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Writing for the Audience that Fires the Imagination: Implications for Teaching Writing

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From Shakespeare to Melville to Morrison, writers have embodied the audiences that fired their imaginations through the language of their texts. Authors leave cues for readers in their texts about what kind of audience they imagine them to be. In Act III, Scene II of *Julius Caesar*, Marc Antony, speaking at Caesar’s funeral, utters the following: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones; so let it be with Caesar.” Through the words of his character, Shakespeare, embodies his audience, communicating to them the role he expects them to take up—that of friend and countryman in order to understand Marc Antony’s modes of persuasion with his audience and to reflect on the consequences of political upheaval during a succession crisis, which was a public concern in England at the time of the play’s writing.

When English teachers teach students to read authors such as Shakespeare, they encourage them to read closely and actively in order to recognize, interpret, and respond to those cues in texts to understand the author’s intent and purpose. However, too often when those same writing teachers read their own students’ writing, the onus for understanding and responding to a reader’s expectations rests squarely on the student writer, who must create a text that considers the possible ways *any* reader might respond to that text in order to engage and please a reader. This upending of the active role of a reader is the result of writing pedagogy and writing process theory that positions the relationship between author and audience as integral in the development of student writers but places the success or failure of a text on a reader’s reception of that text. The challenge for writers then is to develop a text based on that audience’s expectations not only for what a text will say but also for how it will say it.

In positioning student writers to meet these demands, writing teachers often instruct students to imagine an audience or construct assignments that purport to offer them real-world audiences. In asking students to attend to what is described as an authentic audience, teachers frequently set the terms for how writing can be done and constrain writers in the kinds of texts and ideas they can produce. However, no matter who the articulated audience of a text might be, we argue that student writers believe that when they are writing in a classroom the audience that matters, the true audience they are writing for, is the teacher. If students are expected to fictionalize in their minds an audience, when their actual audience is their writing teacher, writing teachers must correspondingly imagine themselves to be the audience that the writer has fictionalized. As readers, we do not expect Shakespeare to consider our expectations; rather we position ourselves as active readers of his works by looking for clues in the text for how to read and engage with his text. These clues—ranging from semantics and word choice to cultural touchstones—are used by readers to stretch their own understandings of a text and become the audience Shakespeare, or any writer, has imagined them to be.

Student writers employ these same rhetorical moves that they have learned as readers, as they take up the conventions and language that best suits their text and authorial purpose. As readers themselves, student writers assume *their* audience will take up the roles they have imagined for them, including recognition of the linguistic and cultural clues needed to understand and engage with their text, so that their audience will take on the role imagined for them. To often, though, student writers are not presented with opportunities in classrooms to write for the kinds of audiences that they have experience being themselves and when they make those opportunities on their own they are not always able to find receptive audiences in their writing teachers.

Background

According to Aristotle, the father of modern rhetoric, when a speaker or writer composes a text he or she must take into account three elements: the subject or message, the audience, and the speaker/writer. These three elements make up what is known today as the rhetorical triangle. In considering the subject, the speaker/writer evaluates what he or she knows already and needs to know, investigates perspectives, and determines useful evidence for supporting claims. Considering the audience means speculating about the reader’s expectations, knowledge, and dispositions with regard to the subject the writer explores. The speaker/writer element of the triangle represents the author’s voice or persona. Writers use who they are, what they know and feel, and what they’ve seen and done to find their attitudes toward a subject and their understanding of a reader. Decisions about formal and informal language, the use of narrative or quotations, the tone of familiarity or objectivity, come as a result of writers considering their speaking voices on the page. Aristotle saw the three rhetorical elements coming from lived experience; speakers knew how to communicate because they spoke and listened in the world. Though not discussed explicitly by Aristotle,

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two other important elements make up the rhetorical situation—the context in which writing or speaking occurs and the writer/speaker’s purpose, or aim.

Clearly, considering the audience has long been considered an important element of the composing process. Many scholars of composition theory have worked to understand and explain the relationship between writers and their audiences and the strategies writers use to accommodate actual and/or imagined readers’ expectations, knowledge, and dispositions toward their subject matter. In doing so, some theorists have emphasized the actual, physical qualities of real, or addressed, audiences; that is, the particular teacher for whom a student writes an assigned essay or editor for whom a scholar writes an article. These scholars encourage writing teachers to provide opportunities for students to engage in “real-world” writing, to support their students in analyzing and accommodating their intended audiences, and to teach the structures and conventions of disciplinary genres (Mitchell and Taylor, 1979/2003). At the same time, though, these theorists acknowledge that for student writers the real, physical audience they write for most frequently is their teacher. In such cases, writing teachers are urged to instruct student writers to imagine an audience that is as close to an audience that exists in reality as possible (Pfister & Petrik, 1980/2003).

Other composition theorists have contended that assigning such importance to an addressed, or actual, audience overemphasizes the audience’s “observable physical or occupational characteristics” (Long, 1980/2003, 223) when in fact most writers, whether writing for an actual audience or not, must construct their audiences in their imaginations. In his well-known essay about audience, Ong (1975/2003) argued that whether or not an author was writing for an addressed audience, “the writer’s audience is always a fiction”:

What do we mean by saying the audience is a fiction? Two things at least. First, that the writer must construct in is imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role...Second, we mean that the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself (12).

Ong called that constructed, or fictionalized, audience “the audience that fires the writer’s imagination” and explained that fictionalizing an audience is how writers “give body to the audience for whom [they] write” (58). What’s more, Ong suggested that, rather than analyzing or imagining actual audiences, writers fictionalize in their imaginations audiences they have learned to know from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imaginations audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers.

By way of example, Ong describes how a student, assigned to write an essay on how he spent his summer vacation, finds an audience by “making like Samuel Clemens” That is, the student who has read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and “knows what this book felt like, how the voice in it addressed its readers, and how the narrator hinted to his readers that they were related to him and he to them” (59) picks up that voice, and with it, its audience. Ong and Long argued that the central task for writers then was not to analyze an audience and adapt to its needs, but instead to “use semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader—cues which help to define the role the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text” (Ede & Lunsford, 1984/2003, 83).

The audience embodied, or invoked, by the text shares a set of evoked attitudes, interests, reactions, and conditions of knowledge. “It is only through the text, through language, that writers embody or give life to their conception of the reader... [that is], they invoke it...by using all the resources of language available to them [they] establish a broad, and ideally coherent, range of cues for the reader” (90). For instance, Ong describes how Hemingway’s use of definite articles in *A Farewell to Arms* subtly cues readers that their role is to be that of a “companion in arms...a confidant” (62). Other roles identified by Ong include entertainment seekers, reflective sharers of experience, inhabitants of lost and remembered worlds of childhood, and the like.

Ong labeled this process of fictionalizing an audience in the imagination and embodying and cueing that audience to their roles through the language of their texts a “game of literacy,” adding that “readers over the ages have had to learn this game of literacy, how to conform themselves to the projections of the writers they read, or at least how to operate in terms of those projections” What’s more, “a reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom corresponds with his role in the rest of actual life” (60). That is, as was stated above, just as the writer fictionalizes his or her audience, the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. Ong does admit, however, that, for a variety of reasons, a reader may or may not be willing or able to fictionalize such an audience or take up expected roles.

For this reason Ede and Lunsford, advocate a conception of audience that captures the integrated, interdependent nature of reading and writing highlighting the important role the writer plays as reader of his or her own text as well as emphasizing that the writing process is not complete until someone other than the writer reads the text also. It is through this process they claim that “writers create readers and readers create writers” (93). Ede and Lunsford (1984/2003), explain the role of audience in terms of a complex series of obligations, resources, needs and constraints embodied in the writer’s concept of audience” (p.88) and submit that any complete conception of the audience must take into account the fluid, dynamic nature of rhetorical situations. “It is the writer who, as writer and reader of his or her own text, one guided by a sense of purpose and by the particularities of a specific rhetorical situation, establishes the range of potential roles the audience may play” (89). These roles might include self, friend, colleague, critic, mass audience, past audience, and future audience. In fact, they assert that Ong fails to take into consideration the constraints placed on the writer, in certain situations, by the audience. In other words, he fails “to acknowledge [that] readers’ own experiences, expectations do play a central role in their reading of a text, and that the writer who does not consider the needs and interests of his audience risks losing that audience” (88). Ede and Lunsford suggest that the best way to understand the writers’ audience is through analysis of particular rhetorical situations.

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Writing in 2003, Ede and Lunsford state that, although writing teachers were becoming more critical of theories like Miller and Taylor’s that emphasize analysis and accommodation of an addressed audience, little scholarship in composition had embraced the perspective described by Ong and Long. In this article, though, we take up Ong and Long’s paradigm of fictionalizing imagined audiences in combination with Ede and Lunsford’s focus on analysis of the rhetorical situation, in order to examine the audiences invoked in the texts of two middle school writers. Specifically, we analyze each girl’s text in order to answer the following questions: What kinds of audiences fired the imaginations of these student writers? What language did these student writers use to embody their audiences in their texts? What roles did the girls signal for readers of their texts? How were the girls’ imagined audiences like those of authors they had read? What might be implications for writing instruction, when these students’ texts are viewed in terms of writing for an audience that fires the imagination?

Methods

Here in, we feature the writing of two girls—Kristina, an African American sixth grader and Charlotte, a European American eighth grader. The texts described and analyzed in this article were generated during two different ethnographic studies both conducted in middle school English language arts classrooms separately by the authors. Study One, conducted by Author One, Denise, aimed to document the literacy practices of African American students in an urban middle school English language arts (ELA) classroom. Study Two, conducted by Author Two, Cara, in her own suburban English language arts classroom, sought to examine the narrating practices of middle school writers. Both studies employed ethnographic methods including participant observation and field note writing, interview, and artifact collection. Below we describe the contexts and participants of each study.

Study One. The site of Study One was Ms. Wagner’s ELA classroom at Hoyt Middle School (HMS)¹, HMS is one of four middle schools in a school district located in a midsized Midwestern city. The student body at Hoyt Middle is composed almost entirely of African American students from poor and working-class homes. At the time the study was conducted, Hoyt was in its fifth consecutive year of failure to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Not surprisingly, concern about preparing students to take and pass the state assessments, called LEAP tests, was an ever-present and highly visible pressure in the lives of Hoyt administrators and teachers including Ms. Wagner, the focal teacher in this study. Ms. Wagner is a middle-class, European American woman, who at the time of the study had taught at Hoyt her entire 12-year teaching career. Ms. Wagner described herself as an avid reader and reported that she “tried to always use best practices” in her teaching and worked hard to stay abreast of and align her instruction with current federal, state, and district curricular expectations for sixth grade language arts. Kristina’s text, a play titled “Ghetto Family,” was written by Kristina on her own outside of the classroom. It was not a school assignment, but was brought to the classroom by Kristina who asked her English teacher, Ms. Wagner, if she would type it up for her. Denise was introduced to Kristina’s play by Ms. Wagner. Ms. Wagner said she thought to show Kristina’s piece to her because it was written in African American Language (AAL), which she knew from previous conversations was a research interest of Denise’s. Kristina brought “Ghetto Family” to class on the first day of a novel study unit featuring *Hatchet*, an adventure story written by Gary Paulsen. During the novel study unit planned by Ms. Wagner, students would read the novel in whole and small group configurations, learn about story elements and literary devices, answer discussion question and complete literature circle role sheets, and compose several texts of their own including an informative essay on survival and a descriptive essay analyzing a fictional character. Through these assignments, Ms. Wagner planned to address the following state Grade Level Content Expectations in writing: set a purpose, consider audience, exhibit individual style to enhance the written message, use writing style conventions, and be enthusiastic about writing.

Study Two. The site of Study Two was Cara’s own ELA classroom at Garden Grove Middle School, one of two middle schools in a small suburban town located in the Northeastern United States. This school, with a student population of 434, is comprised largely of young people who are European American and come from middle, upper-middle class and wealthy homes. The school provides not only the core content classes during the school day but also offers classes through an extensive music program. Most students participate in one or more athletic leagues outside of school. While school personnel were sensitive to the school’s status as a Level 2 school, teachers at Garden Grove were given wide latitude in determining curriculum and assessments. While the state-mandated test, MCAS, informed the work of the classroom, teachers, like Cara made final decisions about what to teach and how to teach. Cara is a middle class European American woman who was new to the school during the time of Study Two. Although Cara had been teaching for nearly twenty years at the time, this was her first year at Garden Grove. At the time of the study, students had worked with her for approximately six weeks. Charlotte’s text, “Emerald Eyes,” was written outside of the classroom for a required assignment in her eighth grade English class. Students were asked to write a 5-page, double-spaced short story as part of a curriculum unit on the short story. The assignment fell midway in the unit so students had spent time reading the works of published authors such as Jamaica Kinkaid, Langston Hughes, Shirley Jackson, and John Cheever, and discussing narrative and literary techniques specific to the genre. These lessons and activities focused on the uses and development of conflict and characterization, the importance of details for making writing vivid for a reader, and

1 All names are pseudonyms

audience as the final arbiter for an author in making a story successful. This assignment also preceded their final term project, an analytic essay constructing arguments about character motivation and choice. Cara, Charlotte’s ELA teacher, viewed the short story assignment as a way to move students from their position as consumers of a text to the producers of such texts in order to develop an insider’s perspective on how stories are constructed. Class discussions, free writes, and partner writing activities were utilized for students to practice with the idea of how one can transform writing for the self into a piece that can resonate with another person.

In what follows we summarize the two focal texts and analyze the cues, or rhetorical strategies, employed by both writers to invoke and embody imagined audiences. We illustrate how, through particular authorial choices, both girls signaled their audiences to play certain roles. We also demonstrate how both writers drew on their own experiences of being certain kinds of audiences as they “made like” authors they had read in order to construct their audiences. Finally, we present and discuss the opportunities each student had to write for, and share that writing with, audiences that fired their imaginations.

Findings

Kristina’s Play. Kristina’s play consisted of several sheets of three-hole punched, lined notebook paper filled from edge to edge on both sides with the balloon-like print characteristic of many middle school girls. In the top margin of the first page was a cast of characters including the narrator, Tamika, MJ, Grandma Cookie, TaNesha, Ra Tonya, Shonda, Tonya, La’Tonya, Re’Lonya, and Doctor. The play began with the narrator speaking to the audience. “Yo, yo, yo. What’s [the] dealio? Well this play is about a ghetto rich family. They is ghetto about everythang. Then MJ gets shot.” In essence the play is about a family, a ghetto family to be precise—that is made up of parents, Tamika and MJ, Tamika’s mother, Grandma Cookie, 5 teenaged girls, and a two year old. In the play the characters chided, squabbled, teased, and tried to get each other into trouble. They also did homework, attended school (where Ta’Nesha got into a fight over a boyfriend), and held down jobs.

Throughout the first part of the play, the reader comes to understand that something is bothering MJ, but when Tamika tries to find out what’s wrong by asking him if he got somebody pregnant, he hits her and accuses her of not helping out. She reminds him that she cooks, cleans, and takes care of the children during the day and then goes to work at night. The following day Cookie and Tamika discuss what happened, and Cookie says he doesn’t have the right to put his hands on her. Tamika says she knows but what can she do, she loves him. Before Tamika and MJ have a chance to address the situation, the narrator informs the audience MJ has been shot by his work partner. MJ is taken to the hospital where he dies from his wounds. The narrator declares an Unhappy Ending, but teases readers with the promise of an upcoming “Ghetto Family, Part II.”

Charlotte’s Short Story. As per the assignment requirements, Charlotte handed in her completed short story typed using Times New Roman font. The length of her story surpassed both the assignment expectations and the length of nearly every other story submitted by her peers. Charlotte’s story includes a two-voiced narrative, which allows her to tell the main story of a kingdom ruled by a cruel tyrant through the voice of his daughter, Evelyn, and the commoner she is secretly in love with, Rowan. These characters describe their resistance to the king, their plot to prevent Evelyn’s arranged marriage to a man like her father, and to admit heir own burgeoning love for one another. Minor characters include the king; Frederick, the evil suitor; Galen, a palace worker Evelyn sees as a surrogate father but who will betray her; Matilda, the “castle seamstress,” who is a surrogate mother; and the members of Rowan’s family, who suffer in poverty due to the king’s reign. Other characters include various guards at the castle and villagers in the kingdom.

Charlotte’s story begins with Evelyn’s wedding, but rather than continue the scene, Charlotte halts that scene as she uses several pages to explain Evelyn’s family situation, life as a princess, and the social and political conditions of the kingdom. Rowan, who has been her best friend since childhood despite the forbidden nature of their relationship, is introduced. When Evelyn and Rowan sneak out of the castle in order to bring food to the starving inhabitants of the village (including his family) they are caught by palace guards. Rowan is imprisoned while Evelyn is told she will marry Frederick. At the same time, her father presents her with the choice to have Rowan killed or allow him to live but as a slave. While she makes the choice, she also hatches a plan to rescue him. He is released from prison, and rouses for revolution sympathetic villagers and later guards who begin to see their ruler’s treachery. While Evelyn prepares for her wedding day, Rowan and his allies prepare for revolt and rescue. As the story moves to its conclusion, Charlotte brings her readers back to the initial scene. Evelyn is rescued as her father, Frederick, and even Galen die in the midst of the battle that breaks out in the castle hall. Evelyn and Rowan are free as are the subjects of the kingdom. For the two main characters, they are also freed to love one another.

Embodying an audience through the language of the text

Both Kristina and Charlotte embodied their audiences, those they fictionalized in their imaginations, through the language of the texts. The language employed by each girl reveals how the two writers created their readers, that is, communicated to them the knowledge, interests, attitudes, and values they expected audiences to take up. The audience Kristina’s text embodies is one that has knowledge of or curiosity about black language, characters, and themes and can appreciate a humorous glimpse into the life of a “ghetto rich” family. Charlotte writes for an audience who enjoys a traditional fairy tale complete with an evil king, star-crossed lovers, and a happy ending with a contemporary flare—a postmodern, boundary-crossing princess of power.

Ghetto rich. Kristina chose to write about her subject, the daily life of a ghetto family, in the format of a play. Her play included many of the standard conventions readers would expect including a cast of characters, stage directions, and a narrator. The narrator opens the play by announcing, “This play is about a ghetto rich family. They is ghetto about everythang.” Kristina’s choice to describe the family as “ghetto rich” implies at least two things about the audience for whom she writes: 1) that her audience is willing and able to understand ghetto as a positive attribute and 2) that her audience will recognize and appreciate her clever word play.

The word ghetto as a noun frequently signifies a poor, culturally or racially homogeneous urban area and for many carries a negative connotation. “For many African Americans, though, ghetto means home: a place representing authentic blackness and a feeling, passion, or emotion derived from rising above the struggle and suffering of being black in America” (Smitherman, 2000). Here Kristina uses ghetto as an adjective. While “ghetto” as an adjective can be used derogatorily, the African American community, particularly the hip hop scene, has taken the word for themselves and begun using it in a more positive sense that transcends its derogatory origins. The audience Kristina invokes with the use of the phrase “ghetto rich” is one that understands ghetto to be a mark of pride. In addition, Kristina writes for an audience who recognizes and appreciates the artful way in which she pairs ghetto (typically signifying poor) with the word rich (meaning wealthy but also abundant) to establish that being ghetto, in this case, is both a source of pride, and hence a positive attribute, as well as something the family is to a large degree.

Though Kristina’s narrator does not explicitly explain to the audience what ghetto rich means Kristina, through the dialogue of her characters, lets her audience hear what ghetto rich sounds like. In the first few lines of the play in an interchange between Tamika, RaTonya, the oldest daughter, and RaLonya, the youngest child, we hear how a ghetto rich family talks:

Tamika: Where yo daddy at?

RaTonya: He at work don’t remember?

Tamika: Who is you gettin’ smart wit’? Cause I will beat you like you stole somethin’.

ReLonya: na, na, na, na, na, na you gon get in trouble.

Tonya: Shhhhhhh... You gon get cha self in trouble.

TaNesha: Can ya’ll stop arguin and help me wit my homework.

Tamika: Naw ask ya gma.

From these lines, we can see that a “ghetto rich” family’s speech is characterized by phonological, syntactic, and lexical features of African American Language (AAL). For instance, we see phonological representations of black speech with spellings like wit’ for with and yo for your; grammatical patterns of AAL, like the absence of “is” and “are” in sentences such as, “Where yo daddy at?” and “You gon get in trouble;” and lexical choices like use of the expression, “I will beat you like you stole somethin’.”

Once again, though some readers may have a negative reaction to both the form and content of this family’s particular way of speaking, the audience Kristina imagines is one that can understand the language of her characters as ghetto rich in the sense of “representing authentic blackness” and perhaps also as reminding them of the language of “home.”

The exchange above also illustrates the conflictual nature of the relationships featured in the play. Tamika and RaTonya exchange sharp words; RaLonya teases RaTonya; Tonya scolds RaLonya; and TaNesha begs them all to “stop arguing.” In fact conflict-ridden relationships seem to be a cornerstone of the text. There is conflict between the members of the family—between the mother and grandmother and the daughters, between the siblings, and between the parents, Tamika and MJ. There is also conflict between family members and the outside world: Tanesha gets in a fight at school, MJ is shot and killed by his work partner, and Tamika smacks the doctor treating MJ after he asks her out on a date as her husband lay dying. In every case conflicts involve either the threat of violence or actual violence. In the following exchange we see the conflict between the parents as Tamika attempts to find out what is bothering MJ after he returns from work for the second evening in a row in a bad mood and heads immediately to bed. Tamika follows MJ to the bedroom. MJ greets her, “Hey bay” and Tamika says, “Why is you always goin’ to bed? You got somebody pregnant?” MJ responds to Tamika’s question by telling her he is tired of her being nosy and smacking her.

Though the play centers around the multiple conflicts in this family’s life and the content—domestic violence, infidelity, murder—suggests a serious tone might be in order, Kristina utilizes the narrator to communicate to readers that, despite the serious content of the text, the tone the author adopts is a playful, humorous one. The clearest example of this occurs at the end of the play when the narrator informs the audience that MJ has been shot and doesn’t have long to live. The narrator punctuates the announcement with, “I feel sorry. Sike (sic).” Kristina even inserts a stage direction (laughs) for the narrator to follow. Again at the conclusion of the play the narrator cavalierly announces that, “The husband died, of course,” and adds, “so as you can say this is a unhappy ending.” Despite the grave circumstances and the narrator’s declaration of an “unhappy ending,” he or she doesn’t really feel sorry about MJ’s violent and untimely demise. One could infer that the narrator believes that MJ got what was coming to him for hitting Tamika, or perhaps Kristina is invoking an audience that has learned to respond to adversity with humor, strength, and optimism—an audience that understands life is hard and that those living it must carry on in spite of the hardships. In fact, the narrator promises the audience as much with the declaration that, “Part two is comin’ at cha.” In other words, life goes on.

Postmodern princess. Charlotte invites her audience to a make-believe land where anything is possible through her adaption of the fairy tale genre with a modern twist: her story is set in a castle, the kingdom is ruled by an unjust ruler, and the

main character is a princess named Evelyn. Fairy tales offer readers an imagined realm, which Charlotte modifies by creating a feminist princess who sees herself as a savior of a people and a kingdom as much as she embraces the traditional romance and happy ending of such stories. Charlotte envisions her audience as familiar with both genres—the traditional fairy tale genre as well as appreciative of her contemporary take on it—largely because they are what resonate with her own literary tastes as a reader, and are commonly read by her white, middle class, middle school peers. Charlotte writes for an audience that she understands to be very much like herself, and their familiarity with both genres presupposes a willingness on the part of an audience to take up both conventions within one story.

This fusion of conventions of the fairy tale genre with those of contemporary young adult fiction is further demonstrated in Charlotte’s adoption of the arched language of the fairy tale, which she blends with the colloquialism of the contemporary teen-ager. When the lovers prepare to revolt against Evelyn’s arranged marriage, Rowan exclaims, “It was time to take down a wedding,” and Evelyn later tells us, “I screamed, and I mean screamed.” Using the phrase “take down” lets readers know what will happen next in the plot, but does so with a term that has a humorous and aggressive tone at the same time and assumes an audience will understand that the next scene will be at Evelyn’s wedding, but will also move readers back into a more traditional fairy tale convention where the princess will be rescued by her love. In a similar way, Charlotte embeds the phrase “I mean” to add emphasis and make clear the stakes for Evelyn, while assuming her audience will understand this rhetorical move.

Unlike princesses in traditional fairy tales, Charlotte’s princess, Evelyn, is a young woman of power, power granted to her both as a princess and the power she takes for herself throughout the story. Evelyn steps outside of the boundaries of the social expectations for a princess in many ways. She maintains a friendship with Rowan, which crosses the boundaries of station and class and is similar to the foster parent relationships she has with servants in the castle. Throughout the story, Evelyn understands that these forbidden relationships have provided her with love, guidance, and a moral code by which to live her life. These relationships and the models they provide her to live as a good person coupled with Evelyn’s rejection of the power granted her by birth offers audiences a main character who will resonate with anyone who has negotiated the individuation stage of adolescent development. Charlotte assumes her audience will understand how rich an emotional life exists outside of one’s own family and will appreciate Evelyn’s rejection of her own father.

In similar ways, Charlotte further positions readers in relation to the genre in her use of violence, but here violence used to further legitimate ends: the overthrow of injustice both personal and social. This idea that the story is ultimately about power and resistance suggests that Charlotte wants her readers to believe in her story and see her character’s actions as just and well-motivated because she is playing on ideas of social justice and fighting for what is right. Evelyn’s resistance for justice continues with her rescue of Rowan from the cell in which he has been imprisoned, putting herself and him in further danger. Rescue occurs not only when she takes him from the cell, but also when she declares her love for him before he is able to articulate his own feelings for her. Evelyn perhaps assumes her privilege as princess will protect her if the guards come upon them; however, in making her feelings clear to Rowan, she makes her emotional vulnerability not a weakness but a strength for both of them.

Finally, Charlotte writes for an audience that enjoys an action-packed story laced with suspense and dramatic tension. Charlotte begins her story *in medias res*: the narrative begins in the middle of a dramatic scene, which readers will later find out is in fact the last scene of the story. The drama has already come to its high point and a reader cannot help but wonder how Evelyn has gotten herself into this predicament and how it might be resolved. But first, Evelyn and her author understand that before the drama can move forward, before we can find resolution, we must fully understand how Evelyn arrived at this moment. The final line of the first scene invites readers deeper into the story through the use of a flashback: “Then, I think back to the day when my life began to unravel.” With this pause on a moment of dramatic tension, Charlotte understands that an audience will read a story when there is something at stake, so her flashback is constructed to cue readers both that the story will move back in time but also that dramatic events, “my life began to unravel,” will continue. In the final section of the story, Charlotte repositions readers out of the flashback and back into the story’s beginning: “Here we are. Back to where it ended. In those few short moments I recapped everything that went down. I have brought you in a full circle.” In bringing readers full circle, she ends not with the overthrow of the evil king, but with the moment of reunion for the lovers, played both for laughs with sexual innuendo as well as perhaps the true intention of her story, that Evelyn believes “everything will be ok” because Rowan has pledged his love to her. Readers are asked to leave Evelyn not in the midst of political or social upheaval to which she has been concerned in much of her story but back in the arms of love.

Cueing audiences to play a role

Through the language of their texts the girls not only embody audiences they have fictionalized in their imaginations, they also cue, or signal, those audiences to the role or roles they are expected to play. That is, through their texts, both authors communicate to their audiences how the author, subject, and audience are related and how readers should receive and respond to their texts. Kristina invites readers to take up the roles of connoisseur of “authentic” black language and life, cultural insider or interested boundary crosser, and consumer of dark comedy. Charlotte asks her readers to root for a postmodern princess of power, swoon when star-crossed lovers fall into one another’s arms, and cheer when an evil king gets what is coming to him.

Dark comedy. The purpose of Kristina’s play is to entertain her audience. She expects her audience to have knowledge of and/or be interested in the daily happenings of a ghetto rich family. She also imagines an audience willing to find humor in

looking on as characters say and do outrageous, larger than life things. In the case of Kristina’s play, it is the narrator, speaking directly to the audience, who most clearly communicates to readers their roles. Kristina’s narrator speaks to the audience six times over the course of the play. Each time the narrator cues the audience/reader to how they should receive the text/events that follow.

The narrator launches the play by saying to the audience, “Yo, yo, yo. What’s [the] dealio?” In other words, “Hey everybody. How’s it going?” To conclude the play, the narrator signs off with a casual, but intimate, “Peace out home skillet biscuit,” meaning goodbye, close friend. This colloquial, informal language gives readers the message that the narrator and the audience are on friendly and familiar terms. In addition, the narrator’s use of the lexicon of black youth culture, especially hip hop culture, such as yo, dealio, peace out, and home skillet biscuit suggests the audience should take up the role of youthful, cultural insider. In fact, Kristina’s narrator signals, by using “urban slang,” that he or she, like the family that is the subject of the play, is at least a little ghetto as well.

However, Kristina’s narrator, unlike her ghetto rich family, uses a combination of urban slang, African American Language syntax and phonology, and Standardized American English (SAE). For example, the following excerpt represents standardized English usage:

Narrator: MJ got shot by his partner at work. He doesn’t have long to live. I feel sorry. Sike (laughs).

Though the narrator’s hybrid language use might simply be a result of differences between dialogue and exposition, it could also be intended to present the narrator as a code-switcher and cultural border-crosser—a person who could act as a guide for an audience who need not be cultural insiders—young and black or ghetto rich—to enjoy this play, but only interested in, open to, and entertained by such things.

With phrases such as “‘Just watch and listen,” “I wonda what is gon happen,” “Now this is interesting,” and “It was so much drama they had to give it to the mama’s,” the narrator communicates to readers that the events the narrator and audience are watching unfold together are at once dramatic, interesting, and entertaining. The narrator’s statements guide the audience in terms of what events are important and cue readers to how they should experience those events and feel about characters. The narrator’s interactional style creates an intimate, playful, provocative relationship with the audience cueing them to respond to the play as the narrator does with interest and black humor.

Happily ever after. Rather than start her story with the typical fairy tale beginning that lets readers know they have settled into “once upon a time,” Charlotte cues her readers to her story’s setting through the mention of a dagger, a balcony, and a dress made of “layers of emerald and pearl silk.” These cues are used in the middle of a wedding scene tinged with danger because, in the story’s opening line, Evelyn tells readers, “The terror that seized me was so great that I was struggling to stand.” Charlotte waits until page three to tell readers that Evelyn is a princess when she also introduces the forbidden relationship between Evelyn and Rowan. As he sneaks into her room late at night, Evelyn warns him, “You know how improper he [her father] thinks our friendship is, not to mention you are an apprentice and I am a princess.”

In this same scene, Charlotte sets up Evelyn’s as yet undisclosed love for Rowan while she also introduces the real reason for his visit, “As I sat in my bed, happy and content, the people, my people, starved to death on their straw mats, if they even had that... That is why mine and Rowan’s job is so important. We deliver food to the people.” If this princess has found the man she desires, she subsumes her feelings with a more valuable and rewarding option: to save her people.

In structuring her narrative, Charlotte uses a two-voiced narration that allows readers to know the inner thoughts of these two well before they have admitted their feelings to each other. When Rowan describes Evelyn’s “smile is my light. Never mind the sun; she is the only light I need,” readers understand that the question isn’t if the lovers will declare their love but how and when during the story.

Charlotte’s struggles as a writer to make the two voices sound like distinct people, and one aspect of their commonality lies in both how proper their language sounds as well as their occasional lapses into more contemporary phrases. Evelyn’s tone can shift from the arched, “‘Father, what is it you’d like to speak about?’” to a description voiced by any teen arriving home past a curfew: “By the time we got back, the whole castle was up.” For Charlotte’s readers, the important cues are not about characterization but rather the resolution of the love relationship, so the lapses into more contemporary speech jibes with Charlotte’s retelling of the traditional fairy tale love story.

When Charlotte brings her readers to the ending of her story, because this is a fairy tale, readers can anticipate a happy ending. But first she returns to the story’s first scene. This time, violence breaks out at the wedding, leading to the deaths of her father and the man he’d intended her to marry. Quickly, the scene moves from “chaos” to that happy ending for the two lovers, but it is an ending that combines sexual innuendo with romantic love: “I hastily move to get off. ‘You don’t have to get off,’ he says cockily. I swat at his head and laugh. ‘You could have gotten hurt,’ I chide. I am dizzy with relief.

‘I’m fine. You know I always will be, as long as I have you.’ He seals those words with a kiss and I know that everything will be ok.” Once again, the words are contemporary in tone but echo one of the most important conventions of a fairy tale: the assurance of a happily ever after.

Writing for the audience that fires the imagination

Kristina and Charlotte both had a great deal of experience being the audiences of other writers. In addition to the texts the girls were assigned to read in school, they both read, viewed, and composed texts they self-selected for their own pleasure. Not surprisingly, many of the texts the girls self-selected were popular culture texts that reflected their personal interests, values, preferences, experiences, and social identities. Both girls drew on their personal experiences as readers and viewers of such texts to fictionalize in their imaginations their own audiences. That is, they made like Samuel Clemens (or Carl Weber or Suzanne Collins) as they composed “Ghetto Family” and “Emerald Eyes.”

Kristina frequently read and wrote texts of her own choosing on her own time. The texts Kristina read, wrote, and viewed reflected an affinity for African American characters, language, and themes that mirrored her African American, working-class, adolescent, and female identity. In fact, the majority of the texts Kristina both read and wrote in class, especially on her own, featured Black characters and/or African American Language (AAL). For instance, during the twice-daily independent silent reading time, Author One often observed Kristina reading books about African Americans. Once, over the course of several class periods, she read a biography about Marian Anderson, the first Black singer to perform at the White House and the Metropolitan Opera. On another occasion she read *Player Haters*, a book by black author Carl Weber (2004) about the “bickering, beautiful Duncan family,” three African American, adult siblings. In addition to reading books about African Americans, Kristina also frequently produced texts featuring Black characters and language. For the final writing assignment of the novel unit, when Kristina was asked to write an essay about a fictional character she admired, she wrote about Major Payne, a Marine Corps Special Forces killing machine, played in the 1995 movie by black actor Damon Wayans, who is forced to find new work as the commander of a junior ROTC military academy. Kristina wrote in her essay that she and Major Payne were a lot alike because they were both bossy and liked yelling at people.

The texts Kristina most often selected to read featured black language, characters, and themes. The characters are black, cross-aged or adults; families are large and extended; relationships are contentious; dialogue is fast-paced, sardonic, and irreverent. The tone is humorous. Love relationships are central, but occur usually between adults and are characterized by conflicts like abuse, infidelity, and unplanned pregnancy. Kristina’s play shares many features with both the books by Carl Weber and the movie featuring Major Payne. Indeed we might say she is making like Carl Weber as she writes “Ghetto Family.” It features a family of black characters who negotiate life’s conflicts with a certain style. They bicker, boss, get into trouble, and are unapologetic about who they are. Kristina’s play, like these two exemplars, adopts a playful, almost slapstick attitude in the face of serious conflicts. For the Duncans, it is the death of a parent and negotiating love relationships. For Kristina’s characters, it’s weathering domestic abuse and death by gun violence. Despite the seriousness of the issues, though, all the texts seem to be designed to entertain their audiences with humor, fast-paced dialogue, and conflict.

Charlotte also had a lot of experience being the audience of other writers. The texts Charlotte reads feature youthful characters and strong female characters who are engaged in violent struggles of good versus evil. They also feature romantic relationships between star-crossed lovers and fractured families that allow for emancipated characters. Main characters are white, though class boundaries are often crossed. The endings are generally happy and the tone serious. She shared in personal discussions with Author Two her love of reading and even showed Author Two a photograph of herself reading one of the Harry Potter series books at age two. She described herself as a voracious reader who enjoyed complex texts and read them with ease. Her interest in reading led her to such texts as the popular series books of Harry Potter, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games*. She preferred to read stories that had fantastical elements, though not necessarily the fantasy genre, and strong female characters who were active participants in the fictional situations in which they were involved but who also were negotiating love and heterosexual gender relationships.

In all sorts of ways, Charlotte creates a fictional world, not unlike the fictional world she has inhabited as a reader, that allows a girl not only options for agency, but the drive to act and in acting the ability to create the kind of world she imagines. Her main character is the sort of hero popular fiction offers to young adult readers today, and Charlotte is an avid reader of such books. Like Bella of the *Twilight* series, Hermoine in the Harry Potter saga, and Katniss in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Charlotte can, in the machinations of Evelyn, live outside of her boundaries, rescue others, and declare her feelings of love – all in public ways Charlotte might not access for herself. Her story fuses imagination with action to provide her audience with a happy ending and perhaps offers her audience the belief that such things are possible in real life as well. Charlotte has written what she knows, both in the literary symbols she chooses and the narrative structure she creates, but also she writes about what would matter most for an early adolescent girl: the ability to fulfill her desire for love and power in equal measures.

Seeking (and hiding from) an audience

Though Kristina’s text was not assigned by or composed specifically for her teacher as part of the novel unit, it did find its way into the English language arts classroom. Kristina brought the play to her teacher and asked her to type it up for her. This act implied that Kristina was in search of an audience beyond herself. It’s hard to imagine why she brought her play to her teacher if not to create a situation in which her teacher would read her text. Ultimately, Kristina ended up with more audiences than she bargained for. Ms. Wagner shared the text with Denise who took an interest in it because the text employed African

American Language. After reading the play, Denise approached Kristina to talk to her about it and to ask permission to take the play and make a copy. When she returned the original to Kristina, it became evident that Kristina desired multiple copies. Denise returned several days later with enough copies that the play could actually be performed. She also approached Ms. Wagner about allowing Kristina and others to perform the play in class. However, Ms. Wagner said she did not “feel like there [was] time.” Ms. Wagner explained that there was “just too much [external] pressure” to devote time to anything that did not address the Grade Level Content Expectations or directly prepare students for the state LEAP test. Still, Kristina was eager to do the play and Denise wanted to find a way for her to have that opportunity so she suggested to Ms. Wagner that perhaps the play could be performed during the lunch hour. Though Ms. Wagner did not think the activity could fit into regular class time, she did agree to let Kristina choose a group of actors who could practice and perform the play during the lunch break. Kristina was given time in class to select her actors and pass out scripts, and Ms. Wagner wrote out hall passes so those actors could return to the classroom during lunch to enact “Ghetto Family.” Charlotte, on the other hand, did compose her short story at the behest of her English teacher. She knew that as an assignment it would be read and evaluated by her English teacher and that she could expect to receive written feedback from her teacher on her text. Charlotte also knew that after her teacher returned her writing, she would have the opportunity to share her short story with her classmates either reading aloud to them herself or having her teacher read the story aloud. Charlotte, though, declined to share or have her stored shared with her class. In addition, the only process of review and revision for this writing assignment was with the teacher; peer conferencing was not included largely because all of the students had some initial trepidation around themselves as creative writers. For Charlotte, who also refused to show her story to any friends or her parents, the only real-world audiences she was willing to consider were herself and her teacher. Imagined audiences could have included any of those people she refused to let see her writing, but perhaps wished she could show them: peers, family, and the best friend in her English class that she had romantic feelings for.

Conclusion

Both Charlotte and Kristina drew on a variety of personal resources as they composed their texts. They made authorial choices about content, style, and form based on their purposes, preferences, priorities, interests, and identities—all of which linked to their own experiences being readers of others’ texts. Charlotte, who was presently smitten with a young man in her class, wrote into being a world in which she and he (perhaps) fell in love and overcame all obstacles to be together. Kristina, who craved reading and viewing material about Black life, created through her text her own irreverent, funny, fast-talking, extended “ghetto family.”

In order to fashion their texts both girls relied on their experiences being readers of certain kinds of texts in order to “give body to their audiences.” That is, they “fictionalized in their imaginations an audience...an audience learned from earlier writers” (Ong, 1975/2003, pp. 59-60). They wrote like the authors they had read with the understanding that readers would know what kind of audience they were invoking because they too had read such texts. Charlotte’s text, which referenced through theme, genre, and character, texts like *Titanic*, *Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* invoked an audience that would accept her invitation to embrace a powerful female heroine, to tolerate some violence as long as it was in the name of justice, and to appreciate true love as the binding narrative thread. Kristina’s play, through content, characterization, and dialogue, reflected texts like *Player Hatesr*, *Baby Momma Drama*, and *Major Payne*, and consequently invoked audiences familiar with or interested in Black life, especially ghetto life, sensitive to nuanced and complicated familial relationships, accustomed to direct treatment of sensitive topics, and appreciative of dark comedy.

As all writers do, these two student writers signaled the range of potential roles they hoped their intended, actual, eventual audiences—whether self, teacher, peers, or researcher—would take up “through the text, through language” (Ede & Lunsford, 1984/2003, p.90). Through choices about language, Charlotte and Kristina left cues for readers about the kind of audience they wanted them to be including the “attitudes, interests, reactions and conditions of knowledge” (Ede & Lunsford, 1984/2003, p.90) they would need to have. In employing the genre of fairly tale, Charlotte invited her readers to accept and expect a certain kind of arched speech while at the same time defying the readers’ expectations by mixing archaic language with smatterings of modern colloquialisms. Kristina, too, by choosing the format of play relied heavily on language to cue readers to be a certain kind of audience. Dialogue was employed by Kristina to develop a family of characters that were “ghetto rich,” which in part meant they used language in a particular way. Dialogue then was an apt device for creating such characters.

Charlotte and Kristina both tapped into unique reservoirs of personal knowledge and experience, including their experiences as readers of others’ texts, in order to craft their texts. As they did so “they made like Samuel Clemens” (Ong, 1975/2003, p. 59)—or Suzanne Collins or Carl Weber—by fictionalizing in their imagination audiences like those of the writers they had read previously. They invoked those audiences, and the corresponding attitudes, interests, and reactions, through cues encoded in the language of their texts. For both girls the texts wrote into being something they each identified with and desired. For Charlotte, though, the text was written for school. She was assigned to write a short story. She knew her story would be read by her teacher, and she opted not to have it read by anyone else (at least for now). Kristina, though, composed her text of her own of her on volition. She did, though, bring her text into her language arts classroom, perhaps so that her teacher might be her audience. In the end, Kristina found many audiences for her text including her peers, the authors of this article, and the multiple audiences with whom the authors of this article have shared, and will share, her text.

This examination of Kristina and Charlotte’s efforts to write for their real and imagined audiences through Ong’s

paradigm of writers “fictionalizing audiences in their imagination audiences learned from other writers,” raises a number of question teachers of writing might consider. In what ways are their students writing, either inside or outside of the classroom, for audiences that fire their imaginations? Are there opportunities in the writing classroom for students to self-select not only topics but also genres, formats, purposes, and imagined audiences? Is there room for students’ texts to be the texts that are read and studied in order to learn how authors embody audiences and cue readers? What roles are writing teachers playing in relation to their students’ texts? Do they play multiple roles, such as friend or learner, taking their cues from the students’ texts, or do writing teachers too frequently simply slip unconsciously into the role of critic or more knowledgeable other? In what ways are writing teachers drawing on their students’ experiences being audiences themselves? Are writing teachers including in their classrooms popular culture texts such as movies, video games, graphic novel, and the like? Are they making their classrooms safe for students to write texts that reflect their unique social identities, values, interests and preferences, and lived experiences? Are writing teachers capitalizing on opportunities, especially unexpected opportunities, to recognize, value, and build upon what their students know about writing because they are speakers, listeners, readers, and writers in the world? Finally, are writing teachers, as the most common audience for student writers, able to interpret the cues student writers embed in their texts and willing to take up the roles students are inviting them to play in relation to those texts even when the imagined audience their students are writing for does not at all correspond to the roles the teacher plays in everyday life?

While it’s true that all writers make demands of their readers, in the sense that they invite them into other life worlds, and cue them through their texts to take up certain kinds of roles, such as “companion at arms,” it’s also true that “readers may accept or reject the roles.” Readers might reject writers’ invitations to become the audiences they have fictionalized in their imaginations for a number of reasons. For instance, as English teachers know, students may not be willing or able to take up Shakespeare’s invitation to be “friends, Romans, countrymen” because they cannot recognize the cues the author has left in the text for them instructing them how to do so. In other instances they are not willing to search for those cues, or take up those roles, because they seem too far removed from their own life experiences and perceptions of themselves. Teachers, as actual readers of, or possible audiences for, students’ texts also have the option of accepting or declining student writers’ invitations to be the kinds of audiences that “fire their imaginations.” As writing teachers, it is essential to consider how our classrooms shape students’ opportunities to write for and be read by the audiences that fire their imaginations.

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