
Rebecca Solnit. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Viking, 2000. 326p.

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“Walking is a subject that is always straying,” writes Rebecca Solnit, and she should know (8). Her latest book, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, winds through myriad discussions such as the origins of bidpedalism, challenges of pilgrimage, and collective action of protests. Other topics that cross her path include the contrast between urban and rural walking, public and private goals of mountaineering, and even the monotony of the treadmill. *Wanderlust* is publicized as the “first general history of walking,” and as such, Solnit cannot linger too long on any one particular topic. She is well aware of the immense possibilities for a history of walking, describing her own as “partial,” as “an idiosyncratic path.” Her overall aim is to trace the history of this “most obvious and most obscure” act to account for the current state of walking in the United States and to assess its future as an everyday practice (3-4).

Solnit situates her history of walking in response to technologies that encourage the disembodiment of everyday life and to the present condition of waning public space and leisure time. For her the act of walking “is one way of maintaining a bulwark against this erosion of the mind, the body, the landscape, and the city” that modern life engenders (11). This history is also one of embodiment, and she suggests that her discussion will investigate the body as a “source of action and production” in a way that “recent postmodern theory” has not (28). Solnit refers to “hundreds of volumes and essays” that represent a “passive body for which sexuality and biological function are the only signs of life”; it is “not the universal human body but the white-collar urban body, or rather a theoretical body” that never even experiences “minor physical exertions” (28). Certainly some postmodern theory reaches a level of abstraction that denies embodiment, but some readers might be uneasy with her sweeping critique of critical theory. Despite the reference to numerous — yet unnamed — texts, she identifies only one specific theorist “at odds” with the sense of actual physical vulnerability. I found myself wanting her to be more explicit in her criticism of postmodern theory; but, perhaps doing so would lessen the book’s appeal to a general audience.

Wanderlust covers a lot of territory, and while there are many notable chapters, I can only highlight some of her most compelling. To explore the fundamental connection between the mind and body that walking brings, Solnit draws on scientific approaches in chapter three, “Rising and Falling: The Theorists of Bipedalism.” Her inquiry introduces paleontologists, anthropologists, and anatomists

to consider the meaning of walking in terms of the human species. She follows the debates that theorize the origins of our two-legged gait. In contrast to the widely held view that our consciousness is what makes us human, the scientific information in this chapter argues that our upright form of locomotion is actually what distinguishes us most dramatically from other species.

In addition to assessing the evolution of the physical act of walking, Solnit examines how walking in nature became politicized. In chapter ten, "Of Walking Clubs and Land Wars," she explains how the American nature retreat celebrated the virtues of the natural world while inspiring the formation of the Sierra Club to defend such places for recreation. She also profiles European groups like The Naturfreunde, the Wandervogel, and New Pathfinder troops that organized in response to the need to preserve open space. Included here is a fascinating discussion on the role of Britain's working class to secure access to common land and rights-of-way in England. The British workers' fight against private property boundaries that she documents challenges the common perception of a middle-class monopoly on nature appreciation.

Though Solnit gives considerable attention to political issues related to rural walking, she also explores the politics of walking in urban areas. The core issue in chapter thirteen, "Citizens of the Streets: Parties, Processions, and Revolutions" is the critical role of public space in democratic processes. The march of the market women, born out of the French Revolution, serves as her starting point for the history of bodily protest. Solnit tracks revolutions in Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia that operated in the form of pedestrian marches. She includes stories of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, and San Franciscans' participation in Critical Mass and protest of the Gulf War among others. "Citizens of the Streets" directly connects physical and political acts and reinforces the importance of preserving public space in urban areas too.

Admittedly, hers is largely a "First World, after-the-industrial-revolution history" that examines and celebrates the walk as a mode of freedom and resistance (267). So readers should not expect discussions of walking as a mode of oppression, as in the Trail of Tears, or of walking as commodity, as indicated by the availability walking tours. However, readers can expect discussions of the Peripatetic philosophers of ancient Greece, in addition to commentary on the importance of Rousseau, Kierkegaard, and Wordsworth to Western notions of walking and thinking. Solnit also addresses the subject within poems, novels, essays, and travel narratives.

Of course there are many other topics that RMMLA members will find useful in *Wanderlust*, such as the figure of the flâneur, the structure of English gardens,

women's relationship to the streets, and walking as performance art. Solnit also analyzes the influence of the automobile and the construction of the suburbs on walking as an everyday practice. This history brings together various European and Asian traditions of walking as well. Solnit's project is massive in scope, but she does a fine job guiding the reader through her manifold history, providing signposts throughout to remind us of where we have been and where she is taking us.

As always with Solnit's work part of the pleasure is her narrative presence. She does not simply organize and report information, but writes about subjects that truly engage her, often drawing on personal experience to inform her analysis. Similar to her earlier books, *Savage Dreams* (1994) and *A Book of Migrations* (1997), she augments her research in *Wanderlust* with stories of hikes, city rambles, protests, and conversations with friends as well as interviews with experts. After reading this book, readers will likely be struck by the sheer volume of information and the variety of approaches she brings to this particular history of walking. Solnit clearly documents her sources, and this list is an invaluable resource in itself. For anyone interested in researching, teaching, or reading about walking, *Wanderlust* provides a clear, accessible map through an unwieldy subject, offering critical insights into walking through the complexities of history, science, culture, politics, and religion.