

## CRITICAL READS

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# Centering Humanity within Ethnographic Research: A Book Review of *Black Boys' Lived and Everyday Experiences in STEM*

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*Our research collective explores Latine learner's experiences with mathematics. Therefore, we must consider possible methods to de-settle the white gaze surveilling and erasing Latine learners in K-12 schools, as well as the white ideologies in educational research. In this book review, we discuss KiMi Wilson's *Black Boys' Lived and Everyday Experiences in STEM* (2021) and explore his use of ethnographic research to tell the story of his boys (Carter, Malik, Darius, and Thomas). Wilson highlights how he disrupts the norms of educational ethnography through his research and posits the need to amplify Black voices and experiences in STEM education. He challenges the reader to push against white ideologies and reconsider the deficit narratives surrounding Black boys. By reflecting on Wilson's work and our own, we consider two points of reflection: Centering humanity and emotionality, and the importance of place. We explore how Wilson addresses these two points through his stories of his boys and how our research collective considers these ideas in our work with Latine learners in mathematics. As educators, educational researchers, and policy makers, we must reflect, acknowledge, and create transformative actions centered around humanity and emotionality, as well as the importance of place, to ensure equitable learning spaces for Black and Latine learners.*

**KEYWORDS:** STEM education; Black boys; Latine learners; educational ethnography

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Latine learners have resisted and persevered through a legacy of racial inequities (e.g., San Miguel, 1989; Yosso, 2006). The *Mi Lengua, Mi Raza, Mis Matemáticas* Collective (Mi3) recognizes the role mathematics education plays in the legacy of maintaining white institutional spaces (Moore, 2008) and perpetuating white supremacy. Since Mi3 explores the intersection of mathematics education, race, and language, we are committed to resisting, interrogating, and disrupting white supremacy for Latine learners. Our individual backgrounds, social identities, and experiences are combined and weaved through our work and research processes. Those collaborating in Mi3 work continuously reflect on ways to center and amplify Latine learners' voices and experiences. As Mi3 pursues this work, it is imperative to continue learning not only from colleagues working directly with Latine populations, but also from co-conspirators who challenge whiteness, while amplifying the voices of other historically and contemporarily excluded and exploited racial groups. Consequently, a sect of Mi3 chose to read *Black Boys' Lived and Everyday Experiences in STEM* by KiMi Wilson (2021) to determine what it means to conduct ethnographic research focused on Latine learners pushing back against the dominant white gaze in mathematics (see Jones, 2022). We share our collective's reflections here to create space for conversation and transparency into the messiness of learning in this community, like other groups before (see Hand et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2017; Translanguaging Study Group, 2020).

Wilson's (2021) book challenges its readers to decenter white ideologies in research through his investigation, which centers both the Black experiences of *his boys* (Carter, Darius, Thomas, and Malik) and his own Blackness when navigating white spaces. Those seeking transformation and disruption of the education system will be challenged to (re)think research norms with *Learners of Color*. According to Wilson (2021), the way one conducts ethnographic work must be attached to the humanity of the individual.

When done correctly, ethnography is humanity, uninterrupted—the unknown, the good, the bad, and the ugly, remembering that it all is subjective. While I would somehow love to romanticize this notion — ethnography is not void of one's own experience. You bring your whole self to this work, and there is no possible way to detach me from this process. (Wilson, 2021, p. 54)

Wilson's (2021) perspectives of ethnography aligns with Solórzano and Yosso's (2001) claim that researchers' narratives and relationships with oppressive systems are data and should be considered as part of the analysis and research project. Our collective's individual Indigenous, Latine, Black, and

white<sup>1</sup> identities are each part of the humanity we bring to our work with Latine learners. Like Wilson, Mi3 members strive to be transparent about their racialized selves and the intersections with other related oppressive systems (e.g., linguicism, ableism, heteronormativity). Our individual identities were important when reflecting on the central themes of Wilson's book. While reading through the book and meeting as a collective, we shared stories and testimonios about our own experiences with school and mathematics, the sanctuaries and spaces protecting our identities from assimilation, and the way our emotions and humanity have been erased in academic spaces. Our positionalities were laid bare for the group to learn and grow from. We weave our social identities together to serve as a reminder of the problematic nature of viewing these social categories as mutually exclusive. For example, it is important to understand the nature of overlapping oppressive systems of one's individual Blackness and Latinidad and one's Afro-Latinidad identity (see Comas-Díaz, 2021).

In this review, the authors reflect on Wilson (2021) and the way he challenges our perspective of ethnographic research in mathematics education. After providing a summary of his book, the authors follow up with a discussion of two reflection points: 1) centering our humanity and emotionality in Mi3's work, and 2) the importance of place. The review concludes by discussing how these points help Mi3 be unapologetic and unafraid.

### Summary

*Black Boys' Lived and Everyday Experiences in STEM* (2021) is broken into nine sections, including an interlude halfway through titled "Sanctuary." Each section describes a different facet of Wilson's journey as an educational ethnographer, while weaving in the voices of his family and community members. Wilson illustrates his humanizing journey by sharing his own lived experiences and those of four high school learners who Wilson refers to as "*my boys*," establishing the importance of the relationships he has cultivated. Wilson shares his ideas to develop a new and hopeful future for educational ethnography, especially in regards to Black learners.

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<sup>1</sup> Like Dumas, we see no need to capitalize white: "White is not capitalized in my work because it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror.... Thus, although European or French are rightly capitalized, I see no reason to capitalize white" (2016, p. 13).

In this educational ethnography, it was my priority to honor my boys, the school site, their families, and Redwood...After all, I want to see a world that not only values equity, diversity, and inclusion through lip service but one that centers and prioritizes the needs of Black children because I believe in the statement: “When Black children win, we ALL win.” (Wilson, 2021, p. 21–22)

Throughout the book, Wilson weaves stories of his experiences as a child growing up in Los Angeles<sup>2</sup>, a classroom teacher, a graduate student, a mathematics teacher, educator, and researcher, and a role model for Black students. Recognizing his positionality, Wilson’s goal as a scholar is “to be an example that liberates Black boys from feeling that they have to withdraw from South Central Los Angeles to be successful” (Wilson, 2021, p. xiii). Through his reflections, Wilson provides an opportunity to make connections between the importance of his positionality and the way it influences his support of Carter, Malik, Darius, and Thomas.

Wilson helps his readers further understand the importance of going beyond *reflecting* on their experiences to *acknowledging* how these experiences shape the *transformative actions* necessary to support Black learners’ STEM identities. Wilson (2021) challenges traditional ways of conducting ethnographic research and encourages others to do the same by writing, “a prescribed set of rules and regulations have gotten us nowhere — not even close to where we need to be, our final destination” (p. 39). Maintaining the status quo of teaching, learning, and generating educational ethnography will continue to hurt and oppress Black learners. A transformative action, Wilson emphasizes that ensuring school environments are safe for Black learners is vital by demonstrating the time and space he dedicates to getting to know *his boys*, both in regards to their lives outside of school spaces and their identities as STEM learners.

Wilson stresses that educators, researchers, and policy makers must do better in their mission to support historically and contemporarily excluded racialized learners: “I write because I want Black boys situated at the forefront. I’m tired of my boys being featured as a sideshow in ethnographic museums” (Wilson, 2021, p. xiv). He recognizes that ethnographic work goes far beyond a

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<sup>2</sup> While South Los Angeles is considered an urban area, Wilson (2021) does not describe the context of his childhood or work in this way. According to Larnell and Bullock (2018), “urban” is a problematic term conflated with race and poverty. Wilson challenges these “overly simplified renderings” (Larnell & Bullock, 2018, p. 44) in the way he describes the city and its influence on him. Therefore, we also stand in defiance against such terminology used to describe place.

research paper or grant. He exemplifies the necessary use of time, resources, and passion to improve opportunities for Black students. Wilson (2021) ends his story with a call to action for his readers: “I hope my words have caused you to look at Black bodies’ dry bones around this country. I vow to breathe life into them by doing the work. I challenge you to do the same” (p. 102). In short, he reflects on the importance of centering humanity, emotionality, and place in his work, while inviting others to consider how they work with and support Communities of Color.

### Centering Humanity and Emotionality

By further developing the relationships between *his boys*, Wilson was privy to their stories, emotions, and family and community circumstances. Their vulnerability challenged him to reconsider the purpose of educational ethnography in his work.

Humility taught me that educational ethnography is about serving others. As researchers, teachers, administrators, and policy makers, this requires giving up privilege, status, and preconceived notions. Exploring sacred life histories forced me to place my plans on the back burner – abandoning my schedule, altering how I gathered information pertinent to school’s inner workings. Sacred stories gathered through impromptu walks. (Wilson, 2021, p. 42)

Humanizing and centering *his boys’* voices and lived experiences in his work allowed Wilson to reflect upon his role as an educational ethnographer and the need for flexibility when developing partnerships with schools and communities.

By immersing himself into the school and communities, he was able to recognize the role of emotions in educational ethnography.

I have to be honest, navigating the messiness of schooling as a researcher caused a range of emotions that quite honestly could have jeopardized the project. I used these moments of uncertainty to apply the challenges I faced as a small microcosm of what my Black parents and children must go through daily. (Wilson, 2021, p. 50)

Instead of excluding his feelings from his work, Wilson used emotions to gain insight on what *his boys* were experiencing in mathematics and scientific spaces. For instance, Wilson described the fascination Carter had with science as a means to make things and support his family and community. However, the traditional call and response environment fostered in his science classroom resulted in Carter questioning his own scientific knowledge and ability and abandoning his dream of becoming a scientist: “I have given up on my dream of becoming a scientist because I don’t think it will happen” (Wilson, 2021, p. 61). Understanding what *his*

*boys* were going through emotionally as they navigated STEM spaces enabled Wilson to learn about the complexities of K-12 schooling, specifically teaching and learning mathematics and science, experienced by Black children.

#### *Our reflection on humanity and emotionality*

Reflecting on Wilson's work with *his boys*, Mi3 considered the crucial role humanity and emotionality plays in our work to understand Latine learners' experiences with mathematics. Through our different projects, we have the privilege of building relationships with Latine learners, their families, and their communities. We have learned about the explicit and implicit ways Latine learners' identities, languaging practices, and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) have (or have not) been acknowledged and leveraged in mathematics. Latine learners' emotions and stories of mathematics classrooms must not be collapsed into one unified monolith. Similar to our work with Latine learners, Wilson's work acknowledged Carter, Malik, Darius, and Thomas's bravery in sharing their emotionality, and demonstrated the importance of listening to singular voices in educational ethnography to understand the Black male experience in STEM. However, Wilson does not explicitly address the need for educational ethnographers to recognize the power dynamics between researcher(s) and participant(s). As relationships are built, Learners of Color and researchers can share their vulnerabilities, lived experiences, and knowledge, yet what is shared by Learners of Color is commonly seen as data sources (de Lissovoy et al., 2013). Elevating the contributions of Learners of Color as valuable insights can create spaces to collectively heal from traumatic experiences in STEM, especially in mathematics (Kokka, 2019). As Mi3 engages in our work with Latine learners, we work to recognize the crucial role emotionality plays in our methodological choices. Moreover, we attempt to make space for our own emotionality and humanity as we navigate white academic spaces to create pathways for amplifying the voices and experiences of Latine learners. In the future, we will look at the work of Matias (2016) and Zembylas (2006) to help us further conceptualize emotionality in our work.

### **The Importance of Place**

Throughout the book, Wilson highlights his intention to navigate the physical space of the research, from the micro (e.g., sanctuary space) to the macro (e.g., South Central LA). However, his intentional moves with space did not always guarantee mitigation of harm, as Wilson shared in an anecdote of his prior teaching years, where he altered his classroom to bring a 'beach day' to his students, not realizing they "...had never left the community and had no concept of what a beach was" (Wilson, 2021, p. 4). Despite having great intentions, Wilson created a place that harmed his students, who did not have beach experiences of

their own that they could use to develop the classroom into a space that was authentically theirs. The students' experiential knowledge was not prioritized or made accessible in his classroom, because it could only be framed through Wilson's beach experiences. This experience taught Wilson how easy it was to choose his own understanding over his students. By sharing this story early on, Wilson provided an initial opportunity for readers to reflect on the importance of place.

Stories of Redwood and the people in it highlight the urgency of Wilson's work by showcasing moments of vulnerability between him, *his boys*, and school staff. Wilson cultivated a comforting sanctuary space in one of the school's classrooms to interview and connect with *his boys*. However, there were many other instances throughout his journey wherein Wilson had to adapt to spaces *his boys* navigated. We chose to highlight one of these stories that we learned a great deal from regarding how Wilson faced challenges in settings with variables that were out of his control. In one such instance, Wilson administered a fitness test to one of *his boys*, Malik, at a running track on campus. Upon seeing kids from a rival housing project on the track, Malik requested to take the test another time, exposing Wilson to his fear. Through Wilson's account, we are able to visualize the area surrounding the running track as not only a physical location, but also a place inhabited and complicated by the interactions between each person in and outside of the school. Malik experienced the running track as tangible danger and panicked because of the other boys inhabiting that space, indicating that there was a part of the history of the community previously unknown to Wilson. At that moment, Malik became Wilson's cultural broker (Aikenhead, 1997). Malik felt comfortable sharing his feelings of fear of the other kids on the track and his concern that this fear would diminish his teacher's perception of his masculinity within the school environment. In response, Wilson permitted Malik to take the test another time and covered for him with his teacher. Wilson's connection to Malik allowed him to experience another dimension of the track, one rich with Malik's lived experience with its actors. By exiting the space, Wilson demonstrated to Malik that, over all else, he prioritized Malik's safety.

#### *Our reflection on place*

Place is as much a collaborator in ethnographic work as the learners inhabiting it (see Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Soja, 2010). In our work, the physical spaces of Latine learners' communities and schools are sources of experiential knowledge, emotional connection, and understanding (see Rodríguez, 2020). No one from Mi3 is native to this neighborhood. Consequently, we have to create connections with the community through hosting local events and participating in existing ones. Unfortunately, a few years of participation is not equivalent to a lived childhood in the community. As ethnographers of Latine learners, we have the incredible opportunity to learn from place as an important aspect of our collaborators'

identities. Wilson taught our collective to reflect on how we can approach each space we encounter with a willingness to engage with our own and our collaborators' emotions, and to respect and prioritize these emotions as valuable knowledge worth reporting. We must be careful to not perpetuate assimilation and erasure (see Jones, 2022).

In addition to our differences from Wilson's experiential knowledge of his research site, our collective is working with a very different population of students. Latine elementary students in central Texas and Black high school boys from southern California have distinct spatial experiences and knowledge. Wilson's advice, while valuable, cannot simply be copied and pasted onto our context. Therefore, as a research collective, we interpreted Wilson's teachings as an encouragement to leverage our emotions and lived experiences (see Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Many in Mi3 experienced school as Latine learners, and some as Texas learners. We drew upon these experiences in our discussions of how to begin approaching the community. We will continue to listen to our emotions when we feel uneasy or hesitant in preliminary planning. We have learned from Wilson to respect the caution of our team members. He shared the potential harm that mistakes regarding place can have on our participants.

## Conclusion

A humanistic approach and consideration of the multidimensionality of Black boys is pivotal in discussions of lived experiences. Wilson unapologetically shared his frustration with the inequities that Black learners face in K-12 educational settings, specifically within mathematics classrooms. He highlights these inequities by providing himself and the reader with contextual understanding of his boys' mathematical experiences. The emotion and realness of his approach to this ethnographic study emphasizes the experiences of Black learners. Reflecting on these experiences allows the reader to grapple with their potential role in maintaining and perpetuating these educational inequities. The reader may feel uncomfortable during their reflection, which Wilson uses as a tool to portray the urgency for Black learners, who are often failed by school systems.

To productively create equitable learning spaces for Black and Latine learners, considerable reflection, acknowledgement, and transformative actions must be taken to determine how we as educators, researchers, and policy makers will (1) center humanity and emotionality in our work, and (2) emphasize the importance of place. Wilson provides readers with an opportunity to journey through the lives of his boys and understand their distinctive aspirations, personalities, and struggles that force them outside of the stereotypical box often used to limit their capabilities. Wilson guides readers through the evolution of his relationship with *his boys* and explains how building a sanctuary or navigating the spaces his boys know better can allow researchers to be collaborators and meet their needs, while



maintaining space for the boys to set their boundaries. Though our work varies from Wilson's in regards to age, location, and racialized identities of our collaborators, we strive to (1) create sanctuaries for the Latine learners we work with and identify the sanctuaries they may already have, and (2) develop meaningful relationships with students, their communities, and their families as we navigate their environment.

Ethnographic studies should be messy and genuine and should embrace the gravity of the work necessary to give justice to the voices of Black and Latine learners. Approaches to investigating with and for Black and Latine learners should work to distinguish them as complex beings with varying and endless talents. Similar to Wilson, we strive to frame the Latine comunidad's narratives as those of a community that has persevered and resisted erasure and assimilation, rather than relying on the common deficit narrative of Latine learners (see Jones, 2022).

Wilson's work encourages uncomfortable conversations and self-reflection. It can be difficult and intimidating to share our thoughts on the racial inequities in our daily environments. Those who do not identify as Black or Latine may find it harder to empathize because issues of inequity may be irrelevant or challenging to relate to their lived experiences. Therefore, it is imperative that we break down the boundaries prohibiting us from these meaningful conversations and work toward a shared goal of uplifting Black and Latine learners. Wilson emphasizes the shared need to create spaces and moments that allow marginalized students to see and hear themselves in STEM contexts. Moreover, educators and researchers need to question (1) how we have worked with Black and Latine children in the past, and (2) how we can work to improve their STEM opportunities and learning environments. Consequently, individual projects have emerged that work closer with Latine caregivers (see Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2022), provide an oral history of prospective Teachers of Color (see Johnson *et al.*, 2023), and delve deeper into the discourses of whiteness (see Gómez Marchant *et al.*, 2023). Our collective is committed to greater community involvement, allowing time for conversations and activities to build relationships and to strengthen our understanding of the communities we engage with. This includes creating, maintaining, and reinforcing new and established sanctuaries for Latine learners in schools and the greater community.

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