

SPILL (SASA)

Liquid Emotion and Transcultural Art

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Introduction

In this essay I would like to reflect on the conceptual notion of 'liquidity' both as an imaginative metaphor and its relationship with the practice of painting emotional relationships with national landscapes. The concept of 'liquidity' for this project is essential to engender approaches to art that engage with fluidity in relation to landscape, emotion and art. In my own research, the site of the Lake District is a site where 'nation', 'Englishness' and national *sensibility* are consolidated, these modes of thinking rely on the medium of liquidity; the site of mere, lake and waterway operate as catalysts for the transposing of grand narrations of country and citizenship in ways that are differently resonant at other material sites of heritage. The environmental textures of this site have garnered the emotional responses of William Wordsworth and others, which in combination, constitute a national sensibility set in a Romantic era, wherein a particular notion of 'whose landscape' and 'which citizens' are part of *Englishness*. Re-thinking 'what difference liquidity makes' is critical to this essay. 'Liquidity' as a landscape concept, as a medium for art praxis and emotion in art in particular, becomes a space of solidification of ideas of a mobile, *transcultural*, and non-occidental approach to art and landscape, including the visual representation of the cultures of national identity. I argue that it is precisely because of the transgressive nature and possibilities enabled with a notion of 'liquidity' that we can consider transcultural art that includes communities usually occluded or 'othered' in art appreciation and praxis. Using examples from my own research and modern art from the Republic of Congo, I show how a transcultural approach disturbs notions of fixity in terms of their cultural value being located within the frame of ethnocentrism often iterated in geography, philosophy and European art history. Here, the landscape itself is shown to be in motion, liquid, along with the populations that traverse it and their sensory engagements with it. Nature and Culture are thus dynamic and in constant flux and not reflected in the singular discourses of 'national cultures' of landscape and citizenry.

Liquid Modernity and Emotional Politics

In social theorist Zygmunt Bauman's¹ terms 'modernity' has now become liquid; instead of the sureties of old social structures (such as governance, economy and nations), society is liquid. Mobility, political activity, economies and ecological thinking are fluid, expansive and international in nature. If the role of art is to provoke record and reflect, then *liquidity* conceptually captures the cultural mode of modernity and can materially engage with the liquidity of our emotional sensibilities and being. However, contrary to *liquid modernity* the politics of nation states are still often located in understandings of *nation* being rooted in soil, blood and genealogies of 'rightful, moral citizens' based on linearity. For post-colonial nations such as Britain and Australia, stasis in national culture is a mythology; both nations have transcultural populations based on genetic mixing, yet both retain notions of a moral 'national citizen'² that can be described as being in denial of a transcultural citizenry. In this essay I consider the value of recording emotional citizenry with landscape and ecologies from a transcultural perspective, promoting the medium of painting as primary transcultural art praxis. I argue that, as a means of thinking *transculturally*, the practice of using the medium of painting makes it possible to record emotional relationships with ecologies, land, time and history that reflect plural citizenries. In my own research *Nurturing Ecologies*, the medium of paint is one that can incorporate the conceptualisation of emotion and 'modernity' as liquid in a transcultural nation that is Britain. Britain comprises landscape cultures evolved through Imperial networks of exchange of peoples, natures and cultures over centuries. The Lake District itself is evidence of these exchanges as it houses non-native species, place-names and peoples, which contribute to the aesthetic of English landscape that is recognisable *as* English. Historically, emotion becomes the sensory relationship with land and territory that consolidates relationships with ecological, geological and time structures; history and heritage are reflections of what is emotionally valued in nation. Securing a landscape art that reflects emotional connections with nation and liquid citizenry as it is lived now is what is needed in consolidating a truly modern art that reflects national citizenry from the perspective of those not included in formal accounts of Englishness.

In my own research, and in thinking about national, especially in these times of 'terror' and 'fear', post 9/11, emotion is critical in the geopolitical landscape. Emotions are manipulated in neo-Imperialist campaigns against 'terror' and for 'fear' as a vehicle for nationalisms and fundamentalisms on all political sides. The emotional economy is the driving force behind new legislation, the international denudation of human rights, and the drive to support military action in the Middle East and within homeland security. As geographer, Nigel Thrift³ has argued, emotions are built into our everyday experiences in our landscapes of living; affective drivers of capital are evident in advertising campaigns, political lobbying and our day to day encounters with architecture, infrastructure and leisure. Emotion is a culpable factor in our decisions towards engagements with political action, negligence or quiet submission from material politics. What neo-conservative politicians have grasped is that emotion is material and has tangible consequences. This mode of articulation is made relevant in the cultural spaces of the public sphere; modern propaganda, news items, political rhetoric and popular discourse, are embedded with visual images that invoke fear, terror, hate and love. Visual cultural representations hence are embedded in the political sphere and are strategic vehicles for geopolitical gestures in contemporary society. To advance a *politics of happiness* (in Sarah Ahmed's⁴ terms) that incorporates a national culture which is inclusive, requires us to look to the vehicles of cultural narration that delimit the possibilities of a *multi-cultural* happiness in a transcultural global world.

Transcultural Art Praxis

Visual cultures' own relationship with emotion is a pertinent place from which to consider political notions of *political citizenship* and in particular the notion of *transcultural* identities. I use the term *transcultural* here as a means to consider 'art', 'emotion' and 'identity' within an intellectual frame that incorporates notions of 'cultures of mobility', and 'national cultures' that are formed through international exchange of values, cultures and natures. This formulation represents an antithesis to the ethnocentrism retained within the academy and a 'universalism' reflected in general philosophical thought.⁵ My focus here is to posit a framework of thinking which promotes and values a praxis and appreciation of art which is transcultural.

This practice would be one which embraces emotion, identity and liquidity in relations with political citizenry. 'Liquidity' in relations with landscape, emotion, and the medium of art praxis are considered here, combined, and not collapsed into one another, to exemplify the possibilities of transcultural art which can make tangible transcultural emotional relationships with ecology, citizenship and landscape. This is not a claim that there are no universal emotions at all.⁶ Simply, in the philosopher Lorraine Code's⁷ terms, an approach that encompasses 'ecological thinking' in respect of our ethical and social approaches to the 'other'. She argues that we need to be responsible in developing our theories of knowledge that are 'organic' rather than ethnocentric, and hold to responsible epistemologies. My argument here is that in the case of research on art and emotion we need to be open to the relationship between culture, emotion and art, and thus use responsible taxonomies of art, culture and emotions themselves. This means that when we look onto 'African' art and 'European' art that we should be able to hold the same gaze, and engage with the structures of art of the 'other' without an inherited ethnocentric lens. This is where the concept of 'liquidity' is helpful – liquidity in our approach to philosophies of art, culture and epistemology extends the parameters of classification, but retains an imperative to explore and think transculturally and emotionally.

Challenging Hegelian taxonomies in art

A transcultural art practice is of critical political significance, given the history of art history. In Hegelian accounts⁸ on art, aesthetics, for him means 'more precisely, the science of sensation, of feeling'. This a reflection of the fact that, in much of art history, emotion and art are sometimes collapsed within the artist's medium of choice, or that the definition of art is reduced to whether or not it makes you 'feel'. I am not here going to journey through the meaning and nature of art. I am arguing that art, emotion and the politics of 'what is it to be human' and 'what kind of human are we' are intertwined. However, in earlier writings, the definition of human that is not artful has also been cast as an antithesis to a European model.

'... the Idea as reality, shaped in accordance with the Concept of the Idea, is the *Ideal*... In this regard it may be remarked in advance, what can only be proved

later, namely that the defectiveness of a work of art is not always to be regarded as due, as may be supposed, to the artist's lack of skill; on the contrary, defectiveness of *form* results from defectiveness of *content*. So, for example, the Chinese, Indians, and Egyptians, in their artistic shapes, images of gods, and idols, never get beyond a formless or a bad and untrue definitiveness of form. They could not master true beauty because their mythological ideas, the content and thought of their works of art, were still indeterminate, or determined badly, and so did not consist of content which is absolute in itself. Works of art are all the more excellent in expressing true beauty, the deeper is the inner truth of their content and thought'.⁹

In this vein, we need to incorporate transcultural vocabularies, grammars and ways of seeing, being and becoming in the contemporary landscape. This would enable a set of taxonomies that were transcultural, and 'ecological' in nature, which acknowledged the situation from which culture has evolved. It is also important to see 'culture' as being about humans and their relationship with place, in a dynamic model. Cultures are mobile and are influenced by networks of values and experiences. Englishness and English sensibility are not evolved in isolation, in situ, through a set of folk that reside as 'folk'. One example of how we can engage with liquidity and mobility of culture and landscape is through thinking art as emotion in place. This is not a two-dimensional notion of a concept of people in landscape that lead to a tangible form on canvas, but a conceptualisation of 'liquidity' of landscape, emotions and cultures of folk being in-process. The first step towards this is to consider an artist who is celebrated by the art establishment as making art that is about emotion in place and time.

Howard Hodgkin: making emotion liquid

The painter Howard Hodgkin is regarded as one of the most important artists working in Britain today. Hodgkin is important both technically and conceptually. Each of his canvases represents emotional experiences, memorialised on the painting plane. Emotion is made liquid and then re-evoked through Hodgkin's particular visual vocabularies and grammars. Visually the images at first seem naive,

but Hodgkin attempts to attain a depth of emotion, constructed through sweeps of colour and a layering process which is haunting, enlivening and moving. The liquidity of the paint and emotion are synthesised sometimes on wood, sometimes canvas, evoking a grand scale and a melancholy mood. My interest here is the notion of translating the ephemeral, intangible, fluidity of emotional experience on to a tangible painting plane of a canvas. The medium of liquidity is I think helpful in this process of transposition and translation. The concept of 'liquidity' is valuable philosophically, aesthetically, materially and politically. Here, the medium of liquidity is 'open' to scale, form and cultural values, the liquidity of paint allows for a transcultural interpretation and representations – not limited by palate or form.

Painting the Transcultural English Landscape

The artist Graham Lowe and I had a mutual interest in heritage, landscape and everyday values of the material English landscape. We also believed that there was a need to investigate other 'visions' and examine an alternative perspective to those found commonly in the UK. We aimed to record landscape experiences not normally visualised on canvas. This is beyond a notion of the sovereign negotiator of landscape in a 'performative *milieu*,¹⁰ experiencing landscape as *phenomenon*; and instead of landscape images reflecting the usual figure of a *universalised* body of a citizen free of fear of racial and/or sexual attack, fear of the lack of 'rightful encounter' with a landscape, free of the constraints of childcare, and economic constraints to roam. We engaged with migrant communities, the poorer and elderly of Cumbria and Lancashire. In our research project *Nurturing Ecologies*¹¹ there was a political intention to record multiple cultures of engagement of individuals and groups who are fearful, frail and feel endangered by the concept of even just walking the lakeside pathways of Windermere. Revisiting the sensory values embedded in the landscape incorporated a desire to record emotional, multisensory values beyond written text – and to engage with those not necessarily accessing this landscape through a visual or literary tradition of English Romanticism with complete sovereignty. The design aimed to enable a creative process, empowering those who didn't write; a re-visioning of the emotional values of the Lakes and a re-imaging of this landscape's sensory registers, through firstly the representational art of

participants in the form of their drawings and collages. These represent sensory values, materially encountered, as they evoke memories of biographical landscapes not normally seen. In essence, the paintings produced by the artist have captured an alternative emotional citizenry to those sensory registers canonised within this cultural landscape. For me this site is one which exemplifies the 'liquidity' of Englishness itself. It has evoked emotions in its historic canonisation from Blake, to Constable, Turner and Wordsworth. There is something about the nature of the lakes and the scale of water and rock juxtaposed which forces encounters with emotional narratives. The mobility, and transcultural nature of the lakes is intrinsic to its form. In Doreen Massey's terms a reorientation is needed in our vision of this site, as one that:

'stimulated by the conceptualization of the rocks as on the move leads even more clearly to an understanding of both place and landscape as events, as happenings, as moments that will be again dispersed... Rather, and once again bearing in mind the movement of the rocks, both space and landscape could be imagined as provisionally intertwined simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished, stories... Indeed, maybe the very notion of 'landscape' has ... evoked a surface which renders that intertwining – knowable and fully representable. Rather it is that a landscape, these hills, are the (temporary) product of a meeting up of trajectories out of which mobile uncertainty a future is – has to be – negotiated'.¹²

Graham Lowe's paintings attempt to record a contemporary *Englishness* that engages with migrant communities living in the vicinity of the Lake District landscape. The aim was to record a *transcultural* lens which includes all forms of emotional attachments to this iconic landscape. This is a way of thinking which incorporates the possibilities for a new visual grammar, vocabularies and emotional landscapes for our contemporary notions of 'home', belonging, being, habitus, modernity, and mobile cosmopolitan, liquid citizenry. In one image, Lowe attempts to incorporate the group's notion of landscape being formed over centuries, in geological time, where migrants from Africa, Rome, China, Europe and America have

traversed this landscape and left their marks on it.¹³ The English Lakes have formed through an environmental history that involves the imperial gateways to 'other' peoples and their natures. This landscape is 'in process', and made up of a palette of international cultures.

In another image, Graham Lowe reflects upon the Lakes as being one that inspires 'play' and 'joy' for all who visit, rather than the 'fear' and 'awe' that reverberates in accounts from British migrant communities.¹⁴ William Wordsworth himself in his *Guide to the Lakes* states that he has not just written the guide for 'the inhabitants of the district *merely*, but, as hath been intimated, for the sake of everyone, however humble his condition, who coming hither shall bring with him an eye to perceive, and a heart to feel and worthily enjoy'. Wordsworth welcomes the world to his Lakes, and wishes all to keep in their regard 'the good or happiness of others'. Embodied, affective experience and cultural enfranchisement to the Lake District landscape, is a right that continues to be struggled over,¹⁵ not simply in terms of access, but in terms of which cultures 'of being' are allowed to formulate our cultures of national landscape sensibility. Graham Lowe's paintings re-figure the landscape as being a place to play for all, without the constraints of a narrow *Englishness* which operates counter to an England that is modern and *liquid*.

Conclusion - Liquid Modernity; post-colonial, transcultural modern landscapes of emotion

I want to end with a final example of an alternative way of thinking modernity through a concept of liquidity, where painting praxis challenges *irresponsible* taxonomies still prevalent in the art academy. I recently went to *Tate Modern* to see a display of paintings by a group of internationally recognised, contemporary artists living and working in Kinshasa, DR of Congo, known as the 'School of Popular Painting'.¹⁶ These artists focus on their experience of everyday life and culture, resulting in a political satire about the geopolitical scene in the territory of Kinshasa.

‘Largely self-taught, the artists developed their distinctive style by painting signs and billboards, an influence reflected in the vibrant colours of their mural-sized canvases’.¹⁷

All the Kinshasa artists regard painting as a political medium enabling change. Some works portray political or social conflicts, others use satire and humour. Emotion and art come together as a post-colonial critique of neo-liberal economics and ‘democracy’ in Congo, to the assertion of consumer economies that negate human needs in cities such as Kinshasa. In Graham Lowe’s account the Lake District became a space for all. In this final example the argument made is that art should become a transnational discipline; there is a lack of ‘liquidity’ in conceptualizing art negating the true nature of modernity as being truly liquid, transcultural and emotive. This is an image by Cheik Ledy.¹⁸ Here, he depicts himself in a moment of confusion within a modern art gallery, failing to understand abstract paintings rendered in styles resembling the works of famous European artists, such as Picasso. The irony reverberates. For many African artists the roots of Picasso’s modernity are in the ‘primitive’ textures and aesthetics of African art. The lack of ‘relevance’, cognition, empathy or a sense of dialogue, locks artists into different worlds. The nature of their own painting is displayed in the Tate as naïve, unscholarly, yet valuable; different to the reception of Picasso’s grammar. Picasso’s conveying a sense of false naivety is considered as intellectual, while Cheik Ledy’s is considered vernacular, and almost un-intellectual: the Tate claims that ‘the artist chooses instead to ground his practice in more legible imagery and straightforward cultural politics’. The stance of Cheik Ledy as an artist is represented as looking onto modernity, not part of it. His embodied cultural capital is designated as outside modern art, yet he embodies the nature of modernity – transcultural, mobile and at the heart of ‘fear’, ‘terror’ and wars over resources.

In Massey’s terms, landscape is in motion, in a geological time frame. However landscape is dynamically shaping present cultures of citizenship and national identity. We must remember that stasis in (art) culture, landscape or nature itself is a mythology. These are liquid, modern times, always mobile, always transcultural, and

cosmopolitan. Plurality is woven through the painted images discussed here. A need to embrace liquidity in art theory, praxis, landscape, culture and emotion can stand as a testament for future cultural worlds. A transcultural approach to art and landscape can reflect responsible taxonomies of art and citizenship which are truly ecological.

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, 2007, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

² David Matless, 1998, *Landscape and Englishness*, Reaktion Press, London.

³ Nigel Thrift, 2004, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect', *Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography* 86 (1):57-78; Thrift, 2005, 'But malice aforethought: cities and the natural history of hatred', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS30:133-150.

⁴ Sarah Ahmed, 2007 (forthcoming), 'Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness', *New Formations*.

⁵ D. P. Tolia-Kelly, 2006, 'Affect - an ethnocentric encounter?: exploring the "universalist" imperative of emotional/ affectual geographies', *Commentary, Area* 38(2):213-7.

⁶ See Mette Hjort and Sue Laver, 1997, *Emotion and the Arts*, Oxford University Press pp3-34.

⁷ See Lorraine Code, 2006, *Ecological Thinking*, Oxford University Press.

⁸ See G.W. F. Hegel, 1975, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, (translation by T.M.Knox), Oxford University Press Oxford, 1-3; 2-25; 69-90.

⁹ G.W. F. Hegel, 1975, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*.

¹⁰ See John Wylie, 2005, 'A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30:234-247.

¹¹ Lancastrian artist Graham Lowe produced a set of 40 images in summer 2004, from a joint research project with Dr. Tolia-Kelly entitled *Nurturing Ecologies*, designed to investigate the multicultural values of the English Lake District to residents of Lancashire. The exhibition *Nurturing Ecologies/ Maps of the Known World* has been held: December 2007 (forthcoming), Durham Light Infantry Museum and Gallery; March 2006, Theatre by the Lake, Keswick; June 2005, Towneley Hall Gallery, Burnley; January 2005, Duke's Theatre Gallery, Lancaster.

¹² Doreen Massey, 2006, 'Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains', *Journal of Material Culture* 11: 33-48.

¹³ G Lowe, 2004, *Changing Landscape*, acrylic on canvas.

¹⁴ G Lowe, 2004, *A Place to Play*, acrylic on canvas.

¹⁵ Wendy Joy Darby, 2000, *Landscape and Identity: Geographies of Nation and Class in England*, Berg, Oxford.

¹⁶ Chéri Samba is recognised as the instigator of the 'School of Popular Painting' in Kinshasa.

¹⁷ Tate promotional literature, 2006.

¹⁸ Cheik Ledy, 1995, *I do not understand*, acrylic on canvas, Collection of the Tate Gallery.