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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 Acts of Authorship, Marc Antony, speaking at Caesar’s funeral, laments 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 buried 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 motives of persuasion with his audience and to reflect on the consequences of political upheaval 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 spending 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 says 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 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 they truly write 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—are 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’s position 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 target audience and their understanding of a reader. Decisions about form and formal language, the use of narrative or quotations, the tone of familiarity or objectivity, come as a result of writers considering 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, two other important elements make up the rhetorical situation—the context in which writing or speaking occurs and the writer/speaker’s purpose.

Clearly, the audience has long 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 writing. Though some theoretical traditions have argued that assigning such importance to an audience’s expectations overemphasizes the “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 its 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, “knows what this book felt like, how the voice in it addressed its readers, and how the narrator hinted to his readers that they knew from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imaginations audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers.

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 system 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 “schoolmate, colleague, critic, editor, and future audience,” and the writer’s “failures 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 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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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 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 arts (ELA) classroom. Study Two, conducted by Author Two, Cara, in her 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 mid-sized 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 in her 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 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 Hatcher, 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 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

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 and motivation choice. Cara, Charlotte’s ELA teacher, viewed the short story assessment to be “primarily a word count” because her students were “not allowed to use phone books or any type of reference.” Cara’s objective was “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 and represented themselves as active and knowledgeable beings who read and write in ways that are meaningful to them. 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 implications 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, MI, Grandma Cookie, Ta’Nesha, 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 [deals]? Well this play is about a ghetto rich family. They are ghetto about everything. MI then 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 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 boyfighter), and held down jobs.

Throughout the first part of the play, the reader comes to understand that something is bothering MI, but when Tamika tries to find out what’s wrong by asking him if he got somebody pregnant, he hits her and accesses 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 that the narrator “will be a court reporter for all your高等学校 when you read this play. The narrator declares an Unhappy Ending, but leaves 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 handed in by her peers. Charlotte’s story includes a king; the king of a small 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 her own burning love for one another. Minor characters include the king; Frederick, the evil suited; 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 guards. Evelyn is taken chained while Rowan escapes. Evelyn is told she will marry Frederick as her father presents her with the choice of having Rowan killed or allow him to live but as a slave. While she makes the choice, she also has a plan to rescue him. He is released from prison, and roves for revolution sympathetic villagers and later guards who help him to see their ruler’s treachery. While Evelyn prepares for her wedding day, Rowan and his allies prepare for revolt and are able to successfully rescue Rowan. Charlotte brings in an element of fantasy and science fiction, Rowan brings his readers back to a medieval past,宝石 that 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 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, constructing—through their knowledge, interests, attitudes, and values—audiences that value their writing. Kristina’s text embodies 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 in the text as textual references would include as a cast of characters, objects, and setting, a series of conventions including a narrator. The narrator opens the play by announcing, “This play is about a ghetto rich family. They are about everything.” 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 black feeling, passion, or emotion derived from rising above the reputation and suffering of being black in America.” (Smithsoner, 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, 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 RaTonya, the youngest child, we hear how a ghetto rich family talks:

*RaTonya:* He at work don’t remember? *Tamika:* Who is you gettin’ smart wit’? Cause I will beat you like you stole somethin’.

*RaTonya:* na, na, na, na, na, you gon get in trouble.

*Tamika:* Where yo daddy at?

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

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

*TeNsha:* Naw ask ya gma.

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

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

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

In every case 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: Tanisha 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. Tanisha follows MJ to the bedroom. MJ greets her with “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, and drug use—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 shot and she doesn’t have long to live. The narrator punctuates the announcement with, “I feel sorry. Sike (sic);” Kristina even inserts a stage direction (laughter) 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,” the audience Kristina is invoking an audience that has learned to respond so as you can say this is a unhappy ending.” Despite the grave circumstances and the narrator’s declaration of an “unhappy ending,” the audience Kristina is invoking an audience that has learned to respond one that understands ghetto to be a mark of pride, and hence a positive attribute, as well as something the family is to a large degree.

Unlike princesses in traditional fairy tales, Charlotte’s princess, Evelyn, is a young woman of 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; she is also engaged to a banker, though the relationship is short lived, and she is also a dark comedy. Charlotte asks her readers to root for a postmodern princess of color and
different sexualities.

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**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...
Charlotte frequently read and wrote texts of her own choosing on her own time. The texts Kristina read, wrote, and experimented with focused on 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 reading time, Author read often observed Kristina reading books about African American culture. After 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 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 featured 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 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, sarcastic, 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 she might say she is made like Carl Weber as she writes her “Kneelo 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 the storms of abuse and death by guns and secrets. Love is the highpoint 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 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 the storms of abuse and death by guns and secrets. Love is the highpoint 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. 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students to read 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 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 Shakespearean invitation to be “friends, Romans, countrymen” because they cannot reconcile themselves to 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.

Conclusion

Both Charlotte and Kristina drew on a variety of personal resources as they composed. They made contextual 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.”

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, 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 Haters, Baby Mama 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, audiences would 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 Shakespearean invitation to be “friends, Romans, countrymen” because they cannot reconcile themselves to 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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