

Limestone Poetics in Adrian Stokes, W. H. Auden and Kamau Braithwaite

Arthur Rose

To synthesize a limestone poetics from the works of the English art critic, Adrian Stokes, the English poet, W. H. Auden, and the Bajan poet, Edward Kamau Braithwaite, I begin with discussions by Chantal Zabus and Lyndsey Stonebridge that effectively place the three in a historical trajectory. Zabus observes that Braithwaite's preface to his collection, *Mother Poem* (1977), contains an "unacknowledged reference to Auden's poem, 'In Praise of Limestone' (1948)".¹ She justifies this connection with the following references: "The collection", Braithwaite writes in the preface to *Mother Poem*, "is about porous limestone: my mother, Barbados".² Auden asks of limestone, "What could be more like Mother or a fitter background / For her son"?³ Jean-Michel Rabaté, in what Lyndsey Stonebridge refers to as "a suggestive footnote", identifies Auden's poem "as a dialogue with Stokes' thesis on limestone".⁴ Auden was aware of Stokes' euphoric celebration of limestone in 14th Century Italian architecture, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to Stokes in 1932: "the poetry in [Stokes's] *The Quattro Cento* is quite devastating. You are one of the three contemporary writers who I can read with genuine admiration."⁵ Taking up Rabaté's footnote, Stonebridge uses Auden's poem to interrogate the way that "for early Stokes limestone tropes both sensual immediacy and the self-identity of the 'Quattro Cento' subject".⁶ "These two theses on limestone [by Stokes and Auden]", Stonebridge continues, "exemplify the transition between an earlier modernist appeal to mythological structures and an attendant drive towards monumentalism, and a post-war suspicion and working through of the potential ideological duplicity of such an aesthetic".⁷ On the strength of Zabus's observation, I extend Stonebridge's "transition" to include a further, postcolonial effort by Braithwaite, to work through coincidences between this aesthetic and the material legacies of slavery and colonization. From these connections between Stokes, Auden, and Braithwaite, this essay synthesizes a limestone poetics in response to their aesthetic practice.

What is a Limestone Poetics?

The synthetic limestone poetics I am proposing incorporates each writer's approach to limestone's effects, identifies the fissures within this manifold (not least those produced by later writers when reflecting on their antecedents) and presents that which is 'grasped' when the writers are read for their limestone effects. For Stokes, the material qualities of limestone played a determining role in the artistic choices made by the sculptors of the Italian quattrocento. So, he connects physical qualities of limestone—its formation through the sedimentation of fossilized marine life, and its responsiveness to human and more-than-human interactions—to certain features of the period, not least an artistic emphasis on representing the life aquatic and an architectural reliance on limestone's interactions with light, water, and weather. Auden, too, recognizes the relation between limestone, light, weathering, and water. But, he counters, those "accustomed to a stone that responds [are] unable to conceive [...] immoderate soils" of more demanding landscapes.⁸ Even as Auden revives Stokes's artistic subject, he observes its inability to expand its awareness beyond the confines of its own landscape. Still, Auden's "inconstant ones" can take limestone for granted because the limestone landscape houses "a secret system of caves and conduits".⁹ In this regard, the poem's treatment of limestone might well explain why it has proved so amenable to different, even contradictory, allegorical readings: its target is, variously, "the body", claims Edward Mendelson, "history", suggests Alan W. France and "cultural memory", according to Rainer Emig.¹⁰ These meanings, like the limestone they describe, dissolve under the pressure of too much analysis. Brathwaite grants the porous limestone of Barbados the potential to produce multiple meanings too: "the stone wrinkled, cracked and gave birth to water".¹¹ However, in an implicit rebuke to Auden, he observes "there are no rivers running in my island".¹² "For how can water flow from rock", he questions, "when the dust blinds the dream of the shocked eye / how can cool silver break from coral limestone / when no wind of rain breaks in upon our prophecies".¹³ The brute realities that face the protagonists of Brathwaite's poem will not be ameliorated by Auden's complex syllogisms, however germane to the limestone that links them. Only a new "nation language", "the underground resources" of *nam*, will offer them "Koumfort".¹⁴ Considered in sequence, the writers present an aesthetics that gradually expands to accommodate questions of historicity. Limestone's shaping power shifts across a spectrum ranging from being a resource that expands aesthetic possibilities to being an impediment to aesthetic or political emancipation. Accordingly, as I move from Stokes to Auden to Brathwaite, attending to limestone's sensory effects demands greater recognition of the histories of slavery and human-engineered ecosystems.

While hermeneutically useful (i. e., it helps us understand the texts' meanings), this historical development creates a problem for a synthetic poetics (i. e., our engagement with shared textual effects). The shifting focus of the poetics, from the substance itself to its historical position, can hardly be divorced from the judgment implicit in any act of synthesis. Such judgment is likely either to dismiss the earlier writers as naïve or to constrain the later writers to their conditions of greater political awareness. The writer may emphasize limestone's formal effects, but only in ignorance of history; beset by history, they are deprived of poetic freedom. To avoid replicating the dichotomy between formalism and historicity, I might adopt one of two potential strategies: either I expand the notion of limestone poetics to engage the indifferent mobilities of what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls a 'petric' or 'lithic' poetics, or I confine my concern to limestone's appearance within the capitalist world-system. In Cohen's words, the former produces an "erratic choreography of entwinement, extension beyond apprehensibility, stinging unconcern, stone love, lethal and companionate embrace".¹⁵ According to Chris Campbell, the latter offers a "poetics of excavation and extraction".¹⁶ These strategies resolve the dichotomy through dialectical syntheses, subordinating either history to form by dismissing the 'small' scale of human history, or, conversely, by emphasizing the historical appearance of limestone as a commodity. They preemptively assume lithic effects, the better to interpret the meaning of stones, whether as 'extensive', 'unconcerned', and 'companionate' subjects or as objects to be 'excavated' and 'extracted'. In this, they forget that limestone, for these poets, proves so evocative because it, perhaps uniquely, can evoke something of the human.

For Auden, limestone creates "the only human landscape".¹⁷ He may well have been thinking of *Stones of Rimini*, where Stokes writes: "Limestone is the 'human' landscape that best shows man in accord with Nature. Limestone is the humanistic rock".¹⁸ This accord between Nature and the human is not necessarily pleasant: one only need cast one's eye across the Barbados of Brathwaite's *Mother Poem* to see that. But they do provide a rapprochement between Cohen's lithic alliance and Campbell's limestone commodities, via limestone's capacity to reflect human pleasure and pain at human scale. To develop an approach more conducive to limestone's poetics, I need to identify a formal preoccupation that plausibly operates in the works of all three writers to explain what is meant by limestone's humanism.

This preoccupation can be found in their shared attentiveness to limestone's aesthetic affordances. Affordances, "the complementarity of the animal and the environment" in James J. Gibson's original definition, describe the "action possibilities" of objects that invite or suggest certain interactions over others.¹⁹ This is no mere theoretical expansion of mineral poetics as an idea. For, if Zabus, Rabaté and Stonebridge are correct in identifying clear lines of influence, then it also reflects the historicity of a particular line of mineral poetics across mid-century global modernism for which Stokes, Auden, and Brathwaite are but three figures. As Rabaté and Stonebridge acknowledge, Stokes's immediate precursor would be the American poet, Ezra Pound, whose interest in Italian limestone must be contextualized within his later support of Italy's Fascist regime. After Brathwaite, a limestone poetics emerges in the epic poem, *Limestone* (2005), by Barbajan poet Anthony Kellman. Within each successive iteration, we can detect as one of its targets the presumptions of its forebears. Stonebridge has already demonstrated how naïve Stokes' early work appears when set alongside the post-war Auden. Complementing Stonebridge's two theses on Stokes and Auden, a third emerges in relation to Brathwaite's *Mother Poem*, whereby Auden's attempt to "work through" the "potential ideological duplicity of the aesthetic" fetches up against the backdrop of slavery's ongoing deformation of everyday life in Barbados. In what follows, I consider the uses Stokes, Auden and Brathwaite make of limestone's affordances, many of which are repeated across all three writers. At the same time, I suggest that these affordances, while undoubtedly connected to some intrinsic aspect of limestone itself, remain largely determined by the vastly different purposes to which the writers put them. In these repetitions and differences, I synthesize a mineral poetics.

The Affordances of Limestone

The primary affordance that Stokes, Auden, and Brathwaite find in limestone is its ability to generate a relation akin to what Cohen variously calls a 'lithic', 'petric', or "inhuman alliance", "through which stone's long temporality enmeshes with human story, an in/organic alliance".²⁰ Such an alliance is not far from Stokes' concept of the Quattro Cento, when stone became "the repository for humanistic fantasies [...] symbolizing southern compulsion to throw life outward, to objectify [and] Renaissance sculptors made stone to bloom".²¹ Stokes's aim in *The Quattro Cento* and *Stones of Rimini* was to produce a theory of art about Italian quattrocento architecture

and sculpture (renamed, in Stokes's work, as *Quattro Cento*) that would explain this "directly and emphatically expressed" connection between "fantasies" and "material".²² As the dust jacket of *The Quattro Cento* advertised, the book isolates "a humanism which is found expressed in art embodying a special attitude to material, particularly to stone". So, when Stokes identifies as "the fount of my arguments, love of stone", we should not be surprised at its resonances with Cohen's own "geophilia".²³

This alliance is, if anything, more intimate in Auden and Brathwaite, who both figure their limestone landscapes as Mother. In his biography of Auden, Edward Mendelson quotes a letter from Auden to Elizabeth Mayer that often frames readings of *Limestone*:

*I hadn't realized till I came how like Italy is to my 'Mutterland', the Pennines. Am in fact starting on a poem, 'In Praise of Limestone', the theme of which is that that rock creates the only human landscape, i. e. when politics, art etc. remain on a modest ungrandiose scale. What awful ideas have been suggested to the human mind by huge plains and gigantic mountains.*²⁴

Although the first half of this passage justifies the poem's Mother-landscape association (i. e., Stonebridge) and the second half, the poem's concern with moderation,²⁵ my own interest is in alliance enabled by his particular concern with "that rock", or limestone, and the idea that it "creates the only human landscape". From Auden's gloss, I take this reference to the human to mean an attitude and a scale immediately accessible to the human ("modest, ungrandiose"). So, even as limestone landscapes are associated with Mother, and so generate alliances modelled on family relations, something in their character also lends itself to communicating something human. In Brathwaite's Preface to *Mother Poem*, we find a comparable maneuver when, following his introduction of porous limestone and his "mother, Barbados", he writes: "the poem is also about slavery (which brought us here) and its effect upon the manscape".²⁶ The neologism, "manscape", implies a landscape modified by human action, or what Auden, more ignorant to the long-term effects of slavery, calls a "human landscape". "That rock", limestone, seems particularly efficacious in communicating these effects, perhaps because it is, as Auden writes in the poem itself, "a stone that responds". Certainly, we can read this back into Stokes when he writes of stone more generally, early in *The Quattro Cento*, since so much of *Stones of Rimini* will ascribe many of these qualities to limestone:

Stone is the greatest instrument of mass-effect, of instant revelation: non-rhythmic, for the flux of life has passed into objective forms.

Stone is solid, extensive and compact, yet reflects the light pre-eminently. The process of living is an externalization, a turning outward into definite form of inner ferment [...] Hence a positive significance to man (as opposed to use) of stone, and of stone-building.²⁷

The “compulsion” for the Renaissance artist “to throw life outwards, to make expression definite on the stone” expresses itself in the positive significance of stone to man, as a substance that is solid, extensive, compact and partial to light.²⁸ After all, it is “the materials” in themselves that are significant in Stokes’s reading of the Quattro Cento: “the materials were the actual objects of inspiration, the stocks for deeper fantasies.”²⁹ Stonebridge rightly argues that Auden mounts a pointed critique of Stokes’s project in “Limestone”. Further, Brathwaite’s response to Auden carries its own barbs. But, before I turn to these historical discrepancies, it is important to observe the same basic principle at work in the three writers: that a human relation can be disclosed by attending to limestone; that the formation of both human and limestone are mutually impactful; and that the relation and its impact can be connected to some of the qualities of the limestone itself, the propensity to be affected by light, water, and weathering referred to above.

Stokes is, perhaps, most committed to the constancy of stone, as someone who finds in the Italian Quattro Cento an exemplary instance of an art where “time is transposed into the forms of space as something instant and revealed”.³⁰ Most critics of Stokes’ early work have focused on this temporal concern with stone. David Carrier, for instance, observes the images the carver creates on the surface of his stone “show the history of that material; the temporal process of the stone is thus exhibited, allowing us to see time translated into space”.³¹ But, alongside these euphoric accounts of “concreted Time”, there is also a humbler concern with “the influence of material upon style”.³² The success of such art, for Stokes, was its appreciation of limestone’s affordances, its affinity with water and its capacity to be carved by both the human and the non-human. If this amenity to alteration does not contradict the variety of effects that stone brings to Cohen’s lithic alliance, it implies a certain instability in Cohen’s tendency to praise stone for triggering “vertigo of inhuman scale, the discomfort of unfamiliar intimacy, and the unnatural desires that keep

intermixing the discrete”.³³ Indeed, it is limestone’s ability to reflect human inconstancies that frustrates any clear association with Cohen’s “vertigo[s]”, “discomfort[s]”, and “unnatural desires”. Limestone proves so compelling for Stokes, Auden and Brathwaite, because it is all too close to the human: counterpointing a pleasing appearance with the concealed pathways and secret pools of psychic disavowal and internal contradiction. However pertinent as an observation of the psyche, this ‘humanism’ risks descending into mere anthropomorphism. This may be why Cohen prefers to associate stone with either alterity or the uncanny in his lithic poetics. But the risks should not dissuade us from trying to understand why limestone offers these writers stability, comfort, and love. For its affordances originate in human engagements with limestone’s material qualities, rather than through the imposition of human qualities on the landscape. As John Hildebidle once argued about Auden’s poem, but which might as easily apply back to Stokes and forwards to Brathwaite, “the mineralogical facts of the [works] are so arrayed as [...] to place limestone not only in the centre of [their] imagery, but of [their] ‘science’ as well”.³⁴ More than a metaphor, limestone provides “a very precise physical instance” of the concerns at the heart of each work.³⁵

Inconstant Limestone

The challenge of limestone presents to a unified theory of stone’s alienating effects is more evident in Auden and Brathwaite. If limestone, for Auden, “form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones, / are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly / Because it dissolves in water”.³⁶ Limestone landscapes threaten dissolution, materially and conceptually. In these opening lines, Auden connects the material dissolution of limestone in water to a conceptual uncertainty, by using the subjunctive mood in his opening clause. Rather than “forms”, which one might expect from a conditional clause, it, subjunctively, “form the one landscape” as a possibility that may be, but by no means is, the case: a contingency that bases itself mostly (“chiefly”), but not entirely, on the capacity to disappear. The result is a grammar whose formality qualifies the poem’s odic ambition—to “praise”—and whose syntax evokes an unrealized possibility that mirrors the poem’s own dissolving argument. In this respect, the first lines anticipate the speaker’s tendency to present the poem’s arguments as already undermined by the assumptions of their associated figures: those of the “flirtatious male”, “the band of rivals”, the poem’s hearer (“my dear”) and even its speaker

(“I, too, am reproached”).³⁷ Like the “springs” that carve their “own ravine[s]”, the poem’s postulates are undercut by its emphasis on false certainty: the male “never doubting, the band “unable / To conceive”,³⁸ the hearer who must be assured and the speaker who must be reproached. Importantly, these conditions are predicated on the material conditions created by limestone, which, unlike “granite”, “clays and gravels”, or “the oceanic whisper”, presents beauty as external, light as public and the meaning of life as “a mad camp”, an idiom which Stephen Spender once identified with Auden’s “serious insistence on unseriousness”.³⁹ Auden’s limestone landscape achieves dissolution by recalling the self-evident beauty of limestone relies on processes that wear it away. It then subjects this aesthetic to a series of assumptions that compromise the conditions under which this beauty is judged. Efforts to extrapolate larger metaphysical claims—“a faultless love / Or the life to come”—give way to immediate sonic and visual stimuli (“the murmur / Of underground streams” and “a limestone landscape”).⁴⁰ Beyond that which is immediately accessible, all, it seems, is subordinated to the poem’s opening subjunctive clause. Auden’s limestone dissolves metaphysical aesthetic judgments, returning them to their sensory percepts. For Brathwaite, limestone is important less for its powers of dissolution than its ability to be carved and, by extension, to register on Barbados’s landscape the deforming effects of the plantation economy. Such carving relies upon the movement of water, despite the island having, as Brathwaite discloses in a footnote, “no distinctive river and very few lakes”.⁴¹ Still, “the ancient watercourses of my island” that open the collection “echo of river, trickle, worn stone”.⁴² In the closing poem, *Driftword*, this line returns, shorn of its parentheses: “echo of river trickle worn stone”.⁴³ The ancient watercourses, the collection suggests, have carved themselves into the stone. But, now, for these “dead streams, carved footsteps” to be remembered, dreamers must “drift plantations away”.⁴⁴ The possibility of such dreaming, however, is countered by rude realities that face the speaker’s father, “man of sugar”, who “has gone out to the world columbus found / to the world raleigh raided / to the plantation ground”.⁴⁵ In this plantation world, where “no wind of rain breaks in upon our prophecies” and where schools teach “blasphemies”, no “carved trails” are possible.⁴⁶ All that are left are “dead river course: dry causes”.⁴⁷ Insofar as the collection offers any hope for redemption, it comes from the attempt to “slowly restore her silent gutters of word-fall”, “re-echo [...] the stream and bubble”, as “the ancient watercourses / [trickle] slowly into the coral / [travel] inwards under the limestone”.⁴⁸

Like Auden's *Praise*, the poem's self-reflexive play on language recalls the material concern with limestone and water, as indicated in puns like "word-fall"/waterfall and "driftword"/driftward. Like *Praise*, the subterranean movements of water in, through, and under limestone hint at fissures in otherwise dominant discourses. But for Brathwaite, language always negotiates with submerged elements. Later, in *History of the Voice* (1984), he would distinguish between "dialect", the "bad English" that comes "from the plantation where people's dignity is distorted through their language and the descriptions which the dialect gave to them", and "Nation language", "the *submerged* area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean".⁴⁹ While Zabus, rightly, criticizes the notion of Nation language for being "reductive and Afrocentric",⁵⁰ especially in light of subsequent work on Creole by Edouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau *inter alia*, Brathwaite's subsequent emphasis on sound recalls the ways that *Mother Poem*, too, uses colloquial speech patterns to communicate a nascent Nation language. We might say that Brathwaite takes Auden's "secret system of caves and conduits" and uses them to show how a subversive postcolonial idiom slowly begins to emerge, running along ancient waterways carved from existing speech patterns.

In Brathwaite's emphasis on carving, we find echoes of Stokes, who ascribes a fantasy of bodily vigor to this activity in *Stones of Rimini*: "Into the solidity of stone, a solidity yet capable of suffused light, the fantasies of bodily vigour, of energy in every form, can be projected, set out and made permanent".⁵¹ Carving is "fine", writes Stokes, when "not the figure, but the stone through the medium of the figure, has come to life".⁵² But Stokes also contrasts carving with modelling: the former helps an object to emerge from its materials, while the latter merges objects together. As Stonebridge demonstrates, Stokes's distinction between carving and modelling carried a gendered component. Stokes writes: "Man in his male aspect, is the cultivator or carver of woman, who in her female aspect, moulds her products as does the earth".⁵³ Stonebridge glosses this as "man is then to carving, as woman is to modelling".⁵⁴ While Brathwaite makes no such distinction, his gender politics are similarly problematic: in *Driftword*, both the potter who works with clay and the sculptor who smashes stone are coded male, while their objects are coded as female. Likewise, Auden, with his references to Mother and "Mutterland", seems to confirm the tired trope of the earth or land as woman and the poet as its male explorer, colonizer, and conqueror. Kate Soper, following Val Plumwood, identifies such moments of "woman-nature equivalence [...] as

legitimation for the domestication of women and their relegation to maternal and nurturing functions”.⁵⁵

The Woman-Nature Equivalence

Feminist critiques of Stokes and Brathwaite have addressed their tendency to essentialize connections between gender and particular forms of making. Stonebridge, as described above, addresses Stokes’s essentialism in opposing a ‘masculine’ practice of carving to ‘feminine’ modelling. Sue Thomas, A. James Arnold, and Zabus have each shown how Brathwaite inscribes ‘a patriarchal ideology’ in *Mother Poem*. For Thomas, this offers “Bajan folk men a vision of ‘explosure’ and ‘implosure’ which will, in restoring them to patriarchal power and prestige, subordinate women and deliver male children and men from the perceived moral authority of women”.⁵⁶ “For Bajan folk women”, on the other hand, “Brathwaite’s patriarchal ideology seems to offer only a sexual political variant of ‘exposure (colonial subordination to the light)’ and ‘imposure (imprint of the rule and ruler...)”.⁵⁷ Arnold, whose argument Zabus follows more closely, relates this replication of patriarchal ideology to Brathwaite’s rewriting of *The Tempest* in the *Ancestors* trilogy (including *Mother Poem*, *Sun Poem* [1982] and *X/Self* [1987]), where Brathwaite returns repeatedly to the relation between Prospero’s slave, Caliban, and his mother, Sycorax. “In the debate over the respective roles of nature and culture”, cautions Arnold, “Caliban is on the side of culture once again, whereas Sycorax finds herself relegated to the familiar role of nature”.⁵⁸ The evidence of sexism is compelling. Rather than dispute it, I use it as the basis for asking, again, what nature *is*, when negotiating the question of limestone. For, without wishing to present an *apologia* for the manifest problem of sexism, I do think that the problematic feminization of nature permits us to address the assumptions about nature that underpin limestone poetics.

According to Kate Soper, nature describes

*those material structures and processes that are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not a humanly created product), and whose forces and causal powers are the necessary conditions of every human practice, and determine the possible forms it can take.*⁵⁹

Soper's insistence on the "necessary conditions" nature sets down for "every human practice" can be read as an alternative, and inverse, version of Gibson's affordance thesis. If objects lend themselves to particular uses, then so too do they condition our practices and the forms these take. And yet, "nature does not, or only very minimally, determine the modes in which we respond to its limits and potentials".⁶⁰ It is precisely our ability to perceive the affordances of certain objects, and not simply the ways their use has been socially or culturally coded, that permits use to expand. Although the restricted gendered imaginaries of *Stones of Rimini* and *Mother Poem* undoubtedly constrains their limestone poetics, these imaginaries are not their all, even if perhaps they should be. While Stonebridge is right to criticize Stokes for his sexist distinction between carving and modelling, this ultimately does not encompass the "stone love" elicited in his passionate descriptions of limestone. Likewise, when Thomas, Arnold and Zabus hold Brathwaite to account for repeating worn social stereotypes, "the emasculated black husband and the matriarchal woman", these stereotypes bear but little resemblance to the processes by which water follows "the ancient watercourses".⁶¹

Despite their blinkered sexism, both Stokes and Brathwaite present an aesthetics that submits to the materials that permit their emergence, and, by extension, to the necessary conditions of nature. For Stokes, the natural weathering of limestone "has inspired many of the comprehensive images on which civilizations have been based". Moreover, "the interaction of limestone and water is always poetic, always appealing to the imagination" because "it was the waters that fed those organisms whose remains formed the nucleus of limestones: it was the waters that carried the calcium carbonate which cemented those remains into rock".⁶² Rather than determining the mode of these engagements, Stokes's limestone presents possibilities that have been, for better or worse, explored through the traditions of sculpture and architecture.

A parallel case may be made for Brathwaite, who, in his 1994 Neustadt Prize lecture, writes of his concern for landscape as "the contexts of ancient & recent personal + historical + catastrophic cultural & environmental disasters w/which i realize now that i relate w/ as in an act of perhaps healing".⁶³ By 1994, however, these contexts have largely left behind "the light of a / limestone cave or cavern", in favor of the water it houses, and, perhaps more importantly, the movements this water makes.⁶⁴ If, in *Mother Poem*, limestone serves to channel the water that carves its way through Barbados's landscape, by now Brathwaite has started to articulate this as a movement of the "Oshun" [Ocean] in a tidalectics, which, mimicking the movement of the waves, he describes

as “coming from one continent / continuum, touching another, and then receding”.⁶⁵ From their shared interest in the interactions between water and limestone, Stokes and Brathwaite move in opposite directions. For Stokes, water explains one of the material features of limestone; whereas for Brathwaite, and largely by implication, the use of limestone gives way to his more complex engagement with water.

It seems hardly coincidental that Nature should play such a shaping force for the writers who present existing gender relations as naturalized. To which we might respond with Soper’s argument about how “relatively under-determining of human culture and choice of life-style” nature actually is: “the real dispute”, for Soper, “is not the existence of biological processes, structures and regularities, but how far these do, or should be allowed to, determine and limit what we can be and experience as subjects”.⁶⁶ Clearly, in their treatment of gender, Stokes and Brathwaite allow “biological processes, structures and regularities” to “determine and limit” the experiences of female-identifying subjects. But they also use the determinations and limits of limestone to articulate a certain impress of the human that resists much of the recent excitations about the inhuman possibilities of mineral poetics.

Mineral Poetics

For Cohen, stone represents alterity. “Stone’s time is not ours”, he writes, a “temporal noncoincidence [that] is profoundly, productively disorienting”.⁶⁷ To simulate this “ontological and temporal reeling”, he explicitly writes *Stone* in a style meant to produce “vertigo” and “dizziness”.⁶⁸ However true this alterity may be of stone in general, limestone, as figured by Stokes, Auden, and Brathwaite, produces no such vertigo. Rather, it reflects human capacity, whether in making art (Stokes), understanding scale (Auden) or modifying environments (Brathwaite). For this same reason, they do not fully accord with Julian Murphet’s more recent examination of mineral poetics as indicative of an early 20th Century poetic rejection of cheap sentimentality in the face of a relentless capitalist expansion. “To labour under capital”, argues Murphet, “is to enter into the kingdom of stone and mineral, to lose organic contours, to become ferrous and porous”.⁶⁹ But, the emphasis on the human in limestone poetics counterpoints his insistence on a mineral poetics that eclipses “all humanistic values”, whose “new value” is “not

connected to the long tradition of the Enlightenment, not tethered to the affect-machineries of empathy or sentiment, and not squandered at the altar of exchange”.⁷⁰

Obviously, the capacities reflected in Stokes, Auden, and Brathwaite are bound up in the history of capitalism, insofar as they have each served to accumulate wealth at the expense of an alienated labor force. Human interactions with limestone do not escape the commodity chain. If this interaction is, as Moishe Postone has it, “a goal-directed social activity that mediates between humans and nature, creating certain products [including concepts] in order to satisfy human needs”, this “labor” cannot be distinguished from the capitalist history in which they are embedded.⁷¹ The Istrian limestone that so transfixed Stokes was bought and paid for by Venice’s mercantile empire; the Pennines, Auden’s “Mutterland”, relied on quarrying Carboniferous limestone as one of its most important economic activities; Barbados’s plantation economy depended upon the island’s amenability to terracing.

Even so, the capacities to make art, understand scale, and modify environments do not strictly conform to either Murphet’s mineral poetics or the poetics of excavation and extraction that interest Campbell. For Murphet and Campbell the dehumanizing forces of capital meet their obdurate match in the stony life of their discontents. But limestone does something different: it mimics the psychic reasons why humans become invested in capitalism, while insisting on those material limits that capitalism, in its relentless drive towards expansion, seeks to overcome. The magic of the commodity, Marx argues, lies in its ability to persuade humans to misapprehend relations between people as social relations between things.⁷² For Auden, though, the relation to the thingly landscape forces a reappraisal of relations between people: the flirtatious youth, the band, even the speaker and its hearer. So, too, for Stokes, whose concern with limestone demands a human eye to appreciate the play of light and water. And, again, in Brathwaite, where limestone landscapes bear witness to the deforming effects of capitalist labor on the father and mother characters. By inverting our relation with things, limestone interrogates our relations with people. But it does so by presenting a natural limit, a capacity to be manipulated to a certain point and no further. It does not achieve this through hyperbolic appeals to the ‘deep’ or eternal time of stones, but through the apparently human interaction with a responsive environment.

For Stokes, Auden, and Brathwaite, limestone poetics emerge from the substance’s ability to capture human concerns, through the ways it, variously, plays on human perception, mimics human inconstancy or registers historical traumas as an imprint. These ‘human’ effects mean that

limestone poetics only imperfectly replicate the obduracy of Murphet's more generalized mineral poetics. They also have other entailments to those prioritized by Cohen in his lithic alliances or by Campbell in his poetics of excavation and extraction. This is not to argue that limestone poetics may not also illustrate the workings of these concerns; just that, like Auden's poem, they will do so equivocally. A limestone poetics reminds us that relations with the lithic are not simply vertiginous encounters with either deep time or capitalist exploitation; they can also creep up on us, in familiar encounters with mineral homes: places whose landscape we have always lived in, but scarcely realized we knew.

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¹ Zabus (2002), 61.

² Brathwaite (1977), unpag.

³ Auden (1948), 540.

⁴ Stonebridge (1998), 120.

⁵ Stonebridge (1998), 120.

⁶ Stonebridge (1998), 124.

⁷ Stonebridge (1998), 124.

⁸ Auden (1948), 541.

⁹ Auden (1948), 540.

¹⁰ Mendelson (2017), 603; France (1991), 141; Emig (2002), 45.

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- ¹¹ Brathwaite (1977), 16.
- ¹² Brathwaite (1977), 31.
- ¹³ Brathwaite (1977), 31.
- ¹⁴ Brathwaite (1977), unpag.
- ¹⁵ Cohen (2015), 34.
- ¹⁶ Campbell (2020), 80.
- ¹⁷ Mendelson (2017), 600.
- ¹⁸ Stokes (1934), 192.
- ¹⁹ Gibson (1979), 127.
- ²⁰ Cohen (2015), 14; 38; 166; 198.
- ²¹ Stokes (1932), 34.
- ²² Stokes (1934), 188.
- ²³ Stokes (1932), 52; Cohen (2015), 19.
- ²⁴ Mendelson (2017), 600; Mao (2008), 244.
- ²⁵ Mao (2008), 244.
- ²⁶ Brathwaite (1977), unpag.
- ²⁷ Stokes (1932), 40.
- ²⁸ Stokes (1932), 40.
- ²⁹ Stokes (1932), 40.
- ³⁰ Stokes (1932), 40.
- ³¹ Carrier (1986), 755.
- ³² Stokes (1934), 198.
- ³³ Cohen (2015), 24.
- ³⁴ Hildebidle (1986), 66.
- ³⁵ Hildebidle (1986), 66.
- ³⁶ Auden (1948), 540.
- ³⁷ Auden (1948), 540-542.
- ³⁸ Auden (1948), 540 f.
- ³⁹ Auden (1948), 541; Spender (1951), 352.
- ⁴⁰ Auden (1948), 542.
- ⁴¹ Brathwaite (1977), 119.

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- ⁴² Brathwaite (1977), 3.
- ⁴³ Brathwaite (1977), 116.
- ⁴⁴ Brathwaite (1977), 3.
- ⁴⁵ Brathwaite (1977), 4.
- ⁴⁶ Brathwaite (1977), 31.
- ⁴⁷ Brathwaite (1977), 31.
- ⁴⁸ Brathwaite (1977), 117.
- ⁴⁹ Brathwaite (1984), 13.
- ⁵⁰ Zabus (2002), 59.
- ⁵¹ Stokes (1934), 231.
- ⁵² Stokes (1934), 230.
- ⁵³ Stokes (1934), 230.
- ⁵⁴ Stonebridge (1998), 115.
- ⁵⁵ Soper (1995), 123.
- ⁵⁶ Thomas (1987), 41.
- ⁵⁷ Thomas (1987), 41.
- ⁵⁸ Arnold (1997), 240.
- ⁵⁹ Soper (1995), 132 f.
- ⁶⁰ Soper (1995), 142.
- ⁶¹ Thomas (1987), 35.
- ⁶² Stokes (1934), 193.
- ⁶³ Brathwaite (1994), 659.
- ⁶⁴ Brathwaite (1994), 659.
- ⁶⁵ Brathwaite (1999), 34.
- ⁶⁶ Soper (1995), 144.
- ⁶⁷ Cohen (2015), 16.
- ⁶⁸ Cohen (2015), 16.
- ⁶⁹ Murphet (2020), 1515.
- ⁷⁰ Murphet (2020), 1515 f.
- ⁷¹ Postone (1994), 4 f.
- ⁷² Marx (1976), 165.