



At the Intersection of COVID-19 and the Privilege of Mobility

Just in Case

von Ninette Rothmüller

Just in case you lost it. I mean who hasn't these days? We have met before.¹ You don't remember when and where? Well, you're not alone. It seems a long time ago since we actually could meet anyone; I mean without the fear that us being close to someone wouldn't cause a threat to others and to us. Frankly, I don't even remember how my mother's body feels when hugging her. And even if I could remember, does it still feel the same after all these years of non-hugging? I don't know – her body for years now (as you might or might not remember from our first conversation) is rectangular and two dimensional and fits on a by now even smaller screen; my daughter's iPad screen. Yeah, right, we upgraded our gadgets. This was

one of the rare decisions that I got to make. Remember, the only authority that I ever get to utilize when my daughter socializes virtually with my parents involves IT solutions and support. Well, we upgraded and Oma² shrank; I mean Oma didn't, actually I wouldn't know, but what we do know is that the screen of the iPad is smaller than the computer screen we formerly used for our transatlantic, intergenerational screen time. Oma now usually sits on my daughter's bookshelf when they engage virtually. I imagine Oma sitting on the edge of the bookshelf, cross-legged, rocking her legs. The bookshelf position is not a problem, because the iPad has a tracking feature and the camera follows my daughter as she moves through her room while playing with Oma. This

¹ This essay is the second of a trilogy. The first essay can be found here: <https://budrich.de/en/news/comedy-cares-to-think-trauma-part-1/>.

² Oma is the informal name for grandmother in German.

makes Opa³, aka Max and the ambulance driver, seasick. Can't pay attention to that; it's progress, suck it up man, progress is always good. I mean maybe, well I mean, the fact that Opa is getting seasick won't lead Apple to develop an anti-seasick feature for iPads, right? That's a minority health problem and we have bigger issues right now, don't we?

My daughter, however, has another problem. As soon as the camera started tracking her, her eyes widened and she asked me whether her gadget is also connected to my computer screen and whether I can see into her room from the living room, where my computer is located, and see what she is doing in her room. Get it? Surveillance suspected in the playroom; didn't our generation have a good life? Floorboards still squeaked when adults approached my childhood play space, giving me enough time to hide chocolate wrappers in the drawer. My daughter recently outgrew believing that all mothers can look through walls. It was very convenient when she still believed this. So, when she asked whether I can watch her on my screen, I hesitated for a second, but then decided to not expand Apple's reach into my daughter's developing belief system. No, I said. I can't see you. She sighed with relief, grinning her Cheshire cat grin.

Tying the knot

Are you still having problems remembering me? Then let me bring you up to speed. The big news since we last met is that I got married. Yes, I know, who would have thought that, and why would I do that, or have I now completely lost my mind, are some of the responses I've gotten. Congratulations, has been a rather rare one. I get it, I have fought against the exclusivity of the institution of marriage for years – but then again, the guy knelt down in front of our compost pile, at the side of the house, where we would hide from the chill of the wind during our outside social-distanced rendezvous. The compost pile! The mother of transformation, renewal, and nourishment. Seriously, what was I supposed to do?

I tell you what I did, I broke my foot two days prior to the wedding. Yeah, man, just testing the load-bearing capac-

ity of that guy. He passed and I got married on crutches. Where did I break my foot, you ask? Well, in the kitchen, which historically has always been a dangerous place for women. Never spend too much time in the kitchen, believe me it will chronically affect your mobility. But back to the wedding. Yes, I hear you. No need to shout. We all know that marriage also has a long history of affecting people's mobility; it's just that none of us ever bother to look up the forced marriage rate for our region. I know, I know, time is limited. Let's move on. Oma and Opa of course attended our wedding in their flat rectangular screen home, which was placed inside an empty barn behind my apartment. Sharing their screen were my new parents-in-law, who live in Florida. Here they were, my mother whose grandfather on one side of her family was a Nazi supporter and my Jewish in-laws whose families entered the US via Ellis Island. You want more details? I recommend visiting the tenement immigration museum in New York City. It's all there, you know.

Back to the barn. See the camera track our movement? Swinging back in time. That's not possible you say? Of course it is. Surveilling memory, ours and that of others, might come in disguise, but it's there and it's very effective. Just take a look into the history text book of your local eight-year-old and it will tell you exactly how it all was and who did what. Look closely, will ya? Handy isn't it? Back to the barn again. In front of it, where we gathered, the sun was shining, and we had 20 minutes to say 'Ja, ich will' and 'Yes, I do' in front of six masked friends and a justice of the peace that my daughter would later call Sher-robo⁴. Yes, true, the justice of the peace wasn't too animated. While it might not be our new normal, it seems to get harder and harder to pay attention to nuances. We are all exhausted after all these months. Geddit? And so it seems to be daily business: contemporary German immigrant, without residency status and no active travel authorization, marrying into a Jewish immigrant family in a bi-lingual, screen-supported and mask-protected, rapid ceremony while balancing on crutches in a muddy field.

3 Opa is the informal name for grandfather in German.

4 As a clever word creator, my daughter combines the first name of the registrar with the word "robot".

The Score

Anyhow, we had 20 minutes before my now husband had to run off to get my daughter's cat from the emergency veterinary hospital in one of our neighboring states where he had to drive the cat to on the day prior when all veterinarian hospitals in our state were at capacity and were no longer accepting patients. So yes, I let my husband off the hook for the wedding waltz. He seemed happy about it; some men would do just about anything to avoid a waltz. Me? Absolutely not, I don't have any gender stereotypes in my head. I well know that many of the men reading this article are wearing skirts as they do so. But back to my waltz-avoiding husband. His movement wedding score instead was: Two days before the wedding: urgent care with his to-be wife – treatment not granted, off to urgent care orthopedic care facility a couple of towns over, wait until complicated fracture is diagnosed and drive hobbling future wife home. One day before the wedding: race cat of soon to be step-daughter to the emergency hospital one state over, freeze his [...] off while waiting hungry in his car in the hospital's parking lot for information about whether he can leave or not. Leave when told. Wedding day: Take 20 minutes to get married in blazing sunshine with international audience on a screen, before running off to get the cat, while your new wife (yeah, there was one before me) gets to eat frozen pizza, leg up, lounging on the couch. Sound great? Well, seems like it did to my husband – and so he is in. He's part of the pack now and you will hear from him from time to time. Why did he have to do all the driving? Well, he's the only one in our family who is mobile at this point in time, no not only because he can drive, as he doesn't have a plastic cast on one of his feet. On top of this, and I don't know why he gets to have both privileges – oh wait, I know, yes, he is white and he is a man so he generally speaking can move up in the line – so on top of this, he is a citizen of the country he lives in. And that's a big one, believe me.

In Theory

And here we go, with this story I introduced the theme of this essay: mobility. Slick, eh? You want some theory now, you say? Don't like my wedding story? Well yes, watching people enjoying the privilege of committing to each other can be disturbing. I am with you, marrying my

last partner wasn't legal in my home country for most of our relationship. Here's some calming theory. Don't forget theory can be a fantastic hiding place; when did you hide behind theory last? Okay, so what we are doing here in three essays is taking my life apart, or said differently, this essay is the second one of a triad to be published sequentially. This is the center piece. All three essays link autoethnographical "assemblage" (Denshire and Lee 2013) and anecdotal comedy as a means of developing socially critical questions from the 'place' of self-reflective humor and yes, sarcasm, in case you hadn't noticed. I use assemblage to free "boundaries between the individual and the social" (ibid., 221) and highlight the political relevance of intimate stories, yes, such as wedding stories, as tools for critical social inquiry.

As the title for this essay suggests this second essay focuses on mobility. It draws from my bi-national, and now multi-ethnic, family's experience with long-term separation across borders and languages, before and during COVID-19. Like the first essay of this series, this one applies notions of post-digitality and investigates changing relationships with technologies through a concern with being human. In doing so, I study how three generations engage mobility in the digital, surveilled, Skype-blue playroom in which my daughter and my parents play and in which my husband first met my parents, at a loss of words, because they do not share a language. As everyone meets up with everyone, most of the time no one acknowledges the presence of a screen between them. My essays address the challenges and opportunities this attitude creates. Yes, it's just sometimes that I miss my mother's hug. I do. But then again, like so many, I am committed to suck it up for the sake of doing my part. I believe in packs you know. Nah, not in six-packs; wolf packs. Why? Well because, "Pack structure enables communication, the education of the young and the transfer of knowledge across generations"⁵ In our family the "transfer of knowledge across generations" seems to sometimes skip me. Perhaps it's just me; I am still learning how to go camping, what can I do. I lost you here?

5 <https://www.livingwithwolves.org/about-wolves/social-wolf/#:~:text=Wolves%20care%20for%20each%20other,be%20best%20described%20as%20culture> (accessed February 16, 2022).

Sorry, let's start from the beginning of the camping story. In any case, I might not know how to go camping, but my daughter and I certainly have approached and travelled across borders. Welcome to digital border-crossing. Get your camping gear out, will ya?

Stay Put – Nail it Down – Head out Camping

One day in Spring 2020, I heard anti-rhythmic hammering sounds coming from my daughter's room. She was playing remotely with Oma. At the time, my daughter and I were living with the owner of the house. You met her in the last essay. Remember she likes nothing more but good entertainment. So we are on, just fixing some last minute lighting design issues, and the curtain will lift shortly. Let the show begin: There are hammering sounds traveling through the door of my daughter's room. All else is quiet, no voices. Although knowing that my technological assistance might not be required and I thus should stay put in my room and not enter my daughter's, I open the door to her room, finding her, tongue between teeth, pounding tent stakes into her carpet. "You can't hammer stakes into your carpet!" I proclaim. "I know," my daughter replies without looking up or pausing. "This is a meadow," she continues, explaining the obvious. Obviously, she would never hammer tent stakes into her carpet before transforming it into a meadow beforehand. Duh! "Mama!" I turn to the black computer screen, from where my mother (Oma) listens, as we don't have enough 'juice' to run the video feature of 'stay put', our homemade screen entertainment game, on that day. "Mama! She's hammering stakes into the floor!" "I thought so," my mother replies. She continues in a calm voice, "What do you want, emotional sanity or a carpet?"

It's the first days during the lockdown. We have been inside all day long. Rain is streaming down the window panes. We are privileged to have a place in which to be 'inside'. I know. Here I am, watching a child having figured out how to take her Oma (who has never been camping in her life) camping. Camping is one of my daughter's favorite things in the world. Next to her, her red knapsack is packed to its maximum capacity. She advised Oma to pack hers, explaining patiently what one needs: a bathing suit, a towel, a blanket, a card game, and a pail. Ready! I am most certain that my mother packed my grandfa-

ther's old blue knapsack, following exactly my daughter's instructions. Well, true we don't have proof of that, but if you can't trust mothers anymore, who can you trust? Nah, again, I don't apply any gender stereotypes. I am a mother; I simply know better.

Before putting down their tents, my daughter and Oma had jointly walked in small circles, my mother around her kitchen table and my daughter in her room, commenting on trees, birds, and clouds, before finding the best spot ever to anchor down their tent, spanning it across the ocean, stakes on either side of it. All peaceful and in unison with nature. Then I walked in. Great timing! At my age (48, at the time) I was terribly narrow minded (some would argue, I still am) when it comes to digital border-crossing involving drilling holes into admittedly old carpets that I do not own. I take two steps back, leave my daughter's room and close the door. In the kitchen I bump into my housemate. Remember, she owns the house. "They are pounding tent stakes into your floor," I confess to her fearfully. "I know," she replies with a rather unengaged voice. "Your daughter asked for a hammer a couple of minutes ago, so I gave her one. One is never too young to learn how to use tools." I hadn't looked at it this way. True, my daughter had not hit her thumb, now that I think about it. No harm done. Holes in the floor, tent put up, mission camping completed successfully.

Postscript

Time passes. It is January 9, 2022. Oma laughs from my daughter's bookshelf as I write. My in-laws, who I have never met in person and who fit into a rectangular screen even smaller than Oma's, celebrate their 40th wedding day alone in Florida. My daughter and I isolate and wait for my husband's PCR test result to come back before we can see him again. I am keeping my daughter out of her school during a seven-day incidence rate of 1.474,4 that is absolutely not evenly distributed amongst population groups. So, where are you? Are we talking? Who is mobile? These three questions should keep you going until we meet next in the last essay of this trilogy: "The Showdown." And yes, these three questions invite you to experiment with autoethnographic practice in your own life.

Take care. Ask questions.

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