

Beloved: Facing the Past and Shaping the Future

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### Beloved: Facing the Past and Shaping the Future

Beloved is a story written as a cluster of images or “rememories”. They are told as separate and distinct events tied together thorough story telling and personal narrative. The novel is also written out of time sequence. As the main character, Sethe, struggles to come to terms with her past, the reader gets bits and pieces of Sethe’s story as she gradually recollects her history. It is from these fragments that an entire story is woven.

Mr. Garner purchases 13-year old Sethe to assist his wife at Sweet Home after Halle, one of the Sweet Home Men, bought the freedom of his Mother, Baby Suggs, “after five years of Sundays” (Morrison, 1988, p.11). The only female slave, Sethe joins a household of five men - three Pauls, Halle and Sixo. One year after arriving Sethe chooses Halle to marry, and throughout the years gives birth to three children. While she is pregnant with her fourth child and under the hard handed supervision of the new Master, Schoolteacher, the six adults agree to run away. Unable to locate Halle the night they are to leave, Sethe gives her children to the care of a runaway slave woman entrusting her to get them safely to Ohio, and goes back to find Halle. Once she arrives back at Sweet Home, she is raped and severely beaten by the Schoolteacher’s two nephews and escapes without knowing what has happened to Halle. Sethe makes it out of Kentucky, giving birth to her baby girl Denver the night before she crosses the river to Ohio. She is the only one successful. With the help of the Underground Railroad and an indentured servant named Amy, Sethe arrives in Ohio with Denver on Baby Sugg’s doorstep. Her three others had made it safely and for 28 days, Sethe and her children happily live with Halle's mother.

Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their

fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. One taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day. (Morrison, p. 95)

Then one day while Sethe is working in the garden, she recognizes the Schoolteacher's hat in the distance and realizes that he has come for her and her four children. To avoid returning to the slavery of Sweet Home, Sethe tries to kill her children and herself. She is only successful in killing her "crawling already" baby and is sent to jail.

At the onset of the novel, which takes place after slavery has been abolished, the spirit of the baby girl roving through the house torments the family, and the Black community has shunned Sethe because of the inhumanity of her actions. When Paul D shows up on her doorstep in Ohio, and "crawling already" baby leaves the spiritual world and joins the physical world as Beloved, Sethe is forced to face her past.

The novel explores the bounds of a mother's love and the intrusion of the past into the present. "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison, p. 35), and Sethe's attempt to prove her love to Beloved and gain Beloved's forgiveness nearly kills her. Beloved symbolizes the murdered child, the repressed past and Sethe's own guilt and loss. Sethe's struggle is to keep Beloved from gaining possession of her present and to come to terms with the legacy of her past.

There are many cultural dynamics in this book; however, the primary dynamic is slavery, and the psychological repercussions the effect enslavement had on African Americans. The master had almost unlimited power over his slaves: to buy or sell, to cruelly punish, to separate families, to exploit sexually, even to kill with little fear of the consequences. Every day, Sethe beats back memories of her enslavement. For a long while, Paul D can only verbalize his experiences through song. It is only when Sethe hears Schoolteacher teaching the nephews that

she fully understands her status as a slave. "I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal characteristics on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (Morrison, p.193). Schoolteacher's propensity to liken them to animals was his way to confirm his own superiority and legitimize his cruelty. Their savagery confirmed his civilization.

One of the most common forms of punishment for slaves was gagging with an iron bit. Sethe's own mother was forced to wear the bit so often that she has a permanent smile frozen on her face. Robbing a slave of their speech was a powerful way to make him or her feel powerless.

The wildness that shore up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was take out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye. (Morrison, p.71)

These are only a few of the barbaric accounts portrayed in the novel that were inflicted on these people. This imagery provides the graphic reality of what slave life was like. They were physically and emotionally beaten, and once slavery was abolished they were forced to fit into a society that did not want them in it. The effects of enslavement leave these characters angry, fearful and frozen. They are unable to relinquish these memories as they struggle to come to terms with them, because they are pulled by both the desire to remember and to forget.

As in African American tradition, spirituality, rituals and folklore are intertwined in this novel. The story alone is Sethe's healing ritual. Her inability to confront her memories of slavery, and the guilt of killing her child, keeps her mentally enslaved. Through retelling her story, she works through the issues that have been keeping her captive for 18 years. Spirituality forms the backbone of this community as they struggle with their grief. Baby Suggs opens her own heart to heal former slaves and enable them to seek reconciliation with their memories, "...slave life had 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,' she had

nothing left to make a living with but her heart..." (p 87). She becomes the gatherer of pieces for her neighbors' experiences and shapes those experiences into a communal declaration.

Otherworldly experiences are seen frequently throughout the novel. The house at 124 was surrounded by the sounds of women's voices, Baby Suggs and Denver had visions of what was to come, spirits touched the living from beyond and Beloved came back from the afterlife. All of these things were accepted as part of the spiritual world. This is because spirituality in the African American culture is not something that is just preached on Sunday, but part of every moment of every day. It is song, it is dance, it is chants and it is rituals. It is what makes a person who they are and gives them the strength to continue. It's powerful force is never taken for granted and is embedded throughout all other cultural dynamics.

Stripped of their names and their right to speak, their families sold, and they themselves considered property, slaves were deemed unworthy of inclusion into the macro culture. This isolation made the importance of ethnic identity even greater. The macro culture came to represent all that was evil, and the slaves rebelled against it in the any ways that they could. Some slaves refused to learn to read or learn the language others refused to show any emotion. They found their cultural validation within their ethnic group and refused to conform to the attitudes and values of the culture that persecuted them.

Community is an essential cultural dynamic in the novel because it is where they derived their strength and identity. Slavery did not favor the development of family structures for slaves. Legal marriage was not permitted. Husbands and wives could be sold away from one another, and children were sold away from parents. It was rare that families were able to stay together. The community therefore, became kin and the sole means of support and guardianship. The community's support, or lack of, in the case of the women living at 124, was shattering in many

ways. "Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (Morrison, p. 23). So, two weeks after Sethe and the children arrived at 124 she threw a community celebration. Her friends and neighbors saw it as giving in excess and responded in spite. When the four horsemen came to find Sethe and the children, no one came to warn them of the impending arrival. After Sethe did the unspeakable and beheaded her baby girl the community shunned them all. "Then there was no one, for they would not visit her while the baby ghost filled the house, and she (Sethe) returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated" (Morrison, p.96). Without this community the women were completely isolated. Not welcome in the "white world" and not welcome in their own, they rarely left the house. Even Baby Suggs who had devoted her life and love to the community as a preacher, gave up her calling to lie down and "...fix on something harmless in this world" (Morrison, p.179). It was only once Denver broke this isolation seeking help for Sethe, does the community come together. They recognize the universal oppression that is embodied in *Beloved*, and whether or not they can except what Sethe has done, come together to try to set Sethe and the community free of the past.

I separate Kinship from Community in this paper, although as previously stated, I believe they are one in the same. I do this to better explain the dynamics of Sethe with each of her daughters, Denver and *Beloved*, and the bonds that hold them together and apart from each other. It is their relationships with each other, coupled with the history of the family's enslavement, that is the crux of this story. Sethe struggles daily to block out her past. The first thing she does when she gets to work is knead bread. "Working dough. Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past " (Morrison, p. 73). The internal and

external scars which slavery has left on Sethe's soul are irreparable. Each time she relives a memory she experiences the pain all over again.

Sethe did not want for her children what she had or did not have. She loved Denver completely and without reservation and because of this “too thick” love she consciously chooses to distance herself from Denver and keep her from the past. Sethe loves Denver so much she is willing to risk Denver’s love in return. The unarticulated past stands like a barrier between Denver and Sethe. Trapped in Sethe’s past, Denver is secluded and has no means to find herself within her own life, family and culture. She finds herself resentful and scared of her life and her mother. She clings to Beloved as her own possession, because it is through Beloved that she defines herself.

Guilt and longing characterize Sethe and Beloved’s relationship. Sethe was forced to do the unthinkable, when she killed Beloved. She felt it was her only option to spare her from the horrors of slavery. When Beloved appears in flesh form and Sethe realizes who she is, she can not give Beloved enough to appease her guilt and Beloved can not take any less to appease her wanting. “Beloved ate up her (Sethe) life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur (Morrison, p.250). This ferocity of emotion almost kills Sethe, and she has no power to stop it. This union of the three women comes full circle when Denver realizes she needs to save her mother from Beloved, not Beloved from her mother. Denver is forced to break her isolation and sever her connection to Beloved in order to help her mother. Morrison paints an almost surrealistic picture of the lengths these women will go to for each other. It is beyond love and beyond passion. It is obsession. I do believe that was Morrison’s intent, to show the bonds of motherhood and family so strong that nothing could break them.

This novel was one of the most disturbing, powerful and captivating novels I have ever read. When I was taught about slavery in school from textbooks with the “European perspective”, the shades were drawn in regards to the atrocities that were deemed too horrible to tell. What I came away with was a watered down view of slavery. Told through the eyes of those who were brutalized, Morrison’s novel exposes the truth of those brutalities in such a personal way I found myself crying at times and shaking with anger the next. I can not begin to understand the torment, grief and anger the slaves went through, but I can recognize the sheer strength it must take today to balance the tension between wanting to bury the past and the compulsion never to forget it.

It made me think back to all the times I have heard a similar quote, “ Here we go again, someone else talking about Black injustice. How long are we going to have to apologize for slavery?” I guess just about as long as it takes a person to forget they were treated as though they were beasts. Cruelty of that kind is not forgotten, and the pain and suffering that it has caused should be remembered and past down so no one can ever forget how low the depths of human nature can go.

I also reflected on some of the experiences that I had doing home visits in primarily African-American communities in Chicago. Especially the times I felt I was being shut out because of the color of my skin. Never did I think, “*They are treating me no differently than what they experience as African-Americans each day.*” Never did I think, “*Here I am, a white woman thrown into this family’s world not by choice, but mandate. I know nothing of their family, their culture or their history. Yet, I am telling them what is best for their children.*” All I ever thought was, “ I’m here to help and they are stuck on the color of my skin.” Which in and of itself, is perfectly ironic.

This novel has helped me to better understand many aspects of the African-American culture. For example, in the European culture, there is much more emphasis placed on autonomy and independence, but in the African-American culture, the sense of ethnic identity plays a large part in a person's life. Much of their identity and sense of belonging comes from being part of that group. Since slavery prohibited any inclusion into the culture at large, their validation came exclusively through their culture. As a counselor it is crucial for me to appreciate how integral ethnic identity is, and be aware of how the influences of my culture directly impact that identity.

Kinship and extended families are tied tightly to ethnic identity, because they provide a sense of unity and interdependency among people. Each individual within the community relies upon the support network that kinship promotes. As Denver, Sethe and Baby Suggs found out, without that support in a communal environment they were isolated. They had difficulty identifying themselves within the family and within the culture. When counseling I will need to explore what role extended family plays in each child's life, and remember to use the wonderful resources that the extended family has to offer. Furthermore, I will need to be aware that the school culture may not be consistent with the child's culture, which will ultimately cause conflict between their ethnic identity and acculturation. It is necessary for me to work as an advocate for change in removing these barriers to learning.

After years of oppression, racism and stereotypes inflicted on African Americans by the macro-culture many people have intense negative feelings towards European Americans. I need to be aware that due to this hostility, there may be resistance to the counseling process. It is my job to recognize what those behaviors might include and try my best to either work to ease the resistance or in some cases, use the resources I have to help the child and his/her family find assistance elsewhere.

The same culture that exploited African Americans for years has also come to expect very little from them. It is my role as a school counselor to promote success, enhance their sense of self esteem and belonging and commit myself to alternate learning strategies that fit a child's cultural needs and values. This is going to require me to continue to be open to new ideas and concepts, appreciate others differences and recognize the similarities. I will constantly need to keep learning about their culture and seek help within their community for guidance and leadership.

It is important to mention that although the book brought out many of the cultural differences between my culture and the African American culture, I also found similarity. Growing up in a large Polish community with a large extended family, I was brought up with the belief that your family comes first. Our gatherings include many people whom I grew up calling sisters, aunts and cousins, who are not by blood but are indeed family. We serve each other as counselors, spiritual guides and wealths of unconditional love. I found that same dynamic rooted in the African American culture. I believe this commonality will help promote the counseling relationship and give a starting point to understanding and accepting each other.

I know I have a long way to go in learning more about the African American culture as well as other cultures. Our class assignments and discussions have really lit a fire in me in regards to increasing my cultural knowledge. They have made me realize how quickly school populations are changing, how much more representative they are to multiple cultures, and how I as a School Counselor can be a key agent for change. Lately, I have begun to do a lot of observing and have been holding conversations with others in regards to their cultures. I have been so pleased with all I have learned and intimidated by how much I have left to explore. These conversations and observations have led me keep track of how many preconceived notions

pop into my head throughout the day. I decided to do this because I found in many of my conversations I was having a repetitive thought, “*I didn’t think that they...*” It startled me how unconsciously I imposed my notions on to someone else. Now that I am *consciously* aware of that behavior, I catch myself, and ask myself why I think that and explore it a little further. It is that type of consciousness that I think is key to cultural responsibility and social change, being able to bring to the forefront of your mind other’s cultures, values and beliefs, appreciate and respect them, and challenge your own perceptions. This novel and this assignment as been a springboard for me in regards to my cultural consciousness and I plan to continually challenge myself.

## References

Morrison, Toni (1988). *Beloved*. New York: Penguin Books.