

**English and Cultural Studies 3QQ3  
Cultural Studies and Critical Theory 3QQ3**



Fernando Botero, *Abu Ghraib* (2007)

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**Remarks on the English & Cultural Studies 3QQ3 Midterm Examination**

Dr. Kay and I very much looked forward to having the opportunity to consider your midterm answers, in large part because the exam provides us with a snap-shot of where each of you finds yourself in the course, and, in a more general way, where the class as a whole is at this particular juncture. The exam is an important part of the learning experience of the course, and thus an occasion for you to consider how closely and carefully you are wrestling with the course materials (the lectures, the assigned texts, and the Study Questions and Course Blog). Beyond the quite specific question you were asked to discuss, the exam forms an occasion to ask broader questions about where you are in the course and how you are taking up the materials: Are you thinking about the larger questions and themes knitting the course together? Are you taking detailed lecture notes and linking those notes to details in the assigned texts? Are you attending all classes? Are you reading the assigned materials before class? Are you bringing the assigned texts to class? Are you taking advantage of the regular office hours offered by Dr. Kay to help you with particular questions related to the course? Are you using the SQCB to help you focus on the course materials?

Many students did quite well on the exam, while some students ran into difficulty. No difficulty struck us as insurmountable, certainly not without some focus and hard work, including, in some cases, work on your study habits, i.e., how you go about taking this particular course. Dr. Kay has put together a memorandum helping students in the course consider some of the most common problems characterizing the midterm exam answers. I urge everyone to take a good look at that memorandum. Dr. Kay's remarks are reproduced below.

Dr. Kay will be holding regular office hours if you would like to discuss your midterm. Before meeting with her, though, please ensure that you do the following things:

1. Carefully consider the detailed marking commentary that Dr. Kay has provided on your exams and posted on Avenue. Contemplate and then work with the problems to which she points, the questions she raises, and the suggestions that she makes. Connect your exam answer to the questions and problems that she helpfully raises in her remarks.
2. Review the examination question. Looking back, did you understand and answer the question? Did you take up the advice given in the exam question on how to write a persuasive and detailed answer? Where do your strengths in the exam answer lie? What are the areas where you can improve? For example, do you have a good handle on the course materials but find it hard to organize a strong answer to the exam question? Did you find that you weren't able to budget your time well, perhaps spending too much time discussing one theorist's work rather than another or too much time thinking about how to answer the question rather than actually answering the question? Perhaps you found yourself unprepared for the examination; for example, attending lectures but not taking detailed enough notes, or attending lectures but not reading the assigned material as closely as the lectures and Study Questions are inviting you to do? Answering these queries in the frankest way possible is the first step towards doing the sort of work that Dr. Kay and I are confident that you can do in this course.
3. Return to the work of the thinkers about whom you wrote, making sure to re-familiarize yourself with their claims, arguments, illustrations, examples, and worries. Connect those details to the exam question, your answer, and Dr. Kay's marking commentary.
4. Return to the Midterm Study Tips posted on the 3QQ3 Coursepage, asking yourself whether or to what degree you employed those suggestions in writing your exam answer.

I look forward to seeing you in class, where we can continue to think together!

Dr. David L. Clark

### **3QQ3 Midterm Exam: Common Difficulties**

Many of you did well on the exam. You're willing to be challenged by the lecture materials, receptive to the "otherness" of provocative and sometimes uncomfortable ideas. The ideas we're grappling with are difficult strangers, some more difficult than others and the challenge is to attend to what these ideas offer, while at the same time honouring their difficulty and maybe, to some degree, their unknowability. As Avital Ronnel tells us, as soon as we feel like we know the stranger, "we're ready to kill them" (49). Here are my impressions and suggestions.

1. **“Accept” and “Duty”:** Many of your essays contain one or both of these words. Essays conclude with the importance of “accepting” the differences of others, or “acknowledging” the common humanity of all. These statements are, in themselves, absolutely reasonable. To fail to “accept” is to be intolerant. Acceptance is a kind of commonplace, a short-form for “do not discriminate or judge,” “be open-minded.” Surely, to do justice there must be some kind of accepting going on. But what does it mean to accept? Is this really what these thinkers are suggesting? Does simply accepting others “do” justice to them? It seems to me that there’s very little “doing” with acceptance and I wonder now whether the word itself is a kind of abrogation of responsibility or justice. It’s too smooth a word, too easy. It lays back. (If you’re fans of *Sons of Anarchy*, you might think about Chucky, the chronic masturbator and his constant reply to insult: “I accept that.”) Differences and “otherness” are actually really difficult to work through and with. Does Butler ask us to “accept” the detainees in Guantanamo? That seems both less and more than she asks. In effect, what I wondered was whether using “accept and acknowledge” is a way of saying, “I know this (strange) idea.” Does “accept and acknowledge” simplify challenging and difficult ideas to the point that it defuses them, makes them un-difficult.

“Duty” is a little different in that I don’t think it substitutes for a more difficult idea, but it’s still a substitution which has implications for meaning. Avital Ronnel uses the word duty, but other thinkers speak in terms of obligation, responsibility, justice. Duty is an interesting word because it carries connotations of social or organizational expectation; your duty as daughter, your Christian duty, military duty. Why choose the word duty? Does it adequately recognize the subject’s relation to the other?

With these observations about accept and duty comes a more general suggestion. Words are important; choose them well.

2. **Contrast and Compare:** The purpose of a comparison is to illuminate particular aspects of the works you are comparing. (We know things not only by seeing what they are, but by seeing what they are not, as Derrida reminds us.) Try to show differences and similarities between theorists pertinent to the question. For example, Appiah acknowledges that we are “partial” in our sense of responsibility to others. How is this similar to/different than Singer’s view? Nussbaum’s theory of justice is built on the idea that the sentient being deserves a flourishing life. How is this different from/similar to Butler’s idea of justice which insists on the vulnerability of the human?
3. **Explain what you mean:** The challenge of writing a theory essay is to grapple with both the stakes of theorists’ arguments, and with the details of their arguments. The first step is identifying, as many of you did very well, the basic tenets or key points. But what comes after that is really the meat of the matter. And, to do this, you need to read, and read carefully, consciously. Ask questions of the text. What does it mean that the guest is the host of the host? Think about it: What does this wordplay accomplish for Derrida? How does it work to unsettle our ideas of hospitality and/or of “stranger”? Why is this argument important to justice? Keep asking yourselves these questions until you think you’ve got it as clear and as detailed as you can get it. The most important question of all is “What does it mean?”
4. **Connect your reading to the question:** This is a simple thing, but really hard to do in the heat of the exam moment, I know. But rather than saying everything there is to say about a particular theorist, hone in on the pertinent pieces. Figure out why they’re pertinent. And don’t try to do it all.

Thank you for sharing your thinking with me. I've enjoyed the conversation. Below is a description of grades.

### **Description of Grades**

D range: Essay is off-target. Doesn't respond to question or misreads/misrepresents the texts.

C-: Essay contains an error in reading or interpretation, but basically responds to question and identifies core ideas of each philosopher.

C to C+: Essay correctly, superficially recognizes core ideas of each philosopher, draws on lecture material, basically responds to question but contains little or no use of textual material and does not compare/contrast in a meaningful way.

B-: Essay correctly, if somewhat superficially, summarizes core ideas of each philosopher, draws on lecture material, basically responds to question. It contains little use of textual material to elaborate/explain (maybe one example from film, but no explanation or elaboration of that example). Might offer nominal comparison.

B to B+: Essay responds to question and makes use of textual material to provide clear and adequate explanation of each thinker. In the B+ range, it makes detailed use of text and explains relevance of examples. In the B+ range it does some meaningful comparison.

A- to A+: Essay responds directly to question and draws relevant, detailed material from the texts to provide illuminating comparison. In the A to A+ range, students recognize that 'others' may be non-human, and manage to pull all 3 writers into meaningful, illuminating comparison.