

Teo's analysis of Rebecca Solnit's book, The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness, identifies an important problem: How to write about other cultures without usurping their voices? Weaving together a range of sources, her essay responds by helping us understand the delicate relationship between representation and power. (Instructor: Gerard O'Donoghue)

A WRITER'S OCCUPATION

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Occupy, verb. The word *occupy* in the English language originates from the French word *occuper*. To occupy, in both its original and contemporary meaning, is “to take possession of, take for one’s own use, seize,” connoting an intrusion of space, an invasion of boundaries: in a nutshell, to take a thing or fill a place that does not belong to you (“occupy, v.”). But how can we clearly delineate what belongs to whom? If we consider *occuper* to belong to the French language, then the word *occupy*, ironically, becomes an example of English’s occupation.

The rise of the Occupy movement, an international effort toward social and political equality, seeks to redefine its eponymous action (“About”). To occupy, as a form of protest, does not just mean to take possession of a building or a piece of land without authority; it means to take back, to repossess, to fight for a space stolen from the people by political or economic elites in the hopes of democratizing that space. Occupation originally meant conquering a territory that did not belong to the occupier. Now, as journalist Randall Amster writes, occupation aims to liberate space, to “[pry] open the inner sanctum of the dominant order” (Amster). The original Occupy Wall Street movement serves as a prime example. Founded in September 2011, Occupy Wall Street saw protesters occupy Manhattan’s Financial District to fight back against “the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy” (Occupy Solidarity Network). By occupying a space that symbolized corporate financial control, protesters aimed to reclaim their rights in that space by demanding a more balanced distribution of income and a reduction in corporate

influence on politics. In “The Significance of Space in Occupy Wall Street,” John L. Hammond borrows and builds upon Henri Lefebvre’s idea that “space is actively produced, not only in its physical disposition but its social meaning, by the activities that go on in it, or that go on in some spaces but not others” (500). Hammond draws a connection between territories and control, stating that it is “not just a matter of lines on a map; it is a cartography of power” (501). In fact, the whole world map is a cartography of power. The designation of entire countries as First World or Third World, the social and cultural influences that some countries can export to others, and the hierarchy of racial and national identities all point to the various ways in which space connotes power.

Rebecca Solnit, a contemporary writer, historian, and activist, describes her anthology of essays *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* as “a book about places” (“Introduction” 1). As she explores landscapes from the Arctic to Mexico, from Japan to Detroit to Wall Street, Solnit constructs a cartography of international injustices, uprisings, disasters, and, above all, hope in humanity. Quite literally, Solnit creates a “Geographical Index,” locating where each of her essays takes place on a map of the world (ii). Solnit imagines the world as a space without boundaries as she advocates a shared humanity. Yet, as she travels across boundaries, Solnit seems to reproduce, rather than subvert, the power connoted by her occupation of space.

Through her exploration of different social issues present in various societies, Solnit calls her readers—particularly her American ones—to action by urging them to reflect on their statuses as global citizens, to believe in hope and change for the better, and to be a part of that change. In “Letter to a Dead Man: On the Occupation of Hope,” Solnit writes, “At this moment in history, occupation should be everyone’s occupation” (220). In “We Won’t Bow Down: Carnival and Resistance in New Orleans,” she urges, “Don’t bow down. To capital. Or to cliché or oversimplification or defeatism. Try rising up instead” (247). Sven Birkerts concurs in his review of the book, writing, “Solnit’s *Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* . . . sounds the wake-up call.” Birkerts sums up what he sees as the main message of the anthology: “For us to Occupy anything we have to first Occupy Ourselves.” Randall Amster, in “Occupy Ourselves,” describes occu-

pying ourselves as a process in which we recognize our complicity with the forces of our own oppression and refuse to comply with them. However, to 'Occupy Ourselves' is not just a call for reflection on the ways in which one is complicit in social injustices perpetuated around the world, but also a call to find one another in a common cause. Solnit's ideal world is one without boundaries, as the form of humanity and hope that she celebrates in her various essays is one that transcends the boundaries of space. It is an attempt to look past cartographies and borders, to focus on similarities rather than the lines that divide us, so as to create change around the world.

To this end, Solnit breaks down the boundaries not just of physical space, but also of time, to show that all boundaries are social constructions. Solnit couches her experiences of a place or a phenomenon within terms of its history, exploring historical relationships and thus giving readers a sense of living in the moment of historical rupture. In "The Google Bus: Silicon Valley Invades" and "Pale Bus, Pale Rider: Silicon Valley Invades, Cont'd," Solnit delves deep into the history of San Francisco as a city that has always been different from the rest of America. It was once "a great city of refuge for dissidents, queers and experimentalists," and the invasion of Silicon Valley has not only displaced the poor through forced evictions—it has also resulted in a "casual erasure" of San Francisco's historical character ("Google" 252, 255). Solnit frames the Silicon Valley tech workers as invading occupiers, but they occupy both literal and cultural space; as the influx of wealthy tech workers increases the cost of housing in Silicon Valley, residents are gentrified out of their homes, with far-reaching cultural consequences.

Solnit further relies on the etymology of key words to show that history very much informs the present, and that to create a distinction between the two would be to create a false dichotomy. In "In Haiti, Words Can Kill," Solnit expounds on the origins of the word *looting*, and how the use of this word "incites madness and obscures realities" because of the history of its usage (128). Solnit writes, "*Loot*, the noun and the verb, is a word of Hindi origin meaning the spoils of war or other goods seized roughly" ("Haiti" 128). She argues that to use the word *loot* rather than "emergency requisitioning" to describe the actions of people who attempt to acquire necessities after a disaster is

to frame them as thieves rather than survivors or humans (“Haiti” 128). In “Letter to a Dead Man,” Solnit further explores the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. Varying her verb tenses, Solnit lists disasters the world has experienced, has been experiencing, or has yet to experience, positioning the reader not exactly in the present, but in a historical moment that incorporates past, present, and future. This can be seen from her description of disasters across the globe: “Japan *was* literally shaken loose . . . by . . . the earthquake and tsunami . . . China *is* turbulent . . . Syrians *wouldn’t* go home . . . Italians *have been* protesting” (“Dead Man” 214; emphasis added). A line from her essay “Arrival Gates: The Inari Shrine in Kyoto, Japan” sums up her idea that every moment is an infinitesimal transition point between past and future: “We are arriving all the time, the present is a house in which we always have one foot, an apple we are just biting, a face we are just glimpsing for the first time” (200). Solnit breaks down the boundaries between what we often call past, present, and future, forcing readers to recognize a string of continuity across time, thus advancing her vision of the world as a space without boundaries.

Because boundaries are illusory, the concept of citizenship, or a sense of belonging to a single place, becomes irrelevant to Solnit. Hence, even as Solnit discusses societies extremely foreign to her, she tries to establish authority as a sort of insider by demonstrating that she has a personal stake in them. Solnit often draws similarities between herself and victims of social injustices, attempting to give readers the impression that she can encapsulate the complexity of those victims’ emotions. This tendency is evident in “The Google Bus,” where she includes her personal experience of being a prospective homeowner in San Francisco, which she seems to believe enabled her to empathize with the displaced homeless in San Francisco, though this is a suspicious equivalence. In “Arrival Gates,” Solnit begins with a paragraph-long sentence detailing her experience on a trip to Japan, ranging from a “speaking tour at the universities” to walking and seeing “with [her] own eyes the bombed places” and the “keloid scars from the fallout that had drifted onto the arm of a schoolboy sixty-seven years before” (196). Here, Solnit positions herself as an insider in an extremely foreign society and culture, implying

that her wide-ranging experience and access to Japanese society grants her the authority to represent it. Presuming that she sees what they see, knows what they know, and feels what they feel, she presents herself as an insider in that society, breaking down boundaries created by arbitrary border lines. Even in societies or cultures where she is unable to find a personal connection, she includes experiences of her friend, her brother, or even “a young man [she] knew long ago” (“Apologies” 228), almost as a desperate attempt to find a connection to the society in order to establish a trans-border relationship with the places and people that she writes about.

This desire for ‘connection’ is picked up by Sven Birkerts. In his review, Birkerts argues that Solnit’s work does not merely contain “news from crisis zones,” but includes “a feel for the expressive image that adds a welcome affective depth” to her reports through creating a personal stake in the matter, no matter how cursory. Other journalists, such as Marcus O’Donnell, concur by arguing that this is Solnit’s way of being “both personally present and attentive to her sources” (940). O’Donnell asserts that what differentiates Solnit from other journalists is her distinctively “polyphonic open journalism” (936). To O’Donnell, Solnit is able to combine journalistic practices with writerly and activist practices to produce a “distinctive open form of literary journalism,” and her inclusion of many personal narratives showcases her capacity to personally engage with the subjects of her work (936). Solnit’s work is “open” because it “allows for both the intentionality of argument and the meandering of associative thinking” (O’Donnell 942). Thus, O’Donnell frames Solnit as a democratizer of spaces and opinions. Yet the way Solnit struggles to pass as an insider in foreign cultures perhaps indicates that, in her attempt to take possession of a position in a society that does not belong to her, she herself is an oppressive occupier.

What emboldens Solnit to this occupation? Solnit writes that during the Bush era, “every American seemed saddled with the weight of the world” (“Introduction” 1-2). She was compelled to “become a public citizen and to think about broad issues . . . across the globe” (1-2). Although it seemed clear to Solnit that it was her ‘American’ burden to assume the identity of a ‘global citizen,’ her vision of the world centers on America. Even her “Geographical Index” places North

America squarely in the middle of the map. In alignment with the cartography of power that Hammond points out, Solnit, a Westerner and an American, is granted authoritative power to occupy spaces in societies that are not her own, much like America has occupied parts of Afghanistan and Iraq. According to geographer Zoltán Grossman, America conducted at least 148 foreign interventions from 1890 to 2014, from providing covert support to commanding entire military operations. During these interventions, the U.S. has often positioned itself as a necessary peacekeeper, yet, time and again, history has shown that interventions in foreign countries only serve to “polarize factions and further destabilize the country,” not to mention the number of natives killed as collateral damage (Grossman). In both the past and the present, Western powers have often justified the expansion of empire with a vision of the world as a space without boundaries and the idea that their benevolent rule would create greater meaning and better usage of the occupied spaces. The self-righteous belief that their leadership model is necessarily the best for the world has driven both colonialism in the past and neocolonialism today. Envisioning the world as a space without boundaries is dangerous because it can be exploited to justify colonization, invasion, and the occupation of cultural spaces. If no one can claim belonging to a single place, everyone can claim any space, effectively destroying the concept of an indigenous people. The twenty-first-century trend of globalization and the call to become a ‘global citizen’ presents continuity between state-driven military occupation and the occupation of intangible cultural spaces that Solnit lapses into in her travels around the world.

Occupationally, Solnit is a writer, activist, and occupier. As she advances her vision of a shared humanity across a space without boundaries, she inhabits identities that do not belong to her and claims belonging to societies that she is not a part of. If Solnit sees herself as a part of Western and American society, why does she feel the need to escape from it? In an interview with Samantha Kimmey, Solnit shares that she grew up in Novato, a conservative and relatively rural part of California, where “because so many people come from elsewhere [in the country], being a local is kind of a minority culture.” In a place where she considers herself a local, Solnit’s family only settled down when she was five, as her family moved around a lot before

that. She went to high school in Paris at the age of seventeen, knowing that the world was bigger, more interesting, and more complex than a Californian suburb. Solnit's early life was devoid of a strong sense of belonging or connection to places or communities around her. This is perhaps symptomatic of the broader American identity that Philip Fisher describes in "Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency" as one "without a single environment or climate, without a culture, and without, in the deep romantic sense, a language"; in sum, for Fisher, Americans are "a patchwork of peoples," and the American identity is one marked by mobility and non-belonging (61, 60). Because 'American' is such a broad identity that does not confine Solnit to a single, particular space, she chooses to occupy as a means to define her own identity.

Solnit ultimately seeks to discover what Katra Byram terms the "historicity of personal identity," to find her identity amidst boundaries of space (2). Byram proposes a new narrative strategy—the dynamic observer form—to describe a narrative situation that emerges when stories about others become an avenue to negotiate a narrator's own identity. She argues that the conception of identity is two-faceted. First, identity relies on narrative, a narrative that "emerges from individuals' history and experiences, and from their attempts to understand and explain who they are in the present by telling a story about the past" (Byram 1-2). Second, identity is relational; the story that one tells is an extremely effective way to "define who one is and has been—and who one is not" (2). Solnit is not homeless in San Francisco, she is not a Japanese person who lived through the nuclear fallout, and she has not experienced a natural disaster, yet these identities produce greater meaning for her by virtue of their differences. It is precisely because of her privilege of not belonging that she feels such a compulsion to empathize and to make a difference.

A dilemma emerges for writers as we come to realize the dangers of occupation. How can writers represent foreign subjects and cultures without occupying? Or should writers and activists be confined to representing their own communities? The very fact that a writer has the resources and permission to study another culture often implies an asymmetrical power relation, with narrative and editorial control

completely in the hands of the writer. Yet in assessing such a study, it is imperative to distinguish one's sense of responsibility towards international crises and one's attempt to disguise oneself as a native. An anthropological analysis suggests the true purpose of writing about 'others' is not to attain complete understanding of them or to represent them without error; that is impossible. Instead, to write about the 'other' is to spark conversation, undermining biases that perpetuate the opposition of 'us' and 'them.' Perhaps, then, Solnit's representation of foreign societies pardons her, in part, for occupying them. At the very least, Solnit's *Encyclopedia* may attune its readers to, or liberate them from, dangerous patterns of narrativizing foreign spaces.

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