

# Praise for *Rebels, Despots, & Saints*

*Rebels, Despots, & Saints* brings together storytelling, research, and solid organizing tools in ways that connect us to the people who came before—the good, the bad, and the complicated—so that we can be the ancestors our children and grandchildren will need in order to build a more just and thriving world.

— Innosanto Nagara, author of *A is for Activist* and *Counting on Community*

At a time when many of us feel disconnected from each other, Sandhya Rani Jha's new book reminds us that we are part of a rich and multilayered historical lineage. Using their own experiences and background, Sandhya guides us in an exploration of our own ancestors, from cultural creators to movement leaders to even the atrocious and embarrassing ones. Jha also provides engaging prompts and reflection questions to help readers apply concepts and ideas to their own lives. *Rebels, Despots, & Saints* is a necessary book for those of us seeking to better understand who we are from the vantage point of who came before us.

— Deepa Iyer, Author of *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Muslim, Arab and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future* and *Social Change Now: A Guide for Reflection and Connection*

Jha invites all ancestors to the wisdom circle to help imagine a better future for our descendants. Jha joins contemporary writers like Resmaa Menakem and adrienne maree brown and good ancestors like Baldwin and Morrison, offering readers a method for understanding their many inheritances and working in solidarity for cultural change. This is the ideal book for social change and justice groups looking to understand their place in the long struggle for freedom.

— Patrick B. Reyes, author of *The Purpose Gap* and *Nobody Cries When We Die*

As someone who proudly claims the legacy of my ancestors, family and otherwise, I'm grateful that Sandhya Jha's *Rebels, Despots, & Saints* encourages us to not only name and retell our stories but to be mindful of the ways in which our stories are often hidden and veiled. It is in this reclaiming that we can own up to those ancestors whose stories have been misinterpreted, forgotten, or misappropriated. There are indeed rebels and despots of whom we must be proud and saints whom we must re-imagine in order to face their legacy. In every case, we must develop the strength to name and own them all. We are because of them. Read this book and clasp the ancestors to your heart once again and let them speak, but also be prepared to speak back to them as you revisit their story in your own.

— Rev. Teresa “Terri” Hord Owens, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada

*Rebels, Despots, & Saints* is a sacred provocation and a necessary journey. A blueprint for the ages. The book prompts us to excavate fully the wisdom and life stories of those who have walked before us, and to do so with a heart intention of self-reflection and collective growth. It is a call to pull back the veil and discover the ancestral stories that may not be so apparent at first glance but that are nonetheless so important as we create pathways to healing trauma and experiencing joy. It is a divinely written text that is inclusive of quiet personal interrogation, generational acceptance, spirited enlightenment, and strong love.

— Regina Evans, artist, activist, and anti-human trafficking advocate

Sandhya Rani Jha's *Rebels, Despots, & Saints* is the book we need right now as we look for new ways to make sense of the world—and of ourselves and our histories. Warm and aware, Jha's narrative is an interesting read that helps the reader explore and understand identity and connect it to both history and spirituality. If you have a spiritual practice, seek to have one, or want to place yourself in history, this book is a must-read.

— Susan Mernit, non-profit consultant and co-founder of tech non-profit Hack the Hood and early hyperlocal news site Oakland Local

For many reasons, some of us have struggled to relate to our ancestors—blood and chosen—with meaning and reverence. Maybe like me, you’ve had religious training that made all ancestor connection seem like a dangerous path to worshipping dead relatives. Or also like me, when you were finally able to overcome that old religious programming, you were confused about how to connect with ancestors in the “right” ways. In this book, Sandhya Rani Jha helps us first better touch into our ancestors’ stories and from there figure out how to relate to them for understanding and honestly crafting our current stories as future ancestors. If you’re not sure what to think of your ancestors, not sure how to resolve your complicated histories and want to make sure you’re tapping into the wise and benevolent people who made it possible for you to be here today, read *Rebels, Despots & Saints* to orient yourself toward meaningful connection across time and space.

— Micky ScottBey Jones, The Justice Doula, Enneagram teacher, facilitator, and coach

Sandhya Jha offers a nuanced and complex look at ancestors and our relationships to them. This book offers a pathway to learning and healing from our ancestors and grounding ourselves in that knowledge to become the ancestors that the next generation needs.

— Phoenix Armenta, environmental justice organizer

*Rebels, Despots, & Saints* offers an accessible and transformative way for humans alive today to heal from the past and move forward with purpose. Through Jha’s trauma-informed approach, readers learn how to make connections between their own experiences and the collective history of oppression. This book provides a much-needed bridge between past and present, while providing a platform for sustainable action and healing justice. *Rebels, Despots, & Saints* is an essential addition to the library of anyone seriously interested in healing justice. It offers an illuminating and hopeful vision for how we can move forward together while honoring our inheritance. In short, it is a powerful invitation to take action and create meaningful change.

— Anand J.K. Kalra, Artistic & Managing Director, Uncaged Library Arts & Information

**REBELS,**  
**DESPOTS**  
**& SAINTS**

The Ancestors Who Free Us  
and the Ancestors  
We Need to Free

SANDHYA RANI JHA

  
**chalice**  
PRESS

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*To all of you, as we work together for liberation.*

*To Laurie Jones Neighbors, whose wisdom informed  
this book and who became an ancestor before we  
were ready for her to stop being an elder.*

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## In order to be born, you needed:

2 parents

4 grandparents

8 great-grandparents

16 second great-grandparents

32 third great-grandparents

64 fourth great-grandparents

128 fifth great-grandparents

256 sixth great-grandparents

512 seventh great-grandparents

1,024 eighth great-grandparents

2,048 ninth great-grandparents

For you to be born today from twelve previous generations, you needed a total sum of 4,094 ancestors over the last 400 years.

Think for a moment; how many struggles? How many battles? How many difficulties? How much sadness? How much happiness? How many love stories? How many expressions of hope for the future? – did your ancestors have to undergo for you to exist in this present moment . . .

— Lyrical Zen<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://lyricalzen.com/ancestral-mathematics/>



# Introduction

## The Blood in Our Veins, the Drumbeats of Our Ancestors

*The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.*

—James Baldwin

*Roth dekha, cola becha. (See Jagannath's temple, and also sell bananas.)*

—Old Bengali saying

One of my favorite youth organizations in Oakland suffered a devastating loss a few years ago. A powerful, gifted, forty-something Black man with a PhD, a head for racial justice-accomplishing public policy, and a passion for Black youth had landed at the organization just a couple of years prior. He was developing the skills to take over from the organization's founder, who had dedicated her whole adult life to community organizing and needed a break. He was helping the organization deepen its policy advocacy work. Most importantly, the Black men's empowerment group was thriving under his leadership because the youth trusted him so deeply. He had become a surrogate uncle to many of them. He then got sick with an illness we thought he would fight and win. Days turned to weeks, turned to months. He did not survive.

The funeral was packed to the walls at a large church in West Oakland, and the grief was palpable. I did not know how anyone would be able to offer comfort or encouragement. The youth no longer had their beloved leader, the one to whom they could turn and who had been committed to making them the leaders the community so needed.

And then one of the elders of the community began to drum. He explained the heritage and history of his drum and the style of drumming he used, which had traveled from Ghana across the Atlantic, the drumming style of the ancestors surviving the Middle Passage and surviving enslavement and surviving the New Jim Crow.

He drummed grief. He drummed solace. He drummed the solidarity and love of the ancestors into that room. In so doing, he united the youth with each other and with their ancestors, including the newest ancestor who had left them too soon but also, they were reminded, would never leave them.



This is a book about ancestors. Not ancestry per se, but ancestors: those who came before, whose wisdom we can learn from in hard times like these. There is a part of me that feels the tiniest bit guilty about writing a book that seems so internally focused at a time all of us need to be doing the work of justice in the streets.

I've been engaged in social justice work for twenty-five years, particularly in the arenas of racial justice, religious liberty, housing justice, and worker rights. For the first time in years, I'm seeing workers turn back the tide of anti-worker laws that began to become entrenched in the early 1980s with the air controllers' strike in 1981. I'm privileged to watch a resurgence of cross-racial organizing that connects racial justice issues in the US with global struggles of people who are marginalized. And I'm seeing how the next generation of justice seekers is doing a better job of creating a movement that cares for our well-being instead of burning ourselves out and using ourselves up "for the cause."

At the same time, these past few years are the first time I've had to consider what it would mean to get arrested and stay in jail, to take a punch, to have people in authority see me as part of the threat to the government they're protecting.

Other have dealt with that threat longer and more palpably. I've worked for years with people whose organizing puts their lives at risk either here or abroad because they look different than I do. I've worked with people who aren't involved in organizing and whose lives are nonetheless at risk. I work with people who have a target on their backs because of

their race, gender presentation, visible sexual orientation, immigration status, or unhoused status.

But in this moment, if I care about what's happening and stand up for it, I'm at greater risk than before. Audre Lorde told us, "Your silence will not protect you."<sup>2</sup> I find myself aware of the fact that as voting rights are rolled back, as our policies become a greater threat to particularly trans and to all LGBTQ+ people, as the air and water become luxury commodities, and as reproductive rights are curtailed and women's bodies become battle zones for politicians, I find myself thinking that if I follow my conscience and speak out about these injustices, my relative privilege will not protect me.

Because I am also queer, mixed race, an immigrant child of immigrants, a religious leader from an interfaith family, ambivalently but realistically a person with disabilities, and gender non-conforming, I end up in relationship with a lot of younger people who don't have many mentors or elders to help them wrestle with the complex intersections of their identity.

I realize that I'm not enough. No living group of elders is enough, especially when so many of us at those intersections experienced trauma that limits what we can provide, no matter how well we want to show up. The fact that I experienced so much privilege even at those intersections is part of what allows me to stay in this work in the first place.

So, I find myself overcoming my guilt by focusing on ancestors. Because the most urgent justice work I do can't continue if I'm not—if *we're* not—paying more attention to the wisdom of our ancestors. It has become, unexpectedly, some of the least hypothetical work I do these days.

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Now, I know genealogy is all the rage, but that's not really what draws me to this subject of ancestors. What draws me to it is seeking the support we

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<sup>2</sup>Lorde originally said in her essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," "My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you." I originally came across this essay in her 1984 book *Sister Outsider* by Crossing Press although it also shows up in the posthumously published 2017 collection of essays *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* published by Silver Press.

need for this current moment in which we find ourselves, unstable and scary as it is. I think the ancestors offer us gifts to engage this moment, and we have more ancestors from whom to learn than we realize.

We sometimes assume “ancestor” means someone biologically related to us, but those aren’t our only ancestors; in fact, they may not even be our most helpful ancestors. We are shaped by a lot of people who came before us, and if we pay attention to them, we may get the encouragement and inspiration we need. Our ancestors may be blood relatives, but we are also shaped by the people from our *cultural* heritage. We are who we are because of the people in our *spiritual* heritage who did brave and bold things, often in resistance to cultures of oppression around them. The people who fought for land rights or workers’ rights or women’s rights are our *movement* ancestors, creating the context in which we can do our work, showing us how to navigate complex political landscapes when the decks are stacked against us. While we don’t often pay attention to them, the original inhabitants of the land on which we live—whom I call *landscape* ancestors—have a lot to teach us about how to be in deeper relationship with the land, with the sacred, and with each other.



I talked a little about my background already. Here’s a little more. My father was a Hindu, born and raised in India (specifically the region called Bengal), and my mother is a Christian born and raised in Glasgow, Scotland. That means I have stories of ancestral strength on two continents with different histories and sometimes different ways of seeing the world. I have ancestors who survived the British, and I have ancestors who survived the Vikings. I know stories of resistance and stories of survival from both sides, from their religious texts and from the stories we prioritize.

One big thing I have learned is that there are also stories that have been hidden or suppressed because they made us look bad or weak, or they made us stand out when standing out is dangerous. There’s a common saying in Hindi and Urdu: “Log kya kahenge,” or “what will people say?” That fear of other people’s perceptions means my family has sanitized some of their stories, left out the awkward bits, and sometimes even left out the people who stood out too much.

We change the ancestor stories in our families sometimes. We do it in our national stories, too. You and I have witnessed over the past few

years a subgroup of people in our nation responding negatively, and sometimes viciously, when people of color share a robust accounting of our nation's history. Their assumption is that if we tell any of the bad, we erase all the good. The reality is that we *do* bring some of the good into question; we complicate it. This section began with a quote by the brilliant Black essayist and philosopher James Baldwin reminding us why our ancestors matter. Another quote of his is this: "What passes for history in this country is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors."<sup>3</sup>

When we examine history, people from the past cease to be mythic. They turn into imperfect people. And some people don't want us to realize that all of history, good and bad, was created by imperfect people. Because that means imperfect people like us can also shape history, and that's dangerous to those who would silence us.

I'm drawn to the idea of connecting with ancestors for several reasons that aren't all that different from why I think we need to tell the whole story of our history. Most of us have ancestors whose stories have been withheld from us because their particularities somehow caused their descendants shame. But that shame says more about us and our immediate forebearers than our ancestors, and, as shame always does, it robs us of the strength we might otherwise gain from relationships with them. Indeed, we lose out on so much when those stories are concealed or altered: we miss the many resources those troublemakers, resisters, defiers-of-social convention, and the survivors of harm grant to us.

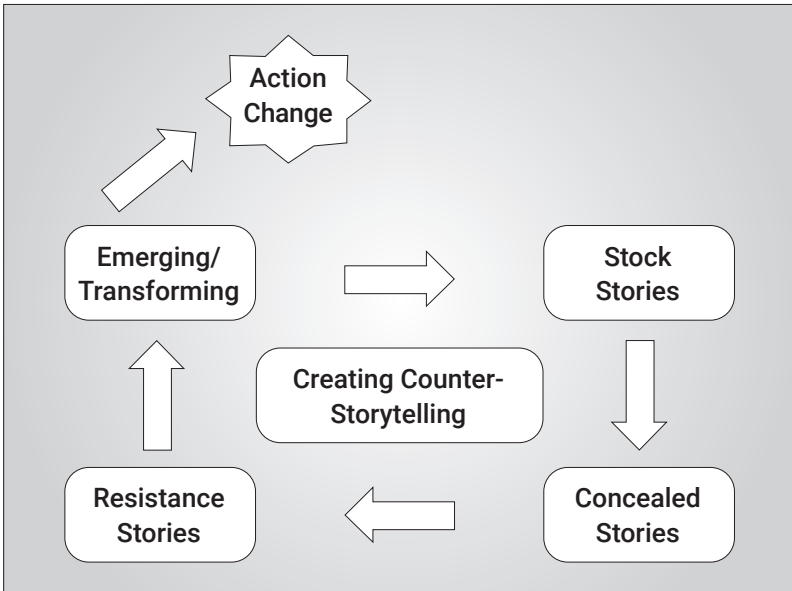
It's not just grandma's shame or dad's ambivalence that keeps us from knowing the full richness of our ancestors' lives. Sometimes we hunger so much for myths that we miss the plainer but much more valuable stories from our own narratives. For example, we may long, for very good reasons, to claim our place in families with power or position. We may fixate on a royal ancestry or embellish our connection to someone with outsized historical influence. But in addition to not being particularly true, focusing on those imagined connections may cause us to miss the rich gifts offered by our *actual* ancestors. Our serf or village-dwelling or farm-working ancestors offer us models for surviving economic oppression today; those medieval folks rose up in poor people's rebellions across the continents of Africa and Europe. We never hear those stories of their courage and thus may feel less able to challenge the unjust systems that keep us "in our place."

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<sup>3</sup>Baldwin, James, "The Negro Child—His Self-Image," *The Saturday Review*, October 16, 1963.

If I were a gambler (which I'm not because legalized gambling exacerbates economic disparity), I would wager that there is always a story hidden behind our longing, our shame, our assumptions, or our aspirations. But how do we uncover what has been hidden? How do we learn to seek and listen for what lies buried beneath the layers of our society's baggage?

In 2020, I learned about Lee Anne Bell's Storytelling Project Model, which she shares in her book, *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching*<sup>4</sup>. It shines a bright light on the ways the stories of our ancestors intersect and the power their stories have if we tell or even if we don't tell them. This model is an amazing resource as we work to uncover, interact with, and ultimately share our ancestors' stories. Let's start with the illustration.



Throughout this book, we'll come back to this resource. I've used it in multiple contexts, particularly as the recurring touchstone for a series of five-week online book groups at the Oakland Peace Center during the first year of the pandemic, known as "The Beloved Book Community." In those groups, we routinely read Black/Latinx history, Afro-futurism and community organizing resources, Indigenous history, and Asian

<sup>4</sup>I am grateful to the folks at [organizingengagement.org](http://organizingengagement.org) for permission to use this model. Their collection of frameworks is invaluable to serious organizers.

American memoir: writing from various voices and historical moments and social locations. In the Storytelling Project Model, we found a means of engaging all these voices with one another and with our own power to shift narratives. Working through that process not only helped us build our knowledge and understanding of our work but also allowed us to build that beloved community.

There are several desired outcomes of this exercise. First, we want to create a practice of counter-storytelling (the center box); that is, telling a fuller story than the stories that consolidate power for a handful of folks at the expense of the rest of us. In order to do that, we follow these steps:

- We notice the *stock story* that already exists in history. For example, Columbus “discovered” the Americas.
- Next, we look for the *concealed stories* that the stock story hides. Stock stories rely on erasing from the narrative the harm that was caused in the incidents they narrate. To continue the example, the stock story of Columbus conceals the brutal treatment of Indigenous people wherever Columbus went.
- We then look for *resistance stories*. If we only told the concealed stories, the stories of pain, we might trap oppressed ancestors in a simple story of victimhood, removing any agency from them and in the process taking away from us a sense of our own ability to resist. Resistance stories in this example would include the ways several Indigenous nations and many groups and even individual Indigenous people actively fought the invaders from Europe. So often, this part of our history gets skipped when it is critical for us to learn about the resisters who came before us. Learning of their presence, power, and legacy allows us to realize that we are inheritors of a narrative that may have been kept from us because it would threaten those who hold power.
- Here’s my favorite move in the methodology: we look for *emerging/transforming stories*. Those are the stories that people from the oppressed group are still engaging in today, carrying on the work of their ancestors in a modern context. The perfect example of this is the Land Back movement, where Indigenous people of many nations are demanding that the land that was stolen from them (by Columbus and so many more!), and which they consistently stewarded better than those who occupy it and govern it now, be

returned. There are many ways that different groups and different nations are approaching this, but the umbrella term “Land Back” captures that diversity of strategies and the commonality of healing the land.

- After making those four moves (recognizing the stock story and whom it serves, unearthing the concealed stories of harm, looking for the resistance stories, seeking the modern-day continuation of those resistance stories as emerging/transforming stories), we use these more robust learnings to help cultivate our own work of action or change. It may be solidarity work. It may be simply sharing the more robust story with others. It may be applying those lessons to our work in a different but parallel movement. Whatever we do, we do not just sit on the information. We use it to bend the arc of the moral universe a little more toward justice.

Columbus (an atrocious ancestor if ever there was one) serves as the example here, but there is no shortage of others. I could have detailed the ways in which we celebrate the robber barons of the early twentieth century and how that stock story hides so much about the labor movement. I could have used the stock story of homesteading and land grants and what it hides about the environmental movement and about the ways the land itself resists what we do to it. (Did you know that Oklahoma has more earthquakes than California now due to fracking? That’s a devastating concealed story. But what if it could become an emerging/transforming story?) I would love to use the example of how we treat British colonialism as if it were kind and polite, pinkies raised as it sipped tea, and the violence and resistance that gets erased because of that narrative.

You might be able to tell that I think this methodology is both useful and inspiring. I’m thrilled I got permission to share it with you and in each chapter. We will touch base with it to make sense of the ancestors we’re hanging out with. It won’t always be a linear walk through all five moves in each chapter; we might check in with them a little bit out of order. Whenever it’s possible, I won’t even necessarily reference the stock story. But now you’ll see the methodology I’m leaning on, and I hope you’ll incorporate it into your next book group, staff retreat, Q’uran study, Durga Puja family meal, or wherever you can get away with helping people shift their historic framework so that we can build



justice together more effectively and build off the work of the ancestors whose stories deserve to be centered.<sup>5</sup>

As I've engaged with this model, here are some things I've discovered about the Rebels, Despots, and Saints who make up our ancestral trees:

- We have *romanticized ancestors*, the *stock story* protagonists in the Storytelling Project Model, the ones with power we recognize ... and who caused harm we often don't recognize.
- We have *embarrassing ancestors*, often ancestors who fit into the *resistance stories* of the SPM, the ancestors who caused trouble and got erased from the narrative because "log kya kahenge?" What will people say?
- *Overlooked ancestors* are also part of the SPM's *resistance stories*, the folks who survived or pushed back against injustice in ways we don't often enough acknowledge and celebrate. Grandma may not have been a suffragist marching in the streets and setting postal boxes on fire, but she may have taken care of the neighbor's kids while the neighbor did those things. Small contributions to the cause by people who did those small things at a big risk to themselves are important ancestors to remember.
- When I started talking about this book, I quickly realized I would have to address *atrocious ancestors*, the ones who participated in awful parts of our history. Our atrocious ancestors who turned a blind eye to atrocities or even participated in them are part of the *concealed stories* in the SPM, and it is hard for us to move forward until we've confronted them.
- Finally, there are ancestors whose stories break my heart. These are the *concealed stories* of suffering that those who came before us had to endure, stories that need to be part of our larger collective narrative.

There are so many complexities in engaging our ancestors. Who can we claim, from whom can we learn, from whom can we distance ourselves, and who can we ignore? And *who do we ignore at our peril?*

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<sup>5</sup>I have actually been to several Passover seders that maybe unwittingly use the Storytelling Project Model, connecting the story of freedom from captivity to modern day struggles for justice and liberation.

- If we're talking about biological ancestors, we confront epigenetics, the science around *inherited trauma*, and how our ancestors' suffering codes onto us both biologically and in the ways we're taught to navigate the world around us.
- Not all of our ancestors are biological, and that is good news. If we have a sense of our culture, we have *cultural ancestors* to turn to even when we don't know our biological ancestors or if their stories of resistance have been suppressed over the years.
- In this world, we increasingly need to respond to the call of the striking coal miners from the 1930s who asked their fellow miners, "Which side are you on?" In these times, it is a real gift to know that we have *movement ancestors* to call on who can encourage us and show us how to strategize and survive what is hard now because they faced hardships also.
- Some of us feel ungrounded in this moment of so much transition. The spiritual practices of our ancestors can help ground us. The stories from sacred texts, complex as they are, might offer more stories of resistance than we realized if we read them through a lens of liberation. And sometimes our *spiritual ancestors* took on the powers that be in ways that are very relevant today.
- Those of us who aren't Indigenous sometimes live on land that we aren't in full and meaningful relationship with. The ancestors of the landscape on which we live might have wisdom for all of us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to learn how to reconnect with the land and each other.

Learning about our web of ancestors brings a rich tapestry of stories into all our lives. People sometimes think that is easier for me because of my diverse heritage. It's true, I am more aware of how caste, race, culture, disability, gender, class, and orientation show up in my ancestral stories. But *all* of us have a diverse tapestry of ancestors who were part of all sorts of pieces of history. In fact, that's part of why, as I wrote this book, I turned to several monthly "wisdom circles" to think through our journeys with ancestors across different lived experiences.

Once a month during 2021 I met with three groups: one of writers, one of white people, and one of people of color. I would offer prompts, share writings or reflections, or simply pose questions about our relationship

to ancestors. The people who participated had so much curiosity and depth of thought on this subject. Many of them also contributed to my Patreon, so I had health insurance while I worked on the book. In addition to my cited research, most of the stories in this book come from those wisdom circles, or from conversations with friends and colleagues over many years that I did my best to recollect. (Where I misremembered details of the stories, they fixed it for me.)

It was important to me to engage white people and people of color distinctly on this subject because while our relationships to ancestors matter so much to all of us, those relationships can involve very vulnerable stories that we might not be ready to share across cultures. We might be afraid of hurting people we love, or we might be embarrassed, or we might not be ready to share our own or our ancestors' frailty across race and culture.

I was confident the people of color would enjoy hearing and sharing stories without having to filter to protect their white friends. What was exciting, though, was that in the first wisdom circle of white people, one of the participants said, "It's really important that we get a space to figure these things out without doing harm to people of color in the process." She then apologized to me for not acknowledging I was a person of color. "Well, you're doing this to help me write my book, so I think it's OK that you have the conversation in front of me," I responded fondly and a little teasingly.

Every individual's journey related to their ancestors is unique. Our experiences of culture and race contribute to those journeys for good and for ill. I'm glad I had amazing partners to think that through with. And I'm glad they were willing to let me share some of their stories with you as well. I want to be clear, though, that so much writing—on this subject and pretty much all subjects—tends to center white voices and white experiences. My goal in differentiating these voices was to create space for a diversity of voices, but I also want to clearly center those voices which have not had the microphone for most of history, in part because my experience of diverse people of color hearing each other's stories in our wisdom circle was so humbling, generous, and generative. If this whole exercise is to get beyond the stock story to the concealed story, we need to pay particular attention to, raise the volume on, those voices which have been stifled and silenced, both our own and each other's.

Another layer to the diversity of human experience I have tried to treat with care is that of both religious and non-religious readers. Some branches of the Christian family tree are deeply suspicious of the exploration of ancestors, thinking that such pursuits are somehow “pagan” or otherwise counter to a faith in Jesus. That is not my branch of the Church, obviously, and I hope readers who might be concerned would recall that throughout the Hebrew Bible *and* the New Testament, the people of God are regularly engaging with the stories of their ancestors. “My ancestor was a wandering Aramean” (Deuteronomy 26:5 NIV) is a statement of identity. Paul is constantly reminding folks that they are surrounded by “so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1 KJV). This work can be an important part of growing in the Christian faith.

At the same time, though I engage a variety of religious and spiritual traditions, I want my secular social justice friends and readers here to know that these resources are for you, too; in some ways this book was intended as my love letter and letter of solidarity to and with you. You may not be interested in some aspects of this exploration of ancestors—portions may be a little “woo” for you—but I hope you’ll be willing to see if there is anything here to help sustain you in what can be soul-destroying, exhausting, dangerous work. Our work is too important, the stakes are far too high, for us not to explore every resource at our disposal. As we used to say to each other at the Oakland Peace Center, “We Need Us.”

In moments of exhaustion and struggle, I want you to be as assured as champion tennis player Naomi Osaka: “I would like to thank my ancestors because every time I remember their blood runs through my veins, I know I cannot lose.”

.....  
**I would like to thank my  
 ancestors because every  
 time I remember their  
 blood runs through my  
 veins I know I cannot lose.**  
 —Naomi Osaka

Our ancestors—the stories we tell, the actual historical events, the lives they lived—affect us. They shape us. So, what do we do with that reality? Some folks try to forget, thinking they have “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.” Some folks ignore the past, thinking that if they don’t

acknowledge it, it doesn’t affect them. Some folks offer “alternative facts,” like the current effort to rewrite US history books to erase things like

enslavement and genocide instead of acknowledging them so we can live differently in the future.

We see the effects of not engaging what our ancestors have to teach us: white supremacy, nationalism, untreated trauma, an earth being butchered, an economy that relies on extracting our labor and leaving us exhausted so someone else can live with more resources than they know what to do with. That's a cost for all of us, people of color and white people alike.

How can we learn to look closely and see clearly, to speak the truth even when the truth implicates us, or breaks our hearts? How can we widen our circle of ancestors, to see the gifts that are being offered to us?

We can turn to ritual.

Our ancestors knew and many of us today still know that ritual is a tool to make sense of complex experiences, to honor the fullness of those experiences, and to create a container to honor what is good and healing or to heal from that which has harmed us. In fact, what draws me most to this theme of connecting with ancestors is what I've seen it offer to activists of color that strengthens us for our work of justice and helps us connect with the ancestors-in-training around us. For me, the rituals that connect us with ancestors have very concrete connections to our work in the world today. I've seen how much it empowers, encourages, and nourishes the young activists in my community. Whether you're here because you're an activist seeking some nourishment, or you've never once thought of yourself as an activist, I think that the rituals we engage really can give us strength to do our work of transforming the culture around us. Here are a few examples of what I've experienced:

- The story I shared at the beginning of this chapter, of a community of youth comforted and encouraged by a connection to their ancestors even as they grieved the loss of someone who had been their lifeline.
- At a public vigil where the voices of Black mothers were centered, in front of our city hall with its long history of police violence, the vigil started with the naming of ancestors—Black mothers who had lost sons to state-sanctioned violence throughout history, Black mothers who had resisted injustice, Black mothers who raised children who changed the world. The names reminded us of who we were accountable to, whose legacies we carried, and what was possible.

- At a spoken word performance on the theme of gentrification and displacement which was (is) ravaging the city where I live, Hmong and Latinx and Black artists shared their stories and the stories of their parents, their journeys, and their parents' journeys. The performance began with the pouring of libations, a practice to ground us in the power of the ancestors we brought into the room with us. While the tradition traces its roots back to ancient Egypt, all of us of a wide array of cultures were invited to acknowledge our ancestors as the leader poured liquid into the ground to honor those who came before.
- At the Oakland Peace Center, a collective of peace-oriented nonprofits I founded in 2012, every event and meeting begins with a land acknowledgment, where we take time to recognize that the land we gather on was originally tended by the Ohlone people who were forced off that land. We acknowledge they were forced off the land so that others could turn land into a commodity for profit, which has led to so much suffering. We also recognize that their descendants are in our midst and we commit to collaborating with them to transform our relationship with them, with each other, and with the land itself.

Sometimes our practices evoke our own ancestors. Sometimes our practices help us see and honor the ancestors of the people in the movement we love. Always, these practices push back against white supremacy, even for the people at the gatherings who identify as white, because they connect us to people navigating the world before [the construct of] whiteness was created. My hope is that, as we go on this ancestor journey together, you'll find that ritual can feed your work and nourish your soul. I believe exploring and doing this work to heal ourselves and our ancestors is so life-giving, so important to sustain us in our work but also? It is our responsibility to our descendants to work toward the world and future they deserve.

At the beginning of this introduction, you saw me include a Bengali saying: *See the temple and sell bananas*. It means set out to do one thing but manage to do two. This work of connecting with ancestors is deeply personal, but it is also a key element in how we remain better grounded, bring more of ourselves, reduce burnout and show up for each other better as people committed to building a world together. And for those

of us just figuring out how to build a better world, it will give us the tools to do so. Come for your own ancestors, stay for the Beloved Community you build. Roth dekha cola becha.

One of my favorite phrases from the Movement for Black Lives came early on, maybe December of 2015, when members of the media, used to telling stories of social movements in a particular way, got really frustrated. “This is a leaderless movement!” they complained. What they meant is, “We don’t know who we’re supposed to interview at a given rally.”

It wasn’t long before the folks coordinating the Black Lives Matter rallies across the country in those early months after Michael Brown’s murderer was acquitted responded to the complaint. “We’re a leader-*full* movement,” they said.

The youth at the beginning of this introduction, as they grieved their beloved leader’s too-soon death, might have felt leaderless. But their ancestors survived and resisted and overcame so that they could be part of a leader-full movement. Their newest ancestor would be there for them as they lived into that possibility.

Almost all of us, if we can look back far enough, come from communal or “leader-full” ancestries. Our ancestors will keep showing up for us as we live into our own callings today. I hope this book will help you find out how they will show up for you.





If you haven't seen the documentary series "High on the Hog" on Netflix, you're missing out. The four episodes of season 1 cover so much of the heritage of African American cooking and how it has shaped our landscape.

In episode 3, "The Founding Chefs," the host, Stephen Satterfield, meets Gayle Jessup White, whose great-great-great-great uncle was James Hemings, the French-trained chef enslaved by Thomas Jefferson. Hemings was responsible for introducing macaroni and cheese to the United States.

Satterfield arrives on Jefferson's plantation in Virginia to try the original recipe of macaroni and cheese<sup>53</sup> and to ask White, who works on the staff of Monticello, to help us learn more about the Hemings family, and how it feels to be James Hemings's descendant. She responds, "It's really an honor. I'm lucky enough to know that history. But every Black American has something like that in their background. They just don't know it."

When Satterfield asks how she thinks her ancestors would feel about the overwhelming popularity of that beloved dish, White says:

Gosh. Well, I'll tell you how I think about it. I'm kind of blown away by the idea that my ancestors helped originate this dish in the United States that has become an American staple. [tone change] I'm proud of the stamina they had, the determination they had, the character they had. I don't think anyone could imagine what it was like to live under those circumstances, knowing that you would never be free. They survived and then some. Because I'm standing here today. We're standing here today—and I get so emotional about this—because of them. Because of their strength. We're standing on their shoulders.

This is nice. I like mac and cheese. We can use this as a symbol. But let's think of who those people really were, their strength, their character, their endurance. So yeah, I'm super proud. Not just because I'm descended from them but because they represent the very best of the United States of America.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> (spoiler: they boil the pasta in milk and it is a game changer)

<sup>54</sup>*High on the Hog*, season 1 episode 3, approximately minute 33.

You may already have gleaned that this book isn't really written for people who think they're doing fine and don't need their ancestors. Here, though, I will be explicit: with a world as hard to navigate, as violent and oppressive, and as isolating as this one, I actually think it's pretty arrogant to think we don't need ancestors in order to get through this life and attempt to make the world better for those who come after us. I think it is foolish to write off the wisdom of people who came before. I even think it's a product of white supremacy culture, which cuts us off from those who came before and shames us for not being able to do on our own something that none of us could do on our own and still emerge with our souls intact.

Despite my convictions about the wisdom of ancestors, so much of our culture denigrates so many of our ancestors. Doing the work of recognizing our cultural ancestors' wisdom may be a way of fighting back against white supremacy, whether we are white people or people of color.

My friend Ashe told me a story of a time during her childhood when her mother got sick. Word got around that small town, and in no time, they had hundreds of pounds of food at their door. "There was a baked-in assumption of hospitality," Ashe said. "Everything wasn't amazing after that. The moral codes still showed up in our community, the judgments and whispers, but there was a sense of community, people connecting at the corner store. The downtowns are boarded up now in a lot of rural America, and with those disappearing downtowns is a loss of what roots people had. Poor rural white people have wisdom for middle-class white people. But we have to recognize the remnants of wisdom we have."

I mentioned in a previous chapter the horrific things that famed anti-fascist folk singer Woody Guthrie's father did in Oklahoma. My friend, who described himself as "a mutt" and is from Oklahoma, might not be shocked to learn about that awful piece of history. He knows a lot about the harm that white Oklahomans did to both the Black community and the Indigenous community on that land. But what does it mean that Woody Guthrie is part of his cultural legacy as much as Charley Guthrie is? What does it mean for white people who don't know their biological ancestry to recognize cultural ancestors who resisted? Who could we be if we learned more about people from our communities who saw evil and stood against it in small and big ways, people like Woody Guthrie but also people who refused to join the Confederacy or the "No-No Boys"

in the Japanese incarceration camps in the US during World War II who resisted the hypocrisy of the US government quietly but staunchly? What if we took strength from those stories as well as the stories of how they struggled and how they survived, and how they took care of each other and settled disputes and honored their dead? What if we also sought out the stories of cultural ancestors who built cross-racial solidarity? If we ask the right questions, we sometimes discover answers that wouldn't have surfaced otherwise.

In 2019, Art Spiegelman wrote an article about how superhero comic books were launched by people committed to anti-fascism. You may know Spiegelman's name (as I do) because his groundbreaking long-form comic books *Maus* and *Maus II* transformed how comic books are understood as a literary art form. Spiegelman himself does not love the term graphic novel because he doesn't think we should have looked down on comic books in the first place. And here's why: the creators of Superman were young Jewish New Yorkers who created a hero who would stand up against Nazis, fascists, and racists, a hero whose very commitment to fighting those forms of evil were what made him American. In the article, Spiegelman goes on to say:

At this point, it might be worth pointing out (not out of ethnic pride, but because it might shed some light on the rawness and the specific themes of the early comics) that the pioneers behind this embryonic medium based in New York were predominantly Jewish and from ethnic minority backgrounds. It wasn't just Siegel and Shuster, but a whole generation of recent immigrants and their children, those most vulnerable to the ravages of the great depression, who were especially attuned to the rise of virulent antisemitism in Germany. They created the American Übermensch<sup>55</sup> who fought for a nation that would at least nominally welcome "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . ."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>"Übermensch" was a term originally coined by Friedrich Nietzsche to describe the ideal man who could impose a culture on a people by strength of will and character.

<sup>56</sup>Art Spiegelman: golden age superheroes were shaped by the rise of fascism," Art Spiegelman, *The Guardian*, August 17, 2019. [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/art-spiegelman-golden-age-superheroes-were-shaped-by-the-rise-of-fascism?fbclid=IwAR2PPHED\\_Op\\_eTKqn0vWZoNVQC619EPMuIf5AqUnxEDJ6rLQyghDiCdPrLg](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/art-spiegelman-golden-age-superheroes-were-shaped-by-the-rise-of-fascism?fbclid=IwAR2PPHED_Op_eTKqn0vWZoNVQC619EPMuIf5AqUnxEDJ6rLQyghDiCdPrLg)

A lot of these artists had to change their names to get hired or published in the rampant antisemitism of the US, but their heroes fought for a day they wouldn't have to.

Here is where I want to do what the fancy people would call a bit of "hermeneutics."<sup>57</sup> Spiegelman's story about those early comic book artists is factually correct. If he had written the article in 2012, I would have been interested. In fact, I learned about the Jewish creators of Superman in the late 1990s and did find it a cool piece of history. But the reason he writes about it in 2019 is because this country was in the grips of the most visible bout of antisemitic, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Black, anti-queer, anti-Indigenous, anti-poor, anti-woman federal leadership in the last thirty or fifty or one hundred and fifty years, give or take. By writing that article a year after a mass shooting of a synagogue in Pittsburgh, in a year of increased anti-Jewish vandalism and hate

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**The way our cultural ancestors show up for us and how and why we need them changes greatly based on what we're facing individually and collectively.**

crimes in Europe as well as the US, Spiegelman was offering a way forward by evoking important cultural ancestors for a distinct moment. He was offering a word of encouragement to young people from his own Jewish American community, that their ancestors had redefined American power for a generation.

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