



POETRY

Unknown Roads

Ninette Rothmüller



Photo credit: Fraser Stables

The autoethnographic poem 'Unknown Roads' crystalizes—in the sense of applying a pattern and producing clarity—intimate experiences of socio-geographical displacement, oppressed language preferences, and family separation across borders. 'Unknown Roads' trots with a dog, as a safe non-judgmental other, unconcerned about language insufficiencies.

The aesthetic medium of autoethnographic poetry 'translates' walking into word-steps on my paper. I discourse. 'Discourse', in its word origin, means walking (back and forth). I pace back and forth restlessly: see the shortness of the poem's lines and my steps are alike? As I pace, words lay bare, they can't hide behind a grammatical order that I can't master. In turn, I take on ownership of the language that I have been displaced into, by walking right through it, by writing autoethnographic poetry. Such poetry does not reveal that I do not know where commas go in sentences.

I walk theory: academically non-aligned and grammatically off-leash. I borrow the term 'walking theory' from the Serbian collective Teorija koja Hoda. In my pacing, borders between play and diverse peoples' everyday realities start to blur. To create such blurring is a performative autoethnographic writing practice that exposes certain experiences, such as being displaced; yet particular vulnerabilities are hidden, such as the language insufficiency that the displaced subject finds themselves confronted with and silenced by. Writing poetry is thus the research writing that I, as displaced academic, can offer in order to provide tender insights, speak, invite a response and foster change.

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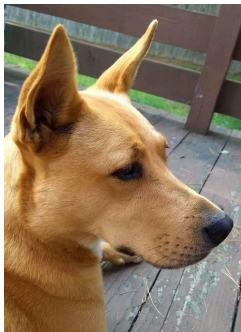


Photo credit: Mark Sellers

Solidarity researcher and artist Ninette Rothmüller (aka Aimee Xenou) is a visiting scholar at Smith College, Massachusetts, and at the Ph.D. Program in Sociology at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY). With a background in Cultural Studies, Social Work and Interdisciplinary Arts, her practice-led and theoretical work is concerned with who humans are to, and with, each other under various circumstances, such as severe crises. Her work applies a gender perspective to the thematic areas of trauma, cultures of fear, ethics, and social solidarity. She promotes joint artistic research practices and embodied forms of knowledge production, based on relational interactions between humans and non-human others. She has experienced involuntary family separation and forced immobility herself. Poetry is the catalyst she utilizes to intimately reflect on all these experiences so that they may be expressed outside of the legal rules that apply to her life.

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Unknown Roads

The dog walks me
through roads
unknown

nothing to remember
now
that I have crossed
the border
and am - here

alone with the dog
alone with words that
live on my tongue
only

The dog walks me
through roads
known

always
nose on the ground
tail wagging
soft trot
her fur the color of the sunset behind
my grandmother's house

to survive
and next to the dog
I walk along known paths

in my mind
I am never here

my feet have never touched the ground here once
never walked next to the dog

this route
now
is the forest path my grandfather took

this one
the long gravel road
tractor marks
along the grave yard

where they all are

now

it has to be
how else would I ever ...?
fold my hands

suddenly
out of

Nowhere

the house
that's never a home

we step in

the dog still wagging its tail
back and forth

as if...

me thinking about going back to the graveyard
tomorrow
taking the

long gravel road

when we walk different roads
as we walk
side by side

the dog and I