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The Wolf Interview: Vahni Capildeo

Photo credit: Hayley Madden

Vahni Capildeo is a British-Trinidadian writer, daughter of Leila Capildeo, with whom she co-writes short fiction and non-fiction for outlets such as Moving Worlds and Womanspeak, and the late poet Devendranath Capildeo. Her most recent book, *Measures of Expatriation* (Carcanet, 2016), won the Forward Prize for Best Collection and is shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize. Her other books include *Undraining Sea* (2009), which was shortlisted for the Guyana Prize for Literature Caribbean Award), *All Your Houses* (2010) (a limited-edition artist's book with photometry by Andre Bagoo), *Dark & Unaccustomed Words* (2012) (longlisted for the 2013 OCM Bocas Poetry Prize) and *Utter* (2013). She read English at Christ Church, Oxford and subsequently became a Rhodes Scholar there, completing a DPhil in Old Norse and translation theory, which overlapped with her Research Fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge. She was the first poet on tour for the Out of Bounds Poetry project, is a contributing editor for the *Caribbean Review of Books*, and a contributing advisor to *Blackbox Manifold*. Her performance and installation work, begun during her Judith E. Wilson Poetry Fellowship, as part of the English Department at the University of Cambridge in 2014, which included responses to Euripides' Bacchae, 'Radical Shakespeare', and the revolutionary Guyanese writer Martin Carter.

Sandeep Parmar: I've been thinking a lot lately about the lyric proposition, its implied stasis within an evolving canon, the conservative gestures towards the lyric in Britain that feel retrogressive and are connected to a high Romanticism that isolates, negates the world and the reader by assuming it into a too-often 'universal' voice that, to me, reads as stable. Re-reading your work from the past several years, I am intrigued by your use of the lyric mode. Sometimes it feels deeply generous and personal—especially when dedicated (as many of your poems are) to correspondents: friends, fellow writers, family. Other times your poems manipulate the 'I', or so it seems to me, to generate a space of determined 'inauthenticity'—not an erasure of the self or a negation of it, but an opening of discourse around the 'I' that asks the reader to look closely at their own assumptions. I'm thinking in particular here of the poem for Alex Houen from *Utter*, 'Hymn to Ceres, London 2012' and the line 'Lyric Was Here', amidst a smattering of birdlime and words set against their meanings in the 'song' of spring. Equally, 'Unfurl' from *Measures of Expatriation* poses 'Not "I / you or me, / Thou and I"— / This is / it, is / it and it / its itness / it's itness' as a way to redress entrapment and power, love and desire across language. In your 'Hymn to Ceres', 'Do you have to mix it up? Write a song; it's time to sing…' feels like a formal and social question for the lyric particular to time and place, but also more broadly. Can you say something about your use of the lyric, and, in turn, the 'I'? Of its ethics?

Vahni Capildeo: When I am writing poems, I am not able to reflect like a critic or an academic, and seldom set out to deploy a strategy. Whatever I answer here is therefore a little misleading, because my response will not be so much a poet's answer. It will come after or between the moments of composition, and be redacted by what I think of as my 'surface brain', or editorial brain; the reviser, the commentator. Poems quite often arise musically for me, in a rhythm or for a voice that are not the rhythm or voice I would myself 'naturally' use. When a poem arises like this, I feel more like a composer than a writer. I am not sure what gives me access to this zone, or whether the things I bring out of it will 'work' when my editorial brain takes back control, or when I have to perform such pieces out loud. It is possible that my childhood training in western classical music (the career I seriously wished to pursue), and my later love for the troubadours, who used very tricky and stylized personæ, have habituated my mind to composing in this fashion sometimes, though not all the time. Other lyric influences are the French folkloric singer and collector of songs Jacques Douai, who also set his poetic contemporaries to music, and the Guyanese poet Martin Carter. I try to keep a habit of listening to what my mind is up to, and also to 'feed' it well. Carter's 'I' is interesting because it feels communal and collective without being representative or coercive. Carter's is the 'I' of an involvement with and in people, politics, history, and landscape, as well as the loves and flowers and news of a particular city or country. The struggle to create this kind of plural

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'I' has perhaps been overlooked by some British avant-garde poets' surface reading of, and turning away from, 'postcolonial' literature: the 'I' that cries or sings as if in one voice and yet is astir with the voices of many. The ethics of careful listening to one's not-self, and careful contextualisation of the 'I', are what I would underline. Your examples are interesting because the poems both arose under the pressure of personal compromise. In the first case, I had accepted an unpaid commission that I felt was ecologically unsound, because it was part of a larger series of events in which I was involved. (Nowadays, being older, I would resist.) I therefore wanted to show the shredding of actual live birds by propeller blades (this is what 'snarge' refers to in the text) alongside an irked, commissioning voice that wants the poet simply to sing and ignore all the other forces at play. The poet is caught in-between in this lyric, in the spaces of the situation, rather than covered by any pronouns. In the second case, I was writing a pre-emptive farewell poem to a trapped friend who had internalized the idea that certain people who hurt him almost to the point of death only did so because they loved him just as much. I was trying to strip down the 'I' and 'you' of 'love' discourse to the basic animal tenderness for self and other, self-as-other, other-as-like, that must underlie humane survival.

SP: Rosi Braidotti writes that 'the point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction.' *Measures of Expatriation* begins with the image of the falcon and the falconer and ends with the motif of transformation, metamorphosis that implies a processual nomadic subject that creates the world as it is created by it. It reminded me of Valzhyna Mort's poem, 'Preface', from *Collected Body*. In *Measures of Expatriation* in particular, the force of being seen and seeing act as transformational to the 'self', a vanishing of individual particulars into 'the moment of encounter between myself and another' ('To Stand Before'). Where, for you, is that 'complex location for a transformation', if at all?

VC: Transformation of the reader's consciousness is performed via a series of co-creations, imaginative acts within and by the language of the poems. The actual content of different poems bears differently on questions of metamorphosis or belonging. Personally, the willingness to try for an almost magical degree of empathy, the spilling of self into another or emptying of self to channel another, is something that has interested me as long as I can remember, whether reading about T.H. White's Arthur apprenticing himself

to the very stones of his land, or Hélène Cixous's description of becoming one character after another, irrespective of gender, when reading. As a literalist at heart, and a poet of place, I want to run away with the word 'nomadism'. Nomadism, for me, is not about flight so much as about following seasonal lines. It opens the idea of home to being constituted by the movement along paths rather than the dwelling in a point. A lot more historical work needs to be done and popularized so that people feel less threatened by modern migrations, and understand how migratory most places' 'identity' has been; change is the continuity. There is also a case to be made for falling in love with places that are not 'one's own', and having a mutually transformative relationship.

SP: There's been much debate recently, both in the UK and the US, about race and poetry. Often representation—percentages of poets published, diversity of lists and prizes—forms the crux of this enquiry into both mainstream and avant-garde traditions. Clearly, things are starting to change, at least in terms of visibility. But ideas about poetic subjectivity, the lyric, exoticism, vernacular, racial identity and racial violence, at least in the UK, haven't been at the forefront of diversity ventures. The UK avant-garde has its own two-fold distaste for 'identity' and a shocking lack of poets of colour among its ranks. How do you see yourself fitting into these debates and what sense do you have of their importance?

VC: Race does not have a biological basis. People are mad and stupid to be dredging up racial arguments. If English became a global language over hundreds of years, and people have been taught that English is their patrimony through Empire, it is only natural that the best writers of the English language may not be 'purely British' in a sense that would satisfy fascists; and that their 'racial' or 'national' background(s) might not numerically correspond to a 'fair' division by simple proportional arithmetic. In fact, it would be surprising if, globally, good writers of English were mostly 'white'. It is also a general point in any type of work environment, including creative work, that unconscious bias occurs and that diversity is therefore in itself a value, not just a tokenistic sop or dark conspiracy. I cannot claim to have an overview of avant-garde debates or any kind of pivotal role in them; I am still recovering from having become actually, physically sick from spending two years in their environment of routine erasures, and I respect those who are conscious researchers and fighters. What does interest me is where different literary and oral traditions are silted into English-language work, and how we can enjoy re-attuning our ears and feelings and expanding our range of reference, whether it is to the Welshness greening in Lynette Roberts and Dylan Thomas, or the five languages coursing through A.K. Ramanujan.

SP: I generally distrust poets who use ethnic food to express identity. There are many ways we are expected to be genuine as poets—not just in terms of racial or gender or class identities, but as individuals, people caught in the moment of seeing and expressing—authentically. You write that: '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.' And yet language makes authenticity artificial, can only do so. So we either embrace its artificiality or we pretend to be authentic—find ourselves in the crossroads of what we're willing or unwilling to say. And it is in one attempting to be known by another that one loses one's self. Both 'Seven Nights in Transit' and 'Too Solid Flesh' present us with these questions of authentic identity and the self—and the appearance of the Arawak woman is chilling, perfect. Then there are mangoes. But I don't mind your mangoes or your tally of identity markers—because you are of course responding, or I think you are, to the artificiality of knowing someone by what they eat.

VC: I have started distrusting my distrust of ethnic food as expressive of identity. Whose ethnicity is ethnic, anyway? English working class identity is expressed by the bread and butter that Pip hides down his trouser leg in *Great Expectations*; J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts students are fed a solid English children's literature heritage of Blytonesque stodge—you might call it a treacle-down tradition; Sylvia Townsend Warner's middle-class Englishwomen cooking oxtail stew are clearly not observing dietary restrictions of Rastafari, Jainism, etc. There is plenty of an invisibilised, taken-as-default identity in such food—and yet I do not know of any writer who would hesitate to mention baked beans for fear of invoking an overly or specifically English identity politics. So if I have spent half the day in cocoa country in Trinidad and am moved to write a piece including the cocoa pod on the kitchen table, I include it because it is there, in its Cézanne apple solidity. To hell with being afraid of 'browning up', and self-censorship of ordinary life. I shall put in the cocoa pods, russet apples, and whatsoever else there may be on the real and imagined tables, towards the labour of creation of a fat and fruitful, un-pin-downable thereness to twenty-first-century-poetry food—until such things have presence and nourishment and heft, and are not treated as ciphers, as tickbox code for their human consumers. I admire Sarah Howe and Mona Arshi for being able to mention things that of course are there, mixed into home. They reclaim 'exotica' as the quotidian. This is also a re-siting of the gaze. A happily creolized environment (as distinct from multicultural–everyone in their bright little boxes) really seems to strike fear or bewilderment into some people ('So what are you, then?'), as if being less brings some kind of safety, or as if being one (which is impossible) makes for the only authenticity. Language does fail in so far as it is communicative of dictionary meanings, for which no two people will have the same personal associations or completely identical cultural referents. However, an important

part of poetry is its musicality, and the utterance of patterned syllables, or the rush or thinning out of *how* words are placed. How the power of this relates to authenticity is beyond me to define, but I know it changes the equation from how non-poetic language has or creates value.

SP: I'd like to ask you about teaching and your experience teaching and studying the humanities and the canon of literature in the UK. Professors or dons, critics, sometimes female, appear in your work as strangely bodily and unknowable. If the humanities stem from the universal image of the human as male, straight and white, and students entering UK universities aren't taught adequately about the history of colonialism, what hope is there for an expansion of the humanities as a discourse that interrogates the body, its positionalities, within a national tradition of literature, in particular? I'm thinking here of much of your work but focused on the poem 'In 2190, Albion's Civil Conflicts Finally Divided Along Norman-Saxon Lines'. I'd be interested to hear your own reflections, as I know your experiences span the UK and its regions.

VC: Decolonizing the curriculum would have to go far beyond teaching the history of colonialism. It would mean, for example, that the teaching of Shakespeare would automatically include up-to-date material on what Persia, India, the Ottoman Empire, and Aleppo were to the Elizabethans and were themselves in that time period, including science, technology, and material artefacts, as all these places are mentioned in Shakespeare's plays. It would mean foregrounding the difference between 'Florentine' and 'Venetian' in *Othello* as a play about more than black-and-white diversity. It would mean actively valuing the languages and knowledge brought by students, and creating the structure for regular interdepartmental collaboration (I would not say the breaking down of departments, which would probably mean dismissals and the loss of genuine expertise). I am sorry to bring matters back to money, but academics need to have better pay and working conditions for positive change to occur, and to be less at the mercy of inappropriate administrative and business models. Marilyn Strathern's essay collection, *Audit Culture*, should be mandatory reading for policymakers and funders. I benefited greatly from focusing on English language at Oxford, which somewhat sidestepped the vexed questions in literature. We had to read both literary and non-literary texts from Anglo-Saxon to the present day through various linguistic lenses, and could not afford to be prescriptive rather than descriptive. I also believe that the benefits of the tutorial system which allowed for 1-1 or 1-2 in-depth conversation two or three times a week, in addition to classes, seminars, and lectures, far outweigh any disadvantages. In the poem you mention, '2190' encodes '1290', which was the year of the Jewish expulsion from England; a forced migration not enough remembered, perhaps, and touched on elsewhere in *Measures of Expatriation*, the heart of

the medieval Jewish quarter, the area around St Aldates, is where I lived for many years. The (non-Jewish) narrator in that poem is transhistorical, inhabiting one after another 'foreign' body that arrives or invades as Other but eventually may be absorbed into the story of 'Englishness'. Your phrase 'strangely bodily and unknowable' is a keen diagnosis; perhaps I am reflecting back the many instances in which I was treated as a specimen or as a creature that had dropped from the sky and had no kinship with locals and no kinfolk of its own. Soon after my father's death and cremation by Hindu rites in Trinidad, I was asked by a don's wife at a dinner party, 'What is the colour of human ash?', as if this were a neutral and intelligent question to which, as a polite guest, I should—while still in mourning—give a detached answer.

SP: In the wake of Brexit and, now with the election of Trump, the rise of the far-right in Europe, do you worry about the complicity of culture in these disturbing developments? Or does adequate resistance, artistic, exist?

VC: Brexit has not happened yet, nor has Trump been inaugurated. On the day I am writing these answers, Austria rejected a far right candidate in the presidential elections. I try not to 'worry'. Radical self-care is revolutionary. With the rise of the far right, I see good people who could and should be making alliances driven to distraction and infighting on social media or neglecting their physical health. (In my paradise, avant-garde poets picnic with green Tories.) If they do not actively work to become and/or remain steady, there is scant hope of a creative and strong resistance. If anyone reads your question as a veiled reference to 'political correctness', then I would recommend Deborah Cameron's excellent study, *Verbal Hygiene*. I cannot really engage with the question on a local or global level because it is ultimately about economics: who controls the press, whose interest is served by the proliferation of stories about divisive identity rather than facts about kleptocracy, and why is there not a central and practical focus on how ecological change is likely to alter the human environment? But how is a poet's opinion on this more valuable than anyone else's in a café? I would like to refer the question to experts.

SP: The prose-poem/lyric essay form permeates *Measures of Expatriation* and appears more here than in your previous work. These poems do something quite different from the more recognisable verse forms—in that they offer the subject room to shift and address itself, perhaps?

VC: It never occurred to me that the prose poem was not a recognisable verse form, because there was a good deal of untranslated French literature in my parents' house. I grew up thinking that prose poems like Mallarmé's, or poems that rained experimentally like Apollinaire's, were well-established poetic

modes. It was only in 2005—two years after *No Traveller Returns*, my first book, was published by Salt in 2003 and more than ten years after meeting Brian Catling, who uses a range of forms including prose poetry and who was like a mentor to me then—that I started to realize just how much the mainstream lyric had locked down the idea of 'poetry' for some readers. Nikki Santilli was guest-editing a special issue of *Sentence*, the American quarterly journal of prose poetics, and had published *Such Rare Citings*, a history of the prose poem in French and English that deserves to be a standard work. Through her, and the event she organised, I suddenly met a disparate group of writers all more or less labelled experimental for using this, to me, familiar form. I know my brain works entirely differently when composing a prose poem from writing an essay or story. It works at the level of metaphor and music. Prose poetry for me isn't a way of smuggling in narrative or indulging in wordiness. It is more like building a place that the reader can stretch out or stroll around in but where the life of that place is dreamlike in how it proceeds, tapping into and tipping the reader into more imaginative than analytical ways of thinking and feeling—even if these can later be analysed for their thought-content.

Questions by Sandeep Parmar