

## “rainy climes and emerald fish” / “like downloads”

... reading Maria Sledmere’s *Virga* (Earthbound Poetry Series 1.4, 2020), Wanda Coleman’s ‘Cool Cats Snap Spats’ from *Ostinato Vamps* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2003) and the Meghadūta of Kālidāsa

Poetry and precipitation have long circulated around each other adiabatically: Langston Hughes’s “little sleep song” in ‘April Rain Song’ (1932), Apollinaire’s ‘il pleut’ (1914), June Jordan’s “rain / falls cool and blessed on the holy flesh” and the simmering anger, palpable distress of Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab’s ‘Rain Song’:

And a ferocious elation embracing the sky  
An ecstasy of a child scared by the moon  
As if arches of mist were drinking the clouds  
Drop by drop dissolved in the rain (1960)

Most of these rain-poets owe something maybe to the great Sanskrit poem *Meghadūta* by Kālidāsa of c. 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The *Meghadūta* (often translated as “Cloud Messenger”) is an extended sequence of lyric love poems in which a love-sick yaksa tries to communicate to his lover through rain clouds. In the poem, rain, separation, desire, laziness, ingenuity, despondency, delay, anticipation, messaging, woundedness, gratification, refreshment, pleasure, promise, futility, fertility, pointlessness, boredom, oppression, abandonment are all bound up in what gets described as “wetted braids” and “tremulous throbs”. It’s a poem of rain as affect, vibrating between fullness and emptiness:

Where thick rose-apples make the current slow,  
Refresh thyself from thine exhausted state  
With ichor-pungent drops that fragrant flow;  
Thou shalt not then to every wind vibrate  
Empty means ever light, and full means added weight.

Maria Sledmere’s pamphlet *Virga* extends this sense of affect-rain by tuning into “rain that doesn’t reach”, affect-message not transmitted or not received, the sort of rain that separates, that dissipates / evaporates before it reaches the ground. Rain in *Virga* is rain that glitches, that misses a beat. Rain that doesn’t get you wet. Language, too, often evaporates before it reaches the ground.

In ‘Venice Effect’ (a term saturated and seeping with connotations from the commodification of contemporary art to a mandolin technique, a type of tremolo known as bisbigliando), Sledmere writes of “a grammar of possible bliss”, echoing, tempering Kālidāsa’s “soothed by expected bliss”. Rain as linguistic, formal, as well as semantic. The form of the *Meghadūta* is a sequence of linked lyric poems that somewhat cohere or condense into a narrative but one that meanders and throbs

(much of the poem is taken up with describing the cloud's journey and the message, postponing, delaying, distorting any sense of narrative pay-off). Sledmere's lyrics perform a similar function, saturating, concentrating meaning into what feel like mini-downpours but slipping out of and deferring that expected gratification in their love-sick-language-sick inflations and deflations:

some human being has burst all the stars inside you  
and the residue of light is a pool, we go there; i wait  
and touch firs, resolve into water.

That "touch firs" feels like it evaporated before its "t" got added. These poems are ambient, the language pools. The penultimate poem in this achingly short pamphlet winds up in this gorgeous droplet: "a succulent promise of stop", the sudden awareness that it's not raining anymore.

Desire is always political. These deferrals are wrought into the politics of the *Meghadūta* too. The reason the Yaksa is pining so for his love is that he is separated from her having been exiled to a monastery for being deemed not to be working hard enough, i.e. for circumventing or subverting expected cycles of productivity. Rain and inactivity are inextricably linked: rain interrupts activity (by its presence and also by its absence). The Yaksa's withholding of labour is a refusal to conform with the demands of capital.

Sledmere's ear is of course attuned to this aspect of rain too in *Virga's* psychic mist: "upscale reality", "the necessity of being here", "vitamins are choice economy"; "Almost / mindless hour". Rain as language as ache. "A Complete Pain", as one poem in this sequence is called... all I can think of when I read that phrase is myself or someone else trite-moaning "that's a complete pain" where the missing surface the rain of that phrase doesn't reach is "in the ass"...

Then again:

Who is to say  
what is meant by  
"touching"

Poetry that doesn't touch. Rain that doesn't reach. Cycles of work and productivity that don't get completed.

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Wanda Coleman's poem 'Cool Cats Snap Spats' from the collection *Ostinato Vamps* likewise figures the pain of rain. With a poet so attuned to sound – in a poem whose

title is pitter-practically onomatopoeic, it's hard not to think of that little glitch between rain and pain as an interference in the transmission:

the reflection of futuristic walls, pressing against  
geometric lines  
widening the window on hell

like torrential pain

The spatiality of rain – its disruption of verticality (an acute rain slant is all that's missing to turn a P into an R) – is part of its connotative gathering. In those geometric "l" s of "walls" and "hell", Coleman's poem signals rain's affectual force. Coleman's poem situates itself in Sylmar, the northernmost neighbourhood of Los Angeles, a place that gets its name from the Latin for 'Sea of Trees' (it's home to vast olive-growing ground) but it's hard not to twist that (trees of sea) into a kenning for rain. It is also a place that has been beset by disasters: deadly earthquakes and wildfires, and which has a history as a place where movies were made too – home to the ranch of early film director D.W. Griffith.

Coleman's poem figures the "torrential pain" as racism, toxic social inequality and the deep-rooted evils of slavery – as well as how these are reconstructed in culture:

starched collars wilt under the solid  
rain of nostalgia punctuated by soft brown eyes  
jacked but brilliant but powerful but banished  
to Sylmar while over the hill  
Hollywood stunts under murky sunshine  
where The Blue and The Gray still fight an uncivil war

That word "banished" is also resonant of the Yaksa's exile in the *Meghadūta*. Here though, the alienation-effect is bound up with Hollywood, with nostalgia and legacy – rain as something that connects and communicates, here speaks potently and loudly of the evils of discrimination, slavery and the continuing violence of "a legacy of purple brown and ebony / the bitten bare feet of the young and fearful". In a poem for Emmett Hill the 14 year old boy murdered in Mississippi in 1955 whose death became emblematic of the persecution of African Americans in the United States, featured in *African Sleeping Sickness: Stories and Poems*, Wanda Coleman also used rain as something that connects to the earth and to what it might tell us of our political realities, using the double meaning of 'pane' to suggest both pain and an opportunity to see: "rainfall panes the bottom acreage – rain / black earth blacker still". Rain seems to stand for a kind of knowledge, the deeply painful knowledge of past and present brutality.

In 'What does a black poem look like?', published in 2011, Coleman forcefully considered how poets might respond to the ongoing repercussions of exactly these wounds in the "interval of the Now":

Only those with the power, position and money to design that future (on hugely political, scientific and economic scales) can predict it, because they control and influence the change in and the passage of the four governmental levels of laws and regulations that dictate the future for those living and for those yet to be born. They are in control of the criminal justice system. They are affecting who and who does not become a criminal of the most beastly kind. They are affecting who and who does not become a leader in one's society. In the interval of Now, the poet and writer affects what will come in terms of the emotional, social and aesthetic values/landscapes of the culture.

And...

That a significant portion of the work of Langston Hughes, or Mark Twain, remains relevant; or, that Ai's complaint, repeated by Kwame Dawes, still evokes argument and dismay, speaks volumes about what little progress has been made on those emotional, social and aesthetic fronts when it comes to discussions on race relations. Electing a Black president has not uprooted or effectively mitigated the racism that continues to dominate American discourse even when couched or unspoken. Celebrating MLK Day or Black History month ain't bloody gettin' it. Neither did the Bush Administration apology for slavery without attaching one effing cent in reparations to the parchment.

Rain as cyclic, the endlessness of rain, rain that causes "mental corrugations" through the recriminations of the past in the present. Rain as oppression as well as the promise of liberation and its desire (elsewhere Coleman describes rain as "englassed in longing" and "what's this at her mouth raining to get out"); rain as substantive. The poem cautions against the feeling of release that rain (or gaps in rain) can bring: the final line of 'Cool Cats Snap Spats' is "remember: escape is seasonal".