

How I Honor What I Carry

Eva Sierra

Grade level: High School

Time frame: 30-60 minutes

Objective: Explore ancestry and identity through writing about gifts from those that came before us.

Prior knowledge and skills: None

Required materials: Writing tools, copy of literary model

Literary model: Excerpt from E. Garcia Naranjo's *Descendant Dissident*

Sequence of activities:

- **Brainstorming questions (part 1):** individually or as a group discussion (10-15 minutes)
- **Poem Reading:** silently or as a group (5 minutes)
- **Brainstorming (part 2):** individually or as a group discussion (5-10 minutes)
- **Poetry Writing:** individually (10-15 minutes, or more if they are still writing!)

Introduction:

This lesson allows students to ponder and explore the topics of ancestry and identity through poetry. Students will dissect their ancestry and reflect on the connection they have to past persons. *Note: This lesson offers consideration of students who may be uncomfortable with writing about or estranged from their biological family or the family they were raised in, and explores non-physical and metaphorical outlooks on ancestry.*

Pre-Reading Questions:

These can be answered individually on paper or posed in a discussion for a group. Group facilitation for these questions works best for smaller groups, ideally under eight people, so that every student can think about their answer and share.

Take a moment to ponder the topic of ancestry. "Ancestry" refers to the origin, path of origin, or background of something. Your ancestry shows up in many ways and is reflected in your neighborhood, your home, your thoughts, and actions. Also consider your chosen ancestors: people who inspire you and whose footsteps you walk in.

- *What does ancestry mean to you?*
- *Who do you consider to be your ancestors?*
- *What parts of yourself do you associate with your personal ancestry? (Think outside of your physical appearance if you'd like.)*

Poetry Reading:

*excerpt from E. Garcia Naranjo's collection *Descendant Dissident*:*

i.

when i wash my face in the morning, i open my eyes slowly.
getting ready to investigate my reflection. letting the droplets
race across my brown-ness. letting the sensation travel from

my forehead to my bottom lip.

mi cara [my face]: an amalgamation of the thousands of faces
before mine. mis ojos [my eyes]: a pair of topaz stones able to
witness the strange world & it's shapes. mis labios [my lips]:
the softest surface on my face; the flesh that consumes,
that mouths, that kisses the things i love.

what miracle this is.
to feel my face & to know it's an heirloom
i've inherited from someone who looked like

me.

ii.
reflection of self,
mosaic of memories:

amá's green eyes
& her thunderous laugh.
apá's umber eyes
& his trickster grin.

what i am
is what they are.
i sense it
when i laugh
or cry or yell.

& i spent many years
looking for the words
that would corroborate
us in the history imposed
over our crowns.

& the words i've found
to explain us were always
right in front of me.

our names.

& the thousands of names
before ours.

&&&&&&&

After Reading Questions:

- What are some of your thoughts about this poem?
- What are some gifts that have been granted to you by your ancestors?
- What are ways in which these gifts have brought you happiness or aided you in your personal growth?

Poetry Writing:

Allow for at least ten minutes for students to write. If students seem engaged and are still writing after ten minutes, and time allows, silently increase writing time until students start to slow down. After the timer stops, allow an additional 2-3 minutes for students to make quick revisions.

Prompt:

In what ways do you honor the gifts given to you by your ancestors? Think of the goals you are working on, the ways you take care of yourself, and the ways you look for joy. You can say something like “**I honor ____ by doing ____.**” Write as many ways of honoring that you can think of.

Examples:

I honor my mother’s precise sense of smell when tending to my flowers every spring.

I honor the strength of Mayan warriors when allowing myself to feel vulnerable.

If students are comfortable, **create the opportunity for students to share some of or all of what they wrote at the end** of the session.