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Lisa Stevenson

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Four thoughts about *Knots and Holes*

Lisa Stevenson

There's a moment in Mattijs van de Port's *Knots and Holes* that offers a portal into his previous film *The Possibility of Spirits* (2016). The moment comes near the end of the film when a man being interviewed recounts the story of being possessed by the mermaid spirit Oxum and catapulted into the sea. As if this weren't frightening enough, a man-eating fish called Meru is reputed to live in those waters.

The man interviewed (as well as his mother) insists that he didn't (and doesn't) know how to swim. And yet he somehow manages to survive the deep-sea possession. It sounds as if, (though the story, like the ocean is not transparent) he was hefted by his mother, or maybe dragged by the sounds of the drum, out of the water and back into a canoe of revelers. We reel against the improbability of his survival. Van de Port asks the man, "Do you have a theory, an idea as to why this happened...Or is this simply inexplicable?" and the man responds, "I don't know how to explain it. I don't know" (2018: 1:05:00-1:05:18).

As his words take hold of us, a pulsating yellow sun comes into focus as the flame of a kerosene lamp. Van de Port's voiceover says: "Once upon a time in Bahia, I was told that a fat man in tight jeans became a frolicking mermaid. I'd like to think of that story as a reminder that if we refrain from throwing our nets everything is possible. As the mystics have taught us, encountering the marvels of the world begins by withholding the imposition of form."

One: Although *Knots and Holes* is ostensibly about nets it's still very much about *The Possibility of Spirits*.

Nets often seem to operate in the film as a kind of form given to formlessness, a catching up and drawing together of fish out of the watery depths of the sea, a method for separating the good from the bad, and just generally, as a form of ordering, locating and *knowing*.

Van de Port says, early on in the film, that contrary to what he might have said to his fisherman friend, this is not actually a film about fishing, he tells us, but “in fact [...] a film on the geometrical figure of the net and the way that figure plays itself out in human modes of worldmaking” (2018: 2:54-3:10). We see nets of all kinds in the film: fishing nets being knotted by thick fingered men, nets petrified into chain link fences, gauzy net-like curtains, netted stockings being pulled carefully over bulging flesh, nets of lace on dancing bodies, (and memorably on a certain head), lace being netted by machine-like hands...

The beauty and love of such netting is amply manifest. So is the texture of the worlds they circumscribe. And yet, withholding these nets seems to allow for the possibility of, well, everything, which includes the spirits, which may not be of *this* world, or reality of any world. And maybe that’s the point; spirits, or even the acknowledgement of the possibility of spirits, unmake the world as we know it—whatever world (or theory)—we are caught up in.

The problem, of course—one that van de Port alludes to—is whether it’s really possible to stop making and casting nets, to stop making knots and holes. And stay sane. And stay alive. The desire for formless plenitude, for the possibility of spirits, for the possibility of possession or merging with spirits, may be something akin to the desire for the dissolution of the self—or death. As the mermaid in tight jeans says, *he* will not enter the sea again. He will participate in the ceremony, but he will not enter the sea.

Two: Being without a net is more than risky.

In an essay published in *Visual Anthropology Review* (2018), van de Port, describes how he came to settle upon the essay film as the genre most able to convey, (or carry across) his material on the possibility of spirits. Because, of course, spirits are tricky to convey with film, especially because they are often invisible, and resistant to our everyday language. He writes that at first he was seduced by the promise of the “delinguified” films of Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab—films that privilege long-takes over interviews, and immersion in landscapes or long scenes of human activity without conversation, over the all-knowing voice-over explaining everything to you.

And we can see why he might have been seduced--the promise that we might circumvent the intellect by avoiding language is appealing. But as he points out in *Knots and Holes*, while the photographic image, through its indexical nature may “pull the world along with it” sometimes you don’t actually want the world. “I keep asking myself is that a problem or a promise?” So van de Port abandons the promise of de-linguified immersion, for the multiplying pleasures of the essay film. Van de Port’s voice over in the *Possibility of Spirits* says, “Over the years I’ve come to understand that for the people of Candomblé spirits do not pertain to the order of things that can be pointed out, named, and thus be known.” (2016: 11:29-11:42)

The essay film is perhaps more net-like than an SEL film, offering even more elements be tied into knots: the materiality of the voice with the words spoken, the words with the images, the sonorous quality of the voice with the light on the fish’s eye, the

notes of the piano with the struggle to get fishnet stocking over a leg. In the essay film's proliferation of knots, in the way it continually points to the artifice of the representation (through calling attention to a failed anthropological interview for example) it is also perhaps a better homologue for the baroque forms of representation van de Port describes in *Candomblé* rituals he is trying to convey allowing for "a deliberate highlighting of the failure of representation to capture the world in its entirety so as to leave the mysteries of the world for what they are: mysteries" (2011: 80).

But van de Port doesn't allow himself the satisfaction of thinking that the essay film is somehow the perfect tool or medium for his material—instead he frames film-genre in terms of the filmmaker's desire and objects of desire. He desires a form adequate to his images. Will he ever find one?

And it's from within this essay film, with all its penchant for poking fun at the seriousness of our representations—its calling attention to the various deceits of form, its calling attention to the knots, and also to the nets we throw without even realizing it—that van de Port keeps coming back to the possibility that we might withhold our nets.

Three: From within the netted-world of the essay-film—(think of the filmmaker as fish writhing in a net)—van de Port finds a way to gesture to what might be possible without a net. Or maybe he's just reminding us that nets have holes, and sometimes the fish escape.

In the final scene of *Knots and Holes*, van de Port talks directly to a lover who is not shown. We see some toes only, poised on the edge of a swimming pool and, van de Port says, "Seven years my love, trying to avoid the labels, I did not want to call you husband, partner, friend..." (2018: 1:08:27-1:08:40).

This scene is in some sense a love poem, a love poem that gives—and refuses—the possibility of language at the same time. It's as if the narrator, (van de Port) is saying that language, that all-too-necessary net, cannot contain or describe my desire. And yet, I use language anyway, because it's all I have. In the litany of not this, not that, not this, (not husband, partner, friend) what *is* conveyed, is a *desire* for the other, a plenitude that cannot be captured in language, a plenitude that we can't *know*. (Remember the fat man who became a frolicking mermaid, and his refusal to "know" what had happened to him). As van de Port's entry for the dating site says, quoting Levinas, "the caress does not *know* what it seeks." It's not that that the caress doesn't yet know, but could discover, but that *knowing* is the wrong verb. It seeks, but without knowing.

(Just to say that van de Port's voice in this scene is quite unlike the voice-over explaining systems of geo-locations to us. That voice would like to pinpoint and know exactly where we stand. Cheekily, van de Port wonders out loud if we can imagine such a voice having sex.)

In this case of the cross-Atlantic lovers, the voice, van de Port's voice—with all its materiality, its grain—conveys, carries something across. It carries the haunting desire to free the lover from the net of language, of labels, or geolocators of the heart. The desire to free the lover from the constraints of knowledge.

The tragedy and the beauty of the film is to recognize the impossible or otherworldly desire to love without labels, to refrain from throwing the net. Yet, through his chosen form—the essay film—van de Port has found a way to temporarily undo the net by drawing our attention to its very presence. Using theory to get beyond theory, net to un-net. And perhaps that's all that we can hope for.

Four: “Isn't it amazing,” as van de Port says, “that a fish is already caught in nets before a single net is thrown?” (2018: 1:07:42-1:07:50).

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