

## Read Me Last: Constructing a Scholarly Catchment Through a Black Feminist Reading

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COMMENTARY

## Read Me Last: Constructing a Scholarly Catchment Through a Black Feminist Reading

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In this commentary, I highlight the importance of my role, your role, our role in engaging this special issue, “STEM Learning: For Whom and Toward what ends?,” as researchers, scholars, and, above all, as readers in the learning sciences. The guest editors, Maxine McKinney de Royston and Tesha Sengupta-Irving, assert a forceful question that is unrelenting in its two parts. The question pushes us past the ubiquitous and high-minded mantra, *STEM for all* (see, for example, Martin, 2003) and beyond the purported and played-out purpose of participation and access to the political economy as the sole means for learning (see, for example, Bullock, 2017). I read the guest editors’ questions, following Philip, Bang, and Jackson (2018) and The Politics of Learning Writing Collective (2017), as a demand for politically-salient knowledge production within the learning sciences at this particular political moment and an acknowledgement of STEM learning as a particular oppressive context.

Equally demanding, the special issue approaches this question not only with theoretical and philosophical imaginings of what STEM learning can be, but resolves the question through praxis, e.g., inside of the unruly reality of classrooms, the world wide web, community centers, and, in one case, the kitchen table. Each article seeks to manage this ambitious call teetering at great heights within micro- and meso- contexts of learning to answer the most pressing question for those of us within STEM and deeply concerned about the growing artifices of social inequality and environmental neglect in our local and global communities. How, then, might we read this special issue in a way that maintains a measure of scholarly and activist accountability to the field of learning sciences and, simultaneously, engenders the necessary support, i.e., scholarly catchment, so that these authors are not holding up an edifice of social imaginaries and radically liberatory futures in STEM learning on their own? Further, what are the challenges in reading as a scholarly catchment? Such a question is not a matter of reading generously but responsibly and inside of our humanity.

### A first read: An empirical read

My first read, perhaps like yours, was or will be a technical read. For me, I read for the demands of this commentary. I read for methodological acuity and innovation. I read to consume. I hungrily read. I read in a way that demands answers from the authors to the outlined questions and required nothing from me as the reader. Said simply, I read as an empirical reader (Eco, 1994). Those familiar with (literary) semiotics will likely recognize Umberto Eco’s construction of the Empirical Reader from his seminal work, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. In this work, Eco provides a useful heuristic and outlines two kinds of readers, the empirical reader and the model reader (Eco, 1994; Varsava, 1995). The empirical reader views the text as instrumental or

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pragmatic, but the model reader (and there are two kinds) engages the text more intimately working within the aims of the author. Jerry Varsava describes the model reader in this way:

Pursuing his metaphor, Eco suggests that there are two ways that a Model Reader can move through a fictional wood. A “first-level” Model Reader will focus narrowly on events and actions, and work his or her way quickly through to the other side in order to reach the denouement as expeditiously as possible. ... Alternatively, a “second-level” Model Reader elects to dawdle in the wood, exploring its many paths to learn more about the place itself.

My goal here is not to follow Eco in a literal sense, but to learn from the models that have been provided. Although Eco (1994) treated the empirical reader as disposable, i.e., of “neither theoretical or hermeneutic interest” (Varsava, 1995, p. 89), empirical reading is part of our work and reading in this manner affords a broad, categorical view of the political landscape of STEM learning and its possibilities within the special issue.

As an empirical reader, there is a constructed answer to the questions *for whom* and *toward what ends*. For whom in this special issue ranges from individual adult learners, a classroom of children, a family, a large organization, or an imagined child end-user. An empirical read allows the tracking of the social identities of participants—Latinx, African American or Black, Indigenous, as well as Singaporean, Korean, Japanese American, Chinese American, Taiwanese American, and White, along with sex- and gender-based identities, such as male, female, boy, girl, man, and woman. The social identities within the special issue, overwhelmingly focused on people of color (with less attention to gender as a mediating construct). Of course, for whom also begs the question of *where at*. The location of participants’ social identities were shaped within a broad array of STEM learning contexts, including an online portal; a countywide, multiservice organization; a classroom; a community workshop space; and my favorite—a kitchen table. Similarly, the disciplinary focus of *what* is meant by STEM learning ranged in each article from STEM as disaggregated topics, like mathematics, science, and engineering, respectively, to their murky composite, such as STEM careers. Analytically, the empirical read revealed the importance of narrative in this special issue. Narrative served as a container for individual’s identity, family histories, national economic ideologies, curriculum, and organizational practices. Now, the authors’ answer to the second question *toward what ends* was equally varied, including: personal accomplishment, intercommunity solidarity, presencing Indigenous knowledge systems, and the survivance of Indigenous family, as well as the disruption of colonized imaginaries of a nation’s economy. An empirical read allowed for some accounting—albeit reductive—to begin making sense of the possible meanings of STEM learning. By taking an empirical read of this special issue, we can actively engage the representational politics of STEM learning and highlight the diversity of participants and contexts. That is, the learning of different demographic groups (racially and culturally as two examples) are not only being represented, but centered.

However, the empirical reader may be falsely led to believe that this special issue is merely a game of diversity discourses and representational politics—a game of semantics and explicitly naming—in which the new science of learning can gaze upon the racialized, classed, and gendered person. To put it coarsely, the empirical reader may engage this special issue as a form of *identity politics*. The working definition of identity politics has been roundly criticized and perhaps intentionally misunderstood as a theoretical construct and necessary project within progressive social movements. For example, Mark Lilla—a Columbia University professor—“declared in a *New York Times* op-ed published ten days after the election [of Donald Trump] ‘that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end,’ because it had been ‘disastrous as a foundation for democratic politics in our ideological age’” (Smith, 2017). As the argument goes, identity politics divide, obscure, and alienate demographic groups from one another and prevent us from dealing with the most pressing issues, which in our case is STEM learning. Of course, in my opinion, this argument is primarily concerned with the alienation of the “good, working-class” White men and, to a lesser extent, White women, and a device to avoid socio-political work of

truth, reconciliation, and reparations. That being said, if we are not careful as readers, this special issue could simply be a project of identification within various demographic groups, at different scales, and within different geographies—merely an essentializing showcase of STEM learners, knowers, and doers.

Fortunately, there is a different way to make sense of identity politics that attends fully to its intellectual traditions. Within a Black feminist framework, identity politics is by no means reductive. To the contrary, the concept of identity politics when grounded in its genealogy, and as first defined by the Combahee River Collective (a group of Black, queer, feminist scholars) is a call for complex structural analysis that stems from the everyday. The Collective (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith (1982)) wrote:

The focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. ... We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. (p. 16)

In other words, identity politics may originate in the everyday within our bodies; however, identity politics are most powerful for deciphering systems that structure the everyday conditions of individuals. These systems (i.e., capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, racism) affect us all, although in particularized ways based on our social locations. Now, the empirical reader has access to the everyday of oppressed peoples, but may not be readily able to see past this quotidian context toward the structural forces shaping everyday moments. To avoid such an oversimplification of the everyday moments in STEM learning, we need a way of reading and engaging with this special issue that allows the diversity of the participants and their experiences not to simply pour over us as a set of identity performances within the theater of the learning sciences. Following Eco, I am calling for a different kind of read and a different kind of reader. Perhaps we need to walk the path laid out by the authors and pick up the stones, the artifacts, the lines of the transcript that they place at our feet and explore the structural spaces and places they are creating textually. We need a Black feminist model reader, who can provide a scholarly catchment for holding the complexity of this special issue as a kind of identity politics to engage the structural complexity of STEM learning. Here, I offer a second reader—a Black feminist, model reader.

### **A second read: A black feminist as model reader**

On this second encounter, I chose to read this special issue as a feminist and, more specifically, a Black feminist production. Although I had not queried the editors to their intent for the special issue as a particular kind of production, I felt this treatment lent itself to useful insights for the learning sciences. Instead of treating identity politics that are playing out in this special issue as a cosmetic shift, I attempted to use identities and social locations of the authors and participants as a critical resource. In particular, as a model reader, I took STEM learning as a multistable object of inquiry within a Black feminist frame (Dotson, 2014). Multistability is a concept originating in the philosophy of science and technology, most notably through the person of Don Ihde (2009), who argued that what a thing really is (i.e., technology for Ihde) remains underdetermined and is subject to perspectival resources. More recently, Black feminist epistemologist, Kristie Dotson (2014), has leveraged this concept to theorize about oppression in her chapter, “Making Sense: The Multistability of Oppression and the Importance of Intersectionality.” Relying on Dotson, I have used this concept in my own study of mathematics learning related to Black girls (Gholson & Martin, 2019) and consider multistability to be an especially useful concept when examining

oppressive contexts, like STEM learning.<sup>1</sup> Dotson (2014) articulated the multistability of oppression as a particular phenomenon.

Taking oppression as a multistable phenomenon is to say that it admits of an open range of ‘topographic’ possibilities. Oppression in a given society will have multiple ways one can understand it, and these multiple ways will have certain ‘apodicticity.’ That is to say, one’s certitude that oppression simply is a certain way originates from such and such place, or can be understood according to such and such orientation, can be experientially fulfilled time and again. This is not simply to say that we see what we want to see, though that is certainly part of it. Rather oppression admits of a number of interpretations and a number of manifestations and a number of conceptions. How a multistable phenomenon is interpreted in space will depend on a variety of factors, not least of which will be one’s ‘perspectival perceptions’ and goals, including, but not limited to, cultural inheritances, cognitive commitments and embodied location. The way oppression is perceived will also depend on its social effect and one’s relation to it. (p. 43)

Importantly, Dotson’s rendering of oppression as multistable allows for a variety of interpretations of the phenomenon of STEM learning, and simultaneously avoids any suggestion that oppression, or a particular experience of STEM learning, is a figment of minoritized groups’ imagination. Rather, multistability lends to a structural analysis of the political contexts that are based on our resources, goals, and social locations. Therefore, in this case, I rightly expected each collection of authors and their participants to engage in particular sense-making regarding the object of STEM learning given their various cultural inheritances, cognitive commitments and embodied locations. I actively disinvited any positivistic impulse for a uniform, coherent response. Said differently, as a multistable object, I was deeply curious how the authors of this special issue would orient to STEM learning as an oppressive context, i.e., for whom, and what topographical possibilities would be explored, i.e., toward what ends.

Black women’s social theory has engaged in a variety of ways of studying and articulating oppression and making their experiences visible (Dotson, 2014). One clear example is the theory of intersectionality introduced by Kimberelé Crenshaw, which argues the knowability of Black women is obscured when using any single-axis framework that individually privileges race, class, or gender (Cooper, 2015). However, within White feminist theorizing, Marilyn Frye (1983) provided a different conceptual frame to explain unknowability of (White) women; she likened oppression to a birdcage. Frye articulates an image of the birdcage, where the individual wires of the cage create an enclosure that restrains and restricts the bird. However, under a microscopic gaze, the bird appears free. That is, if we are only to focus on a single wire of cage, the casual observer (or empirical reader) might be confused as to why the bird does not simply fly away. Oppression, she argued, at the micro-level is generally imperceptible. Within this metaphor, we see a tension growing between the fine-grained analytical work of the learning sciences and the structural realities of oppression. On the one hand, a central concern of this special issue is to acknowledge the oppressive contexts and subtexts of STEM learning that are structured by broad social and historical systems. On the other hand, the learning sciences as an interdisciplinary space is deeply concerned—as it bears out in this special issue—with the micro and meso-levels of learning and identity development, which often renders oppression invisible. A Black feminist reader of this special issue must then take the structural realities of STEM learning seriously, tracking with equal interest both the macroscopic forces and microscopic events in each article. Similar to Eco’s model reader, the Black feminist reader must explore many paths to understand each article but this exploration is telescopically fluid, constantly moving between micro, meso, and macro analytical levels by invitation of author or independently as a model reader.

<sup>1</sup>In this commentary, I do not endeavor to provide a full articulation of STEM learning environments as oppressive, i.e., racialized, gendered, classed, and stratified by constructions ability. Instead, I simply take oppression in and from STEM learning environments as well-established. Other scholars and researchers, including Bullock (2017), Esmonde and Booker (2016), Martin, Price, and Moore, (2019), Mutegi (2013), and Parsons and Dorsey (2015) have provided both the theoretical and empirical grounding toward this claim.

## Scholarly catchment as the work of the model reader

The empirical reader may rightly ask: Is this my responsibility to read telescopically within the everyday moment and the sociohistorical, as well as in a localized cultural space and the geopolitical space? However, the model reader engages such a schema not as a technical activity but in the project of sense-making about human activity. In the following, I provide examples using each empirical article of the special issue to explore how a Black feminist as model reader can slow the flow of ideas and point back to the broader systemic issues that are structuring STEM learning or move more deeply into the everydayness of STEM learning.

One clear example plays out through Davis's and Schaeffer's (2019) "Troubling Troubled Waters in Elementary Science Education: Politics, Ethics & Black Children's Conceptions of Water [Justice] in the Era of Flint." As shown in Figure 8, the children in this elementary classroom are engaged in a debate about the right to water. The three-module unit, *Water is Life*, allowed children to discuss and compare the Flint water crisis of lead contamination to the water shut-offs happening locally in their community. Within a Black feminist read, I begin with the everyday micro-contexts and the realm of learning sciences, acknowledging the accomplishment of children's externalization and articulation of water as a necessary component to human and nonhuman life. However, this observation provides an opportunity to pivot to socio-historical contexts and structural systems that make water insecurity for predominantly Black communities possible, if not probable. There is a full history of racial residential segregation upon which the Black feminist reader indexes through the social category of Black and working-class. In understanding the construction of the ghetto (Massey & Denton, 1993), the Black feminist as a model reader knows that the same racialized mechanisms that made lead-contaminated water a reality within Flint are operating in modestly different ways to make water unavailable as a resource in Riverview. However, this structural reality is not yet held uniformly by the students. Within the sociohistorical valence, the transcript for the model reader shifts from evidence of Black children's learning as a form of externalization and articulation, toward a *desire-centered* classroom discussion in which (I hoped that) children intellectually fight for their individual and communal right to clean water as a historically disenfranchized group and precarious relationship to water and land. In this case, I began hoping along with the authors (and teachers) for these Black children to integrate their knowledge bases as a way to see the structures and name the structures for themselves, as a part of their articulation.

Taking Buenrostro's and Radinsky's (2019), "Looking at my (Real) World Through Mathematics: Memories and Imaginaries of STEM Learning," as a second example, I was drawn to the complexity of identities held by the participant, Calvin, as Mexican, undocumented, working-class, urban-dwelling future astronomer. In many ways, my structural read of Calvin in which criminality is made synonymous with immigration status made the educational *desires* expressed during his interview seem luxurious. In my walk through this article as a Black feminist, it felt as if Buenrostro and Radinsky were challenging me to see through his everyday circumstances and plan with him in attaining citizenship and scholarship and study of interstellar bodies and orbits. Where the empirical reader may only track on instances of appropriation and their form through discursive markers, the model reader seeks to (a) understand how the discursive markers of appropriation are mediated by the intersection of socioeconomic status, immigration status, and ethnic identity and (b) coconspire with Calvin in navigating those structures.

Herrenkohl and colleagues (2019) took me on a different path within STEM learning. Through this article, I felt the oppressive postsecondary structures (what awaits Calvin). The importance of relational agency—connectedness that affords organizational viability is best summarized by Stacy, an Iranian student:

One thing that stands out is the first Friday seminar I attended. ... All the mentors were sitting in a circle, going around sharing difficult moments and things they cared most about. I came out of the seminar

feeling relief and comfort, because for the first time after 3 months on campus, I felt visible and belonged. I had just built solidarity with a group of strangers. (Stacy, Reflective Paper, 2018)

Although Herrenkohl and her colleagues review the literature of under-represented groups in STEM majors, through Stacy's reflective writing, we begin to feel the isolation and loneliness that mediates the learning and identity development of women of color entering college as STEM majors. My Black feminist read did not allow Stacy's words—3 months or 12 weeks or 84 days—to simply flow off the page. I felt responsible for catching the everyday solitude and struggle. Her words, Stacy's words, make clear the accomplishment of the STUDIO as an organization in providing a nurturing space for the mentors that engaged children in the local community. It was a space that held her desire for connectedness.

Tzou and colleagues (2019) textually construct intimate scenes of Indigenous families constructing dioramas of familial stories using robotics. Again, beginning within the everyday scene, the Black feminist reader can be seduced by the engineering problems introduced in the family's conversation:

Yoshi: That's the number one, it's in a forever loop and the red one is brighter one and it's only a 2-second delay and it look like it flickers less and it's brighter. And the yellow one flickers for 6 seconds. ... So I made the red one more random. Oh okay. So it blinks more randomly. So hopefully, you know how the fire goes pitch black sometimes? I was hoping to fix that.

Here, the authors have shared these particular lines of transcript for the reader. A microscopic view would only allow us to see these lines as a design challenge for depicting the undulation of a flame; however, a macroscopic view that acknowledges the logics of elimination that fuel settler colonialism and the attempted annihilation of Indigenous people creates a different topographic understanding of the design problem. Solving such a dilemma with the light-emitting diodes (LEDs) is not simply a technical issue, but, as a Black feminist reader, the LED becomes a mediating tool—a desire—for effectively narrating a family's story designed to refuse a broader colonial project of elimination—a deliberate forgetting.

As a final example, I found de Roock and Baildon (2019) as particularly challenging to understand structurally, given this analysis was focused on an online portal, called *MySkillsFuture*, in Singapore. Although the authors were well acquainted with this context, I certainly had fewer perspectival resources to make-sense of the oppressive contexts. At the same time, I understood the everyday seduction of a well-designed website, graphics, and cartoon cityscapes that made neoliberal discourses palatable. At certain moments, instead of sharing the authors' revulsion, as a Black feminist, I was able to connect with children's desire for possible futures within a well-organized, clean city, even though it was only a virtual world. I tried to imagine the nano-second desires of clicking through drop-down lists and menus and feeling a sense of control and possibility.

My point in walking through each of these examples as a model reader—a Black feminist reader—was to simply share a strategy that purposefully engages STEM learning as a multistable phenomena, necessarily encumbered by various identity politics. Easily, these excerpts could flow over the empirical reader as evidence seeking a claim. As a model reader, my intention was to hold onto these narratives that were flowing like water. This is what I meant by *scholarly catchment*. My goal was to use the identities of the participants as resources to see the structure in the everyday and where the structure was made visible to reorient myself to the everydayness of the phenomena. Priyanka Agarwal and Tesha Sengupta-Irving (this issue) formalize a "structural reading" within research and analysis by proposing a connective and productive disciplinary engagement framework (CPDE), building from Engle and Conant's (2002) original principles. In the CPDE framework, Agarwal and Sengupta-Irving explore learning interactions with respect to epistemic diversity, as well as historicity and identity, along the four principles of problematizing, authority, accountability, and resources.

The descriptions for each dimension within the CPDE framework in Figure 1 are useful examples of the devices needed to conduct structural analysis.

Of course, without a supporting framework, like that of Agarwal and Sengupta-Irving, reading an empirical article (whose analysis has already taken place) with the intention of providing a scholarly catchment is challenging. Scholarly catchment requires motivation, as well as historical, geopolitical, and cultural knowledge, which may or may not be provided. Scholarly catchment, as a Black feminist, requires some engagement of structural analysis and critique. Above all else, the resource that is required for constructing a scholarly catchment is desire. When lacking perspectival resources, the Black feminist as a model reader is left to understand “complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives,” as well as “a longing about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future” (Tuck, 2009, p. 417). Eve Tuck (2009) described this kind of desire-centered work within the practice of research, but these desires are also requisites in our reading of empirical literature. In this special issue, the authors take us part of the way toward answering for whom and toward what ends in STEM learning, but as readers much is required and must be desired in holding the significance of the answers provided.

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