The premise of this course is that there is no great political philosophy in the American tradition—the Federalist Papers do not rival Plato or Marx—but that profound thinking about politics does occur in the literary art of Melville, Faulkner, Ellison, Mailer, and Morrison among others. Moreover, formally "political" writers, like Madison and Hamilton in The Federalist Papers, present a world that seems antithetical to the world presented by, say, Melville and Morrison: one depicts rational bargaining and self-interested contracts among men in markets and legislatures, whereas the other depicts racial and sexual violence, rape and slavery, in domesticspaces or on "the frontier." One depicts rationality and progress, the other madness and tragedy. The literature thus makes visible what is made invisible by prevailing forms of political science and American political thought, not only the power of race and gender, but also the deep narrative forms structuring the culture. Our goal, then, will be to compare prevailing forms of political speech and American political thought, to American literary art. How do literary artists retell the stories Americans tell themselves about themselves? How does that art re-orient people toward the assumptions, practices, and tropes that rule their world and govern what "American" means? To pursue these questions we focus on Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, and Toni Morrison's Beloved, while surrounding and contextualizing each text with contemporary political speech and political theory.

**required texts in order of use:**
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in American volume two* (Vintage)  
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*  
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*  
xeroxed packet of readings

**course requirements:**
* attendance is mandatory/un-excused absences hurt your grade  
* preparation counts toward grade  
* response papers on readings required each week  
* two 5-page critical essays  
* one optional project  
* grading: response papers 25%; participation 25%; essays 25% x 2, but improvement in writing and/or participation also counts

**plagiarism:** the use of the words or work of others without attribution is punishable by an F in the course. If you have any question about what would count as plagiarism, please ask for clarification.
9/6

**introduction**

9/13

**Social Facts: Regimes and Narratives**

**#2 read:**
- Emile Durkheim, “What is a Social Fact?”
- C. Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination* (3-13/184-93)
- William Adams, “Political Poetics”
- Alisdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crisis/Dramatic Narrative”
- Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1-25/654-60)
- JFK, speeches
- Michael Rogin, “Political Repression”

**write:**
- Explore Durkheim’s idea of a “social fact” (How is “the state,” market, “culture,” “myth,” or “narrative” a “social fact”?)
- Discuss “sociological imagination.” How does its absence matter?
- What key institutions & beliefs comprise the American regime?
- How is narrative or myth (un)important in politics?
- Do myths rationalize -or constitute- material interests?
- Identify key stories in American culture: do they rule (in) you?
- When/How do communities experience a “narrative crisis”?
- Is (racial) domination/repression constitutive of American life?
- How does Rogin depict the formation of an “American” identity?
- What explains systemic/repeated patterns of exclusion over time?

9/20

**American political culture I: constitutionalism and democracy**

**#3 read:**
- James Madison, “Federalist #10”
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* volume one (xerox)
- Tocqueville, volume 2: Book I (c1-2/5); Bk II (1-5/10-11/13-14/20); Book III (21); Book IV(1-3/6-8)
- John Schaar, “Federalists Arise!”
- Sheldon Wolin, “Democracy Without the Citizen”

**write:**
- How does Madison define democracy? Freedom? politics?
- What assumptions and/or fears drive Madison’s theory?
- How does Tocqueville locate/define democracy? political liberty? “individualism”?
- What is “democratic despotism”?
- How do Schaar/Wolin define democracy/politics & criticize the Madisonian/constitutional regime? Do they echo Tocqueville?

9/27

**American Political Culture II: exceptionalism, race, & nationalism**

**#4 read:**
- David Potter, *The Impending Crisis* chapter 1
- John O’Sullivan, “Great Nation of Futurity”
- Tocqueville, *D in A*, vol. 2/Bk 1:chaps 17-18 (on “poetry”)
- Michael Rogin, “Liberal Society and the Indian Question”

**write:**
- How does O’Sullivan justify continental (imperial) expansion?
- Is O’S’s “manifest destiny” what Tocq calls “poetry”?
- Compare the language (metaphor & narrative) of Madison & O’S
- By what stories/tropes and structure of difference is a national (“American”) identity constructed? How are race/difference and nation/identity related?
* How is racialized violence related to liberal/const'l democracy?
* Are liberalism and empire (in)compatible? (In what ways?)
* Assess how Rogin analyzes expansion and Indian removal

FIRST PAPER DUE MONDAY OCT 1 by noon

10/4 Moby-Dick I
#5 read: * Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”
* Melville, Moby-Dick up to/including chap 35 (to p.136)

write: * what does “call me Ishmael” suggest about the narrator?
* what is the meaning of I’s relationship with Queequeg?
* why does HM use stage directions?
* what is HM’s view of “equality” and “democracy”? What is “democratic dignity”? What does it mean to call the crew “mongrel renegades and castaways”?
* what is your impression of Ahab so far?
* what is the role of foreshadowing and allusions to fate?
* why does HM call MD a “tragedy”? Who is the protagonist?

10/11 Moby-Dick II
#6 read: * Moby-Dick chaps 36-89 (page 136-310) delete chaps 54-7 & 80-4

write: * What does Ahab personify or dramatize? What is “mono-mania”?
* what is A’s relationship to capitalism? democracy? Starbuck?
* why do the crew agree to a hunt? Is A democratically authorized?
* compare how I & A view MD: why is its whiteness crucial to I?

10/18 Moby-Dick III
#7 read: * Moby-Dick chap 90 to end (p310-427)

write: * assess the character of Ahab
* discuss the meaning of a textual sinking -& of a survivor- how does this address readers in the world beyond the text?
* What does it mean to quote the Book of Job at the end?
* what did Ishmael learn from the experience he has recounted?
* Assess the difference between Ish/narrator and Melville/author
* Does the novel endorse a philosophic perspective? Such as?
* Does it advance a position toward slavery/expansion? Such as?
* Does it teach a “tragic” point of view toward life? Meaning?
* is there a “politics” to the novel’s literary art?

10/25 Moby-Dick IV
#8 read: * DH Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (xerox)
* Michael Rogin, Subversive Genealogy: the Politics & Art of Herman Melville “Moby Dick & the American 1848”(xerox)
* Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” (xerox)
* George Shulman “Chasing the Whale”(xerox)

write: * Compare two interpretations of Moby Dick
* Does MD critically retell the story Americans tell themselves?
* Does the novel engender withdrawal from politics, as Tocqueville worries American “poetry” will do? Or does it represent an alternative way to imagine “democratic dignity”?
* Is the novel “about” philosophy, or politics? Both? Neither - because it is about fictionality and representation as such?

second paper due Monday October 29 by noon
11/1  Forms of Slavery/Narrative/Forms of Protest I
#9
read:  * James Baldwin, “Many thousands Gone”
* James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time (entire)
write:  * how does white imagination of blackness (of “the Negro”) shape American culture and politics?
* what is unsaid or unspeakable by/to those who call themselves “white”? Why be invested in whiteness? What does JB mean by their “innocence” (as opposed to ignorance)? In what senses are whites privileged but unfree?
* How does JB depict the situation/dilemmas of those marked black?
* Why should whites care about racialized inequality?
* why must blacks free whites? Why reject violence?
* what is JB’s view of the past and its power?
* How does JB remain attached to the idea of an American promise?
* compare JB’s “poetry” to Tocq’s account or HM’s novel.

11/8  Forms of Slavery/Narrative/Forms of Protest II
#10
read:  * Loic Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration”
* George Lipsitz, “Possessive Investment in Whiteness”
* Kimberlee Crenshaw, “Real Justice/Reel Time”
write:  * How has race/racism changed since the civil rights era ended in 1968? Is mass incarceration a new slavery/jim crow system?
** Why has racial inequality persisted? How do common explanations of inequality sustain white privilege & innocence?
* how is “narrative” related to conflict about race/inequality?
* Use Lipsitz or Crenshaw to explain our current stalemate about race/inequality

11/15  Narrating slavery and freedom I
#11
read:  * James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”
* Toni Morrison, Beloved, Part One (to 195)
write:  * How does JB criticize “the protest novel”? How are HB Stowe and Richard Wright paired? What is the alternative JB proposes?
* What difference is made by orienting a novel (“Poetry”) around blacks rather than whites and women rather than men?
* why is haunting so important? What does it signify about the past and our relationship to it?
* How and by whom is the novel narrated? With what effects?
* Depict the relationship between Sethe and Beloved.
* Does the novel address only black people? If one emphasizes its universality, is its particularity lost?
* (how) does the novel address constitutively “American” (not only “black”) experiences?
* Is M writing the novel Baldwin said was needed?

11/22 - thanksgiving
(two week gap between classes)
11/29  Narrating slavery and freedom II
#12
read:  * Morrison, Beloved, Part Two and Part Three (to end)
       * Morrison, Nobel Address
       * Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Redemption”

write:  * What happens in the Sethe-Beloved relationship? What are we to conclude from it?
       * How does Denver influence your interpretation of the novel?
       * How does Morrison understand our freedom in relation to the haunting power of the past? Can/should we escape it or gain freedom from it?
       * What does it mean to say “this is not a story to pass on”? Pass on as bequeath or as ignore? Both?
       * Can traumatic horrors in the past be redeemed in any sense? How?
       * M suggests that we can “lay our stories next to each other,” but for Crenshaw stories deeply conflict. Does M see a plurality of stories while C sees the necessity of political choice? Or does M’s novel re-contextualize dominant white stories?

12/6  Engendering narrative and Nationhood
#13
read:  * Stanley Crouch, “Aunt Medea”
       * Mae Henderson, “Re-membering the Body as Historical Text”
       * George Shulman, “American Political Culture”
       * Madhu Dubey, “The politics of Genre in Beloved”

12/13  History, Literary Art, and Politics
#14
read:  * Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility”
       * Wayne Booth, “Metaphor as Rhetoric”
       * David Scott, “Tragedy’s Time”

final paper due Monday Dec 19 by noon
First paper: no more than FIVE pages, typed, due Monday October 1 by noon.

1. Use the idea of a “social fact” to assess the power of “narrative.”

2. What is “sociological imagination” and how does it conceive “politics”?

3. Use the readings to consider the ways in which human beings (a) are constituted/constrained (or silenced and hidden) by narratives as social facts; (b) are enabled or empowered by stories that, after all, “give” them voice and perspective; (c) are able to revise and change or even reject and replace the stories they inherit. **Assess the “structure-agency dialectic”**

4. For Adams, the central question in politics concerns the power of narrative to shape individual character and collective life. If he is right about the enormous power of narrative, or of what Slotkin calls myth, is the democratic goal to pluralize who narrates, and which stories are told? Is the goal to “improve” stories so they more accurately “represent” reality? Or should the goal of story-telling be, not so much representing-what-is, as creative re-constitution of ourselves and world, to project possibilities we aspire to actualize? **Use the readings to explore the purposes and politics of narrative.**

5. Use the texts to explore the issue of adjudicating between narratives: How do we decide what counts as a “better” story? What should be our criteria?

6. Use Adams, MacIntyre, Slotkin, &/or Rogin to explore the relationship between language and narrative (call it the articulation of meaning) - and - material interests, institutional action, structures of domination. Are words, symbols, stories simply disguises and rationalizations, or do they constitute what people call their interests and necessities?

7. “By projecting a vision, ‘poets’ (or literary artists) become the “unacknowledged legislators” of the world; they compose a perspective on the world and a framework of value that shapes the subjectivity, choice, and action of audiences/communities. **This is ‘political’**” -A.nonymous

   “Sure, language is powerful, and there is a ‘politics’ in how literary artists re-present the world. But they do not exercise power, make rules, reform institutions, or devise programs depicting what is to be done. To call them political is to ignore most of politics!” -B.nonymous

   **In what senses is “poetry” a “political” in meaning and impact?**

8. "Users of cultural mythology selectively rewrite myths according to their own needs and political projects. Dominant myths are always open to revision by subordinated groups."-A.nonymous

   "No myth is infinitely pliable; every powerful story shapes the self-reflection and action of those trying to revise/use it." -B.nonymous

   **Use the readings to address this debate**

9. For Madison, politics is about who gets what, where, and when: American politics is pragmatic, interest-based, rational action by groups. For Rogin, American politics is not only about interests -about wealth or power we (don't) possess- but also about identity -who we are/not. **Assess these views.**

10. For Madison a “republic” (involving indirect representation) is better than the direct forms of assembly and power he calls “democracy.” For Mills, Wolin & Schaar, Madison’s system is thus anti-democratic. **Enter this debate about the definition, value, dangers of “democracy.”**

11. Rogin depicts the ruling ideas and institutions in the United States in terms of “liberalism,” and calls the U. S. a “liberal” society. What social practices and cultural ideals characterize it? What problems does he claim are inherent in it?(How does dispossession of native people both express and reveal (not only contradict) its core axioms? **Assess these arguments.**
12. Many (white?) Americans follow Lincoln: American society is conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal. For Rogin, American society is conceived in slavery and dedicated to the proposition that people of color are unequal: racial domination is constitutive of American liberal society, not anomalous. Analyze the stakes in this disagreement: Why (and with what effect) put genocide, chattel slavery, and continuing exclusion at the center of American history/life? Why withhold redemption in his story of repetition? What follows from narrating history each way? Can/must both perspectives be used?

13. Analyze individualism in the forming of an “American” identity. Use Tocq and/or other course texts to address one or more of the following aspects: (a) Does faith in “self-reliance” or self-making bespeak a national identity? (b) Does this idea grossly distort how human beings must and do live, and yet seem credible because it is embedded in widespread social practices? (c) If we view the world and the self through the ideology of “individualism” what is made (in)visible? (d) Is individualism a racial/gendered construction? (e) What are the characteristic problems of a self/nation so conceived?

14. "Tocqueville is right: individualism is a major problem in modern society, and the only cure is political association, to counteract the weakness of the isolated individual, the conformism of the mass, and the power of the state." Assess his critique of “individualism” and his defense of "political liberty."

15. Hannah Arendt says: "No one could be called happy without [a] share in public happiness, no one could be called free without experience of public freedom, and no one could be happy or free without participating...in public power." Assess the idea that participation is the goal/meaning of “democracy.”

16. Does any claim about a common “American” identity impose a fiction on heterogeneous reality, coercing a false unity by excluding certain people and practices? Or do we really need to identify a dominant (“hegemonic”) national culture, to analyze and contest it? Should we argue about politics by making claims about the TRUE “identity” or “values” of “Americans,” or must we discredit just such claims? Explore the idea of a national identity.

17. Use the readings to depict the constituent elements and consequences of “American exceptionalism” as an ideology that articulates nationhood as an imagined community. Can/should our goal be competing versions, linked to conflicting political projects? Or must we relinquish the idea, if Americans are finally to recognize themselves as one profane nation among others?

"In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew so well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other mens' lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me." Henry David Thoreau, second paragraph of Walden
22. By calling poets unacknowledged legislators, Shelley credits the worldly power of poetry, and he invents (the idea of) cultural politics in an effort to reform overtly political practices through expressive arts and cultural production. But by giving artists a public “office,” does he place an impossible or corrupting burden on them, on poetry, and all the arts? *Assess the ‘office’ Shelley and/or Emerson give poets.*

10. Democratic politics seems to require a consensus about a framework of rules and principles, whose authority is both a limit to brute power and a resource for criticizing and changing our conduct. But as excluded groups know, the cultural authority of “the normative” proscribes what is cast as deviant, and constitutional precedent cements injustice. *Assess how a cultural/constitutional framework is a problem & resource.*
SECOND PAPER:

1. “The most self-conscious and sophisticated “theorizing” of American politics is found in our fiction, which gets at the roots of, and provides a critical perspective on, the deep assumptions, ruling myths, and master narratives that shape our politics.” A.nonymous

“On the contrary, novelists in America only replicate the larger culture; even when critical of it, they portray us in traps they cannot imagine how to escape.” B.nonymous

Use Melville’s fiction to address this debate about the ways that fiction criticizes and/or mirrors the culture it represents/address.

2. “Users of cultural mythology selectively rewrite myths according to their own needs and political projects. Dominant myths are always open to revision by subordinated groups.”-A.nonymous

“No myth is infinitely pliable; every powerful story shapes the self-reflection and action of those trying to revise and use it.” -B.nonymous

Analyze how Melville retells a widely shared myth or narrative

3. “American writers emplot as tragedy the quest for freedom and redemption.” Use Melville’s fiction to discuss this claim: what does it mean to write a “tragedy?” Why is it difficult or surprising to write a tragedy about people in a democratic society? In what lies the tragedy?

4. Use Melville’s fiction assess this claim: “great American critics speak in defiance of their time, but always to redeem the American dream.”

5. Use one Melville text (or passage in it) to assess how we make sense of the world, how we make social life, history, or nature both intelligible and meaningful.

6. “Since reality is not self-evident, interpretation is central to politics; positioned differently in society, we disagree about reality, as characters do about the doubloon. Citizenship means recognizing that we must make interpretations, that we bear different perspectives, and that we always are partly blind. ‘Monomaniacs’ deny this.” -A.nonymous

“But surely Melville’s fiction tells truths about ourselves and our world that we deny - at our peril. Some people see the world rightly, and others are blind. Some see the woe or the domination, and others deny it to keep their willful innocence. Melville is a truth-teller against inclinations toward self-denial that characterize nations as much as individuals.” -B.nonymous

Use a Melville text to engage this debate about truth.

7. Analyze how one Melville text theorizes the problem of becoming free, and thus the meaning of “freedom.”

8. “Melville’s characters seem fated, driven and constrained -unfree- just like us.”-A.nonymous

“No, they are agents making choices, just like us.” B.nonymous

Assess what Melville teaches about fate & freedom.

9. Relate what a text teaches and how it teaches.

10. Use a text to ask: what is (our) democracy for?
11. Assess gender - the symbolic meaning of masculine & feminine - in one text: what work do such tropes do and with what consequences?

12. Assess the figuration of homosexual desire in one text and explore its larger political purposes.

13. In what ways is Moby Dick “about” politics?

14. In what ways is Moby Dick thinking about the meaning of democracy?

15. D.H. Lawrence and Richard Slotkin depict Moby Dick as narrating the meaning and fate of “America.” How so? What is your judgment?

16. Depict your views of Bartleby and of the Lawyer as you assess the impact on you of Melville’s story about their relationship. What does this pairing mean; what divisions does it dramatize? What do you think the story is “about” and how do you interpret its “moral”? (Does it concern capitalism and its psychic meaning?) What is the meaning (for the lawyer and for us) of Bartleby’s refusals unto death? Is he a monomaniac with a problem or a truth-teller and rebel to admire? Is Melville suggesting that no redemption is possible? Does the story drive us toward the lawyer, and what kind of fate is that? Why can’t the two be reconciled?

17. Use “Benito Cereno” to depict how the story works, as readers take on Delano’s perspective (both his innocence and his racism) until they realize that he is not reliable. What is accomplished by putting readers through this experience?

18. Use “Benito Cereno” to discuss the problem of freedom in a society governed by inequality or slavery. What are the roles to be played? How does (racial) inequality produce masquerades? Is it possible to get free of them? What are we to conclude from Babo, a character who never gives an account of his own experience? Do you identify with him, with Delano, or with whom? Can readers be outside this story? How, where?
**study questions for Morrison, *Beloved***

** Notice the epigraph, which quotes Paul quoting Hosea: what is the meaning of saying, I will call her beloved who was unloved....? Also interpret the dedication (60 million and more...)

**Notice: the novel occurs in 1876, at the end of the first reconstruction, narrating events from 19 years before; it is written in 1987, after a second "reconstruction" and backlash against it. What is the novel saying about race relations? About the issues facing the African-American community?

1. What constitutes slavery? (And conversely, what is freedom? Does your encounter with slavery in this book change your view of freedom?)

2. How do the characters imagine freedom? Is freedom doing what you want when you want? What does the book suggest about the emersonian vision of self-making? If no one is born free, and freedom is an achievement, in relation to what forces? manifested how?)

3. What is the legacy of slavery for the characters? How does a slave past make “becoming free” difficult? How does a “past” haunt or control a present? Is freedom possible if the past rules the present? Can we ever make the past “past?”

4. Why does Sethe kill her child? Was she “justified?” Was she “prideful?” In what sense is her action “free?” Is it heroic for a slave woman to claim the right to be a mother -even if that means killing your child?

5. How do you feel at the prospect of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver making a new family, a new life, a future together?

6. What does haunting by a ghost signify? Who is this ghost made flesh?

7. What is the relationship between Sethe and Beloved? What is each seeking in and through the other? Is it a healthy healing relationship?

8. What do we learn from the monologues spoken by Sethe and Beloved?

9. How/why is the ghost exorcized? How does Sethe feel about "losing" Beloved?

10. What is the meaning of the epilogue -of the deliberate forgetting? What is the meaning of the repeated final lines: it is not a story to pass on... (think of “pass on” as, it is not a story to ignore, and, it is not a story to bequeath -in what sense are both interpretations true?)

11. What does it mean that “Beloved” is the last word?
Ask: why retell the (exodus) dream of emancipation, of deliverance from captivity, of starting over? Where does this retelling leave the characters, and/or the readers?

Ask: why does the novel compel us to contact, to have a virtually physical experience of slavery, its traumas, its haunting of the present? Is the point to bring readers to FACE, simply to face, what they would forget? Is the point to HEAL the trauma the past represents? Does the novel raise the dead to bury them properly? Or does it show that to be impossible?

Ask: WHO does the novel address? The epigraph says “I will call them my people ...” If the I in this passage by Paul is God, who is the I here? Does Morrison address African-Americans specifically? Does she address Americans in general about an African-American experience? How does the novel, that is, relate the part and the whole, the group and the nation? Also, is the experience of being “haunted” by a painful past EXEMPLARY for ALL “Americans?” But if you say that Sethe can stand in for anyone, are you denying or erasing the particularity of her experience?

Broadest Questions:

1. Say the novel is about freedom, or the dream of emancipation: Where does “freedom” appear in the book? How does it appear? In what acts is it manifest? What is the novel teaching about freedom, especially to a culture that believes the myth of self-making and starting over?


3. People are haunted by the past: is it even possible to get “free” of the past? (How?) Is the goal to get free FROM the past OR, to come-to-terms with it? Is the goal redemption from the past, or redemption OF the past, is the goal escaping the past, or making it a meaningful? If the goal is coming-to-terms with the past, or “acceptance,” as Baldwin says, HOW?

4. Does the novel offer “redemption” or rebirth to its character? To its readers? Does it defeat our wish for redemption? Does it redefine redemption?

5. In the novel, is there a single point of view about the past or present? How is the “truth” of the past known or learned? For that matter, how is this text itself to be known?

6. Imagine the text as a parable that makes us, or reveals us to be, makers of meaning. Imagine that the practice of interpretation is a crucial part of our freedom, a sign of it, a kind of action. Where do you see interpretation IN the text, among the characters? How does the design or art of text compel or invite interpretation -active participation- by readers?

7. No single narrative line, no omniscient narrator, no self-evident truth about the past and present - is this art and or is this life? Is it a view of politics, too? Is the goal of a democracy, as Paul D. says, “to lay our stories next to each other?”
study questions: Crenshaw

1. Characterize the key differences between Crenshaw and Martin Luther King. (What has changed since 1963 or 1968?)

2. What do you think about the ideal of “formal equality,” that is, of individuals “equal before the law” and “ruled by law,” i.e. by an impartial or objective legal process. Is the violation of this ideal the problem, as MLK once argued? Or, as Crenshaw argues, is the ideal itself part of racial domination? Clarify: HOW is the ideal of objective legal process part of the problem???

3. Is “racism” a self-evident truth -or an interpretation of evidence (ghettos, segregation, beatings, inequality) open to OTHER interpretations? Is the politics of the last thirty years about facing the truth of racism as a fact or is it about trying to advance one story and interpretation of how we live against other stories and interpretations of how we live?

4. Do we live in one nation, or two? What does it mean to suggest we live in two?? Or are both statements true?

5. How should we - who? - narrate Rodney King and the LA riots? What alternate stories ARE there? How do you assess which to believe, decide which to persuade others to adopt?

6. What is the implication of Crenshaw’s argument - should the two stories she describes (objective legal process and racial domination) be “laid next to each other,” to quote Morrison’s novel, or does the story of racial domination need to be advanced, and the story of legal objectivity discredited? Is Crenshaw’s goal to make room for the domination story, or to displace the dominant one about neutral legal process??

Specific discussion questions:

1. Is there an inherent meaning to the videotape of Rodney King being beaten?
   (Everyone agrees: he IS being beaten. But how do we interpret it? Is it inherently self-evident that this is brutality - or self-defense by police acting justifiably?. What does Crenshaw end up saying? At first, she says: to see “self-defense” by police the tape must be “dis-aggregated,” which “distorts” its real meaning. But THEN she says: what we see depends on our “background narrative;” the meaning of the tape is a matter of attribution depending on interpretation. Does the meaning inhere to the object, to the tape or the event, which we see truly or incorrectly? Does the meaning depend on background narrative? What is the implication of making one argument rather than the other?

2. Is there an inherent meaning to police brutality?
   (Everyone agrees, the police can be brutal. Is brutality an anomaly, an unfortunate but increasingly rare act of “discrimination,” an exception in a regime increasingly ruled by color-blind law? In this view, the law is a transcendent rule, protecting all alike, and enforced by police, who are sometimes biased. If the problem is bias then the solution is sensitivity training.) Or on the contrary, is violence an ongoing reality, not an exception, because the problem is not “discrimination” but occupation of one community by another? Then the solution is not sensitivity training FOR the police but community control OF the police (and other institutions.)
   How do you weigh these different narratives? What counts as a better story? (Is one more true? Crenshaw insists she is NOT a relativist because she does not think all stories are equally valid.)

3. When african-americans take to the streets in South-Central, are they enacting a “riot” or an “insurrection”? If a different background narrative explains what the event IS, what follows from saying one rather than the other? (This parallels the idea that no meaning is inherent in the video: a man is being beaten, buildings are being burned, but what is the meaning of these acts? Who decides? How?)

4. When Morrison’s Paul D depicts people “laying stories next to each other” Crenshaw lays a story of insurrection next to a story of riot, a story of police self-defense next to a story of brutality, a story of unfortunate anomaly to the rule of law next to a story of ongoing occupation.
What is the point of this? Is the point mutual understanding of the experiences behind different background narratives? To contest the dominant one by asserting the subordinated one? Is Crenshaw trying to get whites to "accept" that we still live in two nations?

5. If actors have different power is laying stories next to each other enough?
THIRD PAPER

1. By calling poets unacknowledged legislators, Shelley credits the worldly power of literary art, and he invents (the idea of) cultural politics in an effort to reform overtly political practices through expressive arts and cultural production. But by giving artists a public “office,” does he place an impossible or corrupting burden on them and their art? Does he confuse the power of language with “politics,” which involves rules, institutions, and coercion of various kinds? **Use Morrison’s novel to assess the ‘office’ Shelley and/or Emerson give “poets.”**

2. “The most self-conscious and sophisticated “theorizing” of American politics is found in our fiction, which gets at the roots of, and which provides a critical perspective on, the deep assumptions, ruling myths, and master narratives that shape our politics.” A.nonymous

“No, novelists only replicate the larger culture; even when critical of it, they portray traps they cannot imagine how to escape.” B.nonymous

**Use Beloved to address this debate about the ways that fiction mirrors and/or criticizes the culture it represents/address.**

3. “American writers emplot as tragedy the quest for freedom and redemption.” **Use Beloved to discuss this claim: what does it mean to write a “tragedy?” Why is it difficult/surprising to write a tragedy about (ex) slaves in a democratic society? In what lies the tragedy?**

4. Analyze how Beloved theorizes (or dramatizes) the problem of becoming free, and thus the meaning of “freedom.”

5. “Sethe seems fated, driven, constrained -unfree- like us.” -A.nonymous

“No, she is an agent making choices, just like us.” B.nonymous

**Assess what Beloved teaches about fate & freedom.**

6. Relate what Morrison’s novel teaches and how it teaches.

7. “Beloved is about the effort to redeem the suffering and crimes of the past, and, by the story it tells and the language it uses, the novel itself redeems this history and those who bear it. This is what art (and politics) must do.” -A.nonymous

“Sethe and Beloved seek redemption, but the novel -by dramatizing what is self-defeating in their quest, and by refusing to redeem the history it retells- confronts this key wish and trope in American culture.” -B.nonymous

**Analyze how Beloved dramatizes, enacts, or troubles our faith in the redemptive power of love, art, or language**

9. Explore how Morrison addresses the place and meaning of gender as shaped by race and patriarchy. (Focus on motherhood, mother-daughter relations, how female bodies are marked and used, figurations of breasts and milk; gendered dimensions of freedom, etc.)

10. **Use Beloved to assess how people make sense of the world, how we make history, circumstances or nature intelligible and meaningful.**

11. “Because reality is not self-evident, interpretation is central to politics; positioned differently in society, we disagree about reality, as characters do about the doubloon. Citizenship means recognizing that we must make interpretations, that we bear different perspectives, and that we
always are partly blind." -A.nonymous

"Morrison's fiction tells truths about ourselves and our world that we deny - at our peril. Some people see the world rightly, and others keep their willful innocence. Morrison is a truth-teller against forms of blindness that characterize nations and individuals."-B.nonymous

Use Beloved (or Baldwin) to engage this debate about truth.

12. Because we inherit not 'the' past but a story representing it, a democracy must multiply the perspectives and voices that narrate the past. That’s Baldwin and Morrison’s point!”
-A.nonymous

"NO! We inherit a past whose meaning we deny; we must get the right story about what matters most in our past or we remain imprisoned by it. That’s their point!”-B.nonymous

Explore the politics of narration

13. "...we have no other choice; we must go back to the beginning; it must all be done over..." William Carlos Williams In the American Grain

"It is for us the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far nobly advanced ... that these dead shall not have died in vain." -Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

"It is not a story to pass on.” Toni Morrison

Analyze how Beloved relates the past, and freedom in the present.

14. For Baldwin and Morrison, the only way to avoid repeating the past is to come-to-terms with it and take responsibility for it, but Obama now argues that such efforts only tie people to injury and recrimination, and preclude making the future differently. Enter this debate about the past and its power.

15. "Formal rights, the impersonal rule of law, and ideals of objectivity are said to characterize a constitutional democracy, but in fact are the mask and instrument of domination.” Discuss by using Crenshaw, Baldwin or Morrison.

16. For Baldwin, “white” Americans intend Blacks to perish, but “innocence” is their worst crime. While they associate the loss of innocence with corruption, he makes losing innocence a condition of adulthood and freedom. But (a) what does it mean to insist that others live by willful blindness, by disavowing what they know but refuse to take responsibility for? What kind of claim precludes any credible way to argue back? Is it ever necessary to make such claims about willful innocence? Are they ever effective, persuasive? And (b) what does it mean to make loss of innocence the key to adulthood?

17. In form and content, Beloved presents the idea of “laying stories next to each other” as a democratic aesthetic & politics, but Crenshaw depicts unequal groups struggling for power. How might you relate these perspectives?

18. James Baldwin: “My inheritance was specifically limited and limiting; my birthright was vast, connecting me to all lives, and to everyone, forever. But one cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance.” Explore how Beloved relates the particular and the universal.