



Author	Alexis Convento
Publication Date	21 May 2021
Category	Workshop
Review status	Peer Reviewed (Editorial Group)
Article DOI	https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/alexis-convento-20210521-reclaiming-our-roots-embodiment-our-ancestors/
Cite as	Alexis Convento, "Reclaiming our Roots, Embodying our Ancestors," <i>Tools To Transform</i> , May 2021, https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/alexis-convento-20210521-reclaiming-our-roots-embodiment-our-ancestors/
Credit as	<p>Alexis Convento, "Reclaiming our Roots, Embodying our Ancestors," <i>Tools To Transform</i>, May 2021, https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/alexis-convento-20210521-reclaiming-our-roots-embodiment-our-ancestors/</p> <p><i>Tools to Transform</i> was initiated by Asia Art Activism, in partnership with DAMN*/Deutsche Asiat*innen, Make Noise! (DE), Healing Justice London (UK), House of Saint Laurent Europe (DE), Unthaitled (DE), The Voice of Domestic Workers (UK) and The Six Tones (VN/SE). This project has been supported by the European Cultural Foundation's Culture of Solidarity award and University of York and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).</p>

Reclaiming our Roots, Embodying our Ancestors
by Alexis Convento

INTRODUCTION



A slight breeze brushes past your neck, your cheekbones flushed from the sun above. A thick wetness up to your knees, toes sink deep into the mud below. In your arms, a heavy weaved basket. Lush, fertile rice fields surround you, green infinitely above and below. Birds sing a familiar melody in the distance, a feeling from within is unearthed.

As I've grown older, I have desired to learn more about my family's place of origin, the Philippines. Born 2nd-generation in the United States, by default I was more distant, and thus less connected to the motherland (of the Philippines), as well as to my ancestors. As an immigrant family, we assimilated into (white) American culture with hopes of being accepted into mainstream society. All traces of Pilipino-ness—big family parties, loud chatter, karaoke until late at night, to name a few—were hidden behind closed doors. Then, not too long ago, I moved abroad to Berlin: these same patterns repeated themselves as I came to understand German culture and life.

I fear the possibility that one day these roots—though inherently a part of me—will be weakened or lost over time. I fear that my future kin may not have any interest in learning about their great-great grandmother during World War II, or of a coconut farm that my family may have once operated. My understanding of my past is from living relatives, either from a small handful of stories that have been repeated and embellished over time, or from a family recipe or two that has been orally shared and scribbled on a piece of paper lost in time, only to be captured in my memory.

With my fears and the little that I know of my ancestral lineage, and as someone of the Pilipinx diaspora, I've grown more curious and aware of the histories that I (or my living relatives) do not know. With this, I find it important to actively work in tracing these roots. More specifically, I hope to:

- Reflect more thoughtfully and broadly upon ancestral narratives and Philippine history, in order to then trace these stories to personal patterns, habits and/or behaviors experienced during my upbringing or learned through my time as an adult.
- Listen more deeply, learn from and work with these patterns, habits and/or behaviors (healthy and unhealthy) within me, to then heal ancestral traumas (known and unknown) that may have been passed down from past generations.
- Find peace of mind and a groundedness within the body, while also reclaiming ancestry, affirming choices and histories, and empowering / transforming the spirit.
- (Re)connect to past voices and spirits living within me; to the land, though not physically there; and ultimately to myself.
- Bring further detail to these stories to pass on to future kin and generations to come.

How can these histories be unearthed? How can I deepen the stories that I already know? This investigation of self comes as writing exercises entitled “*Reclaiming our Roots, Embodying our Ancestors.*” These exercises are made for anyone seeking to learn more about themselves, their homeland and lineage. You may have little to no connection to past relatives or stories, or you may have an abundance of them. You may be an immigrant, a refugee, an expat, adopted or orphaned; come from a war-torn place, or be native to a land and still feel disconnected to it. You may have lived through traumas (personal, familial, collective, historical, global) and are looking for ways to undo and heal them. You can simply be curious about what is unknown.



Lastly, I share my personal definitions of a few words in the Glossary; I encourage you to interpret these words in your own way and to apply them to your own experiences. These exercises can be done individually or as a small group, with an estimation of 20 to 30 minutes per exercise. For these exercises, it's up to you to create the story, regardless of whether it's built from actual facts or from your imagination. To get started, you'll need a sheet of paper or notebook, a writing utensil and an open mind.

EXERCISES

Exercise 1: isipin (imagine)

Visualize (3 min)

Take the time to imagine your place of origin, your motherland. Even if you have never been to this place physically, imagine what it could be or feel like. Move further back in time and visualize the land as it naturally was, before cities, technology or globalization. Before colonization, genocide or war.

Write (7 min)

Write down your visualization. Be specific and include as many details as you can. Center in on specific elements such as the environment, or a moment of exchange with another living being or creature.

- Describe the environment. What does it look like?
- Are you alone or are there others with you in this environment?
- How do you exist in this environment? Do you play a role in this space?
- How do you feel in this environment? Note any bodily sensations, emotions, smells or colors.
- Describe your relationship to others or with nature in this environment.
- Did anything happen in this environment? For example, it can be a gathering that took place or an exchange with another living being or creature. If so, describe.

Inspiration from past participants:

- An untouched piece of land, in all of its original beauty and splendor.
- A ritual by an indigenous tribe or a gathering of community.
- Swimming in the ocean with sea creatures native to these surroundings.

Reflect (10 min)

Reflect upon your visualization and writing, individually or through collective conversation:

- What was the world that took shape in your visualization? Was it an environment you have seen before?
- Were there living beings or creatures in this environment? What was your relationship to them?
- Did you hold a role within the visualization? If so, what was the role that you embodied?
- How did this world make you feel? Why do you think so?
- Was it easy or difficult for you to visualize this past? Why or why not?
- As a group: Thread together each of these stories. Are there any themes or throughlines that have formed between these individual visualizations?

Exercise 2: alalahanin (recall)

Visualize (3 min)

Take the time to recall a story. Perhaps it's a story told by an elder or a relative that you have never met. If you have little to no knowledge of your human ancestors, perhaps it is a story told by an animal, plant or spirit, native to your homeland.

Write (7 min)

Write down your version of this story. Be specific and include as many details as possible:

- Describe the story. Have you learnt this story from someone?

- When does this story take place? Is it during a certain time of day, season or moment in history?
- Recall any specific visual details, like the colors of the sky, the texture of the earth, or the fabric pattern of one's clothing.
- Recall any emotions or bodily sensations that you or others feel during this story.
- Recall any specific words, sayings or phrases said by those in the story.
- Is there a moral or a lesson learned from this story? If so, what is it?

Reflect (10 min)

Reflect upon your visualization and writing, individually or through collective conversation:

- What was the story about? Did you learn this story from someone?
- Why do you believe that this story was recalled in your mind?
- Share your recallings of:
 - Visual details;
 - Emotions or bodily sensations; and/or
 - Words, sayings, phrases by you or others in the story.
- Why do you believe these certain recallings came up for you?
- Are there morals / lessons that you have learned from this recalling? If so, please share.
- Say aloud the first 3 words that come up for you in relation to this recalling. Reflect upon these 3 words.
- As a group: Thread together morals / lessons of each of the stories. Are there any themes among these morals / lessons?

Exercise 3: mahayag (manifest)

Visualize (3 min)

Take the time to visualize a motherland that you hope a future generation will see. What are the harmonies and synergies between one another; with the environment?

Write (7 min)

Write down your visualization as a short letter to future kin, either blood-related or chosen, known or unknown. Be specific and include as many details as you can:

- Include details on where you are in this current moment:
 - Today's date, time and/or season;
 - Your location (can be a certain place in your home, like the bedroom, or simply the city/town/village in which you currently live);
 - Your current mood or emotional state; and/or
 - A current event happening in the world.
- What do you want to preserve / pass on to the future? You can describe the environment / land that you want to leave behind; ways in which your community

works and/or lives together; as well as traditions (old, new, recently imagined) within your culture.

- What are your wishes / hopes / desires for them? Compare these wishes to your current ways of living and surviving.
- What are the words of wisdom that you share with them, so they can then pass them on to the(ir) future? Did you learn these words from someone in your family (blood or chosen)?

Reflect (10 min)

Reflect upon your visualization and letter, individually or through collective conversation:

- Read aloud / share an excerpt of your letter to the group. Why did you decide to share this part?
- Share what you would like preserved / passed on to your future. Why did you decide to preserve these matters, specifically?
- Name one wish / desire that you wrote about in the letter. Are there ways in which you can make these wishes or desires a part of your present-day reality? How so?
- As a group: Vocalize a one-sentence affirmation of your desires for the future, in reflection of today's work and in continuance of your personal journey.

GLOSSARY

I share my personal definitions of the words below, which you will encounter throughout these exercises. I encourage you to interpret these words in your own way and to apply them to your own experiences:

- Ancestor — A person from whom you descend, usually a blood relative beyond your grandparent, who may no longer be living. This can also apply to a chosen family lineage. If there is no knowledge of lineage, then you can imagine an 'unknown' relative as you wish or think of an ancestor as a living thing such as an animal, plant or force of nature, like the wind.
- Ancestral narratives — Any story relating to the native land and people in which you and/or your ancestors descend from, in addition to its culture and traditions. Stories can be factual, imagined or both.
- Chosen family — People that are not blood-related to you, but may be spiritually or energetically connected to you as family or lineage.
- Colonization — The action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area. In my work, I reference the 381 years of Spanish and American rule of the Philippines.
- Diaspora — People who have been dispersed or separated (by force, choice or lineage) from their place of origin or homeland. My grandmothers left the Philippines in the 1940s to work as nurses in the United States. As I was born 2nd-generation in the

United States, I identify as someone of the Pilipino diaspora.

- Homeland — One’s native land, or the place of origin of your relatives. See *Motherland* for additional context.
 - Indigenous — To be of the original ethnic culture of a land for many generations; that has not migrated from one’s homeland or place of origin; and is not of settler or colonial population.
 - Kin — One’s family or relatives, blood-related or chosen. As an example, I look at kin as my future children or my students that have been influenced through my teachings.
 - Lineage — A direct descendant from an ancestor, blood-related or chosen.
 - Motherland — Refers to the country in which you or your ancestors were born and to which you still feel emotionally linked, even if you physically live somewhere else. If you do not know or choose to not associate with a specific country, you may refer to ‘motherland’ as a place— actual or imagined—in which you feel emotionally linked.
 - Native — One born in a specific place or associated with a place by birth, whether actually living there or not.
 - Relative — A living person connected by blood, marriage or simply by choice.
 - Ritual — A series of actions created by an individual, group of people or community. A ritual can look like an event or ceremony; can be traditional or made up of new, invented forms; can resonate, bring deeper awareness, or heal; and can be part of an individual or collective practice.
-

PROFILE IMAGERY + COLLAGE ART

All profile imagery and collage art files can be accessed for [download in this folder](#).

PROFILE IMAGERY (Alexis prefers Image 1 to be used)

Image 1 credit: Quyn Duong

Image 2 credit: Adam Garelick

COLLAGE ART

Collage credits: Original digital collage by Alexis Convento.

Collage Caption 1: “reyna ng mga skyflake” (2017)

Collage Caption 2: “sampaguita kapatid na babae” (2017)

BIOGRAPHY

Alexis Convento (she/her) is a Pilipinx American producer, curator and artist living between Berlin, Germany and New York City, United States. With a background in dance and many years working with big brands in marketing, her true passions turn to grassroots organizing and creating community with others.

Undoing and relearning are constant themes within Alexis’ personal practice, allowing her to come closer to a pre-colonial ancestry. Whether that be through the preparation of Pilipino

dishes or collaborating with like-minded BIPOC chefs under *Ulam*; or as part of diaspora art collective *DULA*, these projects allow Alexis to forge a pathway towards truly decolonizing and reclaiming her roots. In addition, she collaborates with fellow Pilipinx American artists Jay Carlon and Angeline Meitzler as *istorya-istorya*, by (re)imagining the Pilipinx/a/o identity through collective research and practice in conversation, food and play.

Her inspirations are her lolas who migrated to the US in the 1960s, the non-operating family coconut farm in the Philippines, and the imagining of what a tropical future can look like for those displaced from their homeland.

For additional information, visit her website at: www.alexisconvento.com