

Liquid Agency

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If I close my eyes I can hear the faint blue
traces of blood over-gathered by oil
and the sound of ice near the seafloor.

There will be a time when nothing living moves,
a degradation of stillness beyond any liquid scar.
Still, the solutions of despair are weak
if you believe you can touch an undersea reef,
the belly of a small wounded whale.
You have the power to feel it.
The breath of the animal
moving like trust into your arms.

Extract from Joanna Klink, *Terrabone Bay* (2015)

SARS-CoV-2—better known as coronavirus—moves through liquid droplets that migrate from the lower respiratory tract of one individual's body to another via actions such as kissing or coughing (Wilson et al., 2020). Social distancing and mask-wearing are means to control the liquid agency of droplet transmission (Tufekci et al., 2020). The different coronavirus vaccines will be administered in solutions injected into

bloodstreams at a planetary scale: a connected body of people, of bodies and antibodies, a commoning immunity, such are the inversions of individual and community, insides and outsides that the pandemic compels (Mol & Ashraf, 2020).¹ How the virus will respond to and learn from the immune pressure (see Deem and Hejazi, 2010 for this notion) of our bodies and our vaccines is an open question for our laboratory earth.

Naturally, the liquid systems involved in the transmission of the virus are co-constituted with other systems—from the air in our lungs and the atmosphere, to deforestation and the trade in wild animals (Tollefson, 2020). Akin to how words on screen, rendered in liquid crystal, are generated and transmitted through a multitude of material modes and relations, from the extraction of quartz for glass, to the translation of fonts to photons to thoughts—all acting through infinite forms and frequencies, latencies, and energies. Accordingly, this short essay does not intend to suggest that agency is undividedly liquid, rather, it seeks to put the terms *liquid* and *agency* into conversation with each other and correspondingly, with this special issue's themes of pedagogy and wildness. I use the notion of *liquid agency* as a textual device, not a theory, to ask: what agency does liquid have in the world, and vice versa, how is agency liquid in character?

I originally used the term liquid agency as a kind of key at the beginning of my PhD research to excavate the agency of liquid in the shaping of the city of Liverpool in the United Kingdom. I explored relations between its port status and alcohol consumption, sewage systems and marine ecology. Liquid agency was a reductive, but nonetheless enchanted response to my first encounters with new materialist scholarship, particularly its foregrounding of the entangled agencies of matter (Bolt, 2007; Coole & Frost, 2010), and specific concepts such as intra-action (Barad, 2007) and transcorporeality (Alaimo, 2010), ceding that there is no such thing as a blank canvas for agency, human or otherwise, and the implication that one must carefully consider the warp and weft of the canvas, of the world, how it simultaneously shapes and becomes shaped. Liquid agency's crudeness as a term, like a polemical point, is driven less by

¹ A tweet by @caithuls is of note in terms of the profound liquid agency of, and aversion for, the hypodermic needle used to inject the vaccine into the body: "Release the vaccine in vape form and I promise no one will ask what is in it." Tellingly, this tweet was liked over 800,000 times. See caithuls, 2020.

the point itself, than the response it catalyses. Consequently, as a conceptual key or opener it unlocked further avenues of enquiry (such is the immanent process of life/research!), akin to the anarchic, evasive flow of liquids beyond their containers, beyond control. My research led me to a more focused—if nonetheless transient study—of another container of sorts, namely, the Liverpool Observatory, founded in 1845 to conduct chronometer rating to support marine navigation, which translated into a co-curated exhibition, artist commissions, and an artist book.² Liquid agency as a subject and method undid and reformulated itself throughout the project, shifting phases, evaporating, condensing; unpredictably elsewhere, in dances of agency (see Pickering, 2010). I was also drawn to liquid as way to think of those substances that are other-, less-, or more-than water, for example, oil or milk (see for example Jackson & Leslie, 2018; Negrastani, 2008), blood or mucous, to augment with what Laura Winiel has described as an “oceanic turn” (Alaimo, 2019, p. 429) in the Humanities, and to advocate the distinct and transient states in which matter and liquid exist, as a focus of attention. In this latter regard, notable work includes Ben Woodward’s (2012) writing on slime, the edited volume *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art* (Blackmore & Gomez, 2020) which maps the mobilisation of fluids and bodies of water in visual art practices and allied genealogies of liquids and fluidities, work on viscosity by Nancy Tuana, who describes the viscous integrations of human embodiment and environment, and Arun Saldanha’s literal reading of the viscosities of human collectivity (Wagner, 2018). I must also mention the quasi-literary liquid sociology of Zygmunt Bauman who, following Ferdinand Tönnies’ concept of fluid reality, compellingly rejected the prefix ‘post-’ in favour of liquid to describe how “society cannot stand still and keep its shape for long” (Davis, 2013, p. 2).

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To be liquid and/or wild is a dance and a state of nature, always liable to becoming variously tamed, transformed, reified, or polluted. Equally, human agency and pedagogy act to produce effects, but are quixotic and entangled, catalysing both difference and stasis, de- and re-centralisations of power. Wildness and liquidity,

² *The New Observatory*, FACT, Liverpool (2017), a group exhibition co-curated, with Hannah Redler-Hawes (<https://samskinner.net/the-new-observatory>), and artist book *Obs* (2019), (<https://www.brokendimanche.eu/artist-books#/obs>).

pedagogy and agency, operate in opaque milieus of embroiled relations and flux. But within this scene, the key touchstones and vicissitudes of climate change, technology, and social justice engender and demand a posthuman orientation and accountability, enkindling a new material-semiotic reality to emerge and to bear witness: the liquid agency of the earth is performing a kind of wild pedagogy. The world is teaching us about the world, about how untameable it is, about the free-flowing liquidity of its agency, and what happens when its wildness is disrupted, when we presume too much of human agency, too little of the earth's, too little of matter. Chaotic weather caused by emissions, or the pandemic's syndemic correlation of infection rates with social inequality (Bambra et al., 2020), for example, each possess a pedagogical agency that operates synergistically as 1:1 scale phenomena and representation, both material and semiotic. As Claire Colebrook (2017, n. p.) writes: "Nature, now, offers its own narrative and frames the human species, placing it within the scale and register of earth system science." Like morphing Matryoshka dolls, we are containers within containers for liquid agencies and wild pedagogies to evade and inhabit. This is not to suggest that, for instance, hurricanes are pedagogical events or lessons doled out by Gaia, but rather that any event is a material-semiotic and generative node (Haraway, 1991; Law, 2019), in which agency and pedagogy are nested and enfolded within one another.

Today, the posthuman subject is evermore decentred, dissolved and reanimated in a sea of material agencies linked to climatic phenomena and autonomous technospheric assemblages. How human sense augments, subverts, and learns to co-evolve with these liquid agencies is a task for a wild pedagogy that "offers access to other forms of knowledge... a larger world of vegetation and animals, rocks and landscapes, water, and creatures seen and unseen" (Halberstam, 2020, p. 10). As Jennifer Gabrys (2016, p. 7) writes: "networked environmental sensors make it possible to listen in on a planet that has always been 'talking to us' but which we can now only begin to hear." Of course, listening to the earth has been a practice of Indigenous cultures for millennia, but new instruments and devices undoubtedly enable novel forms of observation, pedagogy, and agency. Moreover, humanity's ability to educate and act in response to climate phenomena and data is one of the fundamental issues for agency and pedagogy of our time. But the new pervasive tools

of techno-scientific observation, of what could be called the *observe-atory condition*, have a normative dimension, convenient to the techno-solutionist spirit of our age.

The wild pedagogy of Jack Halberstam and others, which catalyses this special issue, asks us to consider what do such systems of knowledge and legibility preclude as well as include, and how do anarchist, queer, and decolonial modes of being that live beyond the fence (see Gulemetova, 2017), teach and affirm more liquid agencies. Notions of wildness and liquidity are particularly resonant with how apparatuses are always a construction to some degree, limited in what they may describe and generate, but excelling in classification and reification, what Nancy Cartwright calls nomological machines (1983). Such machines may enable the measurement of phenomena and the ascribing of laws, but the degree to which these laws hold beyond the machine or container *in the wild*, out at sea, is unknown and unverifiable (Cartwright, 1989), only empirically adequate (see Van Fraassen, 1980). Further still, as Ian Hacking (1983) suggests, it is less the case that we have learnt to understand the wild workings of the world, rather instruments and the world have been made-to-measure, and the world is evermore tamed, customised, and made consistent with instruments and observation. Accordingly, we need wild pedagogies that embrace liquid agency, excess, and the unknown, and catalyse modes of being and the production of knowledge with, and beyond, the propositional and inscriptive, whilst still enabling accountability.

Agency's relationship to accountability is a feature of dialogue within Rick Dolphijn's and Iris van der Tuin's *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (2012): within which, Rosi Braidotti describes agency, in relation to subjectivity, as a "process ontology of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability" (Braidotti in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 31). Whilst Karen Barad in the same volume states that agency is about "the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices" (Barad in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, pp. 54-55). Elsewhere, in Felicity Colman's entry on agency in the online *New Materialism Almanac*, agency is articulated as:

something that refers to the relationality of the political cultural position that and by which matter and things are defined, distributed, and organised – by their relationality to other matter and things; and which do not have a pre-existing ontology. (2018, n. p.)

Collectively, the above-mentioned descriptions evidence how an understanding of agency's non-linear and nonhuman emergent relationalities does not preclude a situated applied practice that is rooted in ethical commitments and accountability, rather, it compels it. It is interesting to note how often this is misapprehended, strawmanned even. For example, in the aforementioned article, Colman (2018, n. p.) calls Peter Wolfendale to account, for sardonically suggesting that: "The OOO/ANT/NM axis [thus] solves the pressing political problem of cultivating collective agency by dissolving it." This binary image of dissolution is apparently intended as a criticism, to suggest a phase change of agency from solid to liquid, that liquidates agency into a system of *laissez-faire* relationality, in which everything is everything. But to dissolve something into liquid does not herald a reduction in agency. Bonds may become weaker than those of a solid, but they also become more flexible—a Guattarian molecular revolution no less. Furthermore, there are spectrums of solubility, concentrations alter, substances become diffused, sedimented or immiscible. And in turn substances within liquid solutions are not simply forever interred, they can change state again and again, become a solid or a gas, and in turn, cool, condense, and fall back to earth, picking up particles and minerals in the air, raining upon the parades of purity, linear causality, and consequentialism, weathering the colonial solids of platonic and capitalist extraction, before evaporating, and melting into air again. Equally, as Stacey Alaimo delightfully affirms, why not "dwell in the dissolve," within which "the very substances of the world cross through her, provoking an onto-epistemology that reckons, in its most quintessential moments, with self as the very stuff of the emergent material world" (2016, p. 8).

Moreover, as Astrida Neimanis (2016, p. 4) elucidates in her important and stirring work on water and hydrofeminism, "bodies of water" are "specifically gestational." It is water's ability to catalyse emergence and support life, for life to be dissolved and live within, whilst simultaneously remain fluid and uncontainable, which defines it. In

this regard, the words of Kate Bornstein are poignant when she states that gender fluidity:

is quite different from ambiguity... [it] is the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change. Gender fluidity recognizes no borders or rules of gender. (1994, p. 52-53).

Perhaps this freedom to gestate and change, to catalyse difference, is what we might hope for from a wild pedagogy imbued with liquid agency, where more-than-human forces echo the evocation in *King Lear* of: "I'll teach you differences" (Shakespeare, 2012, p. 20), or as Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton write in reference to their translation of Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* (2008) employing fluid figurations of agency: "solidarity and dissensus... requires that a plurality of disparate groups come together in a kind of unified disunity, a pragmatic solidarity without solidity; what one might call, for want of a better word, 'fluidarity'" (Pindar & Sutton in Guattari, 2008, p. 15). How to learn to learn, with/in the wild, as a connected body of difference, is something to embrace and affirm indeed. As Montesquieu wrote: "We receive three educations, one from our parents, one from our schoolmasters, and one from the world. The third contradicts all that the first two teach us" (as cited in Noble, 1995, p. 82). Perhaps a wild pedagogy can have a liquid agency that seeks less to contradict, but instead build relations between these three alternate ecologies of *mater* (mother), *alma mater*, and matter. Multiplied further in the three ecologies of Guattari: human subjectivity, social relations, and the environment/nature. Supporting the possibility of transdisciplinary pedagogical modes to flow and pool, like water's ability to dissolve oxygen and other carbon-based molecules, with liquid agency, to create an unending environment for life, for wildness, to thrive.

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