

project 2 | assignment 2

The second major project opens with an essay by Rebecca Solnit, perhaps one of the most-celebrated contemporary essayists in the United States. Solnit uses the occasion of her return to San Francisco to ruminate on the city's meanings, both for her and for others. Ostensibly, her essay is about urban walking, which she defines as a particular kind of social practice once in vogue, then diminished from the eighteenth century to the present moment. For Solnit, the urban walker opens herself to the possibility of surprise, unexpected delights, sometimes anxious encounters, her walk nearly always punctuated by discoveries, as she puts this: "coincidences, the mingling of many kinds of people, poetry given away to strangers under the open sky" (2).

As a writer, Solnit is interested in how other writers have responded to the city, and she allows us to glimpse a number of walker-writers' discourses revealing the wonders of city wandering. As you read through these various representations, think about what qualities of urban life interest these writers as a group of observers. Is there some attraction to the city that seems to run through their experiences and texts? In what ways is it not surprising that walking and noticing is allied to note taking and writing? What, in other words, makes urban walking a "writerly" practice?

Solnit chooses an interesting vignette to punctuate her conclusion. It's the story of her encounter with both a man sitting in a doorway drinking and an older woman walking along. Let's assume that Solnit has placed the story in this noticeable place in her discourse for some reason other than simply to add another city story to her work. What for you makes the story valuable to include here at her discourse's close? What do you suppose Solnit is trying to tell us or teach us by including the story in some detail? What does her remark that the encounter makes her "feel like a ghost drifting through their private lives out in public" seem to suggest about social interaction in the city?