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Mielikki Org recounts her six months in China evading police, eating stewed snails, and swimming-often-in natural pools.

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Alice came up with two handy guides to network TV's winter season. Since the little screen is filled with white girls-so ultimately uncool these days-we've decided to go with the flow.

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film reviews

Ties that Bind Us

by Teana Lopez

Reading Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is such an anguishing and moving experience that few expected last year's screen translation to work. When the Oprah Winfrey film did hit the big screen, audiences ran the other way. Later when the Academy members were voting for the Oscar recipients, they gravitated towards the "uplifting" Holocaust film *Life is Beautiful* instead of *Beloved*. It was easier for viewers to enjoy a film where a cultural minority being exterminated in a foreign land made the best of their situation, rather than one in which a cultural minority being exterminated in the viewers' own country made the best of their situation-albeit in a completely different and agonizing way.

While one could rail for days about the injustice of box office draws and racism in Hollywood, suffice it to say many missed out on a powerful and wrenching film that should have been one of that years' top flicks.

Beloved (Touchstone) is the story of a slave woman (Oprah Winfrey and Lisa Gay Hamilton play old and young versions of Sethe) who escapes slavery but lives every day with memories of the torture she endured. Empathetic but never condescending, *Beloved* explores one woman's struggle for survival and her motivations for actions that society considers evil. When Sethe is haunted by her long dead child (provocatively crafted by Zambian-born actress Thandie Newton), viewers watch her struggle with her own volatile mixture of guilt, grief, and obsession.

Around the time *Beloved* landed in video stores last year, another well-crafted film about black women coping with haunting and obsession hit the festival circuit.

In *El Espíritu de mi Mamá* (Spirit of My Mother), Alí Allié's debut feature film, Johana Martinez plays Sonia, a young Garifuna woman who is plagued by a haunting memory of her mother. While *Beloved* leaves open the question of what is real and what is a creation of Sethe's mind, Sonia lives in a culture where visits from her dead mother are simply a sign of some sacred request. She's never frightened and her neighbors and relatives never look at her like she's one step away from complete madness.

Where *Beloved* is darkly moving, *Spirit* is uplifting and thoughtful. Perhaps



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that's because Winfrey's film deals with African Americans (people who are bought, sold, killed, and stripped of any family ties), while Central America's Garifuna (also known as the Black Caribs) are the only African descended people on the American continent to never have been enslaved and until recently their cultures and traditions have remained largely intact.

The film-the first feature with Garifuna actors in the lead roles-was shot in Los Angeles and Honduras with scenes spoken in their traditional language. Just as *Beloved* is presented in two worlds (the plantation of Sethe's enslavement and the free slave town she makes a life in), *Spirit's* dual settings contrast to underscore the issues Sonia faces. Her troubled life as a domestic worker in Los Angeles reminds her that she is not at home in this racist land; visions of a affair gone awry and her mother's dream-like hauntings urge her to journey home and rediscover herself. As she honors her mother's request, she discovers her African roots and learns about her responsibilities as a young mother.

While both films offer remarkable looks at African-descended women's live, familial responsibility, obsession, and guilt, *Spirit of My Mother* reminds us that the line between Sethe's crimes and Sonia's homage is a fine (yet maddening) one indeed.

Spirit of My Mother is showing at film festivals worldwide. For more info check out <http://www.flamefilms.com/>.

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