

Through her reading of Rebecca Solnit's A Field Guide to Getting Lost, Wu ruminates on the idea that our words and our world are limitless. Her detailed analysis focuses on how Solnit's rhetorical style and inviting ethos guide readers into the unknown, reflecting on what it means to find connection by embracing loss. (Instructor: Jenny Xie)

A DIGRESSIONAL GUIDE

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From a cursory reading, Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* appears to be an invitation to get lost not only in the real world, but also in the world of words. Solnit's mercurial stream of thought guides readers, with no apparent motive, through personal stories, art criticism, cinematic reviews, and vivid images of landscapes. However, reading through *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* is more like going on a scavenger hunt. Pieces of evidence lead you from one foreign place to another, haunting you with the suspense and excitement of the unknown along the way. When you finally get to the last stop, you find yourself standing on an isolated island in the middle of the sea. There is no treasure to discover, just the vastness of the ocean blue, enveloping and engulfing you. You feel small. You feel invisible. You feel the power of the limitlessness. This is the prize. Solnit's purpose is never merely to disorient; rather, she guides readers out of their limited selves to discover the vastness of the world, inviting them to get lost in the unknown.

A Field Guide to Getting Lost can be divided into two parts. All the chapters with odd numbers relate Solnit's personal stories, whereas all the chapters with even numbers consist of her more objective reflections and art reviews, each of which is titled "The Blue of Distance." Solnit's essays break down generic category boundaries as they range across memoir, art criticism, philosophical writings, and even fictional stories. Though she constantly tries to pull readers out of themselves, Solnit never sounds didactic. In fact, her language is so poetic and her narration so fascinating that readers can flip through page after page without even being aware of the passage of time.

Solnit uses long melodic sentences to enchant her readers. She repeats clauses with similar grammatical structures and uses clauses of different lengths to create a sonic pleasure that mesmerizes readers. Her long repetitive clauses lay down expectations, which accumulate to a climatic burst at the end. They attract readers' attention like metal to magnets. Most of her long sentences are visually descriptive, yanking readers into the places Solnit has been and letting them experience what she went through. But sometimes they become abstract and metaphysical, pulling readers out of the physical world and pushing them into deep reflection. Readers resurface from the book only to find themselves reflecting on cultural, political, and philosophical issues. Solnit strives to immerse readers completely in the world she creates so that they can forget about themselves.

Solnit further disorients readers with her mercurial stream of thought, which jumps from one idea or scene to another. The discontinuities in Solnit's essays are not a reckless disregard for transition, but a thoughtful design that imitates the way people converse with one another. Solnit claims that she loves "the ease with which [people] can get to any point from any other point . . . [and connect] everything back up" in a conversation (qtd. in Fay 130). Solnit's non-linear writing style serves two functions: on the one hand, targeting readers who are used to a linear narrative, Solnit tries to get them lost in her unconventional, meandering writing. On the other hand, Solnit anticipates more from her readers than merely feeling lost. She is encouraging active thought and participation from them in the hope that they will gradually find the connection between every fragment of writing and piece everything together through the course of reading. In an interview, she voices her belief that the meandering process of conversing is how "[people] think and . . . put the world together for [themselves]" (qtd. in Gritz). The way everything connects in Solnit's essays is almost like a simulation of human brain activity: the activation of one set of neurons leads to the activation of another set of overlapping neurons, leading to endless brain activity.

An example of her associative leaps appears in "Two Arrowheads," in which Solnit, with an abrupt transition, parallels a heartbreaking love story with a hermit in the desert and the film *Vertigo*, a tragic romance between a retired detective and a woman

who he was asked to follow. The two stories at first seem to be separate and irrelevant to each other, but a subtle commonality links them together: both her love story and *Vertigo* are “disintegrated” (“Two” 136). Solnit’s love story begins with her intriguing rendering of an intimate and carefree love in the magnificent wilderness. However, the happy story ends with heartbreak; Solnit reflects: “A disintegrated [love] lies at your feet like a shattered mirror, each shard reflecting a different story” (“Two” 136). She insists: “The stories don’t fit back together, and it’s the end of stories” (136). *Vertigo* could also be seen as “a disintegrated love” divided and viewed differently by the two lovers (136). In the detective’s version, the story is about tracing the mysterious lover’s shadow, while in the woman’s version, the story is about her sacrificing herself to become another person for a man’s love. Such passions are bound to lead to a dead end.

However, Solnit does not allow herself to get trapped. After the heartbreak, she creates a new story. The story is a subtle metaphor for how she herself broke through her dead love. Her new story is based on the character Midge from *Vertigo*, whom Solnit leads to the world outside the dead-end of the film. In the story, Solnit uses the temporal and spatial frame of *Vertigo* to let Midge wander through the city and engage in all kinds of adventurous activities. Abandoning the contemporary definition of ‘romance’—love stories—Solnit uses instead its historical definition: an endless adventure through exciting and stimulating places (150). Through composing this story, Solnit transcends her heartbreak in a journey of infinite discoveries and possibilities. As she concludes the essay with her experience hiking on Mount Whitney, she elevates her excursion, noting that “as you get higher, the world gets bigger, and you feel smaller in proportion to it, overwhelmed and liberated by how much space is around you, how much room to wander, how much unknown” (151). Here, the ‘self’ is diminished before the enormity of the landscape, and there arises an awareness that there is a bigger world out there. Solnit insists that her readers experience the landscape with her, alongside her revelation: we can only gain value by breaking out of our small personal spaces and journeying into the vastness of the world. This epiphany is the ultimate prize: it is what Solnit wants readers to reach for themselves after reading her book.

Across Solnit's essays, there is always a dichotomy between being trapped in a limited space and traveling out to the limitless world. In "Abandon," Solnit reflects on the suicide of her good friend from adolescence, Marine: "Marine plunged into the unknown again and again, but she kept returning home, while I trudged on in a straight line away from where I'd started" (109). Here, suicide, like heartbreak, is a dead-end to the story, but it also represents an inability to look beyond one's personal pain. By juxtaposing Marine with herself, Solnit highlights the danger of being caged in personal space. She again implies that the right path is to push ourselves into the bigger world, in which infinite routes and opportunities are waiting to be explored and our limited selves are enlarged by the limitlessness of the world. Solnit also cautions that the process of getting lost and diving into the unknown requires the "prudent anticipation and a philosophical memory" of adulthood, things which "make you navigate more slowly and steadily" ("Abandon" 108-109). She warns readers against the dangers of the reckless act of simply "plung[ing] into the unknown," as Marine did ("Abandon" 109).

And yet despite this warning, Solnit still urges her readers to step into the unknown, to develop what the poet John Keats describes as 'negative capability,' or the ability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" (qtd. in "Open Door" 10). The unknown represents what's outside us and our limited cognition. Solnit tries to persuade her readers to erase the boundary between their personal space and the world by being in the unknown, introducing artist Yves Klein, who makes relief maps in which everything is dark blue without distinction. Unlike conventional maps, these maps represent uncharted territory. For Solnit, the map is a forceful rejection of any boundary between individuals and the world. For example, in "Open Doors," Solnit refers to the Wintu language, in which cardinal directions are used to describe body parts. Instead of saying "left" hand, a Wintu person would say "west" hand ("Open" 17). Solnit admires with enthusiasm the "cultural imagination" behind this language, which is exactly what she is advocating: "the self only exists in reference to the rest of the world" ("Open" 17). If there is no difference between the self and the world, the fear of being lost in the unknown will become non-existent. This idea also coincides with Solnit's style of linking

everything together in her writing: the self is not just immersed in the world, but interconnected with it in every single way.

By eliminating their personal boundaries, people allow themselves to come into the larger system of interconnectedness and coexistence: the unknown world. According to Solnit, the unknown not only eliminates divisions but also allows for contradictions. Referencing another Yves Klein piece, a photograph titled *A Leap into the Void*, Solnit uses “the void” as a metaphor for the unknown (“Blue” 172). She argues that the title could be read as a Buddhist phrase: the ultimate enlightenment of “embracing the emptiness” (172). In Buddhism, ‘void’ is defined by one sentence: “form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form” (qtd. in Richards 251). Because “form” and “emptiness” are antonyms and therefore cannot be equal to each other, this doctrine violates “the law of contradiction” (Richards 251). Solnit’s Buddhist interpretation of *A Leap into the Void* implies her belief in the power of the unknown to allow coexistence despite differences and contradictions. She argues that “embracing the emptiness”—the void—is equivalent to “embracing limitlessness,” which welcomes everyone regardless of personal differences (“Blue” 172).

However, human beings are not rational machines that can always step out of the personal. The emotional effects of personal tragedies are often so strong that people cannot escape them even despite their efforts to do so. Solnit’s own struggle to outgrow personal traumas can be seen in the emotional distance she strives to gain from herself. She refrains from making her essays too self-absorbed, trying to connect her deeply personal stories to bigger stories of cultural and political history. In “Abandon,” Solnit seems to have an emotional outburst when recounting her memories of Marine after learning of her death (103). The whole paragraph of vivid, bittersweet memories lasts for one page, with a sense of emotional urgency that almost amounts to an explosion. However, the explosion is soon contained by a sudden jump from Solnit’s memories to a deep reflection on the cultural and political atmosphere of that era: the thriving of liberals and activists, drug use, queer people, and artists, as well as Reagan’s nuclear brinkmanship and the imagination of a dark future filled with nuclear ruins (“Abandon” 104). Through such a turn, Solnit elevates Marine’s abandonment of her life to a generation’s abandonment of hope and

its subsequent fears of an apocalyptic world that would be a result of the “strange, complicated future that money, power, and technology would impose” (“Abandon” 106). In this way, Solnit distances herself from her emotions by reflecting on the cultural history of that period. A common theme across Solnit’s essays seems to be that of loss: the loss of a dear friend or the loss of a lover. However, Solnit always seems to speak against indulging in the pain of personal losses, constantly striving instead to put herself in a larger context, a larger world with problems and individuals beyond herself. She urges us in an interview to “remember that other people suffer, that other things are going on in the world, that even when you’re going through a huge tragedy, you can be enchanted or bewitched by some fascinating thing that comes along and forget yourself” (qtd. in Gritz).

By stressing the necessity of breaking out of our limited personal space and putting ourselves in the limitless world, Solnit is not telling us to get lost without purpose. Instead, she wants us to “[dive] into the unknown and [resurface] as someone new,” someone who can reemerge from personal losses, understand the interconnectedness and the openness of the world, and see the world as infinite unknown territory to discover (qtd. in Gritz). Perhaps Solnit’s motive is too idealistic for a society that creates egocentric individuals who are obsessed with personal gains and losses. However, in her battle to push herself and her readers into the bigger world, she truly raises the question: how could our limited lives be valuable in a limitless world? A feasible solution is to follow Solnit’s wisdom.

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