Traveling Blind is a romance, a travel adventure, an emotional quest, and a book about coming to terms with lack of sight. It explores the invisible work of navigating with a guide dog while learning to perceive the world in new ways. In a previous book, Things No Longer There: A Memoir of Losing Sight and Finding Vision, I described my initial experiences of loss of sight. Traveling Blind begins where Things No Longer There left off. As my eyesight worsened, I began to use a white cane and soon I wanted to have a guide dog. After completing a month-long residential training program, learning to walk with a lively Golden Retriever-Yellow Labrador by my side, I set out on my own, developing confidence as I traveled both local streets and more distant roads and byways. This book is a story of my travels and of lessons learned.

Three months after coming home with my dog, Teela, I began to write Traveling Blind: Adventures in Vision with a Guide Dog by My Side to document what felt like a unique experience. Walking with a guide dog, one walks differently, and seeing with partial blindness, one sees differently. As I walked with Teela, I was aware that I did not fit the many stereotypes of blindness that surrounded me—that a blind woman should stumble and fall, her eyes should look impaired, she should not be able to do things competently and go places on her own; she should be totally blind and not see
anything at all. Confronting these stereotypes, I often questioned my legitimacy. Am I really blind? Do I need this dog? But then I would stumble or bump into an obstacle I did not see, lose my way, or feel temporarily helpless. Though distressing, these hazardous moments reassured me of my own form of blindness.

This book, then, is about blindness but not about a stereotype. Ultimately, it is a story about my quest for acceptance of my own ways of seeing and not seeing. *Traveling Blind* is intended both for the general reader and as a contribution to the academic fields of disability studies, feminist ethnography, and the study of human-animal bonds. Beginning with my first sociological work, I have experimented with narrative form, exploring topics in an innovative way that involves the reader and encourages new perspectives as I seek to let others “see” what I see. In an earlier methodological study, *Social Science and the Self*, I argued for the value of a first-person approach to the development of academic knowledge. Rather than viewing the self of the inquirer as a contaminant, I championed the importance of the use of the subjective experiences of an author to inform about larger social processes. I have long had an interest in ways of seeing as well as in what is seen.

Although an intensely personal account, *Traveling Blind* is not simply memoir, for it extends beyond the personal to illuminate our understandings of vision. What does it mean to travel blind? I ask. What is it like to live in an ambiguous world where things are not black and white so much as there and not there, present and absent, shades of gray? What is it like to navigate through constantly changing imagery that requires changing inner perspectives as well? What can experiences of blindness tell us about sight? In the Bibliographic Notes at the end of this book, I provide a suggestion of the rich scholarly literature to which *Traveling Blind* seeks to contribute, including both abstract and personal studies. In these notes, I have focused especially on women’s accounts, for too often disability writings tell us primarily about the experiences of men.
For over twenty years, I have been writing and teaching feminist ethnography in a way that emphasizes a personal approach, but only in the past decade have I been significantly losing my eyesight. That experience has challenged me to confront even more honestly than before the realities around me. At a time in my life when I might like to fall back on prior work and habits, I have found I must begin again in terms of learning new skills for reading and writing and for comprehending my experiences, learning to travel blind. It has been a humbling process, causing me to value my own unique ways of seeing and my abilities to be resourceful. In this process, having a guide dog has uplifted my spirits and enabled me to feel less alone. Walking with Teela, I have been prompted to reinterpret the world around me as I navigate it with changed sight. Often I have had to come to terms with contradictions, both within myself and between how I view myself and how others see me.

I am both blind and sighted. I alternately see and fail to see, and I often struggle with my visual impairments. First diagnosed in 1996, my eye condition, called “birdshot retinochoroidopathy,” is a rare autoimmune disease that causes inflammation on my retina and choroid and affects both my central and my peripheral vision. The term “birdshot” refers to the scattered lesions in my eyes, said to resemble a spray of birdshot from a gun. Although the severity of the condition—the amount of swelling and scarring—varies over time, the condition is chronic and progressive without a cure. Its symptoms include blind spots, central areas in which I don’t see; distortions, such as seeing wavy lines instead of straight ones; color loss; lack of detailed vision; blurriness; darkening of my sight; faulty depth perception; occasional double vision; and large floaters in front of my field of view. I have areas of blindness on the edges of my sight: above and below, left and right. Images look diminished in size, and I am slow to see images and to adapt to visual changes. I see primarily what is straight ahead, and I see pieces of the world one at a time. Objects move into my view,
...from out of nowhere, and suddenly I will see them, then lose them again.

My vision loss affects my abilities to read and write and my mobility. This book is unusual in that it focuses on mobility—on my adventures in travel—rather than on more sedentary experiences. My title, *Traveling Blind: Adventures in Vision with a Guide Dog by My Side*, suggests the process of moving through space, constantly asking: What do I see? What don’t I see? How do I make sense of it? And how can I navigate with assistance?

Central to all my movements is a concern with my safety. Several years ago, while walking alone, I was hit by a car that I did not see coming because it was in a blind spot in my peripheral vision. I was tossed up on the hood of the car, spun around, and thrown onto the sidewalk. Although I was not badly hurt, I was severely shaken and I vowed to be more careful in the future. I often remind myself of that accident—because the fact that I see some things makes me think I see more than I do. Sight is so dominant a sense that it tends to overwhelm my awareness of my blindness and this can jeopardize my safety.

In *Traveling Blind*, I confront my denials. I speak with as much honesty as I can about the ambiguities of how I see and feel, trying to depict for the reader the excitement of the visual imagery I do see and, at the same time, the nonvisual sounds and smells and, most of all, the “feel” of things.

How does it feel, for instance, to see a simple desert landscape—far more simple than it would look to another person’s eye? To see a person’s face and then have it disappear, or to have it look strange and not identifiable? How does it feel not to see what is plainly there? Not to be able to drive? To walk with a guide dog? How does it feel to have people ask me questions all the time, to assume at one moment that I am fully sighted, then at the next that I am more blind than I am? How does it feel to be a very private person who suddenly becomes extremely public by virtue of traveling with a large, highly noticeable golden dog? What is it
like to navigate through airports and strange towns, to see when I least expect it, to fail to see when I want to? How does it feel to have an invisible disability?

In answering these questions, I depict a world that is not black and white, sighted and not sighted, but that is always a mixture of all the ways of seeing. It is often assumed, for example, that blind people don’t see, but in fact, most blind people have some degree of visual sight. The problem is that this sight is impaired or unreliable. Further, no matter what the degree of visual limitation, blind people see, through touch or hearing, or through some combination of residual vision, memory, and intuition, and through living in the world of the sighted. It is often assumed that blind people are very different from sighted people, when it is my experience that we all occupy the same world, but with unique ways of perceiving and navigating within it.

In this book, I seek to combat some of the stereotypes surrounding blindness—particularly the negative assumption that blindness implies incapacity or lack. Instead, I offer an account of mobility and activity, an appreciation for life, and a richness of both visual and emotional imagery. Although I tell my own story, I hope it resonates with the experiences of others. Coming to terms with one’s own ways of seeing seems to me an important process whether an individual is sighted or blind. We all embark on journeys that are often unexpected and that require changed dependencies and new ways of seeing—new ways of integrating sight, sound, mind, and feeling.

I have been fortunate in my travels to have had the companionship of an intimate partner, whom I refer to in this book as Hannah. We have been together for the past twenty-nine years, and happily we have become closer since my vision loss. Hannah, like me, is an academic, and although we have long shared many interests, my disability has challenged us to develop new mutual sensitivities. Hannah has been highly adaptive to my needs in our daily life and beyond. In return, I hope I have enriched her world
with new adventures. *Traveling Blind* opens with a story about a time when Hannah drove us through the New Mexico desert when I could no longer drive, because she knew how much I wanted to enjoy this part of the country, to appreciate the sights of the desert before they disappeared from my view. Many years ago when I was teaching at the University of New Mexico, I developed a fondness for the high desert, and although I left it for the West Coast and a position at Stanford University, there was something about the bareness, the dryness, the sense of remove, the big sky over rolling plains that always beckoned me.

Thus even when fully sighted, I would lure Hannah back with me to spend time in gentle regions of the Chihuahuan desert. On our earlier trips, between 1982 and 1996, before my vision loss, I enjoyed what I saw, feasting on the varied landscapes with my eyes, discerning the subtle colors—what looked brown at a distance would actually have shades of green, red, and yellow. I prized seeing the details of my surroundings with great clarity—the turquoise moldings on windows of old adobe homes, the particular outlines of golden aspen leaves in the fall, small purple asters growing close to the ground, fine striations of red hills. I remember the first year I noticed my eyesight fading, when I took a walk through a picturesque residential area of Albuquerque with cactus and chamisa gardens surrounding the houses. I kept taking off my glasses, trying to clean them, searching for the clarity I had seen only the year before. During the next few years, my eyesight became more significantly impaired. As this book opens, just two months after I came home with my young guide dog, and feeling excited to be navigating with her, I am embarking with Teela and Hannah on a new trip. I am not sure how much I will be able to see, but I look for ways I can take pleasure in my surroundings and continue to savor my sight, even as it is fading.

*Traveling Blind* begins with a story of our adventures in a remote area of the southern New Mexico desert during a trip to a mountain called Big Hatchet. This story gradually introduces
my blindness and my close relationships as I wake one morning with Hannah next to me, Teela on the floor at my side, a colorful sunrise dawning. I recall my joy in being able to see Big Hatchet Mountain later that day, as well as my frustrations with the blurri-ness in front of my eyes. Although grounded in a remarkable geographic place, this story is also about my quest for vision, competence, and self-worth. In the second section of the book, Hannah, Teela, and I cross the border into Mexico, where I must cross the border of my blindness as well. I confront my fears and despair, finding lights in my darkness—significant moments that shine despite my loss of sight. I cherish intimacies between Hannah and me, now all the more meaningful for the unusual circumstances we face. I soon take the reader with me as I navigate with Teela the streets of a small desert town aptly named “Truth or Consequences,” and as I delight in the magic of Christmas lights viewed with fading sight.

Back home, in Part 3, I explore dilemmas of walking the streets in my neighborhood with my new guide dog, particularly the experience—and the challenge to my identity—of repeatedly being asked, “Are you training that dog?” The reader accompanies me as I travel through airports with Teela and Hannah, surviving security and learning to navigate in a very public realm with much self-consciousness and with only one hand free, the other tightly grasping the handle of Teela’s harness.

In the closing section of the book, the three of us revisit the New Mexico desert so that I can recapture sights, sounds, and feelings that are fast receding from my view. We return to Big Hatchet and then spend time in a local bar. Later I strain, against odds, to see the subtle lights of luminarias, those small candles glowing in brown paper bags set outside at Christmastime that represent my ability to value both the darkness and the light. On an early morning walk, I carry a camera, snapping pictures, although I can barely see through the lens. I hope that when I return home, these pictures will show me what I have missed. By the end of our trip
and the close of this book, I have come to value my own mixture of blindness and sight and to feel a much-needed acceptance of myself. My relationships with Hannah and Teela have deepened, gaining a new poignance as we find comfort and expanded possibilities together.

The visit to New Mexico that opens *Traveling Blind* occurred in winter 2003, the return trip two years later. The middle section of the book on navigating duality covers the period in between. On each of our visits to the desert, I compared my past with my present and sought to decipher what I was seeing. I have since traveled to these remote places again and I have found that many of the features of the landscape I strain to see have changed. They have been swept away by desert wind and dust and difficult economic times, much like the objects once within my eyesight have disappeared into a larger, murkier background. Yet my memories remain. The mysterious bar in Hachita where Hannah and I once stopped has closed; the vast stretch of wild land surrounding Big Hatchet Mountain, though still rarely visited, is now patrolled intensively by border police. But despite these shifts, the older visions stand as dusty signposts along the way. Like the desert that gradually reclaims its own, my vision has a quality of gradual change in which my efforts to see—to grasp what is before me, and to appreciate my experiences in a positive way—count more than my losses. Rather than a story of moving from light to total darkness or a story of a startling triumph over blindness, mine is a story of subtle changes, of new insights, and of comforts found in shadows and in the spaces between light and dark where clear vision fails.

Although I write of my experiences as a blind woman, this is a surprisingly visual book. As I take the reader on my journeys, visual scenes of desert grasslands, mountains, and mesas jump forth from the pages like snapshots or photos untaken. I describe what I see in greater detail than I might were I able to take my vision for granted, were I able to assume it will be there tomorrow. I often
ask Hannah to describe those parts of my surroundings I cannot see so that I can fill in missing pieces of the picture. I appreciate my vision more now that I am blind than I did when fully sighted. I am happier. Though certain details may be absent for me, the larger features of landscapes stand out, making my experiences deeply memorable.

Picture this: We’ve set out, Hannah and me and my guide dog Teela, on a winter’s morning. The sky is clear and blue, the wind chilly. We are in the very southern part of New Mexico near the border. In the distance are mountains. I am standing with my strong twelve-power binoculars in hand, holding them up to my eyes, trying to see, in as much detail as possible, the towering mountain that has drawn me here, Big Hatchet—a “sky island” amidst a vast plain. I look at it and look at it and stare off into the hazy distance toward Mexico. I look at the golden tan earth at my feet and at my golden dog fading into the surrounding landscape, and at the desert scrub, and I look at Hannah, my loving partner by my side, who is shivering in the cold and wondering what we are doing here. And I am exceedingly, unexpectedly happy. Thus begins the adventure that unfolds in Traveling Blind. I start with a moment of surprise and joy, an opening to all that follows. For this is a book about not letting blindness destroy happiness or a sense of adventure, about staying the same person and confronting fears while going into the world, and about solving, always solving, the dilemmas that lie ahead.