Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represent competing and sometimes overlapping visions of what “black literature” can and should be, as these ideas were being played out in fiction at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, around the mid-twentieth century. As Ellison puts it, referring to the influence of *Native Son* on his own work, “all novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to an extent, criticisms each of the other.” Our class discussions of *Invisible Man* repeatedly invoked the idea that Ellison conceived of his novel in part as a “response” to his former mentor Wright’s earlier protest novel, and in light of Wright’s acerbic review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we could view his own strident protest fiction as an implicit reaction against the kind of personal/individualistic narrative Hurston wrote, which he dismissed as a form of minstrelsy. These novels, “in conversation” with one another, reflect formative and ongoing debates about the aesthetics and politics of a distinctively African American literary tradition—“an argument over the nature of reality” and the representation of that reality in fiction.

For your Research Paper, you will engage in some specific aspect of that larger debate by considering two of these novels in conversation with one another. You will need to figure out a distinct and narrow focus for your analysis of the novels, some particular area where their concerns intersect, overlap, or contrast, and your discussion will be shaped by this framework. Your analysis will be bolstered by research into academic literary criticism—the essay will reflect you, as a literary critic, in conversation with other readers of the novels in addition to viewing the novels in conversation with each other. Your research might reveal information that could be useful in your discussion, but your primary aim is to engage with other critics’ analyses of the fiction and the ideas about black literature it represents.

You should seek out works of academic literary criticism on these authors and their works—articles in scholarly journals or collected in anthologies, or chapters in book-length studies of the authors. All three of these novels have been written about extensively, and are often discussed together. You should find a wealth of material from which to choose; the challenge will be to find stuff that is directly relevant to your purposes in this essay. There is a Class Projects page for this assignment on the Uni High Library website, which can serve as a portal through which to search for relevant sources on the various databases for academic literary criticism. You are also free (and encouraged) to make use of the secondary material we’ve read from Ellison, Baldwin, Howe, and Wright on protest fiction and black aesthetics, and the documentaries we’ve watched on Ellison and Hurston could also be cited as valid secondary sources. In addition to the two novels you’ve chosen to focus on, you should cite at least four (4) secondary sources in your essay. (Four is a minimum requirement; you’ll likely find and want to use more.) Cite all sources using MLA citation style, and list them (in alphabetical order) in a Works Cited list.

You’ve already written short essays on Wright and Ellison, and you are encouraged to make use of these in the development of this project. And, of course, the blogs from both sections contain a number of excellent, focused discussions of all three novels, which you can peruse for inspiration.
and insight. Your first task is to decide which two novels you want to focus on and come up with a compelling and fruitful angle from which to discuss them—a productive and interesting frame for your discussion. You will ultimately produce a narrowly focused, specific thesis that sets out your conclusions about how these novels interact. As always, you must cite textual evidence from the novels throughout, to document, illustrate, and bolster your interpretive claims.

You should commit to a topic and articulate your plans in as much detail as possible in a one- or two-paragraph Proposal, which is due via email (mtmitch@illinois.edu) by 4:00 p.m. on Thursday, November 10. A complete draft of your Research Paper is due in class Thursday, December 1, for a peer-edit session. The final draft (6-8 pages, with at least 4 secondary sources listed in an MLA-style Works Cited page) is due Monday, December 5, in class. (Because this deadline is so late in the semester, which gives you nearly a full month between the proposal and the final draft, I will be unable to grant any extensions—so please pace your research and composition accordingly.) Please turn in the peer-edited draft with the final draft on December 5.