

BOOK
\$10.00

The Muskwa Assemblage

Don McKay

In August of 2006, a group of artists working in different media, and out of a variety of traditions, assembled in the Muskwa-Kechika wilderness of Northern British Columbia. This “art-camp” was organized and managed by Donna Kane and Wayne Sawchuk as a way to direct aesthetic attention to an area — one of the very few — in which a wild ecosystem remains virtually intact.

What follows is my response, presented in a form which, so I hope, fits both the region and the experience.

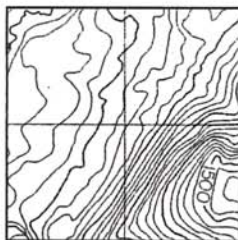
Thanks to Donna, Wayne and everyone at the Muskwa-Kechika art camp; to Marnie and Marlene for editing help; and to Sally for production.

Assemblage: a gathering or bringing together

: a work of art consisting of miscellaneous objects brought into relation

: a biostratigraphic unit or level of strata characterized by a particular set of rocks, animals or plants

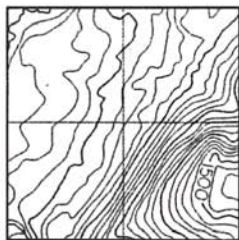
Write it down, cross it out. The struggle of language with itself, its sojourn in the wilderness, its fast. Write down this caribou, a young buck crossing the Gataga on soft snowshoe hooves, write shaggy elegance, write those improbable parentheses it carries on its head like a waiter carrying a tray of silence into the other world. The jaunt and roll of its haunch, its run-like-a-girl gait over the gravel bar, splashing upstream into the current so as to be swept down precisely at its path on the opposite shore. Write down the way your heart fell still and how that stillness raced with it into the forest. Write down the paradoxical thirst of words for seclusion, for animal intimacy, for the embrace of live parentheses.



Cross it out. Remember 94K4, the 1:50,000 map, how strange it seemed, how it drew the eye with its swirl of contours, how it baffled the mind with its lack of names. And how comforting these few words seemed: "Gataga River," a strong diagonal snake running southwest to northwest, up what you knew to be the Rocky Mountain Trench; "South Gataga River," flowing between unnamed mountains, gathering creeks from the valleys between them; on the west side only "Driftpile Creek," flowing from summits down to the lower left-hand corner to join the Kechika on another map. Everything else unlabelled, represented only by the torqued lines of themselves: creeks, canyons, peaks and passes, the mountains like thumbprints, the valleys like sexual clefts, the darker contour of the tree line linking swirl to swirl. Remember how you sat transfixed, Marlowed by it, the whole of 94K4 an EEG of tectonic force, a contorted brainscape laid out on the kitchen table.

And skewed to the diagonal. It was as though some formerly symmetrical design had been invaded by irresistible divinity, some Dionysus headed northwest, so that all its features stretched and dragged, gripped by the eros of the oblique. You might have been a crime scene investigator poring over those lakes in the trench reading them like blood-splatter, sensing a sort of yearning in its elongated reach. After you'd stared a while the lines began to move, to bunch gather and rush as though, without words to hold them in the present, they suffered the infusion of old earth energy — uplift and erosion, strike and slip, glacial

carving and alluvium. As though deep form, like a medicine dream, were forcing its way up from the mantle. Remember that strange longing in your kitchen, with the salt shaker and the honey jar holding 94K4 down by its corners. Remember the fascination. The fear.



Cladonia boralis: aka

Red pyxie cap lichen, aka little stop lights
clustered on a stump. Pause here,
hiker. Consider such symbioses
as these creatures so ingeniously
accomplish in their fungal-algal
love-and-death affair.

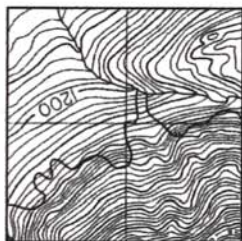
And spare another moment

for the first frail
single-celled companionships
cultured in earth's ancient amniotic
oceans. Think
of the mother of the
mother of the mother-to-the-nth
of thought.

The Muskwa Assemblage is a formation inside the Muskwa-Kechika wilderness which stretches from the Toad River area in the north to the Tuchodi Lakes in the south; some of its outcrops can be reached with a short hike from the Alaska Highway. It is one of those geological phenomena — such as unconformities, island arcs, and fossil beds — that open precipitously into deep time, like a storefront with a sign and window display which is in fact a facade for the abyss. “Muskwa Assemblage” names a set of rocks that share a common ancestry in Rodinia one and a half billion years ago. “Rodinia,” in turn, names the gigantic supercontinent to which virtually all the earth’s land mass belonged. This makes the rocks of the assemblage older than almost all the other rocks in the Rockies, the same age as another Rodinian assemblage close to the American border far to the south. But if these rocks of the northern and southern Rockies belong to the same formation, what became of all the rocks that lay between them? Well, that intervening rock mass now forms most of (mind the abyss) Australia. When Rodinia broke up, like a finished jigsaw puzzle ponderously taking itself apart, life existed only

in the ocean as single-celled prokaryotes. The atmosphere, so I read, had not yet accumulated much oxygen — a process which has to interest us, and which came about thanks to those very prokaryotes, whose photosynthesis created oxygen as a by-product, just like plants today.

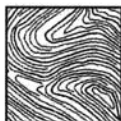
Does it strike you how how brave these words are — “photosynthesis,” “billion,” “prokaryote,” even “Australia,” even “outcrop” — to stand there and declare themselves for all the world as though they stood on solid platforms rather than trap doors?



Wilderness. So overwritten it should probably be granted a reprieve from definition, maybe even a lengthy sabbatical from speech. Nevertheless, let me write down that something speaks inside us, something we feel called upon to name, to say sublime, or wilderness or mystery. Some resonance reaches inside us to an uninhabited place. Uninhabited? There is, says Simone Weil, an impersonal part of the soul. I think something like that part must be the place where the wilderness resonates, where we sense ourselves to be, not masters of creation, not technological wunderkinds, but beings among beings. It is a sense that carries us farther than any humanism, farther than art. It may be experienced as astonishment; it may come tinged with terror. See how lucky we are, how blessed, to inhabit a planet of such infinite complexity; but also — and perhaps simultaneously — see how anonymous we are among these species and genera, how little the scope of our lives in the immensity of deep time.

And is there not a further recognition waiting in this uninhabited place — that the assurance of our connection to the world, its lifetime guarantee, so to speak, lies not in our artful inventions but in our deaths? The experience of wilderness is the call of the duende in the far reaches of the self. Write it down.

Cross it out.

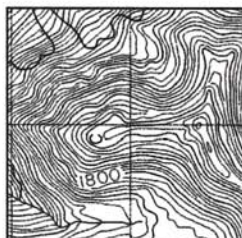


Walking in the burnt forest, six weeks after the fire, was like shifting from colour film to black-and-white, the companionable bristles of the spruce and pine giving way to sooty black fingers pointing at nothing, the ground also scarred, still smouldering in a few places among the roots. At first it simply seemed devastation, the valley of the shadow you get through as quickly as possible. But also, already, here were the first green leaves, vivid against the soot, flipping the eye into one of these reversals in which field becomes ground and ground field. On/Off; On/Off: everything dissolves in death; but death is made up entirely of ecological niches-to-be. (What were those plants? The leaves looked like False Solomon's Seal, but weren't, so they're filed in my mind under False False Solomon's Seal, a category which suggests a taxonomy trembling deliciously on the brink of collapse into infinite regress.)

The burn was, so it seemed, the home place for Karl Mattson's imagination, the way the Giverny Garden was for Monet's and the Precambrian Shield was for the Group of Seven's. Bone-sculptor, roadkill-collector, Karl looks minutely at death's artefacts when most of us look away. Up on the ridge in the burn he made a chair out of materials at hand, modifying a blackened trunk for the back, and balancing a slab of slate for the seat on a pile of stones. It has a faintly silver sheen, luminous in slanted light and shiny in the rain. The armrests are burnt branches,

which means that if you sit there, you're likely to bear a smudge or two when you leave.

Karl's seat beckons just like park benches everywhere, speaking against the impulse to hasten through the burn. It says, take a load off, sit down for a moment with dissolution and see it with something other than horror. When I sit there, I can feel the power of this aesthetic gesture — a small blow against the urge to permanence and immortality, that panic which can lead to imperishable art on the one hand, and atrocity (the reduction of being to matériel) on the other. Pause here, the seat suggests; be at home with the mortality you share with other life forms. Feel the soot on your arms, sense the False False Solomon's Seal breaking through the blackness at your feet. This is the seat from which Hades first saw Persephone. This is where Death first fell in love.



Its fang bit me, left this
cherishable scar.
I left bits of paper
under rocks, lichens, burnt stumps
bearing words of eloquent
awkwardness. Fumbling
for a gesture,
thinking of Han Shan's biodegradable
graffiti. Mist/
mountain. Mountain/
mist:
listen.

Nameless mountains, nameless creeks: language abhors such vacuums. Once we'd climbed the mountain, and were camped with the pack horses beside the tarn, I could feel the impulse to supply names become active, as though language were suffering a housekeeping crisis. I thought of early explorers and scientists leaving their names — or those of their heroes, friends, wives, mistresses or pets — attached to the species and landforms they encountered, how it seems to satisfy some primal urge in the hyperlinguistic species like ours. I suspect that language harbours a desire to be that map in the Borges story that is co-extensive with the world. Once inducted — baptized — into language, the mountain or creek seems to join us in the tissues of discourse that make up so much of human life. It yields a portion of its otherness; it agrees (or so we like to think) to live along with us inside that web of reference which, some would argue, constitutes the real.

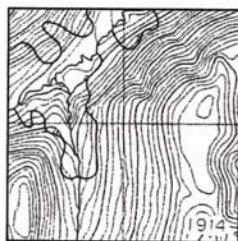
That particular linguistic mania is illusory but compelling, especially in seminar rooms. Out there on the mountain, though, I felt a contrary impulse, an impulse beyond simply letting the being of the place be, a more searching and penetrative questioning of normal naming practice. Can a person contemplate the reverse of paternalistic and colonial nomination? Is it possible to imagine being named by a place? And — were we to contemplate such a thing — how would we come to merit that honour? One thinks of vision quests, out of which the true the name of the questor may emerge, the creation of some deep communion with meditative unconsciousness where divine and natural forces leave their impressions on the spirit. And of

those poet-sages in the Chinese rivers-and-mountain tradition, like Meng Hao-jan, who lived and wrote out of the secluded mountains of the Hsiang-yang region. Meng wrote in a way that made its features — lakes, rivers, mists, bamboo groves, rains, sheer cliffs and steep-sided valleys — exemplifications of the Tao itself, expressed in the realm of daily, thingly existence. After his death, followers of Meng renamed him Meng Hsiang-yang to honour that intimate connection, his life like a permeable membrane between human being and the being that is the way. The example of Han Shan or "Cold Mountain" takes this naming-by-landscape to its mythic extreme. He was the great sage and fool whose name was his region and vice versa, a wandering poet who left poems stuck on trees and bushes. After his death, it is said, a fissure in Cold Mountain opened and Han Shan stepped inside, the fissure closing after him. Cold Mountain became Cold Mountain.

Up on the mountain such reflections naturally turned to our immediate situation. We had been guided there by Wayne Sawchuk, a man whose dedication to the conservation of the Muskwa-Kechika is matched by an intimate knowledge of, and love for, all its landforms and lifeforms. Wayne is a man who, I think it can be said, comes close to living in this region the way Meng inhabited Hsiang-yang. Of course we could propose naming one of its mountains Mount Sawchuk, and accomplish a fit missing from most such nominations. But suppose we tried re-naming Wayne instead of naming the mountain: Wayne Muskwa-Kechika. What would we make of that? Well, the proposal shows us something about our cultural inheritance, since it would be

hard to avoid the implication of ownership, of control. Epithets for nobility like “Leopold of Belgium” may seem on the surface to say that Leopold belongs to Belgium, but no one could doubt that the reverse is actually the case. Add to this the difficulty posed by the fact that both Muskwa and Kechika come from an ancient native tradition to which, lamentably, we have been deaf. Such naming would seem a further instance of cultural appropriation.

But up there beside the tarn, several removes from highways and malls, with the vexed history of property for the moment in a abeyance, with the evil of appropriation for the moment set aside, it seemed possible to be named by wilderness: to say, alongside the Meng Hsiang-yang and Han Shan, Wayne Muskwa-Kechika. To write it down, and then, with all historical caveats remembered, cross it out.



And of moose, speak no more the brawn,
the blunder, the old oaf-of-the-woods
with the glum dumb glare and oversized rack
galumphing through the swamp toward his supposed telos —
to be fixed in final moositude above some fireplace.
Not that.

Write instead this delicate huge
reticulated hind leg lifted — sandhill crane
crossed with industrial crane — over the fallen
log, held there like a hieroglyph then,
knee and hip unlevering, slowly
lowered. All the while his head, five yards away,
browses the bottom.

Write down, and remember this of moose:
inside the gawk, the grace.

Some of the horses — Gataga, Cassiar, Tuchodi — were named after rivers, mountain ranges and lakes of the regions. Mine was named Bucky. Bucky? I asked, hoping this referred to a lucky dollar bill, or that Wayne's godfather had been Buckminster Fuller. "Oh, he has a mind of his own," Wayne said. "Just be firm. And calm." "Sure," I responded, firmly, and prepared to mount.

OK Bucky, I thought, it's your old buddy firm calm Don here, hoisting himself arthritically into the saddle, his feet scrabbling for the stirrups, gripping the reins with a fine combination of steely authority and Buddhist quietude. Now giddy-up. Please.

But overall, we got along great. Yes, there were a few difficult moments over route selection, when Bucky would opt to follow one of the pack horses, Gataga or Big Dan, off the path, to avoid a bad patch of mud or roots, heading into the trees where the footing was safer. The fact that the branches on the detour often left the firm calm rider with a mouthful of pine needles was, I hoped, an oversight on Bucky's part. There were also those moments leading him down from the mountain, the trail slick and treacherous, when Bucky would overtake me and — using his head the way Gordie Howe used his elbows — impatiently bounce me forward and down. This was exactly the same treatment he dished out to pack horses we overtook, and I was uncertain whether to feel elevated to equine status or reduced to it. Was Bucky equally uncertain whether "Bugger off Bucky" was a rebuke or a piece of companionable badinage? I doubt it.

Our most exciting time together, though, came at The Lick — a place where minerals from a bog have seeped into the surrounding clay — very attractive to moose, caribou, and (as Wayne, reading the tracks, pointed out) mountain goats. In fact, the goats had been using The Lick between the time we went up the mountain and when we descended, since their tracks were superimposed on our own. Wayne's tracking reminded me of Tonto from my comic-book past. He'd say, not "Look, moose tracks," but something like "A cow and calf came through here yesterday at 4 p.m."

Anyhow, the way through the bog beside The Lick was mucky, kind of a splashy wallow through thigh-deep water with the bottom sucking at the horse's hooves. Bucky and I waited to cross behind Clem, a new nervy pack horse on only his second trip. He'd been pressed into service as a replacement for Phil, who had, on the trip in, lost his footing and fallen head over heels ("Like an egg-beater," Wayne said.) down a scree slope. Phil had been badly cut, and as I write this, is recuperating, or so we hope, at the base camp. So here was Clem, the rookie replacement, gamefully clambering down the slope and starting to wallow across, and Bucky the Impatient for once heeding my instructions to hold back and give Clem room to thrash. Then, when I figured it was safe, I urged him forward.

But something was amiss. Instead of clambering awkwardly into the bog, Bucky was gathering himself back on his haunches — oh, oh — and leapt, sproinged into the air,

landed with a splash and sprang again. I was fully aware that this was the moment of the yee-haw whoop, that I should have been waving my hat in one hand and holding the reins with the other, rather than clutching the saddle horn with both, shouting "Jesus Wait, Whoa," and who knows whatever else from my rich and profane word-hoard. I was also aware that Clem, three-quarters of the way across, was just as alarmed as I was by Bucky's leaps, and had gotten himself hunkered on a hummock — alas, right in our path, or I should say, trajectory. Bucky hit Clem with his shoulder, Clem jumped off the hummock and, somehow, managed to aim a kick at us — a kick which, fortunately, missed, since we were already up on the further bank with the other pack horses, me catching my breath and fumbling for that firm calm equipoise, Bucky munching willow scrub with a kind of aren't-I-the-lad-insouciance.

Doubtless you're thinking that some disciplinary action was in order here. But what the hell. There's definitely something about leaping that sets wallowing in the pale. While one part of you is thinking whew, that was close, another part whispers hey let's try it again. "Way to go go, Buck," I said, patting his neck as though this had been my plan all along. "Way to go."



How to tie up a horse: the squirrel goes round the tree (or, says Emily, pausing with the rope in her hand, if this is a smart horse, it's a fox) and pops up to make a loop. That's its hole, see, and the loop goes over the rope and the squirrel or fox, which is now this second loop, goes under the rope and into the hole. Now pull tight. Then later you can pull the free end and the whole knot comes undone like that. Except the smart horse might also figure that out so you may have to stick the free end into the second loop. OK? Say: the fox swallows its tail. Got it?

The loop the cinch the bridle the snap the halter the reins the stirrups the traces the saddle the saddlebags the hobble the belly band the saddle blanket the pack frame.

The bit. The shoes.

The posse the cavalry the mounties.

The pack string.

Silver Trigger Tenbrooks Black Beauty Flicka.

Clydesdale Percheron Belgian Arab.

Pinto Sorrel Palomino Roan.

Centaur.

I sit in my kitchen with a piece of rope, tying an imaginary horse to a real chair. There is one photo of the assemblage last August that I keep flashing back to, as I mull over our experiences. In it we are sitting around the fire at the base camp; it is after supper but before dark. Maybe we are arguing about graffiti art, or maybe one of us is giving a presentation — Derek on his land art peace symbol, or Karl on his roadkill constructions, Jerry on the photographs for the Yukon-to-Yellowstone project, Sally on neutrinos or Emily on her cow placenta sculptures. Around us, among the trees and shrubs, stand the horses. They are just passing through, I know, on their way to the grassy places along the Gataga where the browse is richer. But in the privileged moment of the photograph they seem to form a ring around our ring, a band between us and the wilder wilderness. Maybe we are actually telling stories about them, since the presence of the horses can stir our species to anecdote, as empty pools move us to haiku and divinity to epic. Or maybe they are eavesdropping on our plans to pack and saddle them up in the morning for that climb into the alpine — information which, I suspect, would affect how far they wander tonight and how difficult they will be to round up tomorrow.

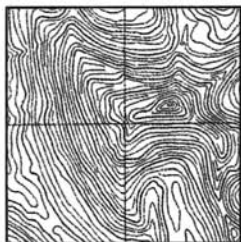
The photo is a tableau which will dissolve once time begins again and they continue their progress over the ridge to the river, moving with that strange rabbit-like lurch which the

hobbles permit. Then there will be just ourselves around the fire,
passing the popcorn and whisky back and forth.

Dusk deepens in my kikchen.

The fox goes round the tree.

The silver-black lake reflects the stars back to the stars.



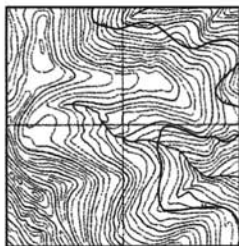
Song for the Song of the Loon

If that's the word:
the song's already gone
before it's uttered so the ear is left
full of it's emptiness,
bereft.

It seems the loon
opens its throat to some old
elemental wind, it seems that time
has finally found its syrinx and for a moment
lets itself be voice.

Jesus,

what perilous music!
Surely, like Odysseus, we ought
to stop our ears against this feral
MRI with its dreadful
diagnostic reverb?
But no, we would rather
be stricken, rather suspect
that the spirit also is a migratory species,
that it is right now flying to star river —
as the ancients called the milky way — that in
fact it is already there,
yodelling for no one and
ignoring us, the collectors,
with our heads full of closets,
our hearts full of ovens,
and our sad feet.



Rapt, sitting on a rock by the shore,
watching the caribou in my binoculars luxuriously
browse across the bay, when something fierce
and shrill scuttles over my foot — yikes! I
drop the binoculars, fumble in my knapsack
for the bird guide, fall off the rock (Han Shan
chortling in the wings) into the water while the
unidentified sandpiper scurries on, leaving
a trail of delicate x's in the sand.

