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The Social Construction of Language: Identity, Reality, and Trauma in American Composition
Courses

By

Joselyne Campos

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

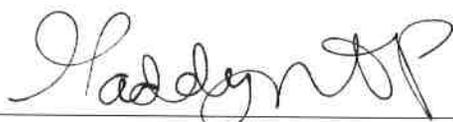
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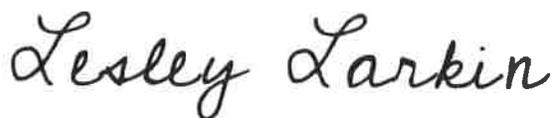
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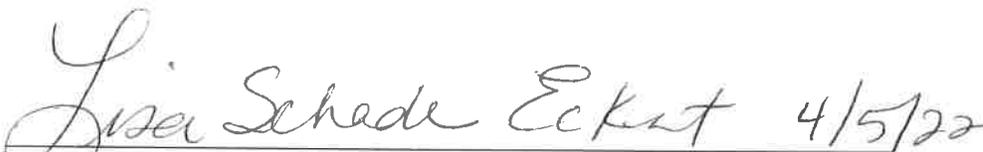
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ABSTRACT

The Social Construction of Language: Identity, Reality, and Trauma in American Composition

Courses

By

Joselyne Campos

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ways in which instructors have the potential to reinforce or disrupt systems of oppression and power in the composition classroom through language, writing, and rhetoric. I draw upon pedagogical and rhetorical theorists, to analyze how language closely interacts with identity and how it impacts an individual's understanding and perception of reality. I consider how texts utilize language to communicate normative citizenship and challenge students' conceptions of the world around them, and how to teach from an anti-racist perspective that incorporates critical pedagogy and does not focus solely on minoritized communities' trauma narratives. Chapter one connects the social construction of language and how it is utilized as an institutional tool to enforce systemic oppression and destabilize a student's reality. Chapter two focuses on the inequity composition courses and universities perpetuate, and the potential pitfalls of overfocusing on trauma narratives in anti-racist pedagogies—ultimately revealing that an equitable classroom where students' discourse communities are respected is the most optimal space to encourage critical literacy and lifelong inquiry.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis employed the MLA citation style.

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INTRODUCTION

My mother's family was from Cuba and my father's side of the family is from Costa Rica. I lost my mother at a young age and this caused a lot of my family members to take on a "motherly" role in my life to ensure I had feminine role models in my life. Out of love, they attempted to teach me lessons "women" should know because they feared I was growing up "too masculine" by their standards of gender expression. Once, my Costa Rican aunt came to visit my dad and me in Miami, Florida, when I was around 10 years old, and she stayed in my room with me. My closet at the time had a bifold sliding mechanism that would sometimes slip loose, and I knew how to easily slip it back into place. To no one's surprise, the door slipped loose during her stay and my aunt refused to let me fix it. I remember being confused and frustrated because of how easy it was to fix the door, but she was adamant that we needed to ask my uncle to fix it. She attempted to make the situation a learning experience and said something along the lines of "*Joselyne, no importa si sabes como arreglarlo. Deja eso a los hombres que hay que dejarlos sentir importante.*" I remember telling her that I didn't care about making men feel important, it was just a closet door. I remember telling her that it would literally only take me a few seconds to put the door back in place. She dismissed it saying that I would understand when I was older. Now, I definitely understand. Through language, she attempted to teach me what her definition of a "woman" was. Using words, I was meant to learn my place in this world and how to interact with men. She tried to teach me the social hierarchy of our discourse community, of who was allowed to speak and act and when. In her own words, to be feminine and a *latina* woman, I needed to prioritize men in my actions and words.

As a first-generation American, who experiences and navigates my reality and the world around me using more than one language, my life is filled with language learning experiences where members of my discourse or speech communities used literacy to teach me the customs of my culture. Literacy lessons in my social circles were never only just about language, but also the vehicle in which I was meant to learn social hierarchies and so much more. My ethnicity is crucial to the formation of my identity and the way I speak and write today. These memories and experiences are the reason I research and teach the way I do today. And I am not alone in this. We all experience these language learning moments that define our understanding of the world and our identity. We all have had moments in our childhood or adulthood where someone important to us relayed information meant to show us how they think the world works. Family members like my aunt used language to show me how she believed the world functioned and tried to shape my understanding of the world and how I should've behaved in it too. As humans, we all have moments that defined to us what it meant to be a man, woman, nonbinary, poor, rich, etc. Language is the site where we learned and continue to learn about others and ourselves. Language is the manifestation of our thoughts and beliefs into reality. I think in words and constantly name my emotions. When I'm frustrated, my chest tightens and my head pulses as the physical embodiment of the word frustration ripples through my body. Consciously aware of the fact my words and myself are inseparable, I know when I speak it's my way of existing and navigating this world. It is a physical act. The way each individual uniquely uses language is closely related to their life experiences. It is an intimate act to investigate an individual's language and the discourse communities they learned from and belong to. bell hooks in "Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom," discusses the intersection of language, emotion, oppression, theory, and so much more. She stated:

To recognize that we touch one another in language seems particularly difficult in a society that would have us believe that in language there is no dignity in the experience of passion, that to feel deeply is to be inferior, for within the dualism of Western metaphysical thought, ideas are always more important than language. (hooks 174-175)

Language is how we communicate with one another and how we build connections, express emotions, and learn. How we use language is incredibly personal and tied to our emotions and cultural identities. This understanding of language, however, is often incompatible with how language and writing is taught in higher education and intellectual spaces. Hooks emphasized that a dualism exists within western cultures, one must reject their emotional nature that is passionate and disregard the intimate interactions of emotion and language, yet value innovation and ideas even though those are closely related to language.

I had to face this harsh truth during my tenure as a graduate assistant and composition instructor. In my first semester of teaching, I failed to recognize how instrumental language is to one's identity and how personal and emotional it can be. I am a passionate individual who prioritizes incorporating diverse sources in my teaching materials and I prioritize teaching from an anti-racist perspective. In an effort to diversify my materials and raise awareness on issues I deemed important, like the US prison industrial complex and white supremacy for example, I only presented trauma novels, or a work of fiction that discusses profound loss, intense fear, or trauma, to my students without taking into consideration how deeply challenging and personal teaching from an anti-racist perspective that prioritizes decolonizing language was. It goes against the rules and foundations of many of my student's identities and language customs. Teaching from this perspective goes against what is enforced and normalized in many American speech/discourse communities.

In my first semester of teaching for my composition course, I chose to teach the book *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. The leaders of my department, in an effort to

address the racism within institutional means, also strongly encouraged me to teach the book and provided me support whenever they could, even though they were also limited by systems of power in higher education. I did not take into account the discourse community I was entering or that my class was predominantly white with no prior experience discussing race or investigating intimate aspects of their identity and privilege. I naively did not expect the material discussed in the book to directly and strongly challenge core values and beliefs that governed their reality and identities, but it did. The novel was written from the perspective of a black father writing a letter to his teenage son. Coates discussed police brutality, the military, and 9/11. The author described police officers as imperfect, corrupt, and not beacons of morality, but enforcers of a systemically racist state, a fact that is proven by historical evidence. I believed these claims were rooted in truth, given the statistics and global research conducted on the US political system, but I did not anticipate the reaction I received, even though I put my students in a vulnerable position to engage with racism for a grade, and neither did my mentors or the faculty in my department who introduced the text for me to teach in my class.

I required my students to engage with racism within an educational institution that still perpetuated and enforced the reality of systemic racism and normalized it. With no prior one-on-one relationship, I challenged their language customs and beliefs that were closely related to their identities, and graded them for how well they could process those challenges in an “academic and professional” manner. Students who had family or were in the military requested to speak to me privately because they disagreed with the book and no longer wished to read it. Other students began to not participate in class or submit assignments and stopped attending altogether. One student even ignored the prompt of one of my writing assignments about genre

analysis and submitted a three-page rant about Rudy Giuliani and how the liberal left and media rigged the US 2020 elections.

Students' lives were being uprooted because of the COVID-19 pandemic and an unprecedented and bitter election with tensions between people with differing/polarizing political views. When I attempted to initiate analysis of issues in the book that required vulnerability and trust, students obviously and reasonably felt challenged. I requested that they engage in sensitive material with no prior relationship of trust and not from a place of care and respect. We were complete strangers and I had set my expectations too high.

I was incredibly upset with myself. How could I handle this topic so irresponsibly? In the face of the next generation, I failed to properly teach them the language lessons I valued so dearly and instead overflowed them with narratives that discussed violent material like white supremacy that may have been traumatic for readers of different backgrounds, worldviews, and complicated connections to current American systems of power with no regard for their emotional states, and their understanding of language. I felt like I misrepresented vital theoretical practices like critical race theory, etc. In an effort to diversify my material, I misrepresented the communities I was attempting to support. Instead, I incited discord before even establishing a space of introspection. I asked them to analyze their identity and worldview through academic research papers in a way that even I wouldn't feel comfortable doing in front of strangers.

It made me question, why was my class such a challenging space for my students? Why did reading a trauma novel cause such reactions? Aren't books supposed to be separate from reality? Why did students cry? Why did they get so angry? Why were they so offended? I didn't lie or present any material that I hadn't thoroughly researched. I presented all of the fact-checked material with sources, and I provided plenty of support along the way. I didn't understand the

anger at me or at the book. After various conversations and check-ins, students expressed that they respected how I handled conflicts and the material, but it was clear we had no common ground and the subjects in the classroom did not align with their understanding of reality, and they rejected it. They simply “didn’t believe” any of the material in the class because they viewed it as opinion, even though it was the truth.

I realized that when I designed the materials for my class, I designed them from my perspective for people who were from similar backgrounds. Because I was unprepared to teach writing to students from different backgrounds and discourse communities than me, and unprepared in general, I lost the opportunity to teach students the skills and lessons I wanted them to learn. I did not design a writing class that connected to their lives at all. hooks claimed that to educate as a practice of freedom, to help students grow and learn in a way that actually improves their lives and society, a teacher should teach in a way that everyone can learn, she explained that:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (hooks 13)

Her work really connects the intimacy of language with identity and an individual’s sense of self. So many of the most meaningful and memorable moments of my life happened through language and writing. I learned the social rules of my gender, felt the pain in the stories my family passed onto me, and professed my love using language. My words are incredibly personal, and I realized I needed to treat my student’s language with the same care and respect if I expected them to analyze their language closely in an academic setting. I wasn’t only teaching them how to perform a rhetorical analysis, I was teaching them what higher education constitutes

as normative speech, language behaviors, and acceptable social customs. I needed to recognize that the process of analyzing trauma, racism, and other social aspects of society and challenging their language was a personal and vulnerable request that directly interacted with their identity and understanding of reality.

My first semester teaching composition motivated me to investigate why the language and rhetoric of inequities in the US can be such an off-putting experience for students, and why instructors fall into the same mistakes as I did. From a pedagogical and theoretical perspective, this experience motivated me to explore ways to prevent an overfocus on trauma narratives of Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color (BIPOC) communities and the potential misrepresentation it can cause. I wanted to see if my experience as a composition instructor was unique.

The process of writing this thesis has afforded me the opportunity to meet and learn from many amazing educators and students. I began to offer my students more compassion and consideration. I adapted my teaching materials and syllabus to give my students more freedom. I was honest about my love for language and rhetoric, and why it was so important to me. I made space in my classroom for passion. I provided students with the opportunity to improve their writing using examples and materials that connected to their lives and represented narratives that displayed different identities and realities that were not only focused on trauma. I asked them what they were passionate about and gave them the space to explore the language and rhetoric of those passions. I discussed rhetorical analysis using resumes and cover letters, and we practiced academic research on topics they deemed important. I incorporated hooks's teaching strategies into my class, and it completely changed my classroom. Instead of imposing my views or opinions, I focused on providing students with rhetorical strategies and tools to analyze language

and writing in the world around them. I didn't need to force discussions of racism or sexism because they naturally brought it to the forefront after establishing trust. I asked questions in order to listen and learn from my students and as a result, we learned together. I didn't demand they analyze power, oppression, and inequity – we did it together after establishing mutual respect. I provided diverse materials that represented all aspects of the human experience, not only trauma, and no one experienced burnout or rejected the material outright. After establishing trust, students discussed race, gender, and class in a respectful manner that engaged directly with an analysis of their language. There were disagreements and opposing views, but it provided learning opportunities and gave space for students to experience academic debate and argumentation. This experience was possible because of the support I received from my department and the theoretical research I conducted for this thesis.

In addition to these discoveries, I learned that my experience as a composition instructor was not unique; it was indicative of a larger system of exploitation and overworked educators. Universities treat composition courses with little to no value, and as an academic prerequisite that is irrelevant to a student's career and degree in the long run, which is far from the truth. Higher education itself does not recognize the nuances of writing and the intimacy involved in critically analyzing one's language behaviors and the communities their language comes from. Even though these prerequisites are a student's first experience of the university and can greatly affect retention rates, humanities at most universities are not valued for the impact that they have, as evidenced by the amount of funding the humanities receive versus other disciplines like the sciences. This disregard leads to underprepared composition instructors and overworked faculty.

Underprepared and unsupported faculty do not have the mental capacity or space to treat writing courses with the care and respect they deserve. The composition courses are many of the students' only experience in higher education where they actively challenge their language and writing skills, and are given the opportunity to improve their literacy and engage with the world from a different perspective. For the mental well-being of everyone involved, instructors need ample time to prepare and receive the support needed to teach these classes, because of how closely they interact with language, identity, and reality.

As a result, in this thesis, I analyze why language can emotionally affect people so strongly, why the material discussed in writing classrooms is so important, and what we can do as educators when we encounter and discuss trauma in the classroom to, within reason, prevent misrepresentation or negative associations to the real-life topics we discuss and writing in general. It is necessary to bring awareness to the issues marginalized communities struggle with without creating a spectacle of their trauma and inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes or creating misrepresentations of said marginalized communities. I analyze why teaching trauma narratives without appropriate pedagogical practices can lead to traumatic experiences for students, but more research is needed to identify why it can actually be counterproductive for language justice efforts by reinforcing stereotypes and stimulating backlash. I do not provide all the solutions to the issue at hand in this thesis, but I do investigate the ways in which instructors have the potential to reinforce or disrupt systems of oppression and power in the classroom through language, writing, and rhetoric.

CHAPTER ONE

Written forms of communication are varied, complex, and entirely made up by humans. In the introduction, I discussed how language is a physical act that manifests our thoughts and emotions to reality. The way individual's use language is closely related to their life experiences and the communities they learned language from. This is because language and writing are essentially social constructs. What a social construct is and how it operates is widely and heavily debated. It is understood that language communicates a person's emotions, thoughts, and their understanding of reality in relation to their identity. In this chapter, I look into why language is the foundation of people's realities. I will use Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's definition of social construction to connect the idea of written communication as a social construct to discourse communities, identity, critical thinking, and trauma in American higher education composition courses. To connect why language and writing in composition classrooms have the potential to reinforce or disrupt systems of oppression, I explore the origin and function of language and why it can affect identity formation. This chapter is written from a pedagogical perspective for composition educators. Students are welcome to read this piece, but it specifically will benefit educators.

I. Language is a Social Construct

In "The Social Construction of Reality," Berger and Luckmann argued that the social world is "a humanly produced reality" (Berger and Luckmann 78). Before Berger presents the argument that reality and social conventions are constructed by people, he introduces the term habituation. He described habituation as "any action that is repeated frequently ... a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort ... the action in question may

be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort” (70 - 71). The actions he refers to are mainly social and non-social activities. Essentially, people repeat social actions and these repetitions form patterns that can be easily reproduced continuously through time by different people. Social actions then become habits that people maintain for whatever reason.

After establishing habitualization, Berger introduces institutionalization. He defined it as “a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution” (72). A habit or social activity becomes institutionalized when the activity becomes a symbol to a community. The habitualized social activity then becomes a staple in the community and an institution. He explains that the relationship is circular, that an institution is a symbol and a symbol is an institution– maintained by those who reproduce it. The institution they refer to is symbolic and not the physical meaning of the term.

Once a habitualized social action becomes institutionalized, it exists separately. Berger argues that since a habitualized social activity is a symbol that is repeatedly practiced by a community, individuals who were not present for the habitualization and institutionalization of the action relearn the social action through said institution. The habitualized social activity is not inherent and can not be learned through internal reflection, an individual must “go out and learn about them” (78). Once a habitualized social activity is institutionalized, it is internalized. Berger describes it as a dialectical relationship between a person, the producer, and the social world (or social constructs). The product, or social activity, is able to project backward and becomes part of people’s reality, or as Berger puts, into their consciousness (78).

Berger's process relates directly to theories proposed in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" by Louis Althusser. Like Berger, Althusser examines social activities and state apparatuses, or institutions, but through a Marxist lens. Althusser argues that:

Every social formation arises from a dominant mode of production ... the process of production sets to work the existing productive forces in and under definite relations of production ... In order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce. It must therefore reproduce: 1. The productive forces, 2. The existing relations of production. (Althusser 128)

Althusser explains that a social formation is repeated continuously, like a habituation. A social formation also simultaneously reproduces the conditions necessary for the habituation to continue. The relations of production ensure that an ideology or social activity, like language and written communication for example, are maintained. Conditions must be created and met concurrently as production occurs to ensure its sustainability. The means of production reproduces continuously in order to survive, and every detail is important in the reproduction process.

Althusser's definition of the reproduction process supports Luckmann and Berger's dialectical process of social constructs and reality—habituation, institutionalization, and internalization. In order for a habituated social activity to become a symbol or institution to a community, it must be reproduced "with an economy of effort and which, ipso facto, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern ... again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort" (Berger and Luckmann 70-71). An individual exerts a measured and repeatable effort to perform the habituated social activity, like writing, and replicate it exactly with the same effort in the future indefinitely.

Luckmann and Berger emphasize that the three phases of the process "corresponds to an essential characterization of the social world. Society is a human product. Society is an objective

reality. Man is a social product” (79). Altogether, this means that human behavior and the social activities and institutions of a community are socially constructed, or a social construct. Thus, language and writing are social activities that were habitualized, institutionalized, and internalized– making them social constructs. Language and written communication are social constructs that are then reproduced and introduced to new generations as tradition and normative behavior and/or activities (79). Specifically, language traditions are reproduced within their respective communities and cultures. Different communities reproduce different social constructs and language traditions based on their respective patterns of habitualization and preferences. An individual may not be fully aware and conscious of the fact that a social activity is institutionalized and internalized. It is possible that an individual remains unaware of the entire process.

II. Discourse Communities and Reality

Different cultures and communities have their own way of communicating with their own rules, practices, and traditions. The community’s social constructs vary and many of the traditions do not need to be replicated exactly in order to be reproduced, which strays away from Althusser, Luckmann, and Berger’s concepts. A social activity, like writing, shares similarities and slight differences culture to culture. The differences in cultural standards of communication are often related to the discourse or speech communities people are a part of. Hilary Janks defines discourse communities as “habits of speaking, thinking, valuing, and doing that we embody (discourse), every society also has conventions that guide behavior, including language behavior” (Janks). Janks further explains “There are social rules controlling who should speak, to whom, for how long, when and where, and in which language” (Janks). Janks iterated that each discourse community has its own rules of communication and human interaction.

James E. Porter in “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community” defines a discourse community as “a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated. An individual may belong to several professional, public, or personal discourse communities” (Porter 38-39). Porter’s definition is similar to Jank’s, but instead of using language like control, he emphasizes that discourse communities regulate discourse and speak or write in approved and socially acceptable methods or “approved channels.” He also points out that discourse communities can be professional, public, or personal like an ethnic specific discourse community or academic research discourse communities.

According to Janks and Porter, in discourse communities, people establish a frameworks of understanding their social reality because a person’s social reality consists of these language behaviors and cultural customs, among other factors like identity (the lens a person uses to exist and communicate with others in the public sphere). Like Berger and Luckmann discussed, reality and normative social behavior is a construct. Individuals build a set of mental tools and a framework of navigating public or private spaces based on their experiences within accessible discourse communities. People then communicate their emotions and ideas within the bounds of what they learned to be normative socially acceptable language and behaviors. For example, in American culture, it is typically seen as rude or disrespectful to ask an adult woman her age. This cultural custom and perceived disrespectful behavior is just one of many learned behaviors typical of American discourse communities and discourse communities in general. One does not inherently know what is considered “rude” behavior or what is socially acceptable, it is learned.

If there are differences between discourse communities, they either clash or renegotiate the terms or rules of their communities. John M. Swales in “The Concept of Discourse

Community” rejects the definition of a discourse community that includes personal interests like language behaviors and cultural customs. He named the communities that regulate social and personal language behaviors as “speech communities.” To elaborate, he stated:

In a sociolinguistic speech community, the communicative needs of the group, such as socialization or group solidarity, tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discursal characteristics. The primary determinants of linguistic behavior are social. However, in a sociorhetorical discourse community, the primary determinants of linguistic behavior are functional, since a discourse community consists of a group of people who link up in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity, even if these latter should consequently occur. In a discourse community, the communicative needs of the goals tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discursal characteristics. (Swales 471)

He specified that discourse communities are groups of people who come together, rather than inherit the community, to achieve certain goals. This thesis uses the modern definition of a discourse community that includes sociolinguistic speech communities and sociorhetorical discourse communities because of the manner in which language is institutionalized among discourse communities and through education. In current American society, people are students and taught language behaviors from a young age where they learn not only social behaviors, but also the communicative goals of educational institutions. J. Elspeth Stuckey in the *Violence of Literacy* supports the concept of educational institutions regulating language behaviors and socialization. She stated “In school, he assumes that comprehension equals the intake of information and ideology. This is how schools turn out proper conformity and regulate failure. As a piece of weaponry in the ideological arsenal, literacy enforces acceptable ideas and behaviors” (Stuckey 54). She explains that through language and the concept of literacy, students learn what is acceptable and what is expected of them. They learn their place in society, power relations, and negotiate language behaviors. They learn the ideology of the institutions that dictate social and language behaviors. This means that individuals in American society, from a

young age, learn normative citizenship from social and institutional discourse communities, which are basically speech communities.

Thus, individuals learn the rules of socializing, language, and language power relations from their discourse communities. They are not inherent. Language and written communication are learned behaviors. Porter describes this process as a forum where “Each forum has a distinct history and rules governing appropriateness to which members are obliged to adhere. These rules may be more or less apparent, more or less institutionalized, more or less specific to each community” (39). A discourse community’s forum has its set of rules of standard language and social behavior that the members of the community should adhere to. A forum can be an academic journal or family dinner table.

Many people’s identities are closely tied to their discourse community and where they frequently learn language behaviors. Each discourse community navigates larger society differently with its own set of language behaviors. Language and written communication expectations typically shift to accommodate a situation and those expectations are defined by discourse community standards. Discourse communities are institutions maintained by internalization and habitualization. Individuals learn normative social activities from their discourse communities because language behaviors and cultural social activities are regulated by the community. Due to the diversity of discourse communities, it is possible to have conflicting language behavior expectations simultaneously. These language behaviors, cultural customs, and discourse communities comprise an individual’s sense of reality, because as previously argued using Berger and Luckmann’s concepts, reality and society are products humans created. Which means, each person constructs their own understanding of reality, and it exists simultaneously next to everyone else's constructed reality.

Individuals build expectations and navigate spaces according to the knowledge gained from their communities that contribute to their reality and interpretation of the world they experience. Essentially, these are the foundations of a person's reality and the lens through which they socialize with other people of similar or different discourse communities and backgrounds. Berger also argues that "Different objects present themselves to consciousness as constituents of different spheres of reality... My consciousness, then, is capable of moving through different spheres of reality... I am conscious of the world as consisting of multiple realities... the language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me" (Berger and Luckmann 35-36). People are aware that the world at large is composed of different constructed realities specifically unique to each individual, and discourse communities directly connect to the foundation of a person's reality because of the normative and cultural knowledge and language the community provides. People specifically use spoken and written language to communicate and interact with other realities and make sense of the world. Language is the main tool humans use to navigate other discourse communities and its corresponding reality.

Lloyd F. Bitzer in "The Rhetorical Situation," argued similarly. He stated that "rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse" (Bitzer 4). Bitzer explains that through thinking and actions, people create discourse and can effectively change reality. Once more, the idea of language and writing as a physical act solidifies. An individual's discourse community,

language, and way of thinking can potentially alter their perception of reality and/or understanding of reality.

Essentially, discourse communities and language have the potential to greatly influence how a person thinks. An individual can reproduce what they learned from their inherited discourse community or divest. Membership of discourse communities are also not always permanent. It is possible to be a member of several different communities and exit them at any moment. Secondary and Higher education are two separate discourse communities people join, outgrow, or withdraw from that have entirely different standards of written communication. Some discourse communities, like a discourse community composed of race and/or ethnicity, are permanent and inherited. These discourse communities can not be chosen, but individuals can choose to leave them or not associate with them. There can be contradictions even in the same discourse community, because social activities can be habitualized differently within institutions. For example, some composition instructors say not to use personal pronouns in research papers while others state the opposite. Negotiation is necessary when navigating discourse communities because of people's differing constructions of reality and language behaviors. This negotiation can unfortunately cause confusion and be particularly challenging for new members who are navigating how to perform or "behave" within the community.

III. Critical Thinking

As established prior, students in higher education come from different discourse communities with their own rules of communication that contribute to the formation of their identity and reality. Even though people have their own methods of written communication and different social expectations, composition instructors are tasked with teaching students how to write professionally and academically, a foreign and fluid concept constructed by humans that

varies depending on the rhetorical situation, as seen with the personal pronoun example. Composition instructors at universities introduce students to the university's standard of professional written communication. Students come to the classroom with their own way of thinking that they developed within their discourse community and then composition instructors are also tasked with teaching writing skills that can adapt according to the scenario and use professional written communication. There are so many different fields and types of academic writing that university standards of written communication are not universal and are dependent on context or rhetorical situations. It is not a monolith.

Northern Michigan University's English Department specifically prioritizes a set of outcomes that are designed to "Continue students' abilities to write carefully, read closely, and to discuss critically. Writers will expand their stylistic range, awareness of form, and ability to deal with complex issues." (Courses). Due to the diversity of academic writing standards, a common framework composition instructors use to encourage writing carefully, reading closely, and language adaptability is critical thinking.

Critical thinking is not concrete and easily definable either. It is a universal standard with no concrete definition or methodology. How to study and track the development of a student's sense of critical thinking is frequently debated and studied. Lisa Tsui in "Fostering Critical Thinking through Effective Pedagogy: Evidence from Four Institutional Case Studies" analyzed interview and classroom observational data from four different institutions to see what are effective forms of developing critical thinking skills. She collected data from a national sample of college students and her findings concluded that "successful development of critical thinking skills was linked to an emphasis on cooperative exploration of knowledge and divergent thinking" (Tsui 742). Essentially, critical thinking is a higher order cognitive skill that prepares

individuals to tackle a multitude of challenges they are likely to encounter in their lives and it develops strongly through repetition and community discussions (740). Critical thinking helps students expand their understanding of the world around them by interacting with their peers and actively engaging in discussions and debates while learning new information.

Since critical thinking is a higher order cognitive skill, it can potentially challenge a student's normative cognitive function. As previously stated, language is a major tool people created and use to navigate discourse communities and other people's realities. An individual learns language and social behavior from their discourse communities, and uses that information to construct their identity and navigate their reality. When a student enters a composition classroom that focuses on challenging a student's cognitive skill, it can sometimes interfere with their understanding of the human experience because language is so closely tied to reality, culture, and identity. When composition instructors introduce critical thinking skills, it can contradict a student's sense of self and reality. Developing critical thinking can potentially destabilize a vital tool the student uses to navigate society.

IV. Trauma and Critical Thinking

As a way of introducing and developing critical thinking skills and academic writing, composition instructors rely on texts. The types of texts vary, but essentially they are tools used to expand a student's critical thinking and academic writing skills. Even with the best intentions, no text is politically neutral. As explained previously using Berger and Luckmann's arguments, language is a social construct that is used to navigate human interaction and communication. In order for a social activity to become a social construct, it must be institutionalized and internalized. Language standards will differ based on the institutions present within discourse communities. Different language activities and behaviors will be institutionalized according to

the preference of the community upholding them. For this reason, an individual will produce texts according to the information learned from their discourse community and its institutions. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) explained that “Stories matter. Lived experiences across human cultures including realities about appearance, behavior, economic circumstance, gender, national origin, social class, spiritual belief, weight, life, and thought matter” (Resolution on the Need for Diverse Children’s and Young Adult Books). The NCTE explains that texts communicate realities and have an impact. Since language can alter reality, a text has the potential to alter or reinforce reality as well.

In the classroom, students are developing their cognitive skills using a tool, language, that can alter reality. This can be an incredibly personal experience since language is learned from their discourse communities and interacts so closely with their identity and reality. Débora de Carvalho Figueiredo supports this concept in her work “Narrative and Identity Formation: An Analysis of Media Personal Accounts from Patients of Cosmetic Plastic Surgery” investigates how “female identities, especially in what concerns the intersection between self-identity and body shape, are construed and represented by certain genres” (Figueiredo 259). She argues in her work that body shape and a sense of self are affected or reaffirmed by genres of media. In order to examine female identity in this manner, she establishes that “In late modernity, the concepts of identity and identity formation are inseparable from language and discourse. As scholars both in the area of linguistics and of social sciences affirm, identities are forged within discourse” (259).

Even though her piece discusses the rhetorical aesthetics of identity and cosmetic plastic surgery, Figueiredo beautifully confirms in her introduction that identity and identity formation are directly informed by discourse and the individual’s discourse communities. A sense of self and reality is inseparable from the language a person uses and the discourse communities they

are a member of. Thus, the language within the texts composition instructors select and in-class discussions of the text have the potential to reinforce or disrupt a student's understanding of their reality and identity. Texts represent their own realities with their own universal truths that can align or go against a student's learned experiences. Since texts are written representations of language, it can potentially reinforce or challenge language behaviors inherited by their discourse communities.

As previously mentioned, a text can encourage conversation and analysis that reinforces or disrupts a student's understanding of themselves and the world around them. If a text disrupts or challenges a student's understanding of reality, it can cause an emotional or psychological reaction. Michelle Balaev in "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" explains that trauma can be "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev 150). Balaev famously argued that trauma is a singular event that disrupts or challenges an individual's understanding of the world around them. Thus, this definition of trauma can be applied to situations where an individual's concept of the world around them, or reality essentially, shifts.

Using Berger, Luckmann's, and Tsui's logic and findings, the act of developing critical thinking, language, and a different form of written communication, like academic writing, can be a traumatic experience and event if not handled with care because language is an integral tool humans use to navigate and alter their reality. A student's identity and sense of self has the potential to become a site of trauma in the classroom or in their writing if the language used to learn their foundational social behaviors and cultural customs is challenged or rejected. The reality a student constructed, be it consciously or unconsciously, can shift. This is especially true when the text used engages in emotionally challenging or sensitive materials because it can

produce emotional reactions in students and further create an event that does not align with the student's construct of reality and normative behavior.

If composition instructors do not engage with the texts they choose critically, it can and will reinforce systemic inequity since that is the reality institutions like higher education create/perpetuate. It can also reinforce any internal biases and/or stereotypes the student holds. Texts themselves are also not politically neutral and communicate the text producer's reality, which can include racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic biases. The NCTE stated "English teachers and teacher educators are complicit in the reproduction of racial and socioeconomic inequality in schools and society. Through critical, self-reflexive practices embedded in our research and our teaching, we can work against racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic inequalities." A text will communicate the writer's understanding of language and communication, and produces work that best fits their intentions and for their own benefit.

April Baker-Bell worked against the reproduction of linguistic oppression by teaching African American English (AAE) to her students and documented the experience from a pedagogical perspective in her book "Linguistic Justice: Black Language, literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy." In the book, she bridges the gap between theory and practice, and uses theory to inform her pedagogical practices in the classroom to subvert oppressive linguistic ideologies. She explained that "For language and literacy researchers, it illuminates how theory, research, and practice can operate in tandem in pursuit of linguistic and racial justice" (Baker-Bell 64). She is essentially urging educators and instructors to use theory in the organized effort to enact linguistic and racial justice. Also, she stated "While developing students' linguistic consciousness is crucial to their sense of self and identity, awareness is not enough to bring about social change" (86). Baker-Bell supports the claim that younger students in the United States

need more than awareness in order to generate any social change. She supports the concept that an individual's sense of self and identity is crucial and closely related to linguistic behaviors and consciousness. According to Baker-Bell, antiracist black language pedagogy must incorporate *critically conscious talk* or *CCT* – where teachers and students question, interrogate, and dismantle dominant language narratives that contribute to racial oppression (81). As an Assistant Professor of Language, Literacy, and English Education at Michigan State University, Baker-Bell applies rhetorical and linguistic theory to select texts and materials to disrupt the reproduction of racial and socioeconomic inequality at universities. She carefully selected the texts because she acknowledges that texts can reinforce systems of oppression and inequity. Her work is contemporary evidence of pedagogical practices that effectively use literacy and texts to represent marginalized communities without over focusing on their trauma. Baker-Bell utilized texts that did not uphold systemic inequity and safely introduced a new discourse community to students without destabilizing their identity or the tools students use to evaluate reality.

Overall, a text can uphold or challenge a person's views of society, their identity, and reality. Rules of communication, language, and writing are created by humans, and people are responsible for the practices they choose to maintain. Thus, composition instructors are responsible for the social constructs they wish to uphold or challenge in their classrooms. The act of using a text to challenge a student's understanding of reality can be potentially traumatic according to Baleav's definition of trauma. If a person's understanding of reality is altered, it can be traumatic. In an effort to expand a student's cognitive ability through a text, composition instructors can potentially shift a student's understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Amidst a global pandemic and rising mental health crisis for college students, it is not unreasonable to evaluate the pedagogical practices composition instructors use to teach language and question the methods. Justin Heinze, Assistant Professor of Health Behavior and Health Education at the University of Michigan conducted a study of university students mental health to assess the gravity of the crises. The study surveyed data from 32,754 students from 36 colleges and universities. Heinze stated that “a substantial majority of students indicated that their mental health has negatively affected their academic performance, with 83% reporting at least one day of academic impairment due to mental health in the last four weeks” (Heinze). The data from the study is alarming and should prompt educators to reevaluate their curriculums and the cognitive effects of the pedagogical methods used in their classrooms. The data shows students are struggling with their mental health.

Composition courses are not single handedly responsible for the declining mental health rates of all university and college students, but they do directly interact with a student’s identity during an already vulnerable time. This interaction can alter a student’s sense of reality and standards they use to evaluate society, which according to Baleav, can cause an emotional response and potentially be a traumatizing experience. In chapter 2, I will discuss how students could theoretically respond to trauma in the composition classroom and trauma spectacles in composition courses. I will also investigate how identity affects a student’s response to trauma and how trauma narratives of marginalized communities can become spectacles in composition courses and contribute to misrepresentations of marginalized communities.

CHAPTER TWO

In Chapter 1, I argued that the process of teaching and learning writing skills using trauma novels in composition courses can potentially create an opportunity for a traumatic experience for students. Because trauma novels of marginalized communities interact closely with language, a social construct and learned behavior from an individual's discourse community, and a vital tool used in the formation of identity and reality, it can disrupt or reinforce a student's perception of reality. I also briefly touched on the responsibility composition instructors hold in selecting texts for their classes because texts utilize language, the same tool used in the formation of identity and reality, and may reinforce or perpetuate systems of oppression. With rising rates of mental health struggles, a closer look at trauma, identity, language, and trauma narratives is necessary for this unique situation composition instructors and modern college students face alike.

To claim that the act of developing critical thinking, language, and a different form of written communication, like academic writing, can be a traumatic experience if not handled with care, the exact definition of trauma used in this thesis must be defined. The working definition of trauma used in this thesis is complex and directly informed by American culture, which is historically and infamously imperialist and capitalist. This thesis focuses on composition courses in the US, and the location and built landscape directly impacts how trauma functions in the classroom.

In "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," Michelle Balaev analyzes trauma in literary theory. Balaev defines a trauma novel as a novel that:

Demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are

themselves connected to specific environments. Novels represent this disruption between the self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories embedded in landscapes that define the character's identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience. The primacy of place in the representations of trauma anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and, in fact, organizes the memory and meaning of trauma. (Balaev 149-150)

What is important to note, is that she defines a trauma novel as a demonstration or portrayal of a traumatic event that destabilizes attachments or understandings of self and others. The traumatic event then challenges core understandings and assumptions of social relationships and a character's sense of morality. Balaev argues that the trauma novel represents the disruption of identity through the description of the place of trauma. The retelling of a site of trauma then provides a space for readers to analyze aspects of the text and plot that contributes to the character's identity and the location where the character experienced trauma. She focuses on the importance of the physical environment because it gives the reader space to process the text's traumatic events. According to Balaev, a traumatic event then disrupts connections between the self and others.

Balaev elaborates on her definition of a trauma novel:

The term "trauma novel" refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world. The external event that elicits an extreme response from the protagonist is not necessarily bound to a collective human or natural disaster such as war or tsunamis. (150)

Balaev further defines a trauma novel as a work of fiction that conveys loss, grief, and fear. The strong emotions then interact with memory and create new perceptions of identity and the perceived world in general. So, a trauma novel, or narrative, portrays a character's traumatic experience and how the traumatic event disrupted their identity and perception of the world around them.

Balaev argues that the trauma novel is also relatable. She explained that a traumatized protagonist in texts highlights the uniqueness of individual trauma that is typically a result of larger systemic inequity, societal institutions, or ideologies. Balaev notes that trauma novels provide insight into the personal experience of suffering that is still relatable to readers (Balaev 155).

She states that the trauma the main character in the fictional trauma novel experiences is designed to bring awareness to cultural values or ideologies. The reader gets to “step into someone’s shoes,” for a day and ideally see from that character’s point of view. The character is typically meant to be perceived as an everyday, regular person and that allows readers to learn and essentially expand their cognitive ability and envision themselves processing the trauma the character endures.

In Chapter 1, I also discussed how humans use language to navigate their reality, and the relationship between discourse communities and the formation of identity. I further argued that rhetoric can alter reality through the use of language and discourse (Bitzer 4). Discourse communities use language to teach members normative social behaviors and “truths” about reality. Through the use of rhetoric, members of discourse communities as a result alter the reality of its members. The information members of discourse communities learn through language then become the foundations of their reality and identity. Balaev’s definition of a traumatic event and a trauma novel highlight how fiction and the content of a text can impact a reader through its use of language to disrupt what other discourse communities consider “normal.” If a text challenges what the student believed to be a fundamental truth of their reality and identity, it can be interpreted as traumatic. Balaev is not arguing that trauma novels traumatize people, but that they shape our perceptions of traumatic events and how people

process the trauma and retell it. As previously stated, a traumatic event is defined as “a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society” (Balaev 150). A traumatic event by Balaev’s definition implies that written depictions of trauma have the potential to disrupt a person’s identity and the standards they use to navigate the world around them. So, a text constructs a particular sense of reality that can affect a reader’s understanding of their own reality. If a person’s understanding of reality is challenged or disrupted, it can be interpreted as traumatic and permanently change the reader’s perception of themselves and the language they use to interact with the world around them. If a trauma narrative reproduces ideologies of systems or institutions of oppression and aligns with a student’s perception of the world around them, then the trauma narrative reinforces systemic inequity. The system of oppression reproduced depends on the location or site of trauma and the demographic of the reader/audience. This is even further complicated if the reader experienced the same trauma the character in the trauma novel survives. For example, what happens when a student of a marginalized community reads a trauma novel of their communities’ traumatic experiences? For example, what happens to a Latina/o/e student’s identity and perception of reality when trauma novels discuss the trauma people of diasporas experience in front of their peers? More research is needed to evaluate the effects teaching trauma novels of students of marginalized identities and their experience witnessing their stories retold in the classroom for other students to wrestle with identity, reality, and empathy.

Composition courses in the United States also face a unique dilemma concerning trauma due to location and audience. The United States is a capitalist society and capitalism affect the economic sectors of public and private life, including institutions like higher education.

Capitalism is one of the major foundations of American society. It affects how the environment is constructed, how societal structures and/or institutions are maintained, and how power is organized and distributed. Language is one of the tools used to communicate, maintain, and enforce power. In general, acknowledging power relations is crucial in discussions of trauma, capitalism, language, and higher education. Capitalism also creates a different type of trauma that is specific to the United States. Frantz Fanon, in “Wretched of the Earth,” discusses capitalist and colonizer societies, stating:

In capitalist societies the educational system, whether lay or clerical, the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary honesty of workers who are given a medal after fifty years of good and loyal service, and the affection which springs from harmonious relations and good behavior—all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission... In the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, counselors and "bewilderers" separate the exploited from those in power. (Fanon 38)

Fanon explains that capitalist countries use institutions to create moral standards and use workers of the institutions to enforce that constructed morality. Fanon specifically cites the role of educational institutions and systems in establishing power and separating exploited populations from those with power, effectively preventing them from confronting their oppressors and enforcing submission. According to Fanon, teachers and instructors are one of the main workers who actively separate exploited individuals from people in power. Capitalism and colonialism thrive by exploiting individuals of lower socioeconomic statuses and has historically done so in the United States. Fanon’s claims directly connect to the NCTE’s statements concerning texts in classrooms. Composition instructors are educators who have the potential to maintain systems of exploitation and power imbalances/inequities. Depending on the narratives and texts used in the classroom and how they are discussed or analyzed, the text and how the instructor analyzes the text in class with their students can reproduce inequities and enforce the disparities between the colonized and colonizers or the privileged and the marginalized. The language and rhetoric the

instructor uses can reinforce a reality of systemic oppression and cement the division between those in power and the oppressed.

Paolo Freire in “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” examines the similar dynamic Fanon mentions of the teacher who enforces a hierarchy of power and the dichotomy between the oppressors and the oppressed. Freire introduces the banking concept of education, where “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire 72). In traditional methods of institutional education, students are the disciplined and ignorant subject, and the teacher is the highest authority with the most knowledge. There is no open communication or mutual understanding. Students are expected to submit to what the instructor considers as normative language and social behavior, and the students are penalized if they do not conform. Freire listed ten major practices of banking education, and the final three were especially relevant to this thesis:

- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (Freire 73)

Freire explains that educators have complete control and authority to select the materials for their classrooms and students are forced to comply. What the educator says in the classroom is absolute and cannot be opposed or contested, which creates an uncompromising atmosphere in the learning environment. Finally, the teacher is the main focus of the learning process instead of the students because of their authority and control of the classroom environment. All of said principles do not allow room for compromise, negotiation, or discussion. When members of

different discourse communities with opposing language behaviors and normative social rules interact in classroom settings that use the banking education method, it is inevitable for there to be tension and conflict. If a composition classroom prioritizes power hierarchies and perpetuates systemic oppression, any difference becomes a conflict or challenge to a student's identity and reality.

Because the American higher education classroom is a site where language can communicate and enforce different realities and systems of oppression, students of marginalized communities are specifically vulnerable. The location and tuition cost of a university affects the demographic of the student population— thus affecting the socioeconomic status of the students and what discourse communities they come from. When marginalized peoples attend courses with students of historically advantaged identities and socioeconomic status, struggles and tensions between different identities are likely to unfold, especially if the differences in power are not acknowledged or one perspective is privileged over another. If a composition instructor presents a trauma novel associated with a marginalized students heritage or community, like race, gender, or sexuality, the marginalized student is put in a position to witness their historically privileged counterparts react to their community's trauma in an academic setting—a location Fanon stated has historically been used to oppress marginalized communities and identities.

Unfortunately, America has a history of relishing in the spectacle of marginalized peoples and their traumas. One of the most infamous spectacles of trauma in the United States is the enslavement of African peoples. Saidiya V. Hartman, in "Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America," discusses the spectacle of black trauma in the United States. She begins her analysis and retelling through the letter of John Rankin to his

brother where he attempts to convince him to stop slave trading by writing a trauma novel where a white character survives the violent events that enslaved people of African descent were surviving at the time. Rankin chose to make the main character of his trauma novel white in hopes that his brother would empathize with the character. Hartman explains that Rankin “illuminated the ‘very dangerous evil’ of slavery ... detailing the obscene theatricality of the slave trade” (Hartman 17). According to Hartman, Rankin used creative writing and a white main character to describe in graphic detail the ‘theatrical’ horrors of slavery he learned through other people. Hartman argues that since he went into dramatic detail in order to shock and sway his brother, it created a spectacle of the situation. Hartman elaborated:

The grotesqueries enumerated in documenting the injustice of slavery are intended to shock and to disrupt the comfortable remove of the reader/spectator. By providing the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence, embellished by his own fantasy of slavery’s bloodstained gate, Rankin hoped to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved... by bringing the suffering near, the ties of sentiment are forged. (17-18)

In other words, in an effort to shock readers and audiences into opposing slavery, he took creative liberties in describing the violence and genocide enslaved people experienced at the time. He did so in order to rouse empathy in the indifferent reader by pushing them to identify with the enslaved person through mutual suffering and/or trauma. He hoped that since the enslaved person in his retelling was white, that the reader would be able to identify with the victim and build empathy, which she defined as the “projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or ‘the projection of one’s own personality onto an object, with the attribution to the object of one’s own emotions’” (19). Basically, she described empathy as the ability to identify with another person or object. Hartman finds fault with the process of projecting one’s own emotions onto a subject, especially if the character is of a minoritized identity and the reader is of a dominant identity, stating, “empathy into important respects

confounds Rankin's efforts to identify with the enslaved because in making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach" (19). Rankin, in an effort to write letters that convince his brother to condemn the slave trade, let his imagination run wild; he lost focus, and began to identify with the enslaved person. She explained that this caused him to feel sorry for himself and focus on himself rather than the audience of his letters, or that real people were experiencing the horrors he fantasized. Because slave trade was already violently theatrical in nature, and his creative non-fiction letters were a spectacle meant to force empathy, the focus of Rankin's writing shifted from the horrors of slavery to his experience of the situation.

Rankin attempted to encourage his brother to perform what Baleav described in her analysis of trauma novels. The fictional character Rankin invented was designed "to allow the reader to bring into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that was connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies and provided a picture of the individual that suffers to suggest that the character was an 'every person' figure" (Balaev 155). Rankin was well-intentioned in his efforts to convince his brother to condemn the institution of slavery and used a trauma novel to accomplish his goal. Unfortunately, in an effort to exercise empathy and appeal to his brother's empathy, he created a spectacle of the trauma in his letters. He also began to identify with the character he created, and as previously stated, his focus shifted to himself.

Hartman explained that:

Is that if the scene of beating readily lends itself to an identification with the enslaved, it does so at the risk of fixing and naturalizing this condition of pained embodiment and, in complete defiance of Rankin's good intention, increases the difficulty of beholding black suffering since the endeavor to bring pain close exploits the spectacle of the body in pain and oddly confirms the spectral character of suffering and the inability to witness the captive's pain. (Hartman 20)

Like trauma novels, Rankin's letters risk overemphasizing, and normalizing pain associated with a traumatic event. By identifying himself with the characters, his writing distracts the reader from acknowledging black suffering, and pushes them to focus on the spectacle of the white character that is in pain and/or experiencing a traumatic event. The pain and horror become the focus and a spectacle rather than the fact that black people were suffering under enslavement. Depictions of a body in pain can be perceived dramatically and draw attention away from "the big picture." Hartman then further explains,

We need to consider whether the identification forged at the site of suffering confirms black humanity at the peril of reinforcing racist assumptions of limited sentience, in that the humanity of the enslaved and the violence of the institution can only be brought into view by extreme examples of incineration and dismemberment or by placing white bodies at risk. (20-21)

Hartman stated that the use of extreme examples in an effort to appeal to people's empathy is questionable at the very least. She questions why people need to see extreme depictions of violence in order to make moral judgments. She also questions why an individual needs self-identification in order to empathize or question an institution. There is no need to create a spectacle in order for people to engage, learn, and process a marginalized communities' trauma. Unfortunately, the spectacle is a phenomenon embedded within American society, as seen in Hartman's analysis of Rankin's letters.

Hartman's analysis of Rankin's letters illuminates a recurring issue within American culture and the way it creates a spectacle out of trauma, specifically black, indigenous, and people of color's (BIPOC) trauma. Even though Rankin was well-intentioned, he inadvertently mishandled his portrayal of slavery by overfocusing on and sensationalizing a body in pain. The focus shifted to the white body in pain instead of the institution of slavery and black people. The shock value of violence and extreme trauma is highlighted over everything else and is valued more highly by audiences.

Marginalized communities' trauma are still spectacles in American culture and unfortunately occur frequently even among the well intentioned, like composition instructors. As the NCTE previously stated, "English teachers and teacher educators are complicit in the reproduction of racial and socioeconomic inequality in schools and society. Through critical, self-reflexive practices embedded in our research and our teaching, we can work against racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic inequalities." Educators can and do reproduce the spectacles of BIPOC trauma, and it occurs frequently when they use BIPOC trauma novels to teach diversity, equity, and inclusion in their classrooms.

To elaborate, due to the cultural history of spectacles in the United States, trauma narratives of marginalized communities are prioritized to promote empathy and a learning experience for students. Only displaying trauma narratives of a marginalized community can become a form of misrepresentation. When instructors attempt to diversify their materials and select trauma novels to discuss marginalized communities, their students are forced to witness violence and exercise empathy either through self-identification or simply because the violence is intense. The texts then can cement stereotypes of minoritized peoples. Many instructors, like April Baker-Bell, attempt to diversify their materials to instead disrupt the systems of oppression that are reproduced through language, but lack the knowledge and support to do so. Thus, they select trauma novels to teach students about different communities. Students may even feel the need to perform empathy because of the nature of a spectacle. Depending on the demographic of students and the environment, students who are members of the community the trauma novel discusses are then forced to watch their peers emotionally and intellectually process their trauma. For example, if an instructor chooses a trauma novel about slavery to diversify their teaching materials, a black student is then now subjected to a spectacle of their community's trauma and

forced to witness their white peers process the violence and respond to the trauma they witnessed. More research is needed to explore why white readers at times reject empathy entirely when analyzing trauma narratives of BIPOC.

Due to the nature of the materials used in classrooms to discuss marginalized communities and its direct interactions with trauma, students then display varying trauma responses. The intensity of the trauma response depends on how closely the trauma novel challenges a student's identity or understanding of reality. A subject like slavery and racism in the United States may directly challenge what a student believes about their identity, family, community, and society in general. An individual can respond to trauma, or a negative experience or event that destabilizes their understanding of themselves and the world around them, with rejection, denial, acceptance, etc. Jose Esteban Munoz, in "Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics," defines the term "disidentifications" as the "survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Munoz 4). Essentially, the term describes a phenomenon amongst marginalized identities where they practice certain strategies in order to exist in a hostile public sphere where a subject rejects an aspect of their identity that puts the individual at risk. Even though the term is born from queer theory and meant for queer people whose identities are policed and persecuted, Munoz clarified that individuals of non-marginalized groups are able to perform disidentifications, or survival strategies, in order to survive spaces that require normative citizenship. Overall, disidentification is a trauma response.

Disidentifications can occur when a traumatic event highlights a part of an individual's identity that they recognize as a target for violence. If it is not generally accepted to be racist in

the public sphere, an individual will “disidentify” with the aspects of their identity that outwardly relate to racism. For example, in discussions of racism and racist institutions in the US, many people will make the disidentificatory statement “I didn’t own slaves why does this matter to me.” On the other hand, if a LGBT+ individual’s discourse community is homophobic, they will disidentify with the discourse community and aspects of their identity that relate to homophobia. Disidentification is primarily the act of rejecting aspects of one’s identity to negotiate existing in public and prevent a destabilization of identity and/or reality or in reaction to an event that destabilized their identity and/or reality.

Disidentification is only one of many trauma responses to traumatic events or situations that destabilize an individual’s perception of the world around them, which can occur when fundamental truths of a student’s reality are challenged by the content in trauma novels and narratives. In addition, if an instructor chooses only trauma novels when discussing marginalized communities, they risk misrepresenting the community. There is no need to only discuss a community’s traumatic events in order for students to expand cognitive ability. Marginalized communities deserve to have their narratives of joy, love, and other life experiences be made visible in the classroom and such narratives can equally expose students to different cultures and improve their critical thinking and literacy. If only trauma narratives of marginalized communities are analyzed in composition courses, it can trigger a trauma response or even worse, potentially influence the student to associate the depictions of violence to the marginalized community. If students are only ever taught trauma narratives of marginalized communities they do not interact with, is that really equitable representation? It’s not.

I cannot provide solutions to issues of misrepresentation or reinforcement of oppressive ideologies and their effect, but I can list some strategies I used in my classroom that fostered

meaningful reflection of the issues we as a class deemed important. A possible solution to prevent misrepresentation and trauma responses is to display narratives of marginalized communities experiencing joy and to structure conversations and discussion using websites that simulate game shows like Nearpod.com. Nearpod is a website where educators can create presentations with videos and interactive slides where students can respond to discussion questions anonymously and at their own pace. It creates a low stakes environment for students to process the course material without the pressure of repeating the information exactly and puts the focus on their perspective and interpretations of the course content. Also, if students have the ability to respond privately and reflect in written format using a website that the professor monitors, it not only allows for students to process new information not publicly but also prevents students of marginalized communities and identities from witnessing their oppressors wrestle with exercising empathy or creating a spectacle of their trauma. An instructor can choose which anonymous reflections to discuss and address while also maintaining engagement with students. Images of black joy can be prioritized over the oversaturated genre of slave or trauma narratives. Genres like magical realism can be analyzed and appreciated in addition to discussions of immigrant communities and their history. Students can learn in an environment that doesn't pressure them to disidentify or trigger a trauma response or reaction. If their understanding of the world around them is challenged, it doesn't happen in front of an audience.

Nearpod is only one example of a possible solution to preventing the destabilization of identity, perpetuation of systemic oppression, and the banking education method. This thesis does not provide every possible solution or alternative to avoid the pitfalls I identified above with composition courses. The main findings of this thesis identified that language is a fundamental tool individuals use to form their identities, connect with the people around them,

and navigate reality. In composition classrooms, language can be used to enforce hierarchies of power and conformity to what institutions deem acceptable language behaviors. If used consciously, language instead can be used as a vehicle for students to learn of differing discourse communities and how to navigate differing realities. If students and the discourse communities they come from are treated with respect, they can assess new information without considering it a challenge instead of reacting negatively to material that can potentially change their understanding of reality. The ultimate goal is always to teach language and rhetoric to students in a way that gives them the tools to continue self-actualization, stimulate endless inquiry, and interrupt the ideological indoctrination into a world of oppression.

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