

# Writing as a Social Act: The Feedback Relation as a Context for Political and Ethical Becoming

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*This paper analyzes written feedback on student writing as a relational site of political education, learning, and becoming. Research on written feedback often defines the goals of feedback in terms of improved writing, while critical literacies often aim to foster critical social analysis and political action. Building on and expanding both views, we consider the role of students' experiences with feedback and writing in everyday forms of ethical thought and relationality. Analyzing the socially mediated process of writing in a university summer pre-enrollment program designed for first-generation, low-income students and students of color, we consider how the feedback relation supported various forms of political-ethical becoming. Using participatory design and ethnographic methodologies, we closely analyze three student cases as contextualized in a broader set of 40 student portfolios (student writing, written feedback, and interviews). In each of our cases, we identify particular aspects of feedback that are attuned to the political and ethical. These include: encouraging connections between social thought and action; cultivating complex political analysis and semantic sharpening; and modeling generosity. We find that students described new relationships with the act of writing as tied to repairing or deepening relationships with family members and cultural practices. Alongside the pedagogical implications woven throughout, we theorize written feedback on student writing as a relation that can mediate other relationships in ways that support everyday enactments of social transformation, what we conceptualize as "political-ethical becoming."*

How do you become in a world bent on you not being and not becoming?

—Imani Perry, *Breathe*

Most writers can recount a time when feedback from a particular teacher or mentor helped them deepen their craft, bringing them closer to feeling at home with the idea of being a writer. Many can also readily recall feedback that diminished their writing, or affronted their sense of dignity (Espinoza et al., 2020). Sharing writing with others is an act of vulnerability, one made riskier by relations of power and schooling contexts that narrowly define what counts as good writing. Such vulnerability can emerge, in part, because one's writing is closely tied to one's thinking and being, and is situated in a world that readily nourishes the being and becoming of some over others. To be meaningful—that is, humanizing and edifying—responses to student writing require trust and intellectual respect (Rose, 2006), which can be enhanced or diminished through the ways feedback itself is conveyed. Further, the relationship between one's writing and one's being in the world can, through particular pedagogical and relational conditions, become a generative space of learning and becoming.

This paper analyzes written feedback on student writing as a relational site of political education,<sup>1</sup> learning, and becoming. Looking closely at the writing students authored within a university pre-enrollment program, the feedback they received, and their reflections on the feedback, we ask: If and how does the feedback relation support various forms of political-ethical becoming? We offer the term *feedback relation* to highlight how the mediational tools and resources for thinking provided through written feedback were embedded in evolving pedagogical relationships (Wittman, 2016). We analyze the feedback relation as a dialogue through which educators and students worked together to reclaim the human practice of feedback from the powered disfigurements it often undergoes in schooling contexts (Bang, personal communication, 2020). In our work as educators and researchers, we have found few pieces that speak to the political and ethical complexities of providing feedback on student writing, or to the ways written feedback can generate politicized trust (Vakil et al., 2016) and support students' development as social actors.

To specify *political-ethical becoming*, we first look to the feedback itself and consider the political analyses and ethical values embodied within the comments, suggestions, and questions posed by educators. We then consider the forms of thinking and becoming that emerged in students' writing and their narrations of their own learning over time. Olsen and VanDerHeide (2020) define students' becoming as writers in terms of changing participation in writing practices and shifting writer identities. Building with this view, our close analysis of three student cases led us to conceptualize *political-ethical becoming* as the dynamic movements between political-ethical analysis and shifting relations that are consequential to students' development as social actors and human beings (Jurow et al., 2016; Vossoughi, 2014). We are particularly concerned with how the feedback relation interfaced with other relationships in students' lives. We understand political-ethical becoming as a socially mediated process that reshapes one's place within an ecology of relations (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003), and seek to better understand the resulting relationships between writing the word and writing the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

We write in a time when multiple crises have further exposed longstanding structural injustices, and created new openings for social dreaming and world-making (Espinoza, 2008). COVID-19, anti-Black racism and violence, climate change, and ongoing processes of settler colonialism and racial capitalism have also foregrounded enduring questions about the purposes and practices of education. As we write, many students are experiencing forms of remote education that reproduce schooling in the home and prioritize compliance and testing over well-being. These conditions are intensified versions of the carceral pedagogies and narrow ideas of achievement that routinely constrain educational possibility, particularly for minoritized youth. It is increasingly clear that movements toward social and ecological justice require transforming education and our fundamental approaches to human learning and becoming (Bang, 2020). Our efforts to design and study pedagogies of writing that nourish social and intellectual well-being are meant to serve these ends, and to envisage the role of writing in healing relations.

### **The SESP Leadership Institute**

The SESP (School of Education and Social Policy) Leadership Institute (hereafter SLI) is a summer pre-enrollment program focused on supporting incoming first-generation and low-income students and students of color to draw on their histories to shape their respective fields and thrive at the university and beyond. As a counter-space to remedial “bridge” programs, and a sister-space to programs like the Migrant Student Leadership Institute (Gutiérrez, 2008; Tejeda et al., 2003), SLI works to create an experience of intellectual self-determination that supports students’ growth as writers, thinkers, and social actors. The institute introduces students to educational research and theory, and creates an opportunity to wrestle with questions of identity, culture, and justice alongside peers who share affinities as working-class and minoritized students at a predominantly White institution.

Within the Culture and Cognition course, where the written work we analyze took shape, students are supported to connect theoretical concepts, their lived experiences, and transformative action in the world through interactive lectures, discussions, and daily feedback on written think pieces and essays. Students read each other’s writing in class before receiving detailed written feedback from a member of the instructional team.<sup>2</sup> Instructors also hold reading circles with their feedback groups, which serve as a space to practice close text analysis and develop connections beyond the written assignments. Students live together in dorms during the program, and evening study sessions with peers and peer leaders serve as another context for talking about texts, ideas, and writing. SLI reframes academic writing as creative scholarly writing, and students are encouraged to play with genre and reimagine what writing can be for. The program begins with an orientation where program staff share their dreams for the space. As a form of ethical grounding, we introduce Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s notion of the “beloved community,” and invite participants to build a collective experience where we enact the kinds of relations we want to see in the world in the here-and-now (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).

## Relevant Literature

### *Written Feedback on Student Writing*

At least since Sommers's (1982) research on the mechanics of responding to student writing, literacy researchers have been concerned with what feedback *does* in relation to students' development as writers. While subsequent studies have examined various dimensions of written feedback (e.g., Ferris, 1997; Sheppard, 1992), the limited measures typically used—sentence complexity, subject/verb agreement—demand more nuanced and ecologically valid definitions of what constitutes strong writing. Research on feedback has also sometimes reproduced deficit ideologies, labeling students as “low-” or “high-achieving” to determine the instruction they should receive. Gutiérrez et al. (2009) challenge such remedial models and advance the notion of *re-mediation*. Rather than aiming to fix students based on narrow views of literacy learning and the simplification of literacy tasks, re-mediation aims to reorganize the ecology for learning. Here students are not only positioned as fully capable of developing disciplinary literacies, but as contributing to and transforming academic domains based on their experiences, purposes, and cultural worlds (Warren et al., 2020).

Distinctions between remedial and expansive frameworks highlight the key idea that how one reads student writing is rooted in an ideological stance about who they are and what writing is for (Bartholomae, 1985; Hull & Rose, 1989). All readings of student writing come from some body in some place (Simon, 2013). Students' readings of instructor feedback are similarly embodied and interested, and involve navigating a range of emotions related to their identities and development as writers and thinkers (Ballenger & Myers, 2019; Bartholomae, 1985).

Further, while students may use feedback to reflect on their writing process, the changes made to their writing may not express the range of their reflections (Lindenman et al., 2018), and revisions often diverge from suggested edits in important ways. The feedback relation therefore rarely consists of instructors crafting feedback to simply be received and taken up by students. Learners situated in particular space-times and coming to writing through particular educational and social histories engage in a complex, dialogic relationship (Pedersen, 2018) with written feedback—akin to the ways they might wrestle with other kinds of texts. This embodied perspective grounds our study, and aligns with our approach to written feedback as its own craft or genre of writing.

### *Literacy Learning as Political and Ethical*

More than attempting to find better ways to engage students in settled approaches to writing, literacy researchers rooted in political and ethical concerns argue for new ways to conceive of writing itself (Curtis & Herrington, 2003). Redefining the purposes of writing with students' multidimensional histories and experiences in mind can help address the disconnects between young people's highly literate lives (as seen, for example, through texting, social media, protest signs and slogans, and interactive fiction) and school-based writing (Gries, 2019; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Matthews, 2016).

While our work therefore encourages deeper engagement with critical literacies (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987; Luke & Freebody, 1997) within research on feedback in English education and compositional studies, we also see the need for greater attention to the details of feedback within critical environments. As Zavala (2018) argues, a lack of careful attention to processes of mediation “can lead to ineffectual, pragmatic ‘learning by doing’ teaching and further to problematic reinscriptions whereby youth are repositioned as objects and literacy is reduced to a mere instrument of a reified consciousness” (p. 71). Zavala connects the qualities of pedagogical mediation with the nourishment of dialogic subject-subject relations, what he describes as *being a presence with others*. We build on the models Gutiérrez (2008), Winn (2015), Zavala (2018), and others provide for privileging mediation as an object of study within critical literacy learning by looking closely at written feedback on student writing as a relational, political, and ethical practice.

We view learning itself as a culturally mediated process of shifting participation over time within practices that are also changing (Rogoff, 2003). This cultural lens draws attention to the specific tools and forms of feedback made available, and to how that feedback is experienced by learners as tied to questions of identity, respect, and belonging (Nasir et al., 2006). Feedback serves as one among many pedagogical practices through which multiple ways of knowing can be invited and cultivated, or policed and repressed (Warren et al., 2020). We work from the assumption that political education is not free of such policing (Freire, 1972). We therefore draw from work on epistemic openness (Vossoughi, 2014) and heterogeneity (Rosebery et al., 2010) to examine how specific forms of feedback on student writing support critical examinations of power and injustice, while intentionally holding space for complex and variegated forms of meaning-making.

### **Political Education as Revising Social Relations**

We explore an aspect of political education in which students examine how oppressive structures and ideologies harm our relationships with social others, and reimagine and repair these relationships in and through the socially mediated act of writing. Bang et al. (2016) attune us to the ways colonization disrupts relationships between humans and their kin, lands and waters, and cultural practices. Ethical learning therefore involves critical readings of the logics that devalue certain beings—colonialism, human supremacy, white supremacy, cis-hetero-patriarchy, classism—and writing/righting social relations through resurgent educational and cultural activity (Bang et al., 2016; Tejeda, 2018). Research on political education with marginalized groups often examines how the internalization of self-stereotypes (Hogg & Turner, 1987) affects learners’ evaluation of members of their own group (Woodson, 1933/1990). Pedagogies aimed at social transformation therefore involve examining and rearticulating the meanings that degrade our perceptions of, and relationships with, others as well as ourselves (Philip, 2011). Political-ethical becoming, as we theorize it, is thus not simply reorganizing our thoughts, but *reshaping our relations*.

Researchers have often construed learning to engage in political action as participation in civic processes such as electoral politics, policy advocacy, or organized civil disobedience and revolutionary activity (Fanon, 1952; Freire, 1972). Drawing on Black and women-of-color feminist theory (hooks, 2003; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015), we argue that political action takes place not only in the public sphere, but also in personal and intimate environments: homes, spiritual centers, playgrounds, schools, workplaces. Construing the personal as political, these traditions recognize macro-historical change as requiring new forms of learning and relationality, including at the smallest scales of activity (Brown, 2017).

By *reshaping our relations*, we do not mean the eradication of tension or struggle with relatives. Instead, we mean the shifting of relationships to find a new equilibrium or harmonic progression. Both concordant and discordant chords exist in emotionally dynamic music. Similarly, Booker and Goldman (2016, p. 226) draw on Steven Jackson's (2014) work to describe repair as "the subtle acts of care by which order and meaning in complex sociotechnical systems are maintained and transformed, human value is preserved and extended" (p. 222). Repair is not necessarily a permanent "fix" but a moment of connection (e.g., calling an estranged relative even if we connect for only a short time) with potentially lasting effects on the bond. We also realize that some relations are too rife with violence to be resuscitated. But for those that can be, these moments of reconnection can be memorable instances of mutual recognition and healing. Akin to prefigurative politics (Yates, 2015) and temporary autonomous zones (Bey, 1985/2002), transformative possibilities emerge when people experience what it would be like for their relationships to be love-laden and absent of oppression—a retrievable reminder of what freedom feels like, or could feel like. We work to describe an aspect of political education in which socially mediated experiences with writing move us to engage in these acts of care and repair. Given the current scale of structural crises and their grounding in relations of hierarchy and extraction, we view approaches to writing instruction—and learning more broadly—that center the development of ethical social relations as not only desirable, but imperative (Bang, 2020).

## Methods

Our research on writing in SLI explores the multiple ways political-ethical becoming emerged in the context of students' writing, the feedback they received, and the revisions they made. Here, *revision* is a double entendre (Laymon, 2018) referring both to the revision required in reshaping writing to be more analytically precise and rhetorically effective, and the revision of self and society toward right relations with others (Brown, 2017). We ask: What types of feedback were provided, and what do they suggest about the revisions we were intending to nurture? What did students notice about the feedback? If and how did the feedback relation open space for students to engage in certain types of feeling, thinking, and becoming?

We draw on participatory design research (PDR) to pursue these questions (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). In line with other forms of design-based research,

PDR involves collaborating with participants to theorize how learning is designed and experienced within particular contexts, and to offer resources for settings with similar values and goals (The DBR Collective, 2003). Methodologically, this involves working to see the forms of learning that emerge when particular conditions are set in motion, which can often spill out beyond intended design goals and thus benefit from close, retrospective analysis (Brown & Cole, 2001). PDR also works to disrupt hierarchical distinctions between *researcher* and *researched* that have permeated empirical studies in the social sciences, often resulting in the reproduction of inequities.

We reconfigure categories of *observer* and *observed*, first by reflexively studying our own writing pedagogies. Since SLI's inception in 2017, this approach has created dynamic cycles of praxis where our analysis of student writing and feedback has guided pedagogical iteration, helping us to engage in generative practices more intentionally, to apprentice newer members of the staff, to work together to address pedagogical tensions and to nurture various forms of pedagogical creativity and experimentation (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). Second, we worked in collaboration with students as co-authors of the interpretations presented here. Our three focal students participated in various member-checking sessions, reading drafts of the accounts we had written about their lives, and assessing their (always evolving) fidelity and integrity. Both their original essays and their verbal and written feedback on the research offered important contributions to the interpretations developed here. Two of our student coauthors also became peer leaders within SLI, and thus brought insights to the research as coeducators and designers. This collaborative process has deepened our own political-ethical becoming toward better conceptualizing how meaning is made together within researcher-learner partnerships.

We also take an ethnographic approach to literacy research, producing detailed descriptions of pedagogical interactions and shifts in student writing, and analyzing what they meant to participants themselves (Erickson, 2004). With joint activity as our unit of analysis, our study privileges the dialogue that emerged between teachers and students through written feedback, and within student interviews (Vossoughi & Zavala, 2020). We examined student writing and the feedback relation for evidence of shifts in thinking and writing, as well as shifts in the qualities of relations within learners' social worlds.

### ***Data Collection***

The three case studies we present here are drawn from an information set that includes 40 study participants across 3 years of the SLI program (2017–2019). We compiled a feedback relation portfolio (FRP) for each student, a course-long record of the dialogue between student and instructor. FRPs included 10 think pieces and essays, the feedback instructors provided through a digital learning management system (Canvas), and pedagogical documents from the course itself. Student writing was exported from the Canvas website along with instructor comments, which were embedded in the documents as annotations.

Between 2 and 4 months after the completion of the program, the instructional team—in all cases, a member who did not give the student feedback during

the course—conducted interviews with participants, reflecting together on their experiences in SLI. Students read through parts of their FRP and were asked to provide interpretations of their experiences with writing (Ericsson & Simon, 1984), what they recalled thinking at particular moments during the writing process, and their perceptions of the feedback they received.

### ***Data Analysis***

We take a case study approach to analysis, focusing on the writing journeys of three students within the first SLI cohort (2017). Case studies offer detailed examinations of one setting, subject, or event (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We selected the cases of Remi, Danny, and Assata<sup>3</sup> because they help conceptualize the phenomenon of political-ethical becoming through writing and the feedback relation, and do so in distinct ways. Extensive reading of and memoing about each student's FRP led us to identify particular aspects of feedback that are attuned to the political and ethical. These include: encouraging students to connect social thought and action; cultivating complex forms of political analysis; and modeling generosity. Each of our cases is organized around one of these themes, which we found to be most salient within that student's trajectory. We compared these interpretations with students' interviews to analyze the forms of learning they named as especially meaningful. In all three cases, students described new relationships with the act of writing as tied to shifting or deepening relationships with family members and cultural practices. Our memos also attended to the emotional valences within students' writing and narrations, which allowed us to notice relationships to the concept of repair. We drew on the connections identified between feedback practices, shifts in writing, and first-person narrations to craft each case.

Based on our ongoing analysis of the broader data set, and our work as educators in SLI over the last four years, we see the relational shifts documented in our three cases as prevalent within the setting. Student writing, final course reflections, and interviews frequently involve narrations of ethical shifts in how students see their families, cultural practices, and communities. This reflects a key design principle of the program, which aims to connect critical theories of culture and cognition to our everyday relationships. This principle also shapes our writing assignments, which include such projects as interviewing an elder in one's family or community and using course concepts to interpret the stories and memories shared. While the kinds of political-ethical becoming analyzed here are therefore common in SLI (and motivate our careful study of this phenomenon), we are not claiming that the shape of student learning in our three cases is representative across the data. Each case carries its own nuance and depth. This internal complexity guides our decision to focus on the detailed rendering of three students' subjective experiences with writing, while drawing connections to the broader information set where relevant.

We do see the feedback moves described in each case as characteristic of the setting, and our coding processes have helped us identify these practices as routine. In line with PDR and ethnographic methodologies, our coding scheme focuses on *kinds of feedback* as well as *shifts in student writing and social relations*,



and has served as a way to surface and name the feedback practices that animate our pedagogy. To this end, we pursued multiple rounds of open coding as well as top-down and bottom-up coding of the broader information set (Erickson, 2004) until we reached saturation among the broader categories and codes. This process led us to identify: (1) key qualities of relationships between learner and instructor as they manifested in the feedback; (2) the purposes of writing emphasized at SLI; and (3) relational outcomes of learning. These categories appear in Table 1, along with the specific phenomena that were found to substantiate them.

**TABLE 1. Coding Scheme**

Category	Codes
Qualities of relationships between learner and instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building politicized trust</li> <li>• Positioning students as co-thinkers/writers</li> <li>• Co-explication of text</li> <li>• Coauthoring sentences</li> <li>• Carefulness of noticing</li> <li>• Affirmation</li> <li>• Epistemic heterogeneity</li> <li>• Directive language <i>and</i> language of suggestions</li> <li>• Forms of racial and/or cultural connection and solidarity through feedback</li> </ul>
Purposes of writing as tied to personal re-visioning of self as historical actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positioning students as historical actors</li> <li>• Encouraging thoughts on future action</li> <li>• Making grammatical/technical or word choice suggestions with theoretical or political consequences</li> <li>• Critiques of impersonal approaches to writing</li> <li>• Reading and analyzing personal lifeworlds</li> <li>• Encouraging exploration of personal feelings</li> <li>• Experiences of freedom</li> <li>• Intellectual risk-taking</li> <li>• Supporting students to recognize the reemergence of deficit ideologies</li> </ul>
Learning outcomes as relational and not simply individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shifting relations with family</li> <li>• Shifting relations with peers</li> <li>• Shifting relations with community</li> <li>• Shifting relations with cultural practices</li> <li>• Supporting students to presume intelligence and ingenuity within community</li> </ul>

Almost all of the practices named in Table 1 appear in the cases that follow, helping us to see how the pedagogies depicted within our three cases reflect the environment as a whole. The coding scheme also supported our efforts to notice within-case patterns and frequencies, situating particular moments within a broader evidentiary context. For example, feedback moves that encourage thoughts on future action appeared numerous times in the feedback Kalonji provided Remi, illuminating the density and centrality of this practice within her journey in SLI.

Finally, as we developed our analysis, we sometimes found ourselves drawing too linear a connection between educators' feedback and students' learning and becoming. This felt constraining, in part because political-ethical becoming is an ongoing process that can be seen throughout students' trajectories within the course and beyond, and that emerges from multiple sources. We also want to avoid treating students as the only ones learning. Educators are also in process, and working to craft careful feedback aimed at students' intellectual and political growth involves its own forms of political-ethical learning (Wittman, 2016). The feedback relation itself might therefore be seen as a dialogue between multiple becoming.

## Analysis

### *Remi: Connecting Social Thought, Action, and Relations*

Remi's story illustrates how feedback connected social thought and action, supporting new relationships with family and with learning itself. Remi entered SLI as a Black, first-year student from a predominantly White, rural area in the United States. In looking closely at Remi's portfolio, we were struck by a learning experience she recounted as particularly salient to how she experienced the program. In her interview, Remi described what it was like to read a piece by linguist William Labov during the second week of SLI. Labov's paper refutes research that presumes the inferiority of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to White, middle-class codes. After reading the piece, Remi was moved to call her brother, who she identified as a speaker of AAVE. Remi shared:

And this is interesting, because it had so much to do with the feedback I was getting from Kalonji, and then also, kind of what was happening in class about infusing personal experience with what you're learning about. . . . I came to recognize through what we were doing in class that for years, for essentially my whole life because he's older than me, I've been communicating to my brother that he's not an intellectual, and that he is not welcome in intellectual spaces.

And so, I remember I called my brother . . . and I just like was able to kind of pour out like I'm sorry, I need to recognize what I'm doing here. And acknowledge it and like apologize for it because it is such a personal issue . . . and so, I had this just drenched in personal experience moment that was also so much a part of my learning in the course. Which I just had never experienced before and didn't recognize was something that could happen.

Remi described coming to a "personal conviction," where she recognized her complicity in enacting deficit ideologies toward her brother. Four times in the excerpt above, Remi mentioned the connection between what she was experiencing in class (including the feedback from Kalonji) and her recognition of her actions toward her brother. While Remi was not the progenitor of deficit views on AAVE—she learned these ideologies from a society steeped in anti-Blackness—her ethical efforts to learn and practice new ways of interacting with her brother demonstrate

the possibility for a new kind of relation. In relaying the experience of calling her brother, Remi also described his response to her apology as caring and validating.

Remi later discussed turning in a writing assignment about Labov, having just felt extremely vulnerable with her brother, as an “airing of [her] dirty laundry.” She also recounted feeling a sense of validation upon receiving Kalonji’s feedback the next day, where he affirmed her emotional intelligence and told her that “knowledge and action is the point” of engaging in this kind of writing. We see Kalonji’s comments as explicitly positioning Remi’s “drenched in personal experience moment” as the very kind of learning the course intended to foster. In her interview, Remi characterized this moment as one of transition, where she began to “think with her whole self.” While recognizing that the broader ecology of SLI, as well as Remi’s life experiences, likely influenced this specific shift, we want to look closely at how the feedback relation supported Remi’s development of a practice of thinking “with her whole self,” which she described as consequential to her life beyond SLI. How did Remi come to feel that the experience with her brother was important to share with her instructor?

Our first think piece asked students to draw on Michael Cole’s (1998) discussion of cultural mediation through artifacts to analyze vignettes where educational dignity was enacted or denied within narratives authored by enslaved Africans (Espinoza & Vossoughi, 2014). The purpose of this assignment was to help students engage with a cultural historical view of mind through stories that centered the historical and political dimensions of learning. In her piece, Remi analyzed the power that plantation owners held over the bodies of enslaved peoples, as well as the power of the narratives they created for themselves. Remi also wondered if the move to analyze slave narratives through the lens of artifacts reduced their stories to an object, and if thinking of literacy as a tool in this way inadvertently dehumanized the narratives she was analyzing. Here is Kalonji’s written response:

I feel you! I almost feel like it’s kind of cold and heartless to refer to a slave narrative as an “artifact.” “Artifact” as a word can sound dead, especially if it’s in the same category as inert objects. But maybe spoons and bowls (as artifacts) have liberatory narratives attached to them as well. The narrative of the woman that created the bowl might be powerful.

Kalonji first established that he felt what Remi was working to express. This substantive affirmation went beyond praise of strong writing; instead, he began the feedback relationship with a foundation of mutual concern and a focus on the deeper questions Remi had raised. Such affirmative moves appeared throughout the data set and helped the instructional team establish ourselves as co-thinkers on the issues that were most important to students (one of the ways our own learning came into dialogue with students’) and to treat their ideas as meaningful on their own terms.

We also interpret such camaraderie as opening a different space to extend students’ thinking. Kalonji asked Remi to assume a kind of intelligence or intentionality on the part of the artifact’s creator. Kalonji modeled and supported

complex analysis by acknowledging what Remi had offered and extending that offering to think differently about some of the ideas she was exploring—that is, that artifacts may be, as she wrote, “cold” and “demoralizing.” The presence of both affirmation and co-thinking early on within Kalonji’s responses provided a key foundation for later feedback, one grounded in a substantive sense of emerging intellectual community.

In a subsequent think piece, students were asked to analyze a tool they use routinely in conversation with a chapter on carpentry from Mike Rose’s *The Mind at Work*. Remi chose to analyze her use of the phrase “I don’t know,” and how it functions as a shield against vulnerability. She wrote:

“I don’t know” when used in casual conversations I have witnessed in my culture is ultimately an invisible shield to be used against vulnerability. In the case of the half-baked idea, we are uncomfortable sharing a thought that we deem incomplete and may struggle to complete.

While Remi recognized that “I don’t know” could sometimes be empowering, she also described her use of the phrase as potentially “dependent” in a way that could “ensnare us as individuals who have no knowledge base.” Throughout the piece, Remi grappled with what it means to constantly position herself from a place of “self-doubt” and wondered, alongside Rose, what it means for “language to constrain our interactions.” Kalonji responded:

Here’s one thing that I’m wondering. As a user of the “I don’t know” tool, how do you think you would like to alter your use of it so that it better mediates your goals [?] One of the most impactful things we can do is to outright resist discursive norms that don’t do us any good. What should we say instead? What phrase would be more affirmative or empowering? What will you say next time?

Kalonji’s questions shifted Remi’s positioning from that of the user of an inherited tool to the creator of a new tool, a cultural researcher who examines everyday practices and develops more affirming and empowering ways of being. While Remi was already wrestling with the power of language to constrain interactions, Kalonji’s feedback encouraged her to consider the power of language to transform future action as well. This feedback is one example among many in which he positioned Remi’s choices, relationships and feelings as the foundation for analysis and theorizing; it also illustrates how critique can be generatively coupled with supporting students to reimagine and revise. Indeed, we found that Kalonji’s feedback emphasized how new actions and relations might grow from the theories Remi was reading at least 15 times throughout his feedback over the 2.5-week period.

The feedback relation with Kalonji helps to elucidate the context through which Remi came to feel a pressing need to reflect on and repair her relationship with her brother, what we argue constituted a kind of political and ethical becoming. Remi was also able to bridge these sets of relations—between Remi and Kalonji, on the one hand, and Remi and her brother on the other—in an environment

that was opening space for potentially profound shifts in her understandings of herself and the world.

### ***Danny: Complex Political Analysis and Semantic Sharpening***

Our second case illustrates the relationships between feedback aimed at cultivating complex political thought and students' shifting relationships with family, and with writing itself. Danny entered SLI as a rising second-year student from a Mexican family in the rural Midwest. In Shirin's written feedback on Danny's writing, she routinely encouraged complex political analysis while positioning herself as a co-thinker and learner. In Danny's third think piece (analyzing Nasir et al.'s *Learning as a Cultural Process*, 2006), they wrote: "Designing learning environments that leverage these repertoires of practice creates a more equitable educational system for non-dominant students." Shirin highlighted the word "leverage" and responded:

Curious to know your thoughts about this term. . . . Do you think it has strengths and limitations? I'm thinking for example if the notion of "leveraging" might lend itself to thinking about everyday practices/ways of knowing as resources for accessing academic domains, but not necessarily for changing them?

Shirin expressed curiosity about Danny's perspective on this term, posed a question designed to encourage critical engagement with the idea of *leveraging*, and shared how she was wrestling with the challenge of disentangling equity discourses from settled forms of academic learning (Bang et al., 2012).

Throughout their interview, Danny commented on the rarity of receiving feedback on particular sentences and words, and named such close readings as "really valuable." Danny also described the feedback relation as one that went "beyond the typical teacher-student thing" and felt more like mentorship. Feedback that focuses on particular sentences or words could feel remedial, or technical, rather than edifying. Here the purpose and spirit of such responses—the "how" of feedback—becomes important. As reflected in the excerpt above, SLI instructors often positioned themselves as grappling with the political valences of particular terms alongside students. Such feedback can invite students to practice careful agency around word choice as thinkers concerned with the ideological echoes of particular terms, what we have referred to as *semantic sharpening* (Vossoughi, 2014).

In their interview, Danny also recalled instances of feedback when Shirin asked them to "continue to wrestle with complex ideas," to "add additional layers" to their analysis, and to explain what they meant by particular terms. Danny noted: "That's something that I appreciated because I noticed that I was like kind of just saying things without delving into what they meant, and that's something I don't think I mastered until the very last essay." Danny's words offer a window into what it can feel like for students' relationships with writing to expand beyond the "encapsulation of school learning" (Engeström, 1991). Here, Danny described a shift from going through the motions of using particular terms to experiencing words as holding consequential social meanings. This shift was most pronounced in Danny's final essay, a piece they expressed feeling particularly proud of, and

one that helps us further understand the relationships between political-ethical becoming and socially mediated writing.

The final essay invited students to reflect on an interview with an elder. Danny's essay drew on course texts to analyze the cognitive complexity of their mother's work at a meat- and snack-packing plant, her role in training others, and the broader political context of labor and migration. Danny wrote:

Rose touches on the mathematics involved in carpentry in *The Mind at Work* (2004), noting that although the math was simple at face value, it turned out to be very complex. My mother focused on the arithmetic involved in counting product. . . . Another task she mentioned was building boxes while the conveyor belt was in transition. This required a level of coordination between her body and her mind to both perfectly calculate how many boxes she could make in the time she had and to flow through the building process itself. All of this mathematics took place within an intensely concentrated setting. While doing this, her mind couldn't wander off because she would lose count, and thus sacrifice the quality of her work. Anyone who has tried meditating understands the difficulty of controlling one's thoughts. When Rose reflects on the "commonplace, ordinary expressions of mind that . . . enable the work of the world to get done," he cites basic mental processes like perception and memory (72). I believe concentration is another one of these simple but critical processes that my mother mastered.

Three months later, when Kalonji asked Danny, "What was it about this piece that you were proud of as a writer?" Danny first shared that they had been able to "add the layers" of analysis that were encouraged in class. The conversation continued:

**DANNY:** So let's move on to the second [reason] . . . um, which I think is like a personal thing that I was able to do something similar to Rose in that like, oh, someone who he really admires, like his mom, and um, like show the world or like the rest of the class, like how, why we admire them so much, and like why—why it's so, why they're so valuable to us I guess. And so I think like it's a really, I, I struggle with that a little bit because it's not like I have to, um, hold my mom to like this academic, like only because you. . . . Do you get what I'm trying to say?

**KALONJI:** Like just because she's like credible to academia

**DANNY:** Yeah.

**KALONJI:** Like that means—

**DANNY:** It doesn't mean she's great, but—

**KALONJI:** Yeah, yeah.

**DANNY:** But I think that did come into play somehow.

Having read Rose's essay on the cognitive complexity of his own mother's work as a waitress, Danny first expressed pride in "doing something similar to Rose." They also described writing and connecting with one's audience as a way to convey their deep valuing of their mother's life and work. With Kalonji's support, Danny also

wrestled with the hierarchies that can be reproduced through the valorization of working-class professions—and the worthiness of people like their mother—using normative definitions of intelligence, a tension we imagine Rose would likely appreciate. This tension was also reflective of the questions posed throughout the feedback relation to consider the political valences of particular terms, and how they position various bodies and communities. We see the co-presence of such disciplinary growth, wrestling, and expansion as germane to the complex forms of political education we were working together to develop.

Danny's essay also examined the political context of the plant and the ways their mother enacted various forms of solidarity with colleagues:

Some workers had greater cognitive loads than others, namely those who had to actively think about their physical safety because of their immigration status. My mother, who was documented, did not have to work and simultaneously worry about whether Immigration and Customs Enforcement would be waiting to deport her or whether she'd get to see her kids again. . . . The learning and thinking undocumented immigrants performed while working at [the plant] happened within the context of a political and cultural atmosphere that aimed to deny them of their humanity. My mother's learning and thinking existed as a counter-script to that cultural atmosphere, affirming one's humanity and practicing solidarity.

In a pre-program survey on writing, and again in the final interview, Danny described themselves as someone who had strong opinions and frequently observed political discourse on platforms like Twitter, but rarely engaged in public critique themselves. Danny said the final essay “[made] me realize like not only can you like answer a prompt and . . . summarize and synthesize papers and stuff like that, but you can also like make someone feel a certain way, and make someone like really think about something in a new way. That's something pretty new to me.” These reflections suggest that Danny was experiencing a shift in their relationship to the purposes of writing, and orienting toward their instructors and peers as a legitimate audience.

While describing how the essay made them feel “confident in my expressive capabilities,” Danny also noted that it made them feel “closer to my mom.” Similar to what Remi described, Danny's efforts to write an essay honoring their mother's labor also had the emotional effect of deepening relations with their mother. Taken together, we understand such affective, intellectual, and relational shifts as key facets of political-ethical becoming in the context of literacy learning.

### ***Assata: Generosity as Political Praxis***

this is the 21st century and we need to redefine r/evolution. this planet needs a people's r/evolution. a humanist r/evolution. r/evolution is not about bloodshed or about going to the mountains and fighting. we will fight if we are forced to but the fundamental goal of r/evolution must be peace.

—Assata Shakur, “r/evolution is love”

When asked to choose a pseudonym, Assata chose to honor the legacy of Black freedom fighter Assata Shakur. In the excerpt above, written from her political exile in Cuba, Shakur (2010) was wrestling with what it means to be a r/evolutionary and navigate the balance between an ethic of resistance (fighting oppression) and one of generosity (making peace with the *other*). We argue that Gen Z Assata was also navigating this tension, utilizing our collective learning environment to explore their own balance between resistance and generosity.

As a first-year student, Assata entered SLI with a wealth of political experience. They had engaged in direct action and supported affordable housing efforts in Boston. Their experience was accompanied by knowledge and skills that were highly valued in SLI, namely analyzing the social world through lenses of race, class, and power. In one of their first think pieces, Assata critiqued America's culture of consumerism as systematically diluting the cultures of those from the Global South. Assata's essay described their family's experience of migrating to the United States from Ethiopia and resisting assimilation by upholding their cultural practices. As an organizer who had conducted their own political education initiatives, Assata also had critiques of our pedagogy. As discussed below, Assata challenged us to reflect on our curriculum and to figure out how to best support their learning. We hoped that our learning environment would be useful in helping them continuously revise their critiques in ways that supported their transformative work.

One aim of this retrospective analysis is to clarify the values that animated our pedagogy. It became clear through our analysis of the broader data set that both critical social thought and generosity were integral components of our approach. This pedagogy of generosity arose in part from our sense that in encouraging social re-imagination, we did not want to make the mistake of encouraging students to rebut an argument prior to deeply understanding it. We felt that deep understanding required generosity and receptivity to the thoughts of others (Said, 2004).<sup>4</sup>

This relationship between reception and resistance can be seen throughout Shirin's responses to Assata's writing. Assata began their first think piece by expressing some frustrations about the aforementioned article by Cole. They wrote: "I am struggling a lot with understanding the readings and forming words into what I am processing. The questions that come to mind are, why should we use Cole's lens?" This was the first question Assata posed in their writing for the course: *Who is this man* (read: cis white man) *and for what reason should I assume his words have legitimacy?* Shirin recognized Assata's question as the expression of an important impulse, and responded with "Good question," signaling her belief in critique as a foundational value of the class. She then continued: "This might be a generative place to practice Said's notion of reception and resistance. What might emerge if prior to asking why we should use Cole's lens you spent some time describing what you see as the lens he is arguing for? This move does not negate critique, but may help to specify it." Notice that Shirin positioned receptivity and resistance as interwoven rather than oppositional.

In a sense, Shirin was also arguing that radical transformation requires not only "calling out" problematic activity, but also fully noticing and nurturing seeds of



social possibility. We wanted to advocate a view of r/evolution not just as a process of negation (removing toxins from the soil), but also as one of affirmation (adding water and nutrients) (Warren et al., 2020). We wanted to provide a space where students could practice generosity and empathy (Mirra, 2018), strengthening habits of mind they could use when they so chose. We recognized the skilled practice of generosity as important to the relational work of liberation (Brown, 2017).

The feedback relation between Assata and Shirin involved numerous moments when they learned together to deepen their generosity. Shirin also modeled generosity in the way she engaged with course texts and student writing. As an example, Assata wrote one of their think pieces about an Ethiopian *jebena* coffee-making ritual central to their household. Assata argued for protecting the cultural integrity of the *jebena* by resisting efforts to hybridize it with electric coffee-making. Shirin's feedback showed her receptivity to Assata's argument: "POWERFULLY stated contrast here. Also thinking about how the celebration of cultural and generational hybridity may occlude tensions of assimilation." Here we attend to the affordances of instructors intentionally emphasizing how student thinking influences their own, making their own process of becoming visible. Consider how Shirin's feedback differs from responses where an instructor might build on a student's thought by (1) prescribing that the student "think about x" or (2) upgrading the student's idea by translating it into more expert discourses. Similar to Kalonji's comments on Remi's writing, we argue that crafting feedback in ways that highlight how student ideas influence our own thinking can model what receptivity looks and feels like. When asked in an interview to characterize the feedback in SLI, Assata shared: "[The feedback] was different, and it was coming from a place of care, it allowed me to be more vulnerable, and creative in what I was saying and what I was revealing." In a follow-up conversation about our analysis in this paper, Assata synthesized the relational experience of feedback in SLI as follows: "I know that I'm loved, and my writing will be loved."

Assata also practiced various forms of generosity throughout the course. This was especially evident in their final essay, which they felt exhibited their most vulnerable writing. Assata decided to write about their mother's religious practice in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Assata's writing embodied reception and resistance, bearing witness to their mother's story about the cathartic role that Christian spirituality plays in her life, while also critiquing patriarchal practices that persist in the church. Assata suspended their own judgments about the oppressive history of Christian institutions in order to fully absorb their mother's perspective.

Their essay captured the richness of *mezmur*, an Amharic word for hymns that describes a number of devotional songs from Ethiopia, the second country to adopt Christianity as the state religion (in 333 AD). Assata rejected an oversimplified reading of Christianity as "the white man's religion" by arguing that these Christian practices in Ethiopia predated the European colonization of Africa by a millennium. They described how singing these praise songs connected their mother to an African legacy of spirituality. Assata included in the essay a recording of their mother lifting her voice in song. They wrote, "I find myself humming gently to the

song. After writing this essay, the song is stuck in my brain. While it doesn't bring me close to God like it does for my mother, I feel closer to her."

Assata found a delicate balance of generosity and critique that allowed them to craft a nuanced and faithful portrait of their mother. We see in Assata's expression of "feel[ing] closer" a kind of ethical becoming, resulting in deeper familial bonds of empathy and understanding. We also argue that this moment represents political becoming. While Assata is taking their own spiritual path, separate from their mother's, they are also building political and spiritual solidarity with the tradition of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Assata's essay pointed out that even though women cannot participate in the priesthood, they can fully engage in *mezmur*. *Mezmur* is a form of spiritual practice in which Ethiopian women's voices exert agency in building personal and communal connections with the divine. Assata recognized seeds of womanist and decolonial potential within the practice, and agency within the women who practice it—a more complex and humanizing representation than one which depicts Christians of the Global South as controlled by a patriarchal and colonial ideology.

## Discussion

This study emphasized social relations as context, subject, and potential outcome of student writing. We examined the feedback relation as mediating forms of political-ethical becoming that shifted or fortified students' relationships with familial relatives and cultural practices. Both Danny and Assata described cultivating a sense of closeness through writing that sought to make meaning of their mothers' experiences on their own terms. While closeness can be cultivated in multiple ways, one of the trends across our cases was the deepening of relations through revaluing the intelligence and complex personhood of family (Tuck, 2009). We saw multiple examples of learners wrestling with the devaluation of social others (Fanon, 1952), such as Remi's profound recognition that she had denigrated her brother's language practices, and her moves to atone and repair. We also saw Danny expressing pride in writing an essay "similar to Rose" while wrestling with the valuing of their mother's worth based on given definitions of intelligence.

Students also deepened their relationships with particular cultural practices. Remi worked to repair her relationship with AAVE, and Assata affirmed the importance of the coffee-making ceremony in their life. One might argue that this is not an example of revaluation, since Assata already had a strong relationship with the ceremony. Yet, understanding assimilation as a ubiquitous force leads us to propose that sustaining the valuation of minoritized cultural practices is labor intensive, and requires the ongoing development and practice of resurgence (Bang et al., 2016; Lee, 2002; Paris & Alim, 2017). Our study illuminates the ways written feedback on student writing can nurture such ongoing sustenance.

A key pedagogical implication of this work is the shift toward understanding students not as discrete individuals (as they are commonly seen in Western thought and practice), but as embedded in relational ecologies. Writing instruction conventionally situates learning in individual knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Yet, learning through writing can also be a relational process of strengthening connections with the voices, cultural practices, and lifeworlds of loved ones. Programs designed for first-generation and low-income students often send the message that students are traveling across a one-way “bridge” to something better. Remedial frameworks can communicate that assuming an academic voice or identity means rejecting relationships with one’s communities in favor of privileged social worlds that are often fraught with elitism and supremacy (Destin et al., 2021).

Pedagogical recommendations that emerge from an alternate ethos and set of purposes therefore include: (1) centering writing prompts and texts that bring students into conversation with communal and familial voices as teachers and co-creators of knowledge; (2) meaningfully acknowledging and supporting these relationships when students share them in their writing; (3) recognizing the social relations that are or could be implicated in curriculum (e.g. instructor–student/s, student/s–family, student/s–social group, student/s–place), and how these relations may generatively interface with one another; (4) defining knowledge production as deeply entwined with ethics and relationality; and (5) noticing opportunities to interweave meaning-making and political-ethical becoming. Since the feedback practices depicted here are often time-intensive, they must also be accompanied by institutional changes, remaking systems that rely on unsustainable teacher-student ratios. We encourage investing in forms of team-teaching that allow for building more personalized relationships with students, and learning from one another’s feedback approaches. Alongside feedback on student writing, intentionally mediated peer feedback and collective (whole class) interpretations of model texts can serve similar goals.

We have also defined the feedback relation as a space where educators, too, are learning and becoming. This dialogical stance can be supported by approaching feedback as its own genre or craft of writing, by co-thinking with students, and by working to model ethical habits of mind, such as receptivity and putting knowledge into practice. At its best, receptivity can nourish generous and relationally healthy intellectual and political spaces, where people learn to practice the ethics of justice with one another (Brown, 2017). Receptivity can be expressed through concrete acts of careful noticing, taking students’ ideas and questions seriously, substantiating marginalized perspectives, and modeling the consideration of multiple truths and ways of knowing. Instructors also used several rhetorical moves that positioned students as historical actors, suggesting that what we learn about social theory has implications for how we live, how we imagine and birth social futures.

Existing approaches to the study of learning often attune us to the ways social relations mediate learning of particular objects (texts, practices, ideas). Through the stories of Remi, Danny, and Assata, we saw how processes of political-ethical becoming comprised social relations (instructors and students working together on writing) that also mediated other social relations (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). A broader implication here is how the study of literacy learning can attend not only to the ideas and practices that particular social interactions open up, but to the ways shifting political and ethical relations can grow from pedagogical interac-

tions with similar values. These perspectives attune us to the potentials of written feedback as a context for wider forms of human development.

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## NOTES

1. Recognizing all education as political, we use this term to refer to educational settings that consciously organize opportunities for analyzing and working to transform the conditions that directly affect students' communities and everyday lives (Vossoughi, 2014).
2. The instructional team included one professor, two graduate teaching assistants, and two undergraduate peer leaders.
3. All student names are pseudonyms.
4. Shirin introduced Said's approach to reading during the first day of SLI. As Said (2004) wrote: "Reading involves the contemporary humanist in two very crucial motions that I shall call reception and resistance. Reception is submitting oneself knowledgeable to texts. . . . The gesture of reception includes opening oneself to the text and, just as importantly, being willing to make informed statements about its meaning and what that meaning might attach itself to" (pp. 61–66).

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