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Discursive Transformation and the Reconstruction of Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of African American Student Texts

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DISCURSIVE TRANSFORMATION AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY:
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT
TEXTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Discursive Transformation and the Reconstruction of Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of African American Student Texts

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The focus of this dissertation is to determine the extent to which African American students at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) resist or appropriate the discursual identities of the academy as they advance through a freshman composition course. Four students and their compositions, sampled to meet specific socioeconomic and learner motivation criteria, are studied during a semester of ENGL 101, a freshman composition course.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (2003) and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1994), are the analytic lens applied to the African American students' texts. CDA provides the discourse analysis tool, enabling me to identify the linguistic features of a written text and how those features represent the student writer's identity in relation to power and language.

Finally, qualitative data collection procedures are employed because they provide me with a naturalistic inquiry into the students' cultural, social, and literacy histories in ways that CDA cannot. The specific data collection procedures include student interviews, document collection, and a critical research journal.

The overarching finding is that context, task, and text play a significant role in the strength of authorial identity and grasp of academic discourses; however, learner investment is a clear factor in how, longitudinally, the student progresses. This study

demonstrates the reflexive relationship between agency and social constraints. In addition, this study indicates there is much more agency exhibited by African American student writers than the traditional paradigm of opposition and appropriation suggests. Furthermore, this study adds to our understanding of the multiplicity of the African American experience by revealing the flexibility inherent in African American writer identity.

Overall, the recommendations for teaching writing comprise of an awareness that pedagogical decisions, types of assignments, and student nurturing play vital roles in how African American student writers perceive themselves and, in turn, determine their identities as writers. Therefore, it is imperative for African American students' multiple cultural identities to be expressed, studied, and critically examined in the classroom, not suppressed.