Crossing the Threshold

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Abstract

In countries like the United States, many immigrants and children of immigrants have embraced sentiments of nationalism and patriotism, leading to what many have called a crisis of identity. This crisis, particularly for people of color, often, if not always, comes from the imaginary lines of separation between race and religion. The question, then, is, how are these borders negotiated? This paper draws from fieldwork conducted as a master's student. This paper explores the notions of space, diaspora, transnationalism, and diasporic transnationalism drawing from the works of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Lorgia García Peña, among others, in two parts. First, this paper examines borders as they exist domestically in the United States and considers the role of a home's threshold as a 'border' of negotiation between public and domestic identity. Second, this paper considers the ways borders are simultaneously imagined and blurred in a global community diaspora.

Keywords: *Diaspora; immigration; spatial theory; identity; borders*

Introduction

"What are you?" "What's your background?" Obviously, you *live* here but where are you *really* from?" "No, but where is your family from?" "These are familiar questions for individuals of color in the United States, regardless of whether or not they were born outside the country. In countries like the United States, many immigrants[2] and children of immigrants identify themselves as—and strive to be seen as—nationals of their new home countries, leading to what many have called a crisis of identity. This crisis, particularly for people of color, often comes from imaginary lines of separation between race, culture, and religion. The question, then, is how are these borders negotiated?

In this paper, I draw from master's thesis fieldwork I conducted in 2015,[3] which explored the challenges faced by Hindu communities building public temples in the United States and Canada. While analyzing the data, I observed common themes of participants expressing challenges relating to their individual identity. In two parts, this paper aims to explore the concepts of space, diaspora, transnationalism, and diasporic transnationalism, drawing from the works of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Lorgia García Peña, among others. First, this paper examines borders as they exist in the domestic sphere of homes in the United States and considers the role of the threshold of a home as a 'border' of negotiation between public and domestic identity. Second, this paper considers the ways borders are simultaneously imagined and blurred in a global community diaspora.

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[2] The focus of this work is on Hindu immigrants generally, and does not address the unique circumstances of refugees.

[3] Over a six-month period, I interviewed Gujarati-speaking Hindu immigrants from India and their family members. Data and quotations used in this paper are from my interviews with sixteen individuals above the age of eighteen who identified as Hindu. Names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Part I: Borders and Thresholds in The Domestic Sphere

My parents raised my older sister and me with a strong sense of our Indian heritage. They filled our home with a variety of role models through books written by authors of different origins, fostered an appreciation of art and culture, and inspired us to be whatever we wanted to be. We were taught the values and practices of Hinduism, and we went to the temple on Sundays where we were surrounded by people who looked like us, spoke the same language, ate the same things, and shared similar experiences being brown and living in the United States. Our 'American' lives were somewhat similar, but it was not until later in life that I understood why my parents had filled our youth with every single extracurricular activity imaginable and encouraged us to join different clubs and teams at school. It was not because, as I initially assumed, they wanted to us to be good at everything. Rather, it was because they did not want us ever to feel that there was anything we could not or should not do. In other words, my parents were breaking barriers that I did not know existed, and which they faced in their own lives as they worked to provide a future for us.

Growing up, I was often one of few, if not the only, person of color in my classes. My sister and I are five years apart and therefore never attended the same school. Teasing was typical, and I heard discussions at home about my sister being bullied but it was not until I was in seventh grade when I experienced a brutal case of bullying. In general, it is difficult to pinpoint a particular reason why certain people get bullied and others do not, but one common thread is the notion of acceptance. All the close friends I had at the time, including ones of color, remained silent and began to disassociate with me out of a desire to be socially accepted. At this point in my life, I already knew that I was different because of the color of my skin. However, what I did not realize until this time was that, in addition to being a good student, other things like my interests and talent in sports, band, and art were perceived as a threat.

After a few weeks of bullying I told my parents and they made their voices heard, yet the principal decided that nothing could be done to stop the physical and verbal bullying. This led me to conclude that I should drop out of the volleyball team and my other school activities and keep a low profile. My parents immediately told me this was not the answer. In fact, it was the first time they told me there was something I could not do. They reminded me that I was already keeping my head down. Without fail, during every parent-teacher meeting my parents would hear that I was doing well but I was too quiet. To my parents, this was not a description that matched their child at home or at the temple on Sundays. This was when they taught me to find my voice. -Naina

This narrative is not a unique one. In fact, almost all of my project participants who attended grade school in the United States shared a similar story involving varying degrees of harassment or resistance to their presence. Throughout my collection of narratives, a constant revelation that many participants shared related to how and to what degree they expressed themselves or changed their conduct based on whether they were at home or in public. More importantly for purposes of this paper, this behavioral switch was almost always unconscious, until one was forced to think and talk about it.

In the introduction of her book, *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that the borders or lines of difference, containment, and conflict are not of one thread. Mohanty discusses her own experiences as an immigrant living in three different cities in the United States and explains that she "learned to read and live in relation to the racial, class, sexual, and national scripts embedded in North American culture. The presence of borders in my life has been both exclusionary and enabling" (Mohanty, 2). I spoke with many Gujarati-speaking Hindu immigrants and their family members who were born in the United States, for whom this notion of borders as described by Mohanty—while theoretically imagined—is a very real aspect of their daily lives. Immigrants of color

and their families often, consciously and unconsciously, find themselves navigating their identities in a country where not everyone looks or sounds the same. In the broader scope of public and domestic spheres, the public sphere represents the space in which these lines of division, discrimination, and an "us versus them" complex reside. In contrast, in the domestic sphere, internal family politics and dynamics aside,[4] individuals who do not fit into the predominantly white, Protestant identity of America are often free of this negotiation.

In her book, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, Lorgia García Peña explores the notion of borders in the context of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and the experiences of living in the United States. García-Peña defines the noun 'border' as "tangible objects (a sign, a site, or even wall) that can arbitrate people's access and belonging to a particular territory" (García-Peña, 6). She goes on to argue:

> "A border, though often invisible, can be named, crossed, and sometimes even erased. "Bordering," on the other hand, evokes a continuum of actions that affect human beings. Bordering implies an actor (one who enacts bordering) and a recipient (they who are bordered) …bordering can take place even when geographical markers are absent; bordering cannot by geographically contained" (García-Peña, 6).

Although García-Peña is speaking directly to the experiences of Dominicans and Haitians, she is also speaking to the broader issue of borders and what she calls 'dictions,' and how they are projected and "performed on racialized bodies to sustain the exclusionary borders of the nation" (García-Peña, 2). García-Peña does not suggest that these experiences are limited to or reserved for a specific race or ethnicity, but rather provides a case study to draw broader attention to a particular issue. Similarly, I aim to use the case of Gujarati-speaking Hindu immigrants and their families to examine borders as they exist domestically in the United States.

Many project participants expressed a feeling of being given an identity by society, as opposed to being able to create or find one for themselves. One participant, Kartik, who migrated to the United States from Vadodara, Gujarat in 1991, explained how certain things have changed and others have remained the same while describing his experiences as an immigrant of color in the United States:

> *"A lot of people became tenser after 9/11 because Islamophobia became something that everyone talked about, you read about it, you heard it on the news. But it's not like things were peachy for brown people, regardless of whether you're Muslim or not, before 9/11. Before my children were born I was taking courses so that my degree as a Pharmacist in India would transfer here, but I also had to work so that we had income. The only jobs available in our area at that time were janitorial. Like I said, I took it. Back then we dealt with being called 'Pakis' and today we get called 'terrorists.' It's like you get a label with the immigration stamp on your papers and passport. We never really had a chance to be 'American'."*

For Kartik, the only space where he was never 'on edge' was his home, where he lived with his wife and, later, their children. He noted that he was treated slightly better when he began working as a pharmacist, but still was subjected to what he describes as "the tone of the superiority," in which many white customers would behave as if it were Kartik's post to *serve* them. "This hasn't changed so much, except now that I own a pharmacy we've made sure to take part in charity events that serve the local community as a whole, and we really get our name out there associated with the everyday culture of the city." From observations like this it is apparent that immigrants of color put forth

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[4] This paper does not explore dynamics surrounding gender roles, queer and/or non-cis-heteronormative gender and sexuality, as they did not emerge in the data collected due to the limitations of the ethnographic process. However, I acknowledge that these factors exist and can complicate the notion of home as a sanctuary.

extra effort to *convince* the white population that they are 'one of us.' This, in turn, indicates that immigrants do not negotiate their own identities in society, because that negotiation relies upon a degree of societal tolerance, if not acceptance. Kartik's explanation, like the reason Naina's parents enrolled her in many extracurricular activities, reflects a need to demonstrate similarity with the majority.

When project participants were asked about when and how they embrace their differences from the rest of society (or, in other words, "dare to be different"), the answers were remarkably but unsurprisingly unanimous. Participants such as Jaina explained that they are their true selves at home and "away from the eyes of judgmental society," where they can "be" as Hindu and Indian as they wanted. Jaina explains that at home, "we do *ãrti*,[5] listen to *bhajans*[6] or Bollywood songs, we can wear our *kurtis*,[7] and eat and breathe in peace without worrying what someone will say or do to us." Other participants also referred to their homes as a space where they could exist without worrying about societal discrimination or harassment, and spoke about the role that *mandirs* or Hindu community centers have played in their development of a sense of belonging and community.

In her article, *Roadside Shrines, Storefront Saints, and Twenty-First Century Lifestyles: The Cultural and Spatial Thresholds of Indian Urbanism*, Smriti Srinivas discusses the concept of thresholds. Both physical and perceived thresholds play an equally important role. Drawing from Walter Benjamin and Michel Bakhtin, Srinivas adapts the concept of the threshold to "evoke the intimate experiences of those enduring shifting and dislocated lives" (Srinivas, 2016). The notion of thresholds, particularly when thinking spatially, captures the sense of an in-between, points of entry and exit, and liminal spaces between worlds (Srinivas, 144).

Urban geographer Edward Soja builds upon Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory and notion of real-and-imagined places and coins the category of Thirdspace. First space is simply the mapping of a space, the tangible structure, while Second space is the non-tangible qualities or purpose of a space. Soja argues that two terms are never enough, there is always the Other — a third term that disrupts and disorders. For this he coins a third category, "Third Space" which is

> "knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experience, emotion, events, and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in *spatial praxis*" (Soja, 31).

In other words, Thirdspace is ultimately lived space—a representational space that transcends perceived and conceived space and is simultaneously real and imagined.

The data acquired through my project participant interviews indicates that the threshold of immigrants' homes is an example of Soja's conception of Third Space. The physical threshold marks the place between inside and outside, domestic and public. At the same time, the imagined threshold, or what it represents, is a space in which identity is negotiated and subsequently embodied. The threshold marks the space where an immigrant of color goes from being one's true self to carrying the label of Other. Much of spatial theory is about forms, an exploration of how one moves from

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[5] A Hindu ritual of worship.
[6] Comes from the Sanskrit root bhaj "to share," and refers to devotional songs.
[7] A traditional tunic.

one place to another, and how individuals balance the way they perceive themselves and how society perceives them.

> *I work for a well-known finance firm as a VP. This is not a position that is often occupied by a woman, let alone a woman of color. I take my job very seriously and if we're being honest, I'm very good at it but I often find myself second-guessing my decisions or overanalyzing a situation. I often find myself being made to feel like an intern or a junior team member during meetings by way of being talked over or underestimated. But at the same time, it feels like for the same reasons I am constantly being held to a higher standard. If I make some sort of error, no matter how small, and even if one of my male colleagues has made a similar one, it's a bigger deal…you know, like it's a bigger deal that I hold this position and have more to prove than others, meaning there's no room for error... In general, I think women are held to a higher standard in the workplace. For everything. Even how we look or dress at work. Sure, a lot of the care I take in my appearance is for me but in my 16 years working up the corporate ladder it's become apparent that it matters if I've gone a week too long to get my eyebrows done, or if I show up to a meeting in flats instead of heels. If I'm not wearing some make up… to be honest, a lot of the time it feels like I have to make up for the fact that I am a woman. And one of color. It's exhausting. —Nita*

In this process of thinking about "*where I am going and who I am going to encounter once I cross that threshold of my home?*" that Third Space represents the embodiment of how identity is negotiated. It is critical to note that this analysis is not intended to suggest that only one type of immigrant or person of color experiences these borders, but it instead speaks to similar though not identical struggles. This is a step toward finding solidarity in one's struggles. In acknowledging that there is more than one sense of a border or a line of difference, this analysis is a step toward removing silences and exclusions by way of drawing attention to them and rendering concrete and visible what these imagined and lived thresholds are.

Part II: The Imagination and Blurring of Borders in The Global Diaspora

Diaspora and transnationalism are individual categories that often overlap with but are also separate from the study of globalization. In studies of the diaspora and transnationalism, it is difficult to suggest universals or generalizations because, within both categories, there are unique experiences specific to particular communities. This involves an examination of boundaries on a global scale.

In the study of migration and the diaspora there are inherent connections to the broader study of transnationalism, which in turn calls for a reexamination of what constitutes a community. In the study of the diaspora, "[a] community diaspora first comes into being and then lives on owing to whatsoever in a given place forges a bond between those who want to group together and maintain, from afar, relations with other groups which, although settled elsewhere, invoke a common identity" (Bruneau, 35). Tracing back to Soja's definition of Third Space, which argues that the real and imagined operate simultaneously, García-Peña writes about *el nié*, a space of belonging which is neither here nor there. Addressing the experiences of the black Dominican and Dominicanyork, García-Peña argues that *el nié* is not a border space inhabited by the subject, but rather "the body that carries violent borders that deter them from entering the nation, from access to full citizenship and from public, cultural, historical, and political representation" (García-Peña, 5). Migration, as detailed by Everett S. Lee, is informed by four categories: 1) factors associated with the area of origin, 2) factors associated with the area of destination, 3) intervening obstacles, and 4) personal factors. Most instances of voluntary migration include a vision of the destination providing something that is not in one's homeland. For some, this is an escape from violence or genocide. For others, migration is motivated by a desire for greater job opportunities or a hope of providing a better future for one's

family. This mobility, however motivated, involves a degree of privilege, in particular the privilege of being able to leave one's homeland and re-establish oneself and one's family in a new geographic place.

For Kartik, his decision to migrate to the United States was driven by a realization of what his life would be like as a pharmacist in India. For many reasons, this was enough to justify the paperwork and expense involved in moving to another country. He went on to explain that he never thought it would be easy, but he was not necessarily ready for the feeling of homelessness. His wife, Maya, jumped in and said, "It's hard to feel like you belong. When I was growing up in India it didn't matter where I was, I always felt like I was home. Here, we have a physical home where we feel safe. But out there, it's a different story. I grew up in a city where not everyone looked the same, or followed the same religion, and there was more coexistence there than here…We didn't live through the British rule [in India] but it feels like we are now, in America."

García-Peña argues that "El Nié functions as an embodiment of past through present knowledge…The symbolic space of El Nié expands our understanding of borders; it displaces the location and polarity of the nation-border, instead proposing the body as the location that contains and reflects national exclusion (borders) across history and generations" (García-Peña, 5). Maya's narrative is not unique. Many of the project participants expressed similar sentiments of feeling displaced. In addition to racial differences, many immigrants spend a significant number of years before attaining a degree of financial and economic security. There are a multiplicity of borders that immigrants and people of color face on a daily basis.

In examining the global community diaspora, many Indian immigrants in the United States find themselves experiencing a sense of solidarity with other Indian immigrants across the globe. Older project participants mentioned the 1985 Air India bombing. While a tragic event in its entirety, many expressed feeling a particular sense of loss because there were 24 Indian citizens on board, despite having no relation to any of those individuals. Other project participants expressed a sort of nostalgia when describing life in India or kept referring to India as "home." Reasons for their migration were clear and made with purpose, but it was also clear that India remains where their fond memories are rooted.

These expressions of solidarity or connectedness allude to a deterioration of borders –both physical and imagined. The geographic boundaries (though man-made and often arbitrary) of nations hosting the Indian diaspora, and those of India itself, are erased in the minds of diasporic Indians who have inadvertently created a global community diaspora. Similar to the ways in which a commonality or shared religion, language, ethnicity, or culture provides grounds for small communities to be formed, the shared identity of a homeland in India has historically bridged communities across the globe.

Simultaneously, however, when participants were asked what it feels like to go back to India, while the initial response was typically "Great!" or "So nice!," that enthusiasm was then followed by "but then we have to come back here because this is where we live." One participant, Minaxi, expressed a feeling of guilt when she and her family went back to India. She explained:

> "I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood, everyone got along. Traditionally, when a girl gets married she leaves her home village and moves to her in-laws, but I never did that. Prakash [her husband] had an IT job lined up and we moved here [to the U.S.] a week after we got married. I thought it would be the same as going back home when a girl goes back home to visit her parents, but the first time we went back to Vaso, it was like I was a visitor. Everyone was loving, but you could feel that there was a sense of 'she's American now.' In

small offhand comments like 'Oh, we haven't had a sitting toilet installed yet but hopefully you'll be okay without it.' One night in conversation with my mother I mentioned how nice it was to be home, and without hesitation she said 'but this isn't your home anymore. You left.' She could have been referring to the fact that I was married, but she was happy about my marriage, and this was not a happy comment."

Minaxi's narrative demonstrates the ways in which an immigrant can live in the liminal space of the threshold indefinitely. She was neither at home here in America or in her native home in India. She lived neither here nor there.

García-Peña coins the term "racexiles" for Dominicans and their US-born descendants who "encounter another form of exile as they become racialized into a US minority and are thus excluded from full US citizenship, inhabiting the dual border space of marginality" (García-Peña, 173). García-Peña's definition of "racexiles" extends to the experiences of immigrants and their US-born descendants as well. Acknowledging that experiences vary, this difficulty for those who have migrated, either voluntarily or by force, suggests that as much as borders can be diminished in global community diasporas, borders can also be built and reinforced in more painful ways.

Detailing Josefina Báez's performance of *Dominicanish*, García-Peña examines the act of embracing and embodying an identity of multiplicity. This process, though arguably a coping mechanism, requires racexiled subjects, particularly US Dominicans, to forget the violent relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic which led to their migration. Indian immigrants faced with assimilation or "embracing the multiplicity" (García-Peña, 187)do not confront an erasure of historical relations between the United States and India, but, as some older project participants expressed, there are resonances in the United States of the British colonial rule over India and systemic oppression by the white male. For Indian immigrants living in Canada, a nation which is still part of the British Commonwealth, this bears a more striking resemblance to García-Peña's description of the contradictions of racexiles living in a country that played a historical role in their exile. The movement of colonized people into the metropole or another part of the Empire is a traceable pattern rooted in forms of management through governmentality, and the colonial effect on identity.

The suggestion that Indian immigrants in the United States are also racexiles is not intended to imply that their individual experiences are uniform or that they are the same as those of Dominicans in exile, or other racial and ethnic groups. Rather, this suggestion highlights the ways the work of García-Peña and other scholars of the Other provide a platform for creating a dialogue and building solidarities between various Other groups and communities. Further examinations in the context of the Hindu diaspora and other racial and ethnic groups will help provide a more nuanced understanding of how immigrant communities experience and adapt within new borders.

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