

# Borders and Crossers

by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

## Storming the Gates of Paradise Landscapes for Politics

by Rebecca Solnit

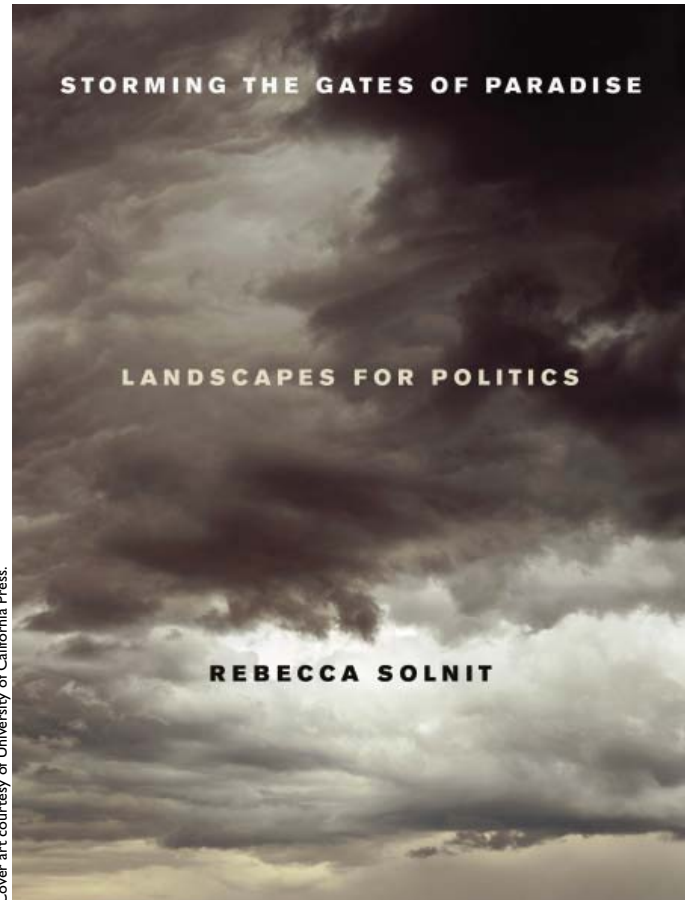
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**T**hough Henry Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" is for many Americans an unavoidable standby of high school civics, it is a fair bet to claim that if some recall the principles of citizenship it espoused, few recollect the particular policies its author opposed. In July of 1846, the naturalist left his pond-side meditations to spend a night in the Concord jail protesting the United States' war against Mexico, which had begun in earnest a few weeks before when a group of American settlers seized a Mexican garrison in Sonoma, Alta California. Two years later the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded Mexico's northern half to the United States, thereby concluding a war which "Mexico never forgot," writes Rebecca Solnit in her new book, *Storming the Gates of Paradise*, "and the United States can never quite remember."

A celebrated essayist and cultural historian who has in recent years been compared to writers ranging from John Muir and Joan Didion to Thoreau himself, Solnit is the author of books including *Hope in the Dark*, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* and *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, which won a National Book Critics Circle Award in 2004. Now, in *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*, Solnit collects a body of her writings from the past 10 years. The essays included — which first appeared in journals as varied as *Orion*, *The Nation* and *The London Review of Books* — range, like all Solnit's work, across geography and art, literature and history. All, however, are unified both by Solnit's sparkling prose and by her distinctive mode of exploring connections between landscape and politics — an approach through which she has succeeded, according to the writer Michael Pollan, in "reinventing the genre we call nature writing."

In a September talk for the Center for Latin American Studies, Solnit read from "39 Steps Across the Border and Back," an essay that opens from a rafting trip down the Río Grande — passing "water, rock and prickly pear" — to



take in the immigration debate, environmental history and militarization of the border. The essay includes a scene which finds Solnit standing in Sonoma's central plaza during the sesquicentennial commemoration of the Bear Flag Revolt, an occasion during which the remarks of anti-immigration California Governor Pete Wilson are met by a chanting group of Latino protestors. Overhearing an elder couple perturbed at the protestors' presence, Solnit offers the couple a possible explanation for the group's disquiet. "Young lady," the man tells her, "California was never a part of Mexico. You should go to college and study some history." Solnit spoke over e-mail with CLAS's Joshua Jelly-Schapiro.

**JJS:** Reading these pieces, I found myself thinking often of that old J.B. Jackson axiom of which geographers are so fond — that "landscape is history made visible." Would you say that this idea is important to you? What is it, for you, that

writing about landscape allows one to see, or perhaps make visible, beyond the landscape itself?

**RS:** Well, with all due respect for J. B. Jackson, I'm not sure that history is made visible in a lot of these places. On the one hand if it was, we might have hideously traumatic scars visible all across the continent that would take away any of the respite, beauty and hope these places have. On the other, we might not have quite the amnesia plague afflicting the modern imagination. The landscape itself is often mute about its own history, and the job of the landscape historian, the writer, the storyteller is to keep that history alive and to teach people to see what can be read there and connect what can be seen to what can't. A lot of Native American cultures have really dense layers of topographical information in their stories, so that the places give meanings to history and vice-versa: they keep each other alive. But by stories.

In *Hope in the Dark*, I wrote about all the places across the West that hadn't been dammed, or logged, or mined, or bombed because of heroic struggles off-site, struggles whose success was that so little human trace was left on the land itself — that no trace of the plans for ski resorts or extractive industries or sprawl were visible — and concluded, "All these places are places of absence, or at least the absence of devastation, a few of the countless places in which there is nothing to see, and nothing is what victory often looks like." This question of what can and can't be seen is really interesting to me.

**JJS:** "It's a place that taught me to write," you write in the introduction to these essays. What do you mean by that?

**RS:** In my mid-twenties I began going to the antinuclear protests at the Nevada Test Site (NTS), where the U.S. and UK set off more than a thousand nuclear explosions in what was somewhat misleadingly called testing — misleading because they were full-scale nuclear explosions, mostly much larger than those in Hiroshima or Nagasaki, and there were real consequences for the people, animals and land downwind. The anti-nuclear movement that gathered at the NTS to resist testing as a step toward peace and disarmament and nonproliferation drew from a fantastically rich array of global cultures — downwinder Mormons, radical Western Shoshones and Paiutes, atomic veterans, renegade physicists, Japanese *hibakashi* [atomic survivors], Quakers, pagans, anarchists — lots of anarchists — and others. To tell the story of the place itself in the context of indigenous history, of the colonizing of the American West, the Euro-American fear and loathing and misunderstanding of deserts, the history of the making of the atom bomb, the cold war and all these radical antinuclear and peace movements — it required

bringing together voices, or modes of writing, that had been separate for me, and still are in much conventional writing. I had to be a journalist, a memoirist, a historian, a cultural critic — and so in writing about the Nevada Test Site in 1991 and after I learned to weave together lyrical, critical, historical and reportorial voices. This free-roaming hybrid mode is still central to my style. And it isn't just style, but a way of being radically inclusive of ideas, experiences and information.

**JJS:** One of those landscapes that features prominently here is *The Border* — by which in this country, or in California at least, we mean the border between the United States and Mexico. And that border, as you emphasize here, is as much a kind of mental barrier as it is a physical one: the line in our national consciousness that separates Resident from Alien, Us from Them, Order from Chaos. The essay "39 Steps Across the Border and Back," however, departs from an experience of the border as place. I wonder if you could describe your impetus for traveling to the border, and what you found there.

**RS:** Well, I've crossed the border several times recently in Tijuana–San Diego, but my most significant experience of it was during a two-week rafting trip down the Río Grande at the point where it stops separating New Mexico east from New Mexico west and begins to separate Texas from Mexico proper. It's always weird to go to the border and find that this huge line in the North American imagination is not a huge line in the landscape, unless it's a manmade one, an imposition. On the Río Grande, for example, everything moves freely from one side of the river to the other, particularly the birds, and the terrain is pretty much the same. It's not a divide between things but an oasis in a dry land that brings them together. And of course the history of this line is the history of brute force and arbitrary cartography. So actually seeing the border undermines the rhetoric of some divinely ordained difference between us and them — and yet profound differences have grown up between the two sides. Then too if you can think systemically, you can see that NAFTA displaces Mexican farmers, who come here for work and keep the U.S. agricultural industry afloat, or that the migratory birds ignore borders altogether to summer in the north and winter in the tropics, for example, and that all this ecology is intimately tied together. That is, facts and encounters can sabotage the idea of the border.

**JJS:** In Bill McKibben's review of this book (in the *Los Angeles Times*), he described these essays as "an attempt to nail down the sources of... power, to pin them to the page." I wonder how you feel about that description. What's different, or





Photo by Farol Tomson.

### On the Río Grande.

similar, about writing about how power acts on a landscape where its not immediately visible — in the middle, say, of the Black Rock Desert, or of a Silicon Valley office park — and a landscape where power is made manifest — outside the FTAA meeting in Miami, say, or along the border in the time of “Operation Gatekeeper”?

**RS:** One of the strange shifts of our time is the disappearance of public space and accountability, which go together. If your locality is being ravaged by a corporation from overseas, it’s hard to find a place to confront them. Of course the corporate-globalization deals of our day are in part about making corporations even less accountable and more free to exploit with impunity. The entertaining thing about these deals is that they are often made in big, high-profile summits. And since the WTO foundered during the extraordinary millennial insurrections in Seattle on November 30, 1999, these summits have had to happen in increasingly isolated locales, often with a mini-police state erected around them for dozens of miles: law enforcement, shut-downs, fences, helicopters and more. Which in a funny way demonstrates their true nature, which is not, to say the least, democratic.

Really there are three kinds of sites at which you can

confront power. There’s the site of the damage or issue itself — for example Ogoni women in Nigeria seizing oil-extraction sites. Then there is the confrontation with the power at its source — which has been so effective in San Francisco that Chevron moved to suburbia and Bechtel is relocating its headquarters to suburban Washington, D.C. And then there’s the Greenpeace approach, where you don’t have to go to where the whaling or rainforest destruction is or to the corporate headquarters or summit, but to hang a banner wherever the public and media are. Placelessness is problematic, but you can in essence make places to take stands. Up to a point. The placelessness of Silicon Valley, which I wrote about in one of the oldest essays in the book, makes it hard to resist what those companies are doing there.

**JJS:** There are a few essays here dealing with the affinity that seems occasionally to crop up between environmentalists and xenophobes. You write, for example, about the Sierra Club’s attempted takeover by anti-immigration activists a few years back. Could you talk a little about this — about how and why these two versions of preserving the “national garden,” as you call it, might overlap?

**RS:** A lot of old-school environmentalists come from the tradition of putting a fence around something. You save places by making them national parks or preserves or land trusts, which is a way of saying, screw up the rest of it, but leave this patch alone. It's a very fragmentary way of dealing with the problem, though plenty meaningful at times. But extrapolating that to consider the United States some sort of national park that you put a fence around and keep people from invading is lunatic.

For one thing, it's not the undocumented immigrants who set policy, create sprawl or consume resources at lunatic rates. For another, you have to think systemically about every place. The survival of the songbirds of the United States and Canada is dependent in part on the well-being of habitat in Mexico and Central America. NAFTA has everything to do with creating the new wave of poverty that pushes a lot of people into migrating. For yet another, the economic impact of Latino immigrants, documented and un-, is debatable, but you can see that banishing them would devastate agriculture, construction, food service and a lot of other arenas. Because environmentalism is so unmitigated a good, a lot of people and groups who are really anti-immigration for other reasons (like racism and fantasies of an ethnically pure culture) have tried to co-opt environmental arguments and organizations

Rebecca Solnit.

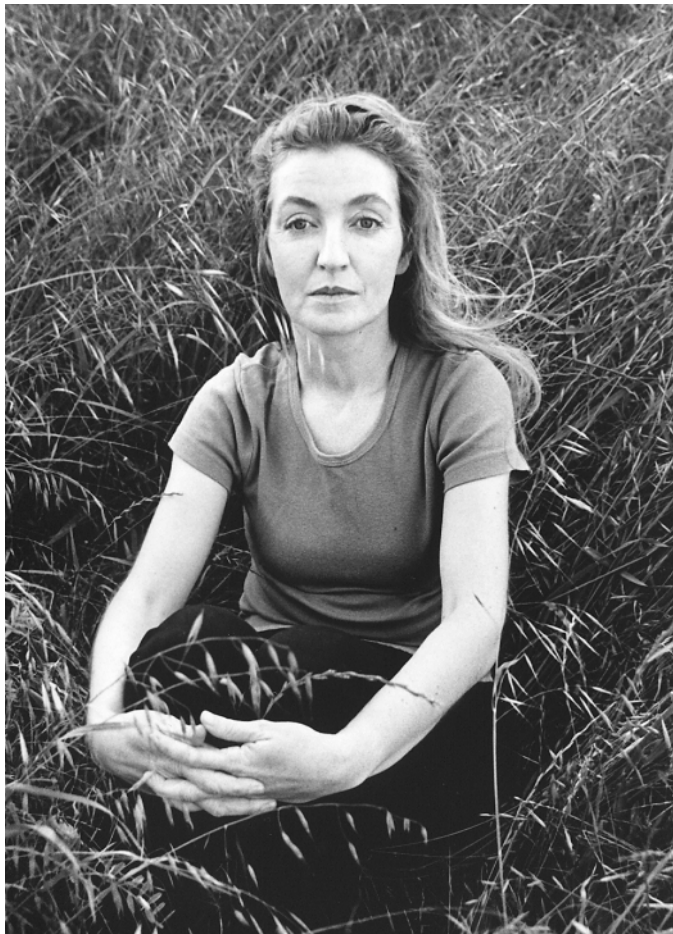


Photo by Jude Mooney Photography.

to win their case.

**JJS:** You speak here of being “pro-Latinoization” of the US. What exactly does that mean to you?

**RS:** I am a great believer in pedestrianism and public life and space, and these are things that come to life in neighborhoods that are Latino or are becoming that way. I wonder sometimes if we will suburbanize these immigrants from the south before they truly urbanize us — and I see that urbanization, that valuation for public life and space and contact with strangers — as a good. I also admire a lot of Latin American intellectuals — Eduardo Galeano, Ariel Dorfmann, Subcomandante Marcos — and movements and hope that just as the ordinary immigrants might revitalize public space, so a Latinoization of political life might bring some of that radical but romantic idealism to a U.S. left that is too often unimaginative, adversarial, defeatist and generally gloomy (thanks in part to amnesia about the ways the world has been changed by radical movements in the past half century, naiveté about how change works — by which measure, cynicism can itself be naive — and a pervasive sense that hope is uncool).

**JJS:** In *A Book of Migrations*, one of your first, you wrote about an experience traveling in Ireland, the country from which many of your own forebears came — and whose poor emigrants were of course once discriminated against in this country in much the same manner as Latinos often are today. “The longer I passed through the Ireland that both the Irish and the Irish-Americans seem to imagine as a solid foundation,” you wrote in that book, “the more it seemed instead to be made up of a continuous flow of discontinuities and accelerating movements, of colonizations and decolonizations, liberations, exiles, emigrations, invasions, economic pendulums, developments, abandonments, acculturations, simulations.” It strikes me that the same could be said of the lands on both sides of the Río Grande. Nations, like places, are never so pure or discrete as some of us might like them to be, are they?

**RS:** I couldn't agree more, and writing that helps people see that this fluidity is something to embrace, not flee from, is one of my big aspirations.

Essayist and cultural historian Rebecca Solnit read excerpts from her anthology, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*, at an event sponsored by CLAS on September 10, 2007.

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro is a graduate student in the Department of Geography and a contributing editor of the *Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies*. A full version of the interview is available at <http://clas.berkeley.edu>.





Ms. Homeland Security.

Photo by Robin Lasser. Reprinted from *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*.