Falling Into the Rhetorical Black Hole: Navigating Language, Terms, and Rhetoricity in Madness and Disability

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FALLING INTO THE RHETORICAL BLACK HOLE: NAVIGATING LANGUAGE, TERMS, AND RHETORICITY IN MADNESS AND DISABILITY

by

Taylor Wyatt

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

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ABSTRACT

Falling into the Rhetorical Black Hole: Navigating Language, Terms, and Rhetoricity in Madness and Disability

by

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Utah State University, 2023

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Department: English

Language enables communities to develop meaning and interpretations of words. Language practices and meanings can change through and with discourse among communities. This rhetorical thesis expands on Catherine Prendergast’s theory of the rhetorical black hole — a phenomenon where folks can find themselves without the means to operate rhetorically, as some audiences are unwilling to engage. I argue the rhetorical black hole is not a binary, and I call for further considerations of intersectionality in understanding the impacts of the rhetorical black hole. James A. Berlin’s New Rhetoric is used to demonstrate the meaning making power of terms and language use. I examine community members’ — Harriet McBryde Johnson, Margret Price, Geoffrey Reaume — use of terms and discourse throughout my argument. This project furthers the field’s understanding of rhetorical black holes and considers how individuals and communities can use language practices as forms of resistance to develop their rhetoricity.

(56 pages)
Falling into the Rhetorical Black Hole: Navigating Language, Terms, and Rhetoricity in Madness and Disability

Taylor Wyatt

Language enables communities to develop meaning and interpretations of words. Language and the very meanings of terms can change through and with use among communities. This thesis project is a rhetorical task that expands on Catherine Prendergast’s theory of the rhetorical black hole — a phenomenon where an individual can find themselves without the means to operate rhetorically, as some audiences are unwilling to engage. I argue the rhetorical black hole is not a binary, and I call for further considerations of intersecting aspects of identity in understanding the impacts of the rhetorical black hole, by looking at the full range of identity markers of rhetors (for example, race, ability status, education level, sex, gender, among others). The late scholar, James A. Berlin’s New Rhetoric theory is used to demonstrate the meaning making power of terms and language use. I examine community members’ — Harriet McBryde Johnson, Margret Price, Geoffrey Reaume — use of terms and discourse throughout my argument. This project furthers understanding of rhetorical black holes and considers how individuals and communities can use language practices as forms of resistance to develop their position in discourse.
DEDICATION

For the community
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Beth Buyserie, my major professor and mentor, for taking me and this project on. Thank you for the numerous conversations about my work. I left all of our meetings with newfound energy and commitment to the project. Thank you for always reminding me to keep people at the center of my work. Thank you for teaching me many aspects of writing not least of which how to quickly add an em dash to a document. To my other committee members, Dr. Jared Colton and Dr. Keri Holt, thank you for your support throughout the process. Dr. Colton, thank you for our many discussions about theory and the field. Dr. Holt, you helped me identify my desires and aims as a scholar. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with each of my committee members throughout this project. I am thankful to my other professors and the wider English department community. The department and my scholarly cohort made me a better writer, teacher, and person. To Millie, thank you for your support, laughs, and willingness to listen as I talked and talked about theory and rhetoric.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

I am fascinated by the connections of language in shaping thought. Language enables communities to develop meaning and interpretations of words. And as contexts around those groups also change, then so too can the language. To talk about something, to write about something is, ultimately, to create meaning. Language allows folks to further knowledge of external objects, abstract concepts, and even the self. Because language is a shared phenomenon, communities and individuals can influence one another through their language practices. All rhetors are tethered to their background and understanding to some extent, as they use language.

My language use in this project is also tethered to my background and understanding — even as I aim to be objective and rational. The paper is framed by my own language practices, my choice in citations, and how I build my argument. The following questions illuminate the tensions going to my study. How can I say what I am writing about without using the terms so often used to describe what that thing is? What if the very terms used to describe “that thing” is the very object of study? What happens when a speaker cannot share their understanding, their Truth?

My initial understanding of language and Truth developed from my undergraduate studies in philosophy and literature, which emphasizes, in part, language as a stand in for truth. My approach has become more nuanced in my graduate studies. I came to this project from two places. The first place was Catherine Prendergast’s (2003) rhetorical theory of the rhetorical black hole and rhetoricity. My second influence was specific individuals who speak to their condition to create meaning with others: Harriet
McBryde Johnson, a civil rights lawyer; Margret Price, an associate professor in the English Department and director of the Disability Studies program from the Ohio State University; and Geoffrey Reaume, an associate professor at York University and madness activist in Toronto, Canada. Price and Reaume are scholars and theorists in this arena. Their scholarship is significant because it is developed through their lived experience. I will turn to community members often to ensure the paper keeps the focus of the discourse on the people that comprise it. Prendergast’s, Price’s, and Reaume’s scholarship helps demonstrate the issues of rhetoricity.

“My goal isn't to shed the perspective that comes from my particular experience, but to give voice to it. I want to be engaged in the tribal fury that rages when opposing perspectives are let loose.” (McBryde Johnson, 2003)

Prendergast’s (2003) scholarship on the rhetorical black hole and rhetoricity demonstrates the issues folks can have as they attempt to share their experiences in discourse. The phrase “rhetorical black hole” was developed in her article, “On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability,” to describe the phenomenon where people with mental disabilities find themselves without the means or ability to operate rhetorically. Prendergast (2003) notes her project began thorough her interactions with her friend, Barbara. She recalls that Barbara was “aware of her mind as having been reconstructed by the discipline of psychiatry” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 189). Accordingly, Prendergast (2003) develops the term “rhetoricity” to describe the spectrum of a rhetor’s rhetorical position in a given context. A higher rhetoricity would suggest greater power in a rhetorical situation. Put simply, someone with a mental disability would have seemingly
lower rhetoricity relative to an able-bodied person. She writes, “that the mentally ill are treated as devoid of rhetoric would seem to me an obvious point: if people think you’re crazy, they don’t listen to you” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 203). If someone lacks rhetoricity they lack the ability to be perceived and valued as a rhetor. Any attempt to speak about the position leads to the speaker losing rhetorical ground — the rhetorical black hole.

My project takes the existing framework of Prendergast’s rhetorical black hole and rhetoricity and expands the framework and applicability of those concepts. Prendergast seems to suggest that the rhetorical black hole is a binary concept: either a speaker is the rhetorical black hole, or not. She comes to develop the expression after discussing accounts from schizophrenics and their families, as well as from popular films such as *Psycho*, and Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (Prendergast, 2003, p. 198). She writes “these polarized positions effectively place the mentally ill and schizophrenics in particular in a rhetorical black hole” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 198). Therefore, the harms of the rhetorical black hole for Prendergast come from the polarizing positions from popular narratives and theory. While I would not disagree about the impact of popular notions of disability from film, I would argue that the issue of the rhetorical black hole is more expansive than widespread narrow views of the experiences of mental illness and/or schizophrenia. I note the rhetorical black hole is more expansive than Prendergast argued.

The paradoxical feature of the rhetorical black hole is any attempt to speak about one’s lived experience, an action typically understood to develop one’s ethos, paradoxically harms one’s ethos and full rhetorical position, as defined by those outside of the community.
Aspects of identity beyond physical disability can be understood within the rhetorical black hole and rhetoricity framework. All aspects of a rhetor’s identity must be considered to understand a rhetor’s rhetoricity and standing in the rhetorical black hole. I argue further that a rhetor’s rhetoricity is not fixed, but fluid based on the wider context and the dynamic aspects of their identity. Intersectionality is an important aspect to consider when reflecting on the rhetorical black hole and rhetor’s rhetoricity, e.g., physical disability and other aspects of identity can also be understood within the rhetorical black hole framework. As Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds readers (1989), no person is ever simply one aspect of their identity and thus rhetoricity and the impact of the rhetorical black hole will be distinct for everyone: e.g., a white woman’s experience would be different than a Black man’s experience even if they both have the same disability. Moreover, other factors such as socioeconomic status can impact an individual’s experience with rhetoricity and, e.g., unhoused individuals, students, and retired individuals will all have particular contexts they operate in.

Language use is a significant aspect to understand how a rhetor might fall into the rhetorical black hole or lose their rhetoricity. Language and term usage is a fundamental way communities and individuals share their experiences and build knowledge with others. Discourse is framed before a rhetor and/or an audience engages in said discourse. Individuals bring aspects of their identity and lived experiences with them into conversations. Language practices vary among individuals and communities. Perceptions about language and the specific terms can influence how folks come to understand the discourse, for terms are both used in discourse and build the discourse. The discourse too can be shaped and changed by members within and outside a community.
A rhetor’s standing in the rhetorical black hole can be understood by the term and language usage. As terms build knowledge and meaning among communities, they are always embedded in constructing and destructing the rhetorical black hole. A key feature of the tension of rhetoricity is not being able to be engaged as a rhetor. Folks might speak, write, or sign to their condition, but the issue of the rhetorical black hole is understood when no audience is able or willing to engage. If a rhetor cannot share their Truth, their lived experience and knowledge making, then they are the in rhetorical black hole and their rhetoricity is impacted. Worse still, attempts to speak about one’s experience can paradoxically erode one’s rhetoricity. Moreover, the terms used demonstrate a rhetor’s position within the context of the discourse: insider/outsider perspectives. While discussion of theory and/or language practices can be imagined or theoretical for some, for others there are real material consequences.

The material consequences present in the discourse can be understood though power dynamics in the discourse within insider and outsider perspectives. Margaret Price (2011) notes the particular weight to naming for mental disabilities, “for often the very terms used to name persons with mental disabilities have explicitly foreclosed our status as persons” (p. 9, italics in original). If a rhetor’s personhood is called into question, then they are in a limited rhetorical situation. Their power to rhetorically engage with others is thus also limited. Some members of the community reject the terms promulgated by the medical establishment; medical practitioners can thus be understood as outsiders relative to the lived experience of people within the community.

Language and term use can be understood as a tool for rhetorical oppression or a tool for rhetorical solidarity and/or resistance. No term is neutral. Terms of the discourse
have the potential to be harmful or inclusive; however, the meaning of the terms isn’t inherently fixed. Many terms are used over Prendergast’s and Price’s “mental disability.”

Even that phrase is not a perfect term. Geoffrey Reaume (2006) reminds readers, “No term in the history of madness is neutral” (p. 182). Reaume’s preferred term of “madness” is made clear to his readers. Many people in the community reject the term “disability.” It is important to remember the distinction of English in the United States and English in the United Kingdom and Canada. The term “mad” has distinct connotations in the US than other anglophone countries. In the US, “mad” is often reduced to anger. There is an extensive range of terms used to describe various states of the human mind from “mad” and “crazy” to “mental health” and “post-psychiatry.”

Accordingly, the very terms used to talk about the concept run the risk of diminishing a community’s rhetorical position. National linguistic practices impact how communities can use specific terms. Disability has connection to institutions, whereas mad does not. Pushing for term standardization for individuals harms an individual’s rhetoricity. The potential for folks to lose their status as persons is also present.

How a phenomenon or concept is defined, and even the terms used to classify the entity, alters how that phenomenon is conceived. Language shapes how objects and concepts are understood. To name an object thus inherently implies or creates meaning about it. Mental activity does not exist in isolated abstract. The language used to describe states of the human mind — and perceived deviation from a norm — demonstrates how states of mind are considered. The discourse is inherently different if the term “mental disability” is used over the term “madness” and different still from “mental illness” or any other term. The specific language and terms used demonstrate perspectives of the
rhetor within the wider discourse. James A. Berlin, a late American academic, was known for his contributions to rhetoric and composition. His New Rhetoric theory shifts the orientation of Truth generating events (Berlin, 1982). Truth is understood as a generative event rather than a static object. Language becomes a way to Truth, rather than language existing as a stand-in for an external truth. Berlin’s theory clarifies the dynamic interaction between language and Truth creation. Truth creation can be understood as events when communities and individuals are able to knowledge build together.

Communities can express Truth via novel term usage — doing so engages in resistance and solidary. Particular contexts can lead to communities developing and changing their term use practices. Likewise, a community adopting a term also thus changes the wider sociocultural context. The term becomes changed by the new meaning given to it by communities as speakers. If external audiences demand a universal term or classification modal, then a limited view of lived experience becomes reinforced. An individual’s particular and unique lived experience is lost when one universal narrative is assumed. Two people might have the same disability; however, their experiences would be distinct. Insistence of universal framing loses sight of particular experience. The desire or impulse to universalize language forecloses other communities from meanings making with terms. A rigid universal term usage runs the risk of enabling and privileging of ableism in the discourse and within our community structures. This project is advocating for the conditions to be possible for further rhetorical discourse by communities impacted by the rhetorical black hole, and not an attempt to reject the rhetorical black hole. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community reclaiming the term “queer” is one well known example of community engagement via language and term
usage. A rhetorically flexible approach to terms and language use by both speakers and audiences enables social justice outcomes by recognizing the rhetorical position of individuals and communities.

Mad/mentally disabled academics operate in a unique rhetorical position, as professors are typically valued for their rational minds. I used Price and Reaume as theorists to deliberately consider rhetoricity in academic contexts. Moreover, Reaume’s and Price’s theories are valuable because the theories are developed by their lived experience. I selected these two writers because they both use distinct language from each other as they describe their experience. Price teaches in the United States and Reaume in Canada. Price identifies as genderqueer femme (Price, n.d.) and Reaume identifies as a man. Given the focus on rhetoricity, I wanted to consider two academics with distinct backgrounds. Additionally, both have lived experience relevant to the discussion and are operating rhetorically as insiders. Price prefers the term “mental disability” and Reaume prefers “madness.” Both professors’ term usage impacts their scholarship and pedagogy. Their theory is impactful because it is guided by their lived experience and their academic work. Their approaches are distinct from each one another. Price’s term mental disability demonstrates her connection and association with disability studies and the wider disability movement. Reaume’s madness demonstrates his connection to mad studies. Grown out of psychiatric system users and folks who were involuntarily hospitalized, mad studies has grown as a distinct academic field (LeFrancois et al. 2013). The relationship between the disability movement and by extension disability studies with conditions/status of the mind have, at times, been in
conflict. Madness and disability have often been conflated by outsiders; e.g., people with a physical disability seen as being mad and vice versa.

I first provide further detail to the theoretical and framework concepts of my argument: rhetoricity and the rhetorical black hole. I turn to Berlin’s (1982) New Rhetoric to demonstrate the Truth making significance of language and term use, unpacking why language usage is so pivotal to Truth seeking events within a madness/mental disability context. I consider the terms and the language practices Price and Reaume use in developing their theory. I also consider outsider naming—namely the naming from medical institutions. I consider the broader social and cultural contexts of understanding and meaning making.

Periodically, my argument is dispersed through vignettes of Harriet McBryde Johnson’s life and debate with philosopher Peter Singer. The McBryde Johnson v. Singer debate is a famous event in disability studies. Their exchange demonstrates the issues of rhetoricity within discourse. The McBryde Johnson vignettes serve as an effective example of the issues of rhetoricity as well as demonstrating Price and Reaume’s theory and scholarship. McBryde Johnson’s audience often is unable and unwilling to listen to her, as her lived experience is devalued and her body questioned. Her experiences in the debate further demonstrate the expansiveness of rhetoricity and the rhetorical black hole as frameworks for understanding the rhetor’s rhetorical position.

I have elected to use the preferred term from the writer and/or community member I am discussing; e.g., Price’s mental disability and Reaume’s madness. While also recognizing the decision may add complexity for my readers as various terms will be used, my choice is deliberate. Using a community member’s preferred term serves two
roles: one, to engage with a rhetor an audience ought to engage and actively listen to what is being shared, and two, complexity in terms and language use can be a good — that is, ease of discourse is not always a good. Focusing on ease of readability in discourse begs the question: what communities are privileged by ease and what communities might be harmed by that ease? The tension of that question underscores the issue of the rhetorical black hole. Using the preferred terms of a community/individual recognizes and values their rhetoricity. As I will argue, there are compelling reasons why groups use the specific terms they do. The push for universalizing terms often reinforces a medical model and/or a biological positivist means of understanding mental phenomenon. I do not intend to suggest that madness and mental disability are synonymous. Those two terms might refer to the same phenomenon, but the use of one term over another creates new meaning and truth, because each term is a particular way of sharing knowledge and lived experience. Novel creations of Truth as meaning making are a method communities can use to develop their rhetoricity. Declining to use a rhetor’s term would place them further in the rhetorical black hole and deny their rhetoricity. One example would be using a term for a rhetor’s gender/sexual identity that does not follow with their expressed position either incidentally or maliciously, e.g., dead naming, misgendering, conflating queer with gay or lesbian. Such action can harm the rhetorical position of those rhetors and lead to other possible harms, too.

Rhetoricity of Speakers: Understanding the Rhetorical Black Hole

The rhetorical black hole can be understood as a situation where rhetors cannot
engage rhetorically with an audience, where rhetors cannot express their lived experience and background in good faith with others. Being in the rhetorical black hole can impact more than someone’s rhetorical standing. Prendergast (2003) calls attention to the bodily harms that can happen to disabled folks as they lose their rhetoricity. She notes the rise and fall of mental hospitals (institutions once known as asylums) and the loss of bodily autonomy (Prendergast, 2003, pp. 194-97).

Prendergast (2003) traces the changes from hospitals to prisons. She writes, “the penitentiary is quickly becoming the repository for other historically excluded groups whose rights have been formally recognized (Native American, African American, for example)” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 197). Her friend, Barbara, experienced other bodily harm and was unhoused and lived on the Streets in New York City. Prendergast notes why Barbara might not have been arrested: “I attribute this at least in part to her being white, young, pretty and not particularly aggressive. Even at her worst she looks ‘likely’ to have insurance” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 197). These passages demonstrate that Prendergast is aware, at some level, of the importance of other aspects of identity when considering rhetoricity. I would argue that no single aspect of identity would be sufficient to understand someone’s rhetoricity. Moreover, some backgrounds might place a rhetor in a rhetorical black hole — foreclosing their status as persons.

In 2002 lawyer and disability rights activist Harriet McBryde Johnson had a debate with philosopher and bioethicist Peter Singer at Princeton University. The particularities of their debate are demonstrative of the wider issues of rhetoricity for disabled speakers. McBryde Johnson uses a power wheelchair and has what she calls a “muscle-wasting disease.”
Her work as a civil rights lawyer and disability activist is motivated by her lived experience. The scope of the argument between Singer and McBryde Johnson undermines her ability to engage as a speaker. Singer’s argument questions the personhood and ethical standing of disabled speakers. The crux of the debate centers around Singer’s questioning that folks like McBryde Johnson should be alive. Humans versus persons. Given the venue is an elite academic institution where Singer is a professor, McBryde Johnson’s position is further limited. The exchange favors Singer by default.

A rhetor’s position in the rhetorical black hole is not “fixed.” As in all rhetorical situations/contexts, the position of the speaker ebbs and flows based on the wider context. Regarding the rhetorical black hole as a fixed rhetorical position further erodes the rhetoricity of speakers operating from the rhetorical black hole. Again, I argue for further considerations of intersectionality. Prendergast developed the concepts of the rhetorical black hole and rhetoricity, and I am expanding the theories by looking at intersectionality. All aspects of identity are needed to consider the rhetoricity of a rhetor. Identities that are privileged in another context will impact the rhetoricity of a rhetor speaking from the rhetorical black hole. For example, a white woman will have a different experience within the rhetorical black hole compared to a Black man, as Prendergast (2003) notes with Barbara. The rhetorical black hole metaphor is helpful at demonstrating the concept, because all rhetorical positions are implicated by the rhetorical black hole. However, the degree of the impact is dynamic. Rhetors within the rhetorical black hole might be better heard in some situations over others.
The academy is one situation where rhetors might systematically have their rhetoricity negatively impacted. Mentally disabled and mad Academics exist in a unique rhetorical position. Price and Reaume both hold Ph.D. degrees. They each are associate professors at their institutions, meaning they have obtained tenure. With the career standing comes enhanced ethos in the public square. They both address their lived experience that connects them to mental disability and madness respectively within their scholarship. The issues of rhetoricity and the rhetorical black hole still impact them. Their experiences set up their theory in meaningful ways. Prices calls attention to the particular tension for academics with mental disabilities. She writes, “For thousands of years academe has been understood as a bastion of reason, the place in which one’s rational is one’s instrument” (Price, 2011, p. 8). Here Price notes that academics are valued for the workings of their mind. Thus, mentally disabled academics have a unique tension with their rhetoricity. Both disability and career are seen in conflict together. The tension raises the question: can an academic be taken seriously, if they do not make “rational” sense all the time?

_Harriet McBryde Johnson outlined the conditions needed for her to agree to the debate. She uses a power chair; accessibility and travel needed to be addressed for her to debate Peter Singer at Princeton. To ensure the necessary accommodations were met, Singer was included in email exchanges. Singer thus becomes privy to intimate details about McBryde Johnson’s body, chair, and her concerns about travel. She writes, “none of this is a secret; none of it cause for angst. But I do wonder whether Singer is jotting down my specs in his little note pad as evidence of how_
‘bad off’ people like me really are” (McBryde Johnson, 2003). Her accessibility needs further impact McBryde Johnson’s rhetorical position with Singer. The exchange begs the question: how is Singer’s argument impacted by McBryde Johnson’s needs? McBryde Johnson is forced to disclose personal details to engage in the debate; Singer’s body and mind are never subject to inquiry.

Rhetoricity is not good or bad inherently. Rather, a lack of being listened to is where the possibility for injustices and loss of rhetoricity can occur. Positing that it would be better not to be in the rhetorical black hole is an ablest framing of the rhetorical position of mad speakers. All persons exist rhetorically in distinct positions in networks of discourse. There can be valid and particular ways of knowing and communicating that are only possible from those particular rhetorical positions. However, there are real material conditions and harms that can happen to folk within the rhetorical black hole. Again, this project is advocating for conditions of discourse to be possible for individuals and communities in the rhetorical black hole, and not for a rejection of the rhetorical black hole itself. Those harms can be understood as the moral/social harms that rhetors engaging from the rhetoric black hole can experience. The issue becomes exasperated when communities are not listened to. This principle applies to all groups from a marginalized perspective and can compound with various intersecting identities. The impact and situation would be different for everyone. Barbara’s rhetorical position is distinct from McBryde Johnson’s, and her position is different still than Price’s position. Issues of rhetoricity can preclude communities from being perceived. Outside audiences
cannot engage with meaning making events and knowledge sharing if they do not first engage with the rhetor. What is being stated might not appear normative.

**New Rhetoric and Truth Creation from the Rhetorical Black Hole**

Sharing perspectives and creating meaning with language is a cornerstone of rhetorical situations. The impossibility of being engaged and valued as a rhetor is an aspect of the rhetorical black hole. In contrast to the rhetorical black hole, James A. Berlin’s 1982 article, “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories” is a significant example in understanding how language can create meaning and Truth. Berlin groups pedagogical approaches into four categories grouped by epistemic form. While Berlin is writing in a pedagogical and composition space, these theories are fundamentally epistemological. By epistemological, here I mean both knowledge creation, but also methods of sharing knowledge. Berlin’s four pedagogical theories are (1) Neo-Aristotelian or Classicists, (2) Positivists or Current-Traditionalists, (3) Neo-Platonist or Expressionist, and (4) New Rhetoric (1982, p. 234). Berlin’s theories on knowledge are essential to the discussion of the rhetorical black hole, because so often mentally disabled/mad rhetor’s knowledge developing events are regarded as irrational. Disabled/mad community members may use language to develop their rhetoricity in ways that don’t always make sense to external audiences. Berlin’s theories help us understand the unique relationship between language communication and Truth, as knowledge building. Because of the focus of language in development of Truth-seeking activities, it is significant that New Rhetoric is developed from someone well situated in writing
studies and composition pedagogy. Berlin’s New Rhetoric is helpful for recognizing how language can be used in meaning making events.

Throughout this section I have made use of truth with a lower case “t” and Truth with an uppercase “T.” My usage is intentional and follows common understanding of American-English grammar. If Truth is external and a unique developed entity, then it follows that Truth can be understood as a proper noun (and thus the need for the capital letter). However, if truth is understood as existing prior to language, then it does not follow that it is a distinct entity. Any language used to refer to that entity would simply be a stand-in. Thus, no capital would be needed. I use the capital T to demonstrate Truth as a dynamic event through language.

In order to best articulate the connection between New Rhetoric and madness, I will pause my argument to unpack New Rhetoric. Understanding the dynamic role of language is essential to my argument. Neo-Aristotelian, Neo-Platonist, and Current-Traditionalists all regard Truth as something external from the human actor. Truth then is something that can be discovered or found. While the three aforementioned approaches have distinct avenues of the how the human might come to identify/confirm something as true, they all posit that Truth is an object that is understood externally.

The relation and function of language distinguishes New Rhetoric from the other three approaches. Berlin (1982) writes on New Rhetoric, “for the New Rhetoric, knowledge is not simply a static entity available for retrieval. Truth is dynamic and dialectical, the result of a process involving the interaction of opposing elements” (p. 242). New Rhetoric views truth as something that is created, not discovered (Berlin, 1982, p. 242). Truth becomes a “dynamic” event. Rhetoricity is also dynamic and
changes with new contexts. Language practices inherently change as speakers and audiences change. Price and Reaume using mental disability and madness is a dynamic decision. McBryde Johnson’s language practices (both in the debate and within her writing) are also dynamic decisions. Other terms may have been used at one point or could possibly be used in the future. By rhetors using their preferred terms and language practices, they create knowledge and meaning with their audience. Communication thus can be understood as essential for Truth to be created. The event of communication exchange is the event of Truth being created. Communication facilitates the creation of Truth because of how language exists in relation to objects (both material and immaterial objects). The distinction of how Neo-Aristotelian, Positivist, and Neo-Platonist view language relative to New Rhetoric is what separates these approaches. Berlin writes on the role of language:

Language is at the center of this dialectical interplay between the individual and the world. For Neo-Aristotelians, Positivists, and Neo-Platonists, truth exists prior to language so that the difficulty of the writer or speaker is to find the appropriate words to communicate knowledge. For the New Rhetoric truth is impossible without language since it is language that embodies and generates truth. (Berlin, 1982, p. 243)

For New Rhetoric, language is both what creates and embodies Truth. The act of writing or speaking can be understood as a Truth creating event. Truth is not an external object to be found and proven. Thus, part of the issue of rhetoricity and the rhetorical black hole is competing notions of what Truth is or how it might be verified. For someone operating within the rhetorical black hole, speaking to their position is a Truth creating event — the
language and terms used build the Truth. Language/terms do not simply act as stand-ins for other material objects. The event of language becomes a moment of Truth specifically. Accordingly, folks who are not able to communicate, or even those that have a hard time doing so, would exist in a rhetorical black hole according to New Rhetoric.

New Rhetoric is particular because of the shift in what Truth is. Berlin’s (1982) novel argument about Truth repositions prior positions and thus necessitates questions about generalized assumptions. Neo-Platonist, Neo-Aristotelians, and Positivist might disagree on epistemology towards truth; e.g., the role of sense experience in knowledge making. However, the three frameworks would all place truth as something separate and distinct from the human agent, and language “stands in” for the external truth. New Rhetoric establishes that language creates Truth. Therefore, the human agent is active in the event. Such a distinction is essential to rhetoricity: Truth creative events can be successful or unsuccessful between rhetors and their audiences. If a rhetor cannot share their experiences for an audience — if they cannot be engaged with as a rhetor — then they are positioned in the rhetorical black hole and thus their rhetoricity is impacted.

Price (2011) incorporates New Rhetoric in her text and expands the concept to demonstrate that language can knowledge build one’s concept identity (concepts of oneself) and external objects (separate from the self). A concept like disability can be developed and complicated through language and someone could hold disability as part of their identity too. Price notes she falls under the New Rhetoric camp and defines it as, “an individual does not perceive the world (or himself) [or themselves] and then report those perceptions through language; rather, the language an individual uses constructs his world and himself” (2011, p. 37). Price’s unpacking of New Rhetoric and her association
with the pedagogy is key and echoes concepts of language. Price takes the concept of New Rhetoric even further than Berlin and directly establishes that language can shape the self. As she notes, “the language an individual uses constructs his world and himself” (Price, 2011, p. 37). Price’s inquiry into New Rhetoric demonstrates that language builds meaning for individuals, but also enables individuals to develop meaning of the external world. The dynamic world building of language is both individual and communal. In other words, there is no static universal structure of the external, material world. Price very much views Truth in a New Rhetorical way. Price ties the construction of the self via language in the same way. If language does construct the self, then it follows that deliberately chosen language can be understood as a deliberate choice in self and self-identity. Using language develops the self and exists as a path of rhetoricity. The use of language also shapes how outsiders consider the phenomenon. A rhetor might use the term “disabled” to build their identity. That identity construction will then impact, both positively and negatively, how external audiences engage with them. The use of the term can be active in furthering one’s rhetorical position.

Concept of self-expression and identity can be understood in positive forms of resistance and solidarity, but also in oppressive forms. I call attention to a passage from Price I cited previously on the negative impacts naming can have for mentally disabled folks. She writes, “for often the very terms used to name persons with mental disabilities have explicitly foreclosed our status as persons” (Price, 2011, p. 9, italics in original). The act of Truth creation, as meaning making among rhetors, has the possibly to extend beyond the individual rhetor and shape wider discourse. The meaning making events,
Truth creating events, is never a neutral event. People can lose rhetoricity and even their status as person via term usage.

Loss of rhetoricity is the real negative harm present within the discourse of meaning making. Price raises concerns that New Rhetoric relies on rationalism of rhetors. I argue that rationalism is not requisite for a rhetor to create Truth within a New Rhetorical framework. Berlin does not use the term “rational” or “rationalism.” However, Price argues rationalism is fundamental to the concept of communication as Truth building in New Rhetoric. She writes, “Berlin takes for granted that the individual rhetor will be able to make sense of her world for an audience” (Price, 2011, p. 38). Price here questions the assumption that a rhetor would always be able to speak coherently about their condition. I do not, however, think that the ability to always speak coherently is a requirement for New Rhetoric. Berlin’s approach to New Rhetoric does not rely on a metric of rationalism; moreover, there is not a test that could be implemented to evaluate if Truth was developed. Such a method or approach would posit Truth, knowledge building, in the way of the Neo-Aristotelian, Neo-Platonist, or Positivists. It is possible the communication event does not produce Truth in all moments. Not every moment of language-based communication would create meaning, Truth, for speakers and audience members. The fact that some conversations do not create meaning does not preclude the possibility of other conversations creating meaning. An autistic rhetor might not always make “sense” to external audiences; however, that does not preclude they might not make “sense” to that same audience at another time or in another context.

Speakers and audiences might not be able to have an exchange for communication in a way that enables Truth for any number of reasons, including Price’s example of a
speaker not being able to make sense of her world for an audience. The reality where a speaker cannot make sense of her world/self to an external audience is precisely the issue of rhetoricity and the rhetorical black hole. Not all conversations will be easy and an individual’s background position might make some exchanges easier or harder. Recall Prendergast’s friend, Barbara. Prendergast’s (2003) article is made possible because of her interactions with Barbara. Prendergast’s engagement with her friend enabled developments of rhetoricity and the rhetorical black hole — that is the Truth building activity. Prendergast’s article in some ways anticipates Price’s objection about the role of rationality. Prendergast writes, “the diagnosis of schizophrenia necessarily supplants one’s position as rhetor, Barbara may tell her story, but no one can hear it” (2003, p. 191). The issue is not that Barbara cannot share her story (though at times that might well be the case). The issue is that no one engages with Barbara — “no one can hear it” to use Prendergast’s turn of phrase. That lack of engagement specifically is the rhetorical black hole.

For New Rhetoric, rationality is not requisite for the creation of Truth. The important feature for New Rhetoric is simply the possibility for Truth to be created by speakers, not the reliance that Truth would be produced following every rhetorical communication exchange. New Rhetoric repositions the concept of Truth rather than providing instructions for systematically seeking it (as would be the case for Neo-Aristotelian, Positivist, and Neo-Platonic structures). Price is spot on when she notes that speakers will often not be able to make sense of their world for audiences. And because of that, folks who cannot express themselves rhetorically to other audiences will have a limited rhetorical position — another way of framing or defining the rhetorical black hole.
hole. The issue for the rhetor is how audiences might respond when they hear something that does not appear rational. Thus, part of the task becomes recognizing rhetoricity in all possible forms. Price contends that “he [Berlin] misses the fact that those with mental disabilities are always already defined as nonhuman, by dint of their failure to make sense (2011, p. 39, italics in original). I would argue that Price is demonstrating the complex and seemingly paradoxical issues of rhetoricity here and not the failing of New Rhetoric. Something might not seem rational to one audience but is thought of as rational to another.

The shifting of language in constructing meaning within disability can also be understood via changes from person first language and identity first language. Sachin Pavithran, the Executive Director of the US Access Board, presented on a panel discussion with doctoral candidate Teresa Larsen regarding person-first and identity-first language within disability contexts. Pavithran and Larsen (2021) note person-first language would read as “person with a disability,” whereas identity-first language would read as “disabled person.” Pavithran shares that he utilizes identity-first language, and he identifies as a blind person. He calls attention to the particular contexts that foster the two types of language usage. Specifically, parents of disabled children and service providers preferred person-first language within the last 20-30 years (Pavithran and Larsen, 2021). They note that legal statute and policy often reflect language practices that are no longer used by community members, e.g., visually impaired/visual loss over blind, or handicap over disabled. Pavithran states that he is not impaired, defective, or broken (Pavithran and Larsen, 2021).
Price’s objections to New Rhetoric can be understood by considering the wider context as constraining regarding the language rhetors use. The dynamic of Truth creation in New Rhetoric comes from communication and embodiment through language. However, if there is no mutual understanding or connection in language then the activity of truth building will not always be a success. Or if the speaker is not valued as a speaker, that is listened to with sincerity, then Truth cannot be created.

Price (2011) raises concerns about the ability for mad speakers to be engaged in rhetorically. She notes that the act of listening to folks lacking in rhetoricity can be difficult. She writes, “if a student (or teacher) lacks rhetoricity, what happens to this vaunted process of listening? Is it possible to listen to the mad subject?” (Price, 2011, p. 42, italics in original). The issues of listening to a “mad subject” reverberate Price’s objection to Berlin’s New Rhetoric. If no one listens to a rhetor, they lose ability to speak — to engage rhetorically. Price is fundamentally describing the rhetorical black hole, but in new terms. The negative impacts she calls to are one and the same as the negative impacts from the rhetorical black hole. If the student lacks rhetoricity and cannot be engaged in the classroom, they likely won’t be able to reach their desired academic outcomes. They might struggle in a course or fail out of the institution. A similar event can happen to instructors, too. Conditional faculty can lose their teaching load. Tenure track faculty can fail to achieve tenure. If no audience will engage a rhetor in good faith, then the rhetor has fallen into the rhetorical black hole. Lack of engagement from an audience is not inherent, as audiences and contexts change.

_McBryde Johnson (2003) reflects on another interaction from her time at Princeton._
McBryde Johnson: I call on a young man near the top of the room.

Unnamed Student: Do you eat meat?

McBryde Johnson: Yes, I do.

Unnamed Student: Then how do you justify-

McBryde Johnson: I haven’t made any study of animal rights, so anything I could say on the subject wouldn’t be worth everyone’s time.

When I was an undergraduate student, I might have made a similar argument as the “young man” did at the debate. After studying rhetorical theory deeper, I have come to understand the limitations of this approach of argumentation. The young man asks McBryde Johnson about her diet to question the rest of her argument. He wants to win the interaction more than he seeks to learn from McBryde Johnson’s perspective. There is value in listening to people and communities about their lived experience. The student views truth as Neo-Aristotelian, Positivist, and/or Neo-Platonic, as he is not able to see the knowledge building potential from McBryde Johnson’s perspectives. Seeking to learn about the rhetor’s Truth and lived experience can create better theory and promote wider understanding. Moreover, better discourse occurs when parties seek to learn and understand the position of the other.

The shifting of terms and the new contexts created by those new meanings is demonstrative of New Rhetoric. Terms and language use can be developed by folks’ lived experience. The term “queer” might be the best example of the development of language in constructing meaning. Price (2011) writes, “as with queer, the broad scope of mad carries the drawback of generality, but also the power of mass” (p. 10 italics in original). Price notes the value of broad terms — they can expand to many communities
and circumstances. Mad and queer are both terms that have been reclaimed. Their wider use cases as pejoratives functioned because of how widely applicable they could be. The act of reclamation of those terms is also possible because of their wide applicability. The expansiveness can be a limiting factor for the terms’ rhetorical function. Discourse with these terms has the potential to further the rhetoricity of individuals and communities.
CHAPTER II

TERMS OF THE CONVERSATION AND IN PRACTICE

New Rhetoric establishes why the issue is terms and language practices are significant in Truth creation, as a meaning making event. In this section, I analyze the specific terms and language practices used by Price, McBryde Johnson, and Reaume. Terms are not static and meanings can shift.

There is a clear example of language not working in Mad at School. Price (2011) discusses the term “psychosocial.” Price discloses that this was her preferred term. She writes, “I like its etymology, the fact that it bumps psych (soul) against social contexts; I like its ability to reach toward both mind and world” (Price, 2011, p. 18, italics in original). As Price demonstrates here, the term works in both ways, conditions of the mind are often understood. Affecting the personal (the psych/soul) as well as the external (the social). The term is very specific to what is identified. However, part of the issue with terms is how they are used with other communities.

Price articulates why psychosocial failed. “I have started to feel like, what’s the point of using a term that no one gets but me? Put simply, in most social contexts, psychosocial failed to mean” (Price, 2011, p. 19, italics in original). Price’s concern here demonstrates the limitations of New Rhetoric. She has the speaker select a term for a range of reasons; however, the wider social context is not sure what the term means. Thus, Price’s engagements with various audiences with this word were not always able to lead to creation of Truth. She calls attention to times her use of the term was successful. She writes, “I’ve been using the term ‘psychosocial disability’ in various settings for over a year — at conferences, in casual conversations, in my writing, etc. —and it seems that,
unless I’m writing an article where I can fully explain what I’m getting at, people just kind of go blank when I use the term” (Price, 2011, p. 19, italics in original). Part of the issue with psychosocial disability failing to work is the same reason way terms like mad and queer succeed. Queer and mad existed as discreet terms in discourse before they were each reclaimed. Psychosocial is essentially a newly created term. Folks with an outsider perspective do not already know what it means. However, as Price demonstrated, when she had the space to establish the meaning, the term was very effective.

Reaume asserts the term “mad” is more inclusive. Reaume has written about his preferred use of terms. He writes, “I do not regularly use this term [mental illness] for political reasons. Mental illness is a term many people in the psychiatric survivor community reject because it is identified as having to do with co-operation with mainstream psychiatry and uncritical acceptance of the medical modal” (Reaume, 2006, p. 182, italics in original). His term use is directly impacted by his lived experience and his position with institutions. Reaume’s teaching and research address the cultural and social ways of understanding madness as opposed to medical/biological positivist ways of attempting to understand madness.

Mark Hopwood (2017), an associate professor of moral philosophy from Sewanee: The University of the South, has commented on the issue in knowledge making from McBryde Johnson and Singer’s debate. He writes, “The problem with Singer’s ‘theoretical world’ … is that it leaves no room for someone like Harriet McBryde Johnson to give voice to her particular experience and thus runs the risk of failing to recognize her humanity” (Hopwood, 2017, p. 638). Lived experience is fundamentally distinct from philosophic, propositional based arguments. McBryde Johnson is not
“making an argument” in the way that Singer does. Their positions in the conversation suggest their own particular approaches, e.g., Singer’s training in philosophy will lead him to universalizing propositions. McBryde Johnson’s argument is grounded in her reflecting on her lived experience, material conditions, and connections to disability communities; moreover, their own desired and intended outcomes of the debate suggest their rhetorical positions. Singer’s limitation in listening to McBryde Johnson ensures that he misses what she aims to share.

McBryde Johnson’s debate with Singer is a strong example of rhetoricity faced by members of the disability community. Both her actions to gain (and regain), maintain, and preserve her rhetorical position are impacted by the very structure and scope of the debate. Singer’s position questions if she ought to exist and questions her position as a person. Moreover, the structure of academic, utilitarian philosophy clashes with lived experience and personal narrative. In McBryde Johnson’s (2003) *New York Times* article she relays an exchange she had with an unnamed philosophy professor.

*A philosophy professor says, "It appears that your objections to assisted suicide are essentially tactical."

"Excuse me?"

"By that I mean they are grounded in current conditions of political, social and economic inequality. What if we assume that such conditions do not exist?"

"Why would we want to do that?"

"I want to get to the real basis for the position you take."
I feel as if I'm losing caste. It is suddenly very clear that I'm not a philosopher. I'm like one of those old practitioners who used to visit my law school, full of bluster about life in the real world. Such a bore! A once-sharp mind gone muddy! And I'm only 44 — not all that old (McBryde Johnson, 2003).

This exchange demonstrates the issue of rhetoricity relative to the impulse to universalize terms. The impulse to universalize can be understood as an impulse to control the exchange. The philosopher wants to move past current conditions of “political, social and economic inequality” by imagining they do not exist. This thought experiment is impossible for McBryde Johnson. Those conditions do exist. Moreover, those conditions are the real basis for McBryde Johnson’s position. Political, social, and economic conditions are all aspects that frame a conversation. It would be difficult to imagine any discussion of death and justice that is not impacted or “grounded” in political, social, and/or economic conditions. Specifically, any discussion of suicide would demand consideration of material conditions. The ethical discussion the unnamed philosopher professor wants to engage in seems to miss the point of the lived conditions of the discussion. The philosopher fails to hear McBryde Johnson — he fails to rhetorically listen to her contribute to the discourse.

As an undergraduate student, I studied philosophy. The unnamed philosophy professor’s line of questions is predicable in my experience of the field. Philosophy attempts to make universalizing statements and arguments, as all arguments are considered as interconnected propositional statements. If the premises do not follow in a logically sound and valid way, then the argument is discarded or revised. The discipline
aims to establish an argument that could be applied in future situations. Even folks with no philosophy background argue to win. The issue present transcends the limits or preferences of one discipline. The unnamed philosopher views truth as external from the participants of the conversation. Read favorably, the unnamed philosopher wants to understand the basis of McBryde Johnson’s argument outside of political, social, and economic material conditions to consider how that argument might be understood in radically different material circumstances. McBryde Johnson is not making arguments in the form that a philosopher would make.

Singer’s analytical argument misses aspects of lived experience as he advances his universalizing ethical framework and approach to utilitarian justice. Considerations of disability are a sidestep for his argument. Singer views truth as external, as something he can prove. McBryde Johnson is operating from her lived experience during their debate. She is not attempting to create a universalizing system of justice. Singer is famous for his work with animal rights/liberation movement. He argues the reason it is wrong to kill an animal is understood because that animal has a sufficient level of rationality and self-awareness. He writes “the right to life and the capacity to see oneself as a continuing mental subject, and the principle of respect for autonomy — are all based on the fact that persons see themselves as distinct entities with a past and future. They do not apply to those who are not now and never have been capable of seeing themselves in this way” (Singer, 1993, p. 153-54). What Singer does here is couple rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, among other attributes with personhood. Singer challenges the assumption that all humans are persons and thus afford with the innate human rights.
McBryde Johnson is aware of the antagonistic Socratic approach within the discourse. The next passage she includes highlights Singer employing the same move, while perhaps more sophisticated (and successful) than his student’s approach. McBryde Johnson (2003) notes, “The next student wants to work the comparison of disability and race, and Singer joins the discussion until he elicits a comment that he can characterize as racist. He scores a point, but that’s all right.” McBryde Johnson’s noting “he scores a point” demonstrates how Singer views the activity writ large. The debate and ensuing dinner conversations are activities where points can be scored — it’s something that can be won. McBryde Johnson cannot win the debate, however. The structure of the activity proports to be equal, but the rhetorical ground is not even. What McBryde Johnson experienced of a paradoxical rhetorical situation is all too common for members of the disability community.

Reaume’s pedagogy and scholarship establish mad people in the center of the work. He developed and regularly teaches a course, “Mad People’s History,” since 2000 at University of Toronto and Ryerson University in both Disability Studies departments and History & Philosophy of Science and Technology departments (Reaume, 2006, p. 172-73). Reaume has published about his pedagogy and approach to his course. Reaume’s teaching and his publications are demonstrative of his ideas as a mad academic. How he defines and structures the areas of study in the course highlights his position in conversations about the mind. The course is titled Mad People’s History, which places the focus on the discourse on individual people. The act of recentering the
discussion on people enables the engagement of individual lived experience. Reaume notes that the discourse of conditions of the mind has historically been from the prospective of medical personal, from outsiders. Significantly, even Michel Foucault’s seminal text *History of Madness* places the condition at the center of the discourse and not the people with the condition (Reaume, 2006, p. 170). Thus, the slight shift in naming the course demonstrates the needed shift for further conversation and attention to be given to mad folks. In a footnote, Reaume notes his objection to the term “mental health.” He writes, “I do not use the term *Mental Illness* in the title of this course because the term is very statis quo” (Reaume, 2006, p. 182). Reaume argues that his intent with the class is to privilege the range of experiences of mad people (Reaume, 2006, p. 170-72). The pedagogical move values the perspectives of mad students. Reaume’s work creates a set of conditions that enable developments in rhetoricity to be possible.

Although he does not use the term, readers can understand that Reaume’s teaching and research seek to further the rhetoricity of mad people. Reaume’s work furthers mad people’s rhetoricity in two primary ways. First, his approach to the field deprivileges the dominating narrative of medical/science writers by enabling discourse of lived experience by a marginalized community. And second, his course furthers rhetoricity for madness as it validates person-centered discourse of madness in the academy. He writes, “‘Mad People’s History’ is therefore intended as a safe environment for anyone with a psychiatric history regardless of whether they choose to be public as a current or former patient” (Reaume, 2006, p. 174). The course existing acts as a way for mad students to learn about other people who have similar experiences. Additionally, the
course exists as an option for students to openly discuss their own mad experiences. Such opportunities further the rhetoricity of mad rhetors.

Margaret Price’s text, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* incorporates scholarship as well as personal experience. Price considers the rhetorical position of both students and faculty with mental disabilities in academic settings. *Mad at School* is rhetorically effective because she does not proport one universalizing system in her text. The value of the scholarship is enhanced by her personal narratives and vice versa. Additionally, the title of her text makes use of two terms of the conversation: mad and mental disability. Price complicates the meaning making of terms from the onset. Her use of “mad” works in both as a condition of the mind and a state of anger directed towards the state of ableism in higher education. Price applies theory with engaged activism to analyze the rhetorical situation of academic settings for members of the mental disability community.

She also often discusses her role as a composition and rhetoric professor. Like others in the disability community, such as McBryde Johnson, Price draws on lived experience to guide her work. Price’s training as a professor of rhetoric and composition enables her to engage further with theory. Thus, *Mad at School* is a blend of theory and lived experience. Price notes “Mental disability should no longer be considered the affliction of an aberrant few, but rather a feature of our contemporary culture” (Price, 2011, p. 230). Price’s task is thus more expansive than a first thought might suggest. Price continues the discourse from Prendergast’s “rhetorical black hole” and “rhetoricity.” She raises the point that mentally disabled students and faculty are invisible to the institution — students flunk out and faculty fail to obtain tenure and thus leave the
institution (Price, 2011, p. xiii, 2-3). The folks that fail tenure or flunk out of school exist in the rhetorical black hole in a concrete way: the institution fails to see them. Those folks become removed from the discourse.

Within the early pages of the text, Price uses multiple terms to describe the range of phenomenon of the mind — further matching her use of two distinct terms in the title. A section of the introduction is dedicated to the issue of naming and terms of phenomenon of the mind (Price, 2011, p. 9-20). Price opens by quoting Reaume’s article “Mad People’s History” — reminding readers that no term is neutral. She writes “the following analysis does not aim to accept some terms and discard others. Rather, I want to clarity the different areas they map and show that each does particular kinds of cultural work in particular contexts” (Price, 2011, p. 9). Here Price establishes that her augment is not to reject terms from the conversation, but to highlight the rhetorical function of the specific terms. Even as she demonstrates what her preferred term is she is quick to complicate the use of a singular term. She writes, “although I use mental disability as my own of choice, I continue to use others as needed…” (Price, 2011, p. 9 italics in original).

Price uses terms to define herself to her reader and develop her ethos and rhetoricity. “And so, in naming myself a crazy girl, neuroatypical, mentally disabled, psychosocially disabled … I am trying to reassign meaning” (Price, 2011, p. 20). This passage demonstrates that Price is rhetorically flexible via the range of terms she uses for herself. The concept of naming oneself connects back to how terms build knowledge about external concepts and also personal identity. Price names herself “a crazy girl” and other terms. As the author of the text, she comes to her audience with a great deal of ethos from the outset. Additionally, she has the rhetorical space to complicate and
demonstrate the value in the usage of those terms. Such complication of terms might be argued as one of the aims of her text. Of course, however, not everyone in the mental disability community has the rhetorical space, or privilege to complicate their experiences in the way that Price does. Consider a student whose anxiety makes it difficult to speak with others. That student might face rhetorical challenges in “making sense” of their position to others. Even navigating a disability resource center can be an undue burden on this student. That student would not have the platform of an academic such as Price to complicate their use of terms.

Price is flexible in using a range of terms for herself. That flexibility demonstrates her rhetoricity as distinct terms will be useful in distinct circumstances. Her flexibility with terms in this way is demonstrated of her stated New Rhetoric position. The self and the external world are constructed from the language. There can be rhetorical needs to shift and construct new means.

Language practices and term use are significant aspects of Truth creation as a meaning making event. As I have argued, Truth is dynamic and not static. The terms of the conversation will change. Particular contexts will call for particular terms and language practices. Individuals and communities can develop their rhetoricity by their term usage. However, term usage can also be used to erode a rhetor’s rhetorical position, as not all terms correspond with a community’s position.

**Outsider Naming**

I have explored the importance of terms and language use in developing meaning within communities. Much of the naming in mental disability does not come from

The American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is the medical framework for conditions of the mind. The *DSM* holds magnificent weight in how conditions are named and identified. The *DSM* is the diagnostic tool of mental disorders and conditions used by medical practitioners and researchers. A *DSM* diagnosis is virtually always needed if people want to seek treatment or obtain a workplace and/or academic accommodations (Price, 2011). The *DSM* and its practitioners can be understood as outsiders and as gatekeepers to systems of support and associability. More broadly, the *DSM* can be understood as a gatekeeper for folks to engage in public life.

_Harriet McBryde Johnson’s actions to establish the scope of the debate with Singer demonstrate her attempts to further her limited rhetoricity. She writes,_

_“He seems genuinely nettled. Shouldn't it be Ms. Johnson and Professor Singer, if I want to be formal? To counter, I invoke the ceremonial low-country usage, Attorney Johnson and Professor Singer, but point out that Mr./Ms. is the custom in American political debates”* (McBryde Johnson, 2003). _McBryde Johnson is not an academic, nor is she trained in moral philosophy. The strength of her_
position is her lived experience and her work as a civil rights lawyer; paradoxically, her lived experience harms her in this rhetorical venue that attempts to universalize moral debates — the rhetorical black hole.

Despite a mask of objectivity, the manual has undergone significant changes since it was first introduced in 1952. The troubled and inconsistent history of the manual makes issues of access and disorder identification all the more pressing. Updates and alterations to the manual have a sweeping impact in public and academic discourse about what “counts” as a disorder. The removal of “homosexuality” as a mental disorder occurred between DSM-II and DSM-III (specifically DSM-II 7th edition). Gender identity disorder was present in DSM-I though DSM-IV. DSM-5 subsequently introduced gender dysphoria. Both conditions aim directly to medicalize the trans experience. DSM proports to be a stable medical diagnostic tool; however, conditions of the mind and social/cultural responses to those conditions are not static. The manual seeks a biologically positivist approach even when its research methods do not support that framework.

Cultural and social factors impact how conditions of the mind are considered. APA seeks to take materialist, empirical medical epistemology to the development of DSM and its various updates. There is a great deal of discourse about the biological positivist structure of the manual. Additionally, Lucille Parkinson McCarthy and Joan Page Gerring are medical doctors. Their article “Revising Psychiatry’s Charter Document DSM-IV” addresses the structure and means of classification used by APA in DSM-IV (McCarthy and Gerring, 1994). Their research is valuable to consider the limitations of and scope of the manual. They write “the DSM classification system adopts the biomedical assumption that there are clear boundaries between diseases and between the
sick and healthy” (McCarthy and Gerring, 1994, p. 183). As a diagnostic tool, the manual aims to establish clear and distinct lines between disorders and conditions — even if research/data does not demonstrate clear and distinct attributes of conditions or disorders. McCarthy and Gerring (1994) note the assumptions DSM must make about mental disorders/conditions to create these boundaries. They write, “maintaining the assumption that mental disorders are discrete entities forwards the assumption that they are not social constructions, cultural judgments about what counts as abnormal, but preexisting realities” (McCarthy and Gerring, 1994, p. 183). The view that conditions could be “preexisting realities” falls apart when one remembers the various changes the manual has undertaken since its 1952 release. How conditions and disorders are diagnosed and even conceived of is impacted by social and cultural factors. The framing and medicalization of conditions by APA and DSM further impacts wider views of a phenomenon.

Social and cultural factors can lead to changes in what counts as a disability or condition. Such changes do not always reflect changes in bodies or ability. Subini Ancy Annamma, David J. Connor, and Beth A. Ferri’s (2013) article “Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of Race and Dis/ability” proposes a theoretical framework that incorporates aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS). In their article, they note how social/cultural factors can impact mental disability in the public square that does have real, material impacts on folks. They note the American Association of Mental Deficiency (AAMD) revised their definition on mental retardation in 1973 from an IQ score of 85 to an IQ score of 70 (Annamma, et al., 2013, p. 11). Following this policy change many people would no longer, legally, be
labeled “mentally retarded.” However, for folks with an IQ score between 85-70 nothing about that policy change would alter their mental abilities. The policy change and other legal updates would have a profound impact on individuals and their families. Insurance, access, and other forms of support are often tied to diagnostic tools. Policy and legal changes are not always medically based and can be understood as social/cultural. The changes from AAMD would of course have profound impacts for communities after 1973. Individuals and their families impacted by this policy would have no recourse following AAMD’s policy change.

McBryde Johnson’s rhetorical position was complicated even in her death. She died in 2008. Singer wrote an obituary for the New York Times. His work focused on their interactions: their debate, her protesting, their correspondence, and so forth. The obituary also established ground between the two of them were possible. Singer focused on their shared connection of atheism. Particularly Singer’s objected to the “idealized” version of McBryde Johnson from other published obituaries (Singer, 2008). Following McBryde Johnson’s death there became a false narrative about her skipping and walking in Christian Heaven. Such an image references ableist notions of body — the ideal state is skipping. Moreover, the false narrative removes McBryde Johnson’s desires from how she would want to be remembered. McBryde Johnson was critical on Christian theology (Singer, 2008). Singer’s objection to this narrative demonstrates he does value her conception of the good life. After her death McBryde Johnson had no rhetorical control over how she was considered in the public square.

The power of naming and the harms of outsider naming impacts communities outside of disability and madness. Lisa King (2015) calls attention to the shifting
meaning of the term “Indian” typically by white Anglo-Americans in her chapter “Sovereignty, Rhetorical Sovereignty and Representation: Keywords for Teaching Indigenous Texts.” The controlling narrative of the term by outsiders leads to a loss of rhetorical sovereignty by Indigenous communities. King’s project focus on teaching Indigenous rhetorics. She writes on the impact of including Indigenous rhetorical texts in her classroom, “my Native students see themselves affirmed, sometimes for the first time in their academic lives, and my non-Native students recognize histories and peoples and already-existing rhetorical practices they did not know existed. In this way, rhetorical power shifts” (King, 2015, p. 215). These practices can be understood as gains of rhetoricity.

**Positionality and Intersectionality**

Social and cultural methods of understanding disability were developed in the late twenty century as a response to the dominating biological positivist and medical modals of disability. As with other modes of discourse and other theory, the tenets of social and cultural modals have shifted over time. Social and cultural understandings of disability consider how systems, organizations, and dominate attitudes can create disabling structures (Dolmage, 2014). Additionally, social and cultural approaches question biological essential ideas of bodies. The concepts of a normative mind lack an empirical basis. Mental disorders and/or disabilities definitions can radically change due to social and cultural factors.

Social and cultural methods of understating/knowledge making about disability necessitate further considerations of an individual’s cultural identity. White privilege can
and does exist in mad spaces. In order to understand and consider the rhetoricity of a speaker, a wider view of that speaker would be needed. Thus, considering the intersectionality of speakers is needed to consider their rhetoricity. The experiences of madness would be distinct for a white person relative to a person of color. The experiences of mental disability would be distinct for a younger person relative to an older individual. The experiences of a woman with madness would be distinct from a man. Canadian politician and activist associated with Mad Pride David Reville as noted that mad movements tend to be mostly white. He writes, “my experience of the Mad movement is that it’s mostly white. There are better connections with LGBTIQ people than there have been; but for visible minorities, not so much; Indigenous people, not so much” (Reville, 2021, p. 312). Reville’s comment echoes what I have uncovered in my research — many public groups are created and maintained by white typically well-educated folks. One aspect of the issue of rhetoricity for mad speakers is the material harm they can experience. Reville (2021) continues, “being out as a Mad person is more dangerous, way more dangerous than it is for me — it’s not dangerous at all for me, anymore (p. 312). Reville recognizes his position and the changing context around madness. Reville was 78 years old and had retired from politics when his comments above were published. He is aware that there is still material violence, but his rhetorical position precludes him from it. Reville’s observations remind readers why expanding concepts of the rhetorical black hole and rhetoricity are so important, as there is no normative experience for madness.

Many organizations like Mad Pride were created by typically well-educated white folks — often men. These organizations develop the rhetoricity for mad white
folks. Again, we must consider who is excluded from these movements. David Oakes is a psychiatric system survivor and disability rights activist. Oakes was involuntarily hospitalized shortly after he started his studies at Harvard. He would go on to establish the Mind Freedom International organization (MFI). MFI is distinct from Mad Pride, but they share many of the same aims (Mind Freedom International, n.d.). Oakes would eventually meet investigative journalist Robert Whitaker at a Harvard lab. Whitaker’s series for the Boston Globe on psychiatric drug experiments used on members of the mad community was a Pulitzer Prize finalist (Whitaker, 2019). He would later expand his work to the text *Mad in America: Bad Science, Bad Medicine, and the Enduring Mistreatment of the Mentally Ill*. Whitaker would later still create Mad in America, a non-profit organization that publishes content from blogs to podcasts, from folks with lived experience to psychologists and lawyers. Their mission statement is remaking psychiatry (“Mission Statement”, n.d.). In considering rhetoricity of folks with mental disability, it is important to consider the folks that cannot speak about their lived experience. A wider question about rhetoricity can be formed when considering organizations like MFI, Mad Pride, among others: What communities lack the power to share their experiences with mental disability and what groups are able to capitalize on it? How can academic institutions further ableism and how can those same institutions also create opportunities for rhetoricity? (Dolmage, 2014).

Readers must consider again Prendergast’s rhetoricity — some communities might enter mental disability from an already limited rhetorical position. That is, the rhetorical black hole further impacts communities who might already be speaking/rhetorically operating from a materialized perspective. Gender identity, sexual
identity, race and ethnicity, linguistic position, and other aspects of socioeconomic position can impact an individual’s rhetorical position. If resisting medical/biological positivist modals of disability requires a cultural/social view of disability, that view would need to consider the full cultural and social position of that individual. Symptoms of madness and mental disability manifest in distinct ways across social groups.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that rhetorical positions in wider communication networks are not static. A rhetor’s rhetoricity will change depending on whom they are engaging with. Allies may be plentiful in one room whereas contention may well be in the next. In many ways discourse is framed before a rhetor engages in said discourse. The language and terms used establish how objects and phenomenon are considered. However, language is not the only thing rhetors bring to conversations. Individual identity and lived experience are essential in understanding the Truth they speak. The terms and language practices are significant because communities use them and grow meaning with them. The rhetorical choices individuals and communities make are the important feature. Terms do not have any inherent value. At some point, the terms and language will change, as the wider rhetorical context too will change. Terms changing is a positive, as it represents communities/individuals creating meaning and expanding their rhetoricity.

One take away from this project is that audiences ought to be rhetorically flexible about terms within distinct situations. Such flexibility requires audiences to value the content of communication of other rhetors. Rhetorical exchanges do not exist in the abstract. Greater understandings of rhetoricity and mental disability/madness call for greater understandings of knowledge making events by various communities. Academic instructors can take greater understandings of language practices to help their students reach desired education outcomes. Technical communicators can better rhetorically
engage with their audiences if there is a greater understanding of dynamic language practices.

Tensions of rhetoricity and the rhetorical black hole impact more than just rhetoric and composition academic spaces. There are connections to other academic fields: technical communication, design, pedagogy among others. There are additional questions that enter once rhetoricity of speakers is considered more directly. In what ways can communicating to an implied audience impact the information being shared? How can universal design approaches incorporate a recognition of mental disability and madness? How ought participation be valued in academia for mad and mentally disabled students and instructors? I aim to continue working in this space and on questions explored above. Writing teachers benefit from understanding dynamic language practices and term usage in creating meaning.

The aim of my argument was not to advocate for universal acceptance of terms like mental disability or madness. Rather, I argued that engaging with communities — meaning making with communities — is the best course of action. I advocate for the conditions to be possible for rhetors to engage with other audiences. Ijeoma Oluo (2019) reminds us of the importance of intersectionality as we strive towards social justice outcomes. She writes, “But if you don’t embrace intersectionality, even if you make progress for some, you will look around one day and find that you’ve become the oppressor of others” (Oluo, 2019, p.79). Creating process for madness/mental disability must be an active process to avoid becoming an oppressive system for other communities. By resisting ableism, intersectionality must be considered to avoid other
oppressive frameworks inadvertently setting in. A greater understanding of rhetoricity
and the rhetorical black hole will call for further consideration of all aspects of identity.

There is further work that needs to be done in this arena. A deeper focus could be
undertaken for students within the rhetorical black hole. I considered community
members who are academics and lawyers for this project. Students often lack the social
and financial privileges that come with working in academic and legal spaces.
Prendergast’s project was developed from her interactions with her friend Barbara who
was unhoused for a time in New York. Further work could be done to consider the
material conditions that impact madness/mental disability, e.g., housing, climate,
socioeconomic status. A future project might consider the rhetoricity of unhoused folks
with a mental disability/madness and their particular rhetorical contexts.

My project pushes against the impulse to create an umbrella term. Terms like
madness and mental disability might not be used by Reaume and Price in future contexts.
Price might choose to use psychosocial again. Such moments would represent the
development of new meanings, because recognizing a rhetor’s rhetoricity enables greater
knowledge making opportunities. The terms and discourse will likely change in the future
— and outside audiences would do well to rhetorically listen.
REFERENCES


