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Contemporary British Poetry
and the Long 1980s

Fluid poetics in *Venus as a Bear* (2018) by Vahni Capildeo

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RÉSUMÉ. Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo, poète britannique né·e à Trinité-et-Tobago en 1973, développe une œuvre dont la dimension transnationale s'impose avec évidence. La séquence *Measures of Expatriation* (2016), récompensée par le Forward Prize, en constitue un jalon majeur. Dans *Venus as a Bear* (2018), qui se clôt par un "index des lieux" allant de l'Islande à l'Écosse en passant par Trinidad, cette poétique de la traversée se double d'autres formes de franchissements — géographiques, matériels et interspécifiques. Le recueil s'attache tout particulièrement à la porosité des frontières entre espèces, invitant à penser la fluidité comme notion opératoire pour l'analyse des poèmes. Si le terme fonctionne souvent au sens figuré, il engage aussi une attention constante à la matérialité du monde. Les métamorphoses et les barres obliques, quasi omniprésentes dans les textes, se confrontent à la résistance des mots et de la matière, qui ne se laissent pas aisément dissoudre. La fluidité implique par ailleurs une incomplétude du mouvement, en adéquation avec la dynamique poétique de Capildeo. Cet article se propose ainsi d'examiner comment, dans *Venus as a Bear*, une poétique de la fluidité élabore et complexifie une "ontologie humide" visant à intégrer la matière au-delà de l'humain, dans la pluralité de ses états et de ses modes d'existence.

ABSTRACT. Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo, a Trinidad-and-Tobago-born British poet (1973), develops a transnational poetics that is unmistakable: the sequence for which they received the Forward Prize is titled *Measures of Expatriation* (2016). In *Venus as a Bear* (2018), which includes an "index of places" ranging from Iceland to Scotland to Trinidad, this transnational aspect is doubled or blended with other boundary-crossings of all kinds, involving the material, nonhuman world of beings and objects. Because of the book's focus on species boundaries and their porosity, this study identifies fluidity as the most productive concept to address the poems. While fluidity frequently functions figuratively in Capildeo's work and in the reading proposed here, its denotation commands a constant attention to matter. If there are slashes and metamorphoses almost at every line in those poems, there is a resistance on the part of matter and words which should be accounted for. Besides, fluidity implies an incompleteness in movements that works with Capildeo's poetry. This paper therefore attempts to trace how, in *Venus as a Bear*, a poetics of fluidity builds and complicates a wet ontology whose aim is to take into account matter beyond the human in its myriad states and modes of being.

MOTS CLÉS : *ontologie humide, post-humanisme, poésie contemporaine, fluidité, Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo*

KEYWORDS: wet ontology, posthumanism, contemporary poetry, fluidity, Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo

Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo is a Trinidad-born British poet (1973) whose transnational poetics shows in most of their works. The sequence for which they won the Forward Prize is titled *Measures of Expatriations* (2016) and it unceasingly returns to experiences of exile and migration. *Venus as a Bear* (2018a) has an “index of places”, from Iceland to Scotland to Trinidad, specifying that often, “more than one place belongs with the poems.” Gender-wise, Capildeo currently identifies as “agender” and uses the pronoun “they.” Beyond gender, in those two collections, the transcultural/transnational aspect of the poetic objects described is doubled or blended with other boundary-crossings of all kinds, involving the material, nonhuman world of beings and objects. Because of the poems’ greater focus on species boundaries, already present in the title *Venus as a Bear*, I have identified the notion of fluidity as the most operative to address the poems. Capildeo having lived in Britain since 1991, they have witnessed British poetry’s opening in the range of subject-matters and voices which this issue is mapping and has partaken of it in many ways. Having experienced a life of expatriation, they write: “Language is my home. It is alive other than in speech. It is beyond a thing to be carried with me. It is ineluctable, variegated and muscular” (Capildeo 2016). This vision of language as a living body manifests an attention to matter which I think makes Capildeo’s works particularly original within the context of poetry’s deregulation in the long 80s. First, fluidity is one logical result of deregulation: whether we are talking about the fluidity of capital, the population flows in a post-colonial world, or the fluidity of poetic form, they are all consequences of an opening up of borders and frames, for the better and for the worse. It is therefore not surprising that British poetry in the long 80s, as it opened up to new influences and welcomed more diverse voice, also resorted to fluidity as a poetic object *per se*. In that context, Capildeo’s work *Venus as a Bear* focuses on the fluidity of matter and living beings which for them, as suggested in the quotation above, are inextricably linked to language and its own fluidity. However, this fluidity is not unhindered. If there are slashes and metamorphoses almost at every line in those poems, there is a resistance on the part of matter and words which should be accounted for. Besides, fluidity implies an incompleteness in movements that works with Capildeo’s poetry. This paper will therefore attempt to trace how, in *Venus as a Bear*, a poetics of fluidity builds and complicates a wet ontology whose aim is to take into account matter beyond the human in its myriad states and modes of being. It first establishes fluidity as essential to the poetics of Capildeo in *Venus as a Bear*. Then, it connects it with the new materialist trend of contemporary philosophy named “wet ontology.” It then examines instances of problematic fluidity before analyzing poems staging objects as both fluid and separate in an attempt at keeping the benefits of thinking of matter as fluid yet coming to terms with the drawbacks of such an ontology.

Fluidity at the heart of more-than-human matter

In “Salthill for Mr Laughlin”, Capildeo establishes fluids as the essential images of their (non-) poetry:

Thinking unlike a poet,
quit making it new
or dragging netted memories
for the breathless why
this milky blue is also
taffeta, a sheen
of pouring fabric
beyond a purchaser's means.
The sea creeps up on walking,
on the unsinkable sun,
shoes unburying seaweed,
sandworms burrowing down. (62)

Once apparently disengaged from the Poundian diktat of making it new, and from poets' alleged clichés and preciousness, one is left with the blue sky of the Salthill landscape. To best evoke it, fluids are crucial: the blue is "milky," and the taffeta to which the sky is likened is "pouring". The persona is also left walking between a blue sky that is "pouring" and a sea that "creeps up": fluids invade the scene, and the result is a vivid layering of wet feet, seaweeds, and sandworms whose fluid nature may be the most fitting evocation of the Salthill landscape.

The unburying of seaweed coupled with the sandworms "burrowing down" put nonhuman agents to the fore in an aesthetics that promotes fluidity, and indeed Capildeo often equates nonhuman creatures and a form of fluidity which they deny to humans. In "Seed, for Maya" this fluidity is essential:

I. the voice of the seed
II. you said
III. as yet it has no voice
IV. the seed
 perhaps ever
V. a star, a trap, a tropism, a keep,
 a wrinkle, a tide; these voiced weirds; (k)not
 so sweet stone, so liquid seed. (76)

First, the existence of a voice for the seed, a tiny, nonhuman entity, is posited. However, it is immediately reframed as a quotation, "you said", and then denied, "as yet it has no voice / the seed". This metahesitation as to the signifying capability of nonhumans, and as to the possibility of voicing them, is a constant trope in literature since the "biocentric tradition." The term, coined by Margot Norris (2019), describes a trend in artworks that aim to depict the nonhuman world but consistently erase themselves as they progress. This highlights the impossibility of their goal: representing the nonhuman using the human medium of language. The playful aspect of the poem, with alliterations as prime movers and meaning seemingly coming second, is also worth noting but omnipresent in Capildeo's work, the poem dizzily revolving around "seed," "said," and "voice." What makes it particularly interesting is how metatextual elements come to confirm our first readerly reactions

– and how this process leads in more than one way to the essential fluidity of the seed.

First, we hear a voice, but we imagine it is problematic. It may be the voice of a mute and minute nonhuman entity. The following line, “you said”, plays with “the seed” but confirms that the voice we heard was Maya’s voice and not the voice of the seed. Then the voice is denied existence: “as yet it has no voice”, and instead, we are given three pairs of images: “a star, a trap”; “a tropism, a keep”; and “a wrinkle, a tide.” None of those images appear to bond well with the seed, and indeed, they are called “voiced weirds.” They are failed attempts at poeticizing the seed. But why those images in particular? Once again, the last word gives us a key: the tide. A “star” radiates; a “trap” encloses. A “tropism” moves towards an external stimulus, while a “keep” denotes a return to oneself; a “wrinkle” is a fold inward, while a “tide” may be high and imply the widening of a body of water. The “voiced weirds” are weird because they do not hold semantically, but they are also tirelessly working inward and outward along the ebb and flow that is characteristic of the master of all fluids, the ocean. Reading the poem again, we understand that the advances and retreats marking its first four lines also work along that process. The seed, as expected, is “not so sweet,” it does not straightforwardly give itself over to representation or consumption: like the poem, it is a “knot.” And yet, finally, the only attribute on which the poem does not add variations is its fluidity. We are left with a “liquid seed”, the liquid quality being the only thing that can be attributed to the seed with certainty. Metaphorically, of course, this fluidity jumps out at us: the seed is highly material but will not let itself be captured, oozing away from the poem through every possible crack.

“Moss, for Maya” (73), in the same sequence, further enacts this poetics of fluidity by emphasizing how well it fits nonhuman entities. Moss is one of those many nonhuman agents in Capildeo’s works that cross all kinds of boundaries as is made clear in the first paragraph:

I. A child left alone can befriend moss. Its bright green, enticing to the eye as a lemon lolly behind the teeth, makes moss seem to shine in the darkness under lizard-haunted ixora bushes & on the killing patch of concrete that disaffected workmen splashed on earth that had been alive with wet-combed roots, as if extermination were necessary for human habitation, & moss an infiltrator. (73)

Nonhuman moss makes itself easily available to the human species through its bright green, “enticing to the eye as a lemon lolly behind the teeth.” Through this first comparison, it travels from sight to taste and therefore from necessary distance to close contact. Facilitating its perception by humans, it overcomes visual obstacles such as darkness, and the competing red of the ixora bushes, but also physical ones as moss survives and conquers the concrete patch that was meant to eradicate any earthy life where it was laid out. It is then recognized as a fluid kind of boundary-crossing agent when it is characterized as “an infiltrator.”

The bright green is easily perceptible but is not a signal. In the second paragraph, moss is expressed as non-signifying, reminding us of the liquid yet voiceless seed.

Capildeo mocks metaphors through a long *via negativa*: “Moss has no tiny tongues, nor little fingers, nor flames fine as watchmakers’ tools, nor an elfin semaphore system.” Moss cannot be reduced to the differentiated and nimble fingers and tongues that have traditionally been used to distinguish the human and establish the anthropological barrier. As an entity that is fluid and holds fluids, it is not surprising that it does not include “watchmakers’ flames or a “semaphore system”, two ways to master fire and use it to its own ends, which, again, have long been considered constitutive of humanity (Gowlett 2010). Moss is then said to be “not-lickable, not-glossolalia, not-in-the-way-on-the-way”. It does not give off any fluids, so that it can be said to be matter that does not exist for humans. Its independence from humans is radical, as it does not exist *against* humans either. It does not express itself in incomprehensible languages (glossolalia), but in no language at all. It does not stand in the way of humans: it just is “on-the-way”, ready to be taken into account as it is but not to appear as a discrete entity. Finally, Capildeo writes, “Moss is myriad, simply many & one. Moss absorbs.” Again, the only thing we can easily grasp about the moss, as was the case with the seed, is that it is gorged with water. Fluids and fluidity help us navigate the anthropological divide, and makes it possible to say something that holds about the nonhuman.

A Wet Ontology

Throughout the sequence, Capildeo insists on paying attention to matter in and for itself. They keep deploring how remote we tend to be from matter, despite our bodies, trapped as we are in our symbolic order. New materialist ontologies appear relevant to use here because of this insistence on matter as such, and because of Capildeo’s claim that *Venus as Bear* is more about “being” than about “doing” (Capildeo 2018b). New materialism is a contemporary philosophical movement that re-examines the role of matter in the constitution of reality. Unlike classical materialism, which views matter as passive and inert, new materialism emphasizes the agency, dynamism, and vitality of matter. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s edited collection of essays, *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (2010), Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) and Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) are foundational works. Within new materialism’s kaleidoscopic array of works and trends, wet ontology brings a specific focus on the fluid and embodied aspects of materiality, offering a nuanced view of the processes and transformations that characterize living systems. Wet ontology is thus contemporary philosophy’s most adequate trend to address Capildeo’s fluid poetics. In their manifesto for a wet ontology, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters advocate for fluids, and the ocean in particular, to be taken as the state of matter by default, so that theory and policies can begin to consider matter as the “mutable and leaky” entity that new materialism establishes. They take up Gavin Bridge’s commentary of Elden’s theorization of Earth as “embodying a plethora of fluid properties”:

As Bridge notes, the value of matter is achieved not just through recognition of a substance's location in space but through the ways in which it persists, seeps into cracks, and transforms itself, all the whilst insinuating its material properties into the infrastructures and institutions that are established to enable the reproduction of volume as territory. (Steinberg and Peters 9-10)

Matter as fluid can then become a political element for which policies must be held accountable. A “wet ontology” insists on the ocean, and therefore the substrate of matter, as generally resisting “individuation into unitary components” (Steinberg and Peters 6), so that Capildeo's variations on the absence of fingers and tongues in moss take on a new meaning: moss, like the primary ocean against which all matter can be assessed, does not lend itself to dissection. Matter as water, or, in Serres's view, as background noise (Serres 13), is “part of the in-itself, part of the for-itself” (Serres 16), a “thing in the world” (Helmreich 134). “Mutable and leaky” are two terms we can easily apply to Capildeo's moss, a paradigmatically fluid being first defined as “an infiltrator”, and said later in the poem to “change[s] at a rate that puts mammals' eyes to shame.” So fluids help us think with matter, but moss as matter helps us think in terms of a wet ontology.

For example, one way for moss to be “leaky” is to be “one and many”. “Moss is myriad”, Capildeo says. Ontological multiplicity is inherent in water, as Steinberg and Peters stress in their wet ontology, basing this point on Stephanie Lavau's work on sustainable water management in Australia: “from water's stubbornly liquid flow, ontological multiplicity emerges” (18). Lavau means it metaphorically when she speaks of “relational materiality,” but also literally when she says that water has agency in its “unruliness, variability, mobility and fluidity” (Lavau 3). Moss further literalizes this ontology: “Moss is myriad,” Capildeo writes, “simply many and one.” In its leaky way, moss is also metaphorically multiple: there are fourteen kinds of Icelandic moss in the glass case in the third stanza, and it also extends across time: “any given colony of moss could have been there since whichever chosen beginning.” It even leaks over to the “child left alone”, the poem's initial trans-species encounter. Metaphorically, moss's mutability is perfectly oceanic: any account of matter that takes seawater as its testing ground insists on matter as exceeding and complicating human, anthropocentric time as well as being the product of constant mutations and dynamism (Steinberg and Peters 19).

Moss is such a good agent and representative of a wet ontology that it may even stand for the whole Earth as a regulating system. In “Water Gaia”, Stephen Harding and Lynn Margulis form the hypothesis that the earth is a community of living organisms that have been actively retaining water with the result of “moist habitability over geological life” and therefore of life as we know it. “Moss absorbs”, Capildeo tells us: it is the supreme wet agent. Humans, on the other hand, do not fare well in the poem's wet ontology:

V. Don't slip. Grab the balustrade. Don't slip. She's broken her arm. Don't scrape too much off. It's beautiful. Bleach it all off. It's a risk. Coexist. Moss exists. Our stone selves roll on different tracks, unmatchably cracked. We cling. Resist.

Shape to our ends whatever is. Not this. Moss induces words in us because, grave
& new, we sentence things; whereas moss carpets, respire, pulls back, is.
(Capildeo 2018, 23)

While humanity goes against the grain, moss embraces it. Human dryness as expressed in “our stone selves” recurs in the poems: the pet turtle in its tank reflects on humans as “tall and dry onlookers” (“The Pets of Others”), and the birds recasting them as unwanted “dry company” (“Alice Yard”). As Helmreich claims in his analysis of seawater in anthropology, water has long been seen as the other for Western, land-based cultures. It is then traditionally conceived as a good embodiment of slippery nature as opposed to a grounded “culture” (136). The link, in Western culture, between a dry, grounded human, and a slippery, watery nonhuman then emerges. It has its obvious political downsides (“nature” and “water” have long been construed as that which is not human, and does not belong to culture or territory and therefore is subject to all kinds of projections and abuse). However, water also has an advantage: it resists abstraction, cannot be fully theorized and therefore retains a presence and intensity of being which remains intriguing. That is why in early anthropology, water functions as an “other to theory: as description” (Helmreich 134); that is also why, in Capildeo’s works, it embodies so well matter in and for itself, resisting and answering the symbolic order with both agency and panache.

Interestingly, wet, slippery moss also showcases a much more efficient agency than the dry human. In the fifth stanza quoted above, the addressee slips and breaks her arm, the persona has not been able to avoid the accident, and “we” the humans do not manage to shape moss to “our ends” the way we do with many other things and beings. Beyond general agency, authorial agency is granted to moss. Not only is it not “shaped” by humans, but it “induces words in us”: it has moved from a poetic object to an authorial, if indirect, agent. A wet ontology is an operative tool to think the material world, but as “Moss, for Maya” shows, it is much more easily enacted, maintained and protected by nonhuman beings.

When fluidity becomes overpowering

A wet ontology is not apolitical: if water can be everywhere, it is also a drying resource, and agency is not distributed evenly across individuals. As Capildeo notes, we (humans) “shape to our ends whatever is”. For this reason, Steinberg and Peters note that fluidifying the material world should not further abstract it to the point that it is no longer taken into account politically (Steinberg and Peters 17). Besides, essentializing the fluidity of capital on the grounds that it is an emanation of the material does not ultimately serve environmental preservation, and therefore the material world, either.¹ I would agree that in philosophies emphasizing the

¹ As Helmreich notes, “the rise of the ocean in social thought represents the unwelcome return of ‘capital’s myth element’, the site of unimpeded circulation (Connery 1995: 289)” (Helmreich 137)

prevalence of *becoming* over *being* and the ensuing new materialist ontologies, the abstraction of flux tends to come with a certain idealization, while here Capildeo makes it clear that not all fluidity is welcome. In “Novena Body Parts,” a hint at a devastating storm yields the following vision:

after the evil eyes of the storms have seen all they want
of our islands

....
.... each psyche is flood

children – faces covered with cloths
eleven bodies – floating in his house
babies made – babies lost (Capildeo 2018, 55)

The nightmarish vision of water gone too far overboard is all the more convincing as, as often in *Venus as a Bear*, some lines sound like parodies of contemporary verse. While endorsing fluidity in “Moss” and “Seed”, here I believe that Capildeo ridicules the celebration of an all-encompassing fluidity, whether between the material and the immaterial (“each psyche is flood” here meaning selves lost to the water), or the transience of lives on earth: “babies made – babies lost”. The flood has left words that are not fluid either, fragmented with dashes and floating over the blank pages in a random arrangement. Fluidity here is not something we should embrace: it is a catastrophe that cannot be redeemed through poetry.

“The Pets of Others” takes the perspective of another nonhuman, a turtle in its tank, meeting the eyes of human onlookers. While the turtle remains on the side of fluids, many flows are staged outside its realm and most of them are highly suspicious. The flow which gives rise to the most sustained image is the compassion of the human onlookers which “flows pointlessly towards [the turtle]” and is likened to sand-dunes shifting. It is doubled by the likeness of her “red streaks” to those of a “punishable woman”, a reference to Hester Prynne wearing the scarlet letter. Those two flows, initiated by humans, are paradoxically the origin of the turtle’s captivity. Without compassion and anthropomorphic projection, the dry humans would have had no interest in keeping a turtle in a tank opposite the dishwasher. The only projection which the turtle can perform is a physical one, her egg-hatching, but in the absence of a responsive flow of fertilization, she might tend to eat her own eggs in a morbid loop which her “warm-handed keepers” will thankfully avoid. Capildeo compares compassion with

a sable marram dune shifting to make valleys
in which some find rest, from which the sea cannot be glimpsed
or a way out predicted. (21)

The dune shifting is ambiguous: it may provide rest, but it also means captivity. There will be no other flow, no other way out: as in “Novena Body Parts” with the

flood, a flow is as catastrophic as any other dynamics when it is overpowering, all the more so when it comes from humans.

What if seawater, fluidity itself, speaks? I believe it is the case in “The Seething Sea” since Capildeo ends this particularly challenging poem with the following instruction: “for speak read seethe.” The “Seething Sea” can therefore be read as a “speaking sea.” In this poem, the sea is also “lip-curved.” Here is what we are presented with when the sea is voiced:

ceaseth the sea	fluid with dead fish
seething the sea	the mind’s eye disguises
seemeth the sea	our self instrumental
diamond the sea	warmth, tremor and seeing. (103)

The left column moves from ending to speaking to appearing to being a diamond, which we could understand as a new birth and then a myriad manifestation. The sea repeats itself, as the rolling waves relentlessly shape themselves, and their white noise is the *sine qua non* for the poem. All we can do, and this will be the case throughout the poem, is to engage in a “less precise, almost automatic reading if we want to extract any meaning from the text” (Fornells), skimming over the waves and the “rough peaks” working as so many semantic obstacles which Capildeo, in the last lines, acknowledges the poem is not here to “ease”:

a poem does not cease a poem does not
ease rough peaks dear poet for speak read
seethe (*Ibid.*)

As readers sailing the poem as a rough sea, what can we keep while staying somehow afloat? Flashes of meanings. For me (I believe such open poems can only elicit very tentative and personal readings), “warmth, tremor & seeing” may best encapsulate it. Flashes of diamonds, the idea that our human selves are accessory, confirmed later in the poem by the sea addressing us: “ah ah thing that does not exist / ah ah children who have run out”. Our human existence is extremely weak in intensity besides this immense and threatening churning, which has given life to us but which we have mostly abandoned. The churning also gives itself the ability to become phonically playful:

for vortex read vertex, for phosphorescence
read foreigners, for read read repeat
ah ah thing that does not exist
ah ah children who have run out
for stones read bombs rough stones dear bombs (*Ibid.*)

Syllables are interchangeable, provided a nucleus remains, “tex” for “vortex” and “vertex,” “pho/fo” for “phosphorescence” and “foreigners.” Reading (and writing) seems to amount to repeating things the way the waves unceasingly shape and

reshape themselves. When the interchangeability becomes more pregnant, at the level of the letter rather than the syllable (for/rough; read/read), the image becomes monstrous: “dear bombs”. Voicing fluidity, when it is taken to its extreme, is dangerous but intensely worth it. Thus, fluidity, attached to an explicitly nonhuman, alien “seething/speaking sea” releases waves of images and meanings that are both fascinating and threatening, and even though the poem is said “not to cease” in the last verse, it does: perhaps because holding this tension, letting a fluid aesthetics take over the page is not sustainable for very long.

Those images of either catastrophic or highly problematic fluidity in “Novena Body Parts”, “The Pets of Others” and “The Seething Sea” echo the threat that thinking in terms of flows may flatten the power relationships at work across the material world. I think there is, in *Venus as a Bear*, an attention to the political that translates into an apology of separation even as it advocates fluidity. A form of separation in identity is necessary, avoiding the flattening risk inherent in this new materialist approach.

Thinking separation and fluidity together

Fluid but separate is an oxymoron that ties up well with “Through and Through,” a series of poems dedicated to the very material that often precludes fluidity in *Venus as a Bear*: glass. The focus thus moves beyond nonhuman creatures to nonhuman objects. The fourth poem in the series, “Wineglass,” celebrates a glass that perfectly answers the needs of both “the grapes [that] wanted defence” and the fingers that wanted “dimples” on which to rest:

an aerated helmet (honeycomb) dented all over, (moulded) as iif
 grapes wanted defence (section) wherever (triple) a
 a finger might (annular) press (on) as iif
 fingers wanted a whole (over) bunch of dimples (on) a
 where they could, as if naturally, thoughtlessly purple to rest
 [...]
 a grappe of glass the reason the wine
 remains contained; this breakable stuff,
 some barriers to spills, is modelled on bliss
 that's thin-skinned, sweetest when burst... (32)

The wineglass is or has been submitted to multiple types of pressure, among which the pressure of the hands of the glassmakers, and the pressure of the wine it then contains. The glass membrane is worth poetic attention because of its trembling and complex relationship with fluids and fluidity. The grapes, which I take as a metonymy for the wine, have partly shaped the glass, which is said to have emerged from the grapes' need for defence. It also informs it metaphorically as the dented glass becomes a “bunch of dimples,” a parallel to the bunch of grapes, and is renamed as “grappe of glass.” The last line evokes the glass as a grape, “thin-skinned, sweetest when burst.” The fluidity of grape juice or wine is continuous with the

fluidity with which its shape informs the glass, but not only. In spite of the glass, the fingers as well, when holding the glass of wine, become “thoughtlessly purple.” Colour has leaked onto them. The most intense poetic knots in those stanzas derive from this double fluidity: using “bunch” with “dimples” brings out a striking oxymoron, as bunch denotes an excess of matter while “dimples,” echoing “dinted,” denotes a hole in matter. The “thoughtlessly purple” fingers bring together the possibility of fingers being tainted by wine and the thin protection which the glass offers, allowing the fingers to be “thoughtless.” The “grappe of glass” is also all the more interesting as the glass, “thin-skinned, sweetest when burst” is more associated with a grape than with a bunch of them. Finally, allusions to the glass’s previous liquid state, with the words “moulded” and “modelled,” makes it akin to fluids while blocking them. Those poetically powerful tensions and oxymora, served by a wobbly syntax in the first stanza, take a careful stance on fluidity. Identities can mingle, fluidity must be contained so that the wine informs the glass or enters into productive interaction with it, but there is pleasure in imagining the dam breaking and the ensuing spills.

The same dynamics runs in another of the glass poems, “Lattimo,” which refers to a kind of opaque glass, that looks like milk, *latte*. At the end of this poem, Capildeo works on a glasswork technique called *incalmo*, which consists in joining together two separately blown glass bubbles while they are still hot:

Contemplate, for a moment
(l’attimo) how just as when
incalmo joins bubbles blown
separately – two, while hot,
made one – each listed item
here desires liquid, lips; (33)

Here, the fluidity of incandescent glass is celebrated and makes the merging between the two bubbles possible, but they remain apart, two colours on one same bottle. The persona shows surprise at the simultaneous yearning for liquid reunions, the two glass bubbles joining through *incalmo* and other pieces of glassware yearning for “liquids” and “lips,” implying that there is something to lose in such contact. Fluidity is also metaphorical: solid glass becomes animate matter, yearning for wine and lips. At the same time, however, it is not merging that the poems are after, but a kind of fluid togetherness that keeps each body separate, each colour in the *incalmo*, each glass membrane, in its place, just like in “Leaves/ Feuilles/ Falls”, where the mottled colour of the leaf is reconfigured as a scene where a glass gently falls on the grass:

so ice water spills on
dew but does not mingle
to make colours (42)

This idea of togetherness without assimilation may have postcolonial implications for Capildeo, but I am trying to keep as close to matter as possible and therefore will extrapolate only in the direction of wet ontologies. As Steinberg and Peters stress, a fluid is not immaterial, it cannot and should not be abstracted. With ocean waters, for example, there is “a persistent, underlying churning, a dynamic pattern of repetition and re-formation that provides stability and texture in an environment of underlying instability” (Steinberg and Peters 3). This materiality of the sea made of stability amidst instability is precisely what “Seastairway” conveys:

seaskin ~ early-white-haired
 furious ~ sea-martyrdom ~ worth
 seawork ~ surrounding ~ searopes
 beside ~ emerald ~ seadeep ~ sea-show
 sea-marching ~ to ~ sealaw ~ into
 seaside's ~ seabent ~ seawalls (67)

The repetition of the noun “sea” in the numerous compounds, whether newly-coined or not, evokes the persistence of a sea whose waves never stop rising. The wave-like hyphens remind us that our environment, matter, the page, being, is fluid; and the chopped syntax can only put to the fore the strength and vibrancy of a sea that cannot be covered or reshaped by well-ordered sentences. Besides, assemblages of things, which constitute the locus of agency in new materialism, are not random either and do not let matter evaporate: “within an assemblage, materiality persists and is re-formed amidst constant processes of ‘arranging’, ‘gathering’, ‘mixture’ and ‘turbulence’” (Steinberg and Peters 17). Flows are important, but in the wet aesthetics at work, they should not obliterate matter, but assist us in better understanding it.

The series “Inishbofin,” including four poems, three of which are dedicated to writers present at the 2015 Inish Festival, reflects this meandering attitude towards fluidity. The first poem starts with the following line: “a stranger bringing water to a stranger”. There is sameness in identities or lack of them, and water bringing the two strangers together. In the water-shaped landscape of Inishbofin, a small island off the Western coast of Ireland, identities leak onto each other and qualities are contagious. Thus, a passage from the first poem goes as follows:

One unlocked house among all unlocked houses.
 A line of stone along a line of clover.
 Beyond a road with stone and clover edges (63)

This interchangeability pervades the vibrant lines of the nonhuman landscape, while even the “unlocked” houses and the seemingly endless clover-lined road pertain to an aesthetics of fluidity. Water, however, is treated with increasing complexity as the first poem progresses:

A looked-for line between sky and water

Seams non-existence: large and swift, headed out,
 Disappeared in a tilting and pouring.
 How have I been so stupid and not known this?
 Heaven most probably is underwater,
 Sounding with ease, increasing pressure on us. (*Ibid.*)

Is this absence of borders, embodied by the “looked-for line between sky and water” to be wished? One could think at first that this image, erected against the line of stone and the line of clover, is the complex, intense one around which this first poem revolves and celebrates fluidity. And yet, the line is only here to “seam non-existence,” a vertiginous void which drives the poem towards darker shores. The old trope of the sea as a cemetery, hinted at with the line, disappearing, like so many boats before it “in a tilting and pouring,” is strengthened by the ambiguous statement that “Heaven most probably is underwater”. The relative straightforwardness of the exclamation “How have I been so stupid and not known this,” breaking with the lyrical vein, makes it all the more ominous. Finally, the mention of an underwater Heaven does not provide any solace as it comes across as a noisy and stifling place. One thus gets two versions of an ideal place in relation to water: first, a water-shaped heaven *on earth* with the description of a safe, small, comfortable island where the writer meets her friends, and where fluidity, as water informing the place and as identities mingle, is welcome; then, a heaven underwater that looks and sounds more like an ominous underworld. Seawater, as well as the metaphorical fluidity with which it is associated, may not save us.

This is in line with “Inishbofin: II” which reads:

You do just have to listen to the boatman.
 Let the boatman make the decision. (64)

There is both threat and irony in this two-line poem, and the assertion on the one hand that one has to let go (another expression of fluidity) and let the expert in fluidity take charge, and on the other hand that seawater when not understood can be dangerous.

The third poem dramatizes fluidity as both beautiful and intimately catastrophic. In the first half, the landscape of Inishbofin is described again but in much more fixed terms. The road is obvious, it goes “two ways: right and left.” One cannot mistake the harbour for the hill, the shop from the slope, and “boundary stones” are here to make sure every object remains in its place. This obviousness is doubled with a permanence in space: the road is “sure as last year and yesterday.” In this landscape reshaped as utterly non-fluid,

Nothing is interchangeable:
 shop, slope, feelproof bone called sand,
 variant seaweed, boundary stones. (65)

The nonhuman objects, in spite of their stability, are somehow abstracted. Just as Capildeo asserts their identity, they lose matter. While the road was an unassuming but graphic “line of stone alone a line of clover” in the first poem, it becomes a way from the right to the left. The sand is now only a name for a “feelproof bone,” and the seaweed is seen in its species categorization as “variant”. Fluidity allowed things to fully reveal their materiality, but the grounded version of them paradoxically abstracts them.

Why such a turn in tide? The aged man who comes into the scene may account for a more sanguine rebuttal of fluidity. Kind and tormented, “a voice of great sweetness and trust”, he elicits immediate empathy. With him, fluidity in identities returns: “Like a child / old age is not, and he is not —” It seems that those ages, or states of consciousness, are interchangeable. It is a private catastrophe: “I very easily get lost.” Fluidity can therefore reign, and it makes for great beauty and emotion, as this scene shows, yet it is to the cost of utter vulnerability. Hence its refusal, and the speaker’s insistence on grounding things and people. There is a need for survival, for the assertion of one’s unique existence. This is how I take the two allusions to a boat in this poem: “dark-sailed and unmistakable” and “Red-hulled and unmistakable.” They echo the elusive line “between wet sky and water” that “seams non-existence” in the first poem. Here, our existence is reasserted, and has a solid shape, since the poem expresses the need for overcoming the fluidity of consciousness that pervades early years and old age. Staying put at sea is rephrased as “this exercise that hurts the heart,” but it is not yet time to embrace seawater, fluidity, and opening to vulnerability.

Finally, “Inishbofin: IV” manages to bring together exceptional intensity and a compromise on the level of fluidity that is acceptable on the island:

sea for a bit
lovingly lifting off
this felted skin
this roof needing resurfaced (66)

The most poetic moment of the series then happens when fluidity opens up a thin membrane but only punctually, while an affection for vulnerable boundaries, such as “this skin” and “this roof,” lingers.

In *Venus as a Bear*, fluids and nonhuman entities each contribute to the understanding of the other. Matter works along a wet ontology: it is thought of as a flow rather than a solid, and representations of nonhuman poetic objects best testify to that process. However, the poem’s wet ontology does not celebrate flux in itself to the point of abstraction: a retained, bounded materiality within fluids allows the reader to consider power relationships in a world whose ontology is not flat, and to address them. Some flows are twisted, some are deadly. The ones that are celebrated are flows and fluids coexisting, touching, without fully merging. Steinberg and Peters say that “the sea makes vibrant matter more vibrant.” Fluids in Capildeo’s poems certainly also do so, the vibrancy of matter and the poems originating precisely from that oxymoronic holding together of fluid yet discontinuous objects.

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