

Yes: There are Slave Owners in My Family.

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This is a personal reflexive exploration, and owning, of my family history in the context of a disavowed chapter of British history and a facing of what I call their blood in our sugar, a riff on Andrea Stuart's *Sugar in the Blood*, her families' story of Slavery and Empire. This exploration is a move towards what Robert Frie calls the ethical responsibility to remember.

It is 5pm UK time and I am in West London. A few minutes away flows the river Thames - the magnificent phenomenon of the twice daily tidal rhythm still very visible here. I think of all the turns of British history that have happened on and with the help of this vast tidal way and the other tidal ways in the UK. I think of the hundreds of slaving ships that came into the port of London on the incoming tide bringing sugar or white gold as it came to be described by white investors, tobacco and cotton; on the outgoing tides these ships sailed across the North Atlantic to the West coast of Africa where they would load with what their owners, and investors, called another kind of gold, the black gold of chattel slaves who were then transported, or trafficked, to the Caribbean Islands and the southern coast of the USA and sold to the plantation owners. Even in these febrile times after George Floyd's shocking death, and the Black Lives Matter activism, I am reminded that the 250 years of the Transatlantic Slave trade is a mostly disavowed part of white British history. The idea of ongoing post slavery trauma for the descendants of the millions of enslaved black Africans, incarcerated in sugar or cotton plantations is still a difficult idea in white western consciousness; The British bask in the moral righteousness of the abolition of slavery in 1837 without owning their pre-eminence in the previous 250 years of slave trading and slave owning. We were not taught that the abolition legislation could only come to pass if every (white) individual who lost earnings through the abolition of slavery would be adequately compensated for their loss. A pay out financed by a borrowing of such proportions that the debt was only

paid off in 2015. We British in this audience have been contributing to this compensation. Of the many ways we have been complicit we have been implicated in bankrolling the industry of slavery. Who knew? Who chose to know?

In this brief paper I begin to explore what it means to discover your family is caught in this web of history and is actively part of a traumatic past over which we had no control. Am I/we or how am I/any of us, responsible for what we only half know and never personally lived. I do this in the belief that despite the distance of time, emotional scars and traumatic memories endure illustrating the extent to which we live our lives in the larger dimension of history. As William Faulkner said: The past is not past; It is not even over.

Levi Gahman and Elise Hjalmason write: “The creation of race and subsequent production of racial subjects offers the imperialist imagination a convenient justification and serviceable pretext to dispossess and enslave, to plunder and exterminate, acts taught to be in some distant past and thought to reside only in history, yet that continue to shatter communities and alienate individuals to this day.”

Born into the miasma of this imperialist imagination I try and face my own history and the history of white Britain.



Image 1

My great grandmother was born Ethel Braithwaite, daughter of James Butcher Braithwaite. Braithwaite according to Creole links is one of the 20 most common surnames in Barbados today. Like the other 19 most common surnames it is British or Scottish in origin. Braithwaite is a well-known surname in the North of England. James Butcher Braithwaite was born in 1821 in the parish of St Phillips, Barbados. What binds these pieces of information inextricably together is the sugar plantation of Three Houses, St Phillips, Barbados. A plantation owned by my ancestors the Braithwaite family from 1685 until the abolition of Slavery in 1837. Like all sugar plantations, it was a plantation worked by chattel slaves. There are 150 years of chattel slave owners in my family.



Image 2

How I wish it were different: that there were abolitionists among my ancestors—that my people were on the better side of this bloody history; but like many white people in the UK, I am explicitly descended from the perpetrators of this crime against humanity.

In a white New Zealand settler family, my kin have trawled through a lot of our family history. For whatever reason, this thread was unknowingly absent. Perhaps because no-one knew my great grandmother, who died before my father and

his siblings were born. Maybe her father had arrived in New Zealand, leaving Barbados and a brief sojourn in England behind, to start afresh, and reinvented himself - there was no one for him to reminisce with about his early life and perhaps, therefore, these stories could remain untold; Post the abolition of slavery did these become stories the plantation owners and slavers, the investors in the transatlantic slavery never told?

This history was an uninterrogated gap until recently when a curious cousin wondered about my grandmother's family. And there we find the Braithwaites. The plantation slave owners. We know very little about why the first John Brathwaite sailed to Barbados in 1679 - the call of adventure, of wealth, a different life, an escape from Britain's bloody history at that time, a journey, perhaps, that was full of promise for him, and becomes a crime against humanity for millions of others.

Did they think about this?

There are very few personal records for any of the plantation owners. One of the few, and most notorious, is that of Mr. Thistlewood who kept a forensically detailed diary of the daily beatings, the rapes that he meted out. As I read this, I kept thinking: is this what my ancestors did? Is this what I am descended from?

There is nowhere for me to hide from knowing now that my ancestors are part of what British writer Ben Okri describes as this failure of humanity, in the context of what British historian David Olusoga calls the collective historical amnesia of the British involvement in this same past.

I so want to separate from this legacy; I don't want this to be in my family. But given the 250 years of Britain power housing the transportation of over 10 million West African men women and children, whose family do I want this history to belong to?

I can feel the pull to dissociate and disavow my own history and to “other” those other egregious white families of slavers and slave owners. To puff up with outrage about them as their statues are rightly toppled. Oh, the sanctity of othering. And the shame of owning, accounting, facing. This is me; this is us.

As I immersed myself in historic records and data, I could hear Toni Morrison’s question, threading through her book *The Origin of Others*. How much data, she asks, do you need to collect before you feel the inhumanity of this. When does the fact finding, the research, become a defence against taking ownership of this history, taking responsibility for the fundamental wrongness of it and sitting within the group perpetrating such a failure of humanity? This IS me, This IS us.

I believe that in knowing, facing and accounting for all facets of history there is the possibility of some kind of repair in the present. As James Baldwin said: Nothing can be changed that has not been faced; and not everything that is faced can be changed.

I am moved by Roger Frie’s idea of the ethical/moral responsibility to remember and his question does the commitment to remember have the power/potential to redeem(redress) crimes perpetrated by a previous generation.

In 1997 Avery Gordon, a sociologist, wrote that the impossible memories and unwritten histories continue living and often come to us as ghosts. “The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person but a social figure... an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known...”; my personal history, our collective history is rife with ghosts that call out the savagery haunting our illusory fantasy of being civilized and our disavowed history of colonialism, slavery and genocide. The not me that we project on to others. We are being called, I believe, to feel shame of harm done and for having benefitted from that harm. Every

spoonful of sugar casually consumed here meant the desecration and obliteration of people, there.

For me, looking at this history has brought a sickening sense of shame of ancestral/collective harm done and benefitting from that harm; and I sense what Lynne Layton describes as a horrific sense of dis-illusionment and the pain of undoing of disavowal.

Lynne Layton talks of white deserved shame that arises from experiencing a conflict between ideals of decency, equality and social justice and awareness of benefitting from racial and class inequalities, from white privilege. It is important, she argues, not to bypass deserved shame, but to move closer to it; and that moving into shame might lead to ethical action.

In 2019 she wrote:

“It seems to me that it is only through the painful process of undoing the disavowals that underlie psychosocial illusions that we might be able to conceptualize and address the ghost’s demand for justice, for a something to be done.”

I am not an extroverted activist, and I have struggled with feeling that that is the only legitimate kind of action but in facing my family story, in talking about it with my family and with my friends, in facing it here with you I believe this too becomes a way into ethical action and gives support for others to be/do the same.

I end with an activist’s prayer that was first tweeted by community organizer Terrance Hawkins in June and was included in the Washington Post’s piece on Race and Reckoning on July 22nd, 2020:

Thicken my love
Widen my heart
Sharpen my analysis
Enliven my praxis
Embolden my voice
Deepen my rest
Lighten my heaviness
Toughen my skin
Soften my heart
Strengthen my friendship
Lengthen my endurance
Weaken my ego
Awaken my soul

Writings I found particularly supportive in writing this piece:

Ball. Edward (1998) Slaves in the family
Frie. Roger (2017) Not in My family
Layton. Lynne (2019) *Transgenerational Hauntings: Toward a Social
Psychoanalysis and an Ethic of Dis-Illusionment*. Psychoanalytic
Dialogues, vol. 29
Morrison. Toni(2017) The Origin of Others
Stuart. Andrea(2012) Sugar in The Blood

Katherine Murphy (UK/New Zealand) is an integrative psychotherapist working in independent practice, and working actively in the education and supervision of practitioners, for the last 30 years. Since graduating in Political Sociology she has been interested in the intersection of the personal/professional/psychological and sociopolitical. She has introduced contextual ways of thinking about therapeutic theories and practices into her training organization and into her all work. She was a founder contributor to PCSR in the UK. In her mind, psychotherapy has always been a political activity.