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### Cancel Culture and Cancel Discourse: Cultural Attacks on Academic Ideals

Mary Gondringer

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**Cancel Culture and Cancel Discourse: Cultural Attacks on Academic Ideals**

by

Mary Gondringer

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

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Thesis Committee:  
James Heiman, Chairperson  
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## Abstract

Calls for social justice have been around since the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, but it wasn't until recently that America has seen a resurgence of these calls. Social media has made it easier for average people who wouldn't normally consider themselves social justice warriors to fight for the social justice of others. With the help of social media, speaking up about social injustices has become easy and convenient. Out of this recent resurgence, we have seen a new culture form: cancel culture. Cancel discourse – the language that perpetuates cancel culture – is threatening the very fabric of our academic institutions. Colleges and universities across America are overwhelmingly trading their long-held ideals – particularly those related to academic freedom – for new ideals created under cancel discourse – specifically, silencing any discourse that may be interpreted as transgressive in nature. By allowing cancel discourse to continue, colleges and universities give up ideals that form a liberal society, particularly those related to open-mindedness. Ultimately, the goals cancel discourse attempt to achieve work to reinforce the very social injustices they attempt to tear down. Cancel discourse is the newest way of attempting to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1984).

## Acknowledgements

Throughout the process of compiling this thesis, I received a great deal of support and assistance from a variety of people.

I would first like to thank my committee chair, Jamie, whose insight never fell short. I appreciate the countless hours we spent speculating about not only this new cultural phenomenon, but also about rhetoric itself. During the last two years, my understanding of the field of rhetoric has grown to a place I never imagined possible, and this new understanding is largely due to your direction. Through sharing your understanding of both rhetoric and critical thinking, I'm leaving this degree as a different person, someone who feels confident in approaching a difficult topic such as cancel culture with ease and an open mind to challenging my own assumptions. Beyond the academic assistance, I must thank you for your emotional support. Through life hardships and collegiate struggles, you were there every step of the way to offer whatever I needed. This thesis would not have been completed without your hours of support and guidance. Thank you for being patient with me as I navigated this new world of thesis writing. Thank you for believing in me.

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what inspired me to pursue a master's degree. Beyond this, your genuine interest in my project along the way helped keep me invested in my own topic. Thank you for asking me many questions, for sending me numerous popular culture examples of cancel culture, and for talking through the cancellations I personally witnessed. Thank you for encouraging me in times of struggle and praising me in times of success. I am particularly appreciative of my mother, for her supreme editing skills.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Who am I?**

As someone who has spent years in the K-12 education sector, and someone who just recently entered collegiate teaching, I value academic freedom. In the K-12 sector, that freedom looks different than in the collegiate sector, but I value academic freedom in all areas of education. I also value and respect the personal, social, and economic struggles experienced by all people, especially those who may identify as a member of a marginalized community, and I would never want my value of academic freedom to cause further subjugation to any person or community. Please know, the views expressed in this paper may not be my actual views; many are simply presented as rhetorical acts as a catalyst to open a dialogue about academic freedom, especially in the collegiate sector. As I sit here in 2021, watching live videos from the police brutality trial of Derek Chauvin and hearing about tragic police shootings, such as the recent Daunte Wright shooting, I believe we must do everything in our power to fight any injustice occurring in our country. I believe that as a country, our hatred of others goes much deeper than many of us realize. I believe we must have the difficult conversations, the conversations that make us uncomfortable, because ultimately, silence will not bring about the societal changes we need to accomplish. I believe open dialogue and debate is essential to learning and progressing as a liberal and democratic society.

With teaching as my professional life's work, I understand how words hurt and I never speak, nor allow, any racial slurs or transgressive dialogue in my classroom. I do, however, invite my students to have a conversation about the etymology and context of the slur to open debate and dialogue, participate in a democratic process, and ultimately, engage in a form of civil discourse to build understanding and compassion for historically marginalized communities.

Ultimately, my intent is to open the possibility for positive change among my students as the future leaders of our country.

For this thesis, I extensively researched ideologies, some of which were related to cancel culture. Because ideologies are not the subject matter of this writing, they appear minimally throughout the body of this thesis; however, they are often the underlying motive behind cancel culture, my subject matter. Through my research, I found that ideologies are created from ideals which are created from ideas. Because ideas are the root of all ideologies, it is essential to know where, how, and why those ideas are implanted into our brains. Where, how, and why do we believe what we believe? Once we can answer those questions, we can start to evaluate our assumptions about our ideologies and start to break down the natural default setting that David Foster Wallace discusses in his 2005 Kenyan College commencement address “This is Water.” For the most part, we are not prompted to truly assess our own assumptions and ideologies; however, when we are, our minds become open to a multitude of possibilities and much of what we thought we knew about the world may suddenly be overturned.

The conversation I’m about to have with you is just me, a graduate student at St. Cloud State University who values debate, asking you, dear reader, to think about your assumptions about our current (2021, United States) culture, race relations, and the way we engage with other individuals. I ask that you keep an open mind about the argument I’m about to present. I hope the conversation I’m about to open helps you engage in an important dialogue about a very real and very concerning phenomenon occurring in our society: cancel culture.

## Chapter 2

### Cancel Culture – How did we get here?

I believe the social justice events of our current time will ultimately find a place in our history books, right alongside the events of the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 1960s. It seems a though not a day goes by in which mainstream media fails to report on a social justice event, may it be a protest, a new movement, or a fatal shooting. Likewise, my personal social media feeds are rich with calls for social justice from family, friends, and acquaintances who hold a variety of ideologies.

For the first time in history, the average person has the means through social media to reach a worldwide audience. Because of this, social justice issues have been brought to life in a way never seen before. Anyone participating in social media, regardless of their following, can publicly fight for social justice. Social media has made the call for social justice easy and convenient, and many people who might not traditionally consider themselves as an activist are now jumping on the bandwagon in the fight for social justice.

While these calls may be well-intended, unfortunately, many calls for social justice have turned into what our popular culture refers to as “cancelling,” whereas a person, group, TV show, song, and much more are interpreted as disrespectful or marginalizing in some way to a specific community of people and are “cancelled.” Actresses, such as Gina Carano, lost jobs because of authoring personal social media posts deemed transgressive (Smith). Books that may have been written with themes accepted during the time of original publication, such as various Dr. Seuss stories, are no longer for sale because those themes, while not appropriate for 2021, still present themselves on the fabric of the books’ pages (Christopher). In the wake of George

Floyd, Dante Wright, and more, we've seen a new culture forming within our popular culture. Many people commonly refer to this new culture as "cancel culture."

While cancel culture seems relatively new, the concepts behind it have been around for years. Its ideals can be traced back to movements such as the #MeToo movement, designed to bring awareness to victims of sexual abuse, and earlier forms of political correctness. Early mentions of the term "cancel culture" do not seem to follow any sort of guidelines, as these early uses carried a variety of meanings (Greenspan) and were used in a variety of contexts. While the term had a mostly unclear start, today it seems to be used most often to "cancel" people who hold some sort of power and have done or said something that could be interpreted as insensitive to one of the multitudes of historically marginalized groups of people. The incidents I've evaluated – occurring in a variety of worlds including entertainment, politics, sports, social media, and the academy – indicate that cancel culture, or more specifically, what I like to refer to as "cancel discourse," seems to intend to strip authority while silencing people in positions of power, may they be a Hollywood actress, a governor of a state, a professional athlete, a social media influencer, a professor, or any other person holding some aspect of authority.

Cancel discourse is not a term commonly used in conjunction with cancel culture. In fact, after a quick Google search, "cancel discourse" does not seem to be a term at all. Therefore, I define cancel discourse as any written, spoken, or implied language that perpetuates cancel culture. Cancel discourse differs from cancel culture because cancel discourse is the vehicle that drives cancel culture. Cancel culture would not exist without cancel discourse because the discourse is what creates the conversation that perpetuates the culture.

To better understand cancel culture, and ultimately to better understand cancel discourse, I turned to Kenneth Burke and his concept of dramatisic analysis as explored in his 1945 book,

*A Grammar of Motives*. On the first page, Burke asks: “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (Burke xv). He uses a pentad to help scholars answer his deceptively simple question. He asks individual questions in relation to each of the terms in his pentad: “Act (what happened?), Scene (where and when was the act performed?), Agent (who did it?), Agency (how was it done?), and Purpose (why was it done?)” (Blakesley 8). Burke’s pentad can help us understand not only specific incidents of cancel culture but also cancel culture as a whole.

Using the pentad to complete a dramatic analysis is most often utilized to help us further understand specific events or situations. In fact, during my research, I completed various pentadic analyses on a variety of occurrences of cancel culture. Through this work, I noticed patterns and similarities between various cancellations. Therefore, I was inspired to complete a dramatic analysis on cancel culture by classifying it into one social phenomenon. I was hoping to gain further understanding of how cancel culture functions in society in general.

In cancel culture, the act (what happened?) most often deals with attacking some form of power or authority. Someone in a position of power loses an aspect of their power, typically because they said, wrote, or did something that was interpreted as a statement against a historically marginalized community. My understanding of power and authority drastically changed through this research. As a teacher, I never realized my own power in the classroom until after reading about Paulo Freire’s banking concept of education. Freire presents the traditional educational model of the teacher as the sole authority figure in the classroom whose main purpose is to fill their students’ brains with knowledge. Students are not necessarily participators in the education process; they are receptors, and they have no authority. After reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where Freire discusses his educational concepts, I suddenly

viewed myself as an authority figure, which led me to find authority in other places I had not noticed before. Freire helped me recognize that almost anyone with a public following can be a figure who holds authority, regardless of whether I personally had heard of that person or not.

At the time of her cancellation, Gina Carano (a name previously unknown to me), was a public figure in a variety of seemingly unconnected worlds, including Hollywood and mixed martial arts. She held power in both worlds and had authority over different audiences. Still to this day, her television interviews and social media posts are viewed by millions of people. What she says and how she acts can and does impact people. Calls for her cancellation came because some people interpreted her social media posts as a way of using her power, her influence, to spread negativity about certain marginalized groups of people. These calls were intended to strip her of her power, and ultimately, Disney fired her from her role in *The Mandalorian*. Through this act of cancellation, Gina Carano lost an element of her power.

In later chapters, this thesis will discuss three individuals (Phillip Adamo (professor at Augsburg University), Greg Patton (professor at the University of Southern California), and Kieran Bhattacharya (student at the University of Virginia)) who also experienced loss of power and authority because of attempted cancellations. Analyzing cancel culture through Burke's dramatisitic lens helps us understand the similarities in the acts, what actually happened, in these different examples of cancel culture. Each example includes a loss of power and authority. The power loss looks different depending on the specific aspects of each individual incident. For example, the cancellation of a well-known author often looks different than a cancellation of a university professor. The author may lose sales and the professor may lose employment; however, the act itself is still the same in most, if not all, instances of cancel culture.

Typically, these cancellations occur in the public eye. Burke would refer to this as the scene (where and when was the act performed?). Cancellations can come at any time after the person in power has committed the interpreted transgressions; however, to bring scope to this widespread cultural phenomenon, the remaining chapters in this thesis will focus on cancellations within academic institutions. Most often, calls for cancellation occur almost immediately following the incident. However, this is not always the case. We are seeing more and more cancellation attempts targeted at incidents that occurred months or even years ago, preserved in such places as high school and college yearbooks. The calls for Gina Carano's cancellation occurred largely on social media. Disney responded to the public outcry by firing her from their production of television series, *The Mandalorian*.

Often, the people who are calling for cancellation are social media users speaking out in support of social justice for marginalized groups of people. Burke may refer to these individuals as agents (who did it?); popular culture sometimes refers to them as "social justice warriors" or more professionally as "civil rights activists." Even people who do not consider themselves to be activists can join the cancellation efforts. These agents can come from all walks of life and economic classes. Anyone from any identifying group – race, gender, political affiliation, and more – can join cancellation efforts. The interesting aspect of agents in cancel culture is that they most often carry their own authority because even those with seemingly no authority, such as a Twitter profile with no followers, can comment on a post by Gina Carano, tag the Disney Twitter account, and express distaste in something the actress is presenting. Therefore, that seemingly insignificant Twitter account uses its own authority to stand up against another authority figure. The agents in cancel culture are widespread, various, and walking amongst us every day.

In cancel culture, Burke's ideas of agents and agency (how was it done?) seem to work together. Because of the power of social media, and specifically hashtags, jumping on the cancellation bandwagon is easy for anyone with a social media account, regardless of their following. Social media seems to be where the agents are most active in their calls for cancellation. On social media, the agency of cancel culture occurs in a variety of ways, such as users utilizing hashtags, commenting on a post, tagging another account, reposting onto their account, or engaging with the post in any way allowed by the specific platform. All a user must do is hashtag the latest movement to trigger the platform's algorithm to further activate the movement as it moves to more users' feeds. The #MeToo movement went viral almost immediately, garnering 1,595,453 tweets in the first week alone (Modrek). We have seen similar virality with other social justice hashtags, such as #blacklivesmatter. Beyond these targeted social justice hashtag movements, we also see hashtag movements that are solely designed for cancellations. Head to Google and search "#cancel" and read the suggested searches. On April 23, 2021, my Google's top four suggestions were #cancellebron, #canceldisneyplus, #cancelsouthpark, and #cancelculture. Many cancellations occur when hashtags gain steam on a variety of platforms. The agency in Gina Carano's case occurred largely with users commenting on her posts, and many times, tagging Disney to alert them to the actions of one of their employees. As we already know, calls for the cancellation of Gina Carano worked. Social media is a very powerful tool in perpetuating cancel culture.

Burke's last term in his pentad is purpose (why was it done?). Why is cancel culture a part of our popular culture today? I have yet to find research that points to the exact purpose of cancel culture; however, in the examples I've deeply analyzed, cancel culture uses cancel discourse as an attempt to silence people who express opinion and discourse that is deemed

transgressive in nature. In the examples I've researched, this silencing seems to not only attempt to cancel – silence – the person responsible for the discourse, but also to silence the discourse itself. The goal of these actions seems to attempt to silence of any form of conversation about topics interpreted as offensive to any marginalized group of people while at the same time, stripping people of their power. While sometimes the purpose is executed flawlessly and powerful people are silenced and stripped of their power, as was the case with Donald Trump who was not only stripped of his office in the White House, but also his presence on social media, many times, the attempts are not fruitful in the long run. While Gina Carano was fired from *The Mandalorian*, she did not allow herself to be silenced. She is still active on social media, with nearly two million followers on Instagram and one million on Twitter, publicly sharing her ideas and values, many of which could be deemed controversial.

After reading Burke and applying his concepts of the pentad to cancel culture, I believe cancel culture is attempting a resurgence of Civil Rights Era ideals, where the activists of our past fought for basic human rights for all Americans, regardless of race.

Beyond this dramatistic analysis, this thesis is not intended to further analyze “cancel culture.” It will, however, examine how the discourse propagating cancel culture – cancel discourse – has affected the conversations, particularly those related to academic freedom, in American colleges and universities. The purpose of this dramatistic analysis was to help myself, and anyone interacting with this thesis, further understand what is occurring through cancel culture and cancel discourse. This analysis will hopefully help bring clarity to the further instances of cancel culture and cancel discourse mentioned throughout the rest of this thesis.

## Chapter 3

### Phillip Adamo's Attempted Cancellation

On October 30, 2018, Phillip Adamo, Professor of History at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota, came under fire for his use of the N-word in his Honors 120 course, Scholar Citizen. According to Augsburg's website, "Augsburg University [a private, Evangelical Lutheran university], has maintained a strong academic reputation defined by excellence in the liberal arts and professional studies since 1869. A safe and welcoming campus in the heart of Minneapolis, Augsburg offers undergraduate and graduate degrees to nearly 3,400 diverse students." Given that the university boasts their campus as safe and welcoming to diverse students, it is likely diverse conversations may occur in a safe and welcoming manner within classrooms across the university. Therefore, in a course aptly titled Scholar Citizen, the probability of debate about diverse topics seems inevitable.

Phillip Adamo was teaching a group of first-year students in the Honors program when a Hmong student read the following excerpt from the 1963 James Baldwin novel, *The Fire Next Time*: "You can really only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a n-----." (Baldwin, as well as the student, used the full N-word rather than the euphemism.) In a video published as a Facebook live post on November 1 by Citlaly Escobar, Facebook user, Honors program officer, and previous student of Adamo's course, Adamo claimed the students in the course gasped and were shocked by the student's use of the N-word. In response to his students, Adamo sparked conversation, attempting to open dialogue amongst his students, by asking them if "it was appropriate to use the word if the author had used it" (Flaherty). In doing so, Adamo spoke the N-word. Debate continued for around forty minutes, at which end, the students decided the word was not appropriate to use going forward.

The conversation Adamo sparked seems an appropriate response to both the student and the book itself, especially considering that Baldwin's goal in penning this book was to "translate what it means to be a Negro in white America so that a white man can understand it," according to Sheldon Binn, author of the 1963 *New York Times* article, "The Fire Next Time." It may be important to note that James Baldwin was a black, gay author writing during the Civil Rights Era and therefore, was a credible source for the content of his book. The debate held by the Honors 120 students seems to align, and even embrace, Baldwin's original intent.

In Adamo's second class of the day, a similar dialogue occurred. Shortly after the second course concluded, Adamo emailed his students, requesting they read two articles about the use of the N-word. "The first, by Andre Perry, David M. Rubenstein Fellow at the Brookings Institution, [which] suggests to 'choose to only use the N-word judiciously, reminding ourselves of its gravity by not using it loosely.' The second essay, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, formerly of *The Atlantic*, appeared in *The New York Times* in 2013, and has what Adamo called a 'provocative title' – 'In Defense of a Loaded Word.' But it concludes that 'N----- the border, the signpost that reminds us that the old crimes don't disappear. It tells white people that, for all their guns and all their gold, there will always be places they can never go'" (Flaherty). While the title may suggest otherwise, the second article seems to most closely embody the conclusion of the Honors students' debate, that is, the N-word should not be used.

In assigning these two articles, Adamo presented his students with two differing arguments: one claiming people should not use the N-word loosely, and another claiming that white people will never be able to use the word. Neither of these articles promoted or praised the use of the N-word. In assigning these articles, Adamo probably wanted his students to read them and come back to class on November 1 to discuss the varying arguments presented in the

articles. Whether he realized it or not, Adamo's teaching decision was rooted in rhetoric as he invited his students to read two articles with slightly differing arguments that would hopefully help them evaluate their own terministic screens, created by their own ideologies, with the N-word and lead them to critically think about the word's traditional and modern connotations.

Students responded to Adamo's assignment by claiming he was pushing his opinion on them. In a December 14 letter to the students of Augsburg, Adamo refuted the claim that he used "the N-word multiple times against the objections of students of color" (Kenney et al.). He added that he sent "two articles to students as a follow-up to class discussion – something every professor at Augsburg has surely done at some point," and explained that "both articles are by African American authors; both have provocative titles... Some students claimed that I sent them these articles to 'defend the use of the N-word.' But this claim is quickly dismissed if one actually reads the articles [sic]" (Kenney et al.). If Adamo's students had taken the time to analyze the arguments presented in the articles, they may have realized that not only do the arguments differ in nature, but neither of them was arguing for what the students claimed, which is that of promotion (or at least, not dismay, of using the N-word).

While Adamo did not directly tie this conversation to rhetoric, it is likely both hermeneutics and context were at play in his intent to open the debate. Ann Berthoff, in her article "Rhetoric as Hermeneutic," defines hermeneutic as "the art of interpretation" which "requires a concept of representation," therefore meaning "what we seek to understand – what we know the meaning of – must be represented in order to be interpreted, those interpretations being subjected to further interpretations" (Berthoff 281). Interpreting various uses of the N-word – by use of the James Baldwin book – and then interpreting those interpretations – by use of the two articles – seems to be what Adamo was asking of his students. Beyond this, he

initiated the debate and sent the two articles as a response to the context – the reactions of the students and the subsequent conversation – of his classroom that day.

Prior to Adamo's December 14 letter, the students' distaste led them to email student officers of the Honors program expressing concern for Adamo's interactions with the N-word, both his use in the classroom on October 30 and his assignment of two articles about the word. The officers were not enrolled in either section of Adamo's course; they were representatives of the Honors program which includes a variety of courses, including Adamo's Scholar Citizen course. The emails prompted the officers to reply (while purposely excluding Adamo on the email) where they explained their intent to observe Adamo's course during the next session, November 1. Because he was not included on the emails between the officers and students, Adamo was unaware of the fact that non-enrolled students were going to attend his class on November 1 and was taken by surprise when they arrived. Not only did these students surprise Adamo with their attendance, but they asked him to leave his classroom so some of them could question his students about the October 30 incident without his presence while the others interrogated him in the hallway.

Adamo protested, saying the class had a lot of work to complete, but eventually agreed to give the students his time. In the hallway, Citlaly Escobar started and posted a Facebook live video – based on the filmography, it is likely Adamo did not know he was being filmed as the camera was pointed mostly at the ground for the duration of the video – with the caption: “\*\*\*\*\*WARNING: RACIAL SLUR INCIDENT\*\*\*\*\* [sic]” The caption went on to explain, “We went to his class because we were concerned about the students in the environment after multiple complaints were said to us. This is him attempting to justify his use and gaslighted students [sic]” and that sending the students the two articles was Adamo's way of “back[ing] up [his] use

of the racial slur.” During this video, the students made comments and asked questions about Adamo’s class and his intent in using the word. He justified his pedagogical moves by claiming he interpreted the students’ gasps – after the Hmong student read a passage from the Baldwin book which used the N-word – as a sign that he should open a conversation about the N-word.

In the video, Adamo asked if it would be better if students didn’t read James Baldwin, to which an unidentified, past student of Adamo’s class in a previous year responded:

The conversation is not whether or not we should read James Baldwin; the conversation is the use of the N-word in that class and while, yes, a student may have used the N-word, does not mean you, as a professor, had to regurgitate that because as you know as conversations [incoherence] they set precedent for how we feel as students about it. So, if you’re asking the question of context, you had no need to say the N-word, but you overstepped boundaries, and you said the N-word and that is the conversation we are having right now... It’s not about whether or not we should read James Baldwin. It’s about the fact that you used the N-word... It’s not about how you said it; it’s the fact that you simply said it [sic].

Adamo responded:

I will tell you that I find that problematic because I do think that utterances like that exist in context, and many students in the class... students of color said there are some contexts where this is ok. One student in this class said, ‘it’s a term of endearment in some communities.’ Now, I don’t know that. I’m not part of those communities and I know if I walked into those communities and said that and tried to say it in the same way...that would not be appropriate [sic].

Through this statement, Adamo brought the conversation back to rhetoric by addressing the context and hermeneutics surrounding the use of the N-word. He interpreted the interpretation of the N-word as a term of endearment to some by stating that it would not be appropriate for him to use it in those contexts, thereby offering his own interpretation of the student's interpretation.

Shortly after this comment, Adamo and the students reentered his classroom. Once in the classroom, Citlaly Escobar again filmed the conversation between Adamo, his students, and the non-enrolled students. This seventeen-minute video was posted to YouTube on November 3, two days after the conversation, four days after the incident. Based on the framing of the video, it is again likely that Adamo did not know he was being filmed.

In this second video, Adamo is heard expressing distress in the fact that he caused harm to anyone in his course and that some people felt attacked in a racist way. He discussed how he, as the Director of the Honors program, has been looking for a person of color to replace him because the department is not very diversified and does not represent the student body as it should. He expressed real concern for the department and his students.

The students stated that Adamo should have used a trigger warning, an alert "that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response" (Lukianoff and Haidt) before speaking the N-word. In the 2014 article "Treatment, Not Trigger Warnings," written for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by psychiatrist Sarah Roff, claims, "One of my biggest concerns about trigger warnings is that they will apply not just to those who have experienced trauma, but to all students, creating an atmosphere in which they are encouraged to believe that there is something dangerous or damaging about discussing difficult aspects of our history" (Roff). Unfortunately, regardless of the students' request, trigger warnings are causing professors to avoid sensitive topics that might warrant a trigger warning

(Lukianoff and Haidt) and ultimately by doing this, debate about important topics ceases to exist. While Adamo could not have provided a trigger warning for the first time the N-word was spoken in class as it was a student who quoted it from the Baldwin book, he could have issued such a warning before he spoke the word. However, it is possible that by providing a trigger warning, Adamo may have shut down the conversation before it began thereby possibly removing any chance the students had to discuss this sensitive and difficult topic. If this were the case, it is likely that Adamo would not have come under fire and the situation he found himself in during the following weeks would not have materialized.

Between November 2 and 7, Augsburg University held multiple listening sessions for students to express their concern and communicated with students and faculty through multiple emails (Moore). On November 13, Adamo was officially removed from teaching and other duties performed at Augsburg (Weiss).

On November 28, Augsburg Provost Dr. Karen Kaivola sent Phillip Adamo a letter by way of email explaining that he may have violated the faculty handbook and the Bias/Discrimination Reporting Policy, and that she was moving forward with the “Informal Resolution Process” (Weiss).

On November 30, a few of Adamo’s colleagues, Sarah Groeneveld Kenney, Mzenga Wanyama & Sarah Combellick-Bidney, wrote an article for the Augsburg’s student produced newspaper, *The Echo*. In the article, “Faculty respond to professor’s use of N-word by calling for institutional change around justice,” they claim, “We... acknowledge that Professor Phil Adamo’s repeated use of the N-word has caused harm to our students. ... We also acknowledge that this harm was intensified when Adamo defended his use of the N-word multiple times against the objections of students of color.” In the remainder of their opinion piece, the faculty

members discuss academic freedom which is under attack, according to Greg Lukianoff in his article and book by the same name, “The Coddling of the American Mind” (2015 and 2018, respectively). Lukinaoff and Haidt assert that “talking openly about such conflicting but important values is just the sort of challenging exercise that any diverse but tolerant community must learn to do. Restrictive speech codes should be abandoned” (Lukianoff and Haidt), which is in conflict with Adamo’s colleagues in their article who claim “academic freedom in defense of language that harms students turns the very principle that makes true learning possible into a mechanism for enforcing institutional racism....We believe that further conversations about academic freedom can only take place after we acknowledge that harm has been done to these students” (Kenney et al.).

Between November 30 and December 14 (when Adamo finally responds), students, faculty, and administration held multiple meetings to discuss racial injustices on campus. In the December 7 *The Echo* issue, Midla Hedblom, Faculty Senate President, wrote an open letter to the students of Augsburg where she claimed that “recent events in an HON120 class have brought to the forefront what many of us knew existed but what we as a faculty have not explicitly named or adequately addressed: the lack of inclusivity students of color have been experiencing,” and then proceeded to highlight various ways the faculty will work toward a more inclusive environment for students of color. The open letter was signed with a variety of faculty members, including Phillip Adamo.

In the December 14 issue, Adamo responded to the open letter by offering insight into the precise events of his course session on October 30. He denied both claims made in this November 30 piece: his repeated use of the N-word and defending his use multiple times. Beyond this, Adamo wrote that “some students claimed that [he] sent them these articles to

‘defend the use of the N-word.’ But this claim is quickly dismissed if one actually reads the articles” (“Letter”). Based on this assertion, it is likely that Adamo’s purpose in assigning those two articles was to open a dialogue about the controversial interpretations and semantics of the N-word.

Unfortunately, Adamo’s situation was not over with the publication of his letter. On January 11, 2019, Adamo received a letter from Kaivola informing him of his official suspension from teaching duties and that his case has been upgraded from an Informal Resolution Process to a Formal Resolution Process, “citing unidentified ‘actions [that] go beyond the incidents that occurred in [the class] the week of October 30, 2018’” (Weiss).

Shortly thereafter, on January 22, Hans-Joerg Tiede, Associate Secretary of the American Association of American Professors, sent a letter to Dr. Paul Pribbenow, President of Augsburg University, addressing Adamo’s suspension. His letter cited the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* as being a reason for the Association’s interest in the case. This 1940 *Statement* addresses various tenets of academic freedom, including teachers possessing the right to discuss and present material about controversial subject matter if the material relates to their subject. In a Scholar Citizen course that, according to the course description (Augsburg “Courses”), “focuses on great primary texts” and “the connections between learning and citizenship, or the public uses of knowledge,” presenting controversial, popular culture material should be expected. Adamo’s text selections – Baldwin, Perry, and Coates – connect learning and citizenship and help students understand the public uses of knowledge by addressing alternative viewpoints of the semiotic and contextual understanding of an unstable, racially charged word, thereby producing scholar citizens.

Tiede's letter also highlights that Kaviola's letter seems to be in direct conflict with the 1958 *Statement on Procedural Standards in Faculty Dismissal Proceedings* which is referenced in the Augsburg faculty handbook: "Unless otherwise stated in this section of the By-Laws, the procedures of the 1958 *Statement* will be followed by all concerned." The 1958 *Statement* explains that "[s]uspension of the faculty member during the proceedings is justified only if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened by the faculty member's continuance." According to the letter, the Association typically defines "harm" as "physical harm." As per this definition, Adamo did not cause any sort of physical harm to himself or his students and ultimately, after citing academic freedom violations, the Association called for Adamo's reinstatement.

To glean further insight into Augsburg's ideas about academic freedom, I consulted the current faculty handbook. The handbook quotes Augsburg University's Student-Faculty Bias/Discrimination Reporting Policy (approved April 2018):

while the commitment to academic freedom and the commitment to the dignity of each member of our community do not contradict, there are times when these commitments may create tension or conflict in the context of relationships rooted in teaching and learning. Academic freedom may be important to consider in the context of student reports of bias or discrimination, for not every upsetting idea constitutes bias or discrimination.

In response to Adamo's situation, it seems as though Augsburg University Provost Kaivola and President Pribbenow reacted in a way counter to the precepts laid out in not only their faculty handbook, but also in their bias and discrimination reporting policy. In these two documents, they acknowledge that not every instance of academic freedom warrants a report of bias or

discrimination, but in Adamo's case, they seemingly failed to respond in a way which upheld the very precepts of their own policies.

After reading the faculty handbook and Augsburg's claims about academic freedom, it seems as though the American Association of American Professors was correct to call for Adamo's reinstatement. Shortly after the reception of the letter, Adamo's story was picked up by Harvard law professor, Randall Kennedy, the African-American author of the novel *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (2003), which discusses the history and sociology of the N-word. He wrote his novel because the N-word is a "key word in the lexicon of race relations and thus an important term in American politics. To be ignorant of its meanings and effects is to make oneself vulnerable to all manner of perils..." (Kennedy 4). In his piece, "How a Dispute Over the N-word Became a Dispiriting Farce," written for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Kennedy claims:

This episode vividly illustrates the embrace of illiberal conformity that is sadly ascendant in academia... This is not a case of a professor calling someone 'nigger.' This is a case of a professor exploring the thinking and expression of a writer who voiced the word to challenge racism. This is not a case of a professor negligently throwing about a term that's long been deployed to terrorize, shame, and denigrate African-Americans. This is a case of a professor who, attentive to the sensibilities of his students, sought to encourage reflection about their anxieties and beliefs. (Kennedy "How a Dispute")

While Kennedy acknowledged the mistakes Adamo made in this situation, such as leaving his classroom and suggesting that his "expressed commitment to intellectual freedom and adventurousness...stems only from his 'privileged position'" which ultimately "stupidly empowers those who have shabbily mistreated him" (Kennedy "How a Dispute"), but more

importantly, Kennedy preconized Pribbenow and Kaivola as two people who have most betrayed academic ideals through the suspension of Adamo. He claims “they are the ones who allowed a perfectly acceptable pedagogical decision to be turned into an academic crime... They are the leaders who, in a moment of crisis, have failed miserably to educate their campus about the aims and priorities, freedoms and limitations that should be part and parcel of life at a serious university” (Kennedy “How a Dispute”).

Three days after Kennedy’s article in support of Adamo and academic freedom, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) wrote a letter to Augsburg president, Paul Pribbenow, cc’d to Augsburg provost, Karen Kaivola, addressing Augsburg’s commitment to academic freedom which “entails a right to confront, use, and discuss offensive language in teaching and scholarship” (Weiss). The letter claimed that academic freedom at Augsburg University was under attack because the action taken by the University against Adamo was in direct conflict with its own policies regarding academic freedom.

In March, Adamo was reinstated as professor, but relieved of his duties as Honors Director. He writes in *The Echo* on March 9:

Most of the public discourse favored academic freedom. Yet whether or not students feel included and able to participate fully in classroom discussions is also important. Not more important than academic freedom, I think, but this need not be an either/or choice. Feel free to oppose this idea: to see my pedagogy as wrong, to take sides, to set arguments in stark contrast rather than nuanced tones, to get angry, to protest. The only thing not allowed is to shut down debate. (“Prof. Adamo”)

Just roughly five short months later, Adamo announced his retirement from academic teaching. He cited that he was interested in pursuing other writing projects as the reason for his retirement (“Retiring”).

## Chapter 4

### An Attack on Academic Values

Similar versions of Phillip Adamo's story have become all too common in colleges and universities across America. To confirm this, a quick Internet search for "cancelled professors" yields over seven million hits. Many professors have been, or attempted to be, "cancelled" often for accusations pertaining to academic freedom and open debate. Professors' "cancellations" typically come in the form of temporary suspension or permanent removal from teaching and/or other duties.

Like Adamo, in 2020 Greg Patton, a business professor at the University of Southern California (USC), suffered a cancellation attempt. Patton was teaching a course, Communication for Management, to seventy full-time master's students on Zoom. The course "was meant to teach students effective skills for communicating in global markets" (McGahan).

During an August class session, Patton lectured on the use of filler words, such as *like*, *uh*, or *um*, and their distractibility while delivering a presentation. To further explain his point, he provided an example he had used many times over the years. He spoke the Chinese word *nèige* – translated to *that* in English – thereby demonstrating filler words exist in many, if not all, languages and cultures. USC enrolls more than 22% of its students from China, so it's very likely that Patton had Chinese students in his course who clearly understood his example.

Patton's first hint of trouble came toward the end of the class when a student sent him a private chat message through the Zoom platform, claiming that some students felt uncomfortable by his use of the Chinese example. Later that afternoon, another student emailed, suggesting he use a different example next time. Coincidentally, on the same day, students completed midterm

evaluations for the course; three separate students chose to mention distaste for the Chinese example on their evaluations.

The next morning, Patton issued an apology to his students. Around the time Patton's apology email was sent, an anonymous group of Black students accused Patton "of racism and harming their mental health by using a Chinese-language word that sounded 'exactly like the word NIGGA'[sic]" (McGahan). Patton "vigorously denied" the students' claim that he acted with "malicious intent" and said the entire incident was a "colossal misunderstanding" (McGahan). He added that since the University has a high Chinese population, it only made sense to bring Chinese culture into class. Regardless of Patton's apology, shortly after receiving the complaints, USC suspended Patton, pending an investigation.

In response to Patton's situation, an anonymous survey taken by professors at USC was leaked to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the survey, professors expressed concern for situations like Patton's by making statements such as, "I will avoid any diversity and inclusion topics and will strictly stick to safe topics, devoid of any potential land mines," and "I may cut sessions on culture" (Bartlett).

In a time when professors and students should feel free to teach and learn to "understand the values at issue in contemporary society" (University of Southern California), instead, "the forces of illiberalism are gaining strength" and "[t]he free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted" (Ackerman et al.). Colleges and universities across America make declarations similar to Augsburg's Core Curriculum, which claims "to prepare students to be effective, informed, and ethical citizens in the 21st century" (Augsburg University "Core"). Colleges and universities are suspending and releasing

professors of duties, for reasons contrary to their established core values, as demonstrated through Professors Phillip Adamo and Greg Patton.

These situations may suggest that the core values of a liberal education may be under attack. In his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech, David Foster Wallace addresses what a liberal education truly is. He starts by criticizing the age-old cliché in that a liberal education “is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about teaching you how to think” but instead, he claims, “the really significant education in thinking that we're supposed to get in a place like this isn't really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about” (Wallace).

To Wallace, the choice of what to think about means “[t]o be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about [ourselves] and [our] certainties. Because a huge percentage of the stuff that [we] tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded” (Wallace). A liberal education is intended to help students critically think, which involves recognizing and evaluating assumptions as a way to view the world as non-binary and to understand that meaning is often open to interpretations. As Berthoff states in “Rhetoric as Hermeneutic” “all knowledge is interpretation and thus [we need] to find a central place for interpretation in teaching, as we recognize its centrality in learning” (Berthoff 282).

It is normal and expected for humans to desire a binary world that is easily understood and explained. Unfortunately, that is not the case. To some extent, we all suffer from what Wallace refers to as a natural default setting, where our brain is hardwired to make us think that we are the center of the universe, “the realist, most vivid and important person in existence” (Wallace). This thinking hinders our ability to interpret the world around us. It puts our thinking in terms of capital-T-truth where what we know is the Truth and there is no other possibility.

This mindset closes the door to interpretation. It is likely that both Adamo's and Patton's students operated under this mindset as they called for their professors' punishment. Had they stopped and opened their minds to alternative interpretations of not only the words the professors spoke, but also the situation, the colleges' reactions may have looked very different.

A liberal education is intended to break down this natural default setting by providing students with opportunities to build their ability and desire to critically think. Stephen Brookfield, an educational researcher and recently retired professor who focuses heavily on critical thinking, claims that "[t]he capacity for critical thinking [is] at the heart of what it means to be a developed person living in a democratic society" (Brookfield 388). Critical thinking can help us break down our natural default settings because, as Brookfield illustrates, critical thinking involves recognizing the assumptions underlying our beliefs and behaviors. A critical thinker provides justifications for their ideas and actions and more importantly, they "judge the rationality of these justifications" which can be done "by comparing [the justifications] to a range of varying interpretations and perspectives...[Critical thinkers] can test the accuracy and rationality of these justifications against some kind of objective analysis of the 'real' world as we understand it," (Brookfield 388). Because critical thinking asks us to evaluate our own assumptions, it becomes a reflective action which can help us become less self-centered. Ultimately, this act of reflection helps us break down our natural default setting. However, even as I pen this, I must remember my own natural default setting and acknowledge that, as Catherine Fox, a St. Cloud State University professor of rhetoric, states, critical thinking can be "seductively entrenched in whitely judgementalism, righteousness, and Truth [sic]; and therefore, complicitous with systems of power [and] privilege" (Fox 198). Viewing critical

thinking as a “god-term” may cause us to lose sight of our goals without even realizing it. Therefore, it may be prudent to critically think about critical thinking.

Fox talks a great deal about Minnie Bruce Pratt’s (1984) and Marilyn Frye’s (1991) theory of whiteness in her article, “The Race to Truth: Disarticulating Critical Thinking from Whiteness.” This theory might help us further understand what is occurring when cancel discourse is used. According to Pratt and Frye, whiteness is an attitude, rooted in white supremacy, the idea that white people are superior to other races, in the United States. The whiteness attitude can be held by anyone of any color. It is possible to exhibit a whiteness attitude if you are *not* white and it is possible to *not* exhibit a whiteness attitude if you *are* white (Fox 199). The systemic racism that seems ever-present in American culture could be considered a whitely attitude. Cancel culture and engaging in cancel discourse could also be considered whitely attitudes because, while the intent may be honorable, cancel discourse is often built from systems of power and privilege. Some may even argue that the penning of this thesis comes from a place of whiteness, as I have certain privileges which allow me to complete a graduate program where I am enabled and empowered to bring light upon such topics as cancel discourse.

Engaging in cancel discourse is often a response to systemic racism. In the early to middle 2010s, America saw the emergence of a new term, “woke,” to describe people who recognized and fought back against the systemic racism in America. Living as a term that has a long and complicated history, it is agreed that the origins of the term “woke” can be traced back to Black communities (Romano). Today, the term is much more universal and is often used to refer to anyone who recognizes social injustices in our current popular culture. Today, being “woke” is almost a fashion statement, or a badge of courage, in a way (Hess). Wokeness is nearly the direct opposite of calling someone politically correct (PC). In 2016, Amanda Hess,

writing for the New York Times, claimed that PC was “a way of calling out hypersensitivity in political discourse” and “woke” was “a way of affirming the sensitive” (Hess). John D. Ramage, in his book *Rhetoric: A User’s Guide*, refers to PC as “a form of disputed language use” (Ramage 163). PC works to derail discourse and often leaves offenders feeling ashamed and criticized. Lukianoff and Haidt claim the “movement sought to restrict speech (specifically hate speech aimed at marginalized groups), but it also challenged the literary, philosophical, and historical canon, seeking to widen it by including more-diverse perspectives” (Lukianoff and Haidt). Through their definition, we can see how aspects of popular culture, such as addressing systemic racism, could have contributed to the new “wokeness” and cancel discourse we see rampant in mass media, social media, and college campuses across America.

Out of “wokeness,” we see different phenomena emerge, such as virtue signaling. According to the Urban Dictionary, virtue signaling takes “a conspicuous but essentially useless action ostensibly to support a good cause but actually to show off how much more moral you are than everybody else.” Virtue signaling, like “wokeness,” is often viewed as simply a fashion statement. It is intended to make the signalers, who may consider themselves social justice warriors, look like they are fighting for a good cause, but in actuality, they usually just succeed in looking good in the public eye. People who virtue signal often leverage their words to call out (or cancel) people for their discourse mistakes, particularly when those mistakes are deemed to harm people of color, either physically or mentally, regardless of intent. Rarely do these virtue signalers take action beyond wearing the morally-higher-ground badge.

Many of us have fallen victim to virtue signaling, myself included. During the summer of 2020 – more specifically, June 2, 2020, the day known as Blackout Tuesday – shortly after the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, I noticed quite a few social media friends and followers

posting black squares on their feeds. Following the crowd, I changed my Facebook profile picture to a black square and also posted a black square on my Instagram feed. Both posts contained the short caption: “#blacklivesmatter.” I wanted my social media friends and followers to know I support Black lives. I needed them to know that I acknowledge my place as a white woman and that I will never fully understand the transgressions done to the Black community, particularly by white people. I felt as though I had an opportunity to support my fellow Black Americans. Naïvely, I felt it was important to show my friends and followers my support of Black Americans.

My pride quickly dissipated when I saw a TikTok video from a Black creator who addressed all people – particularly white people – who posted a black square on their social media page and labeled them as virtue signalers who wanted to wear the moral-high-ground badge. The TikTok creator claimed most of the white virtual signalers probably had no good friends who were Black, let alone an understanding of what Black Americans actually go through on a daily basis. The video claimed these people really had no right to virtue signal like they did. I felt that. While I have Black friends, I will most likely never fully understand their daily experiences. The TikTok creator also brought up the point that the mini-movement quite literally blacked out Black voices for the day; if an Instagram user clicked on the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, they would have seen a page with nothing but solid black images. Needless to say, I removed the black squares from my social media profiles.

Shortly after, I stumbled upon a YouTube video titled “BLACK OUT TUESDAY WAS STUPID!!! | What you on? Ep.4| #blackouttuesday, celebrities, Looting, etc... [sic]” posted by Black YouTube user HakeemAQ on June 3, 2020. Shortly into the video, he posted a screenshot of a Tweet expressing nearly the same concept as the TikTok user had discussed. HakeemAQ

discussed how the hashtag #blacklivesmatter is not bad, that the concept of Blackout Tuesday was not bad, but the implementation was weak. He claimed that people were just simply jumping on the bandwagon, joining the good fight, but not actually fighting and not truly knowing why they were posting a black square.

As HakeemAQ illustrated, Blackout Tuesday was well-intended and important. The execution was weak, particularly because somewhere during the day, the hashtag changed from #blackouttuesday to #blacklivesmatter, a hashtag traditionally used to highlight Black voices and raise awareness about events occurring in Black communities across America and the world. The intent of #blackouttuesday “grew out of a pledge by music and entertainment companies to temporarily halt their businesses and ‘reconnect’ with their communities as violent protests over [George] Floyd’s death roiled major US cities” (Manskar). To execute the original intention, activists were supposed to use #blackouttuesday; using #blacklivesmatter prevented important information from being seen.

Average people like myself saw black square posts on our social media feeds using #blacklivesmatter, and instead of taking the time to research, I – and so many others like me – virtue signaled, even though that was not my intent. In the end, the effort with Blackout Tuesday “actually [hurt] the Black Lives Matter movement” (Manskar).

Beyond being virtue signaling, which in itself was bad enough, the movement occurred mostly on Facebook and Instagram. Both of these social media platforms are owned by Mark Zuckerberg, a 36-year-old, white male, who is worth \$97 billion dollars (USD) (as of April 15, 2021) (Forbes). Using Zuckerberg’s platforms to bring light to systemic racism and Black oppression seems counterintuitive to the intent of lifting up Black voices. Why aren’t we seeing Instagram and Facebook being utilized to drive traffic to Black-owned social media platforms?

Instead, we're using them to bring light to systemic racism, but ultimately, nothing changes, and even worse, we continue to pad the pockets of a white, rich man. We are, as Audre Lorde may claim, attempting to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house; unfortunately, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde).

Lorde, and by extension James Baldwin, could be considered social justice warriors of their time. Both were Black, gay writers, speaking and writing during the Civil Rights Era about the social justice issues during that time, particularly the systemic racism that movements, led by Martin Luther King Jr. and other activists of the time, attempted to tear down. Today, movements for social justice seem to be attempting to tear down the same systemic racism that Lorde and Baldwin were fighting against sixty years ago.

Similar to the ineffective Blackout Tuesday effort, the attempt to silence a professor for opening dialogue and debate about a systemically racially charged word, penned by a Black activist during the Civil Rights Era, seems counter to the students' perceived intent. The students were possibly attempting to tear down the master's house – systemic racism largely created by the silencing of Black individuals dating all the way back to 1619 when African slaves were first brought to the land (Hannah-Jones) that would later be called the United States – by using the master's tools – the silencing of conversation concerning our Black community. During the days of slavery, the master – typically the white, rich man – used tools of oppression to silence his Black slaves and force them to do his bidding. Today, the master's tools of oppression are still being used in various aspects of society to silence (or at the very least, provide less opportunities to) individuals of marginalized communities; this continued silencing seems to be what cancel culture is responding to. If we are to break down systemic racism, to break down the issues Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, current social justice activists, and likely Adamo's and Patton's

students fight against, we must find new ways of doing so. Silence is not the answer; the answer is “exposure, argument, and persuasion” (Ackerman et al.) to spark a dialectic, which through their actions, Adamo’s and Patton’s students did not allow. Lorde advocates that our differences must be “seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark a dialectic” which ultimately will work to generate new ways of being in this world. Only then, can we start to break down systemic racism.

Sparking a dialectic involves engaging with a series of questions and answers about “general issues (such as the nature of justice)” (Aristotle 28). Aristotle taught dialectic to his students as the process of one student stating a thesis for a second student who would try to refute the thesis by asking a series of questions (Aristotle 28). When students ask questions about difficult topics, they are engaging in dialectical meaning-making. In colleges and universities across America, students’ refusal to participate in a dialectic seems as though it is becoming more prevalent, as demonstrated through the recent attitudes and actions of the students in Adamo’s and Patton’s classes, the openness about college students’ mindsets explored in Greg Lukianoff’s and Jonathan Haidt’s article, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” and the concerns shared in the Harper’s piece, “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate.”

Instead of engaging in any sort of meaning-making process, both Adamo’s and Patton’s students interpreted a classroom situation from a dyadic, rather than a triadic, way of thinking. In doing so, they ignored the rhetorical aspects of the situation, such as context and purpose. Their reaction to their interpretation was to shut down any possible debate about the subject matter, and to fight for removing the professors from their teaching duties. Rather than opening conversation, these students silenced dissent as soon as the subject matter became sensitive. This suppression of debate is concerning because, beyond being antithetical to the goals of social

justice movements, “[i]f students graduate believing that they can learn nothing from people they dislike or from those with whom they disagree, we will have done them a great intellectual disservice” (Lukianoff and Haidt). It is through the silencing, as well as the reactions students have toward professors after sensitive subject matter emerges, that cancel discourse thrives on the campuses of colleges and universities. Cancel discourse is a direct attack on open debate and academic freedom, as can be clearly witnessed through the cancelling attacks made against Adamo and Patton.

## Chapter 5

### Issues Created by Cancel Discourse

Aristotle explains that epideictic rhetoric either praises or blames and that “the present is most important; for all speakers praise and blame in regard to existing qualities, but they often also make use of other things, both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future” (Aristotle 28). However, Aristotle’s definition is lacking, potentially due to his distaste for Isocrates who was the master of epideictic speeches. Isocrates, on the other hand, views epideictic rhetoric as more of a display that does not require the listener to cast judgement since the speeches are already “commonly agreed” upon knowledge (Isocrates et al. 35). Aristotle failed to convey that epideictic speeches have the power to instill, preserve, or enhance certain cultural values (Aristotle 22). Rhetorician Dale L. Sullivan extends this understanding by offering that “historically, epideictic rhetoric has been the genre understood to create and maintain a society’s value system” (Sullivan 229). While Sullivan’s article, “The Epideictic Rhetoric of Science,” is geared toward the science field, reading it helped me understand how epideictic rhetoric plays a role in a variety of situations beyond the field of rhetoric. Once epideictic rhetoric is realized as being something widespread, it is easy to understand how this aspect of rhetoric operates within cancel discourse.

As Sullivan highlights, epideictic rhetoric occurs within the virtues of the present moment, and praise or blame is “used to magnify the virtue or vice, rather than the enthymeme or the example” (Sullivan 230). It is used to marry “the real – what *is* or at least *appears to be* – and the fictive or imaginary – what *might be*” therefore, epideictic rhetoric “allows speaker and audience to envision possible, new, or at least different worlds” (Sheard 770). Epideictic rhetoric should be viewed as more than simply “a medium for conveying communal beliefs and values”

but rather, “a vehicle through which communities can imagine and bring about change” (Sheard 771). With this understanding, epideictic rhetoric can help us better understand the motives behind social justice movements that have taken shape on and off college campuses and social media. These movements attempt to bring about positive change by taking the real – social injustices toward historically marginalized communities – and blending that with the imaginary – a world where social injustices do not exist.

Cancel discourse presents a real threat to the imaginary world these movements attempt to achieve because shutting down open debate and silencing the important conversations cannot and will not bring about change. If we are to “defeat bad ideas,” we must do it by exposing people to those bad ideas, allowing arguments to flourish and persuasion to thrive. Silencing or wishing these bad ideas away is not the way to bring about change (Ackerman et al.).

For the students of Adamo and Patton, silencing these professors may have looked and felt like a step in the right direction to achieve the imaginary through an attempt to create positive change. In actuality, their actions were entirely counterproductive to the mission of working to create change which would help society move toward a socially just world for all. They silenced an important conversation.

It is ironic that cancel culture was born from social justice movements, such as the #MeToo movement, which sought so desperately to give historically marginalized communities a voice. Historically, these communities have been silenced and often shut out from society. Cancel culture, and by extension cancel discourse, works to silence and shut down perceived negative expressions about historically marginalized groups, which in turn most often seems to silence the conversation itself. During a time when discourse should be celebrated, cancel discourse is taking over, especially in our classrooms. “The new climate is slowly being

institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion or debate” (Lukianoff and Haidt). This new climate has wormed its way into our academic institutions because students are often coming into undergraduate and graduate programs with a lack of understanding about values traditionally held by the academy, such as academic freedom, which cause them to resort to what they know about the culture in which they currently reside: popular culture.

We are living in a society that is experiencing a major clash of cultures.

We are witnessing the formation of a culture filled with new moral principles and political commitments as a response to racial and social injustices. This should come as no surprise. Starting in 2013, with the shooting of Trayvon Martin, we saw a rise of media coverage of Black lives taken at the hands of police. Michael Brown (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Freddie Gray (2015), Philando Castile (2016) and many more Black Americans have unfairly lost their lives in recent years (Chughtai). Seeing a surge of social justice movements as a response to these injustices should not be alarming at all as this is not the first time in history social justice movements rose up in response to injustices. For example, America saw a major surge of social justice movements in the 1960s, led largely by Martin Luther King Jr.

It appears the rise of these social justice movements is intended to establish a community based around certain cultural values. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca claimed the role of epideictic rhetoric was to maintain cultural values and establish a feeling of community. These new social justice movements do just that because many of these movements are built upon enthymemes and rhetorical syllogisms present in communities of activists, people who fight against injustices. For these activists, cultural values have shifted to openly addressing and fighting against social injustices, thereby creating new rhetorical enthymemes, or culturally

understood references that allow audiences to make inferences and be influenced. Enthymemes work when values are culturally agreed upon. We live in a time when this is not the case. Cancel discourse and culture exists because those culturally agreed upon values do not exist beyond the confines of individual communities of people. Enthymemes provide opportunities for agreement amongst various groups of people, but cancel discourse consists only of dissent. Cancel discourse is likely an attempt to force the enthymemes to work. Cancel culture attempts to force values to become culturally agreed upon which does not work partly because cancel culture pushes itself onto a wide variety of other cultures, such as popular culture and academic culture. While cancel culture may easily find its place in popular culture, it should never enter into academic culture because the culturally agreed upon values of academic culture, such as critical thinking, do not allow for the dissent cancel culture encompasses.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca considered education to be a part of epideictic rhetoric (51-53). When students reacted to Adamo's use of the N-word, they were likely responding to the changing values in popular culture, values which connect a white man's use of the N-word to a socially unacceptable behavior. They responded to the situation with a dyadic way of understanding where interpretation of meaning is not valued. As first-year students in the Honors program, it is likely they did not fully understand the discourse community they were entering as college students. It is also probable that these students had yet to take the courses that instilled in them the values traditionally held by colleges and universities. Because of this, these students likely interpreted Adamo's use of the N-word as threatening rather than a method to open a debate about the context of the word, as was likely Adamo's intent which he explained in the Facebook live video. Based on the students' response to the situation in the class and Adamo's comment in the Facebook video that "[he] can't suddenly not be a white dude," presumably,

these students interpreted his academic use of the racial slur through the lens of the popular culture understanding where white people are not allowed to use the N-word (Coates). If white people use the N-word in popular culture, they are often automatically labeled as a racist. It is plausible, then, that Adamo's students viewed him as a racist.

Patton's case is slightly different than Adamo's, since Patton was instructing a group of master's students rather than first-year students. Since the Office of Graduate Admission at USC requires that "[a]t a minimum [applicants] must hold a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited institution," it can be presumed that these students came into Patton's class with at least some understanding of academic culture and the values traditionally held by academic institutions. If this is the case, the students' response is even more shocking and concerning, especially since Patton never actually uttered the racial slur.

Students who speak against words and concepts used in academic contexts—for understanding and learning across several different areas of learning—mistake academic culture for popular culture. Popular culture is spearheading social justice movements, creating social justice activists, and by extension, virtue signaling, censorship, and an intolerance of opposing views. This new culture has created a cesspool of views that are inherently anti-democratic and illiberal, filled with public shaming, intended to "dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty" (Ackerman et al.). Ultimately, this culture has created a stifling atmosphere that harms the motives behind social justice movements.

As I explored the harmful results of cancel culture, the one philosopher that kept popping in my mind was Karl Marx. In a way, cancel culture seems to have aspects of traditional Marxism. Cancel culture does not fit entirely within the confines of Marxism, partially because Marxist theory has morphed over the years, but it does have aspects of Marxism, mainly in

reference to the concepts of ideology, social class, and power and authority. Even though Marxism is not a rhetorical theory, the thought of it led me to investigate the neo-Marxist perspective.

The neo-Marxist perspective, which is considered a subset of the larger genre of communication theory, helps to somewhat explain how these cultures clash and how many social justice movements are antithetical to their motives. Some scholars refer to the neo-Marxist perspective as critical rhetoric, which examines how texts “create and sustain the social practices which control the dominated” (Mckerrow 92). Interestingly, these texts can be created by anyone in any group of people, dominated or oppressed. For example, we see oppressed groups of people creating and sustaining texts through movements such as the current movement to demilitarize Black neighborhoods, a value highlighted on the Black Lives Matter organization’s website. This call comes shortly after the recent shooting of Ma’Khia Bryant, the sixteen-year-old Black girl from Columbus, Ohio who was fatally shot by police just moments after the conviction verdict of ex-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

The movement to demilitarize Black neighborhoods brings to light a very important issue, and that is of police brutality against Black individuals. Too many Black lives have been lost at the hands of police. Demilitarization is a movement perpetuated by groups, mainly Black Lives Matter, that claim to fight against oppression. Ironically, in the shooting of Ma’Khia Bryant, the police were called to the scene by way of a 911 call placed by a Black bystander. When police arrived on the scene, they witnessed Bryant attempting to attack another girl with a knife, which prompted police to shoot her four times, ultimately leading to her death. The fatal shooting of Bryant is what Black Lives Matter and the movement to demilitarize Black communities is fighting against.

In traditional neo-Marxist fashion, this demilitarization movement could be a form of the dominated group creating and sustaining social practices which end up controlling them in ways counterproductive to their mission. In the case of Bryant, what would have happened had the police not shown up to the scene? She may possibly still be alive. However, the body camera video footage (WLWT) from the officer shows four more Black individuals, one of which Bryant threw to the ground just before she held another at knifepoint. Had the police not shown up, would Bryant have killed the girl she was attempting to stab? Would she have gone back and killed the girl she threw to the ground? Would she have killed the other two bystanders on the lawn? Obviously, because the situation did not play out in this way, it is hard to predict or assume what would have happened had the police not shown up, but it is possible that without police intervention, more Black lives would have been injured or lost.

Instead of calling for the demilitarization of Black communities, maybe it would be more productive to the needs of the dominated community in this instance to discuss Black-on-Black crime by asking questions about how and why Bryant found herself attacking no less than two other Black individuals. All of the mainstream media articles I read about the shooting focused on the character of the police officer, while ignoring the actions of the victims, both Bryant and the girl she was trying to attack. While a loss of life is a horrible tragedy, if we shift the narrative just slightly, we may see people thanking the officer for going to the scene that day and protecting one, if not more, Black lives. From what I can find, the Black girl the police saved, the girl Bryant was attempting to stab, was not in articles I read about the incident. I could not even know her name. In the case of Bryant, it is possible that four or more Black lives could have been lost that day. Will demilitarizing Black communities ultimately save Black lives, or will more Black lives be lost without police presence and intervention?

The act of asking questions about the situation lifts up a struggle because the dominant discourse, as perpetuated by mainstream and social media, portrays police as bad characters needing to be brought to justice whenever their response to a violent situation causes the loss of a Black life, regardless of the context of the situation. This message is published repeatedly through mainstream and social media sources, a predominately white-powered industry. “One way empowered groups maintain their power is through the messages they repeatedly send in mediated popular culture texts” (Sellnow 117). This indicates that demilitarization is perpetuated by the dominant group of people: white people. Black Americans are still thought of as a minority when considering both race and socio-economic status, therefore, we can assume the message against police is perpetuated by groups of people who are not Black and who have a higher socio-economic status, especially the white owned and controlled platforms through which this message is disseminated. It seems as though Catherine Fox’s reference to whiteness might shed light on these calls for demilitarization. Through the lens of a neo-Marxist perspective, we may question why the dominant group would want to control the narrative against police officers in relation to Black communities. Why would the dominant group want to demilitarize Black communities? What benefit does demilitarizing Black communities have for the dominant group of people?

We need to continue to ask questions such as these as we move toward finding solutions to the social injustices of our world. Questioning our world allows us to think about situations in a critical manner while evaluating our own assumptions and ideologies. These questions help move us away from our natural default setting where we are the center of the universe and help us gain perspectives that will allow us to work together to find solutions. Where cancel discourse silences important conversations, questioning opens them up.

A major goal of critical rhetoric is to “free othered people and groups from oppression by unpacking how the norms, practices, and values of the dominant group are oppressing them and then making space for multiple voices to be heard and valued” (Sellnow 117). A neo-Marxist perspective helps us better understand power, often reinforced through ideologies and hegemony, which “is the privileging of a dominant group’s ideology over that of other groups” (Sellnow 117). Dating all the way back to slavery, militaristic methods and worse were used against Black individuals to oppress them. As I pen this section, scenes play through my head from the miniseries *Roots* and Frederick Douglass’ autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. These two texts portray slaves running away only to be brought back, tied to a pole, and brutally whipped. The policing strategies used against slaves were cruel and unusual – unusual for the white man; usual for the Black man – punishment. Slaves died at the hands of those employing the policing strategies. The concept of cruel and unusual punishment in part seems to underlie the call for demilitarization.

Traditionally, questions about demilitarizing Black communities could have been asked and discussed in an academic culture, but now, cancel discourse mostly blocks academics (professors and students alike) to the asking of questions such as:

1. How many lives are saved each year from police presence in Black communities?
2. If we keep pushing for this narrative that cops are bad, what happens to the safety of our Black community if the police force is depleted (by way of police resignation)?
3. What happens when police officers refuse to enter Black communities because they’re afraid they will have to do something that will ultimately cause them to lose their career or worse?

4. What happens if we completely demilitarize Black communities, and no one will come to the aid of Black communities when those in need call 911?
5. With these questions in mind, isn't demilitarizing Black communities perpetuating the systemic racism we are fighting so hard against?

If a professor poses these same questions to their students, they may find themselves in a similar position as Adamo or Patton. By asking these questions, they may risk suspension or worse.

Cancel discourse blocks conversations about important issues and contributes to the social practice of calling for people in power to lose power based on interpreting something they said, implied, or did as being transgressive toward historically marginalized communities. While cancel discourse is interpreted as helping dominated communities by silencing transgressive discourse, instead, it ends up keeping people in subjugated roles through the use of silencing techniques similar to those that have been used to keep historically marginalized communities in subjugation for centuries.

The silencing of these conversations in the academy shuts down opportunities to lift up these struggles so they can be examined by students who ultimately can begin to examine possible solutions to the problems. Simply put, the academy is traditionally thought to encourage students to have an open mind, to critically think. Popular culture ideology and hegemony have entered the academy creating a struggle for academics. Because of the way our education system has operated for generations, professors have traditionally held the majority of the power in their classes. Adamo understands his position of power when he says to his students in Escobar's Facebook live video, "I can't suddenly not be a white dude who's a full professor with tenure. That's who I am. And I don't want to exert that power in any sort of unreasonable way that threatens students, and I don't think I'm doing that." The most of Adamo's power in his

classroom that day was his choice of teaching materials and methods and his choice to explore conversations he may have felt would provide opportunities for his students to think critically about and discuss a racially charged word.

While by tradition and nature, college courses carry a certain element of power, and as highlighted by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the academy is designed, not necessarily to teach students how to think, as David Foster Wallace addressed in his Kenyon commencement speech, but to choose what to think about. Freire discusses the banking concept of education, which “maintains and even stimulates...practices, which mirror oppressive society as a whole” (Freire 73) when he lays out his list of oppressive teaching methods, such as viewing students as mere empty cups that need to be filled from the fountain of knowledge. Adamo’s students were likely thinking about the “oppressive society as a whole” when they raised concern about his use of the N-word; what they did not realize is that by silencing their professor and the conversation, they were contributing to the very oppression they were likely trying to tear down. In this case, the students privileged the “dominant group’s ideology over that of other groups” (Sellnow 117) because they privileged silence over conversation and debate. Essentially, they privileged a popular culture ideology, perpetuated by mass media, over the long-held ideals of the academy, and thereby created a power struggle.

Adamo’s and Patton’s stories are not unique. Students all throughout the academic world create a sort of hegemony by privileging popular culture ideologies over academic ideals. Likewise, administrations often do the same. In both Adamo’s and Patton’s cases, administrations chose to punish their professors based on pressure from the students, rather than standing by the academic ideals their institutions claimed to instill in students. While I was unable to interview these administrators, I suspect they caved to the students’ demands in an

attempt to protect the prestige of their universities and to maintain their status and reputation. By extension, it may be valid to claim the administrators are partly responsible for these popular culture ideals rampantly taking over long-held culturally agreed upon academic values.

One of the academic values of higher education is in breaking hegemonic relations between groups of people. Academic institutions provide students opportunities to evaluate their own assumptions about other groups of people which helps them realize where hegemony lives in our society. Having a conversation about a racially important word could be seen as a way to bring light to one example of hegemony present in American culture. Adamo's use of discourse and choice of subsequent readings were likely not intended to oppress his students, to participate in hegemonic practices, or to fall into the trap of the banking concept of education. Most likely, his intent was to open a dialogue about an emotionally, socially, and racially charged word, a word that carries a certain *pathos*, and a word that has been used for years to oppress a group of people. He was asking his honors students in his Scholar Citizen course to debate about a controversial word and its use in particular contexts. Beyond this, he asked his students to read two articles, both written by Black individuals, both offering differing views on the use of the N-word.

The first of these two articles, "Good teachers use the N-word" by Andre Perry – a Black man who has a long history of working in education, including both academic and administrative capacities, and receiving his Ph.D. in education policy and leadership – states:

To be clear, educators hear and use the N-word everyday [sic]. They say it as a slur, or a term of endearment, or they teach it within the text of assigned readings. Students spew it in the hallways, on the way to and from school, on buses and in sports practice. It

proliferates in pop culture: in music, in movies and in slang. It's so ubiquitous that teachers have no choice but to teach its etymology and proper context of usage. (Perry) According to Perry's analysis of the word, Adamo was wise to bring the N-word into his classroom.

Adamo's story likely strikes home for many educators who have been in a situation where teaching the N-word was not an option, but a necessity. During the 2019-2020 school year, I was teaching a seventh grade Language Arts course. We were about to start reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a classic written in the 1960s by Harper Lee, which discusses race relations in the 1930s. Lee used the N-word (not the euphemism) multiple times in her novel to demonstrate the oppression felt by the Black community during the Great Depression years. The character of Atticus Finch highlighted this oppression for his daughter, Scout, when he said, "Don't say nigger [sic], Scout. That's common" (Lee 85), implying that Scout needed to uphold the strong moral values Atticus was instilling in his children so she wouldn't be seen as "common" folk. During that time in American culture, Black people were often spoken at, not spoken to, especially by the common folk of which Atticus is referring. When Harper Lee wasn't highlighting Black oppression, she used the word Negro: "Mrs. Dubose lived alone except for a Negro girl in constant attendance" (Lee 110). If this novel were written today, it is probable the word "Black" would be used instead of "Negro."

Before beginning the novel, I taught my seventh graders the N-word, "in the context of the history of white supremacy, lynching, economic suppression as well as segregation and discrimination" (Perry). *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the catalyst for me to properly teach this word to my students. I opened the conversation with my twenty-three white seventh graders very similarly to how Adamo opened the conversation with his honors students; however, because of

the age of my students, we only used the euphemism when discussing the word, never speaking the word itself. The questions I asked my students were similar to Adamo's questions.

We discussed where they had heard the word, in what context, and what they thought of the word. Students brought up listening to rap songs by Black artists, hearing their dad use it at the supper table, and witnessing their friend – a Black Saint Lucian eighth grader – joke about the word. We talked about reclamation, how even though their parents may use it flippantly, they shouldn't, and that the word shouldn't be a joke. We talked about lynchings and the very sad history of Blacks being treated poorly by whites. We talked about what it means to be oppressed. We talked about white supremacy. We talked about why Scout and Jem were treated poorly, simply because their dad, a white lawyer, was defending a Black man.

By the end of the novel unit, my seventh graders fully understood the context of when the N-word is used, why some people use it regularly, and why it should never be used flippantly or by white people who do not fully understand the historical transgressions of the word. They criticized Scout's cousin, Francis Hancock, when he referred to her dad as a "nigger [sic] lover" (Lee 95) and when Cecil Jacobs, her classmate, made fun of her for having a dad that "defend[s] niggers [sic]" (Lee 87). They were angered by young, white Mayella Ewell's untruthful testimony against the Black man, Tom Robinson. They cried when Tom unfairly died trying to escape his prison sentence. They praised Atticus for fighting for Tom and maintaining the ethical belief that all men deserved a good lawyer, regardless of his skin color. We decided as a class that we all need to be a little bit more like Atticus Finch.

My seventh graders never attempted to shut down discourse about the N-word or race relations, nor did their parents, nor did my administration.

The Honors college students at Augsburg *did* shut down this conversation. How is it that twenty-three, white, thirteen-year-old students were more able and willing to have this difficult conversation than a group of Honors college students? Lukianoff and Haidt might argue that my seventh graders were better equipped to have this conversation because they had yet to be exposed to the coddling of the students' minds which seems to have taken over college campuses. The current movement toward restricted speech "is largely about emotional well-being" (Lukianoff and Haidt). It is likely my seventh graders responded differently than Adamo's college students because they still maintained aspects of childhood innocence, where their minds had not yet been tarnished by life's hardships, and therefore, had not developed a sensitive emotional perspective. It is also possible that my students were so far removed from the N-word as they likely had never witnessed or experienced any sort of transgressions created by the word. They definitely had never experienced someone using the word to insult their skin color. Some of Adamo's students likely have had experiences such as these and which therefore may have caused a stronger emotional reaction to the use of the N-word.

College campuses have become permeated with emotion. Many times, students' *pathos* drive their interactions in their courses, which cause them to react in ways demonstrated through Adamo's and Patton's cases. Calling for silencing of professors, and ultimately the administration's response to these calls, is anti-intellectual and reinforces the sensitivity of college students' psyche which limits students' ability to open their minds to new ideas, situations, perspectives, and people. Lukianoff and Haidt claim that:

a shared vocabulary about reasoning, common distortions, and the appropriate use of evidence to draw conclusions would facilitate critical thinking and real debate. It would also tone down the perpetual state of outrage that seems to engulf some colleges these

days, allowing students' minds to open more widely to new ideas and new people. A greater commitment to formal, public debate on campus...would further serve that goal.

(Lukianoff and Haidt)

The writers (a group of 153 academics, researchers, authors, and public figures) of the Harper's open letter, "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" (Ackerman et al.) recognize the cancel discourse concern infiltrating college campuses by highlighting the following:

This stifling atmosphere will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time. The restriction of debate...invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation. The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. (Ackerman et al.)

The claims made in "The Coddling of the American Mind" (Lukianoff and Haidt) and "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" (Ackerman et al.), help us understand how cancel discourse functions. It aims to tear down systems of power in an attempt to fight against the oppression felt by historically marginalized communities, but in the end, it often hurts the same communities it claims to fight for because ultimately, it silences voices that need to be heard and conversations that need to be had.

Ultimately, stifling conversation about sensitive topics, such as the N-word, creates an illiberal and anti-democratic society and promotes binaries and a dyadic way of thinking. Through the attack on open debate, we have become "distracted from our mission, which should be to confront the problem of multiple illiteracies, first of all by supporting our colleagues in the schools as they begin to institute ethnographic approaches to reading and writing, learning with them what it means to begin with meaning" (Berthoff 281). The meaning-making process should invite dialogue between multiple parties, teachers and students alike.

A dyadic way of understanding words removes all interpretation and context because dyadic semiotics – “the relationship between a sign, which represents an object (*referent*), and meaning (*interpretation*)” (Sellnow 205) – “cannot represent the making of meaning because it doesn’t concern meaning at all” (Berthoff 284). A dyadic understanding of language forces binary oppositions. Dyadic relationships understand the signifier as meaning the signified. A dyadic interpretation of language closes the door for multiple interpretations.

Ann Berthoff offers a counter argument for dyadic interpretations by claiming that understanding rhetoric as hermeneutic can help us to interpret language in a triadic way. Triadicity is best illustrated as a triangle (Figure 1) in Ogden and Richard’s *The Meaning of Meaning*. (Sometimes, this triangle is portrayed with a dotted line between “symbol” and “referent.”) At the top of the triangle, “thought or reference” represents the “mediating idea held by an interpreter, the meaning by means of which we apprehend meaning” (Berthoff 281). This triangle, and by extension, a triadic interpretation of language, helps us understand that all knowledge is mediated, therefore “we will be in a position to understand, further, what it means to say that all knowledge is interpretation and thus to find a central place for interpretation in teaching, as we recognize its centrality in learning” (Berthoff 281-82).

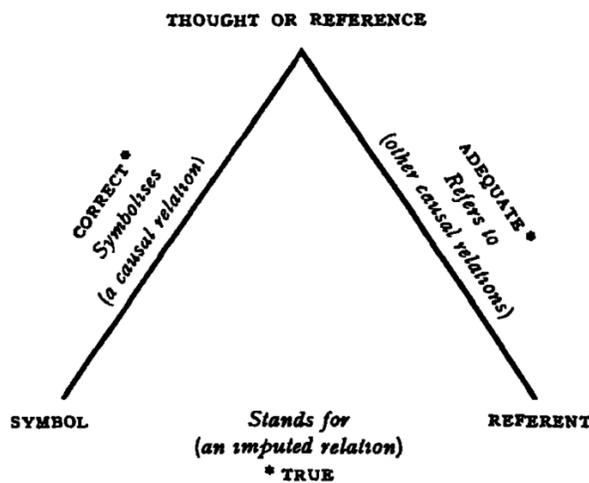


Figure 1. from *The Meaning of Meaning* by Ogden and Richards, p. 11

In the case of Adamo, the signifier/symbol was his use of the N-word; the signified/referent then, was the students interpreting his actions as racist because in popular culture, normally, when a white man uses the word, it carries a certain racist understanding, as highlighted earlier. In this case, sign/symbol (N-word) = signified/referent (racist). This dyadic interpretation is missing the rest of the triangle, where thinking about terms rhetorically occurs.

Patton's case is similar to Adamo's in that his students also interpreted a term used in the lecture as racist, and by extension, it is likely they assumed Patton was a racist. The difference is that Patton never uttered a racist term; he never spoke the N-word. The result of the incident was the same as the result in Adamo's case; both professors were suspended based on the premise of standing up for social justice. Both Adamo's and Patton's cases highlight the dangers of the over-emotional state of mind many college students bring to campus. Students' claims in these two cases – which are not the only two instances of professors being suspended or silenced as a result of similar perceived transgressions – work against the intellectual and open-minded ideals traditionally promoted by an academic environment.

Dyadic interpretations can often lead to misunderstanding, partially because the dyad doesn't take into account the rhetorical context of a situation. Adamo's students took a dyadic understanding of the N-word in popular culture and tried to apply that understanding to a different culture (academic culture) and a completely different context (the college classroom). To do this successfully, and without harm to both their own emotions and Adamo's career, the students would have had to apply a triadic interpretation of the word rather than a dyadic interpretation. Based on the context of the course and the subsequent assignment, it seems this may have been what Adamo was attempting to teach his students. Instead, the students misread

and misunderstood the context of Adamo's use of the word. Their popular culture understanding clashed with the academic culture of the university they had just recently entered.

The current movement we see against professors like Adamo and Patton – especially the actions taken by administration after student complaints – is less about political correctness, which aimed to restrict speech, but more about protecting the “fragility of the collegiate psyche” (Lukianoff and Haidt). This current movement also aims to punish anyone who fails to protect and shield students from words and ideas that may make some uncomfortable. Professors are essentially shamed into thinking twice before they speak, and in many cases, avoiding difficult topics altogether. Being a current instructor of a college class, I sympathize with professors who find themselves in these situations.

I teach an entry-level composition course at St. Cloud State University, a predominately white, middle-class institution. I recently assigned Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's article, “The Coddling of the American Mind” (2015), to my English 191: Introduction to Rhetorical and Analytical Writing students. The class is made up of a few upper classmen but mostly first-year college students, so my curriculum is geared toward first-year students. My intent in assigning this piece was to bring light to the very situation I'm highlighting through this thesis; I want my students to be ready for difficult topics and to understand that they are entering into a different culture, a new culture, the academic culture, which isn't intended to protect their potentially fragile psyche.

My students read the article, answered the questions the authors posed, and discussed the article in small groups. When they finished discussing, I asked them to share their small-group takeaways with the large group. Most shared that they are going to try to keep an open mind as they go through college, or that they never viewed college in the way presented in the article.

The comment that hit home came from one of my two seniors. She is in her last semester and will be graduating this May. She does not have the opportunity to take any more college classes, therefore, her takeaway looked different than the rest of the students in my class. She raised concern that she had missed out on valuable learning over the last four years because she couldn't remember many professors bringing sensitive topics into the classroom. She was disappointed that her professors possibly simply avoided these topics. She said, after reading the article, she felt like the education she anticipated was not the education she received. She expressed frustration that her education may have suffered. This conversation, stemming from one of the only minority students in the class (she is Black), made me take a step back and reflect on the disservice professors may be doing to students by coddling their minds, by avoiding to teach difficult and sensitive topics, by providing too many trigger warnings.

The conversation continued with other students offering their own experiences. Some talked about how they personally witnessed professors challenged or shamed because of something they said. Others made comments about their concerns that college will not prepare them for life after college. The class consensus was clear: the current cancel culture mentality poses a real threat to academic culture and long-held ideals of academic freedom. Cancel culture, and by extension cancel discourse, harms nearly everyone. It harms professors because their academic freedom is challenged; they risk their careers if they teach sensitive topics. It harms students because they are not receiving educations that provide opportunities to discuss difficult topics and to gain new understandings and perspectives that will help them become engaged members of society. It harms the historically marginalized communities because the silencing of these topics limits everyone's ability to participate in the democratic processes that lead to a liberal society. The writers of the Harper's "Open Debate" article said it well: "The way to defeat

bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away” (Ackerman et al.). If we cannot discuss difficult topics about the real to imagine a world that could be (Sheard 770), change is likely to never occur, and therefore, we will continue to reinforce the exact ideals cancel discourse attempts to stand for. Nothing will ever get better for these historically marginalized communities. We will forever participate in the attitude that Pratt and Frye refer to as whiteness (Fox).

## Chapter 6

### **Laying Blame on Only Students and Administrations is Irresponsible**

Academic institutions across America are in a particularly unique situation right now. Professors and administrations are trying to balance their students' belief that they "have a right to not be offended" (Lukianoff and Haidt) with punishing offenses "in a spirit of panicked damage control" (Ackerman et al.). Since the time of political correctness, our definitions of what constitutes hate speech has become looser and looser, to the point where in 2013, the Departments of Justice and Education expanded their definition of sexual harassment to include speech that was deemed unwelcome (Lukianoff and Haidt). Academic institutions now employ that understanding of hate speech, and students are left to use their own subjective opinion to determine what speech is unwelcome "and therefore, grounds for a harassment claim. Emotional reasoning is now accepted as evidence" (Lukianoff and Haidt). Emotional reasoning seems to be the driving force behind cancel discourse, especially as it is used in the academy.

It is important to note that cancel discourse does not always originate with the students or administrations. Sometimes, it comes from the professors.

Up until this point, this thesis has been from a scholar's standpoint, from someone who has spent the last two and a half years studying rhetoric and its impact on language. Now, I would like to shift into student-mode and share a personal cancellation experience which took place in one of my rhetoric classes. Students are not the only group of people who use cancel discourse in academia; some professors also use cancel discourse, possibly as a means to control the narrative of their course. By engaging in cancel discourse, professors are reinforcing Freire's banking concept of education where the teacher holds all the power.

I was taking a course intended to encourage students to look at cultural situations and respond to them rhetorically. It was an asynchronous online course with six graduate students and about twelve undergraduate students. The majority of the course consisted of reading material relevant to our current culture, posting discussion posts, and responding to other students' discussion threads. The professor stated multiple times that her goal was to remain on the outside of the discussion and let the students discuss amongst themselves. As someone who has studied Freire's banking concept of education, I appreciated the effort by this professor in working to remove the traditional authority that a professor inherently carries.

During the week of October 19, 2020, the professor asked the students to respond to a collection of articles about a local restaurant, Rollie's Rednecks and Longnecks (Rollie's) and the recent cancellation attempt against them. UniteCloud, a local social justice organization whose goal is to "resolve tension and restore dignity to all people in Central MN" (Ringsmuth), spearheaded a campaign against Rollie's largely stemmed from the memorabilia displayed in the restaurant as decorations. Beyond criticizing the memorabilia, UniteCloud used "its social media accounts to spread stories about purportedly racist and bigoted experiences at Rollie's" (Reinan), a claim Roland Hogrefe, owner of Rollie's, denies. Shortly after UniteCloud's social media campaign, Explore Minnesota, a Minnesota tourism website featuring Minnesota attractions, removed Rollie's from their website. This was another form of cancellation against Rollie's. Ultimately, Rollie's ended up suing UniteCloud for defamation for character. According to Jeffrey O'Brien, an attorney for Rollies, "the matter was resolved but settlements are confidential" (Baker). Rollie's is still open for business today. As students, we were asked to respond to the Rollie's situation as it stood before the settlement, which occurred only recently, after the course had concluded.

I responded to the Rollie's situation by presenting an argument intended to spark a debate. I started my argument by discussing our First Amendment rights. Then, I moved into stories about how I had eaten there in the past but refrain from frequenting the restaurant now, connected my current post to a previous one where I talked about my refusal to patronize another local restaurant chain for social justice reasons, and rounded out my post with my main argument; I claimed that business owners have a right to decorate their business how they please and if people are uncomfortable, they need not patronize that particular business. Because I was in the middle of researching cancel culture for this thesis, I recognized the situation against Rollie's as cancel culture and I expressed that I did not believe a business should be cancelled in the form of being removed from tourism websites (Reinan) and talked about in false and misleading ways (Reinan; Baker), both actions of which led to monetary damages in excess of \$50,000 (Baker). Beyond this, according to Hogrefe, UniteCloud had "the specific goal of harming Rollie's ability to do business and continue to attract the amazing local and national music acts that have made them famous" (Reinan). Rollie's attempted cancellation came based largely on the decorations they chose to display, much of which is memorabilia from television shows, such as *Dukes of Hazard*, and famous singers, such as Willie Nelson.

I posted my discussion thread on the eve of October 20, 2020, and by early the next morning, the professor replied by challenging most everything I said in my original post, all while failing to acknowledge the argument I presented. The response read like a research paper – complete with a multitude of citations and links to articles – and seemingly intended to prove wrong every non-essential point I made. In a rhetoric class which is partly designed to teach effective argument, this was clearly an oversight on the professor's part. This professor ended the reply by saying, "I've looked at hate groups using the Confederate flag for too long not to raise

my disagreement” (Gondringer). For a post that mentioned the Confederate flag separate of the argument I was trying to make, this response was particularly concerning.

I replied that I did not necessarily agree with the memorabilia they chose to display, but I also did not “believe that I [had] a right to tear down people's businesses” (Gondringer). I apologized if my original post seemed as though I was condoning racist symbols as that was not my intent. I tried to reiterate my original argument. After I recognized this professor’s reply was similar to the situations with Adamo and Patton – misinterpreted meanings and an attempt to shut down discourse by using “emotional reasoning” (Lukianoff and Haidt) – I backed off and ended my reply explaining my concern for dissenting opinion by acknowledging that “this [was] a very unpopular opinion [and that] I almost didn't even reply to this [post] because I [knew] it's unpopular and I was afraid of backlash from my peers [sic]” (Gondringer). That last statement was my attempt to show my professor that we can disagree, but I did not want to be further publicly shamed.

The professor’s reply carried the same rhetorical issues as the first reply, particularly that she failed to respond to the argument I was originally making. The professor stated:

In the case of Rollie's, we're talking about owners who are purposefully doing things to make people uncomfortable—both those who aren't white and those (including whites) who don't go along with treating people differently or with hate speech or with racist symbols being displayed. And as you know, that harassment, that hate speech, and that racism isn't protected speech or behavior. It's actually against the law (in many if not all cases). Thanks for listening. (Gondringer)

This professor’s final reply is concerning. First, to claim that Hogrefe, the single owner of Rollie’s, purposefully made people uncomfortable is an unverified bias. In fact, in multiple

radio interviews over the years, Hogrefe has claimed that the decorations are simply memorabilia, and during their recent lawsuit, Hogrefe denied any such claims of hatred toward specific people (Reinan). Beyond this, refusing to acknowledge that people who feel uncomfortable can choose to avoid the restaurant – my original argument – reinforced the argument made in “The Coddling of the American Mind” where Lukianoff and Haidt claim students feel that they “have a right to not be offended,” but in this instance, that concern is extended to the greater public rather than just college students. Through the exchange, and especially because the professor claimed she would take a backseat in the discussion threads, it would seem as though the professor also felt as though she had a right to not be offended.

Second, this professor’s “as you know” also carries a certain unverified bias toward me, the student. I actually did not know that harassment in the form of images – the decorations at Rollie’s – hate speech or racist speech were illegal, as this professor claimed. In fact, a quick Google search proves this professor wrong. Speech is protected under the First Amendment right, which is why the United States Supreme Court has consistently ruled against laws that criminalize speech (Volokh). However, with that said, the professor is partially correct because – depending on the context of the situation – harassment and racist behaviors *may* be illegal.

Third, the professor ends the post with “Thanks for listening” but consistently refused to “listen” to her student’s argument.

At this point, it was time to end the conversation. I realized this professor’s posts were extremely *pathos* driven, and I realized I had no chance of getting my point across. Beyond this, I had been publicly shamed enough. I ended the conversation by replying, simply, “I agree with you” (Gondringer).

Shame – most often public shame – is a common denominator in most (if not all) instances of cancelling. Both Adamo and Patton were shamed by their students and their college communities. Both professors' stories also became very public, inviting scholars from around the country to voice their concern about the situations. Rollie's Rednecks and Longnecks was publicly shamed in a smear campaign spearheaded by UniteCloud. I was publicly shamed by my professor. According to Brené Brown in her podcast "Shame and Accountability," "Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection" (Brown). I cannot speak for Adamo, Patton, or Hogrefe, but I *can* speak for myself; this is exactly how I felt when my professor ignored my argument, tried to undermine my points, and ultimately, shut down the conversation, the debate that the writers of the Harper's Magazine "Open Debate" article are fighting so hard to keep alive.

My professor silenced me and silenced any debate that could have happened between my classmates. As this professor stated many times during the course, the discussion posts were intended to spark conversation between the classmates, rather than between student and professor. After the professor replied, no other students engaged with my post. This was odd as my peers engaged with all my posts up until this point in the semester. I was presenting an important argument, one which had the opportunity to spark academic debate, but the professor effectively shut it down. Beyond this, for the rest of the semester, I tried my best to keep my posts generic and non-controversial thereby scrubbing my posts "clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense" (Lukianoff and Haidt), which seems to be a recurring theme on college campuses as discussed further in Lukianoff and Haidt's "The Coddling of the American Mind." Because I am so ingrained in the banking concept of education, I felt that if I did not give my professor what she wanted, my grade would suffer. My

Rollie's discussion post experience changed the way I interacted with the course; I no longer tried to spark conversation amongst my peers for fear of retribution. I decided to remain safe.

Being a student with a desire to open conversations about difficult topics can be challenging at times. We, as students, are surrounded by people who are much more powerful than we are and can act in ways that have very real consequences for our professional lives. Professors can lower our grades. Colleges and universities can expel us. Unfortunately, I am not the only student negatively affected by the silencing, the cancel discourse, rampant in colleges and universities today. Thankfully, I was not expelled for my words like Kieran Bhattacharya was.

Kieran Bhattacharya was a second-year student at the University of Virginia (UVA) School of Medicine when he was suspended and dismissed from his university, all because he asked some questions some may deem triggering or insensitive. On October 25, 2018, he attended a panel discussion about microaggressions, presented by Professor Beverly Colwell Adams, associate professor in the Department of Psychology.

Through the panel discussion, Bhattacharya asked Adams a variety of pointed questions about microaggressions, including "Is it a requirement, to be a victim of microaggression, that you are a member of a marginalized group?" and "Exactly how do you define marginalized and who is a marginalized group? Where does that go?" He challenged Adams' definition of microaggression and argued against some of Adams' claims about microaggressions, particularly that the receiver of the microaggression knows the intent of the person who made it and that "a microaggression is entirely dependent on how the person who's receiving it is reacting" (United States District Court Western District of Virginia Charlottesville Division). Bhattacharya challenged the core of Adams' research by pointing out her use of anecdotal evidence. His

continued challenge of the presented information earned him a Professionalism Concern Card later that day. Ultimately, his level of respect was the primary concern.

Later that evening, Christine Peterson, Assistant Dean for Medical Education emailed Bhattacharya addressing his observed discomfort at the panel to which Bhattacharya replied:

Your observed discomfort of me from wherever you sat was not at all how I felt. I was quite happy that the panel gave me so much time to engage with them about the semantics regarding the comparison of microaggressions and barbs. I have no problems with anyone on the panel; I simply wanted to give them some basic challenges regarding the topic. And I understand that there is a wide range of acceptable interpretations on this. I would be happy to meet with you at your convenience to discuss this further. (United States District Court Western District of Virginia Charlottesville Division)

Bhattacharya and Peterson met six days after the panel where Peterson attempted to determine Bhattacharya's ideas on current social and political issues. A month after the panel, after multiple meetings, letters, and emails, Bhattacharya was directed to undergo a psychological evaluation before he could return to classes.

On November 29, 2019, after a hearing the previous day, Bhattacharya received a letter officially suspending him from school, effective immediately, and that he could apply for readmission no earlier than August 2019. On December 30, Bhattacharya was informed that he had a "no trespass" order. When Bhattacharya attempted to reapply for admission the following summer, this order blocked his request for readmission. Bhattacharya attempted to appeal the order, but his request was denied, and the issuing Police Department claimed that he engaged in threatening discourse on social media platforms and that "[t]he conduct [Bhattacharya] directed

at members of the university community compromised safety and security and caused fear” (United States District Court Western District of Virginia Charlottesville Division).

Currently, Bhattacharya is in the middle of prosecuting the university. “His lawsuit contends that UVA violated his First Amendment rights by retaliating against him for speaking his mind. UVA filed a motion to dismiss the case, but a district court judge ruled that the suit could proceed” (Soave). Since, at the time of penning this thesis, this case is still working its way through the court system, it is unclear what the outcome will be. Defenders of academic discourse argue that “it is vital that UVA lose this case and lose badly. Students must have the right to question administrators about poorly formed concepts from social psychology without fearing that they will be branded as threats to public order. That's the difference between a public university and an asylum” (Soave).

## Chapter 7

### Where do we go from here?

This culminating project, more than anything, was a journey of critically thinking about a very important topic in our current popular culture: social justice. When I began this project, I had my own terministic screen about the term “cancel culture” and assumptions about what cancel culture was trying to achieve in our modern society. I knew I did not like it and knew my dislike was based on personal experiences.

My personal experiences began with my own students when one of them came into my classroom, upset after failing a math test. While not responsibly examining his own role in the failure, instead he called for the “cancellation” of his math teacher. He aggressively claimed that “we need to cancel her” which in high school lingo translates to “we need to get her fired.” I was in the beginning stages of brainstorming topics for my thesis and was shocked that this cultural phenomenon had trickled down into my high school English classroom. I thought there might be something worthwhile to research, but did not finally land on the topic of cancel culture until it hit me emotionally when I witnessed the cancellation of my favorite YouTuber, Jenna Marbles.

I had watched Jenna since I was a freshman in college when she first started posting on YouTube. We are close to the same age and have a lot of the same interests, so it did not take long for me to become a loyal follower.

In June of 2020, after countless accusations of racism and insensitivity, Jenna quit the internet, as she puts it. Her last video was an apology to her loyal “Dink Fam” and new viewers. She apologized for insensitive videos she had made in the past that were funny at the time but are insulting now. She said she never intended to hurt anyone and if her presence on the internet hurt people, then it was time for her to leave. I watched her goodbye video and cried. I felt like I was

losing a friend who brought a weekly element of joy to my somewhat chaotic life. Here was an influencer, with more than twenty million subscribers on her YouTube channel, saying goodbye to her entire career because she did not know how to repair the perceived damage.

Jenna is a woman who has spoken publicly in support of all life, including both animals and people. At one point, she posted a forty-seven-minute apology after she purchased a fish and put it in the wrong tank. She often discussed her veganism and shared vegan recipes. She highlighted the importance of adopting from animal shelters and even fostered and adopted an emotionally distraught racing greyhound. She was never afraid to publicly support movements such as #blacklivesmatter. She acknowledge when her own understanding fell short and thanked her supporters for pointing out her weaknesses so she could work to be a better human.

While Jenna left YouTube on her own accord, she left largely because people were calling for her cancellation. These calls seemed to come from her new viewers who hadn't been with her since the beginning like I had, who refused to acknowledge the context during which her earlier videos were posted, and who failed to accept the multiple times she had publicly apologized. To me, it looked like the woke mob got to her. Another one bites the dust. I was furious. My emotions at the time Jenna Marbles left the internet, coupled with my student calling for the cancellation of his teacher, is what spearheaded this entire project. It didn't take long for me to realize cancel culture was far more problematic than my two experiences.

When I started reading about colleges and universities suspending professors over incidents that violated academic freedom, I knew cancel culture was a far larger problem than I originally realized. It was at that point I shifted my research away from Jenna Marbles and other Internet influencers and focused the remainder of my research on the effect cancel culture has on American colleges and universities.

The problematic nature of cancel culture in relation to the academy is highlighted through this project. I am fearful for where our colleges and universities are headed if academic culture continues to support cancel discourse and if administrations continue to, “in a spirit of panicked damage control,” deliver “hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms” (Ackerman et al.). The greater challenge may be the attempt to reform the current climate in colleges and universities, drawing as it does from socio-political dynamics in the larger culture. Perhaps an approach that is not only more manageable, but also aligned with the mission and methods of institutions of higher learning, would be to return to and/or redesign our curricula to incorporate a more robust rhetorical training.

Teaching rhetoric is not a new concept. In his article, “Rhetoric as a Course of Study,” David Fleming, argues the importance of approaching education in this manner. Historically, the goal of a rhetorical education was to “shape and strengthen in its students certain ethically framed, action-oriented, intellectual capacities” (Fleming 180) in an attempt to produce “good citizens,” a promise made by Protagoras, a sophist during the ancient Greek era, who often spoke about rhetoric and what it means to be rhetorical.

A rhetorical education forms character and develops intellectual strength, rather than focusing primarily on the presentation and acquisition of information. Because of this, it takes a great deal of time. One does not become a rhetorically adept person after just one or two college classes; it only truly comes after a lifetime of practice. Most colleges and universities have only four-years (and some less, depending on how many college classes the students took during high school) to develop their students into rhetorical beings. A perfect place to start teaching from a rhetorical standpoint is in the first-year composition (FYC) course required at most (if not all) colleges and universities across America. St. Cloud State University bases their FYC course

around the ideals of rhetoric, but again, just one college class does not provide enough practice for students to become rhetorical thinkers. The rhetorical thinking provided through the FYC course ideally should be implemented throughout the remainder of the students' college career.

To follow in Protagoras' steps and create "good citizens," all professors should be rhetorically training their students, rather than simply teaching subject matter. According to Fleming, "the goal of rhetorical training is neither a material product, nor a body of knowledge, nor technical proficiency in achieving pre-determined ends; it is rather to become a certain kind of person, one who has internalized the art of rhetoric, and who possesses what Quintilian called 'facilitas' (X.i.1): 'the capacity to produce appropriate and effective language in any situation' (Murphy, "Roman" 19) [sic]" (Fleming 179). More so than simply learning subject matter, a rhetorical education is intended to help students become better humans. A rhetorical education intends to help students learn how to communicate, to engage in dialogue, and to effectively argue. With a rhetorical background, Adamo's and Patton's students may have been more likely to open a debate with their professors rather than run to the administration. With a rhetorical background, my professor may have engaged with the argument I presented, rather than shutting down discourse and debate. With a rhetorical background, Kieran Bhattacharya's questions may have been viewed as something to open dialogue rather than something that was attacking and aggressive in nature.

My process of inquiring into cancel culture and cancel discourse has resulted in three key findings.

First, cancel culture would not so much be an issue without cancel discourse. When I began this project, the term "cancel discourse" was not on my radar, possibly because, as the root of the problem, language is rarely, if ever, mentioned in reports about cancel culture. Cancel

discourse feeds cancel culture, because without language, cancel culture would not exist. The entire phenomenon is built around communicative exchanges amongst people, many of whom remain relatively anonymous in their cancellation calls as much of this discourse is taking place on social media, where being anonymous is easy and convenient. Cancel discourse, and the resulting cancel culture, is antithetical to its mission of protecting marginalized groups of people. Wars are not won with silence. The inability and unwillingness to open a conversation, to engage in dialectics, hurts the people the silence is trying to protect. “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde).

Second, cancel culture gained much greater significance as an issue when it entered the academy, the aspect of American society largely thought of as an institution that broadens students’ minds. The opposite occurs when cancel discourse and the implications of cancel culture is allowed into our academic institutions. This allowance reinforces our binary thinking and assumptions. It does not break us out of our natural default settings that academic institutions are traditionally thought of doing. It does not expand our minds by helping us learn to become critical and rhetorical thinkers. While it makes sense that students would bring their popular culture experiences into their academic world, this blending of cultures really hinders the students’ academic potential. Cancel culture in the academy kills opportunities for critical thinking and growth amongst both students and professors.

Third, rhetoric is everywhere. We see it in television shows, movies, songs, advertisements, and books. It is present in every interaction, every conversation, and every thought we encounter. The human condition is rhetorical. Therefore, rhetoric needs to be a course of study in the collegiate sector. If we are to understand the world around us, we need to be able to read and respond to it effectively. If change is possible, it is only possible when

rhetoric is involved. However, rhetoric is not the means to an end; it is the means to the beginning. It is a process that takes time and a willingness to learn, grow, and be vulnerable.

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