

Assignment: The Positionality Progression (in three stages)

Exercise 1: Representing and Analyzing a Moment of Change

Read Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Good, Racist People,” Cathy Park Hong, “Bad English,” and Zadie Smith, “Find Your Beach.” Then, select the text that speaks to you—that reaches inside and somehow resonates with your feelings and thinking. You will work with this text for our first unit.

As you reread it, look for a moment when the writer describes, analyzes, and reflects on an experience or situation in the city that changed how they understood and saw themselves—whether as an insider, an outsider, or somehow as a little of both.

Finally, write 2 paragraphs representing and analyzing this chosen moment. After introducing the reader to the text with a bit of summary, context, and particular detail, slow down, represent, and analyze this textual moment for a reader who has not read the essay. Zoom in especially on several passages where the writer considers how a change comes over how they feel in this neighborhood or place. Where and how does the writer interrogate their complex feelings about feeling like an insider or outsider? Where and how do they consider their blind spots and biases and those of others? As you analyze and start to reflect on these passages, what strikes you as significant, thought-provoking, and why? Try to suggest what you see that others might not consider in passing. Yet, don't worry very much: this is just a start. Total: 1-2 pages, double-spaced, typed.

Exercise 2: Interrogating Your Positionality, Core Myths, and Relations

Take a moment to do a brief self-inventory by considering the following. More specifically, choose three questions below to respond to (whichever ones you're most intrigued by), writing one or two paragraphs per question. *NOTE: This writing is just for you. No one else will be reading it. However, you will be asked to discuss your insights with a smaller group in our class.*

- When writing, it's common to use the universal pronoun “we” to make universal claims. But when you say “we,” whom are you actually imagining? What is your “we”? Meaning, what communities/places do you consider yourself to be a part of? Try to name 3 to 5 different kinds of communities.
- If you had to compare your own life story to a myth, a story from a popular song, or a character in a film, what would it be and why? What does that myth/character capture about yourself? What does it miss or preclude?
- Reflect on an experience when you've felt like an outsider among others in some familiar or new place (at home, in your travels, here at NYU). Tell the story. What was it about the mindset/values of others that made you feel this way? What questions about your values arose?
- Reflect on an experience when you felt like an insider among others in some familiar or new place. Tell the story. What was it that made you feel this way?
- Consider your various affiliations (class or status, linguistic, race or ethnicity, gender and sexuality, culture or nation, etc.). In what ways do you believe these values/identities/communities shape your engagement with the text you chose and analyzed in Exercise 1? In what ways are they influencing your participation so far in the classroom or social conversations at NYU? Describe an experience when your sense of

self enhanced your understanding of classroom content or your engagement with others. Now, describe a time when your sense of self has impeded your understanding of classroom content or your engagement with others.

In-class work: Writing prompt: Which questions did you choose to answer and why? What are the most surprising insights that came out of this work? How might you frame this insight as a question that could motivate the writing of an essay?

- Ask students to discuss in groups and then share with the class.

Exercise 3: Writing a Scene from Experience

As you think further about your work in Exercise 1 and your self-inventory from Exercise 2, brainstorm and write down 2-3 specific *memories from your own experience that feel connected* to a problem or tension considered in your primary text.

Then, select and write one of these memories from your personal experience as a scene (or represent your experience in a place). This is non-fiction, drawn from your experience and not made-up.

A *scene from experience* (a story of your experience or your sense of place in the world) amounts to a brief, single moment when something happened. Your scene should suggest a tension and change that you experienced, one that feels related, conceptually, to the idea or question your chosen writer considers and takes account of your own positionality (how your experience takes on meaning in context and in relation to others). Your primary work, however, is descriptive/representational, not reflective: set up your scene vividly and slow down to describe closely the moment that you want your readers *to see*, sharing details to evoke its *emotional power*. You need not explain the relationship between the scene or your experience in a place and the idea or question of your primary text. Just show us the scene with attention to particular detail (show don't tell). Total: 1 to 2 pages, double-spaced, typed.

Essay Draft: Bias and Cultural Belonging: A Deepening Essay

Our work thus far has focused on two things: 1) A close reading of a text that confronts questions of bias and the complications of cultural belonging; and 2) A close reading of yourself that confronts questions of bias and the complications of cultural belonging. Now, it's time to put these two strands in conversation with each other in an essay that attempts to answer a question that came out of your prewriting. More specifically, you are to deepen a primary idea from your chosen text through the lens of your own positionality story. Remember: this is just a draft. Don't worry about constructing a perfect beginning, middle, and end. Allow yourself to brainstorm, take a risk, and experiment. Your basic aim is threefold: to introduce us to evidence from your chosen text that raises a motivating question; to represent and analyze important moments in your chosen text as a means of illuminating the idea/insights that come out of the writer's investigation of that question; and to deepen/extend our understanding of this idea and its implications by considering related evidence from your own experience. Total: 3 to 4 pages, double-spaced, typed.