Rocks, Stones, and Grandfathers
David Garneau

rock/stone/grandfather (near Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump, Blackfoot Confederacy territory/Alberta. Photo: David Garneau

My body rests in a boulder. Depending on your worldview, the rock was split by frost or by legend. For geologists, it is a "glacial erratic," one of thousands of quartzite blocks cleaved from the Rocky Mountains,[1] carried by centuries of ice action hundreds of kilometers, then deposited across southern Alberta in what they call the Foothills Erratics Train. The rocks range in size from little more than a hand span across to the Big Rock, near Okotoks, which is bigger than a house. This one, the size of a large shed, rests near the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. A plaque explains that, according to the Blackfoot, upon whose territory it rests, this rock chased Napi, the trickster, who cheated the sentient rock out of a gifted buffalo robe. Before it could crush him, a cloud of bats took mercy and battered it with their heads—which is why the rock split and some bats have flat faces.[2]

Both stories are marvelous; as I am wedged in this margin, my mind oscillates between the narratives. While nested in this rock, rather than considering them as mere stories, I consider both to be equally credible. This boulder and its cousins inspire uncanny feelings. They disrupt the otherwise flat prairie like lost strangers and unletter our minds. Bison, wanting to rub off their winter coats or just relieve an itch, trek to them. For human travelers stones such

as this one were navigation tools. For me, it is a site of ontological reflection. Picture the object. It is an attractive anomaly. You cannot help but touch it, story it, remember it—its presence exceeds inanimacy.

Much of the USA-Canada border is an unnatural division, not marked, for example, by a river or geologic divide. It is mostly performed by human agreement: math, treaty, mapping, and behaviour. “Parallel 45 N” features rocks collected by Marcelo Moscheta as he travelled 150 km of this invisible seam. In the field, the rocks are neutral, mute, ignorant of their geopolitical status. Collected, removed, and arranged in the gallery, they become heterotrophic. No longer fully natural nor cultural, no longer there but not quite here; domesticated nature, they are not quite themselves. The installation uses real portions of the landscape to represent itself. It condenses 150 km of border into just a few paces, transforming these rocks-become-stones into a map of their own territory.

In general usage, a stone is a small rock. But geologists consider a rock to be a mineral aggregate existing in nature. Stones are that same material but altered by people.[3] Stone walls are made from rocks. This distinction is important to anthropologists trying to determine whether the mineral aggregates found in sites of ancient habitation are mere rocks or stone tools. Stones are rocks altered by human hands and intention. We refer to the Stone Age rather than the Rock Age as a way of indicating a tool-making era. For the same reason, rocks pressed into human service become Stonehenge rather than Rockhenge. A rock garden is made of stones trying to pass for nature.

Philosopher Arthur Danto famously tried to explain the difference between works of art and mere real things that look exactly like them. Puzzling over Warhol’s Brillo boxes and Duchamp’s Ready-Mades, he noted that works of art had titles, while mere things did not; art is treated specially, in purpose-built institutions, and mere real things are not accorded such respect.[4] Just as stones can look like rocks, art can also be mere real things—both are transformed by human use and meaning. But there is a third order of mineral aggregate being. According to Indigenous experience, rocks are also grandfathers.[5] They are animate. Not alive in the biological sense but as repositories of experience. Some say they are animated by human desire, by anthropomorphic projection.

Lindsay Lawson's "The Real Smiling Rock" tells the story of a sliced and polished agate that was offered on eBay for a million dollars, and Lawson's subsequent work was inspired by this posting, including her feature-length film "The Smiling Rock," a fictionalized account of a woman who fell in love with the stone. Like the asking price for the geode, this body of work engages us through hyperbole but hooks and troubles us by revealing how irrational (or extra-rational) our desires and sense of value can be. Our materialist minds know that there is no face in the rock, no communication broadcast through its random pattern, no author behind the minerals. And yet something in us wants to believe; it rebels at the idea that there is no magic in the world. Pareidolia is the name psychologists give to the projection of meaning into random forms, for example, seeing pictures in clouds. It is at once thrilling and disturbing to witness yourself caught between belief and awareness that it is a trick of the mind.

Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetok's sculptures are barely carved carvings and nearly natural ready-mades. It is if the artist saw human forms in the rock and simply presented it for our recognition and pleasure. Well, she touched them up a little, not so much to impress us with her skill as to help us along with seeing what she sees. Her work is reminiscent of Michelangelo's claim that the figure was already in the stone and simply needed to be released by the artist. Tutsweetok releases not the figure but our imaginations.

Recognizing that rocks are also grandfathers is not pareidolia. We do not see beings in the form but being formed. From an Indigenous point of view, these are not projections but, rather, receptivity to the object's special being. This is not an Indigenous sense alone. Whether it is called awe, the sublime, the uncanny, beauty, and so on, most everyone experiences it. It is just that materialist ideologies discourage recognition of the numinous. This repression is recent and has not quite taken hold of us entirely. We seek out and respond to unusual natural objects and events *as if* they had a presence and/or were shaped by intentions beyond materialist *n*ature, are informed by *N*ature itself. We do something similar with some works of art; we ascribe a being to these mere things that exceeds their material form. Michael Belmore's "Smoulder," for example, re-enchants the world. It is a fiction posing as a truth. Our literal mind knows those stones are cool, but our imagination recognizes these rock-

become-stones as always grandfathers.[6] The artist helps us to see the animation he knows.

Art is the space, in a secular materialist society, where the metaphysical is entertained, or at least whispered about, without being captured by religion. Spring Hurlbut's "Deuil I: Galen #4" is a photograph of a drawing made from the ashes of the artist's friend's cremated body. It could be an honouring or a provocative taboo breaker. Like Andres Serrano's work, the image plays with photography's peculiar ability to make present an absent thing. This is not the drawing but its pristine facsimile, not the ruined body, only its representation. If we were only materialists, this would not move us at all.

For "A World Undone," Nicholas Mangan took a 4.4 billion-year-old zircon, ground it to dust, then recorded the particles being released into the air at 1/100 speed. This may evoke the ancient skeptics, the atomists, and offer an illustration of their claim that because everything can be reduced to particles there is no metaphysical realm: the universe is made up only of things and their relations. Or, it could evoke the idea popularized by Carl Sagan that we're all made of star dust. Both readings offer a materialist sublime without the need for the mystery of metaphysics. Jason de Haan's aerosol-ed ammonite fossil also echoes the atomist's creed. However, because its destruction is accelerated by a human hand, the work also suggests a sinister science, a dark side of creativity. Kelly Jazvac makes art from a rock she co-discovered and named plastiglomerate. It is an aggregate of sedimentary stone and plastic found near Kamilo, Hawaii. This could be an artifact from a future world-without-people where natural forces (re)claim human cultural artifacts for themselves.

The works of Hurlbut, Mangan, de Haan, and Jazvac may seem strictly materialist, but in each is the desire to animate or reanimate the seeming dead matter of the universe. Hurlbut gives the dust that once was her friend new life as a work of art. Mangan plays God and replicates the Big Bang in miniature. De Haan plays nature to accelerate erosion. And Jazvac finds a reversal of the usual nature-to-culture trajectory that hints at the possibility of an invisible hand of Nature (Gaia). All art attempts to animate mere matter with meaning. Art that exceeds illustration opens a crack for metaphor and meta-

physics to enter. Tight between the halved boulder, I know Napi is a myth and the rock inert, and also know they are not. 

Endnotes

[1] This one probably came from Mount Edith Cavell, near Jasper, AB. http://www.albertawow.com/hikes/head_smashed_in_buffalo_jump/buffalo_jump.htm

[2] http://www.olsn.ca/fnplw/content/2015/The_Legend_of_Napi_and_the_Rock.pdf I asked permission of Adrian Stimson (Siksika/Blackfoot) to share this story. He confirmed permission with community elders.

[3] Whitten, D. G. A., & Brooks, J. R. V. *The Penguin Dictionary of Geology*. London: Penguin, 1987. Print.
"Rock. (1) To the geologist any mass of mineral matter, whether consolidated or not, which forms part of the Earth's crust ... (2) The civil engineer regards rock as something hard, consolidated, and/or load bearing, which, where necessary, has to be removed by blasting. This concept also accords with the popular idea of the meaning of the word."
"Stone. In geology the word 'stone' is admissible only in combinations such as limestone, sandstone, etc., or where it is used as the name for extracted material—building stone, stone road. It should not be used as a synonym for rock or pebble."

[4] Danto, Arthur C. *Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981. Print.

[5] For an account of rocks as grandfathers compared with a scientific account by a sympathetic non-Indigenous geologist, see http://www.wawataynews.ca/archive/all/2014/5/2/talking-earth-first-nation-teachings-and-science_25564

[6] Editor's note: Garneau's argument here is not that Belmore's stones are "grandfather rocks" in the traditional sense, nor that they are sweat lodge stones (Belmore has directly rejected both of these notions), but that they act as both rock and stone, in line with Garneau's grandfather stone ontology.