

[OUR LEGACY]

BREAKING THE CHAINS

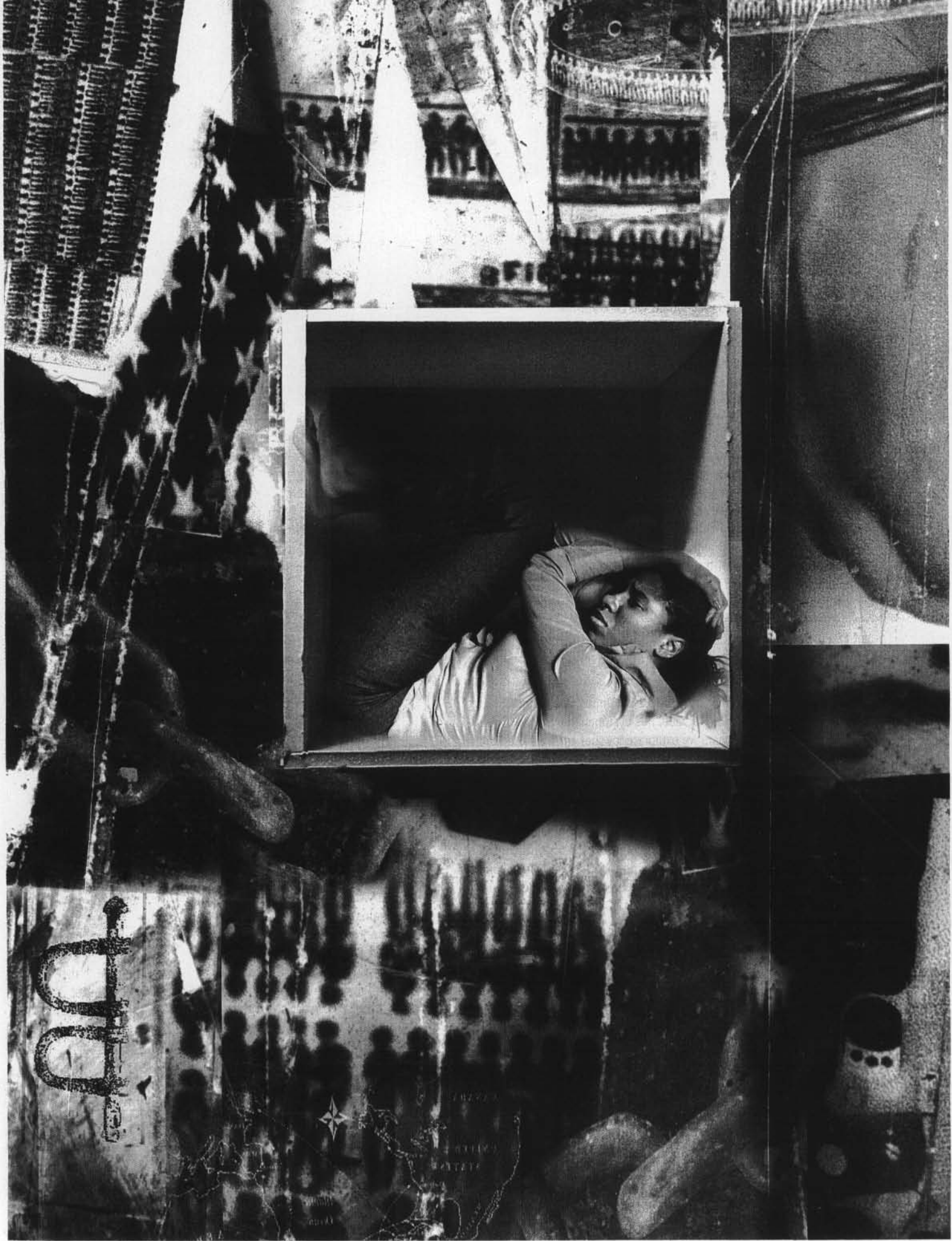
ESSENCE asked three experts to explain how the bonds of slavery continue to hold Black folks captive and how we can set ourselves free



Photo Illustration by Anastasia Vasilakis

Though slavery ended nearly 140 years ago, the brutal, savage servitude endured by our ancestors continues to haunt our very souls, long after we've been "set free." In fact, a growing number of our most critical thinkers believe that African-Americans suffer from a form of psychological trauma that has been dubbed post-traumatic slave syndrome. Though not everyone has bought into this controversial theory, those who have believe that the sheer breadth and scope of slavery's assault on the Black spirit created an extreme, long-lasting kind of stress. And because the fears and coping and survival strategies were never alleviated or analyzed, many believe that they have been passed from one generation of African-Americans to the next.

ESSENCE asked three of the many experts who have looked at this syndrome to help us understand why the model of post-traumatic slave syndrome is useful for explaining how some troubling problems in our community—from Black-on-Black violence to skin-color drama—may have their roots in slavery. According to our authorities—Joy De-Gruy-Leary, Ph.D., a professor of social work at Portland State University, who has studied the centuries-old effects of slavery on today's Black behavior; Brenda Wade, Ph.D., >



a San Francisco clinical psychologist and coauthor of the book *What Mama Couldn't Tell Us About Love: Healing the Emotional Legacy of Racism by Celebrating Our Light*; and Gail E. Wyatt, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry at UCLA and author of *Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives*—only by understanding how a terrible legacy from our past continues to play out in our present can we begin to heal.

—THE EDITORS

THE CONTINUING BONDS OF SLAVERY

ESSENCE: None of us are slaves today, and we don't know anybody who is or was a slave. So why would we be traumatized by something we haven't actually experienced?

Joy DeGruy-Leary: We know that people do not have to directly experience an event to be traumatized by it, and research has shown that severe trauma can affect multiple generations. For example, some children and grandchildren of World War II European holocaust survivors have also suffered trauma related to those events even though they were born years after the war ended. That horror lasted for approximately 12 years and resulted in considerable suffering through generations. Compare this to the slave experience in which a similar series of atrocities were perpetrated on a group of people over the course of 250 years. But no one has ever measured the impact that slavery had on us, what it's meant for us to live for centuries in a hostile environment. We have been hurt, not just by the obvious physical assaults, but in deep psychological ways that are connected to centuries of abuse.

Our ancestors learned to adapt to living in a hostile environment and we normalized our injury. And because they didn't get free therapy after

slavery, these behaviors were passed through the generations.

ESSENCE: Everyone, regardless of race, has dysfunctions. But what are some of the specific behaviors we exhibit today that can be traced directly back to slavery?

Gail Wyatt: Parenting is a good example. During slavery, to keep their children out of harm's way, parents tended to be overly punitive. They would punish their children, often with aggression, to keep them in line rather than allow them to be punished by someone else: the master or the overseer. Parents also may have been overly punitive to look powerful to their children to hide the fact that they were powerless. For these reasons, this overly punitive parenting has been perpetrated by families. Though parents of other races punish children physically, many of us grew up in families where corporal punishment was the norm and where even a child's questioning was often met with a great deal of aggression from parents.

DeGruy-Leary: I've seen so many other parents struggle with this, and they had to learn to hug their own children. For some of us, there's a fear of loving too much, because during slavery there was never any guarantee that families wouldn't be split apart. In a word, it's *abandonment*, abandonment deep down. And so there's this difficulty that we have in really embracing each other the way we need to, even our own children. It's similar with praise. The slave master may have noted that the child is "coming along," but the mother would state his bad qualities—he's stupid, shiftless, unruly, can't work—to keep him from being sold. Many of us normalized

that pathology and now, even though a parent may be very proud of a child, there is a downplay of praise. That creates children who wonder *Am I not good enough?* or who are desperate to make their parents proud.

SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

ESSENCE: How does the legacy of slavery affect our sexuality?

Wyatt: During slavery Black women had no control over whom they had sex with. Rape was a daily occurrence; even Black men raped Black women. Slave owners justified exploiting Black women by creating the stereotype that we were oversexed, always ready. That stereotype endures even today, and many of us continue to react against it by denying our sexuality and being afraid of sex. Others embrace the stereotype, which you can see anytime you turn on a hip-hop video full of out-of-control, oversexed Black women.

Brenda Wade: You also see it in how we feel about our bodies and how we teach our daughters to feel about theirs. A woman who has been sexually molested or abused feels intense fear, shame and anger, even though she may not show it. During slavery we had whole generations of women who were sexually abused, women who learned that their bodies were not their own. The legacy is that we teach our daughters to be ashamed of their bodies. We try to protect them by explaining sex and sexuality in a punitive, prohibitive way. We say, "Girl, keep your legs together," rather than arming them with real information about healthy sexuality, relationships, pregnancy and birth control.

DeGruy-Leary: Slavery also

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affected our men's sexuality. When the importing of slaves became illegal, slave owners took to breeding humans for labor. Our value became more than simply our ability to do hard labor; reproducing children for labor now was important—for men and women. We see that behavior replicated today in our communities, particularly with men. We see them linking their value to how many children they've made, even if they don't take care of them.

DIVISIONS AND POWERLESSNESS

ESSENCE: How have the divisions that were created by the institution of slavery remained with us?

Wyatt: In the South, Blacks outnumbered Whites tremendously during slavery, so the only strategy for keeping us from overthrowing the whole system was to divide and conquer us. The owners pitted field slaves against house slaves, brown-skinned against light, men against women. These divisions created a race of people who often do not trust one another.

Wade: Down through the generations, women have been taught that you can't count on men and you can't trust them on any level—not just sexually, but also economically, emotionally and physically. Men believe they can't trust women, that women are trying to get into their wallets. Young Black men have learned to be aggressive and hostile toward one another. Moreover, during slavery, families were literally divided, men, women and children were taken from one another and sold. So even when people were able to form relationships and create family, it was all tenuous, because at any moment the slave owner could say, "I'm going to sell you." I believe that created a sense of tentativeness and impermanence in relationships

that we sometimes see today. Combined with the trust issues, this may help explain the divorce rate in our community—which is estimated to be 20 percent to 30 percent higher than for White couples.

Wyatt: At the same time, we did find ways to stick together. House and field slaves did work together. House slaves sneaked food to others who couldn't get into the house or eavesdropped to gather information about who was going to be sold, which could be the impetus for people going on the underground railroad or escaping. Despite the divisiveness, we as a people still understand the importance of sticking together in order to survive.

ESSENCE: How has slavery shaped the way we now feel about ourselves?

Wade: When you think of the trauma of slavery, you think primarily of loss—loss of homes, family, language, customs, spirituality. Slavery created a total loss of freedom and mastery over one's life. How would people respond to that emotionally? Primarily with fear-based responses. People who feel afraid and powerless don't

and resilient people we are.

have a sense of entitlement, don't feel that they deserve anything or have the power to ask for what they need. You see it in the superwoman syndrome: the Black woman who overfunctions, taking care of everyone's needs in her family, her community, at work, but not feeling entitled to a raise or promotion and unable to ask for help or get her own needs met. Though people of other cultures have similar feelings, ours is deeper because it comes from trauma patterns passed from slavery.

Wyatt: These losses become so conditioned that a person begins to assume a smaller sense of self than they actually have. That can lead to an impression that "I am less than, and I should be oppressed. I don't have the skills others have, I don't deserve to be happy, successful or loved."

OUR HEALING

ESSENCE: Has any good come out of our oppression?

DeGruy-Leary: That African-Americans have learned to live with and survive such oppression—and in many instances we have actually thrived—speaks to what an amazing and resilient people we are. We are a strong people who survived the Middle Passage, and then later on withstood centuries of violent oppression. In the face of all that, we still retained family, community and a strong sense of spirituality. We know how to take care of people, to take care of one another. But most important, we have maintained our humanity in that we have not, as a group, become barbaric toward those who committed the worst atrocities against us.

Wade: Slavery deepened our sense of spirituality. African people are highly, highly spiritual, and that spirituality kept us alive during slavery and still thrives today.

Wyatt: It also increased our sense of interconnectedness. During slav-

ery we learned to bond with other slaves who weren't related to us. After your mother was sold, the woman who fed you and took care of you became your mother.

Wade: That sense of community, the way we have pulled together in dramatic ways, created one of the most powerful movements of the twentieth century, civil rights. We learned in slavery and must con-



tinue to teach our children that Black communities are powerful.

ESSENCE: How do we move forward?

DeGruy-Leary: So much more research, support and assistance is needed to produce vital healing at a rate that exceeds the injury and decay. But I want to stress that healing must occur on multiple levels because the injury occurred on multiple levels: Individuals, families, communities and society itself were undone by slavery. Therefore our approach has to be one that addresses the injury in all these areas. Rites-of-passage programs that honor and celebrate our history and culture speak to individual change. Reworking the educational system would speak to a shift in the whole society. But we have to begin with simply telling the truth. For so many of us, the moment we just hear the term *post-traumatic slave syndrome* an understanding begins to take shape. We've never been able to talk about it because we never knew what to call it. But to put a name to it, to be able to articulate it, to be able to express it without the fear, the guilt, blame or anger is healing. It strengthens us.

Wyatt: We must never forget that we are a strong people who endured something as brutal and unrelenting as our enslavement period. Whatever happens to us in this century will depend on how well we use those strengths we gained in the past.

Wade: Amen. □