The Emotional Geographies of Being Stranded Due to COVID-19: A Poetic Autoethnography of an International Doctoral Student

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan[1] 🆔

Abstract

This poetic critical autoethnography paper studies my own experiences of disrupted mobility as a Vietnamese doctoral student in New Zealand who was stuck in Vietnam. Through the lens of space and place, I investigate the issues of sense of belonging and sense of place that were reconfigured in different spaces. The article highlights my agency to reinforce and reconnect with my sense of belonging. As the article focuses on immobility, it challenges the mobility bias in international education scholarship, arguing that new forms of mobility can be produced out of immobility and that identity reconstruction can be enabled through respatialization.

Keywords

(im)mobility, international doctoral education, space, sense of belonging, COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 is a Global Event, "a disruptive transformation of the world and of ways of sensing and making sense of it" (Ingram, 2019, p. 11). It is "something that marks a break, shift or bifurcation in the way things are and the ways they work" (Ingram, 2019, p. 11). Since its advent in early 2020, the pandemic has attacked every corner of the world, stalling global flows in all aspects of life and shifting the dynamics of global interactions at an unprecedented speed and scale. International higher education is one among the sectors that have suffered the most in the turmoil. Characterized by mobility, international higher education has witnessed immobility among academics and students who cannot move to teach, to study, and to travel for educational purposes. There are thousands of students who are trapped by border closure policies. They cannot return to their home countries when the novel virus broke out or cannot fly to the destination countries to start or resume their studies. I am in the latter group.

As an international doctoral student sojourning to New Zealand, I am allowed to travel "freely" between New Zealand and Vietnam as long as my student visa allows. When I started my second year of my candidature in early 2020, the Coronavirus had appeared in Wuhan, China, and the news of the virus had spread to various parts of the world. As a neighboring country of the pandemic epicenter, Vietnam was alerted about the incredible infectious nature and fatality rate of the novel virus. But in New Zealand at the time, the virus was still across the ocean, especially when the New Zealand government issued travel bans enacted for passengers departing from China, including Chinese international students, to stem the rising tide of the infection. Many Chinese doctoral students in my institution who flew back to China to reunite with their families for the spring festival in January 2020 were denied entrance into New Zealand. Here and there in my conversations with my friends, we were wondering whether and when the virus would reach the country far down in the Southern hemisphere. We supposed it would not be long and we started to think of wearing masks in public places and on public transport although it might look weird at the time.

I returned to Vietnam in March 2020 to collect data for my doctoral project and planned to remain in my home country for 6 months until October 2020. I had never

[1]The University of Auckland, New Zealand

Corresponding Author:
Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan, The University of Auckland, 74 Epsom Avenue, Auckland 1023, New Zealand.
Email: anh.phan@auckland.ac.nz

thought that it was in fact a thin escape from an international travel ban, New Zealand national lockdowns and border closure, and the global peak and spread of COVID-19. One day after my arrival in Vietnam, there was the first outbreak in the country, with clusters emerging in Hanoi, the capital city where I live. The Vietnamese government for the first time implemented customs restrictions, medical and travel history declaration, and 14-day quarantine at managed facilities. In New Zealand, first Covid cases quickly turned into a full-scale national emergency. Less than 3 weeks after I left, New Zealand went into the very first lockdown with Auckland at the highest emergency level. The borders were shut and they are still kept shut until now when this article is written. I have been staying in my home country for 1½ years, which is about half of my doctoral study time. I am not sure when and whether my international education will resume, together with the physical mobility that used to be the main characteristic of my sojourn.

While extant literature has been focusing on international students who cannot fly home and cope with academic, social, and financial hardships due to the pandemic (Bilecen, 2020; Hari et al., 2021; Jenei et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020), few studies pay attention to the challenges posed to international students who are stuck at home and cannot fly back to the host country. This article is an attempt to address this research gap. Exploring my personal stories of and inward reflections on my (im)mobility during COVID-19 through the theoretical lens of space and place, I employed poetic autoethnography to illuminate how the new situation of immobility influenced my academic learning, sense of place, and sense of belonging. The article argues that the disrupted mobility has influenced me as an international student in a way that requires me to reconceptualize my (im)mobility, reinforce my weakened sense of place and sense of belonging, and embrace other forms of mobility. The immobility in that sense does not induce inactivity but conversely produces new mobilities through my agency enactment. As the coronavirus pandemic represents a unique situation that has only limited historical precursors in the contemporary world, this study hopes to be among the first to explore the issue of disrupted mobility of international education.

Literature Review

International student mobility has been a defining characteristic of international higher education for the past decades, bringing about significant personal, educational, economic, and societal benefits (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Sidhu et al. (2016) argue that circulations of students have "*deterritorialising* and *destabilising* affects" (p. 1497, emphasis in original). At the macro level, the number of 5.1 million international students in 2016 was worth over US$300 billion to the global economy (Choudaha, 2019). At the meso and micro levels, cross-border exchanges are linked to increased revenue for higher education institutions, enhanced intercultural understanding, positive international relations, and improved personal and career outcomes for graduates (Bracht et al., 2006; Münch & Hoch, 2013). In prior literature, it is found out that mobility contributes to the necessary intercultural and social awareness and understanding of international students (Demirkol, 2013; Stoeckel, 2016; Toth, 2012).

As those who physically cross "an international border with the objective of enrolling in education in a country other than their own" (Baas, 2019, p. 222), international students in general are described as possessing "a sense of unlimited global mobility" (Gomes, 2015, p. 10). This characterization associates them with the stereotypical images of frequent mobility and multiple attachments to place (Hari et al., 2021), representing transience and simultaneous mobility and emplacement (Collins, 2012). The mobility bias has been observed in migration and international education studies through the overconcentration of drivers of mobility and the prioritization of investigating the mobile group of people (Bissell, 2007; Schewel, 2019). Immobility is usually conceptualized as the opposition of mobility, or obstruction to mobility, which yields less significant social values than mobility (Roos Breines et al., 2019). While much work focuses on the relative dialectics of mobility and immobility, it is noteworthy that mobility and immobility are relational (Adey, 2006). Findings from previous research have portrayed the switch between mobilities and immobilities (Chan, 2017; Sheller, 2014), with "one preceding the other in different combinations" (p. 484). In the words of Zickgraf (2018), "immobility is inextricably, albeit often invisibly, linked to our understandings of human mobility" (p. 71). In other words, immobility represents the possibility for mobility because, according to Brenner (2004) and Kaufmann et al. (2004), immobility can generate new, innovative forms of mobility. In this worldwide health crisis caused by the novel coronavirus, it is important to acknowledge an ensuing (im)mobility crisis happening at a global scale, affecting millions of people, including international students. The COVID-19 pandemic foregrounds a shift in attention from mobility to immobility among every individual, including myself as an international doctoral student.

Theoretical Bearings: Space and Place

Space used to be conceived as empty and detached from people and their sociocultural processes (Kant, 1892, cited in Saju, 2014). Similarly, place was reduced to location, "at best descriptive, at worst, parochial" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 19). However, modern theories conceptualize space as social space and socially produced by human

beings. According to Massey (2005), space is theorized through three propositions. First, space is defined "as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions" (p. 9). Second, space is understood "as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity," embracing "difference and heterogeneity" (p. 10). And third, space is "always under construction," "never finished; never closed" (Massey, 2005, p. 9). In brief, space is perceived as dynamic, relational, and agentive, which shapes humans' ideas, beliefs, and identity (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996). Space is created by human beings through their bodily movements, actions, and interactions with other human beings in the society in ways that they "coexist, affect each other, fight" (Massey, 1998, p. 37). By that virtue, space has the characteristic of being relational, multiple, and open, which creates the potential for "new spaces, new identities, new relations and differences" (Massey, 1998, p. 38).

Massey (1998) states that place is dynamic and open. Similar to space, place is also endowed with human values, interactions, and relations. Grange (1985, p. 71, cited in May, 2013, p. 141) remarks that our being is mingled with place, so much that "place and human beings are enmeshed." In that sense, human attachment to place(s) is the root of their identity and sense of belonging. Space and place have such a close relationship that absolute distinction between the two concepts is impossible and unnecessary. As Tuan (2001) explains, "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with values" (p. 6). Through the lens of space and place, I attempt to capture my changing sense of place and sense of belonging through different spatial identifications and interactions resulting from the disrupted mobility of my sojourn to unpack the complexities that are particular to my doctoral learning.

Method

The methodology used in this article is critical autoethnography that is described as a process "to map an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life" (Behar, 1996, p. 174). This is a research method that is highly personalized since authors tell stories about their own lived experiences that are related to the culture (Richardson, 2000). Based on the personal stories of the researcher, the "I" in autoethnography can represent a wider community, telling cultural stories of a community because personal stories are "uniquely powerful" (Leavy, 2007, p. 4). Regardless of similarities or differences, personal stories "invite others to develop new understandings, awareness, and at times, empathy" (Leavy, 2007, p. 4). In that sense, the methodology seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences to

understand cultural phenomena (Anderson & Fourie, 2015). In this article, I engaged in critical autoethnography to explore and reflect my experiences as an international student whose mobility has been stalled by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a shift in my understanding of my own doctoral learning, sense of belonging, and mobility. Although the data come from me as an autoethnographer, it contains elements of reflection and thinking about the society that enables an understanding of the society through the unique lens of self (Chang, 2008).

In analysis and interpretation of my data, I adopted poetic inquiry as a way to both analyze and present my story. The data generated for this study were based on what has been recorded in my research journal since early 2019 when I started my PhD. It was written in various forms, including photographs, poems, paragraphs, and even bullet points, on various platforms such as the Notes application on my phone, a Google Doc, and a physical notebook. In this article, I selected and presented the data poems that were most relevant to the research aims of the study (Furman, 2007). According to McCulliss (2013), poetic inquiry can be used whether as a tool to view data in unique ways that can help yield new insights or as a way of representing findings to peers and the general public. I coded the data, including the poems, and classified them under emergent themes based on the literature on mobility and immobility and the theoretical framework of space and place, focusing on the three propositions of space. The following sections unwrap the results of my analysis in three themes on my disrupted mobility, weakening sense of space and belonging, and the new forms of mobility produced out of the state of immobility.

Findings and Discussion

Forced to Be In Situ: When COVID Hit Mobility

The pandemic has plunged many international students, myself included, into the state of being stranded in the home nation due to border closures. While studies on international education tend to feature accounts of individuals "traversing a somehow frictionless world" (Conradson & Latham, 2005, p. 228), the outbreak of COVID reminds us that "bodies still have to cross international frontiers" (Dunn, 2010, p. 5). At the same time, while COVID-19 knows no borders, it has forced us to, again, acknowledge that "borders continue to be a real force" (Dunn, 2010, p. 5).

It is not exacerbating to say that the COVID-19 is the defining event of my sojourn, meaning that it has turned my journey upside down by paralyzing my mobility. Right after New Zealand announced its plan to shut its borders and only allowed citizens to enter, my university issued a recalling student policy that required all students to be back to New Zealand. Those who could not make it, including

myself, would be required to suspend our studies temporarily. The abrupt change in my enrolment status put me in an anxious state for my candidature and my future mobility. Everything became unpredictable overnight. My doctoral venture that had been and should be characterized by border-crossing activities was forced to be stopped by borders. With the halted mobility, immobility became the characteristic of my international doctoral sojourn, which left me in disappointment before dragging me into an in-between, uncertain state of feelings.

After 2 months of study suspension, my enrollment resumed. My study continued with an indefinite date of return to New Zealand and I was forced to become in situ. I constantly talked to other PhD friends of mine in New Zealand to get updated about their lockdown situations, sharing our concerns and anxieties, and providing mutual support. I also reached out to other friends who were in a similar situation of being educationally displaced by the pandemic to make sense of the new situation and provide each other with encouragement. I realized that I would not be able to meet my friends in 6 months as I promised when we said goodbye before I flew back to Vietnam for my research trip:

See you in six months

1. Me: "Let's go take pictures,

Before I depart"

My friends: "But we will see you soon,

Just a few months apart."

2. Me: "You'll have finished your PhD by the time I come back"

My friends: "Yes, but you won't miss my mock viva"

Me: "No, I won't. I'll be there for you"

3. Me: "I'll miss you a lot"

My friend: "Me too. I'll be here and wait for you and your lovely kids. We'll live together"

Me: "Yes, we will."

Six months would be just like a blink of an eye

That's what we had thought, before my flight

And we longed for the day we would meet

Not knowing that it would be a long goodbye

I made promises with my friends

That we would live together, would laugh

That I would be there to see them pass

with flying colours in their vivas

I broke my promises, I missed the events

As the borders separated us

My flight was an one-way

And there is no date of coming back

The pandemic has frozen my feet

curbed my wings and sapped my energy

The pandemic has shut the doors

built the invisible wall and stopped me there

The pandemic has cut my journey short

left me hovering over, unable to land

The pandemic has become a shackle

that chained me and left me grounded

The pandemic has put me in a bubble

One that has been blown far away

Across the oceans

I was constantly asked whether I would return to New Zealand, when and how, whether any part of the program was done online, or whether my study had to be suspended due to my physical absence from campus. These questions shook my identity as a doctoral student and a sojourner to the core. It also became clear to me that while the new situation of immobility threatened my candidacy and academic learning, my mobility was considered threatening because traveling enabled the mobility of the virus. Anzaldua (1987) wrote, "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" (p. 25). If I crossed the borders of Vietnam, it was not safe for me. If I could reach the borders across the ocean in New Zealand, it was not safe for both me and them. I could contract the virus and become the virus carrier. Staying put was the safest choice.

While international students who stay in their host countries, for instance, the United States, during the pandemic might face the dire possibility of becoming homeless due to the directive to leave campus (Redden, 2020), international students in the situation like mine become *campus-less*. Like thousands of international students who had to bring work to home, I had to work from home too. But in my case, it was "home home," meaning my home in my home country. The domestic space became a de facto part of my academic space. My home becomes the materiality of my mobility as an international student (Brooks & Waters, 2018). Learning constrained within the domestic space in my home country turned my international education into a lonely academic experience because not much academic discussion occurred. In other words, my international academic space has been significantly diluted, both in the

degree of internationalization because I had to stay in Vietnam and in the degree of academic intensity because I mostly had academic dialogues with and within myself. The intercultural enrichment and research diversity that were part and parcel of my doctoral study became fragmented and took a more inward direction.

Feeling Detached: Weakening Sense of Place

There are values to being overseas for a period of time. International education is appealing because it is about one's social life in a new academic, linguistic, and cultural environment (Bilecen, 2020; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Collins et al., 2014). Doctoral student development, as argued by researchers such as Sanford (1962), Schlossberg (1981), Astin (1984), and Bronfenbrenner (1994), is not only about "what is being developed, but where and how development takes place" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 34). The development emerges out of the interacting forces of ideology and culture, social and organizational structure, time, and individual agency (Arnold et al., 2012). The immobility, however, weakened my sense of place in New Zealand. My interactions within the academic space in my host institution were almost none. Now intercultural became intracultural to me. Despite the availability of online resources from the university library to facilitate my study and the technological advancement and online platforms that enabled me to stay connected to my supervisors and other PhD fellows, there is a clear difference in the cultural capital that I would have been able to accrue if staying in New Zealand compared with studying "at home." For instance, when there were offline workshops and seminars hosted in my campus in New Zealand or when there were courses that students were allowed to audit, I wished I could have been able to be *there* for my study and academic development. Because of the physical distance, I was deprived of the opportunities, resources, and challenges that were found within and beyond my social spaces in New Zealand. The relations with my supervisors, my PhD fellow students, and others in the academic space were displaced. I had ambivalent feelings because as I learned to adapt to this displacement, I felt sorry for my academic emplacement that had just started to grow in New Zealand. When being separated from my circles of friends and the spaces in my campus, although I was still able to "meet" my supervisors virtually, and texted messages with my friends, the complexity of our interactions was greatly reduced, similar to the experiences of Wang and DeLaquil (2020) in their self-reflective essay on their doctoral learning.

The social spaces in immediate settings such as the campus, and the direct interaction with people and activities, including supervisors, other faculty members, and fellow doctoral students, are believed to contribute to the emerging

academic identity of doctoral students (Jazvac-Martek, 2008). Pittman and Richmond (2008) theorize that a sense of commitment to the institution, individual commitment to work in this setting, and a sense of one's abilities being recognized by others contribute to one's sense of university belonging. Besides, some of the most valuable learning that nurtures doctoral student identity occur outside the academic classroom, in daily interactions with faculty and peers. For me, it was lunch time breaks when my friends and I had lunch together as a group, having informal conversations on our thesis progress, our concerns with problems arising when we were in the field for data collection, and our feelings after every meeting with our supervisors. The vibes and the informal exchanges were social spaces that were important for my sense of belonging and identity as an international doctoral student.

Effective learning is situated because it is place-reliant by drawing on social relations built in those places (Collins et al., 2017). In Bissell's (2021) words, "mobility was what made our sense of place dynamic and exciting through its capacity to create relationships with other places" (p. 152). The physical connections, as emphasized in prior literature, form part of the process of building a connection to the study country and the host institution among international students (Arthur, 2017; Roberts et al., 2018). Ahn and Davis (2020) found that one of the four domains of students' sense of belonging is their attachment to the university surroundings. It is true in my case when I developed strong emotional engagement with the university and the physical campus to the extent that it felt like home to me. On-campus spaces such as my supervisors' offices, the libraries, the common kitchen, the shared spaces, the cafeteria, and even the grass and magnolia trees were viewed as vital spaces for developing my sense of belonging to the university space. However, when I was stuck in Vietnam, my used-to-be taken-for-granted spaces and places of belonging in my campus in New Zealand were now displaced.

I constantly felt as if I was both here and there, which was because I was uncertain about the possibility of returning to New Zealand. I was too much of Vietnam for New Zealand and too little of New Zealand for New Zealand. But I could not completely focus on life in Vietnam because I was committed to my study in New Zealand and longed for a return to complete my study and to reconnect with my sojourn, regardless of how little time will be left. My sojourn should end where it started and I needed a proper closure of my international academic pursuit. I had the exact feeling that is described in Bissell's (2021) study:

> when we are not sure what is going on, when we cannot plan for the future, things feel a bit up in the air. Sometimes it can be difficult to know how, exactly, to feel about something, which itself can feel disorienting. (p. 156)

The disorientation led to a feeling of being in a liminal space:

In a liminal space
Will the *me* be swept away
Like dust in the wind?

When I return, my friends will no longer be there
The office will not be the same
As I won't hear their keyboards clicking
As I won't see their name tags
And I won't find our cards
And we will no longer laugh
In the kitchen, every lunch time

When I return, the acculturation process has to be restarted
And I have to re-learn to drive on the left
And again I face the fear of driving in a foreign country
Because just when I started to get used to it
I left
My skills eroded, as much as my confidence
after over a year living offshore

When I return, I both resume and start anew
It's both coming *back*, and coming *to*
It's both to reconnect, and renew the connection
What's lying ahead, I'm not sure

My sense of place in New Zealand, as analyzed above, got fragmented. I felt as if I was losing my visibility, my academic and personal footprint in my campus, my doctoral office, and the whole academic space in my institution. The pandemic and the immobility took me outside my academic milieu and the social spaces I was a part of:

The fear of no ending
I started my journey with a thought on space
My sojourn began with a flight
My study was a move forward
Now I know I am left behind

I fear that my journey will just stop
It's not a pause, it's a full stop
When we can't fly, when borders are shut
My wings are kept from flapping

I worry there will be no end
For my half-full venture
For my unfinished pursuit
For my not-yet-explored places

I worry I can't say goodbye
To my home and my campus
To the people whom I love
To those I just got to know

I just owe my host country a kiss
For giving me a place to sow
love, hope and a soul
as poetic as white snow.

As if
As if my wings were hurt
As if oceans were farther apart
As if clouds were travelling fast

As if we never took apart
As if we were far from that

As if we were close to here
As if we could avoid tears

As if we could really fly
As if time would never pass by

As if we looked at the sky
As if we could always reach high

As if it would never last
As if the journey wouldn't go fast.

A global event like COVID-19 is "a forceful embodied occurrence, in that it challenges established ways of being and feeling in the world" (Ingram, 2019, p. 11). The analysis of my sense of place and belonging sheds light on one form of precarity to international students that has emerged during the pandemic: the fear of stuckness in the home country that might lead to an extended immersion in a liminal life situation. While previously, international students often fear of being sent back home due to, for instance, visa issues or other serious offenses they might commit in the host country, now in the wake of COVID-19, being at the home country without being able to fly to the host country is also a precarious situation.

What connected me most to my study in New Zealand and sustained my sense of belonging to the academic space there was my research project and the meetings with my supervisors. They have become the net that saves my sense of belonging from being swept away. The interactions I had with my supervisors and the thesis writing process to an extent prevented me from an identity crisis, which means that I still could identify myself as a doctoral student. The part that was greatly reduced was the "international" element. As my identification as an international doctoral student was formed by my spatial mobility across the borders and bounded within the space of my campus and institution in New Zealand, now it was reinvented within the space of my home in my home country. The transformation of the international agenda for my education into the domestic space and setting produced new spatial configurations in my doctoral study: internationalization *at* home and *from* home.

New Forms of Mobility Produced Out of Immobility

While mobility was what I desired at the beginning of my doctoral study, immobility was now the present, and however undesirable it was, I still had to embrace it in ways that it would least affect my learning and my identity. I had to negotiate among various forms of connections and relations that were in play to maintain and renew my mobility. That said, the stuckness at home turned my mobility into immobility which was then reinvented by me into mobilities in multiple directions and forms. This section illuminates how I enacted my "personal autonomy and agency" (Clegg, 2008, p. 343) to create new forms of mobility to counter the immobility in two ways. First, I mobilized resources to get connected to the local network and engaged with the academic space in Vietnam. Second, like many other students, I learned to be mobile, less physically and more digitally.

As I stayed in Vietnam longer than I had planned, I felt a need to reconnect with my existing network here. Massey (1991) suggests that "individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to the flows and interconnections" of spatial relations, which can strengthen or weaken their control over these relations in terms of "mobility and access" (pp. 25–26). As I had easier access to the Vietnamese community and were mobile within Vietnam, I was engaged with local events that were beneficial for my doctoral project. I talked to students, teachers, my friends, and former colleagues whose experiences of coping with the pandemic offered me better understanding of my own situation and inspired me to explore diverse research areas. While my doctoral education has involved a particular direction of physical mobility that is associated with English-medium instruction, education in "the West," and the circulation of

knowledge production in Western countries, the immobility reminded me of my roots and helped me to reground in preparation for my postdoctoral career if I wanted to return to my home country. In a way, the reverse mobility both forced and allowed me to experience a mode of internationalization of education characterized by commitments to and engagement with both my host institution and my home country. Such engagement generates a sense of dual homes, a sense of dual belonging, and the feeling of in-betweenness resulting from uncertainties about my future mobility, whether it is a continuation of my study or a start of a new journey, and where.

Furthermore, in a bordered world with numerous constraints on movement as what we are witnessing, I had to resort to traverse the borderless world: the Internet. I had to both create and find space to articulate my personal sense of belonging in academia. Massey (1998) claims that space is multiple and open, which creates the potential for "new spaces, new identities, new relations and differences" (p. 38). I learned new ways of working and interacting with others, and "let go of ideas of how things ought to be and of how I ought to be" (Bolumole, 2020, p. 1358). The reconfigurations introduced by and through digital infrastructures had impacts on the embodied and experiential dimensions of my doctoral learning, thus my identity. The move of events such as lectures, workshops, and webinars to online platforms was helpful in creating new places of togetherness and facilitating new opportunities for learning. Digital streaming platforms allowed me to reach further to various corners of the world for academic enrichment, without worrying about physical travel and the ensuing complications such as visa applications, flight tickets, and other financial concerns that as a doctoral student I would otherwise find it hard to arrange and afford. By virtue of online learning and open access to digital platforms, I started to cultivate a new sense of place online and a sense of belonging to a wider academic community. Pandemic-driven remote learning facilitated a new way of mobility for me, strengthened it and required me to make use of it: the digital mobility.

Digital technologies, although they could not completely reenergize my sense of belonging and sense of place, became important avenues for my learning and academic identity development. I developed my "own ways of practising and a personal sphere of meaning" (Clegg, 2008, p. 343) when the interrupted mobility occurred. The digital mobility and extended sense of belonging to a wider academic network generated in the digital space changed the way I developed interactions with various relations, including my supervisors, my PhD friends, and engagement with different communities. As these relations operated in "differential spatial configurations" (Murdoch, 2006, p. 86), they required me to develop particular ways of thinking and practicing (Clegg, 2008) so as not to be far away from *there* in New Zealand while engaging with *here* in Vietnam and

elsewhere. As a result, a new form of identity—the emerging identity of an independent academic—was produced in the process of myself navigating these multiple spaces. In this sense, the disrupted mobility of my international education and new forms of mobility resulting from this immobility foregrounds the formation of an academic identity and the reinvention of a doctoral student identity. This process illustrates, on one hand, how immobility does not mean inactivity and obstruction, and on the other hand, how my agency enactment to preserve the sense of belonging and how the reconfiguration of the interactions with places can create conditions for a new identity construction.

Concluding Notes

My emotional geographies experienced fluctuations as a result of the interrupted mobility. It started with a relief that I somehow managed to fly home right before the first outbreak in New Zealand that led to the state border closure. Working from "home" has turned from a privilege to a curse, and then came an anxiety of living in a liminal space. I experienced fluctuations in my international doctoral student identity and loosening connection and belonging to the academic space in New Zealand. Despite the amplified role of technology in my own learning against the pandemic context, the sense of place in international education is still irreplaceable in my doctoral study as it has been embodied through my social and academic interactions in the foreign cultural, linguistic, and social environment.

COVID-19 is a macrosystem disaster and time-specific event within our era. This current pandemic is still evolving, and at the current time when this article is written, borders are still shut and I am still stuck in Vietnam. As everything is constantly changing and unpredictable, "the one certainty among all the uncertainties is that it will not be a *return to normal*, but rather that it will be a *new normal*, which will be quite different from anything that we have known before" (Neuwirth et al., 2020, p. 3, emphasis in original). A "new normal" is in the offing and awaits international students like myself to embrace it in ways that uphold the values of intercultural capital and international academic exchange while adjusting to the new normal of less reliance on face-to-face communication. Mittelmeier et al. (2021) suggest that opportunities of online learning platforms will allow students to actively choose immobility over mobility. However, my experiences tell us that physical mobility continues to be the hallmark of immersive cross-cultural learning, the development sense of place and sense of belonging, and the source of identity construction.

My poetic autoethnographic article has urged us to understand international students' mobility in a new and more nuanced way. We should acknowledge the complexities of students' experiences in mobility and how such complexities become meaningful to students' lives. The COVID-19 pandemic not only raises concerns about mental and physical health, and societal impacts on international students, but also may have brought with it a potential to scar one's mobility, hurt one's sense of place, deprive one's sense of space, and weaken one's sense of belonging as in my case. I concur with Bissell (2021) that "much more open questions include what the virus is doing to our sense of place, to our sense of who we are, and our understanding of togetherness" (p. 156). As such, we now look anew at students' experiences, their evolving sense of belonging, and their complex relationship with space and place. The article highlights the respatialization of my international doctoral education experiences. Through my poetic critical autoethnography, I wish to reiterate the vulnerabilities inherent in (im)mobility, which is underrepresented in studies of international student mobility.

ORCID iD

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan iD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9979-1321

References

Adey, P. (2006). If mobility is everything then it is nothing: Towards a relational politics of (im)mobilities. *Mobilities*, *1*(1), 75–94. http://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489080

Ahn, M. Y., & Davis, H. (2020). Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university. *Studies in Higher Education*, *45*(3), 622–634. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902

Altbach, P., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *114*(3), 290–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303542

Anderson, T., & Fourie, I. (2015). Collaborative autoethnography as a way of seeing the experience of care giving as an information practice. *Information Research*, *20*(1). http://www.openaccessreader.com/LIS/uncategorized/collaborative-autoethnography-as-a-way-of-seeing-the-experience-of-care-giving-as-an-information-practice-2/

Anzaldua, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.

Arnold, K. D., Lu, E. C., & Armstrong, K. J. (2012). Special issue: The ecology of college readiness. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, *38*(5), 1–138. https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.20005

Arthur, N. (2017). Supporting international students through strengthening their social resources. *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(5), 887–894.

Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, *25*(4), 297–308. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ309521

Baas, M. (2019). The education-migration industry: International students, migration policy and the question of skills. *International Migration*, *57*(3), 222–234.

Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Beacon Press.

Bilecen, B. (2020). Commentary: COVID-19 pandemic and higher education—International mobility and students' social protection. *International Migration*, *58*(4), 263–266. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12749

Bissell, D. (2007). Animating suspension: Waiting for mobilities. *Mobilities*, *2*(2), 277–298.

Bissell, D. (2021). A changing sense of place: Geography and COVID-19. *Geographical Research*, *59*(2), 150–159.

Bolumole, M. (2020). Student life in the age of COVID-19. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *39*(7), 1357–1361. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1825345

Bracht, O., Engel, C., Janson, K., Over, A., Schomburg, H., & Teichler, U. (2006). *The professional value of ERASMUS mobility*. International Centre for Higher Education Research (INCHER-Kassel) University of Kassel.

Brenner, N. (2004). *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Oxford University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In T. Husen & T. N. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 1643–1647). Pergamon Press/Elsevier Science.

Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2011). *Student mobilities, migration and the internationalization of higher education*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2018). Signalling the "multi-local" university? The place of the city in the growth of London-based satellite campuses, and the implications for social stratification. *Social Sciences*, *7*(10), Article 195. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100195

Chan, C. (2017). In between leaving and being left behind: Mediating the mobilities and immobilities of Indonesian non-migrants. *Global Networks*, *17*(4), 554–573. http://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12161

Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Left Coast Press.

Choudaha, R. (2019). *Beyond $300 billion: The global impact of international students: Value of recruiting and retaining international students goes beyond financial impact*. https://studyportals.com/intelligence/global-impact-of-international-students/

Clegg, S. (2008). Academic identities under threat? *British Educational Research Journal*, *34*(3), 329–345.

Collins, F. (2012). Researching mobility and emplacement: Examining transience and transnationality in international student lives. *Area*, *44*(3), 296–304. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2012.01112.x

Collins, F., Ho, K. C., Ishikawa, M., & Ma, A.-H. S. (2017). International student mobility and after-study lives: The portability and prospects of overseas education in Asia. *Population, Space and Place*, *23*, Article e2029. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2029

Collins, F., Sidhu, R., Lewis, N., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2014). Mobility and desire: International students and Asian regionalism in aspirational Singapore. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *35*(5), 661–676. http://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.921996

Conradson, D., & Latham, A. (2005). Transnational urbanism: Attending to everyday practices and mobilities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *31*, 227–233.

Cresswell, T. (2004). *Place: A short introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.

Demirkol, A. (2013). The role of educational mobility programs in cultural integration: A study on the attitudes of Erasmus students in Turkey towards the accession of Turkey to European Union. *Anthropologist*, *16*(3), 653–661.

Dunn, K. (2010). Embodied transnationalism: Bodies in transnational spaces. *Population, Space and Place*, *16*, 1–9.

Furman, R. (2007). Poetry and narrative as qualitative data: Explorations into existential theory. *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, *71*(1), 1–9.

Gomes, C. (2015). Footloose transients: International students in Australia and their aspirations for transnational mobility after graduation. *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, *6*(1), 41–57. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.6.1.41_1

Hari, A., Nardon, L., & Zhang, H. (2021). A transnational lens into international student experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12332

Ingram, A. (2019). *Geopolitics and the event: Rethinking Britain's Iraq war through art*. John Wiley & Sons.

Jazvac-Martek, M. (2008). *Emerging academic identities: How Education PhD students experience the Doctorate* [Doctoral dissertation]. McGill University.

Jenei, K., Cassidy-Matthews, C., Virk, P., Lulie, B., & Closson, K. (2020). Challenges and opportunities for graduate students in public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, *111*(3), 408–409. https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-020-00349-8

Kaufmann, V., Bergman, M. M., & Joye, D. (2004). Mobility: Mobility as capital. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *28*(4), 745–757.

Leavy, P. (2007). Introduction to privilege through the looking-glass. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *Privilege through the looking-glass* (pp. 1–6). Sense Publishers.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell.

Massey, D. (1991). A global sense of place. *Marxism Today*, *6*, 24–29.

Massey, D. (1998). Space-time and the politics of location. *Architectural Design*, 68, 34–38.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. SAGE.

May, V. (2013). *Connecting self to society: Belonging in a changing world*. Palgrave MacMillan.

McCulliss, D. (2013). Poetic inquiry and multidisciplinary qualitative research. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, *26*(2), 83–114.

Mittelmeier, J., Rienties, B., Gunter, A., & Raghuram, P. (2021). Conceptualizing internationalization at a distance: A "third category" of university internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *25*(3), 266–282. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315320906176

Münch, C., & Hoch, M. (2013). *The financial impact of cross-border student mobility on the economy of the host country*. Prognos.

Murdoch, J. (2006). *Post-structuralist geography: A guide to relational space*. SAGE.

Neuwirth, L. S., Jovic, S., & Mukherji, B. R. (2020). Reimagining higher education during and post-COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971420947738

Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido-DiBrito, F., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass & Pfeiffer.

Pittman, L. D., & Richmond, A. (2008). University belonging, friendship quality, and psychological adjustment during the transition to college. *Journal of Experimental Education*, *76*(4), 343–361. https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.76.4.343-362

Redden, E. (2020, March 12). Go home? For some students it's not easy. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/03/12/colleges-confronting-coronavirus-tell-students-move-out-many-urge-attention-needs

Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923–948). SAGE.

Roberts, P. A., Dunworth, K., & Boldy, D. (2018). Towards a reframing of student support: A case study approach. *Higher Education*, *75*, 19–33.

Roos Breines, M., Raghuram, P., & Gunter, A. (2019). Infrastructures of immobility: Enabling international distance education students in Africa to not move. *Mobilities*, *14*(4), 484–499.

Saju, Y. (2014). *Spatiality of social life: A model of spatial complexes* [Doctoral dissertation]. Mahatma Gandhi University.

Sanford, N. (1962). The developmental status of the entering freshman. In N. Sanford (Ed.), *The American college* (pp. 253–282). John Wiley & Sons.

Schewel, K. (2019). Understanding immobility: Moving beyond the mobility bias in migration studies. *International Migration Review*, *54*(2), 328–355. http://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319831952

Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *9*(2), 2–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/001100008100900202

Sheller, M. (2014). The new mobilities paradigm for a live sociology. *Current Sociology*, *62*, 6789–6811. http://doi.org/10.1177/0011392114533211

Sidhu, R., Collins, F., Lewis, N., & Yeoh, B. (2016). Governmental assemblages of internationalising universities: Mediating circulations and containment in East Asia. *Environment and Planning*, *48*(8), 1493–1513.

Soja, E. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Oxford Blackwell.

Stoeckel, F. (2016). Contact and community: The role of social interactions for a political identity. *Political Psychology*, *37*(3), 431–442.

Toth, A. (2012). *Unity in diversity: And in Erasmus? Nouvelle-Europe*. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2015-3-SE02-KA105-001304

Tuan, Y.-F. (2001). *Space and place: The perspective of experience* (8th ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

Wang, L., & DeLaquil, T. (2020). The isolation of doctoral education in the times of COVID-19: Recommendations for building relationships within person- environment theory. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *39*(7), 1346–1350. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1823326

Zhai, Y., & Du, X. (2020). Mental health care for international Chinese students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. *Correspondence*, *7*(4), Article e22. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30089-4

Zickgraf, C. (2018). Immobility. In R. McLeman & F. Gemenne (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of environmental displacement and migration* (pp. 71–84). Routledge.

Author Biography

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan is currently a PhD student at The University of Auckland, New Zealand. Her research interests include transnationalism, migration, diaspora, sense of belonging, home, identity and doctoral education.