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9 The Road to Writing
An Ethno(Bio)Graphic Memoir
Ulrika Dahl

WRITING (FROM) A (PERIPHERAL) SENSE OF PLACE

In late July, Jämtland turns a deep green, the kind that almost hurts your eyes. To visit my aging grandparents, I would take bus 40', with a final destination far north of this inland northern Swedish province. Fifty familiar kilometers of poorly kept roads and endless pine forests, occasionally interrupted by a glimmering lake, pass by my window. Not a single billboard, only an occasional car. Jetlag, now from a decade of regular transatlantic trips between the Jämtland of my childhood and the America of my higher education, throbs in the back of my head. It is 'after' I have completed my formal fieldwork 'at home' and 'returned' to an institution that is far away, that I hear the silence here. After months on ever-expanding highways, criss-crossing northern California, this road to my familiar past forms a 'now' that makes my history and the uncertainty of my future meet in an embodied dissonance, a spurred and bracketed surreal sense of place. A rooted echo, a yearning inside me, makes me again question (my) uprooting and lack of life direction.

This, I think to myself, with postcolonial feminist critiques nestled in vertebrates along my intellectual and physical spine, is the first world, Western Europe. It is the middle of Sweden, a part of the growing empire sparsely populated and, at the turn of the millennium, it was repeatedly described as 'extreme peripherality' and subject to EU structural adjustment development funds for 'less advantaged areas'. I am not 'away in the field' like my anthropological kin before me were, I am 'home'. Or—at least in a place that is 'home' to my matrilineal kin. I am 'back' in a place that I could not wait to leave once, as a high school graduate. I have returned with a mission: to assemble materials for a dissertation in cultural anthropology to be written by a 'foreign student' at a prestigious institution in the U.S.

Here in the periphery I find a place continuously (re)made by regional developers and a growing tourist industry, in a time when 'nature' itself is a scarce commodity on the continent and in the imagined community that northernners, like all Europeans, are being taught to see ourselves as part of. Described in images as an 'untouched wilderness', and yet, to middle-class sensibilities, pitched as high in 'quality of life' defined as clean air and friendly neighbors, nature and culture, it is almost exotic, when seen through outside, modern, urban eyes. And yes, while the late modern nostalgia for 'nature' has been unintelligible to me who grew up next to the forest, my teacher Anna Tsing's (2000) approach to understanding globalization and regionalization has forever altered my vision; place is not a background for the unfolding of human drama. The trees, creeks and weather of my homeland are no longer simply an enchanted part of a familiar place, they are actors along with the people, movements, capital, governmental organizations and corporations, ideas and objects circulating in and out of this region.

On this northern summer morning, I am on the road through history and development, my own and that of this place; and here it seems even the wind whispers of the unfinished business of modernizing the periphery.

THE ROAD TO WRITING

Sometimes our critical distance seems less useful than our participation. And yet, can we understand either our own involvement or the changing world without our critical skills? (Tsing 2000, 328)

Writing, Sara Ahmed reminds us, begins with an orientation towards some objects and not others, and for embodied theorists, writing begins in place, with the table (2006, 11). It may be a table for writing or eating, in a room of one's own or one of shared dwelling or community making. I have sat at many tables, with or without views, each with a different unfolding world and a different body of work, and yet I would say that my passion for writing began in movement. It began in the seasonal migration of my youth, my many 'homes' and also in a sense of rootlessness; a structure of feeling that may or may not be a reflection of my postmodern predicament. In this chapter I (re)tell a particular story of movement and direction of writing, one that began on the road to Ange, the home of my maternal grandparents.

'Wherever our locations, whatever our life-journeys, all of us surely have some kind of relation to some dusty road in some close or distant part of our family history' (2010, 287), literary theorist Annële Brännström-Ohman writes in an essay about bell hooks' memoir-writing. That dusty road doesn't just seem to appear in (life)stories, it also has a particular place in the landscape of rurality and tradition and is often tied to a certain kind of (nostalgic) search for homecoming. Such questions have also guided my orientations to social scientific knowledgmaking, hooks' feminist, poetic and autobiographic challenges to scientific conventions have
greatly influenced me. Like hooks, my (femme) body (of work) is concerned with finding a sense of location and home in the world, the academy and the text. My femme figure does not simply fashion outfits and arguments, it seeks an orientation to and in writing that disrupts the (scientific) status quo and takes seriously a dialogue with subjects and objects of inquiry. Donna Haraway, who taught so many of us about situated knowledges, partial perspectives and how to critique what we also love, writes that her love for figures reflects a desire to inhabit rather than deny (hi)stories, and she writes that ‘stories are always more generous, more capacious, than ideologies; in fact that is one of my strongest hopes’ (2004, 1). Here I meditate on how ethnography meets biography as a way to narrate place, history and life forms and I trace a genealogy of (feminist) storytelling practices, because in their situated and embodied forms, stories help us create other knowledge-worlds.

This chapter does not reflect on reflection per se; rather it began as a set of reflections and it still yearns a space beyond reflexive writing about reflexivity. It seeks for an écriture femme-inine to materialize; and for a fem/inist language of a scientific elsewhere. It is a narrative, not in/of progress but in change; the text emerges from the complex ways that my location in languages and landscapes shifts as I dialogue with you, my (imagined) reader. A copy without an original, that is, a string of language without a single origin, this piece was once an essay in Swedish, written for a book about young women in Jämtland, produced by a group that I worked closely with and often collaborated and exchanged ideas with. It then (re)emerged in English as the final chapter of my dissertation, as a poetics of development, quite literally; mine and that of the subject of my research.

Revis(it)ed again now, nearly a decade later, like ‘ground-breaking’ feminist anthropologist Marjery Woolf (1992) does with her tales, I might first note that I am not the same person as when I initially wrote the story, nor does the world or writing appear as they did then. I am now a tenured academic in gender studies, who since has explored many routes of writing; from debate articles to what’s called ‘popular science’, from social scientific reports to poetry; I am someone who compulsively moves and migrates between genres and languages, but who continues to start from the premise of proximity rather than distance, from a sense of kinship and connectedness, and to implode notions of subjects and objects of science (Dahl 2010; Volcano and Dahl 2008; Dahl 2004). With Kamala Vijesweswaran (1994) I could argue that feminist ethnography is always a fiction and so too is this story of my family; like Audre Lorde, who recognizes that the interpretive act, reading or writing, (re)constitutes reality, I have highlighted both biography and myth here (Dhairyam 1992, 231). I could tell many stories about writing and this is simply one of them, driven by Vijesweswaran’s claim that feminist ethnography is possible, less as a truthful representation of complexity, than as the intersection of feminist commitments and textual innovation (Vijesweswaran 1994; Behar 1995, 14).
Ethnography as engagement this text inevitably draws on stories people tell, on the everyday mundane narratives about time and work and the commentaries they offer, it reflects stories from conferences on growth and at meetings of the county council, troubles whispered during car trips across the northern periphery to some network meeting or another, on the bus, and around kitchen tables. Even as I now work on other things and dwell in other settings, these peripheral stories are etched into my composition and into this ethno(bio)graphy. Writing, while born and forever changing in and through movement, migration and travel, is often retrospective, an account of an inheritance and an arrival (Ahmed 2006) and so, it seems, is this. Inspired by the bad girl memoir tradition of Dorothy Allison and Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Cherrie Moraga, as well as the calls they have given me, this is a modest attempt to theorize intersectionally through storytelling rather than in the normative way of social scientific knowledge-making.

A (WRITING) SPACE ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

We believe somehow (still!) in the redemptive possibilities of displacement, of travel, even as it happens lately, our voyages only return us to our abandoned hometown or our high-school graduating class. We go in search of life experience, the stuff that, in a profound way, makes books disturbingly ridiculous. (Behar 1995, 10)

It is true that we always write from somewhere in time and space—even if the clock in one's body is not that of one's location. On that wet green morning I was on the road, not through the buzzing busy highways to the coastal town of the Santa Cruz of my graduate life, but to Ange, the Jamland farm where my grandparents lived for over 50 years, watching the world change and remain the same through their kitchen window. I—who in ten years of exile have become a nomadic subject, with fourteen addresses in four different cities. The only road signs that (still) interrupt the green landscape that stretches endlessly on each side of the bus across a poor municipality in this northern province, point to places where one might go to experience the history and culture of the region. They are few and far between. Fairs, markets, auctions, music events, farms abound in the summer months, created and mobilized, it seemed, by a postmodern nostalgia for something called 'life in grandma's time'. This is not a space on the side of the road of modernity, haunted in a past however; this is the past reinvented for late modern consumption.

I am on my way to my own grandma's, and I know the difference. Or do I? I know that home is far too often a nostalgic fiction, a deeply sentimentalized one that far too often takes the shape of nationalism or regionalism, and I also that claiming belonging can be a struggle even after generations of dwelling in a place. I know that I have traveled the farthest and that I seem to have the most questions for the old ones. Do we who went away, those of us whose identities are more routed than rooted (Sawyer 2002), understand what we left behind? Do we see it differently now as we travel through, or back? Of course we do.

On the bus and in the surreal space of jetlag, a woman is speaking French with her children. She tells stories of girlhood, of milk stations and barn dances and the children and I listen with big eyes, me because my school still seems latent in my translating mind. Paris is a long way from Lillsjöbögen, or any village in these parts. In fact, these villages are also a long way from the regional center where my parents settled, much to my mother's dismay, as she, like me, wanted to leave this northern periphery. Riding the bus towards Ange and my grandparents in 2000, U.S. feminist folk singers Dar Williams and Ani di Franco were accompanying me, like they had for a decade's journey through feminism and young womanhood in and out of America. Perhaps, I thought as I looked at endless woods, it was Ani's raspy voice in my headphones singing 'take me home . . . take me home and leave me there . . .' that moved me, generated that yearning in me for something called home, of which to tell stories of life, but I still wasn't sure this was the direction.

Coming of intellectual age in a time and a place where postcolonial critiques of social science and political efforts to decolonize the discipline of anthropology were taken seriously made me weary of inhabiting the entitled pursuit of 'knowledge' that came with my education or of riding the waves of conquest that has been so central to the anthropological encounter. Learning to read culture in a place already foreign to me made the West itself a strange place. If I wanted to understand European domination, why not examine how it is created and lived? If I wanted to study resistance and political activism, how might I study whiteness and privilege? That persistent and rootless yearning for a place called home that both made me leave and come back remains ambivalent. The home-away dichotomy that is so foundational to my discipline of choice, so contested and so debated (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Clifford 1997; Dahl 2010) within my academic field, the one that says that anthropologists go 'away' from 'home' to study 'culture', it does not omit but rather remains steeped in precisely this foundational yearning, like to theorize is always 'to see'. We are expected to write from a distance.

My seven years in U.S. academic institutions only brought glimmers of 'home', not so much in place, as in the company of friends and ideas. In part, because each entry required a proof of exit as the end of each visa drew near. Despite linguistic and cultural resources, along with the privilege of whiteness, America was often a struggle. Despite my 'close to perfect English', I never forgot that my belonging was conditional, and not only at the border. To an anthropologist shaped in a poststructuralist and postcolonial context, rethinking the metaphors and understandings of culture and power is central to our practice. Recently
movement, deterritorialization, forced migration, refugees, postcolonial subjects and diasporic longings for a homeland have been among the things that `we' have been interested in, continuously paying attention to how borders, papers, and employment markets, and other powerful metaphors and realities, centrally shapes people's lives. Yet, while the classic anthropological study may have been thrown out with the Euro-centric bathwater, its basic modes of analysis were thriving, it turned out, in the kind of institutional knowledge production funded by powerful development organizations and in the endless state commissioned research reports that `experts' were turning out. Being simultaneously at home and in the field I learned that I had not prepared for the estranged familiarity with the persistence of social scientific vision and how it would make me feel like a disembodied alien.

As I ride buses and airplanes, that nostalgic feeling of history and home still comes over me from time to time, even as I know all to well that for women in the places I've been, home has always been a fraught place, sometimes the most terrifying one, one that we can't wait to leave, if we even can. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty's contend:

`being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; not being home is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the seclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of difference even within oneself. (1986, 196)

As I found the women with whom to dialogue around kitchen tables and on car rides, I often thought of feminist story telling practices, particularly those that narrated diasporic stories and migratory memories and memoirs; Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Cherrie Moraga, Dorothy Allison, Adrienne Rich.

Home; as it relates to ethno(bio)graphy and to femininity was at the center of the very question that has brought me back, to the place I left, and it took a dissertation for me to take my story seriously and to understand some of the very question that has brought me back, to the place I left, and it took a dissertation for me to take my story seriously and to understand something of what this place called Jamtland is about. Letting go of the comfort of home means letting go of both nostalgia and claustrophobia. Now, as I (writing) space on the side of the road to (intellectual) development.

**THE LABOR OF HANDS (IN WRITING)**

Every time I would visit Ånge morfar (grandpa) would ask about when I was going to get a job. `How can you be more than thirty years old and still be in school?' he would ask and I would smile and agree, it was a bit strange, indeed. School had itself always been a fraught issue for morfar. What does it mean to have a livelihood steeped in reading and writing, to be transversing multiple (creative) languages? There are days when I chase words that I cannot find; my language continuing to change as I translate my metaphors back and forth, finding them mutating in the process. It does involve accessing a language of analysis and reflecting, but it also means working with one's hands and eyes, if they are able to. Some might say that writing begins in reading; mine began in the movements and migrations of the mind as it expands beyond the woods now that pass my window and those of my grandparents' life times. The road to writing is both an extension of my legacy and what interrupts it and places me on the outside.

Morfar liked to remind me that he went to school for six years, though it was really only three, as in those days the teacher moved between the small villages at lake Singsjön, staying only half the year in each. `I have done just fine without schooling' he would say, even though it took him a long time to read the local paper. Since the day he finished school, the day when his stepfather congratulated him with a firm handshake and money to buy his own saw, (reproducing the masculine tradition) morfar's life revolved around the woods, the land, and the changing seasons. Lumber jack and hunter, farmer and carpenter—his hands were always at work. Mormor (grandma) who everyone, morfar especially, always said had lāshuvud (a head for reading) was never offered the option of studies, for she was a girl and there were no resources but plenty of handy work for girls. She had already worked for ten years on her parents' farm when they married. Since their honeymoon in 1939, a three-day, 150 kilometer bicycle ride into the mountains at Lake Blåsjön, morfar followed morfar loyally in all his
endeavors. Well, except for to his weekly visits at the local Bingo, then she stayed home with a book or needlework. With Moraga, Rich and Allison, I could also say that education and feminism made me migrate away from a legacy of 'male identification' I never understood and that it disables my seamless return into its reproductive folds. With my mother and aunt, the female cousins of my family, I could also say that läshuvud is a female tradition; it is the women who have taken an interest in intellectual work in my family, and we have always married out of the village, our social class, language and nationality.

Biking to the periphery of the province, my newly wed grandparents visited mormor’s Moster (aunt) Anna. She was an unmarried schoolteacher, because as a woman a woman could only work until her proper duties as wife and mother were expected. In the late 1930s, grandma’s aunt was in the service of the budding welfare state; and it was her job to ‘educate’ and ‘civilize’ the mountain communities of Sami and settlers\(^1\). In her memoir, Moster Anna notes that when she took her job in 1910, she knew more about the United States from the writings of the emigrants of her home village, than she did about the indigenous Sami community only a few traveling days away.\(^3\)

To the prodigal (great) granddaughter and student of ethnography, at the brink of the twenty-first century, Moster Anna’s memoir reads like a colonialist travelogue, an anthropological encounter with magical Sami weddings and superstitious illiterates, narrated with the optimism of modernization through education, hygiene, and discipline, but also with the fondness of ‘her people’ and the pride in the civilizing mission, forged through the intimacy created during months of snowed in exclusion from the world. How different from our global situation, the postcolonial readings of today. Yet, when I, unaware of Moster Anna’s legacy in a family of farmers, once left America for education, anthropology, and teaching, the same was true: I knew more of America than I did of Jamtland, its people or my own history. Modernization always builds on a narrative of progress generated through proximity and distance; mormor remembers sewing clothes for ‘the children of Africa’ in the 1920s, as the map of the colonial world was transposed to the modernizing periphery, creating a European imaginary.

Mormor’s aunt’s memoir was the only book produced in our family until my grandfather, with the aid of my aunt, another schoolteacher, wrote and published his own story after my grandmother’s death in 2004. Mormor—who until she passed at age 86, received only the minimum of ‘homemaker’s pensions’ and barely accepted the subsidized state assigned help with her chores as her hardworking hands began to ache—was proud of her aunt’s memoir, as she was proud of all of us girls who like her, loved to read. Mormor, who gave birth to six children and raised five, and who knew how to survive on few means, a couple of cows and chickens. The first three children were born at home, in the cottage in the middle of the woods, a place my mother sometimes would take us to. There, with the wind the only sound, I would think of lineage. Yet, it is the tale of morfar skiing through the woods in the dark of winter to get the midwife when my mother was born that has followed me throughout life and served as a reminder of the rapid changes of place and history, not only of Moster Anna; the first writer, teacher and, perhaps, anthropologist. Modernization is my heritage; feminism and decolonization my critique.

GIRL, YOU’LL BE A WOMAN SOON; TRAVELING AND WRITING BODIES

Like so many young women in Jämtland, I moved from ‘the Republic’ as some would call it (see Dahl 2004), immediately after my high school graduation. With champagne still bubbling in my veins and with the nostalgia of a teenage era coming to a close, I jumped on the train to Stockholm, the capital, in search of the pulse of cosmopolitan life. In my head I had moved a long time ago. The world had opened during endless movies in my childhood; years of following my father’s military career to different Swedish towns, hours in the car on the road to relatives in southern cities and months spent on Cyprus while my father worked for the UN, a Mediterranean island, where I in one summer learned that my father’s brown skin and eyes made him ambiguously placed as a Swede, what puberty does with girls, about the so called history of Western civilization and about the walls of ethnic conflict—a complex unfolding of worlds and subjects which made me understand that the ethnically and socially homogenous neighborhood where I grew up was not the world and what the place of femininity is.

Even ‘at home’ I traveled in my mind, through visits to local cinemas and escapes into the world of books. By the time I was a young adult I was sure, like so many other women with wanderlust, that there was nothing of worldly importance going on in this god forsaken northern periphery. No jobs, no education, and certainly no excitement. As a young woman I interviewed ten years later dryly remarked: ‘people in town have a much bigger rurality complex than us who live in the country side’. When an Internet based company called ‘Class reunion’ sent out a class list for their commercially motivated, U.S. inspired invitation to assist in celebrating our ten year ‘reunion’ in 1999, few people from Storsjöskolan (my junior high school) or Wargentinskolan (my high school) in the county’s only town had Jämtland zipcodes. But more men than women had opted to stay, just like the crisis narrative for promoting gender equality insisted. I was intimately part of the very narrative about progressive women, who were taking life and working into my own hands that I was tracing. Migration was part of my own ethnography.

At the historical intersection of the aftermaths of second wave feminism, an ever expanding global imaginary, and fuelled by a local narrative about
how all the rural men do is sit on their snow mobiles (see Dahl 2004), at least two generations of young women have left Jämtland in large numbers.

Many have not come back, including the majority of my school friends. Now the worldliness of Jämtlanders in exile is celebrated, the flexibility and progresiveness of women that my dissertation addressed is a tradition that my own body of work extends. At the turn of the millennium, it didn't only take an orientation towards girls rather than boys to understand that it was indeed man who was the dying humanist subject of our story of progress; because in the development narrative, it was man who had become hopelessly steeped in tradition, and he is the one who stays 'at home' in the province, or even literally at home.

The women who stayed or returned and with whom I worked, like me crafted life stories within and against modern sentiments of what women ought to do with their lives and how they ought to be; as mothers and wives. As a new wave of feminism went through Sweden in the late 1990s, they too were caught in negotiating how to combine conflicting ideas about the meaning of family and career, reproductive and productive work, the puzzle of gender equal life with their husbands whose names they had taken, 'reflectively'. As I watched them go through young adulthood, it was the stories of feminists, dykes, sluts, and other unruly women, those who haunt the margins of sensible and modern Swedish gender norms, and with whom I often found solace, who helped me trace the contours of norms and their constitutive exclusions, even if they were never the center of the dissertation story.

Migration is always gendered, this we know in late capitalism, with its lack of living wages and its endless demands for care labor of all kinds among the wealthy, and my female friends and I were routed by the imaginaries of our time and our classed aspirations. A couple, the pretty ones, went to make money working as hostesses in bars in Japan, many became waitresses or nannies in France, the UK, or even North America. The majority eventually settled for a life in a big southern city with studies and work, occasionally in another European nation. Oriented towards knowledge worlds, a scholarship let me pack my trunks and go to a small American liberal arts college and I never quite returned. Cultural anthropology and feminist theory, more by chance than intention, but it certainly had to do with my feminist teachers, began to give me answers to questions I had always asked: what does it mean to belong and how do we know who does? What structures our imaginaries and opportunities? What is identity and what makes community? What does being an unruly female have to do with this?

Riding the bus, as the unmarried teacher, whom morfar worries is without a man, I know that I follow in the steps of many women of my kin, fictive and blood; those who have married outside the village, left the province, and sought something else. Rosi Braidotti, a quintessential "nomadic subject" and role model for what she calls a merrier brand of idiosyncratic and hybrid thinking, something that is neither conceptually pure nor politically correct: a joyful kind of feminist "dirty-minded" thinking (1994b, 58), argues that "as an intellectual style, nomadism consists not so much in being homeless as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere" (1994a, 16). Braidotti's vision for European feminism is inspiring, as she seeks the children; because they had married and wanted to be in a 'safe place' after a few years in a southern city, back home where there was a great 'quality of life', where there was closeness to family and housing was affordable. In contrast to them, I had a degree and funding for research, I had made my questions my profession and very few could understand why a university in California would care what went on in Jämtland. That place had turned me into a femme dyke; a whole other part of the femmemoir that is and still will be told elsewhere (see Dahl and Hallgren this volume; Volcano and Dahl 2008), but suffice to say that even if I saw butches everywhere among the women in the rural north, I was quickly reminded that gender norms are local and indeed, desire is both pleasure and danger. I returned with a different language to talk about relationships or to share my private life to all but a select few.

Perhaps I went through what Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has described as a journey from 'modernity as embodied sensation' to one of 'modernity-as-theory' (1996, 2), in my desires to wander and depart that turned to wanting to understand movement, but my wish was simple: to understand the place that formed my heritage; me and my discrepant desires (John 1996). Seven years of living with the American so called 'free market' made me wonder about the relationship between the growing European Union, the dismantling of the Swedish welfare state, and the salutations of thrifty women working for equality in my own at times and at a distance easily idealized homeland. At the same time, anthropology's history in this Nordic land, intimately tied to early twentieth-century welfare state discourses on racial hygiene (Broberg and Tydén 1996), made me uncomfortably the bearer of an intellectual heritage that has fueled conflicts between the Sami and the Jämtlanders, regulated immigration, and marked Sweden's relationship to war and development, modernity and science. Decolonization is an unfinished project and it calls on me, and my situated accountability. With myself promptly inserted into the knowledge-driven projects of modernization, I remained isolated and wondering, what would the uses of ethnographic research be, if not to put it to some political use? I remained embodied and theoretical, straddling the Atlantic as well as the gap between past and future, girl and woman.
dares to think about (feminine) difference and to imagine an elsewhere. However, the constant returns have also made me mindful of how, as feminists, we are all 'progressive women', who more often than not, use 'traditional' as something to position ourselves against.

THE GENDERED ROAD TO PERIPHERAL MODERNITY

'It's good to see you' the old ones would say, 'how nice of you to visit'. I would smile and eat as many baked goods as I could and then scan the large chest in morfar's office in search for old notes that me and my cousins would leave for each other. Notes that nobody has touched since, an archive of girlhood secrets from sleep-overs and reunions, whispering of other writing bodies. Through the kitchen window morfar would watch the overgrown fields, ghostly reminders of the change in organization of everyday life. 'It's a shame' he would say and sigh, not so interested in my worldly travels. 'Soon there won't be anybody left here. What will happen when nobody tends the earth anymore?' Traffic is slow on the big road beneath the house.

While Jämtland experienced yet another 'crisis in the population' due to the exodus of the young and of women in particular, TV brought news of other parts of our European Union. We learned of a fortress being built by the Schengen agreement, a 'home' that refuses to welcome those in search of a better life in the so called first world and yet whose laboring bodies we depend upon. While the northwestern borders of the EU between Jämtland in Sweden and Tröndelag in Norway are barely noticeable as you pass them, and northerners do regularly, we continue to learn of dead bodies being washed up on the shores of its southern perimeter. Not only hippies in the California that I kept returning to had stakes in their organic food, Jämtland farmers on EU subsidies turned 30 percent of its production 'ecological', while French farmers continued to protest on the streets of Brussels, agricultural scientists warn of depleted soil and animal rights activists protest transcontinental transports of animals on their way to the assembly line of industrial food production. The European Union is not one, not unified, not always a center.

'Times will change, people will move back. It is going to turn around', I used to say to cheer up the at times deeply worried old ones, whose aging bodies had left them still, days passing by looking out over overgrown fields and abandoned farms. Even though I knew after 18 months that I was never going to be able to stay, and for reasons that were too complicated to explain to them—or perhaps I still wasn't convinced myself—I would tell them about all the people I met in my work, those women with visions about the future of the province. About village councils and history projects, about people who were fighting the centralization of power and resources as they were being moved further from Jämtland. 'It's going to be ok, morfar' I would say, even as I struggled with explaining what it was that myself and all the other administrators of the province were really doing. While avoiding questions about my own (re)productive labor, I would talk of those who were moving back to raise their children and about how the rural areas had become cast as offering 'quality of life' and full of 'resources'. If nothing else, it seemed, the sparsely populated north was now becoming a resting place for overworked city dwellers.

In morfar's youth, a road needed to be built through the woods. Bids were given and the person willing to work for the least pay got the job. 'People broke themselves working' says morfar 'but we needed the cash'. In the time of my dissertation writing, in the spirit of tillväxt (growth) Jämtland municipalities were still auctioning off the land; selling their most beautiful parks to multinational corporations who promised to modernize our northern periphery. At the computer support centers erupting in remote villages and with a global imaginary as their workplace, young people were learning to dress 'appropriately' and politicians reported that they were proud to see ties and suits walk around empty streets of municipal centers nobody wanted to move to. At that time, as much as in other western nations, 'welfare' had turned into tax breaks for those who want the 'resources', not quality of life for the providence residents. The eldssjalar (fiery souls)—those who burn (out) for the future of the area—were increasingly reclassified as 'project leaders' and given resources and tight time frames and they often complained of drowning in administrative routines. Like the road signs pointing to an EU project, all plans for future livelihoods were expected to line up with the directives of the EU. Now, a decade later, this periphery appears as the laboratory for testing what has become a people's home enterprised up by full-scale neoliberalism.

In Jämtland the women who had been encouraged 'to take life and work into their own hands', and to see that as (feminist) progress, did so by transforming family farms into conference facilities. The psychiatric clinic in the county seat was turned into student dormitories and the old army head quarters are now a university. Identity and history, from reindeers to Vikings, were reclassified as 'resources' marketed to the global market, just like policies and methods for jämtställdhet; that version of equality between men and women that Sweden holds the UN world record in. Still, Jämtland remained defined by its lack. Lack of people, of jobs, and most of all of competence.

Still to this day, as I drown in (academic) administrative work and continue to tell myself that I can work 'more' that things will get 'better', I think of the young women whose EU funded project aims to create meeting grounds for like-minded women who have decided to stay/return/move to Jämtland, who became my closest friends and most important interlocutors for my exegesis on gender, politics, and place in the northern periphery of the EU. They had use for me, not only as a most useful researcher, but also as a recently returned 'expat'. Together we crafted visions of what Jämtland
could be for well traveled and internationally connected young women. They taught me about the meaning of ‘feminism’ and how such a seemingly emancipatory discourse is implicated in the project of modernity and its discrepant desires. ‘We will find a place for you in our next project’ they still say sometimes, and I know that when they call upon me in my much sought after status ‘as a researcher’, in a climate of extreme competition for academic resources, I need them as much as they need me.

As the bus passed through the small village where one of my uncle lives with his three young sons, I thought about unemployment and the Jämtland men who were taking out their government ordained paternity leave—well above the national average. As traditional men’s jobs increasingly disappear or get mechanized, paternity leave is presented simultaneously as a progressive ‘choice’ and as the inevitable outcome of ‘progress’ towards a perfect gender balance. In one of the government’s pilot counties for lämstalldhet the key to a gender equal future lies in men taking responsibility for home and children, they say. Millions of SEK were spent in educational efforts to ‘get men to see’ the necessity of redistributing the chores of the heterosexually nuclear family. But lämstalldhet, it often turned out, was largely about labor market politics and encouraging men to seek ‘untraditional’ professions was not simply a progressive idea; it was where the jobs were.

**WRITING WORLDS, WRITING FUTURES**

If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (Pratt 1992/2008, 9)

‘Jämtland needs people like you, Ulrika’, a county council worker once said to me. ‘You see things that we don’t see’. At the time I didn’t know what to make of that, it made me feel just as alienated, even though I was of that culture. Two years in what my critical friends and I named lämstalldhetsfabriken (the factory of gender equality), our own form of what anthropologist of development James Ferguson calls the anti-politics machine (1997), left me doubtful of the meaning of producing social scientific analysis, even if it was what I was so often asked to do, as they found use for me as an ‘expert’ and an ‘evaluator’. Where is the significance of analysis when the women I worked with were drowning in reports and evaluations that said what was already known? What does it mean to be ‘needed’, as an ‘expert’?  

As the discourse of development became the hegemonic way to understand time and change, not only were traditions transformed into ‘expertise’, when it came to self-reflexive ‘knowledge’, the study of itself is far too often understood to come from the ‘outside’ and to be produced by ‘experts’. Those who leave and those who move in, they are the ones with the powerful thoughts, because, it is argued, without movement, there is no progress, without perspective. Was I perspective? I, who seemed to get stuck on the side of the road, alienated by the discourse that was ‘mine’ by training and by dialect.

Following this process closely, affectively, I felt certain that it was not the ‘knowledge’ that can be defined in quantitative or monetary means that was needed, rather what I witnessed was the neoliberalization of the periphery, the peripheralization of neoliberalism. The persistence of vision, as Haraway (1991) has taught me, remains the primary technology for the production of an (scientific) object, including the subject of a dissertation. Theory, Haraway notes ‘is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite. Theory is anything but disembodied’ (Haraway 1992, 299). For years I struggled to discipline my (traveling) body, and with the erasure of the body within the doubly familiar contexts that I worked in. Time and again, I returned to movement, driving, traveling, and to my embodied yearnings for the art of writing itself to matter in me and to come to matter.

‘Whether a practice, a writing form, or a particular perspective on knowledge and scholarship (autoethnography) hinges on the push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social, cultural and political concerns’ (Jones and Adams 2010, 198). Differently put, autoethnography queers knowledge as a queer form of knowledge making. Deconstructing the subject object distinction, more rhizomatic than dialectic, distance and proximity imploding and exploding; situated and situationist, it calls for action. ‘I live my life in pursuit of the remade world’ writes queer feminist activist and novelist Dorothy Allison (1994, 211). A fellow bad girl and a novelist in an ethno(bio)graphical tradition with a loving and complex relationship to that thing called home, Allison continues to remind me of the power and importance of story telling and the importance of paying attention to the crack in the soul.

As the bus left Ånge, and eventually, as my grandparents and Ånge left us and this worldly existence, I have continued to carry my grandparents’ stories with me, and to work with my hands like they did. I carry the legacy of handiwork of teaching, of traveling and dwelling and remain hopeful of the possibility that an engaged story-telling called ethnobiography, as a situated knowledge and partial truth, can contribute to the remade world. ‘The Road To Ånge’, in its first incarnation, became a story read at a function for local politicians. Its embodied yearning echoing in sterile rooms of municipal buildings and its printing, my first publication, in a hot pink book that was the manifestation of our joint conversations and visions. As Cherrie Moraga once wrote in the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back* ‘the political writer is the ultimate optimist, believing people are capable of change and using words as one way to try and penetrate the privatism of our lives. A privatism which keeps us back and away from each other, which renders us politically useless.’ (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983, x)
NOTES

1. See Dahl 2001. For a discussion about collaborative research methods, see Dahl 2010.

2. For an ethnological account of such processes, see Lilieqvist 1991.

3. Anna Hrén ‘Minnen från Frostviken’. In Förenings för svensk Undervisningshistoria, Hägkomster från folkskola och folkundervisning VIII. no 72. 1945: 86.

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