



Finding Home in A Pandemic

By Ritika Popli

COVID-19 has affected all of us in profound ways. Of course, we are yet to fully grasp the myriad ways in which the pandemic continues to affect our world. Though it is a collective experience, I presume our experiences will be deeply personal. I am an Indian graduate student living in American Midwest and the pandemic has enforced my transitional house into a permanent home.

It has happened in several ways. Like most migrants, I inhabit two worlds and two time zones. One is the university town in Appalachian Ohio where I work and live and second is New Delhi in India where I was born and grew up. Kent Ono in his work on the rhetorical meaning of borders wrote, “migrants carry borders with them.”¹ It is true. Migrants often live somewhere in the precarious intersections of the different worlds they inhabit. We never truly leave behind the weight of the physical borders that we transgress.

My day begins with my phone flashing news updates from the New York Times about the political and public health crisis engulfing the United States. Along with it

¹ Kent A. Ono, “Borders That Travel: Matters of the Figural Border,” in *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Frontier*, ed. Robert DeChaine (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 22.

comes the news of a looming financial crisis predicted to be worse than the Economic Depression of 1929. The day goes by with more such news only making the deep-rooted inequalities of our world starkly apparent. By my bedtime, my phone screen changes color from white NYT updates to the red colored updates from the Indian media house NDTV. Each day there are heart-wrenching stories of migrant workers sacrificed by the absolute cruelty of the State. I check the counter on NDTV every day which reports a rising number of Coronavirus infections.

For me the cycle of news stories never ends. As I sleep, the country which I have called home for 26 years undergoes severe changes each day. By the time I wake up, news of disarray and gloom dawns upon the country I now live in. I have slowly come to terms with the fact that like many international graduate students I will not be seeing my family for a long time. My college town which I saw as a transitional space has for now become more. I have discovered parts of the town as I have started walking on undiscovered trails more. Was it the rigorous graduate program or daily responsibilities of teaching and attending classes which deterred me from walking around the town more? Or was it simply that as a brown woman I never felt that I belonged here, so I stuck to the path of walking from my apartment to my office and back home, trying to avoid venturing in unknown territories reserved for locals? I am not sure. All I know is that the walking on the cobbled streets of my college town is still very different than walking on the broken but cemented roads of Delhi. I will slowly have to come to terms that these cobbled streets are all I will walk on for some time.

As an international graduate student, for the last two years, I have treated my apartment as a transitional home. In a pre-COVID life, I would spend most of my waking hours either teaching or reading and writing in my office. The office which I shared with few other graduate students. Late nights of working in the office was possible as I formed solidarity with other graduate students, specifically with international students in the shared office space. We would often discuss our shared experiences of outsidership and alienation. How we never considered ourselves “PoC” until we came to the United States. We even discussed finances and shared tips with each other on saving money from our paltry stipends. Even on most weekends I would go and study in the solitude of my office as the sense of solidarity would be immanent even in the absence of my colored co-workers. I think the office felt more like home to me since it felt less racialized than other spaces, including my apartment as “the race idea circulates through all manner of other kinds of space. These spaces are as instrumental in transforming the social and geographical structure of space is in reproducing the very idea of race.”²

The pandemic has changed all of that. I am consigned to live in my apartment for the last 10 weeks. One day I sat on the carpeted floors of my apartment to read a book, and it struck me how I never sat on the floor of my apartment simply because it never felt like home to me. I never owned the space I lived in. The first time I kept my bare foot on the carpet flooring in America, I realized how different even the ground beneath

² Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 233.

my feet had become. Vastly different from the hard-cemented floors that I have grown up on. I inadvertently drank and ate very carefully in my apartment, not because I am a cautious person by nature, simply because I did not know the right way to get the stains off the carpet in case something fell on it. Small things like the whistling noise of the dryer, the buzzing of the dishwasher made me realize how alien these sounds continue to be, even after two years. Carrying out the quotidian chores of a household in America have always made me more isolated. I wonder if it took a pandemic to make my transitional house into my permanent home in America.

