

On Black Mattering and (Un)framing the Preparation of Higher Education/Student Affairs Administrators
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Abstract. The purpose of this critical content analysis study was to examine higher education/student affairs (HE/SA) preparation toward a racial framing that centers and honors Black mattering. We explored linkages between Black literacies and epistemic credibility as indicators of Black mattering by analyzing 24 syllabi of foundational courses in HE/SA graduate preparation programs using Muhammad's (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework. The HRL framework is a four-layered equity framework with the following learning goals: (a) identity development; (b) skill development; (c) intellectual development; and (d) criticality. Across the four layers, we found little evidence of Black mattering in our data. To meaningfully situate Black mattering within curriculum development, we suggest instructors use their syllabus to begin unframing white supremacy and framing the curriculum with Black mattering.

Keywords: Black mattering; literacy; content analysis; student affairs; teaching and learning

Higher education/student affairs (HE/SA) preparation programs play a crucial role in training and socializing collegiate administrators (Boss et al., 2018). Foundational courses serve to set the context for the broader curriculum within HE/SA graduate programs. The problem is that many of these programs have operated in a white racial frame (Feagin, 2013), obscuring legacies of racism and granting white ways of knowing an epistemic credibility (Alcoff, 1999) not afforded to Black onto-epistemologies. Parson and Major (2020) argued teaching and learning approaches should be responsive to the sociocultural contexts in which learning takes place. This level of responsiveness necessitates "understanding how our institutions have historically silenced or harmed persons of color" (Parson & Major, 2020, p. 31). Specifically for Black students, educators must understand the explicit and insidious nature of anti-Black racism on campus (Haynes & Bazner, 2019). Historical anti-Black racism and its present-day manifestations have inspired numerous leaders in higher education to issue statements of solidarity, but college and university systems and structures remain oppressive of Black students. One of the two leading umbrella professional organizations in student affairs created a framework for racial justice and decolonization for use by HE/SA professionals (ACPA, 2018). Despite the existence of this framework, approaches for racial justice and decolonization have not been widely adopted; nor have there been conversations about categorically addressing anti-Blackness and Black mattering outside a small collective within the profession.

The purpose of this critical content analysis study was to examine HE/SA preparation toward a racial framing that centers and honors Black mattering. We explored linkages between Black literacies and epistemic credibility as indicators of Black mattering. Namely, we used Muhammad's (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework to analyze content within foundational course syllabi in HE/SA graduate preparation programs. Our findings showcase how the present-day racial framing of HE/SA foundational courses fails to address Black mattering. On the basis of our findings, we offer recommendations for unframing HE/SA foundational curriculum toward a greater focus on Black mattering. Our study makes a significant contribution to teaching and learning literature about the importance of centering Black mattering in higher education in the U.S., where a focus on Blackness has been unwelcomed or ignored in curricular planning outside of Black ethnic studies programs or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Literature Review

Blackness is a collection of onto-epistemologies that represents the rich and varied cultures of the African diaspora. We use the term *onto-epistemology* to represent the mutually reinforcing bond between ontology (reality) and epistemology (knowing). Blackness has not mattered in higher education (Tuitt et al., 2018). Black exclusion began with the enslavement of Black laborers, segregation during the Jim Crow era, and racial animus in response to desegregation (Anderson, 1999; Fleming, 1984; Perkins, 2002; Wilder, 2013). Despite the establishment of HBCUs and forced desegregation into predominantly white institutions, white people's perceptions of Black students as intellectually inferior have remained intact. Black student enrollment has increased over time, but white-centered ideologies of success, learning, and development have relegated Black onto-epistemologies to the margins. Black scholars have insisted on the relevancy of Black onto-epistemologies in higher education (Okello, 2018; Patton, 2016; Porter et al., 2020). Throughout our literature review, we highlight scholars who have made the case for Blackness and Black mattering as part of a liberatory curriculum in education.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Onto-Epistemic Credibility

Within the growing body of scholarship on teaching and learning, only a small contingent of literature has acknowledged or presented issues of identity in a meaningful way. Even within identity-conscious literature, few scholars address anti-Blackness and the ways it manifests in teaching and learning in higher education. Across the disciplines, higher education curricula have been constructed within white racial frames that misrepresent, dismiss, or erase Blackness and Black people (Okello, 2020). Haynes (2021) described the college classroom as "a racialized space, which cultivates white supremacy through the teaching of white normalcy" (p. 2). Anti-Blackness undergirds the teaching of white normalcy through the erasure and dehumanization of Black onto-epistemologies (Haynes & Bazner, 2019). Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and white faculty may reject Black onto-epistemic credibility unknowingly because of racial unconsciousness or

knowingly through a conscious alignment with white supremacy. Haynes and Bazner (2019) argued that the work of countering anti-Blackness in teaching and learning begins with recognizing and honoring Black onto-epistemic credibility. Within formal college classrooms, the syllabus is a critical artifact that serves multiple functions for (re)socialization.

Previous research on the syllabus has shown it to be a site of first contact between students and the instructor, a document that conveys power structures and disciplinary norms, a plan for the semester, a contract between faculty and students, a signal for campus climate, and a tool to facilitate learning (Parkes & Harris, 2002; Priester et al., 2008; Sulik & Keys, 2014). Sulik and Keys (2014) examined the syllabus as a pedagogical tool for (re)socialization. They described how syllabi signal processes of socialization not only to the learning environment but also to the discipline at large and suggested “syllabi might help instructors address elements of the broader cultural environment” (p. 158). Sulik and Keys’ findings were useful in the present study, which examined HE/SA graduate preparation programs with the aim of socializing graduate students into the profession. Relatedly, Liao (2015) suggested faculty construct their syllabi in a way that invites student co-construction of the classroom and shared power over learning. Throughout the literature on the syllabus, much emphasis is placed on language’s function of conveying power and commitments to honor the onto-epistemologies of the students in the classroom.

(Black) Literacies

Literacy and language are indelibly linked to each other, and given the interconnectedness of linguistic and racial hierarchies (Baker-Bell, 2020), the study of literacy cannot be race-neutral. Much of mainstream literacy literature examines text literacy and its expansions, such as media literacy, information literacy, and digital literacy. Muhammad (2020) articulated additional literacies as a means of liberatory educational practice. She offered *critical literacy* (i.e., leveraging an understanding of power, inequality, oppression, and social justice to understand text and other media), *racial literacy* (i.e., seeing, naming, and interpreting the world with an awareness of race, racialization, and racism), and *agitation literacy* (i.e., “reading, writing, thinking, and speaking that are connected to the intention and action to upset, disturb, disquiet, or unhinge systemic oppression”) (p. 125). Critical, racial, and agitation literacies create a direct link between literacy and Alcott’s (1999) writings on *epistemic credibility*. Alcott argued epistemic credibility is concerned with whose writing, speech, and other forms of knowledge sharing is legitimized. Muhammad’s (2020) research on historical Black literary societies’ critical literacy practices showcases how literacy is inextricably bound with Black mattering and liberation.

Muhammad’s (2020) work nods to a growing body of literature on Black literacies and their importance in addressing anti-Black racism and centering Black mattering in education (Coles, 2019; Johnson et al., 2017; Kelly, 2020; Young, 2020). Black literacies involve the use of literacy practices, such as those described in the preceding paragraph, to enliven the onto-epistemologies of Black people and Black

culture. Black literacies are “grounded in Black liberatory thought, which supports and empowers the emotional, psychological, and spiritual conditions of Black people throughout the Diaspora” (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 63). The engagement in Black literacies has played a crucial role in understanding and addressing the anti-Blackness embedded in U.S. society (Coles, 2019). Black literacies have also played a crucial role in Black liberation and Black mattering as acts of resistance to white (language) supremacy (Baker-Bell, 2020). Historically, enslaved Black folks resisted educational suppression through their covert development of literacy as a pathway to freedom. Even after enslavement, Black literary societies continued to bolster Black literacies in the Jim Crow era (Muhammad, 2020). As Coles (2019) argued, Black literacies remain an important pursuit toward Black mattering in a neoliberal educational system, which would rather operate in a color-neutral space than address anti-Blackness. His argument is shared by Love (2019), who asserted educational systems and institutions often dispose of and erase Black people and their experiences, histories, and knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

Muhammad (2020) argued that starting with a focus on Blackness provides the strongest foundation for inclusive education and offered a Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework modeled after the approaches of 19th-century Black literary societies. The HRL framework has the following learning goals: (a) identity development, (b) skill development, (c) intellectual development, and (d) criticality. These four layers of the framework offer insight into how curricular decisions can respond to historical legacies of anti-Blackness and center Black onto-epistemologies. The first layer, *identity development*, focuses on providing opportunities for Black students to reclaim Black onto-epistemologies that have been historically excluded from institutionalized education. The second layer, *skill development*, recognizes the role of multiple literacies in facilitating meaning making. The third layer, *intellectual development*, involves cultivating intellect through asset-based approaches. Lastly, the fourth layer, *criticality*, involves building curriculum using critical theories that respond to racism and other oppressions in learning. Instructors develop criticality by guiding students to “read, write, and think in ways of understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression” (p. 119). Through Muhammad’s framework, which forefronts Black onto-epistemologies, we sought insight into how to center Black mattering within the HE/SA curriculum. Interaction with Black mattering can be liberatory for Black students and also expand the imaginative and cognitive capacity of other students as they are (re)socialized to HE/SA professional practice.

Methods

Given that Black mattering is not addressed within collegiate syllabi literature, we tested Muhammad’s (2020) work as a potential framework in higher education. In this study, we examined 24 HE/SA course syllabi using a blended content analysis approach to determine the extent to which such syllabi manifest the four learning pursuits of the HRL framework. We sought to answer the following research question: What do HE/SA foundational course syllabi reveal about how the structure

and content of the courses are meant to: (a) help Black students learn something about themselves and others; (c) help Black students develop literacy skills; (d) help Black students develop capacity for transforming information into knowledge; and (e) engage Black students’ thinking about power and equity and the disruption of oppression?

Data Collection

Syllabi were solicited via email through CSPTalk, a national listserv for student affairs preparation program faculty. We requested syllabi from those who had taught foundational HE/SA courses. Of the 69 syllabi received, we excluded 19 because they were either duplicates or did not meet our inclusion criterion: master-level syllabus from the years 2017–2020. We reviewed the assigned textbooks, course descriptions, and learning outcomes of the 45 remaining syllabi, and we identified two distinct categories. One set of syllabi focused on the history of higher education (n = 21), and the other set focused on an introduction to student affairs (n = 24). The introductory syllabi covered both history and the other areas most closely aligned with our theoretical framework (identity development, skill development, and intellectual development) whereas the history syllabi were more limited in scope. We chose the broader sample for analysis and provide a profile of the data in (see Table 1).

Table 1

HE/SA Syllabi Sample Profile

Syllabus Number	NASPA Region	Program Degree	Institutional Control	Average Cohort Size	Institutional Diversity	Year
1	IV-East	MEd	Public	16–20	PWI	2020
2	IV-East	MA	Public	26+	PWI	2020
3	III	MA	Public	21–25	PWI	2019
4	IV-East	MA	Public	26+	PWI	2020
5	IV-East	MEd	Public	26+	PWI	2017
6	IV-East	MA	Public	26+	PWI	2020
7	IV-East	MEd	Private	26+	PWI	2020
8	IV-East	MA	Public	21–25	PWI	2020
9	V	MEd	Public	Unknown	PWI	2020
10	VI	MEd	Public	16–20	PWI	2020
11	III	MA	Public	Unknown	PWI	2019
12	V	MEd	Private	26+	PWI	2020
13	IV-West	MEd	Private	10–15	PWI	2020
14	II	MS	Public	16–20	PWI	2018
15	III	MEd	Public	16–20	HSI	2020
16	III	MA	Public	> 10	PWI	2020
17	IV-East	MEd	Public	21–25	PWI	2020

18	I	MS	Private	10–15	PWI	2020
19	I	MA	Public	16–20	PWI	2020
20	III	MEd	Public	16–20	PWI	2020
21	III	MEd	Public	16–20	PWI	2020
22	IV-East	MS	Public	16–20	PWI	2019
23	III	MA	Public	16–20	PWI	2020
24	IV-East	MA	Public	21–25	PWI	2020

Data Analysis

Content analysis employs a family of analytic approaches that seek to make meaning of textual data, ranging from more interpretative qualitative analyses to objective quantitative analyses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We blended two content analysis approaches: qualitative directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and conceptual content analysis (Christie, 2007). Qualitative content analysis is a method of systematically coding and identifying themes and patterns within text data for subjective interpretation. The goal of this directed approach to content analysis is to “validate or extend a theoretical framework or theory” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). In the directed content analysis phase, Author 1, Ginny, created a codebook informed by Muhammad’s (2020) four-layer equity framework, which included subcategories, each with accompanying definitions and examples from a sample syllabus.

Conceptual content analysis involves quantifying and counting the presence of both explicit and implicit concepts (Christie, 2007). In this phase, Author 2, Tiffany, created the coding categories, which the research team reviewed and confirmed. We coded for existence (related to learning activities for the four pursuits) and frequency (related to course texts and media) within the course syllabi. The conceptual analyses were completed by two graduate assistants using a Qualtrics form, and Author 2 reviewed the results to ensure syllabi attributes were accurately coded. In this study, the directed and conceptual content analysis approaches, which were blended, complemented each other for the interpretation of syllabi content.

Trustworthiness

We ensured trustworthiness by using analyst triangulation and reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In analyst triangulation, two or more analysts independently review the data to support analytic conclusions. All three authors independently analyzed the data and engaged in collective analyses. Throughout the study, we carried out a variety of reflexive processes to assess the ways in which we were influencing the study, and vice versa (Thurairajah, 2015). This study was very closely aligned with many of our positionalities as Black women, critical pedagogues, and faculty in HE/SA graduate preparation programs. We tracked our reactions to data through critical conversations with one another and other faculty in our field. We used these conversations to identify any potential barriers that might have limited our understanding of the data.

Findings

Our findings showcase our two goals. Our first goal was to validate or extend Muhammad's HRL framework using directed content analysis. In this section, we present our findings from this qualitative component of our analysis through a narrative overview, with supporting examples taken directly from syllabi. Our second goal was to capture implicit and explicit messages within the syllabi by quantifying the presence or absence of HRL framework signifiers (e.g., learning activities, requirements, or descriptors that align with the framework) using conceptual content analysis. What follows is an overview of HE/SA programs' current approaches as determined through our analyses of the syllabi in search of identity development, skill development, intellectual development, and criticality.

Identity Development

Muhammad (2020) explained, "[i]dentity is composed of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be" (p. 67). Identity development in the classroom has a discursive element tied both to who students are when they show up and the messages they receive about themselves reflected in the curriculum and in their relationships with the instructor and their peers. Muhammad argued that instructors need to use asset-based frames and provide opportunities for learners to explore multiple facets of selfhood. She described how Black students are flooded with images and messages of anti-Blackness and how instructors cannot separate identity from learning goals. She explained that identity-conscious teaching must be the primary pursuit of teachers because when identity is ignored, it can create barriers and opportunity gaps for those who do not fit the prevailing white framing of the curriculum.

Within syllabi, we observed how instructors either distanced themselves through third-person language (e.g., "You are welcome to ask *the instructor* about the course content, . . .when you have initial questions about assignments, due dates, or readings, please, first check the syllabus and then contact your classmates") or humanized themselves and students through first- and second-person language (e.g., ". . . but if *you* have initial questions about assignments, due dates, or readings, please first check the syllabus and then contact *your classmates*"). Most of the instructors used humanizing first- and second-person language, such as,

Having been a graduate student myself twice, I recognize that you are making a degree of sacrifice in order to pursue your studies. Honoring the fact that you are choosing to be in class rather than somewhere else you may also need to be, I am willing to excuse two sessions during the semester for unavoidable conflicts that you are able to anticipate during the semester. (Syllabus 8)

Muhammad (2020) suggested that instructors further humanize themselves and students by providing statements regarding their positionalities and identities. In our content analysis, we found that 33% of syllabi contained such statements. While most instructors did not explicitly share much about themselves across

syllabi, 79% required students to engage in autobiographical learning activities. In further humanizing students, most instructors highlighted different learning styles, the importance of individual identities, and multiple perspectives of the world as valuable to the class' learning community. Often, these identity-conscious statements were interwoven with classroom learning expectations, as shown in the example below.

The classroom will be a safe space for all learners regardless of race, gender, class, (dis)ability, cultural background, or sexuality. We will promote and embrace active engagement, critical dialogue, self-reflection, active listening, and authenticity. Each voice is valued in this space as we honor the experiential and content knowledge of every individual. (Syllabus 20)

We found very few representations specifically of Blackness, with notable exceptions: instructors who required readings and texts written by Black scholars who centered Blackness, or instructors who included HBCU environments as part of foundational understandings of HE/SA. When it comes to identity and skills, the notion of representation becomes a critical touchstone of Black mattering (Baker-Bell, 2020). The presence or absence of Black authors, creators, and histories within the curriculum is a bellwether of Black mattering.

Skill Development

Muhammad (2020) emphasized the importance Black literary societies placed on literacy and engaging with a variety of texts across genres. In contemporary learning environments, literacy education has expanded beyond text literacy and has come to encompass digital and web-based texts and other media, which provide access to an incalculable amount of information and opportunities to engage across genres and cultures. This expansion of literacy also presents increased opportunities for instructors to incorporate a variety of texts in the curriculum to serve as mentor texts in literacy development.

Muhammad (2020) argued against a focus on skill development in a vacuum, claiming skills alone are not enough to address mattering if taught exclusively through hegemonic perspectives. She suggested literacy instruction should incorporate more culturally relevant approaches through the use of learning activities such as case study analysis, current/critical-issue presentations, peer review, literature review, and choose-your-own-adventure or student choice assignments. Through our content analysis, we found that less than 2% of classes offered opportunities for students to engage in case study analysis. We also found that approximately 80% required literature reviews; 71%, current-issue presentations; 54%, student choice assignments; and 33%, peer review. Much of the engagement across multiple literacies and most of the associated assessment practices were constructed in a dominant frame lacking culturally responsive practices. Additionally, we found although instructors were using a range of literacy practices overall, very few were critical literacies. When critical literacies were present, they represented only a small portion of the overall curriculum of the course. Most classes required students to engage with text and information

literacies, and some classes required students to engage in digital and media literacies, such as constructing,

a student affairs scholar/practitioner cajita (creative knowledge canvas). The cajita represents a cultural autobiographical story/student journey told in carefully selected artifacts such as family photos, letters, personal belongings, newspaper articles, etc. A short, 1-3 page paper which may be in the form of a poem, letter, essay, etc. should be included with the cajita. (Syllabus 4)

Intellectual Development

Muhammad (2020) explained, "Historically, it was necessary to cultivate intellectualism because society and oppressors did not see Black people as useful, smart, or capable of rigorous learning" (p. 102). She argued that intellectual development must involve asset-based, learner-centered pedagogies that include engagement with topics, concepts, and paradigms that situate learning in its historical context and that highlight the cultural impact of history. She also claimed that intellectual development requires critical self-reflection and that this is the natural next step to identity and skill development, offering students the facility to "express their ideas, work through justice-centered solutions to the world's problems, and expand their mental capacities" (p. 104).

Our analyses revealed that most syllabi (96%) included descriptions of asset-based, learner-centered pedagogies that included engagement with topics, concepts, and paradigms that situate learning in its historical context and highlight the cultural impact of history. For example, Syllabus 1 instructed students to, "Draw conclusions about whose stories are left out of the history of higher education and student affairs to better advocate for these populations" and Syllabus 11 included the following statement, "we learn through intra-action (Barad, 2007) and dialogic exchange (Freire, 1974/2013; hooks, 1994, 2003). We will engage heavily in communal practices to honor each individual's contributions to our scholarly community." However, few syllabi (29%) explicitly offered students opportunities to engage specifically with Black histories or to critically explore the current-day cultural impacts of anti-Blackness on college campuses and within the profession. Although the syllabi revealed the pedagogical approaches instructors used to support intellectual development, the predominance of white racial framing (Feagin, 2013) of such approaches can have a chilling effect on students' willingness and capacity to employ justice-centered solutions to the world's problems, such as anti-Blackness.

Criticality

Muhammad (2020) defined criticality as "the capacity to read, write, and think in ways of understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression, particularly for populations who have been historically marginalized in the world" (p. 120). To analyze how criticality surfaced in the syllabi, we focused on two areas: the evidence of a critical conceptual framework and the extent to which learning

activities were structured to embed the development of critical, racial, and agitation literacies.

Although not all syllabi contained overarching critical conceptual frameworks, a few indicated critical framing through the presence of language acknowledging issues of power and oppression, such as diversity, equity, or inclusion statements (46%); land acknowledgements (1%); statements of the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on communities of Color (1%); encouragement to use bias-free language in submitting assignments (<1%); and the use of critical text and media (55%). For example, statements such as the following prompted us to also look for examples of critical literacy beyond texts within assignments and learning activities:

I believe we learn best when pushed outside our comfort zones; therefore, challenging readings/videos/assignments, etc. and perspectives are included in this course. These readings are meant to be challenging and push you into a state of cognitive dissonance and disequilibrium. (Syllabus 11)

Muhammad (2020) argued that teaching criticality “helps students assume responsibility for the ways in which they process information—to avoid being passive consumers of knowledge and information” (p. 122). In our search for criticality within syllabi, we coded for the existence of student reading journals, media reviews, position papers, and minute papers, as each of these types of activities includes an emphasis on critique as a part of reflection. Only 42% of syllabi required student position papers, and other assignment types that required critique made up less than 1% of assignments represented across syllabi. Our findings show that despite the articulated commitment to an active learning environment (100%), there were few requirements for critically and actively engaging with ideas related to racial justice.

Lastly, we looked for examples of racial or agitation literacy. We found little evidence of racial literacy across syllabi. Outside the use of critical media that provided limited exposure to issues of race and racism, very few assignments required engagement with racial literacy, and only one syllabus suggested anti-Blackness as a *possible* topic students could explore. We analyzed syllabi for action-oriented projects, and of the 46% of syllabi with a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) assignment requirement, only one syllabus had an agitation literacy assignment requirement.

Discussion and Implications

An increasing number of HE/SA preparation faculty are building their curriculum around the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards for master’s level higher education and student affairs professional preparation programs (CAS, 2019) and the *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The CAS (2019) standards state, “Programs must provide learning opportunities so graduates are able to reference historical and current documents that state the philosophical foundations of the profession and to communicate the relevance of these

documents to current higher education and student affairs practice" (p. 10). Foundational courses provided a useful starting place for examining curricular and teaching and learning practices in HE/SA preparation programs.

In using HE/SA syllabi, we join an ongoing scholarly conversation about the critical functions of the syllabus within teaching and learning. As several scholars have argued, the syllabus is a multifaceted tool that establishes expectations and (re)socializes students to the learning environment and discipline of focus (Liao, 2015; Parkes & Harris, 2002; Priester et al., 2008; Sulik & Keys, 2014). Parkes and Harris (2002) also argued that constructing a syllabus can be an opportunity for instructors to engage in reflexivity. In (re)imagining a higher education that centers Black mattering, critical reflexivity is a necessary pursuit. Through critical reflexivity, instructors can better recognize their tendency to cultivate "white supremacy through the teaching of white normalcy" (Haynes, 2021, p. 2). Using directed and conceptual content analyses, we set out to affirm Muhammad's (2020) HRL framework as a useful tool in exploring Black mattering in HE/SA foundational courses. We found Muhammad's work, which is rooted in Black literacies and onto-epistemic credibility, a useful framework both to root out indicators of Black mattering in HE/SA syllabi and to offer recommendations for centering Black mattering in course syllabi and teaching practices.

Unfortunately, we found little evidence of Black mattering within our syllabi data across the four layers of Muhammad's (2020) framework. With regard to identity development and Black mattering, our findings suggest very few instructors design their courses to help Black students explore Blackness in positive and affirming ways. For skill and intellectual development, despite the engagement of a variety of literacies, little attention was given to addressing the historical and cultural impacts of anti-Blackness. The continued marginalization of literacy materials and activities that center Blackness has been referred to as epistemic apartheid (Evans-Winters, 2020; Rabaka, 2010). The inclusion of student choice and current-issue assignments as student requirements in most of the syllabi we reviewed can offer an opportunity for Black students to challenge this apartheid, but students may be reticent to leverage their learning in this way when the structure of the class suggests onto-epistemic credibility is granted only to white literacy practices.

Love (2019) referred to this dampening of the ambition and hopes of Black students due to white supremacy and other injustices as *spirit murder*. Throughout our data, white literacy practices were embedded in and evidenced through a predominance of white authors, traditional grading structures, and rigid course policies as well as a lack of historically responsive and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. When it came to criticality, we found little evidence of the kinds of critical, racial, and agitation literacies that would support Black mattering and liberation. Graduates of HE/SA preparation programs serve in administrative positions within colleges and universities. The imperative for Black mattering within HE/SA programs is important for the liberatory impact it may have not only on Black graduate students within these programs but also on the Black students served by graduates of these programs. As several Black literacy scholars have argued, Black literacies enliven and empower students to reclaim cognitive,

emotional, and spiritual resources that have been depleted by anti-Blackness (Coles, 2019; Baker-Bell, 2020; Johnson et al., 2017). The imperative is also crucial to galvanizing white and BIPOC professionals to promote Black mattering through the use of critical, racial, and agitation literacies toward recognizing the onto-epistemic credibility of Black students, faculty, and staff. Given the (re)socialization potential of course syllabi (Sulik & Keys, 2014), we have directed our recommendations for (un)framing HE/SA teaching and learning practices starting with the syllabus as an answer to the imperative for Black mattering.

Unframing White Supremacy and Framing Onto-Epistemic Credibility

Black literacy is a powerful approach to centering Black mattering and unframing curriculum built within a white racial frame. Student engagement with text, media, digital, and information literacies can provide a useful starting place for learning how to read, write, and speak across multiple modalities. To be liberatory, they must be combined with critical, racial, and agitation literacies (Muhammad, 2020). The literature on Black literacies provides a model for unframing white supremacy and increasing the mental, linguistic, and existential freedom of Black students (Baker-Bell, 2020). Within HE/SA graduate preparation programs, Black literacies can manifest in a number of ways. We organized our suggested pathways for unframing through Black literacies according to Muhammad's four-layer framework.

Identity Development

Muhammad (2020) emphasized the importance of identity to Black liberation. Within the HE/SA graduate preparation program syllabi, a focus on identity should begin with the inclusion of instructor statements of teaching philosophy and a statement of a conceptual framework of criticality (we have provided an example statement in the section on criticality). In centering Black mattering, instructors should also include labor acknowledgements that recognize the critical role of enslaved Black laborers in building and sustaining higher education institutions (Stewart, 2021). We encourage instructors to refer to the example statement Stewart (2021) included in his article in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. Throughout learning activities, instructors should include historical and contemporary works by Black creators rather than silo works to only 1 or 2 weeks out of the entire semester.

Skills and Intellectual Development

When it comes to skill and intellectual development, instructors must avoid reifying white supremacy in both their use and articulation of assessment practices and how they historicize and describe the cultural impact of history in higher education. Student learning activities should involve not only the engagement of Black literatures but also an expressed focus on countering anti-Black racism. Instructors may enhance recognition of Black onto-epistemic credibility through their use of student choice and justice-focused assessment practices such as labor-based grading. Labor-based grading is an approach that flattens the power structure inherent in assessment practices steeped in white racial frames and involves

assigning grades based on student labor (Inoue, 2019). Finally, instructors can expand onto-epistemic possibilities by considering their syllabus an outline open to collective revision with students once the course begins.

Criticality

Syllabi should be built on a conceptual framework of criticality. Criticality is a hallmark of Black literacy in which Black folks critically engage traditional literacy practices toward liberation. Within their syllabi, HE/SA instructors should include a statement that details how their course is framed by criticality. Below is an example of such a statement that centers Black mattering.

In this course, we will engage critical, racial, and agitation literacy practices as articulated by Muhammad (2020). I consider this syllabus a skeleton that we will en flesh and enliven through a collective identification of text, media, and learning activities that honor the onto-epistemic credibility of those who have been historically excluded in higher education and who presently remain on the margins. We will prioritize engagement in *racial literacy* (i.e., seeing, naming, and interpreting the world with an awareness of race, racialization, and racism) and *agitation literacy*, which involves “reading, writing, thinking, and speaking connected to the intention and action to upset, disturb, disquiet, or unhinge systemic oppression” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 125). We will do this work in recognition of the legacies of anti-Blackness that persist across higher education in the curriculum and co-curriculum.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined HE/SA preparation foundational courses to understand their current racial framing and to propose a racial framing toward Black mattering. We chose to focus on foundational courses because of their function of socializing graduate students to the field and work of HE/SA administration. Through directed and conceptual content analyses, we found that most foundational courses operate within white racial frames and perpetuate a legacy denying or ignoring Black mattering. We argue instructors should use their syllabus as a first step in unframing white supremacy and reframing foundational courses in criticality with a special focus on Black mattering. This work joins a body of works that have come before us to uplift Black mattering and promote loving Black flesh (Okello, 2020). Our work has the potential to guide HE/SA graduate preparation faculty toward a curriculum that honors the onto-epistemic credibility of Black people, from those whose labor built and sustained many of our colleges and universities to those who are entering colleges and universities with the hope of enriching their lives.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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