

SO MANY BEGINNINGS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

FREE COLONIES AND THE UNDOING OF BLACK SAFE SPACES

So Many Beginnings is primarily set in 1863, at the Freedmen's Colony on Roanoke Island.

- Were you familiar with this colony prior to reading the text?
- How many other colonies can you recall from the text?
- What did you glean about the demise of the Roanoke Island colony and others? Were you surprised by what happened to them?

Plantation sites, estates where Black Americans were forcibly enslaved and brutalized, have been preserved in the United States. The sites of the numerous freedpeople's colonies were not.

- Why might that be?
- How might the commemoration of freed Black communities have impacted our national mythology?
- What similarities do you find between the demise of the freedpeople's colonies and the massacres and devastation of Black towns like Tulsa, Oklahoma; Colfax, Louisiana; and Elaine, Arkansas?



CORRECTING FALSE NARRATIVES AND THE ARCHETYPAL "GOOD NORTHERNER"

Whoever has the privilege of telling our histories and stories gets to determine how they are told. The recorder decides which stories are worthwhile, and whether to include nuanced or conflicting sentiments. The truth is never simple and without a full historical context, the motives are often complicated enough to be misleading. For instance, a great American myth that persists to this day, and against which I present dissenting evidence, is that abolitionists were kind, empathetic people who desired the liberation of formerly enslaved or politically powerless free Black Americans. Yet Black Americans were forced to labor on behalf of the Union, missionary teachers infantilized colonists or even made their children into servants, and many abolitionists desired to cleanse their white countrypeople from the moral repugnance of slavery yet did not wish for Black Americans to have equality. Even the American Colonization Society (ACS), which focused on colonizing Liberia, a new country in Africa, for Black Americans did not do so out of kindness.

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“Another early goal [of the ACS] was to make slavery more secure by eliminating the ambiguous status of free Blacks.”—*West Virginia History* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012)

- What information did you glean about Union forces from *So Many Beginnings*? Does it differ in any way from what you have read or seen before?
- How much of this information were you aware of prior to reading *So Many Beginnings*? Why do you think that is?
- How did you feel about Beth having a different opinion of Liberia than the rest of her family? Did the differing sentiments make it difficult to decide how you felt?

In *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862–1867*, historian and scholar Patricia C. Click provides extensive documentation of personal and official correspondences, allowing readers an insight into individual participants of the colony's genesis and maintenance. Missionary teachers were white men and women enlisted to educate and, ostensibly, evangelize the freedpeople. The simplistic dichotomy we have been taught about Northerners would evoke only assumptions of benevolence and moral rightness. Their own writings, however, demonstrate the inherently supremacist views many held, as these excerpts from Click's book show.

“Similarly, Ella Roper's discussions of her work with the freedpeople suggest an association that was simultaneously familiar and condescending. The colonists seemed “like a family,” she wrote, “so much do they depend upon me, for advice in their home affairs.”

Samuel and Profinda Nickerson similarly took in a young woman who quickly slipped into the role of servant, assisting Profinda with laundry and cooking. “She came naked,” Samuel wrote, “and we have dressed her in old clothes sent out and given her a home with us.” Such treatment was “all the remuneration she asks, and [she] seems happy in such a situation,” Nickerson noted, apparently unaware that his sentiments were similar to those that were frequently mouthed by Southern slaveholders.

- What was your impression of Constance Evergreen? How does her interaction with the March family suggest an inability to regard them as autonomous and equal citizens?

LANGUAGE AND ITS ROLE IN OPPRESSION

Language is of critical importance, not just in expressing ourselves, but in contributing to or resisting prejudice and bias. While today Black Americans use African American Vernacular English as a proud example of a unique heritage and to delegitimize attempts at linguistic hierarchies, language has often been used to tacitly suggest white supremacy. In fact, the intentional use of

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broken and sometimes nonsensical English attributed to Black Americans, enslaved or free, is not restricted to fictional accounts in literature, film, or television. Sojourner Truth gave a famous speech in 1863 that would be transcribed so as to suggest that the abolitionist and orator did not have a formal command of the English language.

There are two conflicting versions of the speech, neither of which was transcribed at the time Truth actually gave it. An account reported in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* was the first to be published and does not actually include the titular phrase. On May 2, 1863, Frances Gage, a white abolitionist and president of the Convention, published an account of Truth's words in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. In her account, Gage wrote that Truth used the rhetorical question, "Ar'n't I a Woman?" to point out the discrimination Truth experienced as a Black woman.

Various details in Gage's account, however, including that Truth said she had 13 children (she had five) and that she spoke in dialect have since cast doubt on its accuracy. Contemporaneous reports of Truth's speech did not include this slogan, and quoted Truth in standard English. In later years, this slogan was further distorted to "Ain't I a Woman?", reflecting the false belief that as a formerly enslaved woman, Truth would have had a Southern accent. Truth was, in fact, a New Yorker.

This Day in History,

Though born in New York, Truth's first language was Dutch. It stands to reason that her command of the English language was more formal than not, as often translated English is overly precise.

- Read the following and consider what assumptions you might make about the author.

"I am at this time, and nearly at all times, in the enjoyment of most excellent health. My children are as fat as pigs. Grandson is nearly as broad as he is long; Cornelia is not tall for her age, but is quite stout; Alexander has begun to grow a little, though he is quite small for his age. They are all going to school, and seem to be learning quite fast.

—Rosebella Curke correspondence, *The African-American Mosaic: Personal Stories and ACS New Directions*, Library of Congress"

- This is an excerpt from a personal letter, written in 1859 by a formerly enslaved woman named Rosebella Burke. Prior to reading *So Many Beginnings*, would you have been surprised by what she wrote? Why or why not?

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- When Mrs. Plender suggests that Jo rewrite her autobiography in a more crude dialect, how did you feel about Jo’s reaction? What did Mrs. Plender’s suggestion imply? How might you have responded?

In *So Many Beginnings*, I intentionally use precise language, refusing the common terminology that contains passively transmitted messaging meant to gird and perpetuate an oppressive culture. For example, when young Amy refers to “masters,” her sisters gently correct her to the more accurate term, “enslaver.” Rather than carrying the implication of being superior to another party, this word applies action and intentionality to having enslaved fellow human beings. It shifts the culpability and shame from the enslaved to the enslaver.

- Consider the terms “slave” and “enslaved.” What impact do you think they have on both the people who were victims of chattel slavery and their descendants? Why do you think the former has persisted for so many centuries?

Another example of weaponizing language is the withholding of it. It is not uncommon for the power majority to withhold or refuse to normalize language referring to those they would like to suppress and dehumanize. In *So Many Beginnings*, there are two issues that remain largely untitled: Jo’s aro/ace identity, and her queer platonic relationship with Lorie, and Beth’s sickle cell trait disorder.

Why does it matter if we have words for asexual and pansexual and grey-a and hetero-mantic; why can’t gay and straight be enough? Most simply, the language we use to talk about people with non-heterosexual sexual orientations became important the moment we stopped labeling behavior (as in, two women sleep together) and started labeling people (as in, she’s the sort of woman who sleeps with women). When we talk about people rather than talking about behavior, we label people in the abstract. Whether that label becomes an identity of which to be proud or ashamed is due entirely upon connotation, context, and specificity.

—Chloe Eastwood, “English Language Literature and the Making of Queer Linguistics, 1800–2008,”

- How does missing language of the past impact our present-day imagination and understanding of history?
- Did you ever find yourself defaulting Jo and Lorie to a heteronormative relationship, or having similar expectations of their connection?

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In the text, white nurses disregard Beth's ailment as attention-seeking or imagined because they are not similarly afflicted. Further, there is no name for her illness.

Read the *New York Times* coverage of Susan Moore, the Black doctor who died of COVID in Indiana.

- What evidence is there that medical racism and anti-Blackness persist to this day? How does it impact the lives of Black women in particular?

FURTHER RESEARCH:

Those who work themselves into hysterics over Dr. Seuss or Mr. Potato Head nurture this feeling of being personally attacked. They amplify nostalgia for an allegedly “innocent” childhood, when Dr. Seuss was not political, life was simpler and America was “great.” This is what *Svetlana Boym* calls *restorative nostalgia*—a longing for a unified, uncomplicated past, an “enchanted world with clear borders and values.” However, as Boym warns, “Only false memories can be totally recalled.”

We instead need what Boym calls *reflective nostalgia*, which dwells in memory's imperfections, exploring the ambivalence, the complexity, the pain that restorative nostalgia strives to erase. We must show people that deeply felt memories do not authorize indifference toward others and do not remove the need for reflection. We must ask, “What if something we loved as children might cause harm today?” Indeed, “What if it caused harm then?” What would it mean to acknowledge pain?

—Philip Nel, “Breaking Up with Your Favorite Racist Childhood Classic Books,”
The Washington Post, May 16, 2021

- Read the article in its entirety and consider the impact and implications of maintaining a “canon.”

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RESOURCES

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/06/01/tulsa-race-massacres-silence-schools/>

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/sojourner-truth-delivers-aint-i-a-woman-speech>

<http://www.dighist.org/2018/04/english-language-literature-and-the-making-of-queer-linguistics-1800-2008/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/23/us/susan-moore-black-doctor-indiana.html>

<https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/svetlana-boym/the-future-of-nostalgia/9780465007080/>

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