

*Journeys Close to Home:*

*Travails and Rewards*

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## *Journeys Close to Home: Travails and Rewards*

When you travel to an unfamiliar culture or country, you notice everything. The allure of the unknown enlivens our minds and senses. Whether the sojourn was for commerce or enlightenment, sojourners have long savored the revelations of the new. In earlier days, travel was difficult and risky. The word stems from “travail” for the hardships of meager housing and shared beds, roads rutted in knee-deep mud, spiritual challenge, or the threat of bandits and violence. The rewards of changed perspective were hard earned. The “travail” of travel changed in the nineteenth century with the shift towards tourism – a packaged product to be passively consumed rather than actively achieved. Yet we still seek new vision via odysseys. Though overseas and other adventures can transform us, sometimes the journey closer to home startles and awakens, rendering us travelers again rather than tourists.

Victor Shklovsky coined the Russian term “ostranenie” — to defamiliarize or to make strange — to refer to artistic techniques that render the everyday astonishing. Making the familiar strange can electrify

surroundings paled by familiarity. Shklovsky’s way of seeing things “as they are perceived and not as they are known” frees the traveler from routine and blocked vision. Attention to language and close observation can help us transcend what we think we know.

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### *From Observer to Witness*

We came from Beaverton and Gresham, from Portland Southwest Hills, Northeast Broadway, and Sellwood. We’d observed people living on Portland’s streets for decades. We’d debated the best ways to create opportunity and housing. Sometimes we’d pressed coins into outstretched hands, sometimes turned away, confused and uncertain. More often, we ceased to notice people coiled into sleeping bags or hauling possessions in metal shopping carts. The capacity to stop seeing feeds apathy about the growing inequality we can’t seem to solve. As writers in a documentary studies class at Lewis and Clark, we wanted to see anew. This “re-vision,” a kind of witness, is central to documenting social life. To witness has multiple meanings: to testify, account for, be present at an event, affirm religious beliefs, or give evidence in court. Underlying witness is

Shklovsky's idea of perception beyond what seems "known." "Bearing" added to witness adds significance: to give birth to, support, yield, tolerate, endure. Both at home and abroad, witnessing leads to new political and social awareness, a goal of the documentary studies class. Many of us had wondered at times if a man camped out beneath Highway 99 had eaten that day. Some had pondered the start of a life whose path twisted toward a tent under a bridge. Others had stopped to chat with someone on those days when the oxymoronic "compassion fatigue" didn't overwhelm us. But had we looked into the face of a person on the streets or even less likely, asked what he or she was reading?

Enter Laura Moulton's Streetbooks Project, a mobile library on a bicycle loaded with books for those who lack a permanent address (requisite for obtaining a library card). For multiple years of the documentary studies program, students spent time talking with Laura's patrons. We discovered surprising patterns in complex lives. During one class, we learned that Louis L'Amour and other westerns are popular but so, too, are biographies and literary fiction. One recently returned book details the life of Leonardo da Vinci. We learned to look beyond the assumptions about a group of people so familiar when we noticed them at all, we packaged them with a single word defined by lack: homeless.

It was a fine July day when the documentary studies class headed downtown to the Skidmore Fountain where the Streetbooks library stood. Earlier, we'd discussed how anticipating the writing process sharpens observation. When you turn on "writer's mind," you enter a realm where noticing and writing form a feedback loop: the more you record, the more you see. Your attention to your surroundings and to language makes the familiar novel, enhancing perception – "ostranenie."

Our time downtown seemed magical, the students' enjoyment obvious. We were out of the classroom, after all. But then the transformation. Back on campus, we wrote from the notes students recorded. They created profiles of individuals according to their reading preferences, not where they slept on the Park Blocks or their struggle to find food. Emily noted that James of the long beard and fiery eyes loves Ursula LeGuin as much as she does. Luis wrote on his discussion with Peter on the power of graphic novels. They grappled with how to see "others" in our daily lives and how to choose words carefully to convey their individuality. Through writing about books and the stories therein, workshop participants witnessed themselves in the face of previously invisible strangers. They also acknowledged vast chasms in opportunity and income as well as the speed with which someone's fate can turn. These revelations gratified and

disturbed. Would such knowledge change our behavior? Here was “travail” more emotional than physical but the mark of genuine travel.

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### *Listening for Stories*

We came from Zihuatanejo, Lázaro Cárdenas, and other parts of Michoacán and Guerrero, from Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon. Through “Telling Lives,” a class at the Universidad Latina de América in the Michoacán capital of Morelia, I hoped to help students bear witness to social life. We read and discussed how to be participant-observers – to take part in cultural events, and then step back to record experience. I focused on interviewing for stories, soft-pedaling the writing aspect of the class. Friends in Mexico and the U.S. had warned me that freewriting was not a tool used in Mexican classrooms. Fieldwork and participant-observation seemed less threatening. Eudora Welty extends the notion of participation this way: “Long before I wrote stories, I listened *for* stories. Listening *for* them is something more acute than listening *to* them. [my italics] I suppose it’s an early form of participation in what goes on.” Above all, I wanted to help students attend to language through stories.

We began with practice interviews and reading profiles in *The New Yorker* and Mexican magazines, and then set out to document the lives of women working for a rural health care program, *Mujeres Aliadas*. Based in the town of Erongarícuaro, project workers and their clients are mestizo and indigenous Purépecha women from throughout the region. Staff members conduct community *platicas* (chats), educate women from teens to elders about sexuality and reproduction, train midwives, and offer diverse health services through their clinic.

We boarded a minibus for the first excursion, stopping for *nieve*, the ice cream for which Michoacán is famous. Since most students came from the region and were socially conscious, I assumed they would know something about Purépecha culture as well as issues of poverty and health. However, none had heard of *Mujeres Aliadas*, considered midwifery as an option, or knew of the horrendous abuse indigenous women sometimes face in the medical system. Some students had been to the pueblos surrounding Lake Pátzcuaro; others had simply driven past en route home for vacations. Most of the students were middle-class, as were the majority of students in Lewis and Clark's documentary studies program (allowing for different notions of "middle class" in each country). My students "knew" rural, indigenous life the way many of us in Portland are "familiar" with people

who live on the streets: well enough acquainted to stop noticing. Why had I assumed a kind of witness here I would not expect in the U.S?

Once in Erongarícuaro each student paired with one of the staff to record her life story, sitting on the grass outside the bougainvillea-covered clinic buildings near the edge of Lake Pátzcuaro. The breeze and 75 degree weather felt much like that July day a year earlier on Portland's streets. Later, the students and staff shared a sumptuous meal of beet enchiladas on the terrace of an old mill, laughing and talking. On the bus back, the students discussed their day, what they'd learned, their eagerness to return to *Mujeres Aliadas*.

Back in the classroom, the "ostranenie" begun in the field took shape. Students I'd been forewarned would not write embraced the process and created profiles in English and Spanish. They faced the challenge of telling the story of a stranger, and they responded generously to one another's work. They wrote journal entries about new understanding of the gulf between their own chances for education and the struggles of the women they'd met. Maribel, a Mexican American student who'd come to Morelia to stay with Mexican relatives, wrote about Vero, Verónica Pureco Farías. Her profile features Vero's transformation from housecleaner to *Mujeres Aliadas* community outreach worker, and from life in a traditional family silent

about women's bodies to public spokesperson for humane health care. The parallel transformation was Maribel's, as she recorded how the entire process from fieldwork to writing radically altered her perspective about rural women's lives. Carlos, the only man in the class, had been paired with the secretary, Liliana, who was not much older than he. The interview and subsequent writing made Carlos reconsider his own life. He described how *Mujeres Aliadas* had helped Liliana learn about her rights and to talk openly about sexuality and health issues. She realized, wrote Carlos, that "these things are very natural and important for every person to know about, not just women." In a phrase that would resonate through other pieces he wrote for class, he said, "Men, too, can change their lives through this knowledge."

Maribel and another student, Dinorah, returned the following summer to volunteer for *Mujeres Aliadas*. Dinorah appeared a year later to report for a Morelia newspaper on the graduation of the first class of midwives. The meaning of the women's stories deepened with each encounter, as did the students' commitment to keeping that awareness alive. I take them as models as I walk the streets of Portland, trying to stay attuned to the varied, complex lives that surround me. I want to remember that "familiar" can mean "routine" but also "intimate" and "on a family footing" – human connection severed when we grow habituated to the suffering of others.

The distance from the Lewis and Clark campus to Skidmore Fountain is roughly five to six miles. You can traverse the 73 kilometers from Morelia to Erongarícuaro in less than an hour and a half, depending on traffic. But how can you measure the movement from observer to witness, from tourist to traveler? Pursuing close and often well-trod paths, can reveal dimensions beyond measure, “making strange” the known world. At one time, a grand tour of Europe marked a person of privilege and education, usually a man, as a true cosmopolitan. Perhaps the mark of a cultivated person in the twenty-first century should be how well we journey ten miles from home and penetrate the veil of the familiar. Witness and writing give birth to the awakening that travelers of old sought. Pain attends any birth process but along with the “travail” comes the promise of bold new vision.