

Southern History

Before the war, they were happy, he said,
quoting our textbook. (This was senior-year

history class.) *The slaves were clothed, fed,
and better off under a master's care.*

I watched the words blur on the page. No one
raised a hand, disagreed. Not even me.

It was late; we still had Reconstruction
to cover before the test, and—luckily—

three hours of watching *Gone with the Wind*.

History, the teacher said, *of the old South—* 10

a true account of how things were back then.

On screen a slave stood big as life: big mouth,

bucked eyes, our textbook's grinning proof—a lie
my teacher guarded. Silent, so did I.

—NATASHA TRETHEWEY (B. 1966)

QUESTIONS

1. Is the history teacher African American? Is he presenting his own attitudes or those he is expected to teach? If the speaker can detect a lie in the lesson, can the teacher?
2. Why do none of the students disagree with the lesson? How does the speaker feel about herself? How does she feel about the teacher?