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Critical Family History and Migration: Introductory Essay

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Inspired by the work of Christine Sleeter and Avril Bell, among others, the articles that comprise this Special Issue seek to respond to questions focused on the relationship between family history and the processes of migration and colonisation and how this might impact on a family's sense of itself today. In developing this Special Issue, we sought to better understand the context of family memories in the colonial past and their reverberations into the present, how both memories and silences can tell us more about immigrant and settler colonial narratives, and how we might come to terms with 'surprising' histories. We also wanted to explore how the networks of family, power, and privilege—along with notions of collective identity and inheritance—are enmeshed and intertwined as part of the complex processes of mobility and migration. We were curious to understand the role of identity and when emigrants ceased to hold one identity and take on another; in other words, in our context, when did our ancestors cease to be Irish, Welsh, or Scots and become 'New Zealanders'? Finally, we wanted to ask questions about the ethical issues raised in doing critical settler family history work: what are the ethics of memory for the dead, as well as for the descendants of families and individuals?

Critical family history is naturally an interdisciplinary field. Accordingly, this Special Issue reflects this, with authors writing from a range of disciplinary standpoints. Collectively, the contributors to this Special Issue ask how we might use family history narratives, in the context of stories of migration, immigration, and 'renewal', to interrogate the processes of colonisation and the postcolonial condition. We posit that critical family history might allow us to better reflect on the processes of migration as a constant 'state of becoming' and ask questions about families in colonial contexts and their roles in the migration, settling, and unsettling processes over time and place. Taken as a collection, these articles explore several related issues, such as the relationships between settler families and the resident Indigenous communities with whom they lived and worked, and how these relationships have changed over time. They also explore how norms around identity and social roles were shaped or have been resisted in the trajectories of family narratives, and why certain stories and memories have been celebrated across generations while other stories have been silenced, side-lined, or forgotten.

Critical family history offers a new—and a familiar—lens on the past. Family history (both oral and written) is, in many respects, one of the oldest forms of telling stories about the past (Evans 2015, 2021). Certainly, when seen in the context of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing, sharing, and remembering past experiences, stories, and exploits, the family unit (irrespective of how that is defined) looms large (Aplin 2021). Family history is also a highly respected genre of scholarly inquiry, given impetus from the 1980s by the work of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall and others, often with a focus on gender, domesticity, and complex social paradigms (Davidoff and Hall 2018). Academic historians owe a huge debt of gratitude to genealogists and armies of family historians who have, for many years, tirelessly picked their way through historical and archival materials to decipher, translate, transcribe, and record traces of human experience that today significantly enrich our understandings of history. In summary, it might be

said that family history, in its broadest sense, helps to humanise the past by placing the lives of individuals and their ancestors at the centre of narratives, establishing a personal connection between past and present, and creating a 'golden thread' through time.

Genealogy is critical to family history inquiry. Scholars of the practice of genealogy have also described 'generational history' as being akin to a science, requiring precision and sharing commonalities with genetic research that seeks to establish chains of identity in DNA (Mills 2003, p. 260). It has even been argued that a conservative interpretation of the practice of genealogy could rest on its history of investigating bloodlines in post-Civil War America (Mills 2003, p. 263; Evans 2022, pp. 10–11). More recently, revisionist histories have reshaped genealogy as a major field in understanding the social history of the twentieth century. As part of that shift towards a social historical mode, one that arguably changed museums, film narratives, and teacher education, identity shifts also took place as we defined historical actors and their 'value' in the everyday and in our own personal backgrounds. In Australia, for instance, the shift from 'convict stain' to families now embracing convict ancestors has occurred as historians began to rewrite the histories of convicts as people with great pluck and fortitude, as well as agency and creativity, in the context of European colonial history (Evans 2015, 2021). The courage to recognise the violence that characterised colonial frontiers, coupled with a sense of positive history around European and Indigenous family inheritance, especially but not limited to the example of Aotearoa New Zealand, where interracial marriage was more common, also suggests a maturity of national reckoning around inter-generational stories. Notwithstanding this, in the field of colonial history—which typically draws on archival records produced in the colonial period—the sources often slide over individual family narratives and tend to focus on larger structures and processes. We seek to argue here for the importance (and necessity) of 'writing back' the family into critical narratives of our colonial past and how these narratives inform and infuse with the present.

There has been for decades, too, a growing interest in family histories around the world (Evans 2022) and what seemed to be a thirst for the discovery of records from all kinds of angles, including from state-run institutions.[1] As more people in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, especially those of British and European settler origins, have sought information about their family histories, they have drawn on genealogical research methods to access birth, death, marriage, and shipping records. Their painstaking attention to detail has helped to maintain the purposeful work of public records' offices and official archives. Historians of social lifeworlds, too, note that the many thousands of users of public records' offices over the years have been genealogists (Brown-May 1998, p. xii; Evans 2015, p. 7), and this work has been critical in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the research discoveries of family historians have been a boon to researchers of Waitangi Tribunal claims. Solving the puzzles and mysteries in family lore, such as gaps, silences, and mistakes in family knowledge, is not for the faint-hearted; it means developing a detective's eye, as historian Tanya Evans notes (Evans 2015, p. 9), and often a thick skin. The skills of genealogists are underpinned by methodological approaches to piecing together historical fragments in an 'imaginative and empirical practice' (Nash 2002, p. 29). Networks of genealogists in the community also benefit from the peer support and development offered by professional associations and societies with their own publications and, increasingly, digital resources (Evans 2021; 2022, p. 11).

If the genre of family history is now well known, both to genealogists and historians inside and beyond the academy, then 'critical family history' seeks to extend the methodology and approach one step further. A term first coined by the American academic and education activist Christine Sleeter in 2020, the concept invites and challenges historians to revisit the past through a critical lens, purposefully situating the study of family history within broader historical contexts that speak to power, authority, and, frequently, structural inequality (Sleeter 2020). As Sleeter notes, 'critical family history challenges historians to ask about their ancestors: Who else 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?' (Sleeter 2020). We therefore appreciate critical family history as a concept that brings together genealogical research and family history study with the analytical tools of critical social science. Critical family history is also personalised history, and as Sleeter has noted, it is as follows:

> a lens for viewing the long arc of history as social structures and human relationships that were solidified generations ago continue to play out today. The particular lens of family history turns broad questions into personal ones in which our own ancestors, and we ourselves, are the main actors. (Sleeter 2020, p. 64)

It needs to be said, however, that the status of the work of genealogists has also been troubled by what might be termed as hierarchical knowledge-power structures. Academic historians working in university settings have sometimes perpetuated the notion that family history research is for people who are not 'academic' and who pursue historical details as a hobby (Evans 2022, p. 10). Christine Sleeter's call for a 'critical family history' argues that 'as a personalised pursuit, family history is not necessarily critical' (Sleeter 2020, p. 1). Historian Tanya Evans might disagree. In her work, she asserts a far more 'democratic' model of what it means to create and 'do' history that borrows from a tradition of making public and accessible histories (Evans 2022, p. 12). We are inspired by Evans' inclination to see the work of genealogists who toil beyond the academy as being complementary to and operating in partnership with the work of scholarly researchers—not diametrically opposed, but working towards similar goals of knowing and revealing the past.

Aotearoa New Zealand sociologist Avril Bell has recently addressed this and related issues by extending and further refining the notion of critical family history to propose a critical *settler* family history approach (Bell 2022). Bell has observed that the idea of critical family history is highly relevant in settler societies where family history narratives, records, and experiences are crucial in considering, as she notes, 'the question of settler descendant identities and social locations in the present and responsibilities towards a decolonial future' (Bell 2022, p. 49). As Bell has suggested, adopting a critical settler family history approach in the context of continuing colonisation allows for a more nuanced exploration of the dynamics of the colonial project and the legacies of British setter colonialism. Put simply, it is impossible to disentangle the privileges that come with being implicated in the colonial project.

As we have argued elsewhere, colonisation is, in 'postcolonial' settler societies, a continuing project that carries with it the implications and architecture of unfinished business. In other words, the repercussions of colonialism continue to be felt through a myriad of differences and inequities, structural, social, and economic, that exist both within and beyond the academy (Byrnes and Coleborne 2011). Bell's notion of critical settler family history aligns with this argument as it explores the place and roles of settler families in the work of colonialism (Bell 2022). As Bell and her co-authors have persuasively argued, the role of families in the settler colonial project was both real and active. The occupation of the homelands of Indigenous people and the creation of a 'new' society that displaced that of the existing communities deeply implicated families in colonisation. We agree that critical settler family history is a useful and highly relevant method for, as Bell has written, 'exposing and undercutting the logics and dynamics of colonial violence wrapped in the seemingly benign practice of settlement' (Bell 2022, p. 2). The work of critical settler family history work thus focuses on the home-making of families, 'speaking back' to popular historical narratives and their celebratory tropes and themes and exploring families' relationships with Indigenous peoples and place. In short, critical settler family history examines the ways in which the settler family's home-making endeavour is inseparable from and intimately linked with histories of violence and Indigenous dispossession. Through this critique, as Bell herself commented, 'settler home-making is thus exposed as anything but benign' (Bell 2022, p. 2).

The notion of critical family history (and by extension, critical settler family history) has, therefore, been previously examined in this journal through a series of case studies. The assumption underpinning both approaches is that explorations of family, social, and

settler histories, when brought together, can offer us new ways of understanding the dynamics of the past to better inform the present. Inspired by this previous work, this Special Issue seeks to extend both Sleeter and Bell's previous analyses by adopting their scholarly frameworks to family history when seen through the lens of migration. The articles that comprise this Special Issue thus fuse the careful genealogical research that characterises family history with critical social science scholarship, and in addition, focus on the lives of families whose experiences and sense of identity was profoundly shaped by narratives of migration. The central premise of this collection is that the process of discovering family history can be 'unsettling', especially in colonial contexts, and that this is frequently driven by and contingent upon the processes of dislocation, disruption, and renewal, all distinctive components of the migratory experience.

Both critical family history and critical settler family history, as well as our inflection of this in terms of the context of migratory experiences, contain explicit invitations to readers (and authors) to reflect on their own family's role and place in past events and processes and how the implications of this, the power and the loss, continue to reverberate into the present. This is not easy work, and it is intentionally designed to provoke a sense of discomfort. As historian Rachel Buchanan has written, and Richard Shaw discusses in this volume, part of coming to terms with the past often involves unforgetting, along with confronting a history of not-knowing and facing up to half-recalled or mis-remembered truths (Buchanan 2009). Remembering inevitably involves a reckoning with the past, or at least, a coming to terms with what the evidence tells us, which may conflict with the personal and family myths that shape our sense of identity. As efforts designed to push back against the history of forgetting, critical family history and critical settler family approaches purposefully disrupt comforting and secure ways of remembering and knowing by reminding us, through family acts, events, and encounters, that history is never neutral, and that the power dynamics of privilege and violence continue to be felt. When families choose to remember and valorise certain stories and ignore others (either consciously or out of a sense of shame), they gloss over and side-step the critical, difficult, and painful stories that seek to undermine our sense of selves. This is why engaging in critical settler family history is hard emotional work.

Colonisation carries with it memories of inter-generational trauma, not just for the colonised and their descendants, but for those whose ancestors were (knowingly or unknowingly) complicit in processes of dispossession and resettlement. Wrestling with these family stories is part of the reckoning alluded to above. Richard Shaw writes in this Special Issue of this postcolonial coming to terms with the present through an interrogation into his own familial stories, elements of which he has explored elsewhere (Shaw 2021). His article addresses the process and consequences of colonisation by studying the migration of legislative frameworks from one country to another through the story of an individual who helped implement those frameworks in Aotearoa New Zealand. Specifically, Shaw tells the story of his great-grandfather—a migrant who left Ireland in 1874 and took part in one of the most catastrophic moments in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand: te pāhua (the plunder) of the Parihaka pā and Māori community in southern Taranaki in 1881, and who later assumed life as a farmer in the region, working land confiscated from Māori. This transformation from migrant to successful farmer was enabled, Shaw argues, through institutional mores and models that were 'lifted and shifted' from Ireland to the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, literally half a world away. These included the large-scale confiscation of Māori land in late nineteenth-century Aotearoa New Zealand and the establishment of the New Zealand Armed Constabulary, both of which were based on Irish precedents. Shaw draws on these phenomena to examine the social and economic transformations experienced by his great-grandfather—enabled and facilitated by the migratory process—and in doing so, considers the meanings of this legacy, and its burden and memory, for him and his ancestor's descendants.

The theme of transformation through migration is also explored by Dani Pickering in their contribution to this Special Issue. Using the tools of critical family history, Pickering tells the story of their great-great-great-grandfather, Neil McLeod, who, after being cleared

from his ancestral homeland of Raasay in Scotland in 1864, relocated to the colonial frontier that was then Aotearoa New Zealand. Neil McLeod served more than fifteen years in the New Zealand Armed Constabulary and then its successor, the New Zealand Police Force, before being killed on the job in 1890. Drawing on critical family history literature, firsthand accounts from Neil's personal diaries, other family accounts, and additional historical research, Pickering's article examines his great-great-great-grandfather's assimilation into white New Zealand society. Pickering argues that by focusing on what he calls the 'constitutive forgetting' by which Neil McLeod and his descendants renounced their connections to Raasay and the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd* in their quest to become Pākehā settlers, he sees a history of Aotearoa New Zealand that draws on multi-ethnic cultural origins, challenging the assumption of Anglo-Saxon dominance. Like Shaw, Pickering's chief interest lies in how stories such as their great-great-great-grandfather's narrative both deepen and complicate the relationship between coloniser and colonised and create a sense of necessary discomfort for descendants.

The links between identity, power, and a critical family history approach to the past are also explored by Andrew May in his article examining the complexity of family history in the context of colonial pasts in British India; specifically, the foundation years of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Mission to the Khasi Hills of north-east India. May argues that the frame of 'a life story' must go beyond the accumulation of facts and figures to acknowledge context, structure, and power relations, and the tricky but imperative moral obligation of the family historian to address difficult pasts in all their complexity. Through the story of an immigrant British community in nineteenth-century India, he reveals, through familial blood ties and shared characteristics, how power is both structured and maintained. Drawing on the re-telling of migratory stories and careers of colonial actors, May seeks to add what he calls 'a longitudinal dimension' to family history. Colonial power, he argues, ought not to be simply evaluated by its negative effects, but also understood in terms that are contextual and negotiated; colonial relations are, in this way, complex, relational, situational, variable, commutable, and resisted. His contribution to this Special Issue asks us to reflect on the ways in which critical research into settler-colonial migrations also brings our own family histories into present consciousness, underlining the need for more truth-telling at individual and national levels, along with the necessity of what he terms 'a pedagogy of historical contextualisation and ethical citizenship'. Migration is, in this context of critical family history, a long process of coming to terms with past inheritance, dislodgement, as well as future status and prospects.

Secrets, silences, and shame—and their manifestation through movement and migration—is the focus of Alison Watts' critical investigation into her family's stories that concealed the absence and invisibility of her grandmother, Ada, who was for many years incarcerated in a mental hospital. Drawing on her grandmother's patient files, Watts shares glimpses into her grandmother's encounters with several mental institutions in Victoria, Australia, during the twentieth century. She uses the critical family history approach to gain insights into the gendered power relations within her grandmother's marriage and the power imbalance within families. In re-examining the uses of records of institutions and of archives, Watts demonstrates that 'critical family histories', as defined by Christine Sleeter, also rely on active engagement with the form and function of archival collections. Watts' article suggests that the archive—as well as being a site of the creation of certain forms of historical evidence through collecting and preserving specific records—can also be reinterpreted as a space for the interrogation of family secrets, can account for silences, and help to liberate family stories from past stigma around mental illness, helping to lessen stigma and sadness in the present. Finding out who was confined in asylums—later known as mental hospitals—and why, during the period between the 1860s and 1910s, has meant asking about how institutions operated, how individual cases were recorded, about life inside the wards and boundaries of hospitals, and about families who stayed in touch with doctors and loved ones who were patients (Coleborne 2006, 2010).

In the case of mental health records, genealogical research adds depth to historical research in sometimes surprising ways. It can lead to increased interest in the histories of mental illness and institutional practices, as well as challenging long-held beliefs about mental illness, such as stigma (McCarthy et al. 2017, p. 368), while also posing questions about the ethics of using patient records in this way (Wright and Saucier 2012, pp. 73–76; Garton 2000). For family historians seeking to fill gaps in the record, it can also fulfil a quest for additional clues to a puzzle about identity and family narratives. The theme of migration is examined here on a more domestic and personal scale; it is addressed through the lens of mobility when Ada relocated following her marriage and her subsequent movements between home and sites of care following her committal. While other scholars have shown how the themes of migration and mobility are important in exploring the connection between mental health and institutionalisation, here she demonstrates how mental illness in families has been and is stigmatised and concealed, and how this creates a legacy of silence for subsequent generations.

While the articles in this Special Issue traverse the stories of movement, mobility, colonisation, silences, and shame, they also leave open an invitation for scholars to look at other ways of knowing and narrating critical approaches to family history—and what this means in colonised and colonising contexts. We welcome the future work of scholars whose research might further extend the premise of critical family history, as Sleeter and then Bell have described it, to give it new meaning beyond the settler and migratory contexts described in this Special Issue and to think in terms of different knowledge paradigms.

Indigenous scholars may well be at the forefront of this re-imagining. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori scholars, such as Ngāti Porou academic Nēpia Mahuika, have long argued that for Māori, whakapapa (genealogy) has always been considered the explanatory framework for the world and everything in it (Mahuika 2019). Whakapapa has chronicled evolutions from the beginning of time, explained social and political organisation and has been the way in which people have understood both the natural and spiritual worlds. Mahuika has written elsewhere how, prior to the arrival of Europeans in Aotearoa New Zealand, whakapapa was transmitted orally, and despite the enthusiastic adoption of literacy and print, whakapapa remains 'a living oral history and tradition' (Mahuika 2019, p. 11). He tells of how, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Pākehā (European New Zealanders) researchers set themselves up as experts in Māori history and genealogy and encouraged Māori to apply the genealogical method of dating to whakapapa and to situate their history and genealogy within European methodological traditions and epistemologies. Mahuika writes that Māori were also eager to validate whakapapa by adopting some European ideas and approaches, while at the same time ensuring care to maintain and preserve that 'cultural conventions and terminologies remained key to the teaching and dissemination of whakapapa' (Mahuika 2019, p. 11). Māori have, since then, reclaimed ownership of the ways in which whakapapa is defined, used, and protected, and in the process, it has become of fundamental relevance to how Māori see and understand the past, present, and future. As Mahuika notes, 'Today, whakapapa remains a carefully protected approach infused with deep cultural codes and ethics that serve to amplify and centre our cultural knowledge and the authority to ensure that this knowledge is transmitted appropriately' (Mahuika 2019, p. 11).

Similarly, the work of Ruth (Lute) Faleolo has recently shown how, through an analysis of Pacific Island (specifically Tongan and Samoan) migrants in Brisbane, Australia, family history and identity are maintained through the adoption of diverse and adaptive cultural practices used to promote a sense of wellbeing and cultural continuity (Faleolo 2020). Faleolo argues that Pacific migrant notions of wellbeing and worldviews are linked to their spatial behaviour and material cultural adaptations in new places and urban contexts. In her case study of the Brisbane urban landscape, she has shown how migrants create material cultural adaptations in diasporic contexts, such as places of dwelling, community and church gatherings. These practices, which express continuity of cultural identity, are commonly displayed during family or community events, and in both private and

public spaces. Faleolo's work is important in speaking to how underlying cultural values, manifested in and through material cultural adaptations, are used to maintain and ensure wellbeing through the continuity of cultural practices. We need more of this careful and important research to share how, through migratory experiences, people and communities have rendered significant evidence of the maintenance of cultural identity, which is then retained by generations of Pacific Islanders who live beyond the Pacific Islands.

Our purpose in bringing this Special Issue collection together is not an attempt to convince academic historians of the validity of genealogical research, nor is it to argue for the rationale or intrinsic value and importance of antiquarian family history (Mills 2003). Rather, we seek to invite reflection on our combined practices of archival research across this domain of the private and the public, academic and professional research into families and their experiences over time. We want to suggest that the archive—a site where certain forms of historical evidence are created through collecting and preserving practices—can also be a space to freshly interrogate family secrets, which in turn might reveal or expose silences, and may even help to liberate certain family stories. Our suggestion here is that historical research into families and their less visible pasts can help us towards the possibility of resolution, knowledge, and the empathy produced in finding sources that shed light on the gaps in family memory.

Connecting sources of information about individuals, including births, deaths, marriages, shipping records, land transfer records, and other details, through processes of record linkage allows genealogists to flesh out family stories, and, in doing so, this provides a wealth of new evidence to connect to larger narratives of migration and the expansion of colonial power and imperial presence (McCarthy et al. 2017, pp. 375–79). Ultimately, our purpose in this Special Issue is to highlight the critical role played by genealogists in family history research by extending their work in problematising the archive and how we deal with painful as well as comforting memories that characterise family history stories. The challenge of balancing the 'harm received' with the 'harm caused' is a constant, as is the need to attend to historical specificity and context.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note

[1] Other important research into institutions includes a large-scale project in Australia into out-of-home care and adoption funded by the Australian Research Council (see Shurlee Swain et al. 2012).

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