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**Deconstructing the Past, Reconstructing the History, &
Constructing the Future: Understanding & Healing
Transgenerational Trauma through Process-Focused Creative
Methodology in Costume Construction**

Catja Christensen

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**Deconstructing the Past, Reconstructing the History,
and Constructing the Future: Understanding and
Healing Transgenerational Trauma Through Process-
Focused Creative Methodology in Costume
Construction**



Zenaida del Prado 1952



Catja Christensen 2023

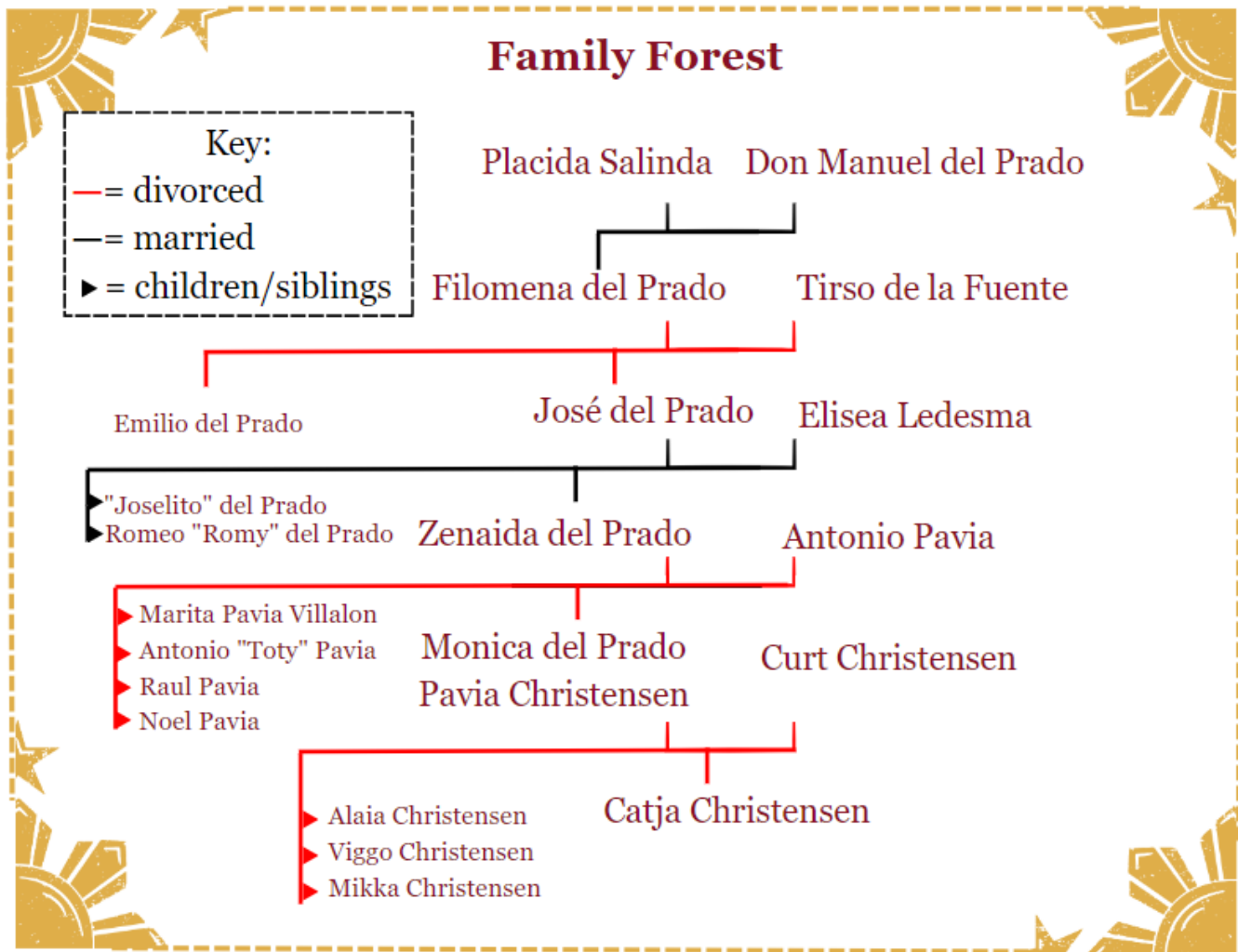
**Catja Maria Mariquita Christensen
Honors Thesis in Dance**

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Family Forests..... | 2 |
| | 2 |
| Bedtime Stories..... | 4 |
| Divorce, Divorce, Divorce | 8 |
| Halo Halo..... | 14 |
| A Dress of Many Names | 16 |
| Patterns and Patience | 20 |
| Deconstructing the Past and Reconstructing the Present..... | 24 |
| Creative Process in Photos..... | 33 |
| | 34 |
| Reflections | 37 |
| Acknowledgments | 40 |
| | 42 |
| Works Cited..... | 43 |

Family Forests

My mom always tells me that in the Philippines, they don't have family trees; they have family forests. Everyone is connected and most likely related in some way. The roots are strong, deep, and widespread. Even when the branches may grow far away or split from the rest, they are still connected. My family is my heart. They are the primary source for this research and my biggest inspiration in life. Meet the cast in our story.



CAST:



Great-Great-Grandmother
Filomena del Prado - "Mang"
(div. Tirso de la Fuente)



Grandmother
Zenaida del Prado - "Mama Aida"
(div. Antonio Pavia)



Mother
Monica Christensen
(div. Curt Christensen)



(Great)(Great)(Grand)Daughter
Catja Christensen

Bedtime Stories



August 5, 2010

1) Mama Aida and her Christensen grandkids (Left to right: Viggo, Catja, Mikka, Mama Aida)

When I was little, Mama Aida would often visit from her home in California, where she lived with my uncle, Tito Raul, in Northridge. She would sit next to me on my trundle bed in the room I shared with my older sister, Alaia, and my younger brother, Viggo, and tell us bedtime stories. Some of my earliest memories are of the glow-in-the-dark stars on our ceiling, the walls painted with fish and seagrass, and of Mama Aida's voice. "Back in the Philippines, I was a queen," she told me. "You were a queen?" I would repeat in excited disbelief. I wondered, *Am I a princess like Ariel the mermaid?* Sleeping next to painted fish in Ariel pajamas only

encouraged my imagination. I wondered when I would be able to wear a gown as beautiful as hers or Ariel's or Cinderella's.

It took me years to realize that she meant she was a beauty queen in Urdaneta, her hometown in a land far, far away. I started putting the pieces together as I grew older and realized how little I knew about her life before. It was my first awakening to the lives lived before I was born. I realized that rather than a throne, I would inherit generations of family lore, memories, and lingering unhealed trauma.

As I piece together my family history with each panel of fabric, I will finally get my childhood wish: to wear a beautiful gown. However, I am more aware of the responsibility and history that will weigh on me when I close the zipper.



2) Mama Aida, Miss Urdaneta 1956 - this was the photo I grew up seeing and associating with Mama Aida's young life in the Philippines

I heard Mama Aida's bedtime story before Mikka, my youngest sibling, was born. Before we would all pile on Mama Aida's guest bed, playing games on her iPad, watching Dancing with the Stars, and napping on top of each other (see image 1). Before Mama Aida's guest bed turned into her permanent residence for nearly a decade. Before my parents divorced when Mikka was only 3 years old. Her bedtime story was one of my favorites. I craved connections to my Filipino heritage, and knowing Mama Aida represented her city in magazines, parades, social events, and more made me so proud. Even as I grew up and morphed into a blended version of my mom's complexion and my dad's frame, Mama Aida would sometimes say that I looked like her, which filled me with pride and connection.

Another favorite bedtime story was one my parents would tell. I have a stronger memory of my dad's warm voice filling the darkness, soothing us as we fell asleep, but I heard my mom's version of the story as I grew older. Both had the same plot, same characters, and same magical air, but each brought different details and new perspectives. The story goes: once upon a time, in a land far, far away, two young travelers met at the Oceana Hotel in Kingston, Jamaica. The young girl, barely a woman, fresh-faced and adventurous at just 17 years old, arrived a few days earlier than her group, a cohort of students connected with Youth for Understanding (YFU). She was an exchange student in the States through YFU and was asked to represent the Philippines in Kingston with other students. The man, a 22-year-old trumpeter from New York City, arrived at the same hotel two days later. While finishing up his joint Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Trumpet Performance at Juilliard, he was representing the US with the New York Brass Entourage. When the girl-almost-a-woman walked into the lobby one day, she locked eyes with the man checking in at the desk. He was tall, well over six feet, with dirty blond hair and blue eyes framed by wide glasses. He had a confident stride and a glimmer in his eye, greeting

everyone he passed with a soft smile and a “Hello!” The woman smiled to herself, too shy to do anything more, and made her way to her room, but his kind face lingering in her mind.

Later that day, the man was exploring the hotel as he often did in new spaces. He was waiting for the elevator to arrive on his floor. He heard a high-pitched *ding*, and looked up to see a petite Filipina woman, just over five feet tall with cropped dark hair and rich brown eyes. They locked eyes again. They struck up a conversation in that elevator, he invited her to his concert, he winked at her in the audience, and the rest is history!



3) *April Fool's! Monica and Curt in Jamaica, 1985*

My parents met on April Fool’s Day in Jamaica, 1985. My mom jokes about this date with melancholic humor on certain days—on their wedding anniversary, which is also Viggo’s birthday; on April Fool’s Day; on days when the divorce becomes the topic of conversation. My parents divorced when Mikka was 3, Viggo was 9, I was 11, and Alaia was 17. My dad retired

from the Air Force the same year and got remarried 3 years later in 2015. They nearly made it to their 25th anniversary. But divorce happens. And it split my family apart once again.

Divorce, Divorce, Divorce

Every family goes through hardships and traumas. In my family, there is a repeated pattern of divorce resulting in families being ripped apart, becoming physically and emotionally distanced, and compartmentalizing the pain in order to survive, literally and metaphorically. I hope that by opening conversations with and about my family, we will be able to release the pressure and lighten the emotional load of holding onto trauma in the body and spirit. My ancestors sacrificed their livelihoods and defied traditional expectations of mothers to protect their families and free themselves from unhealthy situations, but the unresolved internal grief and pain pass down through the generations, impacting their descendants with various consequences.

My maternal great-great-grandmother was named Filomena del Prado, aka “Mang.” Many people in my mom’s family forest share names, so nicknames are common. That is why I have a Tita Baby, Tita Angel, José and his son Joseling (Tito Ling), countless Manuels and Emilios, and Mari and Maria and Maripas. Zenaida is Mama Aida to most but Mom to me because Alaia heard our Mom call her mom Mom and we called her Mommy. It is confusing! But it somehow works.

Mang was in a similar situation: Mama Aida called her “Mang,” but she is more commonly know as “Lola Grande,” big grandmother, to distinguish her from the other lolas in the family. She married Tirso de la Fuente and had two sons: Emilio and José. She filed for divorce from Tirso in 1914, an action that was unheard of in the staunchly Catholic nation (Philippines Supreme Court Jurisprudence). Spain colonized the Philippines from 1571 to 1898, until the United States bought the archipelago from their colonizers for \$20 million following the

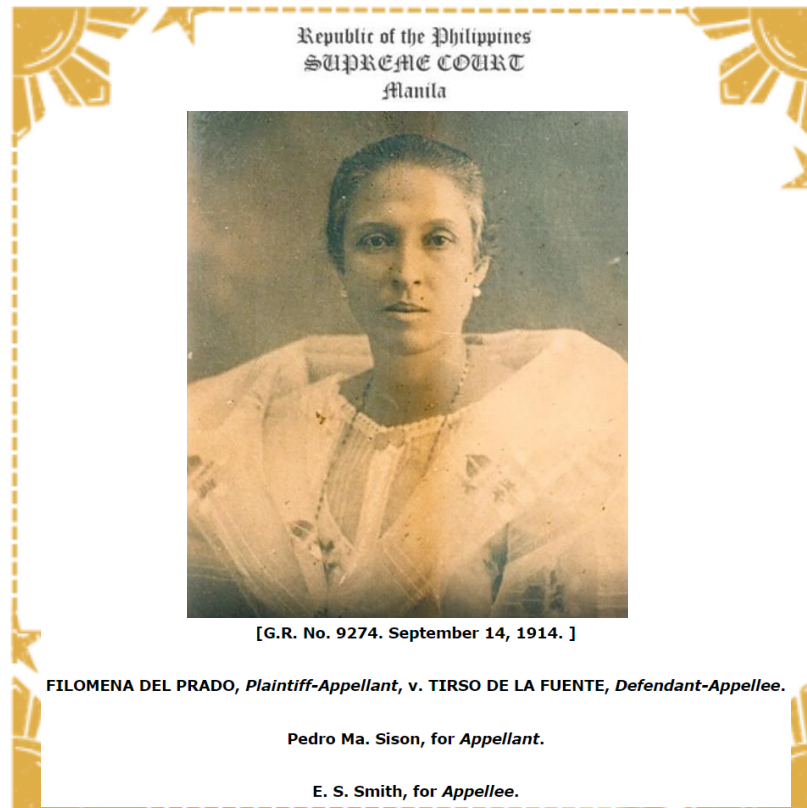
Spanish-American War (Slack). Spain ceded their colony, along with other territories in Central America, as outlined in the Treaty of Paris. Nonetheless, devout Spanish Catholicism remains a tenet of Filipino culture and influences the law, especially when it comes to the sanctity of marriage. To today, the Philippines and Vatican City are the only two countries where divorce is illegal, although the Filipino government has proposed a divorce legalization bill as recently as Aug. 17, 2021. (Philippines: House of Representatives Bill on Divorce).

In an article overviewing the legal history of divorce in the Philippines written by Filipino lawyer De Borja, the period of American occupation before World War II brought new American philosophies that temporarily influenced the culture. De Borja writes:

“The restrictive intrusions of the Catholic church into marriage was seen as impermissible religious interference in a very personal decision which only the State should be able to regulate. Act No. 2710 was passed by the Philippine Legislature on March 11, 1917 which allowed for absolute divorce on the ground of criminal conviction for adultery on the part of the wife or concubinage on the part of the husband. Because of the limited grounds and the requirement of criminal conviction, the difficulty of obtaining a divorce under the new law quickly became clear and several attempts were made to further liberalize the process of divorce in the Philippines. 300 years of colonial Spain and the Roman Catholic church could not be undone that easily.”

Mang took advantage of the American views on divorce in 1914, and she is documented as being one of the first registered divorces in the Philippines. This fact is a part of my family lore. It is not a happy event, nor one to be proud of, but I admire Mang’s strength and courage to separate herself from an unhealthy relationship with a man who abandoned his wife and children. I can only imagine the public backlash she received from her family and community. But she

succeeded, and she lived the rest of her life raising her sons and becoming a beloved grandmother to my own beloved grandmother.



4) *Filomena del Prado; Republic of the Philippines Supreme Court, Sep. 14, 1914*

Mama Aida also suffered through an unfaithful marriage and intensely public divorce. In my hours of interviews and conversations with her, she would open up more and more about her marriage, but after every painful memory, she would pause and reassure me, “He was a *brilliant* doctor. At only 22 years old he was a fully-fledged doctor.” No matter how painful the memories, no matter how much he hurt her, she wanted me to remember the good in him. Even though he was her ex-husband, he is forever my grandfather, my Lolo Doc—“grandpa doctor.” I never met him. He died from colon cancer when I was a toddler and Viggo was just born. Reconstructing my family history is also my way of constructing an image of him: what he looked like, what made him laugh, what music he listened to, what he was like as a father. My

mom and her siblings all have different memories and relationships with him; like Mikka, my mom was very young when her parents divorced, and her upbringing was different from her oldest sibling, Tita Marita, who moved to Canada, or second oldest, Tito Toty, who stayed in the Philippines and befriended Lolo Doc's second family. My mom immigrated to the States, coming first as an exchange student at a time when long-distance phone calls were expensive. She did not see her dad for long periods of time, and she grew up independent, forging a new life for herself in a new country. Mama Aida met Lolo Doc at the peak of her beauty queen era. Her parents thought young, handsome doctor Antonio seemed like a great match for their only daughter. They married on Jan. 10, 1959, just 6 months after they met.

Mama Aida's Miss Urdaneta dress is a symbol of her youth and independence before the marriage that changed her life, for better and for much worse. When I look at the photos of her standing proudly in her custom gown, I see a woman with a bright future. Even when married, she ran Botica Pavia, a successful drugstore along the busy Session Road in Baguio City, with Lolo Doc's clinic on the floor above. She was well-liked and well-known in the close-knit community. She had and still has a heart big enough to fit the world and strength enough to survive the worst of her marriage. Mama Aida as Miss Urdaneta is what I aspire to be now, as a nearly graduated 22-year-old myself: a woman with big ambitions, boundless love, and the ability to rock a beautiful dress with class and finesse.

Mama Aida and I held hands as she told me about the worst day of her life. I cried when she told me, I cried when I sewed my version of her dress, and I cried while writing this thesis. I cannot imagine a world without my Mama Aida. I cannot imagine living a life without her smile, her voice saying, "Hay naku, hija," in the kitchen as I scarfed down the dinner she cooked, her hands guiding mine through a sewing machine for the first time. I would not be the woman I am

today without her, just as she would not be the woman she is without Mang. This is why I dedicate this research to her. This is why it is so important to me to heal my family in our own way.



5) Mama Aida on her wedding day holding her grandmother, Mang's, hands. Mama Aida is wearing the traditional butterfly sleeves here as well.

And finally, my parents, who I love so much. In every sense, I would not be here today without them either. Yet, as much as the way they met sounded like a fairytale, and as much as they went through in the nearly 25 years they were married and 38 years they knew each other, they also went through a highly emotional, tumultuous, and heartbreaking divorce. This story is not one that I need to piece together because I experienced it firsthand. I saw how horrible it is to divide a life you shared with another, to split finances and property and child custody like seam ripping a precious dress into tattered pieces. I saw how love evolves and lives rebuild, and it is traumatic in so many ways for every party involved. I piece together my parents' marriage and

their lives before me. I analyze every photo, replay every story they told me as a child that is too painful to recall now, and try to paint a picture of the two young lovers who wrote letters to each other across the country so that they could stay together. I struggle to remember my parents living together, what it sounded like when they crowded around the stove cooking dinner, how they looked when they picked us up from school together. As I write my family story and recreate this dress, I am also piecing together my childhood. Taking time to focus on the process and use the hours I spend behind a sewing machine to ruminate and process the past helps me heal from my own past. Talking to my family about our history helps us all process the past 10 years together, preventing Mama Aida's lifelong battle of living in a past that she never healed from.



6) Curt and Monica, "A long distance romance ever after..." - Newspaper announcement - Dec. 18, 1988; New Year's Eve 1992; Monticello, VA 1994

Halo Halo

Time for some sweetness interjected into this story! As with every Filipino family, food is an essential part of life, love, and happiness. Halo halo is a classic Filipino dessert consisting of shaved ice, milk, and ice cream – typically ube or mango. Then, it has any combination of toppings mixed in, including red mungo beans, coconut “macapuno” shavings, sweet jelly cubes, palm fruit, jackfruit, flan slices, and more. It directly translates to English as “mix mix,” and it is my favorite dessert in the summer.



7) When I found halo halo in London, I immediately sent photos back to my family. My mom was visiting me for the week, and we treated my friends to our favorite dessert.

Growing up mixed race in the D.C. suburbs of Northern Virginia was an interesting upbringing. Our schools were decently diverse, with children of diplomats, government employees, and immigrants making up our class rosters. I never felt out of place since my friends and I all shared unique identities and cultures. I grew up American—a mix of everything, like

halo halo. In the Philippines, children of multiracial identities, specifically of Spanish/European and Filipino descent, are called mestizo or mestiza. Colorism is rampant in the Philippines, along with many South, South East, and East Asian cultures. Mama Aida would recall family members of different complexions, from the mestiza light-skinned cousins to her youngest brother, who they affectionately nicknamed “Darkie,” although this name comes with a heavy weight of historical discrimination. Mang was biracial, like me, as her mother was Filipina and her father hailed from Llanes, Asturias, Spain. Their marriage is rumored to also have been tumultuous, although not much is known about the Filipina Placida Salinda and her Spanish husband, Don Manuel del Prado. I also identify as biracial, although my ethnic make-up is even more like halo halo/mixed than Mang’s with my dad’s Danish and Polish roots.

Beauty standards in the Philippines, especially in the popular beauty pageants across the nation, are skewed by centuries of colonization impacting the culture. Filipinos often uplift mestizo people and non-Filipino products because long-term oppression and occupation results in a sense of inferiority. As a mestiza Asian-American, I am cautious about celebrating my own beauty in relation to my Filipino identity to avoid perpetuating traditional beauty ideals. I have always struggled with my own image, experiencing tendencies towards body dysmorphia and disordered eating patterns because of my time as a ballerina, so understanding my positionality while making and wearing this traditional dress has been a complicated internal debate. Beauty is a complex subject, and I am more interested in the historical, cultural, and familial web of meaning behind the terno and exploring the function of pageants in forming Filipino beauty standards.

A Dress of Many Names

Much like my family forest, the national dress of the Philippines is known by many names. The “terno” dress, more accurately meaning a “matching” set of clothes and sleeves in the same fabric. The “Maria Clara dress,” named after the main character in José Rizal’s Filipino nationalist novel *Noli Me Tángere*, published during the Spanish colonial period. The “butterfly dress,” popularized by Imelda Marcos, fashion icon, owner of thousands of shoes, symbol of excess and corruption, and wife to infamous Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos. The “traje de mestiza,” the mestiza dress, which acknowledges perceptions of mixed race, lighter-skinned, higher class, Spanish-Filipinas as being the ideal. The “Filipiñana:” the Filipina attire.

UCLA Professor of Asian American Studies Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns published “Your terno's draggin’: Fashioning Filipino American performance,” in 2011, exploring the semiotics of the dress “creatively interpreted by diasporic artists as a dense metaphor for the proper and improper Filipina” (Burns 199). The terno traditionally is a marker of passage for young debutantes, promoting hetero-normative strictures, and a symbol of the conflicts that arise between generations of Filipinas. Burns describes a theatrical performance called *de blues*, which depicts the titular “draggin’ terno” on a 30-year-old debutante’s second debut. Her mother insists on finding her daughter a suitable husband in the traditional dress, but the daughter bemoans the occasion, saying, “The cotillion is one of the ‘three evils of the Pilipino culture’ along with ‘Capitalism and Catholicism’” (200). In this example, the terno as a symbol of femininity, gender roles, class, coming-of-age, and cultural identity are magnified and perceived through a generational lens; as younger generations grow away from Western colonial values and traditions, the icons of Filipino culture warp in symbolism. Burns argues that the terno does not have a fixed meaning when it comes to body and gender politics but rather a fluid one that adapts

to changing social beliefs and contexts. Additionally, unlike scholars like Thorstein Veblen, who Burns cites in her work, Burns does not distinguish between fashion as being adaptable and national costume as being stable; the terno is an example of how costume evolves over time.

When it comes to the performing arts, such as Burns' recollection of *de blues*, she writes: "Multidisciplinary performance and visual arts such as *de blues* [...] "expose a body," one enfolded in the terno, in multiple national contexts. The genealogies of the terno I construct here emphasize concepts of alteration and transformation, and resist facile binaries of the nation as traditional and intact and the diaspora as a space of "undoing" and modernity. Instead, I read the terno as an emergent popular form whose deployments provide spaces of immense possibility for performance artists in the Filipino diaspora [...] The modifications and reconstructions of the terno in Filipino American performances are interjections into the larger discourse of US multicultural liberalism, the Philippine nation's multiple colonial histories, and the circulation of Filipina bodies in contemporary globalization" (201).

Burns adds that this interplay between gender, race, and sexuality "denaturaliz[es] the idea of a seamless relation between the national costumes and the bodies that wear them" (201). As a biracial, American-born woman raised in a Western culture, I have always grappled with my identity to Filipina culture. Was I Filipina *and* American? Was I Filipina-American? Asian American? Mixed race? Super mestiza? Could I feel connection to my heritage even though my exposure to the culture was filtered through American eyes? Was I one or the other or everything or something else entirely? Fellow biracial Asian American arts activist, choreographer, and scholar Phil Chan helped me conceptualize and define myself on our own terms. I interned with Chan and the nonprofit he co-founded with Asian American ballerina Georgina Pazcoguin, Final

Bow for Yellowface, and his work has been highly impactful on my own research interests.

While interning, I read his book of the same name, in which he wrote:

“Having more than one strong culture you belong to at the same time can feel, not like having two legs to stand on, but like not having a place to stand at all. Really hard. To know you look like your parents but are different from both of them, and will have drastically different experiences because you don't fully belong to either of your parents, your race, or your heritage.

It's taken me a while to feel complete in my cultural identity as a biracial person. I only recently rejected the idea of being "Half." [...] So I've started claiming I'm Both. As with the optical illusion of the old woman and the young woman: the image itself hasn't changed; just how you are looking at it changes. Being biracial, and in my case, bicultural, has allowed me to question what aspects of both of my cultures do I actually own. Can cultures be owned? I can think about the meanings of "cultural appropriation," inclusion, and diversity in the arts, in America, in interesting ways that I hope to share” (Chan 17-18).

As I study the terno and understand both the costume and my culture through my mixed lens, I understand more the complexities of this project. I am not just recreating a pretty dress. I am not just recreating Mama Aida's dress. I am not just making a symbol of being Filipina. I am, as Burns says, altering and transforming the terno to fit my identity, expanding on its evolutionary nature to encompass my own complexities and stories.



8) *La Bulaqueña*, Juan Luna's 1895 painting of a woman from Bulacan Province in an older baro't saya (*Baro't Saya Wikipedia*).

The structure of the dress originates with the “baro’t saya,” comprised of the “baro” (blouse), a rectangle “pañuelo” worn on the shoulders, and a short “tapis” wrapped over a longer “saya” (skirt) (Mangosing). Mama Aida’s dress is more 1950s, with a fit and flare gown and detachable butterfly sleeves. The photos I have as reference are sepia-toned, but she recalls the dress being a light cream color and the pop of color on the sash and cape being a deep red velvet. With these facts, I sourced materials as best I could, choosing fabric that felt most like the photo and embroidered flower appliqués that gave the same impression as the original. This was Catja’s version of Mama Aida’s dress, with my artistic and creative liberty influencing my choices more than intense focus on accurate replication.

Patterns and Patience

After piecing together the many facets of my family history—the immigrant story, the colonial narratives, the cycles and transgenerational patterns, the heirlooms of memory—I felt ready to focus on the star of the show: the dress. The patterns became more than just puzzle pieces and measurements. They became a labor of love, a meticulous process of recreating the dress with relative accuracy while also focusing on my intention. Unlike the original dress, which was made for a beauty queen and the sole daughter of a doting father, I was making this dress for me, for Mama Aida, for Mommy, and for Mang. The dress was not only supposed to be beautiful but also supposed to honor and preserve their stories with every stitch. I wanted to link together their experiences, highlighting their similarities in strength and survival, and distinguishing between the unique circumstances and contexts surrounding their lives. This dress was never intended to be just for me. This dress is for my family.

Mama Aida taught me how to sew when I was little. I remember our first project together was a simple quilted pillow with multicolor squares. I remember pressing the pedal and stitching maybe 3 squares together, then Mama Aida finished the rest. I have always had a tendency as a creator to rush to the final product rather than enjoy the process. It is not that I get bored with the process; it is more that I have a vision in my head and am impatient to make that dream a reality. With this mindset, I have a tendency to cut corners and rush so I could see if I even succeeded with my rough pattern-making and measurements based more on gut-feeling than what the actual



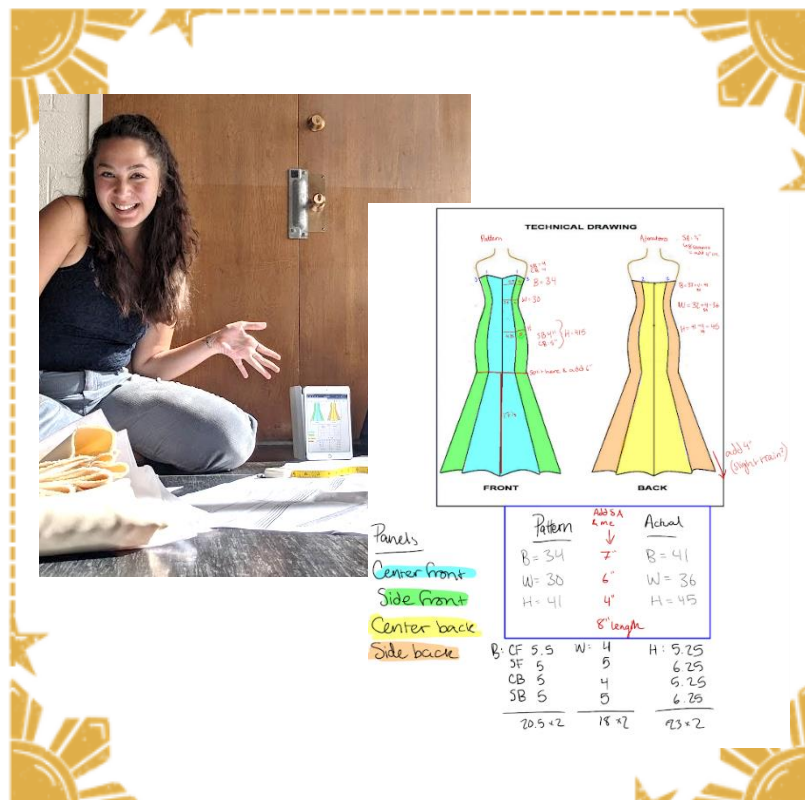
9) 2015 - Caught in the act! Mama Aida always documented my impulsive sewing projects. Viggo would even join in the fun!

measuring tape reads. Mama Aida is the complete opposite. In high school, deep into my pre-professional ballet training, I would get an idea for a leotard after my evening classes and would stay up late into the night frantically sketching and cutting and sewing and fitting until it was wearable and looked beautiful—as long as you did not look too closely at the unfinished seams.

Mama Aida would wake up early, undo my stitches, and redo the seams so that they were perfectly finished. Sometimes, she would take my experimental projects and re sew them when I was at school. She would always show me what she did, always trying to teach me a lesson in patience and detail rather than enabling my frenetic creative bursts of energy. She kept me grounded, as she did in most aspects of my life. In school and in life, I was an anxiety-filled, high-achieving perfectionist who was terrified of criticism and failure. Even before I started going to therapy to learn how to calm and focus my mind and emotions, Mama Aida taught me

in her own way. She knew that my creativity was one of the few times where I felt free to be messy and expressive, focusing more on how I felt than how I thought other people perceived me. She knew that I despised measuring myself because the ballet environment was so critical of my weight and my size, that sewing my own dancewear was my way of reclaiming my body and sense of self. So, she gently demonstrated her meticulous attention to detail, leading by example, rather than criticizing my method. I learned that sewing can be as much about the creative process as it is about the product, another version of enjoying the journey as much as the destination.

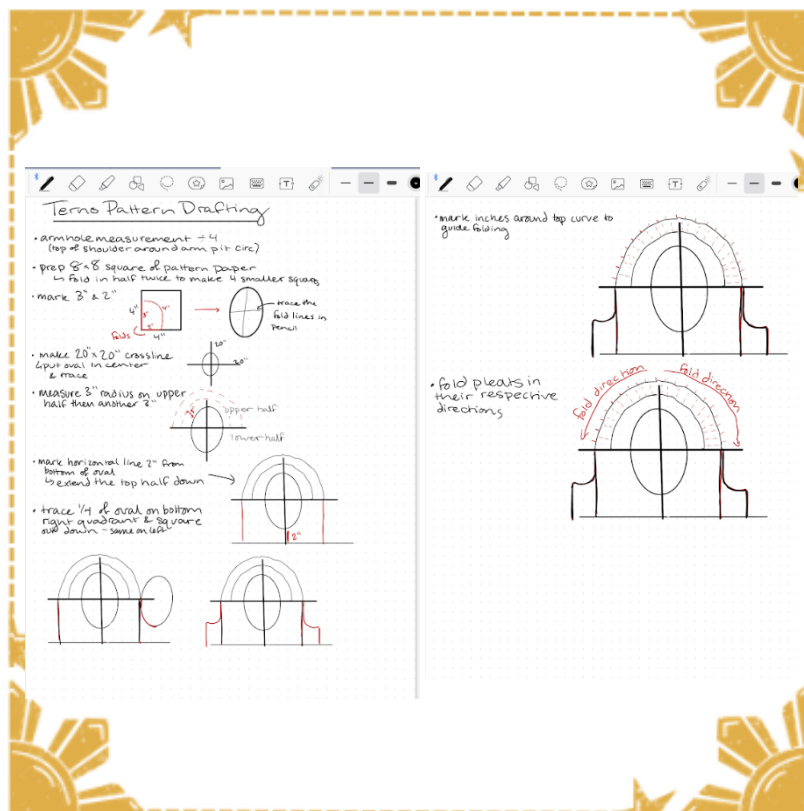
I ordered a basic mermaid dress pattern from Etsy to serve as the foundation for the gown, then I took measurements of my bust, waist, hips, hip-to-knee, hip-to-floor, knee-to-floor, and armpit-to-hip. As I adapted the pattern, which was a standard US size 12 made for a much



10) Oct. 16, 2022 - I learned that taking many measurements at various increments is incredibly tedious yet unbelievable helpful!

shorter person, I realized that taking my time with preparation and measuring saved me from mishaps and strife later.

I drafted the terno sleeve pattern from a video online by a Filipina sewing expert who wanted to help younger generations retain and celebrate their culture through fashion (Hontomen). For such a structured sleeve, this video was surprisingly straightforward. The key was to use interfacing that was flexible enough to slide on and off the arm but stiff enough to maintain the soft, rounded shape. The velvet neckline and cape with the white floral appliqués were the most straightforward and relied more on my interpretation of the original than my exact replication, especially since I could not source the exact same florals nor see how they were attached to the bodice.



11) Taking notes and sketching the pattern from the video into GoodNotes before drafting it to scale.

Deconstructing the Past and Reconstructing the Present

Reconstructing Mama Aida's dress was not only about recreating an iconic piece of my family history. More importantly, this was an opportunity for me to reconstruct my family history from the threads of knowledge my ancestors passed down and to deconstruct the patterns of behavior and anxieties that we inherited from generations of trauma and conflict. 'Breaking the cycle' is a common theme among families, especially for children of immigrants establishing themselves in a new country and culture. My siblings and I are in a position where we are both children of an immigrant and children of an American, both establishing maternal Filipino roots and growing paternal American branches.

My initial plan was to reconstruct Mama Aida's terno dress as closely as possible. Then, I would literally deconstruct the dress and figuratively deconstruct the family narrative by seam ripping each stitch by hand. I considered turning this symbolic procedure into a more public performance art event, inviting my closest friends, faculty, and family to help break the cycle with me. I knew it would be painful to take apart the project I poured so much time, energy, and love into, but I thought it would be pertinent. Breaking the cycle of transgenerational trauma is painful; it takes time and a loving community to heal. I thought the dress would symbolize the trauma beneath the image of loving mothers, devoted wives, and strong women.

However, as I began my thesis research, I eventually realized that this process was going to be different than my usual sewing habits. I consciously chose to slow down my process and take my time with pattern-making, sewing, fitting, and measuring. Unlike my projects of the past, I did not have a burst of inspiration and was not riding the adrenaline wave of an original idea. Rather, I was energized by the fact that I was finally setting aside time to understand my family, my history, and my culture more than ever. Most importantly, I had the agency to choose

what I wanted to research and how I wanted to proceed. If I changed my mind as I learned more, no one would tell me I had to stick to my original hypothesis and plan.

This agency and freedom to adapt my work turned out to be the biggest blessing. My initial hypothesis was that deconstructing the dress would be a powerful, symbolic deconstruction of the painful, inherited memories of generational suffering, especially for the women in my life. However, I realized that as I constructed the dress and constructed my family history, we healed along the journey. Once again, Mama Aida proved to me that slowing down and purposefully setting aside time to talk with family is more valuable and impactful than rushing to the end. In the healing process, there is never an end goal. Humans are complex, and life comes with endless cycles of hardships, successes, traumas, and joys. Therefore, healing is a lifelong process, and even a never-ending process when it comes to multiple generations.

I visited Mama Aida for the first time in over a year midway through my research. She was in Vancouver, visiting my aunt, uncle, cousins, and great-grandchildren for the first time since before COVID. My mom's family has a tendency to not see each other for many years: my mom did not see her older brother, my Tito Toty, for three decades; in fact, she and her siblings now only rarely reunite, and never at the same time. I have never seen my mom and all four of her siblings all together, and I do not know if I ever will. Up until recently, her family was split across the globe. I still have cousins back in the Philippines, and my family members that immigrated to the States now live primarily on the West Coast in California and Canada. According to the dozens of photo albums my mom made, the last time they had a full family reunion was in 2002, before Viggo was born.

Tito Raul, my uncle who lives in Marina del Rey, California, gave me the greatest birthday gift of plane tickets to Vancouver when I asked if I could visit Mama Aida, who now

primarily resides with him and my aunt, Tita Nobuko. He had organized for her to reunite with our Canadian relatives, and he thought it would be best for me to go and connect with the family, too. It was my first time to Canada, my first time meeting my Tito Rey since I was an infant, and my first time meeting my cousin, Rafael's, kids with his wife, Stephanie. This trip felt both like a mini family reunion/meeting and a research trip. I brought my half-finished terno dress and sleeves with me in my carry-on luggage, imagining how Mama Aida would react when she saw me in it.

After a long day of flying across North America, I finally arrived in Vancouver and drove to Surrey, British Columbia with Tita Marita and Mama Aida. My mom and Tita Marita were bookend siblings, not close in age or personality. My mom is bubbly, chatty, and vivacious. Tita Marita is more reserved, quiet, and serious. Despite these differences, I saw so much of my mom in Tita Marita, and I saw so much of Mama Aida in both of them. They all shared the same deep love and devotion to their families. Tita Marita took care of her grandkids when my Rafael and Stephanie caught COVID just before I visited. Watching her prepare little Madeline and Avery after school snacks and bathe them before bed reminded me so much of my own childhood with Mama Aida. When the two of us talked about my senior year and all that happened since I last saw her when I was 12, I felt the yearning for connection between two sisters across a vast continent. My family is used to being split apart, but that does not mean that they are completely detached from each other.

During my first night in Surrey, I told Mama Aida to close her eyes as I shimmied into my dress, struggling to get the zipper (the third zipper I had ever sewn and quite finicky despite me actually following the directions) all the way up my back. I slid on my terno sleeves, which were surprisingly simple to draft the pattern and pleat, then said, “Open your eyes!”



12) Showing Mama Aida her dress recreation in Canada - Jan. 9, 2023

She cried. Then, she immediately started telling me how to fix the parts that did not fit perfectly yet, just like old times. After taking many photos and hugging each other over and over and over, we sat in her bed and started talking about this project. We did not stop talking for all five days I was visiting. I recorded hours of family history from her. One simple question about when she competed in Miss Urdaneta or what her parents were like opened the floodgates of her memory. A downside to having her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren so spread

out and so busy with their own lives is that many of us do not have time, or do not make time, to sit and listen to her. She is lonely, and she has been lonely for a long time.

Recalling intense events from the past and remembering the range of sensations from a long life is emotionally taxing, and it is taxing in another sense to take on the memories as a listener. It is a balance of validating past experiences without becoming stuck and releasing tension without crumbling. Sometimes, family members say that Mama Aida is stuck in the past or lives in the past because she still brings up traumatic memories from the time just before she left the Philippines in Mar. 1980. She never went to therapy or took time to process all that she experienced. Talking about mental health and therapy was very taboo until recent years, and she was focused on bringing her children to the States and making sure they all set the foundation for a better life across the world. It is a typical immigrant narrative with individual complexities and challenges weaved in. I learned that simply being there, holding her hand, and listening to her talk about her life was helping her process the past. She would pause many times during her storytelling to say, “I have not talked about this to anyone,” or “I haven’t thought about that in many years.” I hardly prompted her to speak. The act of sitting in the bedroom with her, being fully present, and listening allowed her to finally open up about the most painful moments of her life mixed into broader stories of her children, her family back in the Philippines, and the funny stories of her own childhood. It was an adult version of her bedtime stories for me. After every long conversation we had, she would say, “Thank you for listening,” and I would squeeze her hand.



13) Holding hands and sharing stories, featuring my "hija" tattoo in Mama Aida's handwriting on my wrist and the sleeve of the gray sweater she knit.

We spent many hours talking and crocheting together, another craft that she mastered. I own so many knit and crocheted garments from Mama Aida, and my mom and siblings had all recently taken up the craft. They taught me basic stitches and got me started on a simple scarf before I arrived in Canada. As always, I proudly showed Mama Aida my progress, she praised my efforts and new skills, then she would begin teaching me tips and tricks for making my work even cleaner. With every stitch, I would stitch together new information that she told me. I preserved her skills and stories in the yarn, and as the scarf grew longer, my knowledge grew deeper. Hand-stitching is a meditative, repetitive process, one that can focus, calm, and ground the mind. Mama Aida and I would crochet together for hours, either in comfortable silence or while swapping stories. Machine sewing is also repetitive and focused, but with a faster pace and

more to pay attention to, it allows for less space for meditation, let alone trying to hold a conversation with someone. As I gained a new crafting skill, I also learned yet again how important companionship is in the smallest, quietest of moments. In our first interview for this research back in April 2022, Mama Aida confessed that she does not have many close friends anymore because the ones she had in Baguio betrayed her trust. I wanted to counter this mentality by prioritizing community, compassion, and companionship, healing through practice, not only in verbal processing.



14) Crocheting and storytelling - passing down stories and stitches.

On Jan 16, 2023, the day after my 22nd birthday and three days after returning home to Virginia from Canada, I wrote in the notes app on my phone: “There's no way I can deconstruct this dress now. I thought I was reconstructing the past, with all the tumultuous memories and experiences attached. What I didn't anticipate was the memories I'd make while constructing my

version of the dress. Viggo sitting on the couch next to me playing video games while I cut fabric. Mikka watching YouTube with me while I hand stitched the sleeve pleats. Mommy helping me pin the dress during my first fitting. Mom's face when she saw me wearing a version of her gown. I can't destroy these memories. This gown is now full of healing. Of family. Of connection and reconnection.”

I learned that the process of healing, much like the creative process, cannot be rushed if it is done well. Having intention, being present, and taking time is vital. The end result or the final performance is symbolic, but it does not always reflect the actual timeline and method. So, after Canada, I decided to focus my energy on creating. I added details to the dress from what I could see in the photos, and rather than trying to be visually accurate, I prioritized making the dress with the love and attention that I spend on my family. Love is hard work, and keeping up relationships is more important than keeping up appearances. My relationship with the dress developed into a way to honor my family, especially Mama Aida, and the sacrifices my family made and continue to make behind the scenes to contribute beautiful, brilliant works to our communities. I spent time making sure the dress fit the woman I am today, the woman who was shaped by my ancestors, rather than making myself fit the dress. Often, in costume fittings for ballets throughout my life, I found myself being asked by teachers to shrink myself to fit old costumes. I took up sewing and design to reclaim my body and counter these ideas that women should conform to fashionable ideals and suffer for outward image. This dress became a celebration of female strength, resilience, beauty, intelligence, and agency. For Mama Aida, this dress was a way to jump back into her past and talk about all that she experienced, to open up to her granddaughter, and to let go of some of the heaviness of her past weighing on her mind and soul. With this dress, I could wear the weight of my family history while also preserving my

ancestors' legacies. This dress was a stepping stone to opening up conversation and listening to my elders. This garment holds my family histories in its panels, brings my family together, and pays homage to my ancestors. Why would I want to rip that apart?



15) Synchronicity: Mama Aida and I realized that I am now the same age she was when she was competing. How different our lives are from each other.

Creative Process in Photos



16) Mama Aida's dress was custom made free of charge by Madonna dressmaker in Urdaneta on the condition that she modeled their work and returned the dress after the pageant. When I prepared to recreate the dress, she sent me sketches from memory of the dress she last saw 67 years ago.



17) Taping the mermaid dress pattern I bought on Etsy.



18) Checking the pattern length in Myers studio during Fall Break. Mama Aida is barely 5' and I am 5'7", so my sizing was significantly different from hers!



19) Back in the Theater Costume Shop to sew the long panels of fabric together.



20) My mom found the yellow dress from her youth, which she wore to perform traditional dances before going to the US on exchange. I tried it on when I visited home. She is pictured next to her dad, Antonio "Lolo Doc" Pavia, wearing a barong tagalog shirt, and her childhood friend, "Jinky," in a terno.



21) The moment of truth—will it fit? Were my measurements and pattern adjustments correct? Thankfully, yes! The vision is coming together.



22) Before I asked my mom and Mikka to help me with fittings, I twisted and bent to pin the dress. Sewing became a workout.



23) Making the iconic butterfly sleeves - After following drafting tutorials from Filipino creators online, who expressed wanting to help fellow Filipinos retain and celebrate their culture, I carefully drafted the sleeves on a paper bag, cut the pattern onto the fabric, and hand-stitched the pleats to make the sleeve. After adding a metallic gold trim to mimic the sparkly trim of the original, they were complete.

YouTube: *The Sewist*



24) First try on! One of my friends eagerly requested work-in-progress photos, so I staged a living room photo shoot. It was exciting to see it all come together, piece by piece.



25) Dance Honors Thesis Photo Shoot - Photos by Haley Lowenthal. I rushed to finish the details and forgot to iron!



26) Apr. 1, 2023 - Honors Thesis Concert - my fellow honors scholars kindly let me set up an exhibit in the dance lounge showcasing the photos and quotes I collected from Mama Aida. It was very emotional to see it all come together. I cried the night before reading everything and taking in the story.



27) Aug. 17, 2011 - Apr. 1, 2023: When Mama Aida and I were apart, we would Facetime as often as possible. When I presented my research and my recreation of her dress for the first time, I immediately video-called her to show her my display honoring her.



28) Apr. 20-22, 2023 - Senior Dance Capstone Weekend - My family traveled from Virginia to watch me dance and to help me set up my final display. This was the third time Mommy and Mikka had seen me dance at Conn and my dad's first time seeing me dance live since high school.



29) "Hay Naku!" by Catja Christensen. Program notes: "Hay Naku! is an interpretation of and homage to the traditional Filipino tinikling dance, a dance my mom learned back in her birthplace in Baguio that I've always wanted to learn. Libertango is a piece I love that my dad often performed in a brass quintet when he was in the US Air Force Band. "Hay naku" is an expression my grandmother always said in exasperation when I did something silly growing up, and I imagine this is what she will say when she sees a recording of my dance!"



30) My dancers added their own personality and flair to the choreography. It was a joy to experiment with them in rehearsal and to have conversations about cultural identity and expression.

Cast: Arisa Hara, Susanna Procaro-Foley, Ava Dobro, Isabelle Custer, Annabelle Breton, Lara Beckius, Moqu Alqudah, Kiera Franciskovich, Kelsey Halio

Lighting: Ankit Pandey - Yale Designer

Photography: Sean Elliot



31) In typical Catja fashion, I finished making my cast gift the day of the last show. I embroidered patches with symbols of imagery we used in the dance and ironed on "HAY NAKU" to white t-shirts. The Capstone show was titled, "Patchwork," so I put my sewing skills to the test and made individualized shirts.



32) To my incredible cast: Salamat, thank you, for this amazing gift of a dance for my family and my community.

Reflections

Although this project, I know that this is just the beginning of a lifetime of research, conversation, and creation, perhaps even a generational one. As much as I focused on transgenerational trauma primarily stemming from divorce and focused on the women in my family, I am intrigued by transgenerational lessons and traditions that benefit future families and individuals. What can we inherit and learn from our ancestors in a more positive light? Remembering both the positive *and* the negative aspects of the past are vital to gain a holistic understanding of familial interconnection and to move forward with the lessons of the past.

This is the concept of "Sankofa," an Adinkra symbol from the Akan people in Ghana, meaning to "go back and get it," or to look to the past to move forward. I came across this symbol first in my Dance History course then again on several occasions during a two-week

dance intensive in Ghana in March 2023. Although from a culture and a land that is not my own, this symbol resonates so much with my research interests. There is much to learn from immersing oneself into cultural exploration and go on journeys of self-identification. As much as reading about history and culture is valuable, so too is living it. Talking to elders and forging community provides stability and gives meaning to life. Processing life with others is healthier than suffering alone.



33) Two versions of the Sankofa symbol I saw in Ghana, both featuring traditional kente cloth weaving.

This project is the first leg of my Sankofa journey, and perhaps the final leg for Mama Aida. It is time for her to leave the past behind, as she has learned many lessons from it and has passed her knowledge onto her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I hope that this project has lightened the load on her soul and spirit, a heaviness she has borne on her own for a lifetime. I hope that every time I wear her dress, my dress, our dress, that I remember our history and feel the gravity of our past with the weight of the fabric. I hope the swish of the cape reminds me of the wind behind my back, my ancestors guiding me. I hope the butterfly sleeves

remind me to stand tall and proud, like Mama Aida on the stage. I hope the red velvet neckline with the white floral appliqué reminds me to lead and keep my chest up for the uncertain future. I hope the flare of the hem reminds me to stay grounded and rooted in my family and our collective knowledge. I know that by deconstructing the trauma and painful stories in my family and reconstructing our history and values, we will be better suited to constructing a future that is lighter, brighter, and even more joyous.

My mom texted me when I sent her our story and a first draft of this thesis: “The terno is just the symbol. You are doing the healing.” For me, the terno is a symbol, a tangible piece of our history, a starting point from which we can dive into these deep conversations and memories. But there is something empowering about realizing that the key to healing a family is to take time together. To take time on the journey of life. To take time.



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Maraming salamat!

Catja Christensen



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