

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Power Relations and Experiential Education: Facilitating *Conscientization* in the Humanities

by Daniel Hengel



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“Theory is cool, but theory without practice ain’t shit.”

—Fred Hampton

My name is Daniel Hengel. I teach—and study—what I affectionately term, “Twentieth and Twenty-First Century English Language Literatures of Resistance” and First-year Writing in the City University of New York system, the most socioeconomically and culturally diverse student population in the United States. 80% of CUNY students identify as a person of color, 58% as female, over 50% of CUNY students face housing or food insecurity, and 39% of our undergrads are second language learners. CUNY students speak a total 174 different languages.¹ Our student body differs substantially in terms of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, gender, age, religion, academic preparedness, and English-language fluency. Our students are a kaleidoscope of too frequently disenfranchised social bodies striving for better lives in a culture whose institutions too readily reproduce the conditions of their marginalization. I have had the privilege to teach in classrooms so full of difference since fall 2013.

Early each semester my students and I discuss the many privileges attached to my subject position and social body. As an able-bodied, straight, cisgendered, white male from a comfortably “middle-class” family in “Upstate” New York, few benefit from more unearned advantages than I do. This careful conversation is vital to my teaching. It lets my students know that I am aware of my own privilege and positionality relative to the works I assign. Many of the texts we read and write about in my classes speak to my students in a language that I can empathize with but never completely understand. My students are familiar with “the quotidian struggles against dehumanization” recalled by Rankine’s narrator in *Citizen* in ways that I can never be (24). Having a candid discussion about “the professor’s privilege” also lets my students know that my classes are a safe space to have difficult conversations. I want them to speak and write as openly and honestly as they can about the texts we study—many of which candidly relate and confront systems of oppression and marginalization.

For me, and many, many others, education is our society’s most readily accessible engine of equality and its most important generator of critical citizenship. Like Henry A. Giroux, I believe “teachers at all levels of schooling represent a potentially powerful force for social change” (28). Even as schools and educators work to “perpetuate . . . dominant ways of knowing” they provide the space for *conscientization* (Breunig 112). Indeed, I believe supporting the growth of our students’ critical consciousness, by facilitating critical dialogues and encouraging students to recognize and challenge the techniques of power and oppression moving through the body politic, may be the most important responsibility we have as educators. That we, in some small way, can not only “prepare people for future work” but offer our students a “vision . . . of a more socially just world” that they help to create (Breunig 112).

Unfortunately, the current neo-liberalization of higher education, all too often, stymies collegiate efforts to help students become “aware . . . and capable of revealing their

active reality, knowing it and understanding what they know” in order to reject “the internaliz[ation] of their oppression” and to challenge and transform the lives and social spaces (Freire *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* 171). Continuing a trend in higher education that surfaced in the 1980s with the rise of Regan and New Conservatism, twenty-first century university studies—yes, even in the “Humanities”—have too frequently sacrificed *conscientization* for “vocationalism in higher education” (Kolb 6). The turn toward a skills-based, job-training, pay-for-play higher educational system in the United States is far too complex and outside the purview of this article to discuss here. Suffice to say, it exists and it effects all of us—after all, how many times have we seen English departments attempt to entice students with flyers reading, “Careers for English Majors.” Instead, in this article I would like to discuss the value of experiential education in the Humanities as a way to foster *conscientization* in the classroom. I begin by briefly advocating for experiential education in the classroom before detailing one way I employ experiential learning in my courses through a semester-long, multi-modal, digital project I call, “Power Relations: The New York City Experience.”²

Why Praxis-Oriented Experiential Education

Done right, I believe experiential learning can be a democratizing force in the classroom that blurs the line between theory and practice, encourages self-directed student-centered learning, and helps create a safe discourse climate that challenges students to think critically about their positions in the world around them (Eyler 28; Rainey and Kolb 130). My employ of experiential learning aligns with the tenets of critical pedagogy and Freire’s understanding of the important role praxis—“the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it”—plays in the liberation of the oppressed (Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 79). Critical pedagogy and experiential education—as praxis—are part and parcel of liberatory systems of education that can foster “critical thinking and promote practices that have the potential to transform oppressive institutions or social relations” (Breunig 109). Praxis-oriented experiential education reminds students and teachers that the “world and human beings do not exist apart from each other, [we] exist in constant interaction”; that knowledge does not exist in a vacuum apart from its application; that there is more to learning in college than filling a blue-book at the end of the term (Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 50).

Experiential education’s movement between the real world and the classroom is vital to critical pedagogy and Freire’s understanding of praxis as a *conscientizado* building practice. Unfortunately, in the Humanities, we too often ignore the liberatory and epistemological potential experiential learning can have in our classrooms and the new depths of knowledge and understanding experiential learning can bring to our students’ understanding of the histories, texts, cultures, and arts we share with them. By giving students the opportunity to, in some way, experience the content we teach, we provide the space to free the text

from our own readerly biases and the (meta)physical confines of the classroom into new fields of meaningful discovery.

Power Relations: The New York City Experience does not place a limit on my students' form of expression as they reflect on and share their experience with the class. Yes, it still asks students to reflect on their experience. The critically-reflective post is, perhaps, the most important element of Power Relations. Reflection is key to praxis. As Lewis and Williams note in "Experiential Learning: Past and Present," (1994), "through critical reflection people become aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way they see themselves and the way they structure their lives" (7). For Freire, reflection leads students "from a purely naive knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the *causes of reality*" and to then act on and transform that reality (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 131). Power Relations provides students with the opportunity to reflect in whatever voice, medium, and style they choose when they draft their posts. My prompt states,

The Post: There's but one true rule governing your post. Your post must include text and some sort of non-textual medium. Oh, and there should be a title of some sort, something epic.

- The text you write can be: a journal entry recalling your observance of the machinations of power and its relationship to a text or construct attended to in our class, a short story about your experience, a score, a series of captions to a video you shot, a newspaper-styled article reporting on your event, an analysis of a cultural phenomenon you observed, a poem, a short feature exposing an agent of oppression, a description of the unreality of the dissonance you reckoned with as the prism of power became visible, an anything that is written. There is no minimum word count—different forms of expression ask different utterances from us—but there is a maximum word count! Please, write no more than 600 words. You don't have to write and write and write. Choose your voice! This assignment is not meant to stress you out and burden you in an endless cycle of production. Try to have fun.
- Your non-textual medium can be anything that's not written words, seriously anything. Be creative. You can: paint a painting, paste a collage, play a song, perform a poem, act out a scene you wrote, sketch a comic, parkour, design a graphic, build a GIF, link to a series of related images or sounds, edit a video montage, do a YouTube thing, draw a picture, or dance a dance. Did I mention you can do anything you want to do?

All too often, in higher-education, we limit—perhaps even scorn—our students' creativity and divergent forms of expression. The lack of creativity in the college classroom

stands in stark contrast to the liberatory practices critical pedagogy encourages us to adopt. One of Freire's biggest criticisms of the "banking concept" in education is its capability "to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity[, which] serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 73). The conventions of academic writing can be stifling, especially to a student body full of wildly different linguistic backgrounds and fluencies. Often in our scholarly work we celebrate authors like Rich and Lorde and Anzaldúa—who protest the marginalization of underrepresented voices and champion ulterior modes of expression—but discourage our students from writing outside the boundaries of academicese. Yet, as Macedo argues, "this sequestration of language denies people the possibility to understand the dialectical relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed . . . language is not only a site of contestation; it is also an indispensable tool for a critical reflexive demystification process that is central to *conscientization*" (18). Giving students the opportunity to express themselves freely and creatively in an analytical exercise encourages students to think more liberally, imaginatively, and enthusiastically about their experience, which often extends to their engagement with the theoretical space and content of the entire course. Furthermore, the addition of a non-textual medium has dramatically increased the degree of analysis and consideration my students have brought to their studies. It also provides students who are not text-based learners with an opportunity to articulate their ideas outside of the limitations of writerly practices. Though most students tend to pair pictures with journal-like reflections of their experiences unveiling power relations in the real world, I have had dozens of students produce a wide array of creative projects including poems, paintings, drawings, music, short stories, creative non-fiction, video-montages, and, on one memorable occasion, a sculpture made of found art while visiting family in Guatemala.

The dialogue generated in the "response and response to a response" elements of Power Relations further grounds this project in critical pedagogical practice. Praxis-oriented experiential education works best when it creates a space for dialogue between peers. As Kolb and Rainy note, "dialogue is key to human emancipation of the oppressed" (138). The idea is to provide the time and space for students to self-generate their critical consciousnesses outside the purview of the classroom and the immediate presence of the educator. Though I read each post, response, and response to a response, I do not participate in the student dialogue until everyone has had the opportunity to engage in the conversation.³ I want this dialogical space to exist free of my opinions. My students do not write to me but to each other, which I find to be a critically generative way for them to engage with the abstract concepts and forms of coercion Power Relations aims to unveil. *Conscientization* is a self-directed practice generated among peers through dialogue. It is something gained through experience, reflection, and discussion not stasis, rote regurgitation, and lectures. I have found that the additional response to a response—to think through how one peer understands what a third peer has

experienced and reflected on—creates a unique matrix of dialogical growth and critical conscientiousness.

Power Relations: The New York City Experience

I developed and refined this project over the course of six semesters and have run it in some shape or form since spring 2018.⁴ I have employed this exact project in a number of different classes including, “The Twentieth Century and the Arts of Resistance,” “Fantasy, Fiction, Film, and their Dissidents,” “The 1980s: A Decade of Upheaval,” and the woefully titled, “Science Fiction and Dissent: Reading Sci-Fi to Explore Identity, Power, and the Environment.” In the fall of 2017, in the first iteration of “The 20th Century and the Arts of Resistance,” Power Relations began as a rather run of the mill experiential learning project that asked students to locate and experience a space in which they could identify a discourse of power and write a short essay about the relations of power they observed. I received papers that analyzed the power relations present in school board meetings, museum displays of indigenous art, student organizations, and a de Blasio press conference. A particularly creative and memorable project on the Battle of the Badges, a charitable boxing event between the FDNY and NYPD, led me to reconsider how students could best present their projects and understand their work as participating in public discourse. This student eschewed the traditional essay form and wrote a piece of creative non-fiction that questioned her motivations for attending a boxing match in light of her distaste for violence of any kind as a commentary on how certain people gravitate toward a particular kind of power and authority. Apparently, the audience representing the NYPD was overwhelming white and the FDNY attendees were a far more racially heterogeneous company. I was blown away. Here was a student, who began her experience with a plan to talk about violence and ended up with a piece that saw through the veneer of boxing for charity and into the current of racial distinction and repressive state authority winding through the audience. For me, this was an “unveiling of reality” that needed to be shared (Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 81). So, that winter, inspired by my student’s piece on the Battle of the Badges, I taught myself how to use WordPress and rewrote “The New York City Experience” project.

Power Relations is now a digital, multimodal, praxis-centered, communal, semester-long project that lives on our class website. The project is divided into three, three-day “cycles” that fall near the end of the first, second, and third months of the semester. In each cycle the class is divided into “posters” and “respondents.” On day one, one third of the class posts about their experience on our class website. On day two, the other two-thirds of the class responds to the posts uploaded to the class website on day one. On day three, respondents address another classmate’s day-two response to a post from day one—I ask the students to begin their day three responses with something like, “Hi Michela, it’s Kumar. How’s it going? I really dig your reading of Johnathan’s post but I disagree with your take on the role power plays in . . .” I call the three elements of Power Relations, “posts,” “responses,” and “responses to

responses,” respectively. Students who post in a cycle do not have to act as respondents, though they often answer peoples’ comments on their work—which is totally great! I allow my students to choose the cycle they post in as it is the most onerous element of the project. After introducing the project on the second day of class we set a time to open cycle requests that gives the students a few days to plot their semester schedules. I award cycle dates on a first come first serve basis at the start of our agreed upon cycle request date and time. Students must wait until the start of the cycle request hour before emailing me their preferences. This way everyone has the same amount of time to figure out what works best for them.

Now, Power Relations requires students to identify and dissect the machinations of power in an ostensibly benign space in their world. I do not tell them where to look.

Critically, the nature of the experience I ask students to engage in and write about has changed dramatically since Power Relations’ first iteration in 2017. Now, Power Relations requires students to identify and dissect the machinations of power in an *ostensibly benign* space in their world. I do not tell them where to look. Though I am happy to brainstorm potential ostensibly benign spaces rife with power relations with my students. I frequently encourage them to email me or pop-by office hours to bounce ideas around. Like Freire’s “problem-posing education,” Power Relations is a self-directed learning experience that asks students to see through the surface of the world around them and into the underling structures of disenfranchisement built into architecture of their social lives. This is a vital change from Power Relations’ earlier requirement to merely “identify a discourse of power.” The aim of the assignment changed from an exercise in identifying how power operates in a space we expect to see it into a project that encourages students to see the everyday as a potential site of power relations. If we believe that all education is political and that we as educators have the ability to play some small role in facilitating social change, then I think we do more to help our students realize their *conscientization* if we ask them to search for and peek behind the veil of society’s spaces and performances in order to demystify the tacit operations and forms of coercion all around them. Importantly, I believe this turn from the exceptional to the everyday encourages students to not only recognize modes of oppression in the quotidian but to see every space as a possibility for resistance.

At its best, Power Relations encourages students to reveal to themselves the polyvalent forms of power, privilege, and coercion that operate in a dialectic of submission and resistance as they seek and support the counter hegemonic discourses waiting to be discovered in their daily lives. I’ve had students deconstruct the deeply imbedded racism of Nivea’s “white is purity” campaign, the hyper-sexualization of the female body and toxic masculinity in gamer culture, K-pop’s complicity in prioritizing Western

standards of beauty, and school dress codes and their woeful reproduction of gender binaries.⁵ One particularly insightful project investigated the cultural biases and inequal distribution of knowledge in NYC’s public library system. This student—Rebekah—decided to do a walking tour of two branches of the NYPL after seeing the NYPL’s advertisement campaign, “libraries are for everyone.” Rebekah visited the Stephen A. Schwarzman building—the main branch of the NYPL—and the Fort Washington Library in Washington Heights—her local NYPL facility. What begins as an excellent comparison of the drastically different quality of the branches’ public offerings, décor, services, and collections evolves into a critique of the prioritizing of European values and forms of knowledge. Rebekah’s post begins with a series of photographs of the two branches and a detailed commentary comparing the ostentatious grandeur of the Schwartzman Library and the dilapidated facilities at Fort Washington. Rebekah’s text discusses the inequal distribution of wealth and knowledge that disproportionately targets socioeconomically distressed neighborhoods. She then notes that the Schwarzman building—as a physical space—largely fails to live up to the promise of the NYPL’s advertising campaign. Though certainly grand in scope, the Schwarzman building in its friezes, murals, statues, and busts, “seems to emphasize whiteness and masculinity” (Rebekah 9). Rebekah pays special attention to the proliferation of a whitewashed Judeo-Christian tradition and literary cannon in her deconstruction of the Schwarzman building’s architecture and art. Importantly, Rebekah also discusses the large amount of surveillance and many

restricted spaces present at the Schwarzman branch. Her project then takes a counter-intuitive turn in its evaluation of the branches. Rebekah argues that, notwithstanding its state of disrepair, the Fort Washington library’s lack of institutionalized surveillance and ease of access better exemplifies the spirit of the NYPL’s “libraries are for everyone” campaign. She writes,

Despite its grandeur, the flagship location of the NYPL actually seems to function in ways that are counter to its stated purpose. Here, whiteness is central and access to information is restricted or must be vetted by the institution’s gatekeepers. Though it is physically less inspiring, the Fort Washington library actually seems more accessible, closer to the ideals of the institution. Perhaps the power of knowledge is available at the NYPL; just don’t look for it at the Schwarzman Building. (Rebekah 10)

Rebekah’s work is exemplary. Not only does her post engage a number of different registers of power and forms of capital but it grows into something more than what she first set out to investigate on her walking tour. What begins as an analysis of class and NYC’s inequal distribution of wealth within its public services becomes a comment on the NYPL’s prioritizing of European bodies and forms of knowledge and a critique of the kinds of access available to the general public at the Schwarzman branch, which ends in a celebration of the egalitarian disrepair of the Fort Washington library.



KAYLEE'S HAND. IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Perhaps unsurprisingly, every semester I run Power Relations one of my students who identifies as a female person of color creates a post critiquing the proliferation of white American standards of beauty represented in the aisles of beauty products that fill pharmacies in neighborhoods historically home to people of color. Happily, posts of this kind exemplify the *conscientization* that I hope Power Relations encourages in my student body. Students frequently compare Duane Reade's wild assortment of "pale-skin" toned foundation to the dearth of ebony-tinted shades on offer by companies like Burt's Bees, Neutrogena, and Almay. My favorite post of this kind was rather cleverly titled, "Yet Another Thing America Can't Makeup For." In it, my student—Kaylee—holds her hand in a Black Power salute next to the "darkest shades [these brands have] to offer." None of the shades on offer come close to Kaylee's warm, coffee-toned complexion. It's a very compelling image. Vitally, her critique of Eurocentric beauty standards doesn't end with her lambasting of major market makeup companies. Kaylee's post finishes with a commentary on a broader problem of self-subjectification she sees within her community. Kaylee writes,

The lack of darker pigmented makeup is not only the fault of many makeup companies, it's the idealism of light skin that created this lack of coverage of the Black population of America. The idealism of white skin, white culture and white supremacy is still alive in American culture today, but is being concealed by the slow progress of those considered to be radical—ie. those who preach that black is beautiful. (5)

Here Kaylee, a bit obscurely, identifies the proliferation of colorism and the marginalization of dark skin within her community as part of a system of privilege that prioritizes whiteness as both an aesthetic and cultural marker of the ideal. Though Kaylee might not yet have the linguistic capital to clearly articulate her observations regarding the mechanisms of disenfranchisement represented in the unequal distribution of foundation shades, her level of consideration and introspection embody the critical thinking and self-reflection this assignment hopes students bring into their lives every day.

A like-minded and particularly unique post approached the aggrandizing of Eurocentric beauty standards by breaking down the deeply imbedded techniques of Othering present in the categorization of beauty products. In this post, the student—Camella—focuses her discussion on the location of certain types of beauty products—something I had never even considered when walking into a CVS. Camella writes,

When I walk into a drugstore and I look for products for natural hair, I won't find them in the "beauty" section with the majority of the hair products, instead, I'll find them within the "ethnic hair care" section. This distinction is problematic because it causes a segregation between hair and a dissociation between POC and beauty. It indicates what kind of hair (therefore what kind of person) can have the word "beauty" associated with it and establishes it as the norm . . . ultimately influencing discrimination and colorism and leading to

self-hatred or feelings of shame for not looking like the beauty standard. (2, 4)

This is a wildly perceptive observation that ably deconstructs the unequal processes of naturalization that exist all around us, while pointing to the very real consequences of privileging one form of beauty over another. Camella's post also notes the scarcity and expense of "natural hair" products like Shea Moisture relative to the abundance and affordability of relaxers. Camella then briefly discusses the implicit biases imbedded in relaxers as a product. Similarly, I have had a number of students disparage the prevalence of bleaching creams and the lack of Black-oriented self-care products available at their local pharmacies—the pictures of aisles of bleaching creams crammed into corner-store pharmacies in communities of color are particularly disturbing.



IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Perhaps my favorite post regarding culturally enforced Eurocentric standards of beauty focuses on Fenty Beauty by Rihanna. In it the student not only eviscerates major market makeup companies, but also celebrates Fenty Beauty as a counter hegemonic discourse. She argues that Fenty's 50 shades of concealer challenge the privileging of whiteness in the makeup industry by providing people of color with the breadth of choices once reserved for people with pale skin. What I love most about this post is its attention to the possibility for resistance within techniques of distinction that engender forms of privilege and the Othering of already marginalized social bodies. I think this student-activated *conscientization* at its best. Indeed, many of my favorite posts—no surprise given my research interests—take Power Relations as an opportunity to reflect on a dialectic of oppression and resistance in an effort to speak truth to power.

In fall of 2019, one of my students—Sarina—wrote a particularly compelling and creative post that framed gentrification as a dialectical exchange between the oppressive marginalization of economically distressed

communities of color and new “places of resistance to the power of gentrification and gentrifier” (Sarina 4). Sarina wrote her post as a literacy narrative detailing her family’s forced relocation to The Bronx after being priced out of their neighborhood in Brooklyn. Sarina’s post takes a confessional tone as she describes the pain of losing the neighborhood you were born and raised in. She writes, “It hurts to visit Brooklyn now because it is unrecognizable to me. It feels like a completely different place, ripped of the culture of the people that once occupied it” (Sarina 2). Her life story and keen observations, including that “gentrification is inevitable because places change and grow all of the time” and the important “difference between improving a neighborhood and completely displacing the people in it” spoke to the class’s lived experiences in NYC. Her work was incredibly well-received by the class respondents. There are 20 comments on her post—the average comment thread is about three or four replies long. After briefly detailing her move from Brooklyn to the South Bronx, Sarina addresses the nascent wave of gentrification occurring in Mott Haven—a neighborhood in the South Bronx. Her post identifies The Bronx Collective—a locally owned apparel and art vendor—and Lit Bar—the only independently owned bookstore in The Bronx⁶—as two “micro resistances” that challenge the “wheel of oppression” (Sarina 5). She notes that though The Bronx Native and Lit Bar likely could not exist without Mott Haven’s economic revival, both recent additions to Mott Haven seek “to improve the community and the people in it, rather than displace them” (Sarina 2). The Bronx Native and Lit Bar feature works by local artists, hold community meetings, visit local schools to support education, and strive to help the people of Mott Haven thrive. I believe Sarina’s post lives and breathes the very best Power Relations offers students. Her work relates her lived-experiences in NYC as the catalyst for a critique of power, identifies a counter hegemonic discourse in her community that speaks truth to power, reflects on how we can reclaim forms of distinction to resist socioeconomic and cultural displacement, and, perhaps most importantly, sparks a powerful discussion among her peers.

A Few Notes: Foundations, Time, and Assessment

Power Relations encourages students to unveil systems of power and coercion tacitly operating through the body politic. When we discuss the potential of this assignment in class, I do not focus on a particular manifestation of oppression and coercion in society. Instead, we discuss how polyvalent structures of power work to maintain hegemony and unique hierarchized forms of distinction that mark one category of people as elect. I focus on techniques of power rather than particular forms of oppression and resistance so that I do not inadvertently limit the potential scope of my students’ inquiries. My partiality for biopolitical dialectics of submission and resistance in Afrofuturism isn’t for everyone. Throughout the semester my students read a truncated version of Althusser’s, admittedly problematic, essay “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” selections from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Bourdieu’s “The Forms of Capital” and

“Physical Space, Social Space, and Habitus,” and excerpts from Scott’s *Domination: And the Art of Resistance*. These texts act as a kind of non-proscriptive roadmap for Power Relations that I hope helps students see behind the veil.⁷ Typically, my students and I read the Althusser and the Foucault before the start of cycle one.

If you decide to run an experiential learning exercise similar to Power Relations in your classroom, I encourage you to allow it to live alongside your class for the entire semester. Critical pedagogy and praxis-oriented experiential education encourage students to continuously integrate new ways of understanding and being in the world into “old constructs” (Eyler 24). For Freire, “true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking . . . which perceives reality as *process*, as *transformation*, rather than as a static entity” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 92).⁸ This relationship to knowledge—our ability to see ourselves in the world and transform it—asks us to recognize our potential for change each and every day. Power Relations’ long-life creates a permanent threshold linking my students’ lived experiences to their classroom practices. It tells students that I too believe that this mode of learning and seeing the world is not something we do once and forget about but a way of being human(e) in the world that we share and live in every day.

In my classes, Power Relations is worth 15% of my students’ final grade. I base my assessment on “Careful consideration. Effort. Execution. Pride. There is no one, concrete, universal standard of excellence governing the assessment of this assignment. It depends on you” (Hengel “The Prompt” 3). This is a quantitatively graded assignment. Students receive full marks for completing the duties of a poster or a respondent. I do not judge the quality of their insights into the ebb and flow of power in the body politic. Instead, I ask myself, “did this student put their best effort in?” The answer is usually, “yes!” I rarely award less than full-marks—most students turn in work that exceeds my expectations. I read everything they write. I do not respond to student responses or responses to responses. I comment on every post. I engage with my students as if I am a part of their dialogue not the judge of it. I do this for a number of reasons. I designed this project to be a co-intentional practice whereby I am in dialogue with and get to learn from my students’ experiences. This is impossible if I stand in judgment over their experiences. By engaging with my students in the voice of a peer rather than that of a figure of power—a professor is certainly in the dominate position of power in the classroom—I am able, however fleetingly, to decenter “a privileged voice of authority” through a “collective critical practice,” which, hopefully, extends into the classroom from the ethereal plane of our class website (hooks 84). Finally, freedom from ABCDF-fetters encourages creativity.

Final Thought

I’d like to take a moment to mention another benefit to breaching the divide between our students’ lived experience and university studies. Experiential education provides a unique opportunity for community building in the classroom. Though this may seem like an ancillary concern to many

college educators; for me, community building is vital to learning at the collegiate level.⁹ University studies can be an alienating, solitary activity that dampens our students' enthusiasm for the work they do in our classrooms. I believe passion and joy and laughter belong in the classroom. They are contagious and they make us want to learn more. I strive to show my excitement and love for the work we do and texts we read whenever possible. Like hooks, I think "excitement is generated through collective effort" (8). Experiential education helps create an environment that encourages cooperation and communal knowledge making. For hooks, "sharing experiences and confessional narratives in the classroom helps establish communal commitment to learning" (186). When this attention to personal experience evolves into a praxis-oriented educational learning environment we have the opportunity to not only build learning communities that respect one another as scholars but we can help our students develop a network of allies that helps them navigate the politics of privilege that permeates the world they live in.

I warmly encourage you to include some form of experiential learning into your assessment portfolio and to open your in-class discussions to your students' lived experiences. Over the past three years, the various iterations of "The New York City Experience" have been widely well-regarded by my students. When we do our post-semester debrief of our class on the final day of the term, this project is usually my students' favorite bit of intellectual labor. Experiential education provides me with a litany of opportunities to engage in critical pedagogical practices that foster student-centered learning and the development of my students' *conscientization*. By providing the opportunity to inscribe their lived experiences into the architecture of our classes, we let our students know that we value their unique subject positions; that their voices will be heard; that their lives matter.

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APPENDIX A

THE PROJECT

Power Relations: The New York City Experience (PRNYCE)

The Assignment: It's a blog thingy and it's going to be great. Divided into three parts, "Power Relations: The New York City Experience" asks you to identify, explore, and dissect a power relation you locate in an ostensibly benign space in New York City and post about your experience with respect to anything we have read for or talked about in class. Try to discover and discuss the movement of power in a space that masks its tacit forms of coercion. For example, how does the layout of the Met reproduce and prioritize Western-hegemonic forms of distinction and value? You will also be asked to respond to other student experiences and to respond to responses of other student experiences in a matrix of student voices and awesomeness.

The Site: pending

The Space: Anything that exposes you to a masked relation of power. Power is a many-faced monster. All I ask is that you check with me first. I'll sign-off—you go for it. Okay, you don't *have* to check with me, but if you're unsure of your project, then email me or pop-by office hours and we can do some brainstorming.

The Post: There's but one true rule governing your post. Your post must include text and some sort of non-textual medium. Oh, and there should be a title of some sort, something epic.

The text you write can be: a journal entry recalling your observance of the machinations of power and its relationship to a text or construct attended to in our class, a short story about your experience, a score, a series of captions to a video you shot, a newspaper-styled article reporting on your event, an analysis of a cultural phenomenon you observed, a poem, a short feature exposing an agent of oppression, a description of the unreality of the dissonance you reckoned with as the prism of power became visible, an anything that is written. There is no minimum word count—different forms of expression ask different utterances from us—but there is a maximum word count! Please, write no more than 600 words. You don't have to write and write and write. Choose your voice! This assignment is not meant to stress you out and burden you in an endless cycle of production. Try to have fun.

Your non-textual medium can be anything that's not written words, seriously anything. Be creative. You can: paint a painting, paste a collage, play a song, perform a poem, act out a scene you wrote, sketch a comic, parkour, design a graphic, build a GIF, link to a series of related images or sounds, edit a video montage, do a YouTube thing, draw a picture, or dance a dance. Did I mention you can do anything you want to do?

The Response: Write 300-ish words in response to a student post. How do you identify, complicate, question, (dis)agree with what was said, sung, drawn, seen, filmed, anything-ed, by the student you chose to respond to? How do your unique lenses overlap, diverge, inform, and/or speak to one another? Please, be sure to read through the entire cycle of posts before responding—you never know what you may find. Feel free to supplement your response with something other than text. The Response should begin, "Dear Posting Student's Name,"

The Response to the Response: Join the Conversation. Try to look through the eyes of an-other as they appreciate the experience of someone else. How does another student's response to a student post affect the way in which you internalize, appreciate, and/or understand the impressions of an-other? Your R2R should attend to both the post and the response—you've got to call them out by name. Again, 300-ish words should do it. Please begin your R2R with, "Dear Respondent, I totally (modifier) (action verb) your reading of Posting Student's Name." You can also respond to an R2R.

When:

1	2	3
Post: Midnight, 09.27	Post: Midnight, 10.25	Post: Midnight, 12.01
Response: Midnight, 09.28	Response: Midnight, 10.26	Response: Midnight, 12.02
R2R: Midnight, 09.29	R2R: Midnight, 10.27	R2R: Midnight, 12.03

How Does This “When” Business Breakdown?

- You will Post only once in the semester.
- You will Respond to a Post and write an R2R twice this semester.
- In the Cycle you Post, you do **not** have to Respond to a Post or write an R2R—though if you would like to engage with a response to your Post in an articulate, considered internet debate please do.
- In Cycles that you do not Post, you must Respond and R2R to a Post and a Response.
- The assignment is broken into threes. A third of the class will Post in any one Cycle, the rest will Respond and R2R.
- You may pick your Post day—first come first Posts the Post they want to Post—email me your best-life Post list. I’ll do what I can.
- Your contributions will not count toward your grade on this assignment if they are late. Feel free to Post earlier than the due date—in fact, that’s totally encouraged.
- Responses and R2Rs must be executed sometime in their listed, 24-hour windows.

What’s PRYNCE Worth to You: 15% of your final grade in this class (each cycle is worth 5% of your grade). Also, a life-affirming experience.

Assessment: Careful consideration. Effort. Execution. Pride. There is no one, concrete, universal standard of excellence governing the assessment of this assignment. It depends on you.

Daniel Hengel is Lecturer at Fordham College. Daniel studies and teaches what he terms 20th/21st-century English Language Literatures of Resistance. His work has appeared in *Nordic Irish Studies*, *The Wellsian*, and *Join the Conversation: A Guide to First-year Composition* and he has a piece forthcoming in *The D. H. Lawrence Review*. Daniel loves being a teacher.



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