



TRACES OF THE TRADE: A STORY FROM THE DEEP NORTH

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

As a young adult I was deeply influenced by Holocaust films: Marcel Ophuls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*), Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) and Michael Verhoeven's *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* (*The Nasty Girl*). I wrote an undergraduate thesis about Vichy France's complicity in the Holocaust and the country's subsequent amnesia. While it's a crude analogy, France is to Germany with regard to the Holocaust as the North is to the South with regard to slavery. Victors write the history books, and thus forget their guilt.

At 28, when I was in seminary, I received a booklet from my grandmother about our family history. There were a few brief sentences about our DeWolf ancestors being slave traders in Bristol, Rhode Island. I was shocked, but realized immediately that I already knew about my family's role in the slave trade, but had somehow buried it. So the bigger shock was what I was now discovering: *my* amnesia.

I dove into the historical literature, and was horrified to learn that the DeWolfs were actually the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history due to the "successful" three-generation dynasty they created. But they were not alone in New England. While exceptional in terms of the scope and scale of their activities, it turned out that they were part of a broad-based pattern of Northern complicity in slavery. The Triangle Trade drove the economy of many cities and towns, including through average citizens buying shares in slave ships. Northerners themselves held enslaved Africans for over 200 years. Northern textile mills used slave-picked cotton from the South to fuel the Industrial Revolution, while banks and insurance companies profited.

Slavery was thus the foundation of the U.S. economy, not a Southern anomaly. Historian Joanne Pope Melish had just released a book, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-186*, on how the North had constructed an abolitionist identity as pure and heroic to cover over these facts. No one wants to be related to bad guys. I realized that our family story was a microcosm of this larger narrative.



Katrina Browne at Cape Coast Castle, Ghana, in a room where slave ship captains, including her ancestors, negotiated to purchase Africans. Photo: Elly Hale.

Also while in seminary, I wrote a master's thesis on Aristotle's theories on the power of Greek tragedies to create empathy and emotional catharses that can lead citizens to better judgment on civic and political affairs. Having worked in Washington, this resonated with my growing sense that internal transformation is as important as external transformation.

In black/white relations, it seems that there is a tangle of emotions/narratives that need to be addressed for there to be policy change. At this point in American history the vast majority of white Americans define ourselves as "not racist." Especially in the North, we presume ourselves innocent. Hence the defensiveness and resistance to black anger and to calls to level the playing field. Hence the vicious cycle of resentments, recriminations, tensions and distrust that manifest in small and large ways and keep the black/white divide painfully in place.

Theater and democracy went hand in hand in Ancient Greece. There would be important civic debate about social issues lifted up in plays. Today we go to movies. I knew that the role of the North in slavery was a story I needed to tell. And I suspected that I should make it a personal journey into the uncomfortable emotional terrain of my and my family's relationship to the legacy of slavery.

So in 1998 I decided to make a documentary film. I was inspired by Macky Alston's documentary *Family Name*, and Edward Ball's book *Slaves in the Family*, which came out around the same time. The two men were descendants of Southern slave-holders, breaking codes of silence.

I began my journey and invited family members to come with me to retrace the Triangle Trade, on camera. I hoped that as we traveled to Rhode Island, Ghana and Cuba, we could explore our struggles with our history and that there would be a larger resonance. I told family members that we should all be prepared to make mistakes, to embarrass ourselves as we felt, and perhaps fumbled our way through the treacherous landscape of slavery, race and class. We're human, and I wanted to humanize our attempts to get things right.

On the journey a core theme emerged that brought me back to Holocaust studies: the idea of regular folks, "good people," who participate (wittingly or unwittingly) in systems that do immense harm. They're not initiating; rather, they're looking the other way. The DeWolf slave traders were extreme — they knew what they were doing — but many well-intentioned New Englanders back then were a step or two removed from slavery while still fueling the system — just as our family today, and many other white Americans, are a step or two removed from the persistent harms being experienced by African-Americans, especially the poor. Yet what is our responsibility?

In the end, I hope that *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North* invites Americans into heartfelt and honest dialogue on these core questions: What, concretely, is the legacy of slavery — for diverse whites, for diverse blacks, for diverse others? Who owes whom what for the sins of the fathers of this country? What would repair — spiritual and material — really look like, and what would it take?

Katrina Browne, Producer/Director/Writer