

The Wandering Entrapped: Pandemic, Movement, and Privilege
by Intan Paramaditha

Translated by Stephen J. Epstein

The tiny studio flat is now mopped, devoid of dust and food crumbs, and all my clothes are packed in the suitcase. Tomorrow, at 7 a.m., my plane will depart Heathrow for Sydney. Outside the window, a clear blue sky looms above a carless street; one or two people are walking along the footpath, their pace slightly hurried. London looks odd, suddenly lonely, far too clean. Inside my flat, I am no longer bothered by the pungent smell of food wafting over from my next-door neighbour, a Sri Lankan restaurant. They have closed up shop.

This trip is unlike those that have preceded. Two weeks earlier, COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic. The whole of London has been locked down for the first time, supermarket shelves are empty, toilet paper is a rare commodity, and my ticket can be cancelled at any time. I feel like a character in a video game set in a dystopia. I have a single mission: to make it home. But anything can happen along the way.

Will the hero of our video game arrive home safely or will she be bitten by a zombie? I want to develop this plot line with a series of thrilling episodes: the lengthy queue at Heathrow, barely moving since five in the morning; the official who won't let me board the plane because he questions my legal status; my gasping breath as I sprint through Doha Airport, deserted and silent, to catch my connecting flight; terror at being infected by the virus because the cabin is so full, passengers packed together, nearly shoulder-to-shoulder even across the aisle. But we shall leave those stories for another time. Instead let us take a step back and observe how I arrived at this point, preparing to leave London with dashed hopes.

In 2019, I was planning a trip to promote *The Wandering*, my novel of a red shoes adventure. Now the book feels like an artifact from a world that has passed, first published in Indonesia in 2017 BC (Before Covid), and composed during the nine years that I lived on the move, in New York, Jakarta, Amsterdam, and, finally, Sydney. The story opens with a woman from the Third World who negotiates with the Devil until she earns red shoes to adventure with, thus escaping the trap of immobility; readers can choose the storyline they will follow. *The Wandering* for me is a meditation on travel and mobility, on who can move beyond national borders in a globalized world, who continues to face walls and fences, on situations in between, on the structures that determine our movements. But in 2020, when the novel was published in the UK as *The Wandering*, the story of an adventurous woman from the Third World together with its questions about boundaries,

inequality, and power suddenly lost relevance. How do you critique travel when the whole world is closing borders?

* * *

A year before *The Wandering* was released, the publisher and I, Harvill Secker/Penguin Random House UK, had discussed plans for the book to have a wandering of its own. I arranged for academic leave from Macquarie University in Sydney where I teach, so that I could go on a two-month book tour. I also contacted a colleague at SOAS University of London about being a visiting researcher while in the UK. After working through a series of hassles, which included arranging visas and accommodation, and drawing up research plans, I finally arrived in London at the end of February 2020, with the support of the publisher, who had covered my airfare and organized several events in London and Edinburgh. My father in Jakarta hardly approved. He phoned me, "What are you doing going abroad? The coronavirus is out of China!" I didn't listen; my dad is paranoid about everything.

Despite the rising number of cases, in early March people were still feeling fine, trying to act normally, even though they were growing awkward about physical contact. At the first event for *The Wandering*, at the bookstore Waterstones, I hugged a friend from English PEN, the institution hosting the event. Standing not far away, her colleague looked on hesitantly.

"Can we shake hands or not?" he asked.

He finally smiled and did so, but confusion was setting in over social interactions.

A few days later I was invited to a small party by my agent. The host shook my hand, then without even realizing it, I squeezed out some hand sanitizer. Some agents were disappointed that the London Book Fair has been cancelled due to concerns over the virus, but the host of the party had remained adamant about meeting her clients outside the fair. "Virus or no virus, I plan to keep enjoying life. People can't be caged," she said.

After March 11, when WHO declared the pandemic, doubt and resistance ceased. All my events in the UK were cancelled; SOAS, where I had been writing and carrying out research, closed. I fell sick and started to grow paranoid, just like my dad: Was it because I had been shaking hands with so many people? Is this a new world, in which we can no longer shake hands? (Unfortunately, the answer to my second paranoid question is yes.)

I was self-isolating and decided to leave London early. I contacted everyone I needed to: airlines, universities, SOS International. But two days before departure, my ticket was cancelled. International flights could no longer pass through Dubai. My editor stepped in to help me find a ticket. We rang each other until midnight,

looking for a way around the border closures: Hong Kong was already impassable, Singapore had just shut its doors, Bangkok was still allowing transit but I'd need a negative test certificate. To cut the story short, after multiple cancellation misadventures, I made it home to Sydney. I was quarantined, immobilized. My novel was also put into confinement.

* * *

A few weeks before the pandemic, several media outlets such as *The Guardian* had run reviews of *The Wandering*. After that, though, things quieted down. The whole world was grappling with sickness and a new way of life; with everyone cooped up at home, a novel about travel felt out of place.

Reviews and stories about *The Wandering* continued to appear here and there over the course of 2020, but an additional note always found its way in: "The novel describes a world before the pandemic," or "When we can't travel, this novel invites us to fantasize." In interviews, I had to provide context to explain why I was talking about travel in the era of the COVID-19. My just-published novel had suddenly passed its expiration date. When you're irrelevant, you have to work harder to explain yourself.

Now, more than a year after it was published, I realize that *The Wandering* is not a salve that offers fantasies of travel when we can't. During a pandemic, all the questions that underlie the novel, about who and what can move beyond a house's walls, continue to haunt.

Technology helps us connect even when we can no longer physically travel. In the last two years, I have spoken at literary festivals in Scotland, Germany and Hong Kong without leaving my desk. In a day, we can traverse space repeatedly: attending meetings, participating in discussions, watching online festivals. One friend told me that the pandemic had opened more networking opportunities for him. At the same time, he also complained that increasing busyness meant that the border separating home and work had become thinner, as now everything happened in the domestic sphere. Virtual travel causes post-flight hangovers even when we don't board a plane.

However, such opportunities and complaints are particular to the urban middle class. For refugees and asylum seekers, the pandemic and accompanying closing of borders are not just a matter of being unable to leave the house or growing busy at home; conditions in between are ever expanding. For a refugee, time resembles the blade of a knife. In his book *No Friend but the Mountains*, activist and former asylum seeker Behrouz Boochani writes, "Waiting is a mechanism of torture in the dungeon of time." Without clarity over their status, refugees become trapped in transit countries like Indonesia, and age as their children grow into adults. The pandemic renders every wasted moment more trenchant.

In *The Wandering*, two women without visas cross from the United States into Mexico, and the border wall makes them realize they can never return. Border walls don't block globalization; they prop it up. The system ensures that a group of cosmopolitan elites can move across boundaries freely, while filtering out the majority of the world's citizens so that they are unable to cross at will. Amidst a pandemic, such barriers are strengthened for health reasons.

During a pandemic borders also present themselves in the form of internet access; those in remote parts of the world are marginalized. I became more aware of this after helping to organize several recent events, including the Makassar International Writers Festival (MIWF) and the feminist gathering Etalase Pemikiran Perempuan. At MIWF and its satellite activities, writers living outside urban areas of Eastern Indonesia had to travel for more stable internet connections. Gody Usnaat, a Papuan poet, told of his efforts to keep writing amidst patchy access. When invited as a speaker for MIWF 2021, Gody addressed the audience via phone rather than Zoom because of technological obstacles.

* * *

Connections that persist during a pandemic are often generated by previously accumulated cultural and social capital. My invitations to speak as an author at virtual festivals originated in networks that developed during long-term travel. In my journeys, I can recall a number of encounters: with my translator in Jakarta and New York, with my literary agent when we were both attending festivals in Ubud and Penang, with my publisher in London. My privilege differs from that of fellow authors who did not have access to existing international literary connections, let alone those without internet access and limited libraries even for writing and doing research. The privilege of pre-pandemic global mobility determines who gets to take advantage of virtual travel in the COVID-19 era.

Moreover, questions of mobility/immobility do not stop when we ask "who?"; they also include asking "what?": what kinds of issues, ideas, and imaginations travel when human movement is restricted? What circulates, and what are the sorts of systems that make something visible and audible?

Last year, hopes for global social justice were rekindled by the Black Lives Matter movement. Everywhere, from Palestine to Papua, the global community has supported the battle against the link between capitalism and racism. In solidarity with the black community in the United States, local movements have used the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to connect. Their struggles are no less important, and so they have used the hashtags #PapuanLivesMatter, #DalitLivesMatter, and #AboriginalLivesMatter. However, behind all that, too many Jakartans use the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter without caring what happens in Papua, much like Australians unaware of the high prison death rate for Aboriginal peoples.

We may believe that every story deserves to be told, but the stories that reach us are very much determined by the geopolitical conditions in which they originate. While we learn a lot about the United States through traditional as well as social media, flows in the opposite direction are not always made possible. Therefore, every meeting and exchange in a global context, including during a pandemic, must consider unequal power relations. Whenever we talk about progressive “Inter-Asia” or “Trans-Asia” initiatives moving away from the West as a centre, we know that capital influences the transnational relations that emerge. When readers in Indonesia are more familiar with the works of Japanese and Korean writers than the other way around, the first step is to acknowledge gaps resulting from a structure that allows this to occur. Then, together, we can pursue various measures to demolish it.

* * *

The questions about movement and privilege in *The Wandering* remain relevant even though we now interpret travel in a different context. The pandemic has slowed down and even halted human movement, but other global flows—media, ideas, images, capital—continue. Who circulates and who is being circulated? Just when we think we're trapped and have no choice but to watch Netflix (another image of bourgeois frustration), something is constantly on the move out there, confirming (or compelling) imaginations about what is "normal." The hands that continue to move beyond this pandemic, space and time let us feel quietly at ease, because we can celebrate the Tokyo Olympics and welcome National Sports Week in Papua.

Sometimes, though, amidst the current limitations on movement, modest initiatives still insist on seeking connections beyond those offered by mainstream culture. In June 2021, the Makassar International Writers Festival (MIWF) tried to explore those connections. In addition to inviting MURATA Sayaka, who certainly has many fans in Indonesia, MIWF also provided a space for writers from the migrant labourer and refugee community to talk about their work and the power of survival. A month later, my friends and I held the Etalase Pemikiran Perempuan, a festival that celebrates feminist thought in the archipelago. There we designed a panel that brought together voices of anti-colonial struggle from Papua, from Australia and from Palestine.

The protagonist in my novel is a woman from the Third World who insists on continuing her journey even without personal infrastructure to support her, a passport, or the devil's magical shoes. Her story may end there, but the stubborn desire to go on and cross boundaries never really dies. The pandemic is a time of deeper thought, including reflections on the inequities that global travel has created and our part within them. At the same time, finding new connections

across borders and making small changes together is, to me, a hope worth nurturing.

Asian Literature Project "YOMU" ©Japan Foundation