
FOREWORD

WHEN I WAS CONDUCTING my own research on Black men and boys more than a decade ago, this was the book that I was searching for but could not find. Books that love us are rare, perhaps because it's easier, or more acceptable, to write about what afflicts us young Black and Brown men and boys than about what heals us. Nevertheless, writing this book could not have been easy, because doing so must have meant contending with this tragic mix of deeply engrained biases—that is, confronting the scars. Researching and writing about Black and Brown men and boys is about balance. One must hold onto the pain while uplifting the heavy wounds, stare at the naked corpse of our bodies thoroughly bruised while listening to the shrill but silent cries of agonies rehearsed over and again while no one ever hears.

Black and Brown men and boys have grown accustomed to not being heard. But with *Am I My Brother's Keeper?* Adriana Villavicencio listens. She cares. In a world too often bent on devaluing Black and Brown life, this book declares that we matter.

Yet, declaring our worth is not the book's most significant contribution. In this moment in which murdered Black bodies pepper our news screens and innocent Brown children cry out in cages, during this time when our collective consciousness can no longer refuse the empirical realities of anti-Blackness and white supremacy, perhaps more valuable

is this book's insistence on helping us atone for our irrational sins—this consented-to belief that something about Black and Brown people is broken.

This book is audacious and hopeful, and it is strategic in moving us past our biases and deficit logics, past our fetish for Black and Brown suffering and our strange fixation on filtering the world through the white gaze. This radical book is about humans. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this book, then, is its alchemy, its ability to turn lead to gold, to see as human people we too frequently strip of humanity. In doing so, each chapter of this delicately woven narrative elevates human sciences above human biases, raising the stakes of research closer to the possibilities of BIPOC bodies released from the narratives of contempt and disdain. It is with care and elegance that Villavicencio writes a study that feels like a song, a book that is fresh and penetrating, research that peers into the educational lives of young Black and Latinx men and boys in ways that allow us to see them not for their problems but for their possibilities.

With thoughtful and heartfelt honesty, the book raises a set of serious questions about threads of racial bias woven deeply into the fabric of social research, where Black and Latinx men and boys have usually been seen as problems to be solved or as broken objects that need to be fixed. This dehumanization fastened to the flesh of children leaves us with a moral problem—empirical objectification, which, left unchecked, has given us traditions of educational research insufficient for understanding Black and Latinx men and boys. By contrast, Villavicencio weaves a new narrative that painstakingly details the story of the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), leading readers to a set of powerful ideas about how Black and Brown men and boys learn and how schools can be shaped around them. Indeed, these ideas start with a recalibration of our gaze to focus on the cast of players who love and refuse to give up on these students.

Villavicencio's findings do not come out of a randomized trial or some other statistical analysis but, rather, from hours spent sitting with people and listening to them. She aimed to converse with people who

felt ignored but who knew more about the educational experiences of young Black and Brown men and boys than our sciences or schools do. These people knew young Black and Brown men and boys personally; they worked with them and dared to bend straighter a crooked system that was in opposition to their needs and dismissive of their cultural backgrounds.

I am glad that the book privileges thick description over randomization. When used to understand racial inequity—something that is neither random nor incidental—I maintain that randomization can only reinforce racist ideas because a random sample of a social distortion can only yield a distorted result. To locate promise and possibility—to understand how Black and Brown men and boys might succeed in US schools, for example—the science seeking to find them cannot be random, because, in a racist world, Black and Brown success does not happen randomly. Thus, the project of the researcher who dares to understand the question of how to transform education, to fix a broken system, to sustain Black and Brown men and boys is a deep dive into uncertainty that requires vulnerability, self-examination, and reflection. Villavicencio offered the young men and boys she writes about the space to enter into a deep but humanizing introspection. Some of the most moving passages of the book were those in which I could feel her feminine presence engage the age-old dyad of I/us, with *I* at its eternal core, elongate—as Audre Lorde puts it—and flatten out into the elegantly strong braiding of sisters reflecting their brothers’ pains.

This story becomes the elegant heuristic for a new type of methodology that moves from within narratives of joy to locate the external realities of lives younger, perhaps tinier, yet more innocent than we have cared to acknowledge. One idea from the book lingers: the many similarities shared by young Black and Brown men and boys—in spite of potential differences in social class, family background, and age, to name but a few—and how they relate to interactions are central to understanding Black and Latinx men and boys, particularly those deemed “at risk” or difficult to educate.

Of course, as Villavicencio notes, the questions raised in this book “are by no means comprehensive, but they are inspired by listening to

hundreds of policy folks, researchers, parents, educators, and students talk about how we should be thinking about change and what it will take to make differences that are meaningful and enduring.” This is because human science is complex, produced interactively, dependent on not only the questions of the researcher but the experiences we share with those we research. Thus, any practice of inquiry is likely to be influenced by who we are in relationship to who we study. Despite the dismal statistics and the growing reality that Black and Latinx men and boys are vanishing or missing from our universities and schools, from labor markets, and from the communities where we were raised, it would be a mistake to treat us merely as victims.

This is not a book about victims but about victories. It is about locating the triumphs of the human spirit, the possibilities that sit between voice and silence where a voice-centered methodology of inquiry makes it possible for us to build theory from listening. This is what Villavicencio has done: she listened. And in so doing, she created a space where Black and Brown men and boys could express what’s too often taken off the table for us: success and second chances, desires and fears, pains and hopes and eventual prosperity. She created an opening for Black and Brown men and boys to escape the stereotypical images and all of the layers of baggage that lay atop us.

This is why this book is so important. It is a provocative and inspiring account of humans and human victories that provides us with the opportunity to listen to and learn from the voices of young Black men and boys—the victors—who are finally heard speaking not of eternal struggle but of expanded success.

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