Critical Family History: A Tool to Dismantle Racism

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Abstract: As schools and universities are under attack for educating students about race, racism, and other topics with deep roots that directly link to our current societal challenges, we must find and utilize meaningful tools of resistance. This article is a collaborative auto-ethnographic narrative inquiry that presents the stories of two professors and two students who engaged in the reflective work of critical family history (CFH). Currently, merely mentioning the word racism is so troubling to many politicians whose ideas are rooted in White supremacist ideology that laws are being passed in the U.S. to ban books on certain topics about race and LGBTQIA+ issues so that students cannot even read about these topics. A Tennessee law recently passed in both the state House and Senate seriously diminishes and limits how professors teach putative “divisive topics” related to race and its societal impact at the college level. A valuable teaching tool, critical family history, offers an impactful approach for us, especially for educators, to face the truth about the complexity of our lives and our ancestors, specifically in relation to issues of race—in a subtle, yet powerful way that is grounded in courage, wisdom, and compassion. The findings in this article are both surprising and troubling, which points to why educators need to seek ways to incorporate CFH in their work to dismantle racism.

Keywords: critical family history; anti-racism; lynchings; relational realms; Ikeda

1. Introduction

We must first consider ways that racism in all its forms roots itself in the consciousness of some people, while others challenge and resist such ideas. At the same time, “we must also admit that the poison of ‘race’ and hegemony, or white supremacy, is now part of global ideology and structure” (Hilliard 2014, p. 28). One of the most pressing questions, then, is as follows: how are we, as educators, to continue to fight back against racism in these troubling times when politicians seek to silence us? While sociologists engage in heated debates over terms related to the social construction of race, for this article, we will focus on the definition offered by Omi and Winant (2012):

Racism is the product of modern history: empire and conquest, race-based slaver, and race-based genocide have shaped the modern world; they have been met with resistance and sometimes revolution, also race-based in crucial ways. This is where race comes from: the drive to rule, and the imperative to resist. (p. 963)

The societal problems linked to race permeate all areas of our lives, but it is often challenging to connect the dots and recognize our personal links to this bigger social issue. Some educators seek to use engaging pedagogies to challenge students’ unconscious biases linked to racism, which is no easy task since the walls of denial are tall and thick. It is clear that “unpacking our levels of consciousness and intent requires hard work. First, there needs to be unswerving, unnerving, scrupulous honesty. Individuals need to become less focused on feeling very tolerant and good about themselves and more focused on examining their biases” (Moule 2009, p. 325). This article is for those educators who
continue to believe that future teachers, medical professionals, lawyers, and others we teach show up on campus with biases that need to be unpacked and deconstructed. Ijeoma Oluo (2020) clarifies for us all that “the beauty of anti-racism is that you don’t have to pretend to be free of racism to be anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself. And it’s the only way forward” (as cited in Anderson 2021, p. 160). One such project to support students to begin to explore their biases and racism within their lives is called critical family history (CFH), which was first conceptualized by Christine Sleeter (2008). Using her approach to challenge racism within our families is at the heart of this research.

Bhattacharya (2016) recognizes the complexities and challenges of this kind of work when she writes the following:

Speaking from the heart—integrating raw emotions, in/tangible incidents, and a state of being—is a legitimate form of negotiation for those situated within de/colonizing epistemologies. Anger, compassion, and confusion are legitimate states of being in conflicting places, and de/colonizing ontologies drive these emotions. Such emotions can be recorded, documented, explained, contested, and interrogated as scholarly, as worthy of publication, and as a means of documenting social history as it unfolds. (p. 317)

Racism, like colonialism, impacted us all in the world, and we must be able to explore, dialogue, and confront the many ways that our hearts and minds have been tainted by these oppressive systems and provide a space for this kind of raw honesty to examine it.

Through utilizing a decolonizing approach to research and turning the researcher’s lens inward, we all need to “look in the mirror” of our own family’s history and keep our eyes open to look at the complexity of what we see. We need to do this work, and we need to support students on their journey of discovery as well. If we, as educators, choose to do nothing, we are complicit in the onslaught of racialized hatred and vitriol being unleashed and shaped into laws by those who depend on our lack of resistance.

This research covers a span of 5 years and is a storied bricolage consisting of the narrative reflections of four people who embarked on conducting critical family histories. Two of the sojourners were initially undergraduate students at different universities in the southwest of the U.S., who were in classes taught by the first author. One of the former students wants to remain anonymous and yet, she wants her family’s story told; she provided written permission to the first author to include her family’s story in this article. The other professor similarly wanted his family’s story told and provided written permission to the first author; however, his circumstances precluded him from participating as a co-author in this article. The second author is currently a graduate student and she maintains a strong interest in the CFH research she began five years ago. For these reasons, the first and second authors include their families’ stories as a collaborative auto-ethnographic piece, along with the stories of two others who also embarked on a journey of self-discovery by engaging with critical family history, but are not collaborators in the writing of this article.

2. The Research

2.1. Research Questions

The questions that guide this inquiry are as follow:

- What is a critical family history?
- What are ways a wide variety of educators can utilize this tool, and why should educators consider using this tool in their classes, regardless of the discipline?
- What are some findings that have been uncovered by utilizing this approach to deconstruct how racism impacts me, my family, colleagues, and former students?

2.2. First Author’s Positionality (Vicki)

I grew up in a solidly middle-class Jewish family in the deep South of the U.S. in the tumultuous era of the revolutionary 1960s and 1970s, which I mostly viewed from
television news clips on one of the three news channels available to all of us before the advent of cable television news. Due to my Jewishness, I embody a liminal existence in which I experience the privileges of being White (Mahoney 1997; McIntosh 1998), while simultaneously being derided and disrespected by the Whites who held the power and prestige in the community of my youth. As a Jewish person who was “othered” by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) of the deep South in that era, we also “othered” the Blacks in our midst who had less power and privilege than we did. This was all jumbled up in my youthful consciousness before I had the vocabulary and understanding to describe it—words which are barely emerging from me after over 50 years.

In doing the kind of work required to conduct a CFH alongside my students, I enter into an even deeper internal liminal world until now left unexamined and buried within a lifetime of a kaleidoscope of memories. The potency of the liminality of being “neither this nor that” in a world that grudgingly embraced me as a woman of Jewish descent is the unique insight that such a positionality can offer for those of us who do the deep reflective work this kind of research requires.

In my 20s, when I became financially independent from my parents and approached life with a rebellious and revolutionary spirit, I used my body and being to live and love as I chose. A couple of years after I met my future husband in Texas, who was a political refugee from Ethiopia, we had our first daughter and we became practitioners of Soka Gakkai Buddhism. We navigated life as an inter-racial couple, which gave me further insights; people constantly stared at us and would then quickly turn away as if they were not. At one point, I was excited to rent a duplex, but when my husband came with me, the landlord quickly shared that he had already rented it out, even though he had assured me earlier that we could rent it. After the birth of our second daughter, I came to see the many complex opportunities and challenges of raising our daughters who identify as Black women growing up in Texas. All of these experiences, along with entering doctoral studies as an older adult and many other life experiences, contribute to my positionality that I bring to this research.

2.3. Second Author’s Positionality (Alexia)

I was born and raised in Houston, Texas. College was an unknown for me, yet it was an expectation for me. Being a first-generation college student was a barrier that I had to eventually overcome. Not only was I a first-generation student, but being a Black woman from a predominantly Black and Brown area navigating a predominantly White institution (PWI) was another challenge. I had never felt like a minority until then. Because of my intersectionalities of being First-Gen, Black, and a woman, the way that I navigate life is very different than what it was five years ago. I am now finishing graduate school and advising first-generation students every single day.

Four years ago, I completed a critical family history class project that I did not think would go far. I opened a new chapter of my life that still has not finished. This chapter became a part of my life’s research, and this research has changed my perspective on not only how I see myself, but also how I see the students I serve. Because of my experience, I would never want a student to feel lost, unseen, unheard, or forgotten.

2.4. What Is a Critical Family History?

Christine Sleeter (2008, 2011, 2020) brought together ideas from critical theory, critical race theory, and critical feminist theories to examine family history within the context of social–political–economic–racial power dynamics. In her words, Sleeter (2008) describes critical family history as a process that “applies insights from various critical theoretical traditions to an analysis of how one’s family has been constructed historically with and through relations of power” (p. 423). This process requires that we do not get stuck in the past; rather, that we harness this research, use what we learn about our past, ask where we go from here, and how can we take action to repair collective harm?
In a foundational article on CFH, Sleeter (2011) makes a case for the need of using this practice in teacher education, explaining that “having inherited stories that legitimate our place in that system of airbrushing out the context of race and class, we need to re-situate family stories within a context of race and class” (p. 431). Ultimately, then, CFH brings together family stories, genealogical research, and historical research, along with the exploration of power and race relations in a particular moment of time. When exploring the social–historical–political context of one’s ancestors, Sleeter (2020) encourages us to ask: “Who else (what other groups) was around, what were the power relationships among groups, how were these relationships maintained or challenged over time, and what does all this have to do with our lives now?”

Over the past five years that I (Vicki) have utilized CFH in teacher education classes, and in research on my ancestors, I have expanded some of Sleeter’s original questions linked to power and encouraged students to ask other kinds of questions, such as the following: (1) What are some stories within our family that are linked to other people of different races or religions? (2) How would our family respond if I started dating or wanted to marry someone who is from xyz background? (3) How did our ancestors originally accumulate funds to start a business or buy land? (4) Historically, what are ways our family may have been oppressed or oppressed others? (5) In what ways may our family have benefitted from laws or practices that were not extended to others in society? The questions solely serve as prompts to stimulate families to dialogue and share stories.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

This research brings together ideas from a conceptual framework, called relational realms, with ideas from Ikeda/Soka studies that focus on harnessing courage, compassion, and wisdom in our roles as educators, within an ethos of a caring culture.

2.5.1. Relational Realms

Relational realms is a conceptual framework and analytical tool through which we explore ways that relationships are formed, based on the myriad of factors that impact with whom we form relationships, how, and why (Mokuria and Wandix-White 2021). Specifically, within this analytical tool we can further focus on one particular component, which is directly related to research that explores the potency of critical family histories, and that is relational cultural knowing, which recognizes “the powerful impact of culture on relationships and relationship building” (Wandix-White and Mokuria 2023, p. 52). It is through digging within our cultural backgrounds first that we can deepen our self-knowledge and recognize the ways that our cultural background influences our thoughts, ideas, and behaviors. When educators, together with students, conduct CFHs, we all deepen and broaden an awareness of the impact of our cultures and how we do (or do not) connect with each other, especially those from cultures other than ours.

Before we can authentically care for each other, we must first be able to connect. As educators, “it is through our encounters with each other, giving and receiving care, we will organically produce the empirical universals we seek, such as equality and inclusion” (Freter 2018, p. 16). If we are to accept Noddings’ (2005) view that “caring is the very bedrock of all successful education” (p. 27), then we must find those points of connection that can lead to authentic care in education. We cannot care for those people or ideas we do not pay attention to or know about, and digging within our ancestral experiences and cultures, though possibly uncomfortable, can serve to help us see how and why we do/do not relate to others’ cultures.

Many educators aspire to create a culture of care, but the very first step is to connect and engage with each other in genuinely respectful ways. Reneau (2021) suggests that “our role as educators must be to prepare students to engage conversations, to grow and learn through discomfort, listening to, and in some cases, appreciating multiple, often conflicting truths” (p. 85). It is the conflicting truths within our own family histories that we need to untangle, understand, and ultimately come to terms with that can support us in developing
a heart of compassion for ourselves and others who live with their own conflicting truths. Relational cultural knowing, within the broader conceptual framework of relational realms, serves as a strategic tool for making meaning of this kind of decolonizing research.

2.5.2. Ikeda/Soka Conceptual Framework Grounded in Wisdom, Courage, and Compassion

Within the field of education, Ikeda/Soka studies borrow from ideas rooted in Buddhist philosophy. This component of my conceptual framework offers a non-Western perspective linked to global citizenship and ideas on how to walk in the world by honoring our shared humanity. Key ideas about global citizenship come from a speech that Ikeda (2010) gave in 1996 at the Columbia University Teachers College, where he offers these qualities of global citizens:

* The wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living;
* The courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them;
* The compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places. (p. 55)

When considering the use of critical family histories, it is helpful to explore the notions Ikeda proposes about wisdom, courage, and compassion as they are linked to cultural differences and embracing those from backgrounds other than our own. If we are to move from a world wrought by divisions and create one with global citizens, we need to explore how to get to that point; CFH is one of the many pathways.

2.6. Method

This qualitative study is a collaborative auto-ethnographic (CAE) narrative inquiry that weaves together the thoughts, ideas, and stories of the co-authors who engaged in auto-ethnographic research that is presented as a narrative inquiry. This research focuses on the co-authors along with two other participants’ life stories that emerged through conducting critical family histories, and narrative inquiry as a method offers the “capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways” (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 10).

Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) define CAE as research that “involves two or more researchers who collectively use their self-stories as data” (p. 397). Within CAE, another approach linked to this study that focuses on painfully recounting stories linked to racism uncovered within our families is called “‘relational auto-ethnography’ that allows researchers to focus on and evocatively tell the lives of others in shared storytelling and conversation” (Ellis and Rawicki 2013, p. 366). The stories presented here are our data knitted together in narrative form.

Within the method of narrative inquiry, this research consists of a particular kind of story, a “collaborative story”. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain collaborative stories this way:

We learned that we, too, needed to tell our stories. Scribes we were not; story tellers and story walkers we were. Additionally, in our story telling, the stories of our participants merged with our own to create new stories, ones that we have labelled collaborative stories . . . a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant. (p. 12)

In addition to the co-authors’ stories uncovered through conducting CFH, the other narratives that comprise this research are from a colleague in academia and a former student. The former student chose to remain anonymous, but she clearly shared on several occasions and in writing that she wanted her story to be told and shared with others. While all of these stories came from auto-ethnographic research using CFH, on different occasions we collaborated through hours of dialogues about these stories, their significance, and power. Based on our collective stories, together they can also be considered constellation stories, where “meaning is uncovered through excavating and illuminating not only teachers’
[people’s] individual reform stories that are lived and told, but also a shared story that is lived and told” (Craig 2001, p. 306). In the future, you may share some of these stories, and in so doing, these very stories may become collaborative stories in your life and part of our constellation story.

3. Findings—Focusing on Power Relations in Our Ancestral Stories

The findings of this research through utilizing CFH include a bricolage of stories to illustrate the potency of this research method to help us recognize some of the many ways that racism has impacted us. While it is so much easier to talk about “those” people who hold “those” beliefs, it is so much harder to squarely face the ways that racism has impacted us, our families, and our ancestors. As Sleeter (2021) points out, it is important for people “to reflect on the embeddedness of racism in their own lives and work. As a social construction, I believe racism can be dismantled. However, that will not happen unless we examine the roots of our own beliefs” (p. xiii). CFH offers a road map on how to embark on such a journey. Much of the findings are in a narrative form written by the first author, who uses the first person “I” when describing her connection to the stories of the other collaborators.

3.1. Vicki’s Stories

3.1.1. First Encountering Critical Family History

After teaching in public schools in a large urban city in the southwest of the U.S., I retired from teaching, only to decide I wanted to continue my education. As a mature adult, with grown children who were out of college, I enrolled in a two-year master’s program, followed by a doctoral program, where I was definitely the oldest student in all the classes I took, and even older than many of my professors. That journey will be for another article, but I can unequivocally say that I constantly learned about ideas and concepts that left me saying over and over, “Why did not I know about this before?” Even though I only taught in urban schools, I am embarrassed to admit that a key area where I lacked any education was in the areas of African American and/or Latinx experiences in education, along with the deep roots of White supremacist ideology in our society. It was almost as if I had been living my life with blinders on—completely oblivious to large chunks of important pieces of history about marginalized people all around me, even though I always sensed that injustices were everywhere; I never deeply studied the roots of the injustices in my midst. As a student in an urban education doctoral program, I dug into understanding the causes of racism in our society and educational system.

At my first American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference, I attended a panel, moderated by Cheryl Matias, in which several panelists shared how they used CFH as a tool in their work with teacher educators. Christine Sleeter, who developed this approach and idea, was in the audience in this small room in a large New York City hotel conference area. I was intrigued and curious, and so my journey began in 2018 into how to use CFH in working with preservice teachers.

3.1.2. Uncomfortable Truths Unearthed—From Headstones to Highways

For someone like myself, who “missed the boat” of being able to ask specific questions of elders, I am left with snippets of memories and troves of historical documents compiled by scholars who documented stories of people who were like my ancestors. In my case, I have a distant cousin who is very much into genealogy, and together with him, I brought together some interesting pieces from some of the branches of my family’s tree that give me insight into ways my family was either oppressed or oppressed others. So, what are some of the main lessons I discovered about my Jewish ancestors who emigrated from different parts of Europe?

Ancestors on my maternal great-grandmother’s side (the Mantler family) can be traced to the early 1000s to an area in current-day Poland, known as the Posen area. This area had a thriving Jewish community (called shtetls in Yiddish), and one town in that area was
called Rogasen or Rogozno. Historians have uncovered disturbing facts about this town, where some of my ancestors may have lived in or nearby: The old Jewish cemetery was originally established in the late 1500s, and during World War II, the Germans used the tombstones to pave the streets of the town. After the war, the tombstones were covered with asphalt. While I have no evidence that any of my ancestors were buried there, I do know that the place where these mothers, fathers, children, and grandparents were buried was desecrated, and that the burial ground was destroyed and covered up with asphalt. During WWII, every person who was part of the Jewish community of that area of Posen where my ancestors once lived was killed in the Holocaust, and all have been recorded in the Central Database of Shoah Victims, or Yad Vashem. (https://www.geni.com/projects/Jewish-Families-from-Rogasen-and-Rogozno-in-Oborniki-Poland/29676, accessed on 18 November 2022).

While my ancestors left that area in the late 1800s for reasons not entirely clear to me, beyond the pervasive anti-Semitism they may have grown weary of, I now know what happened to those who remained, along with what happened to their ancestral burial grounds. Clearly, my ancestors had been oppressed, with great efforts to kill off all Jewish people, a sentiment that continues to be shared by some who base their lives on hatred.

3.1.3. (Un) Intentional Ways to Reproduce Racism

Far beyond the life of my ancestors in shtetl in Europe, I grew up in a suburban home where my family, along with most of the Jewish families I knew, sought to assimilate into the Southern culture where we lived. My earliest schooling in the 1960s was at the Jewish Educational Alliance, where almost all the Jewish children in my community began pre-school. I vividly remember my teachers and their names: Mrs. Blumenthal and Mrs. Rubinitz, both middle-aged Jewish women, and Ruby, the teachers’ assistant, who was Black. My mother meticulously wrote the name of each of the 30–40 children on the back of a large black and white photograph that included our teachers’ names, and only the name “Ruby” is listed for our teachers’ assistant. I asked my siblings and childhood friends, and no one knew Ruby’s last name. While we were never once taught to explicitly disrespect anyone, it is now clear to me that the expectations for me and all the children were clear about who we would address as “Mrs.” and who we would call by their first names. When my oldest daughter was about 8 years old and we were visiting my parents, she pointed this out to me, when we addressed the woman who cleaned my mom’s house as “Mildred” and told her to do the same. I was not ready at that time to admit to myself what that really meant.

Over 50 years after being a young child in pre-school, I am just coming to terms with this uncomfortable truth and fact. It is crystal clear to me now that as a young child, I was taught explicitly to address adults as “Mr.”, “Mrs.”, “Aunt so-and-so”, or “Uncle so-and-so”—except for the Black adults in my life who worked mostly menial jobs in our schools, in our homes, in our houses of worship, or who we knew in the community. In my childhood world, it is evident that I was clearly taught that we were not expected to respect, address, or treat Black people as we did other Jewish people or White people. It is hard for me to admit and face this undeniable truth.

A central concept that I learned early on as a Jewish child was that Jews are considered “God’s chosen people”, who have a unique and special relationship with God. As a young child, this baffled and confused me because I also learned the word “omnipotent” to describe God. I had a hard time reconciling how a loving and all-powerful God could also allow so much suffering and injustice in the world. To my young mind, it just did not make sense. For example, most Jewish people know some Yiddish words, especially those whose parents or grandparents were immigrants. There is one Yiddish word, schwartz, that I heard often when describing Black people. I remember adults using it as a kind of coded word so Blacks did not know they were being talked about; I also remember that it was not used as a term of endearment or respect. Even though Jews were never accepted, respected, or fully embraced in the deep South, using the “N” word in Yiddish was a way for Jews
to express their whiteness and a leg up in society in terms of power and privileges at the expense of Blacks.

As I look back into my younger me, I distinctly remember feeling confused about life. Within my community, I saw distinct differences in how Black people lived and were treated versus the White and Jewish people. I had far more questions than I had answers, and I remember asking our rabbi a lot of questions to try to calm my inner unsettledness. Pinar et al. (2008) explain that “(white) students misunderstand they are also racialized, gendered, historical, political creatures. Such deformity occurs—for most ‘whites’—almost ‘unconsciously’” (p. 329). To begin to untangle the ways my younger self was “unconsciously” racialized and socialized is a lifelong arduous journey, and I must find within myself the courage to continue exploring and uncovering painful truths, along with the compassion to forgive my younger self and those who mis-educated me along the way. At the core of my life, I reject these socially constructed ideas that rank people and separate us. Through continuing to ask the questions about power relations within my family history, I am able to acknowledge the wrongs committed by me or others and begin the healing and repairing—both within myself and on a societal level. If I am unwilling to face the many ways internalized racism has impacted and distorted my childhood self, I cannot expect anyone else to do this work. I am now on the journey to forge an interiority free of distortions from an unexamined past.

This struggle will require me to face the ways that Whiteness has impacted every area of my life, just by the fact that I was born in the U.S. Similarly, I must examine my resistance. While this is my struggle, it is also our collective struggle, as articulated by Feagin (2013): “We have remodeled this racist house two times, during the abolitionist and Civil War periods and again during the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, yet the household’s racist foundation today is still substantially in place” (p. 219). By turning the research lens on myself, using CFH, I recognize the multiple truths of my life that some of my ancestors were oppressed, while my family and I benefitted from oppressing Blacks who were part of the fabric of our daily lives—who were neither paid a living wage, nor respected in simple ways by even the ways young children addressed them. A direct result from the fact that the majority of the Blacks in the South during that era who worked menial jobs and were not paid living wages, such as my pre-school teacher’s assistant or the woman who cleaned our home, was that my family and other similar families were able to accumulate more wealth, at the expense of those who worked the hardest and were paid the least.

3.2. Alexia and Her Ancestral Concubine

I am now a graduate student in Performance Studies, and it was during my undergraduate work that I completed a CFH in an interdisciplinary class on multicultural education, taught by the first author. When class presentations began, I eagerly raised my hand to be the first one to share my findings with the class. I was lucky because I have an uncle who is the family “genealogist”, but I quickly discovered he was reluctant to talk with me until he confirmed my age. He still thought I was in junior high school, and it was only after I assured him that I was in college that he was willing to open up to me. As I shared with the class what I learned about some of my family’s history, I used the word “concubine” to describe one of my ancestors. The word “concubine” came from a newspaper article my uncle found that described our enslaved ancestor. At that point, Dr. Mokuria paused my presentation so the class could use that “teaching moment” and discuss what a concubine meant within the context of enslaved Black people in the U.S.

Regularly in our class, Dr. Mokuria often said simply, “No blame, no shame, no guilt”. This is because she believes that any educator who chooses to engage in anti-racism education must do so in an “aggressively and yet tenderly” (Leonardo 2009, p. 243) manner in order to keep students engaged, while breaking down the inevitable defenses that often come up, especially with White students. She further explained to students that “I know no one in here ever owned an enslaved person, but we need to be honest with ourselves
and look at our collective history with wide open eyes and consider how history and race impacts all of us”.

As a class, we took a detour to discuss the term “concubine” and its meaning; we discussed consensual sex and non-consensual sex, or rape, and then, we were asked to ponder how a woman who was considered the property of a man would engage in consensual sex? After an appropriately uncomfortable silence, we discussed how newspapers in those days might use terms such as “concubine” as a euphemism in order to gloss over the realities of the situation of a White slave-owner taking sexual liberties with an enslaved Black woman, like my ancestor. What we needed to truly consider were the power dynamics in such a situation and call this act what it was: rape. When I looked back up to finish my presentation, I saw the looks of mostly White college classmates staring back at me. I finished my presentation, and the class continued. Dr. Mokuria reminded students that these kinds of stories are nowhere in our history books, but they are part of our shared history that only we can uncover by doing the digging within our families’ histories.

After class, Dr. Mokuria and I had a long talk. Our dialogues later took the form of a published article (Mokuria et al. 2020), based on my interest in digging even further into my family’s history. A few years later, I learned about some male ancestors who were White and had a half-sister, Marcelite, who was bi-racial. Marcelite could have passed for White but we think she intentionally chose not to do so. Marcelite’s brothers visited her on a regular basis, but they speculate that although she (Marcelite) was their sister, they still had prejudice and racist tendencies. Dr. Mokuria and I talked about why Marcelite was clear that she did not want to pass and how her brothers, who were White, would never enter her home. These kinds of discussions we started several years ago continue to this day. Recently, I have been digging for more information on my ancestors after seeing the movie, “Emancipation”, based on the true story of Gordon/ “Whipped Peter”, who was enslaved in an area close by to my ancestors. The reality is that thoughts of my ancestors are always close to the surface of my mind. What I learned from doing a CFH linked me to history in ways no other class or book had. Ultimately, I recognized history running in my veins through my ancestors.

Another piece of my ancestral puzzle is that I know that one of the men who owned some of my ancestors was actually born from a relationship a White man had with an enslaved woman. When the White man died, he freed his son and left the land and the slaves to him. The complexity of this situation and the many conflicting emotions I imagine my ancestors experienced during such painful times has never left me. What must it have been like for a man to know his mother was an enslaved woman and for him to then turn around and own enslaved people? The intricacies and complexities of my story have become embedded within my heart in ways that surprise me. I cannot quite shake it as I consider the multiple layers. My story is just one example of ways a student can connect their life to some complex aspects of history left out of textbooks. The process of using CFHs can be transformative for all students—those who do the research and those who are hearing other students’ stories.

In my research, I also discovered that I have an ancestor, Hyacinthe, who was lynched, and that my second great-grandfather found his mother hanging. I felt numb when I learned of Hyacinthe’s hanging and her young son finding him. Here, is what I remember feeling: I never knew Hyacinthe, but when I connected the dots, I instantly felt like I knew her. I felt a huge range of emotions that was a little aggravating because the oppression is not just history. I did not live in the times of slavery, or Black Codes, or Jim Crow, and neither did the white people in my class, but if I can feel what I felt and cry in the slightest bit over Hyacinthe whom I never met, why is it that my white counterparts still have the same [White supremacist] ideology that we (Black people) have to get over these times? I personally cannot get over the centuries of oppression because there has been no remorse over it. (Mokuria et al. 2020)
My numbing pain when I face the truth about some of my ancestors and their struggles has served to motivate me. I now work with first-generation college-bound students to successfully support them in navigating and flourishing at the collegiate level. The emotional labor I experience should not be the burden of descendants of enslaved people. White people must face the painful truth about their ancestors’ roles in our collective history and ways Whites have been beneficiaries of a centuries-old system that has benefitted them. Recognizing, acknowledging, and having genuine remorse over our past is needed as we dialogue together to move beyond a shameful past and create a future beyond the pain.

3.3. Climbing out of the “Ivory Tower” and Facing the Truth: An Academic’s Experience

The first author (Vicki) shares the following stories based on her interactions with a colleague and former student who both conducted CFHs. As I embarked on the journey to require my students to conduct CFHs, I felt the need to explore my family’s history also, so I could be a sojourner together with my students. I began working at another university with a White man who I began to work alongside as we taught the same class; I introduced the idea of using CFH to him. He gave me permission to share his story with you. Though uncertain and reluctant at first to do a CFH, he agreed, and like me, he wanted to conduct research on his family, since we were asking students to do the same. Shortly before the class was set to start, as William was conducting his research, he became keenly aware of a gnawing frustration about what he uncovered about the family land he spent so much time on growing up. He acknowledged his discomfort in a chapter we co-wrote: “That is how White supremacy functions: It works at all costs, by eliciting feelings of anxiety and fear and irritation, to obfuscate our histories and resist any critical examination of our ancestors. It seeks to maintain silence” (Davis and Mokuria 2023, p. 227). To his surprise, William found the precise plats, showing the land his ancestors moved onto after forcing Indigenous people off the land. It was not easy for him to realize that very unpleasant aspects of our collective U.S. history were directly entwined within his family and life. The land his grandfather was able to buy—where he and his family spent much of his childhood—was once the land of Indigenous people, now displaced.

When conducting the research and looking for the original plat of land through the Bureau of Land Management, William was at first elated and surprised when he saw—for the first time—the original plat with his family’s name on it, along with names of neighbors whose descendants still own that land. He writes,

If I were to have seen this image a few years ago, I would have found it rather interesting, or even something to print and save for family records. However, looking at it now is jarring and mournful. The image represents the first time this area of Osage land was scarred with lines, objectified with arbitrary dimensions and boundaries, and designated to White families. The survey, its lines, and its significance comprise a sign which promotes Western conceptualization of space. (Davis and Mokuria 2023, p. 230)

William experienced something very similar to Alexia: history no longer consisted of random and abstract facts to learn about in a class—far removed from our lives. Rather, history was directly and undeniably linked to him through his ancestors. The impact of this realization can be jarring and uncomfortable because once we face certain truths in life, there is no going back and unknowing these things. In every subsequent conversation, we discuss his family’s land, along with the challenges of working with students on facing our country’s collective colonial and racist past, especially with students who are very resistant to this kind of work and live in very conservative places. We, in academia, cannot pontificate about racism and the many ways it has impacted us all unless we, too, are willing to “climb out of the ivory towers” that surround us and do the arduous and painful work within our lives and our families first.
3.4. An Inheritance like No Other

Finally, one other “collaborative story” left an indelible mark on me and forever changed how I see many simple objects—in this case, gavels. This may become a “collaborative story” for you, as you learn about another student’s history through her asking for family stories linked to race or racism. That was the simple question that broke wide open the student’s family’s history: are there any stories at all in your family about how different family members feel/felt about others of different races or religions? At the end of the semester, I asked Liz (pseudonym) about sharing her presentation with others, since it is so powerful and she responded with “I would love for you to share my story” (personal communication, 5 September 2021).

I usually give students about 2–3 weeks to conduct CFHs, and it was just a few days before the deadline. Liz emailed me frantically because she could not find anything at all about her family’s history and said that it was all just kind of boring. “They were all simple poor farmers”, she told me, “and there’s really nothing at all I can find”.

“I understand”, I said. “Just ask any of the elders in your family if there are any stories at all they know about how any family members felt about people from other religions or races”. Much to her surprise, one of her elders started talking, and with the students’ permission, I am sharing what she discovered, and what I found out when I did further research, based on the one link she included in her presentation.

What Liz discovered was that within her family, photographs of the town’s lynchings were passed down in her family because her great grandfather and his friend took photos when there was a lynching from what she called “the hanging tree” in this small rural town. Much to her shock and horror, she saw the photos, and then she did some research. She learned that a large university had documented that the “hanging tree” in the center of her town’s square where the lynching took place had died, and it was within that slide that she included a link that I further explored. In Liz’s presentation, she acknowledged that one of her ancestors had participated in the lynching by taking photos and admitted that some of her ancestors were racist. The photos he took, she learned, were to be kept as a form of “inheritance” in the family. Liz was shocked to discover this, and discussed it with her sister, who shared this, “some brush it off saying, ‘They are old, and are set in their ways,’ but I still do not think ‘being old’ gives them a free pass to be racist”. It takes courage for someone to admit the prejudices or seeds of distrust, hate, and racism within the hearts of ancestors or loved ones, but it is important to remember a quote by Boris Cyrulnik that “our history does not determine our destiny”.

Liz further explained that she had witnessed a movement in her own father’s heart when her sister married a young man of Mexican descent and that her niece was now the “apple of her father’s eye”. Liz believed her father had shifted his views about race and people from different backgrounds since he became a grandfather. Liz also addressed a key point for those of us who conduct CFHs. She reflected on her mother’s side of the family, and she felt that her maternal grandparents “broke the chain” of racism by becoming Jehovah’s Witnesses, a faith Liz expressed, “accepts all races of people”. Her mother, she shared, was not raised with the same racist views about people from other races as her dad had been. When conducting CFHs, we are often faced with the challenge to simultaneously hold contradictory truths and emotions within our hearts. This kind of conflict is felt in the very marrow of our bones as we face and admit some uncomfortable aspects of our ancestors and families. The challenge is to find the space and compassion within us for these unsettling ideas to coexist within us. Liz now believes, “Growing up in a dominantly White family with such strong viewpoints has been rough, but I believe that my sister and I have broken the cycle of passing down racism”. By facing, contemplating, and openly discussing uncomfortable issues within her family and ancestors, Liz determined to create a different future based on painful lessons from the past.
The subsequent research I conducted was every bit as disturbing to me as it was for Liz to have to acknowledge and admit that her great-grandfather was not “just a poor farmer”; he had also participated in their town’s lynching by photographing a young Black man killed by a mob, whose descendants continue to live in her community. In one of the photos, Lige Daniels was the young man who was lynched in 1920, and who died at the hands of a mob of 1000 people on 2 August 1920. The iconic photo taken that day shows a group of men and children, some smiling, as they witness Lige’s death for a crime it was never proven he committed (Burroway 2019). Lige was 16 years old, and in 2018, nine members of his family were present when the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) erected a marker to remember Lige’s life and death (EJI Equal Justice Institute 2018).

It was 8 years after Lige’s death that another young Black man, Ceodep “Buddy” Evans was hanged on 21 May 1928 by a mob in the same town and from the same “hanging tree” where Lige was killed (Strange Fruit and Spanish Moss 2016). At some point, the town’s “hanging tree” died, and a local carpenter came up with an idea of what to do with the wood. Using his woodworking skills, the carpenter made several gavels from the dead tree’s wood, and he presented those gavels to local judges and garden club presidents—to anyone who used or needed a gavel (Chamberlain 1966, p. 51). A sacred object in our society that is most often used by judges to indicate the court of law is in session had been made from the wood of a “hanging tree” that had died. Within the U.S. imagination, gavels speak loudly without words, saying, “I represent the laws of this land, which will be respected”, when a judge or elected official knocks the gavel on wood to signal the beginning or ending of a judicial hearing or the opening or closing of a democratically elected body of representatives (Parker 2018). A local carpenter/craftsman created gavels from the same branches that had been used to hang most probably innocent young Black men killed extrajudicially at the hands of an angry White mob of men and boys. All of this was documented for me to read, and I felt a pit in my stomach. Even now, I feel that pit in my stomach because of the way a sacred symbol was desecrated with such intentionality. I decided this story must be told and it may grow beyond being a collaborative story with colleagues and students to become a collaborative story with you. Let this story sink in; think deeply about it. A seemingly ordinary gavel most likely continues to be used by a judge or president of a community organization in the rural South that was made by a carpenter who chose to use the tree’s branches from his town’s “hanging tree” that died. Without extending research based on a critical family history, this story could have remained buried and hidden. Schools can be such places, but first, we must be honest with ourselves and allow for a space for healing to happen.

4. Discussion

Within the conceptual framework of relational realms, this research supports the value of relational cultural knowing. The findings gleaned from conducting CFHs can lead to relational cultural knowing, since it is “the goal of understanding generational beliefs and practices that may impact our ability to build authentic relationships with people whose cultural background is different from our own” (Wandix-White and Mokuria 2023, p. 59). It is in understanding the conflicts and complexities of our own cultural backgrounds that we can open ourselves up to respect, value, and honor the cultures of others. CFH is a pathway toward relational cultural knowing, a key component in caring and authentic relationships.

Ikeda’s ideas about “wisdom, courage, and compassion” are visible throughout the narratives presented here. Ikeda speaks of the wisdom to see the interconnectedness of all of life when he writes, “from ancient times, the ability to perceive the invisible threads interweaving all things has been considered a kind of wisdom” (Ikeda 2021, p. 89). When the participants conducted their CFHs, we all described in unique ways feeling a palpable, yet invisible, connection to our ancestors and their experiences. This kind of difficult, yet important, research can give birth to wisdom by opening our hearts and minds to the
experiences of our ancestors and those in their environments that we may have never once imagined.

Conducting a CFH requires courage because we have no sense of what we will discover about ourselves or our ancestors. For each of us who found painful truths in our ancestral treasure houses, it took courage to face those truths and allow whatever feelings we experienced to wash over us and through us. It takes courage to hold conflicting truths within us and be at peace—knowing that within our families and ourselves, we and our ancestors have both hurt and offended others and simultaneously, we have been hurt and offended by others. Both are true. To persevere in engaging students to face racism requires courage. As Jewell (2020) writes,

Our liberation is bound together. I cannot dismantle this structure alone. You cannot break it down on your own. We are in this together. Our ability to disrupt our own complicity and the comfort of others has already begun to create little cracks within the system of racism. (p. 147)

It requires courage to challenge injustices, such as racism, especially the roots within us. The stories shared in these narratives point to a key concept Ikeda (2021) emphasizes about what is needed in our world: “the courage not to fear or deny difference but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures and to grow from encounters with them” (p. 7). By sharing, reading, and contemplating stories of those from cultures other than our own, we grow.

Finally, a gift of CFH is that we are able to expand our understanding and our hearts by facing and sitting with uncomfortable aspects of ourselves or our family’s history and in the collaborative stories of others. Through sharing our stories in CFHs, we are able to see others’ pain and discomfort linked to our own stories, and possibly to extend grace and forgiveness to ourselves and others. Ikeda (2010) writes “we need to feel the compassionate energy that beats within the depths of all people’s subjective lives where the individual and the universal are merged” (p. 197). This kind of research through time and space, where we creatively empathize with our ancestors and those in their world, holds the potential to expand our compassion in a way uniquely accessible when conducting a CFH. For Alexia, whose ancestor was lynched, while she may never feel justice can ever be served, she may grow comfort in learning that a young white girl, whose ancestor photographed a lynching, seeks to “break the chains” of racism that she acknowledges in her ancestors. Finding that “compassionate energy that beats within” all people is possible through conducting a CFH and learning about other families’ stories.

5. Concluding Thoughts

In writing this article, a surprising truth became visible that I had not seen before, though right in front of me for the past three years. I was not ready to see it. The two students—one Black and one White—who conducted CFHs at different universities within a couple of years both found evidence of lynchings in their families. They did not have to seek far; both college students simply asked elders in their families questions about race, racism, or oppression that they might know about, and both students learned that their family members were directly linked to lynchings. Collectively in this country, we will never be able to heal unless we face our past honestly and seek to find and/or create ways to repair and make amends for wrongdoings either inflicted by or on our ancestors. Within our families, classrooms, and in our communities, we need to have these uncomfortable and difficult conversations and not shut them down or silence those who want to address them. We need to listen to each other and learn from each other.

In addition to the uncomfortable truths likely to be uncovered through conducting a CFH, this kind of work can lead all of us to educate ourselves even more about gaps in our education. All of us can see history with fresh eyes. The lessons students learn from each other when conducting CFHs serve in “broadening of memory today [which] is necessary because this subverts the hierarchy between the self and the other, and this makes a crucial contribution to history” (Passerini 2011, p. 248). The collective cultural
stories and memories shared—based on CFHs—give us all a more robust understanding of history based on memories and research linked to students’ families’ stories.

At the same PWI where I initially embedded CFHs in my class assignments—in order to push students to explore the power dynamics within their families—one student at one point shared about her family owning AK-15 rifles to shoot and kill wild boars that regularly came onto their farm and were very destructive. Though taken aback, I found myself saying, “Well, you sure had experiences in your life I cannot even imagine—never having considered shooting a wild boar with an AK-15 in my life”. A couple of years later, I ran into this young woman, who came from an extremely conservative, rural family. She gave me a big hug and said, “Because of your class and everything I learned about my family’s history and that of others, I have since taken two history classes on African American history because I realized there is so much I never learned”. Running into her, I realized that making history “come alive” for students can serve to spark a deeper desire to further explore history, in ways the students may have never considered. Clearly, doing CFHs can serve as a portal for deeper study for students and contribute to a larger goal of becoming lifelong learners.

We, as educators, must be creative and find innovative and powerful ways to challenge racism in its many forms. At the Texas chapter of the National Association of Multicultural Education conference in 2023, Geneva Gay (2023) spoke about “resisting resistance”, and she was directly addressing the floodwaters of resistance to laws that started with the New Deal and continued to be passed through the Civil Rights Movement that politicians on the right are seeking to undo. Policies and laws related to women’s reproductive rights, voters rights, the rights of LGBTQIA+ people, etc., are now being upended in courts and state houses. We must “resist the resistance” to progress and demand a more inclusive society that honors and recognizes all people. The U.S. is at a crossroads and “we, who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes”, as Ella Baker reminded us in 1964. The work of racial reconciliation continues.

This kind of work is for all of us. As teachers who are White (or who are beneficiaries of whiteness), we must take up this mantle. Matias and Mackey (2016) remind us educators to do the following:

burden yourself and not your students, meaning, the hopes of dismantling white supremacy in education should not rely solely on the shoulders of students of color. Instead teachers, many of whom are white, should begin to shoulder some of the burden of race. In shouldering some of the racial responsibility teachers have a greater likelihood to stop emotionally projecting their feelings of guilt or discomfort onto students. (p. 48)

CFHs can be one of many potent tools in our toolbox to provide students with ways to examine how our families were either oppressed and/or oppressors—both. It is sure to be uncomfortable and unsettling, but we must face these truths in order to truly heal and authentically reconcile with ourselves and each other. The same substance used to make medicine can also poison people; the question is how to transform the poison into a medicine that can function to heal, rather than harm (Cunningham 2018). We, as human beings, are capable of embracing contradictions and feeling love and appreciation for ancestors and all they have done so that we can enjoy life now, while simultaneously acknowledging and facing painful truths about our personal and collective pasts.

All educators in higher education can, and should, consider creative assignments like CFHs for their students. When students are in college, they are young adults who are at the perfect age to explore parts of their past that most parents protected them from when they were younger. This kind of robust research can be helpful for college students in all disciplines. For example, if a health professions educator were to ask future nurses or doctors to conduct a CFH that is linked to their family’s medical history, the students would no doubt learn about ancestors that were/not insured and why; treatments family members received (or did not) for a wide range of issues; and statistics about people like their ancestors in terms of medical experiments/practices and who developed them and
who they did the experiments on. In this way, history and statistics come alive for students and they can directly see how issues of race and oppression are connected to their lives, rather than reading about abstract stories of strangers within medical journals. This same thinking could be applied to students who are becoming urban planners, attorneys, or business people. For those who are becoming realtors, recognizing how their ancestors either benefitted or suffered from redlining might give them important insights into their own family’s wealth (or lack thereof) by recognizing how redlining impacted generational wealth. These ideas similarly apply to students studying law so students can admit and accept ways their ancestors directly benefitted or were harmed by laws in the past.

One point is clear. If anti-racism educators are to continue in this pedagogic practice of challenging and resisting racism, we must continue sharing ideas and tools to challenge ways of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of racism in all its forms. Warren (2013) points out that “racial literacy is learned” (p. 120), and it is incumbent upon all educators to admit and recognize this. We must examine how robust—or not—our own racial literacy is and take steps to further educate ourselves. Conducting a CFH can help us all in this process.

For us to heal beyond a painful collective past rooted in hatred and racism, we must continue to look at the reality of our past and create a future that honors, respects, and makes space for all human beings to fully develop ourselves and flourish. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) at the end of “now let us shift”:

We are ready for change
Let us link hands and hearts
together find a path through the dark woods
step through the doorways between worlds
leaving huellas (paths) for others to follow,
build bridges, cross them with grace, and claim these puertas (bridges) our “home”;

si se puede (yes, you can), que asi sea, so be it,

estamos listas, vamonos (we’re ready; let us go)
Now let us shift.

Let us remain hopeful that each of us will shift, and all of our hearts will expand.

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