

Setting the stage: A selected oral history of culturally responsive evaluation

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Abstract

Dr. Hood was the first culturally responsive evaluation oral historian. For justice, culture, and equity to be mainstreamed, he understood that these concepts must be conveyed in multiple formats, settings, and arenas. He authentically brought what had been in the minds, hearts, tongues, and work of many before him to the written word—he expanded and authenticated history. We, the volume editors, have taken a cue from Dr. Hood's astute observations about the nature of history. As such, we connect CRE's past, present, and future and set the stage for this volume by sharing a living history and sentiments as told by contemporary CRE scholars.

INTRODUCTION: WHERE IS OUR HISTORY?

Notwithstanding these encouraging trends, there was an empty spot within me when I first ruminated about my African American perspective on educational evaluation. Who has gone before me? Where is our history? (Hood et al., 2001, p. 32)

Written history has often been weaponized to inscribe power to dominant groups and subjugate minoritized communities. More broadly, publication and social inquiry have

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been effective strategies to eradicate, suppress, and harm systematically underrepresented populations (Gordon et al., 1990; Smith, 2021). Oral history has existed since antiquity, long before the written word. This timeless approach to knowledge and wisdom carried intergenerationally has served as the evidentiary foundation to the survivance of oppressed populations since time immemorial (Augustine, 2008; Chilisa, 2012; Frierson, 2012; Grande, 2007). Oral history is a righteous act of political, social, academic, and practical survival (Shanker et al., 2022; Smith, 2021).

Dr. Stafford Hood was deeply aware and intimately acquainted with these issues. He and many other global Indigenous community members, people of color, LGBTQIA+ scholar warriors, and their allies challenged the dominance that settler scientists and the academy have through privileging published literature. Dr. Hood was the first culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) oral historian. He understood that for justice, culture, and equity to be mainstreamed, these concepts must be conveyed in multiple formats (oral, visual, and written), settings (local, national, and global), and arenas (practical and theoretical). He understood that CRE's transmission, expansion, and evolution require longevity. Through publication he authentically brought to light what had been in the minds, hearts, tongues, and unseen work of many before him (Boyce et al., 2022). He expanded history not only by conceptualizing CRE, but with archival research on those using "CRE-like" methods dating back to the 1940s (see *Nobody Knows My Name Project* highlighting Asa Hilliard, Reid E. Jackson, Leander Boykin, Ruth Browne) (Hood, 2001; 2017; Hood & Hopson, 2008; Hopson & Hood, 2005).

We, the volume editors, have taken a cue from Dr. Hood's astute observations about the nature of history. As such, we connect CRE's past, present, and future and set the stage for this volume by sharing a living history and sentiments as told by contemporary CRE scholars, including Melvin Hall, Karen Kirkhart, Rodney Hopson, Henry Frierson, Robert Stake, Nan Wehipeihana, Joan LaFrance, Pamela Frazier Anderson, and Dominica McBride. We collected stories and wrote this article in the spirit and practice of our kinship to CRE broadly and as part of our responsibilities to our Ancestors, including Stafford, who walked before us (Bowman, 2023; Smith, 2021).

FRAMEWORK AND METHODS: ORAL HISTORY CONVERSATIONS

We approached these conversations thinking deeply about practicing and defining oral history for this volume and in this era (Mahuika, 2019). We did not approach the conversations as a (Western) academic staged approach that often separates oral history and tradition or focuses on one medium over another rather, as Mahuika (2019) and Bowman (2023) invite, we situate these learnings to promote new ways of thinking about "the discipline, its methods, political aims, theories, and the form of oral sources" (Mahuika, p. 2).

As a collective of co-editors, we situate the oral historian as someone who is called upon by the Ancestors and community to carry out the special role. We caution that this is a subtle but important distinction. We contend that few in our field are "oral historians" from a cultural framing, noting that this is not only an internal calling, but a responsibility that is put into one's medicine bundle (life path) by others who are elder to you and important to the community (the field). We feel inspired by our oral historians as they *carry the agenda of the people*, not of themselves. This sacred role is deeply necessary as it keeps our histories, present, and future connected so we can be in kin with each other while knowing these pathways are braided together.

We followed a time immemorial, natural, and relational method, unencumbered by Western standards. We reached out to individuals who we, as editors, collectively felt had contributed to the development and evolution of CRE and had a professional relationship

with Hood. Our conversations lasted from 30 min to 2 hours. We let oral historians know their names would be associated with their quotes and allowed them to review this article. During the conversations, we asked participants to:

- Talk to us about who they are, their connections to CRE and Dr. Stafford Hood, and significant historical events related to CRE from their perspective.
- Reflect on the three key themes of this volume:
 - Cultural responsiveness and CRE as a movement
 - Stafford Hood and his impact and influence on us and the field of evaluation
 - The need for CRE to remain vital during these turbulent times.

We reviewed transcriptions and developed themes using inductive and deductive analysis techniques.

FINDINGS: A SELECTED ORAL HISTORY OF CRE

Our analysis yielded nine broad themes related to the oral history of CRE and Dr. Stafford Hood's impact on the field of evaluation.

1. The origins of CRE are based on culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment.
2. CRE began with implicit commitments to Black evaluators and the Black community.
3. Hood's "Responsive Evaluation Amistad Style" was meant to evoke emotion.
4. One of Hood's key contributions to CRE was his role as a connector, mentor, and conversation space holder.
5. The United States National Science Foundation and Elmima Johnson played an important role in funding space for reflection, which established CRE in the evaluation landscape.
6. Howard University evaluation practitioners and scholars, especially Veronica Thomas, led research and training in contextually responsive evaluation that contributed to CRE.
7. The history of Indigenous evaluation paralleled and supported CRE; this work was reciprocal.
8. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) Statement on Cultural Competence, NSF's User-Friendly Evaluation Handbook, and AEA Dialogues on Race and Class were all instrumental in centering CRE in evaluation.
9. Hood played a preeminent role in the development and evolution of CRE. His legacy will be realized through his work, CREA, his collaborators, and his mentees.

We summarize and discuss each below.

1. The origins of CRE are based on culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment.

Societal issues, struggles, and movements have always been mirrored within social inquiry and education fields. For example, in the United States, the recognition of justice, culture, and equity in service fields has been aligned with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the present. As Black, Brown, and Indigenous people's voices were made mainstream and uplifted in the 1950s and 1960s, education, social work, and health fields began their movements for non-discriminatory practices and cultural competence (Butler, 1992; Chau, 1990; Kohli et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRE oral historians reflected on the emergence of CRE, beginning with inspiration from the fields of assessment and pedagogy. Melvin Hall reflected on the first time he and Stafford heard about

culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment during a lecture at the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

It was in an AERA session by Edmund Gordon that Stafford and I attended that a light bulb went on. And we started talking about what was needed in evaluation. *Melvin Hall*

Rodney Hopson reflected on Stafford's professional relationship with the originators of culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment.

Gloria Ladson-Billings and Stafford had a special relationship. He was also close to Carol Lee and others who were generating cultural responsiveness in other aspects of educational research. This was pivotal as he laid the foundation for CRE, having colleagues he trusted and respected to translate, interrogate, and apply in evaluation from other fields. *Rodney Hopson*

Drawing from movements in pedagogy and assessment, CRE origins also began with reflections on the need to be responsive to culture, especially concerning race and ethnicity.

2. CRE began with implicit commitments to Black evaluators and the Black community.

Hall reflected that when he and Hood began conversations about being culturally responsive, they were initially talking about the Black community. Hall reminds us that “we [he and Hood] didn't specify CRE as Black, as the idea was that in a parallel sense, CRE could be applied to all communities. But for us, for Stafford and me, it was focused on the Black community.” Pamela Frazier-Anderson also reflected on the origins and evolution of CRE.

CRE was about culture being responsive to ethnicity. But that's not all of it; there are many other cultural elements. Now you're talking about being culturally responsive and doing culturally responsive evaluations in philanthropic and public health organizations ... looking at issues with gender identity and sexual orientation. Now, when we talk about culture, we are reframing it and expanding on it so that culture is not just about race and ethnicity but all these other areas. *Pamela Frazier-Anderson*

Hood wanted attention to culture to be central to discussion within the field of evaluation. As such, he introduced CRE in a way that would start conversations.

3. Hood's “Responsive Evaluation Amistad Style” was meant to evoke emotion.

Many within our field contributed to CRE. However, Stafford Hood introduced the term CRE during his (1998) “Responsive Evaluation Amistad style” presentation at Robert Stake's retirement symposium. Hood drew parallels between the Amistad case—at that time a blockbuster movie—and evaluation. He weaved connections between the Amistad case and evaluation as he argued that our field needed more Black evaluators and evaluators with shared lived experiences of program beneficiaries and participants. Stake, who mentored and taught Hood, mused that while culture was not the main focus within responsive evaluation, he had, in fact, called for attention to culture. Stake stated, “I thought that's what we were doing already [with responsive evaluation]. But not at all with the sensitiv-

ity of his efforts, nor with the sole focus that he [Stafford] thought it should have.” Hall reflected that Stafford “wanted to present something forcefully ... it was his way of elbowing his way to the table.” The written format of his talk is included in the symposium proceedings and is a seminal piece of history for CRE.

Hopson reflected on the immense impact that paper still has on him today.

I must say his 1998 Amistad paper, I have on my desk, and I read it at least four- or five times last year. ... And I would have liked to have been a fly on that wall when he actually read that out loud. ... when I need a little inspiration, I just read that. *Rodney Hopson*

After the Stake Symposium, Hood and others worked to expand and evolve ideas around CRE by creating opportunities for conversation and reflection.

4. One of Hood's key contributions to CRE was his role as a connector, collaborator, mentor, and conversation space holder.

Hood created the term CRE and played a major role in ensuring that conversations about CRE occurred. His role as a connector and mentor assisted in facilitating the growth of CRE as a theoretical and practical approach. His mentee and collaborator Dominica McBride recalls being a student and sitting in foundational conversations where Hood had brought many people together and “just soaking everything up and taking notes.” She and others we talked to remember the discussions and having the time to talk and think about what evaluation can and should be. These conversations ultimately led to changes in CRE theory, practices, publications, presentations, and curricula. Hall also participated in conversations with Hood and colleagues. He described Hood as a facilitator and a leader, and he himself as playing an important supportive role, reminiscing that “Stafford was the person with the ideas, plan, and energy to move in that direction. I was more engaged in taking the idea and polishing it.” Karen Kirkhart discussed Hood's role in supporting her explorations of multicultural validity, which would become a cornerstone of CRE.

He respected my ideas around multicultural validity. The way I thought of it was he gave my ideas a spot to land, that he gave them a home of sorts, a place where I could have intellectual space. I could do my work and advance it. ... And, of course, to grow understandings and change them. *Karen Kirkhart*

Hall also reflected on the momentum the convenings built for CRE.

So, it was meetings that both created stronger relationships between people who were in evaluation and created this momentum. And it's in that momentum that we realize all the things that evaluation isn't, that we wish it was. And that then ferments into fully culturally responsive evaluation because that was an attempt to move it [the theory] in the direction we thought it ought to go. ... we were all expressing our angst and concern about this and that within the field. And as we did, it fine-tuned our ideas about what CRE should be based upon, what it wasn't. And that, I think, had as much to do with the development of culturally responsive evaluation and the articulation of it as the formal presentations and publications. *Melvin Hall*

One of the earliest convenings was Hood's co-founding of Arizona State University's national conference on the Relevance of Assessment and Culture in Evaluation (RACE).

RACE was a foundation for countless future conferences and convenings, many of which were funded by the United States National Science Foundation.

5. The United States National Science Foundation and Elmima Johnson played an important role in funding space for reflection, which established CRE in the evaluation landscape.

The United States (US) National Science Foundation (NSF) and program manager Elmima Johnson, in particular, financially supported CRE through grants for theory development, deployment, convenings, and training. According to Hall, the NSF had an evaluation unit that provided grants for research on evaluation. He recalls that much “of that early momentum for CRE was actually through NSF.” Others, including Joan LaFrance, Hank Frierson, and Veronica Thomas, also recalled the role of the US NSF financial support played in increasing the CRE curriculum and opportunities for evaluators of color. Thomas reflects on NSF funding in the 1990s and 2000s.

NSF started funding a lot more. ... much of that with the advocacy of Elmima Johnson. We cannot dismiss her impact in pushing for funding to increase training of evaluators of color and to increase curriculum around culturally responsive or contextually responsive evaluation. So, I can't actually remember the date I met Stafford, but there were some connections in the late 1990s, and then I received a grant from NSF. *Veronica Thomas*

The US NSF-funded conversations and trainings collectively laid the groundwork for the AEA Graduate Education Diversity Internship (GEDI) Program, founded in 2003 by Rodney Hopson. Then, in 2008, Hopson and Gerri Spilka developed and implemented the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Evaluation Fellowship Program. Howard University was funded to offer contextually responsive training, gathering diverse scholars and evaluators.

6. Howard University evaluation practitioners and scholars, especially Veronica Thomas, led research and training in contextually responsive evaluation that contributed to CRE.

Howard University launched its Evaluation Training Institute for Mid-Level Evaluators in 2005. Hood, Kirkhart, LaFrance, Hall, and others were involved as instructors in this certificate program. In addition to training, Howard University hosted several roundtables, conversations, and convenings. Hall reflects that one of the convenings focused on the future of evaluation and played a formative role in the further development of CRE. Thomas noted that her colleagues at Howard University were, in many ways, working in parallel to Hood's efforts. Their “contextually responsive” evaluation had many of the same tenets and goals as CRE.

As Black and African American scholars [at Howard] working in Black and Brown communities, we were aware of the need to build relationships and be participatory. ... Interestingly enough, we didn't use the term cultural responsiveness, but everything that we were doing was CRE. ...It was in 2000, we received funding to develop and implement an evaluation training institute for mid-level evaluators to train them to be not only technically sound, but contextually responsive. We actually went back and forth about whether we should call it cultural responsiveness or contextual responsiveness. We landed on contextual responsiveness because we felt that we wanted to be broader ... Today,

people have expanded how they think about culture, but then when people thought about culture, they really thought about race, ethnicity, and maybe religion. *Veronica Thomas*

The US NSF funded many CRE-related research on evaluation and CRE training projects in the 1990s and 2000s. Indigenous evaluation projects were also funded, which ultimately contributed to the evolution of CRE.

7. The history of Indigenous evaluation paralleled and supported CRE; this work was reciprocal.

As key tenets and definitions of culture were evolving, being revised, and expanding, Indigenous evaluators already had approaches and were embedding traditional cultural knowledge within the field in efforts parallel to those of CRE. Joan LaFrance recalls, “CRE embraced us more than we went the other way. I mean, we [Indigenous evaluators] are just downright sovereign.” The US NSF supported not only CRE but also Indigenous evaluation. LaFrance also reflected upon working with Johnson from the US NSF and participating in an NSF grant that hosted a breakfast for Indigenous evaluators during a conference. Although Indigenous-focused evaluation was well on its way at the advent of CRE, Nan Wehipeihana appreciated that Hood and CRE brought another lens for her and her colleagues to view Indigenous evaluation.

And I think for me, the point that differentiates culturally responsive, and particularly Indigenous, it’s really the whole notion of sovereignty of self-determination. Many of the other things of how we engage in evaluation, how we are respectful, but it’s that point of indigeneity and self-determination in particular, which differentiates the two [CRE versus Indigenous evaluation] in my view. What I think CRE did was bring another lens, I wouldn’t call it a theory, another lens, which supported the conversations or assertions that we were having about Indigenous evaluation. *Nan Wehipeihana*

Indigenous oral and CRE-specific historians reflected on the importance of forming Topic Interest Groups (TIGs) within the AEA. Other critical moments in CRE were related to mainstreaming culture through statements, publications, and dialogues. This relational and reciprocal relationship between CRE and Indigenous peoples brought forward their shared and similar histories, community and emancipatory roots, and strongly held visions for supporting each other and emancipating within the field in uniquely expressive and impactful ways.

8. The AEA Statement on Cultural Competence, NSF’s User-Friendly Evaluation Handbook, and AEA Dialogues on Race and Class were all instrumental in centering CRE in evaluation.

There were many pivotal moments in the history of CRE. Hood et al. (2015) provide an important record of the development of CRE in the 4th edition of *The Handbook on Program Evaluation*. The evaluators who were a part of this CRE oral history project pointed to the AEA Statement on Cultural Competence, the US NSF’s User-Friendly Evaluation Handbook, and AEA Dialogues on Race and Class as substantial events in the evolution of CRE and centering CRE within the field of evaluation. Hall considered the influence of CRE on AEA and AEA’s Statement on Cultural Competence (2011) on CRE.

My experience of it was that cultural competence was the actual movement. And that APA [American Psychological Association], every federal agency, Kellogg Foundation, and everybody was using the label cultural competence. I wanted AEA to be out in front. ... I proposed that AEA have a statement of cultural competence; I was the committee chair. ... So that's how I describe cultural responsiveness. It is the next step after cultural competence, and it was a natural outgrowth of seeing that cultural competence doesn't go far enough in expressing what's needed in evaluation and assessment. *Melvin Hall*

When asked about seminal moments in CRE, Thomas, Hall, Kirkart, and others highlighted the importance of the CRE chapter within the US NSF *User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation* (Frechtling, 2002) because it is a heavily cited document. Kirkhart notes that the US NSF also convened a workshop titled, *The Cultural Context of Evaluation: A Native American Perspective*, which subsequently published a Proceedings (NSF, 2002). She sees it as “a singularly valuable resource, and a companion to the first edition of the *User-Friendly Handbook* in 2002.” John Stanfield's (1999) “Slipping Through the Front Door: Relevant Social Scientific Evaluation in the People of Color Century” *American Journal of Evaluation* article was also listed because of the conversations, published and unpublished, that it stimulated.

In 2017, AEA hosted three national dialogues, moderated by Melvin Hall, around evaluation and evaluators' roles in racial, ethnic, and class disparities in our society. While this was a bold commitment to CRE, Hall reflected on the events with disappointment.

I would say that the Dialogues did not have as much of an impact as I had hoped or assumed they would. ... the Dialogues were supposed to position AEA as a force in culturally responsive evaluation. But the way I would describe it now, it was a good idea that I had, and it was well executed. ... But AEA wasn't paying attention. So, it did not impact our organization as I hoped it would. *Melvin Hall*

Oral historians lauded Hood and his personal and professional importance. They reminisced, often through mournful tears interspersed with reflective laughter, on his achievements and contributions to the field of evaluation and CRE.

9. Hood played a preeminent role in the development and evolution of CRE. His legacy will be realized through his work, CREA, his collaborators, and his mentees.

Hood's role in CRE is unquestionable. His collaborators, mentees, and mentors all reflected on his essential position in CRE. Pamela Frazier-Anderson believes the political period in which Hood grew up played an important role in the person he would become. Kirkhart reflected that he was “passionate, but also compassionate.” Thomas observed that he was “bold in his approach... he challenged you to think outside the box.” McBride characterized him as “fearless,” admiring that he wasn't afraid to call injustice and people out, “and in that way, he embodied CRE.”

Frierson celebrated Hood's prolific writing to move CRE forward. Wehipeihana also highlighted the importance of his publications. She specifically listed the lasting impact of Hood and his *Nobody Knows My Name* project. Hopson also reflected on the importance of the *Nobody Knows My Name* project, stating that Hood “was always disrupting history; that's what that project is all about.”

The formation of the Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) is one of Hood's most laudable accomplishments. According to the CREA website,

“CREA is an international community of scholars/practitioners that promotes a culturally responsive stance in all forms of systematic inquiry including evaluation, assessment, policy analysis, applied research and action research.... CREA seeks to produce a body of informed practitioners, published scholarship, professional development opportunities, technical assistance resources, and advocacy advancing cultural responsiveness across inquiry platforms and settings.” Karen Kirkhart reflected on Hood’s centrality to CRE and CREA.

Stafford was central to the development of CRE because he first had a clear vision. And second, tenacity. He stuck with an idea. ... You saw those multiple iterations of this idea growing, but he never let go of that vision. He was tenacious. He was collegial. He was social. He respected and was interested in old people and young people, in old friends and people he just met. He was a genuinely collegial social being. The networking piece, which played so heavily in developing CREA, was very natural to him. It wasn’t a sales pitch. It was just him sharing his thoughts, ideas, energy, and optimism for what could be. *Karen Kirkhart*

Frazier-Anderson, LaFrance, McBride, and Hopson also reflected on the importance of CREA to Hood’s legacy and the future of CRE. Wehipeihana asserted that CREA increased the legitimacy and centrality of CRE.

We [CREA affiliates] occupy a slice of the dominant world. The dominant world thinks in particular ways. The CREA conferences, the books, and the presentations are the things people have done about how to responsibly engage culture. All of those practice tools that emerged increased our ability to position care in our work and to argue for its legitimacy. *Nan Wehipeihana*

CONCLUSION: THE STAGE HAS BEEN SET

We end our article with considerations of the future of CRE from our oral historians. Thomas reflects that CRE, like history, will be “two steps forward, one step back, two steps forward.” McBride is cautiously optimistic as she considers CRE and current social, political, and societal events. She sees “a bright, big future for CRE, both in ways that are beautiful and good, then in other ways that are scary, tough, and challenging. ... I see a really strong place for us to be in advocacy.” Hopson contends that culturally responsive evaluators “have a lot of work to do. Although the work is not all about publications. ... the work we’re doing has got to be done on our own terms.” Embattled, Frazier-Anderson boldly asserted CRE will continue despite everything happening in the world.

My first thought is that we’re not going anywhere, considering that as a people who have been through adversity, challenges, and struggles based on our race, ethnicity, views, and values. We’ve survived so much that we’re not going anywhere. No matter which way the pendulum swings, we will still be here. We will be in a fight doing what we have to do, adapting like we have for hundreds of years. We stand on the shoulders of mighty people from many cultures. ... No matter what policies or practices you put in our place, we find a way. *Pamela Frazier-Anderson*

We find ourselves wrapping up this conclusion on January 15, 2024, exactly one year after Dr. Hood's passing. We revisited our words across three states and two snowstorms, reminding ourselves of the "why" we wanted to weave together many voices. Oral history and tradition are *our* paths to pass along intergenerational wisdom and honor legacies, something Dr. Hood modeled to us all extraordinarily (Kirtman & Boyce, 2023). We hope that these oral history conversations and the chapters of this volume inspire the next seven generations of scholar-warrior-poet evaluation leaders.

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