

Acknowledgements

Laurent van Lancker for your sustained support and criticism.

Nana and *Nani* for your all the years of love and food.

Anju and Prabir for your unwavering belief in me.

Savyasachi Anju Prabir
My Room as a Cosmopolis

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Abstract

My Room as a Cosmopolis: Spatial and Temporal Third Spaces [within the confines of four walls] is a textual and visual exploration of identity and belonging rooted in India and growing beyond South Asia. The essay attempts to demystify concepts of post-coloniality – specifically looking at Homi Bhabha's 'third space' theory – through a reflexive and auto ethnographic lens. The text works as a seamless interwoven body that traverses social and cultural scenarios by situating journal entries, culinary practice, film and arts practice within the academic framework. It begins with the intention of recreating a home lost in time and space, but advances on questioning the very idea of it. By reflecting on my immediate environment, I attempt to create temporal and spatial third spaces within the confines of my apartment, in the backdrop of the covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. The pandemic created islands of solitude even in the most densely populated regions and this journey is an attempt at visualising such islands as an archipelago.

The essay comments on topics of identity, belonging, kinship, culture and country as a means to merge the personal with the social and the political. The project will deconstruct everyday objects and interactions to emphasize on the underlying socio-political dynamics. Through these dynamic and contrasting processes, the room in which the publication is drafted and edited becomes a portal to the world outside. In this constant crossing-over – between the world and the room, the personal and the political – a reflexive yet descriptive account of phenomena is generated. Here, writing provides the scaffolding required for memory-making while memories inspire a process of reflexive writing. It is imperative to recognise this text as a process – a rhizomic explo-

ration of the self, situated in the world – rather than an output oriented research. The primary concern of this publication is to question (rather recognise crucial questions) that perhaps remain unanswered. I speak/write around the peripheries of ideas and concepts in an attempt to evoke a visualisation/imagination as opposed to creating an image of it. Lastly, this became an opportunity for me to spend time with Nani (my grandmother) and attempt to bridge the gaps created through physical distance and over time.

[BEGIN]

*One afternoon, I asked Nani, "Where is our home now?"
She promptly responded, "I suppose it is wherever we are."*

नानी घर (read *Nani Ghar*), my grandparents' home, was the centre of my universe as a child. My first solo trip as a 3-year-old in the outside world was to my grandparents' home. I recall walking down the street, turning right and climbing uphill, then turning left and soon enough spotting Nani standing on the patio outside the house. A year later, I had enrolled in a school that was at a distance of about a 100-metres from my home as well as my grandmother's home. These three spaces had made an equidistant triangle that I would traverse every day of my childhood. The idea of home had expanded beyond our walls and onto the three streets that connected these spaces. In the evenings my grandparents would assemble on their patio and observe the world pass by, while I explored my little town on my bike. Every second passer-by recognised my grandfather and waved out to him. A few nosy ones dropped in, unannounced, for a cup of tea. Nani was always disapproving of unannounced visitors as she'd have to be back in the kitchen making tea and serving snacks while my grandfather did what he did best, entertained. But, *Nani* never complained.

Nani Ghar had become a landmark in my little hometown called Ambernath.

Today, Nani and I both live in our own high-rise apartments. Perhaps this is what will soon be constructed in place of *Nani Ghar*. Floors replacing memories. Elevators replacing the permanence. I try to imagine a house under my apartment. A family playing in the field that now holds a parking lot. A roof full of stars replaced by neighbours stacked on top of each other. Yet another family, displaced... dislocated... dispersed...

[PAUSE]



AN UNSENT POSTCARD - AN ADDRESS FROM THE PAST
(2018)

Time in India flows differently than what I experienced in Germany. One learns to follow the rhythm and movement of the space as opposed to the ticking arms of a clock. Upon returning from Germany, I found myself struggling to adjust to these movements. The unease with that made me feel like a tourist in my own home. In Germany, I had begun to wear a wristwatch regularly. Ironically, the watch allowed me to read the time in Hindi (Devanagari script), always a temporal reminder for me to cross-over into India. Through a phone call, an email or flipping through images from home. I missed the infringement on personal space in Germany. No one walked into my room unannounced. No spontaneous tea and snacks to serve. *Nani* would've loved it, I thought. But then, after a few months of that solitary intimacy with myself, I realised that I felt alone. No friends would be hanging out in my room without my permission. No one ate my food from the fridge. Everything was labelled and marked. For the first time in my life, I knew that I was alone. Sometimes, the silence was unbearable. I could hear footsteps from the street in my 3rd floor apartment. When I walked down the street, no one was waiting for me at their patio. No street vendors. No vegetable sellers. No noise. I doubt *Nani* would have loved this. It was like a perpetual lockdown was in place in Germany. Today, I think India in a lockdown is still busier than a regular day in Germany.

Upon returning to India, I didn't find much use for this wristwatch. For one, it suffocated my wrist - eventually creating a band of sweat underneath my prized tan-leather strap. The summer heat didn't care much for my sweat or my time. It was March already. Time had begun to suspend itself entirely. As the country went into a complete lockdown to tackle the pandemic, I stayed at home. At first, there was no day or night. Then the weeks disappeared, all fading into one another. Soon, months

made no sense either. The meaning of time itself has been altered. I lay on my bed at different points through the day, wondering what moved outside. Suddenly, it was an uncharted territory, one that could only be imagined in my mind. Glimpses of it could be seen through the windows, but that only contained me further. For the windows have metallic bars that imprisoned my vision and separated those on the outside. These had become boundaries between my world and 'theirs'. After much hesitation, I mustered up the courage to ask *Pinku* (the gardener from my apartment society) to share some images of the outside. A glimpse of the world through his eyes. It was relieving to see some movement. I would return to my bed and stare at the ceiling. The fan rotating at top speed to fill the room with an artificial breeze. A simulation of the outside. Staring endlessly at the fan, it began to spiral instead of rotate. Suddenly, there was a depth to the rotation, taking me deeper and deeper into the ceiling and eventually bursting me out to the sky.



THE OUTSIDE DURING THE LOCKDOWN. Image by PINKU. (2020)

[Field notes, August 12, 2020]

After a long day of listening to music and being on phone calls, I paused my midnight film and just sat in silence. At first, the ringing of the sounds continued. It seemed as though they'd never stop ringing. After a while the ringing grew softer and slowly faded away. There was complete silence. In the same way that eye lids fall for a night's rest. The light dims, objects de-shape and the blurring slowly turns to darkness. The darkness of silence grows. Its darker than dark. There's no end to the shade of black...

I hear nothing.

In the nothingness, I see everything. The outside, the hills, and the rivers with waters that I would swim in. I decide to float. I turn myself, my body slowly lifting to the surface. My ears just above the surface of the water. I lay there in my bed, floating.

Out of nowhere, a loud airplane sound fills my ears. I can feel its wetness entering my ear. My body slowly sinking until I can hear the universe under water. The ringing returns. Louder and closer this time. It begins to unfold time onto me and there's no returning from it. I feel the flow of the water taking me along. It's a slow and long journey, a constant movement through my memories.

I sit up.

Reach out to the switch board and click a button in the darkness.

The ceiling fan begins its first rotation and creaks. This time, the air fills my ears. The creaking finds its rhythmic pulsing and mimics sounds that could qualify as experimental techno from underground clubs in Germany.

[PAUSE]

It feels like I have returned from my trip.

Yes, I went to see the sky. But, I found myself listening to it instead.

Aron Ettore Schmitz was born in 1861 to Jewish-Italian and German parents in the city of Trieste that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time. The Kingdom of Italy, where he died, was formed in the same year of his birth. The German Empire – where he lived and studied – was much younger than him. Schmitz wrote under the pseudonym Italo Svevo, in an attempt to imbibe his Italian and Swabian kinship. In his 2018 book, *The Lies That Bind*, Kwame Anthony Appiah claims that “Schmitz’s life poses sharply the question how you decide what country, if any, is yours.”¹ To this, I believe, Svevo has appropriated an accurate response through his works which Appiah himself mentions later: “Svevo could have written well in German; he preferred to write badly in Italian.”² Does everyone have the privilege to choose their cultural and linguistic identity? By laying claim to both sides of the border, Svevo was able to transgress the nation-state boundary and write in a language that meant more to him as opposed to one that would mean more to others. Are people that live in close proximity to borders able to lay claim to either side? Again, does everyone enjoy the privilege of choosing one’s cultural and linguistic identity?

Had I the liberty and privilege to pick my cultural and linguistic identity, I would have loved to write this paper in Hindi. Unfortunately, my cosmopolitan identity is far more complex than Svevo’s. Hindi, being the language that I do find most comfort in speaking, is actually not my mother’s tongue, that would be Punjabi, the language of a region split during the Partition of India in 1947. My father’s family comes from Bengal, another region split during

1 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies that Bind*, London 2018, 72.

2 Ibid., 85.

the Partition, and speaks Bangla. Both my parents were born in the region of Maharashtra where they also learnt to speak Marathi and hence, I grew up listening to and speaking a mixture of all these tongues. When I was finally of age to go to school, I was admitted in an English medium school, a continuation of our colonial past, where my multilingual upbringing had to take a backseat. So today, I am afraid I would make as little sense to myself as to you, by attempting to write in any of the other languages that I can claim as my own. Perhaps, my pseudonym could involve abbreviations of many more regions than that in Italo Svevo, but for now, I will stick to English, and hence to Savyasachi Anju Prabir.

[PAUSE]

The artist Rahima Gambo's film *A Walk* (2018) attempts to map the internal onto the external, through the physical act of walking. Gambo establishes a direct link with her personal geography, a mapping of her memories and experiences in a physical space. Her work, as described by Christian Nyampeta is "a psycho-geographical survey from Lagos to Abuja, conceived as an interior cartography mapped onto the external environment traversed by the artist"³ Gambo's call to take *A Walk* is an invitation to communities to map their own memories and experiences in physical spaces. It can be viewed as a journey that transgresses corporeal and abstract spaces across time. Taking from Gambo's exercise, I take the first step on a line that divides the two nation-states of India and Pakistan on the east of the river Indus. In his 1997 film *A Season Outside*, Amar Kanwar, an artist and filmmaker, refers to this 'line' as a 12-inch wide mythical line that runs hundreds of kilometres deep into the earth.⁴ A line that appears two-dimensional on a map is claimed to be running deep into the many layers of the underground. Similarly, in Sadat Hasan Manto's acclaimed play *Toba Tek Singh* (1955), a Sikh "lunatic" called Bashan Singh⁵ traverses exactly these depths in Lahore's asylum.⁶ When India and Pakistan were divided, the charac-

3 Cf. Christian Nyampeta (ed.), Rahima Gambo in Conversation with Ogemdi Ude, in e-flux, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/video/330080/rahima-gambo-nspace-a-walk/> (last accessed on May 10, 2020).

4 Amar Kanwar, *A Season Outside*, documentary film, 1997, DVD.

5 The person Bashan Singh and the place Toba Tek Singh are used interchangeably in Sadat Hasan Manto's play. Bashan Singh belonged to Toba Tek Singh; hence the person and place became one; an individual identity deeply rooted in a physical space

6 Cf. Sadat Hasan Manto, *Toba Tek Singh*, in *Words without Borders*. Online Magazine for Inter-

ter Bashan Singh was described as “...lying face down on the ground. India was on one side, behind a barbed wire fence. Pakistan was on the other side, behind another fence. Toba Tek Singh lay in the middle, on a piece of land that had no name.”⁷

[PAUSE]

Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer, was brought to India on the 8th of July, 1947 to draft the actual line that partitioned India and Pakistan. Radcliffe had never been east of Paris, but was tasked with determining the fate of approximately 15 million people that lived in the region, who would forever be marked by his ‘white line’.⁸ Radcliffe sliced this piece of land within 36 days and returned to England four days after the Independence of India and Pakistan, never to return.⁹ On the eve of Independence, he wrote to his step-son, “Nobody in India will love me for my award about Punjab and Bengal and there will be roughly 80 million people with a grievance who will begin looking for me. I do not want them to find me. I’ve worked and travelled and sweated. Oh, I’ve sweated the whole time.”¹⁰ Perhaps, Radcliffe knew very well that the 12-inch wide demarcation he created would lead to a divide that will run deep into the ground and for centuries to come.

national Literature, September 2003, <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/toba-tek-singh>
(last accessed on July 14, 2020)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. Ricardo Pollack, *The Day India Burned*, documentary film, BBC, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8lwsAlmsbk> (last accessed on July 16, 2020).

⁹ Cf. W. H. Auden, *Partition*, in: Edward Mendelson (Ed.), *Collected Poems*, New York: Modern Library, 2007, 803-804.

¹⁰ Sir Cyril Radcliffe, cited in: Ricardo Pollack, *The Day India Burned*, documentary film, BBC, 2007.



PIGEONS IN HER BALCONY. FINGERS IN HER IMAGE. Image by NANI (2020)

Habibullah celebrated Eid in his home in Sialkot in Pakistan on May 24th, 2020, by allowing his pet pigeons to take flight. One of his pigeons reportedly crossed over Radcliffe's line into Kashmir, and was taken into custody (suspected to be a spy) by the Border Security Force, who then handed the creature over to the police for interrogation¹¹. Habibullah urged the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to release the innocent bird, which according to him stood as a symbol of peace. Four days later, on the 28th of May, the pigeon was released by the Indian police after "nothing suspicious was found."¹² Pigeons have been bred by our ancestors for centuries. They travelled long distances at great speed to deliver messages.

They were carriers. We were the message.

11 Cf. Abid Mehdi, Owner rejects Indian claim of 'spy' pigeon's capture, in: Dawn Newspaper, Online Edition, May 27, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1559604> (last accessed on June 20, 2020).

12 Cf. No Author, India returns alleged spy bird to Pakistan, Deutsche Welle, May 29, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-returns-alleged-spy-bird-to-pakistan/a-53624862> (last accessed on June 20, 2020).

The artist Imani Jacqueline Brown wrote, 'A Love Letter' to the Pigeons in her balcony –

“And during our “Great War,” we strapped tiny cameras to their soft bellies, using the brilliance of their internal compass and map senses to track our enemies’ movements. Some humans even offered them medals of honor. (We are a silly species.)

And then we invented the telegraph. Having extracted all the labor we needed from your bodies, we cast you out. Now, we line our buildings with spikes. We let our children kick at you. We poison your nests. An exile from both domestication and nature, you are at best insignificant, at worst a pest, the enemy, ranked among the lowest of Earth’s creatures. We resent your freedom.”¹³

Under this lockdown, I have begun to look at birds differently. They seem to be showing up everywhere or, do I seem to have more time to observe them? Nani too sees them fluttering their wings in her balcony. She leaves some of that roti (Indian bread) she taught me to make, for a couple of pigeons. This way she could lure them into the balcony and snap a few images for me, for this film. But, the pigeons too are smart, for I believe they know just how much time they have before Nani is able to recall where she kept her smartphone. They know to keep their freedom, even in these times of a lockdown.

Nani opens a door for them and a pair decides to build a nest and move in with her. After all she does offer the best services

¹³ Imani Jacqueline Brown, To: The Pigeons on my balcony, A Love Letter, CC:World, ed. Meg Stuart, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, https://ccworld.hkw.de/?etcc_cmp=ccworld&etcc_med=e-flux2#imani-jacqueline-brown (last accessed on October 5, 2020).

in town, comforting food, protection from predators and wrinkly woollen warmth, just what one would require in a lockdown. As my country begins the process of stepping out of the lockdown, Nani moves into her new home and I open a window to the world outside. Only, it prompts me to look deeper inside. I travel back and forth through this window and run into myself in various situations.

Brown too reflects on her relationship with the world through her letter. She writes (referring to the Pigeon of course),

“Sitting with you, I’ve thought a lot about kinship.
Not as a metaphor,
not as a myth,
but as a truth.
As a fact:

That all matter is shared.

The shared condition of existence is one of
bodies within bodies,
houses within houses.

Our bodies are homes to microscopic bodies.

Our bodies strive to be at home within the greater body of the world,

which the human has reshaped into a hostile environment.

I want you to be at home in the world. I want to be at home in the world.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid.

I wonder if the pigeons moving in, sparked such reflections in Nani's mind. Brown's speculation of kinship is prompted by the company of pigeons in her balcony. In such prolonged moments of solitary living (due to the coronavirus lockdown), simple interactions are being cherished for the little intimacy that they offer. The birds outside my window, those outside Nani's, the ones in Brown's balcony and probably those at yours are carrying messages, once again. Perhaps they always have and it's just now that we made the time to read them. This standstill has prompted individuals across continents to find and build solidarity. A letter. A phonecall. A relationship. Maybe even a kinship.



MEMORIES. Painting by me (2012)

[PAUSE]

In his 2004 short film *Little Terrorist*, Ashvin Kumar tells the tale of a boy that crosses the Radcliffe line from Pakistan into India in order to fetch his cricket ball. Jamal, the boy, is chased by the Border Security Force and eventually finds refuge in a Rajasthani Hindu man's home.¹⁵ In the little time that the boy and his host spend together, they bond over their shared love for cricket. The audience is able to deduce that the older man played cricket on the very same pitch as Jamal when he was just a boy. Back then, there was no line to be crossed when the ball would travel far. In Kumar's own words, "Jamal's only hope is the humanity shared by a people separated by artificial boundaries"¹⁶

Cricket has always been a sensitive subject within South Asia. Especially when there is a match between India and Pakistan. There is a strong sense of animosity that is cultivated in the hearts of everyone that follows cricket (and perhaps those that don't as well). Winning is a matter of prestige that cannot be taken lightly. It is as much of a political topic as it is a sport. I remember watching cricket with *Nana* in his bedroom when I was younger. We would be glued to the television, following each team member and anticipating each run or wicket. I recall spending hours playing cricket with my friends but also during sleepy afternoons, by myself. There are so many variations of the game that one can play with any page-numbered book or even pens and erasers in school. We traded cricket cards that held much value, at least they did back then. The game was not just a sport but part of our everyday lives, encroaching upon every space. In the 2001 film, *Lagaan*, it even became a symbol of the anti-colonial struggle

¹⁵ Ashvin Kumar, *Little Terrorist*, short film, 2004, DVD.

¹⁶ Ashvin Kumar, cited by IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0425200/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl (last accessed on November 4, 2020).

against the British rule in India.¹⁷ At the end of the film, the protagonists (that are the underdogs) celebrate their victory against the British, precisely how we today celebrate our victory against Pakistan. Each match has become a test of solidarity and commitment towards your country of citizenship. A common interest that has the potential to bridge the gaps between the two nation states is instead utilized to further that gap. Unfortunately, the only crossing-over of borders taking place in this case, is in the story of Jamal and the Rajasthani man.

‘The humanity shared by a people.’

The terminology of referring to ‘people’ as a singular is particularly interesting with regards to the idea of identity. In an attempt to establish a connection between an individual identity and a collective one, Appiah writes, “...having an identity can give you a sense of how you fit into the social world. Every identity, makes it possible, that is, for you to speak as one ‘I’ among some ‘us’ to belong to some ‘we’.”¹⁸ I believe Appiah has hinted to a progression from an ‘I’ being individual to ‘us’ being family/group to further ‘we’ being a form of kinship. In South Asia, the ‘we’ strongly presents itself in matters of social, political and economic importance as *Biradiri*. The word, *Biradiri*, is related to the Indo-European root for brother, denoting to the descendants of a common male ancestor.¹⁹ While quite literally, *Biradiri* would stand for kinship, it often extends itself to beyond a shared lineage. According to Anatol Lieven in his book *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, “the kinship group is the most important force in society.”²⁰ I would assume this description to apply to India and other parts of South

Asia too. Especially since physical boundaries fail to demarcate social and cultural practices and contain them within the assigned geography. Kinship provides a sense of collective solidarity in a world divided by borders, both physical and metaphysical. Just as Brown crosses these borders through the shared company of the pigeons in her balcony, Jamal has crossed them (quite literally this time) in search of a cricket ball. His discovery of ‘a people’ across the border that could recollect the physical spaces around his home came as no surprise. To reiterate, I would borrow from the author Mohsin Hamid, who in his 2014 book, *Discontent and its Civilisations*, rightly claimed, “The idea that we fall into civilisations, plural, is merely a politically convenient myth.”²¹

17 Ashutosh Gowariker, *Lagaan*, 2001, DVD.

18 Appiah, *The Lies That Bind*, 9.

19 Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, Penguin 2011, 87.

20 Ibid, 43.

21 Mohsin Hamid, *Discontent and its Civilizations*, India 2014, 124.

[PAUSE]

A little further south from Rajasthan is an area known as the *Banni* grasslands in the region of Gujarat. The grasslands are the only home to *Kharai*, a unique breed of camels that are known to swim and feed on mangroves. The *Kharai* have traversed these lands for centuries with their carriers/owners known as *Maldharis*²², a nomadic community from the region. The *Banni* grasslands were bequeathed to the *Maldharis* on the condition that it would be governed as commons and not private property.²³ In 1947, Radcliffe's line partitioned the grasslands and put an end to the nomadic lifestyle of the *Maldharis*. They do not enjoy the same privilege as Italo Svevo of Trieste to cut across this nation-state boundary and pledge allegiance to both sides. As a result, the *Maldharis* have become a marginalised community, much like most other nomadic communities in India.

In Nina Sabnani's 2010 film, *The Stitches Speak*, we learn about the journey that some *Maldharis* made across the border that divides India and Pakistan.²⁴ *Raniben*, one of the protagonists in the film, remembers the war between the two nation-states. She claims that India had occupied the lands on which her village stood and hence she and her community decided to make a journey into India. They crossed the desert with their families, supplies and camels through the night. *Prakash Bhai*, another protagonist in the film who was just eight years old at the time, recalls, "I knew we were going somewhere but I didn't know we

22 Maldhari literally translates to 'livestock owners'; where Mal means livestock and Dhari the carrier/owner.

23 Radhika Mulay, Let it be Banni: Understanding and Sustaining Pastoral Livelihoods of Banni, Environmental

Justice Atlas, <https://www.ejatl原因.org/conflict/let-banni-be> (last accessed on October 15, 2020).

24 Nina Sabnani, *The Stitches Speak*, short film, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfjReP7SlnA&t=52s> (last accessed on October 7, 2020).

were leaving our home forever.”²⁵ If I recall correctly, most that had been displaced due to the Partition of India did not know that they were ‘leaving home forever’. Many, including my Nana and Nani, had travelled across the border into India to find a safe haven from the riots that ensued the Partition, with the intention of returning once the situation was under control. A ‘return’ that may never be possible.

[PAUSE]

²⁵ Ibid.

One is able to physically mark a 12-inch line onto the ground, but over time it fades away and has to be redrawn after each dust storm and rainy day. The above scenarios are a call to recognise the similarities that exist on borders. These bordering regions refute territorial markings and offer hope in furthering diversity and plurality across regions. In his 2004 book *Biology as Politics*, Somnath Zutshi rightly points out that,

“...borders are not the same as boundaries, even if the two do overlap, for borders, unlike boundaries, are not merely traces on a map, inscribed for political/ideological reasons. Borders are inhabited areas, with people living in them, which is why borders are often referred to as borderlands. Borders separate us from all the ‘others’ who live around us and indeed, act as a barrier and purport to safeguard us from ‘them’. Yet the populations that inhabit borderlands often mingle and melt into one another, in customs, habits and even cultures, often disregarding the barriers wherever possible.”²⁶

Hence, these 12-inch inscriptions are only a means to define territories, make them exclusive and command power over a region and its people. They are not inclusive of any persons unlike the claim. Perhaps communities along borderlands threaten homogeneous perspectives as their boundaries are blurred, identities multifarious, and cultures mixed – just like Bashan Singh from Manto’s *Toba Tek Singh*.²⁷ Radcliffe’s line had positioned Toba Tek Singh in Pakistan while Bashan Singh, being Sikh, was being

transferred to an asylum in India. Upon hearing that his home lay in Pakistan, Bashan Singh refused to enter India and died on the 12- inch wide line between the two countries. His refusal of the partition placed Toba Tek Singh, his home, on the borderlands and challenged the binaries created by Radcliffe’s line. Such borderlands enable the creation of a third space that confronts the dualities of boundaries and proposes for a mediation between its two sides.

A *Maldhari*’s living reality defies borders and territories precisely in this way, as explained by Zutshi. Their maps are chalked by the availability of water and sweet grass for their livestock, dependent on the seasons that are in constant flux. Hence, their maps are a process, a journey, which results in them returning to the same place at the same time of the year, each year. Their movement is cyclical and evolutionary, developed each season by each member of their community. In this process, their livestock also influences miniscule decisions about which track to follow in the seemingly barren landscape. The *Dharis* claim to allow their *Mal* to lead their way through these landscapes, since the camels and buffalos know where to find their food. Their relationship with their land is one of mutual respect, as opposed to that of an owner and their property. They are producing and reproducing knowledge systems (in collaboration with their livestock) through their quotidian way of life.

Hayoun Kwon in her work *489 Years*, illustrates the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea through computer animations based on the recollections of a former South Korean soldier. The region, in her work, appears as this mystical place, completely left for the wild of nature to take over and inhabit. Kwon’s work pertains to the crossing of these boundaries in

²⁶ Somnath Zutshi, *Biology as Politics*, Calcutta 2004, 72-73.

²⁷ Cf. Manto, *Toba Tek Singh*, 2003.

subversive ways, ways through which individuals and peoples as a whole recognise their cultural and hereditary similarities as opposed to their distinctions. Through the 489 Years project, she is able to erase this manufactured border and expose it to the wilderness of the earth. This is beautifully illustrated by a planted landmine in the DMZ that appears to have been devoured by a plant that grows all around it and in the process hides it and so, consumes it.²⁸ 489 Years is a project that attempts to bring back the significance of memory on a landscape. By choosing to develop images based on a person's recollections of a space, she is legitimising the memory onto the land. Her work is in direct correlation to Gambo's film, *A Walk*, as discussed above. These works advocate to move away from representational depictions and towards an experiential approach of producing and disseminating knowledge.

About five years before *Toba Tek Singh* – Manto's story – and 500 kilometres away from Toba Tek Singh – the town in Pakistan – my *Nana* began his journey in the small town of Mardan. He travelled with his family to Delhi after the Partition and creation of the two independent nation-states – India and Pakistan. His family was fairly well-to-do and could afford air travel to Delhi. They crossed the border but I wonder how different it would have been on foot. Did they still feel the physicality of that boundary even though they flew above it? Did he ever wish to cross it back? Would he have liked to visit Mardan again? After all, it would only be a couple of hours by plane. The plane would fly from Mumbai to Peshawar, retracing his journey from over half a century ago. Or did my *Nana* feel imprisoned by the border, unwilling to risk the crossing over? He could allow his memory and imagination to fade into each other and create narratives that no one could contest.

28 Hayoun Kwon, 489 Years, short film, 2016, (limited online access on April 20, 2019).

Was he trapped inside this home, as I am right now?

Since the end of March, I have been under strict lockdown at my temporary home in India, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from the infrequent visits to the supermarket, my only exposure to the outside world is through my metal-barred window. Sometimes when I look out of the window and stare at the faint sky between the high-rise apartments, I spot an airplane or two. Some are loud and fast, visible between the blink of an eye before disappearing behind one of the towers. Others are soft and slow, gliding in circles between the towers. They spiral too, like my fan, but only in the opposite direction. They fall from the skies, breaking concentric circles into arbitrary shapes and forms. Eventually, they land on shrubs and bushes, breaking their fall for a fairly safe landing. They remain intact but will never be able to return to their place of origin. They began their journey from children's hands, out of barred windows, like mine, from the top floors of the apartments. Their capacities failing them from returning back to those heights, to those homes.

In September of 2017, I took my first flight outside of India. My parents and then girlfriend came to drop me off at the airport. We all wept at the drop-off point while saying our goodbyes. I was to go to the furthest place and spend the longest time away from home. While sitting in my cramped seat, I felt like asking myself the same questions as I wish I had asked my *Nana*. Do I feel the physicality of these boundaries? Would I wish to cross it back? If yes, would the plane retrace this journey or would there be other boundaries along the way? Would I be imprisoned within my new boundaries of Germany, or Europe and its neighbours? I was to make this journey many more times over the next couple of years.

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[PAUSE]

RAIN SOAKED PAPER PLANES. Image by me (2020)

One afternoon I asked my Nani, "Where is our home now?" She replied after giving it some thought, "I suppose it is wherever we are."

Since this conversation with *Nani*, I have been thinking – what constitutes a home? Is it the physicality of a place and/or people in our world? Is it possible to take my home with me and if yes, what components would I have to physically carry with me? According to McLeod, "The concept of 'home' often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong. As an idea it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort."²⁹ I believe, this deeply corresponds with the practice of the *Maldharis*. Their home is the entire region of the grasslands they inhabit. It provides them with food, shelter, security, comfort and most importantly, a sense of belonging in and to the world. Avtar Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora* takes this a step further to say that, "'Home' is a mystic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'".³⁰ This is precisely why the 'home' is constructed through our recollections – memories and imaginations. Perhaps my question to *Nana* would have been futile then? This struggle to reimagine and recollect "signifies that one can forget all, but not the indigenous roots and real belonging".³¹ Upon leaving, one loses their way

²⁹John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* Manchester 2000, 210.

³⁰ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Routledge 1997, 192.

³¹ Bhat, Altaf Ahmad, and Mir, Shabir Ahmad. An Appraisal of 'home' as a Psychological space in Interpreter of Maladies. *Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal*, LLILJ 2014, 124.

and does not know to return. Especially those that do not follow their *Mal* like the *Dharis*.

This constructed and imagined state of a home is what Homi Bhabha refers to as a 'third space'. He argues that a sense of hybridity and ambivalence becomes inherent to a person that has 'lost their way home'. But, as I have argued at beginning of this paper, I have always thought myself to possess this hybridity and ambiguity, well before my flight to Germany on the 28th of September, 2017. Moving away from the dichotomies of the coloniser and colonised, I believe, this is not just a consequence of movement and travel but an acknowledgement of the diverse influences upon one's life. Derrida calls this ambiguity – 'undecidability'. He believes it to be a state of confusion between the presence and the non presence. It advocates for the impossibility of ever clearly articulating identity, rather allowing it to develop over time as a process of agency. As Bhabha further argues, "[The] importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge".³² Sir Richard Francis Burton, the 19th century explorer, expressed similar ideas when he chose to write under the pseudonym Abdu al-Hichmakani al-Yazdi, meaning - of no-hall, nowhere - a rootless cosmopolitan.³³ When asked about writing and home, Saidiya Hartman (in an interview for The Creative Independent) responded to Thora Siemsen, "A place that isn't home... I think that so much of writing is about a way of trying to make home, and I often think of this in terms of national identity. I don't really feel like an American. I feel like a New Yorker. A New Yorker is as close as I get to having a national identity. I think part of writing is about that

³² Bhabha, Homi K. *The Third Space*, Interview with Homi K. Bhabha. Interview with Jonathan Rutherford. *Identity, Community, Culture*, London 1991, 211.

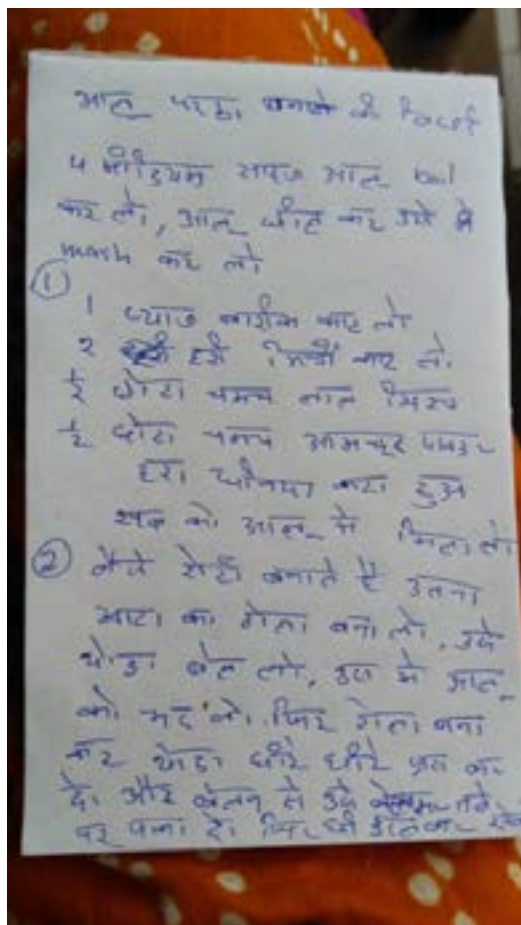
³³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, London 2007, 4.

negotiation with homelessness and placelessness".³⁴ Although writing is a distant performance for my *Nani*, I believe her idea of home (rather the construction of home) is analogous to that of Hartman's. Where Hartman is a prolific author, my *Nani* is a magical cook.

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34 Cf. Thora Siensen, On working with archives, in The Creative Independent, 2018, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/> (last accessed on June 12, 2020).

Nani's Aloo Paratha Recipe



NANI'S ALOO PARATHA RECIPE. Image by NANI

The morning after I asked *Nani* about our home, we were cooking together. She was teaching me to make *Aloo Parathas* - Indian flatbread stuffed with potatoes. While I was kneading the dough and stuffing the *parathas*, she was learning to film with my camera. *Parathas* are a typical breakfast especially amongst the north Indian – Punjabi community. The potatoes would be leftovers from the previous night's dinner. *Nani* had taught me that *parathas* could be stuffed with any leftovers, making the perfect breakfast. We had often stuffed them with onions, cauliflower, radish, lentils and sometimes even sugar for a quick dessert. It was only much later that *parathas* had become a delicacy that people started stuffing them with fresh foods. Typically, we eat *parathas* with generous portions of *Dahi* (yogurt) and pickles or preserves.

Nani makes the *Dahi* at home too. She warms milk to the right temperature and mixes a spoonful of *Dahi* into it. Then she leaves the bowl of milk overnight in a cool and dark place. By the next morning, the bowl of milk hardens into thick and creamy *Dahi*, ready for breakfast. I always wondered how that would work. I turned to questions that made *Nani* uneasy - how was *Dahi* made for the first time? Where did this first spoon of *Dahi* come from? It is the age-old chicken and egg question. But *Nani* had a fix for it all. She quickly flipped a perfectly crisp paratha into a plate, generously layered it with homemade butter and held it in front of me. My questioning ended as my mouth filled up with this magical substance made by her magical hands. The heat of the *parathas* (and of the never-ending summer) perfectly balanced itself with the cold spoonful of *Dahi*.

The taste of *Nani's* food is like Michael Harner's description of the hallucinogenic vine of the Shuar Indians in Ecuador – “a brilliant substance in which the spirit helpers are contained.”³⁵ These helpers could be in the little spoon of *Dahi* that can transform an entire bowl of milk overnight. But, these spirit helpers are also present in her hands and fingers, in her body. She embodies the years of experimentation that it took to master the skill of cooking. The magical substance is not inherently present in the food itself. It passes through her and into the food. Her memories, love, and care are passed on when she kneads the dough with her bare hands.

The physicality of the ingredients is explored through touch. If I was to knead instead of her, she would lose her judgement and be completely thrown off. She believes that the right consistency can only be assessed through touch. The haptic quality of food is often overlooked as we learn to eat and cook with the use of kitchen apparatus. In Martha Rosler's 1975 performance, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, we see her critique the role of women in society through the very same kitchen apparatus.³⁶ Rosler creates an alternate spectacle that seeks to challenge the traditional norms enforced upon women by societal conventions. I sent a link of Rosler's performance to *Nani*.

35 Michael Harner, *The Sound of Rushing Water*, in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael Harner (New York, 1973), 17. See also Harner, *The Jívaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls*, Garden City, N.Y. 1972, 163.

36 Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDUDzSDA8qO> (last accessed on July 30, 2020).

In a couple of hours, I received a phone call from her –

“What is this that you sent me?”

- “I sent you a performance, did you watch it?”

“Yes, I watched it but I don't understand”

- “What did you see or feel?”

“I saw this woman beating kitchen utensils, I don't understand it”

- “She is expressing her anger towards the societal norms of women being homemakers...”

“[LAUGHING]”

[PAUSE]



ALOO PARATHA. Image by me.. (2021)

After leaving for Germany in September 2017, my first return to India was in October 2018. Having spent exactly a year away from my family, friends and food, I had grown tired. *Nani's* stock of magical substance that I had carried with me was long over. Some of it was shared with friends from University and the rest was polished during the cold winter nights of Germany. *Nani's* food brought warmth to my mind and body. After a couple of weeks of missing *Nani's* food, I found an Indian grocery store run by Punjabis. One of the freezers contained bags of frozen *Aloo Parathas* that could be heated and eaten in an instant. Over the course of the year, I had purchased numerous bags of frozen parathas wishing for it to be even slightly as magical as *Nani's*.

It was not long before I found temporary solace in the frozen *parathas*. Besides, the elderly Sikh woman at the store reminded me of my *Nani*. The only difference being - she spoke fluent Punjabi and German but no Hindi or English, making it very hard for me to communicate with her. Her linguistic fluidity aroused my interest further and I tried to make conversation with her. She was quick to dismiss my eager need to acknowledge our commonalities and restricted conversation to business. And so, business it was.

I began a process of imitation and juxtaposition with the *parathas*. The preparation with *Nani* would begin with the boiling of potatoes. Then followed peeling, mashing and spicing to the right taste. Chillies were often avoided as I hadn't developed the palette for it. Once the potato mash is ready, flour was kneaded into dough and little palm-sized dumplings were made. The next step is what requires careful practice – one must mould the dough

dumplings into a thick but wide bowl and generously stuff it with the potato mash. The last and most important step is to stretch the walls of the dough bowl and enclose the stuffing completely. Now, with the help of a slender rolling pin, you flatten the dumpling on a marble slab and carefully place it on a pan. In Germany, I simply remove two pieces of parathas from the frozen bag and placed them on a dish to thaw. Once the icy layer has evaporated, I simply place the parathas on a pan. While *Nani* had a little help from her homemade *Ghee* to fry them crisp, I resorted to store-bought butter or margarine. While she fried them on a gas burner, I used an electric cooktop (the second alternative that she would reject). Greek yogurt replaced *Dahi*. But, the inherent feeling remained the same. I still felt closer to home, closer to *Nani*, and of course, closer to my stomach.

This juxtaposition of Indian food, between my life in Germany and India, firmly correlates with Emily Jacir's two-channel video work titled *Ramallah/New York* (2004-05). Jacir montage of similar images from the two locations – Ramallah and New York – stages a sense of confusion. She stages the history of memory and trauma suggesting that the 'ethical witness'³⁷ is caught in-between a past that refuses to die and a future that will not wait to be born.³⁸ The ethical witness is caught in this temporal and spatial separation between New York and Ramallah and in my case – Germany and India. The two images from two locations resembling each other draws further inferences than just the juxtaposition itself. It splits the viewer between the two locations, creating an ambivalent positioning for the moral witness. She politicizes the everyday life in displacement, that she refers to as going 'back and forth'. It is about the 'crossing over' (as discussed previously with

37 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, USA 2002, 182.

38 Homi Bhabha, *On Global Memory: Reflections on Barbaric Transmission*, Australia 2009, 46-56.

respect to the Partition) as continual border crossing and continual cultural exchange. It is about people that are unhomed, in search of a home and perhaps those that have never been home. In precisely this way, I felt a similar juxtaposition through my *Aloo Parathas*. The (re)creation of a 'home' was through adapting, accommodating and improvising. The frozen bags of food may not compare to those fried by *Nani* in homemade *Ghee*, but within the given context, they had become much more than a mere replacement. It created a window through which I look back into my past and revisit the markets, the kitchens – the homes. Here, I believe Avishai Margalit in his book *The Ethics of Memory* asks the crucial question – “Is the moral witness a forward-looking creature even when his testimony is about the past?”³⁹

[PAUSE]

³⁹ Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 152-3.

Aloo Parathas are generally accompanied by raw mango pickle. Pickling mangoes is essential as it allows one to prolong the ultimate reward of the Indian summer. As I chose to stay in Germany for the summer, I was unable to taste the mangoes of 2018. Mangoes have always held a special place in the South Asian hearts and hence stomachs. They are officially the national fruit of both India and Pakistan. Cumulatively, we have over 100 varieties of mangoes in the subcontinent with each region having its own special preparations. Mangoes are intrinsically linked to the regional cultures and subcultures of the subcontinent. But, they only remain ripe for a couple of months in the year. The heat of the summer soars over 40 degrees and while people suffer, the mangoes ripen. There are just as many preparations with mangoes as there are varieties. Mangoes are pickled, pulped, squashed, milkshake-d, ice creamed and of course eaten as they are.

At 12, my parents enrolled me into a residential school that was a four-hour drive from home. The school was situated on the outskirts of Pune, in the Sahyadri mountain range and hence was named Sahyadri School. It was situated on a plateau next to a reservoir of the Bhima river. The school had a large mango orchard in one corner of the land that was restricted for students. Of course, when something is restricted, we have to visit. So, one afternoon in peak summer heat – knowing that the guards wouldn't venture out – a couple of us decided to raid the orchard. We vigilantly walked along the perimeter of the school fence until we reached the orchard. Each of us picked a tree, sat under its shade and enjoyed our harvest. The summer heat was a distant dream under the mango-filled sky. With sticky fingers and faces, we lay in the

dirt, full of sugar sweetness. School had become our home outside of home. We were all to remember those precious five-years with an expansive fondness. Our minds created signs and symbols (just like in maps) that can and definitely do guide us back to school – to home. Each student was assigned an 'admission number' that was to be marked on all of our belongings. Today, exactly a decade later, I still own T-shirts that read the number 732 written in my child-like handwriting. Whenever I spot the numbers 732, I am taken back to school instantly. A part of my identity is intrinsically linked to the numbers, seven-three-two, in that specific order. In a diary from many years ago, I recall having written – 732 – to fill an entire page. It allowed me to mark my book endlessly as mine. It triggered me to remember all that I could associate with those three wonderful numbers. Writing – just as it is here – became a way for me to remember. It is not a documentation of my memories, rather a process through which I can recall those memories. As Emilio Reyes Bassail writes, "It seemed to me that there was a linguistic scaffolding that enabled memory to produce its own images."⁴⁰ In school, we had no access to any kind of technology. Our only way to communicate with our family was through letters. These letters created memories – linguistic memories of a time – of a home.

40 Emilio Angel Reyes Bassail, *Memory as a Method for Filmmaking*, Journal for Artistic Research, 19 2019, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/648128/719789/0/0> (last accessed August 21, 2020).

In precisely this way, multiple narratives can be created through a writing and recollection of memories. As Sarah Pink argues, “...reality is, in fact, continuous and subjectively experienced, at best, one can only reconstruct fragments of a subjective experience of reality, representations of knowledge are never complete”.⁴¹ There can be an ambiguity to the sense of ‘reality’ produced by memories. It’s not that they are lies (or that I am lying), but that they are not necessarily complete or total truths.

There is an in-between of reality and fiction that is expressed in the form of memories. In this way, memories seem to occupy a similar ‘third space’ as previously discussed with the concept of ‘home’ as well as the works of Emily Jacir. Just as bridging between two worlds is identified in Jacir’s video works, memories become a way to bridge two times. The anthropologist Roberto Beneduce was troubled by the inconsistency and contradictions in the stories retold by refugees and migrants. There was a narrative fragmentation and a sense of ‘forgetting’ in their recollections. Noting this, Beneduce writes that in these stories it is: “as if for these women and men it is impossible to bridge the time ‘before’ and ‘after’, impossible to bridge different times and experiences, different worlds – a work of bridging which is the specific function of the imagination.”⁴² In an interview with Kiko Aebi the British

41 Sarah Pink, *Doing Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, London 2001, 167.

42 Roberto Beneduce, *Undocumented bodies, burned identities: refugees, sans papiers, harraga – when things fall apart*, *Social Science Information* 47, no.4, 2008, 507

Algerian artist Lydia Ourahmane, describes her installation *In the Absence of our Mothers* (2018) as a means to process her past, observing that her work is “a way of understanding what [her] history is...as a way of moving forward.”⁴³ Ourahmane’s work attempts to represent the psychological wounding produced as a result of the loss of one’s family history and national identity. In this way, to respond to Margalit’s crucial question above, the moral witness does become a forward-looking creature. It attempts to excavate the future from the past. With its one foot back in time (the past) and the other in the future, this creature creates its own fragmented present in the middle. Through this negotiation, the creature is able to reflect upon its past that refuses to die and create fragmented and speculative futures that are eager to be born.

43 Kiko Aebi, *Retracing the Colonial Past: Migration and Multi-directional memory in Lydia Ourahmane’s In the Absence of our Mothers*, *Kunstlicht* vol. 41, no.1, 2020 <https://tijdschriftkunstlicht.nl/kiko-aebi-retracing-the-colonial-past-migration-and-multi-directional-memory-in-lydia-ourahmanes-in-the-absence-of-our-mothers-kunstlicht-vol-41-no-1-2020/> (last accessed on August 10, 2020).

[PAUSE]

“History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.” ~ James Baldwin⁴⁴

The city of Delhi, where I currently reside, is divided between the Old and the New. While New Delhi boasts of beautifully planned development, Old Delhi carries a charm that cannot be replicated. The New is full of restaurants that proudly serve food from across the globe. One of my particular favourites is a Vietnamese joint run by a very sweet couple. They claim to source their ingredients from the infamous INA Market – one of the largest food markets in the centre of the new city. INA Market witnesses a regular clientele of people from the furthest corners of India and the world. It is by far the largest (and most literal) melting pot of diversity I have come across in the city. At various occasions, I have found myself gravitate towards INA for a change of cuisine, for a cleaning of my palette. A tiny diner run by a woman from Kerala reminds me of my time at University in Bengaluru, in the south of India. I would frequent the place when I wished to be taken back to the little diner from Bengaluru. It was a portal to return.

In the old city of Delhi, there's a restaurant by the name of Karim's. Karim's specializes in Mughlai food – a delightful remainder of the Mughal rule over South Asia. The ancestor of the owners of Karim's served as a chef in the royal court of the Mughal emperors. In the early 20th Century – towards the end of the Mughal rule – the chef decided to move out of the royal courts with a wish to serve royal food to the common man. Karim's was birthed and was soon to be the city's most famous culinary destination.

⁴⁴ James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, ed. Raoul Peck, USA 2017, 169.

I have been to Karim's just a handful of times, in the wish to be able to taste the royal food, or what remains of it. The chaos of the Old City, within which Karim's flourishes, is mesmerising and their food...*aah*. Rumour goes that the owners of Karim's save a ladle of their spice mix from each day to mix it into the next day's food. Claiming to have carried on this practice since its inception, Karim's can proudly declare that the food we eat today carries minuscule portions of the spice mix prepared by their ancestors in the royal courts of the Mughal emperors. I must confess though, this is not a claim by the owners of Karim's, rather a proverbial – dare I say, street gossip – that has strengthened itself over decades. I do not wish to find out the degree of truth in this claim. I have (now) learnt, to ask questions that I wish to have answered. Karim's has been able to hold and carry a memory deeply embedded in food. To some, Karim's allows their only chance at savouring food that once belonged to the royals; to others, it is a reminder of an era that is being erased from the history of our lands.

In the 2020 zine, 'Recipes for Resistance', the writer Vijeta Kumar has contributed a personal yet profoundly political story titled, 'The Nose, My Grandmother, Our Beef.' The story tells the tale of Kumar informing her family (on a vacation) that she eats beef – an extremely charged, political and social issue in many parts of India. Kumar writes, "I can eat beef because he [her father] gave us a home where food was casteless – unless it was beef. Because Dalit homes can try to be casteless but neighbours will not, and my country will certainly not."⁴⁵ Kumar's father's rejection of beef arose from a need to erase caste from their identity. It was a rejection that was furthered with her Eng-

45 Cf. Sabba Khan, Jasleen Kaur, Navi Kaur, Yas Lime and Raju Rage (Ed.), Vijeta Kumar, Recipes of Resistance: The Nose, My Grandmother, Our Beef, London February 20, 2020, <http://www.rajurage.com/2020/02/recipes-for-resistance-2/> (last accessed on October 11, 2020).

lish education and ambiguous name, that would hide their caste background. While sitting here in my room – the one I claim to be a 'Cosmopolis' – I can only attempt to try to understand this. Unfortunately, I don't believe that I can. For I come from a family that too attempted to erase caste and religion from our home. And we did. To the extent that I have very little knowledge of the implications of it in our *modern* society. It was an erasure, but one that was substantiated by privilege. To be honest, I do not know which caste my family belongs to. But the implications of this ignorance are far deeper than I would wish. This piece of missing information only confirms that we are not Dalits, as if that were the case, we would have been sure to know. Need I remind you of Kumar's essay again – "...Dalit homes can try to be casteless but neighbours will not, and my country will certainly not."⁴⁶ It is precisely what Catherine Russel identifies in her 1999 book, *Experimental Ethnography*, "He has chosen to give up his privileges, but he can do nothing about the privilege that has allowed him to choose."⁴⁷

At the beginning of this essay, I wrote about how I can only write in English and hence stick to Savyasachi Anju Prabir. But, I didn't explain where my name comes from. Savyasachi is, of course, my first name and what most people refer to me as, while Anju Prabir is my last name and also the first names of my parents. Anju being my mother and Prabir my father. At my birth, my parents decided to use both their first names as my last name in order to rid me of the patriarchal practice of carrying my father's last name forward while also attempting to dissolve any enquiry into my caste. You see, in most cases, one is able to determine the caste of an individual from their last names. Ones belonging to upper caste backgrounds carry their last names with pride and

46 Ibid.

47 Catherine Russel, *Experimental Ethnography*, USA 1999, 310.

sometimes literally wear it on their person. Bracelets, tattoos, car stickers and what not. In the cases of lower castes, one may attempt to hide or conceal their last name as far as possible. On many occasions, lower caste last names also tend to become street slang curses that are openly used to belittle and demean individuals during confrontations. Although the Indian government has taken legal measures to stop such vulgarity, it continues to remain common practice with very lax enforcement of such laws. By using their first names as my last, my parents successfully managed to confuse every soul that cheekily or sneakily tries to determine my caste. However, names are only one of the parameters through which such caste distinctions can be made. The very fact that we (my parents and I) can successfully erase our caste from our names hints towards our upper caste backgrounds and conditioning. To rid oneself of such generational baggage is a privilege that few can even attempt, forget enjoy. So, crossing cultural and religious practice by eating beef and pork, changing names, not visiting any places of worship, et cetera is a great privilege that I have only slowly begun to realise. When I turned 18, I distinctly remember my parents asking me if I had wanted to change my name, to which I just shrugged and shook my head. Perhaps it was the infamous Indian shake of the head. Because, it did not really matter to me what my name was and not many could point their finger at me and question me for it. I had enjoyed my privilege for the last 18 years without having a hint of the caste-based history and implication of it. It has since been a long and tedious process to truly understand the implications of such privilege over the last eight years. Perhaps it takes as much time (or more) to unlearn the things you learn consciously (or subconsciously). Not to rid myself of the responsibility in any way of course. But, I now realise that I did have the choice all along. So, writing in English wasn't a compulsion for me in the

way that I articulate it earlier. It was a condition that is created and presented to me on a platter. It is a direct representation of the upward mobility that one speaks of in a capitalist, democratic system. An erasure of the acknowledgement of privilege itself. To the extent that one truly forgets their privilege and begins to learn to look up. So much so, that one completely forgets the existence of those living below. Living under. In the cracks and fringes.

[PAUSE]

I recall the first time that I told my *Nana* and *Nani* about eating beef. I was slightly nervous because I could not gauge the extent of their 'liberal-ness'. They seemed slightly surprised but could say very little. Just like when I stopped attending the prayer ceremonies and instead watched television on auspicious and festive days. My parents supported my decision to stop praying – and to some extent even encouraged it – while my *Nani* would pose a half-hearted request to do the bare minimum. It was only so that *Nana* would not be offended by my 'lack of conviction'. Over the years, the television had replaced the conviction that *Nana* had sought for me. The only non-negotiable practice in his house was to avoid non-vegetarian food on Tuesdays (if you ask me why, I would have to look it up). My favourite breakfast of eggs would not be permitted on Tuesday morning. My temporary solution was simple, I avoided early morning visits to their home. However, a more permanent solution presented itself in the winter of 2018, right after *Nana's* death. Since our entire family was present in *Nani's* home, still processing the aftermath of his departure, we decided to organise a dinner together. I suppose, it was in part mourning and part celebration. We all wanted to order from a lovely seafood restaurant that we had frequented. Since it was a Tuesday, *Nani* was not comfortable with the idea. Yet, an order at a restaurant was placed and generous portions of seafood arrived within the hour. A practice, tradition, ended that day. Tuesdays became any other day in the week. *Nana* was really gone.

Well, *Nana* is still remembered of course. Just as Tuesday's are.

The Karachi-based artist Fazal Rizvi is exploring an artistic prac-

tice titled, “The Sherbet Project”, that is an inquiry into memory and nostalgia surrounding his maternal aunt. Rizvi’s aunt used to make a sherbet – a sweet drink syrup – that he used to relish. Upon his aunt’s death, there was no more sherbet and hence, Rizvi departed on a journey to recreate the drink from his memory. Rizvi hopes that his attempt at recreating the sherbet recipe may rekindle much more than just his taste buds.⁴⁸ As I attempt to use image-making and writing as a scaffolding to create memories, Rizvi is using food – specifically his aunt’s sherbet. By stumbling upon Rizvi’s sherbet making, I see my indulgence in mastering the *Aloo Paratha* in a new light. Nani’s recipe (as shared above), as written by her, is of much help in recreating the dish as well as memories of my childhood. Although, a recipe does not necessarily lead to the taste, smell and touch that one associates with the food and its memory. This can only be mastered in time and with much practice. During my short visit home from Germany, Nani was teaching me to make Aloo Parathas. She asked me to feel the dough with my hands to know if it has the right consistency. Further she said,

*“Put some more flour, then it won’t stick to your hands.
The pizza rolling pins are too fat to make rotis.
Take back a rolling pin with you when you leave.”*

I didn’t bring a rolling pin with me when I returned to Germany.

As Rizvi attempts to recreate a recipe from his memory, I struggle to simply follow a recipe chalked out for me.

Nani will (and still can) leave behind many recipes for me.

⁴⁸ Fazal Rizvi, Ed. Pro Helvetia, The Sherbet Project, <https://prohelvetia.in/en/fazal-rizvi-on-home-not-alone-residency-in-karachi/> (last accessed on October 12, 2020).

All of which are vegetarian and can definitely be prepared on the Tuesdays that follow...

[PAUSE]

Movement through time can be understood in so many different ways that eventually, it would surpass my ability to comprehend the possibilities. Through the duration of this particular paper itself, I have travelled back and forth interweaving multiple narratives and sometimes the same narratives following a non-linearity. Revisiting multiple histories – fictional, real and speculative – as a method of memory and meaning making has provided much insight into the building of an identity. Instead of arriving at a definition of identity, it has led me to believe that identity is a process – a continuous creation. The artist Paul Klee has described the line as a point ‘on a walk’.⁴⁹ Tim Ingold on the other hand has ascribed a similar meaning to the line with respect to a person. In his 2011 book, *Being Alive*, he writes, “As soon as a person moves he or she becomes a line. People are known and recognised by the trails they leave behind.”⁵⁰ Ingold’s claim reminds me of the *Maldharis* in the Banni grasslands. Their ability to trace their livestock (and people) in a landscape – that appears deserted to the uninformed outsider is quite remarkable. The trails left behind on the dry earth can be read as lines inscribed by people (or points) that have traversed the landscape. They can be read, tracked and caught up with, provided we possess the necessary tools. Sebastian Schneiders in his 2017 text, *Anticipating A Trace*, writes, “To read a line is to identify with the gesture that made it. A line invites us to trace its history and to anticipate its future.”⁵¹ While I do believe that tracing points, people

49 Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, 1960, <https://archive.org/details/KleePaulPedagogical-Sketchbook1960> (last accessed on October 10, 2020).

50 Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*, USA 2011, 237.

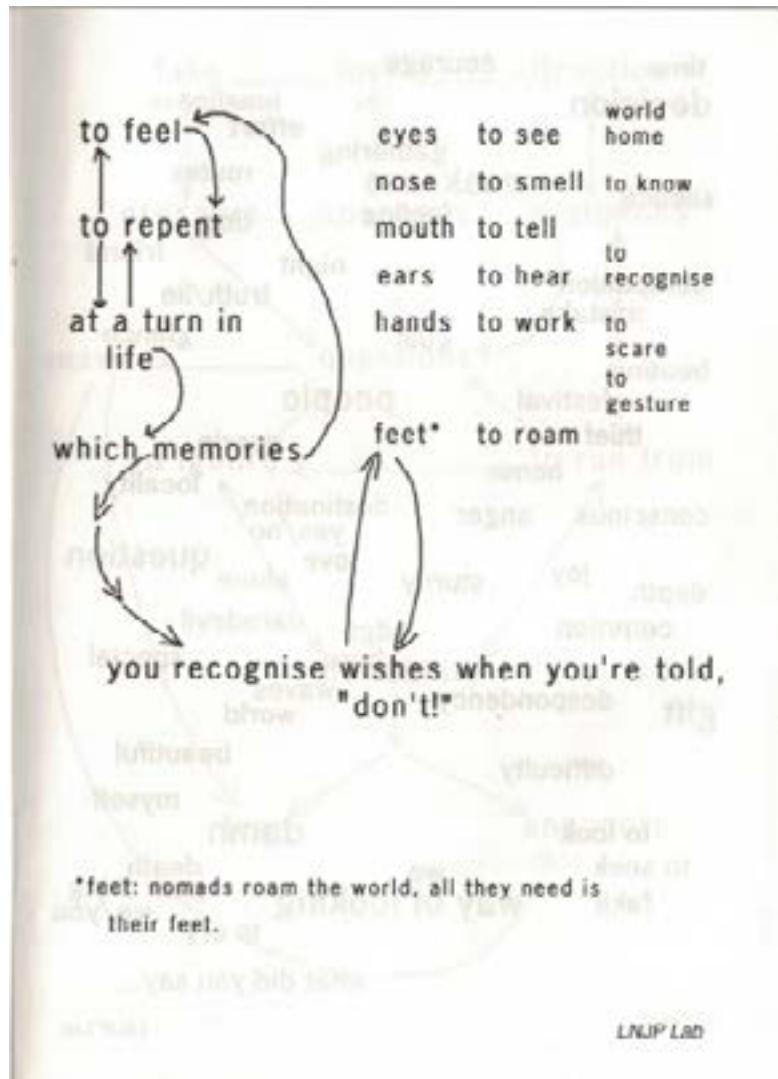
51 Cf. Sebastian Schneiders, *Anticipating A Trace*, (Amsterdam: Kunstlicht: Journal for visual art, visual culture and architecture, 2017).

and lines is what this paper has predominantly entailed, I find it hard to subscribe to the linearity of the above-mentioned claims. People do move and lines are created, but they are not necessarily following the linearity we expect. The tendency to move in a rather rhizomic fashion is warranted as one cannot limit themselves to the linearity of time or space. As Deleuze and Guattari have written in their 1987 book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo.”⁵² Rhizomes allows for interpretation and representation to exist in multiples and non-hierarchical structures. It moves away from the binaries of right-wrong, true-false, fiction-documentary and occupies a liminal space in between. In a sense, a rhizomic form of knowledge production and representation occupies a similar ‘third space’ as discussed previously. It seeks to follow ‘routes as opposed to roots’⁵³ with the hope of transcending borders that it may encounter. These routes create maps that find much resemblance to those created by the *Maldharis*; maps that are, a journey, a process that leads to the constant questioning of staticity.

52 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, USA 1987, 25.

53 Penny Travlou, *Ethnographies of Co-Creation and Collaboration as Models of Creativity*, University of Edinburgh 2013, 7.

[PAUSE]



FROM - WHAT IS THAT WHICH EVERY THING NEEDS?

“Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a ‘staging of subjectivity’ – a representation of the self as a performance.”⁵⁴

~ Catherine Russell

[Field notes, August 25, 2019]

*At this particular moment,
I don't belong anywhere.
Four walls have the ability to
make me comfortable,
as long as they surround me,
alone. The light through the
only window, forms my perception
of the outside.*

*If I had to choose a camera, I
would choose a pinhole camera.*

*Primarily, because it does not
see through lenses. At least, not in
the way that my grandfather saw,
through his.*

*When he passed away, I spent
hours looking for his glasses.*

*Now, there is a muddy ambiguity
to my perception.*

*Over time, the pinhole loses its
sharpness. Particles of dust attach
themselves to its edges.*

*There was a storm this morning.
I went running, embracing the
harsh wind. But it did not receive me
with the same warmth. A speck of
dust lodged itself under my eyelid.
I stopped running and after a bit
of struggle, caught the little speck.
While my eye tried to focus on it in the crease of my finger, the
wind claimed it back.*

*Those glasses are lost now, the
only thing that remains, is an image of him wearing them.*

*Sometimes, I pretend to be him. I raise my shirt over my belly
and sit hunched over my computer. I fantasize about oiling my
hair and combing it backwards to reveal my receding hairline.*

*I wish I wrote something about my grandmother too. Perhaps I
write this for her, or rather to her.*

*Recently, she started to write me as well, on her new smart-
phone. She took an image. It was a flower that blooms once a
year. The image and the flower belong to her. And her garden.*

⁵⁴ Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 1999, 276.

In 2005, a young film crew visited *Nani Ghar* and asked *Nana* and *Nani* if they could shoot a short film in their house. They came prepared with a script about an old woman that was to be played by an actor they had previously selected. Their proposition to shoot a film in *Nani Ghar* was accepted and in their next visit, they came prepared with the entire crew and equipment. The production of the short film titled *Silence* had begun. But, the actor had backed out at the last-minute and now, the crew stood in our living room without a protagonist. Consequently, *Nani* was asked to perform the role of the older woman and her struggles with loneliness. With much apprehension, *Nani* began to play the role of the woman. She was asked to 'get into character' and given specific directions on how to 'act' in each shot. It seemed as though the crew had a meticulous shot breakdown that was put into practice now that they had sought a replacement for their protagonist. When *Nani* talks about her role in the film, she does so with a hint of excitement in her eyes. Although, she dismisses her 'performance' as a casual stint just as that excitement vanishes from her eyes. During one of our many conversations about her 'short-lived acting career', she narrated an incident that took place on one of the evenings –

"The shoot was going on for a long time that afternoon. We were doing a lot of retakes and it took up much of the time. It was already evening and there was no sign of the shoot ending anytime soon. Your Nana had already woken up from his afternoon nap and was sitting outside in the porch, waiting for his evening cup of tea.

So, he called out saying, 'That's enough for today, am I going to get my cup of tea this evening?'

Listening to him getting impatient, I asked the crew to leave, 'Let us continue this tomorrow, now I must make tea for him.'

Nana sat in the porch of his home while *Nani* stepped out of her performance, in order to step in to another. I wonder if *Nana* had his shirt raised over his belly while he waited for his cup of tea. *Nani* was in the kitchen boiling a mix of milk and water in spoonfuls of dark tea leaves. I imagine her actions in relation to Rosler's, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* – based on the previous conversation (described above). Where Rosler expresses her anger with the kitchen apparatus, *Nani* gracefully plays with them. She froths the tea by repeatedly pouring it in and-out of a cup. Her hands orchestrating a symphony between the milk, water, tea and sugar.

An action that is mimicked by every tea-drinker and tea-maker I have come across. Finally, she places two cups of tea along with some snacks on a tray and brings it out to the porch. *Nana* and her quietly sip their tea, as they observe the world outside. I wonder if he asked her about the experience of acting in a film. Getting into another character. Playing a role. Performing. The body is integral to the performance, in the sense that it is the site through which the performance begins and is conveyed. In this way, the body becomes a living medium that is conditioned to the process of representation. As Hans Belting has claimed, "*Representing bodies* are those that perform themselves, while *represented bodies* are separate or independent images that represent bodies. Bodies *perform* images (of themselves or even against themselves) as much as they *perceive* outside images."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Hans Belting, *Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology*, *Critical Inquiry* 31, no.2,

In *Experimental Ethnography*, Russell describes a woman's role in a film to, "shock and to attract, and yet gently resist this role in the performance of everyday activities."⁵⁶ On this particular shoot day, *Nani* performed both these roles but in separate occasions. In the film, *Nani*'s character shuts herself inside expelling the world outside. Her loneliness is depicted in a way that borders a sense of delusion about her understanding of herself. She appears to be lost in her thoughts, in her memories, digging for familiarity. She closes the windows upon hearing children playing, shutting out any semblance of the outside. Yet, she appears to be content with herself and her conversations. Although fairly evident throughout, it is only revealed at the end of the film that she is speaking to herself. The dramatic camera pan from this revelation to the title slide of the film overtly affirms Russell's point on the intention (of the filmmakers) to shock the viewer. But, the 'gentle resistance' seems to be missing from the narrative of the character. *Nani* brings this resistance to life upon stepping out of her acting shoes. Her performance of everyday activities begins where her performance for the camera ends. One could argue that *Nani* lives two lives within the same space that is divided by the recording of the camera. Through this switching between the two performances, *Nani* represents herself (her identity) from two loci within the same space.

2005, 311.

⁵⁶ Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 74.



NANI AS ACTOR. Still from the film *Silence*. (2004)



NANI AS NON-ACTOR. Image by me. (2021)

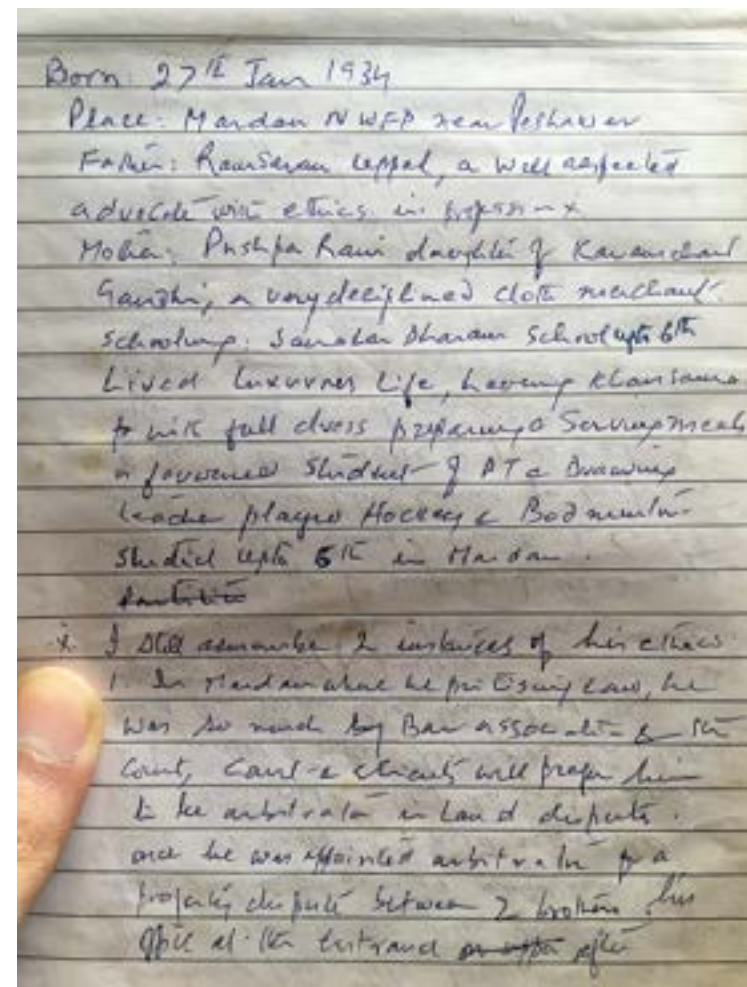
Russell claims, "The camera as an instrument of vision serves as a means of making them [bodies in space] visible, a vehicle for the performance of their identities."⁵⁷ Although the camera does trigger a dual performance (in the case of *Nani*), she is only comfortable with herself when outside the frame of the camera. In, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes, "Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eyes, evacuates the self as a site of identity and autonomy and...leaves a sign of resistance."⁵⁸ *Nani*'s two lives – what Bhabha refers to as a 'dimension of doubling' – leads to a splitting of the self, building an understanding of the ambivalence necessary for a postcolonial identity. An experience that creates a partialized subjectivity to be understood as a process, an in-the-making-of, an identity.

"...living a life is itself a performance that demands skill, that it is the most comprehensive and important challenge we face."⁵⁹

57 Ibid, 294.

58 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, 49.

59 Ronald Dworkin in *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*, Cambridge 2000, 253.



NANA'S ATTEMPT AT WRITING A DIARY
SOMETIME AFTER HIS RETIREMENT

Image by me. (2020)

[PAUSE]

For the last seven months, I have been inside my room. Permanently. I cannot say this enough. My life revolves within a 10-metre space. I wake up in the morning and take

one	step	to	reach	my	desk
step	step	to	reach	my	bookshelf
to	to	to	reach	my	door
reach	reach	reach	reach	my	kitchen
my	my	my	my	my	room
work	memory	exit	food	life	home

Learning to live in a box was a tedious process. The walls grew, inching closer each day. Constricting my movement within the space. Home, a place of comfort had become a place of arrest. Arresting the physical body while simultaneously enclosing the mind. A closed mind. Silent and dark. A mind where images are formed but never displayed. A dark room. Like the ones where analogue photographs are developed. A process deemed in the past with the advent of the digital. Like this computer screen replacing a typewriter. The loss of materiality and haptics felt through the aching pain in your eyes and head. A million eyes glued to screens as they await the passing of the lockdown. Closing themselves in to postpone the imminent danger. Shutting windows and

drawing curtains. Allowing the walls to close in. Learning to live in a box.

Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol offered some food for thought in their book titled, *The Practice of Everyday Life*,

“Ordinary memory knows it so well that it sings, in all languages, of the sweetness of one’s ‘home, sweet home.’ Yet, the enclosed garden where the body hides its pain and joys is not a ‘forbidden city.’ If it does not want to become a synonym for a terrible house arrest, separated from the living, the private space must know how to open itself up to the flow of people coming in and out, to be the passageway for a continual circulation, where objects, people, words, and ideas cross paths; for life is also about mobility, impatience for change, and relation to a plurality of others.”⁶⁰

One particular day – a pleasant day that was unlike typical Indian summers – I opened a window to my room. The images-in-the-making (in the dark room) were immediately destroyed, I wish I could share them with you. Instead, an image formed on the wall across the freshly opened window. Unlike myself, the image was in motion, not static. It reflected the outside. An inverted reflection, but a reflection nonetheless. The movements were disorienting to the quarantined eyes. As they struggled to focus and process this new light for comprehension, a gust of wind entered the room, and the lungs. Replacing the aged, the stale, air that lived inside for months with a green freshness.

60 Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, translated by Timothy J. Tomasik, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Volume 2: Living & Cooking, Minnesota 1998, 148.

Some green for the eyes, some for the lungs.

As Henry David Thoreau once wrote in his journal,

“In this fresh evening each blade and leaf looks
As if it has been dipped in an icy liquid greenness.
Let eyes that ache come here and look...”⁶¹

Staring at a distance was rediscovered. The depths of the internet replaced by the depths of the world outside. In those depths I found airplanes, hiding behind tall apartments. I found pigeons, congregating on rooftops of those very apartments. I heard voices of children playing across balconies. They claimed to perform magic tricks for each other. Set up dates for quarantined hang-outs in each other apartments. I wished to present them with cup phones for private communication. Just as I watched airplanes gliding down from the balconies of their apartments, now I began to see lines of communication drawn taught between those very balconies. An interconnectedness that I had failed to recognise in the quiet of the lockdown, when I closed my windows in need of social and physical isolation.

61 Henry David Thoreau, Journal Entry, June 30, 1840, <http://www.awb.com/dailydose/?p=145> (last accessed on December 26, 2020).

[PAUSE]

The noted Indian poet Ranjit Hoskote spoke of the concept of 'Interlanguage' in a live online poetry recitation for Akademie der Kunste der Welt in Cologne. According to him, South Asia never had a word for 'mother tongue'. The Hindi term *Matru Bhasha* is a literal translation from its Germanic root *muttersprache*. This is where 'Interlanguage' – moving between and through languages – plays an important role in identifying the South Asian confluence of cultures. Being able to communicate between cultures and languages has been a prerequisite for inhabitants of this subcontinent as they navigate its diverse terrain. Hoskote goes on to say that we must learn to own our kaleidoscopic backgrounds and multiplicities in an attempt to challenge the existing dominant narratives. In Arundhati Roy's 2017 book, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum (a transgender character who lives beyond any fiction) is questioned about her belonging by an older man. To him, she responds beautifully and with an openness that brings shame to any following questions,

"I'm a *mehfil*⁶², I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited."⁶³

⁶² Mehfil has its root in Arabic. It stands for a festive gathering but can also mean an ambience, feeling or atmosphere.

⁶³ Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, USA 2017, 4.

I could recall the strongest feeling of a *mehfil* forming in my *Nani's* kitchen during our family get-togethers. My entire family would be gathered together, enjoying meals and drinks around a low floor-table. *Nana* would sit on a stool as it was difficult for him to cross his legs and sit on the floor. Everyone would be talking loudly and over each other. But, there are no large kitchens in any of the homes we inhabit today. Just as is written by de Certeau et al in, *The Practice of Everyday Life*,
“Our successive living spaces never disappear completely; we leave them without leaving them because they live in turn, invisible and present, in our memories and in our dreams. They journey with us. In the center of these dreams there is often the kitchen, this ‘warm room’ where the family gathers, a theatre of operations for the ‘practical arts,’ and for the most necessary among them, the ‘nourishing art’.⁶⁴”

[PAUSE]

64 De Certeau et al., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 148.

Writing these lines
has already brought images to my mind
from a past
that cannot be returned to.
Just like the paper planes from the balconies.
The pigeons and their messages.
Pre-partition India.
and
नानी घर.
[END]

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