



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2014 Volume II: Exploring Community through Ethnographic Nonfiction, Fiction, and Film

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## Using Film as a Gateway to Action Research

Curriculum Unit 14.02.09  
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### Section One Introduction

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"I realize that I participate in the same affect economy that I write critically about" (Adams 26).

#### 1.1 Statement of Context

At Metropolitan Business Academy Inter-district Magnet High School of New Haven, Connecticut, we have attempted to adopt the Comer Community School model, building a sense of community in an inter-district magnet school is no small feat. The challenges are many, but after completing this unit students will have a greater understanding of shared political-economic conditions that transcend simple geographic proximity.

Although the opportunities for curricular creativity in English, especially at the senior level, are decreasing at an alarming rate <sup>1</sup>, I am fortunate to also be teaching an elective course in film studies. Students will be exposed to a number of non-fiction texts, as well as a number of social-realist films that fall under the umbrella of ethnography. In addition to students' analyses of themes over a variety of texts, they will in fact be required to construct ethnographies of their own.

Boston native and Yale graduate anthropologist Karilyn Crockett, like Junot Diaz currently teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, visited our seminar meeting on Tuesday, July 1, 2014, and in doing so opened my eyes to the possibilities of ethnography inside and out of the classroom. Up until this point I was aware that as a group our Institute seminar's focus was community, but I was not entirely sure what was meant by the term "ethnography."

The American Heritage Dictionary provides the following:

community 1. A group of people living in the same locality and under the same government. 2. a. A group of people having common interests. b. A group viewed as forming a distinct segment of society.

ethnography 1. The branch of anthropology that deals with the description of specific human cultures, using methods such as close observation and interviews. 2. A text produced using such methods.

## 1.2 Descriptive Overview

"That things take longer than planned is a basic given in qualitative research" (Glesne 34).

This unit runs for approximately six weeks. In years past, students in Introduction to Film have critically viewed about one film per week; this unit decreases the pace of content covered while it increases the amount of time for and responsibility of students to engage with one another. The culminating activity of this unit requires students to conduct ethnographic studies of their own. Rather than simply record and analyze their findings, the goal is action research. After intense study of the "lines of division and solidarity," student generated ethnographies will create positive social change.

Students will be required to keep running logs and field journals, conduct interviews, and collect documents (both authentic and manufactured <sup>2</sup>). Ethnography is perfect fit for my course as it requires students to become more active, especially in terms of speaking, listening, and writing.

"Much of what we seek to find out in ethnography is knowledge that others already have" (Hymes). Although I attempt to avoid what Paulo Friere terms "the banking method" of education, it is sometimes difficult to shift the role of the teacher especially when the students themselves have limited experience with a particular type of text (e.g. black and white and foreign language films) and as a result look to the teacher as expert. Getting students to value their own ideas and the ideas of their peers is of utmost importance.

"Rather than studying people ethnography means learning from people" (Spradley). One area in which I have success is getting students to express their own ideas and interpretations of films through blogging; however, a blog should not exist in a vacuum, that very much defeats the purposes of not only creating a wider audience for one's ideas but a forum and a catalyst for ideas to grow in a communal setting.

This unit includes a wide variety of print and non-print texts that examine such central community issues as power, powerlessness, agency, and acquiescence. Among the resources suitable for use are: Lee's *Do The Right Thing* with its themes of race and gentrification in relationship to the lesser known dramatic works of August Wilson *Jitney* and *Two Trains Running*; Granik's *Winter's Bone* in comparison with readings from John Gaventa's studies of corporate mining towns in Appalachia, which will in turn act as a bridge to a study of John Sayles early masterwork *Matewan*, a dramatization of early labor organizing efforts.

## Section Two: General Guide

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### 2.1 Special Issues

*Winter's Bone* received an R rating from the MPAA (Motion Picture Society of America) for its portrayals of drug use and violence, more specifically violence against women. I do forewarn students when required texts do contain disturbing images. My film classes are only open to high school juniors and seniors; students participating in the course are given permission slips at the onset.

Students in my school usually study Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* in junior English after reading the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Some may argue that it is more appropriate for a college audience. Taking into consideration that most of my students have seen *Do the Right Thing* in the context of

the English classroom I opt for the softer Crooklyn (its vivid depictions of seventies Fort Greene, Brooklyn and the music on its soundtrack as documentary evidence of shared feelings and values).

Although not discussed at length within this unit of study, I recommend teaching Lee's biopic of Malcolm X in either February, Black History Month, or May (Malcolm X Day is May 15). Malcolm X received a PG-13 rating from the MPAA; it contains drug use, sexual references, and violence including actual footage of the Rodney King Beating from 1991.

## **2.2 Aims: Objectives and Goals**

Regardless of which texts students encounter (i.e. the more accessible Crooklyn or the more challenging Killer of Sheep) the objectives and goals of this unit remain the same. Although Introduction to Film Studies at MBA is an "elective," some students have had it plugged into their schedules without choice or consent. This has the potential to divide the classroom community. One of my goals is to have all students be stakeholders and observer-participant researchers.

One way in which I have attempted to build and strengthen community in the past is through the creation of a class blog. I have had occasion to question whether or not Google's Blogger application is the best way to go about this; however, a more lengthy discussion of social media and appropriate use may be found in section 3.1 Texts and Methods.

Students need to have a basic understanding of the following: the common good, community, neoliberalism, the social contract, philanthrocapitalism, and venture philanthropy. All of the works contained herein are distinctly American and explore communities that are marginalized.

Most communities discussed in seminar center on work, i.e. farmers and autoworkers; here struggles for power and capital revolve around the means of production. Having read Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith does it become increasingly clear that structural inequities are universal. The idea of "natural disaster" as pretext for social and economic experimentation is a salient one. It is difficult to avoid the parallels between crises real and manufactured and current trends in education especially with regards to "reform."

## **Section 2.3 A Model for Qualitative Research**

The Lay Study:

Who am I?

Although I am a fan-boy of existentialist cinema, ontology based on my predilection for muscle car films of the sixties and seventies may prove less than useful. Hence, I am a forty-one year old teacher of English, a father of two New Haven Public School students (K and 2). I am extending an invitation to all community members to participate in an action research ethnography.

This research study aims to increase understanding of how the Metropolitan Business Academy Inter-district Magnet High School functions as a community, identify its subgroups, and what may be done to maximize support across groups in service of "the common good."

I have been teaching for nine years, across two states, and two urban districts. I studied education at City College, CUNY (City University of New York), student taught in Washington Heights and in the Bronx. I spent my first year teaching at the soon to be defunct Choir Academy of Harlem (Madison Avenue between 126<sup>th</sup>

and 127<sup>th</sup> Streets) before relocating permanently to New Haven, Connecticut.

Since settling in the East Rock section of the city, I have taught in three schools (two of which might be more precisely classified as programs). My first teaching position in New Haven was at Wilbur Cross Annex High School (WCAHS), a satellite of one of two comprehensive high schools in the district that serviced truants and behaviorally challenging students. The program underwent structural changes as a result of its parent school's accreditation process; it merged with the Hillhouse Armory (housed in the New Haven Armory on Goffe Street in the Newhallville section).

This new program referred to as Gateway Learning Academy Downtown (GLAD) was located in the Prince Street School building in Church Street South (bordering "the Jungle" and the Hill) was managed by Alternative Opportunities LLC (Limited Liability Corporation), a private for-profit entity. There were approximately six New Haven Federation of Teachers (NHFT) members in employment; the rest of the staff was at-will employees, without collective bargaining rights and job protections.

Before the management contract was non-renewed and the program rebranded as New Horizons, currently located in the former Micro-society Magnet School site in the Hill/Long Wharf area, I applied for and accepted a position at Metropolitan Business Academy High School, then located at 495 Blake Street (proposed site of the Booker T. Washington Charter School). I taught at this Westville campus for one year before being moved to a swing-space on Leeder Hill Drive in Hamden, Connecticut for approximately eight months. We finally landed in our "permanent" home at 115 Water Street in April of 2010.

Why do I provide such detail?

I believe it is important to think about the MBA (Metropolitan Business Academy) community as one whose "reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing." Additionally, I have been an active member of the MBA community of seven of its eleven year history, it was founded in 2003.

According to Corrine Glesne "qualitative methods are generally supported by the interpretivist (also referred to as constructivist) paradigm... in which social realities are constructed by the participants." Glesne further posits that we have all been involved in a variety of "diligent searches without necessarily labeling the process research." This concept is further complicated when we add a modifier i.e. quantitative or qualitative that makes our searches seem all the more academic and abstract.

## **Section Three: Unit Description**

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### **3.1 Outline: Texts and Methods**

At the unit's center are three films that explore community from the perspective of strong female protagonists: Crooklyn, Beasts of the Southern Wild, and Winter's Bone. Although all three films deal with communities that are based largely on geography and proximity, socioeconomic pressures reinforce norms and shared values. Additionally, students will analyze themes across these texts noting similarities and differences in the cultures being depicted.

Students will be required to experiment with a variety of social media, many of which they will undoubtedly

have greater experience with than myself and many others within the teaching profession. In researching appropriate tools for classroom use I have encountered the website nhv.org. The site offers the following, "The truth about Facebook is that as a publicity platform, it is not quite reliable and can be unpredictable because of the selective algorithms that determine who sees what. The way that the content is curated can sometimes make it difficult to rely on, when you're trying to promote awareness of an event".<sup>3</sup>

Crowdsourcing as a means for collecting and promoting ethnographic material may be more effectively accomplished using other free web-based tools such as Twitter and Instagram, which somewhat ironically has been acquired by Facebook.

Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* from 1994 is the oldest of the three, a period piece centered on the struggles of a working class African American family in 1970s Brooklyn. This film may be for the lack of a better term "the odd man out." But why? Community is clearly at the heart of the narrative, so much so that the title is a riff on its location both geographically and culturally. Its urban locale has appeal and is easily identifiable for a good many of my students. The film takes some time to establish Troy as its protagonist as it establishes the neighborhood as a character in its own right. The opening credit sequence is an ethnography in and of itself with its vivid rendition of urban life in the streets.

Benh Zeitlin's Academy Award-nominated film from 2012 *The Beasts of the Southern Wild* is about a fictitious rural "freegan" society; although, the characters Hushpuppy and Wink are clearly not vegan, they and the other inhabitants of this bayou community referred to as "the Bathtub" are "people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources.... embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed."

Although bell hooks is scathingly critical of *Beasts* in her blog post "No Love in the Wild," I disagree with her assessment that it is poverty porn that simply perpetuates negative stereotypes based on gender and race. In viewing the film with students, many have raised the question, "Why?" Specifically, why would anyone choose to live like this? And, why are they (the inhabitants of the Bathtub) so resistant to the help (and control) of "civilized society"?

These are important points of contrast between the Hushpuppies and the Rees of the world. Ree, the protagonist of *Winter's Bone*, is not a member of a society with Utopian ideals. Her Ozark mountain community is plagued by poverty and hopelessness. Regardless of the situations these characters find themselves in there is a shared sense of belonging and of "home." At times in her film, Ree longs to break the cycle of poverty by joining the Army. There is a particularly poignant scene where she is interviewed by a recruiter, who in the end advises her that the greater challenge and her charge is to stay and put her house in order. This raises important questions about community and community building, as well as self-preservation versus the "common good."

What exactly are the implications of a community needing help from an outside institution or agency to keep the proverbial house in order? What supports should a teenage girl have? Should all teens be protected from neglect? If so, how and whose responsibility is it to provide for both the physical and emotional well-being of teens? Family members, both immediate and extended? What happens when care givers become ill, infirm, or are incarcerated? Then whose responsibility do teens and other dependents become?

The mother in *Crooklyn* is a teacher; however, that particular film takes place during summer vacation rendering the institution of school absent. Of the three films discussed at length *Beasts* is the only one that

portrays formal education as being both desirable and of value. Depictions of school in *Winter's Bone* are limited to shots of a life-skills class in which teens are taught how to care for infants and of student ROTC members marching through the halls with their drill rifles.

The police and other "outsiders," such as the "relief workers" in *Beasts*, are generally portrayed as antagonistic interlopers disruptive to the natural flow of the community. Police in *Crooklyn* are only seen taking Vic the Vietnam Veteran away in handcuffs after he intercedes in the dispute between Troy's family and the white neighbor Tony Eyes. Similarly to Troy's disapproval of this action is Ree's physical recoil when the sheriff shows up to interrogate her invalid mother as to the whereabouts of her crank cooking father. Within the Ozark community in *Winter's Bone* the dominant belief is that "talking just causes witnesses and he [Thump, the patriarch of the holler sic and presumed kingpin] don't want none of those."

### **3.2 Details: Sample Lesson Plans**

#### *3.2.1 Community in Spike Lee's Crooklyn and in Connecticut*

Opener:

Part One: Memory Writing- although not instantly apparent *Crooklyn* is a story told from a child's point of view, a bildungsroman of sorts <sup>4</sup>; therefore, a memory writing exercise is appropriate.

Students are required to list up to ten memorable incidents and encouraged to include their earliest clear memories. Once a list of events is generated, students place them in chronological order. Next, they are to add descriptions concentrating largely on sensory details. Finally, students construct an episodic narrative of the events. Although my experience as an English teacher often shapes the types of products I ask my students to construct, this being a film course begs the question of whether or not the written word is the most appropriate format. Rather than tying students to one type of output, students may use a variety of means to convey their narratives including audio files and Vines (Vine is a social media application that allows users to construct and share seven-second video clips that loop). Individual Vines may be connected and easily searched by using a single hashtag.

Part Two: Change with Me- this is both a community/team building exercise and a kinesthetic activity, a variation on musical chairs; however, it requires more mental activity on the part of participants and avoids "elimination."

Students form a circle with a "caller" in the center. The caller makes a "Change with me if..." statement. Students who answer in the affirmative must then change positions; the student unable to fill a vacant spot in turn takes over the role of caller. In *Intro to Film*, I often add categories to make this exercise more content specific. Here our focus is community, so rather than asking students to use a simply film related statement such as "Change with me if you laughed while watching *Twenty-two Jumpstreet*," I might start with a statement such as, "Change with me if you have a library card and have used it in the past thirty days."

Direct Instruction:

Storytelling, Traditional Linear Narrative Structure, Episodic Vignettes, Point of View

Workshops:

Critical Viewing #1: The Opening Credit Sequence

Before viewing I will remind students to think back to both the sensory details and types of events they described in their earlier memory writing exercise. In their research logs/field journals they are to record observations paying particular attention to setting. In these first few minutes how does filmmaker Spike Lee establish a sense of community?

Mapping: In small groups students create maps of their neighborhoods and larger communities using the opening credit sequence as a model. Students label areas of importance esp. meeting areas, recreation spots with and without specific purposes, institutions, homes of prominent community members etc. Maps may be hand-drawn, collages, or multi-media. Note: each group member should have either a hard copy or electronic access to a copy of the map for homework purposes.

#### Summary/Review

#### Homework:

Students conduct interviews with one or more community members using their small group-generated maps as a basis for inquiry. Student researchers introduce their maps to interviewees encouraging their subjects to comment on and add to these primary source documents. Interviews may confirm importance of institutions and community members as well as reflect change over time.

#### Materials and Resources

Spike Lee's Crooklyn DVD or as of the time of this publication available as rental or purchase via Amazon streaming. Netflix is DVD only.

Internet access and recording equipment (may include student owned smart phones and cameras) for construction of narratives and maps.

#### *3.2.2 Norms and Taboos in the Ozarks according to Winter's Bone and in Connecticut according to You*

#### Opener:

Norm, taboo, or both? In small groups students discuss the following scenarios especially as they relate to acceptability within defined groups and populations:

1. An individual cuts and pastes text without crediting an appropriate source.
2. Students discuss a work of literature while taking an English examination.
3. An individual informs someone in a position of authority about a wrongdoing by a peer.
4. A student uses an anonymous app to report bullying.
5. A student is recognized as being exceptional for conforming to previously established norms and expectations.
6. A small group of students are regularly disruptive to the learning and inquiry of the rest of the class; the disruptive students are obsessed by juvenilia and are regularly marking one another's written work with primitive representations of genitalia.



Direct Instruction:

Review of diegetic and non-diegetic sound

Tone and mood

Workshops:

Students working in small groups compare and contrast the opening scenes of Lee's *Crooklyn* and Granik's *Winter's Bone*. Although taboos and norms play a large part in both communities being represented, we must remember that one of our aims is to explore how shared socio-political realities transcend geographic proximity. Consider how both filmmakers establish a sense of place.

How do they use sound (diegetic and non-diegetic) and image to convey both place and community values?

Next, students are to review lists of significant events they compiled during their study of *Crooklyn*. After considering how both Lee and Granik use non-diegetic sound, music specifically, to convey tone, students create playlists that appropriately accompany their events.

Summary/Review

Homework:

Interview a community member. Have him or her create a short list of significant life events. Next, ask her to think of at least three songs that would act as an appropriate soundtrack. Research at least one song. In writing analyze why or why not it seems an appropriate choice.

Materials and Resources

Access to both Lee's *Crooklyn* and Granik's *Winter's Bone*

*3.2.3 Utopian Ideals and Community in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Here at Metropolitan Business Academy**

Opener:

Now that you have completed your viewing of Zeitlin's Academy Award-nominated film in small groups you are to consider whether the *Bathtub* fits your definition of a utopian community. What factors contribute to or detract from its status as such? Why might its inhabitants/community members embrace it?

Share.

Direct Instruction:

PechaKucha (see Section Four: Assessment for more detail)

Review of utopia and dystopia

Workshops:

Although students will be working in pairs to support the development of individual presentations, each and



every student will ultimately be required to present her slideshow. In addition to assembling twenty slides (each to run for twenty seconds), student presenters are to have a well-developed and rehearsed script. Even though this is film class, PechaKucha is meant to be an engaging public speaking exercise, not simply a short film presentation.

Students must include in their slides and scripts a clear relationship (may be either points of comparison and or contrast) between elements of one or more of the films covered in the unit and her chosen community (e.g. Metro at large, a club or subset of the school population, the student's own neighborhood etc.).

#### Summary/Review

#### Homework:

It is recommended that individual students spend no less than six hours preparing for their presentations. Preparation is to be documented through the writing of three one-page reflections: the selection of slides, script development, and the selection of primary and secondary source material (this includes film elements in support of your ideas).

#### Materials and Resources

DVD or streaming access to the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

LCD projector and Microsoft PowerPoint or similar slideshow presentation software

Copies of the Film Comment article "Louisiana Story"

## Section Four: Assessment

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Students are required to conduct conversations that demonstrate critical thinking skills with diverse partners. These conversations are both informal and formal; they include traditional interviews, both small group and whole class discussions, and the use of social media.

Students are required to keep research logs that demonstrate close observation, analysis of texts and "real world" application of principles taken from readings and critical viewings.

Whether or not students elect to conduct traditional ethnographies or action research, all participants are required to present their findings. Although students will create a number of documents and use social media along the way, the final presentation is based on "PechaKucha," which is taken from the Japanese term for "chit-chat." Traditional PechaKucha (I use the term "traditional" rather loosely as PechaKucha came into being in 2003 according to Wikipedia) as developed by Klein-Dytham Architecture of Tokyo calls for presenters to deliver a script in front of a slide-show lasting six minutes and forty seconds (twenty seconds per slide for twenty slides); however, elsewhere I have found that freshmen English instructors at University of Connecticut have adapted presentations to five slides progressing at sixty-second intervals. Regardless the number of slides and the interval length, the desired result is a fast-paced presentation that is "more than a slideshow, it thrives on new human connections created during each event. PechaKucha can start discussions and

relationships, so [students] don't be shy, show your work, make an impact." 5

## **Appendix I: Links to CT Core Standards and Metropolitan Business Academy Graduation Requirements**

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Upon completion of this unit students will have employed narrative and explanatory techniques in the service of larger projects of argumentation. These projects will take "compelling, controversial" stances on "universal and provocative issues" (Calkins 2012).

Students will use relevant and appropriate technology. Additionally students will engage in a variety of conversations with diverse partners and groups. These technologies and human interactions will be used to build focused research questions, and these primary and secondary sources will be analyzed in the service of creating ethnographic artifacts.

Students will create and participate in a communal setting that encourages inquiry, makes meaning, and expands understanding.

### **Notes:**

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1. During the 2013-2014 academic year students at MBA were engaged analyzing themes across texts that included the writings of Junot Diaz and the playwrights Tennessee Williams and August Wilson. Midway through the year in response to a Connecticut state law that forced public institutions of higher learning to cease offering non-credit bearing remedial courses, students were pulled from senior level English courses and placed in a course centered on short non-fiction passages and the writing of five-paragraph themes.
2. By "both real and manufactured" what I mean to say is that some documents will be authentic primary source documents while other times students will be required to create "false" artifacts that relate to the texts (i.e. films they are viewing critically).
3. "What Is Nhv.Org All About?" [Http://nhvorg.blogspot.com/2014/06/what-is-nhvorg-all-about.html](http://nhvorg.blogspot.com/2014/06/what-is-nhvorg-all-about.html).
4. The concept of bildungsroman or the traditional coming-of-age story does not in fact only apply to Lee's film Crooklyn but is also relevant in the study of both Granik's and Zeitlin's films included in the unit.
5. "Presenter Tips." PechaKucha New Haven.

## Works Cited and Reading List

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Arias, J., "Teaching Ethnography: Reading the World and Developing Student Agency," *The English Journal*, 97 (July, 2008), 92-97.

Cooper, Chris. *Matewan*. DVD. Directed by John Sayles. New York: October Films, 1987.

Foundas, Scott. "Louisiana Story | FilmComment." *Louisiana Story*. May-June 2012. Web. 24 July 2014.

Gaventa, John. *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Ostensibly an undergraduate sociology text, Gaventa's ethnography of Appalachian coal mining communities is a natural fit as companion-piece to Sayles' film. This text may also be used with Granik's *Winter's Bone* to help students understand the lack of opportunities in rural mountain communities that lead to Ree's predicament.

Glesne, Corrine, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. New York: Longman, 1999.

This somewhat obscure academic text is recommended for teachers wishing to facilitate student-led ethnography projects. It is rather dense although it runs less than two hundred pages. This text is particularly useful in its explanations of and methods for developing both research and interview questions.

*Killer of Sheep*, DVD. Directed by Charles Burnett. New York: Milestone Films, 1977.

This film was finally released thirty years after its completion due to the amount of money required to secure the music rights. It was shot on a budget of \$10,000 and was director Burnett's MFA thesis project at UCLA. The film may be considered challenging for some students as it is black and white and employs a non-traditional narrative structure devoid of plot arcs etc. Vividly depicts life in Watts during the 1970s. Parallels may be made to *The Jungle* as both include insight into the working conditions in the meatpacking industry.

Lawrence, Jennifer and John Hawkes. *Winter's Bone*. Directed by Deborah Granik. Roadshow Pictures, 2010.

Leimbacher, Irina, "The World Made Flesh: The Sensory Ethnography Lab: Toward a Post-Humanist Cinema," *Film Comment* 50 (March/April, 2014); 36-39.

Lindo, Delroy and Alfre Woodard. *Crooklyn*. DVD. Directed by Spike Lee. Los Angeles: Universal, 1994.

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Scheller, Melanie, "On the Meaning of Plumbing and Poverty."

Wallis, Quvenzahne and Dwight Henry. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Directed by Benh Zeitlin. Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight, 2012.

Washington, Denzel, and Angela Bassett. Malcolm X. DVD. Directed by Spike Lee. Los Angeles: Warner Brothers, 1992.

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