zone. All this has changed, however, as BC has begun working at the intersections of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. Reluctant simply to enter the realm of 'pure spondaic' theory (McKay 2005 88), BC made the decision to take seriously American ecocritic Lawrence Buell's call for a literature, and a criticism, that leads readers back to the physical world rather than away from it (11). The birder-critic is willing to acknowledge, and to embrace, the limitations of language, of knowledge, of naming. The postcolonial world of the west coast invites an especially rigorous introspection in part because '*there is nowhere on the planet left to go*' (Gaston 37). With no more land to conquer to the west of what has already been claimed and/or embroiled in legal battles for ownership,

and with the current state of global environmental crises, perhaps the west-coast poet is turning his gaze to the local, the familiar, the edge of known geography and ecology — and literary criticism. The North Pacific Coast, like all coastal regions BC can think of, provides rich metaphorical possibilities for poetry, the landscape of which, as John Elder has written, ‘is an ecotone where human and natural orders meet’.

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

This discussion of avian ontology reminds BC of similar ruminations by McKay, albeit in a more sweeping statement about birds in general, about birdness. Reflecting on bushtits — on their gourd-shaped nest hanging precariously over his driveway, on their status as “‘creatures of the air” not only because they fly through it, but because it comprises so much of their bodily presence’ — McKay writes that ‘birds do not need a Lao-tzu [author of the *Tao Teh Ching*] to remind them of the non-being their lives depend on’ (2001 103–104). Don Stap refers to avian physiology to explain birds’ ethereal existence and describes a Bewick’s wren that was in the midst of repeating ‘a complex series of notes with precision and force’: ‘Each time he sang, the wren expelled air from his respiratory system with extraordinary efficiency. Nearly 100 percent of the air passing through a bird’s vocal cords is used to make sound. Humans use only about 2 percent’ (73–74). In his statement about the non-being of avian existence, McKay both acknowledges a human need for textualised meaning and an avian proclivity to *mean textually*. Bushtits become a living, breathing Lao-tzu from which BC might learn a little something about the world and his place in it. Identifying a bird — “‘Ah, bushtits”: check, snap. Next topic’ (2001 84) — tells BC as much about himself as it does about the bird. Field marks place BC in relation to an invented system of knowledge and the objects of that system.

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

Again, BC turns to McKay for some advice: ‘The small measure of congruence evident with the onomatopoeic chickadee disappears entirely with ring-necked duck, a beautiful diving duck whose neck ring is all but invisible unless you’re holding the bird in your hands’ (McKay 2001 64). While BC was hiking around Sasamat Lake in Port Moody, B.C., recently, other hikers gathered on a footbridge, clambering to identify a small gathering of black and white ducks. Most wanted to name them ring-necked (*Aythya collaris*), but no one could see, really, even with high-powered binoculars, a subterminal ring on the beak (a field mark used in identifying males). Proximity inflects specificity, sometimes to a degree that is not particularly useful. American critic Dana Phillips complicates the congruence evident in the chickadee’s onomatopoeic name by imagining a novice birder attempting to identify a particular species of chickadee. Phillips notes that ‘establishing the identity of black-capped as opposed to Carolina chickadees can be surprisingly complicated’ (178) in spite of the illustrations and descriptions — including field marks — Roger Tory Peterson’s field guides provide. In the end, ‘the birder is confronted with a variety of interpretive options’ (178); in the end, Peterson’s (or Audubon’s or Sibley’s) ‘stylised images’ cannot enable, in each instance, the proper identification of a bird: ‘the birder will have to engage in a lot of back-and-forth between text and world, and world and text, and between stylised image and bird, and bird and stylised image, if she really wants to know what kind of chickadee she saw’ (179). Phillips refers to the green-backed heron, which used to be called the little green heron, even though it is not little or ‘green all over, as the name implied’ (180). The new name, while it is not ‘especially descriptive’, ‘seems arbitrary and yet it is perfectly accurate’ precisely because the bird does have a green back and other characteristics not included in the name (180).

So, why is naming such an important aspect of birding and of poetry? After reading McKay and considering the differences between blue and Steller’s jays, BC finds the act of naming itself less compelling than contemplating the implications of a human desire to name and to know; but to arrive at such a position, one must first establish a useful repertoire of names and be able to identify field marks. It is like Francis Ford Coppola directing Dennis Hopper, who had not learned his lines (but had apparently done a few in his trailer) prior to shooting *Apocalypse Now*: memorise your lines first; then you can forget them. For poets this is akin to mastering the grammar so as to create meaning at the edges of linguistic order; for

ecopoets, it is akin to undermining the unquestioned authority of anthropocentric language and knowledge. Scott Bryson illuminates the paradox a little, claiming that for ecopoets ‘Ignorance is exalted over conventional knowledge, which is usually connected with the *acquisition* of wisdom’, with the collection of empirical data at the expense of other ways of knowing (105). Bryson’s ‘ignorance’, thinks BC, informs a humility that encourages an understanding of the world *qua* the world. But humility with McKay is not exalting ignorance so much as following a trail of ecological referents to get closer, maybe getting lost in the meantime because of a lack of knowledge (perhaps an ignorance) that is inevitable, though not necessarily exalted. We can know via biology, ecology, and ornithology. The question remains: So What? What will we do with such knowledge, knowing? Folding the paper and putting his mug in the sink with the rest of the breakfast dishes, BC sets out for a walk. So, he thinks, let’s find out.

FIELD GUIDES

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

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

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

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

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

.....

There's an understory here, shades
of meaning, tale told by a rock
signifying everything.
To open the grammar of being seen
and let the creatures name *you*.

Wheeler's infinitives coupled with the poem's title (which appears in the poem between two vague markers of place: there, here) reflect a tentativeness BC wants to emulate. The listening. The waiting. The birding. The ontological shift when he allows himself to be named in a language he will never understand. BC keeps coming back to McKay's most recent collection of essays on place, wilderness, and poetry, in which McKay reveals an interest in 'the possibilities for reverse flow in a relationship that has been so thoroughly one-way' (2005 18). Reverse flow represents a complex postcolonial, environmental relationship, a conscious willingness to admit complicity and desires yet still manage to work (against the mainstream) toward a more equitable relation to other humans and nonhumans. BC is an actor in the saga of place even as he resists complicity by learning the names of things in place. McKay's reverse flow echoes Tim Lilburn's notion that humans in a new place 'should learn the names for things as a minimum' gesture, 'as acts of courtesy ... entering the realm of decorum' ('Going' 184). One does not respectfully engage in a dialogue with another person and begin, 'Hey, what's-your-name! Let's talk about this land you claim belongs to your ancestors'. The saga of place can take place in the realm of decorum. BC is convinced he can start, as eco-poets and interdisciplinary ecocritics have started, by learning the names for birds, trees, winds, and the people who live and have lived along this coast.

Recapitulating a colonial expansion westward, BC moves through rainforest toward coast and waves; salal and Oregon grape border the trail, interrupted by 'illegitimate, superfluous', occasional yet persistent bursts of Himalayan blackberry, an introduced *Rubus* cultivar courtesy of famed horticulturalist, Luther Burbank (Robertson 125). Arbutus trees point nakedly toward sun and waves. He is looking for a bird-poem, a hybrid creature like himself. But what does it mean to be walking like this? Like Wordsworth walking the Lake District in an earlier time, 'imaginatively and physically' BC 'is always moving around' — unlike Wordsworth, BC considers his relation to the natural world with a healthy dose of humility. If 'motion is', as John Elder claims, 'the integrating dimension of a quest'

(137), BC sees his walking, his moving through the landscape, as a participatory gesture. Otherwise, the quest is likely to become a conquest, recapitulated colonial expansion to become postcolonial, as it were, thus reaffirming a continuing presence of colonial thought. As if in response to a poet's bird-word playfulness, birds become participial modifiers, gerunds, continuing actions in the present — *meaning, birding* — and to look at them thus becomes a way of looking at and of knowing 'trees and rocks and seas and all that weaves itself into habitat' (Bringhurst & Ricou 93). BC moves from the specificity of recognition and nomination — Steller's jay, check — to an inclusive consideration of linked entities and of a process of connection between *this* Douglas fir, *that* spotted owl, and his own desiring gaze. The task is difficult, but as Gabriele Helms suggests, 'the interconnectedness of all the environment, of the human and the nonhuman world, its interdependence and mutual implication, make it possible for the [birder-critic] to come to an answer to her/his own impatience and frustration' (51–52). The answer often rests unobtrusively in a space, in a moment, between not-knowing and knowing; BC necessarily hesitates, delays the action of naming in order to pay homage to the named.

But how is it possible to represent birds as birds in the pages of literature, or in a poem? How is it possible for the birder-critic to negotiate the layers of representation and, in reading McKay's 'Song for the Song of the Common Raven' (2006 27), for example, write about actual ravens? One answer, an easy one, is: It cannot be done. Even field guides, with their ostensible 'capacity ... to put the reader or viewer in touch with the environment' with their 'stylised images' and mimetic representations, necessarily fail to achieve scientific or literary realism (Buell 97). BC is not interested in debating how real things are in themselves, though. Reality he takes for granted; but he understands that his experience of the real, how he perceives things, removes him from their experience in the world. Helms puts it this way: 'From a constructivist point of view, I do not deny the existence of an ontological, non-textual reality; what I deny is the possibility of making a statement about its "real" nature' (45). BC feels impoverished by the proximity he seeks, not by the birds. BC wants to know more about the birds because he is relatively new to this place, their home. His presence alone informs an ongoing history of colonial presence; and it also inheres in an even older history of humans' misunderstanding and destruction of the more-than-human world. Familiarity on the way to recognition, then. He is learning that 'users of [all] guides will encounter innumerable frustrations, uncertainties and quandaries. Such "troubles" are typically experienced by committed birders as temporary problems arising within a personal and situational relationship to "reality" — problems with perspective, acuity and luck' (Law & Lynch 291). Knowing includes being known: but the moment of recognition, of realisation, is constantly changing. Familiarity takes time. BC longs to achieve the familiarity expressed by P.K. Page in 'Only Child' (114–16), a poem about a mother (a

‘noted naturalist’) and ‘her very affectionate and famous son’. The son, neither interested in learning Latin binomials nor in knowing the common names for the birds he and his mother encounter, nevertheless gains a familiarity through proximity afforded by walking with his mother; ‘he knew / them by their feathers and a shyness like his own’ (114). His guide is polymorphous.

In his critical appraisal of ecocriticism, Dana Phillips analyses Roger Tory Peterson’s field-mark system of bird identification, what Buell identifies as ‘highly abstract renderings that have proved, in the experience of veteran birders, to enable the student to identify the originals more effectively than would a denser mimetic image, such as a photograph in the Audubon Society field guide’ (97). Responding to Buell’s description of Peterson’s field-mark system, Phillips criticises Buell’s ‘assumption that the images in the *Field Guide* have something of crucial importance to do with “originals”’ (174). Buell’s use of the term ‘original’ is problematic, to be sure; however, BC has little ethical difficulty taking Buell to be referring to a bird or species of bird that existed prior to any representation, image, or description, whether mimetic, abstract, or verbal. While Phillips and Buell agree on the irony implicit in Peterson’s *Field Guide* being ‘not only mimetically parsimonious, but visually impoverished, too, and deliberately so’ (Phillips 174), they disagree on the value and success of such an aesthetic. Phillips remains unconvinced of the guide’s ability to put its reader ‘in touch with the environment’ since Peterson’s ‘merely adequate’ images, which require the ‘birder to become a reader’, push the birder to consider ‘another image, and yet another, while returning, now and again, to the environment for fresh impressions’ (176, 179). In other words, Buell privileges a too-simplistic version of literary realism that Phillips seeks to complicate:

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

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

Yet for all that BC wants to demonstrate how learning about the biology and ecology of birds can help to develop a less anthropocentric model of critical inquiry, Ricou reminds that ‘something in us resists a guide. Hence the sometimes

hectoring tone, as the poet-guide has to persuade his companion to see it his way. We would rather go it alone' (1997 22). If the poet is guide, BC must learn how to read the guides, must learn nuances of the genre. In contrast, Andrew Durkin notes that the typical "consumer" of a [field] guide is not a reader in the usual sense but a user'; not until 'the establishment of a reciprocal relationship between the technical means to produce well-illustrated, relatively inexpensive books on an enormous scale ... did the bird guide take on what might be called its modern paradigmatic form', of which Peterson's *Field Guides* are most representative (5).

What other guides might we turn to? While Lilburn claims that Euroamericans are not quite capable of being 'autochthonic' the way, say, Aborigines in Australia or Haida in British Columbia are (2007 45), BC wants to keep an ear tilted toward available stories, available strategies for attempting the world. There is a danger, though, he realises, in the way simply 'speak[ing] of Native Americans in relation to place, earth, land, or any other geographic location courts cliché', but as Kathryn Shanley argues, 'the definition of "indigenous" entails place' (137). During one of his visits to a library across campus — the First Nations House of Learning, or *Xwi7xwa* Library — BC encounters Leroy Little Bear's foreword to *Native Science*. To 'the Native American mind', Little Bear suggests, land's significance goes beyond mere affinity or identification with Nature as stereotypical constructions of Indianness would have it. BC has come to a stark realisation regarding the emergence of a North American environmental consciousness. Though in the academy and in literature it represents thoughtful responses to centuries of abuse both Euroamericans and Natives have perpetrated on the earth and its inhabitants, the colonisation of the Americas by European settlers effectively upset(s) the precariously balancing dynamism theorised and practised by the continent's First Peoples, a dynamism that emphasises respect for, and participation with, the natural world — a dynamism developed and maintained across generations through the act of storytelling. Indigenous communities, even in the seemingly mundane, domestic act of cultivating their gardens, BC learns once he gets past Little Bear's foreword, express by way of an 'attitude of reverence for their food plants ... the central foundations of Native science — participation and relationship' (Cajete 132). Despite current consensus that acknowledges Native North Americans' role in unsustainable hunting practices and the extinction of 'four-fifths of all large vertebrates in North America' (Glavin 123), Western scientists — and Western literary (eco)critics/academics — who refuse to acknowledge the parallels between Indigenous and Euroamerican cultures, refuse to acknowledge and consider the efficacy of 'participation and relationship' in the development of their theories, including ecocriticism, refuse to acknowledge their own complicity in the world's ill health. Stories that are of a particular place, that are chthonic, can still tell us something about how to live in the world. 'Unless the cultural/ecological context of a relationship is understood', however, 'one cannot fully comprehend a particular Indigenous technology' (125). BC wonders

at the seemingly innocuous slashing together of culture and ecology in Cajete's phrasing; surely it is a significant typographical and theoretical decision, as if to say culture can be defined in terms of a particular geographic region and the practices of a particular group of people living in that region, but the cultural practices are not exclusive of a broader ecology.

FIELD NOTES

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

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

While a field guide might help with the identification process in the field, often BC finds there is not time to flip, find, and identify *in situ*. The field guide is often of more use after returning from a day in the field. C. Bernstein advises the birder to '[c]ompare your sighting with books only after the notes are made. Having the book at hand during the note-taking will only interfere with the process.... The description often is that of the picture in the book, *not* of the actual live bird seen' (2). Once observed, though, identifying characteristics — field marks — have a tendency simply to disappear as memories often do. Something else is needed, BC thinks, to bring marks and guide together: call it 'striv[ing] for affirmative praxis' by way of note-taking as Gabriele Helms does (46); embrace Ricou's argument that 'the act of writing, and rewriting, is essentially a mode of thinking' (2002 135). Making notes in the field enables a mode of thinking that destabilises the written word's — and hence conventional knowledge's — imperial authority. Paradoxically, by making notes toward naming, BC engages a 'radical process of demythologising the systems that threaten to define' the natural world, effectively 'uninvent[ing] the world', as Robert Kroetsch would have it (1989 394). For BC, having first arrived on the west coast, the idea of making notes was persistently absent, even when he consulted the *Sibley Guide to Birds* purchased on a whim in Toronto. He made a mental note about the flight pattern of a bird silhouetted against a typical northwest coast sky (grey) and flying from treetop to treetop, the familiar level flight punctuated by brief flapping, with wingbeats almost entirely below the horizontal plane. Turning to page 351 in the Sibley guide, BC saw the Steller's and Blue jay side by side for the first time, and saw that conspicuously ravenous hood, too, for the first time — on the page and not in the field. Birds on the west coast of North America — on this geographically last post of colonial presence — bring us, all of us, closer to the observation of natural life forms if we, all of we, so choose to be brought. This last post strikes BC as both a theoretically and a geographically significant marker of newness. Or, not newness exactly, but of the impulse to stop expanding and take a walk in a place newly acknowledged, to turn and look at one's environment.

Tues 17 Oct,
 walking dog after dinner, noticed long line of crows flying
 east — hundreds, too many to count; is this a usual occurrence?
 Wed 18 Oct,
 walked dog at same time as yesterday — saw crows again, tho
 not quite as many — where are they going?

BC still consults books, searching for a key or a legend — some piece of a map he doesn't yet hold. He reads George Levine: 'I take the arbitrariness of naming as part of the pleasure of birding, a continuing revelation of the ways in which "nature" and human conventions and consciousness are always intermingled and never in entirely satisfactory relation' (153). Identifying a particular bird correctly, as McKay suggests, does have 'its indisputable satisfactions' as 'one of the pleasures of system to which us big brains are addicted' (2001 84), but the name addict might be apt to assume his pleasure is more important, ontologically, than it is.

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

Tues 24 Oct
 quick, successive 'laughs'; descending, harsh.

He knows this is not enough, that there is something missing. The note lacks coherence, it is too cryptic; and when BC compares it to other notes from the field — notes that share a slight resemblance to notes he makes while skimming journals in the library — he has a hard time piecing a narrative together. He recalls an article from the *New York Times Magazine* that came out in the wake of the ivory-billed woodpecker controversy. Ivory-billed woodpeckers (*Campephilus principalis*) have been considered extinct by most ornithologists since approximately 1940. In 2005, some ornithologists claim to have sighted (and heard) ivory-bills in Arkansas.³ To support their sighting, field notes would play as great a role as the grainy video and audio files.

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

If birding is storytelling, what writerly activity, BC wonders, cannot be approached as a field in which to take notes? Jan Zwicky writes that '[s]ome things can be known that cannot be expressed in technocratically acceptable

prose' ('Bringhurst's' 109); the idea of story, save, perhaps, the improvisational storytelling of many First Nations cultures, seems too linear, too structured to embody the frantic, hesitant notes of a birder as she stands, shivering, just past sunrise watching and listening for signs of avian life, head cocked, mouth slightly agape, pen at the ready.

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

In his introduction to Robert Kroetsch's *Completed Field Notes*, Fred Wah urges readers to 'think of "field notes" as temporary, as momentary gestures that interpenetrate possibility. Perhaps even as investigations into the potential for narrative' (xii). Similar to McKay's corpus of bird poems, BC's nascent list of birds remains even less 'completed' than Kroetsch's field notes, 'announced in medias res as continuing' yet, 'in its acceptance of its own impossibilities, completed' (2000 251). Where Kroetsch's impossibility manifests in the poet's inexorable reflexivity and self-doubt, in an endless deference to the symbolism of words, BC's failure to know for sure recapitulates a postcolonial desire — BC wants to defer to the authority of schists, shrubs, and shrikes, of terranes, terrain, and towhees, of faultlines, forests, and flickers. This act of deferring, of accepting the possibility of failure in the process of learning about the field, in the field, positions BC as patient observer, as part of a naming that 'will be quiet, useless, broken maybe' (Lilburn 2002 184). Insofar as birding comprises identifying field marks, reading field guides, and writing field notes, its connection to reading literature, particularly from a postcolonial perspective, remains.

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

NOTES

- ¹ In *Lifebirds*, George Levine provides a useful gloss on the various ways ‘bird’ is used: ‘But I am a “birder”. That’s the noun birders use to describe themselves. There is a related verb, “to bird”, which I use a lot, and there’s a participial noun built from that verb, “birding”, which is what most of the essays in this book are about’ (3).
- ² Though European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are now common across North America — thanks to Eugene Scheiffelin, who endeavoured to introduce to the New World all the birds mentioned in the works of Shakespeare — and thus not unique to the west-coast, they are not common in BC’s hometown.
- ³ See Jerome A. Jackson’s *In Search of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker*, updated after the controversial rediscovery.

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