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Authors

Adenihun, Maya Sayo Amaka

Antonio, Kristin C

Fulmore, Jewel Sanaa

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CHALLENGER

VOLUME 007

2025 - 2026



CHALLENGER



"...PRIORITIZING THE HUMANITY, CULTURE, AND LIFE EXPERIENCES..."

"...RECOGNIZE LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AS AN ASSET RATHER THAN A DEFICIT..."

! "...INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES...MUST BE BETTER UNDERSTOOD WITHIN RESEARCH SPACES..."

"...SURREALISM CAN BE APPROACHED IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS..."



VOL. 7

2025 - 2026

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In Memoriam

40 Years After the Challenger Disaster

The Editorial Board honors and dedicates Volume 7 of the Challenger Research Journal to the astronauts aboard the Challenger Space Shuttle. **Francis “Dick” Scobee, Michael J. Smith, Ronald E. McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Judith A. Resnik, Gregory B. Jarvis, and Christa McAuliffe.** These individuals represented the strength found within social diversity and identity while embodying humanity’s universal characteristic—curiosity. Curiosity of what lies beyond our planet and curiosity of the unknown, inspiring many to keep learning, wondering and discovering. However, their loss also serves as a stark reminder of the dangers of a culture in which voices are silenced.



The STS-51-L mission was set to send the Challenger Shuttle into orbit to deploy the TDRS-B satellite and observe Hailey’s Comet. This would also be the first launch of the Teachers in Space Program, meant to inspire students to pursue STEM disciplines and highlight the dedication of K-12 educators. Thus, a diverse team of trained astronauts and an eighth grade History and English Teacher, Christina McAuliffe, were set to board the Challenger Shuttle.

On January 28, 1986 seventy three seconds after launch the the Challenger Shuttle combusted and all 7 members of the crew lives were lost. The cause of the Challenger Shuttle Disaster was concluded to be the to the O rings seals which became defective due to irregularly cold temperatures. Engineers were aware of the issues and attempted to stop the launch, but were unsuccessful. Increasing political pressure has caused a culture of contentment within NASA leadership and the launch was continued despite clear dangers raised by engineers. In the follow years the lethal Challenger and Columbia Disaster served as a catalyst for major organizational change within NASA.

We hope to commemorate the Challenger mission of discovery and diversity through publication of original work and outreach to historically underrepresented groups. We push the curiosity of all UC San Diego undergraduate students to international academic community and ensure all voices are heard.

We look to the stars and honor their legacy,

Challenger Research Journal
Volume 7 Editorial Board



“Only in the darkness can you see the stars.”

Dr. Martin Luther King

Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

Thank you for being part of the seventh volume of Challenger Research Journal (CRJ) and engaging with the brilliant papers in this publication. CRJ was established in 2019 as a collaboration with the UC San Diego Undergraduate Research Hub, providing UCSD's McNair Scholars the opportunity to publish and share their research. From our first volume's success, our publication scope was extended to the greater UCSD undergraduate community and now serves as a platform for all undergraduates of any academic background to publish their own original research and experience the publication process. Since our founding, our purpose has not changed. Through each of our publications, we have ensured that our foundation rests on a mission of inclusivity and advocacy for the advancement of student researchers, especially those who belong to underrepresented communities across higher education and academia. Thus, we are incredibly proud to provide an accessible publishing space where traditional barriers to publishing are removed and academic works can be disseminated to wider audiences.

Our volume features six papers spanning the fields of politics, education, cognitive science, literature, and history. The volume begins with an analysis by Kristin Antonio, of the historical conditions of Filipina/o/x American immigrants and their influence on the community's connection with identity, race, and citizenship. We then move to a piece authored by Monique Wynn, which highlights the systematic practices that underlie the oppression and marginalization of Black students in education alongside testimonies of their educational experiences. Our third paper by Sophia Kistler examines the impact of music as a memory stimulus, specifically whether a background in music can lead to distinct cognitive differences when listening to a familiar or unfamiliar genre of music or instrument.

The second half of the volume contains the student paper by Jewel Fulmore, which assesses current practices in undergraduate writing courses that neglect diverse academic languages and how embracing linguistic diversity can foster more inclusive academic spaces. Our fifth student paper by Maya Adenihun explores how allusions to mythology in various literatures pieces exemplify Afrosurrealist themes. Finally, the student paper section of our volume concludes with a historical analysis by Siyuan Liu that examines the Chinese Great Leap Forward's influence on the collapse of the relationship between China and East Germany.

This volume represents the months-long culmination of rigorous and collaborative effort by CRJ's editorial board, student authors, reviewers, and advisors. As editors-in-chief of this undergraduate research journal at UC San Diego, we recognize our responsibility to serve our academic community while promoting representation and diversity in the scholarship we publish. In an uncertain yet evolving research landscape, we are immensely proud to publish six outstanding student papers spanning a wide range of disciplines and highlight the academic endeavors our authors have embarked on. We sincerely thank you for your continued support and for engaging with and reading the seventh volume of CRJ.

Sincerely,



Johnny Tran
Editor-in-Chief



Meghana Hariprasad
Editor-in-Chief

Acknowledgements

The Challenger Research Journal team, and our authors, would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Tom Brown, our mentor, and the spectacular staff of the Undergraduate Research Hub. We would also like to acknowledge Dr. Claire Meaders for her help with our new projects. Finally, we would like to thank the eScholarship platform for open access publishing and the University of California, San Diego.



Meet the Editors

Challenger Reasearch Journal Board - Volume 7

Editors In Chief



Johnny Tran



Meghana Hariprasad

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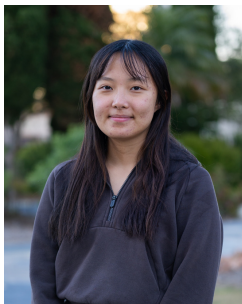
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Thank you to Rushil Chandrupatla and Masar Shakir for editorial board headshots!

Meet the Author

Kristin Antonio



“While the pursuit of knowledge is a worthwhile endeavor in its own right, my research also represents an opportunity to uplift my community, empower its members to strive for collective liberation, and contribute to the positive transformation of academia towards increased diversity and inclusion.”

Biography

Kristin Antonio is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of California, San Diego, working towards a B.S. in Education Sciences with plans to obtain a PhD in Education and pursue a career in academia. Her research interests include grassroots community mentorship programs grounded in an Ethnic Studies curriculum and the influence of U.S. militarism and imperialism on Filipina/o/x American communities. She is currently researching the role of military service in San Diego's Filipina/o/x American community and its impact on this community's conceptualization of race, citizenship, and patriotism, particularly concerning Filipina/o/x students.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my research mentor, Dr. Amanda Solomon Amorao, for guiding me through this project. It was through her endless support, encouragement, and feedback that I was able to reach this point in my research journey. I would also like to thank the Triton Research & Experiential Learning Scholars program for giving me the funding I needed to pursue this research project. To all my family, friends, and community members, this project was born out of the knowledge and experiences you helped me build, and I hope this work will bring us closer to collective empowerment and liberation.

Student Paper 1

“We’re more American than they’ll ever be”: Race, Citizenship, and Patriotism Among San Diego Fil-Ams

Kristin Antonio | Advised by Dr. Amanda Solomon Amorao

Abstract

While notable research has been done into the history of Filipina/o/x American (Fil-Am) communities in Southern California (Espiritu, 2003; Bonus, 1997), many of these analyses fail to take into account the unique construction of San Diego’s Fil-Am community as a result of two primary factors: enlistment into the U.S. Navy as a dominant avenue for Filipino immigration to San Diego and San Diego’s physical proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border during an anti-immigrant political climate. This particular historical and geographic context has positioned enlistment into the U.S. Navy as a “common sense” mode of being Fil-Am in San Diego through the perception of military service as a means of becoming an ideal immigrant-citizen (in stark contrast to the image of an “illegal alien”). Through analyzing the historical conditions of Filipina/o/x American immigrants, veterans, and military-affiliated communities from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, this paper aims to explore the specific political alignment of the San Diego Fil-Am community to unravel the connections between race, citizenship, and patriotism and imagine alternative configurations of Fil-Am identity grounded in collective liberation. This paper also briefly explores the potential of grassroots, community-based youth mentorship initiatives to push back against the seemingly de facto enlistment of these community members into the military. Such analysis is crucial for challenging White supremacist logic that conflates proximity to Whiteness with “worthiness” of a place in the United States.

Introduction

There is a running joke in my family: If anyone tells us to “go back to our country,” we say that “we’re more American than they’ll ever be,” referring to the irony of my family having U.S. military connections going back several generations, despite only immigrating to the U.S. in the 1990s. But despite our near-comically excessive relationship with the U.S. military, this connection is not unique to my family. Being Filipina/o/x in San Diego is nearly synonymous with being connected to the U.S. Navy— while data is scarce concerning contemporary, military-affiliated Fil-Ams in San Diego, this connection is not unknown to members of this community (Rowe, 2016; Patacsil et al., 2010; Delute et al., 2024). The extensive military ties within this community of Filipina/o/x Americans (Fil-Ams) has produced an identification with “American-ness” that intertwines patriotism with race and citizenship in pursuit of proving one’s worthiness as an “American” deserving of a place in the U.S. This paper seeks to unravel this relationship between race, citizenship, and patriotism and explore what it means to be Fil-Am in San Diego when the

unfulfilled promises and exploitative neocolonial nature of military service are exposed in the hopes of decentering this aspect of Fil-Am identity and imagining alternative ways of being based in collective liberation.

Part I: San Diego’s Fil-Am Community

To understand this community, it is important to discuss Fil-Am enlistment into the U.S. military in the context of the (neo)colonial relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines which sets Fil-Am enlistment apart from other racial minorities. The U.S. has actively recruited Philippine nationals into its Navy since it acquired the Philippines from Spain in 1898, and after the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act revoked the “U.S. national” status of Filipinos, military service was one of the only remaining immigration pathways to the U.S. (Espiritu, 2001). Additionally, influenced by the U.S. colonial education system that sought to “Americanize” the Filipino population, American culture and society is heralded by many Filipinos as superior (a “colonial mentality”; Constantino, 1970; Leonardo et al., 2013; Hsu et al., 2013). The U.S. Navy has also long been perceived as a status symbol by Filipino men, implying their ability to economically provide for their families and representing the opportunity for a better life according

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to an idealized view of America. (Espiritu, 2002; Paligutan, 2021). In short, not only did the U.S. military provide an accessible and established pathway for Filipina/o/x immigration, but the U.S. and its military has also been romanticized by many Filipina/o/xs.

With this context in mind, two key factors differentiate San Diego's Fil-Am community from others: San Diego as a navy town and its proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border. The former is a significant way that this community has formed and grown that is not present to the same extent in other Fil-Am communities on the West Coast. The latter addresses how geographic space shapes the collective consciousness of San Diegans, including Fil-Ams, which influences their conceptualization of racial identity.

While enlistment into the U.S. Navy as an avenue for Filipina/o/x immigration is not unique to San Diego, San Diego stands out as a prominent navy town. This county houses three prominent naval bases (Naval Base San Diego, Point Loma, and Coronado), and San Diego boasts the third-largest Fil-Am population in California (Pew Research Center, 2021). Most of this population in the early 1900s was Navy-affiliated (Espiritu, 2001), which follows the characterization of many other Fil-Am communities that are often demarcated using pre-1965 and post-1965 labels (as the 1965 Immigration Act eliminated discriminatory country-of-origin quotas, greatly expanding immigration pathways for Asia and Latin America; Hatton, 2015). Enlistees are often depicted as predominantly a characteristic of pre-1965 Fil-Am communities, with the post-1965 crowd characterized as skilled laborers and those who arrived via pre-existing familial connections (Espiritu, 2003; Bonus, 1997). However, San Diego remains one such arena where this demarcation is less set-in-stone and more drawn-in-sand, as a large number of Filipinos continued to join the Navy. Thousands of Filipinos enlisted in the Navy after 1965, and as of 2000, Filipino naval enlistees were overrepresented relative to their population in the U.S. (Naval History and Heritage Command, 2020; Maligat, 2000, p. 76). Given its prominent naval community, the established and heavily military-affiliated Filipina/o/x ethnic enclave, and the romanticized perception of American military service held by many Filipina/o/xs, it stands to reason that San Diego is a prominent destination for military Fil-Ams.

This strong identification with the Navy among San Diego Fil-Ams is amplified by San Diego's position as a border community. Its proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border places it on the frontlines of America's war on

immigrants, particularly concerning hostility against "illegal" immigration. President Donald Trump declared a national emergency on the U.S.-Mexico border due to "illegal" immigration in 2019, but this border has been described as a "warzone" since at least 1994 with Operation Gatekeeper (Espiritu, 2003, p. 206). As such, while immigrants are widespread throughout the U.S., anti-immigrant rhetoric in border communities has a palpable impact on those who appear visibly foreign. To illustrate, in 2000, seven San Diego teenagers were charged with a hate crime for attacking five elderly Mexican workers, all of whom were legal residents (Perry, 2000). Also in San Diego, an elderly Laotian man was beaten in 2022 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and rising anti-Asian hate crimes (Nakano, 2022). Both attacks represent an understanding shared by San Diego immigrant communities: legal status matters less than the appearance of being phenotypically "foreign," as legality and the validity of one's place in America is inherently tied to how a person is racialized (Omi & Winant, 2014).

To clarify, the pressure to assimilate is not unique to border communities. Where there is a hegemonic structure that places racial minorities at the bottom of the sociopolitical pecking order, there will be pressure to assimilate. Yet the distinction between "American" and "not American" is most salient near the border. As such, San Diego's Fil-Am community experiences the compounding effects of being visibly foreign on the frontlines of America's war on immigrants. The significance of the U.S.-Mexico border should also be emphasized, as it is Latina/o/x folks who are primarily perceived as "illegal," whereas Asian stereotypes typically center around being law-abiding, acting as a buffer against presumed illegality (Enriquez, 2019). Thus, assimilation for Fil-Ams (often racialized as Asian) in San Diego means moving towards Whiteness and away from Latina/o/xs, pitting the two groups against each other.

San Diego's naval presence further complicates this picture, as Fil-Ams in San Diego are able to mitigate the danger of being visibly foreign by centering military status—after all, what is more "American" than proving your devotion to this country through military service? The need to center one's military identity as protection against anti-immigrant sentiment changes the way this community conceptualizes Fil-Am identity by producing an inverted form of patriotism: We do not serve in the military because we are American, but rather, we are American because we serve in the military. This places military affiliation at the forefront of Fil-Am identity and fuels the de facto enlistment of San Diego Fil-Ams into the Navy. Even moving past the material benefits of military service like citizenship (as American-born

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Fil-Ams do not need to acquire legal citizenship), Fil-Ams continue to join and/or identify with the military because it moves us closer to the aforementioned romanticized idea of "American-ness" developed during the Philippines' American colonial period and farther away from the "illegal" (often Latina/o/x) immigrant.

Nevertheless, assimilation as a form of protection is fundamentally incomplete, as it is always at odds with racialization. A uniform cannot erase appearing phenotypically Filipino (i.e. "foreign"), making fervent patriotism a security blanket at best. Yet Fil-Ams continue to identify with the military despite our non-White phenotypic presentation because the power/value associated with the Filipino conception of American-ness derived from a "colonial mentality," in addition to the intense fear of being perceived as an "illegal" immigrant, overshadows whether or not White Americans actually validate these claims to American-ness.

In short, patriotism through military service within a border community context produces a cyclical relationship between race, citizenship, and patriotism. The negative racialization of immigrants (i.e. conflating legal status/criminality with race) creates the need to prove citizenship to differentiate oneself as a "good" immigrant, encouraging San Diego Fil-Ams to emphasize their patriotism and "American-ness" through military service. However, a "good" immigrant implies that there is a "bad" immigrant, returning to the negative racialization of immigrants (specifically the racialization of Mexicans as "illegal aliens"). But this if-then reasoning (i.e. if we served our country and immigrated "the right way," then we deserve a place in the U.S.) at the core of this cycle falls apart once we look deeper into the history of Filipino service in the U.S. military, fraught with injustice and betrayal. A closer look reveals that patriotism and military service has never guaranteed citizenship.

Part II: A Legacy of Betrayal

As previously stated, Filipinos in the U.S. military have existed since the late 19th century (Espiritu, 2001), but the validity and value of this service has consistently been challenged and trivialized. Filipino World War II veterans are the biggest examples of this betrayal, with their service deemed "un-American" and uncompensated for. Looking past WWII, immigrant veterans and their families have continued to be treated unjustly, with their service better characterized as exploitative rather than patriotic.

The most notable example of betrayal is the Rescission Act of 1946, which retroactively stripped Filipino WWII veterans of their military benefits. According to this act, service in the Philippine armed forces was not considered service on behalf of the U.S., despite President Franklin Roosevelt placing the Philippine Armed Forces under U.S. Command in 1941 (Peters & Woolley, n.d.). Thus, Filipinos who served in the United States Army Forces in the Far East were not eligible for U.S. military benefits. Instead, this act allocated \$200 million to the Philippine government to cover the benefits Filipino WWII veterans would have received in place of the estimated \$3 billion in benefits promised (The Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project, 2023). The Immigration Act of 1990 offered a paltry remedy through allowing for the naturalization of Filipino WWII veterans, yet did nothing to address the lack of benefits nor explicitly grant the children of these veterans U.S. citizenship or residency (S.358 - 101st Congress, 1990). The fight to reunite aging Filipino WWII veterans with their families and receive proper compensation for their role in WWII is ongoing (H.R.1053 - 119th Congress, 2025).

To the Fil-Ams who assert that they are "just as American" as natural-born (White) Americans because of their service, they have earned a rightful place in this country. Their service means that they are a "good" immigrant worthy of calling themselves American. But what does service mean to the Filipino WWII veterans who were denied their promised benefits, the veterans who died before gaining U.S. citizenship, or those without their families in the U.S.? The fact is that it was just as easy to deem the service of Filipino WWII veterans "un-American" as it was to deem it "American" in the first place. In this light, their service in the U.S. military was a means to an end—a valuable source of power in the Pacific theatre, but not valuable enough to warrant awarding them veterans' benefits.

But Filipino recruitment into the U.S. military did not stop at WWII, and neither did the injustices. The Philippine Enlistment Program (1952-1991) actively recruited Filipinos in the Philippines into the U.S. Navy (Maligat, 2000, pp. 2-3). This continued recruitment of Philippine nationals into the U.S. Navy points towards the neocolonial relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines. Additionally, until 1971, Filipino sailors were restricted to "stewards" (i.e. confined to traditionally "feminine" tasks like cooking or laundry), showcasing how the Navy functioned as a colonial project to produce a racialized and gendered source of exploitable labor out of Filipinos (Espiritu, 2002).

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Even moreso, military service is an unreliable source of protection against deportation, further destabilizing military service as an avenue towards acceptance in the U.S. Whether it be the Purple Heart veteran who self-deported to South Korea after nearly 50 years in the U.S. over 15-year old drug charges (Kim, 2025), or the daughter of a Filipino Vietnam War veteran who faces deportation over a 20-year-old fraudulent check that had been repaid (Samson, 2025), military service did little to protect them from deportation. Veteran deportations directly contradict the idea that patriotism and military service prove worthiness to be "American." When operating under the assumption there is nothing more patriotic than serving one's country, a logical conclusion of veteran deportations is that the U.S. never considered immigrant veterans to be a part of this country.

To summarize, immigrant military service has consistently been deemed second-class—useful to the U.S., but not enough to consider them actual Americans. There is little historical proof that puts Filipino military service on par with White Americans, but even more relevant is how Fil-Am military service is not just part of a legacy of betrayal, but a legacy of exploitation at the hands of a colonial power. What does this mean for the vast community of Fil-Ams in San Diego whose military connections are near foundational to their Fil-Am identities, or the American-born Filipina/o/xs who followed in the footsteps of their families and joined the military? Exposing the unjust, betrayal-ridden, exploitative nature of Fil-Am military service implores us to question the validity of viewing this de facto service as a pathway to becoming ideal immigrant-citizens (particularly in contrast with "illegal aliens").

Part III: (Re)configuring Identity

The role of military service in shaping San Diego Fil-Am identity cannot be understated. The historical yet ongoing pattern of Fil-Am military enlistment is foundational for understanding this community's construction. The pride and material benefit that the military offers is also undeniable (Espiritu, 2002; Paligutan, 2021). However, the fervent identification with the military that has driven a wedge between Fil-Am and Latina/o/x communities and upheld White supremacy by preventing cross-racial solidarity cannot be ignored. Neither can the history of Filipino enlistment as a product of America's colonial project in the Philippines, nor the fact that Filipino service in the U.S. military is rife with betrayal. The way that many San Diego Fil-Ams imagine our identities in relation to military service lacks nuance: while not necessarily a problem to be solved, it is deserving of critique.

The task at hand is figuring out how to recognize the military service of Filipina/o/xs and appreciate the role that it plays in offering security for San Diego Fil-Ams, while also decentering this part of our identities as a result of (neo)colonialism. While many solutions exist, one possibility is education as a means of collective liberation. Paulo Freire (1972) argues that oppressed peoples will never reach liberation without understanding the conditions of their oppression through education. While few have managed to take root in San Diego, grassroots youth mentorship organizations that serve Fil-Am communities (e.g. the Filipino Community of Seattle, Galing Bata and Pin@y Educational Partnerships in San Francisco) strive towards this goal by empowering Fil-Am students and their communities. Similar feats may prove promising in San Diego, granted an emphasis is placed on unraveling this community's complex, enmeshed Fil-Am identity. Ultimately, any solution will involve a critical exploration of Fil-Am identity and substantial efforts to dismantle the notion that assimilation into Whiteness is feasible and/or desirable, when it truly functions to uphold White supremacy.

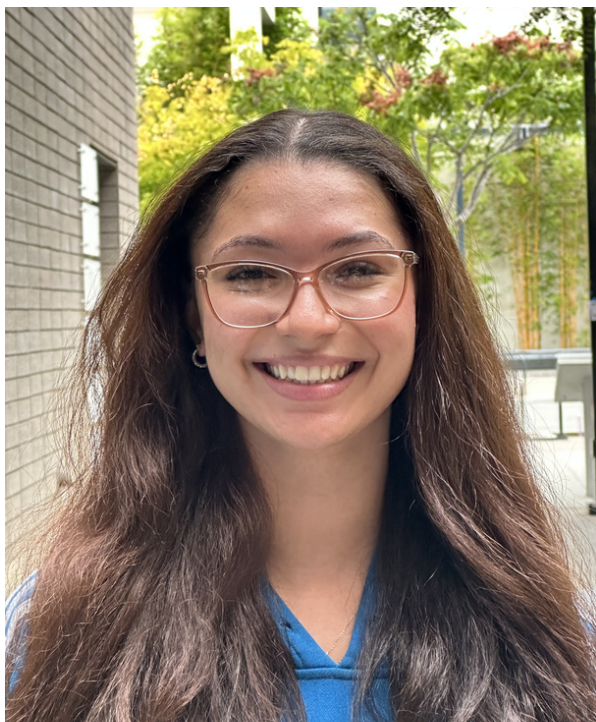
Student Paper 1

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Meet the Author

Monique Wynn



Biography

Monique Wynn is a Summer 2025 graduate of UCSD. They earned their B.S. in Education Sciences, with a minor in Sociology. They aspire to earn their PhD in Education in the future and expand upon the research that they have done as part of the McNair Scholars program on Black belonging in Education. Education is their passion, and Black belonging is what they hope to facilitate throughout their educational journey. Currently, they work as a Behavior Technician for children with autism, and spend their free time reading books from their personal library.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the McNair Scholars Program at UC San Diego for funding my research project, Dr. Tom Brown, the director of McNair, Dr. Sherice Clarke, who was my mentor throughout the process, and my parents, Quartez Wynn and Sandra Wynn.

“The opportunity that I was given to conduct research that centers and uplifts Black people was a lifelong dream of mine come true. Pursuing research at UC San Diego has been the most fulfilling and challenging part of my academic career thus far, and I am so grateful to be moving onwards and upwards in my education and in the wonderful world of research.”

Student Paper 2

Black Belonging in Education: Understanding the Impacts of Gendered and Racialized Oppression

Monique Wynn | Advised by Dr. Sherice Clarke

Abstract

Black students in the public school system are facing challenges like racism, misogyny, toxic masculinity, and dehumanization. These issues are systematically upheld as barriers between Black folks and their educational attainment. This research project aims to examine and compare public school data for both California and San Diego county in regards to suspensions, expulsions, and felony arrests stratified by race to highlight the systematic aspect of these events. Keeping in mind the long-standing racist and misogynistic oppression that Black students have experienced in public schools, this research hopes to adequately address the similar but different experiences of Black students based on their gender expression and skin color through the aforementioned quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis of relevant testimonios. Testimonios have been generated for this project, both formally and informally, and were given by family members and community members who chose to share their educational experiences. Investigating this question is one small step towards a future of securing school practices and classroom spaces aligned with the intention of prioritizing the humanity, culture, and life experiences of Black students.

Introduction

I am a mixed-ethnicity, light-skinned, Black researcher and recent first-generation graduate of UC San Diego; I am also a queer, non-binary, feminine presenting individual. My life as a Black person, a student, an educator, and a family member has led me to pursue research in the hopes of understanding how to facilitate Black belonging in educational spaces. In pursuing this "mesearch" project, I was able to understand my personal experiences and familial history in terms of Black belonging while participating in the knowledge production detailed in this paper (Collins, 2025).

This study asks two related research questions to understand the sense of belonging that Black students are lacking due to gendered and racialized oppression: (1) In what ways are Black students systematically being pushed out of traditional classrooms? (2) How does the concept of "Black belonging" inform current conversations on education and equity?

In this study, I will discuss the explicit and implicit ways in which Black students of masculine and feminine presentation are effectively excluded from learning in educational spaces, hindering Black belonging. Black belonging is achieved when Black students are

treated with equitable, culturally relevant treatment that facilitates their education and life success goals (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Black belonging in educational spaces is more than combating racism, misogyny, or the school-to-prison-pipeline; it is the compilation of all of these things, along with the resources to address any of these obstacles while struggling for an education from a young age well into adulthood. Racism, misogyny, intersectionality, and educational inequity are all obstacles that stand between Black students and a sense of belonging in educational spaces that not only enables, but also encourages their success (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This research paper highlights the different experiences of Black male and female students who struggle similarly but also so differently in their educational attainment journeys; Black belonging is the unifying issue.

Theoretical Framework

This project is based on critical race theory and Black feminist theory in order to view the gendered and racialized oppression of Black students through two necessary lenses that can potentially bring action oriented towards a future of equity for these students. Black feminist theory is defined by the Combahee River Collective in their Combahee River Collective Statement as "the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women

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themselves (The Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 1). While many researchers who implement feminist perspectives tend to limit their discussion to Western feminisms, Black feminist theory and those who utilize its perspective in their research expand upon the most popular feminist ideologies to factor in the racialized aspect of the Black feminine experience (Kwachou, 2023).

Critical race theory found its emergence based on similar sentiments shared in the Combahee River Collective Statement; it was decided that current movements meant to understand legal processes were not doing enough to address and critically analyze the specific struggles of Black people in this country in terms of their fight for civil rights (Lynn & Dixon, 2022). Both critical race theory and Black feminist theory were created on the grounds of Black exclusion, and are initiatives meant to chisel out a part of every conversation related to race and feminism that would always prioritize the struggles of Black folks. Critical race theory finds its place in education because "race is always already present in every social configuring of our lives," and education is not immune to the inequities of social structure (Taylor, 2023). The stories of Black youth as they navigate their educational attainment are imperative in the analysis of education through the critical race theory lens. Additionally, the stories of Black feminine youth through the Black feminist theory need to be included to combat the oppressive forces of misogyny and racism that help inform the intersectional identity of Black feminine individuals.

Methodology

Testimonios were given by family and community members who expressed interest and consented to be included in this research project. The term "testimonio" is a Spanish term that means "witness account." This term historically has a social justice lens and is used specifically in regards to first person accounts of oppression, social inequity, or marginalization of any kind (Mora, 2015). Though traditionally used as a research tool by scholars of color to understand the experiences of the Latine community, it can also be applied for the first person account of oppression of any culture. In this research article, all testimonios are centered on the Black experience to aid the discussion of how Black belonging is either absent or actively stifled in many educational spaces. The testimonios discussed in this paper are that of a Black male student, a Black female faculty member (who either attended or worked at the continuation high school that I volunteered my time at while I was conducting this research project), my grandmother, my father (who chose to discuss their experiences as Black students in the '60s and '80s, respectively), and myself.

All five participants are Black Americans with ages ranging from early teens to early 80s who have educational experiences in American school systems. This analysis brings about a qualitative aspect of the study that honors Black American and African oral tradition, namely, the sharing of one's experiences with other community/family members. This methodology was chosen to highlight the marginalized experiences of the researcher (myself) and the participants, as bringing equal value to the conversation on Black belonging, while creating the basis for the racial sense-making conversations that transpired between participants and myself as part of this research process.

Testimonios

This section consists of five testimonios given by a student who will be called "R" in this paper, a faculty member of a school who will be called "J," my grandmother, my father, and myself. The conversations detailed in this section explored topics like racism, education, school systems, misogyny, success, and what a sense of belonging looks like for us as Black people.

In one of my conversations with R, a young high school student, he shared that "some [students] are expected to be smarter than others and it's based off their race, some are expected to, I guess, do worse in classes, or not do so good in classes." R also noted that the teacher always seemed "too busy" to help him and his friends get caught up in class. He stated that while he and his other Black male friends sat in the back of the class, silent and lost, it seemed like other students were getting all of the attention. When asked why he did not ask more questions in class, he responded that, to school faculty, he "probably felt like a burden." The only teacher who helped him try to get on top of his work was an Ethnic Studies teacher who had a clear understanding of how this student's experience might be informed by subliminally racist practices within the school. One faculty member alone could not provide the support needed and one can view an accumulation of these, and other marginalizing experiences and not be surprised that eventually, R's grades dropped and he was transferred to a continuation high school. Transitioning from a comprehensive high school to an alternative high school can be hard, and R stated that he had no expectations of his new school placement because "it couldn't be worse than [the] last one." Evidently, his lack of sense of belonging led to his inability to be successful in his comprehensive high school, but it did not impede his success at continuation school. When asked about how things are going at his new school, R shared that "once I first got here, there was a period just talking, sitting down, meditating with Mr. W, like that. So, I don't know, I think that helped a little

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more, too. And then, in some of my classes I meditated with my teachers in class," and "when I meditate I just feel calmer." R was now part of a school that practiced meditation as an act of togetherness, and this thoughtful activity helped him reach a sense of belonging that he struggled to have before.

J told me a story about writing a research paper for a class that she took while working towards her Master's degree. She had written up an extensive paper including references and text that supported every claim that she made, and she was proud of the work that she put in. Later, she found out through peer interaction that she received a lower grade than her white, blonde female classmate who wrote one full page front and back. This incident was demoralizing for J and was the first thing that she brought up after I mentioned the racist experiences that I had in my own pursuit of higher education. This instance felt worthy of highlighting in this paper because it is not the kind of experience that is recorded anywhere but in the memory of those who were wronged. In the same conversation, J informed me that she was born of an interracial couple in the same year that interracial marriage was legalized in California and encouraged me to "imagine the kind of crap" she went through. J said, "obviously I wasn't a slave," and left the rest to the imagination. Though not detailed in her account, I understood what was left unsaid; she was not comfortable diving into the specifics of her discomfort growing up during this time, but still wanted to connect with me by sharing her experience. After her story, I shared some of my own thoughts and feelings about being the child of an interracial couple in California myself. J and I created a space in her office that day where we both felt a sense of Black belonging, and we spent over an hour laughing, story telling, and relating to each other.

My grandmother has struggled with reading and writing skills throughout her life. When she went to high school, it became evident that she was struggling with something like dyslexia (though she has gone undiagnosed with anything specific in her life). Around this same time, my grandmother's sister had a baby at a young age. Due to my grandmother's known struggles with literacy, it was decided that she would stay home and take care of her sister's baby. A baby born of no consequence of my grandmother's own actions came to be under her care because no one felt like she was worth the resources being spent on her in school. When asked about this life event, my grandmother stated "it was no interest [school staff] had in trying to help me all but one." The responsible adults in the situation did not do enough to advocate for how unjust it was for her to never finish high school on account of her sister having a baby.

Because of her known struggles, it was deemed no loss for her to be uneducated. The system that devalued her on account of her being a young Black girl stifled her educational opportunities. My grandmother never did get the chance to finish high school or pursue any higher education, but she has had the joy of visiting me at the UC San Diego main campus on numerous occasions. The day that she watched me walk across the stage as the recipient of a Bachelor's degree was a moment of absolute joy for her and a testament to the resilience of our family.

My father, upon reaching the end of his high school career, began to wonder where his life would take him next. His future was laid out in front of him and all he had to do was choose the right path. When he asked the adults in his life about how he might pay for college, he was met with something akin to disbelief. He was told that Black men don't go to college unless they played sports. Black men, to his understanding, either went to jail, the military, or died on the streets due to gang-related violence. Those were his three options. My father chose the military at the young age of 17 as his path to success straight out of high school. Despite being explicitly told that college was no space for a man of his color and lack of athletic ability, he began pursuing an Associate's degree at a local community college much later in his life with one purpose; my father had set out to prove to his children that if he can take college courses in his 40s, there was no excuse for us to not pursue higher education.

Anything is possible, and "education is king," he would say. His life path was informed by his racial identity, and he easily could have been a victim of one of the other two common destinies of young Black men. My father beat the odds and lived to see one of his wildest dreams come true, a Wynn family descendant graduated from college.

In the eighth grade, my white male science teacher mispronounced my name in front of the entire class while taking attendance on the first day of school. My name is not difficult to pronounce, but was uncommon amongst my non-Black peers. My father had always told me to take pride in the fact that he had named me Monique, and I was not going to be called something different. I corrected this teacher politely, to which he responded with "nah, I like what I called you better." My classmates laughed. I corrected him once again, he ignored me, and moved onto the next student. No other name on the roster was mispronounced in such a purposeful way. Disregarding my given name in an effort to make a joke out of me is something I dealt with as a Black student attending school in a non-Black area. That same day I found myself in the principal's office

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requesting that my science teacher be held accountable by someone who he would respect, as I clearly was undeserving of his respect as a Black student. This strategy amended the situation, and this important lesson in self-advocacy never left me.

Though these testimonios all discuss varying aspects of the Black identity with varying societal responses, the importance of Black belonging in education is apparent throughout them all. In many different ways, both implicitly and explicitly, we were all made to believe that we were not as welcome as our peers, in some part, due to our Blackness. Despite this, we exemplify strength. I found and facilitated Black belonging in all four of my discussions with participants; Black belonging is the string that tied us all, and this research, together.

Implications and Conclusion

A lack of sense of belonging in educational spaces is a symptom of the gendered and racialized oppression leveled against Black students that requires both recognition and change. In all classrooms, from early education to PhD, it is crucial for Black students to be rid of the burden of being unwelcome (Wood & Harper, 2016). To facilitate the success of Black students is to critically analyze the ways in which their racialized and gendered experiences of oppression have very real impacts on the students' success and ability to attain diplomas and degrees. As a way forward towards progress, all educators should dedicate themselves to understanding what might encourage a sense of belonging in their Black students to ensure they are not falling through systemic cracks. It is the responsibility of educators everywhere to encourage all students to succeed, including Black students. Black student success looks like joy: the joy of meditation, the joy of graduation, the joy of encouragement, the joy of community, and the joy of belonging. Black student success looks like Black belonging.

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Meet the Author

Sophia Kistler

Biography

Sophia Kistler is a second year Cognitive Behavioral Neuroscience Major at UCSD. She is currently involved in clubs such as Music and Memory and the Morning Sign Out Publication, where she aims to utilize her education in new, more personal perspectives. She has been involved in research throughout her undergraduate career. After participating in the Triton Research and Experiential Learning Program, she now works in the Serences Lab at UCSD as a research assistant, as well as interning in research analytics outside of UCSD. She has recently enrolled in the behavioral neuroscience PhD program at UCLA where she hopes to continue exploring memory, neurodegeneration, and learning.

Acknowledgements

Sophia would like to acknowledge the mentorship of her Advisor Dr. David Borgo.



"Music, my first passion, led me to research. Since then, research has only led me back to music. This project has taught me that research is about appreciation as much as exploration. To strive to understand something is to cherish your ability to do so."

Student Paper 3

The Usage of Music as a Working Memory Cue in Practicing Musicians

Sophia Kistler | Advised by Dr. David Borgo

Abstract

Music, and its connection to memory, has been a topic of consideration among memory scientists for some years now. Practices such as music therapy take advantage of the apparent relationship between listening to music and increased cognitive performance. More recently, research aims to better understand why music has this effect, and what additional factors play into it. This paper details a within-subject study that aims to explore the effects of music as a stimulus for memory, taking into account differences in the subjects' exposure and background as musicians. Specifically, if a history in musicianship in one instrument will produce the same or different cognitive effects when listening to music of that type or music from an unfamiliar instrument. Through this study, we aim to determine whether there is a significant relationship between a person adept in a specific instrument (classical piano and classical violin) and their performance on a word recognition test. We hypothesized that there will be a positive impact on test results when taking the word recognition test using the more familiar instrument as the stimulus. This led to the question if cue-based relationships were present where listening to music activated the parts of the brain necessary for learning their instrument. Results showed that there was no relationship present, and even in some cases a significant decline after the stimulus was present. However, because of the nature of this study and its assumed errors, the results are acknowledged as inconclusive and were instead analyzed for further hypotheses or research questions on this subject matter.

Introduction

Music is a nearly universal human experience that engages systems in the brain related to attention, emotion, and memory. Beyond its artistic value, music has increasingly been studied for its potential to influence cognitive performance. In particular, researchers have examined whether music can enhance working memory, the mental system responsible for temporarily holding and manipulating information. Understanding how music interacts with memory has implications for education, performance training, and therapeutic intervention.

Working memory has limited capacity. Because attention is a finite resource, additional stimuli, such as background music, may either support memory through association or interfere with it by competing for cognitive resources. Prior research has demonstrated both possibilities (Lehmann & Seufert, 2017; Wang et al., 2025). Some studies suggest that background music may serve as a distractor during demanding tasks, while others show that musical training can strengthen memory systems over time.

Musicians provide a particularly unique population for studying this question. Years of structured auditory

training and increased familiarity may shape how musicians process sound, potentially making them more sensitive to musical input. This raises an important question: does familiar music help musicians remember better, or does it distract them more?

This study examines whether music stimulates memory differently depending on familiarity and musicianship. Specifically, we investigate two primary questions: 1) How does task performance change between musicians and non-musicians with and without any musical background stimulus? 2) How does each participant category (non-musicians, pianists, violinists) change in task performance across no-music, piano, and violin conditions?

Literature Review

As music therapy has become increasingly used for neurological and psychological conditions, researchers have begun to examine whether music produces measurable changes in cognition, memory, and behavior. Recent studies investigate not only the therapeutic outcomes of musical engagement, but also the cognitive and neural mechanisms that may underlie these effects. The articles summarized below provide foundational evidence on how music influences working memory, memory recall, and the specialization of auditory memory.

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Music and Working Memory

While the practice of music and music therapy is often misunderstood for the general effects of any exposure to music, the relationship between music and working memory is often complex and dependent on task demands and listening conditions. Taheri et al. (2022) examined the effects of background music on cognitive performance and found that music does not consistently enhance working memory. In some cases, background music acted as a distractor, particularly for tasks requiring sustained attention and cognitive control, supporting the idea that music can compete for limited cognitive resources rather than facilitate memory.

However, more benefits towards working memory ability are uncovered when observing the effects of actively engaging in musical training. Studies such as Diaz Abrahan et al. (2021) demonstrate that music can enhance verbal and visual memory. This enhancement was specifically observed following active musical engagement rather than during passive listening. These benefits are exhibited over the long term as well, with Mussoi (2021) demonstrating how through improving working memory processes, older age individuals with musical training were able to maintain better speech recognition compared to those without training. This study closely supported the idea that auditory-cognitive interaction can be strengthened through significant musical training. Taken together, both sides of the literature reinforce the importance of personal and task-dependent context in the observation of music effects on working memory. These findings all point to new questions about the current and long term cognitive effects in musicians versus non-musicians.

Stimulus Familiarity as a Memory Cue

In everyday life, people everywhere can resonate to the feeling of being pulled into an old memory at the sound of a nostalgic song. This phenomenon, known as cued recall, is present in both visual and auditory memory, and is particularly effective when assisting in recalling past memories (Muffato V 2024). Through this, researchers have found that music familiarity appears to play a more supportive role when music functions as a memory cue rather than as background input. Kubit and Janata (2022) showed that spontaneous mental replay of familiar music improved memory for incidentally associated information, suggesting that familiarity strengthens associative memory links during retrieval. Importantly, this effect occurred after encoding, not during active task performance. Similarly, Diaz Abrahan et al. (2021) found that memory improvements were driven by active musical engagement. Together, these findings suggest that while familiarity can increase the effectiveness of a memory cue, its benefits are most

apparent during recall or reflection rather than during concurrent verbal memory tasks. This distinction is particularly relevant when considering whether instrument-specific familiarity in musicians enhances or interferes with word recognition performance.

Methods

This experiment on the relationship between familiar music and memory recognition was done in an online format with a total of 56 participants. Participants were prompted to take a memory test to find a relationship between their performance and the music stimulus that was played. The music served as background audio rather than the primary task, allowing memory performance to be measured under different auditory conditions. This test and data were independently programmed and organized through a python program. After consultation and discussion with participants, all results were consolidated and analyzed through excel. The study focused on short-term word recognition as a measurable indicator of memory performance. Familiarity with the music stimulus was assessed through participant self-report rather than direct manipulation.

Participants

Participants were recruited as students within the University of California, San Diego. The majority of participants were students enrolled in UCSD's Winter Quarter MUS20R course. The study focused on three groups of people: Piano players ($n = 23$), violin players ($n = 11$), and non-musicians/did not play these instruments ($n = 18$). This study used a remote, within-subject design. This design allowed each participant to serve as their own control across conditions. Participants were first given a form gathering information on a series of questions, with main focus on the following: 1) What instrument do you play, 2) Do you actively practice your instrument, 3) What type of practice. All responses were self-reported, and no exclusion criteria were applied beyond completion of the questionnaire. Responses were used to categorize participants for later data analysis.

The Study

Participants who successfully completed the form were then emailed an executable file containing the online word recognition test. This test was a three part task, first completed on its own with no music stimulus, secondly completed with the classical piano piece, Chopin Etudes Op. 10, playing in the background, and lastly completed with the classical violin piece, Bach Partita No. 1, playing. The order of these conditions was fixed for all participants. For the task, a randomized series of 24 four-five letter nouns were displayed briefly in sequence for a span of 0.2 seconds each.

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A brief transition screen would then be displayed before the recognition test. Twelve words would be shown in sequence with the option to select "Yes" or "No" if they were in the original list shown just prior. These answers were automatically recorded within the software.

For the next two times the task is repeated, before the words were shown a short questionnaire page was displayed as the respective music piece was played in the background. Participants were instructed to use headphones and set the volume to approximately 50% volume. This step was intended to standardize listening conditions while allowing participants to acclimate to the background audio. This was done with the intent to gain additional information on the participants' familiarity with the music, as well as give them time to acclimate to the background noise, so that it would minimize itself as a stressor or distractor, and maximize as an audio stimulus. The questionnaire contained the following questions: 1) Do you recognize this music piece, 2) Have you ever played this music piece, 3) Can you name the composer. After completing the questionnaire, the participants would do the same word recognition test (with different randomized words) as the respective music played in the background.

Gathering Results

Throughout the online test, information about performance was automatically recorded and calculated. Results including average accuracy, accuracy and time to respond for each word, and overall accuracy were downloaded to a file on the participants' device. Participants then emailed their results files to the researcher. From there, all data from the participants was gathered and organized where it was later analyzed. No identifying information was included in the submitted data files. All files were manually compiled into a single dataset prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Active instrument practice, type of instrument played, and rigor of practice were analyzed independently via univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). The dependent variable for the memory test was the amount of words correctly identified into their category (present or not present). After the ANOVA results, post-hoc T-Tests were conducted for significant results to analyze significant main effects. For these tests the alpha value was set at 0.05 and conducted using excel software.

Results

No statistically significant effects were observed for almost all groups analyzed. Specifically the task accuracy of musicians and non-musicians with music versus no music stimulus, as well as the inter-trial changes in accuracy of all groups across all stimulus conditions. As shown in the example tables below, the data consistently showed a p-value over 0.05 and a F value below F crit. This pattern remained consistent across all music conditions. No subgroup demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in memory performance.

Furthermore, the observed change was negative, contrary to the hypothesis. Across conditions, performance tended to decrease rather than improve in the presence of music. These results were repeated throughout the different analyzed groups. When looking at the task accuracy of pianists across all conditions, there was even a significant decrease in accuracy from no music stimulus, to piano, to violin.

Figures 1–3 illustrate mean word recognition accuracy across conditions.

Discussion

We found that background music did not improve word recognition accuracy. In some cases, particularly among pianists, music significantly reduced performance. These findings suggest that concurrent background music may act as a competing stimulus rather than a supportive cue during visual-verbal memory tasks. While musical training may strengthen auditory memory systems over time, those same systems may draw attentional resources away from non-auditory tasks when music is present.

Limitations

After conducting this study, it is necessary to describe possible sources of error for the sake of both reflection, learning, and transparency. The errors within this experiment stemmed mostly from the structure of the study and targeted its internal validity, that is, the experiment's ability to determine a true cause and effect relationship despite its results. The errors (and possible effects on the data) being mentioned are order effects, ineffective data collection, and test formatting. These limitations reduce the interpretability of the null findings and may have obscured smaller effects.

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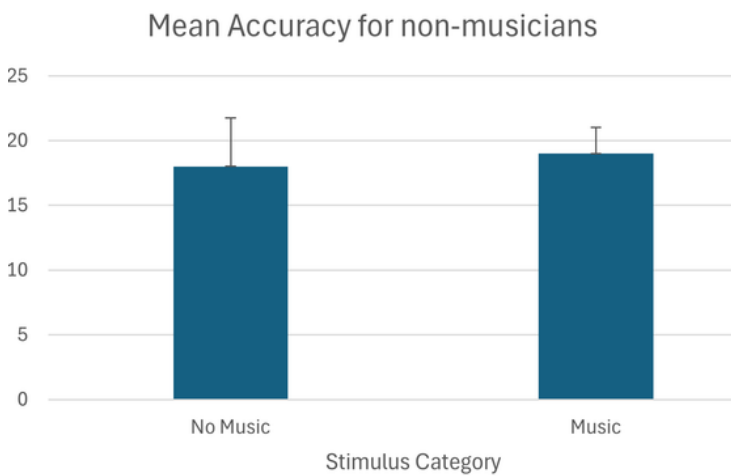


Figure 1. Mean Word Recognition Accuracy for Non-Musicians in Music and No-Music Conditions.

Mean word recognition accuracy (proportion correct) for non-musicians in the no-music and music conditions. The music condition represents performance averaged across musical stimuli. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean. Non-musicians showed a slight increase in mean accuracy when music was present compared to the no-music condition; however, this difference was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). The y-axis represents mean recognition accuracy, and the x-axis represents auditory stimulus conditions.

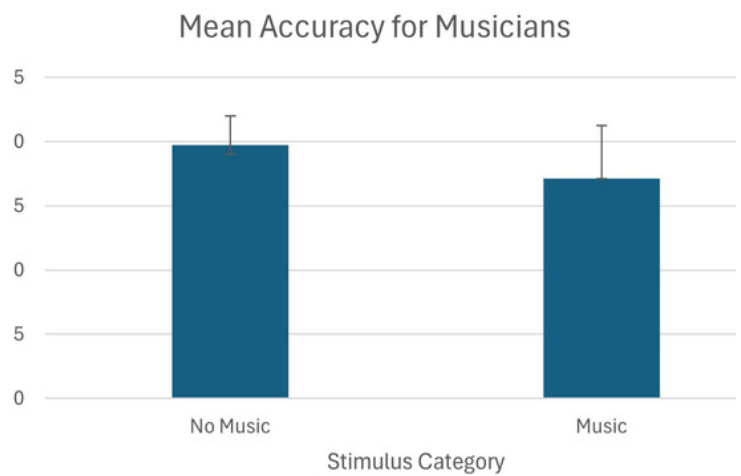


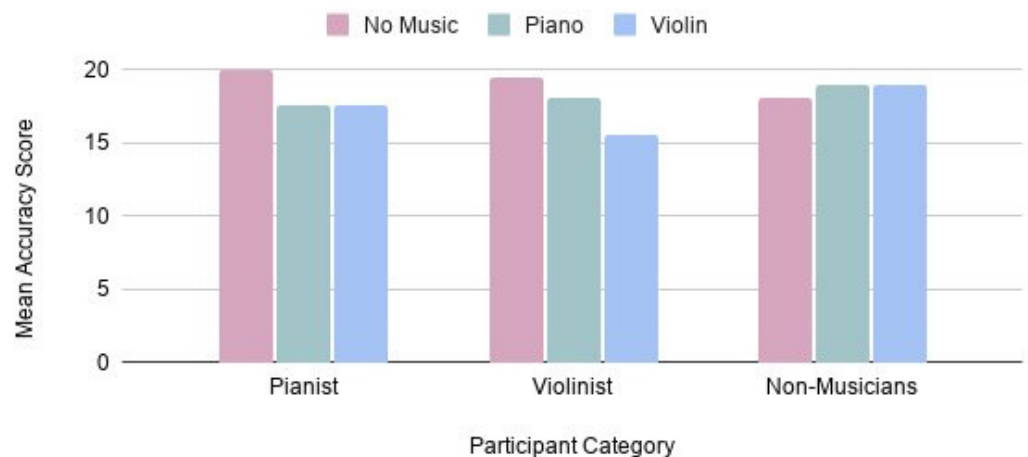
Figure 2. Mean Word Recognition Accuracy for Musicians in Music and No-Music Conditions.

Mean word recognition accuracy (proportion correct) for musicians in the no-music and music conditions. The music condition represents performance averaged across musical stimuli. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean. Musicians showed a slight decrease in mean accuracy when music was present compared to the no-music condition; however, this difference was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). The y-axis represents mean recognition accuracy, and the x-axis represents auditory stimulus conditions.

Figure 3. Mean Word Recognition Accuracy Across Stimulus Conditions for All Experimental Groups.

Mean word recognition accuracy for non-musicians, pianists, and violinists across three auditory conditions: no music, piano music, and violin music. Pianists demonstrated a decrease in mean accuracy from the no-music condition to the musical conditions. Violinists showed a gradual decrease in mean accuracy across the three conditions. Non-musicians showed a slight increase in mean accuracy when music was present. None of these differences reached statistical significance ($p > .05$). The y-axis represents mean recognition accuracy, and the x-axis represents the participant category.

Mean Word Recognition Accuracy Across Stimulus



The possibility of order effects in this experiment are likely because of the lack of counterbalancing. As a within-design study, each participant had to take the test three times in the same order, which may have altered their results. Based on the data, the most likely order effect was the fatigue effect. Starting as participants perform the study again and again, the task causes a level of fatigue that negatively affects their performance. However, the typical trend was a drop in performance during the second test that stayed consistent through the third, rather than a continual drop. While the fatigue

effect may have played a role, it was not the only contributor. Practice effects were not observed, as performance did not improve with repeated exposure.

Ineffective data collection refers to the questions asked in the questionnaire and if they successfully measured the factors considered in the research question. I believe that the data collected was too broad, as was the general research question. This led to an increased amount of analysis and sorting needed and resulted in messier results. In addition, many response options

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lacked standardization, limiting their usefulness for group comparisons. For example, for some of the questions in the questionnaire, participants were given the option to answer freely. Additionally, most of the pre-given answers were not standardized in a way to accurately divide groups. This reduced the clarity of participant categorization and weakened group-level comparisons.

The online, asynchronous format of the test also likely contributed to the results of the study. This study was entirely and independently coded in python by me. The coding processes took multiple weeks and a lot of trial and error that may have resulted in a lessened functionality of the software. While everything was checked multiple times and tested properly, underlying issues with word randomization, sound volume, transition delays, or broken buttons could have happened on an individual basis and would not have been accounted for. In addition, the freedom of an asynchronous experiment could lead to variability in the time spent in each section. While these times were recorded, they were not accounted for when analyzing the data. Environmental distractions, device differences, and uncontrolled listening environments may have introduced additional variability.

Future Directions

One possible explanation for these results is specialization in auditory working memory among musicians. Rather than showing broad memory improvements, musical training may lead to a stronger focus on auditory information, making musicians more sensitive to sound-based input (Gagnon & Nicoladis, 2021). In this study, the use of background music during a visual word recognition task may have acted as a competing stimulus, drawing attentional resources toward the auditory modality and away from visual memory processing. This could help explain why musicians showed decreased accuracy with music present, while non-musicians, who may not rely as heavily on auditory processing, were less disrupted or even slightly benefited. Future research should directly compare auditory and visual memory tasks under musical conditions to better test how modality-specific training influences attentional allocation and memory performance (Taheri et al., 2022; Schulze & Koelsch, 2012).

Conclusion

This study examined whether familiar music improves memory performance in musicians. This was done so using a within-subject design to compare word recognition accuracy under music and no-music conditions. Contrary to our hypothesis, background music did not enhance word recognition accuracy and

in some cases reduced it. Overall, these findings suggest that music may not universally function as a cognitive enhancer during concurrent tasks. Instead, its effects appear to depend on task demands and individual training history.

Based on the results, it is shown that there was no relationship uncovered from this experiment. In addition, there were many limitations contributing to the results. However, the negative trend provides insight for future research. Based on the data trends, which showed worse performance on the tests, it can be assumed that the music acted as a distractor to the memory test. Future research could examine whether melodic noise is more distracting than unmelodic noise, if different tasks cause different effects, or how different types of trained musicians would perform in a similar study. Research involving brain scans could also look further to see if similar brain areas are activated when listening to music as are when listening to meaningful speech, as meaningful speech has been shown to be more distracting (Ylinen et al, 2024). Future studies could also benefit from including counterbalancing conditions, narrower participant group definitions, and controlled laboratory environments to reduce variability.

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Meet the Author

Jewel Fulmore



"My research is rooted in language justice and asks how higher education can move beyond fairness toward genuine care for marginalized students"

Biography

Jewel Fulmore is a fourth year Marshall College student, double-majoring in Literature & Writing and Black Diaspora & African American Studies. She is deeply involved in campus mentoring and equity-focused programs where she supports students' academic transitions and leadership development. Her academic and research interests center on anti-racist education, linguistic justice, and marginalized student experiences in higher education, alongside creative work that explores the lived experiences and identities of Black Americans. After graduation, she plans to pursue graduate study in education or student affairs, with the long-term goal of becoming an educator in higher education focused on educational policy and analysis.

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Challenging Linguistic Discrimination: Anti Racist Writing Pedagogy in Undergraduate Writing Courses

Jewel Fulmore | Advised by Dr. Elizabeth “Libby” Butler

Abstract

Linguistic discrimination in higher education disproportionately affects Black students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Black Language (BL). Standard Language Ideology (SLI) reinforces the belief that Standard English (SE) is the only legitimate academic language, embedding racial biases in grading and assessment. Traditional grading systems penalize students for linguistic diversity, positioning AAVE as “improper” and “unacademic” rather than recognizing it as a legitimate linguistic system (Baker-Bell, 2019; Horton, 2000). Scholars (Inoue, 2015; Baker-Bell, 2019) advocate for anti-racist assessment models.

Using surveys of UC San Diego writing instructional staff and undergraduate students who are enrolled in or have completed at least one undergraduate writing course, this project investigates the types of assessment models used and students’ perceptions of their impact on academic success. Understanding how grading practices influence student success is critical in addressing systemic linguistic racism in higher education. By reshaping assessment practices, universities can foster learning environments that recognize linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a deficit, ultimately contributing to more equitable and inclusive academic spaces.

Introduction

Language reflects identity, culture, and history, yet academic institutions do not treat all language varieties equally. Black students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black Language (BL) often face scrutiny when their linguistic practices differ from white normative standards. Scholars recognize Black Language as a legitimate linguistic system with distinct phonetic, syntactic, and rhetorical features rooted in Black cultural history (Smitherman, 1977; Baker-Bell, 2020). Despite this legitimacy, Standard Language Ideology (SLI) positions Standard English as the only acceptable form of academic communication (Horton, 2000).

Traditional grading systems in writing courses often reinforce this hierarchy by rewarding adherence to Standard English norms. These writing systems have been found to have unequal outcomes in written assessments, including higher failure rates among African American students (Inoue, 2014). These disparities reflect not differences in writing ability but biases embedded in assessment structures.

This study examines how undergraduate writing programs across UC San Diego implement anti-racist grading practices and how these grading structures shape students’ perceptions of academic success, linguistic fairness, and writing development. Using survey responses from students and instructional staff across the university’s eight undergraduate colleges, the study explores whether alternative grading models support students who experience linguistic discrimination in writing courses.

Purpose

This study contributes to conversations on anti-racist writing pedagogy by examining how undergraduate writing programs implement alternative grading models, including labor-based and anti-racist approaches, compared to traditional grading systems. Rather than assuming these models reduce inequity, this project examines how students and instructional staff experience grading structures and whether they perceive them as reducing linguistic bias and supporting academic development.

Because writing assessment often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism in higher education (Welsh and Little, 2023)

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grading practices shape students' confidence, sense of belonging, and perceptions of fairness. Grounded in scholarship on Black Language and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), this study approaches linguistic discrimination as a structural issue within assessment practices. At the same time, the survey instruments measure perceptions of linguistic bias more broadly across racial and linguistic backgrounds. This broader approach allows for the further analysis of how grading structures shape experiences of linguistic fairness across diverse student populations while remaining attentive to the racialized dynamics of language in academic spaces. By examining student and instructional staff experiences across UC San Diego's eight undergraduate writing programs, this study shows how grading philosophies translate into classroom practice. The findings inform institutional discussions on assessment reform, instructor training, and the limits of grading structures alone. Ultimately, the study frames grading reform as a material component of broader efforts to address inequities in higher education.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-case study approach to examine the extent to which undergraduate writing programs in universities, specifically UC San Diego, implement anti-racist grading practices and support students facing linguistic discrimination. Using anti-Blackness as a framework, this research investigates how institutional and pedagogical practices perpetuate or challenge racialized barriers in academic writing. Data will be collected through two mixed-method surveys, one distributed to faculty/instructors/teaching assistants, and the other to students who are currently enrolled in their undergraduate writing course or have completed at least one-quarter of this course. For this study, the term writing instructional staff refers to writing faculty, instructors, and teaching assistants involved in the undergraduate writing programs who participated in this study. Each survey includes both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to capture a combination of quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

The surveys were designed and will be analyzed with a grounding in anti-Blackness theory (Dumas, 2016; Gómez, 2021; Welsh & Little, 2023). By collecting and analyzing data through the framework of anti-Blackness, this study aims to uncover systemic patterns that shape educational outcomes and explore the effectiveness of current efforts to create more inclusive and just writing pedagogy. Additionally, this study will consider institutional constraints, biases, and traditional academic norms that may prevent educators from fully embracing anti-racist grading practices despite their potential to foster equity.

Theoretical Framework

Anti-Blackness is a systemic force that shapes institutions, policies, and social norms, positioning Blackness as inherently inferior (Dumas, 2016; Gómez, 2021; Welsh & Little, 2023). Dumas (2016) defines anti-Blackness in education as the persistent devaluation of Black students through curriculum and institutional practices that reinforce white hegemony. This framework is relevant when examining linguistic discrimination, as SLI upholds whiteness as the norm while marginalizing AAVE and BL as unacademic. By embedding these biases into grading and assessment, academic institutions uphold anti-Blackness by reprimanding Black students for their linguistic identity rather than recognizing it as a legitimate mode of expression.

Welsh and Little (2023) extend Dumas' argument by illustrating how anti-Blackness in education is reinforced through discipline and evaluation. Traditional grading systems function as gatekeeping mechanisms that disproportionately penalize Black students for not adhering to white linguistic norms. This concept also connects to Gómez's (2021) Critical Trauma and Anti-Black Racism framework that highlights the psychological toll of navigating an educational system that invalidates Black linguistic and cultural identity. The expectation to suppress BL or AAVE in academic writing creates a form of racial trauma, forcing Black students to choose between authenticity and academic success. Together, these perspectives reveal how anti-Blackness is embedded in educational assessment, making anti-racist grading models not just a tool for equity but a necessary intervention against systemic racism in higher education.

Data Collection

This study recruited undergraduate students and writing instructional staff from the eight undergraduate writing programs at the University of California, San Diego. Student participants included individuals currently enrolled in or who had completed at least one course in their college's writing program. Instructional staff participants included faculty, instructors, and teaching assistants involved in undergraduate writing instruction. Participants were recruited through email invitations, student resource centers, and faculty networks. Surveys were administered through an online survey platform.

Writing programs were categorized based on publicly available syllabi and program descriptions. Programs identified as utilizing alternative or anti-racist grading models included Thurgood Marshall College (Dimensions of Culture), Muir College (Muir College Writing Program)

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Eighth College (Critical Community Engagement), and Seventh College (Synthesis). Programs categorized as utilizing traditional grading models included Earl Warren College (Warren College Writing Program), Eleanor Roosevelt College (Making of the Modern World), Sixth College (Culture, Art, and Technology), and Revelle College (Humanities Program). These categorizations were used for comparative analysis across grading structures.

The student survey (see Appendix A)¹ collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Likert-scale items assessed perceptions of grading fairness, linguistic consideration, comfort discussing linguistic challenges, and whether grading practices reduced linguistic discrimination. Students responded using a five-point frequency scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Additional items gathered demographic and linguistic background information, including whether students reported speaking Standard English growing up. Open-ended questions allowed students to describe supportive or harmful grading and feedback experiences in greater detail.

To operationalize linguistic discrimination, the survey measured perceptions of linguistic bias rather than conducting direct linguistic feature analysis. The item asking whether students spoke Standard English growing up served as a proxy indicator of linguistic positionality relative to dominant academic norms. Subsequent items assessed whether students believed their linguistic background was considered fairly, whether grading practices reduced linguistic discrimination, and whether feedback penalized linguistic differences. Thus, the study captures perceived linguistic bias in assessment practices rather than isolating AAVE-specific grammatical or syntactic features.

The instructional staff survey (see Appendix B)¹ paralleled the student instrument. Respondents were asked about their implementation of anti-racist grading practices, feedback approaches, and perceptions of effectiveness. Most items used a four-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always), with select questions including an additional "I don't know" option that was excluded from quantitative analysis but reviewed qualitatively. Professional development items used a five-point agreement scale. An open-ended question invited instructional staff to reflect on their grading philosophy and implementation practices.

¹Available in online version of this volume at <https://escholarship.org/uc/challengerresearchjournal>

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach that integrated quantitative and qualitative findings. Quantitative analyses began with descriptive statistics to examine overall patterns within the student and instructional staff samples. For each Likert-scale item, means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were calculated. Analyses were conducted for the full student sample, disaggregated by grading type and demographic group where appropriate, and for the instructional staff sample.

To examine differences across grading structures, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted comparing students enrolled in programs categorized as using alternative or anti-racist grading models to those enrolled in traditionally graded programs. Additional ANOVAs were conducted to examine differences across racial and ethnic groups. Given the relatively small sample size, these analyses were interpreted as identifying patterns within the sample rather than supporting broad generalization. For instructional staff responses, descriptive statistics were calculated to examine reported grading practices, perceptions of effectiveness, and professional development needs. Correlational analyses were conducted where appropriate to examine relationships between reported grading modifications and perceived student outcomes.

Qualitative responses from both students and instructional staff were analyzed using thematic analysis. Drawing on Wutich et al.'s (2021) meta-theme analysis framework, the analysis identified themes that appeared across institutional contexts and grading models. A hybrid deductive–inductive coding strategy was employed following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Initial a priori codes were developed based on the research question and theoretical framework, including constructs such as linguistic identity, grading bias, fairness, and anti-Blackness in assessment practices. These codes were refined iteratively as patterns emerged from the data. The integration of quantitative trends and qualitative themes allowed for examination of both structural grading differences and lived classroom experiences.

Ethical Considerations

To protect participant confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was collected. Surveys were administered through Google Forms with settings configured to prevent the collection of IP addresses or other identifying data. Demographic information was reported only in aggregate form to minimize the risk of indirect identification, particularly given the small sample

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size across some groups. All exported data were stored on secure, university-approved platforms in accordance with institutional research guidelines.

Limitations of the Survey

Voluntary participation may introduce self-selection bias, as respondents with stronger opinions or experiences may be more likely to participate. Additionally, because student and instructional staff responses were collected separately and anonymously, direct connections between student experiences and specific grading practices cannot be made.

Secondly, although this project is grounded in an anti-Blackness framework and was initially designed to focus specifically on Black students and Black language, I was not able to recruit solely Black or African American students for the sample. Data was collected from a broader population of students enrolled in or recently completing undergraduate writing courses. While this allowed for cross-group comparisons, it limited the ability to center Black students' experiences as the sole analytic focus. However, the responses from Black students who did participate still revealed patterns consistent with anti-Black linguistic racism, particularly in descriptions of language policing and disproportionate grading penalties.

Additionally, data collection occurred during the summer term, when significantly fewer sections of undergraduate writing courses were offered. This reduced the overall pool of potential participants and likely impacted both student and instructional staff response rates. Summer enrollment patterns may not fully reflect the broader academic year population, which limits the generalizability of these findings.

Furthermore, alternative grading practices are not implemented uniformly across writing programs or instructional staff, making direct comparisons more complex to analyze. The absence of classroom observation, syllabus analysis, or grading artifacts limits the ability to corroborate participant perceptions with tangible instructional practices. Finally, because this study is situated within a single university under a college system, the findings may not be generalizable across other institutions.

Data Preparation and Analytical Approach

Before analysis, all survey responses were reviewed for completeness. Submissions that did not contain sufficient data for analysis were removed.

Because no survey items were mandatory, participants were able to skip individual questions; therefore, sample sizes vary across survey sections and specific items.

Likert-scale responses were coded numerically for quantitative analysis. Student participants were grouped by grading structure based on their enrollment in programs categorized as utilizing alternative or anti-racist grading practices versus traditional grading practices. Given the overall sample size, analyses were designed to identify patterns and group differences within the sample rather than to support broad generalization. Quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics and single-factor ANOVA. Qualitative responses were organized and prepared for thematic coding.

To assess the internal consistency of the survey instrument, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for relevant Likert-scale constructs. Cronbach's alpha evaluates the degree to which items within a scale measure a cohesive underlying construct, with values above 0.70 generally indicating acceptable reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This analysis provided an estimate of the reliability of the survey items measuring perceptions of grading practices and linguistic discrimination.

Student Survey Results

A total of 27 student responses ($n=27$) were included in the analysis. Respondents represented undergraduate writing programs across UC San Diego's eight undergraduate colleges. Based on publicly available information from college writing program websites, including descriptions of grading practices and posted course syllabi, writing programs were organized as having either alternative or anti-racist grading models or traditional grading models. Of the student respondents, 14 were enrolled in courses categorized as using traditional grading models, while 13 were enrolled in courses categorized as using alternative or anti-racist grading models. The distribution of student survey responses by college is illustrated in Figure 1a.

The data was analyzed and separated according to the categories of questions posed in each survey. Student survey items assess academic outcomes, writing confidence, linguistic comfort and safety, perceptions of linguistic discrimination, instructional support and feedback, and perceptions of linguistic fairness in grading. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine differences in student experiences by grading type, and where appropriate, by racial or ethnic group.

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Student ANOVA Results

To examine the differences in student experiences across grading models, a series of ANOVAs was conducted to compare courses categorized as using anti-racist or alternative grading practices to those enrolled in courses using traditional grading practices. Additionally, ANOVAs were conducted to examine differences by racial or ethnic group. Due to the relatively small sample sizes across racial and ethnic groups, analyses focus on identifying patterns in student experiences rather than making broad generalizations.

Summary of Student ANOVA Findings

Across student outcomes, statistically significant differences emerged consistently when responses were analyzed by grading type rather than racial or ethnic group. Alternative grading practices were significantly associated with higher perceived academic success, greater writing confidence, increased comfort discussing linguistic challenges, and stronger beliefs that grading reduced linguistic discrimination. In contrast, perceptions related to instructor effort, feedback practices, and linguistic fairness did not differ significantly across grading models. This suggests variability in instructional implementation beyond grading structure alone.

Academic Outcomes

Statistically significant differences emerged for both academic success and writing confidence by grading type. Students enrolled in courses using alternative grading practices reported significantly higher perceptions of academic success than students in traditionally graded courses, $F(1, 25) = 5.30, p = .030$. Similarly, students in alternative grading contexts reported greater confidence in their writing abilities, $F(1, 25) = 5.68, p = .025$. No statistically significant difference in academic success or writing confidence was observed across racial or ethnic groups ($p > .05$).

Linguistic Comfort

Students' comfort discussing their linguistic background or challenges with instructional staff differed significantly by grading model. Students in an alternative grading context reported greater comfort than students in traditionally graded courses, $F(1, 25) = 4.37, p = .047$. There was no statistically significant difference in linguistic comfort across racial and ethnic groups, $F(3, 30) = 0.27, p = .848$.

Perceptions of Grading as Reducing Linguistic Discrimination

Students' beliefs that grading practices reduced linguistic discrimination differed significantly by grading type, $F(1, 25) = 4.70, p = .040$. Students in courses using alternative grading practices were significantly more likely to report that grading reduced linguistic discrimination compared to students in traditionally graded courses.

Beliefs about whether grading reduced linguistic discrimination also differed significantly by racial or ethnic group, $F(3, 30) = 3.94, p = .018$. More specifically, Latinx students reported the highest ratings, followed by Black/African American students and Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Desi-American students (APIMEDA).

Instructional Support and Feedback

There were no statistically significant differences by grading type for students' perception of instructor effort to understand linguistic challenges, $F(1, 25) = 2.30, p = .142$. Similarly, perceptions that instructor feedback considered students' linguistic backgrounds did not differ by grading type, $F(1, 25) = 1.53, p = .227$. Differences across racial or ethnic groups for perceptions of linguistically responsive feedback also were not statistically significant, $F(3, 30) = 2.81, p = .057$.

Linguistic Fairness in Grading

Analyses examining whether students believed their linguistic background was considered fairly in grading revealed no statistically significant differences by grading type, $F(1, 25) = 2.71, p = .112$.

Instructional Staff Survey Results

A total of 15 writing instructional staff responses ($n=15$) were included in this analysis. Respondents represented faculty, instructors, and teaching assistants across the undergraduate writing programs, categorized as utilizing antiracist or alternative grading practices ($n=9$) or traditional grading practices ($n=5$), with one respondent not specifying the college that they teach for or have taught in the past, and was excluded from grading type comparisons. ANOVAs were conducted to examine differences in instructional staff responses and self-reported practices by grading type.

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Summary of Instructional Staff Findings

Across instructional staff outcomes, there were no significant differences by grading type. While several measures approached significance, such as perceptions of engagement effectiveness and professional development, results did not meet the alpha threshold due to sample size. Overall, instructional staff across grading models reported relatively high commitment to linguistically responsive grading practice, with shared concerns regarding training and implementation support. These findings are treated as descriptive trends and contextualize the student survey results, and they are further explored in the Discussion section, particularly to discuss gaps between institutional intent and student experience.

Linguistically Responsive Grading Practices

There was no statistically significant difference between the grading models for instructional staff reports of considering students' linguistic backgrounds when grading $F(1,12) = 0.31, p = .590$. Similarly, no significant difference was observed for the implementation of grading practices that aimed at minimizing linguistic discrimination, $F(1, 12) = 0.10, p = .752$, or for modifying grading strategies to ensure fair assessment of linguistically diverse students, $F(1, 12) = 0.30, p = .595$. Although they were not statistically significant, these findings suggest that instructional staff across both grading models reported similar levels of engagement with linguistically responsive grading practices.

Feedback and Instructor Effort

There were no statistically significant differences by grading type in instructional staff reports of providing feedback that acknowledges students' individual writing progress without penalizing linguistic differences, $F(1,12) = 0.01, p = .930$. Similarly, there were no significant differences found in reported effort to understand students' linguistic challenges, $F(1, 12) = 2.25, p = .159$. Although mean differences favored alternative grading contexts for some measures, these differences did not reach statistical significance within the sample.

Training and Professional Development

There were no statistically significant differences found by grading type regarding instructional staff agreement that they had received sufficient training on implementing alternative grading practices, $F(1,12) = 2.03, p = .180$. Additionally, perceptions of the need for more professional development did not differ significantly across grading models, $F(1,11) = 4.20, p = .065$.

Perceptions of Anti-Racist Grading Effectiveness

Instructional staff perceptions of the effectiveness of alternative grading practices in improving student motivation did not differ significantly by grading type, $F(1,11) = 4.51, p = .057$. While it was close to reaching statistical significance, it didn't meet the alpha level of .05. There were no statistically significant differences observed for perceptions that anti-racist grading practices lead to better writing outcomes for linguistically diverse students, $F(1,12) = 3.09, p = .104$.

Qualitative Findings: Students and Instructional Staff Perspectives

The qualitative findings come from the open-ended responses at the end of the student and instructional staff surveys. Students were asked to describe their experiences in their course and what practices supported or did not support their development as writers. Instructional staff were asked to reflect on their responses provided in the survey and any insights they have about the implementation of alternative grading practices. All responses were coded thematically, and representative excerpts are presented using anonymized identifiers that include participant role and college writing program (e.g., Student A, Marshall College – DOC; Instructional Staff A, Eight College – CCE). The purpose of integrating student and instructional staff perspectives highlights the alignment and tension between grading philosophy and lived classroom experience.

Identity Recognition and Linguistic Validation as Support for Learning

Across student responses, a recurring theme was the importance of grading and feedback practices that recognized linguistic and cultural identity as assets rather than deficits. Students enrolled in programs using holistic, contract, or alternative grading practices frequently described feeling encouraged to prioritize meaning, voice, and rhetorical clarity over grammatical perfection.

As one student in Marshall College explained: "My TA encouraged me to show my cultural background in my assignments and to focus on conveying my words rather than perfect punctuation... I'm a better writer because of that." (Student A, Marshall College – Dimensions of Culture)

Instructional Staff teaching in an alternative grading context articulated similar commitments.

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One instructional staff respondent from Eighth College stated: "Because Eighth College is founded on equity and social justice, it's important for all students to have an equitable chance to succeed while learning the fundamental values of writing." (Instructional Staff A, Eighth College – Critical Community Engagement) These perspectives suggest that when grading practices affirm linguistic diversity, students are more likely to experience writing as developmental and affirming.

Pressure to Conform to Standard English and Linguistic Constraint

There were several students, particularly those enrolled in traditionally graded programs, who described feeling pressure to conform to rigid SE norms. They described that these pressures resulted in writing that felt constrained or inauthentic. "Writing often felt robotic and unnatural because I felt like I had to write a certain way to get a good grade." (Student B, Revelle College – Humanities Program)

Writing instructional staff noted that there are structural constraints that may unintentionally reinforce such pressures. "It's hard to know what each student's linguistic background is without making stereotypical judgments... with a large class and a lot of grading, it feels impossible to individualize assessment." (Faculty B, Warren College – Writing Program)

Instructional Support and TA Mediation

Multiple responses from students emphasized how central teaching assistants and instructors were in mediating their experiences with grading. Office hours and individualized feedback were frequently described as the most impactful forms of support. "Going to my TA's and instructor's office hours helped a lot... I could focus on learning without adherence to certain writing norms." (Student C, Sixth College – CAT)

Instructional staff also described the challenge of ensuring consistency of grading practices across teaching. "Many TAs do not have experience or training in the teaching of writing, let alone anti-racist assessment practices. Translating that vision across a large instructional team is the biggest challenge." (Faculty C, Eleanor Roosevelt College – MMW)

All together, these alignments reveal that student success often depends on individualized support, while instructors face structural barriers to consistent implementation.

Holistic and Contract Grading as Stress-Reducing Structures

Students enrolled in programs using holistic contract grading frequently described these models as reducing stress and shifting attention away from point accumulation to learning and revision. "We had a holistic grading rubric... graded on quality rather than perfect English. I still passed the class with an A thanks to the grading." (Student D, Seventh College – Synthesis)

One instructional staff member teaching in similar contexts reported observing similar outcomes. "We've had overwhelmingly positive responses from students... they're more engaged and less anxious about grades." (Faculty D, Eighth College – Critical Community Engagement)

Inconsistent or Punitive Grading and Experiences of Harm

A small subset of student responses, particularly from Black students, described experiences that reflect anti-Blackness in grading and feedback practices, shown mostly through the policing of language and disproportionate penalties in assessment. Although these practices were not always described by participants as explicitly racialized, they function as racialized forms of assessment given the historical association between Black language and deficit-based evaluation in writing. One student shared: "Some TAs would take entire points off for an inappropriately placed comma... it felt like a show of power rather than help." (Student E, Muir College – Muir College Writing Program)

Another student described how repeated corrections of language affected their confidence in writing: "It made me feel like no matter how strong my ideas were, the way I wrote would always be wrong." (Student F, Revelle College – Humanities Program)

Based on the responses from instructional staff, their responses suggest that these harms were often unintentional and tied to structural constraints, including limited training and inconsistent implementation of grading practices. These findings reveal that anti-Blackness in grading emerged across both traditional and alternative grading contexts, highlighting that grading structure alone does not prevent racialized linguistic harm.

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Discussion

This multi-case study examines how grading practices in undergraduate writing courses shape student experiences and instructional implementation across the eight undergraduate colleges at UC San Diego. Quantitative and qualitative findings from students and writing instructional staff show that grading structures influence student confidence, academic success, perceptions of fairness, and the limits of grading reform when institutions lack consistent implementation.

Quantitative analyses show that students enrolled in courses using alternative grading practices, such as labor-based or anti-racist grading, reported significantly higher academic success, greater writing confidence, increased comfort discussing linguistic challenges, and stronger beliefs that grading reduced linguistic discrimination than students in traditionally graded courses. Qualitative responses contextualize these patterns. Students in alternative grading contexts often described feeling less anxious about linguistic correctness and more able to focus on learning rather than avoiding errors, while also feeling more supported in their writing development. These findings align with scholarship that critiques traditional grading for reinforcing Standard Language Ideology and penalizing linguistic difference.

The findings reflect broader patterns of perceived linguistic bias in assessment rather than direct measurement of AAVE-specific penalization. Because the study includes a relatively small sample size, particularly across racial and ethnic subgroups, the analysis does not examine linguistic features at a granular level. Future research could extend this work by analyzing graded assignments, instructor feedback, and rubric language to more directly examine how instructors evaluate AAVE and other Black linguistic practices in academic writing.

The qualitative findings also show that grading structures alone do not guarantee equitable outcomes. Participants described significant variation in how instructors implemented grading practices across programs, sections, and classrooms. Although some programs identify their grading systems as alternative or anti-racist, instructors did not always apply these approaches consistently. Instructional staff frequently cited structural constraints such as limited training and professional development for teaching assistants, large class sizes, and heavy reliance on TAs for grading. These conditions often shaped students' experiences more than the stated grading philosophy of a program.

Students also reported instances of language policing and disproportionate penalties for minor grammatical errors across both traditional and alternative grading contexts. Black/African American students in particular described experiences that reflected anti-Black linguistic bias in evaluation. These patterns suggest that anti-racist grading must function as an institutional practice supported through consistent training and implementation rather than as a stand-alone grading model.

Conclusion

This study examines how grading structures in undergraduate writing programs shape students' perceptions of academic success, writing ability, and linguistic fairness. Students enrolled in programs that use alternative or anti-racist grading structures reported significantly higher perceptions of academic success, writing ability, and reduced linguistic discrimination than students in traditionally graded programs. Comparisons across racial and ethnic groups further show that students do not experience grading structures in the same way, highlighting assessment as a structural site where institutions can reproduce or disrupt inequities. However, instructional staff did not report statistically significant differences in their use of linguistically responsive grading practices across grading structures, revealing a gap between grading philosophy and classroom practice. These findings suggest that grading structures alone cannot eliminate linguistic bias; institutions must also support consistent implementation, training, and accountability.

These findings carry several implications for writing programs. Programs should provide professional development on Standard Language Ideology, linguistic diversity, and anti-Black linguistic discrimination to support consistent implementation of equitable grading practices, particularly for teaching assistants who often serve as primary graders. Programs should also adopt more transparent grading criteria that distinguish rhetorical effectiveness from surface-level grammatical conventions. In addition, institutions should regularly examine student perceptions across racial and linguistic groups rather than relying solely on aggregate grade outcomes, since inequities may appear in perceptions of fairness and belonging even when grades remain similar.

Although this study draws on scholarship about Black Language and African American Vernacular English, it measures broader perceptions of linguistic discrimination rather than specific linguistic features. Future research could extend this work by analyzing graded assignments, instructor feedback, and rubric

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language to examine how instructors evaluate AAVE and other Black linguistic practices in writing classrooms. Larger datasets could support more detailed subgroup analyses, while longitudinal studies could examine how alternative grading models influence students' academic development and sense of belonging over time.

Many institutions treat grading primarily as a teaching practice, but grading also functions as a gatekeeping mechanism in higher education. Efforts to reform grading must therefore operate as structural interventions rather than symbolic gestures. Because writing courses often represent students' first sustained encounter with academic evaluation, grading practices shape not only writing outcomes but also which linguistic practices institutions recognize as legitimate in academic spaces.

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Appendix A Student Survey

Key Terms

- **LinguisticBackground** : The language(s) someone speaks or has been exposed to.
- **LinguisticDiscrimination** : Unfair treatment based on language use (Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024).
- **StandardEnglish** : English in its most widely accepted form, adhering to fixed academic norms, and neutralizing nonstandard variation.

Section 1. Demographic Questions

1. **What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply)**
 - ☐ American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous
 - ☐ East Asian
 - ☐ Southeast Asian
 - ☐ Black or African American
 - ☐ Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latine
 - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - ☐ White
 - ☐ Other: _____
2. **Were you born in the United States?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
3. **Were your parents/guardians born in the United States?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ Yes for one, but not both
 - ☐ No
4. **Did you speak Standard English growing up?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ Sometimes
 - ☐ No

Section 2. Experience With Anti-Racist Grading Practices

5. I believe my linguistic background is/was considered fairly in my writing course grading.
Scale: 1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always
6. My writing instructor(s) provided feedback that considers my linguistic background and development rather than penalizing my differences.
Scale: 1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always

ANTI-RACIST WRITING PEDAGOGY IN UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE COURSES

7. I believe the grading practices in my writing course(s) help/helped reduce linguistic discrimination.

Scale: 1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always

Section 3. Confidence and Support

8. I feel/felt comfortable discussing my linguistic background or challenges with my writing instructor(s).

Scale: 1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always

9. My writing instructor(s) make/made an effort to understand the barriers I face/faced with language in academic writing.

Scale: 1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always

Section 4. Impact on Academic Success

10. The grading practices in my writing course(s) help/helped me feel more confident in my writing abilities.

Scale: 1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always

11. I believe that the current grading practices in my writing course(s) help/helped me succeed academically.

Scale: 1=Never 2=Rarely 3=Sometimes 4=Often 5=Always

Section 4. Reflections on Instructor Support

12. To what extent do you agree: "More individualized feedback from my writing instructor(would/would have helped me better understand how my writing is/was graded?"

Scale: 1=Not at all 2=Somewhat 3=Mostly 4=Completely 5=I'm not sure

Section 5. Open-Ended Questions

13. Describe what has been most helpful for your academic success in your writing course(s) in terms of direct support from the instructor(s), feedback on assignments, and/or grading practices.
14. Describe what has been least helpful, or needed but not provided, for your academic success in your writing course(s) in terms of direct support from the instructor(s), feedback on assignments, and/or grading practices.

Appendix B
Instructional Staff

Important Key Term(s):

- **Anti-Racist Grading** : An assessment approach that challenges white language supremacy by valuing linguistic diversity, prioritizing student labor over standardized correctness, and mitigating racial and linguistic biases in grading practices (Inoue, 2015; 2019).

Section 1. Implementation of Anti-Racist Grading Practices

1. I consider students' linguistic backgrounds when grading their writing assignments in undergraduate writing courses.
Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Most of the time, 4 = Always
2. I actively implement grading practices that minimize linguistic discrimination in my assessments for undergraduate writing courses.
Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Most of the time, 4 = Always
3. I modify my grading strategies to ensure that students from linguistically diverse backgrounds are fairly assessed in undergraduate writing courses.
Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Most of the time, 4 = Always

Section 2. Feedback and Support

4. I provide students with feedback that acknowledges their individual writing progress, without penalty for linguistic differences in undergraduate writing courses.
Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Most of the time, 4 = Always
5. I make an effort to understand the linguistic challenges my students face in their writing in undergraduate writing courses.
Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Most of the time, 4 = Always

Section 3. Effectiveness of Anti-Racist Grading

6. Anti-racist grading practices improve student engagement and motivation in undergraduate writing courses.
Scale: 1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Most of the time, 4=Always, 5= I don't know

ANTI-RACIST WRITING PEDAGOGY IN UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE COURSES

7. Anti-racist grading practices lead to better writing outcomes for students from linguistically diverse backgrounds in undergraduate writing courses.

Scale: 1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Most of the time, 4=Always, 5= I don't know

Section 4. Professional Development

8. To what extent do you agree: “I have received sufficient training on implementing anti-racist grading practices for undergraduate writing courses.”

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

9. To what extent do you agree: “I would benefit from more resources or professional development on anti-racist grading practices for undergraduate writing courses.”

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

Section 5. Open Ended Reflections

10. Please share any additional information regarding your understanding and/or implementation of anti-racist grading in your teaching practice for undergraduate writing courses. This may include new reflections after answering the questions in this survey or any other comments you have.

Meet the Author

Maya Adenihun



Biography

Maya Adenihun is a 3rd year undergrad studying World Literature and Culture. She aspires to be a Comparative Literature professor and creative writer with research interests in surrealism, religion, and mythology in literature and cinema, postcolonialism, speculative fiction, English, French, Latin, and Japanese literature, intellectual history, and more. In her spare time, she likes to write, journal, play video games, and talk during movies with her friends.

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"My experience with research helped me understand the importance of using international philosophies to study literature and how I couldn't have realized that without the McNair Program supporting my scholarship."

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Afrosurrealist Aesthetic in Selected Stories in Sheree R. Thomas's *Dark Matter*

Maya Adenihun | Advised by Dr. Gabriel Bámgbóšé

Abstract

This paper explores how allusions to mythology in "Anansi Meets Peter Parker at the Taco Bell on Lexington" by Douglas Kearney, "The Magical Negro" by Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, and "Aftermoon" by Tananarive Due from *Dark Matter* by Sheree R. Thomas exemplifies an Afrosurrealist literary aesthetic. Using James Scott theory of public and hidden transcript, Nelson Maldonado-Torres theory of the coloniality of being, and Isidore Okpewho's definition of myth, mythology signifies aesthetics of mysticism and grotesque and a rejection of linear time to demonstrate patterns of oppression and how colonialism affects present reality to create a surreal experience. In "Anansi Meets Peter Parker at the Taco Bell on Lexington," the parallels of Anansi to Spiderman and B'rer Rabbit to Bugs Bunny demonstrate the absurdity of racial economic inequality from cultural production. In "The Magical Negro," references to Thor the Brave from Norse mythology critique the trope of a "magical negro" by disrupting the narrative and directly addressing the reader's participation. In "Aftermoon" the protagonist, Kenya tries to hide that she is a werewolf to be desirable to romantic partners, critiquing the absurdity of Modern, Eurocentric beauty standards having high social power. Understanding how allusions to mythology work as an Afrosurreal literary aesthetic can illustrate how surrealism can be approached in different cultural contexts.

Introduction

Dark Matter: Reading the Bones is a collection of speculative fiction stories written by Black and African Diaspora writers edited by Sheree R. Thomas, published in 2004. As this is the second volume of her *Dark Matter* anthology series, she specifically collected stories that would demonstrate the wide range of aesthetics, genres, and styles of Afrodiasporic speculative storytelling. Many of the stories use speculation to address cultural issues and the legacy of European imperialism in genres ranging from myth retellings to science fiction. In this analysis, I explore how Douglas Kearney's "Anansi Meets Peter Parker at the Taco Bell on Lexington," Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu's "The Magical Negro," and Tananarive Due's "Aftermoon" employ allusions to mythology to address how the legacy of racist narratives damage African American life. I then assess how they can be analyzed alongside and expand on the aesthetics of Afrosurrealism.

Literature and Theoretical Review

The term "Afrosurrealism" was first used to describe the literary work of Henry Dumas in Amiri Baraka's article "Henry Dumas: Afro-surreal Expressionist." To Baraka, Henry Dumas' work was mythological but still had a lot of imagery tied to Black folklore and culture. He was creating his own world, but was still grounded in our reality. Drawing on the work of other Black writers like

Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, he proposed that Afrosurrealism is "black mythological lyricism, strange yet ethnically familiar" and "uses the revelation of truth as a function of its beauty" (Baraka 164-5). From there, many definitions and manifestos have been written on what Afrosurrealism is. To study how Black speculative fiction can be analyzed through Afrosurrealism, this paper will draw from these definitions to demonstrate how Afrosurrealism can be signified with allusions to mythology.

The selected stories' allusions to mythology follows an element of Afrosurrealist aesthetics: mysticism. By using a qualitative approach proposed by Isidore Okpewho, myth and mythology are understood as a mode of imaginative activity that mixes fact and fiction. This mode of imaginative activity is a separate form of knowledge and understanding of the world that can explore "cultural and existential issues" (Okpewho 69). Literary allusions to mythology can be understood as mystic because myth emphasizes imagination and play, and the authors of the stories use mythology to speculate a different understanding of Black issues. Additionally, according to D. Scot Miller's "Afrosurreal Manifesto," Afrosurrealism is "mystical and metaphorical.... necessary to transform how we see things now" (114-5). Afrosurrealism is focused on the present because anything that would happen in the future has already happened (114).

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It rejects linear time to demonstrate patterns of oppression and critically engage with the past and present-day to highlight the oppression of Black people.

According to Rochelle Spencer, Afrosurrealism creates a grotesque aesthetic by being discordant and illogical. Irrationality calls back to the origins of surrealism, particularly in its rejection of the Enlightenment period's core principle: logical thinking (2, 11). Being discordant and illogical to that Enlightenment thinking makes the stories appear shocking and subvert the audience's expectations of what narratives about Black people are supposed to look like.

Afrosurrealism's rejection of the Enlightenment's principles can be further used to explore a novel aspect of movement: postcolonialism. A common theme of Afrosurrealism is that time is circular. Afrosurrealism is focused on the present because Afrosurrealists see how the present is haunted by the past and uses the past to predict the future. Postcolonialism maintains a similar argument, understanding how the history of colonialism has affected countries even after they gain independence from colonial administrations. Afrosurrealism can be a form of postcolonial critique as it is concerned with the history of Black people globally in relation to their diaspora caused by European imperialism. Furthermore, the theory of coloniality of being by Nelson Maldonado-Torres suggests how colonialism affected oppressed people on a philosophical level: "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (Maldonado-Torres). Combining the theories together, Afrosurrealism's critique of power demonstrates how colonialism affects reality to create a surreal experience. For the characters of these stories, they live in a surreal reality because of a cyclic pattern of oppression where the contemporary material and non-material lives of Black people are affected by the legacy of colonialism. Additionally, as Afrosurrealism builds on Surrealism's critique of Enlightenment thinking, the dominant narrative and cultural production caused by colonialism will be what is critiqued in these stories.

Furthermore, allusions to mythology can be used as a method of postcolonial critique of power because it can be interpreted by James Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts introduced in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. The public transcript is the self-portrait of dominant elites have to naturalize their power (Scott 18).

The hidden transcript is the way subordinate groups make use of disguise, deception, and indirection while maintaining an outward impression of enthusiastic consent to act out a fantasy of anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination (17, 37-8). It is through the hidden transcript that the public transcript is reacted to, rejected, or critiqued. Enslaved Africans deployed hidden transcripts in these ways to challenge the system of slavery and how it is perpetuated. White enslavers used the paternalist ideology to justify enslaving Africans, meaning they saw themselves as civilized humans who had to take care of and guide enslaved Africans like children. Those enslaved Africans would use this to their advantage by appearing to need guidance and care to receive better treatment and tools (18). Scott also points out that folktales can serve as a public transcript because they can happen in the public view but have a double meaning. This is evident in Brer Rabbit stories from African American folktales, where the weak triumph over the strong with wit, and how the more common folk hero has historically been the trickster figure who manages to outwit his adversary and escape unscathed (19, 41). Knowing this, allusions to mythology in these stories can be interpreted as a hidden transcript because they are used to reject the domination perpetuated by public transcript in the same way that Afrosurrealism critiques postcolonial power and narrative.

Anansi Meets Peter Parker at the Taco Bell on Lexington by Douglas Kearny (2000)

In this short story, a character called Anansi goes to a Taco Bell on Lexington Avenue in New York City. Even though the quality is terrible, he gets \$0.69 bean burritos because it is all he can afford. Anansi then gets annoyed when his picture is taken by Peter Parker, who wants him to be in his article about obscure figures in New York. Anansi agrees to have Peter Parker take more pictures for some cash. He tells him about the many adventures he has had since ancient times, but Peter has never heard of him and they go their separate ways. Two weeks later, the extra money runs out, and Anansi goes to buy more bean burritos. In a window he sees Spiderman swinging from buildings. He laments on how famous Spiderman is but isn't bitter because he doesn't want the same thing that happened to Brer Rabbit after Bugs Bunny to happen to him.

The allusion to mythology in this story is with the central character Anansi. Anansi is the name of a trickster figure who can take the form of a spider or a man. He originates from the mythology of the Ashanti and Akan people who populate southern Ghana. Given their geographical origin, it's likely that the myth of Anansi

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is part of the many influences of African American culture since West Africa is where many enslaved Africans traded into the US came from. Thus, there is a parallel between Spiderman and Anansi: Anansi can take the form of a spider or a man, while Spiderman can take on the form of a superhero or the civilian Peter Parker.

The parallel between Anansi and Spiderman is expanded when the author Kearney makes a reference to Brer Rabbit and Bugs Bunny. Margaret Baker has highlighted these parallels in the essay "The Rabbit as Trickster." They are both trickster rabbit characters, with Brer Rabbit coming from African American folktales and Bugs Bunny coming from the tv show Looney Tunes. Despite these characters being similar, there is a clear difference in their cultural capital and relevance in the US. Brer Rabbit and Anansi are obscure in the US, despite both having origins that are centuries old. This is highlighted in the story with how Peter Parker doesn't recognize Anansi and is interested in him as a "quaint & obscure local character" (Kearney 89). Brer Rabbit's last appearance in popular American culture was in the film *Song of the South* (1946). In this film, a character named Uncle Remus tells stories of Brer Rabbit to African American sharecroppers, and the film's protagonist Johnny whose grandma owns the plantation the sharecroppers work. The film has received criticism over the years for its depiction of African Americans as subservient. Bugs Bunny from Looney Tunes on the other hand is a very beloved American cultural icon who is still featured in many projects by the Warner Bros. corporation.

But this story makes a point about how this cultural relevance is tied to the economic reality of these characters' lives. Later on in the story, Anansi comments on how famous Spiderman is and beloved in American media. He says, "i see some jackass in red & blue spandex swingin down lexington with some half-ass spider moves. next day the same clown get front page of the—daily bugle? hmmph spiderman. got his own book, tv show, movie & everythang" (Kearney 90). Similar to Bugs Bunny and Brer Rabbit, Spiderman is beloved in American culture and media while Anansi is not. This directly translates to their economic situation, as Anansi has to eat \$0.69 burritos and Spiderman is much more well-off. This is where a reading of Afrosurrealism can be read because of the allusion to Anansi from Ashanti and Akan mythology. Anansi, an ancient figure with a plethora of interesting stories and experiences and a trickster, also has relevance in the U.S. by being a direct inspiration for Spiderman. However, while Anansi is a

character that is deeply tied to African mythology, Spiderman's character is largely tailored to appeal to American culture and audiences. Thus, when Anansi's picture is taken by Peter Parker for the Daily Bugle without his consent, Anansi's upset reaction not only serves as a response to a disregard of his personal autonomy, but also speaks to the greater displeasure of Black people in having an aspect of their culture taken, converted, and commodified to fit an entirely different group of people with no real credit to the originators. Likewise, Anansi's remark about Spiderman being a "jackass with half-ass spider moves" serves to both highlight how Spiderman is a watered-down version of the Anansi from African mythology and his personal outrage at being a direct inspiration for the character and yet having little money to show for his significant role.

The absurdity is exemplified with how Anansi cannot openly complain about the situation. Anansi knows that if he does, he will end up like Brer Rabbit. Essentially, if he tries to exert himself into American media, he will end up in media that undermines him and his culture. This very thing happens when Peter Parker takes pictures of him, without his permission, because Peter Parker thinks he is strange. This is also where the public and hidden transcript can be read. The public transcript is that white, American culture is superior where African American is inferior. This is enforced by the media projects of Spiderman and Bugs Bunny who are hailed as the heroes of their stories, while Anansi and Brer Rabbit are disregarded and if featured, play subservient or stereotypical roles. Afrosurrealism is demonstrated in the absurdity of Spiderman and Anansi's racial economic inequality. However, the hidden transcript can be seen in how Anansi chooses to not be bitter. He would rather be obscure in American media than featured and treated with disrespect. He can live out this hidden transcript by looking to the past to understand what is happening in the present and what will happen in the future. Anansi looked to the past to understand the present racial, economic inequality he faces and accepts the absurdity.

The Magical Negro by Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu (2004)

This story starts with a character named Thor the Brave running away from shadow creatures that are going to suck the soul out of his body. Just as he stands at a cliff about to die, a man called "the African Man" appears. Floating above the ground, the African Man tells Thor he must use his heart to activate his amulet and save himself. The African Man dies while trying to save Thor, but then comes back to life and curses at Thor and the shadow creatures for thinking he was going to die. After chastising everyone, the African Man then proclaims

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himself "The Magical Negro", kills everybody, and walks off to start his own adventure.

The allusion to mythology in this story starts with the character Thor the Brave as a reference to the Thor god of Norse Mythology. The amulet Thor wears is referring to protective amulets worn in the Viking Age known as "Thor's hammers" (Lindow 489). In this story, Thor represents the stereotypical image Europeans have of themselves as beautiful, just, and civil people. This image, notably, was used as justification for the colonization of African societies by painting African people as savage in comparison and in need of help from Europeans to become civil. When Thor is backed to a cliff by "the shadows," the African Man helps Thor use his amulet to protect himself then dies.

The public transcript of the narrative is demonstrated with the imagery of Thor and the shadows. The shadows that Thor runs away from are characterized with European stereotypes of Africans. They are "horrible black things" (91) that induce gruesome torture on their victims and leave "rotten filthy blackness behind" (92). When The African Man appears, he is described as "equally dark [as the shadows]". Thor, on the other hand, is characterized in European ideals. The story introduces him with "long blond hair blowing in the breeze" (92). He brings justice to the world and his country with his sword and has a "beautiful, fair wife and lovely daughter, Chastity" (92-3). Reading this characterization as public transcript, he is the self image of Europeans – beautiful and just. Not only that, the narrator emphasizes Thor's own concern with his self image. When The African Man is about to die, Thor is sad because he wanted to be the only one who dies on the cliff: "this moment was about his martyrdom only" (92). Another aspect of the public transcript is that "elites are also consumers of their own performance" (Scott 49). Thor wants to maintain the idea of himself as justice for his country even in death by calling it "martyrdom". This is the public transcript of the story up to this point: Africans are evil and violent creatures that must be destroyed by benevolent Europeans, except for the ones with mystical powers that can help Europeans.

The hidden transcript then can be read when the African Man renames himself as The Magical Negro, and rejects the quiet servitude he was put in by the narrative. The phrase "Magical Negro" refers to a trope in Hollywood movies where Black characters use their spirituality, mysticism, or otherwise otherworldly knowledge to help white characters' dilemmas. As Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham state, this

trope emerged from white screenwriters who are unaware of Black people's lives and therefore had to write them into stories based on stereotypes from earlier depictions of Black people like minstrel shows (136). In this trope, Black characters usually don't have storylines outside of their subservient role and often die before the movie ends. The first half of the story plays into this trope, with The Magical Negro helping Thor use his amulet and then getting stabbed. But the second half subverts this trope with The Magical Negro killing Thor, giving him an unceremonious death instead of the dramatic one he had hoped. The hidden transcript is found in how The Magical Negro names himself after this trope. He acknowledges that his mystic knowledge was used in the narrative to help Thor, but he uses it to resurrect himself and reclaim his humanity in the narrative.

This story is an Afrosurrealist critique of Black people in narratives. The story exemplifies the grotesque aesthetic of Afrosurrealism by defying the logic of the narrative by rejecting Thor and directly confronting the reader's expectations. As The Magical Negro takes control of the narrative, the story itself changes with him. He addresses the reader directly by saying "Looking directly at you, the reader. 'All this bullshit you readin' is 'bout to change. The Magical Negro ain't gettin' his ass kicked 'round here no more'" (94). By doing this, he is breaking the confines of the narrative that we as the readers participate in. Additionally, he controls the narrator of the story so he is able to define how he is seen. The third party The Magical Negro refers to when he yells at the sky could be the omniscient third person narrator, who controls the narrative and participates in the public transcript. The narrator details the imagery of righteousness and justice onto Thor to create his self image as an elite in the public transcript. He referred to The Magical Negro as The African Man, as that is how Thor saw him. But once he calls himself The Magical Negro and kills Thor, the narrator refers to him as The Magical Negro and narrates how he talks to the readers directly.

The Afrosurreal is also signified with the story's relationship with time. The Magical Negro emphasizes "'Damn, how many times? Always the same shit!'" when he sees blood oozing from his chest (93). The italicized words, "how", "times", and "always" emphasizes how this Magical Negro narrative is reoccurring. Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham analyzed that The Magical Negro trope is a reinvention of racist stereotypes created to justify enslavement and the subordination of Black people in the US (138-9). It shares many characteristics of older tropes such as The Mammy and The Uncle Tom: the Black characters in these tropes sacrifice their lives to save white characters and are

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happy to serve their needs. The Magical Negro is aware of and resents how he is stuck in a narrative similar to other racist tropes. The pattern of oppression is present here in how, what has happened in the past, is happening currently, and will continue to happen in the future. But since he is aware of this troupe, he knows how to resist it.

The allusion to Old Norse Mythology with Thor is necessary to create an Afrosurreal aesthetic in this story. It exemplifies the power The Magical Negro is able to defy characters that are like gods, but also able to change the narrative structure he is in. He is able to create new narratives and worlds by using his mystic powers to help himself instead of Europeans.

Aftermoon by Tananarive Due (2004)

Aftermoon is about Kenya, a young woman with an internal conflict: she is about to marry her fiancé who doesn't know she is a werewolf. To help her, Kenya meets a doctor named Dr. Jack, who gives her cosmetic products to remove her werewolf hair. While Dr. Jack gives Kenya the products, he also advises against her using them and instead advocates for her to embrace her werewolf side by joining the werewolf group meetings he organizes. Although Kenya takes the cosmetic products and declines Dr. Jack's offer, she daydreams about meeting a werewolf man in the group on the train home.

The issue posited by this story is of desirability in Black bodies. The protagonist Kenya is a werewolf who gets paste from Dr. Jack, another werewolf, so she can hide her fur from her human fiancé. As mythological creatures, werewolves demonstrate the Afrosurreal experience of social isolation and undesirability caused by the dominant culture of Eurocentric beauty standards.

The public transcript illustrated in this story is that werewolves are violent creatures who can't control their desires, and therefore need to be killed to protect everyone else. An important allusion to werewolves explored in this story is to *The Wolf Man* (1941), of which Dr. Jack has a movie poster in his examination room. *The Wolf Man* is a film about a man who turns into a wolf when he thinks about a woman he is attracted to. He is killed at the end of the movie after he ends up killing two men out of uncontrollable aggression. To Kenya, she thinks the movie is a harmful caricature like *Mammies* and *pickaninnies* (191). Drawing the similarity to minstrelsy shows, how Black people are depicted in those shows as lazy and dim-witted is also public

transcript. They are both subordinate to the dominants in those narratives, namely desirable white Americans.

To further illustrate how werewolves symbolize undesirable people in the narrative, the use of werewolves in both stories can be viewed with Monster Theory by Jeffery J. Cohen. Jeffrey J. Cohen's monster theory claims that monsters represent the cultural fear of political differences (7-8); here, the werewolf speaks to the United States' conservatism about sex, exemplifying potential violence caused by desire and instinct. Their deaths are needed to represent the dominant image that sexual desires need to be suppressed. Larry, the protagonist and titular wolf man from the film, and Kenya as werewolves are subordinate in this narrative. Both fear their violent nature when they are in werewolf form: Larry with how he kills a village man, and Kenya with how she kills animals on Moon Nights. They are also surrounded by family who pathologize and try to hide their curse: Larry's father says Larry is delusional and Kenya's parents pathologize her lycanthropy as a hormonal condition. Kenya fantasizes about meeting another wolf man in Dr. Jack's werewolf group meetings and wants to join them but pushes those desires down to be with her fiancé. She is also haunted by the memory of a guy from college backing away from her when he felt a patch of fur between her breasts. Knowing and experiencing the dominant narrative that werewolves are dangerous and unlovable, Kenya fears and battles her authentic self, eventually pushing it down and erasing it so she can be accepted.

The hidden transcript can then be found in how Dr. Jack and Kenya's grandpa embrace their werewolf characteristics. Dr. Jack doesn't cut his fur, organizes group meetings for other werewolves on his own time, and he is the one who had *The Wolf Man* movie poster on his office wall proudly. Kenya's grandpa says that "conventional people" will see Kenya as a monster, but encourages her to embrace being a werewolf. He feels no shame about it, even as he lives in social isolation. Both characters still exist within the narrative that werewolves are violent and dangerous monsters without betraying or being ashamed of their characteristics. They are still able to live satisfying, fulfilling lives even though they live in the margins of society.

Yet the fact that they have to live in the margins demonstrates the physical cost of undesirability for Black people. Applying Monster Theory, werewolves can be understood as a metaphor for undesirability. Kenya feels the need to always ignore her desires and instincts. Undesirability causes social isolation, as seen with the fact that Grandpa's neighbors don't interact with him at all.

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Kenya's solution to her hair growth is a paste, which Dr. Jack gives Kenya a paste to stop her werewolf hair growth and remarks, "modern times modern solutions" (192). This is where Afrosurrealism can be read as a counterculture to modernity as proposed by Jonathan Eburne. Kenya's werewolf hair is subordinate to the dominant culture that wants female bodies to be hairless. To highlight the absurdity of this expectation, werewolves are used as a metaphor of the undesirable features Kenya naturally has. The psychological damage of this is demonstrated with how Kenya has developed a daydreaming habit about being accepted to separate herself from reality.

Conclusion

The implication of my analysis is that Afrosurrealism in these black speculative fiction stories can be a form of postcolonial critique. They take a surrealist approach to exploring Black people in narratives and society to connect it to the history of African Americans as neocolonial subjects in the United States. Anansi's inability to defend himself from Peter Parker's violation of his privacy, when viewed through an Afrosurrealist lens, reveals how Black characters like Anansi are forced to either become caricatures of themselves to reap cultural and economic benefits or remain true to who they are and risk access to basic needs. "The Magical Negro"'s analysis highlights a reclamation of stereotypes and harmful rhetoric by giving power back to characters once used as objects that moved a story. "Afternoon" spotlights the harm done unto Black people due to stereotyping and othering of natural characteristics through Kenya's journey. In order to feel desirable when using the hegemonic ideal as a guide, Kenya must relinquish her werewolf side and feels constantly ashamed for who she truly is. Analyzing texts through an Afrosurrealist lens allows the experiences of these characters to be seen in their full complexity within the text and in relation to the post-colonial treatment of Black people, rather than being reduced to harmful tropes. This approach thus not only serves as a tool to critique literature but also is a form of empowerment by centering Black voices and stories in a way that honors their agency, complexity, and humanity.

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Meet the Author

Siyuan Liu

Biography

Liu graduated from UCSD in March of 2025. He was a History major with a research interest in Chinese and modern European history. UCSD has given him the opportunity to conduct an independent research project through the History Honors Program. Currently, his research focus has shifted more towards Chinese history and politics, as well as social media, but this research project has given him not only substantial research experience but also confidence for his future career.



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Although the project itself is titled an independent research project, completing it involved assistance from people from various groups. With special thanks to my instructor, Professor Jan Hansen, here, I'd like to express my appreciation to all the scholars who once offered me insightful assistance, including Professor Nancy Kwak and Dr. Chen Xi. In addition, I would like to thank my interviewees for generously contributing their time and stories to academia. For the sake of potential political threats, their names are deliberately concealed. May they have a healthy life or an afterlife! Moreover, many of my peers provided suggestions and assistance with thought-provoking ideas and source selection. Great thanks to them too.

"To those who have passed, their stories shall never fall away."

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Initial Enthusiasm and Lasting Estrangement: Shift in the Relationship between China and East Germany after the Chinese Great Leap Forward

Siqvan (William) Liu | Advised by Dr. Jan Hansen

Abstract

The deterioration of the relationship between China and East Germany was critical and has been under-researched. Many scholars have emphasized the importance of diplomatic events in contributing to such a deterioration. Yet, less focus was paid to Chinese internal policies, specifically the Great Leap Forward. Though implemented nationally, the Great Leap Forward had an international influence on the GDR's national situation and its relationship with China. This paper will argue that the Chinese Great Leap Forward was instrumental to the collapse of the Sino-East German relationship in 1961, specifically analyzing how the Great Leap Forward contributed to this relationship shift within the context of the Sino-Soviet Split. In terms of the primary sources, while most of them will be archival government documents, interviews from native Chinese people who experienced the event will also be taken into account as oral history. The submission will incorporate Chapter 3 – the most significant part of the thesis, which discovers the correlation between China's Great Leap Forward and the deterioration of the China-GDR relationship – and a supplementary part from Chapter 2, which includes the interviews from people who had experienced the period.

Introduction

In contemporary academia, a considerable number of scholars have explored the history and politics of post-World War II China and Germany, respectively. However, only in the past two decades have certain Chinese and Western scholars begun to examine the relationship between China and Germany, particularly East Germany, which became part of the socialist bloc and was governed under communist authority following the division of Germany in 1948. While many researchers have addressed critical aspects of the bilateral relationship during the 1950s and 1960s, a gap appears to exist in the extant literature. Chinese scholars tend to focus more on specific issues, such as Chen Tao's thesis on East Germany's introduction of the Chinese mass line experience, or Ge Jun's article on economic interactions between the two nations. Conversely, Western scholars tend to offer more comprehensive perspectives; for instance, Axel Berkofsky authored a book covering the relationship from 1949 to 1989. Despite the broad temporal scope, the level of detail in Berkofsky's work is less specific compared to Chinese theses. Consequently, this article aims to synthesize these perspectives and primarily concentrate on the external repercussions of the notorious Chinese Great

Leap Forward on the bilateral relationship between China and East Germany immediately following the program and the famine it incited, specifically during the period from 1958 to 1963.

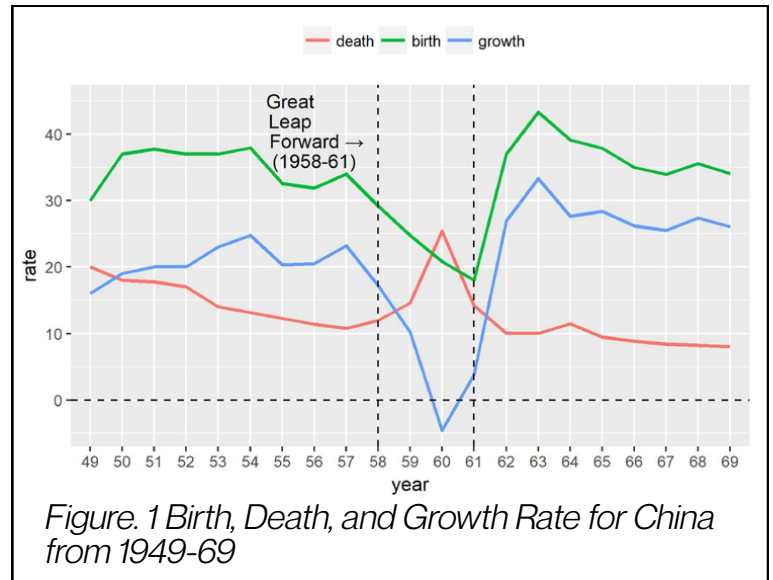
After the Second World War and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the leadership of the CCP, under the guidance of Chairman Mao Zedong, established the authoritative regime of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949. From this point forward, the party embarked on a series of domestic reforms aimed at recuperating the nation from the devastations caused by war and consolidating communist authority. Drawing on experiences from the Soviet Union and adapting the Soviet model to local conditions, Mao and his colleagues initiated numerous reforms across various sectors. The 1950 Land Reform redistributed land from landlords to peasants, addressing issues of starvation and livelihood. The First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957), modeled after the Soviet Five-Year Plan, advanced China's heavy industry, thereby promoting the nation's industrialization. Additionally, the 1950 Marriage Law granted women the right to pursue their own interests, a milestone that many Western nations had not yet achieved, thereby fulfilling the ideals of a classless communist society. China has also begun establishing diplomatic relations with other nations.

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During the Cold War era, the Chinese government primarily concentrated on strengthening ties with socialist states within the Eastern bloc, specifically the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, all the developments were accompanied by questions and disputes that would incite future disagreements. With the swift advancement of industry and social infrastructure, China experienced a period of widespread enthusiasm for over a decade. The entire nation harbored a strong belief that the country could surpass Western powers economically and industrially within a relatively short timeframe, specifically several years. The 1958 Chinese Great Leap Forward was proclaimed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in this socio-political climate nationwide. Renowned, albeit notoriously, for slogans such as "人有多大胆，地有多高产" (How bold people are determined, how much the land produces), the nation was swept by a wave of exaggeration, wherein all agricultural and industrial outputs—both the quotas and reported yields—were vastly overstated, leading to incalculable waste. Coupled with unscientific methods employed to increase production, the nation succumbed to a delusion of inexhaustible grains and materials. Consequently, the Great Leap Forward resulted in one of the most catastrophic famines in history, caused by human activity.

Regarding the establishment of the East German regime, the process differed from that of China; however, the outcome was a comparable communist state. Following Germany's surrender in 1945 and the Berlin Blockade between 1948 and 1949, Germany underwent a series of societal and political transformations. The definitive decision to partition Germany and the inauguration of Walter Ulbricht led to the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) one week after the founding of the PRC. Owing to its geopolitical position and unresolved issues between socialist and capitalist powers, East Germany encountered considerable pressure from both the socialist and Western blocs, despite robust support from the Soviet Union. As a border state between the two blocs, East Germany faced substantial economic and diplomatic challenges from its Western neighbors. Within the socialist bloc, many allied countries remained uncertain about East Germany's status, presumably concerned that the reunification of the two German states could adversely affect their own national interests, thereby creating hesitation to form strong alliances with the GDR.



In light of shared national concerns and external pressures, the diplomatic relationship between China and East Germany was established promptly following the formation of both nations. As proponents of Stalin and his associated cult of personality, both Mao Zedong and Walter Ulbricht were fervent supporters of the Soviet Union and its policies during the early 1950s. Their respective national policies closely emulated Soviet models in pursuit of the ideal of ultimate communism. However, subsequent to Stalin's death and the delivery of Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, East Germany's international position became increasingly precarious. On the one hand, Khrushchev's critique of Stalin adversely affected his relationships with both Mao and Ulbricht, thereby straining Soviet relations with China and East Germany. Conversely, East Germany's heavy dependence on Soviet support for resources and international esteem compelled Ulbricht to refrain from overtly expressing discontent towards Khrushchev, complicating his ability to initiate and implement national policies, particularly those reminiscent of Stalin's approach. This dilemma ultimately established the GDR's preference for alignment with the Soviet Union over China.

The evolution of attitudes within the Soviet Union and in its bilateral relationships underwent significant change between 1958 and 1963. While China experienced a series of climaxes and fall-downs during the Great Leap Forward, East Germany was also severely affected in multiple respects. In light of the successful propaganda campaigns and the outcomes of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, East German leaders developed a strong belief in the Chinese model and in Mao's interpretation of Marxist-Leninism.

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In an effort to emulate the Chinese Great Leap Forward, East German officials actively promoted bilateral engagement from 1958 to 1960. However, the ramifications of China's leap culminated in substantial social issues and widespread food shortages within the nation. Nevertheless, China's desire to preserve its international reputation led to a discrepancy between the officially propagated statistics and the actual conditions on the ground in socialist countries, fostering growing mistrust in East Germany towards the Chinese government. Furthermore, the national economic difficulties precipitated by the Great Leap Forward led to a deterioration of international trade relations between China and East Germany. Lacking guarantees regarding exports, maintaining a positive relationship became increasingly challenging. Additionally, these prior events, coupled with failures in negotiations regarding these matters, led East Germany to recognize the ideological divergences existing between the two nations. Collectively, these factors, stemming from the immediate consequences of the Great Leap Forward, initiated a process of estrangement between China and East Germany.

Proclaimed Success and International Influence

Since 1956, following the revelation of Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to socialist nations, both Mao Zedong and Walter Ulbricht had endeavored to identify an alternative to the Soviet model of communism. Mao's execution of the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Leap Forward exemplified his ability to govern a nation utilizing a cult of personality akin to that of Stalin. Together with the agricultural and industrial achievements he secured for China, he thereby demonstrated the viability of his distinctive perspective on Chinese communism. As articulated during the 8th Central Committee meeting of the Chinese Communist Party, the strategy of combining reforms with a centralized government that ensured democratic processes within the party corresponded with the sentiments of both conservative and reformist factions within the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). Consequently, subsequent to the 20th Congress of the CPSU, East Germany commenced the process of learning from and emulating Chinese experiences.

Despite the profound tragedy—the Great Famine, one of the most disastrous anthropogenic famines in human history that caused millions of deaths—induced by the Great Leap Forward, East Germany actively supported this transformative policy in China, with Ulbricht initiating

several imitations of the people's communes between 1958 and 1960. A declassified research paper authored by the CIA in 1960 indicates that the international influence of China and the Great Leap Forward was extensive and significantly strengthened the bilateral relationship during that period. In contrast to the Soviet Union's conservative stance, it is noted that East German leaders and media had consistently praised the communes and even characterized the commune movement as being of great international importance, an enrichment of Marxism-Leninism, an extraordinary consolidation of the worker-peasant alliance, the foremost of many Chinese achievements, and an example for other Asian peoples. While these statements may reflect a bias from a U.S. perspective, the numerous accolades offered underscore the effectiveness of Chinese international propaganda concerning its accomplishments during the Great Leap Forward.

Through solely international propaganda, the GDR may not fully endorse all of these achievements, as acquiescent exaggeration was frequently embedded within international campaigns. Nevertheless, according to a report from People's Daily dated October 8, 1959, regarding Ambassador Paul Wandel's address (who served as East Germany's ambassador to China during that period), Wandel expressed his gratitude towards the People's Republic of China and lauded the significant accomplishments realized during the Great Leap Forward. It is acknowledged that Wandel may not have had the opportunity to investigate the actual conditions faced by Chinese peasants, which indicates that his remarks could convey inaccurate information. However, from the perspective of East Germany, the insights provided by Ambassador Wandel may constitute the most genuine information available regarding China. His speech reflected that China managed to obscure the true situation from the international media, a situation attributable either to China's information blockade or the misrepresentation of reality by local officials. In any case, both CIA research and Chinese news outlets suggested a discrepancy between the realities in China and what East Germany perceived. During the years when both nations were still able to derive mutual benefits, bilateral relations were sustained despite this discrepancy. However, as diplomatic tensions began to surface, such an imbalance of information was likely to exacerbate the situation.

The successful implementation of people's communes, which Ambassador Wandel argued ranked among the

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foremost of the most important achievements in China, indicates that China's agricultural collectivization model was both feasible and successful. However, by the end of 1959, disagreements arose between China and East Germany, despite the latter's support of the assertion, highlighting the communes' international influence. Although not overtly expressed, Paul Wandel communicated the Chinese leaders' message regarding the potential for an East German implementation of a similar system. Nonetheless, the response from East Germany clearly indicated a rejection of such experiments, stemming from concerns over the dangers the communes might pose to the country. It is presumed that East German leaders were apprehensive that a collectivized agricultural system like China's people's communes could exacerbate the exodus problem that had emerged since 1959. Due to multiple comparisons between life in East and West Germany, the differences in living standards and freedom allowed West Germany to attract East Germans to migrate, thereby causing the exodus issue in East Berlin. To justify their refusal, East Germany explicitly stated that their commendation was directed towards "the Chinese action in solving their problems." According to CIA research, rather than attempting to replicate the communes, East German leaders appeared more inclined to adopt the rationale and spirit that underpinned them.

The CIA research presented a favorable view of the bilateral relationship between China and East Germany; however, 21st-century scholarly investigations revealed greater complexity. Regarding the SED's stance on the implementation of the Chinese commune system, it was initially stated that in July 1959, the SED ordered Neues Deutschland (official party newspaper of the SED) to put its approval for Mao's leap and the communes on paper, declaring that the GDR's great leap of agricultural production was being made possible by the Agricultural Production Cooperatives (Landwirtschaftliche Produktions Genossenschaft, or LPG). Only when East German farmers became aware of Ulbricht's intention to introduce the Chinese-style communes and subsequently rebelled against it did the SED alter its position, asserting that the commune was "China-specific." Furthermore, research conducted by Chen Tao, an associate professor at Tongji University who specializes in German History and Cold War International History, indicates that East Germany modified its public stance towards Chinese-style communes after the construction of the Berlin Wall. This event, which was a direct response to the issue of exodus, marked the failure of East Germany's objective to achieve German reunification through the

establishment of socialism and to demonstrate the superiority of its ideology with an open border. In order to avert further exodus and farmer dissatisfaction, public support for the people's commune had to be eschewed. Simultaneously, East German leaders received feedback regarding the failure of the Chinese Great Leap Forward, which fostered increased skepticism regarding the GDR's trust in China.

The summer of 1960 signified a pivotal juncture in the bilateral relations between China and East Germany concerning the people's commune. For the Chinese authorities, the principal directive for their participation in East Germany's agricultural exhibition, held from June 5 to July 17, was the promotion of the Great Leap Forward in accordance with the General Line (总路线). Consequently, all Chinese exhibitions and propaganda incorporated elements pertinent to the national program, particularly emphasizing the commune system. Conversely, East Germany, for the first time, publicly asserted that the Chinese experience regarding the commune system was unsuitable for its context. Furthermore, during the subsequent International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties, held from June 24 to 26, Ulbricht explicitly criticized China's interference in East Germany's domestic affairs, stating, "For East European nations, the people's commune represents a fundamentally erroneous path." Through this overt critique of the Chinese communes, East Germany's concerns regarding the model transformed into an overt discontent with China's propagandistic portrayal of their experiences.

The comparative analysis between the CIA's research and Chen Tao's scholarly paper elucidates the disparities between the domestic policies of China and East Germany. While East Germany appreciated China's rationale and commitment to developing effective policies and achieving success, China's proposals did not align with the specific demands of East Germany. The criticism of the people's commune in 1960 indicated a rejection of the Chinese model, highlighting the divergence of national interests and concerns that had emerged at that time. Following the changes in China's national policies since 1959, the Chinese government sought to enhance its international prestige through the promotion of its experiences. Conversely, East Germany, facing adverse consequences from enforced agricultural collectivization—such as a significant exodus to West Germany—could no longer endorse a similar concept within its own borders. Coupled with an increased suspicion in East Germany due to prior discrepancies in information, a deterioration of the

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bilateral relationship commenced in the 1960s.

Trades, Deficits, Economic Disagreements

The transition from Ulbricht's reluctance to establish the commune in 1960 to the explicit denunciation of China's situation in 1961 cannot be attributed solely to growing distrust stemming from information discrepancies. Instead, several other factors must be considered to account for this significant shift. The economy, recognized as a fundamental component of international relations, played a pivotal role in the deterioration of the relationship between China and East Germany from 1960 to 1961 and beyond. Around the same period, when Chairman Mao articulated his intention for China to surpass the United Kingdom in steel production, Ulbricht declared that East Germany would outpace West Germany in food and industrial consumption by 1961. Nevertheless, the Landwirtschaftliche Produktions Genossenschaft (LPG) promoted in East Germany did not achieve its goal of enhancing agricultural productivity; on the contrary, it resulted in a decline. For instance, in 1959, a privately owned cow produced an average of 3.246 kilograms of milk per day, but following its integration into the LPG, the yield decreased to 2.529 kilograms. Acknowledging this failure, East German leaders endeavored to ensure the sustainability of food supplies for civilians by procuring supplies from China, primarily peanuts and beans, since 1959. Nonetheless, from the Chinese perspective, fueled by the widespread enthusiasm of the Great Leap Forward, imports of German goods surpassed exports, leading to trade deficits that could jeopardize the stability of the bilateral trade relationship. Despite this, the extensive engagement with national policy resulted in an increase in import levels.

It was only upon the visit of Peng Dehuai, the Minister of National Defense of China, to East Germany in May 1959 that Ulbricht became cognizant of the unreliability of China's food exports. During the meeting, while Ulbricht expressed hopes that Peng would enhance Chinese meat exports, Peng responded hesitantly, indicating that there remained Chinese citizens enduring starvation. However, the concerns of East German leaders regarding China did not pertain to China's ability to support East Germany, but rather to the accuracy of Peng's assertions. Peng faced accusations of being a rightist due to his criticisms of the Great Leap Forward at the Lushan Conference, and East Germany was informed of both Peng's criticisms and the assurances surrounding Chinese production. The two conflicting

pieces of information relayed by China exacerbated East Germany's skepticism regarding China's true economic conditions and reinforced its resolve to continue trade relations with East Germany.

The definitive cessation of bilateral trade occurred towards the end of 1960, following China's execution of a new trade agreement designed for the bilateral trade for the period of 1960-1962. However, China found itself unable to fulfill East Germany's requests for essential grains, such as beans. According to research conducted by Professor Ge Jun of East China Normal University regarding economic relations from 1956 to 1964, it was evident that post-Lushan Conference, Chairman Mao's persistence in pursuing an accelerated industrial initiative, particularly targeting steel production in spite of the national economic imbalance, precipitated significant economic challenges nationwide. These challenges encompass substantial financial deficits, market shortages, and a considerable contraction in production.

Consequently, these complications had a direct impact on China's export capabilities; by July 25, 1960, the annual procurement plan for export goods was only able to fulfill 43.3% of its original targets, whereas the export plan was completed at a mere 38%. Furthermore, despite China's attempts to reorganize its trade strategies, it still faced an outstanding debt of approximately 2 billion rubles owed to the Soviet Union and other communist nations by the end of 1960. Specifically regarding trade with East Germany, there was an initial plan for East Germany to import 192,000 tons of beans from China in 1960, with a contract signed for 180,000 tons. However, by the end of the second quarter, China had fallen short by 9,000 tons of beans and indicated that there would be no further exports of beans or peanut oil for that year. Estimates suggested that by the end of 1960, China would incur a deficit of approximately 120 million rubles. More critically, this delinquency in 1960 had adverse implications for subsequent bilateral trade agreements. China resolved to address the outstanding deficits prior to entering new contracts, resulting in a diminished trade volume in future agreements. Collectively, these statistical figures illustrate the immediate repercussions of the Great Leap Forward on China's national economy and its international trade relations.

The significant transformation in China's stance regarding its trade with East Germany, along with the substantial debts incurred, culminated in a critical juncture for the economic relationship between the two

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nations. In January 1961, Walter Ulbricht dispatched a representative of the SED Politburo, Hermann Matern, to China with the objective of compelling the Chinese government to honor the trade agreements established in 1960. Despite the extensive censorship of documents from the Chinese Diplomacy Bureau, insights derived from a publication by the Chinese scholar Tong Xin indicate that the discussions between Premier Zhou Enlai and Matern did not unfold favorably. While both parties articulated their respective national predicaments, Matern's demands were limited to an inquiry directed at Zhou Enlai regarding which aspects of the 1960 trade contract could potentially be fulfilled. Conversely, Zhou Enlai explicitly communicated China's inability to comply with the trade agreement or to supply the promised foodstuffs, attributing this shortfall to an acute nationwide food crisis. This exchange underscored the detrimental consequences inflicted by the Great Leap Forward, which had fundamentally undermined China's agricultural productivity. Furthermore, the failed LPG initiative, a German adaptation of agricultural cooperatives drawing from Chinese experiences, was notably hampered by the imposition of rigid communist ideologies, resulting in severe repercussions for both East German agriculture and the broader economy, ultimately spurring widespread civilian flight. It is evident that had circumstances in East Germany been more favorable, Matern would not have needed to explicitly interrogate the viability of any components of the trade contract, and China could have readily extended vital assistance to East Germany, which would have contributed to the continuation of their prior amicable relationship. Nonetheless, both nations found themselves compelled to exert pressure upon one another. Following this incident, economic discord escalated into political conflicts, as both parties questioned their commitment to further economic cooperation and mutual political support. Ultimately, the bilateral diplomatic relationship deteriorated significantly, primarily due to economic discord stemming from the economic difficulties wrought by the Great Leap Forward in China and the mass emigration resulting from East Germany's misguided replication of these experiences.

Following the distressing dialogue between Zhou Enlai and Hermann Matern, the nature of Sino-East German trade underwent a significant transformation. Ge Jun asserts that by 1962, bilateral trade had evolved into a mechanism for political rivalry. While some degree of mutual understanding regarding each other's national challenges remained, the negotiations surrounding trade

increasingly emphasized pragmatism. A key reference in Ge Jun's research highlights that East Germany postponed negotiations concerning cultural cooperation and demonstrated hesitance in providing materials for technological collaboration. Conversely, the GDR insisted that China furnish increased quantities of grease and ore, as well as accommodate a higher influx of East German visitors. These instances served as a direct response from East Germany to China's failure to adhere to trade agreements, citing the economic difficulties precipitated by the Great Leap Forward as justification. Ultimately, this complex and estranged economic dynamic transformed the previously amicable trade relationship, a shift attributable to the enduring impact of the Great Leap Forward, as well as the domestic economic and political changes in the GDR.

Sino-Soviet Split and Ideological Disparity

While the evident impacts of the Great Leap Forward were primarily societal and economic in nature, its failure prompted inquiries regarding the fundamental aspects of Mao's ideologies. In 1958, at the time when the Great Leap Forward attained its initial successes, Mao proclaimed it a successful alternative to the Soviet model and further characterized it as the ideological successor to Stalin's industrial revolution. Alongside existing discord regarding Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence with the West versus Mao's inclination towards inevitable confrontation, Khrushchev ultimately withdrew all Soviet experts from China. Coupled with other contributing factors, this culminated in the Sino-Soviet Split that unfolded during the 1960s.

Under such circumstances, East Germany found itself in a precarious position. Five years subsequent to Khrushchev's declaration of de-Stalinization and the pursuit of peaceful coexistence with Western powers, East Germany and China espoused an ideology of forging distinct approaches to communism, in alignment with Stalin's model and cult of personality. Although their ideologies were comparable, the initially proclaimed successes of the Great Leap Forward, coupled with an increase in economic collaboration, instilled confidence in both nations regarding their respective choices. In the case of East Germany, this fostered a resolve to extricate itself from Soviet hegemony. One primary motivation for East Germany's examination of Chinese experiences was the admiration held by the SED leaders for Mao's commitment to developing an independent model of communism that diverged from the Soviet paradigm; the early accomplishments further

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validated the plausibility of pursuing such autonomy. Consequently, through the emulation of the Chinese model and the anticipated enhancement of economic and thus international standing, East Germany sought to attain its diplomatic and economic independence from being a satellite state of the Soviet Union. However, in 1960, as these achievements manifested into disasters and economic collaboration disintegrated, East German leaders recognized the ideological disparities between Mao's interpretation of communism and the policies deemed suitable for their nation. Specifically, Ulbricht articulated during the International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties in June that the Chinese experiences might engender discord within the East German populace and party, as previously noted. In response, senior officials of the SED issued directives to confer with Soviet communists prior to engaging in negotiations with China.

The most significant event that underscored the ideological conflicts between China and East Germany was the Sixth Congress of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) held in 1963. Drawing upon Chen Tao's research regarding the tensions between China and East Germany during this Congress, it becomes evident that China's anti-revisionist ideology—contextualized by Mao's characterization of the Soviet Union as representative of "modern revisionism"—underscored China's response to the Sino-Soviet Split. Additionally, diplomatic disputes involving China and various socialist and third-world nations elicited a substantial international wave of criticism directed toward China. During the Congress, Ulbricht's inaugural address articulated the GDR's support for Khrushchev while indirectly condemning China's "adventurism." Although Ulbricht did not explicitly intend to disparage China, he emphasized the importance of internal negotiations within the socialist bloc and the avoidance of escalating tensions, which was perceived by China as East Germany's overt criticism for the first time. Furthermore, the Chinese representatives interpreted both Ulbricht's condemnation and Khrushchev's subsequent address, which called for an end to public disputes, as an effort to foster collaboration aimed at garnering international support from other socialist nations, thereby attributing the Sino-Soviet Split to China. Following discussions between the Chinese representatives and the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after both speeches, a comprehensive struggle approach was adopted by the latter, leading the representatives to decline participation in multiple diplomatic engagements subsequent to the Congress.

Subsequently, the representatives from China delivered a speech that criticized several socialist parties, including the SED and the Soviet Communist Party, which elicited immediate condemnation. Furthermore, East German radio reported that the Chinese representatives had attacked the fraternal parties, which the chairman of the meeting promptly refuted on the spot. Throughout the remainder of the meeting, while Ulbricht continued to advocate for the preservation of camaraderie with China and to promote mutual understanding and benefits within the socialist bloc, China's stance was evidently characterized by indifference and even opposition. Following the Congress, Chinese representatives declined to participate in any diplomatic events or comply with arrangements proposed by East Germany.

The Sixth Congress of the SED significantly exacerbated the estrangement in the Sino-GDR relationship on diplomatic matters, particularly from China's perspective. While China maintained a relatively radical approach both domestically and internationally, the Soviet Union and East Germany adopted a more moderate stance. While more complexity existed within the bilateral relationship between the GDR and the USSR, Ulbricht's critique of Chinese ideologies served as an indicator of his pro-Soviet alignment amid the rivalry between China and the USSR from the Chinese perspective. Consequently, although East Germany endeavored to reconcile with China and uphold their tenuous relationship, the People's Daily, with Mao Zedong's endorsement, disseminated an editorial denouncing the SED's conduct of advocating unity among communist allies while condemning parties such as the Chinese Communist Party. This editorial expressed astonishment at China being accused by other socialist factions of decrying Yugoslav revisionism. Rather, the divergent attitudes regarding the Yugoslav issue and the contrasting ideological interpretations of revisionism between China and East Germany underscore a growing alienation in the bilateral relations of the two nations.

In addition to the ideological divides and conflicts evidenced during the Sixth Congress of the SED, similar public attitudes toward their authorities also indicated the sensitive nature of the bilateral relationship between China and East Germany. A comparative analysis of Chen Tao's thesis regarding East German engineers in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province in China, along with the aforementioned oral history, reveals that citizens of both nations exhibited a hesitancy to comment on political matters. Firstly, some East German

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engineers and elderly individuals from Taizhou shared a cautious approach regarding political discourse. Following the Sixth Congress of the SED, Walter Berger, a former leader of the engineers, declined to express his views when presented with an editorial from the People's Daily by the director of Ersha—a cooperative factory between China and East Germany that is also the focus of this article. Moreover, when Heinz Rast, the deputy head of the German engineers, was urged by his Chinese translator to accept a German-language propaganda pamphlet, he refused, stating his desire to avoid potential complications. These instances are comparable to the concerns expressed by the elderly residents of Taizhou. Specifically, Mr. Lyu voiced his apprehension regarding the discussion of certain topics, asking, "Can we really chat about these topics, like the Great Leap Forward?"

In summary, the ramifications of the Chinese Great Leap Forward on the deterioration of Sino-East German relations were both immediate and long-lasting. The orchestrated achievements and international propaganda cultivated a disjunction between the actual circumstances and the perceptions held by East Germany, resulting in an escalating distrust between the two nations as conditions deteriorated. The economic challenges encountered in bilateral trade, which coincided with the growing distrust fueled by misinformation, further aggravated the bilateral relationship. Ultimately, the intensifying skepticism and trade disputes culminated in East Germany's diminishing confidence in Mao's alternative model of communism. Particularly within the context of the Sino-Soviet Split, East Germany's pro-Soviet inclination irrevocably influenced its bilateral relations with China, which, following the Sixth Congress of the SED, ultimately resulted in a sensitive political environment among both diplomatic occurrences and public sentiment.

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Angela Chapman

Written by Jewel Fulmore

When Angela Chapman reflects on her journey at UC San Diego, she returns to one word: curiosity.

“I’ve always been a curious and inquisitive person,” she says. “When I entered UCSD, I knew I was interested in the brain and psychology, especially psychopathology and clinical populations.” During her first year, she explored labs aligned with those interests and cold emailed professors and principal investigators. She states, “I didn’t have much guidance at the time, so I relied on initiative.”

Angela graduated from UCSD in 2023 with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a specialization in Cognitive and Behavioral Neuroscience. Before joining the McNair Scholars Program, she recalls her “understanding of research was introductory. She was learning what a lab looked like, what research assistants did, and how to read scientific literature.”

Through McNair, her understanding shifted.

She conducted a literature review and learned how to perform a systematic review. She gained exposure to working with brain data, cleaning datasets, and coding. She describes this as learning “the back end of research,” understanding not only participation in a lab but how projects are designed, how data is handled, and how to communicate findings. McNair strengthened her technical skills and gave her a fuller understanding of what it means to be a researcher.”

Outside of learning how to produce research, McNair’s mission resonated with her deeply. While not knowing Robert E. McNair before she joined the program, the program’s mission to “support underrepresented and first-generation students who wanted to pursue research and earn a Ph.D.” deeply resonated with her. Angela’s research experiences expanded beyond McNair. She participated in UC Scholars during her first year, attended a summer research program at UC Irvine, joined a computational neuroscience lab, and completed the Psychology Honors Program. Each experience layered onto the next, preparing her for graduate study.



*B.S. Cognitive Behavioral Neuroscience 2023 UCSD,
Psychology PhD Student & NSF GRFP Fellow at
University of Iowa*

Angela always intended to pursue a doctoral degree in clinical psychology. During her fourth year, she applied to Ph.D. programs while also applying for the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program. She received the NSF fellowship but was initially rejected from the Ph.D. programs she applied to.

After receiving the fellowship, she reached back out to programs and faculty and leveraged her network. Eventually, she secured admission to a Clinical Science Ph.D. program at the University of Iowa.

She graduated in June and began her Ph.D. in August.

“That shift was intense,” she says. “Doctoral training requires emotional, intellectual, and physical stamina.” Alongside the academic demands, she has navigated chronic health conditions and disabilities, working to secure accommodations across coursework, lab work, and clinical training.

Looking back, she speaks honestly about timing.

Alumni Spotlight

“Part of me sometimes wonders whether I should have taken more time between undergrad and graduate school. There’s no single timeline you have to follow.”

“Graduate school will still be there. Sometimes stepping back, recalibrating, or taking time to care for your health is necessary for long-term sustainability. Pursuing your career and prioritizing your well-being are not mutually exclusive.”

For students with chronic illness or disabilities, she adds, “You are a whole person. Don’t be afraid to ask for accommodations, extensions, or even a leave of absence if you need it.”

Angela also emphasizes the importance of representation in research.

“There has been a large gap in underrepresentation across many fields, especially within research,” she says. “That underrepresentation shows up not only in who participates in research studies, but in who conducts them.”

She explains that representation influences what questions are asked and what populations are centered. She points to intersectional identities, such as being a person of color and having a disability, as examples of experiences that must be better understood within research spaces.

Programs like McNair, she believes, create access and opportunity for students who may not otherwise see themselves in research. She says that there are many people with potential who have not yet had the opportunity to explore research.

For students who feel intimidated by research, her advice is grounded in taking small steps during the research process.

“Start where you are. Reach out to professors or teaching assistants. Many TAs are Ph.D. students involved in research and can talk about their experiences.”

She encourages students to connect with the Undergraduate Research Hub, attend events, explore faculty pages, and consider independent study or capstone courses as entry points. She explains how students interested in research don’t have to have everything figured out, nor does their path have to be

narrow or rigid. Having an open mind is the first step for those who aren’t sure about pursuing research.

Even if research turns out not to be the right path, she emphasizes reflection. “Reflect on what you gained from the experience. The skills you develop will carry forward.”

She also notes that lab culture is critical. “Being in a lab that feels welcoming and accepting, where your ideas are valued, makes a difference. Growth happens over time as you build skills gradually.”

“Being in a lab that feels welcoming and accepting, where your ideas are valued, makes a difference. Growth happens over time as you build skills gradually.”

Mentorship has been central to her journey. She hopes to carry mentorship and support into her career, whether as a psychologist, clinical scientist, or professor.

Angela’s story reflects curiosity and the courage to recalibrate when necessary. Her message to current students is simple and powerful: you do not need a perfect plan to begin. Growth happens step by step, and sometimes the most important thing you can do is allow yourself the space to take that next step at your own pace.



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