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Damp Bodies: Fluid Ground

Kirsten Cooke

Compass

Damp Bodies: Fluid Ground takes the three most common types of damp found in properties as its cardinal directions and organises the text in accordance with them: *Rising Damp*, *Condensation Damp*, and *Penetrating Damp*. We are invited to stay with the trouble of this wet terrain, as opposed to falling back into using coordinates that make humans think that we can control the planet (North, South, East, and West). We are not aiming to be Promethean meaning-makers (readers and writers) that set our desires and planetary score by our closeness to the sun (Heavens), and existing technologies (such as the fire Prometheus steals from the Gods), but instead find ourselves in Avril Corroon's watery composition, which, similarly to the planet, we cannot transcend.

In *The Second Body* (2021), Daisy Hildyard provides the reader with the concept of a virtual second body that is attached to our first body, our lived fleshy experience.¹ This enables us to picture the porosity between ourselves, as embodied actors, and the wider systems in which we circulate (infrastructures that extend into the biosphere and a wide range of ecosystems). It closes the distance between our bodies and their effects in planetary webs and networks. In this context, damp acts as a charting instrument through which to engage with Corroon's project, the city infrastructures, and the inhabitants that the lively materiality traverses,² both viscerally, through our bodies, and speculatively, through theoretical responses to contemporary issues. Damp, deployed as a compass, enables us to flow with the materials and discourses that Corroon's project renders tangible: the context of the Capitalocene through the housing crisis,³ the toxic bodies it produces, as well as the anthropocentric thinking that constructs these lived relations to matter. These systems place damp outside of our buildings and bodies, an entity to be controlled from without, rather than coursing through us, already within. Corroon's *Got Damp* project works-with damp as opposed to working over the top of it, which would obscure the material's operations and wider implications. Charting its fluid coordinates in correlation with the methodology of Corroon's project, we will write, read, and view-with damp's movements through cities, buildings, and bodies.

Rising Damp

On surveying the watery landscape opposite TACO! (Thamesmead), I recall an iconic scene in Stanley Kubrick's 'A Clockwork Orange' (1972) in which the lead protagonist, Alex Delarge, and his fellow gang members, the 'droogs' roguishly torment a similar lake's banks, referring to it as the 'Flatblock Marina'. Through a quick scroll on my mobile, I learn that Southmere Lake was artificially constructed in the 1960s and did play host to the film scene. Kubrick's film is set in a dystopian society in which inequality and violence, both by citizens and the state, is rife. On first entering *Got Damp* at TACO!, this wider context resonates with Corroon's work and the soft violence that it is staging. A violence that we find in our current housing crisis, which is caused by the increasing privatisation of property and the hostile conditions constructed for tenants.⁴

¹ Daisy Hildyard (2021), *The Second Body*, London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, p. 13.

² 'Lively materiality' interprets damp as alive and active.

³ 'Capitalocene' is a term which highlights the ways in which our current epoch is being shaped by the systems of capital, which is terraforming our planet through mining and climate change. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*, London: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 99.

⁴ 'Soft violence' is a term developed from Pierre Bourdieu's 'Symbolic Violence', which is an invisible or indirect violence that is produced through social hierarchies and inequalities. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, 'Foundations of a theory of symbolic violence' in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage ([1970] 1977).

On rounding the corner from the café into the gallery space at TACO!, I immediately back up, as I am confronted by a barricade of jerrycans. Each tank acts as a vessel for varying amounts of water, presumably consisting of the collected damp taken from the project's participants in London. Beyond these, I peer through an abstract formation of distorted transparent sheets at a map-like, colourful image that beckons me into the looming skeletal frame which is occupying most of the space.

Crossing the threshold into the translucent structure, which I note to be the size and shape of a small flat or a bedroom in a house share, I pass what looks like steam pumping out between two plates of Perspex. Vapour is escaping where other particles are collecting on the cold transparent panes, and these absconders brush against my skin spreading goose pimples up my hands. I am aware of damp rising, entering my body, and rendering it porous, a somatic reminder of my own aquatic alliances with wet environments. Humidification and condensation render the exhibition's air thick and heavy. Damp droplets cling to the already dense air in my lungs.

Nicotine-like stains snake up the sides of the walls in Corroon's video work that features the thermal imagery which, through the glitching caused by the damp-slicked Perspex, originally lured me into the architecture. A target, eerily familiar to the simulated telescopic gunsight in video games, hovers over the participants in the project and scopes out their surroundings. This menacing gauge transfers the temperature levels into colour coded patination, areas of damp being registered in cold blues and blacks. We encounter the red and orange talking heads of those living with damp, but also survey the wider damage through sweeps of the lens. When not in the thermal mode, the camera takes in the white powdery forms that flower on the walls, blossoming from the salt deposits brought up by the rising damp. Rising damp ascends through the building materials from the wet earth below, climbing wall cavities as the ground area heats up. A conveyor belt for salt, the damp distributes crystals on the surfaces of buildings and populates the vacuums in architectural walls.

I am viewing and occupying damp simultaneously, laced into the threads of a potentially toxic environment. Stacy Alaimo, in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (2010), reminds us that there is a trans-corporeality across bodies and landscapes; nature and culture exist on a continuum. We are toxic bodies; toxins in transit are enveloped into the folds of our flesh.⁵ In observing oceans, we can see that aquatic life flows through water and water through life. Humans often assume that this is not the case for land breathing mammals, but we are also integrated with the air, water, and food chains that stream through us. We are vacillating vessels through which the environment ebbs and flows, constructing what Alaimo describes as a spectrum of 'material memoirs'.⁶ In this sense, we are co-authors with the planetary actors that run through us and co-construct entities that can flower and bloom in our bodies. We do not inhabit the Platonic or modernist ideal of a sealed body but are always already something else; co-conspirators in building material memoirs, in which the planet and our bodies keep the score.

Condensation Damp

Condensation damp occurs in environments that have excess moisture in the air and poor ventilation, which is signalled through mould growth, streaming windows, and mildew on soft furnishings. Participants in *Got Damp* are recorded stating in the video that they are scared to use their kitchens or showers, as they know that this will exacerbate mould growth. Many observe increasing health issues, which range from mould irritating allergies to serious emergencies. Book ending the testimonials is an animation, which visualises the stealth-like progress of damp; a thick vein that chokes buildings from the inside out, winding its way across a fictional interior. This

⁵ Stacy Alaimo (2010), *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 67.

⁶ Ibid, p. 95.

portrayal could also be interpreted as concomitant with the progress of black mould, which travels on the back of condensation damp.

In *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019), Sara Ahmed situates the soft violence of institutional structures through the metaphor of a 'well-trodden path'.⁷ A well-trodden path is designed for a templated body, a prototype that does not fit all and excludes many, which encourages us to use it for supposed practical and economic ease. To deviate from these well-used paths is to enter a tokenistic complaints system with an institution that is not built for you. You become a *problem*, similarly to the participants in *Got Damp* who testify to their ongoing contact with landlords and agencies, only for their enquiries to be buried in bureaucracy or dumped back at their feet, as a problem caused by the tenant.

Ahmed encourages us to queer this narrative of use by deviating from the well-used path and constructing our own 'uses of use'.⁸ For use inevitably uses us by defining our operations, similarly to the systems of capital (landlords/agencies and legal grey areas) that restrict tenants from being able to enjoy cooking a meal, taking a bath, or relaxing at home. To determine our own uses of use, we must queer the existing paths. Corroon's project could be seen as putting the houses occupied by damp, their tenants, and even damp itself to a different use. In this context, *Got Damp* questions the uses of use, but in this complex situation we as participants and/or viewers are also put to an alternative use, to provide a set of starting points to queer these damp paths.

Hints of potential paths have been traced through *Got Damp's* gift economy, in which Corroon purchased and distributed dehumidifiers to participants who volunteered to contribute to the project after a poster campaign. Circulated ephemera was designed by Corroon, based on a 1971 damp poster protest in the Thamesmead area. Corroon distributed these invites to contribute to the project across estates, as well as circulating them via online platforms. Through these acts Corroon forges a commitment to collaboration and works with a range of participants to extract and collect damp from houses across London and Dublin. The inevitably behind-the-scenes logistics of the project are made visible in the material decisions of *Got Damp's* physical staging, indicated in: the metal framing of the space and grey gutter pipes that mimic domestic interiors and exteriors; the sculptural installation of the jerrycans; the 220L conical tank figuratively positioned on a stand, and the blue barrels that were used to store damp in the Projects Art Centre, Dublin.

In the Projects Art Centre, visitors were also offered the opportunity to contribute damp from their own homes. There was a deposit point at the entrance to the gallery; clamped to the first-floor banister was a funnel, into which the public could pour their collected damp, and connected to this was a transparent hose that traversed the edges of the staircase down to the ground floor and into the space that holds the exhibition (both provisionally and then actually). This dispensing of damp was rendered palpable in the installation, through its descent across the space (much like the sprawling damp in the animation), and its amplification in the hollow drop to the collection tank below. Visitors could register the volume of water amassed both individually and collectively, through the audio patter across the venue and the depth of splash to the holding tank. *Got Damp* viscerally engages the viewer in traversing its terrains and contexts, via architectural structures, personal testimony, and guerrilla organisational tactics. These aesthetic decisions also implicate visitors in the exhibition's wider social, political, and economic flows of damp.

Penetrating Damp

We've been penetrated by damp; it's moving from the walls of the exhibition into the fleshy frame of our bodies, travelling down capillaries and circulating in our interiors. Relentless lashings from the

⁷ Sara Ahmed (2019), *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use*, London: Duke University Press, p. 152.

⁸ Ibid, p. 199.

exterior conditions have entered through skin and orifices, which like bricks are porous. We soak up the damp and are saturated; wet and crumbling we take a hesitant look at the prevailing conditions.

A wet atmosphere, fully penetrated by damp, resonates with the research project *Fluid Ground*, which postulates that environments and bodies are always already leaking and cross-contaminating, as well as forging positive allegiances.⁹ Its title comes from Astrida Neimanis' reworking of Luce Irigaray's initial theory of fluid ground in her hydro-feminist publication, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017). In *Bodies of Water*, Neimanis foregrounds Irigaray's theory that water is a matrixial material and the source of all life. Through this, Irigaray links women (via gestation, and the wetness of the womb) to the potential of reproduction and becoming in water, providing females with the ability to virally infect the boundaries of patriarchal society.¹⁰ Neimanis retains Irigaray's understanding of water as a matrixial materiality and holds onto its resistant potentialities, but queers the latter's version of fluid ground by injecting a posthuman DNA into its chemical makeup. This procedure opens up Irigaray's watery transgressions, the operations of reproduction and becoming, to not only multiple genders and sexualities but also an array of planetary actors.

Got Damp distils and renders physical Neimanis' interpretation of a posthuman fluid ground, by treating damp as both a lively material and an entity that is being demonised as a scapegoat for what is presented, under the increasing privatisation of property, as an individual housing issue. Corroon's project constructs a tangible depiction of the invisible mechanisms that Keller Easterling refers to as 'infrastructure space', in her book *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (2014).¹¹ Easterling defines infrastructure space as the grey area between quasi-governmental and corporate agendas, which is manipulated behind-the-scenes to construct our lived environments. Corroon implicates both the instrumentalization of housing under right-wing governments, and their complicity with capitalism, into the cycles of damp. She posits damp as both an active material that matters and a symptom of a larger global game; a capitalist drama that preys on the notion of a contained self and accompanying home that need to remain safe, implying both the fallacy that to be secure under globalisation is possible, and deepening the threat of an attack from outside. At the same time, the mechanisms of capitalism firmly place these structural and foundational issues as the responsibility of the tenant who does not have the rights, finances, or access to manage the building. This solidifies a notion of the atomised anthropocentric individual, which *Got Damp* both narrates and counter-narrates. Corroon stages the larger socio-economic and political issues of the housing crisis through damp, as both a dynamic substance and socio-political vehicle, and attempts to transgress these well-trodden paths by scaffolding collaboration as a trans-corporeal agency between planetary actors.

⁹ *Fluid Ground* is a project launched by Dr Kirsten Cooke (2023 – ongoing). An article titled 'A Slice of Fluid Ground' can be found in the *Journal of Writing as Creative Practice: Ways of Writing in Art and Design, Special Issue 2*, edited by Lucy A. Sames at the University of the West of England (2023).

¹⁰ Astrida Neimanis (2019), *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 68.

¹¹ Keller Easterling (2016), *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, London: Verso, p. 15.