

BLACK BOYS' LIVED AND  
EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES  
IN STEM

# STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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# BLACK BOYS' LIVED AND EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES IN STEM

BY

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Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*Dedicated to my mom, Donna, who curated a rich,  
love-filled childhood and adulting navigation.  
You deserve everything life has to offer.*

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## SERIES EDITOR PREFACE

This book, *Black Boys' Lived and Everyday Experiences in STEM* by KiMi Wilson, is a much awaited one in the catalog of reemerging volumes in the *Studies in Educational Ethnography* book series. Having taken over from Prof. Geoffrey Walford from Oxford University since the volume 13 (*New Directions in Educational Ethnography: Shifts, Problems, and Reconstruction*), the series is publishing a second book in the new volume home within the College of Education, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign. Located in the Quantitative and Qualitative Methodology, Measurement, and Evaluation (QUERIES), Department of Educational Psychology, the College of Education has been the academic home to multiple traditions of research and evaluation scholarship in humanities and social sciences for decades. On the campus, for example, is the site of conferences such as the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) which hosts hundreds of scholars and practitioners who travel from around the world to the cornfields of Illinois.

The primary objective of *Studies in Educational Ethnography* is to present original research monographs or edited volumes based on ethnographic perspectives, theories, and methodologies. Such research will advance the development of theory, practice, policy, and praxis for improving schooling and education in neighborhood, community, and global contexts. In complex neighborhood, community, and global contexts, educational ethnographies should situate themselves beyond isolated classrooms or single sites and concern themselves with more than narrow methodological pursuits. Rather, the ethnographic research, perspectives and methodologies featured in this series should extend our understandings of sociocultural educational phenomena and their global and local meanings. Studying classrooms and educational communities without concomitant understanding of the dynamics of broader structural forces renders ethnographic analyses potentially incomplete.

Reading Wilson's book will draw you into the vulnerability of an ethnographic tradition much like Ruth Behar's 1996 book, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, one that reveals the openness and authenticity of the ethnographer coming to terms with the

challenges of doing fieldwork in challenging and revealing histories, representing the experiences and stories of those othered and marginalized, with a texture of writing and engaging the reader. Through the book, Wilson brings the realities of doing ethnography with Black boys pursuing math in more than challenging living and learning spaces through portraits of their everyday schooling experiences. Nevertheless, in the narratives of the boys and the engaging and transforming ethnographic text, Wilson leave us with hope and promise for them, and the discipline.

For more details about the series, we invite you to visit the website and read the new directions in educational ethnography that our series produces.

Rodney Hopson  
*Series Editor*

## PREFACE: SUMMER SOLSTICE

*Write down in a scroll all the words I have spoken to you.*

*(Jeremiah 30:2)*

Infatuation submerges like a multitude of bricks, rejuvenating my soul.

On the 26th, 96 hours before June was a distant memory, and three days away from ushering in time representing completeness and perfection.

I fell in love again.

The mercy of Black boys. Lust with teaching.

A surge needed to defibrillate my tired heart.

An institutional grant landed in my academic orbit after the sudden departure of the Curriculum and Instruction department chair, who accepted another visible leadership position in academia. A decision which opened the excellent fortune of spearheading an initiative focused on recruiting men of color into teaching. As a tenure-track faculty member, I plunged for two reasons; I was authentically excited about the work. Also, the act would be a massive win against a devilish retention, tenure, and promotion sideshow. After procurement, skepticism tiptoed in silence, vocalizing, “How the hell are you going to persuade Black men into teaching when they are immobilized as early as transitional kindergarten? You can’t get blood out of a stone, KiMi.”

Nevertheless, I said yes.

In hindsight, I should’ve listened to the Chicago stepping’ voice not because of the mission, which remained problematic, but because of the bureaucratic and personnel bullshit accompanied with grant administration weakening its real purpose. Desperately wanting to rescind my yes, I challenged and tore down funding parameters barring access to Black boys presenting the opportunity to meet and fall in love with 16 Black high schoolers ranging from 14 to 18 years old. Their bright smiles summoned my calling and purpose on this earth, and the reason why no matter how tough it got, I would fight for them because I needed them just as badly as they needed me.

Although I came out victorious in what seemed like the Thrilla in Manila, my first day with the boys was here, and I was admittedly nervous.

Even after 20+ years in education, my first day with students causes high anxiety. The inside of my stomach mirrors a gymnastic competition, and Dominique Dawes is cutting up. The nervousness shows up because I never want to fail them. A condition I wished more people suffered.

Ms. Hunt, Washington High's office manager, confidently and elegantly rocking a honey blonde short haircut, whom I would later affectionately call Mama Hunt, greeted me with an authoritarian eye. Not one of intimidation, but one secretly communicating, she protects her cubs at all costs. Mama Hunt gently provided my attendance roster, door key and summoned someone on the walkie-talkie to escort me to the space serving as my sanctuary for the next seven days.

As I stood in front of the reception counter with my back turned to oncoming traffic, three boys entered the main office, laughing and talking. Many of them strolled right past me, spoke to Mama Hunt, and proceeded to sit in the chairs reserved for visitors. Little did they know, their facilitator was standing directly in front of them. With my Black Beverly Hills hoodie that read La Cienega, Slauson, La Brea (an homage to growing up in Los Angeles) camouflage pants, white V-neck peeking out from underneath the hoodie and Nike boots.

With loud voices of protest, my future boys asked Mama Hunt what this math intervention thing was all about.

"I wonder who is teaching this class?"

"My mom is making me do this, and I don't want to." "This dude better be good."

Hues of chocolate skin bursting colorism at the seams. Intelligence effortlessly framed through life experiences.

Colorful du-rags served double duty as both a style aesthetic and wave formation and protector.

Hoodies.

Fresh sneakers.

Backpacks.

Here are my boys.

Once other boys trickled in my conversation with Mama Hunt came to an end. I turned to the cadre of young men occupying all the office seats and standing around the perimeter of the office and told them to follow me. The boys quickly stated, "That's our teacher???"

I proudly proclaimed, "Yes."

You see, I had to fuss to be able to walk these kings up the hallway and into their home school classroom. The road wasn't easy. I received pushback from folks wanting to hold the mathematics intervention class on my college campus requiring students to travel miles away from the place they call home. Never once did the powers that be think about how the daily come and go would be unmanageable for my boys and their caregivers neglecting work, which was not an option, and riddled with transportation woes. I wanted to be present and show them the value of learning in and about their local context, their school. They needed to see a Black man, who just happens to be a professor, exist in their space. After all, their school and their community is also my community.

I feel safe here.

I honor this place.

And I want to be an example that liberates Black boys from feeling that they have to withdraw from South Central Los Angeles to be successful.

It's okay if you do. But it is not mandatory, nor is it a prerequisite. As many people will devalue your community in an attempt to coerce Black people to flee.

Quite honestly, I come from a family that valued (values) our space, which encouraged me to stay and purchase a home in South Central Los Angeles, the same community that nurtured. Right now, I am able to create generational wealth for my family, as white families are now moving in, driving up home values while pricing Black people out. It's interesting how the same Black folks whose thought process is shaped by white ideology, attempted to talk me out of buying in my community 10 years ago. The same people want to come back but can't afford to.

All these scenarios are inside me, and the reason I fight so hard to have my voice ring throughout these blue halls.

I'm here because I have healthy relationships with district personnel, and they were attentive to my appeal in providing a sanctuary for Black young boys struggling in mathematics. To find their identity and voice in the discipline since desegregation has been brutal.

I knew I had the right group of boys when a fellow student at the school walked in our room to make an announcement and stated, "Oh, he's got the bad kids in here."

Walking in the spacious fluorescent-lit room with a Promethean projection screen and two whiteboards, I asked each person to tell me their name, grade level, last mathematics course taken, and something fun they wanted me to know about them.

Sports came up a lot.

My heart fluttered as most of my boys mentioned Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry as completed math courses. And yet this same heart broke into a million pieces when unbeknownst to them the problem I asked them to collaboratively solve was a 6th-grade equivalent fraction problem that no one answered correctly.

I was enraged. Not with my boys.

But in the yearbook photos of teachers who failed them.

Anger that intensified after witnessing one of my boys writing on a third-grade level.

If I can see this in less than 30 minutes, why the hell has no one done anything about it?

Tears overflowed my face and heart, emotionally drained as I drove out of the parking lot surrounded by a locked gray fence.

I wept not because I didn't want to be there anymore, but because reality slapped me in the face, yet again and my time with them expires in six days. Instantly, I begin to think about their futures, and wonder what happens after I leave. My boys felt nervous about the future too, and valued our connection as Luke asked, "Will we be able to stay in contact with you after this?"

And throughout all of my experience in education, the fresh wound of how public school continues to fail Black youth is a pain that remains unbearable.

I fell into my driver's seat. Forcefully tapped the ignition button, and hurriedly scrolled through the dashboard screen until I arrived at my mom's name. In less than half of a full ring, her comforting voice answered.

I'm not verbalizing anything new. My mother has heard this same frustration, the same script, throughout my many years as a teacher. Never admitting it, my rants have to be taxing for her. Because it is for me. But she manages to listen and advise every time. I always lead in with the rhetorical question, "Mom, what are teachers doing to us?" And when I say us, I mean Black folks.

Pressing yet again for an answer to this age-old dilemma. Hoping one day her spoken language provides elimination. Broken hearted as she hesitantly states for the millionth time, "I can't." Words which sting every time and the little boy inside refuses to accept them. While in the crevices of her soul she doesn't even want to murmur them.

Yet she motivates to be present and give (them) all I have. Leave it all out on the court reminiscent of watching Magic Johnson with Paw-Paw. Connect, mentor, and pray the next teacher matches the blue flame.

Déjà-vu.

Mom's attentive ear, soothing tone, and supportive spirit enables more rounds of boxing. So, on days 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, these fellas are going to get all the moves. Passing techniques showcasing mathematics as collaborative, and not an individual flex. Critical thinking strategic moves developing mathematical literacy, encouraging amnesia of past teachers who imprisoned my squad. Granting clemency from mistakes and relieving the pressure of correctness as being a necessary condition when voicing an answer. Placing liberatory learning as the statistician.

Aware, I couldn't erase years of violence and malpractice in several days. I could love them. And expose them to benevolent mathematics teaching and learning. One relieving claustrophobia and unleashing different ways of knowing. Where drawing diagrams are commonplace, trash talking and being noisy is the norm, and vulnerability is the star player. Not merely creating a safe space, but a resilient one.

No, it wasn't traditional.

Yes, students used profanity to express their success, displeasure, or enlightenment in solving a problem. And I allowed it.

Colorful language showcasing active learners and a high level of engagement versus silence, boredom, or noncommunication.

I was dead set on allowing my crew to be free-thinking Black boys in a world that often tells them no.

In a world that rejects them because of their skin color. In a world that dismisses them because of their gender.

In a world that vetoes their preferred learning style.

In a world that ostracizes them because of their sexuality.

I fell in love again.

So much so that their world is the opening of my book.

Because if we can't reimagine education for Black boys in public schooling as a nation, my summer solstice meant nothing.

This is me.

Raw. Uncut. Vulnerable.

I've navigated K-12 and higher education plantations.

I've seen the highs and lows of Black male success, as well as Black male sabotage, neglect, pain, and mistrust.

Life's work fueling my fire with my boys.

This is my ethnographic love letter.

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.

I want us front and center.

We deserve it.

The world owes it to us.

As you read, I want you to think differently about Black kids in K-12 spaces. I want ethnographers to stop preying on us, and do their job in documenting our smiles, silent cries, ultimately leading to an educational revolution.

Ethnography demands a deep love for humanity.

Three years before arriving at Washington High, I embarked on another journey. Countless hours spent, way more than seven days, with Carter, Malik, Darius, and Thomas. A fifteen-minute drive from Washington High. The same thing I encountered with my four boys writes the script of what I experienced with my 16.

I fight.

Behind the backdrop of a nation and an incompetent President rejecting the phrase, “Black Lives Matter”; a mantra reflecting my life’s commitment.

If you play in the kiddie pool of ethnography, the people on the receiving end of your summations and critiques will be further victimized and damaged. My love runs deep for Black folks - DNA etched. Thus, my ethnography is different; Research doesn’t consume me, I consume it. I’m in the trenches, personally and professionally, which makes my voice valuable, powerful, and needed.

Sit back, and let the sun hit you.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: ROAR, BLACKNESS

Confronted by a soothing male voice challenging me to think about Who I am?

Up until this point, guided meditation has made me think about the world around me.

But today was different.

I was forced to think about my existence.

And all of a sudden, tears welled up, and I began to visualize the faces of those who poured into my very essence. I am because THEY are.

I am the son of Donna.

I am the great-grandson of Lou Johnson (Ma Lou).

I am the grandson of Katie (Ma Katie) and Leemar (Paw-Paw).

I am the great-nephew of Hilda (Auntie Hilda).

I am the nephew of Lynese (Nee-Cee) and Ronald (Uncle Ron).

I am the brother of Trachelle.

I am the cousin of Dante and Kejsa.

I am the godson of Gladyce and Alta.

I am the god-brother of Shatari.

I am because these women and men are.

A strong, supportive maternal lineage. While paternal memories slowly faded. No bitterness or envy, the maternal side ensured a balanced childhood. Years missed, impossible to recapture, new memories must collide with my current state of being.

And while some names listed above no longer occupy physical space, their ancestral spirits guide and impart wisdom every day. Imperfect, flawed human beings, but just right for me.

I love them hard.

Individuals who shape, love, and hold me – the sole impetus of why I fight so hard for Black children in education.

A sacred offering that is for and because of them.

I document their names because I want them in print. I want people to know the artists behind the portrait.

I know love because of them.

Adulthood expanded my agape circle.

Bill (Coop) cleared the debris and revitalized a flame for learning slowly extinguished in high school, renewing excellence.

John Davis was my GPS blending the intellectual worlds of sociology and African American studies within an often harsh, predominantly white institution.

John Reilly, say what you mean and mean what you say attitude, forced an unapologetic, abolitionist, and revolutionary mindset. Barbara Lang, with poise and beauty, effortlessly exposed an inquisitive kid to compassionate liberation theology.

Entering my first professional gig, Coca-Cola taught me I wasn't built for the corporate world.

The city of Compton birthed an intimacy for education during my inaugural year as a 2nd-grade teacher.

Pepperdine opened my eyes to zip code malpractice.

UCLA taught me just how insidious inequality stains campus streets, crippling Black folks' degree conferral.

Cathy, my fellow Virgo partner in life and crime. A friend turned family. You've played a pivotal part in my wellness. Always checking in and being there whenever I need you. During the transition of my grandmother, you gave me strength when I had none. You have a place in my heart and life forever. Grateful for the beautiful, hard-working spirit you are. Your warmth provided the gateway to my extended DC fam.

Mama Joyce, Audrey, and Kim. Your love and support are endless. Thank you for being there whenever I need you. The laughs, the talks, and overall good times solidified our bond. Even though Audrey thinks she runs the show, Mama J wins every time, and Kim is in second place.

Tenderness runs extensively for Curtis and Jennifer. Two people who pray with and for me, traveling life with me, lifting me in weakness, jokesters, always laughing, chastising me, critiquing me, a forever, reserved seat in my arena.

Lois instilled a high level of confidence that my voice is unique and just enough. Andrea gave a real-life example of intellectual royalty.

Chris, Samara, Nadia, Rosa, and Crystal pushed my ideas with laughs, drinks, and the solace of genuine friendship.

Sharon's kindness was a healing salve needed in a hostile academic environment.

Edwin challenged my entire way of looking at life, taking me out of the predictable, mundane, and offering a new way to look at and enjoy my

existence, my purpose, and the world. A pure, innocent heart entering my life at the right time. Irreplaceable, a solid rock.

The all-Black Metaphor club co-working space is used for writing sessions with the Black Brain Trust (BBT) crew. Beautiful Black spirits uplifting my soul, holding me accountable professionally, pushing when fear strikes, and hilarious group chat text threads – friends who force me to get out of situations when they no longer serve me. I speak Portia, Marla, Matthew, Porschia, Nick, Erica, Jide, Tasha, Brianna, and Khadija. I love all of you hard. Honorable mention goes to my boys Ted and Q. You both already know who my favorites are; some things don't need to be said (smile).

Late night and early morning conversations with Darnise pushed me to think about systems and structures which hurt Black children, awakening a sincere call of action in my soul. Kindred spirits who don't see educating Black kids as a 9–5 but something to think and wrestle with constantly.

Magan's brilliance helped me think through what actionable steps are necessary to put in place so that teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members know what is expected to force Black achievement to move from ideation to reality.

Cheryl allowed me to see all the intricacies leaders must navigate in fighting for Black children. Dr Sharon Robinson's wisdom and guidance enable me to think strategically with maximum benefit in fighting for Black children.

Jamie and Christina for being real friends and believing in my worth. Brilliant scholars with good hearts.

Alton and John, my brothers for life. Excited about all the work we are doing. I look forward to all the amazing things we will accomplish together.

Last but not least, this book would not be possible without Rodney Hopson. My heart is full of gratitude for the opportunity to use my words to effect change in educational ethnography. Shout out to Kimberley Chadwick and the Emerald Team. I am forever in debt to the kindness and consideration you have shown.

And because of these people, the statement "Learning is a human and social experience" rings loudly.

Similarly, the individuals listed above contributed to my development; there are also theoretical constructs that inform and guide my thinking. Gloria Ladson-Billings' speech at the American Educational Research Association has eternally changed the way I think about public education. I owe her for introducing me to the idea of educational debt. A concept embedded in my psyche as I think about the obligation owed to Black children throughout the diaspora. Police brutality is the outcome of the debt. The lack of Black people in STEM is the effect of the debt. Residential segregation is the result of the

debt. Inequality is the consequence of debt. All are resulting from a country, systems, and structures that disregard Black life. Billings set the stage for how I would frame my conversations with Black boys – discussions honoring their humanity while simultaneously centering their experiences within educational debt confines.

Another scholar, Gee (2000), believes identity helps us understand how historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces impact society and schooling. Taking this view a step further, I sought to uncover Black boys' identities by listening to their voices. Their words illuminate the toxicity of educational debt poisoning American society and schooling. Damaging the souls of Black folks through reified white supremacy and ideology. To understand who my boys were, I utilized my knowledge of critical race theory. While the theory is extremely complex and comprehensive, I wanted to situate everyday occurrences that may not seem important to non-Blacks but are extremely informative about Blackness in uncovering the institutional and structural inequities they face, impacting their racial and academic development. I want their words to have legal consequences for curriculum and instruction, assessment, funding, and helping us as a nation think through whether or not desegregation has truly worked for Black folks.

I want their phrases to pinpoint institutional racism and push ethnographers to document social thought and relations impeding Black student achievement. But to make their voices resonate, I needed my boys to recall the good, the bad, and the ugly (Montandon & Osiek, 1998). I built a trusting relationship so they could indulge me in how they experienced school, not simply at their current standing, but at those times when I had no idea who they were. Requiring Carter, Malik, Darius, and Thomas to think deeply and reflect on the knowledge, values, ideals, and culture transmitted to them from various bodies throughout their existence. Knowledge, values, ideals, and culture, which influenced learning and self-portrait. Orchestrated school arrivals and departures spoke volumes about the lack of care for the Black family. Decisions from gatekeepers impacting how much Black boys positioned their intellectual capability, professional careers, and futures. And even while many folks claim Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of human development is overused (1977, 1979, 1989, 1994, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), I felt it was important to incorporate this framing as I thought deeply about the interrelationship between settings that directly and indirectly impact my Black boys. Policy became one of those federal systems, where the voices of Carter, Malik, Darius, and Thomas are absent. Ultimately, policy decisions designed to benefit them never reach their community, heightening the stench of

educational debt on Black bodies. Impacting and worsening their interest, let alone representation in STEM when science as a discipline isn't even held accountable. Thus, I had to collapse all of these everyday factors and situate them on my journey to understand how four Black boys' makes sense of all of this mess (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). I had to ask Carter, Malik, Darius, and Thomas to define their goals, values, beliefs, and self-esteem. I asked how interactions and relationships with others shaped their views since they couldn't reach these conclusions in a vacuum. I was curious how schooling and society played a role in what Black kids thought, as they had to be validated by other folks for these thoughts to be normalized and accepted. Leading to the next investigative thread of what it means to be Black and male. Through these responses, I understood the feelings, beliefs, and attitudes my crew held from identifying with other Black boys their age, younger and older. Lastly, I understood how my boys make sense of their home life, community, and geographical space. While some may think this is a potpourri of information, it speaks to Black boys. And unless we engage in educational ethnography that recognizes and addresses these complexities, we will spend too much time trying to "fix Black boys" when the school environments they enter are the ones that need abolishing. I reiterate, "Learning is a human and social experience." I want to honor them. And a complex, layered, intentional approach is the method I have chosen to maximize their time and engulf myself in their thinking. An action that forced me to come to terms with my identity as a Black man unavoidable in presenting this offering. I am still unpacking their stories, which lets me know I barely scratched the surface with my boys, even while spending countless days and hours with them.

Educational debt, race, reflection, human development, and identity.

Take this ride with me with an open heart and mind.

I intend to have you roar, Blackness – with me.

–KiMi