

Family History Research Instructions

Inspired by and adapted from materials created by
Sharon Martinas - [Challenging White Supremacy Workshop](#); the [Catalyst Project](#);
Doug Bowen-Bailey - the [Cracking the Shell of Whiteness](#); and
Nicole Litwiller from her project with [Mistress Syndrome](#) and [Yoga Roots on Location](#)

To prepare for the Family History session, research the questions on the following page about your family. If different branches of your family have very different experiences, research one or two sets of ancestors. We acknowledge that for a number of reasons--including death, gender identity, slavery, adoption, sexual orientation, and more--not everyone has access to their biological families of origin or their ancestors. It is important to note that the ability to trace one's genealogy and ancestry is an inherited privilege not easily accessed by African Americans, the majority of whom are descendants of enslaved people. We encourage you to research the history of the family you were raised in and/or think about your life path and how it has brought you to where you are today. Some things to keep in mind:

- The goal of this exercise is to obtain information about our families, to hear the family myths and stories that have been passed down through the generations. It is also an investigation into the gaps, silences, and the white-washed parts of our family stories.
- The goal of this exercise is not to confront, have conflict, or create defensiveness (though these dynamics may already exist in your family). You are the best judge to know whether or not to engage your family members during this exercise in larger conversations about the roles white privilege and white supremacy have played in your family's history. If it feels appropriate to you and there is an opportunity to have these conversations, then go for it. If it feels like trying to have those conversations will inhibit your ability to get the information you are looking for right now, that's okay too.
- Use questions 1-7 as an interview tool for family members, tailoring them to your subject. Ask questions that you think will help the person open up. You may not be able to answer all of the questions. If there is a storyteller in your family, start with that person.
- Use active listening and ask follow up questions.
- Look for differences in experience based on gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation.
- Remember that this can be a very challenging exercise. Be sure to give yourself a good amount of time to contact people, have conversations, process the information, and prepare for the session. There are many complicated emotional issues that exist in our families. Take care of yourself as you do your research. Be aware that it may bring up a lot for you emotionally, and seek out support if you need it.
- OPTIONAL: As you are gathering information, create a timeline of your family's history. Focus on survival, resistance, and privilege. You can use words, pictures, drawings – be creative. Or you may want to write out a narrative.
- OPTIONAL: If you are interested in doing more research about where your family came from, where they settled, or more about the political and historical context your family experienced, here are some resources that might be helpful for you: www.rootsweb.com www.ancestry.com www.ellisland.org www.cyndislist.com www.familysearch.org
 - Local libraries or state/local historical societies of the town your family lived often have lots of information about specific families and the history of the town. They often have archives including photos and other historical documents.

Family History Research Questions

Inspired by and adapted from materials created by
Sharon Martinas - [Challenging White Supremacy Workshop](#); the [Catalyst Project](#);
Doug Bowen-Bailey - the [Cracking the Shell of Whiteness](#); and
Nicole Litwiller from her project with [Mistress Syndrome](#) and [Yoga Roots on Location](#)

Before you begin, read “Critical Family History” by Christine Sleeter <http://christinesleeter.org/critical-family-history/>
And “Genealogy and Anti-Racism” by Diane Kenaston <http://christinesleeter.org/genealogy-and-anti-racism/>

1. Where did your ancestors come from and when did they come to what is now your home country? If your ancestors came from another continent, what circumstances (political, social, economic) impelled them to immigrate? If you have indigenous ancestors, how and when did your ancestors’ homeland become part of the U.S.?
2. Where did your ancestors first settle?
3. Describe the obstacles your ancestors faced, noting differences based on gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, language, culture: finding work; finding a place to live; traveling; going to school; marrying and raising a family.
4. Were they targets of violence? If so why were they targeted? Are there stories about members of your family being agents of violence? If so, against whom?
5. Were they eligible to become citizens? Did they? Do you know why or why not? Did any of your ancestors lose their citizenship or have their rights as citizens violated?
6. What kind of organized support networks did they have? E.g. Familial; religious and cultural; social; neighborhood; economic (co-ops, credit unions, business associations, labor unions, etc); political (community organizations, neighborhood associations, political parties, etc). *How did the practices of your ancestors’ support networks impact specific peoples of color? If the practices were oppressive to people of color, did your relatives acquiesce, object to, resist or initiate them?*
7. If some or all of your ancestors are of African, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian or Pacific Island, Arabic, or mixed racial/continental origin:
 - a. How did institutions of white supremacy oppress them? List three examples.
 - b. Did organized networks of European Americans oppress them? List three examples.
 - c. How did they resist these different forms of oppression?

Questions 8-15 are intended for you to answer after you have completed your research.

8. What family traditions were taught to you?
9. How did you experience race as a child? Modeling by parents? External environment?
10. Did your parents explicitly teach you about your race? If so, what did they teach you? If not explicitly, what implicit lessons did your family teach about your race?
11. If you are white, what messages did you receive from your family about people of color? Did you have opportunity to get to know people of color? If so, at what age and was there any reaction from family and friends?
12. What are some pivotal points in life that you remember being aware of racial inequality?
13. Can you think of a story from your life that illustrates your internalized racial superiority (for white folks) or internalized racial inferiority (if you are a person of color)? Try to think of a specific instance.
14. What benefits and privileges can you identify throughout your family history and your individual life path?
15. How did your family history and life experiences lead to you actively working against racism?