

You have **2** free member-only stories left this month. [Sign up for Medium and get an extra one](#)

On Roots and Research

Accessing who you are and where you come from



Kali Fajardo-Anstine

Follow

Jan 29, 2020 · 10 min read ★



Illustration by Christina Yoseph

“What are you?” is a question I’ve been asked by strangers since I was a child. As a little girl, I didn’t know how to answer this question with a simple one-word, one-identity response. And I still don’t. I knew then just as I know now that we were many things. We were American, we were Mexican, we were Filipino and Spanish and Jewish. And on my maternal line, here in Denver I am only a few hundred miles north from where my Picuris Pueblo ancestors lived since the beginning of time. I grew up one of seven children in both the suburbs and an older section of Denver called the Northside, an area that developers renamed to Highlands, a term used by those who flocked to the city during the waves of gentrification starting in the 1990s and charging

through today. As a child, I traveled throughout the city with my parents, visiting an auntie on the West Side, a grandmother in Five Points, and another on the East Side. These places were associated with the people who lived there — Brown, Black, and Jewish sections, the unofficial segregation of Denver.

I was in a cemetery when I first realized that my people were seemingly *placed* in designated areas. It came to me in my early teens, one Memorial Day, a time when my family visits our graves, cleans the stones, and plants new flowers. We circle our dead, burn copal and sage, place small rocks over headstones and send prayers for our ancestors into the sky with smoke. I remember noticing no Anglo names buried in the section along the train tracks near my Uncle Jaimie Fajardo, an immigrant from the Philippines who died of tuberculosis while attending law school and working as a chauffeur for a wealthy Denver family in the 1940s. I noticed this at each grave that day, at the flat headstone of my cousin Napoleon Lucero who had died of AIDs in the late 1980s, his little brother Michael who had been killed as a child by drag racers, and on and on. And later, visiting other cemeteries across Denver, I felt envious of the marble mausoleums where wealthy Anglo families buried their dead — Evans, Byers, Chivington, the latter who ordered the horrific Sand Creek Massacre of the Cheyenne and Arapahoe people in 1864. At our headstones, one had to bend over and squint to see our names while at these looming tombs, lineage was displayed as if inside lay the bones of Coloradoan Gods.



I went to college at Metropolitan State University of Denver, a campus built on a former Latino neighborhood called Auraria, a few blocks away from where my Auntie Lucy and my Uncle Avel lived for nearly sixty years. In the 1970s, through eminent domain, the neighborhood was plowed to make way for the urban campus. The wounds of this displacement are still felt today as students rush in and out of an old church and a synagogue converted into events space. I've seen art shows, Selena impersonators, and Student Activities taco bars housed in these former places of worship. No formal plaque or memorial is in place to educate those who do not know of Auraria's past, though a small section of tiny Victorian houses remains, now office space and a faculty lounge. For all the hurt this campus caused my community, Metro now serves more Latino students than any other institution in Colorado. Metro is also the place where I first saw my people in textbooks.

After dropping out of high school the second week of 12th grade, I enrolled at Metro State and soon began taking Chicana/o Studies classes. My Chicana/o Studies professors looked like me, they came from similar backgrounds, and they had stories of both triumph and tragedy. But Metro is also the place where, during a Colorado History course my sophomore year, a professor announced to my class that the Ku Klux Klan,

which was rampant in Colorado during the 1920s, was merely a social group, a little club, if you will. In my family, there were stories of ancestors laying across floorboards before their tenement windows, hiding and waiting for the Klan to march through the streets in their parade of hate. I'll never forget the sorrow I felt that day — too shy and scared to speak up and tell this educated white woman, this professor of mine, that I've heard things from my own people and you are not correct. But it was right there, plainly written in her lecture notes, pulled from a textbook, preparing us for the final. How was I to compete with that when all I had were stories?



In the 1950s, my pregnant Auntie Lucy was pushed down the stairs by a white woman while shopping at a department store on Denver's east side. She said the nearest hospital turned her away because she was a Mexican, and her baby, my cousin John was born severely disabled. When John was twelve-years-old, long after my Auntie had stopped being able to lift him on her own, he was forcefully taken away by the State, where shortly after he died in an institution.

I began writing a novel based on my Auntie Lucy's life when I was a teenager, a novel that has greatly shifted over time, but a book I am working on to this day. I briefly lived in Key West, Florida in my late twenties and I remember trying to write about Denver from afar. It was difficult, vague, as if reaching for a past shrouded in a veil. My Auntie Lucy had died a few years earlier, and I had to rely on my own memory to populate the world of my ancestors. I was working for a literary nonprofit and during my residence on the island, the organization donated several materials to an archive in Miami. Archivists arrived a few weeks later, all together in a white van with banker's boxes. They loaded up books and ephemera, maps and photographs, carrying them along like a line of ants. I had worked in rare and antiquarian books off and on since I was teenager, but I didn't know much about official archives. "What happens to everything?" I asked one of the archivists, a brilliant-eyed woman in a track suit who told me, "we process it, catalogue it, make it available to the public for research."

I began writing a novel based on my Auntie Lucy's life when I was a teenager, a novel that has greatly shifted over time, but a book I am working on to this day.

The next day on my lunch break, I searched through online databases of archives back home in Colorado. I wanted to see what information existed on my ancestors. Maybe the archives could help me imagine myself into my Auntie Lucy's life. I was surprised at what

little information I found on Latino residents of Denver, especially considering that a quarter of the state had once been Mexico. Stranger still, I could find no reference to Filipinos in Denver during the 1930s and 1940s. But I was a brand-new researcher, a novice. I called a Denver archives and told them the story of my Auntie being turned away from a hospital. I wanted to know if they had ever come across something like that in historical documents. “That wouldn’t have happened,” said the faceless voice on the other end of the line. “I’ve never come across record of anyone being turned away from any Denver hospital based on race.” I started to say, “but my Auntie — ,” though I soon realized it didn’t matter to the person on the other end. They didn’t believe me, there were no documents, no record, and my story, to them, was just that — a story.



In 2016 I lived in Durango, Colorado and taught Freshman Composition at a small liberal arts college on the bluff of a mesa, overlooking the little mountain town along the Animas River. It was the first time in my life that I lived in the region of my ancestors, the southern portion of the state, the place they had left. Many of my students were Native, as the college, a former Indian Boarding School, offers free tuition to Native American students as a type of wildly inadequate amends for the past. To this day, I haven’t felt more at home culturally and spiritually than I did living in the Four Corners region. People with my family names were everywhere — my students, my bank tellers, the drinking buddies I met over trivia in the local bars. While I was in Durango, I became deadly serious about writing a draft of my novel. On a weekend trip home to Denver, I found an old VHS tape of a home movie buried among a box of family records and old photographs. “Grandma” was written in sharpie in my mother’s handwriting across a piece of masking tape. I brought the VHS back to Durango, where I popped it into the videocassette player at the campus library. It was an interview between my mother and my great grandmother Esther, who had died when I was nine-years-old. There she was, regal, serious, and deeply mad.

In the video, my great grandmother is seated on her yellow satin sofa in her Five Points home, a home my family has since lost to gentrification and bad luck. My mother is doing the talking while my sisters and I appear as little flashes of blurred black hair in the corners of the shot. “Now Grandma,” my mother asks from behind the camera, her voice young and musical, “can you tell us about what languages you spoke at home? Spanish, right?”



Due to racist policies of the past and forced assimilation, my family are monolingual English speakers, besides the few siblings who have reclaimed Spanish. I’ve spent much of my life being embarrassed by the fact that I

cannot speak Spanish while many of my ancestors were shamed because of their language. My great grandmother stares into the camera, her black and white hair spiked, her intense gaze locked and her coral lipstick on point. “Sure, of course,” she says in her gravelly, wondrous voice, “but we spoke more than Spanish — we spoke our old languages, too.” And for the first time, I realize that my great grandmother also spoke Indigenous languages, like Tewa and Tiwa from the Pueblos of Northern New Mexico. She then describes eating bread out of a horno that her aunties used to make, bread for ceremony, bread people in my family have only recently started to eat again. My mother asks about queerness in our lineage, and my great grandmother shrugs, as if bored. “That’s just the way some of our people are.” Later my mother asks about violence, about racism, about their big walk north to the city. My great grandmother, still mad as hell in her eighties, says, “We didn’t know about prejudice until we come north, until we come to this part of the state.” I had started to cry a little bit, and I remember because a student of mine, a boy who is Hopi and Navajo, presented me with a plate of sugar cookies from a campus event in another room of the library. “I’ve brought you some, miss. Please don’t be sad,” he said, and I thanked him, eating together through all that loss.



I found my master document that day, the oral history that would guide my creative work for years to come. Once I saw my own great grandmother on tape and heard her voice again for the first time in decades, I fell in love with research. I had access to who I am, and where I come from. Since my discovery of my mother’s oral history tape with my great grandmother, I’ve been fortunate enough to meet others from similar backgrounds. Archivists, librarians, historians, artists, and elders with limitless knowledge of the people from Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado. We exist in private Facebook groups, where families post photos of their loved ways from another time, another place. In these groups, there are mixed people like me whose families left the desert and created something new in the cities, layers of complicated ancestry for hundreds of years. I have formed friendships based on mutual research interests. My life has been enriched because of the trail that leads to where I come from.

I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to thank my mother enough for having the impulse to record and retain our stories. When the official archives ignored our existence, within the closets of our homes, our records were waiting, our stories powerfully alive.

