



# FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

## TRAUMA-TALK: DISCURSIVE CO-CONSTRUCTIONS OF AGENCY AFTER RELATIONAL VIOLENCE

Public defense to obtain the degree of  
**DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY**  
of

Mrs. Margaret Slaska

which will take place on  
**12 July, 2019, 10 am**  
Promotiezaal

Brussels Humanities, Sciences & Engineering Campus (Etterbeek)

How to reach the VUB: <http://www.vub.ac.be/campus/brussels-humanities-sciences-engineering-campus>  
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### Jury:

INTERNAL:

Prof. dr. Karen François (Chair)

Prof. dr. Katrien De Koster

Prof. dr. Veerle Soyez

EXTERNAL:

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Prof. dr. Murilo Moscheta (Taos Institute. Estate University  
of Maringá Brazil)

Prof. dr. Sheila McNamee (Taos Institute, University of  
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Prof. dr. Gerrit Loots (VUB, Psychological and Educational Sciences)

Prof. dr. Jasmina Sermjin (VUB, Psychological and Educational Sciences)



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## Summary

**Introduction:** This study examined a diverse group of women who have experienced relational violence and later engaged in collective political action. This research explores how trauma-talk and notions of agency and empowerment were discursively utilized by participants.

**Method:** This study draws upon social constructionism, intersectionality and critical discursive psychology to analyze the utilization of interpretive repertoires and subject positionings women take up related to trauma.

**Results:** Despite its widespread cultural availability, participants did not utilize a singular biomedical repertoire about trauma. They used biomedical language to legitimize suffering, positioned themselves as active agents and position against victim-blaming culture. Descriptions of healing and closure from trauma were always intertwined with utterances related to helping others. Participants described the importance of liberating the story from the self and the dialogic process of telling and listening (with a helpful audience). Agency was co-constructed as a movement of becoming that is established relationally. Activist identity positionings can shift our sense of what is possible for ourselves; moves us into a place of new possibility for ways of living.

**Conclusions:** Therapeutic efforts aimed at “healing” trauma may benefit from a relational understanding of co-constructions of agency and empowerment that occur through collective political engagement rather than relying on a privatized “personal” journey. Healing is likely more connected to sense of justice; it is positioned an imperative to not allow this to happen to someone else and to change the broader system, as evidence by the utilization of an interpretive repertoire that bounds the self with others. Rhizomatic becoming-agency refers to a potent and not-yet-fully-storied emergence that occurs when we connect our own experiences of oppression to the matrix of intersecting divisions and privileges and imagine how others might experience it; a confluence of experience that constitutes an activation process.

## Curriculum Vitae

### Margaret Slaska, LMFT

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### Education:

- M.S. Counseling, Marriage and Family Therapy, *San Diego State University, California, USA*
- M.A. Women's Studies, *San Diego State University, California, USA*
- B.A. Psychology and Women's Studies, *West Chester University, Pennsylvania, USA*

### Employment:

- Lecturer and Director of Masters in Arts in Education Program, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA (2013/2017-Present)
- Clinical Supervisor and Marriage and Family Therapist (License #89883), San Diego, CA (Sept. 2009 – Present)
- Lead Therapist, Shelter and Family Violence Support Services, South Bay Community Services, Chula Vista, CA (May 2013 – Aug. 2014)
- Domestic Violence Response Team Advocate, South Bay Community Services, Chula Vista, CA (July 2006 – Jan. 2012) and Center for Community Solutions, San Diego, CA (Aug. 2003 - Sept. 2008)

### Publications

- (In progress). “Creating New Narratives: Integrating Critical Discursive Psychology and Queer Feminist Intersectionality as a Research Method”

### Community and Conference Presentations

- 2018. “Trauma-talk, Collective Action and Resiliency.” Audience: Narrative Health Initiatives International Conference, Coronado, CA.
- 2017. “Trauma, Resiliency and Collective Sustainability.” Audience: San Diego County District Attorney Victim Witness Assistance Program.
- 2015-2016. “Service Learning and Civic Engagement.” Audiences: Be HIP Student Conference: High Impact Learning Practices; San Diego State University undergraduate students and faculty; Imperial Valley Campus faculty.

### Professional Affiliations

Narrative Therapy Initiatives San Diego	2009-present
California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists	2008-present
Coalition for Abused Refugee and Immigrant Women, San Diego	2005-09