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MAKING CONNECTIONS with Rebecca Solnit

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Rebecca Solnit.

Photo: Sallie Dean Shatz

As someone who has been reading Rebecca Solnit's work for the past 10 years and who has seen her speak several times, I knew what to expect when I found a seat in the wings of the lobby at the Menil Collection.

True to form, she wandered.

Her talk ranged from the glass arrowheads in the Menil's "Witness to a Surrealist Vision" installation to Ursula K. Le Guin, Cabeza De Vaca, Elizabeth Taylor's 1956 performance of Leslie Benedict in "Giant" and her remark upon coming to Texas – "We really stole Texas from Mexico" – to, of course, Mona Hatoum, whose work is on view through Feb. 25.

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And that was just the introduction.

These seemingly tangential topics could make a casual listener think that Solnit is erratic and unfocused or wandering from one topic to another. Maybe that word "wandering" does not quite get at the intentional connections she draws, but I don't think she would eschew its poetry.

These threads of culture Solnit held together by talking about the 1848 Treaty of Hidalgo and the etymology of the word "metaphor" among many other things – historical, factual and researched observations.

She is a historian, after all.

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And, as she so often does, beyond the reference to "Giant," she rooted her discussion in the local. She told us about her visit earlier in the day with Texas Seventh District Congressional candidate Laura Moser and their trip around Houston to see the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. She did not shy away from reminding us that this is an effect of climate change.

But she also reminded us that such "climate catastrophes" are full of new possibilities; the displacement they cause has the ability to connect us to new neighbors and new empathies, to bring us together in powerful ways.

Disorientation can lead to progress.

She talked about "the orient," Edward Said's orientalism, disorientation, the ever-shifting location of "the west" and the disembodiment of our culture through technologies like Google Maps. She didn't hold back on our local politics and made sharp comments – nearly as sharp as Hatoum's towering cheese grater – against the policing of women's bodies and restrictions against abortions in Texas, how we address our community members with phrases like "alien" or "immigrant," how the

Rio Grande is really a place of conversion, not of separation.

Throughout all this, Solnit brought us back to Hatoum's status as a refugee and immigrant and how the work she creates elicits similarly visceral, corporeal, disorienting responses that insist we feel our bodies are fragile, but full of possibility.

Like Solnit, Hatoum confronts us with the opportunity to approach the mundane in a new way.



Mona Hatoum's sculpture "Grater Divide" at the Menil Collection.

Photo: Mark Mulligan, Houston Chronicle

As I walked afterward back to the Houston Center Photography with a friend, I said, "You know, [mansplaining](#) comes from an encounter with a book about photography," and I realize just how much Solnit has instigated my own search for connections among disparate ideas and histories that truly form the invisible fabric of our culture.

RELATED: Poetic fear factor: Mona Hatoum's 'Terra Infirma' hits Menil

My one request, though?

Next time, Rebecca, after spinning us in a circle and turning us loose to eat dinner or get back to our evening routines, maybe as an addendum to the last audience question, "Do men still explain things to you?" (which I will let you all guess her answer to), let's ask, "And then what?"

But to return to her opening quote from the late Le Guin: "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words."

How can we use different words, different maps, different forms of activism, no matter how mundane or small, in order to continue shifting our culture in the direction of collaboration, compassion and connection? She left it open, but I hope all of us sitting in the room felt a new urgency to decide where we would like to place ourselves in this "terra infirma." That thought is another reason to walk through the exhibition one more time.

***Ashlyn Davis** is the executive director of the Houston Center for Photography.*

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