The Problem We All Live With: The Knowability of Black Girls, the Importance of Context, and Mathematical Chauvinism

In this talk, we will explore the knowability of Black girlhood, the importance of context, and the problem of mathematical chauvinism within mathematics education research. Using Norman Rockwell’s iconic portrait, *The Problem We All Live With*, as a backdrop for our discussion, I provide my own portraits of a group of young Black girls from the West side of Chicago in their mathematics classroom. We will investigate how the girls’ social relationships and interpersonal struggles for recognition, relevance, and fair treatment mediate mathematics learning and participation. Many images of mathematics classrooms are presented as orderly, exclusively mathematical, and primarily individualistic, where the social and relational context has been entirely whitewashed. In contrast to these ideal images are the problematic mathematics classrooms, which are presented as disorderly and mathematically dubious, wherein the learners’ personal lives and outside identities consume the serious “business” of mathematics learning. Through this talk, we will view portraits of mathematics learning as disorderly, partially mathematical, partially social, and fundamentally communal. We will problematize what I call mathematical chauvinism, which has led to a whitewashing of mathematical studies that obscure the classroom, such that when real children with real bodies, social lives, and mathematical practices are described they are deemed unfit or positioned as orthogonal to “real” mathematics. Relying on social network and ethnographic analysis, I share an intersectional and emic view of a Black girls’ social network and argue for considering children’s figured worlds (and their relationships within) as an important ecological space for researching mathematics participation.

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