

Multiplicity, Language & Survival: Rhetorical Movement in Trauma Survivor Narratives

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This article leverages interview excerpts from human trafficking survivors to demonstrate that the stories told by survivors of trauma exhibit movement across and between rhetorical domains that purposefully operates to assert control over stories based on personal knowledge and language capacity, as well as to present stories to external audiences in an effort to leverage language to claim credibility. In so doing, the author shows how trauma-related storytelling practices operate as expressions of rhetorical ambiguity and multiplicity. This rhetorical multi-linguagedness in trauma survivor storytelling reveals a discursive in-betweenness, or liminality, that survivors tactically navigate when telling stories about their experiences. By exploring the tension that exists within the language survivors use to tell their stories, the author demonstrates how they engage in a deft navigation of the politics of legitimation to travel between different discursive spaces and use language to adeptly engage in tactical refigurings of experience.

Keywords: human trafficking, survivor storytelling, trauma narratives, rhetorical ambiguity

I remember one of the earliest times I interviewed a trauma survivor in a professional capacity. The subject was a woman from Malawi who had fled the country for fear of suffering female genital mutilation. As is the practice in rural parts of that country, she had been targeted by the village elders to undergo her “initiation.” Through a network of friends, acquaintances, and strangers, she made her way out of the country, to South America, and was eventually smuggled across the border into the United States. That is where I first met her. The interview we conducted was fraught with emotions ebbing and flowing. However, it was not the descriptions of the traumatic that stuck with me. Nor was it her palpable description of fear. Rather, the most notable aspect of that interview was the rhetorical movement that occurred within her story. There was no linear narrative. Her story came in stops and starts, it moved from one scene to another without any identifiable logic, and what seemed like some of the most important parts were obscured by seemingly mundane details, many of which she seemed particularly fixated upon (such as the color and feel of a tapestry, the smell of bread, the taste of a fetid drink).

To those who have worked in and around trauma, this should sound familiar; after all, it is well established that survivors of trauma engage in much more than a simple presentation of events. Their stories are complex re-tellings, more snapshots than narratives. To the average listener, such stories often fail to make sense or render the type of narrative that brings sufficient standing in institutional settings. While those who do trauma-related scholarship have long acknowledged this

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reality there remains a need to better understand how survivors of trauma tell their stories and how those stories work.¹

Since that early interview, I have devoted years of study to the rhetorical nature of the storytelling practices of trauma survivors. This article, in particular, focuses on the more recent work that I have done with survivors of one particular type of trauma – human trafficking – which encompasses not only mental and physical manifestations of trauma, but also often the social and legal traumas that accompany the individual once they are extracted from the trafficking scenario.² In the following pages, this article will leverage interview excerpts from trafficking survivors to demonstrate that the stories told by survivors of trauma exhibit a level of movement across and between rhetorical domains that purposefully operates to assert control over stories based on personal knowledge and language capacity, as well as to present stories to external audiences in an effort to leverage language to claim credibility. In so doing, this article shows how trauma-related storytelling practices operate as expressions of rhetorical ambiguity and multiplicity, what Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes as “the internal dialogism of double-voiced prose” that “draws its energy, its dialogic ambiguity, not from individual dissonances, misunderstandings, or contradictions... but sinks its roots deep into a fundamental socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-languagedness.”³ This rhetorical multi-languagedness in trauma survivor storytelling reveals a discursive in-betweenness, or liminality, that survivors tactically navigate when telling stories about their experiences.

This navigation is exemplified throughout the interviews described in this article, represented in a continual shifting of language that is both self-regulatory and which transgressively moves within and between narrative frames and discursive spaces. This article will demonstrate that liminal situatedness and will show the ways in which trauma survivors construct their stories in this liminal space. By exploring the tension that exists within the language they use to tell their stories, I will demonstrate how trauma survivors engage in a deft navigation of the politics of legitimation to travel between different discursive spaces and use language to adeptly engage in “tactical refigurings.”⁴ Such stories may then be understood as practiced uses, makings in which they simultaneously consume, deploy, and reject the dominant narrative about trauma, which in turn allows them to “maintain their difference in the very space” occupied by the dominant narrative.⁵

Spatiality and Liminality

We were midway through an hour-and-a-half long interview when I asked one of my research participants (“Participant-1”) about how she interpreted her lived experience, how she viewed her own story. Her eyes lit up and she leaned forward, fingers reaching to grab a pen and paper sitting

¹ Kagan, Michael. “Believable Victims: Asylum Credibility and the Struggle for Objectivity.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 16, no.1 (2015): 123-131; Bedard-Gilligan, Michelle, Lori Zoellner, and Norah Feeny. “Is Trauma Memory Special? Trauma Narrative Fragmentation in PTSD: Effects of Treatment and Response.” *Clinical Psychological Science*, 5, no.2 (2017): 212-225.

² The study was conducted under IRB# 15-1271 at Michigan State University. Participants were recruited in a modified snowball sampling approach in coordination with the Michigan Human Trafficking Taskforce. Oral history interviews with research participants were audio recorded, transcribed, and rhetorically analyzed.

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press (1981): 325-326.

⁴ Powell, Malea. “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing.” *College Composition and Communication*, 53, no.3 (2002): 405.

⁵ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 32.

mid-table. She drew two meandering lines down the center of the paper, something that looked very much like a river on a map. She paused, looked up at me, and started talking animatedly while continuing to draw on the paper in front of her. She described what she was drawing this way:

My lived experience, I'll give you an illustration. It's not so much about human trafficking or mental illness or addiction or anything. I talk about how there's this river here and there's alligators, there's crocodiles, there's a lot of scary stuff in there like piranhas, these things like the monsters. On this side of the river is this desert. It's dry. Nothing grows there. It's awful to live there. On the other side of this river is a big, lush, green forest. You look over there and you see things are growing. There's food over there. There's everything, and it's just beautiful, and you long to be over on this side of the river, but you don't really know how to get there.⁶

When Participant-1 invoked the imagery of movement across terrain, she made an explicit maneuver to consciously transform a place into a space through the practice of storytelling, while also engaging in a multimodal and embodied approach to the telling of story. Notably, all the research participants in the study structured their stories in ways that highlighted this spatial movement from what Participant-1 described as the desert to the lush green forest on the other side of the river. Participants repeatedly invoked word choices such as *journey*, *progress*, *going forward*, and one even used the metaphor of driving: “if I had stopped long enough and drove slowly along enough, I would've observed it sooner...you're going to notice things you normally wouldn't notice and quit passing.”⁷ Another participant (“Participant-2”) situated her use of language by reminding that to initiate the journey, “you've got to start at the beginning.”⁸ By telling their stories, then, survivors engage in acts of *practicing place* that transform mere places into spaces through telling and the language choices that comprise the story. The space is, therefore, actuated by “the ensemble of movements deployed within” and situated by the actions of the subjects involved in the telling.⁹

This differentiation between place and space becomes crucial to understanding trauma stories because it reduces the impulse to flatten narrative and encourages a consideration of how such stories might be considered spatially. Indeed, as Jane Rendell observed, “For those concerned with issues of identity, spatial metaphors constitute powerful devices which can be employed as critical tools for examining the relationship between the construction of identities and the politics of location.”¹⁰ In using the metaphor of traversing terrain, Participant-1 reminds that stories *take place* and thereby constellate disparately situated tellings as “linked through narrative.”¹¹

Participant-1's focus on spatializing story implicitly invokes Michel De Certeau's ideas about stories as loosely connected devices for making connections between the incongruent. In this, then, trauma survivors' construction of spatial stories might be viewed as a means of exploring and understanding the discursive terrain in terms of the relationships between their own experiences, individual storytelling practices, and the stories *about* them existing in the dominant narrative. In some sense, such spatial stories exist as ongoing interrogations of the borders between private and public; past, present, and future; and determinations of a self that is embodied separate from, and yet which embodies, cultural discourses which categorize the subject. The stories told by trauma

⁶ Participant-1, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 13, 2016, interview 2.

⁷ Participant-1, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 25, 2016, interview 3.

⁸ Participant-2, interview by John T. Gagnon, December 30, 2015, interview 1.

⁹ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 117.

¹⁰ Rendell, Jane. “Travel Stories: Angels and Nomads.” *Sue Ridge: Travel Narratives*. Norwich (2003): 3.

¹¹ Rendell, Jane. “Travel Stories: Angels and Nomads.” *Sue Ridge: Travel Narratives*. Norwich (2003): 1.

survivors, then, are consciously and unconsciously designed to navigate identity in self-defined legitimate spaces *and* exteriorities through the creation of frontiers and bridges.¹²

Trauma survivors produce meaning through the construction of story as they traverse this discursive terrain. In this traversal, they actively change their connections to the external and in so doing seek to redefine their individual relationships between self and the world. Importantly, Participant-1's illustration also shows that her travel story is an ongoing negotiation of contradictions, limitations, and border crossings. She draws clear distinctions between the desert, the lush green forest, and the river, which serves as a boundary. By clearly demarcating different points of travel within her story, Participant-1 generates what De Certeau refers to as geographies or theaters of action that both create boundaries and serve as Geertzian models for reality.¹³ However, "more than just reproducing and preserving what is perceived as already given, stories as forms of the 'productive imagination' also pave the way for an exploration of the possible and of the possibility of change."¹⁴ These theaters of action present potential for the possibility of change within the stories told by trauma survivors, yet they also structure "journeys and actions [that] are marked by the 'citation' of the places that result from them or authorize them"¹⁵ From the maps offered in such stories, De Certeau teaches that personal stories can be compared against broader narratives.

Dianne Brunner theorizes such a move as being "the disruptive site of personal narrative when read against grand narratives."¹⁶ However, this ongoing internal comparison is not merely disruptive *but also* generative, insofar as it is tactically used by trauma survivors to build connections and cross bridges. Importantly, this traversal of terrain reveals trauma survivors' lived experiences as existing in a rhetorically liminal space that they navigate and use for their own purposes. This liminality requires rhetorical transference across the so-called De Certeauian bridge and, as such, their stories are tactically created through the practice of explicit yet fluctuating constructions of self in relation to language.

Interiors and Exteriors: Traversing Domains

Across the interviews that were conducted, trauma survivors engaged in what is "much more than a simple presentation of events."¹⁷ Instead, they present those events in ways that are designed to make sense both to themselves (i.e., asserting control over their own stories based on personal domains of knowledge and language) and to external audiences (i.e., using the language of a broader, culturally based domain of knowledge and language to claim credibility). Trauma survivors constantly shift back and forth depending on the point they are trying to make and, importantly, on whether the point they are trying to make is based on how they view themselves or whether they are discussing their attempts to persuade external audiences on issues and concepts about which they care.

¹² De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 123.

¹³ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 123.

¹⁴ Pannell, Sandra. "From the Poetics of Place to the Politics of Space: Redefining Cultural Landscapes on Damer, Maluku, Tenggara." *The Poetic Power of Place*. Ed. James Fox, Australian National University Press (2006): 164.

¹⁵ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 120.

¹⁶ Brunner, Dianne. *Between the Masks: Resisting the Politics of Essentialism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield (1998): 52.

¹⁷ Powell, Malea. "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, 53, no.3 (2002): 406.

It is important to consider their rhetorical liminality because the language of their subject formation is not necessarily aligned with the language of the dominant narrative; indeed, their subjectivity exists wholly outside of this narrative and, as such, operates as a rejection of the assumed double subjectivity that exists within the language of the human rights system. How they articulate themselves operates separately from the language that they use to meet the expectations of external audiences. As Michael Murray argues, such narratives are not and cannot be told in a vacuum and, as such, the language used by storytellers becomes shaped by specific contexts.¹⁸ Murray's observation comes to bear because the audiences to which trauma survivors tell their stories vary.

During my interviews, for example, I learned that Participant-1 tended to feel more comfortable telling her story to people who came from similar situations: she regularly shared her story with individuals recently coming out of trafficking scenarios, currently and previously incarcerated females, and those overcoming addiction and mental health issues. She saw broad overlap across these populations and made helping individuals in those situations, whether trafficked or not, a centerpiece of her practice. Even so, she delivered public testimony of her experiences to audiences comprised of law enforcement, state government officials, victim service providers, and was involved in a video documentary on human trafficking. Other participants in my research have, likewise, done some work with those who have experienced trafficking. Even so, the audiences that the survivors spoke to varied, including church groups, members of the general public at awareness events, and forums on human trafficking hosted by the U.S. Department of Justice.

It is in these ever-changing contexts that trauma survivors make purposeful moves to adjust their language and their stories, and in these adjustments there exists a profound tension between their articulations of self and in their attempts to describe their experiences in language that is accepted/acceptable. We see this in their descriptions of how they construct stories differently based on considerations of audience. It is important to highlight that rhetorical liminality is not (just) about agent location; rather, it is about agent relationality to other bodies (human bodies, institutions, etc.) as audiences. As Participant-1 observed:

Now, you find a lot more people coming in with mental illness and substance abuse issues. As I talk to more people with substance abuse issues, I talk about being trafficked because a lot of times, some of the females that have used drugs can relate to more of that story or some aspect of it. I guess it depended on my audience.¹⁹

Her approach considers the potential that her own story has in connecting with whom she is sharing. For her, the opening of her storytelling, where she specifically invokes the trauma and exploitation of her own experience with having been trafficked occurs almost exclusively in those instances where she can engage in the relational: building bridges, trust, and lines of communication with others who may benefit. As she described it across interviews, she was less interested in telling stories to larger, more public audiences than in being able to work with specific individuals who might find strength from her personal journey. As she put it: "I guess my storytelling is to empower people, to let them know that they're not alone."²⁰

For her, relationships are primary. She roots this in her own experiences, across decades of struggle, exploitation, addiction, and incarceration. These experiences are not meant to be shared

¹⁸ Murray, Michael. "Narrative Psychology." *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. Ed. Jonathan A. Smith, Sage Publishing (2003): 116.

¹⁹ Participant-1, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 13, 2016, interview 2.

²⁰ Participant-1, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 25, 2016, interview 3.

for the mere sake of sharing, or for merely creating awareness, but rather specifically for connecting with people who are sitting where she sat, living through what she lived through, and struggling with the same or similar issues. She remembers what it is like to feel alone, to feel lost, to not know what the next step is, or whether to even try. And, for her, telling her story is meant to respond to that sense of loneliness, to outstretch her hand and say, *I'm here and I understand; if I got through it, you can too.*

For Participant-2, who speaks to a broader range of audiences, her stories are situated more generally and for a multiplicity of purposes. Depending on the context, the scope of the story changes, sometimes dramatically. During one of the interview sessions, she stated:

You got to know your audience. You got to know who you're talking to. What part of the story is more important for them to hear? Do they need to hear the whole story or do they need to hear just what pertains to them like mental health? Do they really need to know about the law enforcement not listening? Yeah, I think they do, so I go into that, but then I don't when it comes to church groups because they don't really need to hear the horrifying aspect of it. It depends on your audience. You just have to know who you're speaking to and what issues you're allowed to talk about and what you're not.²¹

Participant-2's emphasis on the context, setting, and constituency of audience are important elements of her storytelling. Of even more interest is her statement regarding the acceptability of language. The way she constructs this – “what issues you're allowed to talk about and what you're not” – is an observation about the politics of representation and legitimation that exist in and around human trafficking discourses, and trauma narratives more generally. While her audiences have different needs and expectations, across the audiences there is a perceived commonality as to limitations on her stories; that is, there are aspects of her experience that she recognizes as being disallowed from putting into discourse, that she is restricted from putting into speech. Diane Carr characterizes this conflict of allowed/disallowed speech as a power struggle between the purveyors of the dominant narrative and those telling their own stories:

De Certeau describes a dynamic, generative partnership of non-equals. On the one hand are the sanctioning, legalizing, and delineating discourses of empowered institutions and producers. On the other are the proliferating, ephemeral and transient practices of consumers. These practices in fact reposition consumption itself as a form of production. While this resistance involves a kind of empowerment, the practices are the symptom of an unequal distribution of power and this inequity is not itself overturned by these practices.²²

Considering this, trauma survivors might be seen as tactically self-repositioning to operate both consumers and producers: engaging in acts of resistance, even of self-empowerment, while also reminding us of their liminality and unequal status position. While the distribution of power may not itself be overturned by her choices in storytelling, Participant-2 does seek at least to confront it. Even so, she sees that there are elements of her story and the language she uses to tell her story that remain unspeakable. Interestingly, the unspeakability of these elements is entrenched in her own discussion surrounding it. Across interviews, she mentioned allowed/disallowed speech multiple times yet never articulated what, specifically, she perceived as being restricted or unacceptable in the context of telling her story.

²¹ Participant-2, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 5, 2016, interview 2.

²² Carr, Diane. “The Rules of the Game, The Burden of Narrative: Enter the Matrix.” *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*. Ed. by Stacy Gillis, Wallflower Press (2005): 43.

There are multiple layers to consider. We must address the story itself and that which exists outside the story – the socio-political context, if you will – which shape how trauma survivors navigate the language elements they choose to use or disregard based on an analysis of what they perceive to be important or relevant to external audiences. In Murray’s view, then, “the narrator is regarded as a complex psychosocial subject who is an active agent in a social world.”²³ How trauma survivors use language demonstrates not only their agency, but their recognition of the social contexts and power dynamics implicated by putting their stories into circulation, and the ways in which those contexts lead them to alter their stories and to negotiate perceived restrictions by engaging in discursive blending and shifting. By unpacking the language blending and shifting in their stories, we can begin to understand the tension that exists between how they articulate themselves and how they seek to actively put that articulation into conversation with broader narratives.

Nowhere is this more noticeable than in how trafficking survivors, in particular, grapple with the trope of the inhuman, monstrous trafficker. In the dominant narrative, the traffickers – those who exploit – are given little attention and, too, are rendered voiceless. Interestingly, across interviews with survivors, they all talked at length about their traffickers. One of the most significant revelations I experienced during my work with them was a recognition of ways in which they humanized the individuals who had exploited them. Certainly, there was anger. Certainly, there was a desire for justice. Certainly, there was a sense of loss. And, certainly, they blamed their traffickers for the ways in which they had been traumatized and brutalized. But they also reflected on their experiences by discussing the humanity that they saw in their traffickers. In one particularly emotional exchange, Participant-1 discussed how she had reached out to communicate with her trafficker years later, describing him in a way that directly contrasted with the narrative trope of the monster:

Participant-1: There was a charisma about him. When you think about human traffickers being monsters and these older men, I guess, he was just 19 years old when we met.

Interviewer: He wasn’t that much older than you?

Participant-1: No. I tried to find out, “Well what made you do that? Why did you have so much resentment and anger for women? Why did you hate women?” He opened up about a couple of things that I didn’t know about him. As a child his mother hated him because he reminded her of his dad that had abused her and left her. He was constantly being abused by his mother. Constantly being neglected emotionally, physically. It was hard for him, I guess. So, I wonder if it stems from how his mother treated him. I don’t know.²⁴

Participant-1 wanted to know why she had been exploited and abused. And while she did not receive a fully satisfactory answer, she described the inquiry as central to her healing process by attempting to understand the human behind the monstrous actions she lived through. Interestingly, Participant-1 indicated that she kept in touch with him, even encouraging him to tell his own story because she believed it would be valuable for the public to explore both perspectives. Her observation on this point is an important one. Those who engage in trafficking and associated exploitative practices have not yet been deemed worthy of serious study in academic contexts. Considering that such individuals supply society’s demands for various types of free or low-cost labor, further study is warranted to gain insight into the individuals who take advantage of systemic inequalities

²³ Murray, Michael. “Narrative Psychology.” *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. Ed. Jonathan A. Smith, Sage Publishing (2003): 116.

²⁴ Participant-1, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 13, 2016, interview 2.

to exploit others in order to meet those demands. They, too, are part of the story. But this type of ongoing reflection and communication to find answers – and to broaden awareness about the complexity of human trafficking – is rarely discussed in the literature and certainly is never found in the dominant narrative.

Participant-2 engaged in a similar move. For her, discussing the humanity of her traffickers was more complicated because she was initially trafficked by her own father. But her description of her second trafficking experience is one in which she describes her trafficker as “a criminal for a reason.”²⁵ To some extent she sees his humanity and some goodness within him. She explained:

I feel sorry for Randy because, in a way, I believe he was scared... I don't know if it was because he was under his brother's wing or what. I'm more afraid of [his brother] than I would be of him. I think, in a way, that I have to look and say, criminals are criminals for a reason. His parents enabled him to do drugs, his circle, and being up under his brother was his downfall.²⁶

In this excerpt, we see Participant-2 looking for a way to understand her trafficker's behavior and mindset. She tried to understand the *why* of her experience and, in her estimation, one cannot understand the *why* without humanizing the person who did it. There is a deepness here, a maturity, a recognition of shared humanity that is rooted in pain. Yet trauma survivors purposefully and routinely engage with this pain – often making it a point to do so – to confront it, reflect on it, and acknowledge it as a part of their experience. With an issue so charged and a rhetorical frame that demonizes, simplifies, and silences, survivors remind that there exists pain on both sides that needs to be explored to find healing and reconciliation. It is not a justification for exploitation, but they tell us that we need to examine it. In doing this, trauma survivors make an argument about the complexity of their experiences, reminding that we need to account for that complexity without reducing trauma into simplistic tropes if we are to fully address it as an issue.

In moves like this, trauma survivors engage in movement between discursive spaces to keep their stories as theirs and maintain control over the self. It is transgressive in the sense that the larger forces at play would contend that the traffickers should not have a voice in these spaces and, yet, the survivors reject the shame that would typically be associated with such reflective examinations, instead opting to articulate their own experiences in a way that can help them make meaning from their experiences. In so doing, they reassert their own control over stories. In these moments, survivors reject the politics of legitimation out of the recognized need to engage in control over their own stories. This tension has important implications for how we understand their use of language and structure in the stories they tell, particularly as it relates to dominant cultural narratives.

If we accept De Certeau's claim that “both rhetoric and everyday practices can be defined as internal manipulations of a system – that of language or that of an established order” we might argue that trauma survivors refer to the fixed rhetorical map markers of the dominant narrative because they are aware of their rhetorical liminality.²⁷ Culturally situated language about trauma is not sufficient to describe their experiences and, yet, it is the only language they have that can be used to connect to external audiences. This rhetorical liminality creates its own space in which they both reference map-markers from the dominant narrative and disregard them within the same

²⁵ Participant-2, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 5, 2016, interview 2.

²⁶ Participant-2, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 5, 2016, interview 2.

²⁷ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 24.

story. This is an eminently pragmatic use and, I believe, is informed by the ways in which they see the entire rhetorical frame of trauma as inadequate.

Each of the participants in the study was asked specifically what they thought about the phrase “human trafficking” and how it related to their own experiences. In asking, I sought to get at the root of some of the language in operation and how they specifically viewed language usage through their own individual lenses. Their responses are informative and critically problematize the way in which their experiences are discussed. You can see the apparent frustration surrounding this language use in one participant response:

I wouldn't have understood. I wouldn't have understood what the term meant. What do you mean trafficked? I'm not trafficked. What is trafficked? I'm thinking of a convoy. What is that? I think of a convoy. I was in the truck stops, but I wouldn't have understood. I think the word trafficking is very confusing. Trafficking, everybody thinks of the word prostitution when they hear it. Majority of people I asked, what is trafficking to you? It's people being sold into prostitution. Okay, but what about all this other stuff? To me trafficking is a huge word that's misconstrued. A lot of people just misinterpret the term.²⁸

The level of misinterpretation described poses significant issues and it also leads to a consideration of rhetorical frameworks around traumatizing experiences as inherently colonizing. In the sense that such frameworks deploy language that is inherently confusing, we must at least consider the possibility that they are designed to be limiting and to limit those who can access it beneficially. The frustration is not so much that the framework is not technically usable – it is – but rather that the framework can only be used by those authorized and empowered to do so. By highlighting that some people can hear the phrase “human trafficking” and not understand its meaning, she reminds that the framework operates as a colonizing language used to not only silence, but to deafen; and in deafening, to dampen understanding. This is typical of colonizing frameworks. As David Spurr noted in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, colonizing rhetoric is a tool that is used to create difference:

The problem of the colonizer is in some sense the problem of the writer [...] colonization is a form of self-inscription onto the lives of people. For the colonizer as for the writer, it becomes a question of establishing authority through the demarcation of identity and difference.²⁹

The language surrounding trauma – and, in particular, human trafficking – asserts a radical difference from the colonized, which then becomes an assertion of authority over the other. As a form of colonizing discourse, this operates to create an “inherent confusion of identity and difference.”³⁰ The above examples show a tactical use of language that reveals that trauma survivors are not merely concerned with subject formation. The use of culturally situated beliefs about trauma permeates both stories, while also being drawn – profoundly – into question. Much of this is rooted in the perceived need to garner credibility while simultaneously problematizing the need to be deemed credible in the first place.

Negotiating the Spaces of Credibility

²⁸ Participant-1, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 13, 2016, interview 2.

²⁹ Spurr, David. (1993). *The Rhetoric of Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press (1993): 7.

³⁰ Spurr, David. (1993). *The Rhetoric of Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press (1993): 7.

While it is true that the necessity of credibility is essential to any storyteller, the purposeful attentiveness trauma survivors pay to using language that aligns with the dominant narrative seems to stem from experiences having been deemed non-credible. In other words, they use acceptable language because they know it will be accepted. This is a tactical choice, one that reflects their respective past experiences with telling stories that have been rejected. Being deemed non-credible is a common experience for those who have endured forms of trauma and exploitation. Stories tend to result in negative credibility determinations not because they aren't true, but because of "the lack of rationality, the lack of internal consistency, and the lack of inherent persuasiveness in testimony."³¹ Early on in my trauma-related research, I learned that the stories with gaps, with missing memories, with inconsistencies – the stories that were raw and which did not neatly fit into tidy categories – were actually more often than not credible stories that made legitimate claims. Those who have experienced trauma, realized or potential, simply do not recount full stories in a perfect linear format. Add socioeconomic differences and education barriers into the mix and you have a perfect storm of misunderstanding.

When an audience considers a story, there is no formal consideration required for such differences or even the impacts of trauma and, as such, the whole process comes down to audience positionality. Unfortunately, too many audiences – in formal and informal settings alike – fail to address these hurdles, instead using minor inconsistencies or reactions to unacceptable language choices to render a story either legitimate or illegitimate, credible or non-credible. In a society that views a storyteller's credibility as "of extreme importance" in assessing claims, a negative credibility finding is, then, the easiest way to not listen.³² There exists no need for audiences to justify such determinations because internal inconsistencies in the story or unacceptable language usage are perceived, *de facto*, to demonstrate a lack of credibility.

Recent publications demonstrate that negative credibility findings remain an all too common experience of those who tell stories about trauma, reflecting a lack of awareness about how trauma impacts mental health and how socioeconomic differences impact the interpretation of stories. Michael Kagan, for example, describes the ways in which credibility assessments can actually re-traumatize individuals. Not only do such individuals re-live their trauma in telling their stories, but are further traumatized by then being told that they are not believable.³³ Unfortunately, those who have the courage to tell their stories – such as the research participants who agreed to be interviewed by me – are often told that they are liars.

Therefore, the need to be viewed as credible storytellers is centered in a reaction to disbelief that they routinely encounter. It is a response to the perceived reality that they are purveyors of subjugated or non-legitimate knowledge. As Foucault describes it, this type of knowledge represents a way of knowing that dominant culture neglects, represses, or fails to recognize. Michel Foucault, who wrote about subjugated knowledge in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, described such ways of knowing as those which have been "buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemization."³⁴ Foucault argued that despite the dismissal of such ways of knowing, the subjugated can gain power through opposition; this struggle is apparent in the practices shared by trauma survivors.

³¹ Kassindja, Fauziya. *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* New York: Dell Publishing (1998): 373.

³² Kassindja, Fauziya. *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* New York: Dell Publishing (1998): 373.

³³ Kagan, Michael. "Believable Victims: Asylum Credibility and the Struggle for Objectivity." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 16, no.1 (2015): 123-131.

³⁴ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Reissue Edition. New York: Vintage Books (1990): 81.

In this sense, then, we can see trauma survivors grappling with their own way of knowing as a form of subjugated knowledge, rendered illegible, because they exist outside the proper and legitimate ways of knowing that would render them legible and legitimate. The struggle to be recognized as legible and legitimate is a centerpiece of their experiences and provides insight as to why trauma survivors engage in the tactical uses of language that they do to garner credibility. Participant-2 tells of an early experience, one of the first instances in which she attempted to share her story, which was rejected out of hand, setting the stage for a lifetime of negotiation with the politics of legitimation:

I went to talk to a detective in South Carolina, and I pulled him aside, I said, "I want to tell you. I need to tell you what happened." I gave him the whole story, and he looked at me and he says, "You know, that's all bullshit. You're just telling me that because you're busted." I even gave them the name of the girl that I overheard that they left for dead in Florida because they made her sign everything over in her house and they put it on a U-Haul truck and they left her in the woods. I was very discouraged by law enforcement at that time.³⁵

In seeking to share her story with the detective, Participant-2 was not heard because she positively asserted her agency in direct contrast to how she was supposed to operate as described within the dominant frame of the rhetoric of rescue. Therefore, as Participant-2 tells it, because she proactively told her story she faced rejection because her actuality was misaligned with perceptions about how she should be: abject, ashamed, fearful, a shadow.

Indeed, the dominant narrative asserts that individuals who are traumatized have no voice, requiring someone else – an authority – to speak on their behalf, someone to deem them legitimate. When she tells of speaking on her own behalf, she describes a moment in which *believability* and the rhetoric of rescue clashes. She is unbelievable because of her act of positive assertion and unrescuable because the authority has not rendered her as a credible victim. Simply put, by asserting herself as someone in need, Participant-2 actively undid external perceptions of her identity as rooted in the abject, deserving of pity, and in need of rescue. In undoing this, she created a new perception that she was instead a “bullshitter,” a criminal seeking to find a way out from being busted, all stemming from a simple plea for help. During the interviews, she described the feeling this way:

Help me. You get the door slammed in your face. You might as well go back to that lifestyle because they're not going to believe you. For those who are brought up in it, that's the real truth of it right there. They're not going to want to come back to law enforcement. They're going to say, "They aren't going to believe me anyway, I might as well go back to it. What's the point?"³⁶

This skepticism provides us with insight as to *why* trauma survivors engage with the politics of legitimation and why they use language in the way they do. They experienced rejection because of the ways in which their story has been perceived by audiences in the past and, in their storytelling practices now, they actively seek to counter potential objections by aligning the narrative with the dominant discourse. Participant-1 described similar encounters which colored her view and informed her language use in her storytelling approach. Over the years during which Participant-1 was trafficked, she faced dozens of arrests; not a single time during which she was identified as someone in need of help, even when she positively asserted a need. I asked her about this, why she

³⁵ Participant-2, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 5, 2016, interview 2.

³⁶ Participant-2, interview by John T. Gagnon, January 5, 2016, interview 2.

thought none of her potential rescuers identified her as someone in need, or even at risk, particularly while she was underage.

In Participant-1's experience, her interactions with law enforcement were rooted in mistrust and skepticism that was defined by the backward logic of the rhetoric of rescue, which in her case failed to account for a lack of options to assert agency without being penalized. Indeed, if there's a persistent theme throughout Participant-1's story it is that her capacity to act within her situation was severely limited by a scarcity of productive options due to structural limitations. Nowhere was this clearer than in her description of a fundamental lack of trust of the institutional structures that were purportedly there to help. Participant-1 asserted her agency repeatedly, finding clear paths of survival and resistance, but she was unable to assert it in a way that would alter external perception. Indeed, for Participant-1 there was no option to ask for help because, in her situation, it was just as often law enforcement who engaged in trafficking and supporting trafficking operations as anyone else.

Mistrust of institutions translates into an observation that the rhetoric surrounding trauma is both muddled and yet operates in very specific ways, many of which are actually detrimental rather than beneficial. For trauma survivors, storytelling about lived experiences tends to be rooted in a fundamental lack of trust of the institutional structures that purportedly exist to help. In such stories, we see the victim/agent dichotomy of the rhetoric of rescue play out, resulting in silencing. It is because of these experiences that trauma survivors know that to be heard they need to use the language of and operate within the framework of the dominant narrative, even if they view that framework as insufficient for understanding and explicating their lived experiences.

While this seems contradictory, we may consider De Certeau's argument that "stories are actuated by a contradiction that is represented in them by the relationship between the frontier and the bridge, that is between a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority."³⁷ As Andrew Thacker (2003) argues, two things cannot occupy the same place: "elements can only exist beside one another, each situated in its proper location. De Certeau uses proper to mean the official and legitimized use to which a place or activity belongs. A space, however, is based not on stability, but on direction, movement, and velocity."³⁸ Accepting this, it appears that trauma survivors engage in storytelling practices through which they consciously attempt to fit their language within what they perceive as being the proper/legitimized space while also regularly returning to their own language.

Trauma survivor storytelling practices demonstrate a continual, persistent *movement* that reveals their liminal rhetorical situated-ness through a fluidity of language. Specifically, depending on what point was being described language shifted, often contradictorily, in a way that revealed a tension between lived experience and a desire to be accepted and acknowledged. More than this, they appear deeply aware of their own in-betweenness. In other words, the movement within each story – and its attendant contradictions – seems to be a conscious attempt to negotiate the liminal and in so doing meet perceived culturally-situated expectations while also remaining true to lived experience, an experience that did not necessarily align with those expectations.

Liminality, Perception, and the Performance of Movement

Persistently aware of their liminal situatedness, trauma survivors exist somewhere in between the normative victim or survivor who shares stories aligning with the dominant narrative and the post-

³⁷ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 126.

³⁸ Thacker, Andrew. *Moving Through Modernity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (2003): 31.

survivor self, whose stories draw that narrative into question. In effect, they use their liminality to move between domains of knowledge, that of trauma and a subsequently re-envisioned self, and that of the dominant narrative.

Examples of this discursive shifting span all of the interviews I conducted. Trauma survivors use, reject, and re-use the language of the dominant narrative. Words and phrases like *survivor*, *victim*, *trafficker*, and *criminal* all make appearances, as does the binaristic language of morality, sometimes in ways that align with the dominant narrative and sometimes in ways that draw the language into question. One of the most noticeable examples of this, across my interviews, was the shifting that occurred in the use of language surrounding victimization and survivorship. Yet, despite apparent discomfort with these labels, and despite the fact that they engage in creative articulations of the self that purposefully exclude those labels, there are moments where trauma survivors turn back to them, using such labels in reference to their own stories.

Another example exists in the way in which trauma survivors shift back and forth from the use of the simplistic binaristic constructions of the dominant narrative (e.g., immoral / moral; criminal / noncriminal) to a complicated and complex multidimensionality. All my participants talked at some length about engaging in criminal and immoral behavior; yet this construction broke down, repeatedly, when they were asked to describe the experience in their own words. The immoral criminal then becomes a multifaceted person who has a need for love, need for acceptance, and a place in society. Participant-1 engaged most notably in such shifts, from describing herself within binaristic frames and then humanizing both herself and her trafficker(s) by deploying language that sought to demonstrate a multifaceted nature of her experiences, even reflecting on friendships made and positive moments while she was being trafficked. It is in this discursive movement that trauma survivors reimagine and refigure the major features of the dominant narrative. This *use* transmutes each within colonizing discourses: they exist as they see (and articulate) themselves *and* as culture perceives (and articulates) them. This dual positionality *within language* renders them rhetorically *in-between* and is demonstrated by how they deploy language to construct their stories.

We might think about their storytelling practices as expressions of rhetorical ambiguity, what Bakhtin characterizes as “the internal dialogism of double-voiced prose” that “draws its energy, its dialogic ambiguity, not from individual dissonances, misunderstandings, or contradictions... but sinks its roots deep into a fundamental socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-languagedness.”³⁹ Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia is useful for exploring the language shifting in the interviews conducted with trauma survivors because it highlights the ways in which their storytelling practices are dynamic, relational, and engaged in a process of re- vision. The double-voicedness of their language choices to describe experience is one that both seeks to draw lines between past and present, but which also is revisionary. They use the language of the dominant narrative to revise the rawness of their stories to be more palatable for a general audience. Indeed, by choosing more sanitized language to describe their experiences, they have represented themselves as acceptable and credible practitioners of the dominant narrative in their storytelling practices. The shift in language that occurs when asked to put experiences in their own words is notable for how unsanitized and raw the language is.

In this there is a negotiation between the rawness of lived experience and the language used to describe it, and the choice to convey that experience in language that is more palatable to external audiences. This is not occupying a double subjectivity, as some might assert, but rather an assertion

³⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press (1981): 325-326.

of a single subjectivity while acknowledging the expectations of the dominant narrative and tactically playing to those expectations in language use. Carol Winkelmann argues that such language shifting is common in survivors because it is representative of the phases of healing: as they move from phase to phase, they assimilate new language which, in turn, results in a hybridity or doubleness in storytelling.⁴⁰ Winkelmann's notion of hybridization oversimplifies what is happening in the storytelling practices of trauma survivors. Rather than being representative of the phases of healing, their language shifting is an ongoing negotiation and compromise between the articulated post-survivor self – which does not fit neatly into healing phases – and the perceived expectations of external audiences.

A dissonance presents itself between the realities of trauma survivors' lived experiences, the language used to describe such experiences for themselves, and the language used to describe experiences for the external. In seeking to draw connections, build credibility, establish trust – in effect, *to be heard* – they realize that the role they inhabit as storytellers requires careful language choices that only change when asked to use their own language. Rather than representing a fragmentation of subjectivity, this demonstrates a clear sense of self and a purposeful move to use specific language to protect the self in the realm of public discourse. If, as De Certeau tells us – “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across” – we might see the dominant narrative as a map and we might see the stories told by trauma survivors as tactical uses of and subversions of the map.⁴¹ They actively use the language of the dominant narrative to speak to their audiences while also engaging the act of protecting their own articulated identity. This (re)positioning discursively locates them as “observably and subjectively coherent participants” in collectively produced narratives.⁴² According to Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, this entails a critical approach to the idea of self-as-entity, where language is central, as “people become fixed in position through the range of linguistic practices available to them to make sense” of their world.⁴³ In this, the language choices used by trauma survivors are tactical and subversive, as well as limited: the linguistic practices available to them to describe their experiences are insufficient.

Conclusion

Chris Brickell argues that selves are constructed using socially available meanings and discourses as resources.⁴⁴ But what happens when socially available meanings and discursive frames are inadequate resources for trauma survivors to convey experiences? The stories shared by the trauma survivors I interviewed are located in a rhetorically liminal space because they exist in between their perception of their own lived experiences and cultural perceptions. They are in between rhetorical framing and language usage as it relates to trauma. Indeed, the language available to them is separated from their respective constructions of self, a situation that disallows incorporation into

⁴⁰ Winkelmann, Carol. “The Language of Healing: Generic Structure, Hybridization, and Meaning Shifts in the Recovery of Battered Women.” *Survivor Rhetoric: Negotiations and Narrativity in Abused Women's Language*. Eds. Shearer-Creamean, Christine and Winkelmann, Carol, University of Toronto Press (2005): 211.

⁴¹ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1984): 32.

⁴² Davies, Bronwyn and Rom Harre. “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves.” *A Body of Writing, 1990-1999*. Ed. Bronwyn Davies, Rowman & Littlefield (2000): 91.

⁴³ Potter, Jonathan and Margaret Wetherell. *Discourse and Social Psychology*. New York: Sage Publications (1987): 109.

⁴⁴ Brickell, Chris. “Masculinities, Performativity, and Subversion: A Sociological Reappraisal.” *Men and Masculinities*, 8, no.1 (2005): 37.

cultural discourse *as themselves*. But instead of recapitulating the tragic caught in between two worlds stereotype, trauma survivors demonstrate the promises of occupying the liminal, where they negotiate the distance between several discourse communities. In my exchanges with trauma survivors, discursive shifting/blending operate to negotiate this distance, a traversal of the discursive terrain.

There is, in this, a sophisticated navigation of the politics of legitimation and the self. Each knows that in order to be heard, specific language choices are required. Trauma survivors align with the language of the dominant narrative because there is no other acceptable language to use and in order to be heard. Across interviews, there is a reticence on the part of participants to fully embrace the narrative as they seem to recognize its limitations and the ways in which it is limiting – it doesn't tell the whole story; it doesn't recognize the complexity of their experiences. Even so, the trauma survivors who I interviewed see this not necessarily as a tragedy but instead as an opportunity to cross the discursive terrain in meaningful ways. Malea Powell sheds some light on this in her description of Charles Eastman's rhetorics of survivance, when she writes of

his willing participation in multiple discourses, his awareness of how those discourses work, and his surfacing of the imposed belief systems of those discourses through simple commentary and observation. This participation becomes useful when he injects a doubleness of narrative awareness into his retellings and then engages in a tactics of linkage and textual and symbolic affiliation combined with experiential tellings that reveal his familiarity with Indian and white culture.⁴⁵

Like Eastman, my research subjects were willing and knowing participants who leveraged their liminality to engage in tactics of linkage. This is where the profound nature of the stories told by trauma survivors across venues and audiences is made manifest. This may be best exemplified in the commitments that trauma survivors have made to participate in projects such as this, and to speak to a broad range of discourse communities interested in the issue of trauma. The value of making these connections is, for them, clear: with each telling, they open up important new spaces to seriously contemplate – and to help others contemplate – the ways in which their respective stories run up against and intersect with broader cultural discourse.

⁴⁵ Powell, Malea. "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, 53, no.3 (2002): 427.