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## Stuck on Stuckness: On the Intractability of the Present

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This essay is part of the *C21 Literature* special issue, *The Century at 25*, which reflects on the first twenty-five years of the 21st century in literature and literary studies. The essay complements [the introduction to the issue](#) which identifies stuckness as a central theme across the contributions. This contribution serves as a 'hinge' that both connects and extends the articles in the issue, which have been assembled into two halves: the first concerned with crisis and chronology, and the second which brings (informational) technocultures into view. In doing so, this essay theorises stuckness as a concept that can be observed in a body of contemporary novels. Though stuckness is often most vividly depicted as an affective feature of contemporary life in these texts, it can also be traced through a material history of the present, as exemplified by certain aspects of technology, and to various political moments of the 21st century, as exemplified in ongoing and developing crises. To construct its account of present-day stuckness, this essay proceeds through brief readings of six novels published in the last five years: Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2022) and Sarah Moss's *The Fell* (2021); Ali Smith's *Summer* (2020) and Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* (2023); Carlos Manuel Álvarez's *False War* (2021, trans. 2025) and Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021).

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## Introduction

The characters in Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* (2023) are, as the text tells us in its opening sentence, 'Rotating about the earth' (2023: 1). Everything moves past the spacecraft: the earth 'reels away [. . .] peeling backward' (1); it is a 'rolling, glowing ball' (8); it is 'galloping through space' (13); 'hurtling' (19); 'slid[ing] past' (36) and 'sailing past' (36). The continents and oceans 'fall away beneath' (11) and the universe 'unfolds' (1). Time passes with a continual sense of movement that goes nowhere, with '[t]he mind [. . .] in a dayless freak zone, surfing earth's hurtling horizon' (13). All the while, the astronauts can only look upon this constantly changing world. Watching an impending typhoon, '[t]hey have no power – they have only their cameras and a privileged anxious view of its building magnificence. They watch it come' (24). It might seem reductive to compare the beauties of seeing the earth from orbit to the experience of scrolling on a phone in the dark, but the novel's imagery of actionless watching, of 'surfing', of the 'privileged anxious view' of the hurtling, sliding, galloping, rolling days seems unavoidably evocative of the closest thing mediated experience offers us to a planetary perspective.

*Orbital's* set up illustrates a particular contemporary experience and perspective that is reflected in certain current events that coincided in 2024 and 2025. They are a time capsule of events that happened when the century was turning 25 and mirror the contemporary stuckness we will describe. In the summer and autumn of 2024, *Orbital* was longlisted for, shortlisted for, and then won the Booker Prize. During this period, when many readers would have been encountering the novel for the first time, a real orbital drama was unfolding on the International Space Station. Four astronauts had become stranded above the earth when the Boeing Starliner that was meant to bring them home from an eight-day mission in June 2024 was grounded with technical issues. In the end, after months of problems with the Boeing spacecraft and the SpaceX rocket that was drafted in to replace it, they would eventually return to earth nine months later, in March 2025. By the time SpaceX's rocket eventually passed enough safety checks to rescue the stranded astronauts, NASA's webpages were being scrubbed of references to race and gender equality, as part of the anti-DEI initiatives overseen by Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). While the astronauts of Harvey's novel watched the successful launch of a manned mission to the moon, in reality human beings have not been on the moon since 1972, and twentieth-century dreams of space exploration have been recast as the private fantasies of billionaires. Stuck in space, watching global disaster after global disaster with no power to intervene, while privatised infrastructure fails around you: is this the characteristic experience of the twenty-first century in the global north?

What we are discussing in this essay under the name ‘stuckness’ is characterised by a form of experience which is not necessarily physically still, but lacking a sense of coherent progress. It is highly affectively charged but lacking agency. This experience is apprehended in *Orbital* in the orbiting astronauts’ ‘privileged anxious view’ of events they have ‘no power’ to change. Stuckness can watch and watch but not intervene. Stuckness can surf and slide and reel across the globe at speeds faster than anyone can physically move on the planet’s surface but not find a new path. It takes up a distanced, often technologically mediated position, combined with sustained, negative feelings. Stuckness has the temporal characteristics of anxiety: anticipation of the coming disaster, procrastinatory deferral, rumination, compulsive checking and exhaustingly repetitive rechecking. As a hermeneutic, stuckness is paranoid. If we want a model for stuck reading, that model is doom-scrolling. As Laura Salisbury explains, doom-scrolling is not just a way of killing time, but also ‘an attempt to jump start time into passing in conditions where it feels stuck’ (2022: 895). If you just refresh, reload the page, check for new messages one more time, maybe you can unstick the world.

Our analysis builds on the work of a cluster of *Post45 Contemporaries* essays on *Stuckness*, edited by Stephanie Foote. In the introduction, Foote argues that stuckness is not just about ‘feeling trapped’ or ‘a recognition of the limits of individual agency’, but a ‘rational response to the evacuation of once-expected possibilities [...]’ (2023). Indeed, stuckness in the contemporary may partly be explained by what Lauren Berlant describes as ‘crisis ordinariness’ (2011: 10). Because crisis is both systemic and widespread ‘across diverse geopolitical and biopolitical locations’ in such a way that ‘increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis’ (Berlant 2011: 7), we are stuck on crisis to the extent that it is normalised. The ordinariness of crisis renders it an ‘impasse [...] in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on’ (Berlant 2011: 8). Stuckness might then be understood as caught between slowness on one hand (manifest in the way geopolitical crises are slow to resolve, stalled by the conflicting interests of different parties) and acceleration – of climate crisis, techno-science, the financial industry and the rise of cryptocurrency – on the other. While scholars such as Marco Caracciolo have explored the aesthetic and experiential affordances of slowness for challenging narratives in which natural resources are instrumentalised by bringing to the fore ‘the rich interconnectedness of human subjectivity and nonhuman materialities’ (2022: 5), slowness to respond to other more violent political contexts is woefully inadequate. Beyond cultural studies, stuckness has always been pertinent for psychoanalysis – commonly as resistance or repetition – and, more recently, psychoanalysis as a framework of political critique. Despite its complicated history with politics, Amia Srinivasan points out that ‘what we come to know, when we have psychoanalytic knowledge of politics, is the reason things remain stubbornly as they are, even when it seems obvious that they should be otherwise’ (2025: n. pag.). The political import of psychoanalysis, then, is its capacity to explain stuckness as crisis ordinariness.

Stuckness therefore sits at the intersection of a narrowed material experience shaped by the interests of capital and the stalled, fearful temporality of the intersecting chronic crises of the present. As we explain in the Introduction to this special issue, the essays collected in *The Century at 25* find that digital experience and enduring crisis surface as two major preoccupations of contemporary literature and culture. Stuckness, we are arguing, is the feeling we find in the place where they meet. This essay sits, conceptually, where this special issue's two halves are hinged, and seeks to move this stuck juncture into new articulation. To construct its account of present-day stuckness, this essay proceeds through brief readings of six novels published in the last five years: Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2022) and Sarah Moss's *The Fell* (2021); Ali Smith's *Summer* (2020) and Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* (2023); Carlos Manuel Álvarez's *False War* (2021, trans. 2025) and Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021). The ways that stuckness appears in the contemporary novel are shaped by the form's ambitions to mediate between personal experience and a broader social world, as well as the inescapable temporal demands of narrative plotting. Without the scope for representative breadth, these texts – diverse in their settings, subjects, and tone – are selected for their capacity to demonstrate the ways that stuckness can manifest. In some cases, the texts resolve their plots of inertia, stagnation, or blockage but in others they seem to find ways to stick with stuckness and discover new forms of meaning within it. There are also ways in which these stuckness novels resist both scholarly and popular notions of trauma. Their interest in systemic malaise follows Berlant's well-known call for a 'moving away from the discourse of trauma – from Caruth to Agamben – when describing what happens to persons and populations as an effect of catastrophic impacts' (2011: 9). Moreover, they largely reject what Parul Seghal has identified as 'the trauma plot', a prevalent twenty-first century narrative structure (in fiction, film, and television) that works backward to an originary moment of trauma, rather than forward: 'unlike the marriage plot, the trauma plot does not direct our curiosity toward the future (will they or won't they?) but back into the past (what happened to her?)' (2021: 62). Stuckness novels are, of course, suspended somewhere in between. The brief readings in this essay attempt to chart the dimensions of an apparently intractable present in terms of digital mediation, political agency, temporality, and narrative possibility.

### **Stuck timelines and political inertia in Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* and Sarah Moss's *The Fell***

Stuckness appears in contemporary writing as an impression of the texture of digital experience, as the affective consequence of foreclosed futures, and as a stalling of the individual subject's agency in the face of structural injustice and complexity. In *Enduring*

*Time*, Lisa Baraitser notes that ‘modern time itself contains within it obdurate strands of the anachronistic; of slowed, stilled or stuck time’ (2017: 6; see also Koepnick 2014 and Salisbury 2008, 2017 on ‘slow modernism’). What the Marxist theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi calls ‘the slow cancellation of the future’ is, for Baraitser, the psychological perception that the future has been ‘emptied of its affective qualities such as hope, anticipation, longing or the promise of satisfaction or betterment’ (Berardi 2011: 24; Baraitser 2017: 8). Instead, what we have is an experience of the contemporary as ‘stuck, perpetually present and unable to change, leading to suggestions that we are living within the ‘tyranny of real time’ (Virilio 1999), the ‘continuous present’ (Harvey 2010), or indeed a ‘contracted’ present (Lübbe 2009; Baraitser 2017: 8). Baraitser describes her own monograph as ‘an unfinishable book about time’s suspension – modes of waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining – that produce felt experiences of time not passing’ (2017: 2).

Extended and unrelenting, the interlocking crises of the present contribute to the impression of stuck time. Without crisis-response or resolution, crisis has become a paradigm that keeps its affective urgency but loses its demand for action. Governments and the intragovernmental organisations meant to promote our common interests seem unwilling to act at the decisive moment of crisis – whether the climate crisis, genocide, or breaches of other international agreements or norms. As Andreas Malm and Wim Carton have recently argued on climate politics, for instance, the consensus among the most powerful people in the world seems to have shifted from a need for emergency action to reduce emissions to an attitude of deferral represented by the idea of ‘overshoot’ (2024). By this belief, excess carbon released in the present will simply be mopped up by as-yet-unavailable capture and storage technology. Similarly, AI boosterism holds that the problems of the present will be solved at some later date by computing power too complex to even dream of today. These futures are deferred but at the same time already locked in, past the point of no return. In Anna Kornbluh’s terms, we have reached a stage of ‘too late’ capitalism (2024). The connection between the present and the future has been severed and the role assigned to us is simply to wait for technology to produce the solutions to our problems. We’re stuck on the loading screen, installing updates and, as usual, the time to completion is fluctuating wildly.

The stuck temporality of digital experience surfaces strikingly in Sally Rooney’s novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, for instance, when the character Felix wanders around Rome continually refreshing his timeline: ‘He didn’t even seem to read the new posts before pulling down to refresh again’ (Rooney 2022: 87). As another character, Eileen, remarks, ‘The present has become discontinuous [...] the events of our lives make sense only in relation to a perpetually updating timeline of news content. [...] There is

only the timeline' (39). The timeline, as a digitally mediated account of the present, is experienced in contradictory terms by the characters. While Eileen characterises the timeline as 'perpetually updating', Felix's compulsion to refresh the page without reading the news posts suggests an experience of the present as unchanging and inconsequential.

While Rooney's fiction is often criticised for failing to mobilise the kinds of political critique she makes in her op-eds and public talks, it speaks precisely to the disempowering effect of structural injustice on individuals. Writing in *The Irish Times* shortly after the publication of her debut novel, *Conversations with Friends*, Rooney admits that she couldn't be sure the novel 'offered any resistance to anything at all', but the characters resemble Rooney and others today who 'don't really do anything about their radical beliefs, besides espousing them' (2017: n. pag.). By *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, Rooney's doubts about the political affordances of her fiction surface through Alice's reflections on the value of literary cultural production in a collapsing world. Alice, a novelist whose shot to fame resulted in a mental breakdown and withdrawal, overtly questions the novel's value when she confesses to Eileen that she 'can't read contemporary novels anymore' (Rooney 2022: 94). It is not simply because contemporary authors seem divorced from the ordinary life they depict in their fiction, but that the structural integrity of the contemporary Euro-American novel seems to be upheld by 'suppressing the lived realities of most human beings on earth' (Rooney 2022: 95). If 'put[ting] the fact of that poverty, that misery, side by side with the lives of the "main characters" of a novel' is aesthetically crude, then, Alice concludes, 'the novel works by suppressing the truth of the world' (Rooney 2022: 95–96). In writing this novel, Rooney distinguishes her own position from Alice's, but the question of what it means to be writing – and by implication, reading – amidst sociopolitical injustices and environmental collapse looms large and unresolved.

Sarah Moss's *The Fell* (2021) offers another perspective on the present as a crisis of failed political agency. The protagonist Kate meditates on life in the 'end times' (Moss 2021: 115). Sick with Covid-19, she has broken self-isolation protocol to walk on the titular fell, only to badly injure herself and get stranded outdoors. In a semi-hallucinatory state, her thoughts turn to future catastrophe, wondering if her teenage son and the 'next generation' will need 'pre-industrial skills' like 'organic farming and metalsmithing and spinning and weaving' (Moss 2021: 115). Kate's grim thoughts of our age of extinction are preoccupied by both catastrophe and the impossibility of action: thinking of her son, she reflects briefly that while as an adult she has come to love the outdoors, 'she wasn't interested in gardening at his age so maybe there's time, except that time is what there isn't, time is running short' (Moss 2021: 115). Ultimately, her

thinking coheres around the idea that '[o]ne of the things we're learning, we of the end times, is that humanity's ending appears to be slow, lacking in cliff-hangers or indeed any satisfactory narrative shape' (Moss 2021: 72). The end times are both too short to allow for action and too slow to comprehend as narrative. No cliffhangers, then, in which characters make a last-minute escape from peril through their own agency, but instead the slow stuckness of the wait for rescue, and recognition that the individual cannot survive alone.

Like *Orbital*, *The Fell* is narrated in the third person, and moves between a set of focalising characters. Though Kate's chapters are the most substantial, and the novel is oriented by her subject position, this narrative strategy situates her in broader contexts and different perspectives, giving texture to her stuckness through other characters. Kate is of course literally stuck on the fell and this central plot device provides an extreme example of Covid-19 isolation while also depicting her as caught between political impulses. Early in the novel, before setting off for her walk in the fells, Kate reflects on Covid lockdown in a way that ominously recalls Bill Hampton, villain of Moss's *Ghost Wall* (2018) – the first of a trilogy of post-Brexit novels exploring the anxieties and hostilities of the white working class in Britain, that also includes *Summerwater* (2020) and *The Fell*. In *Ghost Wall*, Hampden is obsessed with the Iron Age past, which he sees as an era of original Britishness, and continually bemoans what he perceives as 'softness' in contemporary Britain. Though Kate is in no other ways similar to this violent misogynist, she too considers the present in the context of the past, referring to the 'original inhabitants' of her village – in her case the Victorian mining community – and in similar terms. She recalls that there were 'epidemics then too' but that 'they got on with it, didn't they, people died and they were sad but they didn't wall themselves up' (Moss 2021: 22).

This self-justifying use of the past aligns with Kate's eventual eschewal of protocol designed to protect the public. Though her desire for fresh air and space is entirely understandable, it is also an act of individualism that poses risks to her community. However, in other senses Kate's characterisation and stated values identify her as a progressive leftist. She is a working-class folk musician, a furloughed waitress in precarious financial straits, a vegan who grows her own organic vegetables, helps her neighbours, and repeatedly bemoans the hypocrisies of the Conservative government. There are always caveats, though, and she even states that while she 'doesn't disapprove of lockdown or masks or any of it, not on principle [...] the longer this goes on the less she objects to dying and the harder it is to understand why other people don't feel the same way' (Moss 2021: 36). A present ungraspable as decisive crisis or as narrative cliffhanger, a present which simply 'goes on', produces not just a collapse of a feeling

of personal agency but also of shared responsibility. Both Rooney and Moss therefore identify a breakdown in narrative's potential for depicting agency which is related to a conception of the temporality of the present that includes the discontinuities of digital experience, the apocalyptic uncertainties of the 'end times', an instrumentalising relationship with history, and the dissolving of the bonds of shared, progressive future-orientation in the elongated present.

### **The accrual of stuckness in Ali Smith's *Summer* and Samantha Harvey's *Orbital***

Moss has been one of Britain's most politically engaged and prolific writers of the post-Brexit era. Just as Smith's *Summer* (2020), the final novel of her seasonal quartet, concluded a cycle of contemporary writing with incredible speed (publishing just months after the emergence of Covid-19 towards the end of 2019), *The Fell* was published in November 2021, with the pandemic still shaping sociopolitical life in Britain and abroad. The speed of these literary responses to crisis has given the texts a sense of immediacy and even urgency, but may also be at the root of what can feel like political paralysis.

This said, the serial form of Smith's seasonal quartet offers one technique for making legible the accrual and layering of a deep contemporary stuckness. *Autumn* (2016), for example, begins with stories of political division, xenophobia and racism, and the entrenched positions of extreme political polarisation have neither left nor resolved by the time of *Summer*. In this way, stuckness in relation to different and possibly worsening crises is accrued and deepened. At the same time, there are shifts brought about by the seasons' turning. By *Summer*, the context of the emerging pandemic sees some of those detained in *Spring*'s airless, suffocating immigration removal centres offered a place to live in the house where the events of *Winter* took place, and *Autumn*'s elderly Daniel Gluck is removed from his care home at the moment when those institutions became increasingly dangerous places for the most vulnerable. As Christina Lupton and Johanne Gormsen Schmidt explain in their research on reading during the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, reading and writing can be a way of 'processing time', and of conceiving of temporalities that have the potential to unstick the present. They write, 'to write and read about getting stuck in time does not necessarily involve staying stuck' (Lupton and Gormsen Schmidt 2023: 17). The serial and seasonal form of Smith's quartet introduces an element of temporal progress and repetition that allows her and her readers to 'process' stuck time.

The quartet's most striking image of the stuck present appears at the beginning of *Summer*. On Brighton beach one of the novel's main characters, Robert Greenlaw, sticks a glass egg timer to his older sister Sacha's hand with superglue and runs away:

She tries to open her hand to look at it properly. Her hand won't open for some reason. Whatever it is is stuck to her. Her hand is stuck to it.

It's an egg timer. [...]

She stands on the slope of stones shaking her hand as if to shake the stuck thing off. It's stuck right across her first three fingers. She can't uncurl them. She can move the thumb and the pinky.

They're not stuck. The other three fingers she can only waggle the ends of. (Smith 2020: 44–45)

The scene encapsulates a stuckness that is compounded by several layers. Sacha is stuck to an object that immobilises her physically, though not completely or irreversibly. She realises that she cannot 'scrabble or scramble' after Robert on the pebbles of the beach because she risks breaking the glass on her hand (Smith 2020: 44). She is also stuck in her relationship with Robert, with whom she cannot find common ground since he began repeating the bigoted positions of the country's politicians and then 'began to be foul about *her*' (Smith 2020: 36). He mocks her, treating with contempt her earnest belief in the possibility of a better world: 'my sister is an idiot. She actually thinks she can change the world, that with a bit of a nudge from her and her woke friends anything will change' (Smith 2020: 36). For Robert, any hope of dislodging the stuck present 'with a bit of a nudge' is risible.

But at the same time, Robert's prank literalises Sacha's fears about the lateness of the times and the intractability of the present. He sends her a text after he has run away up the beach, explaining the object that he had told her was a '[p]resent...[F]or the future' (Smith 2020: 44). His text: 'know how worried ur about how theres no time left so this woz best present I cud imagine from now on u will always have time on ur hands' (Smith 2020: 45). The prank makes use of two highly symbolic elements: the hourglass – used since the 2010s as a symbol of climate emergency (Osmond) – and superglue – the preferred means of immobilisation used by climate direct action groups such as Extinction Rebellion from 2019 onwards, now criminalised as equipment for 'locking on' under the UK's Public Order Act 2023. The prank provides an apt metaphor for Sacha's anxious relationship with time and her sense of the present as 'catastrophe', as 'prison cell' (Smith 2020: 26). And Sacha does, in the end, find it funny, managing to get a text to her brother thanking him for the 'exceptional bonding experience' (Smith 2020: 45). It is because she needs assistance to free herself from the stuck time of the hourglass that she meets the other characters who will set the final stages of the quartet's plot in motion.

The hourglass signifies in two directions, then: first, the ways that stuckness is compounded and accrued, with layers piled on top of each other. In *Summer*, Sacha

first references the pandemic in response to the recounting of an experience of pandemically charged anti-Asian racism towards her friend's Chinese grandmother in a supermarket. She understands the Covid-19 pandemic not as an exceptional event, but as one which adds to and compounds the existing structures of racism and xenophobia. One could argue that the pandemic stuckness has not really left us since 2020, despite the normality of public life resuming for the majority of people after the development of vaccines. Instead the stuckness of the pandemic has been added on to earlier layers of contemporary stuckness – of entrenched inequalities, of inaction on climate, of a failure of political imagination – deepening these feelings of immobilisation. The pandemic trauma and loss hasn't left us, with long covid and the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic persisting.

But *Summer's* hourglass also implies the ways that we might attempt to find some insight in the experience of stuckness. When Sacha hears the racist abuse suffered by her friend's grandmother, her thoughts dart from microscope images of the virus and its similarity to 'a little world that's been shot all over its surface', to Second World War sea mines, to the history of racism against Chinese people, to the ethics of eating any kind of meat, finally landing on the 'insanity' of humanity (Smith 2020: 40–41). The way in which her thoughts zoom inwards and outwards, from the microscopic to the global, from past to present, reinforces Sacha's tendency, even before the egg timer incident, towards trying to grasp the scale and dimensions of the present. Before her brother's text telling her he 'needs a hand', she has been imagining the world around her 'held in the palm of a giant hand' and wondering if that hand could be hers (Smith 2020: 32). A Blakean innocent, Sacha is already seeing the world in a grain of sand and attempting to hold infinity in the palm of her hand. The text from Robert that calls her to the beach, characteristically misspelled, reads 'think am about to do somer thing stupid ;-\` (Smith 2020: 32). As the novel tells us later, 'the English word for summer comes from the Old English *sumor*, from the proto-indo-european root *sam*, meaning both *one* and *together*' (Smith 2020: 262). Robert is about to do a 'somer thing' which will stick Sacha to time and to the telescoping paradoxes of the particular and the general, oneness and togetherness.

The characters of Harvey's *Orbital* dwell on the same experiences of polarised opposites as a way of finding a meaning in the intractable present. Harvey's novel explores these immobilising contradictions in relation to each of its six astronauts (two Russian, one British, one Japanese, one Italian, and one American). In some cases, this is articulated via comparisons between them, for example the difference between American astronaut Shaun's Christianity and British astronaut Nell's secularism is both 'trivial and insurmountable' (Harvey 2023: 45). Elsewhere, such terms are

attached to single astronauts, such as Pietro, the Italian crew member and his notion that ‘our lives here are inexpressibly trivial and momentous at once. Both repetitive and unprecedented. We matter greatly and not at all’ (Harvey 2023: 121). Nell’s experience of a spacewalk is one of both ‘claustrophobia’ and ‘agoraphobia in an instant...you have both at once’ (Harvey 2023: 82).

Mostly, though, there are evocations of a kind of shared experience of being stuck between opposing poles of thought or experience. The crew share uncertainty over whether the human ‘lust for space’ is ‘curiosity or ingratitude’ (Harvey 2023: 49); their orbit which sees them circle the earth sixteen times every twenty-four hours makes them feel as if they have been ‘nowhere and everywhere’ and like they exist in ‘all time zones and none at all’ or that it is ‘always now and never now’ (Harvey 2023: 63, 66, 76). Smith’s seasonal rotations and Harvey’s extended daily orbit therefore become ways of sticking with the present in all its accruing contradictions, even while fulfilling narrative temporality’s forward demands.

### **Stuck Movement in Carlos Manuel Álvarez’s *False War* and Natasha Brown’s *Assembly***

In their remote serenity, the astronauts in Harvey’s *Orbital* assume a planetary view which erases geopolitical division and conflict. This initial view of Earth evokes a sense of ‘friendliness and peace’, and the ‘seamless’ planet is stripped of borders and visible discrepancies in wealth and resources (Harvey 2023: 72). The final part of this essay turns to two novels which take up the history and present of bordering and of human movement through migration as part of their engagement with the stuck present.

Carlos Manuel Álvarez’s second novel, *False War* (2021; English translation by Natasha Wimmer, 2025), is a polyphonic narrative of a disparate but loosely connected group of Cuban exiles and migrants, and their friends and families left behind. Many of these characters have journeyed from Havana to Miami via Mexico City, and in this sense the novel registers a shift in routes of Cuban migrants, away from the perilous but less than 100-mile boat trip across the Florida Straits, to long and sometimes circuitous overland journeys. Yet, *False War* is an unusual migrant novel in that it rarely attends in detail to the actual journeys of its characters or to the truly brutal forms of ‘stuckness’ they can entail. Border walls, detention centres, checkpoints, and precarious crossings are mostly off screen in its thirteen interlocking narrative strands. This is not to say that the novel diminishes the many violences inflicted upon migrants, but it instead emphasises the pervasive psychological, social, and affective features of their lives. These features cohere in *False War*’s vision of a less visible form of stuckness, a seemingly paradoxical situation in which characters are physically mobile but in other

senses trapped. This begins from the opening lines, when one of the novel's first-person narrators emphasises physical mobility:

The sound of airplanes cut across the interminable sky of Mexico City. I couldn't hang around. I caught a flight to the border and crossed over in the South, riding buses for three days through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and part of Alabama before funnelling down into Florida. I saw the sick skies. Saw the streets and the fast-food joints and primordial gas stations of America. Looking at the map, you drift west to east across the mainland until all of a sudden you drop into this hole. (Álvarez 2025: 11)

Despite the imagery of movement, we soon learn that this character has drifted or dropped into a particular kind of hole that is less to do with his journey or his daily life in Miami Beach, than his longtime psychological state. He is haunted by the loss of his fiancé and home in an earthquake, and unsure of what life can or will be.

Most characters in Álvarez's novel share this absence of futurity. Certain visions of stuckness in *False War* can be traced to traumas of migration or what Anna Menyhért describes as a 'pre-migratory trauma' deriving from a 'deep disillusionment with the home country' (2020: 250). But the novel doesn't narrate these traumas and instead emphasises other defining ruptures or forms of uncertainty that are less attached to singular events or episodes. In the second of two central 'Interludes' situated in the middle of the novel, an 'exile' who has returned to Cuba 'doesn't understand yet what kind of plot his return has planted in him' (Álvarez 2025: 151). This line resonates across the novel's dense, fragmented narrative. Its characters, including 'the exile', struggle to understand the trajectories of their lives, the currents they are moving with or against, the plots they've fallen into or that have been 'planted' in them, or the holes into which they have drifted or dropped. Characters in Álvarez's novel work, socialise, and have forms of mobility – there are in fact strands where characters travel briefly to Paris and Berlin – but the novel is pervaded by a feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty that these movements are leading anywhere fulfilling. Indeed, much of the novel traces the meandering thoughts of characters as they drift around Miami Beach or the outer zones of Havana, tracking their impulses, desires, obsessions, and the idiosyncratic stories they share with each other to kill time. What emerges is a vision of stuckness that isn't attached to any particular migrant routes or diasporic tensions, but to a broader sense of foreclosed futures.

This said, state power looms palimpsestically in the novel's implication that wherever one arrives to or departs from, the inexorable power of the global north will shape life in the global south and for citizens of the global south. While in one sense, *False War* departs from the 'aesthetic representation of spaces such as airports, consular zones, freeports,

detention camps, gated communities, and the oceans', the focus of *Extraterritorial* (2020), Mathew Hart's study of depictions of state violence across borders, in other ways it exemplifies Hart's assertion that 'geography is not just a topic (topos) of the novel but an active force that shapes it from within' (2020: 7, 8). Indeed, movement across geographical borders is a structural feature of the work that ironically conveys a vision of stuckness beginning at the level of form. The polyphonic novel of interlocking stories is not a new phenomenon, but Álvarez's narrative is multiply fragmented and voiced. Its strands include several distinct first-person narratives, close and distant third person, and second person address. Their temporalities shift, and some strands even have distinct genre codings; one is noirish, another is melodramatic, and another autofictional, for instance. Yet, despite these very conspicuous divergences, there is a tonal or affective coherence to the novel that is not quite futility, but certainly a pervasive kind of lassitude. This coherence is also aided by the autofictional strand, whose title, 'False War', is the same as the novel's (the other twelve strand titles are different). Late on, its narrator reflects on the nature of the book he is writing and stories he is trying to tell again using the language of movement: 'the coherence of this splintered emotional grammar could only be maintained on the page, as text, with me as the magnet unable to attract all the fragments to myself and therefore going where the fragments happened to be' (Álvarez 2025: 247). Moreover, the autofictional narrator, again aligning with Hart's assertion about the inextricability of geography and contemporary fiction, not only cites his own movement toward the 'fragments', but insists that literature itself is both stuck and inherently reliant on movement:

It seemed literature couldn't be written unless from an absolute awareness of a force that always seemed to be fleeing the place it wanted to get to, a body seeking the spot it was already in, from which it shouldn't have moved in the first place. But at the same time literature seemed to actually be this constant straying, like a cathedral where all worship is of the god of error, the only god who inhabits all things, or so I imagined. (Álvarez 2025: 220)

Here again, is the emphasis on movement, and, simultaneously stuckness, in that 'literature' is a 'constant straying' that is always shaped by 'error'.

Though the autofictional narrator illuminates the organisational logic of *False War* by naming its ostensible centre, the novel remains irreducible and resistant to national allegory. The interconnected stories of its often-floundering individuals are never meant to add up to a coherent story of the struggle of a people. Yet, a loose sense of shared experience does come into view through the novel's oblique metaphors. One of the most vivid of these metaphors appears in one of the novel's final scenes, when

a woman named Elis – who features in four of the novel’s strands – at the end of a long day at work, walks into her closet and falls asleep standing up. When her partner, Fanboy, arrives home with their children, shouting up the stairs for her, she stays still and hidden for reasons she doesn’t entirely understand. This is typical of the novel’s use of metaphor. Elis isn’t sure why she has gone into the closet, ‘has no way of justifying why she was there’, but decides to stay, ‘to see how it all ended up’ (Álvarez 2025: 242). It is easy to imagine many of the novel’s characters in this situation: halted and hidden, unsure of what is to come, and unable to decode or interpret their own actions.

Natasha Brown’s *Assembly* (2021) presents its unnamed protagonist in very similar situations of inexplicable immobility within a present that is stuck, stalled, or halted. The novel’s protagonist is, on the face of things, a success story: an aspirational Black British woman whose individual drive has taken her on an ascendant trajectory of social mobility. But in her unceasing experience of racist microaggressions, harassment and violence, she receives the news of her cancer diagnosis as an opportunity to ‘stop the endless ascent’ and choose death instead (Brown 2021: 57). The protagonist’s experience of stuckness is of the impossible double bind of being a Black woman in Britain: ‘Exceed every expectation. But also, be invisible, imperceptible’ (Brown 2021: 58). The unspoken demand is of constant mobility, constant striving, but also to remain unmoving; to be exceptional, but also assimilate completely.

Many of the novel’s sections find the unnamed protagonist halted, unable to will herself onwards in her narrative or physical journey. In the novel’s opening vignette, ‘Alright’, the text describes a character – possibly a younger version of *Assembly*’s main narrator – who has been sexually and racially harassed at work, and who spends her lunch breaks ‘in the end cubicle of the ladies’ room [. . .] waiting either to shit or to cry or to muster enough resolve to go back to her desk’ (Brown 2021: 1). Later in the novel in a section titled ‘Here I Am At The Station, I Should’, the narrator is about to embark on a trip to her white boyfriend’s country house when she finds herself similarly unable to move:

But I’m here now. And I should at least move. I’m in the way, standing here. Jostled by the currents of rushing people, dawdling people, people arranged as families, clustered like ducklings. I’m right in the throughway. So come on now. Lift left foot and swing it ahead, spring forward. Don’t slow down, don’t stop. Don’t think. Just keep it moving.

Go get on the train.

But here I am,

still

stood, still  
at the station.

I really should (Brown 2021: 35–36)

Among the crowds of moving people, the narrator has become a blockage. The narrative hints at the techniques she has used to goad herself on in the past: guilt, a reminder of her responsibilities, reiterating how far she has come already, breaking up the task into smaller steps. But she remains physically stuck at the obligation of ‘should’ in the final, incomplete sentence.

*Assembly* finds the stuckness of its protagonist’s present to be rooted in the foreclosure of a future. When pressed to give aspiration-raising outreach talks to schoolchildren, the narrative of past and future begins to break down:

I’d traded in my life for a sliver of middle-class comfort. For a future. My parents and grandparents had no such opportunities; I felt I could hardly waste mine. Yet, it didn’t sit right with me to propagate the same beliefs within a new generation of children. It belied the lack of progress – shaping their aspiration into a uniform and compliant form; their selves into workers who were grateful and industrious and understood their role in society. Who knew the limit of any ascent. (Brown 2021: 23)

In accordance with the resistant affects of Sara Ahmed’s ‘affect aliens’ (2010) or Xine Yao’s ‘disaffected’ (2021), the protagonist’s refusal to participate in the passing on of feelings of aspiration and gratitude becomes a way of withholding the circulation of affects and preventing their accrual of value.

In other places, *Assembly* returns often to the narrator’s association of the future with reproductive futurity. Vanessa Montesi identifies the novel’s ‘reproductive geography’ as a preoccupation with bordering, fertility, and the intersection of race, nation and gender (2024: 89). For instance, when the narrator imagines futures for others, such as her working-class white British colleague, Lou, she can envision his future success borne down through his family line, as ‘his children will grow up knowing only this. Believing it’s free’ (Brown 2021: 78). As Montesi observes, ‘It is thus not surprising that the central metaphor and metonymy of the novel, a breast cancer, is attacking the protagonist’s reproductive system’ (2024: 89). The foreclosure of the protagonist’s future is symbolically tied to her reproductive cancer diagnosis.

If the reproductive future does not fit, neither does thinking of the future in financial terms. The protagonist conceives of her life as a ledger more than once, leading to her envisioning her death as a maximum profitability scenario: ‘I think of the cashflows:

the immediate death scenario. It's the tallest bar in the chart, a grab at money from years to come. A present valuation of me' (Brown 2021: 45). Training in financial services and her prudent management of personal finances have produced this precise assessment of her own value. But she also recognises the financial evaluation of her life as a repetition of the economic logic of imperial exploitation and enslavement: 'Any money that was spent on me: education, healthcare, what – roads? I've paid it all back. And then some. I am what I've always been to the empire: pure fucking profit' (Brown 2021: 47). Consequently, she is in a position to withdraw, to refuse to participate in the British state's biopolitical investment in her life. As she justifies it to herself, 'I don't owe [the empire] my next forty years. I don't owe it my next fucking minute. What else is left to take? This is it, the end of the line. I am done' (Brown 2021: 48).

More profoundly, then, the protagonist cannot find her place within the story of the nation. When her replacement passport arrives in the post it immediately brings to mind the precarity of first and second-generation British migrants within the hostile environment of the 2010s. The protagonist alludes to the Windrush scandal and 'the readiness of this government and its Home Secretary to destroy paper, our records and proof', and goes on to recall the notorious GO HOME vans that were a feature of Theresa May's tenure as Home Secretary (Brown 2021: 53–54). Like the contradictory demand to 'Exceed every expectation. But also, be invisible, imperceptible' (Brown 2021: 58), Britain's hostile environment produces the demand for all racialised citizens to both remain ready for deportation and assimilate completely. It overshadows the present with the fear of the knock at the door that will lead to detention, an event which is both anticipated and shocking, 'unexpected, always' (Brown 2021: 54). This precarity places the protagonist outside both a past and a future: 'Living in a place you're forever told to leave, without knowing, without knowledge. Without history' (Brown 2021: 48). While she cannot conceive of a liveable future for herself, her experiences of racism and anti-migrant hostility have also disconnected her from any legible past.

The novel conveys this experience of living 'without history' by reproducing the staggering 2018 tweet from the British Treasury offering the chirpy '#FridayFact' that British taxpayers 'helped end the slave trade' by paying off the debt of compensation given to slave-owners for the people they had enslaved (Brown 2021: 92–93). The only thing a refresh of the timeline produces in this context is a new version of the grossly distorted history of Britain's involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The ways that histories of racist violence and injustice persist into the present – a historical obscenity appearing on the newsfeed as a feel-good government tweet – produces a temporality that can find no trajectory forward into the future and is at the same time unmoored from the past.

*Assembly* therefore offers a series of models for temporal relations: the family tree, the chart of economic forecast, the social media timeline. Each of them are rejected as representations by the protagonist, who remains stuck in a present that cannot become a future and cannot be connected coherently to a historical past. *Assembly* also asserts the failure of literary, narrative form to address the experience of the stuck present. The novel's main section begins by identifying upward mobility as a narrative form that has lost its meaning. We, the audience of this story, are immediately cast as sceptical listeners to the immigrant story of opportunity and progress, which has become cliched and stale:

It's a story. There are challenges. There's hard work, pulling up laces, rolling up shirtsleeves, and forcing yourself. Up. Overcoming, transcending, et cetera. You've heard it before. (Brown 2021: 9)

The protagonist is exhausted by 'living up to' these expectations (Brown 2021: 13). 'Perhaps', she thinks, 'it's time to end this story' (Brown 2021: 13). One way of reading *Assembly*, then, is as an attempt to try and find an alternative to the immigrant family saga or the *bildungsroman* of assimilation. The times demand a narrative form that can capture the plotless experience of stuckness, of duration without action or revelation.

*Assembly* draws, like *Orbital*, on the legacies of modernist narrative compression. *Orbital* is a variation, from space, on the one-day novel, while the action of *Assembly* takes place over a few days leading up to a weekend garden party. Sara Collins in the *Guardian* called it 'a modern *Mrs Dalloway*', while the novel was blurbed by Olivia Sudjic, who described it as '*Mrs Dalloway* meets *Citizen*'. But unlike *Mrs Dalloway* or Mansfield's 'The Garden Party' – to which the novel more overtly gestures in the title of its final section, 'Transcendence (Garden Party)' – *Assembly* does not grant its protagonist a moment of clarifying comprehension. At the end of the novel, in its longest scene, the narrator goes up to a hill above her white boyfriend's country estate and, looking down on the preparations for a garden party, reaffirms her decision to reject cancer treatment:

Surviving makes me a participant in their narrative. Succeed or fail, my existence only reinforces this construct. I reject it. I reject these options. I reject this life. Yes, I understand the pain. The pain is transformational – transcendent – the undoing of construction. A return, mercifully, to dust. (Brown 2021: 96).

From her vantage point above the party hosted by her boyfriend's family she feels 'the thumping nationalism of this place' and feels herself to be a drum, 'against which their

identity beats' (Brown 2021: 96). When her boyfriend emerges from the scene below and spontaneously asks her to marry him, she understands that he is thinking of her only as some racialised other against whom he can develop an understanding of himself:

It's the impulse of a boy who himself understands, in his flesh and bones and skin, that he was born to helm this great nation – upon which the sun has never set. Not yet. It's bright, now. And the sky is impossibly blue. He's himself again. Here. At home, and rendered in sharp contrast to me. (Brown 2021: 99)

Along with the marriage proposal, the boyfriend delivers a version of Laura's final inarticulate revelation from Mansfield's 'The Garden Party'. Laura's stammering, "Isn't life..." from Mansfield's story becomes the young man's banal exclamation, "Life, it's...We've got to seize it!" (Brown 2021: 99). But if the protagonist's boyfriend is Laura, experiencing a moment of epiphany through the encounter with the body of the labourer who has died on the periphery of her family's delightful afternoon, *Assembly* shows that the protagonist understands that the man's revelation comes at the cost of her marginalisation.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist is left suspended, her decision made, and with her boyfriend expecting a positive answer to his marriage proposal. In another inversion of a modernist ending, rather than Molly Bloom's affirming 'Yes', *Assembly* anticipates a coming refusal that has not yet arrived:

His lips tremble with the strain of pursing; confident in the assumed yes, and yet, uncertain.

Suddenly, so uncertain. (Brown 2021: 100)

Like Smith's seasonal quartet and Harvey's *Orbital*, *Assembly* returns to modernist forms that attempt to rejuvenate the time of the present through the repetitions of the seasons and the days, but is unable to find epiphany or consolation in that repetition. While Smith and Harvey find that their modernist inheritance continues to give them models for a promise of renewal, Brown's character seems to face the intractable struggles of modernity while reaching the limits of modernism's artistic potential for liberation.

*Assembly* thus responds to its protagonist's position of stuckness by affirming it as a position of drastically limited agency in straitened circumstances. At the doctor's office, the protagonist has previously reiterated her decision to refuse treatment, thinking 'I earned this coat and this doctor and this life and now this choice' (Brown 2021: 57). The decision leads her to a final way of framing the story that she is telling:

as a warning or cautionary tale. In the penultimate paragraph of her diagnosis story, before she arrives at the garden party, she refers to a younger sister, one who mimics everything her older sister does:

And now she's at a firm just down the road. The sisters meet for lunch. The younger is sprinting down the same path and the elder can't stop her, can't hold her back. Can't free her from the endless, crushing pursuit. (Brown 2021: 58)

Rather than telling her story as a rising star whose trajectory should be followed, the protagonist instead narrates herself as a blockage, someone whose stuckness might halt others in their pursuit of aspirational mobility and therefore free them from endless movement. Instead of willing herself into movement to get herself out of the way, the protagonist of *Assembly* ultimately refuses to move, halts within the impossible double binds of gender, race, and migrant heritage, and stays stuck. Both *Assembly* and *False War* therefore put a stop to narratives that understand mobility as progress, and instead implement plotting that stalls in stuckness.

### **Conclusion: Sticking with Stuckness**

The texts discussed in this essay offer compellingly staged scenes of metaphorical stuckness: Rooney's unrefreshed timeline, Moss's wait for rescue, Smith's superglued egg timer, Harvey's orbiting astronauts, Álvarez's closet sleeper, Brown's blocked throughway. While metaphor offers a static encapsulation of stuck experience, the attempt to place that experience into a narrative plot is more demanding. What these texts have in common is recognition of the limitations of any attempt at meeting the intractable present with an aptly formed narrative. In Moss's *The Fell* we are told of the lack of 'any satisfactory narrative shape' (Moss 2021: 72) in humanity's present, while in Álvarez's *False War* the characters are unable to come to an understanding of 'what kind of plot' their stories have begun to take on (Álvarez 2025: 151). Sacha's search for a hero for her story in Smith's *Summer* and the systematic rejection of the heroic *bildung* of the individual in *Assembly* all become ways of figuring the tense relationship between narrative temporality and curtailed agency. In the end, the most successful of these texts find ways to entrench themselves further into stuckness – to get stuck on stuckness, to stick with it – and to find in it something of resistance to narrative itself that allows for a new purchase on the reeling, rolling, hurtling present.

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## Competing Interests

This is an article by the editors of the *Century at 25* special issue, who are also part of the editorial team of C21. The article has been through the journal's standard peer review process.

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