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Walking, writing and dreaming: Rebecca Solnit's polyphonic voices

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Abstract

American writer Rebecca Solnit has published 17 books since 1990, ranging from biography to cultural histories and art criticism to personal essays. Because her work is not easily classified and because she sits at the intersection of a number of different fields, her work provides a particularly interesting case study of hybrid practices in contemporary non-fiction. This article argues that her work is a form of literary journalism: polyphonic open journalism. Solnit's work demonstrates traces and practices arising from her training as a journalist that she has combined them with writerly and activist practices that produce a distinctive open form of literary journalism. This article develops a detailed case study of Solnit's *Savage Dreams*, her book-length investigation of the Nevada Test Site and Yosemite National Park, in order to show how her writing pursues a range of open-ended, associative strategies that create a choral effect: she moves from evocative to proclamatory to exegetical modes of writing as part of this multivoiced strategy.

Keywords

writing, voices, walking, polyphonic, dreaming, solnit, rebecca

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Walking, writing and dreaming: Rebecca Solnit's polyphonic voices

ABSTRACT

American writer Rebecca Solnit has published fifteen books since 1990, ranging from biography to cultural histories and art criticism to personal essays. Because her work is not easily classified and because she sits at the intersection of a number of different fields, her work provides a particularly interesting case study of hybrid practices in contemporary non-fiction. This paper argues that her work is a form of literary journalism: polyphonic open journalism. Solnit's work demonstrates traces and practices arising from her training as a journalist that she has combined them with writerly (Barthes 1974) and activist practices that produce a distinctive open form of literary journalism. This article develops a detailed case study of Solnit's *Savage Dreams* (1994), her book length investigation of the Nevada Test Site and Yosemite National Park, in order to show how her writing pursues a range of open-ended, associative strategies that create a choral effect: she moves from evocative to proclamatory to exegetical modes of writing as part of this multivoiced strategy.

Keywords: Rebecca Solnit; literary journalism; polyphonic journalism; Yosemite; Nevada test site; protest literature; creative non-fiction; lyric essay.

Rebecca Solnit is a West Coast, American writer, biographer and essayist often compared to Susan Sontag (Terzian 2007). The *San Francisco Chronicle* once parochially described her as who Sontag might have become if she hadn't abandoned California for New York (Kipen 2003). Like Sontag, Solnit is an example of what might be called a "freelance intellectual," somewhere between journalist, writer and academic but not simply described with any of those terms. Although she trained as a journalist, and has written for major magazines like *Harper's* and worked extensively as a freelance arts journalist, she has mostly built her reputation through publication of book-length works. Many of these books are deeply researched cultural histories and Solnit has been a visiting fellow in a number of international universities, but she has never held a fulltime academic position.

Solnit has published fifteen books since 1990, ranging from biography to cultural histories and art criticism to personal essays. *River of Shadows* (2003), her biography of pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge, won several accolades including a National Book Critics Circle award. *Wanderlust* (2000), a cultural history of walking, explores walking as recreation, pilgrimage and protest. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005) is a collection of personal essays that combines memoir, art history and politics. *Hope in the Dark* (2004) is an extended essay on activism in the Bush era. *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009) is a kind of sociology of disaster that traces the ways communities come together in times of crisis. She has also published several collections of essays, a delightful book of maps of San Francisco, written in collaboration with a range of local artists and writers, called *Infinite City* (2010).

In this article I will introduce Solnit's work as a form of literary journalism that I call polyphonic open journalism. Because her work is not easily classified, and because she sits at the intersection of a number of different fields, her work provides a particularly interesting case study of hybrid practices in contemporary non-fiction. I will argue that Solnit's work demonstrates traces and practices arising from her training as a journalist, but that she has combined them with writerly (Barthes 1974) and activist practices that produce a distinctive open form of literary journalism. Through an analysis of Solnit's *Savage Dreams* (1994), her book-length investigation of the Nevada Test Site and Yosemite National Park, I will show how her writing pursues a range of open-ended associative strategies that create a choral effect rather than merely constructing a traditional prose argument or narrative plot. I will also show how she moves from evocative to proclamatory to exegetical modes of writing as part of this multivoiced strategy.

Writerly journalism: creating choral effects

Solnit has acknowledged the importance of her training as a journalist at Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, but also noted that she always found the journalistic focus on traditional, fact-based, objective news style problematic. She told the *Columbia Journalism Review*:

I could never attain that perfectly flat voice that I think is as affected a style as any but that's supposed to be the style of objectivity. But I understood what it was and when to restrain opining and expressing and florid touches and individual style. Basically I think it gave me a good sense of when that's relevant and when it gets in the way and undermines what you're trying to do. There was one news professor that I really drove nuts, because of my inability and/or refusal to write in that tone that I think is both Hemingwayesque and ultimately masculine in ways that are dubious. (Terzian 2007: 52)

She also acknowledged her early experience, as an art reviewer for a local newspaper and a researcher for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, as important training grounds for her later writing:

I think the sheer volume of those early years was really great. In the way that musicians have to play a lot of chords, writers have to write a lot. The short review is like a very short essay. You have to set the scene, you have to layout the facts and somehow negotiate the relationship between them and your opinions and ideas and interpretations, and you have to come up with some kind of conclusion, and a lot of times you have to do that in eight hundred words. (Terzian 2007: 53)

We can see here, in Solnit's description of her negotiation with the traditional practices of journalism, a concern with tone of voice, scene setting, the delineation of opinion and point of view, and the development of a style that is both expressive and clear. As I will show below, these concerns recall the factors that a number of writers and scholars have outlined when defining the emergence of literary journalism in its various forms. Solnit has never been claimed by the anthologists of these various literary journalism movements (Sims 1984; Sims & Kramer 1995; Boynton 2005; Kramer 2007), but I will argue that her work both exhibits and extends many of their concerns and techniques.

Attempts to theorise the elements that distinguish literary journalism as a journalistic and literary form have tended to veer between those which focus on a set of particular writing practices and those which try to describe a broader philosophical approach to writing and journalism. Tom Wolfe's initial attempt at a definition, in his introduction to his influential anthology, pointed to four elements of writing practice (1973:46-47). He defined the "new journalism" of his title as a true story created from

- scenes;

- whole dialogues;
- point of view; and
- details of characters' "status life".

In her book length study of four key literary journalists, some twenty years later, Barbara Lounsberry (1990) still focuses on writing practices like "the scene" in her introduction to the genre. But she broadens out her definition to include the process and style of writing. She delineates four key characteristics of literary non-fiction:

1. It chooses documentable subject matter from the real world as opposed to "invented" from the writer's mind
2. It is the product of exhaustive research
3. It is centrally based in a consideration of "the scene"
4. It is artful fine writing or literary prose. (1990:xiii-xv)

However, out of this rather dry structural shell, Lounsberry then develops a far more important typology, which points to the "sense-making" perspectives of the four writers in her study. She notes their importance in "addressing many of the persistent themes of the American imagination" (1990:xvi). These themes include, according to Lounsberry, the conflict between the individual and society, and the continuing efficacy of the "American Dream". In a further classification, she links the concerns of the four writers under consideration with broad ongoing mythic traditions in American culture. She casts Tom Wolfe as prophet: "an American Jeremiah" in the evangelical tradition of the revivalists. She links John McPhee to the transcendentalists and "the charming temper of Emerson's and Thoreau's relentless idealism". Joan Didion is cast against a narrative of the fall: a writer who "insists on human sin and punctures all illusion of individual or national melioration." Finally, she places Norman Mailer with Whitman, Miller and Hemingway, and a regenerative tradition that demonstrates that "individual growth and change can be a model of social growth" (1990:xvii).

Although Lounsberry fails to make this jump, the mythic/sense-making/nation-building concerns displayed by these writers could well have formed a fifth definitional characteristic in her typology alongside the structural and epistemological concerns. As she ably demonstrates, these concerns are more central drivers of their work than mere stylistic concerns. And although the specifics differ, taken together, this impulse towards the mythic dimensions of cultural life is certainly a common defining characteristic.

Norman Sims (1984), in the introduction to his anthology of literary journalism, makes such sense-making elements more explicit in his criteria, which include attention to the "historical sweep" of the story and a concern

with “symbolic realities”. Whereas Lounsberry acknowledges the importance of exhaustive research, Sims contextualizes this as a particular type of research that involves “participation and immersion”.

Sims’ criteria are indicative not just of evolving scholarship, but of an evolving form. Like all forms of writing, literary journalism has evolved since Wolfe defined the emergence of the New Journalism, and Robert S. Boynton (2005) has more recently documented what he calls the “new new journalism”. Boynton situates this “maturation of American literary journalism” at the intersection of the 1960s new journalists’ concern with formal experimentation and the concern with social and political engagement of their nineteenth-century predecessors (he is thinking here of writers like Lincoln Steffens and Stephen Crane). He describes the key elements in this latest incarnation of literary reportage as a form of journalism that is: “rigorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated and politically aware” (2005:xi).

What I call in this essay polyphonic open literary journalism draws on these previous categorisations of both the form and process of the various “new journalisms”. It also draws on the work of Ruth Skilbeck, who has written about the “fugal modality” in her own arts journalism (2008) and other writing practices (2010). Skilbeck, drawing on the dialogical theory of Bakhtin (1982), uses the musical fugue as a metaphor for the incorporation of multiple voices into journalism:

The musical fugue (derived from the Latin fuga for flight) is a self-referential reflexive melody-based form that produces potentially infinite variations on a theme through the interweaving of ‘voices’ (instruments) using techniques of polyphony and counterpoint. The modality of the fugue form is one of possibility, coming into being, contingency, change—and also cause and effect. As it is based on an individual interpretation of a given theme, it is a particularly apt model for art journalism and aesthetic criticism which responds to an artistic text or texts. As the fugue is composed of individual voices melodically playing interpretations of a theme it is also a model of democratic pluralism and cultural diversity. (Skilbeck 2008:147-8)

Skilbeck’s fugal analogy makes explicit not just the value of a multivoiced approach but that this choral effect goes beyond any traditional understanding of multiple sources and a balance effect. While Skilbeck and the traditional “professional ideology” (Deuze 2005) of objective journalism are both concerned with servicing democracy, her concern with “pluralism and cultural diversity” seeks to actively engage with multiplicity rather than merely provide two-sided balance. Both the notion of the choral fugue and the notion of “the scene” point to writing as a space where ideas and images

emerge rather than a space where facts are merely collected, reiterated and arranged.

In traditional journalism, balancing multiple sources supposedly builds an easily apparent but singular “truth” by gradually showing it from all sides. But Skilbeck’s fugal form of writing embraces multiplicity as a way of acknowledging the contingency of facts: it entertains contradictions and always allows for complexity. It is what Roland Barthes called a “writerly” approach, where writing and interpretation are constituted by a “triumphant plural”; by “ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world”. In Barthes’ “ideal text the networks are many and interact, without anyone of them being able to surpass the rest...we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (1974: 5). He contrasts this to the “readerly” approach where meaning is set and is “nothing more than a referendum” (1974:4).

I have previously described this multivoiced approach to journalism, which seeks to open-up possible meanings rather than foreclose interpretation, in an analysis of two journalistic responses to the 1988 murder of Matthew Shepard (O’Donnell 2009). Shepard, a young gay student, was left tied to a fence near death, in Laramie, Wyoming. After his death the case became the focus of a national campaign for hate crimes legislation. In that case study, I suggested that a multiperspectival approach, which involves a “compassionate questioning” rather than the “ethic of toughness” characteristic of traditional investigative reporting, is particularly important in journalism dealing with vulnerable minorities.

Nicholas Lemann, a former *New Yorker* staff writer and Dean of Columbia Journalism School, told Norman Sims that establishing this type of connection between particular narrative forms and socially compelling content is one of the prime challenges for the evolving field of literary journalism.

Lehman has argued that narrative technique can be an empty vessel if it lacks a solid intellectual content. If the defining moments of twentieth-century journalism have been the arrival of narrative technique in new Journalism and investigative technique during Watergate, Lemann says, then the next challenge is achieving the explanatory power of, say, political scientists. “If the issues of narrative technique that dominated the consciousness of nonfiction writers for most of this century now seem to have been largely worked out and therefore to have become less compelling,” he said, “the issues of intellectual content, style and voice (and of their marriage to the narrative form) have only just begun to be explored.” (Sims 1995:9)

I will argue in this article that a consideration of Solnit's work provides such an exploration. Not only does she use a range of impressive stylistic devices to create scenes, dialogue and points of view, she does this as a rich collage of images and voices that present a compelling and socially significant story. Solnit is deeply immersed in her storytelling, she is both personally present and attentive to her sources, and she writes from an engaged perspective that drives both a sense of writerly discovery and her vision of social change.

Writing and walking: the posture of discovery

When she was asked (Cohen 2009) a few years ago how she would categorise her work and her writing, Solnit recalled a passage that she had written in her history of walking, *Wanderlust*:

This history of walking is an amateur history, just as walking is an amateur act. To use a walking metaphor, it trespasses through everybody else's field—through anatomy, anthropology, architecture, gardening, geography, political and cultural history, literature, sexuality, religious studies—and doesn't stop in any of them on its long route. For if a field of expertise can be imagined as a real field—a nice rectangular confine carefully tilled and yielding a specific crop—then the subject of walking resembles walking itself in its lack of confines. (Solnit 2000:4)

Then she added:

I have a very clear sense of what I am here to do and what its internal coherence is, but it doesn't fit into the way that ideas and continuities are chopped up into fields or labeled. Sometimes I say I'm an essayist, because that's an elegant, historically grounded—if sometimes trivialized—mode of literature, while nonfiction is just a term for the leftovers when fiction is considered to be paramount, and creative nonfiction is even more abject a term. (Cohen 2009)

The root word for "essay" connects it to weights and balance and an essay originally had the sense of testing something out, or weighing it, an essayist was originally someone who conducted experiments in writing, tested out ideas. In this sense the term suits Solnit well, because her work is always testing out ideas both in content and in form. As she herself suggests: "walking," or perhaps meandering or wandering, is also a perfect metaphor for her work; not just because it is a constant theme in her writing but because it expresses something very important about both her method and style. In her work she meanders or trespasses across a range of disciplinary fields, but more significantly walking is an important metaphor for her work because it links it to both a sense of place and the mechanics of both the mind and the body. In her history of walking she goes on:

Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals....Walking, ideally is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord.....The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were travelling rather than making. (5-6)

In Solnit's description we see the way that her walking metaphor and Skilbeck's fugal analogy come together. Solnit describes the act of walking as producing a "chord" where the notes produced by mind, body and world harmonise. What I am calling polyphonic open journalism is defined by these various processes:

1. It brings together multiple voices in a choral effect; but also
2. It values multiple styles of knowledge both sensual and rational: from mind, body and world; as well as
3. Valuing interdisciplinarity and the contributions of different fields;
4. It allows for both the intentionality of argument and the meandering of associative thinking; and
5. It is about rhythms and echoes as well as about things seen and noted.

For Solnit writing, like walking, is an "intentional act" which settles into its own rhythms, which produce thoughts, experiences and arrivals. Writing is a conversation, which traces the connections between the geographies that we visit, inhabit and explore, and the bodies that have developed particular histories and trajectories moving across these landscapes. Like thinking and walking, writing is perhaps travelling rather than making; or perhaps writing is the kind of making that happens through travelling, through movement of the eyes, the body and the mind.

Solnit describes her book about the Nevada test site and Yosemite, *Savage Dreams*, as a breakthrough book for her and a key marker in her discovery of this unique approach to writing:

My big breakthrough was at the Nevada Test Site. I realized there that the genres—first-person lyrical essay, reportage, critical analysis—couldn't be separate, that I needed all the tools to describe a place so complicated, a place where all kinds of cultures, histories, and ideas converged and collided, filtered through my own experience camping out with the antinuclear activists. That breakthrough led to *Savage Dreams* and the mixed, meandering style I've mostly used since. It was breaking through genre, in some ways. (Cohen 2009)

Savage Dreams is subtitled "A journey into the landscape wars of the American west." In it she examines the history of this slice of land at the intersection of California and Nevada that has been the site of wars over both indigenous rights, the environment and the nuclear arms race. It is also a search for a language and style to capture this complex history. She says at one point: "I realized that I had been living in a war zone all of my life without noticing the wars, since they didn't match any of the categories in which I had been instructed." (88)

Religious groups began protesting at the Nevada test site in the late 1970s and big annual protests were held between 1985 and 1994. During this time nearly 16,000 arrests were made for trespassing into prohibited zones. Solnit became involved in these protests through her brother David who was one of the movement's chief organisers. Her book is divided into two parts: the first part deals with her participation in the protests over a number of years and documents the stories that she hears from participants, from the native Americans she meets and from her own observations and research as she walks and drives through the landscape. The second half of the book is about Yosemite National Park – again the narrative is driven by Solnit's own exploration of the area and her conversations with park rangers and Native Americans. In this section the story of James Savage and his war against the local Indian people is a key story just as the struggles of the Shoshone people are at the heart of the first half of the book. In the second half she ponders "the speed at which the valley was transformed from an indigenous stronghold to a war zone, to a tourist attraction." (232)

Solnit says that she learned to write at the Nevada test site. In fact she says it was the *place* that taught her to write because "trespassing into this most bombed place on earth" taught her that *place* could be *problematic* (2007:1).

We can see in this assertion, and the writing that follows this insight, the importance of the fusion of innovative style and socially relevant content that Nicholas Lehman signaled as important for the development of the literary journalism genre. Solnit's concern with place is not merely about developing the evocative style of nature writing – although she very ably does this – she is concerned with the "problematic" of place – the way geopolitical histories

reveal cultural tensions and unresolved issues. This includes both historical investigations of the land and its people as well as scientific investigations of the consequences of nuclear testing. It includes gathering stories from people *in situ* and it includes traveling, walking, observing and experiencing place. It means bringing all these elements together in a choral or polyphonic effect but one that allows for dissonant chords as well as melody i.e., one where balance doesn't seek to ameliorate or disguise the ongoing *problematic* of place.

Walking through Nevada: proclamation, exegesis and evocation

Solnit literally moves into her story. The opening scene has her driving into the Nevada test site and then walking through the camp in search of her brother. And throughout the book she is constantly walking. This is not merely a connective strategy that allows her to join incidents: for Solnit walking is a posture of discovery. Even when she is retracing familiar paths the posture of discovery is still evident because walking traverses both space and time and is therefore a discovery of place and history. Thirdly it is also often an encounter or a discovery of and *with* people.

To say that Solnit's writing is about space, time and people may seem like a truism, as setting, incident and character are the familiar components of any narrative. However it is her process of engagement with each of these elements which distinguishes her writing. For like the act of walking – movement where “the mind, the body, and the world” act in concert to strike a “chord” – Solnit's writing is always consciously and reflectively in play.

After her opening walk into and through the initial moments of the story, the chapter continues when Solnit meets the other activists and she meanders between the story of her current visit, her past visits, the history of the protest and the history of the site. In this opening scene Solnit drives into her narrative and sets up tent – makes herself at home by planting herself, by surveying her scene and then by walking through the landscape – all the while remembering the history of the place. Her reflection on not just the human history of the landscape but the geological history is important because it allows her to not just enter into a different place but to enter into a different sense of time. This sense of time is the slow time of discovery, the long view of history. Later in the chapter Solnit says: “I came to the test site four springs in a row and the third spring the spring of 1990, the place begins to make sense to me” (20)

She allows that walking, protesting and writing all gradually lead to discovery but that this does not take place all at once. And that the long view – the view of geological time that she learns from being in the desert – is the view that must be brought to activism, to thinking, to walking and to writing. In another

interview she again asserts that writing *Savage Dreams* was a breakthrough in her evolution as a writer, and she puts it this way:

I was finding a way to bring together the pieces that you need to describe something as complex as those subjects and to describe the act of discovery so you don't set it up as "I know and you don't." It instead becomes, "This is how I found out about this struggle, about this place, about this crisis, about this bizarre history," and so you foreground yourself not as particularly important or enlightened, but like Virgil to the reader's Dante. And maybe this comes out of postmodernism, to establish that you're not even pretending to be objective, that you have a point of view, and that the most honest thing you can do is make that point of view clear. (Terzian 2007: 53-4)

But this is not just about an abstract postmodern technique. It is a realization that things change as we walk, things change as we protest, resist, things change in and through the process of writing and reading. Both writing and reading is about surrendering to this different sense of time. However, what makes Solnit's account compelling is that she manages to simultaneously position her uncertainty, her struggle and her belief. She admits:

I am not sure what our purpose was – curiosity? – but my own desire was always to walk as long as possible across the land that was off limits. "Reclaim the Test Site" the big American peace test action of spring 1988 had been called. Walking claims land not by circumscribing and fencing it off as property but by moving across it in a line that however long or short connects it to the larger journey of one's life, the surrounding roads and trails, that make it part of the web of experience, confirmed by every foot that touches the earth. (20)

This web of experience that is metaphorically and physically revealed in the act of walking, that is claimed by the protester who says – I will walk in this place, I will lay claim to this space that is not marked on a map and I will walk respecting its ecology, its history and its original custodians – this walking is both story gathering and storytelling.

Although she is often poetic and although she is proudly "west-coast," she is never indulgently "new age," and so when she refers to the theory of "ley lines" – "a theory about lines of energy that traverse the earth, running through sacred sites" – she does so with a type of skeptical respect:

I'm not sure about ley lines, but I believe in lines of convergence. These lines are no more visible in the landscape than ley lines, and I am not even proposing that they have any existence outside our imagination – which are themselves territories. These lines of convergence are the lines of biography history and ecology that come together at a site, as the

history of nuclear physics, the Arms Races, anti-Communism, civil disobedience, Native American land-rights struggles, the environment movement, and the mysticism and fanaticism deserts seem to inspire in Judeo-Christians all come together to make the Nevada Test Site, not as a piece of physical geography, but of cultural geography, not merely in the concrete but in the abstract. Such places bring together histories which may seem unrelated – and when they come together it becomes possible to see new connections in our personal and public histories and stories, collisions even. A spiderweb of stories spreads out from any place but it takes time to follow the strands (23-24)

A little later she goes on: “This is the abstract whose weight I have tried to feel bind every concrete gesture at the Test Site, a place that however few may see it, however invisible it may be, is the hub of so many crucial lines of our history.” (25)

Then the abstract collides with the concrete, her reflections on protest, walking and the converging lines of stories are mixed with her description of protesting, running from security guards through harsh desert and being arrested. She continues: “But it was hard to remember all this while pulling thorns from someone’s sweaty feet with my hands cuffed together.” (25)

We can see in these excerpts the way that Solnit brings together three quite different styles of writing in a complex polyphonic effect. These three styles I call:

- The proclamatory: a strongly pitched authorial voice that lays claim to the value and meaning of protest;
- The evocative: descriptive and lyrical writing which situates her narrative in personal anecdotes and observations of place; and
- The exegetical: which stitches together the broader sweep of history with the events of the present.

Solnit’s gift as a writer is in her ability to move from the proclamatory mode of the prophetic voice to the evocative lyricism of the poet or nature writer and then into the exegetical questioning of the critic. Woven through these various modes of expression, Solnit is also sure to include the voice of others, which is key to the creation of her polyphonic effect.

In her trip across Nevada, in the third chapter of *Savage Dreams*, we can trace the intersection of these three modes with what I have been calling her “polyphonic” approach. Just as her introduction of the Peace Camp in the first chapter is built around a long walk, her exploration of some of the surrounding areas is built around a three-day drive across the state.

The chapter is called “April Fools” because at one point one of her companions plays an April Fool’s Day joke on her and her colleagues: sadly telling the story of the arrest of one of their key protest companions. But the chapter head signals a deeper concern with the nature of stories and their authenticity, with our ability to read the hidden signs in history and the landscape, as well as our capacity to be tricked by government obfuscation and propaganda. It is through constant movement both physically, in her protest walks and her driving, and stylistically, in her constant movement across time and place, that Solnit gathers together the multiple voices of her story to guard against this possibility of being fooled.

Solnit begins simply, anecdotally, by describing the signing of a peace treaty – “The People’s Comprehensive Test Ban” – a treaty of international activist groups that preceded and modeled a possible treaty for government. She describes the signing ceremony in the desert and notes that “it took a certain bravado to sign an international treaty in a little stage in a vast open space so far from any city.” But she locates this act in the symbolic realm, a ritual that “gave a kind of heart to our actions here at the heart of the arms race, actions that reached far out into other communities into the political bloodstream of this and other countries.” In this opening section Solnit both describes and asserts the importance of these actions and *proclaims* some of the ritualized beliefs of activism:

Civil disobedience asserts that we are the public, and that as the public we will be actors in history, not an audience to it. Direct action takes back history from the corridors of power and gives it to the public gathered in public places. This is what public places – city squares, the Capitol steps – are for, for the generation of a public, though it was more unusual for the public land of such a remote place to be put to such use.
(69)

She then narrates another protest walk and arrest before launching into the long drive that forms the major part of the chapter. On this initial walk she again meets photographer Richard Misrach, a landscape photographer with whom she has had a long conversation in the previous chapter and through Misrach introduces one of her major themes: the West as a physical and mythological landscape.

The whole book is an exploration of this western corner of the United States, but it is also an exploration of the call of the “West” as frontier of colonization in American history, the call of progress and manifest destiny. Solnit also personalizes this tension by recalling her attraction to Europe and remembering that at this time she was considering taking up a fellowship at Oxford and had to decide whether she wanted to focus her study and writing

on the “roots or the branches”. Whether she wanted to look “east” to Europe or “west” to her own landscapes.

The main part of the chapter, framed by her drive through Nevada, narrates Solnit’s conversations about the proposed underground nuclear storage facility proposed for the Yucca Mountains. She begins her journey in a car with Chris Brown, an activist, who guides her through the landscape, pointing out its sights and their significance. This leads her to conversations with various scientists about the competing claims and a deep *exegesis* of the long-term effects of storing radioactive waste in the fragile ecosystem of the desert.

As she begins this journey she reflects on how we “find out what (we) have been seeing”. Although she had been along this route many times, it is only now with a guide that she actually sees more deeply into the landscape’s history and significance. She compares this trip through the desert with her youthful discovery of the great cathedrals of Europe and how the immensity of those buildings confused her until she learned the significance of their cruciform shape that always pointed east towards sunrise and Jerusalem. She also notes how “the main portal was in the west, the end of things in Christian theology and therefore often featured an image of the last judgment” (76). This seemingly brief comparative reference is part of her fugal strategy: the building of themes of the east/west divide; of reading the signs of place; and of apocalyptic endings and judgments.

Hovering over the whole narrative of the book is this apocalyptic impulse that circles around the catastrophic power of the nuclear bomb and its consequences. Throughout this chapter, Solnit gradually weaves an apocalyptic fugue, first with references to hell, then to scenes of the last judgment, and, finally with the reflection of one scientist on the destructive possibility of nuclear waste stored underground seeping into the water system:

You flood that thing and you could blow the top off the mountain. At the very least the radioactive material would go into the groundwater and spread to Death Valley...You couldn’t stop it. That’s the nightmare. It could slowly spread to the whole biosphere. If you want to envision the end of the world that’s it. (81-2)

But this is only part of the polyphonic effect that Solnit’s meandering creates because she matches this with her tales of camaraderie and camp fire singing, and tales of the long enduring connections of the Shoshone to this area. Then as she does throughout the book she moves back *evocatively* into the landscape:

Seven mustangs loped across the road, five chestnuts, a bay, and a black, gleaming and fine in the glimpse we were given. Now three days into Nevada and halfway across the state, I was beginning to forget where I'd come from and what I did there. The stories about military atrocities and the roll of landscape mesmerized me, and the extraordinary spectacle of exuberant wild horses seemed of a piece with this expedition with cowboys and Indians into an interior world I'd never quite believed in, a West endlessly at war. (85)

Solnit ends this part of her journey waking at their final campsite and going to see a series of local petroglyphs – ancient rock engravings, “faint signs of a culture and a relationship to the land that they didn't evoke but only told us was out of the reach even of our imaginations.” (89) She then moved to view a nearby crater from a 1968 nuclear test. It, too was a sign of past “human presence” a mark of a very different sort on the landscape. Solnit ends this part of her journey very simply and quietly:

The crater and cylinder had become a monument to the event they evidenced, and there was even a commemorative plaque on the concrete. I went up to read it. It said that the test had been called Operation Faultless. And then I turned around and went home. (90)

Throughout her journey Solnit engages in standard journalistic practices, interviewing various scientists and historians and activists and Shoshone elders, she listens and weaves their stories together allowing the anecdotes, facts, speculations and histories to create a powerful sense of the past present and potential future of the region. Yet Solnit is far from an objective observer she is engaged as both a participant in the protest movement and as someone who allows herself not only to observe, but to feel the power of this landscape and its “lines of convergence”.

Solnit's writing is documentation, search and celebration. She refuses to divide her politics from her writing. She makes the point that her commitment to this hybridity is a political act of resistance in itself:

In a divided culture, being undivided and synthesizing and connecting across broad areas can be an act of resistance....And there's no firm dividing line between passionate political engagement and epiphany and pleasure. At the core of my writing is a desire to dissolve most of the cultural Berlin Walls running through our imaginations. (Cohen 2009)

At the end of her journey through Nevada in this section of the book, she simply goes home. The questions, with which she began: the new myth of the west, the future safety of nuclear waste, and justice for the Shoshone are not resolved. They will recur again in the other chapters of the book, like musical motifs across a complex symphonic work. But she has brought them into

connection with each other and she has begun to signal the choral tone of the work. Through strategies of proclamation, exegesis and evocation – or engagement, epiphany and pleasure – she will take further journeys and ask further questions building up a richly detailed, beautifully pictured sense of this corner of America’s West, its wars, its landscape, its histories and its many voices.

As Solnit develops her polyphonic themes and variations across the two halves of the book – the first, which deals with the Nevada Test Site; and the second, which explores Yosemite – she reflects on the similarities and contrasts between these regions. Significantly, she comes to discover different voices as she discovers different landscape. Both sections of *Savage Dreams* recount multiple journeys, and gather multiple stories, anecdotes, facts and histories from a range of human and other sources. But part way through her exploration of Yosemite, Solnit realizes her experience at the national park and her experience at the test site are quite different. She writes:

I came back to Yosemite again and again, but nothing ever happened to me there. It was a place where nothing was supposed to happen. I had become used to things happening, used to Nevada which has not yet come out of the freewheeling frontier era....It may also be the difference between institutions and communities, for at the Test Site I worked with communities of volunteers, while at Yosemite I met almost exclusively with employees of the National Park Service. (228)

In this second half, where “nothing happens,” she allows the voices of history to be even stronger than they were in the first half, and documents both the conquest of the local area from the native peoples and the founding of the national parks. She also discovers something important about each region by writing them together:

To say that Yosemite is Eden is to say that everywhere else is not. “This place shall we set aside and protect” implies “all other places shall we open up and use”. So the national parks counterbalance and perhaps legitimize the national sacrifice areas, which in the nineteenth century meant mostly mining and timbering and now has grown to include waste disposal and military-use areas and places drowned by dams. (246-7)

This is in many ways the central insight of the book, but it is one that is produced in the choral narrative of the book as a whole rather than as a dramatic conclusion that is underlined and reiterated.

Situating Solnit

Solnit’s polyphonic approach, that I have been describing, has its roots in the literary journalism tradition’s experimentation with a variety of voiced

techniques. Wolfe himself described a range of these methods such as the “downstage voice” (1973:32), where the author adopted the tone and characteristic inflections of his informants to better tell the story. However, Wolfe’s commitment to voicing his characters was mainly a concern with entertainment – avoiding writing in “beige” or “New York journalese” (1973:32) – and he has been criticised for ventriloquizing, and thus homogenising, the voices in his stories (Frus 1994:228). Solnit’s exploratory style, on the other hand, takes care to include a collage of discrete original voices as part of her layered encounter with the story.

So where should Solnit be placed in the canon of contemporary non-fiction writers? She has been compared to both Susan Sontag (Terzian 2007) and Joan Didion (Benson 2004): all three writers are female essayists with strong intellectual and political concerns, and there is certainly some common ground between them, notably various biographical and textual connections to the American West Coast. However I think distinctions are more instructive. Like Solnit, both Sontag and Didion have written extended investigations of place. Sontag’s long essay, “Trip to Hanoi,” (1969) about her trip at the height of the US-Vietnam war, is in many senses, like Solnit’s work, an investigation of people and place that unfolds through a journey. Similarly, Didion’s *Miami* (1987) is an investigation of the city’s characters and histories as she traverses its urban landscape. Both “Trip to Hanoi” and *Miami* carefully include multiple, local points of view and a collage of information from a range of sources, but their characters’ voices are, in each case, primarily filtered through the author’s observations rather than through reported dialogue. The voices are parsed through the narratorial voice of the essayist, whereas, Solnit’s strategy of narrating conversations directly, models her sense of engagement and writerly discovery with, rather than merely through, her sources.

When asked in an interview about comparisons between herself and Sontag, Solnit replied in a typical, oblique way: “one of the ways that I answer for myself, ‘Am I like Susan Sontag?’ is to say, ‘Not that much, because I’m also like Gary Snyder’” (Terzian 2007:54). She went on to compare Sontag – “deeply enamored of nineteenth-century European models of the intellectual and the writer in society” – with Snyder, the environmentalist and poet, who “chose to... face Asia and indigenous America, to be rural and deeply anti-Eurocentric”. Yet, she admits to learning from Sontag to speak “directly...about the emotional content of this moment—the interior, personal side of what is often represented purely as public life”.

Marina Warner (2013) has recently suggested a more apt comparison: between Solnit and “psychogeographical” writers like W. G Sebald and Iain Sinclair. These writers, to whom we might add Will Self and Robert

McFarlane, “don't constitute a party, or a movement or a club, but they have purposes and methods in common: flaneurs, rambblers, climbers, twitchers, urbanists and scryers of signs, tramping about” (Warner 2013). Warner points out that Solnit is a unique female voice in this primarily male group. I would add that two other factors distinguish her work: while Sebald, Sinclair and Self alternate between fiction and non-fiction, and sometimes create fact-fiction hybrids, Solnit, even at her most personal, has resolutely stuck to a journalistic engagement with the world. Secondly, while her “flaneuse” essayist mode may be most characteristic, she has also proven adept at a range of other forms such as biography and cultural history, an adaptability she has, in part, credited to her journalistic training (Terzian 2007: 53).

Solnit stands in the literary journalism tradition and demonstrates the same *reportorial* strengths of its recent innovators, as mapped by both Boynton (2005) and Yagoda (1998), but her work goes beyond immersively reported fact. She has incorporated insights from the more academic approach of cultural studies, as well as, the more writerly and artistic approaches of the psychogeographical flaneurs. She is therefore part of the long evolution of the *new journalism* and part of what keeps it *new*, as its practitioners now adapt not only the techniques of the novelist, but also those of the geographer, the psychoanalyst, the memoirist, the poet and the activist.

Conclusion: polyphonic open journalism

In describing Solnit's work as polyphonic and open, as producing choral or fugal effects, I have shown that she not only uses and skillfully combines a multitude of historic textual sources from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, she has combined these with a similarly impressive range of interview sources and her own evocative descriptions, careful proclamations and detailed exegetical analysis.

At both the micro and macro levels the work is the product of associative effects: in each chapter she juxtaposes a range of experiences, reflections and witness accounts, and in the book as a whole she contrasts the story of the Nevada nuclear test site with that of Yosemite National Park. In each case, she matches the complex histories of each region with contemporary experiences. In all this she creates a narrative of discovery and revelation that is grounded in her physical experience of place, walking, and driving, and in her emotional experience of the landscape and its residents. She does not pretend to adhere to an abstract standard of balance or objectivity, but she does carefully circumnavigate the landscapes and their histories, providing an unusually rich account of the “problematics of place”. These multiple, layered accounts create

a set of choral effects rather than producing the simple direct argument of a line melody.

Solnit draws on a rich polyphony of interdisciplinary knowledge: traditional and alternative histories of the regions, biological and scientific accounts of the land and its ecosystem; scientific, historical and political accounts of the arms race and nuclear protest movements; anthropological accounts of the lives of indigenous people; political analysis of activists; art history; and cultural accounts of landscape. She also on occasion engages with philosophical and religious theories from a range of traditions. Each of these forms of knowledge is accessed from multiple sources: original archival research; witness or interview accounts; and a diverse set of published works.

But this book is essentially a very personal history about the process as much as the facts of discovery. She opens her account by driving into the Nevada test site, and she ends it by driving away from Yosemite. She realises she has come full circle or rather she has brought the experiences of these places deeply into the circle of her life: “We left for San Francisco late that day...This time I was just going back because I was already at home” (385).

Solnit has not “solved” the “problematic of place” that the Nevada test site or Yosemite National Park present. She has not in a traditional sense told their complete or chronological histories. But her journeys and the stories that she has gathered have created a rich polyphony that evokes a sense of completion for both author and reader. In the process of discovery – walking, writing, talking, reading, looking, investigating, analysing and contemplating – she has brought the rich experiences of these places inside the circle of her own experience, broken down the boundaries between here and there, us and them, then and now. She has produced a rich harmonic effect, a resonant hum rather than an easily reproducible melody.

In Solnit’s work we see clearly many of the classic characteristics of literary journalism as defined by Wolfe (1973): scenes; dialogues; point of view and descriptions of a character’s status life. But, importantly, it is an example of the way such literary technique can be put at the service of building the social and political “explanatory power” (Lehmann in Sims 1995) of such writing. As I have shown the literary, the explanatory and the political effects of Solnit’s work are each rooted in her polyphonic or multi-voiced technique.

What Solnit’s book reveals is not just the facts of the “landscape wars” in these areas and their difficult colonial histories; nor is its big revelation about the extent and cost of the nuclear or environmental threat (although these issues are all thoroughly explored). Solnit reveals as much through her writerly posture of engagement and discovery as she does through the facts narrated.

She stands with the cast she has assembled, traces their struggles across time and returns to them as she makes multiple visits to the region across a nine-year period. In this way she creates a powerful, slowly cumulative, meditative literary effect. But, importantly this way of writing makes one of her essential points about social change. As she points out in her afterword to the second edition, activism for social change in complex areas like indigenous rights, environmental protection and nuclear disarmament aren't causes that have neat beginnings or ends. They are multi-generational struggles. In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit provides vignettes of this struggle as she travels across the American West, she gathers a set of choral voices that come together to sing part of this song of change but her very method signals that this is only part of an ongoing, larger, continuously evolving story.

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