

## Annotated Topics List: American Studies

### I. Man and Machine after 1945 [1]

#### Primary [2]

"The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," Henry L. Stimson (1947)

Map of 1964-5 World's Fair, Robert Moses, et al. (c. 1962) \*\*

*The Rocket Thrower*, Donald De Lue (1963)

*Rocky IV*, dir. Sylvester Stallone (1985)

*Her*, dir. Spike Jonze (2014)

#### Secondary [3]

*Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May (1988)

"The White Man's Muscles" from *White*, Richard Dyer (1997)

"The Challenge of War Management" from *Railroads in the Civil War*, John E. Clark, Jr. (2001)

1. **Topic:** This list has a clear, specific time frame that invites questions about the historical relationship between man and machine after World War II: what prompted this relationship, and how has it evolved since then? This is also the only topic on the list that's strictly devoted to the late-20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.
2. **Primary sources:** The topic list has several different kinds of primary sources (an essay, map, statue, and two films), which allows for a variety of analytic approaches.
3. **Secondary sources:** The secondary sources from Richard Dyer and Elaine Tyler May call attention to how "man" in the title functions as a specifically gendered concept: how have ideas about masculinity changed in relation to technology?

\*\* Many of the images included on the topics list appear in an appendix (included at the end of this packet). This allows examiners to look at less common/readily accessible sources, and also provides an opportunity to perform formal analysis of visual images during the exam.

## II. The Public and Private in American Identity [1]

### Primary [2]

*Behind the Scenes*, Elizabeth Keckley (1868)

*The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane (1895)

"A Plea for Straight Photography," Sadakichi Hartmann (1904)

*American Psycho*, dir. Mary Harron (2000)

### Secondary [3]

"Looking at One's Self Through the Eyes of Others': W.E.B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition," Shawn Michelle Smith (2000)

"Michael Jordan's Family Values" from *From Jack Johnson to LeBron James: Sports, Media, and the Color Line*, Mary G. McDonald (2016)

1. **Topic:** This topic includes texts from after the Civil War from a variety of perspectives, considering who has access to the public and the private. While *American Psycho* and the secondary source on Michael Jordan are temporal outliers from the other sources, their inclusion raises questions about how the concept of public and private has changed over time.
2. **Primary sources:** The presence of texts that speak to race, gender, and class illustrates the many different ways "American identity" might be defined.
3. **Secondary sources:** The essay on Du Bois's photography in 1900 sets up a natural, if indirect, pairing with Hartmann's essay from 1904.

### III. Deification and Commodification of the Black Female Body, 1885-2016 [1]

#### Primary [2]

Stanza 7 from "I Sing the Body Electric" from *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman (1885)

*Cotton Pickers*, John Biggers (1947)

*Voyage of the Sable Venus*, Robin Coste Lewis (2015)

"YEEZY Season 3 Performance Rules," Kanye West (2016)

#### Secondary [3]

"An Object in the Midst of Other Objects" from *Things of Darkness*, Kim Hall (1995)

"Shafted Victory," Tyrone Simpson (1999)

1. **Topic:** This topic's title raises many potential lines of questioning. It calls explicit attention to race and gender, and gives two key terms—"deification" and "commodification"—to be unpacked during the exam. By naming its temporal span, the topic also invites questions about how representations of the black female body have changed over time.
2. **Primary sources:** The primary materials cover a wide range of media, voices, and forms; the inclusion of poems from both Whitman and Lewis highlight different perspectives in the same media, while artwork like *Cotton Pickers* provides an opportunity for visual analysis. The list of performance rules by Kanye West is an unexpected and interesting addition.
3. **Secondary sources:** The inclusion of Tyrone Simpson's essay on *Shaft*—about the black male body—provides a way of thinking about how masculinity and femininity interact more specifically.

#### IV. Houses: The Domestic & Political [1]

##### Primary [2]

First Constitution of Kentucky (1792)

North Carolina Constitution of 1776, Amendment of 1856, Art. 1, Sec. 3 (1856)

"A House Divided," Abraham Lincoln (1858)

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (1861)

##### Secondary [3]

"The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut" from *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1958)

"The Case for Reparations," Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014)

1. **Topic:** This list is made up of texts that provide the opportunity to discuss pre-1865 American history and literature, and, like Topic I, offers an example of a list with a narrow time frame. By announcing the house as both a "domestic and political" category, the title also suggests questions about the relationship between the physical and the symbolic.
2. **Primary sources:** The inclusion of legal documents and Lincoln's speech creates opportunities to conduct both historical and rhetorical analysis.
3. **Secondary sources:** These secondary sources are not in direct conversation with any of the primary sources, and instead suggest the underlying interests of the topic in physical space and property ownership as a political tool. The Bachelard piece offers a more theoretical perspective to consider what the house is. As a secondary source, the Coates essay (which also could have been included as a primary source for thinking about the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries) provides an alternative historical lens for understanding the relationship between race and property.

## V. American Water [1]

### Primary [2]

*The Slave Ship*, J.M.W. Turner (1840)

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain (1885)

"Columbia's Easter Bonnet," Louis Dalrymple (1901)

"Gerontion," "Marina" from *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, T.S. Eliot (1920, 1927)

*A Contract with God*, Will Eisner (1978)

### Secondary [2]

"Mud, Blood, and the Blues: Hurricane Katrina and the Floodwaters of the African Diaspora"  
from *Water and African American Memory*, Anissa Janine Wardi (2011)

*On Elizabeth Bishop*, Colm Toibin (2015)

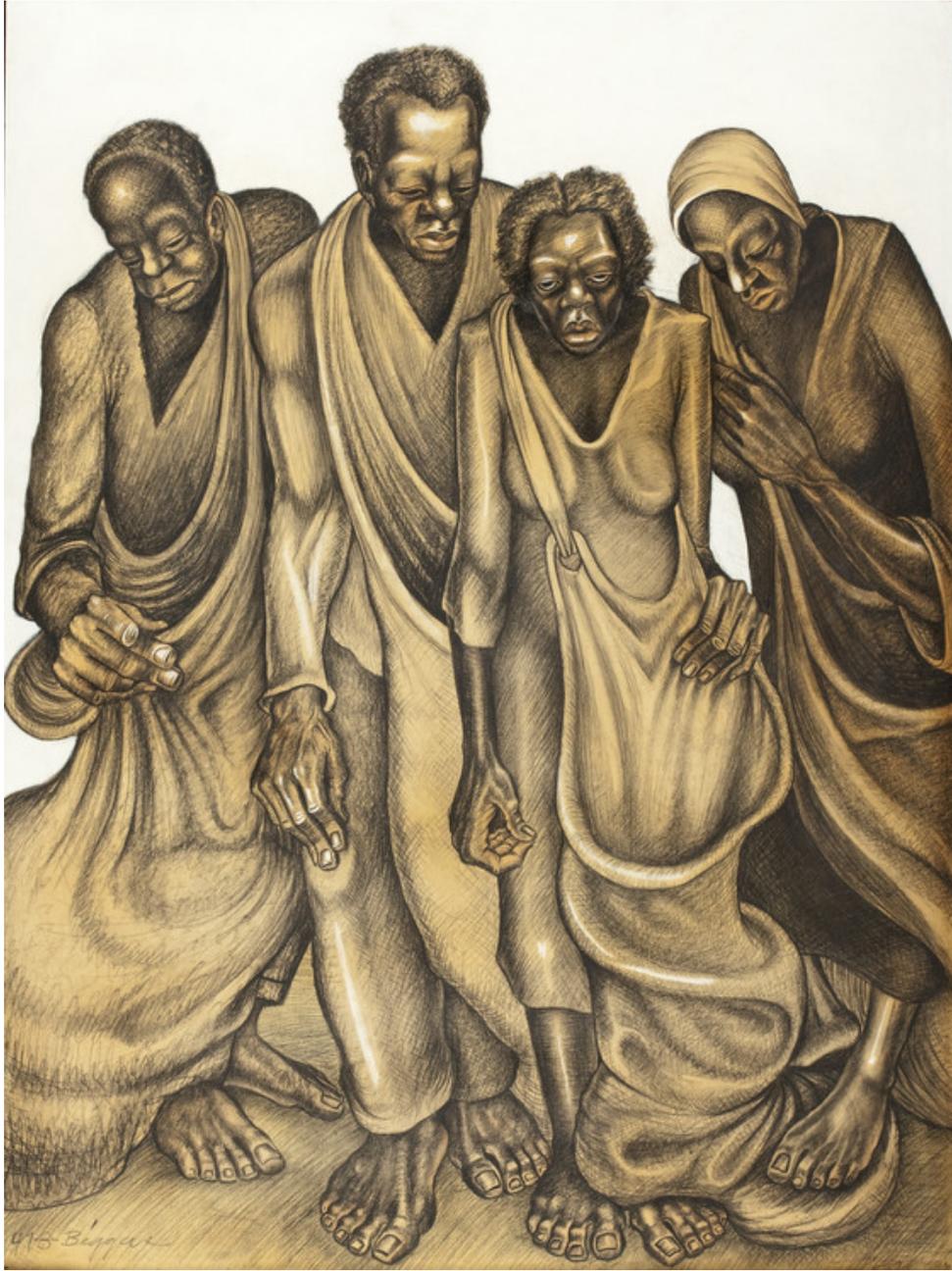
1. **Topic:** This list has a capacious, abstract title, which invites questions about what "American Water" means. It suggests a broad connecting theme that allows for the inclusion of many different texts from many different time periods.
2. **Primary sources:** The variety of texts included prompts many different kinds of analysis, especially in thinking about how the category of "water" can be represented in different forms, including a painting, novel, political cartoon, poetry, and a graphic novel.
3. **Secondary sources:** The inclusion of a work of literary criticism is a somewhat surprising choice, considering Bishop's own writing does not appear on this list. It generates a natural question about how the conception of water within Toibin's reading of Bishop might map onto another poet like Eliot.

# Appendix: Images

Map of 1964-5 World's Fair. Robert Moses, et al. (c. 1962)



"Cotton Pickers." John Biggers. (1947)



The Slave Ship. J.M.W. Turner. (1840)



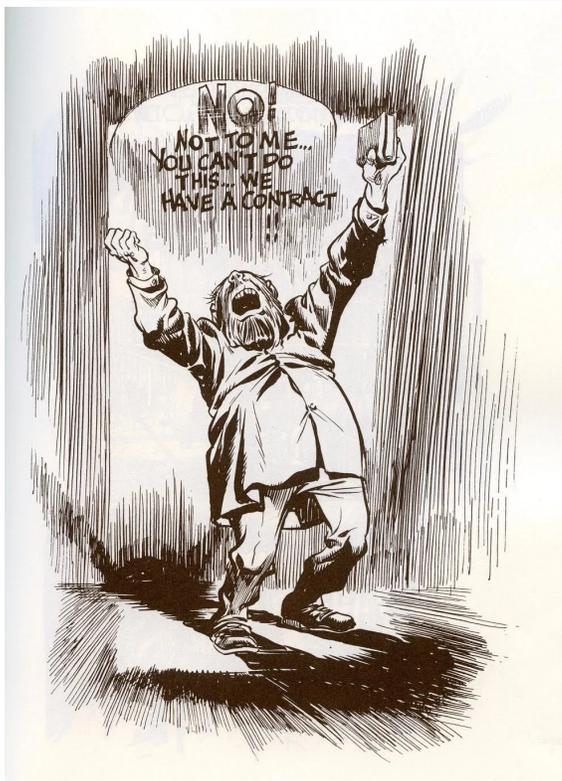
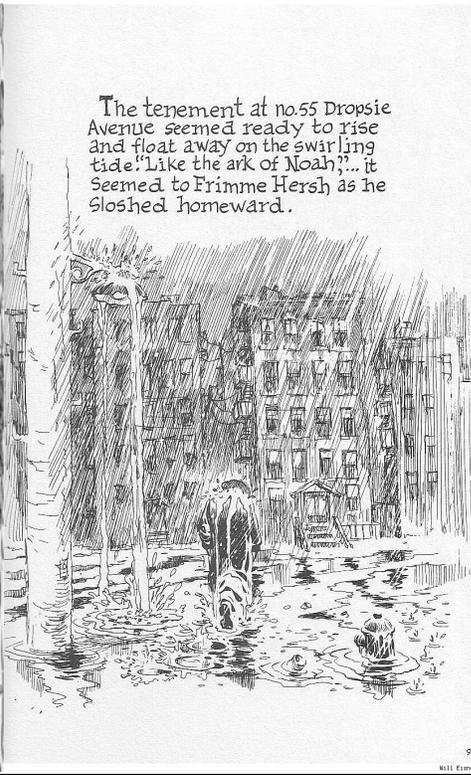
Columbia's Easter Bonnet. Louis Dalrymple. (1901)



*A Contract With God.* Will Eisner. (1978)



The tenement at no.55 Dropsie Avenue seemed ready to rise and float away on the swirling tide. Like the ark of Noah, it seemed to Frimme Hersh as he sloshed homeward.



At the exact moment of Hersh's last earthly breath... a mighty bolt of lightning struck the city... Not a drop of rain fell... Only an angry wind swirled about the tenements.

