SLAVES TO THE PAST

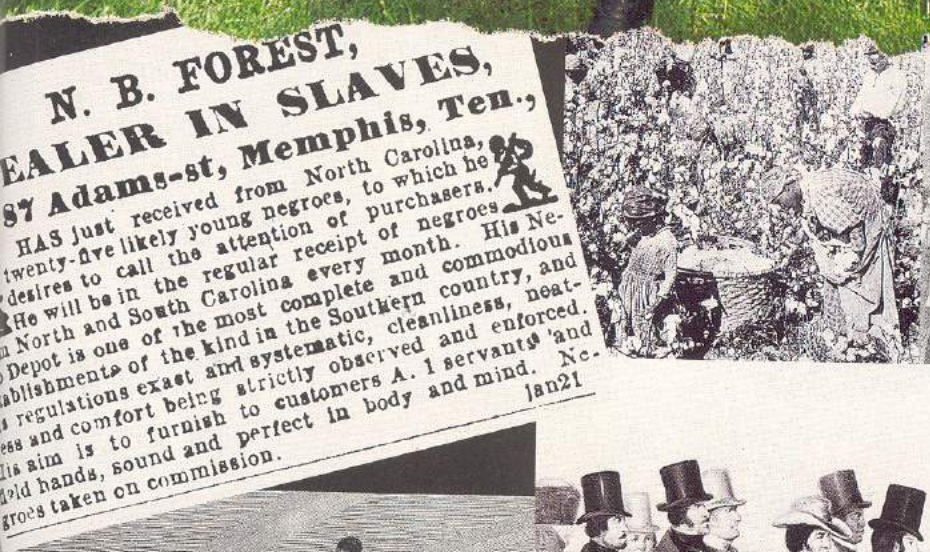
Imagine that your great-grandfather was born a slave on a cotton plantation in Virginia. He told your mother that he always wanted to learn to read and write, but all he was allowed to do was carry his young mistress's books to school. Like all the children on the plantation, his days were spent cleaning the yard, carrying water to the men in the fields and going to "the big house" to fan the flies from the dinner table. His mother was too busy with her own work to look after her children, so they had to fend for themselves. He had never seen his father, but heard he was a white man who lived on one of the local plantations. That man had raped his mother. ▸

"I am comfortable with my past. Slavery brought horrible things, but I don't feel guilty"

Bonny

By Véronique Mistiaen

Above: Dr Mona Weissmark (far left) with descendants of slaves and slave owners who met up to confront the past. Clockwise from below left: Ad for slaves in a Tennessee newspaper; picking cotton; on a slave ship; slaves for sale; up for auction.


N. B. FOREST,
EALER IN SLAVES,
87 Adams-st, Memphis, Ten.,
HAS just received from North Carolina, twenty-five likely young negroes, to which he desires to call the attention of purchasers. He will be in the regular receipt of negroes n North and South Carolina every month. His Ne- Depot is one of the most complete and commodious ablishments of the kind in the Southern country, and regulations exact and systematic, cleanliness, neat- ess and comfort being strictly observed and enforced. His aim is to furnish to customers A. 1 servants 'and old hands, sound and perfect in body and mind. Ne- groes taken on commission.
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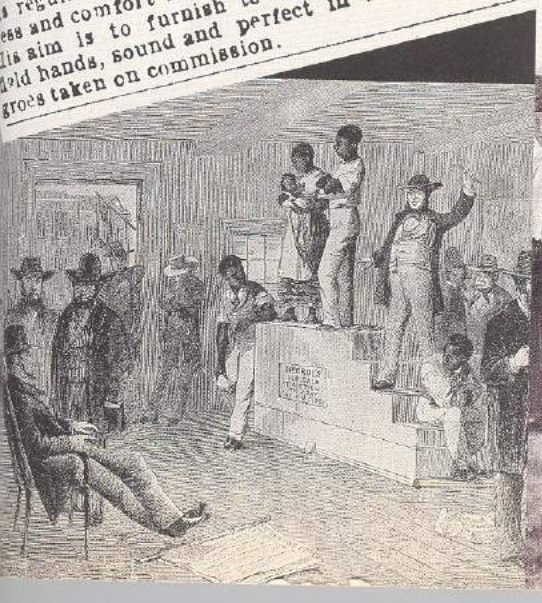

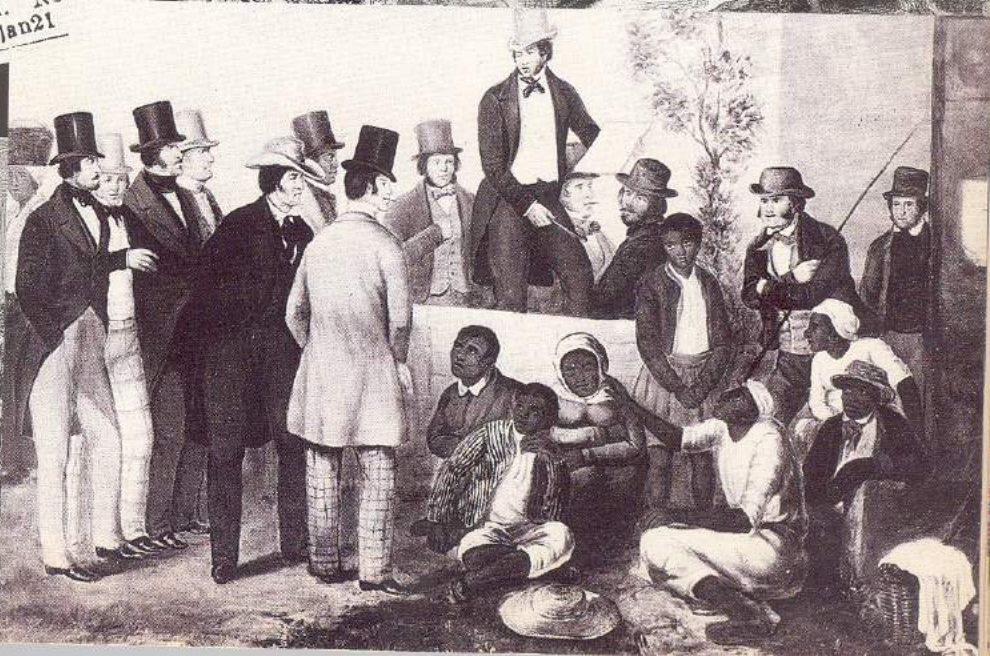

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◄ Thirty years after Martin Luther King dreamed that "one day, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood," 20 grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaves and masters spent four days doing just that. Ten black and ten white men and women from the southern and midwestern states of the US recently met in Chicago to spend time discussing what their ancestors did to each other when slavery was a way of life. It was the first-ever such meeting, held at a time when ethnic violence in the United States is on the increase and resentment on both sides is simmering.

"Slavery is a taboo subject, but we must talk about those terrible days to understand the fear and hatred that still taints relations between whites and blacks today," says Dr Mona Weissmark, assistant professor of psychology at Roosevelt University, and one of the meeting's organisers. Not all masters were cruel, but some slaves were beaten, castrated, attacked by bloodhounds and even executed. Their crimes? Not working quickly enough, refusing to work, protecting their wives and daughters from their masters' advances, or trying to escape.

Slaves were freed in 1865, at the end of the Civil War. At that time, there were four million toiling on tobacco, cotton, rice, sugar and indigo plantations, in mines, or building canals and railroads.

It's hard to believe that something that happened three, four or maybe five generations ago could still have an impact. But it does because slavery was followed by what many blacks still refer to as "the aftermath" – years of constant violence and threats by whites who couldn't accept that their former slaves were entitled to vote or hold office. Ku-Klux Klan members burned black churches and schools, and beat and lynched thousands of blacks to prevent them from exercising their civil and human rights. "The aftermath" also refers to police brutality, the numerous laws that prevented black people from improving their lot, and the systematic segregation in public places that was enforced in every southern state in the early 1900s.

Today, black babies in some US cities have less chance of survival than those in the Third World. More ►

A common legacy

Four women at the meeting – two from each side of the slavery story – give their personal accounts to SHE

Vera Adams, 47, is a retired computer operator. Now a full-time student, she is married with three grown-up children.

"My great-grandparents on both sides were slaves in Mississippi. My mom's grandfather was born into slavery. He used to tell her stories that she found very painful to hear.

"When he was eight or nine, he belonged to the master's daughter, as if he were a pet. She was just a few years older than him, but he had to obey her or he was whipped. He was born with the surname Grace because he and his family belonged to the Grace plantation. One day, he and some other family members were sold to the Ellis plantation, and they never saw the Grace part of the family again. We lost half of our family, which was devastating. My great-grandfather had to change his name to Ellis. He had no possessions and no name of his own.

"Being a descendant of slaves has had an impact on my life – it made me more determined to make it. And I've instilled a sense of history and pride in my children.

"I wanted to come here because I thought it would be healing to speak to descendants of slave owners and see if the fact that whites regard blacks as less human is a result of slavery. I've met people who came here voluntarily and said, 'Yes, my family owned slaves and I want to know how I can redress the wrongs.'"

Cindy Fabry, 25, is a graduate student. She is married.

"My great-grandfather did not own slaves, but he was a member of the Ku-Klux Klan in Ohio. My father and uncle would joke about it, but they say that my great-grandfather never spoke about the Klan. My father said that anybody who was somebody was a Klan member. My family do not consider themselves racist. They ►

"When my grandfather was eight, he belonged to the master's child as if he were a pet"

Vera

SLAVES TO THE PAST

◀ than half of all US prison in-mates are black, yet blacks represent only 12% of the total population. Blacks are also twice as likely to be unemployed as whites. Only a few months ago, as the slavery meeting was taking place, the Ku-Klux Klan paraded slowly through Chicago.

Slavery may provide an explanation for the complexity of the country's social problems, from housing and employment to the family and drugs, yet the slavery era has been pushed under the rug. No-one dares to talk about the past for fear of stirring up the present.

Revisiting the past to change the future is something Mona Weissmark has done herself. The daughter of Holocaust survivors, she had always speculated that the children of both victims and victimisers have a lot in common. This was confirmed when, in 1992, she organised the first-ever meeting between children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis.

She notes that people from both the slavery and Holocaust groups share not only a compulsive desire to learn about their past, but very similar feelings – of guilt, anger and responsibility – either because of what their parents and ancestors had to endure, or because of what they did.

If these descendants of victims and victimisers were able to leave most of their anger, fear and mistrust behind and take back to their lives understanding and compassion, perhaps other polarised groups elsewhere in the world could attempt the same. ■

"A feeling of being oppressed – and the need to work out why – was passed on to me"

Pela

◀ say that as long as black people act properly, they are OK. But my family are the ones determining what right is.

"This meeting gave me a chance to release a lot of emotions regarding the injustice of slavery, and what is still happening today. I feel very protective towards the people I've met here and will keep in touch with them."

Pela Cain, 29, works for a social services agency and is a part-time pre-medical student.

"I always knew that we were descendants of slaves on my father's side, but I only recently found out that we are on my mother's side, too. My father's ancestors worked on a plantation in Mississippi; my mother's in Arkansas. My family didn't pass on their stories, but I have a feeling of being oppressed and the need to figure out why. The aftermath of slavery – the systematic oppression and segregation – all perpetuated the pain, and I have absorbed some of it.

Race was never an issue in my immediate family. Mom always said, 'No matter what people call you, don't let it get you down because they are going to call you something.'

"I wanted to come here because I try not to be racist and I wanted to see how the other side was doing. I came to defend something. At first I was guarded, but I was overwhelmed by the openness. As soon as I made eye contact with Bonny [right] I felt a bond. I don't feel my injustice is bigger than hers. I now want to raise my children in an environment that is more understanding."

Bonny Burke, 26, is a dancer and works in customer services.

"My family had a small cotton plantation in North Carolina and they owned slaves. We don't know a lot because the older members of the family are dead. My mother told me that we had been slave owners, and we discussed it openly. She told me it's part of my history. But I come from the other side as well. My grandfather on my mother's side was American-Indian. He said that when his grandfather was a baby, his house was broken into and people put him into a fire. His feet were burned off. So, even though I am white, I carry a sense of injustice.

"I am comfortable with my past. Slavery brought horrible things and I'm deeply sorry about it, but I don't feel guilty. I came here because I wanted to recognise my heritage and to teach people that not everyone feels hatred, mistrust and fear."