



Amsterdam through a (Trans)national Gaze: A Conversation with LifeWriting Author Alejandra Ortiz

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18. Amsterdam through a (Trans)national Gaze: A Conversation with Life Writing Author Alejandra Ortiz

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Abstract: Alejandra Ortiz, author of *De waarheid zal me bevrijden*, offers readers an opportunity to see Amsterdam from her (trans)national gaze. Through this piece, she shares how Amsterdam has influenced her identity as a woman, writer and activist, and her feelings of (non) belonging. At a young age, Ortiz travelled to the north looking for the safe environment that her hometown did not provide. In 2015, she resettled in the Netherlands as an asylum seeker. Unfortunately, she encountered a severe bureaucratic system that denied her that opportunity. Despite these difficulties, Ortiz has built a support system for herself and those around her facing similar situations. She continues to share her story with the hope of fostering a more understanding society.

Keywords: belonging; intersectionality; asylum narratives; queer migration; autobiographical activism; identity formation

Alejandra Ortiz is the author of the book *De waarheid zal me bevrijden* published in 2022.¹ In this autobiography, Ortiz provides the reader with a first-hand experience of what being a trans migrant woman entails. She recounts her life story in Mexico, the United States and the Netherlands, where she currently lives.² Ortiz has become a voice for migrant, refugee and trans people, as well as other groups who face similar situations. In

¹ The title can be translated into English as *The Truth Will Set Me Free*.

² At the time when this piece was written, Ortiz has not been granted asylum yet.

the book's concluding remarks, Ortiz expresses how she "wanted to make a time document of the 'refugee crisis,' the tumultuous period for Europe, from the perspective of a non-European."³ Ortiz decidedly raises her voice to denounce unfair procedures that asylum seekers undergo, while also includes an intersectional analysis of gender, religion and race.

I invited Ortiz to talk about Amsterdam and the places in the city that have a special meaning for her. I met with her on a beautiful spring day in Amsterdam Central in May 2024. She had a clear plan of the places she wanted us to visit, so we started our adventure.⁴ Ortiz is a great conversationalist who shares her captivating and heartbreaking stories with an innate eloquence. Walking through the city of Amsterdam with her was a delight, and I will forever be grateful to her for this gift. We visited places where life slows down and hides from tourists. Places that came alive as she spoke, and that are now assembled here through photographs and her story.⁵ This creative piece intends to take the reader through Amsterdam Noord, Floradorp, De Pijp neighbourhood, Oosterpark, and Boost Amsterdam.⁶ Additionally, we took the IJ ferry and visited Amstel Station, recurring places in Ortiz's book.

I use the term "(trans)national" with a double intention. First, to highlight Ortiz's transnational gaze related to what Paul Jay refers to as "authors who have themselves experienced the kind of displacement and mobility characteristic of twentieth- and twenty-first-century life under decolonization, globalization, and the proliferation of struggles related to nationalism around the globe."⁷ And second, to feature a life story narrative from a trans woman's perspective, considering that the "trans" in transnationalism may be connected to "transgressive sexual identities."⁸ It is my hope that readers view these places through Ortiz's (trans)national gaze and question and rethink their own sociocultural location.

3 Alejandra Ortiz, *De waarheid zal me bevrijden*, trans. Simone Peek (Lebowski Publishers, 2022), 413. Translated into English by the author of this chapter.

4 The places and the photographs are organized as we visited them during our walk around Amsterdam. The photographs and audios were collected by the researcher on 21 May 2024.

5 There were no specific questions. At each place, I recorded Ortiz's short monologues in Spanish, explaining why these places are meaningful to her. Her words were translated into English and edited by the researcher.

6 Please visit www.boostamsterdam.nl for more information about this organization.

7 Paul Jay, *Transnational Literature: The Basics* (Taylor & Francis, 2021), 52.

8 Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei and Stuart Taberner, "Introduction: Contemporary German-Language Literature and Transnationalism," in *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*, ed. Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei and Stuart Taberner (Camden House, 2015), 8.



Fig. 18.1. Ortiz in a passageway in Amsterdam Noord.

Amsterdam Noord: Pandemic Times

Alejandra Ortiz (AO): “I remember this passageway because in 2020, during the pandemic, I was living in Amsterdam Noord. There was a time when the police were doing roadblocks, and people with no documentation, like me, could get in trouble. I was vigilant of always using the face mask and the bike’s lights correctly, so they would not stop me. I used to see the police officers, and then I would take an alternate route, with the fear that the alternate route had roadblocks as well. This place has stayed with me because, although it is safe and it has been my home and I love it, it has not always made me feel safe.”

Amsterdam Noord: A Place to Call Home

AO: “Amsterdam is my home. It is a city that has opened many doors to me. It has welcomed me and helped me grow as a person. In no other place, not in

Mexico, not in the United States, nor in any other place in the Netherlands, have I felt so safe and accepted as in Amsterdam. There is a type of magic in this city that makes people who are different, or any person because we are all different, feel like we are home. We feel as if we are part of this city and its community even if we were not born here. I feel welcomed and loved by Amsterdam and its people and its LGBT community.”

“We started this journey in Amsterdam Noord because this place is less known. Not many people come here because you have to cross the water. It is a place which gave me the home that I did not have, and it offered me a peaceful feeling that I had not found anywhere else. Besides, it is full of parks and water, and the water relaxes me. Amsterdam Noord is not a touristic place, but it is very calm. Maybe that is why I love it.”

Floradorp: A Room of One's Own

AO: “In the year 2020, during the pandemic, I was moving from one house to another because it was difficult to live with people or to find a place where I could feel comfortable. One day, a friend told me about an elderly person in the north of Amsterdam who was looking for someone to live with in exchange for cleaning the house and offering company. It was the first time I visited Amsterdam Noord, more specifically Floradorp. It is pretty because it is picturesque. The houses are baby blue and baby pink. When I lived here, with my own room and everything, it was the first time that year that I felt truly safe.”

AO: “Honestly, to be in Amsterdam Noord provided me with another perspective because it is a very peaceful place. It was really comforting to listen to the birds. You can hear them throughout all of Holland, but in the centre of Amsterdam with so many people, tourists, and noise one rarely pays attention to them. To me, this area has pleasant memories of safety during a moment in which there was a lot of uncertainty.”

After having shared some hours in the stillness of Amsterdam Noord, we embarked to Amsterdam Central on the IJ ferry, and from there we visited the other places on her list. We experienced the contrast between the crowded ferry and the residential area of Floradorp as people moved around with their bicycles, chatted with their companions, and played the guitar while singing to entertain the crowd. Even so, Ortiz shared how in this tumultuous space she has found the opportunity to bring her attention to the present moment and enjoy the beauty of Amsterdam from the water.



Fig. 18.2. The IJ-ferry.

The IJ Ferry: A Moment to Live in the Present

AO: “When I moved to Amsterdam Noord, I started using the ferry. I had seen it before, but I did not know that it is free. It was a nice surprise to know that I could use it as many times as I wanted to. I worked cleaning houses and taking care of children, so I had to cross the city every day. I was always hurrying. I rode my bicycle really fast from one place to another, trying to make it on time. But when I got on the ferry, even though I did not want to, I had to stop because I could not control the ferry’s time. I used to write on my phone, or I took pictures of the landscape, which is so pretty from there. I admired the giant cruises, because they are a real spectacle, as well as the sunsets and sunrises. The ferry has always been an experience that forces me to be in the present. It also reminds me of the past and how much I needed a moment of calmness.”

De Pijp: To Play, Write and Belong

AO: “At the beginning of 2019, I started working as a babysitter, taking care of French and Russian children. First, it was only one family, but later, I became so popular that I worked with six different families. It was a job that kept me busy, which I really enjoyed.”

“Adults are very strange. We can be very cruel sometimes. On the contrary, children are very open. I think some of the children’s parents, or all of them, knew that I am a trans woman, and sometimes they made strange comments. Other times, they did not say anything, but I felt that the children accepted me in a very natural way.”

“Back then, I was writing my book *De waarheid zal me bevrijden*, and while the children played, I wrote notes or sent audio notes to myself. The time I took care of the children gave a different sense to my life in Amsterdam. A different tie from the one of being part of the trans, the migrant and the refugee communities. This place brings me nice memories. In fact, I do not have any negative memories of this playground.”

Amstel Station: An Interlacing Hub

AO: “Out of all the train stations in the Netherlands, the Amstel Station is my favourite. The murals are beautiful. It brings me many memories; some are happy memories and others are very nostalgic. A lot of times I arrived in and left Amsterdam from this station. Many episodes in the stations that I mention in my book happened here. There were goodbyes, encounters, kisses, hugs and sad moments as well. Moments in which I thought that there was not going to be a better tomorrow, which there was, fortunately. I really like this station because it echoes many of my experiences in Amsterdam.”

Boost Amsterdam: A Writing Haven

AO: “Boost is an organization where they teach various classes such as languages, computer skills, sports and others. Boost is also a place where, from Monday to Friday, people cook for the community. Everybody can come and eat with people from the city of Amsterdam and all over the world. I started coming to Boost in 2019 for my Dutch classes. After the pandemic, coming here was a moment of retirement and peace for me. They helped



Fig. 18.3. Amstel Station.

me a lot. For instance, when I was writing my book, they let me use their offices to write in peace.”

AO: “I always felt welcomed here. No one ever disrespected me. I felt that they made me feel part of the community. Even though Boost does not self-proclaim as an LGBT-friendly place, everyone I know from the LGBT community feels safe here. There is a non-spoken agreement that they treat people who are different with the same respect as any other person. I am so grateful to the people at Boost for everything that they do for this beautiful project, and they deserve our support. They do it for people like me, who, at some point in their lives, may not have a place to go to during the day.”

Oosterpark: A Peaceful Retreat

AO: “I have come to realize that Oosterpark is the most beautiful park in the city. It is well designed and there are several small spaces where you can come

and sit down and have a moment of peace. During some years, I lived in this part of Amsterdam. I used to walk by this park every day, unfortunately, not always taking the time to meditate and relax. In fact, I think that today is the third or fourth time that I sit here with the sole objective of relaxing, but it is a space where I have come with my friends, lovers, and with my Dutch teachers and classmates. For someone who is running from the noise and chaos of the city, here I can find, and I have found, a lot of peace.”

Conclusion

Amsterdam is a city that hosts people who migrate for varied reasons with the hope of finding a new home, and Alejandra Ortiz is one of them. Although Ortiz mostly narrates her experience in Amsterdam as positive, it is important to also point out the difficulties that she has encountered. For Ortiz, to experience the pandemic in Amsterdam proved a difficult matter in terms of safety since she could have been deported. Furthermore, after nine years in the Netherlands, Ortiz has not received asylum status, which uncovers a faulty system that fails transgender people, mainly from Latin American countries. A report published by the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau confirms that transgender people live in a precarious socio-economic position, with fewer assets, and are less likely to own a home and to be employed, and this precariousness might be aggravated if the person is a migrant or a refugee.⁹

Even so, Ortiz found in Amsterdam a place to safely be herself and a community that supports her, something that she could not find in Mexico or the United States. (Trans)national narratives, such as that of Ortiz, are important because they shape current modes of understanding society and provide alternative representations. We are in need of more migrant, refugee and trans people voices, as well as other minority groups to “create a lifeline” of untold stories, as Ortiz herself puts it.¹⁰ To understand the city of Amsterdam from a (trans)national gaze is an opportunity to question our privilege and to bring up issues that directly affect transgender people who have migrated. I conclude this piece with an excerpt from Ortiz’s book about Amsterdam:

9 Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, “LHBT Monitor 2022,” 5 July 2022, 8, <https://www.scp.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2022/07/05/lhbt-monitor-2022>.

10 Winq, “Winnaar Winq Community Award 2023: Alejandra Ortiz,” 10 May 2023. <https://www.winq.nl/winnaar-winq-community-award-2023-alejandra-ortiz/103934>.

For me, Amsterdam is truly “the city where anything is possible.” The city presented itself to me as a blank canvas, where I could draw whatever I wanted. Here is where I found my voice. I became part of organizations like Trans United Europe, TNN and the TransScreen Film Festival. I founded Papaya Kuir, my own brainchild: an art collective for Latinx queer refugees in the Netherlands. [...] Amsterdam often makes me forget that I am undocumented. Mokum [a nickname for Amsterdam] makes me feel like I matter and that there are people who love me.¹¹

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About the Author

María Auxiliadora Castillo Soto is a PhD candidate at Utrecht University in the EUTERPE Project: European Literatures and Gender from a Transnational Perspective. She analyses how transnational life stories of women challenge the idea of Europe. This research is supported by the 101073012 EUTERPE HORIZON-MSCA-2021-DN-01 Project.

11 Ortiz, *De waarheid zal me bevrijden*, 406–407 [my translation].