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Date prepared: 12/19/2008

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Rebecca Solnit

Rebecca Solnit (b. 1961) is a writer, art critic, photographer, and antinuclear activist. Her most recent books include *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art* and *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*. She has also curated exhibitions and written catalog essays for museums. “Aerobic Sisyphus and the Suburbanized Psyche” is from *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*.

For alternative views of walking, see *Walking Magazine* at http://<www.walkingmag.com/>.

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**WHAT DO YOU KNOW? WHAT DO YOU EXPECT TO DISCOVER?**

Before reading the essay, take a moment to consider the following questions.

1. What topics does Solnit’s biography suggest she is interested in? What do you know about those topics? Knowledge can come from personal experience, stories you’ve heard, other classes you’ve taken, or other reading you’ve done.

2. Look up the words “Sisyphus” and “Pschye” in a dictionary or do a Google search for each term on the Internet. What kind of essay do you expect from Solnit given these two terms plus her other keywords in the title, “Aerobic” and “Suburbanized”?

3. Solnit discusses the death of walking in her essay. Most people take walking for granted. What do you suppose that an essay about the death of walking may tell you about your culture and about yourself?

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**Aerobic Sisyphus and the Suburbanized Psyche**

Freedom to walk is not of much use without someplace to go. There is a sort of golden age of walking that began late in the eighteenth century and, I fear, expired some decades ago, a flawed age more golden for some than others, but still impressive for its creation of places in which to walk and its valuation of recreational walking. This
age peaked around the turn of the twentieth century, when North Americans and Europeans were as likely to make a date for a walk as for a drink or meal, walking was often a sort of sacrament and a routine recreation, and walking clubs were flourishing. At that time, nineteenth-century urban innovations such as sidewalks and sewers were improving cities not yet menaced by twentieth-century speedups, and rural developments such as national parks and mountaineering were in first bloom. . . . [T]he history of walking is a history of cities and countryside, with a few towns and mountains thrown in for good measure. Perhaps 1970, when the U.S. Census showed that the majority of Americans were—for the first time in the history of any nation—suburban, is a good date for this golden age's tombstone. Suburbs are bereft of the natural glories and civic pleasures of those older spaces, and suburbanization has radically changed the scale and texture of everyday life, usually in ways iaimical to getting about on foot. This transformation has happened in the mind as well as on the ground. Ordinary Americans now perceive, value, and use time, space, and their own bodies in radically different ways than they did before. Walking still covers the ground between cars and buildings and the short distances within the latter, but walking as a cultural activity, as a pleasure, as travel, as a way of getting around, is fading, and with it goes an ancient and profound relationship between body, world, and imagination. Perhaps walking is best imagined as an "indicator species," to use an ecologist's term. An indicator species signifies the health of an ecosystem, and its endangerment or diminishment can be an early warning sign of systemic trouble. Walking is an indicator species for various kinds of freedoms and pleasures: free time, free and alluring space, and unhindered bodies.

I. Suburbia

In *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, Kenneth Jackson outlines what he calls "the walking city" that preceeded the development of middle-class suburbs: it was densely populated; it had "a clear distinction between city and country," often by means of walls or some other abrupt periphery; its economic and social functions were intermingled (and "factories were almost nonexistent" because "production took place at the small shops of artisans"); people rarely lived far from work; and the wealthy tended to live in the center of the city. His walking city and my golden age find their end in the suburbs, and the history of suburbia is the history of fragmentation.

Middle-class suburban homes were first built outside London in the late eighteenth century, writes Robert Fishman in another history of suburbs, *Bourgeois Utopias*, so that pious merchants could separate family life from work. Cities themselves were looked upon askance
by these upper-middle-class evangelical Christians: cards, balls, theaters, street fairs, pleasure gardens, taverns were all condemned as immoral. At the same time the modern cult of the home as a consecrated space apart from the world began, with the wife-mother as a priestess who was, incidentally, confined to her temple. This first suburban community of wealthy merchant families who shared each other’s values sounds, in Fishman’s account, paradisiacal and, like most paradieses, dull: a place of spacious freestanding houses, with little for their residents to do outside the home and garden. These villas were miniaturized English country estates, and like such estates they aspired to a kind of social self-sufficiency. However, a whole community of farmworkers, gamekeepers, servants, guests, and extended families had inhabited the estate, which usually encompassed working farms and had thus been a place of production, while the suburban home housed little more than the nuclear family and was to become more and more a site only of consumption. Too, the estate was on a scale that permitted walking without leaving the grounds; the suburban home was not, but suburbia would eat up the countryside and diffuse the urban anyway.

It was in Manchester, during the industrial revolution, that the suburb came into its own. The suburb is a product of that revolution, radiating outward from Manchester and the north Midlands, which has so thoroughly fragmented modern life. Work and home had never been very separate until the factory system came of age and the poor became wage-earning employees. Those jobs, of course, fragmented work itself as craftsmanship was broken down into unskilled repetitive gestures in attendance on machines. Early commentators deplored how factory work destroyed family life, taking individuals out of the home and making family members strangers to each other during their prodigiously long workdays. Home for factory workers was little more than a place to recuperate for the next day’s work, and the industrial system made them far poorer and unhealthier than they had been as independent artisans. In the 1830s Manchester’s manufacturers began to build the first large-scale suburbs to escape the city they had created and to enhance family life for their class. Unlike the London evangelicals, they were fleeing not temptation but ugliness and danger—industrial pollution, the bad air and sanitation of a poorly designed city, and the sight and threat of their miserable workforce.

“The decision to suburbanize had two great consequences,” says Fishman. “First the core emptied of residents as the middle class left and workers were pushed out by the conversion of their rooms in the back streets to offices. . . . Visitors were surprised to find an urban core that was totally quiet and empty after business hours. The central business district was born. Meanwhile, the once peripheral factories were now enclosed by a suburban belt, which separated them from the now-distant rural fields. The grounds of the suburban villas were en-
closed by walls, and even the tree-lined streets on which they stood were often forbidden except to the residents and their guests. One group of workers attempted to keep open a once-rural footpath that now ran through the grounds of a factory owner's suburban villa... Mr. Jones responded with iron gates and ditches." Fishman's picture shows a world where the female mix of urban life in the "walking city" has been separated out into its sterile constituent elements.

The workers responded by fleeing to the fields on Sundays and, eventually, fighting for access to the remaining rural landscape in which to walk, climb, cycle, and breathe... The middle class responded by continuing to develop and dwell in suburbs. Men commuted to work and women to shop by private carriages, then horse-drawn omnibuses (which, in Manchester, were priced too high to accommodate the poor), and eventually trains. In fleeing the poor and the city, they had left behind pedestrian scale. One could walk in the suburbs, but there was seldom anyplace to go on foot in these homogenous expanses of quiet residential streets behind whose walls dwelt families more or less like each other. The twentieth-century American suburb reached a kind of apotheosis of fragmentation when proliferating cars made it possible to place people farther than ever from work, stores, public transit, schools, and social life. The modern suburb as described by Philip Langdon is antithetical to the walking city: "Offices are kept separate from retailing. The housing is frequently divided into mutually exclusive tracts... with further subdivision by economic status. Manufacturing, no matter how clean and quiet—today's industries are rarely the noisy, smoke-belching mills of urban memory—is kept away from residential areas or excluded from the community entirely. Street layouts in new developments enforce apartness. To unlock the rigid geographic segregation, an individual needs to obtain a key—which is a motor vehicle. For obvious reasons those keys are not issued to those under sixteen, the very population for whom the suburbs are supposedly most intended. These keys are also denied to some of the elderly who can no longer drive."

Getting a license and a car is a profound rite of passage for modern suburban teenagers; before the car, the child is either stranded at home or dependent upon chauffeuring parents. Jane Holtz Kay, in her book on the impact of cars, Asphault Nation, writes of a study that compared the lives of ten-year-olds in a walkable Vermont small town and an unwalkable southern California suburb. The California children watched four times as much television, because the outdoor world offered them fewer adventures and destinations. And a recent study of the effects of television on Baltimore adults concluded that the more local news television, with its massive emphasis on sensational crime stories, locals watched, the more fearful they were. Staying home to watch TV discouraged them from going out. That Los Angeles Times advertisement for an electronic encyclopedia... —"You used to walk across
town in the pouring rain to use our encyclopedias. We're pretty confident we can get your kid to click and drag"—may describe the options open to a child who no longer has a library within walking distance and may not be allowed to walk far alone anyway (walking to school, which was for generations the great formative first foray alone into the world, is likewise becoming a less common experience.) Television, telephones, home computers, and the Internet complete the privatization of everyday life that suburbs began and cars enhanced. They make it less necessary to go out into the world and thus accommodate retreat from rather than resistance to the deterioration of public space and social conditions.

These American suburbs are built car-scale, with a diffuseness the unenhanced human body is inadequate to cope with, and just as gardens, sidewalks, arcades, and wilderness trails are a kind of infrastructure for walking, so modern suburbs, highways, and parking lots are an infrastructure for driving. Cars made possible the development of the great Los Angelean sprawls of the American West, those places not exactly suburbs because there is no urbanity to which they are subsidiary. Cities like Albuquerque, Phoenix, Houston, and Denver may or may not have a dense urban core floating somewhere in their bellies like a half-digested snack, but most of their space is too diffuse to be well served by public transit (if it exists) or to be traversed on foot. In these sprawls, people are no longer expected to walk, and they seldom do. There are many reasons why. Suburban sprawls generally make dull places to walk, and a large subdivision can become numbingly repetitious at three miles an hour instead of thirty or sixty. Many suburbs were designed with curving streets and cul-de-sacs that vastly expand distances: Langdon gives an example of an Irvine, California, subdivision where in order to reach a destination a quarter mile away as the crow flies the traveler must walk or drive more than a mile. Too, when walking is not an ordinary activity, a lone walker may feel ill at ease about doing something unexpected and isolated.

Walking can become a sign of powerlessness or low status, and new urban and suburban design disdains walkers. Many places have replaced downtown with shopping malls inaccessible by any means but cars, or by building cities that never had downtowns, buildings meant to be entered through parking garages rather than front doors. In Yucca Valley, the town near Joshua Tree National Park, all the businesses are strung out along several miles of highway, and crosswalks and traffic lights are rare: though, for example, my bank and food store are only a few blocks apart, they are on opposite sides of the highway, and a car is the only safe, direct way to travel between them. Throughout California more than 1,000 crosswalks have been removed in recent years, more than 150 of them in traffic-clogged Silicon Valley, apparently in the spirit of the L.A. planners who proclaimed in the
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ho proclaimed in the
early 1960s, “The pedestrian remains the largest single obstacle to free
traffic movement.” Many parts of these western sprawl-cities were
built without sidewalks altogether, in both rich and poor neighbor-
hoods, further signaling that walking has come to an end by design.
Lars Eigner, who during a homeless and largely penniless phase of his
life in the 1980s hitchhiked with his dog Lizbeth between Texas and
southern California, wrote eloquently about his experiences, and one
of the worst came about when a driver dropped him off in the wrong
part of town: “South Tucson simply has no sidewalks. I thought at first
this was merely in keeping with the general wretchedness of the place,
but eventually it seemed to me that the public policy in Tucson is to
pede pedestrians as much as possible. In particular, I could find no way
to walk to the main part of town in the north except in the traffic lanes
of narrow highway ramps. I could not believe this at first, and Lizbeth
and I spent several hours wandering on the south bank of the dry gash
that divides Tucson as I looked for a walkway.”

Even in the best places, pedestrian space is continually eroding: in
the winter of 1997–98, New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani decided
that pedestrians were interfering with traffic (one could just as well
have said, in this city where so many still travel and take care of their
business on foot, that cars interfere with traffic). The mayor ordered
the police to start citingjaywalkers and fenced in the sidewalks of
some of the busiest corners of the city. New Yorkers, to their eternal
glory, rebelled by staging demonstrations at the barriers and jaywalk-
ing more. In San Francisco, faster and denser traffic, shorter walk
lights, and more belligerent drivers intimidate and occasionally man-
gle pedestrians. Here 41 percent of all traffic fatalities are pedestrians
killed by cars, and more than a thousand walkers are injured every
year. In Atlanta, the figures are 80 pedestrians killed per year and
more than 1,300 injured. In Giuliani’s New York, almost twice as
many people are killed by cars as are murdered by strangers—285
versus 150 in 1997. Walking the city is now not an attractive prospect
for those unequipped to dodge and dash.

Geographer Richard Walker defines urbanity as “that elusive
combination of density, public life, cosmopolitan mixing, and free
expression.” Urbanity and automobiles are antithetical in many ways,
for a city of drivers is only a dysfunctional suburb of people shuttling
from private interior to private interior. Cars have encouraged the
diffusion and privatization of space, as shopping malls replace shopping
streets, public buildings become islands in a sea of asphalt, civic de-
sign lapses into traffic engineering, and people mingle far less freely
and frequently. The street is public space in which First Amendment
rights of speech and assembly apply, while the mall is not. The dem-
ocratic and liberatory possibilities of people gathered together in public
don’t exist in places where they don’t have space in which to gather.
Perhaps it was meant that way. As Fishman argues, the suburbs were
a refuge—first from the sin and then from the ugliness and anger of the city and its poor. In postwar America “white flight” sent middle-class whites to the suburbs from multiracial cities, and in the new sprawl-cities of the West and suburbs around the country a fear of crime that often seems to be a broader fear of difference is further eliminating public space and pedestrian possibilities. Political engagement may be one of the things suburbs have zoned out.

Early on in the development of the American suburbs, the porch, an important feature for small-town social life, was replaced at the front of the home by the blind maw of the garage (and the sociologist Dean McCannell tells me some new homes have pseudo-porches that make them look scantly old-fashioned but are actually too shallow to sit on). More recent developments have been more radical in their retreat from communal space: we are in a new era of walls, guards, and security systems, and of architecture, design, and technology intended to eliminate or nullify public space. This withdrawal from shared space seems, like that of the Manchester merchants a century and a half ago, intended to buffer the affluent from the consequences of economic inequity and resentment outside the gates; it is the alternative to social justice. The new architecture and urban design of segregation could be called Calvinist: they reflect a desire to live in a world of predestination rather than chance, to strip the world of its wide-open possibilities and replace them with freedom of choice in the marketplace. “Anyone who has tried to take a stroll at dusk through a neighborhood patrolled by armed security guards and signposted with death threats quickly realizes how merely notional, if not utterly obsolete, is the old idea of ‘freedom of the city,’” writes Mike Davis of the nicer suburbs of Los Angeles. And Kierkegaard long ago exclaimed, “It is extremely regrettable and demoralizing that robbers and the elite agree on just one thing—living in hiding.”

If there was a golden age of walking, it arose from a desire to travel through the open spaces of the world unarmored by vehicles, unafraid to mingle with different kinds of people. It emerged in a time when cities and countryside grew safer and desire to experience that world was high. Suburbia abandoned the space of the city without returning to the country, and in recent years a second wave of impulse has beefed up this segregation with neighborhoods of high-priced bunkers. But even more importantly, the disappearance of pedestrian space has transformed perception of the relationship between bodies and spaces. Something very odd has happened to the very state of embodiment, of being corporeal, in recent decades.

II. The Disembodiment of Everyday Life

The spaces in which people live have changed dramatically, but so have the ways they imagine and experience that space. I found a strange passage in a 1998 Life magazine celebrating momentous
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events over the past thousand years. Accompanying a picture of a train was this text: "For most of human history, all land transport depended on a single mode of propulsion—feet. Whether the traveler relied on his own extremities or those of another creature, the drawbacks were the same, low cruising speed, vulnerability to weather, the need to stop for food and rest. But on September 15, 1830, foot power began its long slide toward obsolescence. As brass bands played, a million Britons gathered between Liverpool and Manchester to witness the inauguration of the world's first fully steam-driven railway. . . . Despite the death of a member of Parliament who was run down by the train at the opening ceremony, the Liverpool and Manchester inspired a rash of track-laying round the world." The train was, like the factory and the suburb, part of the apparatus of the industrial revolution; just as factories mechanically sped up production, so trains sped up distribution of goods, and then of travelers.

Life magazine's assumptions are interesting; nature as biological and meteorological factors is a drawback rather than an occasional inconvenience; progress consists of the transcendence of time, space, and nature by the train and later the car, airplane, and electronic communications. Eating, resting, moving, experiencing the weather, are primary experiences of being embodied; to view them as negative is to condemn biology and the life of the senses, and the passage does exactly that in its most lurid statement, that "foot power began its long slide toward obsolescence." Perhaps this is why neither Life nor the crowd apparently mourned the squashed Parliamentarian. In a way, the train mangled not just that one man's body, but all bodies in the places it transformed, by severing human perception, expectation, and action from the organic world in which our bodies exist. Alienation from nature is usually depicted as estrangement from natural spaces. But the sensing, breathing, living, moving body can be a primary experience of nature too: new technologies and spaces can bring about alienation from both body and space.

In his brilliant The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century, Wolfgang Schivelbusch explores the ways trains changed their passengers' perceptions. Early railroad travelers, he writes, characterized this new technology's effects as the elimination of time and space, and to transcend time and space is to begin to transcend the material world altogether—to become disembodied. Disembodiment, however convenient, has side effects. "The speed and mathematical directness with which the railroad proceeds through the terrain destroy the close relationship between the traveler and the traveled space," Schivelbusch writes. "The train was experienced as a projectile, and traveling on it as being shot through the landscape—thus losing control of one's senses. . . . The traveler who sat inside that projectile ceased to be a traveler and became, as noted in a popular metaphor of the century, a parcel." Our own perceptions have sped up
since, but trains were then dizzyingly fast. Earlier forms of land travel had intimately engaged travelers with their surroundings, but the railroad moved too fast for nineteenth-century minds to relate visually to the trees, hills, and buildings whipping by. The spatial and sensual engagement with the terrain between here and there began to evaporate. Instead, the two places were separated only by an ever-shortening amount of time. Speed did not make travel more interesting, Schivelbusch writes, but duller; like the suburb, it puts its inhabitants in a kind of spatial limbo. People began to read on the train, to sleep, to knit, to complain of boredom. Cars and airplanes have vastly augmented this transformation, and watching a movie on a jetliner 35,000 feet above the earth may be the ultimate disconnection of space, time, and experience. “From the elimination of the physical effort of walking to the sensorimotor loss induced by the first fast transport, we have finally achieved states bordering on sensory deprivation,” writes Paul Virilio. “The loss of the thrills of the old voyage is now compensated for by the showing of a film on a central screen.”

The Life writers may be right. Bodies are not obsolete by any objective standard, but they increasingly are perceived as too slow, frail, and unreliable for our expectations and desires—as parcels to be transported by mechanical means (though of course many steep, rough, or narrow spaces can only be traversed on foot, and many remote parts of the world can’t be reached by any other means; it takes a built environment, with tracks, graded roads, landing strips, and energy sources, to accommodate motor transport). A body regarded as adequate to cross continents, like John Muir’s or William Wordsworth’s or Peace Pilgrim’s, is experienced very differently than a body inadequate to go out for the evening under its own power. In a sense the car has become a prosthesis, and though prosthetics are usually for injured or missing limbs, the auto-prosthetic is for a conceptually impaired body or a body impaired by the creation of a world that is no longer human in scale. In one of the Alien movies, the actress Sigourney Weaver lurches along in a sort of mechanized body armor that wraps around her limbs and magnifies her movements. It makes her bigger, fiercer, stronger, able to battle with monsters, and it seems strange and futuristic. But this is only because the relationship between the body and the prosthetic machine is so explicit here, the latter so obviously an extension of the former. In fact, from the first clapped stick and improvised carrier, tools have extended the body’s strength, skill, and reach to a remarkable degree. We live in a world where our hands and feet can direct a ton of metal to go faster than the fastest land animal, where we can speak across thousands of miles, blow holes in things with no muscular exertion but the squeeze of a forefinger.

It is the unaugmented body that is rare now, and that body has begun to atrophy as both a muscular and a sensory organism. In the century and a half since the railroad seemed to go too fast to be
The suburbs made walking ineffective transportation within their expanses, but the suburbanization of the American mind has made walking increasingly rare even when it is effective. Walking is no longer, so to speak, how many people think. Even in San Francisco, very much a “walking city” by Jackson’s criteria, people have brought this suburbanized consciousness to their local travel, or so my observations seem to indicate. I routinely see people drive and take the bus remarkably short distances, often distances that could be covered more quickly by foot. During one of my city’s public transit crises, a commuter declared he could walk downtown in the time it took the streetcar, as though walking was some kind of damning comparison—but he had apparently been traveling from a destination so near downtown he could’ve walked every day in less than half an hour, and walking was one transit option the newspaper coverage never proposed (obvious things could be said about bicycling here, were this not a book about walking). Once I made my friend Maria—a surfer, biker, and world traveler—walk the half mile from her house to the bars on Sixteenth Street, and she was startlingly pleased to realize how close they were, for it had never occurred to her before that they were accessible by foot. Last Christmas season, the parking lot of the hip outdoor equipment store in Berkeley was full of drivers idling their engines and waiting for a parking space, while the streets around were full of such spaces. Shoppers weren’t apparently willing to walk two blocks to buy their outdoor gear (and since then I have noticed that nowadays drivers often wait for a close parking spot rather than walk in from the farther reaches of the lot). People have a kind of mental radius of how far they are willing to go on foot that
seems to be shrinking; in defining neighborhoods and shopping districts, planners say it is about a quarter mile, the distance that can be walked in five minutes, but sometimes it hardly seems to be fifty yards from car to building.

Of course the people idling their engines at the outdoor equipment store may have been there to buy hiking boots, workout clothes, climbing ropes—equipment for the special circumstances in which people will walk. The body has ceased to be a utilitarian entity for many Americans, but it is still a recreational one, and this means that people have abandoned the everyday spaces—the distance from home to work, stores, friends—but created new recreational sites that are most often reached by car: malls, parks, gyms. Parks, from pleasure gardens to wilderness preserves, have long accommodated bodily recreation, but the gyms that have proliferated wildly in the past couple of decades represent something radically new. If walking is an indicator species, the gym is a kind of wildlife preserve for bodily exertion. A preserve protects species whose habitat is vanishing elsewhere, and the gym (and home gym) accommodates the survival of bodies after the abandonment of the original sites of bodily exertion.

III. The Treadmill

The suburb rationalized and isolated family life as the factory did manufacturing work, and the gym rationalizes and isolates not merely exercise but nowadays even each muscle group, the heart rate, the "burn zone" of most inefficient calorie use. Somehow all this history comes back to the era of the industrial revolution in England. "The Tread-Mill," writes James Hardie in his little book of 1823 on the subject, "was, in the year 1818, invented by Mr. William Cubitt, of Ipswich, and erected in the House of Correction at Brixton, near London." The original treadmill was a large wheel with sprockets that served as steps that several prisoners trod for set periods. It was meant to rationalize prisoners’ psyches, but it was already an exercise machine. Their bodily exertion was sometimes used to power grain mills or other machinery, but it was the exertion, not the production, that was the point of the treadmill. "It is its monotonous steadiness and not its severity, which constitutes its terror, and frequently breaks down the obstinate spirit." Hardie wrote of the treadmill’s effect in the American prison he oversaw. He added, however, that "the opinions of the medical officers in attendance at the various prisons, concur in declaring that the general health of the prisoners has, in no degree suffered injury, but that, on the contrary, the labor has, in this respect, been productive of considerable benefit." His own prison of Bellevue on New York’s East River included 81 male and 101 female vagrants, as well as 109 male and 37 women convicts, and 14 female "maniacs." Vagrancy—wandering without apparent resources or
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purpose—was and sometimes still is a crime, and doing time on the
treadmill was perfect punishment for it.

Repetitive labor has been punitive since the gods of Greek myth
sentenced Sisyphus—who had, Robert Graves tells us, “always lived
by robbery and often murdered unsuspecting travelers”—to his
famous fate of pushing a boulder uphill. “As soon as he has almost
reached the summit, he is forced back by the weight of the shameless
stone, which bounces to the very bottom once more; where he
wearily retrieves it and must begin all over again, though sweat
bathes his limbs.” It is hard to say if Sisyphus is the first weight lifter
or the first treadmillier, but easy to recognize the ancient attitude to
repetitive bodily exertion without practical results. Throughout most
of human history and outside the first world nowadays, food has
been relatively scarce and physical exertion abundant; only when the
status of these two things is reversed does “exercise” make sense.
Though physical training was part of ancient Greek citizens’ educa-
tion, it had social and cultural dimensions missing from modern
workouts and Sisyphean punishments, and while walking as exercise
had long been an aristocratic activity, industrial workers’ enthusiasm
for hiking, particularly in Britain, Austria, and Germany, suggests
that it was far more than a way to make the blood circulate or calo-
ries burn. Under the heading “Alienation,” Eduardo Galeano wrote
a brief essay about fishermen in a remote village of the Dominican
Republic puzzling over an advertisement for a rowing machine not
very long ago. “Indoors? They use it indoors? Without water? They
row without water? And without fish? And without the sun? And without the sky?” they exclaimed, telling the resident alien who has shown them the picture that they like everything about their work but the rowing. When he explained that the machine was for exercise, they said “Ah. And exercise—what’s that?” Suntans famously became status symbols when most of the poor had moved indoors from the farm to the factory, so that browned skin indicated leisure time rather than work time. That muscles have become status symbols signifies that most jobs no longer call upon bodily strength; like tans, they are an aesthetic of the obsolete.

The gym is the interior space that compensates for the disappearance of outside and a stopgap measure in the erosion of bodies. The gym is a factory for the production of muscles or of fitness, and most of them look like factories: the stark industrial space, the gleam of metal machines, the isolated figures each absorbed in his or her own repetitive task (and like muscles, factory aesthetics may evoke nostalgia). The industrial revolution institutionalized and fragmented labor; the gym is now doing the same thing, often in the same place, for leisure. Some gyms actually are born-again industrial sites. The Chelsea Piers in Manhattan were built in the first decade of this century for ocean liners—for the work of longshoremen, stevedores, and clerks, and for the travel of emigrants and elites. They now house a sports center with indoor track, weight machines, pool, climbing gym, and most peculiarly, a four-story golf driving range, destinations in themselves rather than points of arrival and departure. An elevator takes golfers to their stalls, where all the gestures of golf—walking, carrying, gazing, situating, removing, communicating, retrieving or following the ball—have vanished with the landscape of the golf course. Nothing remains but the single arc of a drive; four tiers of solitary stationary figures making the same gesture, the sharp sound of balls being hit, the dull thud of their landing, and the miniaturized armored-car vehicles that go through the green artificial-grass war zone to scoop up the balls and feed them into the mechanism that automatically pops up another ball as each one is hit. Britain has specialized in the conversion of industrial sites into climbing gyms. Among them are a former electrical substation in London, the Warehouse on Gloucester’s Severn River waterfront, the Forge in Sheffield on one side of the Peak District, an early factory in downtown Birmingham, and, according to a surveyor friend, a “six-story former cotton mill near Leeds” I couldn’t locate (not to mention a desanctified church in Bristol). It was in some of these buildings that the industrial revolution was born, with the Manchester and Leeds textile mills, Sheffield’s iron- and steelworks, the innumerable manufactories of “the workshop of the world” that Birmingham once was. Climbing gyms are likewise established in converted industrial buildings in the United States, or at least in those cities old enough to have once had industrial-revolution architecture. In those buildings
abandoned because goods are now made elsewhere and First World work grows ever more cerebral, people now go for recreation, reversing the inclinations of their factory-worker predecessors to go out—to the outskirts of town or at least out-of-doors—in their free time. (In defense of climbing gyms, it should be said they allow people to polish skills and, during foul weather, to stay fit; for some the gym has only augmented the opportunities, not replaced the mountain, though for others the unpredictabilities and splendors of real rock have become dispensable, annoying—or unknown.)

And whereas the industrial revolution’s bodies had to adapt to the machines, with terrible consequences of pain, injury, and deformity, exercise machines are adapted to the body. Marx said history happens the first time as tragedy, the second as farce; bodily labor here happens the first time around as productive labor and the second as leisure-time consumption. The deepest sign of transformation is not merely that this activity is no longer productive, that the straining of the arms no longer moves wood or pumps water. It is that the straining of the muscles can require a gym membership, workout gear, special equipment, trainers and instructors, a whole panoply of accompanying expenditures, in this industry of consumption, and the resulting muscles may not be useful or used for any practical purpose. “Efficiency” in exercise means that consumption of calories takes place at the maximum rate, exactly the opposite of what workers aim for, and while exertion for work is about how the body shapes the world, exertion for exercise is about how the body shapes the body. I do not mean to denigrate the users of gyms—I have sometimes been one myself—only to remark on their strangeness. In a world where manual labor has disappeared, the gym is among the most available and efficient compensations. Yet there is something perplexing about this semipublic performance. I used to try to imagine, as I worked out on one or another weight machine, that this motion was rowing, this one pumping water, this one lifting bales or sacks. The everyday acts of the farm had been reprised as empty gestures, for there was no water to pump, no buckets to lift. I am not nostalgic for peasant or farmworker life, but I cannot avoid being struck by how odd it is that we reprise those gestures for other reasons. What exactly is the nature of the transformation in which machines now pump our water but we go to other machines to engage in the act of pumping, not for the sake of water but for the sake of our bodies, bodies theoretically liberated by machine technology? Has something been lost when the relationship between our muscles and our world vanishes, when the water is managed by one machine and the muscles by another in two unconnected processes?

The body that used to have the status of a work animal now has the status of a pet; it does not provide real transport, as a horse might have; instead, the body is exercised as one might walk a dog. Thus the body, a recreational rather than utilitarian entity, doesn’t work, but
works out. The barbell is only abstracted and quantified materiality to shift around—what used to be a sack of onions or a barrel of beer is now a metal ingot—and the weight machine makes simpler the act of resisting gravity in various directions for the sake of health, beauty, and relaxation. The most perverse of all the devices in the gym is the treadmill (and its steeper cousin, the Stairmaster). Perverse, because I can understand simulating farm labor, since the activities of rural life are not often available—but simulating walking suggests that space itself has disappeared. That is, the weights simulate the objects of work, but the treadmill and Stairmaster simulate the surfaces on which walking takes place. That bodily labor, real or simulated, should be dull and repetitive is one thing; that the multifaceted experience of moving through the world should be made so is another. I remember evenings strolling by Manhattan's many glass-walled second-floor gyms full of rows of treadmills looking as though they were trying to leap through the glass to their destruction, saved only by the Sisyphean contraption that keeps them from going anywhere at all—though probably they didn’t see the plummets before them, only their own reflection in the glass.

I went out the other day, a gloriously sunny winter afternoon, to visit a home-exercise equipment store and en route walked by the University of San Francisco gym, where treadmills were likewise at work in the plate-glass windows, most of them reading the newspaper (three blocks from Golden Gate Park, where other people were running and cycling, while tourists and Eastern European émigrés were walking). The muscular young man in the store told me that people buy home treadmills because they allow them to exercise after work when it might be too dark for them to go out safely, to exercise in private where the neighbors will not see them sweating, to keep an eye on the kids, and to use their scarce time most efficiently, and because it is a low-impact activity good for people with running injuries. I have a friend who uses a treadmill when it's painfully cold outside in Chicago, and another who uses a no-impact machine whose footpads rise and fall with her steps because she has an injured hamstring (injured by driving cars designed for larger people, not by running). But a third friend's father lives two miles from a very attractive Florida beach, she tells me, full of low-impact sand, but he will not walk there and uses a home treadmill instead.

The treadmill is a corollary to the suburb and the autotropolis: a device with which to go nowhere in places where there is now nowhere to go. Or no desire to go: the treadmill also accommodates the automobileized and suburbanized mind more comfortable in climate-controlled indoor space than outdoors, more comfortable with quantifiable and clearly defined activity than with the seamless engagement of mind, body, and terrain to be found walking out-of-doors. The treadmill seems to be one of many devices that accommodate a retreat from the world, and I fear that such accommodation disinclines people to participate in making that world habitable or to participate in it at all.
It too could be called Calvinist technology, in that it provides accurate numerical assessments of the speed, "distance" covered, and even heart rate, and it eliminates the unpredictable and unforeseeable from the routine—no encounters with acquaintances or strangers, no sudden revelatory sights around a bend. On the treadmill, walking is no longer contemplating, courting, or exploring. Walking is the alternate movement of the lower limbs.

Unlike the prison treadmills, of the 1820s, the modern treadmill does not produce mechanical power but consumes it. The new treadmills have two-horsepower engines. Once, a person might have hitched two horses to a carriage to go out into the world without walking; now she might plug in a two-horsepower motor to walk without going out into the world. Somewhere unseen but wired to the home is a whole electrical infrastructure of power generation and distribution transforming the landscape and ecology of the world—a network of electrical cables, meters, workers, of coal mines or oil wells feeding power plants or of hydropower dams on rivers. Somewhere else is a factory making treadmills, though factory work is a minority experience in the United States nowadays. So the treadmill requires far more economic and ecological interconnection than does taking a walk, but it makes far fewer experiential connections. Most treadmillers read or otherwise distract themselves. Prevention magazine recommends watching TV while treadmilling and gives instructions on how treadmill users can adapt their routines to walking about outside when spring comes (with the implication that the treadmill, not the walk, is the primary experience). The New York Times reports that people have begun taking treadmill classes, like the stationary bicycling classes that have become so popular, to mitigate the loneliness of the long-distance treadmill. For like factory labor, treadmill time is dull—it was the monotony that was supposed to reform prisoners. Among the features of the Precor Cardiologic Treadmill, says its glossy brochure, are "5 programmed courses" that "vary in distance, time and incline... The Interactive Weight Loss course maintains your heart rate within your optimum weight loss zone by adjusting workload," while "custom courses allow you to easily create and store personalized programs of up to 8 miles, with variations as small as 1/10th mile increments." It’s the custom courses that most amaze me; users can create an itinerary like a walking tour over varied terrain, only the terrain is a revolving rubber belt on a platform about six feet long. Long ago when railroads began to erode the experience of space, journeys began to be spoken of in terms of time rather than distance (and a modern Angeleno will say that Beverly Hills is twenty minutes from Hollywood rather than so many miles). The treadmill completes this transformation by allowing travel to be measured entirely by time, bodily exertion, and mechanical motion. Space—as landscape, terrain, spectacle, experience—has vanished.
READING, REREADING, AND ANALYSIS

1. Do you agree with Solnit that walking is seen today as more of a nuisance than an activity to enjoy?

2. Why does Solnit believe that the "golden age" of walking has disappeared? Why, especially, does she equate the rise of the suburbs with the "golden age's tombstone"?

3. Solnit uses an example of a fisherman puzzling over a rowing machine. What does the example illustrate?

4. What does Solnit mean when she discusses "disembodiment"? Share your answer with classmates in a group. What are the problems Solnit associates with "disembodiment"? Is her perspective valid, or is her argument about "disembodiment" much ado about nothing?

5. Think about commercials you have seen for exercise machines or think about your own use of exercise machines. Is use of exercise equipment a type of punishment, and if so, why do so many people seem to eagerly embrace such punishment?

6. What does Solnit mean on page 447 when she writes:

   I am not nostalgic for peasant or farmworker life, but I cannot avoid being struck by how odd it is that we reprise those gestures for other reasons. What exactly is the nature of the transformation in which machines now pump our water but we go to other machines to engage in the act of pumping, not for the sake of water but for the sake of our bodies, bodies theoretically liberated by machine technology?

RESPONDING THROUGH WRITING: BUILDING AN INTERPRETATION

7. Solnit has some very strong opinions about the history she describes. Write a short paper analyzing her point of view and looking closely at least two moments in the text where she reveals it. What do you think her goal is in writing this piece? To what extent do you find her argument persuasive?

8. Solnit argues that because of our reliance on trains, cars, and airplanes, we experience a "disembodiment" that greatly changes our sense of space and time. Write a paper in which you explore a part of our lives that is affected by this disembodiment. Develop an example that shows how lives in the twenty-first century have changed, and discuss the consequences of this change. (Note: Do not use either of Solnit's examples, walking or exercise, as your primary example.)
ANALYSIS

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9. In four or five sentences, summarize the main point, as you see it, of Solnit's use of the term "Calvinist" in her essay. What is she trying to convey by using the word "Calvinist"?

10. Write a letter to Solnit in which you discuss your reaction to the following claim in her essay:

Television, telephones, home computers, and the Internet complete the privatization of everyday life that suburbs began and cars enhanced. They make it less necessary to go out into the world and thus accommodate retreat from rather than resistance to the deterioration of public space and social conditions (p. 438).

GOING FURTHER: LEARNING FROM OTHER SOURCES

11. Find a website that focuses on the kind of exercise equipment that Solnit describes in her essay. (It could be a gym, fitness, or health website, for example.) Look at the language used to describe what the machines are designed to do. Make a list of the most vivid words, and write a paragraph in which you assess those descriptions in the terms of Solnit's critique. Is there anything odd, funny, or even surprising about the language surrounding exercise?

12. Use an academic search engine to find information about the treadmill as a type of prison punishment. When did prisons stop using treadmills as a form of punishment and why?

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

13. In "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," Arlie Russell Hochschild discusses how work practices such as the drive for efficiency and how the allure of consumer culture transform life at home for many Americans. Write an essay in which you use Solnit's discussion of relationships between walking and suburbanization to help you discuss Hochschild's analysis. Part of your essay might compare Solnit's claim that "walking is an indicator species for various kinds of freedoms and pleasures: free time, free and alluring space, and unhindered bodies" with Hochschild's discussion of Taylorization.

14. Does the present-day situation that Solnit describes constitute an example of what Walker Percy calls a "radical loss of sovereignty"? Discuss the "Aerobic Sisyphus" in the terms of Percy's essay.
15. Both Solnit and Turkle describe ways in which technology can transform human behavior and habits of mind. Compare the processes of transformation that they describe in order to arrive at your own theory about the gains and drawbacks of a new technology you have experienced.