

Article

# The Story of the Black Family: What It Means to Be Black with an Interracial Family Tree

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**Abstract:** This paper is using a critical personal narrative and decolonization theory to share the story of my family. It is the story of my great-grandfather, who was the child of a slave master and a house servant, and his story of survival, using historical documents. Race and racism have been a part of my family from its origin, because of the cultural and social meanings of Blackness, which are discussed in the article.

**Keywords:** critical family history; racism; interracial family; critical orientation

## 1. Introduction

I started doing research on my mom's father's family back in 2000. I was a young History major student and thought it would be interesting to find out more information about her dad who, according to his birth certification, was born in 1894. The first roadblock that I ran into was on the Louisiana vital statistic website; it stated that the State of Louisiana did not issue birth certificates for Black people until after 1900. I later discovered that Catholic churches might have had baptism records for slaves, but that was the only documentation of slaves and their children at the time. There was a Slave Schedule with the census in 1860 that only listed the ages of the slaves under the master's last name.

I decided to try again in the recent years, and what I discovered was enlightening. What is missing from the records is as important as what is found (Apple 2004; Margolis 2001). What I found was that my grandfather was the child of his slave master and his mother was a house servant. I followed the European family history to pre-American Revolution to immigrants from Ireland. However, the African family history was truncated with slavery. There are several extrapolations from the data that this paper explores: The purposeful truncation of African culture to African slaves and their descendants, the value of women's history and the multilayer problem of being a woman and a non-White minority, the problem of the dichotomized thinking in terms of race and ethnicity, and finally, the disconnect between the attitudes and culture of the past and issues of the present.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

I am using critical personal narrative, decolonization theory, and critical race theory (CRT) to tell my family narrative. Mutua and Swadener (2004) wrote that using critical personal narrative is a form of decolonization that is telling a story with the goal of bringing social change or movement. Ladson-Billings (2009) illustrated how CRT and decolonization are interconnected:

CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of powers (p. 9).

One of the primary purposes of this piece using Critical Family Studies (Sleeter 2015, 2020) is to show that, historically, families have both benefited or suffered from racism



**Citation:** Anderson, Joy. 2021. The Story of the Black Family: What It Means to Be Black with an Interracial Family Tree. *Genealogy* 5: 6. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5010006>

Received: 20 October 2020

Accepted: 12 January 2021

Published: 14 January 2021

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and from both the deconstruction and reconstruction of the American family story. The dichotomy of white and black is a part of my family story. In my family history, White and Black families are the same families and to not think about how racism has created this dichotomy limits our ability to change it.

I am focusing on the tenet of CRT of experiential knowledge or, in other words, counterstories (Solórzono and Yosso 2002). Stories are powerful, and they can help people to see others' perspectives that might differ from their own. Brenè Brown (2017) argued that, for African Americans to be enslaved for years, the society had to culturally dehumanize them. They had to decide that they were objects, not people. The US Constitution counted slaves as three-fifth of a person on the US Census, even though they had no right to vote. It was not until the 13th Amendment that African American men had the right to vote, and until the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s, African Americans continued to be disenfranchised in voting (and unfortunately, this continues in current times in some parts of the United States). The oppressor is as affected by this dehumanization as the oppressed. Brown continues to argue that dehumanization is not natural to the nature of people and there is no way that one or two generations can resolve all the years of dehumanization within our society.

Counterstories can have more power now than ever before. Counterstories must be beyond the surface level of information, because interaction between White people and African Americans has always existed, but this problem of dehumanization that has been inserting in the conceptualization of race has skewed concepts of how people think of each other. Counterstories do just that: counter this idea of dehumanization.

### 3. Historical Context: Connecting the Past to Current Times

My grandfather was born after the American Civil War had ended (1865) and the era known as Reconstruction, which ended in 1877. The 13th Amendment was added to the US Constitution that ended slavery as a whole. In 1868, the 14th Amendment was created which stated that the newly freed slaves had the rights of "due process of the law" and that they had "equal protection of the law". Finally, the 15th Amendment opened up the right vote to Black men (US Courts 2020).

At the same time during the Reconstruction era, Southern states created what has been known as 'pig laws'. 'Pig laws' are a punishment of African Americans for trivial crimes by re-enslaving them. There was a 'vagrant status' that made it illegal to be unemployed, and given the fact that they were just coming out of slavery, it was purposely to punish them for just being (PBS 2017). The 'pig laws' were expanded and the precursor to the Jim Crow laws that were finally challenged in court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was the US Supreme Court decision that issued an era of segregation in the US society. Thus, historically, the United States went from being a slave state from 1776 until 1865, and then, in 1896, became a segregated society. The goal was separate but equal, but with the culture of dehumanization, the purposeful stratification of the races equally did not exist and I would argue that it still does not exist in the US society as a whole yet.

Then, the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* demanding that an era of desegregation begin. They had a *Brown v. Board of Education II* in 1955, because the extent of the changes that were coming needed to be explained (US Courts 2020).

After years of slavery and segregation, we have been a free society for about 70 years. The point of this paper is that our dichotomy of race is flawed and colored with this history that tends to be unspoken. While this story is my family's history, it is the history of a lot of African Americans in the United States, especially the truncation of the African history from our family stories.

#### 4. My Family

My mom's father died in 1952, when she was three years old; so, she does not remember him that well herself (Cynthia [Higgenbotham 1949](#)). His name was Dave Pipes Higgenbotham<sup>1</sup>. Most of the information available to piece together his family's story was from census data and historical documents. He was the child of a slave; therefore, his birth date is not concretely known; as stated previously, Louisiana did not start recording birth certificates for African Americans until 1900. On my mother's birth certificate, it is stated that his birthdate was August 15th, 1894 and that he had a second-grade education. However, on the 1900 US Census report, it is stated that he was born in 1882 ([US Census 1900](#)). On War World 2 draft papers, it is stated that he was born in 1885 (Dave Pipes [Higgenbotham 1942](#)). I was not able to find a death certificate for him. When I went further into the family history from the information shown on the 1880 census, it comes to light that most likely his father was a white American plantation owner with two families: a Black family and a White family with seven kids in each ([US Census 1880](#)). Dave Higgenbotham and his siblings were named after their father's siblings ([US Census 1850](#)). My grandfather and his siblings are marked as Mulatto and their mom is marked as the wife and as being Negro. On the 1900 census documents, Dave's brother Eddy is listed as the head of the household, although the father is marked as present on the census.

Going back to the family history, Dave's father John J. Higgenbotham's records show that he previously was a private in the 16th Infantry of the Confederate Army ([Louisiana Civil War Service Records of Confederate Soldiers 1861–1865](#)). On the 1860 United States Census documents, they had a "Slave Schedule". John Higgenbotham's father, who was named John B. Higgenbotham, is shown on it with all of his slaves. The slaves had no names, but ages. It also has labels of the number of owners, number of houses, the number of male slaves, the number of female slaves, the total number of slaves, the number of fugitives, number of manumitted, and the number of deaf and dumb individuals ([US Census Slave Schedule 1860](#)).

I discovered that John B Higgenbotham was in a position of authority in the Methodist church in their small town in Louisiana. As I mentioned earlier, I was able to trace the White side of the family back to the pre-American Revolution time. They were colonists from Ireland to Virginia to Georgia and finally, after the Louisiana Purchase, Louisiana. There are records of the family in the American Revolution, at the Constitutional Convention, and the land deed of the property in Louisiana signed by Abraham Lincoln ([United States 1997](#)). There is also a signed contract of the selling of African slaves to John J. Higgenbotham and his wife Mary (although not related to my family). Census data shows that John J. Higgenbotham had a relationship to (and on the 1900 Census, it states marriage to) Mildred Kent, who is marked as a house servant on the 1870 Census. The 1870 census listed John B. Higgenbotham and his family first, then, John J. Higgenbotham and his White family, and then, Mildred Kent and her three kids at the time are right underneath ([US Census 1870](#)). In the 1880 census, John J. Higgenbotham is listed as the head of the household with Milley Kent, who is listed at Milley Higgenbotham and their five children at the time ([US Census 1880](#)). The only information on Milley Kent is that she was born in Mississippi and her mother was born in Virginia, and that she was named after her mother. Milley Kent's death certificate has her marked as being 106 years old when she died, but the reality is that no one knew how old she was exactly, because there were no birth certificates for slaves ([Higgenbotham 1939](#)).

#### 5. Analysis and Thoughts

It is important to talk about the larger sociocultural phenomenon that was happening at that time, because we, as a society in the present, do not talk about the shortfall of the Reconstruction and we talk about the American Civil Rights Movement as a fulfillment

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<sup>1</sup> In doing the research there are several spellings of the last name Higgenbotha but, upon further examination it is apparent that it is the same family being addressed. It is also spelled Higenbotham, Higginbotham.

of racial equality. Talking about historical events in time can help to see the magnitude of racism and dehumanization that occurred, and the effects that it has on the present. The Civil Rights Movement was both progress and a “Band-Aid”. It is time to push further while admitting that imperfect progress is progress.

First of all, this story is significant, because it shows value (or rather than a lack of value) to life. The state of Louisiana did not issue birth certificates for African Americans born before 1900. Even though slavery had ended in 1865 and the 3/5th Compromise in practice was stricken from the Constitution (the language of the 3/5th Compromise was never taken out of the US Constitution), Black people still did not have enough value for the state to have a record of their birth ([US Constitution n.d.](#)).

How does this affect us in the present? I had a consultation for a surgery and the doctor asked for my family history to see if the sickness ran in the family. I had no answers for her, because I had no information beyond my mom’s, because vital statistics for slaves did not exist, and the doctor seemed clueless as to why I would not have that information. This is information that should be taught in medical school to physicians in training.

Next, this family history personifies how slavery “broke” the idea of the “nuclear family” for both Black and White people, but especially for Black families. Black women were valued for their physical labor abilities and for their reproduction abilities ([Tibsy 2019](#)). The children of slaves were sold. Many of the Confederate monuments that are being argued as historical treasures are the exact places where Black people were sold as property. My grandfather knew his father as his owner. How was he supposed to define what his role was as a father himself, based on that example? While for many in the US, this is not their grandfather’s story, it is however only two or three generations beyond their grandparents’ stories. Ripping children from their parents and having your father being your owner has an extremely lasting effect beyond the generations. Every White wife thought their husband would have an affair with a Mulatto house servant, and every house servant thought their master would leave their wives for them ([Aslakson 2012](#)). The whole household was living in trauma. Slavery was traumatic to everyone involved.

## 6. Conclusions

The African ancestry was purposefully systemically erased from families of African Americans. It was a little amazing how easy it was to trace the White side of my family history, but there was no way to trace the African part (both my mom’s grandmother and my father’s family). For myself, personally, the other great-grandparents were of African descent, but there are no historical documents that trace them beyond themselves. I did a DNA test to confirm my discoveries while doing my historical document analysis, and it confirmed what I found, but the part that was a cause for pause was realizing that the information given on that DNA test was the closest that I would probably get to discovering where in Africa my family originated. It listed countries and diverse regions, but it is better than nothing. However, I still wonder after reading the names: Who really was Mildred Kent?

Mildred Kent was the slave (and later his wife) to John Higgenbotham and had seven kids for him, and that was the beginning of tracing the African history of my family. Hence, what made John Higgenbotham’s White children so much different than his Black children? This story of having children for slaves is a familiar story in our times. I wish I could find more information on Mildred Kent. I want to know more than just the fact that she was a house servant who could not read and write and had seven children for her master. I want to know more than the fact that she lived to be between 90–106 years old, which is impressive for that time epoch, when living to 65 years old was a privilege. I want more information of my grandmother, my mom’s mother.

I come to three conclusions with this information. Christine Sleeter used Critical Family Studies with her White college students to help them see that their families benefited from racism and White supremist. My family is the prime example of what happened when “Black” became a part of the family dynamics. The only thing that made my family

different from the White family was because John Higgenbotham had children with a house servant. We will never know what went into that relationship; but, using other historical references around the time period in question, we can extrapolate some ideas about it. We know that, most likely, this was not optional for her. Black women during slavery did not have a lot of choices when it came to advances from the master. Sadly, there was very little support too. The White women were jealous and could be vindictive as a result, so the Black women were on their own to navigate this very inhumane system. All the women involved were the primary victims in all of this: Both the White wife and the Black lover. The White wife was acknowledged as the primary partner, but during that time, women were not treated well, and to know that your husband was having an affair with a Black servant had to hurt and cause friction in the household.

The second conclusion is interconnected with the first. A well-meaning friend made the comment that the problem with Black people in the United States is just because of the breakdown of the nuclear family. That is a flawed perspective that is not situated in the reality of history. The reality is that slavery has torn up the nuclear family of Black people, as mentioned previously. Women's value was wrapped in their reproduction as well as their ability to work. The primary purpose of reproduction was to sell the offspring as slaves (Tibsy 2019). Slavery was a horrible approved practice of dividing families. Then, there is the fact that my White great-grandfather should never be referred as my great-grandfather; he was the slave master/the owner. The power dynamics cannot be ignored in this phenomenon.

My final conclusion from this information goes back to the fact that Black people have been trying to have their cries of freedom since slave times, and throughout time, it has been viewed as rebellion and revolt. In our current society, we are in a position to have real change happen, but there is a still clinging to these perspectives of racial stratification and that Black people just need to accept their lot in life and live with the reality that never should have been. The challenging part is the reality that this is a post-colonial problem, not a Black or White problem. American slavery was a response to colonialism, but colonialism was throughout the world. The concept of race was created to control the people with racial divisions. We have been approaching family dynamics with a subconscious racial hierarchy and stratification, and this suggests that maybe we need to approach this in a different way. I end with a quote by James Baldwin. He said: "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced" (Baldwin 1964).

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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