

A Family Discovers Its History of Shackles and Shame

By Ellen Maguire
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Juanita Capri Brown and Katrina Browne, though not related, call each other "cousin." They met a decade ago as members of a Bay Area improvisational theater group and forged a friendship over blunt, often painful conversations about race and class.

Brown, 35, is an African American whose family tree includes slaves. Browne, 40, who is white, traces her family line to the DeWolfs of Bristol, R.I., the most active slave-trading dynasty in U.S. history. "It turns out my forefathers bought and sold more than 10,000 Africans," Browne says.

Not long after they met, Browne began making her documentary, "Traces of the Trade," which examines the legacy of her ancestors. Now, "I am aware that I am white so many more hours of the day than I used to be," she says. (The film, shown at the Sundance Film Festival in January, airs tomorrow night on Channel 26.)

After repeated invitations, Brown, the only African American member of the documentary team on the film's journey, joined the project as a co-producer -- with trepidation.

"I wanted to make sure the film was being accountable to black people, to issues that black folks have been talking about and thinking about forever," says Brown, who has a master's degree in public policy from the University of California. "I was also very aware that I could be seen as the Uncle Tom or the mammy or the mascot." She dispelled that fear by focusing on a long-held professional goal: "to keep the conversation about race going."

With Browne's polite but insistent on-screen prodding -- and the on- and off-screen support of Brown and other experts on race relations -- the film follows 10 DeWolf descendants as they discover ugly details of family history, discuss their complicity, attempt to understand the raw suffering of the enslaved Africans and, at the end of the journey, hash out their varying degrees of enlightenment.

Directed by Browne, the documentary -- part history lesson, part encounter session -- provides a window into the awkward and painful consciousness-raising of a set of privileged white Northerners, as well as a gauge of the distance between black and white America. (As the director points out, the slave trade was outlawed 200 years ago, but where's the official apology from the U.S. government?) And the entire project, it turns out, began with a simple booklet.

Browne received a record of DeWolf history from her grandmother, and more shocking to her than the mention of slave trading was her realization that she had buried her previous knowledge of the family business. In that way, the director says, her behavior mirrors "white Northern amnesia" about slavery.

The first-time filmmaker invited 200 DeWolf descendants to come with her as she filmed a path of discovery from Rhode Island to Ghana to Cuba, sites along the transatlantic slave-trade route used by their family's fleet of ships from 1769 to 1820. (Congress outlawed the slave trade in 1808.) Nine of her relatives decided to join the journey.

Why, though, would Browne choose to publicize her family's past?

"If you really believe that all members of society are equal, it makes sense to deal with the grief that arises from our shared history," the director says.

Against the backdrop of an elaborate Independence Day parade, the DeWolf descendants, ranging in age from 32 to 71, gather seaside in Bristol, which bills itself as "the most patriotic town in America."

They learn that the slave trade was the cornerstone of Northern commercial life for about 200 years, forming the economic engine behind the early nation and the subsequent Industrial Revolution. They also learn that a family nursery rhyme, "Adjua and Paulemore," describes two child slaves given by James DeWolf to his wife as a Christmas gift. DeWolf, whose local rum distilleries supported his slave trade, would become one of the richest men in America, as well as a U.S. senator.

The group visits slave forts in Ghana, where their ancestors traded rum for captured Africans, many of whom had been baptized by Christian missionaries, stripped of their birth names and confined to crowded dungeons beneath the living quarters of their captors.

The family's journey coincides with Panafest, a festival attended by many people of African descent in search of their ancestral roots. One of the DeWolfs, Dain Perry, reports that his attempts to draw a black woman into conversation at a slave fort were rebuffed, an experience he calls humbling.

"She said she was hoping not to see any white people there," Perry, 64, says by phone from Boston. He adds that he and his wife, Constance, 60, an African American friend he married after the film's journey, have appeared at more than 60 public discussions on race relations -- work he describes as a "ministry." (The couple donate their speaking fees to the film's outreach efforts.)

The film's escalating tension peaks in Cuba, where the DeWolf ancestors transported African slaves to work on plantations that supplied sugar cane to the DeWolf distilleries in Bristol.

During a family discussion about white responsibility, Elly DeWolf Hale expresses concern for Brown, the co-producer -- prompting Brown's unplanned appearance on camera.

"The entire truth is that in this moment you're just a good person to me," says the co-producer, clasping the hands of Hale, who appears close to tears.

"Of course I'm angry at white people," Brown continues calmly on-screen. "I think white people have been cowards and have chosen to give up their integrity and their humanity for so long. Anybody who's alive or who's paying attention should be [angry]. And the fact that white people are not [angry] means that they're not paying attention."

Brown elaborates by phone from California. "My mother talks about one of her cousins, a former slave. He had scars on his ankles and wrists where the shackles used to be. He ate from a trough. To people who tell me, 'Get over it, it's ancient history,' I say, 'I can touch the hand of my mother who touched a slave.' "

Over lunch at a cafe on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Browne, who lives in Boston, criticizes white Northerners who deny having systemic or economic privileges rooted in the slave trade. " 'My parents or grandparents weren't even here then' is a common refrain," she says.

"Even if you entered this land of opportunity from a boat at Ellis Island, you had access to privileges not available to African Americans," says Browne, who is also descended from Irish immigrants. "Some people think that their ancestors pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, but no, actually there were a lot of government handouts for the white middle class, like the G.I. Bill and home loans."

The personal cost of making the film?

"To go through the slave pavilions [in Ghana], that is a very difficult thing, and I learned that I am not as indestructible as I think," says co-producer Brown. "The grief that comes up . . . it would have been nice to have had an African American ally."

"I work around the clock," the director says, " and I can only wonder if there is a piece of white guilt that I have not let go of."

Browne says she has received hate mail -- from white people who fear making financial reparations for slavery, a subject the film raises.

"It is a lot to ask black Americans to love white people, to forgive them," adds the director, a "preacher's grandkid" who identifies as Buddhist, Episcopalian and more.

"The accumulated rage passed down through the generations, well, that needs an outlet," she says. "The people who deserved it didn't receive it, so how do we figure out how to honor and welcome those feelings and make up for the mistakes that were made without putting up our own brick walls?"

She sighs. "Maybe when white people, in word and deed, do everything in their power to apologize to black Americans, step two would be for black Americans to decide whether or not they wanted anything to do with that."

The "P.O.V." documentary *Traces of the Trade: A Story From the Deep North* (90 minutes) airs tomorrow night at 11:30 on Channel 26.

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