

**Because We Know: Toward a Pedagogical Insistence on Black Mattering**  
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**Abstract.** Black mattering is contested terrain. As we write this, more than 25 states and municipalities have proposed or passed legislation banning critical race theory (CRT) and the incorporation of material(s) that upset the normative curricular and pedagogical conditions of whiteness. Against this backdrop, *what is mattering for Black people?* This essay interrogates the formations and utilizations of educational pedagogies and curriculum. It raises questions about the implicit intent of these mechanisms on and for the lives of Black people, with specific attention to the notion of mattering. Plainly, pedagogies and curriculum that have failed to center or theorize the ways anti-Blackness facilitates projects of unmattering have engendered a set of conditions that reproduce anti-Black racism in and beyond the educational context. To address these conditions, we conceptually trouble the notion of mattering by meditating on a set of priorities urgently embodied by Black passage into and through anti-Black spaces and places.

**Keywords:** Black mattering; anti-Blackness; pedagogy; curriculum

Doors can be real, imaginary, and metaphorical. Doors leading into the middle passage did more than transport Black people; it transformed Black bodies into Black flesh. Entering through its gates meant that one would never return (the same). For Brand (2012), "one enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives" (p. 6). Thus, "our inheritance in the diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space" (p. 3), in the along, to consider what this door, or doors, instantiated in and through Black bodies. These opening pages theorize the door as a portal; a reckoning; an entry; a refusal, for we know:

*perhaps, we have always have  
call it borrowed, brokered over bones and flesh,  
Broken and spilled libation, running beneath our seas  
Beat and bless us forward, though boats be tossed  
To and fro,  
be still our rest, and peace*

And because we know, this essay interrogates the formations and utilizations of educational pedagogies and curriculum. It raises questions about the implicit intent of these mechanisms on and for the lives of Black people, with specific attention to the notion of mattering. Plainly, pedagogies and curriculum that have failed to center or theorize the ways anti-Blackness facilitates projects of unmattering have engendered a set of conditions that reproduce anti-Black racism in and beyond the educational context. To address these conditions, we conceptually trouble the notion of mattering by meditating on a set of priorities urgently embodied by Black passage into and through anti-Black spaces and places.

## Mattering

As it is understood in the student development canon, mattering is in conversation with marginality. Schlossberg (1989) examines this relationship to discuss the importance of mattering for students navigating higher education, particularly those in transition. According to Schlossberg (1989), transitions represent those events or non-events that affect how one understands themselves concerning others. The premise presumes that when students experience marginalization, they tend to feel like they do not matter to anyone. Mattering coheres on the core belief that [we] matter to someone, that our living means something to those with whom we are in a relationship. Mattering operates on two primary levels, interpersonal and social (Rosenberg, 1985; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). The interpersonal dimension accounts for the ways one matters to others in their network while the social dimension considers one's indispensability in the social structure and institutions that encapsulate living. Explicating this point, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) highlighted three fundamental dimensions for mattering: attention, ego-extension, and dependence.

Regarding attention, individuals feel like they command recognition and notice by others, such that their presence is intensely felt and their absence missed. Ego-extension denotes the belief that others are genuinely interested in what one has to say, think, or desire. Relatedly, dependence posited that others need or rely on an individual in some way. Schlossberg (1989) located a fourth dimension that she proposed as appreciation, or the sense that one is esteemed and deemed worthy for their efforts by those in authority. Insignificance or the feeling that one does not matter can prompt an existential crisis.

Following Schlossberg (1989), the classroom should be read as a site of transition-passage, entrance through doors, both physical and metaphorical—and therefore, must grapple with the potentiality of mattering. Mattering, in so far as it stresses connectivity, is built on optimism, or "the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer that satisfying something that you cannot generate on your own" (Berlant, 2011, p. 2) but feel drawn to as a pathway into some form of belonging. Constructing a sense of worth on optimism, however, can have its drawbacks. When optimism fails or becomes "cruel," the object that demands one's attachment "actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (p. 2). Stated differently, the object/scene/attachment becomes cruel when it "ignites a sense of possibility that makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving" (p. 2). Against this backdrop, *what is mattering for Black people?* The language of mattering, as written, gives way to the subjectivity of perception, where, all things being equal, one may feel as if they matter; in the same way, another may suggest that they do not matter. However, understated in these claims to mattering is the function of anti-Blackness as a structuring apparatus that functions to enclose—surveil, patrol, monitor, and place limitations on Black livability.

## Mattering and Ordinary Crisis

Importantly, anti-Blackness puts forth the irreconcilable truth that Black people exist in a structurally antagonistic relationship with society. Wilderson (2010) considers Blackness "a paradigmatic impossibility" because to be Black is to be "the very antithesis of a Human subject" (p. 9). Anti-Black scholarship is necessarily motivated by the question of Black suffering, as it interrogates the psychic and material assault on Black flesh. Taken together, the body becomes the site for the manifestation of anti-Blackness—the constant humiliation, murder, disgust, and disregard for Black life and humanity. Anti-Blackness, more specific than discussions on the effects of racism toward Black people, insists on "grappling with the position of the Black person as socially dead—denied humanity and thus ineligible for full citizenship and regard within the polity" (Dumas, 2016, p. 12). The presumption of life and citizenship that this stance argues against is verified by mappings of historical terror in the Western, United States context, involving Black flesh (Okello, 2020). An honest theorization on anti-Blackness must continuously wrestle with what it means to have one's very existence as Black constructed as a problem—for White people, for the public (good), for the nation-state even as a problem to be resolved in the educational context.

Here, the very technologies and imaginations that allow a social recognition of the humanness of others systematically exclude this possibility for Black people. In this sense, Black people cannot be human, and, for all intents and purposes, they are something other than human. This baseline assumption explicitly critiques the social dimensions of mattering discussed by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) and advanced by Schlossberg (1989) and raises questions about the interpersonal tenets. Critique of the interpersonal rests on the belief that sociopolitical systems are inextricably bound to the personal and, as such, inform how individuals engage and make meaning of interpersonal relationships. If anti-Blackness is permanent and enduring, then Blackness is perpetually at odds with the notions of appreciation, attention, importance (ego-extension), and dependence, tenets germane to mattering. In other words, passage through the door of no return as a heuristic for reading the value of Black people, and further, their capacity to belong, interrupts possibilities threaded in and assumed by Schlossberg's (1989) dimensions of mattering.

Accordingly, the question for mattering, theorized through anti-Blackness, asks, what does it mean to matter when the organization of human sociality and politics do not, and cannot, comprehend *the Black* as legible and worthy of mattering? This inherent conflict outlines the ordinariness (Shange, 2019) of anti-Blackness, where Blackness in educational learning spaces is understood as a type of "impasse shaped by a crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures" (Berlant, 2011, p. 8). In the impasse, Black people, specifically Black pedagogues, have embodied what it means to curate a liberatory agenda that comes to terms with the cruel optimism of (not) mattering. Relatedly, the impasse calls forth an acute recognition of power relations and enclosures surrounding them toward ways of living and sustaining the self.

## **Black Pedagogies**

The realities of anti-Blackness leave little room for pretense in what is required of teaching and learning in higher education. Speaking at UC Berkeley, Baldwin (1974) would say it this way:

For a Black person to get an education in this country, [they have] to have a lot of guts first of all, and this institution is like many institutions, which means that it is a racist institution, there is no way around that. All the American institutions are racist. And to get an education under those circumstances is a tremendous act of the will. Black people very largely educate themselves.

Baldwin posits that white institutions and the pedagogies and curriculum that direct teaching and learning, at best, fail Black students, and at worst, mis-educate them. It would seem then that Black students, by way of traditional schooling, are gaining a political education about what is expected of them if they are to fit into the United States' social structure. Even in the most progressive models, one may still experience ideologies of absence (Stewart, 2019) that enclose Black ways of knowing and being in support of respectable comportments that privilege whiteness. Of note, schooling achieved through a liberal discursive tradition is markedly unoriginal in the deployment of reform-based practices that stress acquiescence and unthreatening expressions of Black being, such that theorizing Blackness will not consequently undo repressive regimes' forms of governance. Progressive projects, generated by white institutions, equally, if not more discreetly, depend on obedient Black subjects (Cox, 2015; Shange, 2019)

Against all likelihood, the transformation of Black bodies into Black flesh, humans into things (Shange, 2019), gave birth to a different kind of creativity. This onto-epistemological metamorphosis would forever define what Black was, is, or was capable of becoming (Alexander, 2004). Through the door and into the hold (Wilderson, 2010), where death waited in stow, survival meant imagining and curating life-giving practices that would intervene on denials of citizenship. Encased in these practices were inheritances that M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) would call pedagogies. The language of pedagogies invokes curriculum or the production and reification of knowledge, both formally and informally, in and across various sites.

At the heart of pedagogies is the imperative "of making the world in which we live intelligible to ourselves and each other—in other words, teaching ourselves" (Alexander, 2005, p. 6). Relatedly, the language of pedagogies emphasizes interdependence, established by a mutual investment in teaching and learning. Pedagogies, in this way, are epistemic and ontological projects that summon "subordinated knowledges that are produced in the context of the practices of marginalization" (p. 7). Through the door of no return, the middle passage represents one such context of marginalization that produced pedagogies bent on mattering. Black students, through the gates of higher education, and classrooms within them, point to another such context.

## Black Mattering

In an open letter to Angela Davis in 1970, James Baldwin abides in the protracted diminutive history of Blackness in the United States. We begin here and record Baldwin at length as one point of entry into Black mattering. We lift a portion of this letter to demonstrate the ways Black mattering can flow beyond the formal educational context and be enacted as social-political praxis. Additionally, the scene and circumstances that compelled Baldwin to write this letter offer a picture of carceral technologies that work to enclose the lives, spirits, and freedom of Black people. Davis' imprisonment is an egregious manifestation of anti-Black sentiment. Yet, Black people broadly, and Black girls and women in particular, in schools daily, must devise social and cultural choreographies to disrupt the pedagogical rhythms of captivity, progressive (read: anti-racist) or otherwise. Baldwin (1970) wrote:

We must do what we can do, and fortify and save each other—we are not drowning in an apathetic self-contempt, we do feel ourselves sufficiently worthwhile to contend even with inexorable forces in order to change our fate and the fate of our children and the condition of the world! We know that a man is not a thing and is not to be placed at the mercy of things. We know that air and water belong to all mankind and not merely to industrialists. We know that a baby does not come into the world merely to be the instrument of someone else's profit. We know that democracy does not mean the coercion of all into a deadly—and, finally, wicked—mediocrity but the liberty for all to aspire to the best that is in him, or that has ever been. We know that we, the Blacks, and not only we, the Blacks, have been, and are, the victims of a system whose only fuel is greed, whose only god is profit. We know that the fruits of this system have been ignorance, despair, and death, and we know that the system is doomed because the world can no longer afford it—if, indeed, it ever could have. And we know that, for the perpetuation of this system, we have all been mercilessly brutalized, and have been told nothing but lies, lies about ourselves and our kinsmen and our past, and about love, life, and death so that both soul and body have been bound in hell... If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name. If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber. For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night. (para. 14)

There is no going back. Baldwin knows this. Black mattering assumes passage into the longer wakes of history for Black people, and once there, a sitting with realities of that passage. If to move through these doors is to take up a posture of history's burden and willfully inject that consciousness into one's teaching philosophy, mattering cannot remain idle-static, immobile, stagnant, and must be complicated in ways that resist objectivity. Mattering invested in *living* Black people must think beyond the conventional tropes that define acceptance and appreciation and wrestle with the cruelty of anti-Black racism as a process of necropolitical organizing, where Black people are already condemned to death and dying.

## Pedagogies of the Flesh as Black Mattering

At the very least, we know that freedom and therefore mattering, "is a practice...to want freedom is to welcome struggle" (Love, 2019, p. 9), but what are the pathways, innovations, decisions, and nondecisions, that facilitate this flight and resist generic solutions to the problem of racism? Offering insight on a praxis of Black mattering, Gwendolyn Brooks (1991), in her poem *Speech to the Young: Speech to the Progress—Toward (Among them Nora and Henry III)*, wrote "Live not for battles won/Live not for the-end-of-the-song/ Live in the along" (p. 23). As a poetics of survival, to live in the long "proposes an injunction, a proposition...a declaration of war" (Kelley, 2002, p. 192) that commits to building possibilities and new conceptions of Black liberation. Though nestled in the hold of the ship (Wilderson, 2010), to live in the along is to enact an imagination bent on Black people's material and epistemic desires. To live in the along is to "produce beautifully, visceral, and eloquent literature, photography, visual art, and films that explain and endure our suffering, soundscapes...body movements that express pain and joy simultaneously" (Love, 2019, p. 8). Moreover, following Baldwin (1970), Black mattering, in part, is actualized at the convergence of radical divestment in anti-Blackness and loving [Black] flesh. Regarding the former, the possessive investment in anti-Blackness cannot be rectified by learning "how to be anti-racist." It necessitates a radical divestment in the project of anti-Blackness and a refocusing of energies and resources. It requires an abolitionist ethic that surrenders negotiations with anti-Black structures and refuses the project altogether.

Divestment is clear in that whiteness is irredeemable, and Black mattering begins and ends at [our] belief in its merits. This commitment gives way to loving flesh. Although the surveillance of Black people, materialized by anti-Blackness and systems of terror means that Black people must wrestle with external and internal disciplining that reads their bodies as unlovable things, loving flesh is personal, discursive, and collective, engendering a willingness to look, see, and account for the embodied lives of Black people (Okello, 2020). Consequently, to take up Black mattering pedagogically is to dedicate oneself to enlivening flesh. Pedagogies of the flesh note the constraints of carcerality as more than a physical occurrence, but the psychic, spiritual, and emotional states that Black people are trained into and take on as ways of being. Pedagogies of the flesh fully engage the Black body-mind as a living, moving entity deserving of humanity. Baldwin's letter to Davis projects this mattering.

### Affirming the Collective

At the onset, Baldwin gets clear about who and what is at stake. Crossing over and beyond the tendency to lift individuality in the quest for living, Baldwin employs and affirms the collective *we* as a site of struggle. One gets the sense here that mattering could not just be about ego-extension, as in tying one's sense of value to the works that they might otherwise perform, but he clarifies that Davis requires protection because the collective *we* are deserving of protection. To "fortify" and "save" each other re-presents the best of the Black radical tradition, whereas

mutuality does not presume sameness; instead, mutuality is an invitation to materialize freedom that says, I cannot be free until we are all free. In this special issue, Robin Phelps-Ward, Keneisha Harrington, Lashia Bowers, Travis Smith, Cherese Fine, Dion Harry, and Maurice Williams consider how to structure research teams such that they serve as a community building space and, one, where Black scholars can experience belonging as they negotiate anti-Black educational places. Similarly, Ginny Jones Boss, Tiffany Davis, and Christa Porter underscore the potential hazards that lay in waiting should instructors continue to abandon framing their courses deliberately—through syllabus, citations, and course designs—with Black mattering in mind.

### **Clarification**

There exists a will to social, political, and cultural amnesia in a western, United States context that derides the need for close examinations. This derision fears the interruption of progress. Forgetting seems to be more desirable, less threatening. Forgetting, at times, "stands in for never having known or never having learned something, the difference between staying in tune with the source of our wisdom and relying on borrowed substitutes" (Alexander, 2005, p. 276). Baldwin (1970) interrupts this training by confronting miseducation levied against Black people, "we have all been mercilessly brutalized, and have been told nothing but lies, lies about ourselves and our kinsmen and our past, and about love, life, and death." The recognition seems to be that a corrective is necessary, and thus, memory intervenes on individual and collective amnesia, nostalgia, and the logic that promotes fragmentation of the mind, body, and spirit. Taking up this project, Toby Jenkins, Gloria Boutte, and Kamania Wynter-Hoyte posit that higher education cannot simply include Black cultural experiences and activities into the college experience and call that mattering. There must be a mindset change among those who teach and lead that is informed by Black cultural values, beliefs, habits, and histories. Relatedly, in the spirit of leading with Black cultural habits and beliefs, Christina Morton's offerings describes how providing students with creative outlets to express themselves in and coursework to meaningfully recognize global antiblack solidarity at work can help them process their experiences and produce material that is humanizing, liberating, and life-giving.

### **Emphasizing Agency**

Baldwin emphasizes agency (Okello & White, 2019) in the absence and, perhaps, the impossibility of full regard and appreciation. Critically engaging the concept, he moves to consider the body's movement against methods of enclosure, writing, "we are not drowning in an apathetic self-contempt, we do feel ourselves sufficiently worthwhile to contend even with inexorable forces in order to change our fate and the fate of our children." Notably, he does not implore an agency devoid of history or hard memory. So, too, it should not be read as a variant of rational western sensibilities that situate public and private appreciation in the realm of possibility; it is an embodied agentic response to anti-Black exploitation woven into the tapestry of western social life that insists on the Black people's capacity to curate their healing. In this issue, led by Afrofuturism, Stephanie Toliver and Elizabeth Gilliam

put forth Black Feminist Wondaland (BFW) as framework to account for how Black women reckon with the misogynoir enacted against them, how they celebrate themselves as an act of radical resistance, and how they reclaim their joy in a society bent on keeping us in a state of sorrow.

### **Accountability/Intercession**

Intercession proposes a deliberate *doing* that is willing to put one's own life on the line to advance the life chances of another: "If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impassable with our bodies the corridor." This appeal, different from dependence, which proffers that a relationship exists because one is needed or relied on, the willingness to intercede, already renders value and works at the edge of possibility and imaginatively beyond to create life. Intercession bends on the richness of Black onto-epistemologies and cosmologies, and, in doing so, pedagogically asks, What does the collective need to become to survive? Here, the classroom/assignment/text/letter becomes a convergent space of otherwise possibilities, the site where we discard the unuseful to pick up that which is necessary. Theorizing collective survival, Robert Robinson meditates on the potentialities of Black Educational Spaces, particularly, stealin' the meeting, a Black Antebellum practice of creating otherwise literacy practices under repressive circumstances. Beyond the classroom site, Ti'Era Worsley and ReAnna Roby work to address a void in maker education literature by specifically considering how Black joy can foster spaces of pride, creativity, and ownership for and by Black youth. The issue concludes with a book review where, in addition to reviewing the text, Roshaunda Breeden uses Love's (2019) *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* as an analytic to suggest possibilities for a praxis of Black mattering and abolitionist teaching in higher education, specifically.

### **Endless Beginnings**

Black mattering is contested terrain. As we write this, more than 25 states and municipalities have proposed or passed legislation banning critical race theory (CRT) and the incorporation of material(s) that upset the normative curricular and pedagogical conditions of whiteness. We understand this current contestation against CRT, and larger critiques of oppression, as an historical script that has functioned to control what counts as legitimate knowledge and how it is reproduced through white institutions. To be clear, Black mattering decenters whiteness, and, purposefully, centers Blackness. Taken together, these contributions offer important beginnings, with the understanding that anti-Blackness is enduring and adaptable. And so, let us begin again.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

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

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