

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Conceptualizing Belonging as a Black African Immigrant Woman in Spaces Not Built for Me

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Dear Higher Ed,

I write to you as a Black African immigrant woman who has moved through your historically white corridors for over a decade: first as an undergraduate student from Uganda, then as a graduate student, and now as a scholar theorizing belonging within spaces structured to exclude people like me. This letter emerges from what Frank (2012, 39) calls "conscripted fieldwork," where lived experience and scholarly inquiry collapse into one another.

The Rupture of Migration

When I arrived in the United States as an undergraduate student at a historically white institution in the Mid-Atlantic region, I experienced an epistemological rupture. In Uganda, I did not locate myself within a Western racial schema. Over 90 percent of my country's population, including those in power, looked like me. Ethnicity and socioeconomic class organized difference, while colonial histories quietly structured hierarchies of skin tone, education, and proximity to whiteness.

The US racial order, which collapses ethnic and cultural distinctions into a singular, consequential category, produced a disorienting encounter. In Uganda, my Black and African identities were intrinsic and unremarkable (Hollingsworth and Kakooza 2024). In the United States, they became legible, regulated, and consequential.

Racialization did not simply name me; it reorganized the terms through which I could be known.

Within a year, I developed a heightened racial consciousness. I was racialized by others and learned to racialize in return, adopting imposed categories as interpretive tools. Within hegemonic structures grounded in white supremacy (Leonardo 2013; Wilder 2013), identity was reordered. Ethnic and socioeconomic markers receded as race became the dominant organizing logic. I became Black and African through processes that were social, institutional, and inescapable (Hollingsworth and Kakooza 2024).

This transformation unfolded without ease. I arrived with anticolonial and antiapartheid sensibilities shaped by my upbringing. In this context, theorizing Blackness became urgent. It functioned as both analytic framework and political necessity, a way to name myself into legibility within the academy.

The Paradox of Progressive Spaces

I earned both my bachelor's and master's degrees in Women's and Gender Studies, a field positioned as progressive and committed to intersectional analysis. In these spaces, I encountered what Mohanty (1988) identifies as the recentering of Western feminist frameworks as universal.

Coursework privileged white feminist epistemologies, while engagement with Black and African women's scholarship remained limited. My knowledge of scholars who theorized from positions like mine developed through independent study. I experienced epistemological isolation in classrooms that claimed marginality while reproducing dominance.

Spaces that name marginality often reproduce it through what, and who, they refuse to center.

This tension reflects the contradiction of belonging within your institutions. You articulate commitments to global citizenship while sustaining epistemological exclusion. You extend invitations to enter and establish expectations that require assimilation.

Theorizing Belonging from the Margins

Research is never neutral (Mohanty 1988). Race, ethnicity, and belonging are contingent constructs shaped by power and space. My standpoint, formed through migration and racialization, compels a set of questions: What constitutes belonging? For whom does it become possible? Under what conditions does it emerge within historically white institutions?

My journey includes alienation and exclusion. It also represents one narrative among many. This awareness informs my "animating interest" (Frank 2012, 37) to examine how Black African immigrant students encounter, negotiate, and construct belonging.

Belonging is not a static condition; it is a negotiated practice shaped by power, proximity, and possibility.

I remain attentive to the structural conditions that constrain belonging. I also maintain a critical curiosity about how belonging is produced in unexpected ways. Even within restrictive environments, students generate connection, meaning, and alternative forms of community.

Why We Need to Be Heard

Higher Education, Black African immigrant women must be heard because silence stabilizes institutional comfort. Our voices disrupt narratives that position diversity as sufficient. Our experiences expose the limits of symbolic inclusion.

Representation without epistemic transformation leaves institutional logics intact.

Our identities, shaped through migration and layered difference, offer critical epistemological insight. We theorize from positions that hold multiple realities simultaneously. We understand belonging as both experienced and denied within the same institutional spaces.

Why Transformation Is Possible

Higher Education, I write with a grounded sense of hope. This hope reflects a commitment to critical curiosity and a refusal to accept existing structures as fixed.

Transformation is visible in specific moments: classrooms that center Black and African women's scholarship, mentorship that affirms epistemological contributions, and communities where students construct belonging on their own terms. These moments signal that alternative institutional possibilities already exist.

Transformation does not begin with inclusion; it begins with a reordering of what counts as knowledge.

Women of color in the academy continue to reshape higher education through scholarship, community formation, and intellectual intervention (Hollingsworth and Kakooza 2024). These efforts generate counternarratives and expand the boundaries of knowledge production.

As I continue my research on how Black African immigrant undergraduate students construct belonging, I understand these narratives as interventions. They call institutions to account and illuminate pathways for transformation.

An Invitation to Accountability

This letter calls for accountability, structural change, and epistemological humility. It invites higher education to reimagine itself as a space shaped by the knowledge of women of color.

From my position as a Black cisgender transnational woman from Uganda, I offer this letter as both critique and possibility. Writing from my "conscripted fieldwork" (Frank 2012, 39), I approach this work with clarity about what must change and intention toward what can be built.

*With critical hope and unwavering commitment,
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About the author

Martha Kakooza is a PhD candidate in Higher Education Administration and Student Affairs at Morgan State University. Kakooza is a Black African scholar and transnational woman from Uganda whose research centers the belonging narratives of Black African immigrant undergraduate students at historically white-serving institutions. She holds degrees in Women's and Gender Studies and employs dialogical narrative inquiry to interrogate the epistemological and structural violences of US higher education. Drawing from her own experiences as a student and scholar navigating predominantly white academic spaces, her work challenges institutions to reckon with their exclusionary architectures while imagining futures built on the knowledge systems that were once excluded. Kakooza's scholarship is animated by critical hope and a commitment to theorizing belonging otherwise.