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Methods of (un)knowing

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A Trilogy of Getting Stuck

Methods of (un)knowing

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An impossible knot. Stuck in an undersized shirt. In the trunk of a car crossing a border. Locked doors with broken keys. Never be found in a game of hide-and-seek. Left in a dead hunter's trap. In a solitary cell. Crawling through a pipe. A wedding ring on a fat finger. On the border with a fake passport. In a car sunk to the bottom of a deep lake. In never-ending grief. Exiled to a far-off island. In a broken elevator. Under a table in a bombarded house. Whether in nightmares or in real life, *getting stuck* leaves us in situations that we hardly *know* how to put an end to. Short or long, experiences of getting stuck give us a different understanding of the space around us: its scale, temperature, tactility, materiality, our body and its movements change due to an intimate, violent and frustrating situation. Getting stuck separates a person or a group of people from the rest of the world and isolates them in an impossible situation. In the struggle to free oneself from being stuck, one needs to start (un)knowing the possibilities, improvising other ways of moving and surviving in space. The informal phrase 'to get stuck in' also means 'to start doing (something) with enthusiasm or determination'. It indicates a period of inhabitation of a troubled situation as well as determination to get out of that situation. The one who is stuck and determined to free herself is engaged in an improvised performance of liberation and breaking free. Such performance is carried out without rehearsal and in response to the characteristics of that specific situation, about which the performer doesn't know much. For this performer, the only way of knowing the unknown and unknowing the known is improvising micro acts of struggle, often in a limited time frame. Time stretches and becomes viscous on one hand, and on the other hand the struggle makes the time that remains tick away.

In this text, I situate the discussion of getting

stuck in a context in which the individualistic culture developed under neoliberal world views has left in its wake unsupported individuals who are expected to survive and who are, at the same time, blamed for failing to do so. This image of getting stuck is becoming more and more the paramount image of our contemporary world, where individuals suffer from isolation, loneliness and failing political and social structures that have left them struggling alone for life and competing against one another. In response to what clear social change marks out our time, George Monbiot describes ours as the 'Age of Loneliness' (2016: 29), where structural changes in society 'enforce and celebrate our social isolation' (30). This text is about those individuals who are stuck in complicated, brutal and inhumane situations and forced to fight against them in isolation. Martin Lukacs (2017) discusses that neoliberalism has not only produced an increasingly individualized society, but has also left individuals with a sense of guilt and self-blame about their own failures in terms of both having a 'successful' life and of caring for society and the environment. Such a system gives an image of success into which it is impossible for the majority of people to fit. We find ourselves stuck in an impossible situation, where self-blame and a sense of guilt don't even allow for the effort to succeed in getting out of that situation, instead creating a situation in which the burnt-out individuals give up.

To get closer to such challenging situations and the vulnerable bodies that are stuck in them, I study such situations through the lens of 'spatial performativity' (Hannah 2011). Such a lens situates the struggling bodies in a specific place and time and exposes the space to the forces of the 'event' of getting stuck, and thereby complicates and changes the existing political relations of the space and the body—an *unknowing* of the known that re-politicizes both.

The performing bodies stuck in a complex situation act through methods of *unknowing* in the manner of improvisation. While improvisation, as Jon Ross puts it, ‘requires both tremendous knowledge of the subject on which improvisation is based and outstanding preparation (not to mention courage) needed to be able to perform well’, each time the performer improvises, she should respond to the existing relations of the context in a novel way (2012: 5). The situation of getting stuck is a situation of not knowing how to get out. While not knowing the unknown makes the struggle more difficult, unknowing the known makes us construct a new way of knowing in relation to that specific place and time and ultimately to liberation. Struggling through unknowing creates other ways of inhabiting the space and communicating with its existing relations, breaking them, coming to terms with them, expanding them or surrendering to their power relations.

The following ‘trilogy of getting stuck’ stages three different environments to explore through the acts of three different characters who have got stuck in them. Each of the three characters—the *geologist*, the *illegal traveller* and the *carrier*—takes us on a journey through three ecologies of *pollution*, *borders* and *confinement*; ecologies that represent environmental, social and political crises that have resulted in unsupported refugees, polluted environments and the deterioration of society. While the characters struggle in these environments through bodily experience, they get deeper and deeper into the impossible situation. The *geologist* performs through moving backward and forward—slow oscillation—in the viscous environment of the oil waste pit. The *illegal traveller* performs through stillness, and the *carrier* longs to connect to the outer world by imagining catching, carrying and touching. In each part, getting-stuck has shrunk the worlds into isolated situations. But, at the same time, not knowing the unknown, or unknowing the known is a way of improvising the act of overcoming the situation of getting stuck.

01

STAGE: RESERVE PIT

CHARACTER: GEOLOGIST

ACT: SLOW OSCILLATION

– How to get out of this mess?

– ‘Make a mud map. Find your way through the dirt’, thinks the geologist. (Frichot 2019: 11)

The reserve pit, containing mud, polluted water and oil waste, is a paramount image of the environmental crisis of our age. An age of thorough dependency on fossil fuels, where oil flows through every part of our lives, even in our bodies. To get out of the mess of oil, one needs to stop this fast-forwarding project of development and progress. ‘We need to slow down’, thinks the geologist, holding his arms up. The black sludge is up to his knees.

The harder he tries to get out, the deeper he sinks into the sludge. Under his feet are metres of soft ooze, a mixture of oil and earth with all other stuff that water and earth bring to each other: soil, dead plants, animals’ excrement and water, mixed with the black oily things of petroleum waste. In the background, in the distance, long cylinders and towers of the refinery emit white exhaust into the air. Around him, just black ooze. The horizontal pipes constantly fill the pit with fetid black liquid. The geologist is now halfway through the pit. The oily mud reaches over his knees. He takes a breath and tries to keep the panic at bay. Time is ticking away, but if he moves fast, he will be engulfed by the sludge. ‘There are many of these internal drainage zones on the Earth, collecting and cramming water into land-locked isolation’, he thinks (Mason 2020: 119). But this one is an environmental disaster. A quagmire that will ultimately swallow us all. The thought of it brings back the panic. The geologist takes another breath and tries to concentrate and to remember how to get out of this pond of sludge. A verse of survival hits in:

Make yourself as light as possible—toss your bag, jacket, and shoes.

Try to take a few steps backwards.

Keep your arms up and out of the quicksand.

Try to reach for a branch or person’s hand to pull yourself out.

¹ The term is borrowed from the title of the book 'Illegal' Traveller: An auto-ethnography of borders, by Shahram Khosravi (2010).

Take deep breaths.

Move slowly and deliberately. (Ball-Dionne 2021)

He tries to take a few steps *back*. Back in his mind, millions of years ago, plankton has died, mixed with other particles of death, accumulated between the layers of Earth, *stuck in-between* for years, was heated up by Earth's core and became the black liquid. Millions of years later, when geologists found those underground tombs, they wounded the earth to free those dormant liquid black ghosts, called oil. When the liquid black ghosts were awakened, the world stepped into this modern era. Engineers came up with infrastructures to capture them and benefit from them. They invented pipes to let the oil flow without meeting the earth, without producing sludge and dirt.

The geologist now tries to move *slowly* forward. He has left his bag several metres back. Nothing else to get rid of now to grow lighter. Against him are tens of metres of shiny black sludge resting below the sunrise, stretching up to the horizon. Oil was supposed to bring speed to modern life: development, progress, innovation. And '[t]his is a body trying desperately to keep up with the speed of the world, miles behind, but transfixed and obsessed by the illusive prize on the horizon' (Rey 2010). Now in order to survive he must be slow, moving against the 'faster is better' slogan he has always known of the modern world. To survive, he has to move backward and forward very slowly. A very slow oscillation in a viscous environment.

'When they made all those modern products out of petroleum and lubricated the various machines of modernity with oil, they ended up with unwanted stuff, trash, dirt that they didn't know what to do with. They sent them off scenes from the big urban centres, creating a mess, an environmental disaster, a pit of sludge', thinks the geologist while taking his step forward. 'Sludge is the dirt of dirt. It is a metaphor for the impossibility of moving beyond petroleum. What was supposed to make us faster is now making us immobile', he thinks, struggling to move backward, forlornly. The sludge is now up to his hips, his next move forward is nearly impossible and his knowledge has failed to help him know the unknown.

02

STAGE: TRUCK

CHARACTER: 'ILLEGAL' TRAVELLER¹

ACT: STILLNESS IN FOETAL POSITION

'The paradigmatic image of the world today is undoubtedly one of bodies, squeezed between pallets inside a truck.' (Khosravi 2010:1)

The truck is rushing through the mountainous roads, fearless of the deep valleys, ignorant of the moonlight that renders the mountains black giants against the dark blue sky. Massive boxes of plywood are shaking in the back, making various sounds in sync with the truck engine. The 'illegal' traveller is curled up on her left side, in a tiny space arranged for her, among the boxes. The dimension of the space is just enough for her foetal position, and there is just enough of a gap to shift from one side to another. Crossing the border on the map is slipping one's finger over a drawn line. Simple, easy and fast. In reality though, the line is roaring rivers, steep valleys, human-made roads, barbed wire, concrete walls; it is punctuated with checkpoints, passport controls, CCTVs, scanning machines and guards. The illegal traveller tries to imagine the road and landscape, while staying still in her foetal position, connecting to the outside world through the movements and sounds of the things around her. She feels the bumps of the road, curves, stops, downhill, uphill, speeding up, slowing down, through the moves of the truck, of the boxes and her body, each combined with the symphony of clunking boxes, the buzz of the engine and the whining brakes.

In the eyes of the illegal traveller, there is a shinier life on the other side of the border, a safer home, brighter days, softer bedsheets, cleaner water, night skies with more stars, blue skies with plumper clouds. As if the border were a transitional line at which all of the curses on this side turn into blessings. The border becomes a magical line. 'Magic changes our perceptions of the real: something turns into something else. Like magic, borders engender new perceptions' (Keshavarz and Khosravi 2020). But what that magic would bring to her is unknown. 'Against the magic of the border, there is counter-magic', thinks the illegal traveller, squeezed in the



magic box of the truck, trying to move from her left side to her right side, to give some respite to the muscles of her left-side body (ibid.). Knees drawn in towards her stomach, arms crossed over her chest, head slightly bowed to fit into the space among the boxes. Her body is hurled back and forth in short, fast movements as the truck moves over the uneven surface of the road. She knows the unknown landscape through her body. Hitting her head on the upper box means driving over a hump. Being pushed rightward means moving along an inward curve towards the mountains. Being pushed leftward means an outward curve towards the valley. Squeezed among the boxes, her body is reduced, dehumanized and descaled. Invisible in that magic box, she is more aware than ever of the size of her body, of the sound of her breath. As the illegal traveller approaches the border, her body extends beyond that tiny space among the boxes. Her skin becomes the outer body of the truck.

And the whining sound of the brakes means slowing down. But the sound of the whining brakes followed by a sudden push of the boxes forward means a pause, a stop, a checkpoint, a scanning machine and the unknown consequence of a magic spell.

03

STAGE: CELL

CHARACTER: CARRIER

MOVEMENT: CATCHING/HOLDING

A greenish cloud approaches the city and everyone has to stay at home. The cloud has escaped from a nuclear laboratory; it was a human mistake. It is toxic, alien and lethal. There is a cell deep underground. In the cell there is an acrobat. The acrobat is an expert carrier in hand-to-hand acrobatics. He carries the flyer, keeps her aloft; they become one, trusting each other, caring, supporting. His body is shaped through the repetition of caring, carrying, holding, supporting. Now in the cell, he still stands alone for hours, arms stretched upward, hands ready to catch the hands of the other, eyes staring at the ceiling. 'In isolation, what does symbiosis mean?' He thinks.

In isolation, the carrier has nightmares of the disappearance of the flyer at the very moment when he is meant to catch her hands. He wakes up with tense arms and hands, having waited forever to catch the flyer. Next night, another nightmare. The flyer pulls her hands back as soon as he reaches out to grab them. He wakes up when she hits the ground. The night after, similar nightmare, his hands liquify as soon

■ Getting Stuck—An X-Ray of a truck with 'illegal Travellers' crossing the borders. Thirty-seven illegal immigrants being smuggled with a shipment of bananas out of Chiapas, Mexico. Photo: Science Source/Science Photo Library.

as the flyer catches them. He wakes up when she hits the ground. Out there, society has disappeared. Individuals compete, 'lone rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone' (Monbiot 2016: 30–1). Out there, there is a 'war of all against all' (33).

He starts touching the walls of the cell, tapping on the pipes in the corner of his cell, sending messages in a coded language through the pipes that go all the way up to the rest of the building on the ground and down into the sewer system and into the network of water infrastructure. The carrier spends hours putting his palm on the cold concrete walls of the cell. Trains passing through underground tunnels send their vibrations through the rocks and the walls to the carrier's palm. He listens with his palm, talks with his fingers, taps on the pipes, longs for a connection, waits for a response.

'What is the meaning of my existence without catching and holding the other's hands, without anticipating carrying the weight of the other', he ponders. In confinement, his hands long to hold, catch, grab, touch. A train passes by in the distance and his hands tremble, performing a duet in the absence of the other.

C O D A

The three characters, *geologist*, the *illegal traveller* and the *carrier*, represent the burnt-out individuals who fight in isolation to liberate themselves from a situation of getting stuck. While each situation is specific in its nature and hence requires contextualized improvisation, it refers to an intersection of environmental, social and political crises in a larger context. Here, a performance lens can situate these isolated acts in a larger global struggle, where the world becomes a series of 'performing grounds' in which, as Laura Levin describes, 'the human body commingles with or is presented as a direct extension of its setting' (2014: 13). These scattered and isolated situations create a landscape of interconnected performing grounds, where those who struggle in silence and isolation against frustrating situations, in forgotten, hidden and unsupported spaces, reach out and are connected globally.

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