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Book Review Essay: *My Life on the Road*

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***My Life on the Road* Gloria Steinem 2015 Random House New York 352 pages. Black and White photographs. Index. Hardcover.**

Reviewed by Diana J. Fox¹

There are two overriding, pervasive purposes that drive Gloria Steinem's recent autobiography, *My Life on the Road*. The first is to convey the significance of continually seeking out and listening to peoples' stories as a powerful tool for organizing collective action and bringing about sociocultural and political change. Steinem's second and related point is to share stories from more than four decades of traveling, collaborating, writing and speechmaking as one of the trailblazers for second-wave feminism. We are a story-telling species, she says, and it is through stories that women's movements globally and historically have been sparked, and have transformed the world—and continue to do so in the face of ongoing appalling acts of violence, discrimination and exclusion. In living rooms and at kitchen tables, in villages, religious meeting halls, agricultural fields, on long walks collecting water, in hotel rooms, classrooms, conference centers, break rooms and bathrooms, and yes, on planes, trains and automobiles, women across cultures, classes, castes, ethnicities, races, sexualities and abilities have launched grassroots movements, the self-proclaimed agents of women's rights in any language. Along the way, they have garnered allies in men who have joined their listening-talking circles and participated in exchanges about both their common experiences and significant differences. Strategies for action and platforms for change at local, regional and international levels emerge through stories. Steinem locates herself firmly within a historical and cross-cultural process, always on the way to somewhere else and always sharing her experience. Talking circles, the title of the book's second chapter, are, for her, key, original sites for social transformations. Moreover, for Steinem, stories come from journeys, both inner movements of self-discovery and actual travels. Our ancient past as nomadic backpackers “following the crops, the seasons, traveling with their families, our companions, our animals, our tents...” moving from place to place, she asserts, “is still in our cellular memories” (250).

As a frequent traveler myself, and one whose work as a cultural anthropologist is rooted in learning about peoples' lives, largely by listening and observing, I find I am already convinced by Steinem's point about the centrality of storytelling and listening to identity-making. As I read, I found myself reaffirmed in the power of narratives to connect people in common cause. Nonetheless, I was also alternately surprised, charmed, moved, saddened, made distraught and yet inspired by the narrative windows she opens onto peoples' struggles, resilience and creativity. There is a particular urgency to her message today, amidst our current polarizing election season

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in the U.S., when ugly explosiveness in email chats and article comments on all our devices passes for “normal” discourse, and the incessant 24/7 news cycle pulls us into ideological camps. Civility, respect and the ability to listen—these qualities seem to be increasingly undermined and diminished.

But a closed-mindedness to the views of others is not just the province of politicians, nor is it anything particularly new. Steinem claims that she, herself still needs to be reminded of the value of hearing others speak. No matter how open-minded we are, how often we self-reflexively challenge our own assumptions, most of us are still prone to rapid conclusions, easy stereotypes, and simplified overgeneralizations. Restrained by the norms of protocol (Don’t talk to strangers! Mind your own business!), held back by our own self-consciousness or shyness or anxieties around reaching out to others, we stop ourselves too often from engaging. Steinem reassures us that she is no different—perhaps to allow her readers to identify with her as an ordinary person, but one who has chosen a remarkable life. She offers numerous examples of her fallibility to illustrate her need to continually engage. She is prone to misjudgment and tends to be suspicious. Over and over again, people surprise her. Emotions often hold her hostage, so she travels, breaking free to what she knows is true—that talking to people builds connections and lays the foundation for transformation.

Case in point: in chapter six, titled “Surrealism in Everyday Life,” Steinem tells us how in 1999 (location 3070-3083, Kindle Edition), she crossed paths at a roadblock manned by a construction worker. There, a large man carrying a pick ax approached the car—she was tremulous—and looking in, recognized her, saw her and her two women companions wearing *Ms.* magazine T-shirts and immediately shared that he is a reader. She was completely shocked: What?! A huge male of the species on a construction site, with calloused hands wielding a large potential weapon and approaching a carload of women on an isolated road in the desert, reads *Ms.*? He continued, referring to a story in the magazine about *los feminicidios*, the hundreds of young women working in the *maquiladoras* (the factories just over the Mexican border where young women assemble electronics cheaply for resale in the U.S.) who were raped, tortured, mutilated, murdered and abandoned just across the border from El Paso, and that in 1989 his sister at age 16 had been one of them (186-187). He became teary-eyed conveying his appreciation for the article. The book is filled with story after story of chance meetings that challenge her assumptions—in truck stops, in diners, in taxis, on buses, in bars—as she traverses the country on her way to college campuses, women’s rights conferences and marches, numerous campaign stops (in 1996 alone, she worked with 29 campaigns) and the many hundreds of talks she’s delivered over forty-some odd years. Her style is journalistic—that is her craft, after all—and personable. Her stories are tasty bites—little tidbits that spark readers’ curiosity, so that we frequently have to pause and look up some background information to acquire more detail. As I read this book, I stuck pieces of paper onto pages I wanted to return to, scribbled notes in the margins, and realized somewhere toward the middle of the book that I had marked almost every page. At moments I found this irritating, because I wanted more specifics, more history in front of me, but as I read on and saw the scope and number of stories she was sharing, I realized each one could be a chapter or its own book. She impresses us with the vastness of the human experience as well as patterns that emerge and re-emerge, in place after place. And she compels us to seek our own experiences through travel, to acquire our own cadre of stories.

From the book’s Introduction through its concluding chapter, “What Once Was Can Be Again,” Steinem offers data-driven reflections on “the journey,” as a shared, human and often unchosen experience. For many women, journeys have been requirements of culture in patrilineal,

patrilocal societies—the majority of societies on the planet—when, according to cultural norms, they leave their natal homes to live with or in the vicinity of their husbands’ families (Coles 2016). After they are married, many women rarely see their mothers and other relatives, because of distance or cultural restrictions, or because they are overburdened with work. The majority of women around the world work seven days a week, year after year and have never had a vacation. When I began my fieldwork in a rural village in Jamaica in 1991, I came into contact with that reality for the first time, one that I’ve observed these last 25 years repeatedly. Nor is this just in “other” societies. Study after study shows that in U.S households where both spouses work and even in those where men are unemployed, women still rack up 10 hours/week in reproductive labor (household activities including grocery shopping and caregiving to children, sick and older adults) more than men (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/cwg/data-on-women>).

Women are less free than men to travel. However, women do journey for multiple reasons—*fleeing* is more accurate terminology—including escaping oppression, migrating for work, leaving home as refugees from war or natural disasters and running from domestic violence. Steinam reminds us, “the moment of leaving is when a woman is most likely to be murdered,” which lays to rest the tedious question, “why doesn’t she just leave?” (194-195). Women flee not just from husbands but other relatives as well, including mothers-in-law—patriarchy places women into power relations that pit class, caste and kin against each other. In some places, journeys are restricted because of gender norms. Women can only leave the home accompanied by a male relative or with written permission, and when they do take chances going about on their own, even in their own villages and cities, they risk rape by individuals and gangs (Gupta 2016: 154-157). Traveling freely is a high stakes enterprise. Even more sobering, says Steinem, is that “statistically speaking, home is an even more dangerous place for women than the road” (xxv). There, they face dowry murders, acid burns, honor killings, domestic violence, all which occur in or near the home. The capacity for a “self-willed” journey and to return home safely to open arms is a revolutionary act, and those of us who are free to do this, are privileged indeed.

Chapters One (“My Father’s Footsteps”) and Two (“Talking Circles”) are the only chronological sets of stories in the book. Born in 1934 in Toledo, Ohio, Steinem spent the first decade and a half of her life living mostly out of a trailer, driving from state to state from the mid-west to the south to the west with her jovial, optimistic and happy-go-lucky father, her mother who suffered from mental illness and her studious sister. Leo Steinem was a traveling salesman, often selling wares he collected along the way, purchased in antique shops and country auctions. They rarely started with enough money to complete their improvised journeys and they often slept in trailer parks or, when they were “flush,” in inexpensive motels. Travel was Gloria Steinem’s early education, along with the many books, including comics that her mother packed along for the ride. The author didn’t go to school until she was of high school age; her parents divorced and she lived in the family house in Toledo with her mother, after which she attended Smith College. Ironically, during all those formative years on the road, she craved a stable home, but when she finally stayed in one place for her college years, she wanted movement.

After graduating, Steinem traveled to India for two years. Here, in the 1950s, her global feminist education began in earnest. Traveling across India in old colonial trains, riding third class with the other occupants, women and girls, her presence piqued curiosities, and conversations began with question after question directed to her: “why hasn’t your family found you a husband? All Americans are rich so why are you with us in third class? Does everyone in America carry a gun? If I came to your country, would I be welcome? And once we got to know each other: How do America women keep from having too many babies?” Steinem realized what Indira Gandhi had

learned when she herself traveled in these women-only train cars “as her best preparation for becoming prime minister”: women’s illiteracy did not deprive them of self-knowledge and the desire for agency. They knew when they were suffering from too many pregnancies; they knew the household sizes they were able to manage. Indira Gandhi created the first family planning programs in India. She learned that even if women had to journey to family planning centers in secret, they would take the risk (34).

While in India, Steinem joined up with groups from an ashram who were walking from village to village to find peacemakers amidst caste violence that had broken out. She watched

...as villagers slowly came out of their small earthen houses and compounds to sit around a kerosene lamp in circles of six or twenty or fifty. I listened as villagers told stories of burnings and murders, thefts and rapers...to my surprise these long nights often ended with pledges to keep meeting, to sort out what was true and what was not (36).

A few years later, when she returned home to begin a career in journalism, which eventually led to launching *Ms. Magazine* and a parallel career as a women’s rights organizer, she had come to understand that talking circles had been a basic form of governing among indigenous peoples around the world. The practice took various forms—the “talking stick,” for instance, among some Native peoples of North America (the stick holder talks while others listen), fire circle discussions among the San and Kwei in Southern Africa, and contemporary parallels in the “testifying” that occurs in Black churches, and which helped spark the Civil Rights movement. One of the most important insights Steinem gained from the privilege of listening while journeying around the world is that social movement activism, in whatever local lexicon, is a global phenomenon, and does not exist worldwide as a patronizing gift from the West to the Rest. Liberation movements, collective efforts to rally against injustices small and large, have deep historical roots everywhere. Moreover, everyday forms of resistance, individual acts that cannot be classified as part of a congealed movement, and through which women seek to carve out spaces for self-expression and self-determination are also pervasive. But you have to listen to discover them; they are not obvious. Ubiquitous are the subversive and beneath-the-surface acts that many western feminist intellectuals overlooked in the 1970s and ‘80s, including, ironically, the first self-proclaimed feminist anthropologists who in 1970 asserted the existence of a global sisterhood before listening carefully to “Third-World” women’s definitions of their own problems. As the recently deceased Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi pointed out in *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*,

It is necessary to avoid generalizing, to avoid projecting on poor women our own preoccupations and problems, and, above all, to do our work as intellectuals. By this I mean: to develop our listening capacity, to be sure that we hear everything, even those things that don’t fit into our theories and pretty constructs...(Merissi, cited in Colligan, 2000: 1)

When Steinem had the chance with a group of students to meet with Kamaladevi Chattorpadhayay, a woman leader who worked alongside Mahatma Gandhi during the Independence movement from Great Britain, she told them: “We taught him everything he knew.” Chattorpadhayay explained how Gandhi had witnessed women organizing against *suttee* (immolation of widows on their

husbands' funeral piers) during British rule, in massive peaceful protests. Later, studying law in Great Britain, he was exposed to the Pankhursts, England's famous radical suffragists. From India to England, women's activism had shaped Gandhi (38).

Women have resisted and rebelled on their own terms as individuals and collectively throughout the world. Steinem's stories remind us that there are dangers that emerge when we don't listen deeply, dangers that lead to false premises and mischaracterizations. As a graduate student, I heard anthropologists actually debating whether it was unethical for members of our profession to work with Indian women to eliminate *suttee* because it was an imposition of western notions of individualism and human rights. The juxtaposition of saving "Third-World" women and then fretting about the imposition is hubris that is born of ignorance. This tension between women's human rights and cultural relativism, while certainly not unimportant, is misdirected if it is assumed that women's rights come from the West. While the terminology and structures of international law that currently frame women's human rights issues are rooted in a particular western history, parallel constructs of human dignity and the relationship between normative obligations and responsibilities are concepts that are widely shared in many societies around the world (Fox 1999). This is why women's human rights discourse, when translated into locally meaningful terms, resonates around the planet, from rural villages to urban centers, from southern NGOs to enlightened North/South NGO partnerships, from local to regional and international conferences. While Steinem never directly frames the problems in this terminology, she clearly makes the point that women's organizing to protect themselves is a cross-cultural universal and real coalition building involving listening and learning must be multi-directional.

Women are talking, arguing, and sometimes boycotting each other to assert perspectives, demanding that we listen to each other across our differences with the goal of arriving at cooperative strategies. We must continue to do so, because not everybody is listening with equal attention. The generality that women everywhere experience inequalities does not go far enough. We must know why, and how effective strategies for change can be designed. Nor does it consider the ways in which equalities are unevenly distributed and experienced across our differences. In 1980, for example, at the international women's rights conference in Copenhagen, many African women boycotted a presentation delivered by two non-African women about female genital mutilation (FGM). The African contingent themselves were already convinced of the need to eradicate FGM, but they were shocked and distressed by the over-simplified understanding and portrayal of the practice by western feminists, White and Black. They understood that rendering FGM illegal under international law would not be sufficient on its own to eradicate the practice because of its complexity, varied meanings and multiple connections to other cultural behaviors, such as marriage, under conditions where marriage is a necessary pathway to women's economic survival: No FGM, no marriage, no financial stability. So how does one begin to talk about, strategize and implement change that will be effective and long lasting? The non-African women who presented had never traveled to Africa, spoken to women who experienced, condoned or performed FGM, and neglected to understand it in its multiple contexts. Therefore, they could only offer remote and abstract proposals, lumping it all together, using language (such as "torture") that alienated African women. Torturous it may well be, and many African women have themselves described it as such. But how something is said, by whom, to whom and under what circumstances are all important elements of building allies across cultures and all our other myriad differences. The boycott, in fact, led to a fruitful change. Discussion about how to frame the practice in terms of health risks and violations of the right to health emerged, and FGM has been fought, successfully in many cases, on such grounds ever since (Brems 2001: 172-173). The recent success of Samburu

women in Kenya, who have now replaced FGM with education for their daughters as a rite of passage, is an example of such collaborative change that links up local circumstances with the internationally shared objectives (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxtXKCSZLSs>).

Half way through Chapter Two, Steinem abandons any attempt at a chronological outline of her life. The chapters instead become organized by themes, which she illustrates by jumping from decade to decade, sometimes returning to descriptions of events she began earlier. This technique is sometimes frustrating and off-putting because the reader has to turn back to earlier portions to piece the parts together. Some may find this approach appealing, allowing them to see connections across many themes. In any event, it promotes active reading. In Chapter Three, “Why I Don’t Drive,” Steinem explains that she travels by bus, train and airplane because this is how she avoids isolation and learns the most. When she does travel by car, it’s in a taxi or carpool where she always has the opportunity to open a conversation. Of course, given her familiar face, people start conversations with her constantly, just like the construction worker in the desert. Steinem shares stories from all these modes of transportation, going into most detail when discussing the group Stewardesses for Women’s Rights. She had learned first-hand of the indignities these women faced through her in-flight chats, before they organized in the mid-1970s. Women pressed to change their title to Flight Attendant as part of a broader campaign to gain respect and improved work conditions. She shares the sexist advertising slogans airlines developed using “stewardesses” to entice male fliers: “‘I’m Sandy, Fly Me,’ ‘She’ll Serve You—All the Way’ to a fake ‘Air Strip’ in which they were required to walk up and down the aisles while stripping to hot pants” (90). They were constant victims of sexist jokes (of the “farmer’s daughters” sort) along with hyper-disciplining and low pay. Driving alone in a car to her various events, Steinem would never have been exposed to the numerous intimacies that these women shared with her.

In Chapter Four, “One Big Campus,” as Steinem zigzags back and forth across the country and her life, from campus to campus, sharing details of her meetings and collectively strategizing protests with faculty but particularly with students, she gives us a sense of the whirlwind of motion and change she’s lived over the decades. In Chapter Five, “When the Political is Personal,” the author forges links between daily battles fought on the front lines of women’s lives and political action, demonstrating how domestic violence, unequal pay, deaths from illegal abortions, the denial of sexual citizenship, the second shift, employment discrimination, etc. became introduced into life-changing legislation or put on the national radar through ongoing political pressure. All of these processes started with stories, when women opened up to one another in consciousness-raising sessions, taking their secrets, abuses and suffering out of the closet of shame and into the public forum. Steinem details the pioneering efforts of women such as Bella Abzug, who ran for Congress in 1970 and with whom she worked closely, and Shirley Chisholm, who in 1972 became the first Black presidential candidate and the first woman on the ballot—although only in 14 states (134-148). The results of these decades are impressive: anti-domestic violence laws; women’s shelters; rape crisis centers and hotlines; the movement of women into previously all male-career tracks, including women police officers specializing in domestic violence; *Roe v. Wade*; women pouring into institutions of higher learning; women’s health clinics and research monies directed toward women’s health issues, among many other gains. Of course, over the last decade we have seen a steady dismantling of many of these achievements, a point I wish Steinem had focused on more intently. In Chapter Six she does, for a few pages, discuss briefly the anti-abortion protests, attacks on clinics and the tragic death of Dr. George Tiller in 2009, who was shot in the head at close range while in his Lutheran church participating in Sunday services. She also relates the

touching experiences of some women anti-abortion demonstrators, who snuck into clinics for their own abortions, then, plagued by guilt, rejoined the public protests (190-191).

As I read *My Life on the Road*, I kept waiting for Steinem to raise her voice in an urgent plea to safeguard our gains and to highlight in more dire terms the steady losses: the return of back-alley abortions and the systematic closure of women's health clinics; the persistent inequalities and forms of discrimination ranging from unequal pay to derogatory and sexualized portrayals of women in sports; the sexist double standard applied to women running for political office that focuses on their clothing and questions their capacity to care for their families while in office; the imbalance in reproductive labor; and the ongoing need for society to take on the issue of childcare and work, the scourge of gender-based violence. She never does directly rally her readers to political action, but focuses instead on the journey and the collection of stories at the grassroots level, perhaps implying that these first steps will make it impossible for story-seeking adventurers to stay out of the fray; that their empathy will ignite a passion for organizing. Maybe. But the urgency is here and needs to be communicated and felt with unwavering clarity.

Before the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling that states must make abortion legal until the fetus is viable, the Guttmacher Institute (a reproductive health organization) estimated that 1.2 million women annually either self-administered or sought out illegal abortions, leading to thousands of women hospitalized and that "in 1965 alone, nearly 200 women died from those procedures" (Basset, 2014). Last year, there were more than 300 abortion-restricting bills pending, and legal limitations on women's ability to acquire safe abortions and birth control (the situation in Texas being particularly dire where only six clinics are available to serve 75,000 women).² The situation is pushing women back into the shadows to seek various forms of illegal abortion. These include "miscarriage management," such as purchasing misoprostol in Mexico or illegally at flea markets in Texas, an abortion-inducing drug that is dangerous when taken without proper medical advice and that is expensively out of reach for poor women. For women with internet access, some women's health doctors have begun to relate directions on the web. On these matters, Steinem's tone is too matter-of-fact, too toned down in the face of such harrowing losses. Perhaps after more than 60 years of activism, having seen battles won and lost, and now in her early 80s, Gloria Steinem takes a long view, a quieter perspective of sustaining passion that I have yet to acquire.

There is one more very significant contribution that Steinem makes as she recounts the history of second-wave feminism and her role in it. Steinem reminds us that the painful story of the abandonment of Black women by the affluent White women who claimed to speak for all women during the first wave of feminism deeply influenced the organizing actions of the 1960s and 70s. There is a tendency still to view feminism as a White, middle-class women's movement, which, despite the persistence (and denial) of White privilege and the structures of White supremacy, mischaracterizes the very important contributions of Black women, Native women, Latin American women, Jewish women, Asian women and working women across race and ethnicity, to second-wave feminist platforms. Moreover, the multiple, intersecting movements of the '60s and '70s did not all emerge suddenly, as if there had been no activism since 1920. Instead, between 1920 and 1965, a grassroots foundation of many tens of thousands fought to improve the lives of women through the labor movement, the National Council of Negro Women and the YMCA (Edson and Linde 2014: 293-297). While Steinem doesn't explore these movements, she makes it very clear that her early organizing work was collaborative across race, ethnicity,

² Since the writing of this essay, the U.S. Supreme Court has struck down parts of a Texas law that would have severely restricted women's legal access to abortion in the state by closing down 10 additional clinics, thereby strengthening women's constitutionally protected rights to an abortion, established by *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.

occupation, class and sexuality, and that these efforts were continuities. She began her speaking tours in collaboration with Dorothy Pitman Hughes, “a pioneer of nonsexist, multiracial child care in New York, a fearless speaker, a mother, and a member of an extended Black family in rural Georgia—all things I was not” (46). She spent her first decade on the road with Hughes, “traveling to campuses, meetings of the National Welfare Rights Organization, the United Farm Workers, 9-to-5...lesbian groups...and the political campaigns of anti-Vietnam War and new feminist candidates.” (47).

When, in 1972, the United Nations declared 1975 International Women’s Year, planning began for the 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston. The details Steinem provides about how this took place and was executed through the collaboration of women from all walks of life, span the book, as she returns to the necessity of collaborative, grassroots organizing across our differences. Bella Abzug’s leadership championed the discovery of the issues and aspirations of

...the female half of this country...enlisting Congresswoman Patsy Mink as coauthor and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm as coconspirator in writing a revolutionary piece of legislation. It called on federal funding for fifty-six open, economically and racially representative conferences over two years, one in every state and territory. Delegates elected and issues selected at each meeting would then go to a national conference in Houston. There, a National Plan of Action would be voted on. The purpose was to represent U.S. women not only to the rest of the world, but also to our own leaders in Washington and in state legislatures. At last, there would be democratic answers to the classic question: *What do Women Want?* (54-55).

If this question still remains for you, the answers are out there. Steinem’s autobiography is a good place to start.

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