Final Paper Assignment

I would describe our course as an examination of two historical eras (roughly, the eras of decolonization and globalization) in which we have tried to understand the shifting relationship between cultural forms (as well as the very notion of culture itself) and a series of political collectivities that include the “third world,” pan-Africanism or negritude, the nation, social movements (both national liberation and alter-globalization movements), and more. These issues, then, will form the conceptual axes of your final papers. Within these parameters, this final assignment affords you the opportunity to develop a research project in the area of the course that most interests you.

This project asks you to make connections, to think carefully about the process of reading texts comparatively. In addition to blending original research with an analysis of course readings, you should look for provocative ways of putting texts into conversation with one another. Your paper should focus on two texts, though other texts will be brought in to round out your analysis. At least one of those texts ought to be a literary text, or a theoretical text that explicitly addresses questions of culture (and your paper, too, should explicitly address the issue of culture).

That means, for example, you could examine one text from the era of decolonization, and a second from the era of globalization in order to chart historical continuities or shifts. You could examine two texts from the same era in order to look for divergences or elaborations. You could look at two novels. You could use a theoretical text to help you read a novel. You could read a novel as a theoretical text. You could compare one or more documents of a national liberation movement to those of an alter-globalization movement and discuss their various understandings of culture or national culture. You could examine the relationship between aesthetic form and political consequence. You could analyze the ways in which two texts might be understood to both constitute and be constituted by an imagined community (the nation, a movement, etc.) The possibilities are many and I want to give you the freedom to develop your own topics within these general guidelines.

You should feel free, if it makes conceptual sense, to build upon the short research assignments that you have done thus far or that you will be doing over the next few weeks.

Logistics:

- 8-10 pages double-spaced (2000-2500 words)
- Minimum of five sources, at least two of which need to be independent research (i.e. not texts we read in class) and at least two of which need to be class texts.
- Topic proposals are due 11/30. This will involve a one-page description of the project including the texts you will be analyzing and your thesis.
- Final drafts due at my office by noon on December 16
Tips:

• Develop a strong, coherent thesis in which you stake out a position of your own about the topic you have chosen. English, as a discipline, values complexity and nuance on the one hand, and well supported arguments on the other. Hence, it will be important for you to identify a thesis that goes beyond simplistic comparisons or broad generalizations; rather, look for the ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities that make these topics so rich and multifaceted. Look, then, for a provocative connection that links the texts together. Try to go beyond what we have discussed in class and develop an innovative framework on which to structure your essay. Defining a strong thesis will be essential.

• Once you have identified a strong thesis, you will need to support your claims with evidence, both from the primary literary texts and from any outside sources you select. That means quoting and analyzing key passages as well as summarizing/paraphrasing important ideas. Be sure to interpret and analyze these materials—do not assume that a quotation speaks for itself. It is your job to tell your readers how you understand a particular passage, why it is important, and how it is relevant to your larger claims. Avoid plot summary and simply pointing out or listing examples, and focus instead on developing arguments about the implications of the evidence you include.

• Look for complexities rather than simple answers. In other words, things are rarely cut and dry in these sophisticated texts. They probably do not simply suggest that nationalism is good or bad, that culture is more or less important than nationalism. Look for contradictions and complexities in the texts and develop an analysis that is sophisticated enough to handle these complexities. And rather than simply pointing out these complexities, analyze them. Discuss the broader implications of why it is important to read these texts in the manner that you are reading them? What does it tell us about both the texts and the conceptual issue you are discussing?

• I encourage you to draw upon the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that we have developed in the course. For example, the work of Pletsch on three worlds, Anderson on nationalism, Sassen on globalization, Wright, Fanon, Senghor, Césaire, and Klein on culture and resistance, and others can all provide useful launching points and useful frameworks for your investigation. But, as we have seen throughout the semester, the process of reading texts comparatively demands that we break down firm and fast distinctions between, for instance, theory and literature. You should, therefore, feel free to make the case that one of the novels offers a theoretical framework, or conversely, that one of the theoretical essays should be read as a cultural product of sorts (the hybrid form of the texts from Césaire and Marcos in particular lend themselves to this sort of analysis). In any case, one doesn't simply use theory and read culture. Rather I am suggesting that you draw upon the theoretical frameworks that we have discussed, but that you read, interpret, analyze, and critique all of the texts that you work with in the paper.

• As you work on this paper I strongly recommend that you make use of two resources that are available to you. First, I suggest that you make an appointment (or possibly more than one) with the Writing Center. They have trained tutors who can help you with a paper at any point during the writing process. Secondly, my door is always open (at least during my office hours or if you make an appointment—HUM 340). Please come by and see me with drafts, with outlines, with ideas, etc. I will be more than happy to discuss the paper with you and to help you define and develop an argument. If you need to set up an appointment with me, send me an e-mail (bret@albany.edu).