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# *Beloved*: A Counterstory About a Counterstory

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Course Design: Counterstory

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Kaley Johnson is a student at the University of North Texas where she studies Writing and Rhetoric, Journalism, and History. Originally from Austin, she is hoping to find a career that allows her to travel and live in many places. She prides herself on her love for storytelling, something that made this essay not so daunting to write. She enjoys any

form of storytelling whether it be reading, writing, music, television, or movies. Johnson is an editorial intern at Bookstr where she writes articles about all things books and entertainment and is hoping to one day go into publishing where she can help people with their own stories. She would also like to continue entertainment writing where she can share and discuss her love of stories with others. She also enjoys exercise and embroidery. Most days she can be found in class, working at her retail job, or writing at a coffee shop.

**A** counterstory in its most basic form is simply a story. But it is a story with a purpose and a goal. Counterstories help people understand concepts that they otherwise can't relate to or do not resonate with. Often when someone is presented with information, complex information to think about, they shut down or put up a wall of sorts—a wall of intolerance and stubbornness so they won't have to discuss topics that are difficult to swallow. Counterstories work to break down this wall subtly. It could even be argued that counterstory is a little bit sneaky in its attempts to help readers care about characters or situations that they wouldn't otherwise give the time of day. Counterstories convince the average reader to open up their mind as they learn about the characters, their lives, and their situations. Counterstories help audiences learn about something in a way that is easier to digest and yet will still stick with them as they go through life.

Derrick Bell, often thought of as the father of Critical Race Theory, argues that "using stories [is] a means of communicating views to those who hold very different views on the emotionally charged subject of race. People enjoy stories and will often suspend their beliefs, listen to the story, and then compare their views, not with

mine, but with those expressed in the story" (Martinez slide). Counterstory in Critical Race Theory is everywhere. Academic scholars for many years now have worked on their own counterstories whether this be through methods like narrative, dialogue, allegory/fantasy, and chronicle (Martinez 22). There are also composite characters that scholars will create and insert into their chronicles for years always revisiting them (Martinez 25). One of the most interesting things about the counterstory is how it exists in works that were never meant to be counterstories in the first place. Pieces of historical fiction that while intended to tell the story of a marginalized person or group, were not created to further academic knowledge or research in Critical Race Theory. One of these pieces is Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*.

I will be writing my own counterstory that works to analyze another counterstory, *Beloved*. To do this I use a classic counterstory method and structure: a dialogue between and teacher and a student. As this is something that legal scholar Richard Delgado (considered to be one of the founders of Critical Race Theory) does a lot I do take inspiration from him regarding this structure. It is an excellent way to speak directly to the reader without the reader feeling like they are being talked at and rather they are witnessing a conversation that includes a student—a student that they can resonate with and will ask a lot of the same questions.

The counterstory is be inspired by various conversations me and my classmates had with our teacher when I first studied the novel in my senior year of high school. My characters are Mrs. Isla, a high school teacher and community college professor who is very passionate about her job and very well respected by her students, and Alana, a high school senior discovering her love of literature and analysis with the guidance of her favorite English teacher. I will be analyzing *Beloved* as a fantasy/allegory counterstory due to the nature of the title character Beloved, being something of a ghost of one of the main character's children. I will also argue for allegory by arguing that Beloved, the character, is the personification of the past and slavery.

Regarding counterstory as fantasy/allegory, Dr. Aja Martinez writes "Bell himself has confirmed that many of his stories were written

to facilitate classroom discussion and that his use of allegory and fantasy concerning race—and the methodological use of fiction in general—enables him and his audience to separate themselves from the real and perhaps “see things in terms that are less threatening and confrontational” (Martinez 53).

In my counterstory, I will also include conversations inspired by two tenets of Critical Race Theory that I believe are present in *Beloved*. These are the permanence of race and racism and the centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color. I have chosen these because I believe that my argument that *Beloved*, the character, is the personification of slavery relates to the power slavery had on Sethe and still has today as slavery is the reason that racism is still so ingrained in society today. Racism will never be “solved” or go away. For the centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color, one very important theme in *Beloved* is the power of memories and how her experiences affect her decisions without her directly intending them to.

## A COUNTERSTORY OF A COUNTERSTORY

In a classroom engulfed in darkness, high school English teacher Mrs. Isla shows a video in class. The video is an interview with Toni Morrison, the author of *Beloved* a novel that tells the story of Sethe, an escaped slave, and her life after killing her daughter and attempting to kill her other children. The interview was done in 1988 just some months after the release of the novel. She is being interviewed by Mavis Nicholson. The class has been studying the novel for a couple of weeks now and they are discussing Toni Morrison’s motivations and intentions in writing the novel. Morrison is discussing with the interviewer the fact that the novel takes inspiration from the true story of Margaret Garner.

TONI MORRISON: She had escaped from slavery. She had made it into a free state with four children and at that time slave owners could enter into free territory and take them back... The law was controversial but at any rate a month or so after she had gotten into free territory the man did come for her. She saw him and instantly ran out into the back to kill those children. She wounded two, cut the throat of a third, and was about to bash the head of a fourth into the wall when they caught her and imprisoned her.

Looking out into her student’s faces Mrs. Isla could see a range of emotions running through them. Some stared at the screen seemingly unable to look away. Some looked down at their hands picking their cuticles. All looked lost in thought. The video is being shown after a couple of students expressed doubt about Sethe’s story. That a mother could be so desperate to now allow her children to be taken back under the control of slavery that she decided death had to be the better option.

TONI MORRISON: So that story was haunting you know because it was not an exhausted mother. It was not contempt for the

children. It was what she said... She said only they will not live the way I have and death she felt was better... And it was that moment. Anything that Margaret Garner would have chosen to do at that moment would have been a disaster. It was a perfect dilemma.

Mrs. Isla paused the video here with only a few minutes left in class.

MRS. ISLA: *Beloved*, class, is in fact inspired by a true story. Margaret Garner was simply a mother who wasn’t allowed to be a mother. The most maternal thing she could think to do at that moment to protect her children was to end the suffering she knew was in store for them. As Morrison said, any decision that she could have made at that moment would have been the wrong one. There wasn’t something she could do or say that would have made the outcome something tolerable or compassionate.

The bell rings signaling the end of the school day and though Mrs. Isla would love to continue this discussion she felt the class needed the time to sit and think on this.

MRS. ISLA: Ok everyone. Make sure to finish the novel before the next class and be prepared to discuss it. We will pick it up here next time.

As the students began to file out of the class one student, Alana hangs back. Alana had been a very engaged student throughout the year. Often being involved in discussions and bringing up new viewpoints for the class to discuss. Mrs. Isla could tell throughout the year that her love for literature and the conversations it can produce has been only growing. This is why Mrs. Isla chose to teach high school as well as at the local community college. There is something about being able to help cultivate a high school student’s love for literature that she doesn’t get from English majors.

ALANA: Mrs. Isla there is one thing that’s occurred to me that I am struggling to understand, and I don’t think it can wait until the next class.

MRS. ISLA: What would that be?

ALANA: Well, we know at this point that Morrison intended for her readers to believe that *Beloved* is something of a ghost. The ghost of the daughter that Sethe did kill that day.

MRS. ISLA: That’s correct. Or that is at least what all of the characters in the book come to believe.

ALANA: So, then I guess my question is how can Sethe want so desperately for her children not to live under the control of slavery but then herself fall under the control of *Beloved*? Is it the guilt she feels for killing her?

MRS. ISLA: In a sense yes, it's the guilt. That's part of it. But it's the trauma too. It's the fact that Sethe has yet to feel the responsibility one has to feel before one can forgive themselves.

Alana still looked somewhat confused but no less motivated.

MRS. ISLA: If you have time there is more of the interview, I think you may be interested in seeing.

ALANA: Yes, I absolutely have time.

Mrs. Isla has Alana come over to her computer so that they can watch more of the interview that is still pulled up on her desktop. She hits play.

TONI MORRISON: So, the only one I felt who could judge her would be the daughter she killed. So she in fact does return in order to claim what she has been robbed of which is a mother's love and life and also to accuse her. She is the only one who can say "How do you know death is better for me since you've never died? Maybe it isn't." No one else is in a position to ask that question.

Mrs. Isla pauses the video once again to allow Alana to process Morrison's words.

ALANA: So, Beloved is Sethe's guilt personified?

MRS. ISLA: Sure. There is the argument that Beloved is a lot of things personified. Sethe's guilt, Sethe's past, trauma, or slavery itself. Beloved is something different for each character in the novel.

ALANA: So, it could be correct in saying that Beloved isn't exactly Sethe's guilt personified but slavery. And so there is an irony in the fact that Sethe falls under her control just as she was under the control of slavery. Which is the exact thing she didn't want for her children.

MRS. ISLA: Yes. And this speaks of the long-lasting effects slavery had on those who were enslaved. Even free it stays with them through their trauma and memories never really not controlling them. It even controls Denver, Sethe's other daughter, through generational trauma and the pressure Denver feels to save her mother and the whole town from Beloved. Slavery and racism are permanently ingrained in those who were affected by it and will be for all generations that come after and is therefore forever ingrained in our society.

ALANA: So, despite the fact that she didn't want her children to be under the control of one thing she had to once again fall under its control before she could begin to forgive herself and recover from how it affected her. At least as much as she possibly can, given the circumstances.

MRS. ISLA: That is definitely a very valid way of looking at it. It should be remembered that Beloved and her origins are an open-ended question. When analyzing literature nothing is really ever wrong and this is especially true with Beloved. She can be whatever the reader feels she is or needs to be in that moment for these characters.

Mrs. Isla once again hits play on the interview with Toni Morrison.

MAVIS NICHOLSON: Do you think it is possible then for someone to forgive themselves even when they've done something absolutely terrible?

TONI MORRISON: Yes. It's called grace. At some point you do. If you don't you're in a cul de sac. But you have to go through the fire first. You have to experience the full fall and the complete self-loathing in order to come around to something like forgiving oneself. It's when you skip responsibility. When you use a substitute emotion like guilt. But if you feel the real thing which is shame, hatred, humiliation, and self-loathing. That is the door and if you get through that. Then you can forgive yourself.

### Works Cited

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