

# “THERE’S REALLY A LOT GOING ON HERE”

## *Toward a Cosmopolitics of Reader-Response*

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### **Introduction**

In a teacher education classroom in Toronto, teacher candidates and high school students discuss their responses to the young adult novel *House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer (2002). The novel is told from the perspective of an adolescent, Matteo, who struggles for survival and self-definition in a dystopian world in which he discovers he is a clone of a vicious drug lord named El Patron, ruler of a country called Opium that separates the United States and Aztlán, formerly Mexico. Like the book itself, students and teachers covered an array of social and political topics in their conversation. As one teacher candidate, Cheyenne, put it, “Yeah, there is a lot to take in: climate change, the US/Mexico border, the war on drugs. There’s really a lot going on here, including the ethics of cloning.” Cheyenne attempted to summarize issues participants took up, but others used her comment as a platform to range even more widely. Kate, for example, pointed to class divisions and differential power relations in the novel. Bryce discussed transhumanism, and, with the help of Will, Kate, and Mica, suggested connections between the biological cloning described in *House of the Scorpion* and the ways that schooling can “clone ideas” in the process of assimilating students.

The context of this discussion was atypical – youth and teachers were members of a research collaborative with Rob and Will called the *Teaching to Learn Project* (Simon & Campano, 2015; Simon et al., 2014), an inquiry community that

developed as an opportunity for teachers to learn alongside adolescents – yet it is in many ways emblematic of the kinds of interpretive discussions that commonly take place in secondary literacy classrooms. We have returned to these data numerous times since the conversation took place in 2012 but have struggled to make sense of it. The discussion did not settle on a single focal issue, no one interpretive perspective was used to unpack the book, and therefore no one framework seemed able to capture everyone’s responses. We were left with many questions, including: How can educators honor the range of perspectives that individuals bring to classrooms and support students to read across difference? How do students make sense of their individual interpretations toward a more collective vision? In what ways might the seemingly fragmented ideas in literature discussions make legible how a clean, interpretive synthesis may paper over interpretations of the shifting political landscape? How might educators work against their desire for readings to settle on singular interpretations?

Though these conversations happened years earlier they seemed to us to capture aspects of the contemporary political condition, suggesting a form of collective precarity – a moment in which, to borrow the words of Cheyenne, “There’s really a lot going on.” In this chapter, we examine how what we are calling a cosmopolitics of reader-response can help us better account for the ways teachers and students collectively make sense of texts in relation to contemporary and historical legacies of injustice. Beginning with a review of the reader-response landscape, we emphasize the sociopolitical turn in reader-response research (Lewis, 2000) as a basis for theorizing a more distributed interpretive approach, one that acknowledges the nexus of personal, social, and political dynamics. Drawing on recent work in cultural studies (e.g., Latour, 2014; Stengers 2011), we consider how “cosmopolitics” (Stengers, 2010) may encourage educators to regard the unfinished, heterogeneous process of collective inquiry in classroom communities as meaningful interpretation. Taking these insights into account, we return to our data to suggest how a cosmopolitical analysis can draw attention to differing perspectives and subterranean histories of colonization and oppression that might otherwise remain hidden in classrooms.

### **Situating Reader-Response Theory**

Through the twentieth century, the emergence of reader-response theory marked a paradigm shift in literacy education. In contrast with formalist and new critical approaches to reading that, in the words of poet Adrienne Rich (1993), observed texts “through a long and protected viewing tube” (p. 33), reader-response laid groundwork for literacy pedagogy that took seriously readers’ personal and affective responses to literature. Where previous methods located interpretive “meaning” within the bounded frame of the text itself, reader-response theory suggested meaning might, instead, be seen as the outgrowth of dialectical transactions between the text and the reader. Drawing on traditions of Peircian semiotics, Rosenblatt (1938; 1978) argued that the contingent interplay of text and reader synthesized

into what she referred to as “the poem” – a term used to signal the artistic event that takes place as a reader constructs meaning from a text:

[The poem] happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him as a human being.

*(Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 12)*

The resonance of reader-response theory in English education and literacy studies has taken a variety of forms – some that reorient encounters with literature around aesthetic response; others that position texts as a lever for personal growth (cf. Beach, 1993; Willinsky, 1990). However, in wresting “meaning” from the literary work itself and relocating it in the coming-together of reader and text, reader-response also reoriented pedagogies of reading. Sumara (1996) argues that reader-response approaches helped promote students’ subjective engagements with literature in a way that complicated prior modes of instruction which placed heavier emphasis on instrumental skills and cultural transmission (p. 184). Without a circumscribed meaning to be mined from a literary work, teachers could instead entertain multiple, competing interpretations, acknowledging the ways individual readers will not always produce homogenous readings. Such a perspective, scholars have argued, also helps challenge other normative frames that shape the contours of literacy education: for instance, in the ways ostensibly “off-task” classroom behaviors can, at times, be a complex form of literary engagement (e.g. Sipe, 2002; Simon & Campano, 2015) or how the creative construction of “the poem,” in Rosenblatt’s terminology, may not be amenable to assessments that assume singular, “correct” readings and answers.

However, even as reader-response theory has opened new possibilities for pedagogy and practice, it has also raised questions among researchers about the limits of individual responses to literature. These questions often hinge on the axis of two interrelated concerns: an overemphasis on the personal and an underemphasis on the sociopolitical. The first of these charges has long been levied at proponents of reader-response by those more firmly steeped in traditions of new criticism and formalism. If meaning is a negotiation of reader and text, the argument goes, then we have no basis for evaluating the merits of one subjective meaning over another – and, thereby, render the text itself as meaning-less, outside personal interpretation. Of course, Rosenblatt, herself, anticipated such arguments and explicitly warned against the reduction of reader-response to a “passive tool in the psychological study of personality” (1985, p. 36). Nevertheless, in practice, many applications of reader-response have not been as attentive to the theoretical nuances

of transactional reading that Rosenblatt imagined. Cai and Straw (1997), for example, note that much of the theory's uptake has focused on the personal enjoyment of texts, and Karolides (1997) warns that uses of reader-response rarely do justice to the complexities it was intended to elucidate. More recently, scholars have also wondered if this emphasis on the personal might have even deeper challenges than the problem of reductive or simplistic interpretations: perhaps, the entire framing of literacy as a transaction places too much importance on the individual reader in the production of "the poem" (e.g. Damico et al., 2008). Such perspectives complicate the image of an autonomous, idealized reader and instead draw attention to the ways meaning-making is distributed among the components of Rosenblatt's reader-text-poem triad and beyond.

Related to this line of inquiry is the second concern associated with reader-response: the under-emphasis on the sociopolitical. It is not only that reader-response theory's focus on individual transactions risks reifying the image of an ideal "reader" and reducing interpretation to a matter of personal enjoyment, it can also elide the complex ways that readers and texts – and, by extension, their transactions – do not exist independent of broader social contexts (cf. Luke and Freebody, 1997). As scholars in new literacy studies (Gee, 1990; Street, 1995) have argued, reading is never a neutral or autonomous activity, but rather a contingent upshot of practices, conditioned by context and imbued with ideology. Such a stance, animated by the cultural "turn" in 1980s social theory, was not immediately available to Rosenblatt and other early theorists of reader-response, who forged their frameworks for literacy from contemporaneous resources in cognitive science and semiotics. For this reason, it can be difficult to reconcile reader-response with more recent work in critical literacy, which regards individuals as not only interpreters of texts but also designers (Janks, 2010) or cultural workers (Macedo & Araújo Freire, 1998), agents of change who navigate a broader political world (Freire, 1998). Lewis (2000), for example, suggests that Rosenblatt's mapping of individual transactions on a continuum between "efferent" – or outcome-oriented – and "aesthetic" readings does not provide a clear location from which critical readings might emerge. What is needed, she suggests, is "a view that melds the personal, pleasurable, and critical in aesthetic response" (p. 257).

### **The Sociopolitics of Reader-Response**

Lewis's work begins to chart a path for how such an alternative view of reader-response might take shape. Rather than centering reader-response on individual transactions, she instead shifts attention to the "constructed world of the text" – that is, the ways both texts and readers are products of social entanglements. For Lewis, texts are not neutral resources with which readers transact, but artifacts that reflect the beliefs, values, prejudices, and assumptions of the authors and societies from which they emerge. In the same way, readers, likewise, are unable to hold an innocent position in the reading transaction – each one brings to the interchange their residual histories, accrued over a lifetime of experiences. From such a

perspective, the interplay of texts and readers becomes a site through which power is circulated and negotiated (Lewis, 1997; 1999). It is for this reason that Lewis (2000) articulates a need to refine Rosenblatt's theory to account for "the sociopolitics of reader-response." If the transaction of reading is always political, we need methodologies and pedagogies that are attuned to these dimensions of literacy practice.

In the years since Lewis's critique, scholars have taken up her call for an approach to reader-response that is grounded in sociopolitical critique. For example, Beach (2000) looked to activity theory (e.g., Engeström & Middleton, 1998) to provide more multilayered accounts of readers' responses to texts, while Sumara (2000) suggested complexity theory as a framework for considering broader sociopolitical and "more than human" (Abram, 1996) influences on reader's interpretations.

In response to Marshall's (1991) and others' (Applebee, 1993; Pirie, 1997) concerns that reader-response had become a "new orthodoxy" in schools, Appleman (2015) has advocated for literacy educators to teach theoretical approaches to reading that go beyond reader-response and, instead, incorporate a diversity of "lenses" for interpreting texts: from feminism and Marxism to postcolonialism and deconstruction. This method includes teaching reader-response theory to adolescents, with the goal of helping them to recognize and name reader-response as one among many approaches to textual interpretation. The metaphor of the "lens" has proven to be a generative way for teachers to make clear the plurality of possible critical readings that might emerge from students' transactions with texts. This approach also provided a means of making multiple perspectives intelligible for adolescents. Of course, there is no such thing as a disembodied "feminist reading" or "Marxist reading" – each is uniquely contingent on the location and history of the individual behind the "lens" (cf. Alcoff, Hames-García, Mohanty, & Moya, 2006). Indeed, there may be as many (or more) feminisms as there are feminists. But teaching adolescents to regard these theories as "lenses" that an individual reader can put on has provided a means to bridge reader-response with critical theory. It may also be a starting point to account for how individuals' situated interpretations are collectively negotiated.

A second, related challenge is the enduring imagery of the dialectic transaction of reading. For Rosenblatt, the coming-together of reader and text always synthesizes into a new creative product – the poem. Even with an increased attention to the sociopolitical facets of reading, there still remains an anticipation that the meaning of the text will emerge as a coherent synthesis. However, in de-centering the individual reader in reader-response and relocating meaning in the collective act of situated interpretation, such ideas do not dissolve into a singular "poem." As the teachers' and students' reactions to *House of the Scorpion* illuminate, these discussions are often provisional and fragmentary. They start and stop. They are frayed at the edges. "There's a lot going on" – and, as a result, the readings that emerge tend to confound and frustrate as much as they clarify the shape and meanings of the text.

In revisiting these data from the Teaching to Learn Project, we were struck by the way the same challenges faced in making sense of the transcripts – the plurality of meanings; the open-endedness of the conversations – were similar to the challenges of enacting sociopolitical approaches to reader-response. Yet, now, as the United States confronts a sudden rise in populist nationalism, fueled by anti-immigrant perspectives – not unlike nativist movements throughout the globe – there was something familiar about the disjointedness of the dialogues, the recalcitrance of the interpretations. Such conversations never synthesized into a shared interpretive frame, and the breadth of suffering being produced daily across countless spheres of existence made it difficult to focus or prioritize countervailing tactics and strategies. Pulling out of the Paris Agreement and expunging climate change research from the Environmental Protection Agency, for example, would jeopardize the future of the planet, but so too would a nuclear war, baited by fatuous Twitter tirades. And, yet, was it really possible to focus on these urgent matters when Trump’s election also had immediate material consequences for intersecting populations of Muslims, undocumented immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community, communities of color, and women? How were we to collectively make sense of – and act in – this shared moment when, to paraphrase Cheyenne in the Teaching to Learn Project, “There was so much going on”?

It was in discussing these parallels between the challenges both of reader-response and of collective action in uncertain times that we began to articulate the need for a more distributed approach to interpretation – one that would not only encourage individualized critical perspectives, but that would acknowledge the open-ended political negotiations that take place as readers’ social worlds are brought to bear in the collective production of meaning. One generative possibility for charting such an approach was to extend Lewis’s (2000) “sociopolitics of reader-response” to include broader, more open-ended modes of communal deliberation – or a cosmopolitics of reader-response.

### **Cosmopolitics**

The term “cosmopolitics,” coined by Isabel Stengers (2010; 2011), emerged in part as a means to complicate common descriptions of “cosmopolitanism” – in particular, those that celebrate the idea of a fluid, world identity that individuals might cultivate and embody. In general, such perspectives on cosmopolitanism emphasize transcending parochial loyalties in order to build a common world based on tolerance and inclusion. Rich traditions of postcolonial thought have critiqued this position because of its Eurocentricism and alignment with the exclusive epistemologies of Western liberalism. Scholars have argued that there are in fact multiple cosmopolitanisms (Robbins, 2012), including a “cosmopolitanism from below” (Appadurai, 2011) or a “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah, 2006) that values the knowledge and radically hybrid experiences of historically disenfranchised communities (Campano, 2017; Campano & Ghiso, 2011). In the field of education, postcolonial theorizations of cosmopolitanism are helpful frameworks to understand

the diverse activist and intellectual legacies that shape the literacy engagements of youth and families. For example, Campano, Ghiso, & Welch (2016) characterize a multilingual and multiethnic faith community as a “critical cosmopolitan counter-public” whereby youth and families link local and global issues to combat the racism and xenophobia that affect their educational opportunities. Other postcolonial theorists are more skeptical of a shared world and emphasize the role that power plays in deciding who is or is not able to participate in world identity (e.g. Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000; Stornaiuolo & Nichols, 2018). For Stengers, “cosmopolitics” builds on such analyses, making legible the contingent political labor required to produce a “common world” as a stable and unified whole.

A similar problematic animates certain approaches to reader-response. Such orientations, including some ostensibly engaged in “critical” readings, position individuals as autonomous readers, capable of navigating the world of a text as detached flâneurs, shifting effortlessly between interpretive viewpoints, unencumbered by their sociohistorical locations. It is assumed that such an approach is not only possible, but desirable – that individual readers might take the sum of these diverse perspectives and synthesize them to arrive at a congealed meaning. By contrast, a “cosmopolitics” of reader-response does not presume the unfolding of such a synthesis. Instead, it foregrounds the precarity and open-endedness of collective deliberation. From such a perspective, Lewis’s (2000) notion of the “constructed world of the text” is not just an interpretive transaction that individuals navigate – it is the opening of a shared political project.

Both component parts of the term “cosmopolitics” are integral to its usage. The “cosmos” denotes an expanded sense of activity: the transaction of reading may well produce, in Lewis’s words, a “constructed world,” but this world is by no means singular. Each reader, by virtue of their unique personal histories, experiences, and positions, will, at a given time and place, construct such worlds differently. This means the act of collective meaning-making is a matter of not simply coming to consensus about a fixed world but recognizing the plurality of worlds in circulation and negotiating the contours of what a shared world might look like. For example, in the Teaching to Learn Project, participants identified multiple resonances that emerged in the discussion of *House of the Scorpion*: from border politics to biopolitics, transhumanism to environmental justice. While all of these themes were present in the text, they were animated differently in the conversation as different readers foregrounded certain elements over others. With multiple “constructed worlds” in dialogue, Cheyenne’s statement – “There’s really a lot going on here” – not only names the plurality of readings coming together in the discussion, but also anticipates the resultant challenge that stood before the group: of working together to reconcile these disparate worlds, to the extent that such a task is possible.

This process of reconciliation signals the importance of the second component of “cosmopolitics.” It is not enough to simply name the plurality of worlds that are produced in collective reading – the labor of bringing these competing, and at times incommensurate, worlds into conversation is always a decidedly *political* act.

Sumara (2000) anticipated this sense of collective interpretation, arguing that educators should “not pretend that any one interpretation will be sufficient” but, rather, ought to recognize that “many layers of influence need to be studied and represented together in order to represent the complexity of the act of reading” (p. 278). Importantly, for Stengers (2005), representing and negotiating such complexities has little to do with the “miracle of decisions that put everyone into agreement” (p. 1003). In other words, a cosmopolitics of reader-response does not anticipate that the coming-together of multiple worlds will result in a pure or harmonious synthesis – in part, because some perspectives in circulation may be fundamentally irreconcilable. We witnessed such moments in the aftermath of the 2016 election, when centrists calling for “dialogue” across political differences neglected the preconditions necessary for such discussions: because white supremacy and anti-racism are not morally or intellectually equivalent positions, there is no virtue in seeking a “middle ground” compromise between these two worlds. Cosmopolitics, by contrast, operates as an alternative to the “tolerance” of liberal consensus-building: for Stengers, it elucidates the ethical obligations that bind those involved in collective deliberation to one another, to those not present, and to those who have historically been silenced. Such a stance encourages consensus, when possible, but is not afraid to leave open those frayed edges that may be incompatible with our vision for the shared world we are building together.

This open-endedness is a generative feature of cosmopolitical reading. As Latour (2004) suggests, “The ‘cosmos’ protects us against the premature closure of ‘politics’; and ‘politics’ against the premature closure of ‘cosmos’” (p. 454). In other words, unlike conventional uses of reader-response, interpretation is a collective process that is not guaranteed to produce a single, coherent meaning from the transaction – the expanded interpretive scope and the politics of deliberation, instead, work together to prevent the hasty erasure of uncommon worlds. Rather than Rosenblatt’s “poem” surfacing as the emergent production of an individual reader and text, cosmopolitics positions the unfinished process of collective interpretation as, itself, “the poem.” In this sense, it is akin to Chakrabarty’s (2000) conception of “minority histories,” which do not endeavor to arrive at perfect consensus but instead look to engage in nonstatist forms of democratic deliberation. Such a perspective allows us to follow the interplay of heterogeneous worlds “without seeking to reduce them to any overarching principle that can assimilate the different voices” (p. 107).

### Reading Cosmopolitics

With this perspective in mind, we return to the dialogue we introduced at the outset of this chapter, to suggest how youth and student teachers who were members of this interpretive community used the dystopian novel *House of the Scorpion* as an imaginative platform to articulate and negotiate divergent worlds that might otherwise be suppressed in a curriculum, especially those that have been silenced due to histories of oppression or colonization. In the following excerpts



from the longer discussion, we can see the beginnings of a collective cosmopolitics. We quote these exchanges at length to draw attention to the ways in which individuals co-articulate their separate perspectives, jointly make analogies to the contemporary dystopian world or to their own experiences of marginalization, identify and argue for patterns of salience and meaning, in the process of working together to decenter individualized readings toward the co-construction of a more pluriversal vision of the social world (Mignolo, 2011).

Near the outset of the conversation, Cheyenne, a student teacher, named some of the array of issues raised in *Scorpion*. This provided an opening for others in the group to contribute to a collective analysis:

*Cheyenne:* Yeah there is a lot to take in: climate change, the US/Mexico border, the war on drugs, there's really a lot going on, including the ethics of cloning.

*Kate:* It's interesting to see how the author envisions the future. The social class lens was really strong for me [Appleman, 2015]. The idea that the clones were now the bottom rung of society—low-class illegals were how some were described. The people who were running away from America into Mexico were seen as people, or things that they could turn into *ejits* and just use them to work. So I think there is a huge social commentary there on how we treat people and classify them, and a warning against cloning and what kind of ethics are involved. I read in the newspaper—I can't remember if it was yesterday or today—about this company . . . [that] parents can pay and choose what genes they want for their baby. So “we want our kids to have blond hair, blue eyes.”

*Cheyenne:* It's kind of like the fusion of cloning and Eugenics. I was thinking, this really relates . . .

*Bryce:* It's called transhumanism.

*Kate:* Once you start doing that, what are you doing to society?

*Will:* But do you think that schools clone students, in some ways?

*Mica:* I guess they can manipulate them. They tell us that by learning more, it will force us to think. I don't know.

*Kate:* It's not so much cloning as indoctrination.

*Bryce:* Schools can be used to clone ideas though. It's so important, it's a part of our role [as teachers] to help students understand that whenever you are introduced to a new idea, you have to examine it critically and not just accept it . . .

*Kate:* Cloning can be biological, but it can also be indoctrination, your ideas. You don't have to have the same genes to force someone to think the way you think. Maybe that is more dangerous than biological cloning.

As we noted previously, Cheyenne raises several contemporary social issues. Kate attempts to synthesize these issues, in a sense, and suggests that the heart of the “social commentary” of the novel is about how people are classified and treated. This effort to distill the novel’s central concern with ranking humans marks an attempt to go beyond single-issue interpretations, for members of the reading community to discern or collectively construct a larger interpretive framework through which to make sense of the dizzying array of issues raised in their transactions with the novel. While this frame serves as a provisional step in building a shared consensus of the text, the flow of the conversation does not allow this synthesis to harden, as discussion of human-ranking pivots to cloning – both with regard to transhumanism, and to students and schools.

Collectively, the group explores how notions of *the human* are constructed – an issue taken on from other perspectives later in the discussion – and the ways that the education system has historically been the mechanism through which an assimilationist, Eurocentric, heteronormative universal, rather than a pluriversal (Mignolo, 2011), worldview has been asserted. Their communal critique of cloning becomes a kind of metaphor for something more dangerous: “cloning ideas” that proclaim a universalist perspective that papers over difference. This too remains unsettled, opening new questions about the differences between “cloning,” “manipulation,” and “indoctrination” – and their biological and intellectual valences. We see, too, how individuals bring their unique positions and experiences to bear in this deliberative process – from Kate’s reference to a recent newspaper article about genetic modification to Bryce’s association of “cloning” with his work as a teacher.

This brief exchange signifies a cosmopolitical reading, in which individuals engaged in the conversation not only negotiate textual meaning from their unique social locations, but also attend to the perspectives of those who are most oppressed in the novel, and make correspondences to their present political landscape. Latent in this emergent, collective meaning-making are theories of coloniality, critical ethnic studies, and ecopolitics. Each of these interpretive approaches, we believe, embraces a more shared and global experience, even as the community of readers struggle to negotiate how they ought to lay out their ethical priorities and direct their energies. This process creates a foundation for beginning to coauthor a vision of a shared world, both in the text and beyond – a world that ought to be more attentive to those who are most oppressed, including the ethical issues surrounding who does and who does not count as fully human.

Later in the conversation, the group continued to surface perspectives on how difference is produced and created in order to rank human beings (Weheliye, 2014):

*Bryce:* [Here] in Canada, we call people who immigrate *permanent residents* right? In the States, even after they get their status, they are still called, *resident aliens*.

*Will:* That’s a really good point.

- Kate:* The word, in itself, *alien*. What does that connote? What is the connotation of an alien? It is *not human*.
- Will:* It is the definition of the other.
- Bryce:* Yes, exactly.
- Will:* The definition of malignant exception . . .
- Kate:* We were talking about this, this morning in our anti-discrimination class. . . . Whoever doesn't fit into heteronormativity is exiled outside. And Freud had this theory of aggressive narcissism. We differentiate ourselves from each other so that we have a stronger identity, "You're gay, I'm straight." You build your identity by separating yourself from others and not connecting yourself with others. We do this by making false dichotomies, false differences, and similarities. That's what they do with [the novel's protagonist] Matteo, right? They tell him he's different: he doesn't feel different, he doesn't look different, he doesn't act different, than another human. But they tell him he is an animal, that he's disgusting, and that he's different . . .
- Bryce:* What about the other side of it? You can be told that you are the same, and still feel different. . . . I'm from the Caribbean. In the Caribbean, we don't think about racism. You are the dominant culture. It's not something you think about. I believe Caribbean Blacks react to the concept of racism differently than North Americans.
- Cheyenne:* Or African Canadians.
- Bryce:* It's an entirely different way of viewing your life. For many Africans, they've been displaced, and now they have to deal with a new reality. It was a reality that was never your reality . . .
- Will:* I think it is important to talk about this. Whiteness is often seen as some kind of neutrality. It's like we don't have a race. It is a ridiculous proposition, but it often exists. Your point about how people from different places have a discourse around race that is very different . . .
- Bryce:* It is very, very different. The other day I had to answer a question around race. . . . The question was, what race do you identify as? And I wrote: *Human*.

Bryce and Kate, with the help of Will and Cheyenne, suggest how any perspective of the universal is defined in the boundaries by those who are excluded. Kate takes on the idea of a universal human through a critique of heteronormativity. We continue to learn from colleagues (Airton, 2013; Blackburn, 2002–03) who discuss working against binary perspectives in the process of queering pedagogical spaces (hicks, 2017), which we view as resonant with the idea of cosmopolitical

approaches that similarly operate from the baseline assumption that our classrooms are made up of a spectrum of identities and standpoints. Bryce's comment about identifying as human could be critiqued, for instance, as downplaying anti-Black racism or oppression, or presuming a universalist, heteronormative subject. Yet, at the same time, Bryce gestures toward the historical struggle of Blacks in North America to strive for their humanity, and begins to dig beneath the veneer of facile universalist conceptions of the human (Weheliye, 2014).

Across the contours of the discussion, the plot points of the dystopian novel recede, superseded by a practice of what Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) have described as "re-storying the self." This exemplifies a kind of cosmopolitical work, in that it acknowledges that texts are not so much a "constructed world" as they are multiverses, where diverse readers produce new worlds and new configurations of characters from the same text – and often put these worlds to work as resources for imagining and understanding other social worlds they inhabit and navigate. From such a perspective, formalist interests, universalist interpretations, authorial intent, concerns for what is canonical or non-canonical become moot. The meaning of the text shifts from an outgrowth of individual transactions with the printed page to the open-ended conversations that circulate around it – a collective negotiation that decenters individualized readings without assuming a harmonious synthesis.

## Conclusion

The shift from a sociopolitics of reader-response toward a cosmopolitical frame is marked by lack of interpretive closure. Rather than emphasizing individual transactions of readers and texts that congeal into hardened "meanings," a cosmopolitics of reader-response aims to untangle the ways such meanings are fragile and fragmentary, yet are nevertheless indispensable to the precarious, political work of collective interpretation. Like earlier articulations of reader-response, this stance retains a resistance to literacy pedagogies that embrace high stakes testing paradigms and ranked ability groupings. However, it also extends this open-ended and egalitarian approach to "meaning-making" beyond the individual, to the interpretive community itself. It acknowledges the plurality of social worlds that converge when students and teachers deliberate over a common text, and the politics involved in collectively determining what sort of world they might share.

Such a position does not assume a singular "meaning" or "reading" will emerge from this transaction. As Audre Lorde (2007) reminds us, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (p. 138). Our social worlds are not animated by single-issue struggles, and, as such, when these worlds comingle in the shared space of classrooms, the meanings produced will be multiple and refractory. A cosmopolitics of reader-response, then, strives to leave open the possibility for new assemblages of meaning, interpretation, and affect that may transform not only the collective understanding of a text, but the community itself. From such a perspective, the classroom can come to be seen as a common world that encompasses many worlds (cf. Mignolo, 2011).

Of course, such a stance also brings new challenges. While the “cosmos” in cosmopolitics signals the need for a more expansive view of the social worlds represented (or omitted) from our texts, conversations, and interpretive communities, there is a danger that readers might adopt the role of “tourists” in worlds they are not fully conscious of, or responsive to (cf. Kincaid, 2000). Such a position risks relativism, reinscribing what Weheliye (2014) calls the “grammar of comparison” that affirms “existent hierarchies rather than design[ing] novel assemblages of relation” (p. 7).

It is for the purpose of resisting this tendency that the “politics” in cosmopolitics is so crucial: the aim is not just to learn about “the other,” but to engage in the political work of listening to, cooperating with, and participating in interpretive and political struggles alongside others. As Latour (2014) notes, “there is no common world, and yet it has to be composed, nonetheless” (p. 12). And because such processes are always vulnerable to appropriation by white supremacist, heteronormative universalism, a cosmopolitics of reader-response demands reflexivity, characterized by humility and an ethic of justice. For educators, not arriving at a unified interpretation or even a closed set of multiple readings may seem counterintuitive. While this necessitates reimagining what counts as appropriate participation in or outcomes of literature discussions like the one presented here, acknowledging the multiplicity of different perspectives that inhere in classrooms can be a starting point for constructively complicating universalist readings, toward building a shared vision of a collective future.

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