It is difficult to say when I "came" to the United States, since I had made a few short visits before arriving for graduate school. Prior to this last long sojourn as an "exchange visitor," I had visited briefly—once to board the SS Universe in Seattle for a fall semester at sea, another time to take a boat to the edge of San Francisco Bay and throw the ashes of my cousin into the Pacific. During that first voyage, around the world on a Hong Kong ship filled with U.S. university students and professors (and manned by a Taiwanese crew), my country "became" myself and the only other Filipina on board. For those who didn't know either of us, my country was simply another stop on the world course of this floating university, another week in the core course on global politics required of all the students; and, for me, another cultural presentation in which I was enjoined to participate. Unlike the other student-tourists, I was also a native informant.

During this trip I was struck by the evidence abounding of American wealth—the copious amounts of food both prepared and wasted, the number and kinds of personal possessions brought on board, and the students' nonchalant
spending power, which afforded them great mobility in the countries we visited. My friends, who were mainly foreign students like myself, on scholarship or traveling as work-study students, were all in the same berth as mine and, like me, stayed close to the harbor towns where we docked. Upon our arrival in Egypt, we were among the few who did not or could not fly on to Israel. The world seemed to be at the disposal of the American students, and I remember feeling a great sense of deprivation, not least of deprivation of experience. I was seventeen and these other people of about the same age had the means to experience so much more than I did.

It is obviously one thing to live in the United States and quite another to sail around the world with 600 Americans. But the latter gave me a sense, albeit limited, of who Americans were thought to be or who they thought themselves to be in relation to what looked—from the decks of this floating American university—like the rest of the world. When we were about to leave Egypt, I was struck by how many White women came back to the ship with tales of the magical appeal of their Whiteness and, as we went on to Greece and Spain, by their stories about the men who wanted to marry them and follow them to America. I could not recall hearing of any such experiences when we were in Asia. But I was aware that traveling with Americans gave my own features and behavior different meanings. Sometimes I was subsumed, treated like an American; sometimes I was chastised for behaving like one. “American” was a powerful signifier that warped the meaning of anyone in its proximity.

It was some years later that I came to the United States to mourn the death of my nineteen-year-old cousin. He and his girlfriend were killed in a car crash which involved only them and the long stretch of highway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. My uncle, who had fought for a Filipino census category, discovered that his dead son had been certified White. With deepened grief and anger, he had to go and insist that even in death his son was still Filipino. I did not see my cousin’s body and therefore could not see how this mistake had been made because, unlike anyone else in the family who had died, he was cremated. Instead, I saw the remains of a life I hardly knew, since it had been a life lived here. And somehow my cousin’s ashes, thrown into the Pacific, only widened the gap between the life deeply related by blood and childhood to mine on the other side of that ocean and the life profoundly connected by love and dreams and friendship to the lives of others on this side of the same ocean.
My cousin was an American; I am not. I grew up in San Fernando, La Union, 270 kilometers north of Manila. My cousin and his brother and sister often came to visit me and my siblings, as well as my other cousins and our grandparents. Although they were cousins, they were also Americans—a difference that was, more often than not, at issue when we did not get along. Even as children we knew this difference. To our cousins, my siblings and I were part of this other country, which was both familiar and weird. To us, they were part of that world we mainly knew through books and movies, and from living there briefly a long time ago when our parents were in school. It was a world in which my parents had chosen not to remain because they were nationalists and believed (especially my father) that they had a duty to serve our nation and (for my mother, especially) our people. My mother’s father, too, had returned from the United States after his training in the 1920s to serve the people as a doctor. And my father’s father was executed by the Japanese during World War II because he was suspected of serving the people in opposition to the occupation government. Both my grandmothers were still alive, but they were also viewed as having lived lives dedicated to the people. In all these family stories, serving the people included not serving or living in another country. With Japan long since defeated, “another country” could only mean the United States, for the presence of this power was still felt in every aspect of Philippine life.

My childhood awareness of America, and of an implicit antagonism between that country and the one I considered my own, was shaped not only by my parents’ deeply felt sentiments and their stories of who we came from, but also by the continuing resonance of the anti-imperialist nationalisms which martial law was intended to silence. I was aware of this resonance among my teachers who belonged to the radical generation before mine. In college, that awareness crystallized into an anti-Americanism which was far more than ambivalent; it was blatantly inconsistent and contradictory, for my life, my history, and even my future had already been marked by things and forces that were identifiably American. Yet to me it did not seem contradictory at all—“American” was a negative signifier that referenced the U.S. government, multinational corporations, and ways of living that were life-taking, that is, built on the bodies and resources of others.

When I came to the United States as a graduate student, I was besieged by the assumption of friends and relatives that I would soon want to be
or in any case become "American." It made me so angry to be equated with the Filipinos who lined up at the U.S. embassy to appeal for permanent residence in what my sister still sarcastically refers to as "the land of milk and honey." Those people seemed like colonial sheep before the U.S. consuls with their bwana airs. And yet, I too, like any emigrating Filipino, wanted to avail myself of the material (and immaterial) wealth that it was America's privilege to dispense. But I had imagined some difference between me and them, a political difference that could not but make my coming to the United States an act of betrayal.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that during my first year at the University of Minnesota almost all my friends, not just my Philippine friends who had also come to the United States as graduate students, were foreigners. I understood myself to be a outsider, and surrounding myself with people who perceived themselves in the same way enabled me to harbor my alienation. In the years that followed, after I began a new program at Duke University, the foreignness that I took to be the reason for the small differences I experienced in everyday interactions became acute. Identity politics and multiculturalism intensified my sense of national alienation, since those movements—at least as they played out in the academic context where I found myself—threatened to "assimilate" my differences as traits of a minoritized or marginalized identity. I experienced and held on to my foreignness most when I was too easily understood as representing some position that I was not prepared to take or when I was expected to show solidarity with others in a casual subsumption of the differences and history I felt were mine. The feeling I got from this experience of "politics" was that unless your "difference" was already in the United States, it could have no bearing on U.S. struggles.

I realized that it was the gradual disappearance of any sense of an outside that prevented the recognition of my foreignness. Foreignness is not, of course, the only way of perceiving one's difference. How did I know that it wasn't just me in the sense that other differences were just other people—singularities that are themselves always foreign to any community? I didn't. But in some ways the foreignness that I took upon myself was compelled by the unquestioned way in which the U.S. context set the terms and scene for any comprehension of politics. Perhaps in the long run the real issue was not the actual positions people took, but rather the righteousness with which those positions were assumed—a righteousness that seemed to
stem from the privilege of their presumed universe. It was a righteousness that my own indignation and resentment did nothing to soften, however.

I have many regrets about this time. I fell out of favor and friendship with people whom I would have liked to know better and with whom I could have cast my lot. My subjective experience of the proximity between assumptions of a U.S. context and an insidious Americanism short-circuited a more sympathetic understanding of the continuities between the forms of resistance against domination I encountered here and those against what were often the same kinds of domination in my own country. This was a difficult time for me because I did not experience a sense of abiding community with those around me. Graduate school itself only intensified my feelings of transience, and, when friends began to scatter, it seemed time to go home.

I write all this in amazement at the ease with which my life and consciousness seem to unfold and develop. This "moment" when I felt it was time to go home was a very long time—a time of inexpressible anger and antagonism, but also one of much happiness and love. At the height of being antagonistically non-American, I fell in love and life with an American. So in this long and turbulent moment when it seemed time to go home, it also seemed that I was home. Then the struggle to decide where to live and work began, a struggle that has not yet been fully or finally resolved. When I did decide to go home, I also decided to come back.

It turned out to be easier to go home to the Philippines than to return to the United States, however. Ten years earlier, I had accepted a Fulbright scholarship on the condition that I would return to my home country for two years after finishing graduate school. Actually, the condition was that I live and work outside the United States for two years. In some ways, this condition, enforced by both the U.S. and the Philippine government by means of my passport, formalized the contradictions of my subjective experience. All those years my passport had been the instrument and symbol of my national difference, invariably producing the same familiar anxiety as I waited in line to present it to U.S. Immigration officials and always reinforcing my estrangement.

So I finally returned to the Philippines after having come back for longer and longer periods every year. All the years of living in the United States had altered my perspective on my own country and its social relations so as to enable me to recognize more similarities in and more direct connections
between the struggles in the United States and those in the Philippines. My U.S. years also gave me another place from which to more fully experience other, abiding differences with my presumed national community that were integral to my life. Some of them I might describe as differences of gender, class, and religion, others I can only vaguely characterize as differences of personal history and social landscape; but all of them were probably overshadowed by my vision of a national community to which I could belong. I had experienced the euphoria of a communitarian potential that dissolved my subjective alienation in the 1986 people’s revolt against the Marcos regime. This uprising was not unlike that psychical event which triggers the memory of a trauma experienced for the first time, except that here it released a future possibility that was already and forever known. Although this future was quickly usurped, that vision, experience, and memory of communitarian potential remains with me—and remains powerful for me—even if less closely attached now to a national form.

Other events have shaped my imagination of who I am and might become, what I am and of what I might become a part. If I had been asked what it means to perceive oneself as a woman or what it means to perceive oneself as an Asian woman, instead of what it means to perceive oneself as an American, this narrative would likely have been very different. I might have mentioned, for example, the many times that I was assumed to be, in one way or another, for sale. But even if I had written in response to this variation on the question, I might still have arrived at the following point.

When the two years of my residency requirement were up, and after spending almost as long filling out forms, waiting in lines, making phone calls and inquiries, and being subjected to all sorts of examinations, I was issued an immigrant visa to the United States. During this long process, I was often in the company of those very people on whom I had once looked with contempt or from whom I had remained aloof. We had come to share a common lot, however, not for any one, clear reason, but rather for a host of reasons and non-reasons that made us all different from one another, yet members of the same. I came to feel an affinity with these people who waited, talked, and laughed with me, and a respect for them that was founded less on this affinity than on a sense of alienation which persisted in spite of it—an alienation indicative of more than the systems of stratification that shaped and ultimately divided our individuated identities.

I recall experiencing these feelings of affinity and respect very strongly
during the medical exam, which took place in a series of stations on one floor of an office building in Manila. At the station for the physical exam, I waited with other women, young and old, each of us going in turn to be seen alone by the female doctor. Everyone came back out with a different demeanor and a different bodily attitude (some still putting on their shoes or fixing their hair), a different comment or a different silence. One old woman made us all laugh heartily with her anecdote of embarrassment and amusement at having to take off all her clothes. When my turn came, I was told that I had lumps in both breasts, a shock I could not share with the others waiting outside. I went to the X-ray station, where I was called into a room with other, mainly young women, a few of whom I overheard talking about their American fiancés. With the ubiquity of Filipina sex workers and mail-order brides, Filipinas who marry Americans are subjected to the most racist and sexist forms of regard. I know this from having experienced both ends of that regard. In this room where we waited to be X-rayed, I could feel this regard hovering over us as well as passing through our eyes, but I could also feel the failure of those objectifying gazes to encompass and register the infinite particularities of our lives. Maybe it was my sense of this failure which drew me to these women. I wanted to get to know them and wanted them to know me, too, not because I thought we were the same but because we seemed so different, even as we shared a common lot.

Objectively sharing a common lot is a far cry from subjectively being part of a community, yet here it was a condition of communitarian possibility. I was told that I had to hand-carry my chest X ray through U.S. Immigration. Noticing, for the first time, all the Filipinos coming off those trans-Pacific flights who openly carried their X rays in large, brown "Manila" envelopes, I could not help reflecting on both our common lot and our divergent histories and destinies. It is this contradictory feeling which now moves me toward people here in, as well as outside of, America. Every time I see people with whom I am identified by race or gender or both, I ask, Who are we, who are so different yet treated as the same? I am not just looking for explanations but for community—or, I should say, communities: not communities that are assumed for me or even by me as a matter of identity, but rather communities informed by living, feeling relations of affinity and respect, as well as by the common struggles that give rise to them.

I have these living, feeling relations now with many people and communities. Although they are in and of America, they do not necessarily or un-
equivocally believe in the omnipotent myth of "America." Our relations are a product not only of consciousness but also of experience. Having lived in the United States for many years now, I experience the discrimination directed against me as a woman of color, not as a foreigner or a Filipina. And I experience myself as a woman of color now not simply because I finally recognize the truth of it (as I once could not), but because I have been recognized, over and over again, as bearing its "truth"—a "truth" in many ways borne and embodied by my child, or by the fact that I gave birth and now have a child. This "truth" is not my truth or me, however, even if it is one that often exercises considerable influence over my life. But it is precisely the violence and the failure of this "truth" that make me want to be part of a different truth, realized in the form of a different community. The problem many of us face (whoever might recognize themselves uneasily in this us, and there might be many kinds of us) is that of creating communities to which we would want to belong. It is a problem that we face as the fundamental dilemma and meaning of our work and our lives.