



English and Textual Studies 142  
Unit IV: Agency – Culminating Multimedia Project

For this final project, you will work collaboratively with your peers to explore issues within the subject of agency. According to Nealon and Giroux:

Agency, in its simplest definition, is the power to *do* something. In the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the entry for ‘agency’ illustrates this meaning by offering a helpful quotation: ‘We cannot ignore human agency in history.’ We cannot, in other words, ignore the fact that people create history by doing things; history is *made* rather than found. (193)

In *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, theorist Jonathan Culler emphasizes how agency is something that needs to be achieved rather than simply an action:

Cultural studies asks how far we are manipulated by cultural forms and how far or in what ways we are able to use them for other purposes, exercising ‘agency,’ as it is called... The question of ‘agency’... is the question of how far we can be subjects responsible for our actions [i.e., subjects who choose our acts] and how far our apparent choices are constrained by forces we do not control. (45)

Your Task: Your group will choose a cultural text and explore the following:

- **The subject as agent or actor** - “Although humans certainly do make history, everyday people tend not to see their actions as having much if any impact on the grand historical stage” (194).
- **How power operates within the text** - “One of the things we’ve been consistently trying to confront throughout our investigation of theory is the fact that people are *subject* to their historical contexts rather than the *master* of them. None of us is in control of the social spaces that we inhabit; nor are we completely in control of the subject positions that we occupy” (194).
- **Agency in relation to social structures** - “The subject positions we occupy are never simply a function of what we choose for ourselves. Granting or withholding recognition, then, is another manifestation of how we use power and how power is used on us” (199).
- **Cultural and institutional constraints upon one’s agency**
- **Modes of resistance to dominant norms or hegemonic forces**

- **How people “make do” with what they have**
- **Consumers of commodities as cultural producers**

Possible Texts: For this assignment you should consider texts that spark insightful conversations about power, are possibilities for agency, social structures, dominant norms, and cultural and institutional restraints.

*Suggestions:*

**-Chain stores/restaurants** (think about *The Gap*, *CVS*, *Target*, Car Dealerships, *TGIFridays*, *Applebees*, etc.) – Think about how power operates within these establishments and the cultural norms that are present when visiting these places.

**-Neighborhoods** (areas of wealth, areas of poverty, areas dominant in a certain religion, race, or ethnic background) – Think about how everyday people don’t see their actions as grand or historical and how that rings true or false within certain neighborhoods; think about the cultural restraints placed on personal power within certain neighborhoods; think about modes of resistance to dominant norms when younger generations try to make changes to rules and traditions established by older generations

**-Education** (your school, the college admission process, pre-school) – Think about the subject as agent or actor in your school. What roles are you required to play when certain restraints are put upon you? Or, think about dominant norms in the college admissions process and how power operates within this system. Or, think about younger children and how power operates at the pre-school level... what are the institutional restraints placed upon a child’s personal power... what modes of resistance are there at the pre-school level and how is this resistance dealt with to make a permanent change in behavior?

Requirements: Once you have chosen a cultural text and explored the criteria above, your group will produce a complex, theory-enriched reading of the text. You must:

- Develop a theory-based claim and have a concluding implication of the readings of your text. To develop this claim you must find and use at least one written text that supports your ideas (for example, if I were exploring agency within *The Gap*, I might read and analyze “The Jeaning of America” and incorporate pieces of that essay into my claim. (10%)
- Produce a multimedia artifact (15-20 minute slideshow or film) showing how power operates within the text. For this artifact, you should be innovative and creative. For example, if I were exploring agency within *The Gap*, I would interview sales associates and customers to get an idea of how power operates at certain levels; I would take photographs and make observations to get an idea of the cultural norms associated with the store and its consumers; I would explore the constraints placed upon individuals who do not or cannot shop at *The Gap*; I

would research print, Internet, and television ads to determine the function of the consumer, how they are being targeted, and how they are possibly stripped of power. I would especially research *The Gap* Red Campaign, what it is, how much of the earnings actually support AIDS in Africa, and why celebrities are involved in the campaign process. It's also very important to consider how one might enact agency within such a space of consumption, what kinds of guerilla tactics might be possible or desirable in such a space and why. The multimedia artifact must be presented to the class and each group member must have a role. (70%)

- Write a 1-2 page annotation of the project outlining the focus of agency within the cultural text and reflecting on the process of creating the project. You should also include references to the written text you have chosen to include as well as references to *The Theory Toolbox*. (20%)

### The Nitty Gritty

-Groups must be no fewer than 2 people and no more than 5 people

-The written annotation must include an MLA Works Cited Page for the entire project. .

- -Presentations will begin on June 12<sup>th</sup> and will continue through 6/18/11