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‘ANOTHER APPALACHIA: COMING UP QUEER AND INDIAN IN A MOUNTAIN PLACE’

By Neema Avashia

West Virginia University Press (\$19.99)

In the first essay in “Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place,” author Neema Avashia describes a present-day drive through her hometown of Cross Lanes, West Virginia. A suburb of Charleston, Cross Lanes grew after World War II as a home for managers and executives in Kanawha Valley’s chemical manufacturing industry.

The town’s fortunes have declined with the chemical industry, and throughout the chapter Ms. Avashia notices evidence of economic depression, like weedy ballfields and boarded-up houses. But she also recalls the feelings of warmth and community she experienced as a child: “Pass the double hill between the Carney’s and Mundays’ houses, where

you whiled away hours of childhood. [...] Pass the streetlight that marked home base during games of Spotlight every night of every summer between six and sixteen. [...] Pass the two basketball hoops, diagonally placed, where you would play for hours.” In these pages and throughout the book, Ms. Avashia’s Appalachia is many things at once.

Ms. Avashia’s father immigrated to West Virginia from India in 1973 to work as a plant physician for Union Carbide, and she grew up there until she left to attend Carnegie Mellon University in the late 1990’s. As a racial minority in nearly all-white West Virginia, she suffered harassment and abuse as a child, and she recalls these experiences in her book. But she also recalls the unconditional support and love she felt in her immediate neighborhood, and the unlikely bonds her father created with his white co-workers.

She experienced a similarly divided response when she came out as gay. In an early essay, Ms. Avashia remembers how her mother’s Indian friends supported her and welcomed her partner into their lives. But she also includes painful memories of her partner waiting for hours in Tim Hortons while she visits with old friends who might object to her sexuality.

Ms. Avashia responds to these complicated memories by asking questions. When she reflects on growing up in a patriarchal household, she wonders “What level of accomplishment would a woman need to ascend to in order for her success to outweigh her gender?” Recalling an early struggle to feel comfortable in her body: “If neither the beauty standards of my classmates nor those of my mother and her beloved Bollywood stars felt like the right ones, then what models existed in the world for me?” On being accepted in her all-white neighborhood: “Is minority presence in a community only acceptable when we make up less than 1 percent of the population?”

These are real questions for Ms. Avashia, and they demonstrate the most fundamental difference between her book and, say, J.D. Vance’s “Hillbilly Elegy.” “Hillbilly Elegy’s” questions reduce people to problems and assume that the right answers will fix them (or at least get more of them into Yale). “Another Appalachia’s” questions are part of its practice of building community. It’s no surprise that Ms. Avashia’s statement of what Cross Lanes taught her about how to be a good neighbor also works so well as a guide for how to be an ally to people from historically marginalized

communities: “Be present. Listen well. Share your bounties. Look for ways to help.”

This definition comes in the essay “Neighbors,” which ends by stating the book’s deepest wish: that the love and connection Ms. Avashia felt in Cross Lanes might be felt more broadly. Ms. Avashia writes that she recognized this feeling of community during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, when millions of people suddenly realized that “we can care for each other when the moment demands it of us.”

This was a bracing realization for many of us, so if it’s depressing to see this moment fading into history, maybe it’s worth noting that this goal of community-building also inspires Ms. Avashia’s ongoing, tireless work as a public-school teacher in Boston (some of which is visible in essays and articles on her website), and that she doesn’t need a pandemic as motivation.

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