

“Weaving an Otherwise” Through Black Lives Mattering in U.S. Schools

A Book Review

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We are responsible for doing whatever we can to make this world into the best one for everyone by increasing education, teaching acceptance, and demanding diversity in voice and perspective across contexts.

(Williams, 2022, p. 70)

But he also writes ... about the capacity of Blacks, in the absence of curricula designed to affirm Black life, to create the spaces and the institutions necessary to do so.

(Spence, 2022, p. 203)

BLACK LIVES MATTER IN U.S. SCHOOLS, edited by Boni Wozolek (2022), brings together present-day thinkers and curriculum theorizers, including Walter Gershon, Roland Mitchell, Denise Taliaferro Baszile and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, to make meaning of the Movement for Black Lives in the polyvocal curricula of U.S. schools from K-12 through higher education. Taking curriculum seriously, the volume considers “the many ways we learn from the presences and absences of Black lives across forms of curriculum—formal, enacted, hidden and null—and the way that such lessons have impacted socio-political and cultural norms and values” (Wozolek, 2022, p. 3). While the book primarily focuses on forms of curricula within schools, it also acknowledges and engages curricula that exist outside of formal schooling, like media coverage and representation of the Black Lives Matter movement, Hurricane Katrina, and Black people in general. In taking Black lives seriously—as well as the resonances of their presences and absences across curricula—this volume allows readers and scholars tied up in the Movement for Black Lives to gain a sense of the curricular implications of these absences, presences, and half-truths.

The authors, perhaps intentionally, do not delve into the concrete actions necessary to bring a curriculum of this magnitude to the fore in U.S. schools. Practically speaking, the present violence enacted through racist, homophobic, and transphobic laws and book bans makes it difficult to see where any inroads may be made in K-12 schools in a practical sense. Simultaneously, the curriculum of violence enacted against Black lives on college campuses

includes the erasure, devaluation, and bastardization of Black theory, white flight in the wake of protests, and defunding all levels of education. Readers should not expect a “how to” guide for implementing a curriculum of Black life mattering in schools. Instead, the authors theorize a polyvocal curriculum of Black life mattering and inspire generative thinking around ways to organize and operationalize Black life mattering in schools. For readers yearning for curricula that reflect and celebrate the beauty, genius, and innocence of Black life, this book is a bittersweet reminder that the urgency to actualize this future is often met by resistance.

Leaning on the works of Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Pauli Murray, Sylvia Wynter, Marimba, and other Black scholars, the authors offer many examples of the historical and current ways Black life does not (yet) matter in U.S. schools, but they also acknowledge, through an afro-realist lens, that Black lives have always mattered to Black people. Theorizing and historicizing Black life in the curriculum is not a new project, but it is still a pressing one.

Do Black Lives Matter in U.S. Schools?

As Wozolek (2022) explains in the introduction,

the purpose of this book is to think critically about how such violence is tangled up in systems of schooling (Nespor, 1997) while considering the curricular implications of what it would mean for Black lives to *actually* matter in schools. (p. 2, emphasis in original)

The urgency of the text comes to a field that has been engaged in colorblind and neoliberal logics resulting in an entrepreneurial model of educational leadership (Rigby, 2014). Although the entrepreneurial model was meant to spur innovation and close achievement gaps, time has revealed a reliance on the same anti-Black foundation as prior leadership models and a failure to address the ways “schooling normalizes the dehumanization of all bodies outside of the white cis-hetero patriarchy” (Wozolek, 2022, p. 12). Rather than develop innovative ways to realize educational equity for all students, the entrepreneurial model has led to a foreclosed understanding of curriculum that detaches it from history, geography, and socio-political entanglements. Recent calls to teach history without reference to certain parts of history, to teach reading without representation from certain groups, and to teach science without reference to widely held and accepted theories on evolution and climate change are borne from a misguided belief that young people can or should learn how to be “good” citizens without grappling with socio-historical contexts or the value and challenges of living in a diverse society. And what realities has this line of logic written? The quote leading into Sherick A. Hughes’s essay in the volume illuminates the nonsensical “TRUE FACTS” that characterize anti-Black sentiment in the current era: “ANY black that feels whites have it over them HAS to be a racist. That’s a whole lot of blacks!” (Bobby, 2018, as cited in Hughes, 2022, p. 23, emphasis in original).

To counter school curricula that have led to the devaluation and dehumanization of Black life, Wozolek suggests a need to understand the “polyvocal curricula” beyond the bounds of that which is explicitly taught in classrooms and a need to grapple with “how, what, and when schools teach about Black lives” (p. 5). She asks,

What does it mean for a child to be metaphorically lynched or choked through the schoolroom, as scholars like Du Bois (1926) and Woodson (1933) have described? As such

how does the everyday choking away (Du Bois, 1926) of a child's way of being and knowing contribute to larger sociocultural violence against people of color? (Wozolek, 2022, p. 12)

The essays in *Black Lives Matter in U.S. Schools* weave together to create a curriculum of refusal that confronts the neoliberal paradox in academia. Museus and Wang (2022) offer an apt framework for this review, posing that research seeking to refuse neoliberal logics needs to attend to issues of reflexivity, responsibility, and relationships. The remainder of this review considers *Black Lives Matter in U.S. Schools* through this framework.

Reflexivity, Responsibility, and Relationships

The framework Museus and Wang (2022) present for refusing neoliberal logics in research design seeks to push researchers to move away from “tangible systemic violence that harms real lives in the communities that they love” (p. 16). The authors present three characteristics of research necessary to achieve this distance: seeing reflexivity as transformative, prioritizing responsibility to communities, and centering relationships to cultivate solidarity in and through research.

Seeing reflexivity as transformative means moving beyond reflexivity that simply “fesses up” to the biases researchers bring to their research and moving toward viewing one's positionality in relation to the community in which they work and research. Wozolek takes this on explicitly in the introduction, sharing her desire to make space for Black scholars speak for themselves in the volume. In addition to Wozolek in the introduction, several chapter authors also engage in transformative reflexivity as they shake off anti-Black ideologies that had taken hold in their own practices.

By prioritizing responsibility to our communities, Museus and Wang (2022) urge researchers to ask, “What is the impact you hope to see? With whom do you want to experience these outcomes? What are the implications of the research for your communities, the Indigenous land you inhabit, and the waterways that surround it?” (p. 25). These questions lead researchers away from the practices of doing research for the sake of self (i.e., publications and presentations that serve only the length of one's CV) and toward conducting research for the sake of the community. In this vein, essays written by Ngozi Williams, a university student, and Cluny Lavache, a high school coprincipal, bring necessary community perspectives to the text, helping to move toward the community it hopes to impact. In another essay, Roland Mitchell explores the ways his work as a scholar can *help fortify*, but not solely sustain, the levees that hold back the waters of racism.

Finally, Museus and Wang (2022) suggest researchers “consider how the research process ... will (re)shape your relationship with those around you” (p. 25) and “construct the research process so that a central outcome is to deepen your relationships with those around you, the generations who came before and will come after you within your communities, and your environment” (p. 26). In taking a polyvocal curriculum approach, Wozolek considers the ways the *Black Lives Matter in U.S. Schools* text as a whole reshapes our relationship with the curriculum of Black lives (not yet) mattering in schools. I now turn this review toward the individual essays, leaning on the ways the authors' works do and do not engage in a curriculum of refusal through reflexivity, responsibility, and relationships. I also consider how the text as a whole engages “in a

continuous struggle with academia’s deeply embedded assumptions about what constitutes impact, ... [refuses] taken for granted but unnecessary assumptions, ... and [works] to understand how [Black] collective communities define desirable impact” (Museus & Wang, 2022, p. 25).

Weaving an Otherwise of Black Life Mattering

In the first essay, Sherick Hughes (2022) breaks down three often used arguments against the Black Lives Matter movement as quoted by an Amazon customer by the name of “Bobby” in their review of a White Lives Matter t-shirt that is no longer for sale on the site. Bobby claimed the White Lives Matter t-shirts would help “white people to look at the TRUE FACTS”: (1) “more whites are killed by police than Blacks,” (2) “blacks kill more police annually than police kill Blacks,” and (3) that all lives matter (Hughes, 2022, p. 23). Using an equity literate fact-checking framework, Hughes takes on the responsibility to have a nuanced conversation about the evidence supporting the three claims. Hughes presents triangulated evidence showing that U.S. society and schools operate in ways that make clear that Black lives do not matter as much as white lives. The work is thorough, presenting 33 findings from 10 sources showing evidence to support and counter Bobby’s claims. Hughes concludes with a discussion of curriculum as racialized text at historically and predominantly white institutions (HPWIs) helping readers understand how “true facts” like those presented by Bobby are allowed to permeate the curriculum unchecked when schools (a) don’t call “into question how biased observers can easily misinterpret race-related data,” (b) aren’t transparent about “various forms of race-related data, including how misinterpretations of data can normalize texts of a hidden curriculum of racial inequity,” and (c) don’t revisit “how racial epistemologies are hidden within the HPWI curriculum at large” (Hughes, 2022, pp. 48–9). My biggest challenge with Hughes’ essay is the number of unanswered questions remaining about the data, which Hughes acknowledges results from the disaggregated nature of the data sources. Specifically, I am left wondering how and whether gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status of both victims and those convicted of crimes matters and how stratifications of Blackness play out in the curricula of Black life not mattering as much as white lives.

Hughes writes the chapter to “the *chronic egalitarians* who have goals of monitoring their own reactions and behaviors in an effort to root out stereotypes and feelings that counter their espoused values” (p. 25). In naming this audience, Hughes attends to transformative reflexivity in the Museus and Wang (2022) framework. Hughes wants readers to consider the facts he presents and to develop four abilities in relation to bias, discrimination, and inequity, (1) recognize their forms, (2) respond thoughtfully, (3) redress the situation through studying how social change happens, and (4) cultivate and sustain communities (Hughes, 2022, pp. 25–26). Hughes proposes equity literate fact-checking to be used within a curriculum of refusal of neoliberal logics and acknowledges that refusal requires one to grapple with nuance and “facts” that don’t always support one’s cause. Hughes further urges educators to use the equity literate fact-checking framework in other fact-checking endeavors to help consider both the individual and collective responsibilities they have in addressing inequities.

The inclusion of Ngozi Williams’s (2022) essay in the volume is an example of attending the relationships with those members of the community who are the subjects of research. Williams writes not as a scholar, but as a member of the community who has experienced a curriculum of anti-Blackness. Williams’s words illustrate the tragic internalization among Black women of the insidious curriculum against Black lives that exists in the media and seeps into U.S. schools.

Williams reflects on her own “rejection of my Blackness” in her youth and opens to a critique of beauty standards as presented in the media that reinforce anti-Blackness. As an example, Williams highlights the persistent messaging through *Essence* magazine toward assimilationist beauty standards, while neglecting more pressing health challenges, like obesity, maternal mortality, and diabetes faced by members of the Black community at disproportionate rates. Even media meant to promote Black lives—to show Black lives mattering—operate in ways to reproduce white beauty standards, corroborating the curriculum against Black lives by adopting and reproducing the logic that Black life mattering has a positive correlation with white assimilation. Williams concludes, “Instead of focusing on necessary health care and attempting to right the structural wrong done to Black people by the health care industry, the focus is on aesthetic” (p. 64). Williams’s essay demonstrates in vivid detail the ways a curriculum of Black life not mattering plays out in the lived experiences of Black people and specifically Black women and girls as self-inflicted violence of rejection and internalized racism.

By including Williams’s chapter, Wozolek makes space for members of the community to theorize their own experience. The authors’ detour from formal school curricula might indicate to readers the ways that people are attuned to polyvocal curricula outside of schools. As I concluded the chapter, I wondered why Williams focused on the curricula outside of schools rather than what she experienced inside of schools. Further, I wondered about the salience of school curricula in relation to outside of school curricula and how the two are in conversation with one another. This chapter reminds readers that researchers can change the relationship between research and participants to make “space for participants to share what they want from the research” (Museus & Wang, 2022, p. 23).

In his essay, Roland W. Mitchell (2022) invites readers to explore the ways resistance against racism is like a mud levee—perhaps simplistic in its construction, but effective in its purpose. The chapter’s framework—rising water, contraflow, and levees—comes from Mitchell’s personal history having moved to Louisiana in the summer of 2005, just months before Hurricane Katrina caused disaster in the region. The essay tacks back to 2005 and forth to 2016 when three events—the police killing of Alton Sterling, a 500-year flood, and the retaliatory murder of three East Baton Rouge Police Department (EBRPD) officers by Gavin Eugene Long—resulted in enrollment challenges at Louisiana State University. The focus of the essay, however, is the metaphorical levee constructed by the relationships across members of a community. Mitchell’s commitment to building and growing community is inspired by deeply personal reasons, but the acts of engaging with—and being challenged by—the East Baton Rouge and LSU communities show how “the simplicity or substance for which the levee is composed” should not cause people “to overlook a levee’s profound strength” (R. W. Mitchell, 2022, p. 78). While the levee represents a refusal against the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural genocide required by assimilation into white logics, the composition of the levee is the source of its strength—a realization Mitchell gets to only after being called to account by a well-intentioned member of the community in 2016. In this essay, Mitchell explores the tension between a predominantly and historically white institution and the majority Black community from which its lush grounds have been erected. The contrast is stark. If one were to travel the mere 9-minute ride north from the LSU campus to Capital Senior High School, they would certainly note the shift from a serene, green campus to a grey, dilapidated, and nearly treeless downtown. Mitchell’s essay reminds readers that working in and on a community is not synonymous with working for and with a community, and that the latter is the only way to write new futures.

Considered against the Museus and Wang (2022) framework, Mitchell's essay is deeply reflective of his own work as a scholar and the ways his work has fallen short of respecting the communities his research was intended to serve. Mitchell tells the story of his own transformative reflexivity and, in sharing his experience, provides a model for readers to begin this work as well. Mitchell's chapter further shows readers that transformative reflexivity occurs in conjunction with critical reflection on one's responsibility to the communities they hope to serve and openness to authentic relationships where challenging questions are given space.

Kirsten T. Edwards's (2022) essay, "Black Theory Matters: AntiBlackness, White Logics, and the Limits of Diversity Research Paradigms," is perhaps the strongest call for transformative reflexivity in the volume. Edwards's call for readers and researchers to turn the critical lens on themselves and examine the ways research on Black lives has often still not been *for* Black lives embodies the calls for transformative reflexivity and responsibility in Museus and Wang (2022). On the heels of Mitchell's chapter, Edwards's questioning of the theories scholars lean upon and the questions they ask takes up responsibility to communities where Mitchell left off. Edwards asks,

Why does higher education scholarship continue to encounter limits/limitations in its ability to positively alter the experiences of people of color on college campuses? Why has the preponderance of literature related to race and justice seemingly produced little to no impact on higher education's colonial project? How might expectations regarding standard research practice within the field inhibit productive lines of inquiry? (p. 95)

Edwards builds a sharp critique against "white theory in black face" (p. 95)—research predicated on white higher education holding validity and value for Black collegians that simultaneously is "ill-equipped to contend with the reverberations of oppression rooted in enslavement and antiBlackness that formed not only the nation, but also its institutions" (p. 97).

Edwards's essay questions the impact of research when said research is founded on theoretical frameworks that uphold white comfort at the expense of Black liberation. The author asks readers to question their responsibility to the communities they research and to take up radical Black thought that "recognizes the revolutionary as opposed to the assimilationist dispositions of Black students" (p. 102). Black theorizing, she claims, must guide the scholarly work in a world where Black lives truly matter.

In "Education as if Black Lives Mattered," Yolanda Sealy-Ruiz, Marcelle Haddix, and Cluny Lavache (2022) directly take on the curriculum against Black lives in K-12 schools. They say,

An essential design of [the] educational experience is for [Black students] to believe they are without history, that their culture is barbaric and uncivilized, and that the success of Black people is often dependent on their ability to assimilate by accepting and/or adopting European perspectives. (p. 114)

Taking aim at the implicit curriculum of K-12 schools and the deficit beliefs held by educators who enact the curriculum, the authors demand educators take responsibility for why they entered the field of education if not to change patterns of mass incarceration and Black death. Perhaps the most practical suggestions for enacting a curriculum of Black life mattering come from this chapter. The authors suggest educators develop cultural competence, address deficit thinking, and

bring Black voices into literacy as three ways to shift to an enacted curriculum of Black life mattering. Such a curriculum, they explain, should be enacted by a diverse selection of educators. This chapter is important because it begins to operationalize a curriculum of Black life mattering, specifically in literacy, and the characteristics required of an educator to teach such a curriculum. Furthermore, this chapter is co-authored by a school principal who shares in the theorizing around a curriculum of Black life mattering, once again ensuring that the experiences and theories of members of the community are included in the volume in ways that challenge readers to consider their own relationship to the communities they research.

In “Getting Schooled,” Walter Gershon (2022) calls up a vision of free and public education that “is essential to any nation or state project that might begin to claim a responsible citizenry, and informed economy, or knowledgeability for its own sake” (p. 133). Gershon argues that engaging this vision will require “deep reflexivity” to “address the inherent hatred of its foundation that continues to be normalized today” (p. 133). The reflexive turn in this chapter brings the everyday violence in the formal and enacted curriculum of U.S. schools into plain view. The curriculum of lying, which characterizes differences as deficits, leads to choking “the ontological and epistemological life out of students of color in school” where they learn “they can’t be themselves and be successful in many iterations of schooling, that asking questions will often be considered impertinence, and that to survive one must hold onto multiple versions of self in which one’s true self is suppressed” (p. 135).

Here again, the text takes reflexivity as transformative. Gershon explores the relationship between schools and those being schooled and shows how failing to think reflexively about how curricula and practices founded on a history of eugenics and Jim Crow has left Black students open to violence in schools and beyond. Gershon offers no tangible path toward a new future, leaving readers to sit in the discomfort of knowing that there may not be a path toward Black lives mattering in schools as they are constituted today.

David Omotoso Stovall’s (2022) chapter takes Gershon’s curriculum to Chicago to demonstrate other ways U.S. society teaches that Black lives matter less than other lives. Stovall writes “in the spirit of solidarity and humility” called for in research that fosters relationships in resistance to neoliberalism. Throughout the chapter, Stovall challenges the reader to look again at what they think they know about a city dubbed “Chi-raq.” Stovall presents to readers alternative narratives—counter narratives—to help frame the city and its people as a place ripe with curricular opportunities to “study up” (p. 145). The author commits to Black humanity and the right to exist in peace and in place. Stovall closes the chapter with a strong statement of solidarity and hope:

Our decision to resist the conditions that contain and marginalize us will come in-between and underneath conventional spaces. Let it be known that we are still tired. We are still sick of the unrelenting thirst the state exudes for Black death. After the fires subside we will still be part of loose and well-defined formations that work to claim our humanity and build a world where we are not perpetually in the crosshairs of the state. It is not linear nor will be connected to an explicit white, Western-European, male, cisgendered, heterosexual, Protestant Christian, able-bodied ethic. It is something different. It must be if we expect to get anywhere closer to the things that make us free. (p. 154)

Throughout Stovall’s essay, readers are left wondering how someone can love a place and a people that have been so marred by violence the way he clearly does. Stovall’s chapter provides a model for contesting deficit narratives about a community through a commitment to centering

relationships, breaking with the individualism of traditional research and neoliberal logics. Stovall also reminds readers that an important part of a movement is the education of the activists. Teachers and teacher educators must work to historicize the racist and patriarchal foundations of education for and with students and to use their cities as a curriculum for Black lives.

In “Letter to Rev. Dr. Pauli,” Reagan P. Mitchell (2022) challenges readers to wrestle with the reverberations of absences of queer lives across the “chocolate spectrum.” Mitchell intends to *ridicule* the reader—to bother their senses so that they “get in touch with the Black diaspora” (p. 157). Mitchell plays with epiphenomenal time and argues against “rigid verticality in narrative depictions” that make it impossible “to conceive points of simultaneity” (p. 165). Instead, Mitchell engages epiphenomenal praxis through a letter to the ancestor Pauli Murray, to resist “a linear approach to understanding the Black diaspora [that] can silence and leave out voices, perspectives, and experiences” (p. 158). Murray, the recipient of Mitchell’s letter, represents a significant absence from the formal curriculum. The Black queer feminist legal scholar was a significant figure during the Civil Rights Era whose accomplishments reverberate into the present, but she has been erased from formal history curriculum in both K-12 and higher educational spaces. Readers will leave this essay feeling the weight of the absence. Indeed, Mitchell successfully ridicules readers to get in touch with the Black diaspora—or at least to become aware of how out of touch we are. When absences allow us to refrain from ridiculing our consciousness, from becoming “uncomfortable with the continued rationalized reformulations of Black lynching, nationally and nationwide” (p. 172), what futures are written and foreclosed in the absences?

The effect of Mitchell’s chapter is discomfort with the absence and with the many other absences that readers are forced into knowing *of* and yet do not leave knowing. This chapter calls responsibility into question. Readers leave the chapter being made aware that voices in this community have been decentered, exploited, and erased because they did not play by the neoliberal regime’s rules: “You can do equity work, as long as you do it according to the neoliberal regime’s rules and help spread the same logics that have decimated and subjugated marginalized communities” (Museus & Wang, 2022, p. 20). Pauli Murray’s erasure is evidence of this paradox projected through history and engages readers in questioning how erasure teaches boundaries, specifically for people with historically marginalized identities.

In the final chapter, Denise Taliaferro Baszile (2022) brings present-day context to the fore, answering for readers where exactly a persistent curriculum against Black lives has led us—to democracy in the break and “an ongoing accumulation of Black death” (p. 180). Baszile asks readers to be honest about the state of democracy, both in the U.S. and beyond and to imagine the consequences of either continuing to teach “democracy in the ideal” or “democracy in the break” (p. 181). The passion behind Baszile’s words throughout the chapter will draw readers in—she is not impartial to the outcome. Baszile opens the argument asking readers to engage with the question of “who we have become vis-à-vis a curriculum of disremembering” (p. 185). Reading Baszile’s engagement with the “technology of forgetting” with Mitchell in the previous chapter is to acknowledge the ways democracy is held hostage because its dream is limited by the subjugation of many. But re-membering is only the first engagement. Baszile then goads readers to engage the history of protest and a narrative of violence that has been one-sided as it casts the actions of Black protesters as violent and recasts the historical violence committed against Black people as though it occurred without actors.

Finally, the chapter closes with a call to

reckon with ... the fact that at any point in time in our histories and our present, when our interests as non-white peoples are addressed because of interest convergence, then we are, by virtue of that fact, working against some other group of people, who have been used in the no-win game of empire building. (p. 190)

In this, she calls readers to take community seriously with an understanding that power has been maintained by pitting the powerless against one another. On the other side of “democracy in the break, already broken, and breaking still,” should we be so bold to achieve it, stands people united across time and space because of their shared interest in humanity.

Conclusion

In each of the 11 essays, readers are forced to explore and imagine a curriculum of Black life mattering in new, different, and sometimes uncomfortable ways. The text as a whole successfully engages reflexivity, responsibility, and relationships toward a curriculum of Black life mattering. The central question of the text—what would it mean if Black lives actually mattered in U.S. schools—is material. The authors do not ask readers to simply imagine this future, but to engage it and to go out and work toward it, knowing full well that the path is neither linear nor clear. The authors argue that this work requires scholars, educators, and even students to reflect on their relationship with the work, their responsibility to the communities, and the relationships with the people in those communities.

Black Lives Matter in U.S. Schools disrupts the ways we read, re/produce, and live Black lives mattering, which as Tachine and Nicolazzo (2022) suggest, is the best possible outcome of qualitative research methods:

Qualitative research methods produce, at their best, disruption and then a process of re-warping. They encourage unsettling un/realities through which we can question that which we (think we) have come to know. They remind us of the power of dreaming, of weaving the worlds we need, of demanding for that which the state codifies as excessive, as if excess was a pejorative mode of being. (p. 3)

The proverbial silver lining coming from this discussion are the wins—large and small—resulting from the increased attention to the Black Lives Matter movement and research that takes Black lives mattering seriously. In 2021, the American Federation of Teachers, the United States’ largest teacher union, published a resolution, *Making “Black Lives Matter” in our Schools*. This resolution represents a powerful addition to the *policy ecology* (Weaver-Hightower, 2008) and makes way for future policies to incorporate more explicit language regarding the treatment of Black lives and Black bodies in curricula and schools.

Of course, Black lives matter in schools. There has always been a cadre of educators who believed so and worked to write a future where others would also believe so. These educators have likely felt the sting of isolation as they worked toward a future their colleagues actively claimed was already here. To that end, *Black Lives Matter in U.S. Schools* offers these educators a place where the tensions they’ve felt are acknowledged, affirmed, and, most importantly, regarded seriously.

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