

"WHERE ARE WE FROM?":

A CRITICAL COMMUNITY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY
OF PLACE, SPACE, AND BELONGING BY PH.D.
INTERNATIONAL FEMALE STUDENT-SCHOLAR-
ACTIVISTS IN THE U.S.

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Abstract

Constructing an identity as an international female student-scholar-activist in the U.S. has a lot to do with cultivating sense of place, belonging, and fostering new communities. Coming from China, Colombia, Israel and South Korea, the authors of this article share their testimonios of what it meant for them—individually and collectively—to be international female students enrolled in Ph.D. programs in the U.S. while maintaining to be scholar-activists. By employing the methodology of critical community autoethnography, the authors reflect upon and analyze their individual and collective experiences, which cannot be separated from where they are from, where they are at—and where they are going.

Keywords: identity politics, critical community autoethnography, testimonios, narratives, international female students

Where in the hell can you go
Far from the things that you know
Far from the sprawl of concrete that keeps
Crawling its way about 1,000 miles a day?
Take one last look behind,
Commit this to memory and mind.
Don't miss this wasteland,
This terrible place
When you leave
Keep your heart off your sleeve.
- Natalie Merchant, *Motherland*

In this article, we share our experiences as international female scholars while being enrolled in graduate schools in the U.S., and the larger contexts in which our narratives are situated. We, critical professionals and activists, from four different countries, pursuing Ph.D. degrees in different education programs across the U.S., share our narratives of struggle and triumph, and our common insights from different positionalities. As critical scholars, we take these narratives as both personal and political, emotional and intellectual.

Our testimonios deconstruct the meanings of identity formation processes, socializing, learning, living, and working in the U.S. Nonetheless, from our international positionality, we perceive how some of our voices remain silent or silenced in the U.S. Empowered by the pursuit of equity and justice, we come together to share our stories, expose our identities, and advance a necessary dialogue with a community of critical scholars that aim to eradicate systemic inequalities and injustice—locally and globally. We situate our narratives in intersectional and transnational conceptual frameworks, including third world feminisms, Chicana/Latina feminisms, Indigenous epistemologies, cultural/ethnic studies, and queer theory.

Our goals are (1) to demystify and challenge labels and stereotypes of our countries of origin and places where we come from; (2) to situate our personal narratives and reflections within the larger

political and cultural contexts, particularly in the midst of discursive and material conditions of discrimination against diverse groups; and (3) to explore practical and conceptual possibilities to better understand diverse people in graduate programs across the U.S.

OUR COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGY OF CRITICAL COMMUNITY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In this collaborative work, we embody the methodology of community autoethnography (Pensoneau-Conway, Bolen, Toyosaki, Rudick, & Bolen, 2014), as a process and a product. The four of us met at academic conferences where we started sharing our experiences as international students in different U.S. graduate programs. When we listened to each other's stories, we found commonalities and differences, and developed deeper understandings on our personal experiences when putting them in dialogue with each other. Thus, since 2015 we have collaborated in writing, reading, and commenting on each other's narratives through community autoethnography and developed conference papers as a way to meet again and share new insights. In this collaborative and critical community autoethnographic writing practice, we have been able to "resituate identified social/cultural and sensitive issues with the explicit goals of community-building and cultural and social intervention of community through collaboration" (Pensoneau-Conway, et al., 2014, p. 313). Immersing in a critical and communal self-reflective practice is a powerful force not only to "illuminate privilege, power, and marginalization in educational contexts" (Marx, Pennington & Chang, 2017, p. 3), but also to nurture our political consciousness in terms of identity formation and to build an empathetic and solidary community beyond any divisive boundaries.

As scholar-activists from stigmatized and often negatively stereotyped countries—China, Colombia, Israel, South Korea—we offer four testimonios that portray the complexity of making sense of our 'selves' while creating spaces in our institutions and communities to enhance understandings of the diverse places we are from. Writing these testimonios has allowed us to explore research methodologies, which opened up new spaces to theorize from our bodies, and analyze

our experiences collaboratively (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Flores Carmona, 2012). Each scholar's narrative embodies the conceptual frameworks that inform our intellectual, political, and emotional works. In the process of writing, we dialogue with each other on different elements of our stories. Here, we choose to highlight some passages from each scholar to show the commonalities and differences between and among us, which, taken together, also demonstrate the collective dynamics we share as a community. In these lived experiences, we explore the politics of identity construction connected to notions of place, family histories, roots, and values; positions of privilege; the silencing, negotiation, and/or emergence of our voices; and our actions to build communities. Our distinctive individual voices are in constant collective dialogue and intend to enhance understanding about the intricacies of being an international female student-scholar-activist in Ph.D. programs in the U.S.

OUR TESTIMONIOS

REVITAL: I AM FROM EVERYWHERE

can you be a daughter

if you have no

mother language?

- Nayyirah Waheed

My Roots. I come from families of immigrants, one from Poland and one from Iran. My Polish grandparents, Chaya Kuperboim and Benjamin Zilonka, and their families fled to Russia about a month after the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939. They met only after the war ended, in a displaced persons (DP) camp. They fell madly in love and in 1948 immigrated with their families to Israel and built a new home. They got married in January 1950; my dad was born in November that year.

My Iranian family immigrated to Israel in two waves, in 1951 and 1958. First, my great grandparents, Esther and Yossef, arrived with two of their children. Later, in 1958, my grandparents, Pnina and Reuven, and their three children—my mom, then 5 years old, and her little brothers—packed their belongings, and moved to Israel. I

am the firstborn of my parents, Malka and David. My dad spoke only Yiddish* until he went to first grade; my mom spoke fluent Aramaic** and Farsi. Both of my parents started to learn Hebrew only at the age of six. My siblings and I are Israeli biracial, bicultural hybrids. We were never taught Yiddish or Aramaic; we were born into the melting pot ideology, where everyone has to speak only Hebrew. My native language isn't my parents' languages. I don't have a mother tongue, or a father tongue. Can I still be a daughter?

I moved to the U.S. in 2009 to earn a masters in Bilingual Education. Although my immigration circumstances were tremendously different from my grandparents', my struggle as an immigrant in the U.S. echoes my grandmothers' struggles specifically, whom I've had a beautiful bond with (I never met my Polish grandfather, who died in an accident when my mom was pregnant with me; and my Iranian grandfather wasn't much of a talker, to say the least). For the first time, I was able to understand some fractions of what my grandmothers have gone through: the identity crisis, the emotional costs, the sense of loneliness, dealing with micro-aggressions regarding one's accent and cultural background, the ignorance and the rejection of the cultural richness immigrants carry, the challenges of cultivating a sense of belonging, and the efforts of surrounding oneself with a supportive community that cares for one's well-being. All of those experiences and many more have allowed me to better understand and bond at a deeper level with my beloved grandmothers.

In the years I have been in the U.S. I have gotten even more curious about my grandmothers' immigration experiences and I asked them to share those experiences with me. Their stories have come to life; fragmented memories were put together; anecdotes were told with laughter, sometimes with tears. We've become storytellers, sitting in the kitchen, cooking, and talking. My grandmothers understood my struggles and have become my greatest cheerleaders. Our *herstories* (Carroll, 1976) as immigrant women have crossed paths. I have been them, they have been me, sixty years apart.

The Yiddish language which has been spoken by Jews from central and Eastern Europe.

The (modern) Aramaic language has been spoken by Jews from the Middle East.

My academic experiences in the U.S. have assisted me to better understand my identity as an immigrant; identity that has been constantly shifting, ever-changing, always learning new things about the world and myself. The education courses were powerful and heartbreaking and rewarding and depressing all at the same time. The lines between the academic texts and my personal experiences blurred almost immediately. After I moved to the U.S. I realized how language, accent, culture, xenophobia, sexism, and racism intersect in ways I never quite related to before. Since 2009 I have become occupied by thoughts about identity, belonging and place - issues that had never been part of my life while living in Israel. Back home, I enjoyed the privileges of being Jewish, “half” European, Hebrew speaker and formally educated. Those privileges almost vanished as soon as I moved to the U.S. and was immediately marked as *the other* (Zilonka, 2016).

My Branches. Recreating a place I can call my own has become an unfinished project. I will never be a U.S. American, and the more years go by, I am no longer the same Israeli who has left her family, friends, and homeland behind and crossed an ocean to obtain advanced degrees. The initial plan was to stay in the U.S. for a couple of years, complete a Master’s degree and go back to Israel. Two years have become four, and then I decided to pursue a Ph.D. More than nine years later, and I am still here, in between, a more complex hybrid - reconciling Israeli, Iranian, Polish and U.S. American cultures and traditions.

My home has become a bridge that arches wars, love, continents, herstories, and languages alongside stories of pain and hope. I’m from Israel, but I’m also from Poland and Iran. I’m from Israel, but I’m also from Idaho and North Carolina. My home is a bridge, and that bridge has become my home. And on this bridge, in this ever-changing home I am being transformed, again and again. In Anzaldúa’s (2002) words,

Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives [...] Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. (p. 1)

Displaced, culturally and linguistically isolated, frequently I found myself alone. Sense of home is oftentimes intertwined with sense of belonging—not only to a space, but also to a community and meaningful relationships; and because my immediate support system was more than 6,000 miles away, I had to co-create new communities with my new colleagues and peers. Simply put, fostering and cultivating communities have been necessary for me in order to survive my graduate school journey. I belong to a few communities—some are local in Idaho and North Carolina, others do not abide to geographical borders but rather lean on technology: video-chats, emails and social media.

Most of my best and closest friends are immigrants and international students from around the world: South Korea, France, Sudan, Italy, Colombia, Saudi Arabia, and China. With them I can say one word, and they'll understand. I don't need to labor emotionally around them. My communities allow me to be me, see my struggles and relate to them. To these communities I belong, within them I feel home, in them I invest. As Block (2009) writes, "to belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place" (p. 3). My communities are filled with beautiful languages, accents, traditions; and most importantly, they are filled with understanding and empathy, similar to the understanding and empathy my grandmothers and I began to share after I moved away. My immigrant friends and grandmothers' testimonios resonate with my own testimonios. Now I am from there, too.

NANCY: UNDER MY SKIN

Peer: Are you Colombian for real?

Nancy: Yes, I am.

Peer: You are not Colombian!

Nancy: Why?

Peer: Isn't Shakira from Colombia?

Nancy: Yes.

Peer: You are definitely not Colombian.

(Exchange with a Ph.D. peer September 2013)

My name is Nancy Emilce Carvajal Medina. I am the daughter of Maria Margarita Medina Ramirez and Marco Julio Carvajal Vergara. I was born and raised in a small mining town, Socha, located in the Andean Region of Colombia. In the nineties, teenagers from my hometown were expected to graduate from high school, get married, and have children. But, the tenacity of my mother and the support of my father gave me the opportunity to leave Socha and enter the university. Since I was fifteen, academia has been the place to develop understandings, grow humanly and intellectually, and imagine ways to use that knowledge to support others. I got my bachelors and masters degrees to teach English as a Foreign Language from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). In 2013, I embarked on a new academic adventure as a critical scholar and “artist” (Salgado & Rodriguez, 2012)*. I obtained a Fulbright Scholarship that allowed me to experience and navigate U.S. socio-cultural, political, and educational reality from the inside.

In my first year as a graduate student in a U.S. university I experienced not only the excitement of being immersed in a new environment but also the tiredness of constantly attempting to portray a more nuanced image of Colombian citizens. Once I landed in the U.S. I was automatically labeled “Woman of Color”. My nationality, fashion style, and discourses led people to call me a drug addict, a fascist, bossy, and a feminist. As perceived in the exchange at the beginning of this section, one of my peers questioned my place of origin due to my physical appearance. As a guest speaker in U.S. classrooms, the very first question I was asked related to drug cartels in Colombia. Unfortunately, media and the few female singers and actresses known in the U.S. have nurtured an image of a drug addict nation with exotic women. For four years and a half, I had to constantly justify and/or explain who I was and what I was doing in the land of the American dream. My identity was essentialized and my sense of self slowly started to be impacted.

Artist refers to the individual (artist+activist) who uses art to fulfill for social justice agendas. One of Carvajal Medina’s recent projects is called “Under the Skin: Dismantling Borders within Borders,” a series of workshops conducted to challenge labels and stereotypes.

At the beginning of my second year, I started to hear voices of doubt. I lost confidence in myself. Despite having taught English for ten years in Colombia, I questioned my ability to speak "proper" English. After I expressed my ideas in the classroom, there was a silence I interpreted as a marker of "your research is going nowhere" and "your ideas are unintelligible". I started questioning whether as an international student I had been equipped with the knowledge and tools to participate in a U.S. academic setting. Yes, I doubted my intellectual skills.

In 2015, at the end of my second year as a doctoral student, a phone call, communities, and Chicanx/Latinx Feminists rescued me from uncertainty and self-doubt. My friend Abraham Baruch called me from República Dominicana. He encouraged me to remember why I had applied for the Fulbright Scholarship. After listening to Abraham's own experiences in U.S. academe, I recalled those who fueled my desire to engage in social justice practices: my Colombian research group Knowledge in Action - K.I.A., Colombian displaced youth and children, U.S. "houseless"* , and some of my peers and faculty in the Cultural Studies program. From that day on, uncertainty has visited me, but I try to refuge in lessons I have learned from the communities I have worked with. Communities and friends like Abraham are constant reminders of the possibilities that lie ahead to make a difference, for changes are still in need to make social justice a reality.

Another experience that assisted me to reclaim my misread body and fragmented self was taking a course on Chicana/Latina Feminism with Dr. Linda Heidenreich, which offered me a venue to feel whole. Hearing the voices of mestizas with an awakened consciousness allowed me to turn up the volume of my own voice. Reading and witnessing how Chicanas used their "mindbodyspirits" (Facio & Lara, 2014) as a source of knowledge and being gave me hope. For me, Chicanas/Latinas' and Indigenous' testimonios and scholarly work became a path for an enriched, decolonized, and critical research process and

Houseless is a term proposed by Lawrence (pseudonym), one of the interviewees in the critical ethnographic study on U.S. rural homelessness alluded to previously. Lawrence states people who are unstably housed do have a home but they do not have access to a physical space - a house.

philosophy of life. Finding the strength in Chicanas/Latinas and Indigenous texts and conferences, I gave a turn to my last two years and a half of graduate studies. I learned I need to silence the voices that paralyzed me if I want to achieve any professional and/or personal goal. In 2016, my international peers, undocumented friends, and myself were immersed in a toxic and emotionally harmful political environment in the U.S. Thus, I created the space called “Under the Skin” as a platform to challenge paralyzing fear through the arts in that political environment, with the hope to spark “cultural and social intervention of community through collaboration” (Pensoneau-Conway, et al., 2014, p. 313). “Under the Skin” became a safe space where we explored the politics of identity construction drawing from our personal experiences.

In December 2017, after I obtained my Ph.D., I returned to Colombia. While I continue to struggle with the voices of uncertainty, working with communities has taught me that home resides in relationships and our inner selves. Studying in the U.S. allowed me to develop understandings about myself and enter the terrains of identity politics acknowledging and respecting U.S. peoples’ histories and fights for recognition. I also entered this terrain to create communities of ‘being’ beyond labels by challenging stereotypes, prejudices, and assumptions.

As a human-being-under-construction, my discourses, relationships, and actions speak to the nature of who I am and who I may become. I am a “self-in-relation” (Graveline, 2000) and a “betweenner” who experiences “life in and between two cultures” (Diversi & Moreira, 2009, p. 19). I am a “multiplicitous self”, in the sense that my identity operates in different ways according to my social location (Ortega, 2016). My gratitude goes to my grandparents Maria Ramírez, Jesús Medina, Ana Bertilde Vergara, and Marco Tulio Carvajal, farmers from San Mateo and Socha, Boyacá Colombia, who offered me an opportunity to develop a connection to pacha mama; and to my parents who have taught me how to use my hands to work with and for the communities. Family roots and the communities ignite my passion and commitment to use knowledge as a bridge to create critical, dialogical, and loving communities.

SOPHY: NEGOTIATING "WORK FOR/BY/FROM/WITH THE COMMUNITIES" BETWEEN PLACES

I am from a farming family that struggle and celebrate with mountain and earth, water and soil, materials concrete and close to nature. However, at the age of eight, I was finally sent to school, after looking forward to it year after year. Since then, there has been always a negotiation between the places I belong to, between home and school, between being close to nature and being schooled inside the classroom, with books, paper, abstract languages, and the work of reading and writing. In between these places, I feel that negotiation in the darkness, in secret, in silence, which was amplified by crossing the Pacific Ocean to U.S. graduate school and becoming an "international student."

The negotiation was first of all with the English language, or more exactly, reading and writing in a language not of my own. With Trinh Minh-ha (1989), I found myself "at odds with language," which, as she points out, "partakes in the white-male-is-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations" (p. 6). Further along, I constantly found myself "at odds with my relation to writing", which I was constantly aware of, "when carried out uncritically often proves to be one of domination" by writing from 'a position of power, creating as an "author," situating herself above her work and existing before it, rarely simultaneously with it' (p. 6). Then I found myself paralyzed and unable to work. I did not know how to situate myself "above" and "before" my work. When I worked on the farm with my parents, I only learned to situate myself on it, the farm, with it, in it, within it, with the mountain and earth, with the water and soil. Being. Existing. When I looked at the white space I was supposed to write on, I only saw my mother's eyes when she looked at the banana blown down by typhoon or my father's gentle touch on the banana trees after the flood, with their full attention, their full being.

The negotiation was then with the intellectual and epistemological traditions that I was exposed to. Since my first class in "Traditions of Philosophy of Education" in graduate school, I have posed a question, in class or in silence, to my often White male professors: why are we only reading philosophies of education written by American and

European authors? Why are we not reading traditions other than Anglo-American tradition? Since then, this question has been one of the intellectual and epistemological struggles that I grappled with. I have now learned from critics of Western liberal humanism that this is one illustration of the problems of “overrepresentation” (Wynter, 2003). In my search for an expanded epistemology and ontology in the philosophies of education that were discussed in my graduate classes, I felt the lack of attention to the material conditions and the “earth-beings” (de la Cadena, 2010), including the land, the mountain, the earth, and the soil from which I grew.

The negotiation was also with the purposes of the work of reading and writing. Time and again, I asked myself these “primary questions: Why write? For whom? What necessity? What writing?” (Trinh, 1989, p. 9). With *hattie gosett*, I searched and searched, lost and again lost; what could compel me to write when I know for a fact that “a major portion of the people” I want to write about and write for “cannot read but seem to think reading is a waste of time” (Trinh, 1989, p. 7)? With Trinh Minh-ha and many other Third World color-women-writer/author/reader in literature, I was wrapped up by “the Guilt:”

that of being privileged (Inequality), of “going over the hill” to join the clan of literates (Assimilation), and of indulging in a “useless” activity while most community members “stoop over the tomato fields, bending under the hot sun” (a perpetuation of the same privilege). (Trinh, 1989, p. 10)

The guilt sank into my life, day in and day out, eventually sunk into silence deep inside me. Only silence. Only guilt. Until I read the slave narratives while finishing up my M.A. thesis. In the writings of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, what I heard was not “silences,” but narratives, voices, screams, callings, all telling me: writing, reading, thinking, imagining, speculating, these are not luxury activities, but necessary activities for life, for living, as a human being, especially for unfreed human beings in the world of oppression and exploitation, for liberation, freedom, and self-transformation, especially for the service and transformation of the community.

These voices and screams came back after the 2014-2015 winter break, when I came back from my hometown to the U.S., lost and disoriented, having witnessed the struggles of my grandmother battling cancer and her sons and daughters battling health care bills. I seemed to have been lost in the world of Anglo-American theories and the space called "global," losing sight of the concrete struggles that my "local" community was going through, the big gap between rich and poor, between developed big cities and underdeveloped rural villages, between basic needs of health and unaffordable health care.

It was at the time that I came to my study on global poverty and women's empowerment, grounded in the international Subsistence Marketplaces Initiative. On the initiative's website, with tears in my eyes, I looked at photos; pictures of women from different places in the world carrying firewood, fetching water from rivers, squatting and cooking on wood stoves. I watched videos of a typical day in the life of rural homemakers in India, looking at their daily chores, thinking back to what my grandmother or my mother would be doing. I watched documentaries about students from the U.S. going to these communities to learn about poverty and design solutions for them. There, I found the connection between what I had been doing in the U.S and where I came from. I decided to take a closer look. Then I developed it into my Ph.D. dissertation project.

I described this process here to show the ethical and political struggles behind the study, the work, the writing, and the negotiation between places. With Chandra Mohanty, bell hooks, and many other feminist scholars, "I turn to theory, and to the potential of political education, for some way to link my 'personal' story with larger stories" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 191). I struggled to search for the theories, the frameworks, the collective and historical context, or the ideas of justice that could help me make sense of the challenges posed by my own personal story and journey, the collective struggles that my mother, my grandmother, and many other women in rural China went through. This struggle is an ethical and political one, a work that is devoted to the "service for the community," a work that is "for the people, by the people, and from the people" (Trinh, 1989, p. 12).

GA YOUNG: INHABITING A NEW PLACE IN SOLIDARITY WITH MARGINALIZED OTHERS

“In our society, immigrants from Asian and Pacific Islands have historically encountered political, socioeconomic, and cultural isolation and othering.” For instance—while working as a teaching assistant for an introduction to Asian American Studies on September 8, 2016, I found myself speaking this sentence and consciously calling the U.S. society *ours*, whereas I had previously intentionally called it *the U.S. society* or *this society*. If the latter was the expression of my positionality—that it is not *my* society, that I do not legally and culturally belong to the U.S.—the former underscores how I started locating myself as a member of American society. Then how did this transformation happen? What do I challenge by doing it and why does it matter? Answering these questions, my narrative reveals the transformation in my identity and positionality as a female international doctoral student, which have gradually transformed alongside my shifting sense of place in the U.S. My reflections derived from, and are affected by, the intellectual legacy of ethnic studies, feminism, and queer theory.

In 2012 I relocated from South Korea to enter a doctoral program in the U.S. Despite being the same person, once I crossed the border, I was profoundly “reoriented” (Ahmed, 2006) as a foreigner, a Woman of Color, and a temporary traveler who is meant to leave the U.S. as soon as my degree is acquired. Furthermore, in my being classified as an international student, the performances of (and external expectations attached to) my foreignness, femininity, and student status became amplified “in some more thorough and totalizing way” (Butler, 1991, p. 18). The new labels I was given did not fully identify who I was, and the attendant practices of discrimination often left me feeling defeated and disrespected.

It was not until I met my Seoul-based mentor again at the end of my first year that my perspective shifted. After listening to my experiences, she advised me, “It’s so important that you fully face up to the discrimination and problematize it from the experience of your own. But why don’t you consider this situation not solely [as a] tragedy but a chance to put yourself in an immigrant’s shoes for the

first time?" She pointed out how I had long been working on issues facing unprivileged and/or undocumented immigrants in South Korea, pressing me to consider whether I had truly been able to understand their struggles before. Her comments pressed me to consider my own biases in assessing the borders "over here," which restricted me in the U.S., while I disregarded the borders "over there" in South Korea that had, in fact, provided me protection and privilege in the hierarchy of citizenship, nativity, and race/ethnicity. Becoming more aware of both global and local 'structure of borders' (Mohanty, 2005) challenged me to understand how I have been a recipient of certain privileges. This challenge has made me shift away from criticizing the discrimination I encountered in the U.S. or victimizing myself, but reorganizing my positionality as multi-layered.

This standpoint allowed me to engage more fully how *people* inhabit and re-inhabit marginality in the U.S., charting how oppression and privilege at times intersect. And it inspired me to think about more complex notions of equality. In particular, this has been an invaluable lesson over the course of my doctoral research into undocumented Korean immigrant youth in the U.S. When I met with various individuals from different backgrounds regarding legal status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and age for four years, we were able to be connected because of empathy and a shared understanding of each other's vulnerabilities and insecurities. With the mutual engagement, we organized events, fundraising, and rallies together and continued our efforts to expand the solidary community with unprivileged *others*. In other words, the specific realization of reciprocal connectivity in our lives (Kim, 2005) indeed led me to meet both local and global "others" with deeper sensitivity about the differences and oppression that each of us continues to go through. Also, the reciprocal connectivity helped us strengthen the trust and solidarity so that I/we have been able to create communities of our own together. As Ahmed (2006) pointed out, one's orientation is "a matter of how we reside in space" as well as "'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (p. 1); it is about "the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places" (p. 8). Through cultivating communities, I (re)inhabited my place in the U.S. so that I no longer feel as a

foreigner, outsider, or bystander. I began defining myself as part of the U.S. as a space where I struggle alongside people from diverse backgrounds to challenge the very structures of our exclusion. As Massey (2005) states, space is “always in the process of being made” and “never finished; never closed” (p. 9); the space of inclusion that my community attempt to build up is also constantly formulating, expanding, and ever-changing. Our joint efforts to make sure that minoritarian voices are being heard and made visible within and outside of the U.S. society continue.

At the 2017 presidential plenary panel for the Association of Asian American Studies annual conference in Portland, Oregon, Lisa Lowe addressed that we—scholars, practitioners, and activists—need to consider the current era of unabashed racism, islamophobia, and global capitalism not as a crisis but as an opportunity to be more reflexive and engender solidarity among and for marginalized communities. She also underscored the gravity of producing undocumented knowledge, queer knowledge, workers’ knowledge, and subjugated knowledge that we can practice through reflexivity and solidarity. For me, our article collectively reflects the challenges of female international doctoral students who dismantle the discriminatory institutional structures. It represents the knowledge of newcomers to the U.S. who make the U.S. more inclusive and reflexive through their solidarity with unprivileged others. I believe what I/we craft collectively through projects such as our community autoethnography as a practice of documentation is the first step toward a more humane future.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

These four testimonios portray our multiple, fluid, and evolving identities. We didn’t arrive in the U.S. as empty baskets. We came as candles to continue shedding light in the communities we are part of. As international scholar-activists, each of us has brought distinct cultural, educational, and political richness to the U.S. We have been willing to learn, share, dialogue, be part of and co-create communities. Our experiences as international students have enhanced the understanding of the intersectional, multilayered socio-political and cultural realities of the U.S., and have allowed us to see our nations

and communities of origin from unique perspectives. Having finalized the academic experience as Ph.D. students, Sophy and Nancy returned to their home countries (China and Colombia) as professors, while Revital and Ga Young continue working in the U.S. With new sense of place, we continue being critical scholar-activists committed to working with/for communities – at home and afar.

Our complex, subjective—past and present—experiences entail layers of relationships, reflection and resilience. Cultivating meaningful relationships and investing in communities feed our souls and lift our spirits; our testimonios portray deep self-reflective processes that assist us to better understand our identity formation, and how our unique identity make-ups resonate with each other. These testimonios speak to our desire to stay true to our roots, our evolving beliefs, and our ever growing values. We derive our resilience from our cultures, traditions, ancestors, family and friends back home, while situating ourselves in a new home, or building a new one, a home that functions as a bridge which arches between where we were from, where we are, and where we are yet to go.

We invite you, the readers, not to reduce our identities to the stereotypical view of the foreigner with an accent or other constraining categories. We embarked on this embodied, intellectual, and political writing exercise to raise awareness about what it means to be an international student-scholar-activist. These narratives expect to spark dialogue in U.S. graduate programs about how to better understand diverse students from different backgrounds and better support our transition to a new academic, working and cultural environment. We hope listening to our experiences can strengthen institutional efforts to create diverse, solidary, inclusive, and welcoming spaces where knowledge and understanding becomes a bidirectional process. These possibilities are the practical goal that we hoped for in writing and sharing our testimonios. As Pensoneau-Conway et al. (2014) consider, in the process of writing our community autoethnography, we build a strong community among us across different places. As a product of our community autoethnography, we also hope that it will enrich more dialogues, relationships, and communities with possibilities of transformation and growth in wherever we are going.

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