The premise of this course is that profound thinking about politics occurs in American literary art. Indeed, formally “political” writers, like Madison and Hamilton in The Federalist Papers, present a world that seems antithetical to the world present 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 domestic spaces or on "the frontier." One depicts rationality and progress, the other madness and tragedy. The literature thus makes visible what political rhetoric and canonical political thought make invisible -the centrality of race and gender in the formation of nationhood and the operation of ordinary politics, but also the deep narrative forms that structure the culture as well as ideas of "America." Our goal, then, is to compare prevailing forms of political speech, theories of politics, and American literary art. How do literary artists narrate nationhood? How do they retell the stories Americans tell themselves about themselves? What is the difference between a fiction that dramatizes a world, and a treatise that makes an argument about it? What can literary art do that theory cannot? How does that art reorient people toward the assumptions, practices, and tropes that rule their world and their subjectivity? To pursue these questions we read Herman Melville's Moby-Dick, and Toni Morrison's Beloved, while surrounding each text with contemporary political speech and political theory.

required texts in order of use:
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in American volume two (Vintage)
Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, Norton Critical Edition
Herman Melville, Short Novels (Norton critical edition)
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.

Learning goals:
* close reading/analysis of texts
* analytic writing in the critical essay format
* speaking in collaborative ways about controversial topics
* conceptualizing the history & practice of “American” nationhood
* conceptualizing politics and the political
* exploring how literary art dramatizes political life
introduction

Social Facts: Regimes and Narratives

* Emille Durkheim, “What is a Social Fact?” (x)
* C. Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination* (1-11/186-91) (x)
* William Adams, “Political Poetics” (x)
* James Madison, “Federalist #10” (x)
* Michael Rogin, “A History of American Political Repression” (x)

write:
* Explore the idea of a “social fact” (How are states & markets, What is “sociological imagination”? How does it matter? How is narrative or myth (un)important in politics? How does Madison define democracy? Freedom? politics? What assumptions and/or fears drive Madison’s theory? For Rogin, what institutions/beliefs comprise the U.S. regime? * (How) is domination/demonization constitutive of US society or national (“American”) identity?

American political culture I: nation/race/narrative

* Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1-25/654-60)
* JFK, speeches
* R.W. Emerson, “Self-Reliance”
* Michael Rogin, “Liberal Society and the Indian Question”
* Alisdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crisis/Dramatic Narrative”

write:
* Relate the “frontier myth” to other key “American” stories
* Do myths merely rationalize—or constitute—material interests?
* (How) can a “myth” be updated, reused, reworked?
* When/how do stories lose credibility or come into crisis?
* How does Rogin link liberalism to genocide & continental empire?
* Are empire and liberalism linked or antithetical?

American political culture II: narrating democracy

* Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* volume one (xerox)
* Tocqueville, volume 2:
  Book I (c1-2/5/20)
  Bk II (1-2/4-5/8/10-17/20)
  Book III (8-12/21)
  Book IV (1-3/6-8)
* Sheldon Wolin, “Democracy Without the Citizen”

write:
* How does T define “democracy,” “equality,” and “freedom”?
* What is “political liberty” and why does it matter?
* What are T’s concerns about “individualism”?
  What is “democratic despotism” and why is it a danger?
* In what senses can there be “democracy” w/o political liberty?
* how is “association” (as verb & noun) an antidote to despotism?
* How does Wolin criticize Madison & echo/revise Tocqueville?

FIRST PAPER DUE MONDAY FEB 23 BY NOON
**Moby-Dick I**

* David Potter, *The Impending Crisis* chapter 1
* John O’Sullivan, “Great Nation of Futurity”
* 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?
* why does HM call MD a “tragedy”? Who is the protagonist?

**Moby-Dick II**

* 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? who is democratically authorized?
* compare how I & A view MD: why is its whiteness crucial to I?

**Moby-Dick III**

* 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?

**SPRING BREAK**

**Moby-Dick IV: commentary**

* Tocqueville, *Democracy* vol 2, book 1 chaps 17-18
* 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?
* Is the novel about making (and being trapped in) fictions?

SECOND PAPER DUE MONDAY 3/30 (OR READ MORE MELVILLE AND DELAY A WEEK)

4/2 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
  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.

4/9 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”
* Saiddiyah Hartman, “Fugitive Justice”

write:
* How has race/racism changed since the civil rights era ended in
  * Why has racial inequality persisted? How do common explanations of inequality sustain white privilege & innocence?
* how is “narrative” related to conflict about race/inequality?
* Can Crenshaw clarify our stalemate about race/inequality?

4/16 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
  * 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?
4/23Narrating slavery and freedom II
#12
read: * Morrison, Beloved, Part Two and Part Three (to end)
      * Morrison, Nobel Address
write: * What happens in the Sethe-Beloved relationship? What are we to
      * How does Denver influence your interpretation of the novel?
      * How does Morrison understand our freedom in relation to the
      * 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?

4/30Engendering narrative and Nationhood
#13
read: * Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Redemption”
      * Stanley Crouch, “Aunt Medea”
      * Mae Henderson, “Re-membering the Body as Historical Text”
      * George Shulman, “American Political Culture”

5/7History, Literary Art, and Politics
#14
read: * Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility”
      * Wayne Booth, “Metaphor as Rhetoric”
      * David Scott, “Tragedy’s Time”

final paper due Monday May 11 by noon
First paper: no more than FIVE pages, typed, due Monday Feb 23 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) can 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 better 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 symbolic order -language, narrative, or 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. "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

"As the frontier myth surely shows us, no myth is infinitely pliable; every powerful story shapes the self-reflection and action of those trying to revise/use it. In some cases we must get over and replace a story, not revise it." -B.nonymous

Use the readings to address this debate

8. 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 (wealth or power) -what we (do not) possess- but also about identity -who we are/not. Assess these views.

9. For Madison a “republic” (involving indirect representation) is better than the direct forms of assembly and power he calls “democracy,” whereas for Wolin Madison’s system is flawed because it is anti-democratic. But Wolin echoes Tocqueville’s idea that “association” (as verb and noun) can democratize civil society by distributing power and decision in more decentralized ways. Enter this debate about the definition, value, dangers of “democracy.”

10. 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."

11. Rogin depicts the ruling ideas and institutions in the United States in terms of "liberalism," and he calls the U. S. a “liberal” society. What social practices and cultural ideals characterize “liberalism”? What problems does he see as 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 tell a story of repetition (not progress) to withhold a redemptive conclusion? 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. Assess Tocqueville’s depiction & explanation of:
   a) the unquestioned axiomatic assumptions made by a “democratic” people; or
   b) “democratic despotism” as the “novel” form of tyranny equality enables; or
   c) the relation between equality, association, and political liberty; or
   d) the relationship between faith, morality, and liberty

15. "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 T’s critique of “individualism” and his defense of "political liberty."

16. Assess T’s image of “mass society” and a “tutelary” state -what does he fear? Why? Why is his antidote not “the free market” but political liberty?

17. Explore the idea of national identity: Does any claim about a common “American” identity impose a homogenizing fiction & false unity by excluding certain people and practices? Do we need to identify -to contest- a dominant (“hegemonic”) culture? Must we argue about politics by making claims about who “we” Americans really are- or must we refuse that way of justifying platforms?

18. Use the readings to depict the constituent elements and consequences of “American exceptionalism” as an ideology that articulates nationhood. Should we seek competing versions of exceptionalism, linked to conflicting political projects? Or must we accept we are one profane nation among (and
like) others?

19. Use the texts to ask: what is “democracy” or a “democratic” politics (and culture)? What is democracy for? In turn, by what beliefs, customs, practices is ‘democracy’ fostered or sustained, and against what obstacles/dangers?

“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*

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?

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 & 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 passages to assess how we make sense of the human world, history, or nature, how we make them 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."

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

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

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

10. Use the 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 the text and explore its larger political purposes.

13. In what ways is the text “about” politics?

14. In what ways is the text exploring the meaning of “democracy”?

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

16. DH Lawrence’s Melville creates an Ahab who represents the dominant European & white world, whose “idealistic” consciousness, at war with body, nature, matter, will destroy itself. In this way, DHL argues, Melville both represents and kills off the European legacy that holds Americans hostage, as if to make way for a “new world” consciousness. In contrast, Toni Morrison’s Ahab is a great rebel, against not just slavery, but the white supremacy that survives it. Whereas DHL sees the whale as nature, and so as an object Ahab demonizes, she sees the whale as a real political object whose horror he correctly assesses and whose power must be attacked if democracy is ever to emerge. Assess this difference about the whale, and about Ahab.

17. Moby-Dick advances the positions of Ahab and Ishmael toward nature and being — one posits depravity behind visible appearances, and thereby sees a hidden albeit demonic purpose in life, the other posits a blank indifference, an inherent, essential meaninglessness. If one creates a charged allegory, therefore, the other endorses human symbolizing but recognizes its limitation. Does the novel tell us how to stand toward these alternatives? Does the novel ultimately take Ishmael’s point of view toward Ahab, or does it leave the issue unresolved and undecidable?
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, OF the past, or 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." -Anonymous

"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." -Anonymous

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!" -Anonymous

"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!" -Anonymous

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.