THE RED PEN CUTS DEEP: HOW PAPER FEEDBACK ON LANGUAGE AFFECTS

IDENTITY & CLASSROOM RELATIONS

by

Elisa Serrano Sandoval, B.A.

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Committee Members:

Eric Leake, Chair

Rebecca Jackson

Patrick Smith

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my participants, Xochil, Patricia, Heidi, and Katrina. Thank you for trusting me with your stories and experiences and for believing in me always. I hope I made you proud.

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Topic Introduction

Language is a vital part of one's identity. Not only is it the primary avenue through which we communicate, receive information, and make sense of what is going on around us, but it is also part of who we are, how we learn, and the legacies we pass on to future generations. Language is particularly important for marginalized communities, seeing that this keeps them connected and in tune with their culture and ancestors. Every single language represents an enriching culture and should be valued as such in every social space, including the classroom. bell hooks calls African American Language a "counter-language," saying that it is a language of resistance created by enslaved people as a way to resist having to communicate with the "oppressor's language" (170). Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa also talks about Spanglish, or Tex-Mex English, as a language born out of necessity, out of circumstance, from Chicanxs living along the border, informing their culture and own sense of belonging (168-170). Inspired by and adding to Anzaldúa's work on border studies, Norma González calls language, "*alma de culturas*" (the soul of cultures) (xix). I use the way that hooks, Anzaldúa, and González talk about language and their research to define identity as a facet of our being informed by language and the history and culture behind language practices.

In line with this research, González argues that "language is not simply a vehicle for communication, but the site of a highly politicized and vitriolic debate concerning the nature of who speaks what language where and under what circumstances" (54). A university composition classroom in the United States is a place where Standardized American English (SAE) is typically placed above other languages. This takes form as

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sets of practices that can be both intentional and unintentional. These practices may not only devalue students' home languages but also greatly affect their identity (Daniels 20-21).

A student's sense of agency, which for the purposes of this study is defined as the student's belief that they have a voice and a choice in how and what they learn/write, relies heavily upon their relationship with their teacher and the classroom environment the teacher creates. That is, if the student feels as if their teacher does not see potential in them or does not really care about their overall wellbeing (not just their test scores, or in the case of this study, their SAE proficiency), then the student will not feel valued or as an important part of the classroom community, making them doubt their place in the classroom. If there is miscommunication and perceived nonacceptance in the classroom, whether it comes from cultural or socioeconomic differences, that agency is disrupted. Miscommunication and nonacceptance can arise from paper feedback on language, which is the focus of this study. This feedback can be misconstrued by the student as a personal attack on their language and identity, even when the teacher just intended to educate them about SAE standards. These potential conflicts are not limited to certain age groups, school levels, or institutions; they are universal, and their effects can be just as damaging at every level. I have experienced these conflicts as a young student, thinking that it was normal until I witnessed it happening again as a graduate student years later.

As a child of Mexican immigrants and a former English Language Learner (ELL) student (as labeled by my school district), my language practices, and by extension my writing, have always been judged against the standards set by curriculums favoring SAE. Almost a decade later, as a second-year graduate student, my sophomore English

teacher's words, "You'll never be a good writer," still ring in my head whenever I set out to start a paper. Since then, I have revised and adapted my writing style to conform to SAE guidelines, believing that it was the only appropriate academic language for writing. My experiences as a student in Texas State University's Master's in Rhetoric and Composition program have allowed me to confront this belief that resulted from years of being encouraged and pressured to assimilate to dominant standards. One experience, in particular, brought these memories to mind and inspired my thesis research topic.

The red pen, the metaphor that draws the reader to the title of this work, is also a product of my experiences as an elementary, middle, and high school student and the weight those memories still hold years later. While always included in our "required school materials" list, the red pen was reserved for grading, most often done by our teachers. The red ink was always a marker of errors, needed corrections, and by extension, of authority we students lacked, and teachers possessed. The memory of seeing my old, graded papers covered in red ink resurfaced upon seeing some of my graduate peers' graded papers covered in instructor feedback. While the modality of writing and grading has changed since then (handwritten to typed), the effect of commenting remains the same. The ink or text color may not be red, but its effect is the same. It still marks the paper and the student, for better or worse, and for that reason, I have adopted the metaphor of the red pen as professors' comments on graduate student papers.

For graduate students, particularly those who are in writing programs, paper feedback is really important. Our professors' comments are yet another way to learn from them and know whether or not we are on the right path, not only for our success in their

classroom and in the larger program but also for our success after the program. For new

graduate students, like myself and the rest of my cohort at the time, the first paper, our

grade, and feedback of every course are monumental, which is why witnessing someone

from our cohort receive what many saw as harsh and negative feedback on our first paper

had such an impact on us. I remember my feedback being pretty average – a little heavy

on grammar issues, yes, but overall, nothing I had not seen before. I remember feeling

grateful for my grade, thinking that all of the conforming and revising I had done to my

writing continued to pay off and would maybe lead me to be successful in this program.

After sharing grades and feedback, we began to see a pattern, and some comments stood

out more than others, changing the way we all approached writing and paper feedback.

One member of the cohort received comments concerning their language and

grammar usage. Their reaction affected me greatly for many reasons. First, we are both

Latinx and from the Texas/Mexico border, although from different cities. Second, I

quickly realized that we had different experiences concerning our languages in our

educational journeys; while my fellow cohort member exhibited pride, joy, and justified

anger over the treatment of our people, not just for our Spanish language, but for every

single part of our culture that others have critiqued, I had assimilated greatly, for I was

never allowed to use Spanish in academic settings. Third, and most importantly, their

reaction made me question everything that had been ingrained in me and to consider that

the belief that success only came through assimilation and a leaving behind of my

language, culture, and a part of my identity could be wrong. This experience, the

conversations I had with my cohort about it, and everything I was learning in my courses,

has led me to dig deeper and investigate if and how paper feedback on English writing

affects graduate students like myself and members of my cohort.

This study aims to understand when and how commenting on graduate students' use of language on their papers affects student identities and classroom relationships. Latinx, African American, and other marginalized groups (like all populations) have a close tie with their native tongues, and many well-known writers, educators, and activists have shown that their languages (e.g., African American Language, Spanish, Spanglish) need to be recognized as just as valid in academic spaces as SAE. In *Vernacular Insurrections,* Carmen Kynard highlights the history of unequal and unfair education for the African American community and argues for the validity of AAL in academic spaces. Anzaldúa and Juan Guerra make similar arguments for Chicanx voices and languages in *Borderlands* and *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*, respectively. In a very powerful TEDx talk, Jamila Lyiscott discusses how the English classroom is silencing students of color by devaluing their home languages. I use these arguments on the validity of differing languages in my study in an attempt to humanize a problem that some educators, particularly English monolinguals, may only experience in theory and demonstrate how commenting practices are implicated in the treatment of student languages.

In preparation for this study, I reflected on my experiences, my cohort's experiences, and read books and studies on paper feedback, a student's right to their own language, and language problems in multicultural environments. From this, I drafted the following research questions:

Main Research Question

Understanding that language is a vital part of one's identity, in what ways does

paper feedback on language usage affect identity and complicate the student/teacher relationship, particularly for graduate students of marginalized communities?

Sub-Questions

- What are the relationships among language, race, and identity as demonstrated in paper feedback, specifically for graduate students studying writing?

- How do students reflect upon paper feedback experiences, and how do those contribute to their sense of identity?

- How can a better understanding of this relationship improve classroom relations among students and teachers?

- How is that relationship constituted in feedback and in related classroom interactions?

- How does paper feedback function as part of a larger curriculum that may support or impair student progress?

Purpose of Study, Methodology, & Subject Pool

This project aims to better understand and bring awareness to a very real and important issue. There is very little research concerning how paper feedback can affect graduate students, especially those studying writing, preparing to be educators themselves. This project may be particularly useful for educators who may be unaware of how deeply paper feedback on language may affect their graduate students, particularly those of marginalized communities. If more educators become aware of the impact of paper feedback on student language and how it affects students, they can be more mindful of their comments. This awareness will help mitigate the damage that could be done to their relationships with marginalized students and those students' sense of agency and identity. This is especially important considering the growing number of graduate

students from Latinx, African American, and other underrepresented cultural and linguistic backgrounds in college composition classes. Awareness, in this case, is also important considering that graduate students studying writing often go on to teach writing themselves and if they are only presented with unchallenged, deficit, monolingual views of writing, they'll transmit these same practices to another generation of minority students.

This study is important in how it builds on Nancy Sommers's findings in *Responding to Student Writers*, extending the research to graduate student writers, specifically those who have a critical understanding of Sommers's work and what, based on her research, feedback should look like. Many of my participants were also able to reflect upon earlier comments on their papers by referring to Sommers's work. This made the findings more nuanced and interesting, showing that there seems to be a "do as I say, not as I do" mentality in how graduate students preparing to be writing instructors as taught to comment on student papers and how some of their graduate professors respond to their papers. On the other side, my study and its findings reiterate the importance of Sommers's work, since it can be applied at the graduate level. My study also builds on her findings by showing that by commenting on content and not on grammar conventions, professors can avoid crossing racial and linguisitic lines, which based on the writing classroom's tendency to favor SAE and the dominant standard, can happen quite often (Inoue 26).

This study looked at how the graduate student/teacher relationship is affected by paper feedback on student language. With this in mind, I take a qualitative research approach by conducting interviews. Interviews allow me to highlight my subject pool's

experiences and give me sufficient data to analyze whether or not, and if so, how, paper feedback on language affects graduate students' identity and relationship with their professors. Interviews allow for in-depth answers and follow-up clarifications, giving my participants the freedom to expand and give as much detail as they feel comfortable with.

In order for my data collection to be feasible for this project, I limit my participants to 3-4 members of my master's degree cohort. I selected members of my cohort as my participants because they come from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds; two are from the Texas-Mexico border, one is an international student, and all four teach English composition courses with culturally diverse students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Their experiences as graduate students in the Literature and Rhetoric and Composition programs make for interesting data, seeing that they are studying writing, gained admission based on their writing abilities and educational accomplishments, and yet their self-worth and identities as writers and academics could still be impacted by paper feedback based on their language usage. This fact is indicative of the influence that language ideologies have on power dynamics, relationships in the classroom, and with the formation of future writing instructors.

The experience that I mentioned earlier, seeing one of my cohort members react to certain feedback, drew us all closer together. While we have only known each other for about a year and a half at the time of the interviews, we have bonded over facing similar struggles and have established trust with one another, making the interviews more productive. I asked them to tell me of a notable experience with paper feedback in their graduate career. I also asked them questions about their relationship with language, their identity, and how those relationships have changed since starting graduate school. All of

the questions circle back to the significance of paper feedback on language, especially in a university rhetoric and composition classroom.

Significance of Study & Overview of Findings

My study takes place in a Hispanic-Serving Institution, a majority-minority institution with a high percentage of Hispanic/Latinx students. Like most universities, however, there is a lack of diversity among faculty in the Rhetoric and Composition program. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it can be hard for White faculty to relate to the struggles of minority students and become aware of practices that may affect their graduate studies. This study finds that my participants' identity is deeply rooted in their language practices as well as their proximity to other languages/dialects. With this aspect of identity established, the study finds that comments such as "this may be an ELL marker" and "problems with word choice may be due to ESL" make graduate students question their place in the program and their ability to succeed. It leaves a mark on their identity as writers, bringing to light how racially or linguistically insensitive comments on language can be. ELL or ESL labels or markers are frequently used to point out a student's English language deficiency; it very rarely has to do with whether or not English is indeed the student's second language, as one of the participants points out in a later chapter. This practice further confuses and infuriates students because rather than helping a student with the error the professor points out, it just makes the student more self-conscious and dejected about a label that does not fully suit them.

This study also discusses the effect that overcommenting, a practice discussed by Sommers, has on the student/teacher relationship and by extension, student agency. Conversely, the study also has positive findings, showing that constructive and

encouraging feedback can nurture a constructive student/teacher relationship and increase the perceived sense of student agency. These main findings reiterate the significance of the study, which with a listening and responsive audience, could help writing professors approach commenting on graduate student papers with more awareness and sensitivity.

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 covers methodology and study design rationale. Chapter 3 considers my study participants' backgrounds and identities and analyzes how they are affected by paper feedback on language. Chapter 4 analyzes the effects of professor feedback on student papers on the student/teacher relationship; it also covers how my participants approach commenting on their students' papers and whether their practices are informed by their own experiences with paper feedback as graduate students. Lastly, Chapter 5 concludes the study, summarizing its implications and sharing my participants' advice on how professors can help support graduate students through their paper feedback.

II. INVESTIGATING THE EFFECT OF THE RED PEN THROUGH A QUALITATIVE LENS

Restatement of Problem and Chapter Overview

Many composition teachers may be unaware of the impact that paper feedback has on students, particularly at the graduate studies level. This project may be of particular importance for teachers who are unknowingly contributing to what some view as a harmful and broken system by implementing SAE in their classrooms with the idea that they are helping their students prepare for a world that is already unwelcoming to them. The first step in solving any issue is awareness. If more educators become aware of the impact that paper feedback on student language has on students and how it affects them, they can be more mindful of their comments. This awareness will help mitigate the damage that could be done to their relationships with marginalized students.

In particular, this project focuses on how graduate students in English programs at a Hispanic Serving Institution react to or are affected by paper feedback. In order to gain admittance into an M.A. program in English, whether that be in Rhetoric and Composition or Literature (as is the case with my participants), one must demonstrate themselves to be a competent, well-established writer. As mentioned in Chapter 1, our identities are always under constant construction; my identity as a Chicana, a bilingual student, a writer, and an aspiring academic/educator, is intersectional. When one facet of my identity is attacked, so are all the others. There are safe havens, places where my identity, in whatever state of construction, feels protected, immune to society's harsh realities and hierarchies. The composition classroom is not always one of them, and paper feedback is largely to blame. A lot of weight lies behind professors' comments, which are

mostly influenced by their personal experiences as graduate students, pedagogical beliefs and practices, and theories on writing and language, some of which are arguably harmful or outdated.

While this study takes place at Texas State University, one of the many Hispanic-Serving Institutions in Texas, it holds relevance beyond Texas State, particularly in institutions with a growing number of students of color and those looking to develop larger and more diverse graduate student programs. Through interviews, this study shows the importance of minority representation in English programs at an HSI, where the subject itself, or how it is taught, can discourage minority students from pursuing the subject further or potentially returning to the university as faculty. The interviews shed light on how a professor's commenting practices can either contribute to the societal factors that create language hierarchies or begin to remedy and mitigate that damage. As such, this study holds relevance in other institutions and universities that may be looking to attract more faculty of color in their programs, support graduate students and future faculty of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and make allies and advocates of White faculty.

This Time, It's Personal: Interviewing as a Means for Understanding

This study takes a closer look at how the student/teacher relationship at the graduate level is affected by paper feedback on student's use of written language. To be more specific, the study aims to answer the research question: Understanding that language is a vital part of one's identity, in what ways does paper feedback on language usage affect identity and complicate the student/teacher relationship, particularly for graduate students of marginalized communities? With this purpose in mind, I conducted a

qualitative research study through a series of interviews to collect my data. In order for my data collection to be feasible for this project, I limited my participants to four members of my master's degree cohort. The interview questions explored their experiences with paper feedback, both as students and as new composition teachers. I asked about their relationship with language use in academic contexts, if and how their identities or self-worth were affected by paper feedback on their language, and how they try to remedy or reduce any damage they may do to their students now that they are in the teacher's place.

The Texas State University IRB approved the study, and the approved interview process and questions are included in Appendix A. To gain IRB approval, I explained the importance of the project and detailed the interview process, ensuring the safety of my participants and any professors they mention through anonymity. I also drafted and shared email recruitment letters with the IRB, which is how I reached out to my participants. The recruitment letters and informed consent forms lay out the purpose of the project, its outcome's importance, the interview process, and potential risks. Upon agreement to participate in the study, I scheduled Zoom interviews with my participants during which study information was again provided and consent was once again given and recorded. The email recruitment letter and informed consent form are included in Appendices B and C, respectively.

Interviews afforded me a more nuanced understanding of the weight graduate students studying writing attach to paper feedback. In other words, through these interviews, I was allowed to reflect on someone else's experiences with paper feedback, which allowed me to first identify any emerging themes – similarities or differences in

participants' responses – and second, to make any connections in order to see the role that paper feedback has played in my participants' development as graduate students, scholars, and writing teachers. In a similar study involving students' perceptions and experiences with writing, Bronwyn Williams conducted interviews, gathering the students' first-hand experiences as his data. In his book, *Literacy Practices and Perceptions of Agency: Composing Identities*, Williams defines agency as "the perception, drawn from experiences and dispositions, that the individual can, in a given social context, act, make a decision, and make meaning," and the interviews he conducts help prove his point that memory and previous experiences with writing affect student agency (9). Williams conducted interviews, in supplement to his ethnographic observations, so that his participants "could tell [him] about their experiences with literacy practices as well as their motivations, frustrations, and desires for the future" (6), a story-telling process that Irving Seidman calls "meaning-making" (1). Similarly, interviews allowed my participants more agency than other methodological approaches, i.e., surveys, and gave them the opportunity to take the interview in any direction they wanted, making meaning out of their experiences and stories.

Interviews also allowed for conversation, giving my participants the time to clarify feelings, misunderstandings and engage in nuanced reflection. The conversations helped clarify a key problem behind paper feedback: assuming how people will respond to comments. Through interviews, I also mitigated the risk of speaking on behalf of my participants or misinterpreting their answers because they were readily available to clarify any doubts for me or correct misunderstandings. On the other hand, surveys would have produced shorter answers and reduced the participants' agency, leaving me with the

responsibility to make sense of their answers and feelings about paper feedback without the opportunity to ask more about their answers.

In an ethnographic study of language ideologies in a predominantly Hispanic high school in Chicago, Jonathan Rosa conducted interviews to supplement his observations of what he calls "the racialization of language" (139). Rosa interviews Mexican and Puerto Rican students, as well as faculty, in order to gain a better understanding of the raciolinguistic ideologies that run the school. Rosa's interviews validate his observations and fortify his claims. In other words, Rosa avoids speaking for the students, teachers, and faculty through interviews; instead, he gives them a voice, agency, and the ability to share their views and feelings with him. Much in the way that Rosa uses interviews to supplement and support his observations, beliefs, and claims, I conducted interviews to supplement my analysis of the graded papers that my participants shared with me. Interviews ensured that my participants were not reduced to the text; if I were to only focus on their papers, I will be doing the same thing that I criticize: removing the student writer from the equation, responding to the text, instead of the writer. My study aims to humanize a theoretical issue, and interviews were the appropriate research means for me to accomplish this goal.

The Faces Behind the Papers

I selected members of my cohort as my participants because they come from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds; three are from the Texas-Mexico border, one is an international student from the European Union, and all four teach introductory English writing courses to culturally diverse students at a large Hispanic-Serving Institution. Their experiences as graduate students made for interesting data, seeing that

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in order to have gained admittance to their respective programs, their writing abilities had to have been up to par with the graduate school's requirements. Yet, the fact that this part of their identity, their ever-evolving identity as writers, could still be damaged by paper feedback based on their language usage is indicative of the influence that language ideologies have on power dynamics and relationships in the classroom.

I also have a preexisting and ongoing relationship with my cohort members. I share similar backgrounds with all four of my participants. Our shared experiences as multicultural students from the Texas-Mexico border have allowed us to form a bond based on our language experiences. We share a love and understanding for Spanglish, or the Tex-Mex dialect prevalent in border cities. We also share experiences of being immersed in classrooms and other settings where the language practices differ from ours. Our experiences dealing with that change, the way it impacted our identities, and how we adapted to it have created this shared space in which we can talk about our experiences and feel more connected to one another. My participants and I have also bonded over the memories and feelings associated with the feedback we have received as new graduate students in this program. We have established a sense of trust with one another, which made the interviews more productive and yielded high quality data.

All four participants have a deep appreciation for language, including those languages that they do not speak or are not familiar with. They also have a critical awareness of pedagogical practices and their effects on students at any level. Our shared experiences and understanding allowed for more fruitful and engaging interviews. It is also important to note that all four participants have had different experiences with writing since they come from different places and backgrounds. Just as important is the

participants' knowledge of language ideologies and their place in academia; while this knowledge made for a critical interpretation of the feedback they received, it did not appear to change the emotional impact of the feedback based on their physical responses as they shared their feedback (i.e., long pauses, nervous laughs, ticks, etc.).

I have created short profiles of the interview participants for reader reference below:

- **Patricia**

    Patricia is a second-year Rhetoric & Composition graduate student from Brownsville, Texas. She currently works as a Teaching Assistant for the English department, teaching first-year Composition. Prior to her role as a TA, Patricia was an Instructor Assistant, helping professors with their grading and holding office hours for students. Patricia speaks English, Spanish, and the Tex-Mex Spanish that is prevalent in the Texas-Mexico border. She has a critical understanding of language practices and border studies.

- **Heidi**

    Heidi is a second-year international graduate student from Europe studying Literature. Heidi currently works as a Teaching Assistant for the English department, teaching first-year Composition. Prior to her role as a TA, Heidi was also an IA, assisting with English professors with their grading. Heidi has a critical understanding of language practices and is familiar with six different languages, speaking German and English fluently.

- **Katrina**

  Katrina is a second-year graduate student studying Rhetoric & Composition. She is also a Teaching Assistant for the English department, teaching first-year Composition. Katrina was also an IA prior to her role as a TA. Katrina grew up in Laredo, Texas, where she gained a critical understanding and appreciation of different language practices. Katrina also taught English abroad, deepening her appreciation for differing languages.

- **Xochil**

  Xochil is a second-year graduate student studying Rhetoric & Composition. Xochil is from Edinburg, Texas, and speaks English, Spanish, and Tex-Mex Spanish. Like Patricia, Xochil has a critical understanding of language practices and border studies, linking them to identity and a bigger social context. Xochil is currently a Teaching Assistant, also teaching first-year Composition. Unlike the others, however, prior to her role as a TA, Xochil worked at the Writing Center as a tutor. Her experiences there helped shape the way that she approaches writing and teaching.

Learning Through Conversation: The Interview Process

The interviews were recorded through Zoom's record function and ranged from 30 – 50 minutes long. Prior to starting the interview, I asked my participants to bring a graded paper with professor comments that left an impact on them (positive or negative) to the interview. I began the interviews by reiterating the study's purpose and reaffirming

the participants' verbal consent. After that, I asked them to pull up their chosen paper using the share screen function on Zoom. I asked if they could tell me the story behind the paper, those comments, and how the comments made them feel. More specifically, I asked them why they chose that paper and why the comments impacted them. All papers presented were analytical in nature, meaning they were assignments geared towards an analysis of a text or theory. The interviews flowed naturally from there and took a very conversational tone, and while I used the questions on Appendix A as an outline and to kickstart the process, my participants' responses guided the interview.

While slightly different in length, tone, and responses, the interviews had the same structure, meaning that they tended to flow in the same manner. The interview participants began discussing their professors' comments on the papers; this then led to a discussion on language ideologies, identity, and the role they played in interpreting the feedback they received and its aftermath. We then began discussing their training as Teaching Assistants for English 1310 and 1320 for the university. We focused on the guidance or training they received regarding commenting on student papers. Throughout all four interviews, we kept going back to their graded paper and the comments on it – whether their professors modeled or followed the training TAs received or how their commenting practices differ from their professors' practices. All interviews ended with talking about the participants' pedagogical practices, particularly how they grade and comment on students' papers. At the end of the interview, I gave the participants space to share any final thoughts or comments; interestingly, all four ended with words of advice for professors, experienced or inexperienced, about paper feedback and the impact it has on students of all levels.

After each interview, I uploaded the video and audio files to a project site on the university's Canvas page for security and ease of access. I then transcribed the interview, noting facial expressions, hand gestures, and any other nonverbal responses to the questions I asked. To stay true to my intention of giving my participants as much agency and protection as possible, I sent them a copy of my transcription, giving them the option to approve, delete, or change any of their responses, both verbal and nonverbal. I also gave them the opportunity to analyze their own responses or disagree with my analysis of the transcriptions. This practice, known as member-checking, enriched and helped inform my understanding of the data by providing me with different perspectives as to what my participants may or may not have found important and a deeper understanding as to why they felt that way (Seidman 118). Member-checking also afforded my participants the opportunity to reflect on their responses and give more detail about their experiences, without the pressure of having to produce an answer in the moment, as is the case with interviews. While none of my participants offered changes to my analysis, they did supplement their answers, providing me with more information and relevant details that did not come up in their interviews. In this way, my participants continued to be part of the process and conversation even after the interview was over.

Connecting the Dots: The Data Analysis Process

Leading up to the interviews, I expected one of my themes to be relationships and perhaps another to be language, since my project is focused on the student/teacher relationship and language ideologies. However, as Seidman advises, I set my expected themes aside and approached the analysis with the understanding that different themes may arise or be more important than others, labeling the themes as tentative, because

entering the interview analysis process with expected or "locked" themes can lead to a

dead end (126). For this reason, I approached the analysis with an open mind and no

hypothesis, following Williams's approach in his study, placing the spotlight and

importance on my participants' responses rather than on prior assumptions of what I

thought I would find. This reduced the risk of letting personal bias affect or force the

results of the study. As the interviews progressed, I took note of emerging themes I found

interesting or was not expecting. In my analysis of my participants' responses, I refer

back to previous and current research literature regarding commenting on student papers,

language ideologies, critical pedagogical practices, etc., to inform my analysis and

legitimize the importance of my study.

I asked my participants to share an old paper or papers with notable feedback that

affected them, positively or negatively, during the interviews. All participants shared a

paper and as such, I also analyzed the feedback that they pointed out in those papers. I

mostly focused on analyzing the comments or markings that the participants mentioned in

their interviews, noting in my transcriptions the emotions present in the interview. I

focused on the language the professors used, their tone, number of comments, and

whether they offered guidance on how to fix the issues they commented on. Just like with

the ideas and data that came out of the interviews, I referenced current and previous

literature to back up my claims and analysis of the papers. I also supplement my analysis

with my participants' assertions to reduce any potential bias. One common thread

throughout the interviews was the mentioning of Sommers's *Responding to Student

Writers*; two of them were introduced to Sommers's work in Composition Pedagogy,

while the other two were introduced to her work in their TA training. All four participants

mentioned this book in their discussion of how they understand or judge the feedback that they receive from professors along with how they respond to their students' papers. As such, I reference Sommers in my analysis, noting her methodology, results, and thought process as she advices on how to respond to student papers.

While I was transcribing the interviews, I found myself using the Review and Track Changes function on Word to highlight, analyze, and comment on certain participant responses as I relived the interview experiences. I made note of powerful responses, as well as comments or feelings I was not expecting. In the comments, I mentioned why I found them powerful, interesting, etc., and how I was interpreting the responses so that in reviewing my transcription, my participants would have the opportunity to disagree/agree with me. I did this so that they would keep their agency and humanity in my analysis; again, I did not want to reduce them to their texts or speak for them. This was also my way of "following up" and keeping the conversation going after the interviews.

The "Fruits" of the Interviews

There were many ways to approach this project and to analyze the data. Interviews have given me the opportunity for more nuanced answers and a better understanding of how paper feedback directed at language affects graduate students. These interviews have also allowed my participants to speak to their professors, albeit anonymously, about their feedback practices and how their comments have made them feel without the fear of any type of repercussions for it. The interviews provided a more nuanced understanding of paper feedback and just how important it is. Two particular things that stood out from the interview was how particular comments, particularly those

comments that labeled errors as potential "ELL" or "ESL" markers, made students more self-conscious of their work, not just in regard to that paper but their other courses as well and how overcommenting made their professors' comments seem personal, as if they were singling out the student with their comments. One participant explicitly mentioned that it was the inconsistency of paper feedback across professors that bothered and made them self-conscious of their writing abilities and not necessarily the "ELL marker" comment itself. Two other participants talked about how the nature of the comments they received felt personal and differed from the comments their peers received. The interviews created a safe space in which my participants felt comfortable sharing these feelings with me. It allowed for them to vent and make sense of the professor's feedback through a critical lens.

Interviews also add to the emotional significance of this project, both due to my ability to observe physical, nonverbal responses to the questions and to the storytelling nature of the answers. In using interviews as my methodological approach, I am adapting Lisa Blankenship's work in *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy,* employing empathy through a practice of rhetorical empathy. Blankenship defines rhetorical empathy "as both a topos and a trope, a choice and a habit of mind that invents and invites discourse informed by deep listening and its resulting emotion, characterized by narratives based on personal experience" (5). Blankenship's work highlights the importance of personal narratives as getting the Other to listen, inspiring empathy and possibly leading to change. In the case of this study, the Other, the one with more privilege and power is the professor, and by centering my participants' experiences and personal narratives through interviews, my study gains significance and makes its

implications more important.

   The following chapters discuss the interviews in more detail, covering my analysis of both the interviews and the papers that were shared with me. Chapter 3 begins the discussion on identity, arguing that language informs identity. I discuss previous and current literature on border studies, socio- and raciolinguistic ideologies in the classroom, and the history of the harm that pushing a single standard of language causes on students. This then leads to a discussion on how instructor feedback on student papers can either help remedy the damage previously done, creating a perceived sense of student agency or leave a mark on the students' identity, creating confusion and reducing student agency. Chapter 4 continues the conversation and discusses the second theme, Relationships. This second theme is broken down into three sub-themes: relationships to self, to the text, and to others. It is important to note that while I primarily focus on an individual theme per chapter – Identity on chapter 3 and Relationships on chapter 4 – they naturally intersect in both chapters, further showing that, because they are intersectional facets, one cannot damage, mark, or nurture one without doing the same to the other.

III. HOW THE RED PEN MARKS STUDENT IDENTITY

Foreword and Overview of Chapter

This study is a product of personal testimonies and vulnerability. My participants graciously shared their experiences with instructor feedback with me; they have shared their papers, grades, and feedback, all of which could make anyone feel insecure and under the spotlight. Their willingness to participate in this project has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of just how important paper feedback is. These interviews strengthen my study and provide instructors/professors with a new lens for understanding paper feedback. For these reasons, I approached my analysis of these interviews with the respect they deserve while also being mindful and respectful of the Texas State professors that have come up in the conversation. This project is meant to bridge the gaps in the misunderstanding between professor and student; the gaps I address are created from, or in some cases, resolved by instructor feedback on student papers.

This chapter is organized as follows. I first begin by discussing the facet of identity that is constructed by language – what informs this facet of identity and how it is affected by outside forces. I discuss previous and current literature concerning language, language ideologies in education, classroom relations, trust, and memory. I also begin analyzing my participants' responses, contributing to previous and current conversations concerning language and identity. I follow this section with a discussion on relationships – to self, to text, to others – and how these relationships are affected or strengthened by paper feedback on language. To protect my participants' anonymity, I will be using the pseudonyms that they provided in the interviews in lieu of their actual names. I will also be using the character names of my favorite television sitcom, *The Office (U.S.)* in

substitution of the professors' actual names for no other reason other than my love for the show.

Identity as Informed by Language

This study began as an exploration of how paper feedback on language affects graduate student identity and classroom relations. As the interviews progressed, it became pretty evident how much paper feedback influences, discourages, and leaves a mark on how graduate students see themselves – as writers, academics, and teachers. The participants' cognitive understanding of feedback (what is construed as constructive and conversely, as damaging) made for nuanced data that all current and future professors and their graduate students can benefit from. This section is organized into two parts: the first discusses how the participants' language ideologies inform their identity; the second begins to discuss the different facets of their identities as writers, academics, and teachers, and how these facets intersect when presented with instructor feedback on papers.

Tearing Down the "Hierarchy of Language"

Language is an important part of minorities' identities; it informs and helps defend their positionality in a country that favors standardized American English. Gloria Anzaldúa talks about the importance of language in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, especially when it comes to the forms of Chicano Spanish born from life at the border, a life spent in-between spaces, such as in-between English and Spanish and the U.S. and Mexico (77). In my following analyses, I show the nuances of language practices and how they inform my participants' identities, especially for those who speak more than one language or dialect. One of my participants, Xochil, a second-year Rhetoric and

Composition graduate student from Edinburg, Texas down in the Rio Grande Valley, sees her identity rooted in her language and informed by Anzaldúa's border studies, saying,

> It wasn't until I learned about positionality and Gloria Anzaldúa and all of her work on border studies and that there are those, what does she call them, nepantlas, where it's like you're in that in-between space. … The dialect here in this border area is Tex-Mex and we speak this language that's like in between both and a dirty, knock off, version of both … So I guess my identity would be like a little bit of both, like in that in between space, as Anzaldúa says or like Selena's dad in the movie says, "you're too white for the Mexicans and you're too Mexican for the whites." I didn't really understand that until I came to a predominantly white area where I'm like surrounded by white people and I'm like, "oh my god. I'm from the rancho." Like I am those people. And then it also comes together when you see other people from those border towns and you're like, "eeeeyyyyy." And just like, okay, we're like a different identity. We're a different people and that's who I identify with. That's what I like to kind of use as my front base, I guess. A Chicana. (Xochil)

Xochil finds her identity to be deeply rooted in her language, her Tex-Mex, which she describes as a "dirty, knock off, version of [English and Spanish]," a sentiment that some may see as a product of Xochil's environment, an in-between space, where so many Chicanxs try to find their identity in a place that demands so many things from them at once. Anzaldúa calls this place, neplanta, as a site for the clashing of forces, of ideologies, and a place of transformation (56). The border and the mestizas that are born there, like Xochil, are a place that is in constant defiance of "the norms"– dominant

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identities, ideologies, and cultures – and we can see this in how Xochil sees her Tex-Mex dialect as something that may never be "up to par" with standard English or Spanish but that she still values (Anzaldúa and Keating 71-72). In regard to language, I refer back to Xochil's comment about Selena's dad: Chicanxs are expected to speak perfect Spanish and perfect English, when really their Spanglish is just as beautiful and as Anzaldúa says, legitimate.

Much like Xochil finds herself in between spaces, in between languages, Heidi, a second-year graduate student in Literature, finds herself juggling between her spoken languages, German, and English. Note her awareness of how her native language practices are changing after being immersed in a predominantly English-speaking country:

> My relationship with German has changed by also now speaking so much English in the sense that my German got worse in some remarks. Like I've always considered myself a language person and like by also always having been a literature person … and now I see that by using English all the time that I miss the identity part of my German like I realize that now for some reason I use my dialect far more and miss that part the most. Like suddenly my language became far less fancy and I do less – like in German – using fancy words, using long sentences, be far more like *blah blah blah* in German if that makes sense.
> (Heidi)

Heidi talks about the duality of her personality as a German who spends most of her time speaking English. She experiences similar conflicts that Chicanxs face when immersed in primarily English-speaking communities and spaces: the modification and possible loss

of our native tongues. Her experiences and challenges with the juggling of languages differs from Xochil and other Chicanxs due to Heidi's lack of proximity to Europe. For Chicanxs living in South Texas, Spanish, or Spanglish, still forms part of their everyday life unlike Heidi's situation, where she is physically distanced from Europe and everyday German linguistic practices. To deal with this complexity, Heidi describes her knowledge and accessibility of different languages as pockets existing in her brain:

> When I imagine my brain, how I connect languages, I have like one pocket where there's German/English and one pocket where there's Spanish, French, Russian, Latin where if I look for a word in French, I might find a Spanish one. I don't find an English or a German one. But if I look for a word in German, I might sometimes find an English one and the other way around. Like they are together in a pocket, where I have to crumble. (Heidi)

Heidi's accessibility to language – creating pockets in her brain to draw from – is something that most multilingual people can relate to. When talking to my mom in Spanish, I oftentimes find myself unable to find the right Spanish word in the pocket of my brain where I keep English, Spanish, and Spanglish words; the same occurs when I am talking to someone in English. Heidi considers this a conflict when talking to her German friends or family who do not have her grasp of the English language – a proficiency that goes beyond learning English as a second, third, or fourth language in the classroom, as is the case in Germany:

> It's really cool but like having three languages is basic if you're a language person, but now the thing is so that because it's not special, I sometimes feel weird because people think I'm an asshole when I am going back to Germany for

confusing German words with English words but that's where I'm at … And it is hard to convey when I go back home to people. Like, "oh, I'm not the kind of person who learned English in school or maybe studied English at University and now has to make you know that *air quotes* I'm so globalized and worldly that I speak half English/half-German." It's really that my brain is confused … Like English really is different to me than having learned English in just school. And it just became that by living here, definitely. But now it's different. It's hard to convey that in Germany because you seem like an a-hole all the time, switching those two things up, people think like, "oh we all learned English, why are you bragging?" Like I'm not bragging, I'm genuinely confused in my head now, those two, English and German, are sticking together. (Heidi)

Heidi's conflict, of seeming like "an a-hole" for mixing up languages, or code-meshing English and German, is similar to the struggles that Spanglish-speaking Latinxs face. In this sense, her established identity through language is very similar to mine and the other participants. In a different sense, while Heidi may be seen as trying to show off or as an "a-hole" for using English words to substitute German when she is confused, if a Chicanx, like Xochil, were to use Spanglish to substitute English words when she is at a loss for the right English word, she may be seen as linguistically inferior, and vice versa with using Spanglish in substitution for Spanish (Anzaldúa 80).

Heidi and Xochil both find comfort or acceptance in commonalities, bringing awareness to language or dialect being a sign of otherness in societal groups, an issue that also applies to the classroom since that awareness and possible insecurity filters into the classroom, as my analysis will show. For example, Xochil says that when she left The

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Valley, she realized she was from "the rancho," but once she finds other people from border towns, there's that shared identity, that shared language. She is no longer "the other." Similarly, Heidi says that, in her working-class community in Europe, her dialect , "[is] not a marker of otherness. It's even rather the other way around … and then the people who speak high German are the 'other' one" (Heidi). Joseph Harris describes this idea of language or discourse as a "marker of otherness" that Heidi points out, when he discusses the nuances of discourse communities in classrooms. Harris poses the clashing of discourse communities in the classroom as a crossing of borders. He states that students must cross a discourse border and that this crossing becomes more a problem of socialization and privilege than one of intellect or ability (16). In this study and in the two previous participants' responses, we see the clashing occur even when one is toeing the border line of, stuck, or living in-between discourse communities.

Anzaldúa's assertions that Chicano Spanish was born out of the need for Chicanxs to communicate with each other in a "secret language" echoes the assertions that bell hooks makes about African American Language being a "counter-language," a language that enslaved people created to resist against Standard English, "the language of conquest and domination" (168-170). Both Anzaldúa and hooks discuss these new languages/dialects that were formed out of necessity and survival as opposing assimilation into the dominant language practice that is Standard English. They show pride in their language, tying it to their identity. Anzaldua expresses it so eloquently in the following quote:

> So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is
> twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my

language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (81)

In line with discussing language ideologies and practices as a part of identity, as an opposition to assimilation, and the threat that seems to pose, Leo R. Chavez examines the rhetoric behind "the Latino threat" and legal/illegal immigration. Chavez notes that Latinxs are seen as posing a threat to the American way of life because of their failure to assimilate. Those who are against immigration see linguistic differences as resistance to assimilation and considering the growing number of Mexican immigrants and Chicanxs, it is seen as a threat to the dominant group (42-45). These conversations on language, the power and resistance behind it, are important for the purpose of this project, primarily because language ideologies form a part of how my participants perceive themselves and any agency they might have. It is also important because these language ideologies, whether harmful or empowering, filter their way into curriculums and classroom practices, and as such, they deserve a closer look and analysis.

In order to begin to understand the harm that a "hierarchy of language" – the belief or practice of ranking languages (i.e., placing Standard English above Spanish) – has on ethnic and marginalized students' educational experiences, we must first understand where the problem stems from, a part of which was discussed in the

paragraph above. Carmen Kynard discusses how language practices/ideologies were used to justify the segregation of schools, arguing that Mexican American students were segregated due to their perceived inability to master the English language (152-153). Similarly, *Stolen Education*, a documentary film that shines a light on the repercussions of the 1950s Discroll school board decision to make Mexican American students repeat the first grade three times on the basis of an assumed "English language deficiency," shows that language was once again used to excuse the continued segregation of students. This documentary shows the damage that this caused on these students: 80% of students did not finish school, others did not teach their kids Spanish because of their experiences in the school system, and all students internalized the belief that their language, culture, and themselves by extension, were deficient. Social responses to the language ideologies and practices of minority groups have a dark history – from AAL being constructed out of broken parts of English to communicate without having to use the oppressor's language like hooks points out to Spanish-speaking students being punished for communicating in their native tongues in school – and so it makes sense that when our languages are attacked, corrected, or belittled, our entire identity is being attacked, corrected, and belittled as well. Although the literature lacks in studies concerning graduate students, this study shows that this damage can be done at the graduate studies level just like at the elementary school level, as *Stolen Education* shows.

In a more recent, but arguably less extreme example of imposing language ideologies in the classroom, Patricia, a second-year Rhetoric and Composition graduate student from Brownsville, Texas (also part of the Rio Grande Valley), shared her experiences with language in the school setting. Patricia's experiences with school's

enforcing certain language practices are one that is common in many border cities, or cities with a large multilingual population. Guerra argues about the repercussions and negative feelings that students that experience this carry with them. My analysis, follows Guerra's study, showing that the confusion that schools create about which language is "appropriate" for school creates what Guerra calls "an identity problem that [students] would have to deal with the rest of [their] lives" (26). Patricia's experience is indicative of this, as she still remembers the confusion and clash of languages:

> So when I started going to elementary school, they were like "okay, no more Spanish. You have to speak English." Like "you have to assimilate," without telling me directly. And I was like, okay, so then I started learning a lot of English, English, English … and then you know, once I got to high school, [it] was an atmosphere where everyone spoke Spanish. So then I started getting confused. I was like, okay, what's considered professional in school and what's not considered professional? Since my peers are talking in Spanish but the teacher wants us to speak in English. So what do I do? How do I communicate? So from that, you know, I really had to do a lot of code-switching, do a lot of Spanglish as well, with my classmates but with the teachers, you weren't allowed to speak Spanish. Like if you spoke Spanish in the classroom, you would get points taken off your assignments or you would even get pulled out of the classroom and they'd be like, "no, you have to speak English." (Patricia)

Patricia's experience is not a singular one and it exemplifies that language is much more than just a means of communication, especially for minorities; in this context, it becomes "the site of a highly politicized and vitriolic debate concerning the nature of who speaks

what language where and under what circumstances" (González 54). Many schools with large populations of Latinx students discourage students from speaking Spanish in academic settings. Guerra calls this practice and its result "code-segregation" – "the ideology [that] encourages total assimilation by children who speak a language other than English, as well as varieties of English that have little status in the broader society" (33). Guerra criticizes the notion of a "hierarchy of language," arguing against code-segregation, which "demands that children strictly and without deviation completely adapt to a hierarchical world that has been carefully construed to avoid dealing with difference" (33). Like aforementioned scholars, Guerra argues for an appreciation of differing languages and dialects, especially in academic settings, and warns against the emotional damage that denying these languages has on minority groups.

Guerra also proposes and argues for a nuanced approach to code-meshing and code-switching as a way to combat code-segregation, stating that code-meshing and code-switching should not be dichotomous, rather students should gain a critical awareness of how and when to code-switch or code-mesh and use that as a rhetorical strategy in academic settings (38-40). Guerra's argument presents itself in Composition studies, with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)'s statement, "Student's Right to Their Own Language," which encouraged composition teachers to value and encourage their students to write in languages that are not Standard English. Patricia talks about the importance of this awareness upon entering graduate school following her experiences in the Valley's education system:

> Once I go to my graduate program, I took a class with Dr. Pam Beesly and also
> Dr. Michael Scott and they really reinforced the idea of channeling our own

language because language is tied to my identity and it is how I communicate

with my family and that it is imbedded in my culture and in a lot of my

relationships and communications so of course, it's part of my identity. So, you

know, those two professors really inspired me and encouraged me to incorporate

my own native language if I wanted to. And if I was ever stuck with a word, to

incorporate Spanish, because that is my language and that is how I communicate

with my family. (Patricia)

Here, Patricia is explicitly tying her language to her identity, using the knowledge that

Dr. Beesly and Dr. Scott have shared with her to remedy any negative feelings or

memories that her previous educational experiences have caused. In this quote, Patricia

also offers solution to the problem that Heidi talked about earlier, of finding an English

word instead of the German she was looking for in the language pocket in her brain, but

for academic contexts; Patricia's professors have validated both of her languages

encouraging her to use her native tongue if she is "ever stuck with a word." My analysis

shows that aware of how important language is to the formation of identity, Patricia uses

her knowledge to promote welcoming pedagogical practices in her own classroom,

encouraging her students to write in their native languages, further showing that an

awareness of this issue can help promote positive relationships in the classroom:

So after that, I was really encouraged to research a lot about border rhetoric and

border pedagogy and student's right to their own language and all that. So now,

every time I have class – this is my third class that I'm teaching – so in my first

two English 1310, both of those sections, I told my students that they're allowed

to write in whatever language they want to write in and for that, I showed them

the rules from Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. There was you know,

students are allowed to have their own time with their writing process, students

are allowed to write in their own language because it's tied to their identity. So I

showed them that and was like, you know, if you want to write in whatever

language is your first language, you are free to do so. Don't worry about me not

understanding, you know, I'll contact a faculty member that is specialized in that

language and I'll be able to like – cause I really just want to see your writing, I

don't care much about what language you're composing in because what matters

is how you communicate what you want to communicate.

Here, Patricia is showing how gaining this critical awareness of language, code-switching, and code-meshing in her writing, also gave her a critical awareness of the role that language plays in constructing her identity. Patricia's experiences as a graduate student inspired her to follow Rashi Jain's translingual approaches to writing. Jain addresses the fact that those who speak two or more languages outnumber monolingual people, and as such, teaching strategies should accommodate those students better. Patricia, and her graduate professors who instilled this pride in her language, acknowledges their student's languages as valid, tries to become familiar with them, and helps students sharpen their translingual skills. Jain, like most others in this literature review, advocates for equality. Jain essentially asserts that a translingual student's success is only as successful as their teacher's acceptance of and preparedness for it (492).

In a discussion about language ideologies and experiences with differing languages/dialects, Katrina Rhodes, a second-year Rhetoric and Composition graduate

student from Laredo, Texas, describes a humbling experience that helped shape the way she views and approaches language. My analysis of this conversation shows that being immersed in a discourse community that differs from our can be a humbling experience, one that can be an opportunity for growth and adaptation rather than one of exclusion. Note the way that Katrina expresses her appreciation for different languages and how that appreciation made her aware that there are no "hierarchies of language":

I grew up in Laredo where I initially realized very pretty quickly that I did not speak the language that the people of Laredo spoke when I first moved there. Even the people who were speaking English around me, it wasn't the kind of English I knew. And me speaking my kind of version of English was like reason to get dirt kicked in my face [laughter] I can tell you a really cute story. I was in the playground one time and I saw a butterfly and I called it by its scientific name … and the kids in Laredo thought that was the funniest shit they ever heard in their whole life and made fun of me so bad [laughs] up until middle school [laughs] cause I was like "oh look a blue morpho!" and they were like "I'm done." Yeah, my ass was grass from that. So, um, I got really good at learning how to speak in a way that didn't [laughs] conflict with my peers [laughs] and it was great. I think it was a great lesson for me to learn. Also, now I love the language that is spoken in my hometown. It makes me happier than anything else. It's the funniest thing I've ever heard because people are just genuinely funny there like all the time. It's also like really expressive, which I find super beautiful, and it makes me feel like home, to hear somebody speaking like that. Moving on, when I moved around and I started living in Indonesia and Brazil, it just became

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so abundantly clear to me that there's no such thing as "right." Every language is different and super cool in that way. The metaphoric abilities of a language to convey meaning and symbolism varies greatly across languages, how you can put two words together to make a new word. That kind of stuff, like I love that. And I realized it's not a ladder. It is a web. There is no hierarchy of language. There's no hierarchy of accent. Everybody's just different and it's a very personal thing and nobody should be criticized for that at all because if you were to drop, you know, Joe Shmoe from Luling into Paris, France or you know Singapore or anything like that, they would be the ones that are weird. So I've really operated that way since I've been traveling and whenever I was teaching English as well. And I definitely make that an important thing that we discuss in my classroom all the time. (Katrina)

Katrina, who comes from a family who "almost speaks in academic Standard English, (Katrina)" not only responded to and grew from a situation that arguably resembles bullying, but she grew to love the language practices that make up her hometown. This love, along with being on the other end of the language correction – her formal English was ridiculed by her peers when in different cases, informal English, Spanglish, or Spanish is corrected – informed the way that Katrina approaches or understands language. She very powerfully states, "*And I realized, it's not a ladder. It is a web. There is no hierarchy of language. There's no hierarchy of accent* (emphasis mine)." There is no hierarchy of language/accent. How could there be, when Anzaldua, hooks, Guerra, Kynard, and so many other scholars emphasize how languages/dialects are made from or born out of different languages, creating the web that Katrina mentions?

A Cognitive Understanding of Paper Feedback and Its Effect on Identity

The tension between language, race, and identity is intensified in the English/writing classroom. This tension is present at all levels; we begin to learn and study grammatical conventions in elementary school, begin testing in writing in fourth grade, and spend the rest of our educational careers conforming to rules and conventions that have been imposed on us from a young age. English/writing classrooms are places, where due to the nature of the course – mostly that we are taught to write in Standard American English – students, their languages, and their cultures can be silenced. Jamila Lyiscott argues that the English classroom silences students of color by pushing Standard American English conventions on them. She says "the voices of these young people cannot be constrained and limited to that typical five paragraph essay. The power of what they have to say is so much deeper than that and to silence them and to continue marginalizing the identities of students in the service of a singular standard is violence" (10:45-11:06). Lyiscott argues that silencing students' native tongues is a form of violence, which would be in line with Guerra's earlier claim about code-segregation.

A more recent study continues the conversation regarding the systemic issues that can be in play when commenting on student language. In "Never Tell Me How to Say It: Race, Language Ideologies, and Harm Reduction in Secondary English Classrooms," Julia Daniels applies the concept of harm reduction to confront and remedy the damage she was causing her students when she commented on their language. In this chapter, Daniels talks about the role that raciolinguistic ideologies play in teaching and talking about language. She is critical of code-switching, which she describes as a "term commonly used in the context of schooling to refer to an 'appropriateness-based'

pedagogy and approach to language education" (20), arguing that rather than helping

their students succeed by enforcing code-switching, educators are harming their identity

and the value of their native language. She very powerfully states that "when I crossed

out the words in Elizabeth's paper, I built on a history of White people shaming and

policing the language practices of people of Color" to draw attention to the damage that

feedback on language creates (22). Daniels cognitive awareness of the deeper, systemic

issues at play and her students' positionality as students of color follows the earlier

claims made my hooks, Anzaldua, Guerra, and Lyiscott alike.

In trying to see how these issues play out in a graduate level course, I asked my

participants if comments based on language usage or grammar affected their identity,

whether that be positively or negatively. All four participants shared that the comments

did affect them and played a monumental role in their confidence as writers, abilities as

academics, and pedagogical approaches as teaching assistants for the university. Two

participants, Xochil and Heidi, received a comment regarding potential English Language

Learner (ELL) markers in their writing. The nature and tone of the comments played a

role in how both participants reacted to and were affected the comments that singled out

language usage or language markers. The comments made on Xochil's and Heidi's

papers can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

y when it came to sophists, who were regarded as corrupt because the price they
was deemed unethical. The unknown author presents five arguments used by

This is potentially an example of an ELL marker. Many of the other surface level things I've pointed out are more about learning scholarly conventions.
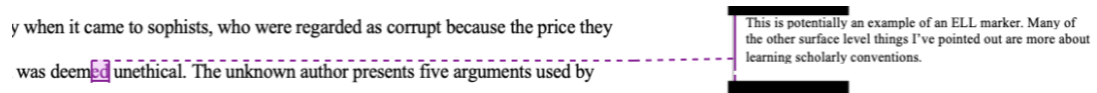
Figure 1: ELL Marker Marginal Comment

> In the marginal notes, I indicate places that need more explanation and revision, particularly in the conclusion. Problems with word choice and idiomatic expression may be related to ESL, but work with the online Writing Center and with me during online office hours to try to improve in these areas.

Figure 2: End Comment with Mention of ESL issues

The differences in tone are pretty evident in the comments. The comments also differ in type; one is a marginal comment, the other is found as part of the end comment. It is also important to note that both comments are made by different professors. For anonymity purposes, I'll be calling Xochil's professor, Dr. Jan Levinson and Heidi's professor, Dr. Andy Bernard. Nancy Sommers talks about marginal comments being as if instructors are *invited* (emphasis mine) to dialogue with the student writer, meaning that instructors should approach the text as if they're really talking to the student, humanizing the student writer (16-17). So if we were to agree with Sommers and understand marginal comments as a conversation with our instructors, then we can return to Harris's discussion on discourse communities and begin to acknowledge instructor feedback on student papers as an important site for enacting discourse communities in a composition classroom. Harris states that the problem with discourse communities then becomes what establishes someone as an outsider and how one can become an insider (16), and in the case of paper feedback, through marginal comments, the instructor becomes that authority figure that can point out and label a student as an insider (if they conform to the conventions) or an outsider (if they stray from conventions).

In the case of Figure 1, Dr. Levinson dropped the comment, "this is potentially an example of an ELL marker," in response to what could very well just be a typo, or rushed

error – if we consider all four participants' admittance to procrastination and rushed last minute writing – without offering a solution or proposing a way to help. Dr. Levinson's comment is done to separate that particular correction from the rest, which they say are "more about learning scholarly conventions." In doing so, they divert from the conversation they created, one where the student needs guidance in following scholarly conventions, to one where the students' mistakes could possibly be due to their linguistic abilities. This makes the conversation more important, more impactful after understanding the heavy weight and dark history of language ideologies that push for Standard English. It is important to note that Dr. Levinson, like Julia Daniels earlier, could have approached this feedback with the best of intentions, trying to give a new graduate student the guidance they felt she needed in order to succeed in graduate school, but as was the case in Daniels's experience, with the "[building] on a history of White people shaming and policing the language practices of people of Color," this professor's comments caused Xochil more harm than good (22).

Figure 2 is part of an end comment that Dr. Bernard left on Heidi's paper. Sommers states that end comments are equally important as marginal comments, saying that they too engage the student in conversation about their written work. Sommers suggests that end comments should be constructive and encouraging, thinking of how the student's paper works on a global scale and most importantly, should offer feedback with the understanding that no piece of writing is ever really finished (21-23). Unlike Dr. Levinson's marginal comment, Dr. Bernard's end comment offers the opportunity for help, and more importantly, the chance to keep the conversation that started on this paper going with the suggestion to attend office hours. It is true that marginal comments are

meant to be succinct and to the point (less is more), which could have been Dr. Levinson's approach to commenting but the length of the other marginal comments discard this probability. Dr. Bernard's comment also does not single out or highlight specific words, phrases, or sentences and labels them as "potential ELL markers;" instead they make a general observation about a pattern that they could have been noticing. It is important to note that I am not comparing these professors' approach to feedback in order to say that one is better than the other; rather, I am trying to show that these different approaches played a role in how their students understood the feedback and how it affected them.

My analysis of the participants' reactions shows how instructor feedback on language, like pointing out potential ELL or ESL markers, is damaging to their identities and makes them question their abilities as graduate student writers. Xochil's feedback confused her and felt different in nature than the rest of the feedback her peers received. She states:

> it definitely put into perspective where I thought I was as a writer when I came in and I thought I was horrible. Like I was really thinking to myself when I got home, "what am I doing in a writing program if I'm such a bad writer?" And I just didn't understand, and I felt like you guys – my friends – were lying to me when I would tell them "omg no. I don't want to show you my paper because there's so many bad comments." And then when I finally did, they were just surprised at how different her tone was compared to their criticism. (Xochil)

This difference in feedback between her and her peers further shows that Dr. Levinson saw Xochil's mistakes as directly related to perceived English language deficiencies and

such required more attention and comments. This then speaks to the function of race in writing assessment practices, whose power hides within these practices that enforce dominant discourse or the dominant standard that is SAE (Inoue 28). Heidi's reaction to her feedback was similar in the way that the comment made her doubt her abilities as a writer but different as to why it made her doubt herself. Heidi first calls ESL "a weird marker," stating:

> English isn't even my second language. English is like, I think, yeah, my third language. So it seems, kind of, this weak marker that sometimes, like [pauses] … *makes motion with hands, indicating a ladder, or hierarchy* creates these levels. *raises hands to indicate* Like there's the good people who have English as their first language and *lowers hand* then there's the bad people with English as their second language. There's nothing in the scope that accredits for the fact that the person you are talking ESL with is not like, "English is just their second language," but no, English is my third language and it's my third language out of six. (Heidi)

Heidi feels irritated by the marker because the label places her in a category that she feels does not fully apply to her because English is not her second language, but her third. Heidi's reaction then brings up how ineffective the ESL marker is in a country where multilingualism and translingualism is growing as a practice. The comment not only offends students, as it did Heidi, but it leaves confusion in its wake, marking the student's identity, but also makes the student feel like their professor is misunderstanding them or underestimating their abilities as writers and students. This comment creates a conflict in how she identifies and how her professors see her. She goes on to say:

But the problem that I had here was basically that he was the first person to note it and I'm aware that I have problems with English because it's not my native language. And what is unsettling about it is not that he, I'm not angry that he marked it. I'm more concerned/confused because other people haven't and that creates this super wobbly ground of self-doubt where I have to ask myself, do I get slack from other professors because they have this *air quotes* ESL idea about me and so they don't grade me to the same standard as *raises hand again to indicate a higher level* someone they don't perceive as ESL and so my English is worse than I think it is … Because to this point, I always think, Oh, like I got an A for this paper and I always get an A for my papers and I think, "you're doing really well with your English. You're in grad school for English as a non-native speaker and you're doing good." And now, if he is the only person who ever noted that, it's like does everyone else ignore it? Is everyone else like, "it's so cute that she's trying"? I think that's what hurt about the comment, not the comment itself. (Heidi)

Both participants state that their identities and confidence as graduate students were affected by the ELL and ESL comments they received on their papers. In making these comments, at this level, their professors were, perhaps unknowingly, participating in a form of violence that Jamila Lyiscott mentions in her TEDx talk, and that Daniels calls "the policing of languages of people of color" (22).

Understanding this feedback as harmful is important in helping to mitigate the damage it may cause on the shaping of graduate student identity. In Threshold Concept 3.5 of *Naming What We Know*, titled "Writing Provides a Representation of Ideologies

and Identities," Victor Villanueva argues that one's identity, as writers or in general, is composed of many things and that writing is a tool that helps towards the discovery of that identity (57). Villanueva acknowledges that a lot goes into building one's identity; it can be influenced by societal pressures or put-downs, cultural expectations, and political views. He states that "because all writing is inflected by power dynamics shaped by identities and ideologies, writers must become aware of how those identities and ideologies are represented in their writing" (57). His threshold concept implies that the writing classroom is a venue in which students can become aware of their identity. With this in mind, graduate students, who are studying writing or English in some form, are faced with a conflict when receiving unexpected feedback on their language, like Heidi points out. It fuels their imposter syndrome, making them question whether they belong in the classroom, both as graduate students and as teaching assistants.

IV. HOW THE RED PEN LEAVES A MARK ON CLASSROOM RELATIONS

Importance of Relationships in Academia and Overview of Chapter

The previous chapter discussed identity as constructed by language and how instructor feedback on language affected the participants' identity and confidence. This chapter further explores how this feedback affects the graduate students' relationships with their professors, the text/writing, and themselves. A student's success in graduate school, in any discipline, relies upon and can benefit from the relationships they form with their professors and possible mentors. We look up to our professors and trust them to guide us in pursuit of our goals and development as academics and future professionals. A lot of different factors can affect the student/teacher relationship, and in the composition classroom, instructor feedback on student papers plays a major role in the development of the relationship. Relatedly, when our relationship with our professors is affected by their feedback, so is our relationship with the text, writing, and ourselves as academics and teaching assistants, as is the case with my participants.

This chapter builds on the conversations about identity as constructed by language and how graduate students react to and are affected by instructor feedback on their writing. The chapter is organized as follows. I begin the discussion by analyzing if and how paper feedback on language affects graduate students' relationship with the professors who gave them the feedback. I supplement this analysis with the literature on language ideologies, classroom relations, and commenting on student papers. Based on my findings, I first analyze and discuss how specific feedback negatively affected some of my participants and then I analyze or compare the feedback that positively affected another participant. This analysis is tied to discussions on memory, perceived sense of

student agency, and the construction of identity through writing. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on if and how their paper feedback affects how my participants view and understand themselves – as writers, academics, and teachers. I also touch on how their experiences with paper feedback as graduate students helped develop their pedagogical practices concerning responding to their students' papers as teaching assistants.

The Importance of the Student/Teacher Relationship at the Graduate Level

As previously mentioned, a graduate student's success in and out of their program can rely on the relationships they form with their professors. These relationships can determine who forms part of their thesis committees, their thesis writing process, and the availability and quality of recommendation letters for jobs or Ph.D. programs. As such, they can directly correlate to a student's academic and professional development. Like at every other level in education, we graduate students look to our professors for validation and assurance that we are on the right path and can contribute to the conversations in our respective disciplines. This validation can be sought out in classroom or online forum discussions, office hours, and of course, our paper feedback. Relationships, of any kind, are about give and take and, more importantly, are built on trust, trust that in the case of student/teacher relationships is initially built from the student giving their professor the benefit of the doubt.

The student/teacher relationship in the writing classroom relies heavily on teacher feedback, written or verbal. Sommers argues for more individualized feedback, almost as if one is having a conversation with the student through their work (9-15). Doing this makes feedback more fruitful and encourages the student to come to the teacher for help;

it builds trust and makes the student feel as if their voice matters and that they have agency – a choice about how they move forward. A professor may have good intentions when giving what they believe to be constructive criticism, but if not on the same page, the student may perceive it as an affirmation of their status as a "bad" writer; the student may also perceive the feedback as an indication that they may not belong in graduate school. This label will discourage the student from 1.) reaching out to their professor for help, 2.) engaging with the material and providing fruitful content, and 3.) establishing agency as students and writers.

As is the case with some of my participants, when graduate students feel like the trust they placed in their professors – as mentors with their students' best interest in mind – is broken, then their relationship with them is severed and their productivity or agency in the class seems to diminish. In contrast, with constructive feedback and support, the student/teacher relationship flourishes and the graduate student feels like they are capable of succeeding and that they belong in academia. As a suggestion as to how to balance the power dynamics in the student/teacher relationship, Bronwyn T. Williams argues for the importance of respect and equality in the classroom. He claims that it is important for teachers to establish an environment in which students feel like their teacher can learn as much from them as they learn from them (184-185). Sommers discusses a similar idea when she suggests developing a common language with students when it comes to responding to their papers. By establishing a common language, the professor acknowledges that they and their students form part of the same community of learning, and as such, their feedback should emanate the respect that Williams argues for and be cognizant of the fact that the writing process is never truly over (7-8).

Sticks, Stones, & Paper Feedback: How the Latter Negatively Affects Classroom Relations

New graduate students studying English, where their grades and success rely heavily on written papers, can have their confidence as writers affected by their performance and feedback on their graded papers. The previous chapter discussed how paper feedback as an experience in the writing classroom affects graduate students' identity. This chapter deepens that analysis, taking into consideration the students' societal position, previous experiences with writing, perceived sense of agency, and how they all can either benefit from or be damaged by the student/teacher relationship. The number of comments, their tone, and their focus play a role in how the students interpret and digest the feedback. For example, Xochil states that her paper had "specific comments that [she] felt weren't part of getting [her] to be a better writer." As Sommers warns about overcommenting, Xochil's feedback, rather than offering or providing her with guidance on ways to develop her ideas/arguments, was merely pointing out what she was doing wrong (Sommers 4) and as a result, the professor wasted their and their student's time since Xochil did not learn from the comments (Sommers 27). In Sommers's study and analysis of paper feedback on student papers, she reveals that professors' comments should be productive, otherwise they lose their value and leave students confused about how to move forward, if at all. Xochil says, "my paper was just covered in marks, highlights, and strike-throughs and corrections on the side … And they just didn't seem constructive. It was just like questioning why I was making so many mistakes rather than telling me, 'oh you might benefit from brushing up on these grammar mechanics.'" Xochil's experience is similar to Roy's, a student in Sommers's

study who received similar comments; like Xochil, Roy thought that his instructor was only commenting to tell him what he has done wrong (3). Roy is a first-year writing student. Xochil wrote this paper as a first-year graduate student. The results are the same. They both were confused by their feedback and did not find it the least bit helpful. Sommers states that commenting in this way – screenshots of comments found on Xochil's paper are included in Figures 3, 4, and 5 below – does more harm than good, discouraging students from feeling like they can develop as writers (3-4), as Xochil demonstrates in the following quote, "it definitely put into perspective where I thought I was as a writer when I came in and I thought I was horrible. Like I was really thinking to myself when I got home, "what am I doing in a writing program if I'm such a bad writer?"
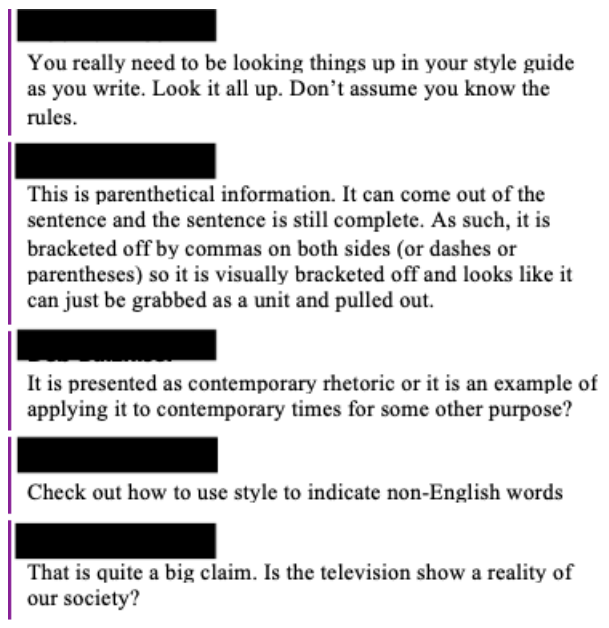
Figure 3: Know Your Style Guide Part 1

> This is why you need to use your citation style guide and not
> assume you know all of the rules. The beauty is that we don't
> have to know all of the rules because we have a reference
> guide, but you have to reference the guide.

Figure 4: Know Your Style Guide Part 2

> "outweighing" is not the same as "weighing out"
>
> Word can indicate when there are problems. This had a
> double underline, so if you don't at least address what is
> being indicated as potentially wrong by your software, your
> professors might get the impression that you either don't care
> or are lazy. This is not what I think, but as a faculty member
> in a class at the beginning of the program, it is important to
> convey how things get interpreted

Figure 5: Pay More Attention

There is a lot to say about the nature and tone of the comments on Xochil's paper,

but I'll start by saying that this paper was particularly impactful for Xochil because it was

the first grade and first comments she received as a graduate student. Xochil mentioned

earlier that this feedback made her question whether she belonged in a graduate program

for writing, primarily because of the repeated comments about her convention and

grammar mistakes. Xochil's feelings are in line with Williams's findings on memory and

agency, where he argues that we accumulate memories and emotions based on our

societal positions, and this collection later develops into learned behavior and responses

(29). Xochil, coming from the Valley and being aware of her societal position as a

Chicana from the Valley, would take these comments as a reinforcement of the negative

experiences she may face in her daily life as a minority (Williams 30). When initially,

Xochil saw this professor as taking her under their wing, with this feedback she felt like

"that's where the line was crossed like racial insensitivity and linguistic insensitivity, I guess." With this statement, Xochil is showing that she is aware of her societal position as a Chicana and that with this feedback her professor was not only reinforcing the societal hierarchies that exist outside the classroom but was also using a deficit thinking model to try to "correct" Xochil's language practices, which they read as "racially and linguistically 'deviant'" (Daniels 21).

Figure 3 contains five different comments, one after the other, with only two comments directed at the content of the paper; the other three are comments about style and conventions. Figures 4 and 5 take on what some may view as a condescending tone; a tone that may be due to what Sommers warns about overcommenting, primarily that overcommenting begins to look like the instructor is trying to reinforce the hierarchy of power that exists between student and teacher, rather than actually helping the student with their writing abilities (4). This study once again expands on Sommers's study, comparing her findings with undergraduate students to the experiences of graduate students studying writing. Xochil felt like her instructor, more than giving her guidance on how to correct the issues on the paper, was basically telling her that she did not belong in the graduate program. Xochil took the comments personally, emphasizing the differences in the feedback she received to that of her peers, "And then when I finally [showed them my feedback,] they were just surprised at how different her tone was compared to their criticism" (Xochil). Xochil also points out that another classmate showed her the comments on their paper; while Xochil's paper had **multiple** comments on grammar usage and style conventions, this White student had **one** comment suggesting that they should go back and edit/proofread their paper more before

submitting it. This difference in tone and the fact that Xochil had multiple comments pointing out her grammar errors with underlying assumptions as to why they were so many proves that this professor, while still possibly having good intentions, was straying from treating all of their students with equal respect for their abilities and intelligence as writers; in doing so, this professor unknowingly made their writing classroom another societal space in which Xochil was marginalized because of her language practices and identity (Williams 30) and reinforced the idea that as a Chicana student, Xochil must work twice as hard to be "up to par" with her peers, without creating or promoting the nurturing classroom community for Xochil to succeed in (Wassell et al. 602 – 603). Xochil's feedback, especially the numerous and repetitive comments pointing out surface level grammar and convention errors, and her reaction to it is in line with research on sociolinguistic studies, such as Jonathan Rosa's study which finds that claims about linguistic inferiority, implicit or explicit, can be seen as perfectly legitimate, even when done with the misguided intention of helping ELL/ESL students, which for the record Xochil is not (139). The overcommenting on grammar or language errors on the part of Dr. Levinson could be seen as her way of trying to point out Xochil's perceived linguistic inferiority or her lack of understanding of other forms of non-standardized English.

In a similar case of overcommenting and the effect the practice has on graduate students, Katrina Rhodes, my participant from Laredo with a well-established identity as a writer, shows how debilitating this type of paper feedback can be. When Katrina pulled up her graded paper with instructor feedback, I was stunned into silence while Katrina laughed incredulously and then paused before explaining the topic of the paper. This impacting first page is demonstrated as Figure 6 below.

<Coding Problems / Problems Coding>

Algorithms have been criticized, scandalized, and editorialized for the past few years as the problem with social media sites and often end up taking the blame for the political unrest in the country. Commonly associated with words like "polarization" and "echochamber," algorithms are often blamed for the division seen online because they are coded to make recommendations to users based on users' previous online interaction within popular social media sites. typically bear the brunt of the blame for online extremism (see: *The Social Dilemma* on Netflix, articles like this one from *USA Today*, etc). As Van Dijk predicted in *The Network Society* in 2012, it does seem like the group dynamics of [name them], which he attributed to computer mediated communication (CMC), have been effectively propagated and fully integrated into our social networks. Conversations surrounding recommending algorithms typically devolve into antagonistic, forebodingly toned warnings about how you as the user can teach it to be more ethical—meaning provide you with more diversely opinionated information—and break out of your echochamber, essentially cheating the system in an effort replicate how we believe face-to-face or print based (read: non-algorithmically mediated) conversations typically went, which was …. There are a few underlying assumptions within statements like this, however: 1) there is an entity at fault, 2) non-algorithmically mediated conversations were typically more evenly distributed in terms of varying ideologies and opinions, and 3) human nature (or, at least, our natural social conventions) is in opposition to the algorithm.
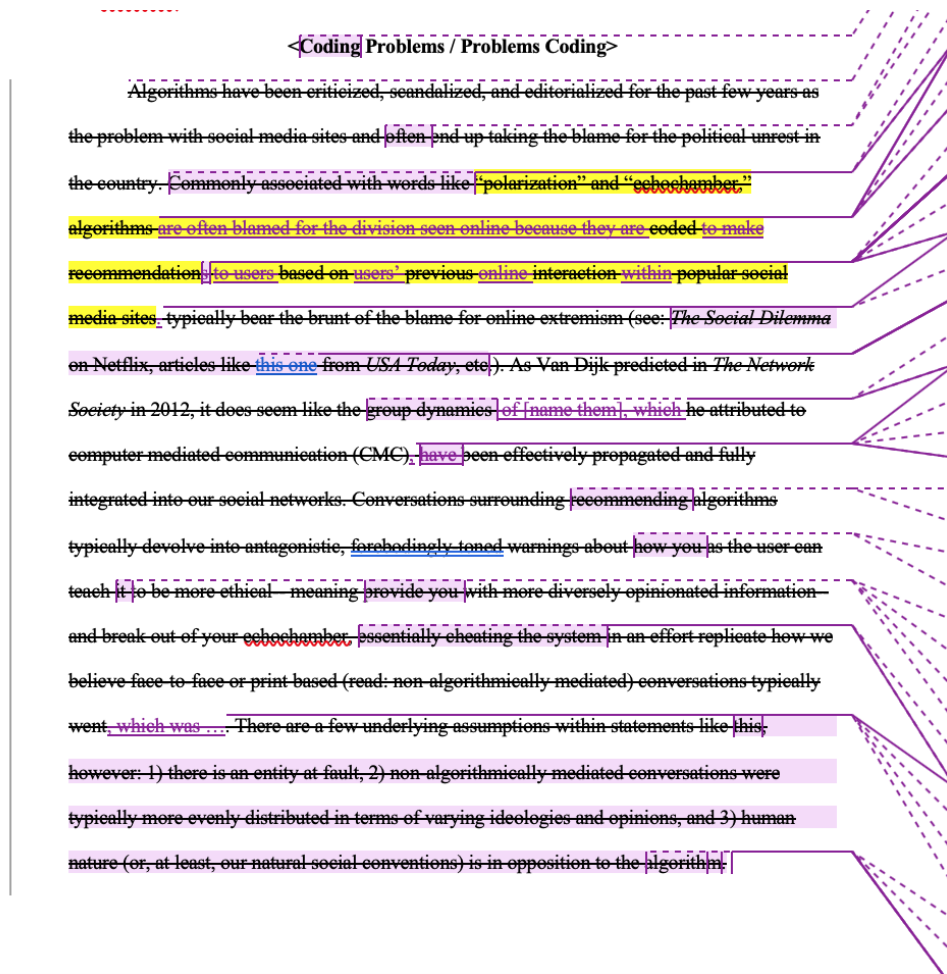
Figure 6: An Impactful Sight

Katrina felt personally attacked by this feedback for two reasons: 1.) she was passionate on the topic of the paper and 2.) she felt misunderstood by her professor. My analysis shows that these two reasons not only made Katrina feel bad and discouraged her from taking any feedback this professor gave her as a legitimate attempt to help her improve as a researcher, but it also severed her relationship with her professor. Katrina's initial response to the feedback was, "Um, how did I feel when I opened it up? I felt like shit. Can I say that? I felt bad … I knew that there were issues with it but it really [pause] the professor's comments on it and the grade I received for this paper were pretty shocking to me [uncomfortable laugh] in the sheer amount and the harshness of um what we got

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going on here … and the feedback I got for it was typically um pretty, pretty mean."

While discussing how the feedback made her feel, Katrina paused a lot, sometimes filling the pauses with laughter, clearly indicating that the wounds are not yet completely healed and that looking at this feedback again and reflecting upon the experience brings everything she felt when she first saw it to the forefront. This reaction is a consequence of overcommenting. As you can see in Figure 6, Katrina's entire first paragraph is stricken-through, with corrections and comments inserted within the text, further diminishing Katrina's hard work; to take this analysis further, one can say that if writing generates knowledge and is used to express our ideas, thoughts, and ideologies then by striking a line through Katrina's words, her professor is invalidating her ideas, thoughts, and ideologies (Estrem 19).

The overcommenting and the "harsh" nature of the comments affected the way that Katrina began to interpret and make sense of this professor's feedback, further affecting their student/teacher relationship. Katrina says,

> And [the comments] kind of [feel] all over the place, to me. Like [pause] the professor is also having like a hard time organizing their thoughts. I'll admit it. I wrote this paper in like six hours [laughs] so I'll be honest about that. Like it isn't my best work, but this is um pretty harsh, and I can't really tell how [pause] true it is vs. like a professor's opinion. (Katrina)

Katrina's statement is indicative of the harm and confusion that overcommenting causes, as Sommers says (17). Rather than engaging in a conversation with their student through their work, this professor is imposing their own understanding, ideas, and opinions into their interpretation of their student's work. This not only reduces Katrina's perceived

sense of agency, because rather than feeling that she has the power, agency, and abilities to write engaging and thoughtful papers on a topic she is passionate about, her papers now became "about [her professor] instead of what [she] had to say because [she] had such a harsh audience" (Katrina). This turned their student/teacher relationship from one of possible mentorship and guidance to one in which the student feels they must please their professor by altering their work and writing process in order to succeed in the class and avoid low grades.

This shift in relationship also occurred in Heidi's relationship with the professor who suggested her "problems with word choice … may be related to ESL (Figure 2)." Heidi states, "so it became this thing where I'm like 'phew he thinks I'm an idiot so I'm going to ride with it so I can't impress him by who I am then I'm just going to take the ticket and be like, for someone who doesn't know English, she's doing sooo good' *makes two thumbs up and smiles sarcastically*" (Heidi). While in Katrina's case, she modified her writing process and papers, shifting from writing to generate knowledge to merely writing to please her professor, in Heidi's case, she took her professor commenting on her word choice as "an out." In both cases, the student writers' agency was diminished: one felt like they lacked the agency to write what and how they wanted; the other felt that they lacked agency in using their writing as an accurate depiction of their understanding of and contribution to the material, although Heidi does state, "I don't know how it practically affected the relationship but it changed the way that I thought about it, how I would do in this class and what I'm achieving in this class and it changed my perception that way."

Katrina's professor's comments also sparked tension and possible animosity in

how Katrina sees and remembers the feedback, with Katrina saying that "there may be actual advice in here that is useful to me, but it is hard for me to tell because one, I'm offended so I don't really care anymore if [they were] right or not. It just kind of rubbed me the wrong way" (Katrina). Katrina's response not only highlights how important paper feedback is in relation to positive student/teacher relationships and student growth, but it also indicates how Katrina may approach paper feedback from this professor in the future: not as something that is meant to help her progress as a writer/researcher, but simply as "a lot of 'you' sentences directed at what I'm doing wrong and not a lot of help being offered" (Katrina).

Both Xochil and Katrina had negative experiences with paper feedback, were offended by the number and tone of their professor's comments, and saw the comments are particularly unhelpful. With this being said, I think it may be of some importance to note that both Xochil's and Katrina's experiences with paper feedback in this study are with the same professor, who for the sake of anonymity, we are calling Dr. Levinson. Just of equal importance is that while both received numerous comments and corrections, Xochil's feedback was more heavily geared towards language usage, grammar, and style conventions, while Katrina's feedback was geared towards substance and assessment of quality, arguably completely dependent upon their professor's own opinion.

Crossing the Line: Where Student/Teacher Relationships Break

As with every type of relationship, in a student/teacher relationship once a line is crossed – by the student or the professor – it is hard for anyone to come back or regain the trust of those they may have unintentionally hurt. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the writing classroom and arguably student papers can be seen as their own

discourse communities with the instructor being the authority figure that welcomes or unintentionally tries to exclude graduate students from the community (Harris 16). The following analysis shows how this power dynamic creates tension and, in the case of my participants, makes them question whether their professor actually wants to help them. Xochil states that after this paper, and the rest of her experience in this professor's class and as their employee as part of the writing center, she viewed her as like a different type of professor "who possibly did not have my best interest at heart because the narrative basically changed to me misunderstanding her and her positionality. That I was not understanding her intentions" (Xochil). Similarly, Katrina states that "based on the feedback that I've consistently gotten from her and just how I've had to interact with her has made me realize that it's actually not about the content of what I'm writing, it's about how she feels" (Katrina). With these responses, Xochil and Katrina are sharing the same reduced sense of agency when it comes to their writing and how they feel they can react to their feedback. Their rocky relationship with Dr. Levinson reduced their internal motivations to produce meaningful work (Williams 88) because their writing process then became about keeping Dr. Levinson happy. Katrina then says that this experience

> *really highlighted the power dynamic* because … I still rely on [them] for that grade, which you know, affected my funding. It affected my ability to get into Ph.D. programs, *so I needed [them]* … that's whenever the dynamic really changed from I'm working on a paper because I want to make it better to, I have to make [them] happy …I can't be critical of [them] because then [they'll] do stuff like this. Um, I can't say something that [they don't] know because then [they'll] do stuff like this. And um [pause] it really just became a paper to stroke

the ego of my professor to make sure that I didn't bomb. (Katrina)

Xochil and Katrina both felt that their professor made their feedback and their reaction to it about themselves, further removing the student writer from the paper. Both participants also felt like they lacked the agency and power in their relationships to bring their professor out of what they saw as harmful practices. My analysis shows that this creates a problem with accountability in regard to the weight of the comments, because as Xochil says, "little did I know that that meant that I'd be just relieving [them] from being held accountable because no one else in the department and no one else at work really took it upon themselves to hold her accountable any further than this conversation that I was having with her," which is problematic since as Sommers points out, "to college students, teachers' comments are often their most personal contact with their institutions and carry messages larger than the words themselves" (6). In this sense, accountability becomes an important part of paper feedback; if professors do not hold themselves accountable and work to correct or amend any damage they might do, then the student/teacher relationship may never be amended. While this study only briefly touches on the subject of accountability at higher levels, it leaves a door open for future studies, especially when it comes to accountability about professors' commenting practices and their implications.

This discussion on Xochil and Katrina ends with them completely breaking off their relationship or proximity with this professor. Now, this may or may not only be due to the paper feedback alone, but what the comments implied. For example, Xochil also worked as a writing center tutor and her experiences there were also not pleasant due to her perceived English language deficiency. Xochil shared that she was made to take extra training on grammar conventions even though her white coworkers had only scored

slightly higher than her on the PUG test (a test designed to determine one's proficiency in SAE grammar conventions). This professor's feedback not only added to Xochil's insecurities as a graduate student, a writer, and a tutor, but it also reinforced the sociolinguistic and raciolinguistic ideologies at play (Daniels, 23-24; Rosa, 139; Guerra, 32). This is why Asao B. Inoue argues that "race functions in classroom writing assessment practices, hiding behind power relationships set up by the judgment of student writing by teachers who use a dominant discourse" (28). In Katrina's case, if we are to agree with Heidi Estrem's claims about writers using writing as a way to create new knowledge and make sense of dense concepts (19), then her relationship with her professor went downhill after, with their overcommenting and undermining of Katrina's knowledge and authority as a writer, this professor discouraged and castigated Katrina for doing exactly what Estrem says writing is about.

I would like to conclude this section by offering some grace to the professor that both participants mentioned. Daniels had a similar experience in her classroom, where a student told her, "don't ever tell me how to talk or change my writing like that, Ms. Daniels. Never tell me how to say it. That shouldn't be your job," in response to how Daniels commented on her paper (19). This experience prompted Daniels to take a step back and explore where the response came from, which led her on a study of socio- and raciolinguistic ideologies present in writing classrooms, inspiring her to use harm reduction as a way to mitigate the harm she had been unknowingly causing (19-26). Daniels adopted a harm reduction approach from the public health field to help mitigate the damage that White teachers, in particular, cause their students of color through their language pedagogies. Through this approach, Daniels was able to point out the damage

and engage with it, while also being aware that this does little to reverse the fundamental damage of systemically racist and inequitable practices that exist in education (20). Much like Daniels's experience and professional development helped her become aware of a problem in her pedagogical practices, I hope my study and my participants' personal accounts of the way things transpired will help this professor, and others enacting the same practices, to take a step back, reflect, and begin enacting change.

"Identity Crisis with Handholding": How Paper Feedback Nurtures Classroom Relations

Instructor feedback on graduate student papers can also be constructive and nurturing, centering the student writer in the conversation. The following analysis shows that with encouraging feedback that establishes student agency, professors can nurture a positive and healthy relationship with their students, one that resembles the mentorship I discussed earlier. When discussing her relationship with writing, Katrina shared her experiences as an undergraduate student at St. Edwards University. Katrina shared the term "identity crisis with handholding" with me, saying:

> the faculty at St. Edwards University was very big and open about their pedagogical practices and giving students agency. You know, making sure that they don't feel they're in liminal space. They do something called *an identity crisis with handholding*, meaning they want you to question why you're doing this and then support you as you explore that. So it becomes less about like identifying as *air quotes* a Writer with a capital W and more about the process. So the identity isn't linked to what we think writers are but actually what you're doing. (Katrina)

The "identity crisis with handholding" approach to composition studies is in line and conversation with Victor Villanueva's claims that writing creates and discovers one's identity, with the understanding that identity is multifaceted and complex (57-58). Katrina's response and experiences as an undergraduate student go hand-in-hand with Williams's discussion on the writing process being the most important part of literacy practices that "engage emotion and mediate relationships" (91). To continue the conversation, Sommers ties this belief to paper feedback, saying that it is what the comments evoke or inspire in the student writer and "*the relationship [they] foster* (emphasis mine)" that truly matter (24). It is evident that Sommers's and Williams's studies apply at the graduate level from how well Katrina remembers her experiences and the perceived sense of resulted from them.

In line with positive, constructive feedback fostering positive student/teacher relationships, after receiving constructive feedback for the first time in her collegiate career, Patricia, a MARC student from the Valley, began to see herself as someone who "[could] actually write," and that she "was encouraged [and] wanted to be in that class and actually engage more with it." This sentiment followed her to graduate school, saying:

> after I took this class, I went into English … then I got into graduate school, and all my professors' feedback was very positive, even if I did something wrong or they wanted me to go more in-depth, or they wanted me to narrow the focus, right, they would tell me, "narrow the focus," but *they would do it in an encouraging way*. So yes, I do feel like the sentiment did follow along to graduate school. (Patricia)

Patricia's continued experiences and memories with writing and constructive feedback have given her an established sense of agency (Williams 9) and instilled internal motivation for continued engagement in writing as a graduate student and researcher (Williams 61). Patricia's experiences with helpful and encouraging paper feedback also solidified the fact that she belonged in and was a contributing member of her graduate program, thanking Dr. Beesly and the way they responded to her papers:

> The first paper I turned in, I was like, "okay, she's going to completely demolish the paper. She's going to write all over it and I'm going to have to pack my bags and move out cause I can't do this. I can't deal with that." [laughs] But … the feedback I got really encouraged me to stay but also implement that pedagogy into my own teaching practices … because you know a professor with such prestige and degrees was able to tell me that my ideas are profound, and I have enough to say. … I feel like I know so much more now, and I feel like a scholar, honestly. Like I feel like I know so much that I can tell other people and that I can put in my own teaching practices. (Patricia)

The Student Becomes the Teacher

My participants' experiences with paper feedback as graduate students, their training, and their graduate courses have informed the way that they respond to their students' papers. As previously mentioned, all of my participants are Teaching Assistants teaching sections of English 1320, the second course in the university's first-year writing sequence, at the time of our interviews. We began discussing their pedagogical approaches to paper feedback by talking about their training regarding commenting on student papers. My analysis shows that while they did receive training on how to

comment on student papers, it was very brief and that TAs that do not take Composition Pedagogy or Composition Theory courses in their graduate studies may not have the same critical awareness of the weight behind paper feedback, a sentiment that Patricia shares when she says, "[they] told us a lot about Nancy Sommers but they didn't really go in depth at all and even hearing that I was really nervous because I was like, okay, how are the TAs who have not taken Composition Pedagogy, how are they supposed to comment back on student papers?" (Patricia). My analysis also shows that in tying their training with their experiences with paper feedback as graduate students, my participants share a critical understanding of what feedback "should be" while still possibly feeling like they lack agency due to the power dynamics of the teacher/student relationship.

All four participants share that Sommers was brought up in the brief training, with only Heidi not remembering the name of the book, which makes sense since she is studying Literature and not Rhetoric and Composition like the other three participants. Heidi also did not remember much of the training; for that reason, she had very little to say on the subject, although in a later analysis, we will be able to see that she applies a lot of Sommers's practices in her pedagogical approaches to paper feedback. Katrina's, Xochil's, and Patricia's responses were similar in nature. Katrina used her own graded paper as an example to show what they were told not to do and how to avoid commenting like that:

> when we were training for being a Teaching Assistant, we were shown like a paper sort of similar to this [gestures to paper] and Dr. Phyllis Vance was like "this is going to make them feel bad." [pauses] "they're not going to like writing if this is what they get back." They told us to make clusters. So if you recognize a

problem throughout, like an organizational issue, then you would make one

comment that is more about how they can improve than it is just critical of that.

(Katrina)

The knowledge that Katrina acquired through her training and time in class informed and

backed up her belief that the way this professor was commenting on her papers was

flawed and not indicative of how she is being trained as a new educator. Katrina also

brings up a great point about more experienced and possibly tenured professors; she

states that:

Yeah, I feel like this specific professor maybe hasn't thought about pedagogy in a

while, but I also feel like [they were] graded this way and so that's why [they do]

it and [they feel] like it's sort of a rite of passage because … this is just me

inferring, [they haven't] said this – a certain amount of suffering is supposed to

happen in their mind, which you know, being critical of a student's writing, yeah,

like you have to get better. Like I do, as a student, want to know what my weak

points are and how to improve on them, for sure. And I actually love criticism. I

do. [laughs] I love professor feedback because I love the idea of getting better.

But at this level, I don't really think it would've matter what I wrote. (Katrina)

Katrina's argument for why her professor may not be following Sommers's

advice on how to respond to student papers rings true for most graduate students. It is

also something that deserves to be examined by professors at all levels, mostly because

graduate students, like Katrina, feel powerless against it, since their grades, academic

careers, and funding rely, in part, on their professors. Teaching at any level, for so many

years, can become tedious and exhausting; one may over rely upon and misremember

their own experiences as students and use those experiences to inform their pedagogical

practices, even if times have changed, even if they find themselves working at a

Hispanic-Serving Institution, where the students' needs are so much different from their

needs when they were at school. Xochil very aptly states:

> I just feel like everything we learn; it gets lost in the systematic racism … I feel
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> like in graduate school, everything is even more magnified because there's even
>
> less minorities in graduate school and there's even less minority professors in our
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> graduate program and it's just like, there's a reason the moment a Latina was in
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> this program or in the face of this one professor, it happened. This situation
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> happened because along the way there's less accountability and less focus on the
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> way teachers are teaching their students. It matters when it's young professors,
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> when it's us, and they're making sure that they're not screwing up College
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> Writing 1 & 2, but as you get into the more tenured professors and the more
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> seasoned professors that really don't take lick from anybody, it's hard to get them
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> to be accountable. (Xochil)

Here, Xochil is alluding to a few things: 1.) tenured professors lack accountability, 2.) the

lack of accountability can lead to racial and linguistic insensitivity, 3.) there is a

collective understanding of constructive pedagogical practices, and 4.) these practices are

only taught to young professors at the beginning of their career, while seasoned

professors are given the benefit of the doubt. While there is growing research on anti-

racist, critical, and feminist pedagogy practices, at the higher levels, if not related to the

professors' discipline or field, they may not have the opportunities to become aware of

them, or at least aware of the fact that there are now findings that prove that their

classroom practices could be harmful to their students, such as Inoue's *Antiracist Writing*

Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future. Xochil

argues that this is an issue because of the lack of accountability in academia; if a

professor is not held accountable, then they might not take the necessary steps to remedy

the damage they caused.

With this being said, my participants showed that their experiences with these

professors, their training, and coursework play a big role in the classroom communities

they create and the paper feedback they give. My analysis shows similarities in

approaches and argues that these approaches show forward-thinking, are closely related

to the translingual approaches that Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner propose, and promote

student agency and positive experiences with writing. I also argue that my participants

work on remedying any damage caused by paper feedback on their papers through their

pedagogical approaches; similarly, they also use their professors and everything they

instilled in them to promote welcoming and nurturing classroom communities and just

like their professors did with them, instill a sense of agency in their students.

All four participants follow the practices found in Sommers's study and promote a

translingual approach to writing. In the previous chapter, Patricia stated that she

encourages her students to write in their preferred language, saying that she would take

the necessary actions to understand or translate her students' writing without having them

conform to what Jamila Lyiscott called "a singular standard' (11:06). Patricia's

pedagogical approaches correlate with Rashi Jain's claims that in a translingual

classroom, educators must first acknowledge the student's languages as valid, become

familiar with them, and help students sharpen their translingual skills (491-492). Patricia

gives her students agency – the choice or power to write how they want in whatever language they want – and arms them with the tools (Paulo Freire's teachings) necessary to have a critical understanding of language ideologies and their role in the composition classroom. Xochil offers her students the same, telling her students:

> let me pull up the CCCC's and NCTE statement and let me show you what they say because it's so crazy that they're saying students have a right to their own language. It is not up to the professor to say, "you're not speaking correct English," because there's so many dialects and there's so many languages out there and so when you tell them that it's like a light blinks on in their head and they're like, "oh my god, I have rights? I have a position in this?" and it's true you know? I feel like that will give them a little bit of confidence to advocate for themselves in the future if they're not English speakers. That they can say, "you know what? I have a right to my own language apparently." (Xochil)

Both Xochil and Patricia's pedagogy and approaches to writing are informed by what they have learned and their own experiences with paper feedback. As a graduate student, with Dr. Levinson, Xochil felt like she lacked agency and did not yet have the tools to argue and defend herself against the damage Dr. Levinson was causing. Now, she ensures that her students know that their languages differ and are valid and has conversations with her students about language ideologies and their socio- and raciolinguistic components saying that "just having those conversations and allowing students to be part of the truth about the education system before they have to go into graduate studies and they have to learn it the hard way, it'll allow them to be ready and to have agency" (Xochil). Similarly, Patricia uses her positive experiences with feedback, from that initial

positive experience as an undergraduate student to the experiences she's had with Dr. Beesly in graduate school, to promote the same awareness and agency in her students. Both further prove how important instructor feedback on papers, especially concerning language, is for graduate students; it not only dictates their success in the program, their agency as students, and their identity as writing researchers, but it also informs how they approach their classroom pedagogy.

Similarly, Katrina follows Sommers by clustering her feedback, saying that with comments based on language or grammar, she does the following:

> I do cluster it together and when I notice that it's like, you know, [pause] so there are markers, like preposition misuse, for example, which makes sense when you think about it linguistically because we have far more prepositions that don't actually have rules … when I see that happening, what I'll typically say is, "here's a passage in your textbook that explains these things. In SAE, these would be considered incorrect." They don't get points off for that, ever. (Katrina)

Here, we see a similar approach to Xochil's, of explaining the rules, following SAE, but doing it in a way that does not diminish their grade, their confidence, and most importantly, their agency. Xochil and Katrina do what Sommers calls, "establishing a common language" with their students (7), and in doing so, they keep their students in mind and in the conversation when responding to their papers. Like Xochil and Patricia, Katrina also follows Freire and the NCTE statement, allowing her students to write in their preferred language, saying:

> This is about you, this paper, so please express yourself to the highest degree. Be as creative as you want. You're not going to be graded for what you say, exactly,

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I just want to see that you're reflecting and like thinking critically about your

experiences and stuff like that … I was just like I don't want anyone to ever tell

you you're a bad writer because of this because you're not a bad writer. That was

always the thing. I was like this is actually a really smart idea. You did a really

good job connecting things. You did a good job finding evidence for your points.

Be conscientious of genre and standard written English standards going forward

but you are a really good writer and I'll fight anybody that says otherwise. That's

typically how I address that. (Katrina)

Xochil, Katrina, and Patricia promote and create agency for their students through their

translingual approaches to writing, which Lu and Horner argue acknowledges the societal

and cultural construction of language and how multiple languages can coexist at once. It

proposes for the differences in these languages to be the new "normal" or "standard,"

rather than promoting defiance of SAE. Much like Williams does in his book, this Lu and

Horner's article advocates for a sense of equality in both value and intellect in every

language or dialect present in the classroom (587).

All four participants also value content and cohesiveness over form and grammar

in their students' papers. They establish these guidelines with their students after having

conversations about grammar and conventions. Heidi, in particular, states that her status,

her identity as a non-native English speaker, makes her more approachable to her

students as their English 1310 and 1320 instructor:

As a teacher, I see myself as someone more approachable due to this experience

and less bullshit oriented in the end because I feel like often native English

speakers tell students who they perceive as non-native speakers … telling them all

these unuseful grammar rules and things to *air quotes* clean up their writing and I feel I can tell my students, you can ask me about that comma rule, I cannot promise you I know it because I am as confused as you are … I'm really vibing with my students and it's really like, "why is that that way?" and I can tell them, not why it is that way because of syntax but I can tell them just whenever you see that word, you do the comma. I have no clue why that is. I have no clue where this comes from. I can recommend Google and Google will probably have the explanation but if right now, you just want to *air quotes* do it right, because you know people will make your life harder if you don't, even though I'm not always sure how fair that is and if that is how the world should be. But if you want to get an internship, I know they will not care about composition pedagogy and questions about language hegemony. They just want me to put the comma at the right spot. I'm just like this word, put a comma there *shakes head*. And I feel that this makes me, as a teacher, more approachable. (Heidi)

Heidi is equating her experiences with that of her students, and the complexity, vagueness, and rigidity of SAE grammar rules and conventions gives her and her students something to bond over. It also allows for the conversation about language ideologies to take place, since Heidi's practices also differ from the "standard." Here, Heidi is also developing a common language with her students, letting them know that their struggles are not singular, and that she, as their teacher, also struggles to understand and arguably validate mundane SAE conventions. This prompts Heidi to value and look for reader guidance and cohesiveness in her students' papers, saying "reader guidance is the thing that I follow most when I give feedback to my students' papers in the sense of, 'I can

imagine what you mean here but it's very hard to follow. Please give more context here.'
Like I basically mostly give feedback on that level" (Heidi).

In line with this conversation, my participants also noted that in their clusters of feedback, they point out that while it is not important or penalized in their writing classroom, certain "mistakes" that stray from SAE guidelines may be punishable in other English classrooms; they also emphasize that their linguistic practices, such as using Spanish in their writing, may not be valued in other classrooms. In doing this, they are preparing students for feedback that may be damaging to their identity, confidence, and agency as writers. This helps mitigate the potential damage by arming students with ways to protect themselves from institutions and practices that, rooted in systemic racism and classism, may unknowingly harm them.

V. USING THE RED PEN FOR GOOD: IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

Overview & Summary of Main Points

This study was inspired by Xochil's experience and my proximity to her and the rest of my cohort. Living this experience with her and seeing how fast the relationship with this professor deteriorated helped me realize how fragile and important the student/teacher relationship can be at the start of our careers as graduate students. This made me question what informs this relationship and what factors work to either develop and deepen it or cause it to break. This study focused on four graduate students' experiences with instructor feedback on their papers and the findings indicated that a professor's commenting practices do matter and impact their students. While a mix of topics came out in the interviews, the study highlighted the following main findings:

- Professor feedback on language or grammar usage can negatively affect graduate students' identities

- Overcommenting reduces graduate student agency and confidence

- Graduate students benefit from constructive and guiding feedback, increasing their agency

- Professor feedback on student papers can nurture or damage classroom relations

- A professor's critical awareness of and conversation with students about the racial and linguistic implications of pushing for a singular standard (SAE) can help mitigate the potential damage of commenting practices and their effect on students.

These findings, and the process that produced them – primarily my proximity to the participants and being able to observe my participants' physical and nonverbal responses

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as they thought of their answers or looked over old professor comments – add to the emotional significance of the project. Professor feedback on language, or just in general, can hold emotional and personal significance for graduate students, particularly for those studying writing, whose entire success in the program heavily relies on their written work. It is evident from their responses, both the positive and negative, that they still carried these experiences with them, a semester or more after receiving the feedback. It is also evident that all four participants learned from their experiences as students and the emotions tied to them, since they attempt to either remedy the damage done to or promote the same agency and growth nurtured in them through their pedagogical practices as English 1310 and 1320 instructors.

The Graduate Student Advice Column: Implications of the Study

Part of the purpose/significance of conducting this study with interviews is giving a nuanced first-hand account of current graduate students' perspectives on the importance and weight of paper feedback so that the harm that was depicted in this study by some participants can be avoided in the future and so that the positive experiences that were also depicted can continue to take place in the future and become the norm. In providing current and future professors with advice or suggestions on how to better support graduate students through their commenting practices, my participants all chose to end their interviews reiterating the effect that paper feedback has on students, with some offering specific advice for professors. The main points of their last words are directed at:

- Being more mindful of how their comments affect students
- Keeping up with the literature and progressive practices

- Understanding that it is unrealistic to expect "perfect" papers with no grammatical errors

- Advocating for accountability when a program lacks minority representation

As parting words to the professors who might read this work, Patricia reiterates the importance of their comments on student papers, saying, "professors and teachers, even if they might not think it, their comments have a lot of impact on a child, a teen, and an adult. You know, just a single comment, or a question mark, or 'this is wrong,' or an 'X,' all of that can really impact how a person feels about writing." Patricia strengthens her claim with her observations and experiences as a composition instructor, reiterating the findings in Williams's study about memory and perceptions of student agency:

> I read it from my students all the time cause I ask them to write a literacy narrative and they write about how they felt discouraged, and they felt like crap after a teacher would comment on everything they did wrong, and they didn't want to write anymore. So, I just wanted to add that. They really do have an influence even if they don't think it. (Patricia)

Building on the theme of being mindful about their commenting practices, Heidi asks professors to be more consistent in their feedback, saying, "One thing I would just love is if there was some consistency and actually more paper feedback because I think in the last two years, for most of the final papers I wrote, I never got any feedback." Heidi ends by asking professors to be more realistic about graduate students' writing processes, reiterating a prior point about comments on student language ignoring that those mistakes could very well just be a result of insufficient proofreading on the part of the graduate student:

And also like more honestly… all syllabi in grad school have this long paragraph about like "a good paper is free of typos, any mistakes, clean it up, blah, blah, blah" I – who are they kidding?! I read peer-reviewed published papers who like a million people read before it got published and I find mistakes there. Like I find reference mistakes, I find typos, I find grammar mistakes in published books … we as grad students, we are all friends that we could ask to read our papers as grad students when we have a paper due. We don't have the process of sending our paper to three different people who will then correct it and we all know enough about the composition process that your brain will correct the mistakes that you make yourself and so you will find it. And so I find it kind of daunting and weird that people still stress the *mocking voice* no typos, so much when it should be just, " I expect you to thoroughly edit and revise your paper. Don't hand in your first draft but be sure to look over it." That should be said but not, "I expect no typos, no mistakes, no this" because who do you expect this from? (Heidi)

Heidi's comments also create a new research area worth exploring, when she says, "first of all, we procrastinate. We do things in the last minute. I still feel the paper I got the comment for, it might also just be me screwing up and this created this shift, *like I should ride with this ESL thing before I admit that I was lazy*" (emphasis mine). Labeling student errors as potential ESL markers or mistakes might reduce student agency and accountability in their writing abilities to the point of them using the marker, and the potential way their professors' see them as non-native English-speaking writers, as an out. So, in commenting on language, and ignoring or underestimating the fact that most graduate students procrastinate, professors could possibly be creating conflicts in identity,

encouraging students like Heidi to accept the ESL marker, a marker that she previously described as "weak," before admitting that she did not proofread her paper.

Throughout this study, the disconnect between what we are taught in composition studies regarding commenting on student papers and some of the program's professors' commenting practices surfaced and was analyzed. As a way to bridge this gap, Katrina offers the following advice:

> I think in closing, I would say that professors, especially the longer they're being a professor, need to continuously read up on what this is, and you know, I'm not pro-standardization for anything pretty much because I think that's really a gatekeeping process that happens, especially at universities, but I think it's important that they continue to learn as well to avoid situations like this. And I don't know, maybe they can just have like a meeting before the school year about stuff like this. I think it would be really helpful. (Katrina)

It seems that lessons, experiences, and literature gets lost when professors sit in their comfort zone, relying solely on their previous experiences as graduate students and current experiences as professors. The effect of their commenting practices on graduate students may also get lost or overlooked depending on the nature of the course; some professors may also excuse "harsh" or devaluing comments with the perceived rigidity of the course – the harder the course, the higher the expectations and the more intense the feedback. In any case, the truth remains the same: constructive, nurturing professor comments on student papers do not and will not take away from the rigidity of the course, and as with anything in life, there is always room for improvement. Like Katrina suggests, a yearly meeting that includes discussion about a critical understanding of

language variation could help mitigate any damage.

The lack of Latinx representation in this Hispanic-Serving Institution is also a topic that came up near the end of Xochil's interview. She emphasizes the importance of Latinx voices in the classroom, using her experiences as a TA, tying the lack of representation to her perceived lack of accountability in academia and the need for minority students to self-advocate:

> I'm able to teach a lesson and get feedback from students saying, "hey, this really hit home because you taught it by a person of color, and we were able to read a person of color or a Spanish text." And it's just so meaningful for me because I feel like that is something that is overlooked in graduate programs, or in my specific graduate program. And from what we learned in composition studies, as you go higher and higher, the accountability is lower and lower … And we've had those conversations where it's like all eyes are on you and even though there's other Latinos, we're still the minority. There are tons of white students in our programs and so it's just hard. It's hard because it feels like more work to always have to self-advocate when other students don't have to and they can just come to school and do the work and get fair feedback and we have to advocate for fair feedback, even for our students. (Xochil)

Xochil's comments alludes to the fact that in a perfect world, or a more just world, our program or academia in general, would have more minority representation; if programs lack representation, then the accountability needs to be higher, more important. As I mentioned in the earlier chapter, the student/teacher relationship is vital in graduate studies. Graduate students should feel like they can trust their professors to always have

their best interest in mind. This trust then becomes more important when you introduce outside, societal factors, such as race and ethnicity. This study shows how in the absence of or breach of trust, the student/teacher relationship deteriorates, damaging student identity and agency. Xochil ends with the importance of this study, not just because of its nature but also because I, a Chicana, conducted it. It is important to note that Xochil also emphasizes the importance of Rhetoric and Composition as a field, saying that it has the potential to be a place where other voices, languages, and cultures can blossom and be valued:

> I just want to say that it's really important for me that a fellow Latina, Chicana, is doing this type of work because so much of what we read, although it's important, it doesn't come from border perspectives. That's what's missing from our personal education even though we might've gotten it from border towns … It's just important, you know, that Gloria Anzaldúa's not the only one that writes about the Valley. That we write about the Valley … I think I was lucky. I had such a support system over here and I think having Latinas around me also that you were all like "no, you're not a bad writer and you're not a bad speaker." *It's important to have those voices reaffirming that we belong in academia too.* It's not just the American Standardize English people. It's people that speak our language too, the languages of the border. We've been pushed out of academia, like especially because even if a lot of people do make it out, they're pursuing you know medical school and becoming lawyers and what space do they have to use their voices in this way? They have to abide by American conventions because that's what those disciplines call for but we're lucky enough to be in a discipline

where you can basically say "f*ck that" in Spanish *laughter*

A Happy Ending?

In closing, I would like to discuss how my participants see themselves based on their experiences in their English graduate programs – with the paper feedback they discussed in this study and any other experiences in the program that informed their self-view. In general, all of the answers had the same themes:

- participants see themselves as having agency

- participants find more value, pride, and validation in their languages

- participants used their experiences as students to better their own teaching practices

Much like Anzaldúa, Guerra, and Kynard, who use their native languages/dialects in their academic writing, Heidi finds unapologetic pride in her identity as an international writing student:

I kind of see myself less eager to assimilate than I did at the beginning in the sense of like I felt like "oh you have to be a good US English writer." And now, especially with my thesis, I feel like "you're interested in this topic. The sources are in German. You know what? Get over my complicated sentences. That is my style." Like I don't want to write like super complicated but sometimes when people say, "you can make two sentences out this," I'm like "yeah, but I'm German, so I want to keep it long." *And I'm more eager to maybe like see some pride in it and let it shine through* like, oh yeah, this reminds you of the language that Nietzsche used. This sentence will be complicated because that's where I'm from … So I feel like I see myself more as I'm German, studying US Literature

but I bring this German perspective to it and I'm still good. I still play in the same class as everyone else and I can be good at this in this group, among everyone else who is American and as a German I don't have to be like "oh, she's good *as a German*" and then be taken out. (Heidi, emphasis hers)

After her negative experiences with commenting practices, which Katrina says, "really deflated a lot of [her] self-worth and belief that [she] could pursue this [research] further," Katrina found reassurance, worth, and inspiration in her teaching. I see this as a product of her trying to remedy the harm done to her by being the professor she needed as a graduate student to her undergraduate students.

I feel like I kind of always wanted to be pretty much where I am. The second I took my very first college level writing course, I knew. I was like "this is so good. I love this." And I never wavered since then. I was like "no, I want to be an English professor. I want to do research. I want to write stuff and I want to teach people because I think this is one of the most important tools somebody could ever have." Being a Teaching Assistant here has definitely reinforced that. I was kind of scared that I wouldn't like teaching and I love it. I absolutely love doing the Teaching Assistantship. Nobody ever told me that being a professor was like the biggest ego stroke of all time [laughs]. I'm so excited to see them get something, like to see the little light go off. People have talked about that but really when you experience it and you're like "I did that." It's just very gratifying. And I love my students. I love getting to know them as people, for sure. (Katrina)

Xochil's experiences have transformed her into an advocate and voice for minority students in and out of her classroom:

Yeah, I think that, for a lack of a better cliché, it's made me a better person in the sense of that I want to make sure that I am impactful but also that I don't harm any student along the way, and I feel like my professor/boss probably had the best intention coming into this but there needs to be boundaries and there needs to be cultural understanding of boundaries. I think that overall, my experience has just made me more aware of each student as an individual, as a learner of language, as a learner or writing, and not just my class who I need to teach a concept to … I feel like I definitely try to surround myself with people with similar views on education and speak up when I'm in TA meetings and I feel like my colleagues aren't being sensitive to people who don't speak English, people who don't view the world the way they do, and I guess it has made me more of an advocate for that, you know, making sure that students are seen as individuals. (Xochil)

Xochil has come out of this experience with the confidence and perceived sense of agency to not only resolve any negative emotions or self-perceptions that Dr. Levinson's comments created but also be the advocate that she needed for others. It is clear that she has taken everything she has learned to push for and enact nurturing classroom practices, including commenting on student papers. Similarly, Patricia, who says that "in the beginning, I didn't have that much confidence at all. You know, my age and going straight from undergraduate to graduate school, I lacked a lot of agency in that, and I was always worried," now sees herself "as a scholar," who has a lot to teach others (Patricia).

This study focused on graduate students in English programs at Texas State University and utilized interviews to emphasize their experiences with instructor feedback on their student papers. The results of this study show that professors need to be

mindful of how they provide their graduate students with feedback. A lot of emphasis on prior and current studies regarding paper feedback focuses on first-year writing class – with good reason since first-year writing courses have a lot of impact on how those students perceive or will perceive writing – but there is little research on how much feedback affects graduate students in English/writing programs. A future study could look at faculty, focusing on their practices and ideologies to complement the student experiences in this or future studies. This could help clear up some misunderstandings between students and professors, humanizing the professor. Future research could also expand on this study by including more participants, more fields (i.e., Technical Communication studies), and a more diverse pool. Future research could also explore how the genre of assignments (i.e., book report, rhetorical analysis, personal narrative) can differ in feedback and therefore in the effect it has on graduate students as well. All future research can contribute to the purpose of this study: providing professors with a better, more nuanced understanding of how their commenting practices affect graduate students in an effort to promote more nurturing, constructive practices.

APPENDIX SECTION

Appendix A: Interview Questions, Justification, and Process

Adapted from research proposal:

Guiding questions that support the development of my interview questions are:
• What was the participants' relationship with language and writing prior to starting their graduate studies?
• Have their experiences as graduate students changed the way they view their language, themselves, or their place in academia?
• Is the problem with paper feedback on language, if any, deeper than the individual professors? In other words, is the problem a product of systemic racism/prejudices?
• Do their experiences as students inform the way they approach giving feedback to their own students?

My motivation is my interest in exploring how, if at all, paper feedback directed at one's language affects a student's relationship with writing, themselves, and their instructor. I am interested in seeing how graduate students react to and process feedback on their language usage and how those experiences shape the way that they move forward in their own teaching.

Interview Process

Preparing for the interview:
• Explain the process of interview, (1. Record Zoom session, 2. Transcribe, 3. Archive video and audio files for three years on Texas State Canvas project site, 4. Interviewee reviews transcript and changes/deletes/adds whatever they'd like)
• Explain anonymity.
• Explicitly discuss consent, affirm that I will respect withdrawal of consent at any time
• Confirm consent for interview verbally
• Get final permission to start the interview

Primary Research Question: Understanding that language is a vital part of one's identity, in what ways does paper feedback on language usage affect identity and complicate the student/teacher relationship, particularly for graduate students of marginalized communities?

I will ask my participants to have a previous paper with teacher comments for a graduate course handy during the interview

Initial Questions:
- Name and Pronouns:
- Where are you from, and where did you earn your bachelor's degree?
- How old are you?
- Do you speak more than one language, and if so, which is your primary language?
- What is your current job?

Main Questions:

1. How would you describe your relationship with your language? Do you consider language as part of your identity? Has this relationship changed since you started graduate school?

2. Before starting your graduate studies career, what was your experience or relationship with writing, and what experiences helped form this relationship?

3. Tell me of a notable (positive or negative) experience with paper feedback in your graduate career.

4. Can you point to a specific comment on this paper that affected you and tell me in what ways and why it has affected you?

5. How do you feel as you think back to this moment and stare at that comment again a year after you first saw it?

6. Have you felt that your relationship with the professor who gave you this feedback has changed? In what ways?

7. Can you tell me about the training you have received regarding commenting on student papers as a Teaching Assistant? Please be as specific as possible.

8. After going through this training, do you feel that the comments your professor made on your paper adhere to the instructions you have received as a Teaching Assistant? Why or why not?

9. How do you approach giving paper feedback to your students? What do you look for? Do you follow your training? Why or why not?

10. How do you see yourself as a student, a teacher, and an academic now? What role has your experiences with paper feedback played in constructing your self-image?

11. Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding your feelings and experiences with paper feedback?

<u>Interview strategy:</u> I don't plan to adhere rigidly to the questions as they are outlined above. I will ask them, using close to the same language as they're written here, in a way that feels organic to the conversation as it unfolds. I will add additional questions if there's space for them in the interview. I will allow the interviewee a huge amount of agency in the interview. That is to say, I will allow digressions, tangents, side topics, etc., as the interviewee sees fit.

Appendix B: EMAIL RECRUITMENT MESSAGE: The Red Pen Cuts Deep: How Paper Feedback on Language Affects Identity and Classroom Relations

To: [Use this line for individual addresses or your own address if BCC line is used]
From: ems198@txstate.edu
BCC: [Use this line when sending the same email message to multiple addresses]
Subject: Research Participation Invitation: How Paper Feedback on Language Affects Identity and Classroom Relations

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Dear XXX,

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about how paper feedback on language affects student identity and classroom relations, particularly for classrooms with marginalized students. The information gathered will be used as qualitative data to gain a better understanding of the nuances of the teacher/student relationship and how it is affected. You are being asked to participate because of your multicultural background and your experiences with language and paper feedback, both as students and as Teaching Assistants.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in one brief Zoom interview on a day of your choosing. Each interview will last approximately 45-mintues. During the interviews, you will be asked about your experiences with paper feedback on your language, your relationship with this teacher(s), and your current classroom practices. With your consent, the interview will be recorded, and the researcher may take notes as well.

This interview may include questions regarding current Texas State University faculty. Their and your identities will be kept anonymous in the study to ensure everyone's safety. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may refuse to answer them and ask to move on to the following question.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study. There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will help raise awareness of a very harmful issue and hopefully improve the way that educators approach paper feedback by decentralizing Standard American English.

To participate in this research or ask questions about this research please contact me, Elisa Serrano, at ems198@txstate.edu or at (830) 335-4597. You may also contact my thesis advisor, Eric Leake, at eleake@txstate.edu or at (512) 245-2163.

This project (IRB # 7490) was approved by the Texas State IRB on [insert IRB approval date or date of Exemption]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales,

IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

Appendix C: INFORMED CONSENT - VERBAL

Study Title: The Red Pen Cuts Deep: How Paper Feedback on Language Affects Identity and Classroom Relations

Principal Investigator: Elisa Serrano   **Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr. Eric Leake**

Email: esm198@txstate.edu   **Email: eleake@txstate.edu**

Phone: (830) 335-4597   **Phone: 512-245-2163**

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about how paper feedback on language affects student identity and classroom relations, particularly for classrooms with marginalized students. The information gathered will be used as qualitative data to gain a better understanding of the nuances of the teacher/student relationship and how it is affected. You are being asked to participate because of your multicultural background and your experiences with language and paper feedback, both as students and as Teaching Assistants.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in one brief Zoom interview on a day of your choosing. Each interview will last approximately 45-mintues. During the interviews, you will be asked about your experiences with paper feedback on your language, your relationship with this teacher(s), and your current classroom practices. With your consent, the interview will be recorded, and the researcher may take notes as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

This interview may include questions regarding current Texas State University faculty. Their and your identities will be kept anonymous in the study to ensure everyone's safety. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may refuse to answer them and ask to move on to the following question.

In the event that some of the survey or interview questions make you uncomfortable

or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating and you are a Texas State University student, you may contact the University Health Services for counseling services at list (512) 245-2208. They are located LBJ Student Center, 5-4.1, 601 University Dr, San Marcos, TX 78666

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES
There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will help raise awareness of a very harmful issue and hopefully improve the way that educators approach paper feedback by decentralizing Standard American English.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY
Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION
You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY
You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS
If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Elisa Serrano : ems198@txstate.edu.

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on 12/18/2020. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

DOCUMENTATION OF VERBAL CONSENT
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained

to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Your participation in this research project may be recorded using audio recording devices. Recordings will assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

Do you consent to video and audio recording? Please answer yes or no.

Do you have any questions for me? Please answer yes or no.

Do you understand the purpose of this interview? Please answer yes or no.

Do you want to continue with this interview? Please state your name and answer yes or no.

Thank you.

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