

# On the Edge of a Bank: Contemplating Other Models by Which to Live

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*This essay examines quiet, introspection, and reflection as markers identifying aspects of living well. Drawing on the work of Toni Morrison, Natasha Trethewey, and Kevin Quashie among others, "On the Edge of a Bank" offers examples both actual and fictive that can be used in classrooms to provide substantive models for reflecting on the range of complex and interesting choices people have made regarding how they want to live and find satisfaction in doing so. While mostly narrative, two questions drive the interrogation: 1.) What are the risks of living quietly? 2.) Why does becoming enlivened by the pleasure's of one's own company appear threatening to others?*

Keywords: *quiet, attentiveness, identity, other models*

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Author's Note: The title of this paper derives from two artists: Toni Morrison and Carrie Mae Weems. "On the edge of a bank" is cited in the paper and placed in its original context, while the quote from Carrie Mae Weems is used to note alternative ways of living well but not placed within the same context as the work from which it is taken, *Not Manet's Type* (1997).

Upon receiving a Melcher Book Award for *Beloved*, Toni Morrison (1989) offered an acceptance speech; afterwards, she fielded questions from the audience. One participant, asserting youth, wanted Morrison's opinion regarding the importance of lived experience for telling a good story. She offered an interesting response. Morrison told the questioner that experience without careful consideration of it is inadequate since it fails to make discrete moments meaningful. "If you can't make anything coherent out of it then it's not information. It's not knowledge," she offered. What I found even more provocative soon followed these remarks. Morrison offered an image of a person whose existence I find seductive: "Some people sit on the edge of a bank and fish all day. They don't even talk and yet they're complex and fascinating." I have known such people. My neighbor Thomas Greer was quiet and interesting, but my grandfather was my idol in this regard. After breakfast, my grandfather used to sit in the room we called the TV room and look outside for what seemed like hours. He never turned the television or radio on; he didn't even read there. He just sat and thought. On numerous occasions, I asked him, "What are you thinking about, grandpa?" Consistently, he replied, "Girl, one of my thoughts would *bust yo' brain WIDE open.*" "Wow," I thought, "what kind of idea could that be?" One of my goals, then and

now, has been to chase my grandfather's potent ideas. My grandfather's sustained commitment to quiet, his investment in introspection, and his willingness to sit with unsettled thoughts was compelling to me. It looked so different from the busyness that seemed to consume everyone else.

Essentially, for so many college students, sitting quietly "on the edge of a bank" (Morrison, 1989) giving life careful attention, catching up their perceptions with the world going on around them, making careful observations, and adjusting themselves to meet them hardly seems an option. (Re)introducing students to the possibilities of being enlivened by one's own company and finding value in the cultivation of a rich interior life expands their chances for living well. Implementing strategies in our classrooms that call for students to reflect on the ways individuals, groups, and generations of people have intentionally chosen novel ways of living in the world expands the likelihood of students using such models. At the very least, students learn to recognize diverse modes of living. Such awareness can certainly inform how students become involved in the learning process.

The practice that best showcases my attempt to create a setting where extended rumination can occur most evidently appears through my course design. I craft two syllabi for every course I teach: 1. Procedural (see Appendix A) 2. Intellectual (see Appendix B). The Procedural Syllabus features the catalogue description, course description, books, and classroom and college policies. The Procedural Syllabus takes very little time to craft, as oftentimes only modest changes need to be made to a course description or to classroom policies. The Intellectual Syllabus involves more time crafting, as it features the ideas, concepts, history, and issues that will be valuable for bringing students closer to careful examination of the material. In this document I offer a series of themed units. Each unit may feature readings, Internet links, videos, sound recordings, or photographs. Students are required to read over the Intellectual Syllabus and come to class prepared to discuss the units they find most compelling and to explain why this is the case. The discussion concludes once every student has offered an informal statement of her interests. The course content emerges from what the students select.

Oftentimes, students share an interest in common units, and this provides an opportunity for me to include additional units for students to consider through small group projects and independent presentation topics so that they can be exposed to more material. I am also sure to insert any books that I require students to purchase, either as an introduction that focuses the class or to provide a transition between some of the ideas that interest them. Through a reconsideration of time, the Intellectual Syllabus can significantly impact how students come to know the questions and concerns of the members of their particular intellectual community. My specific practice for privileging the concerns of the class as an intellectual community allows for maximum fluidity. Thus, my classroom privileges ideas, not dates.

Many students show a great deal of anxiety around my course design. For them, a course organized through the interests of their classmates and then organically taken up on undetermined dates thwarts their ability to be prepared for class. These students are generally disturbed by what they perceive to be the “lack of structure” that undermines their personal effort to be responsible in their studies. “The simplest way to address your concerns regarding being prepared,” I tell them, “is by coming to class.” Continuing, I may add, “if you are in attendance, then you will know what we discussed, what questions we posed, and where we want to begin next time.” My refusal to provide page numbers for books frustrates them as well. Without knowing the page numbers in advance, they tell me, they may not know where we are and what we will be discussing. “Read as much as you can or all of the work,” I tell them. “Read it ahead of time of its being assigned,” I might say. “That’s what being interested looks like.” Even though skeptical and anxious, these students usually remain enrolled in the class.

Schooled into believing that thinking, learning, and understanding occurs from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday, in accordance with their teachers’ lesson plans, many students accept this framework as the optimal design—if not the only design—for solving equations, recalling historical periods, studying their lab notes, and completing other school work. These students find it discomforting when asked to participate in an environment based on an improvisational schema given that their academic success resulted from a more regimented learning schedule. I push ahead with the improvisational approach because I find it more interesting; it feels familiar to me given what I saw of my grandfather’s intellectual work, and I also think the design finds deep roots in the ways that African American cultural expression has influenced American history and culture. To that end, jazz, the music that scholar Robert O’Meally calls, “the cadence of American culture” (p. XI), significantly influences my philosophy for designing courses that privilege contemplative practices.

Though often misunderstood as a musical form that defies definition, jazz music has a recognizable structure. The design elements of the form include, according to O’Meally, “call-response exchanges, repetitions-with-a difference, Afro-dance-beat-oriented rhythms [...], solo breaks and other improvisations, vamp-chorus-riff-outchorus patterns, impulses to play and game, soulful changes straight out of church, and, perhaps most fundamentally, face-to-face exchanges with the blues and other musical forms” (p. 3). Performing well in an environment taking on a jazz-influenced design requires attentiveness, vigilance, and focus on the expression, ideas, insight, and tone of those in one’s immediate environment with a recognition that such conversations are steeped in earlier, past, and ongoing conversations preceding the moment. To that end, the improvisational design of the course, rooted in a “jazz cadence,” promotes the contemplative practices

of those enrolled (O'Meally, 1998). The intense, energized, and active presence of students reflecting upon their own ideas in relation to multiple texts and to multiple voices has the potential to challenge the prevailing expectation that learning *happens* when professors become performers / entertainers.

Despite my insistence that I am not Beyoncé (students most often identify with her before they would identify with Nancy Wilson), students' posture continues to suggest their anticipation of a dazzling professorial spectacle. Though my students expect a performer's stage, my ideal classroom space uses my grandfather's TV room as a model. In this regard, I aim to transform a bare, sparsely furnished, large or small space into a quiet place, an almost sacred one where an engagement with information transformed into knowledge, as Morrison would have it, provides the setting for the explosive potential of intellectual exchange and reflection: the potential for the emergence of novelty, clarity, or even truth. While in my classroom, I have some measure of control over the respect students give to the space and to one another through rules that limit how they use their mobile devices, how they address one another's remarks by naming the person, and require them to arrive on time and to remain for the duration of the class in order to limit distractions. When I am not in charge of the intellectual space, however, student distractedness has angered, saddened, and frustrated me. In one of those instances, my husband, a high school math teacher, was my chief witness to contemporary students openly refusing to pay attention.

This particular experience occurred after I accepted a colleague's invitation to present on a panel discussing Manning Marable's book, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, which a group of college honors students had been assigned to read over the summer. Only after receiving the itinerary did I learn that the event would take place a little over an hour away in Macon, Georgia. My husband and son accompanied me to the event, thus making it a nice drive.

The historic Douglass Theatre served as the venue for our program. Since the theatre's name was spelled the same as the historic abolitionist's, I initially thought it a tribute to him. In fact, the name honors the man who built it, Macon native Charles H. Douglass. Douglass built the theatre after making his money as the proprietor of a bicycle repair shop. We learned that some of the most talented black musicians to come from Macon performed on that stage. It was hard to imagine such an intimate venue framing the expansiveness of Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix, and James Brown, but apparently, it did. I liked the venue very much, although what I was about to do on that stage strayed far from those legendary performers who captivated their audiences. To that end, I should have anticipated my audience's disinterest.

As our panel convened, my three-year-old son became antsy, wanting to talk to me from afar. Once my co-panelists, a professor of Africana Studies and four students, began their presentations, my son had to be taken from the venue. As

he calmed down, my husband and son would reappear periodically throughout the various presentations. Afterwards, my husband shared with me that he had never seen so many people playing Angry Birds and texting while others were presenting work as he had seen from his vantage point at the back of the room. He found it extraordinarily disrespectful. "If these are the honors students, I would hate to see how the regular students behave," he said. I agreed. I was put off by their seeming arrogance and disinterest. This group challenged my presumption that the best students demonstrate that intellectual growth stems from both curiosity and an ability to admit what one does not know. Such an admission suggests humility, not arrogance. If these students considered themselves seriously invested in the pursuit of knowledge, their behavior and comportment undermined such a claim.

The students had not altogether overlooked taking themselves seriously as I overheard many of them expressing to the Director the itineraries requiring their timely return to Atlanta. Clearly, they had a very different notion of taking oneself seriously than we did. Taking oneself seriously for them meant focusing on their self-designed social calendars. If they were not focused on those appointments, they allowed themselves to become distracted from what was occurring before them. Moreover, taking oneself seriously also involved expressing one's aspirations for professional success. The students on the panel discussed their career ambitions and actually used their presentations to describe how they were using the history of Malcolm X's life, as documented in Marable's historical account, to inform their professional pursuits. Thus, many of their presentations combined reports on Marable's book (every student on the panel admitted they had not read the autobiography itself) with speeches on what they wanted to be when they grew up. The discussion was not what I expected. Other than my co-panelist colleague and the colleague who invited me, no one else paid attention to any of what was being discussed. Typically, students at least pay attention to one another and then turn to the professors for career advice, but these students were different. In fact, the students showed no evidence that they were even aware of the significance of attentiveness. Toni and Slade Morrison (2004) offer a (re) interpretation of Aesop's Fable, "The Farmer and the Snake," that these distracted students should read.

In their reconsideration of Aesop's Fable, Toni and Slade Morrison's *Poppy or the Snake? (Who's Got Game?)* offers a character that emblemizes the possibilities regarding the allure and the pleasures of a quiet life. Poppy lives alone in a cabin by a lake; readers get a sense of what he spends his time doing there and how he imagines quality experiences. Poppy and his grandson Nate swim, pick blackberries, and fish. These activities convey their *sovereignty in quiet*. Their activities are ones that can be done quietly and under one's own authority and at one's own pace. The fact that Nate enjoys visiting every summer testifies to the pleasures of a quiet, non-commercial set of experiences.

After learning about Nate's difficulties focusing and paying attention in school, Poppy shares a story with Nate about accidentally driving his truck over a snake. In the wake of the accident, Snake convinces Poppy to assume responsibility for his care by promising that he would "never even think of biting" him (p. 1).<sup>1</sup> As Poppy plays host to the snake he nearly killed, Snake asks him one night, "Why don't you get a TV? Liven this place up" (p. 21). Poppy responds, "I like the peace and quiet" (p. 21). And yet, Snake continues, "Not even a radio? You don't want no radio?" (p. 22) "No," comes Poppy's response. "Don't you get lonesome?" Snake asks (p. 22). "No, Poppy replies, "*I like my own company* [emphasis mine]" (p. 22). Though Snake tells Poppy "That's alright," Snake finds this revelation intolerable: following Poppy's admission of his investment in a quiet life, Snake bites Poppy (p. 22). Thus, as Poppy claims his true nature, Snake claims his. An interesting fact to note here is that, unlike in other versions of this fable, in Morrison's re-telling, Snake specifically responds to the nature of a quiet man.

Nate concludes that Poppy injecting himself with snake serum is what saved his life. Poppy, however, corrects Nate, telling him, "Not entirely. Paying attention is what saved me" (p. 27). After all, Snake did not say that he would not bite Poppy, only that he would not "think" of biting him (p. 12). Though Poppy lived a quiet life without the distractions of television or radio, he believed that his life was worthwhile, worth preserving. Thus, Poppy paid attention to the minutia around him so as to sustain and to safeguard that life.

As much as I like my devices, being convinced of the value that paying attention carries crushes their seductive powers. The value of paying attention was once an early lesson taught to children through fairytales like *Little Red Riding Hood* and by adults who repeated this caution. When I tell my son to pay attention, I think I'm equipping him with a life-sustaining piece of advice. Those honors students were showing a very casual regard for themselves by playing *Angry Birds* and text messaging. Paying attention is a call to the present, a tenet of contemplative practices. It acknowledges the meaningfulness of the present as a necessary context for any future you plan on having. Playing *Angry Birds* and text messaging while others were presenting work where they presumed a present audience, if not an interested one, was not only rude, it was reckless.

The importance of paying attention is old advice that matters in an age of new technology. The hazards of texting while driving comprise one area exemplifying the dangers of technological distraction; however, Morrison's story covers more terrain. Poppy's account of the technology that could disrupt the time he spends enjoying his "own company" suggests the importance of paying attention

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<sup>1</sup> The book itself does not have page numbers. I imposed numbers for the sake of other readers by starting with illustrator Pascal LeMaitre's first drawing of Poppy's house.

at all times. As a posture that offers another way of “taking yourself seriously,” paying attention and enjoying one’s own company as a quiet experience, Morrison suggests, disturbs others. Thus, Snake’s attempt to destroy Poppy’s version of a good life prompts me to ask two interconnected questions: 1.) What are the risks of living quietly? 2.) Why does becoming enlivened by the pleasure of one’s own company appear threatening to others?

In scholar Kevin Quashie’s beautiful book, *Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012), his argument suggests that one of the risks of living quietly in a context of racial oppression for black Americans involves a tragic complicity with what poet Cornelius Eady (2001) terms “the brutal imagination,” or the construction and reification of black life as rooted in criminality, shiftlessness, licentiousness, and immorality. Both Eady, through his poetry, and Quashie, through his scholarship, posit that black life exceeds the limitations of how it gets imagined and portrayed in popular culture. Quashie’s work, in particular, challenges the presumption that publicness and resistance are the sole categories for conceptualizing black life. Quashie offers “quiet” as a catalyzing concept for expanding the myopic angles of vision that limit expressions of black humanity. Resistance alone, according to Quashie, requires that black people live in response to the gaze and the concerns of the public world. He writes:

So much of the discourse of racial blackness imagines black people as public subjects with identities formed and articulated and resisted in public. Such blackness is dramatic, symbolic, never for its own vagary, always representative and engaged with how it is imagined publicly. These characterizations are the legacy of racism and they become the common way we understand and represent blackness; literally they become a lingua franca. (p. 8)

Quiet, however, enlivens black humanity:

The idea of quiet, then, can shift attention to what is interior. This shift can feel like a kind of heresy if the interior is thought of as apolitical or inexpressive, which it is not: one’s inner life is raucous and full of expression, especially if we distinguish the term “expressive” from the notion of the public. Indeed the interior could be understood as the source of human action—that anything we do is shaped by the range of desires and capacities of our inner life. (p. 8)

Similar to my perceptions of my grandfather’s quiet introspection, Quashie suggests that one’s interior life may be exuberant. Dazzling. Quashie, following poet Elizabeth Alexander’s (2004) assertions regarding the existence of a “black interior,” surprises the black women students I teach. Alexander describes “the black interior” as:

black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of. It is a space that black people ourselves have policed at various historical moments. Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty. (p. X)

Rather than recognize or even acknowledge the possibility and fact of black life “behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination,” my students are oftentimes near-perfect examples of post-modern articulations of an acceptance of simulacra over reality. As Michel de Certeau (1984) observes:

Today, fiction claims to make the real present, to speak in the name of the facts and thus to cause the semblance it produces to be taken as a referential reality. Hence, those to whom these legends are directed (and who pay for them) are not obliged to believe what they don't see (a traditional position), but rather to believe what they see (a contemporary position). (p. 187)

Generationally speaking, then, young black Americans seldom question representations of black Americans on television or in magazines in the overt ways earlier generations doubted them. Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1995) contends that earlier generations were highly suspicious in this regard. Thus, they used cameras in an attempt to humanize black American life for their own sake. She contends that the photographs that black people made of themselves reflected the beauty, dignity, and integrity of black life. Denied public space to display these photographs, hooks asserts that black people created “museum walls” in their homes, which served as sites of witness. The troubling shift to the post-modern condition that de Certeau describes leaves black people, particularly young black people, accepting fiction as truth.

In general, the relationship that many of my students have with representations of black Americans in popular culture exemplifies de Certeau's analysis. Frequently, their discussions and close readings omit the possibility of a range of expressions available for articulating black subjectivity. The best example of my students' overall surprise regarding their own assumptions and beliefs concerning the scope of black expression and the near impossibility of black quiet emerges most obviously in their singular and perfectly consistent reading of Natasha Trethewey's (2000) poem “Tableau,” from her collection, *Domestic Work*:

At breakfast, the scent of lemons,  
just-picked, yellowing on the sill.  
At the table, a man and woman.

Between them, a still life:  
shallow bowl, damask plums  
in one square of morning light.

The woman sips tea  
from a chipped blue cup, turning it,  
avoiding the rough white edge.

The man, his thumb pushing deep  
toward the pit, peels taut skin  
clean from plum flesh.

The woman watches his hands,  
the pale fruit darkening  
wherever he's pushed too hard.

She is thinking *seed*, the hardness  
she'll roll on her tongue,  
a beginning. One by one,

the man fills the bowl with globes  
that glisten. *Translucent*, he thinks.

The woman, now, her cup tilting  
empty, sees, for the first time,  
the hairline crack  
that has begun to split the bowl in half. (p. 18)<sup>2</sup>

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2 I would like to thank Natasha Trethewey for granting me permission to reprint "Tableau" in its entirety for this publication.

The intersecting aspects of identity, particularly race and Southernness, reflect common themes in Trethewey's work. Many of the poems in *Domestic Work* derive from stories she recalls her maternal grandmother sharing. To that end, Trethewey's Southern, black, maternal grandmother certainly influences my reading of "Tableau."

I imagine the man and woman in the poem as an African American couple. I admire their ability to be still together, quiet and comfortable enough with one another to take leave of their partnership to think their own thoughts and have their own ideas about everyday things. Their peace enables them to see mundane things anew. While the "hairline crack" in the bowl might suggest something ominous about their relationship, I reject this interpretation. Instead, I see that "hairline crack" much like the "chipped blue cup" the woman sips tea from: a mark of character as well as a feature of the cup. Flaws do not make items disposable for this woman. The cup has not lost its value as a conveyor of her morning drink. She does not throw it away in preference for a flawless cup. Despite being chipped, the cup still works and she makes use of it. The couple reminds me of the working-class black men sociologist Mitchell Duneier (1992) describes whose humanity defies the caricatures standing in for them in popular culture. Duneier's observations challenge the notion that black working-class and poor men all envy the black middle class, lust for material wealth, and lack morals worth emulating; instead, Duneier observes black working-class and poor men "who are almost ascetic, quietly satisfied with their humble lives" (p. 67).

Before I share my interpretation of Trethewey's poem, my students offer an unvaried account of an ill-fated couple. Where I observe "quiet," my students perceive an *absence* of conversation between the couple. They interpret *absence* as a *lack* symbolizing something *missing* in the couple's relationship. Such a deficiency read alongside the "hairline crack" in the bowl makes their unhappiness obvious and their separation inevitable. "So you see no hope at all for this couple?" I ask. Some say "no" while others shake their heads in alliance with their classmates' negative conclusion. "Well, what about the woman turning her cup?" I ask. My students admit seeing nothing in that gesture other than further evidence of this couple's crumbling relationship. Although their reading works, the unanimity of this shared point of view incites my interest. "Don't you know couples who love and enjoy one another but who may travel quietly together in a car? Sit quietly on the porch? Eat quietly during breakfast? Who see value in slightly damaged objects? Make quilts from pieces salvaged from other well-worn things?" After thinking about this, students begin sharing stories of grandparents, neighbors, and close family friends with long-lasting relationships who appear comfortable with one another despite the fact that they're quiet together.

Intrigued by their misrecognition of the reality of the “quiet” couple in the poem as a representation of folk they know—those who are at peace with themselves and in their relationships—students are prompted to consider the role that popular culture, particularly television and social media, plays in their disregard for and dismissal of the realities they have known and experienced. Opening to the aesthetic possibilities of the couple’s *still life* in “Tableau” typically urges my students to question the portrayals that black couples offer on social media sites and those broadcast on “reality” television programs. Blame heavily falls on social media platforms and television programming for greatly informing their reading of Trethewey’s quiet couple as either doomed or impossibly African American.

The representation of an African American couple that can be still and quiet together counters the representation offered on reality television shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta (RHOA)*. As scholars assert about this franchise, consumerism assumes a prominent role on the show as well as on-line (Cox and Proffitt, 2012). The portrayal of African American married life on this reality show stands in direct opposition to Trethewey’s presentation of a tranquil *still life* between a black couple. Unlike the woman who turns the cup in “Tableau,” the characters presented on *RHOA* eschew preserving anything despite its functionality. They constantly shop for new things whose significance seemingly derives from their brand names rather than their use. This show interprets the meaning of African American married couples spending time together, at least the significant part of it, as mostly devising ways of making more money.

According to scholars Cox and Proffitt (2012), “Bravo’s reality program *The Real Housewives (TRHW)* is about spending money, and lots of it. Being a ‘housewife’ is about designer jeans, massive mansions, and international vacations; it is rarely about child rearing or chores” (p. 295). In Cox and Proffitt’s contention, then, *TRHW* casts domestic work as mostly a matter of consumption. David Grazian (2010) supports this view of *TRHW* through his assessment of reality television and neoliberal principles. The aspects of neoliberalism that intersect with the features of *TRHW* concern the values emphasized through its economic principles (Grazian, 69). Rather than *TRHW* featuring storylines about friendship, camaraderie, and cooperation, the women are often in competition with one another for status. As Grazian asserts about the reality television program *Survivor*, there are certainly “naked displays of individualism and self-interest” in *TRHW* series as well (p. 69). As Cox and Proffitt note, “[f]rom *TRHW* thus emerges a familiar theme in contemporary reality programming: convincing viewers to buy—and buy more—to be happy” (p. 295). To that end, the couple in Trethewey’s “Tableau” must be doomed and certainly unhappy because they are not shopping to replace their aging and fragile possessions.

Initially, then, the couple in Trethewey's poem appear unrecognizable to even young black women who dismiss the real experiences of black love as quiet and peaceful as witnessed through their own lived experiences. Rather than arguing, fistfighting, shopping, or partying like the black men and black women on reality television, the couple in Natasha Trethewey's poem counter this behavior. What they *are doing*—together—is giving life careful attention. They are catching up their perceptions with the world going on around them. They are making careful observations and adjusting themselves to meet them (i.e., the woman turning the cup so as not to sip from the “rough edge”). They are a contemplative pair. This couple represents a model of living that I find most attractive because of its availability to the poor and moneyed alike. Such accessibility poses a threat to the economic principles and values of neoliberalism, thus making the quiet, reflective couple a threat to prevailing ideology.

One of the assignments that I give students after reading and discussing Trethewey's poem and reading scholarship on popular media asks them to evaluate social media platforms for their potential to provide the “museum walls” bell hooks locates in black homes. The assignment typically asks that students address the following questions: Are such “curatorial spaces” still needed in post-civil rights America? If not, provide your rationale. In this case, how does cyberspace facilitate this new possibility? Your thesis must specifically demonstrate how Facebook (or a social media platform of your choice) reveals evidence that racist imagery no longer prevails and that dignified representations of black life in cyberspace evidence the aesthetically recuperative work black women once performed. The other choice you have is to argue for the need for “curatorial spaces” in post-civil rights America: offer your rationale. In this case, how does cyberspace undermine new possibilities for expanding diverse and dignified representations? Your thesis must specifically demonstrate how Facebook (or a social media platform of your choice) reveals evidence that racist imagery prevails and therefore requires the private, aesthetically recuperative work black women once performed.

This assignment asks students to analyze new technology and its role in disrupting or sustaining racially derogatory portrayals of black life that diminish the expressions of black humanity that “quiet” aims to expand. One objective of the assignment is to urge students to evaluate the potential of new technology to reveal diversity among black people, which, Quashie contends, derives from the cultivation of one's inner life. The assignment forces students to make a choice regarding the necessity of those “museum walls” given the potential that social media affords. Being forced to choose requires that students wrestle with determining a single “answer” without the opportunity for nuance. Their responses are thus compromised given the complexities involved in thinking through the questions and deriving a unique thesis that exceeds the constraints I have imposed. Personally, I love it when students learn to expect the complexity involved

in having correct answers to questions that emerge from curiosity and not facts. While my office hours are typically jam-packed with students whining about “not knowing *the answer*,” I love being able to say over and over again, “Good! Sitting with uncertainty will help you become a better thinker.” Despite their frustration with me for not telling them “the answer,” they later tell me that the assignment helped them become aware of their process for deriving conclusions. They also come to realize how provisional “the answer” can be and what might influence changes in perspective.

In order to support the cultivation of independent thinking, I prepare lectures and discussions featuring terms with meanings students assume we share. Terms like “success,” “wealthy,” “rich,” and “smart” appear often in these class sessions. For example, I usually prompt students to consider the difference between what being rich means on reality television and what being rich means in Trethewey’s poem. Like the scholarship read in the course, students agree that on reality television being rich means having money to spend and to waste. The couple depicted in “Tableau” offers another model of wealth that hardly makes an appearance in popular culture or social media as reflecting a high quality of life. In order to underscore the possibility of black quiet with its inherent possibilities for presenting other models of living well, I acquaint students with the stories of autobiographical subjects who enact such alternatives. David Halberstam (1999) offers just such a portrait in his wonderful book *The Children*, a work that focuses on the stories of the young activists who were involved in non-violent, direct action protest in the 1960s.

One of the many exquisite stories Halberstam shares focuses on civil rights activist and minister James Lawson’s mother Philane. Halberstam writes beautifully and movingly of the impression Mrs. Lawson made on young Lawson and his future wife:

Jim’s mother, in addition to her other household chores, worked regularly in her home doing alterations for a local dress shop, and there were frequent offers for her to come and work full-time in the downtown store. It was only when the youngest children were in high school that she took such a job. Even in the late fifties, with her family largely grown and her holding the full-time job, she still ran a wonderful home. The first time Dorothy Wood came to Massillon [Ohio] to meet her husband’s family, the thing she remembered both then and every other time she visited was that on Saturday, at 4:00 a.m., the wonderful smell of baking bread would fill the house because Philane Lawson had gotten up early and started cooking so that her family would have the best of homemade foods all weekend, full-time downtown job or no. She was, her daughter-

in-law decided, a woman full of human richness and a woman who took her own codes seriously [...]. (p. 33)

Halberstam's understanding of Dorothy Wood's impressions of her mother-in-law as someone "full of human richness" strikes at the very core of the meaningful portrait he paints of Philane Lawson. Lawson's ability to generate riches for her family is astonishing in light of the fact that the world of Jim Crow segregation, with its thorough contempt of blackness, which permeated all of America, North and South, would have defined riches against a black person's ability to have them. The America of Philane Lawson's time forced most black people into the most menial jobs and thus the lowest economic positions and housing options that it could fashion. It was a nation that left black people to enter the most ill-equipped schools and to be cared for in the most neglected corners and basements of medical facilities. It was a country that used its creativity, its energy, its laws and its customs to showcase its disdain for black people.

Despite the goal of segregation to convey "the all-pervading desire to [inculcate] disdain for everything black," (Du Bois, 16) Philane Lawson's work for her family suggests definite limits to how far Jim Crow was allowed to permeate black life. Mrs. Lawson's actions towards her family suggest that she had not used the broader culture as a model for determining the quality of the experiences her family should enjoy. That Mrs. Lawson could value herself and the people that the nation had decided were unworthy of anything it regarded as valuable was an achievement. Mrs. Lawson defined her humanity itself as wealth. She disagreed with the nation's contempt for blackness, and so she baked bread for her family at 4 a.m. on Saturday; she reimagined how her family's food would be served; she planned and saved for how her family would be clothed. Her example offers a model of wealth in human terms and thereby challenges capitalist definitions and methods of accumulating and acquiring money.

Segregation and the codes of Jim Crow staged roles and performances for black subservience. These roles ostensibly placed black people outside of dignity and thus the possibility of living well. Poverty, oftentimes extreme poverty, was assumed to have guaranteed black exclusion from this same possibility. The goals of the civil rights movement certainly sought to improve the economic conditions of those living in extreme poverty, because capital does inform the quality of one's medical care, one's ability to experience dignity, the safety of one's environment, one's encounters with bureaucracy, and one's opportunity for leisure. At the same time, many movement activists understood that in the face of lack, oftentimes extreme lack, those same poor people had managed to create an alternative system of value and meaning wherein they did live well and with dignity. That is to say, for those black people living under the harsh terms of segregation, living well and with dignity was not exclusively defined as having the goods that so many white people had. Those terms would have made it impossible for black people to ever expe-

rience lives of value. Instead, one example of living well and with dignity meant having a home with at least one adult there to provide meals for the family. Such was the case with Mrs. Lawson. Living well for the Lawson family was not based on being able to hire someone to perform domestic chores within one's household, but on being able to do that work for the sake of one's own family.

The Lawson case illustrates the ways that financial terms might be reworked to highlight the expanded ways that words might be redeployed to reflect alternative values. When I discuss examples like these with students, most of them come to recognize that they have known or encountered black people like Mrs. Lawson in addition to the couple depicted in Trethewey's "Tableau." For students, the challenge of embracing alternative values involves the lack of recognition and acknowledgement of having a good and successful life without its material markers: large home, luxury car, expensive clothes, membership in exclusive clubs and organizations. In this case, the risk of living quietly gets defined through absence, lack, and thus the perception of one's personal failing. Thus, many of my students admit to complying with the mandates of a culture that dismisses the possibility of contentment symbolized by the couple in "Tableau."

As a way of encouraging introspection, mindfulness, and careful consideration of others beyond appearances, I often use iconic stories of people my students presume to know alongside scholarship that challenges such narratives. Sojourner Truth has been a subject of one of these lessons, but given the objective of exploring Quashie's notion of "black quiet," Rosa Parks has become a central figure for analysis. Jean Theoharis's exceptional biography of Mrs. Parks, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (2014), challenges the iconic portrayal of her as a quiet old lady who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus; instead, Theoharis offers historical insight into the life of a very interesting, complex, thoughtful, and quiet woman. Theoharis's consideration of Rosa and Raymond Parks's marriage helps to further enliven the couple featured in "Tableau." The biography teases readers with details about Parks's inner life through her discussion of how quiet she and her husband Raymond were together, as Theoharis learned through interviews with those who knew the couple. In one story, Theoharis provides Edward Vaughn's impression of Mr. and Mrs. Parks. Vaughn was the proprietor of the only black bookstore in Detroit when it opened in 1959. He describes Mrs. Parks as one of his best customers. Reflecting on the Parkses as a couple, Vaughn asserts that they were "two of the quietest people you ever see [sic]" (p.192). Theoharis resists speculating about what Mr. and Mrs. Parks's quiet love looked like, but this unknown generated classroom discussion about how their lives looked when they were alone together: did they communicate in other ways besides using words?

Through the presentation of two separate encounters that writers had with Mrs. Parks, Theoharis insinuates that Parks's hair was a site of intimacy for the couple. Theoharis reports that writer Cynthia Stokes Brown encountered Mrs.

Parks in the restroom as she was freshening “up before meeting with reporters” when Parks revealed an intimate detail from her private life that repeats the experience Alice Walker had with Mrs. Parks:

They went into the bathroom and Parks took down her hair. Walker was “stunned.” As she put back her bun, Parks explained “my hair was something that my husband dearly, dearly loved about me...I never wear it down in public.” (p. 14)

Theoharis ventures that politics played a role in Mrs. Parks’s decision to shield her long hair from public view. She writes that, “[a]ware of the racial politics of hair and appearance, Parks kept her hair long in an act of love and affection (even after Raymond died) but tucked away in a series of braids and buns—maintaining a clear division between her public presentation and her private person” (p. 14). My students and I accept Theoharis’s reading, but we also imagine that Mrs. Parks wore her hair down at home to speak to her husband’s adoration of her long hair. We wondered whether Mr. Parks liked to run his hands through her hair; if he helped her wash it; too, we explored Parks’s “private person” through Quashie’s notion of quiet.

As Theoharis explains, when Mrs. Parks first met Mr. Parks he was involved with the Scottsboro case—one that she would also devote her energy towards. Of her involvement, Theoharis contends that, “[b]eginning with the Scottsboro case, Rosa Parks had learned to be discreet about her political activities” (p. 205). Theoharis’s use of the word “discreet” greatly interested me because of what I take to be its current devaluation. Being discreet seems to have no place in contemporary American life. The fact that Mrs. Parks “learned to be discreet” makes you wonder what taught her such caution.

The class was asked to consider the lessons young people learn about being discreet in contemporary U.S. culture and whether, as it appears, indiscretion rules the day. Given the numerous accounts of young girls and young women being shamed by the circulation of nude pictures of themselves posted on-line or maliciously sent as mass text messages (Hoff, 2011), as well as the tragic efforts towards shaming people through social media, which in Tyler Clementi’s case (Topics, 2012) drove him to commit suicide, being discreet presents today’s youth with a challenge their predecessors may not have faced. On this point, prompting students to reflect on the historical conditions informing generational choices concerning values like discretion encourages substantive inquiry regarding how different models of living might occur across time. Such inquiry also extends the exploration into generational difference that my students consider in their social media assignments.

Asking questions about the inner lives of quiet people helps explicate the fascinating complexity of people who Morrison describes as being “on the edge of a

bank.” (Re)introducing students to the possibility of cultivating their inner lives as they pursue other studies is worthwhile because it expands the value of higher education beyond career services. At the same time, it involves them in meaningful inquiry about what holds value in their lives and in the lives of others. Emphasizing the value of paying attention to one’s inner life may bring students the satisfaction of careful introspection and the influence that it has on good judgment. My hope is that encouraging the value of paying attention in this way could save their lives, as it did in Poppy’s case, or at the very least, it might encourage an assumption of an intellectual posture, a contemplative stance, that playing Angry Birds refuses.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

MICHELLE S. HITE is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Spelman College. She is currently working on a manuscript exploring “other models by which to live” as articulated through the daily lives of mostly working-class African Americans since the mid-twentieth century. She serves on the South-View Cemetery Historic Foundation Board. She also works as a researcher for Atlanta’s Families First.

**APPENDIX A: ABBREVIATED PROCEDURAL SYLLABUS**

Spelman College

*ENG 422: Except Sunday: A Seminar on Labor and African American Culture*

Illustration 98. Richard Samuel Roberts (American, 1907–36), *Unidentified Portrait (Woman in Uniform)*, probably 1920s. Estate of Richard Samuel Roberts



Illustration 99. Richard Samuel Roberts (American, 1907–36), *Unidentified Portrait (Woman Out of Uniform)*, probably 1920s. Estate of Richard Samuel Roberts

Catalogue Description

ENG 422 – Seminar on Identity and Labor (4). This interdisciplinary seminar investigates past and present attitudes regarding labor and identity produced within various cultural traditions, as they are revealed and critiqued in selected creative, historical, and theoretical works. Time period varies. Category III, 20th Century. Seminar.

Course Lens

This seminar examines representations of African American lives through the lens of work from the antebellum period through the rise of Black Power. The designated historical context finds African Americans laboring in an environment of rabid hostility. Against such a backdrop, our investigation takes measure of the ability of African Americans to live lives of dignity and integrity while enslaved, then working for wages and, concomitantly, freedom. This exploration will consider and evaluate competing and companionate narratives of African Americans' working lives and take measure of the consequences of these representations while consid-

ering who they might serve and how. Drawing from a variety of sources including labor history, fiction, memoir, photography, film, and music, the course will query the extent to which African Americans were able to experience joyful lives given the nature of their labor; whether they were able to develop rich interior lives; how or whether work influenced how they loved; if work informed the way they defined worthwhile experiences.

Moreover, ours is an investigation into the politics of identity through representations of labor. To this end, this seminar interrogates representations of African Americans as Mammy, Uncle Ben, and Stepin Fetchit among the general population of mythical scourges put into service in American culture. We will examine these stereotypes as depictions of African American labor and take measure of the kind of cultural work they do and consider the impact they have had for African Americans--especially as they encounter them through work.

Required Seminar Texts (to be purchased)

Rita Dove. **On the Bus with Rosa Parks.** W.W. Norton and Co.: 1999.

Mitchell Duneier. **Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity.** The University of Chicago Press: 1992.

Jeanne Theoharis. **The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks.** Boston: Beacon Press, 2013.

John Edgar Wideman. **Philadelphia Fire.** Vintage: 1990.

August Wilson. **Fences.** New York: Plume, 1986.

Films and Videos (soon to be available in Moodle)

*At the River I Stand*, dir. David Appleby, Allison Graham, and Steven Ross (1993)

*Claudine*, dir. John Berry (1974)

*Long Walk Home*, dir. Richard Pearce (1990)

*We Shall Not be Moved*, dir. Bernie Hargis (2001)

*10,000 Black Men Named George*, dir. Robert Townsend (2002).

## APPENDIX B: INTELLECTUAL SYLLABUS

### *Except Sunday: A Seminar on Labor and African American Culture*

Many, many times, I have quoted from the bell hooks essay, “Loving Blackness as Political Resistance,” wherein she makes this revelatory insight about students in her classes:

I left class of more than forty students, most of whom see themselves as radical and progressive, feeling as though I had witnessed a ritualistic demonstration of the impact white supremacy has on our collective psyches, shaping the nature of everyday life, how we talk, walk, eat, dream, and look at one another. The most frightening aspect of this ritual was the extent to which their fascination with the topic of black self-hatred was so intense that it silenced any constructive discussion about loving blackness. Most folks in this society do not want to openly admit that “blackness” as a sign primarily evokes in the public imagination of whites (and all the other groups who learn that one of the quickest ways to demonstrate one’s kinship within a white supremacist order is by sharing racist assumptions) hatred and fear. In a white supremacist context “loving blackness” is rarely a political stance that is reflected in everyday life. When present it is deemed suspect, dangerous, and threatening. (Taken verbatim from [Killing Rage: Ending Racism](#))

Though I have consistently raised the question, “what do you love about blackness?” I have, at the same time, neglected to follow through in helping students fluently answer this question. This goal of assisting your efforts at gaining fluency in speaking in loving terms about black identity and black experience undergirds the conceptualization of this seminar.

*Coming to Know Who We Are:*

...“the black interior,” that is, black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of. It is a space that black people ourselves have policed at various historical moments. Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty. What do we learn when we pause at sites of contradiction where black creativity complicated and resists what blackness is “supposed” to be? What in our culture speaks, sustains, and survives, post-nationalism, post-racial romance, into the unwritten black future we must imagine.

Elizabeth Alexander  
from “Preface” to *The Black Interior*

The watermark for the previous page may be found in John Ficara's book, [Black Farmers in America](#).



"I felt like making a statement about being in a place. I wanted to leave a dignified image of a black person who had been there." -[Whitfield Lovell](#), [Whispers from the Walls](#)

Unit I. "This expressiveness of quiet is not concerned with publicness, but instead is the expressiveness of the interior. That is, the quiet of a person represents the broad scope of his or her inner life; the quiet symbolizes—and if interrogated, expresses—some of the capacity of the interior." Kevin Quashie, [The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture](#).

**Read:**

[Elizabeth Alexander](#), "Toward the Black Interior" in *The Black Interior*. Gray Wolf Press, 2004, pp. 3-20.

-----, "Can You be BLACK and Look at This" in *The Black Interior*. pp. 175-205.

[Walter Johnson](#), "On Agency," in *Journal of Social History*, 37.1.

[Kevin Everod Quashie](#), "The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet," in *African American Review*, Vol. 43, No. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2009). pp. 329-343.

**View:**

Quashie, [Speaking out on Quiet](#), Smith College Scholars in Studio Video Series



Martin Luther King, Jr. and [Ralph Abernathy](#) on one of the first desegregated buses, 1956. [Ernest C. Withers](#)

Consider the significance of the photograph above for the statement it makes regarding the Montgomery bus boycott. What story of the Montgomery Movement does it tell? How does it compare to the photograph of Mrs. Parks below?



Read Philip Geffter's article, "[Essay: Icons as Fact, Fiction, and Metaphor](#)" concerning this photograph of Mrs. Parks on a bus in Montgomery, Ala., on December 21, 1956.

**Begin reading:** *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Consider reading with the following questions in mind.)

1.) Consider using Kevin Everod Quashie's questions regarding quiet and everyday life to engage Theoharis's book: How does interiority inform interactions with other people? How does the quiet subject negotiate moments of subjection and power? What is the action that quiet motivates, or how does it shape behavior? Simply, what does a quiet life look like? Does Theoharis's biography of Mrs. Parks offer an example of how a quiet life is lived? Where are such moments? Explain.

2.) As you read, consider the public narratives of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. For example, visit this [website](#) dedicated to it. How would you evaluate this site?

How would you evaluate this narrative about [The Club from Nowhere](#). Read more about Mrs. Georgia Gilmore [here](#).

3.) What seems to count as meaningful for Mrs. Parks? What does she want out of life?

4.) Poet [Frank X Walker](#) asserts that his own mother “didn’t call herself an artist, but everything she did around the house was artistic.” Did Mrs. Parks ever call herself an artist? Does Theoharis call her that? How does regarding Mrs. Parks as an artist inform your understanding of her legacy?

5.) How does Mrs. Parks mark the boundaries between her public and private selves?

6.) In [Charles M. Payne](#)’s important book, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, on the Mississippi Movement, he offers an insightful observation about community building when he writes:

Viewed from one angle, what is remarkable about the Black South is the degree of solidarity it achieved. From another, it is the problem of divisiveness, of “fractions,” as Miss [Ella] Baker put it, expressed in part in a tendency to make distinctions of status on the basis of the most trivial differences—the texture of one’s hair, one’s complexion, the size of the plantation one got exploited on, the kind of southern accent one spoke with, and so on. (186)

How did these “fractions” impact Mrs. Parks’s life?

**View:** Charles Rose [interview](#) with Rita Dove.

**Read:** [Rita Dove](#), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*.

**Excursions:**

Both [virtually](#) and in [fact](#), plan on visiting the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Consider these questions:

1.) What connections do these sites make between Dr. King and Mrs. Parks?

2.) What do you learn about Mrs. Parks with respect to the “Rosa Parks Room?” Does this information help you better understand her?

**View:**

[Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks](#) (if this link fails, try [this one](#))

*Unit II. (Approx. 2 weeks) "I owe a responsibility to you." Work and Family (Part 1 and Part 2)*



*Memphis sanitation workers strike, 1968. Ernest C. Withers*



*"I Am a Man," America, Glenn Ligon, 1988*



*I Am a Man*, [Hank Willis Thomas](#), 2008.

**Read:** [August Wilson](#), *Fences*

**View:** Sanitation Workers-Tumblr <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/sanitation%20workers>

**View:** *At the River I Stand* dir. David Appleby, Allison Graham, and Steven Ross, 1993: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwLmlbc6f7M>

**Read:** [Toni Cade Bambara](#), “[The Lesson](#),” 1972.

**Listen to:** [Marvin Gaye](#), “[Inner-City Blues \(Makes Me Wanna Holler\)](#),” 1971; for lyrics, [visit rock/rap genius](#). I love this site because you can click on the highlighted passages and get interpretations of the lyrics.

**Listen to:** [Gil Scott-Heron](#), “[Winter in America](#),” 1974; for the lyrics, visit [rap genius](#).

**View:** *Claudine* dir. John Berry, 1974

*Unit III: “A quietly devastating attack on misguided social analysts and black and white journalists in search of sensational sound bites on the ghetto, who replace traditional racist stereotypes of the black man with patronizing caricatures of a demoralized and utterly marginalized race of men hopelessly wrecked by white racism. Rejecting this homogenized travesty, Duneier gives voice, dignity and meaning to the lives of the forgotten majority of working class black men who pay their bills, fear their god, respect their women, and cherish their friendships.” (Orlando Patterson, Harvard University on Slim’s Table)*

**Read:**

[Mitchell Duneier](#), *Slim’s Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity*

*Unit III. Working Class Lives and the Politics of Contempt: “[You were] born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that [he was] a worthless human being.” James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.*

**View:**

*The Bombing of Osage Avenue* dir. Massiah (1986) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVbOIY7svfE>

**Read:**

[John Edgar Wideman](#), *Philadelphia Fire*. Listen to the interview Wideman gave to NPR’s Michele Norris. The link is found on Wideman’s bio page embedded in the hyperlink above; you can also find it [here](#).

**View/Listen/Read:**

“MOVE 25 years later:” [http://www.philly.com/philly/news/inq\\_HT\\_MOVE25.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/inq_HT_MOVE25.html)  
NPR: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4650751>  
NPR: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4651110>

*Unit III. (Approx. 2 weeks) “But beauty is also a battle. And the right to be beautiful and to be acknowledged as such, whoever you are, and wherever you are from, is not so much a folly as a human-rights issue” (Ben Arogundade)*

Why are these women in an exhibit about beauty?

- 1.) Richard Samuel Roberts photo featured in the syllabus
- 2.) Charles “Teenie” Harris photo of the “Waitress at the Crawford Grill”
  - Charles “Teenie” Harris Archive: <http://teenie.cmoa.org>
  - Ron K. Brown and Evidence Dance Company, “One Shot,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzOyjsYKXdQ>  
<http://vimeo.com/channels/rkbevidence>

**Read:**

Deborah Willis, "Introduction" to *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present*.

bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography in Black Life" in ed. Deborah Willis, *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. NYU Press, 1994, 43-54.

**Additional Topics for you to Consider for Research Purposes:**

*Unit IV. "When called, I come. My job is to get things done:" Contemptible and "Brutal" Representations of Black Workers*

- Cornelius Eady, *Brutal Imagination* (excerpt)
- Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (excerpt)
- Bill "Bojangles" Robinson scene from *The Little Colonel*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtHvetGnOdm>

*Unit V. "I Worked Until I Thought Another Lick Would Kill Me:" Work and Enslavement*

- Valerie Martin, *Property*
- Jacqueline Jones, "My Mother Was Much of a Woman," *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*

*Unit VI. "Ringing Bells is Played Out:" Post-Bellum World of Work*

- Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*
- Natasha Trethewey, *Domestic Work*

*Unit VII. (Approx. 2 weeks) "Hammer be the death of me:" The Legend of John Henry*

- Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days*
- Harry Belafonte, Rene Marie, "John Henry"
- Disney's *American Legends* (2002)

