Writing as Worldmaking

This article examines the poetry writing practices of two teen girls through a worldmaking lens—a writing approach that critically centers youth experiences and identities.

We open this article with a piece of writing that sits at its heart, a poem authored by seventh-grade student Raquel (all names are participant-chosen pseudonyms). To say that she is the sole author of the poem, however, downplays the collaborative process that Raquel engaged in with her friend, Sapphire, as they discussed the poem, acted out different parts, and revised and performed it together across formal and informal school spaces over a period of a few weeks.

MLK’s Fight
They’re moving,
They’re shaking
Their hearts are breaking
Beatin’ like trash
No sympathy taken
Momma’s mind getting shattered,
Black brains getting’ splattered
You got killers gettin’ matters
It’s only gettin’ sadder.
I see the dancers twirl like the gun that fell out of his hand,
when he realized he just shot a young man.
And when their bodies turn-
it turns because they couldn’t handle the truth
Mike Brown devastated his whole town
He put his hands up now he Down in the ground
the cops are like their own gang,
they got the people, the power
and the careless actions,
but all that really matters is who’s layin’
in the street
summer’s dead sun.

That shot across the room
as fast as the bullet did,
as a tear ran down his mother’s face.
Trayvon Martin all he did was try to get a drink
And didn’t even make George Zimmerman think
It’s not fair
It’s like these people don’t care
Emmett Till1
All he did was try to talk to a girl
But then the racists took him right out of this world
It’s really like a genocide
Black on black crime
White on black crime
It’s too much to pay in this whole rhyme
And now kids gotta’
grow up in this world thinking that it’s a place for hate.
So this gotta’
stop because it’s not right, we gotta’
make a scene
like it’s no point for MLK to fight.

In this article, we trace Raquel’s process in writing “MLK’s Fight”—a process that included drawing together her knowledge of poetry, dance, and spoken word; responding to recent police-involved murders of Black males; and collaborating with Sapphire to compose it across different media and spaces. We are particularly attuned to how Raquel sees herself as a writer, and how, through the authoring process, she imagines, names, and constructs herself and her world. It is important to note that Raquel and Sapphire are both Black girls, and both are identified as

1An icon of the Civil Rights Movement, Till was lynched in Mississippi in 1955. The White woman who accused Till of harassing her in a grocery store, leading to his lynching, recently admitted that she fabricated her testimony.
having learning disabilities. In a time when Black girls are fighting to be recognized and ableism permeates schooling in the form of standardization (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015), Raquel and Sapphire use writing to challenge their positioning as disabled literacy learners, and thereby show us a world where their language has power and their lives are centered.

In this article, we frame writing as a practice of worldmaking to foreground its productive, generative dimensions, as young people use resources at hand to construct new worlds.

We focus on Raquel and Sapphire’s process of composing as a powerful example of how young people are writing to represent, challenge, and reimagine their worlds. This collaborative process serves as an example of worldmaking (Goodman, 1978), which can be defined as “a process of constructing shared worlds through symbolic practices that intertwine the creative, ethical, and intellectual in the act of making meaning from the multiple and dynamic resources at hand” (Stornaiuolo, 2015, p. 561). In this article, we frame writing as a practice of worldmaking to foreground its productive, generative dimensions, as young people use resources at hand to construct new worlds and write themselves into narratives that have excluded them and systems that have disabled them.

At a time when writing’s purposes and forms are expanding in our everyday lives but increasingly constrained in schools (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008), particularly for young people with identities that others marginalize (Muhammad, 2012), we argue that educators need a theoretically rich understanding of writing in order to encourage and enable youth to draw upon their interests and cultural knowledge in their writing lives and to acknowledge and use their own agency to reposition themselves in relation to inequitable systems and structures.

In the first section of our article, we begin by outlining what such a theoretically rich approach to writing might entail. We propose that a worldmaking framework complements theories of writing and literacies that position young people as powerful, literate, and capable actors in their lives. We then situate this framework within scholarship about Black girl literacies and critical race disabilities studies (DisCrit). We turn next to our methods section, offering a detailed portrait of Raquel and Sapphire and their school as we describe the research context in which we worked with them. We outline two central findings from this inquiry: one that centers around the world dimensions of worldmaking, highlighting the ways that Sapphire and Raquel composed from particular positions; and one focused on the making dimensions, tracing how they collaboratively constructed meaning from available resources.

The final section concludes with suggestions for educators on how to implement a worldmaking approach to writing in their classrooms. We argue in this final section that such an approach centers young people’s lived practices, emphasizing writing’s rhetorical dimensions as youth use new tools to compose flexibly across varied audiences, contexts, languages, modes, and purposes. Such a practice-oriented approach shifts focus away from the capacity or competence of individual writers (or pieces of writing) and toward the experience and action of writing. This shift positions educators to design and reconfigure literacy-rich spaces to accommodate young writers’ multiple purposes and learning trajectories.

Theorizing Writing as Worldmaking

Worldmaking, a concept with a long history (e.g., Bruner, 1991; Goodman, 1978; Holland, Lachiotte Jr., Skinner & Cain, 1998), refers to the ways we collectively make the spaces we inhabit. Consider the different worlds we inhabit daily: perhaps the world of academia, with its conventions about academic publishing and ways of speaking, being, and doing that mark one as an academic insider or outsider; or the world of church, with ritual and routines around prayer, community norms that guide who sits where in a service, and ways of talking and participating that signal one as a member of a particular denomination or congregation. Worldmaking serves as a generative lens for understanding the ways people construct and negotiate these social frames of meaning from existing cultural and historical resources.
How we create these social frames involves symbolic activities like art, talk, and writing, as people weave together resources to orchestrate, improvise, and creatively assemble meanings (Holland et al., 1998). It is important to note that there is no one “true” world existing apart from our interpretive frames and practices—we create and live in many worlds, all of which are constructed from existing ones (Goodman, 1978). The world of public K–12 schooling in the United States, for example, weaves together representations of student learning, courses of accountability, and routines that pattern the days in familiar ways: dividing learning into different subjects like math and English Language Arts; organizing activity around periods of time for study, punctuated by different lengths of breaks for lunch, recess, and vacation; administering tests as measures of student growth, the results of which are published in state and local reports; and using classroom data to group, sort, or arrange students in different configurations. While educators, parents, and youth participate in co-constructing this figured world—and are in turn informed, positioned, and shaped by it—they differentially experience and participate in it based on their individual and collective histories, the resources available to them, and the other worlds in which they participate.

Since people make the worlds they live in through their symbolic activities, we see writing as having particular affordances as a worldmaking practice. First, we seek to emphasize writing’s practice dimensions, whereby knowledge about writing is deepened by the experience of writing (Bartlett & Holland, 2002; Yagelski, 2009). Writing becomes more fluent, meaningful, and expansive when practiced over time and across contexts. From this standpoint, writing can be understood as a recursive, iterative process with its social, historical, cultural, and political dimensions embedded in complex relationships and histories (NCTE, 2016). We build on recent work in post-process theories of writing that resist any grand narrative about writing as a one-size-fits-all process (e.g., Arola, 2018). Post-process writing scholars (e.g., Kent, 1999) argue that all writing is public and situated in particular lived contexts, requiring scholars to examine those contexts and the ways people’s interpretations are tied to intertwining systems of gender, race, class, and disability within them. We propose that a worldmaking approach to writing foregrounds the ways people negotiate these systems in lived daily experience by making meaning through symbolic activity. Scholars who foreground these productive aspects of writing (e.g., National Writing Project, 2013) emphasize that writing is not only a material practice (one involving words, pens, or keyboards), but also always a cultural one. Drawing on Native American rhetorical traditions, Arola (2018) describes writing as culturing—a productive, active practice in which individuals draw on social, historical, and cultural resources to make meaning and construct their lived realities.

By bringing culture into discussions of writing, a worldmaking perspective emphasizes how writing is not only a means of producing a text to be read, but of experiencing oneself as interconnected with others more broadly (Winn, 2012; Yagelski, 2009). By framing writing as a way to understand oneself as linked to others, Muhammad (2015) argues, educators can value knowledge that youth bring and connect to their identities, histories, and cultures while building on their desires to transform the world. Muhammad (2012) developed historically rooted writing institutes with Black adolescent girls, concluding that students write not only to understand themselves but for liberation and emancipation. Similarly, Wissman (2011) found that students articulated a vision for social transformation through their writing when participating in a poetry and photography elective course about the traditions of African American women (see also Winn, 2012). We submit that framing writing as a worldmaking practice can help educators tap into the transformative power of writing as a cultural practice, illuminating both “the powers of culture to disable” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 327) and the powers of youth to “re-story,” or counter-narrate, those disabling, silencing, and deficit-oriented cultural narratives (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016).

Black Girls’ Literacies

We want to emphasize how identity is central to the understanding of writing as a worldmaking practice,
particularly the ways people use symbol systems to create, embody, and enact identities in practice; however, we also want to disrupt notions of identity that center White, abled norms, as well as recognize the ways people’s lived identities are subject to discriminatory practices around sexuality, race, gender, language, and disability. To that end, we situate this worldmaking perspective within scholarship on Black girls’ literacies. This framework, proposed by the Black Girls’ Literacies Collective, “essentially begins from Black girls’ ways of knowing, . . . disrupting [the White, monolingual, middle-class] norm to be inclusive of the intellectual traditions of marginalized groups, including Black and Brown youth, students with disabilities, immigrant and undocumented youth, English language learners, and queer youth” (Haddix, McArthure, Muhammad, Price-Dennis, Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 386). By beginning with Black girls’ ways of knowing and constructing worlds, this theoretical approach centers the experiences of Black girls and positions us to ask: “What does it mean to be teachers and educators in the reawakening of racial violence against Black people, and in particular, Black women and girls?” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 294).

As two White educators concerned with developing literacy theories and pedagogies that promote social justice and equity, we submit that this is a crucial question to be asking ourselves at this historical moment. Given the increase of publicized (and sanctioned) violence against Black women such as Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Korynn Gaines, and countless others, and the documented inequitable treatment of Black girls in schools (Crenshaw et al., 2015), we join other scholars and educators in advocating for increased attention to the ways that literacy educators might “interrupt the violence, pedagogical injustices, and misrepresentations against Black girls in schools” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 294). If we create the spaces we inhabit through our collective representation practices, scholars and educators must attend to and support the worldmaking practices of young Black women in the context of this racial violence in schools. A Black girls’ literacy framework, in addition to placing Black youth perspectives at the center, operates from six tenets: literacies are multiple, identity oriented, historical, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). These tenets reorient educators to literacy practices that explicitly reject normative ideologies, positioning us to understand identities in practice through the study of what young people do, think, believe, and understand as they engage in worldmaking practices through their writing. It further positions us to take a critical stance in our own work and to foster such a stance in young people.

**Disability Critical Race Studies**

While foregrounding issues of race is of central importance from a worldmaking perspective, we must consider young people’s intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989), and particularly the ways that race, racism, disability, and ableism intersect and operate within educational settings. The field of Disability Critical Race Studies (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013), or DisCrit, builds upon scholarship in Disability Studies in education that challenges systems of schooling to shift the focus away from a medical model of disability to a social model that acknowledges human variance and strives to construct more inclusive and accessible school environments (Collins, 2013; Connor, 2008). By extension, DisCrit (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013) brings a dimension of critical race theory that encourages educators to question the racialized ways that disability labels are often assigned, and how educational practices are often segregated, speaking less to what individuals are capable of accomplishing and more to the systems and structures that benefit from upholding and stigmatizing these categories of difference.

One of the central tenets of DisCrit relevant to a worldmaking framework is its emphasis on voice. DisCrit “privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research” (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013, p. 11), a centering of young people’s perspectives of critical importance for educators and researchers. A DisCrit-informed approach to understanding Raquel and Sapphire’s experiences as writers in school begins in a similar location as a Black girls’ literacy framework (2016): with young people’s lived experiences and understandings of their worlds. Such a focus reaffirms the socially constructed nature of
disability, and positions researchers and educators to use young people’s own framings as the basis of understanding. From a worldmaking perspective, “MLK’s Fight” shows us how Raquel and Sapphire use multiple resources to co-construct a world where their voices, and their lives, matter.

Methods of Inquiry

Our discussion of Raquel and Sapphire’s process of composing is situated in a broader practitioner inquiry study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in which Erin collected data over the 2014–2015 academic year in her full-time work as a special education teacher at a K–8 arts-based school in a large Northeastern city. The school, founded as a partnership with a local folk arts organization, was comprised of 69% Asian American and 19% African American students, with many immigrant and refugee students in attendance and multiple languages spoken. The 7th-grade English language arts class that Sapphire and Raquel attended used a workshop model for writing instruction, focused on teaching genres like opinion writing, research reports, and literary essays. Around the state testing period, instruction focused on writing in response to open-ended questions about reading passages. However, the ELA teacher also taught a poetry unit in partnership with a local spoken word poet, and the integration of poetry and spoken word into formal instruction had a powerful influence on Raquel and Sapphire’s identities as poets and writers. This article asks how Raquel and Sapphire engaged in writing as worldmaking in creating their poem; that is, how did the poem emerge in practice, and what social and cultural resources did they draw upon?

The study included: extensive observational data in the students’ classrooms, within Erin’s resource room setting, and at schoolwide activities (including daily fieldnotes, audio and video recordings, and weekly memos); interview data (including numerous informal conversations and three structured interviews); and artifactual data (such as student drawings, writing, IEPs, evaluation reports, teacher notes, etc.). This article draws specifically on data that traces the girls’ writing of “MLK’s Fight,” including formal and informal interview data about writing the poem; observational data, such as fieldnotes and media recordings about writing and performing it in different spaces and contexts; and artifactual data, such as various versions and forms of the poem.

To center the experiences of Sapphire and Raquel and attend closely to their rhetorical decision making, we engaged in thematic narrative analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). We coded for stories they told about themselves and others (Stories), how they told those stories (Mode), and the resources they drew upon to tell those stories (Resources). For example, in preparing to perform the poem, Raquel described that since she was a dancer, she wanted to include movement (Story—about self); she and Sapphire worked to choreograph the performance by repeating lines and trying different complementary actions (Mode—collaboration); and they both used their knowledge of Step in planning the poem’s choreography and tempo (Resources—school activity). We also examined how the students positioned themselves, each other, and resources in those stories (Positioning), and what kinds of rhetorical decision making emerged from narrative activity (Decision Making). For example, the poem only has one first-person singular reference (“I see the dancers twirl like the gun that fell out of his hand”), which seems to reflect Raquel’s stories about herself as a dancer and to position her as a witness; later in the poem, however, the perspective switches to third-person plural as she joins with Sapphire, or perhaps the reader, as an actor. After coding the data, we created a timeline of the composing process of “MLK Fight,” populating the timeline with data and relevant codes. From this coded timeline, we identified two themes that emerged across the composing process: 1) that the two girls placed themselves in their worlds in grounded fashion; and 2) that they drew on different cultural and historical resources to construct the spaces they lived in. We detail these themes in subsequent sections.

To provide some background about Raquel and Sapphire, we offer comments they shared about themselves. Raquel described herself as a creative person, as articulated in her high school admission essay: “I consider myself a young artist. Poetry is my way to express my feelings about things that are happening in the world. I have always been a
creative person and I am always looking for opportunities to improve myself as an artist” (11/10/15). She enjoyed designing and making clothing and shared her excitement about receiving a sewing machine for Christmas. She loved to dance and had been a participant in the school’s Step elective since third grade. Sapphire was also a dancer, and she and Raquel often choreographed dances together. Both girls also loved singing, performing duets in front of the whole school on two occasions that year. Like Raquel, Sapphire expressed an affinity for writing, including composing short stories on her own time, such as the five-page psychological thriller called The Boy Named Arthur. In her high school admission essay, she wrote, “I love to sing, write poems, and to play sports” (11/10/15), which reflects her interest in music, writing, and movement.

Raquel and Sapphire’s self-identification as creative individuals, and their prolific output as singers, dancers, and creative writers, stand in contrast to the identities ascribed to them as students with learning disabilities; their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) describe them as having weaknesses in reading and writing. When asked their feelings about receiving special education, both students conveyed discomfort. Raquel asked, “Do I have to keep having this IEP thing in high school?” (Fieldnote, 5/13/15). She elaborated by saying, “I don’t want it when I get to high school because, like, I want a new reputation” (Interview, 6/10/15). Sapphire, also concerned about her IEP in high school, wondered, “Does this change the way people think about me?” (Fieldnote, 5/18/15). These comments point to the tension in the figured world of special education; while students are provided with additional support—Raquel says, “I like (getting learning support) cuz it helps” (Interview, 6/10/15)—they also contend with the social stigma of labeling. In addition, the medical model of special education focuses on learning deficits, and often overlooks the rich creative and intellectual backgrounds that students bring into the classroom. However, when teachers do create spaces for multiple forms of writing and acknowledge multiple means of production and expression, students can participate in and create alternate worlds in which they are recognized as capable writers, thinkers, and actors.

World Dimensions: Locating Self in Relation to Others

When writers engage in worldmaking, “it always starts from the worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking” (Goodman, 1978, p. 6). In other words, worldmaking involves people locating themselves in existing worlds, even as they use the tools found there to build and transform those worlds. In the making of “MLK’s Fight,” Raquel and Sapphire located themselves in the current moment, invoking current and historical events urgent in their day-to-day lives, and used tools at their disposal (e.g., words) to reframe and refashion the world. The subject of the poem is the killing of young black males in America, including Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Emmett Till. By drawing in the reference to Emmett Till, the authors traced the pattern of racialized violence over a period of 60 years, pointing out that the fight for Black lives still needs to be fought.

Analyzing the poem from a Black girls’ literacy perspective (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), “MLK’s Fight” is clearly rooted in intellectual and sociopolitical commentary as Raquel and Sapphire express their despair that “kids gotta’ grow up in this world thinking that it’s a place for hate” and advocate for action, saying, “we gotta’ make a scene like it’s no point for MLK to fight.” In their poem, they critiqued the unjust treatment of Black individuals, advocating for social transformation and activism in fighting for a world where Black lives matter, and children and their mothers don’t live in fear. In addition to historical and current references, Raquel and Sapphire also drew upon their own experiences as young Black women living in a city facing problems with gun violence and police brutality, about which they sometimes related firsthand experience within their families and neighborhoods.

Raquel and Sapphire drew upon their knowledge of poetry and spoken word in their composing process. Some of the knowledge they drew on included their passion for music, both in popular media and school activities. Some of this knowledge was developed in the after-school poetry class, as well as in the students’ English language arts class during an
artist residency with the leader of a local spoken word group. As part of a class poetry unit, students read work by Black poets, such as Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, and watched videos of contemporary spoken word performances, such as Gina Loring’s Somewhere There Is a Poem, which struck a particular resonance with Raquel. Another influence was the book Brown Girl Dreaming (2014) by Jacqueline Woodson, which Raquel, Sapphire, and two other students read in a book club led by Erin. In reading this book, which is narrated using a poetic structure and tells the story of Woodson growing up as a young Black girl who struggled with print but claimed an identity as a writer, we had discussions about the power of language to make change. We can see this message echoed in Raquel’s description of her purpose for writing, which was to “get more people to relate” (Book Club, 5/18/15). She went on to explain, “If I write down a poem, then it’ll be like showed all over the class or something, everybody will see it” (Book Club, 5/18/15). Her implication was that if more people see it, more people might relate to it, resulting in some sort of action.

By reading poetry by other Black women who used language as a form of social and political commentary (similar to the ways girls in Muhammad’s [2012, 2015] writing clubs used historical mentor texts from activist women of color to inspire their own writing), Raquel and Sapphire saw themselves as having power to do the same, which points to the importance of historically rooted cultural representation in the school curriculum. In addition, their cultural knowledge came from living as young women in contemporary culture, enmeshed in artistic cultural performances of singers, rappers, dancers, and songwriters whom they sought to emulate. Raquel often referred to the influence of her older sister on the ways she composed dances or poems, and she was informed by her Step teacher, who taught her about the use of rhythm and movement as a form of storytelling. Overall, the students’ experiences as artists, dancers, and poets were nurtured in their homes and leveraged within a school setting that centered folk arts, allowing for remaking and remixing across modes and genres. These powerful influences made their way into the poem, some more visible than others, and worked to locate each of the girls in relation not only to history, but to current society and its arguably state-sanctioned violence against young women like themselves.

For Raquel in particular, who had a vision of what she wanted to communicate in her original composition—“different stuff in the world . . . that might be important to me”—this effort to re-story the experiences of the work toward racial justice through a young person’s eyes was also a way of creating a figured world in which she was positioned as a maker, artist, and writer. There were similar instances when the girls used poetry to convey their feelings about themselves, their bodies, and their positions in society, such as Sapphire’s poem, Why Me?, that used a metaphor of a doll to resist being mistreated by a male friend, or Raquel’s poem Define Skinny, which critiqued the comments she had heard from people saying that she was too thin, and asserts her pride in her body and a rejection of social constraints. In both of these poems, Raquel and Sapphire’s voices and their lives remained at the center, and their words had transformative power. In making the world of “MLK’s Fight,” with Sapphire’s input as well as inspiration from other writers similarly invested in centering Black girls’ lives and experiences, Raquel positioned herself as connected to others and as a capable worldbuilder. The recognition of this world by others, particularly by her teachers and school community, helped to re-story broader narratives about disability and social exclusion, even though these worlds still maintained power in important ways.

This effort to re-story the experiences of the work toward racial justice through a young person’s eyes was also a way of creating a figured world in which she was positioned as a maker, artist, and writer.

In examining how Sapphire and Raquel positioned themselves in the world, we want to emphasize the importance of culture, particularly “the power of culture to disable” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995,
McDermott and Varenne’s central premise is that in using cultural tools to “hammer worlds,” people build societies that enable some people and disable others, so that the property of disability is not located within individuals, but within worlds that create those disabilities (p. 326). Take their example of the ways most curbs, stairs, and sidewalks are designed for able-bodied people, creating barriers that position some people as disabled and that can be turned into a source of social exclusion. A worldmaking framework that takes into account the ways race and disability intersect with other cultural systems and practices recognizes that people all learn and communicate differently, which repositions young people as already connected to the world and orients educators toward addressing systems of social exclusion. This understanding turns the responsibility onto educators to design curricula that provides multiple entry points for students to communicate, represent, and build knowledge, as opposed to focusing on remediation of individuals and skill areas that reinforce narrow definitions of what it means to be literate.

Making Dimensions: How Meaning Emerges in Material Practice

“MLK’s Fight” originally took seed in an after-school poetry workshop in which Raquel participated as part of an arts-based program sponsored by the city’s ballet company. On some days, students engaged in dance lessons, while on Fridays, they read and wrote poetry and spoken word. Raquel explained how she came up with the idea for the poem on a Friday afternoon but had “writer’s block,” so she thought about her idea over the weekend. The following week, her ideas started to take shape. She said, “When I came back to class on Monday, I started to think when I just didn’t have any time in Science, I started to think about uh—about different stuff in the world… that might be important to me. So I thought about Michael Brown” (Interview, 2/5/15). For Raquel, writing about what was important to her involved telling the story not just of Michael Brown as a person, as a human being, but as a son, using the lens of a mother’s love through which to interpret the hate and senselessness of violence that strips Black bodies of their humanity and personhood (and life). In that same conversation, which included Sapphire, the girls described the collaborative process of composing the poem together, during their science class. They explained:

Raquel: Um, I started writing it on Monday, and then Sapphire started helping me in Science class, and then we started to put it together, yeah.

Erin: Oh, so you did that together?

Raquel: Well, not that part—the other part someone else, I don’t know.

Sapphire: But I gave her the idea and . . .

Raquel: She gave me more of an idea how to write it.

Sapphire: Look, hold up, wait.

Raquel: Cuz at first it just started off a little wonky, and then she just like started giving me more ideas of how to put it together better.

Sapphire: Um, instead of me like, so like, so if a mother loses her child, she picks up the phone, she breaks onto the floor. (Acts out falling onto the floor)

Raquel: Yeah.

Sapphire: She starts screaming. Tears come out of her eyes, pain in her heart, her stomach, she has that ache—you’ve got this nasty feeling in your stomach. (Makes movements to show tears falling, grabbing stomach to show pain). Raquel: Mm-hmm.

Sapphire: “. . . and I don’t know how to handle it.” Raquel: Yeah.

Sapphire: So like . . .

Raquel: So that’s why I said like tears that ran down his mother’s face as fast as the bullet shot.
Something notable about this conversation is the way that Raquel credited Sapphire for “giving me more ideas of how to put it together better.” Sapphire used movement and gesture to act out what she expected would be a mother’s experience upon finding out her child has been killed. She described the physical pain that a mother might feel in her stomach and her heart, and how she would scream and cry and fall to the floor. As Sapphire embodied this scenario, Raquel affirmed her performance, uttering “mm-hmm,” and “yeah” and ultimately saying, “That’s why I said like tears that ran down his mother’s face as fast as the bullet shot.” While Raquel ultimately claimed authorship of the poem, their process was collaborative in that both students acknowledged their roles in the poem’s creation. In a time when schools often define writing as individually produced, following an often ritualized process of brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing, Raquel and Sapphire show us that writing can emerge from unplanned times and spaces and from shared understandings of their worlds. The two girls participated in creating a space in which they shared the experience of loss and violation, as they also shared a moment of being together, experiencing the power of composing collaboratively and writing their way toward racial justice and equity.

What we want to emphasize here is the collaborative and emergent nature of writing from a particular epistemic location: Raquel and Sapphire were not asked to write a poem in this particular time and space, but their ideas emerged from their lived experiences and their daily interactions. For Raquel and Sapphire, these improvisational moments continued across modes and spaces. For example, they worked on turning the poem into a performance piece, pulling in aspects of the dramatic voicing and movement from their dance classes to animate the emotion for broader audiences. In a school with an arts-based focus, these kinds of multimodal, embodied community performances were embraced as an important dimension of composing, in making one’s voice heard in and beyond the school community. As part of a broader worldmaking practice, Raquel and Sapphire located themselves in relation to others, such as through the poem’s only third-person plural reference: “we gotta’ make a scene.” No longer willing to stand by as witnesses alone, they commit to making a scene, to fighting alongside others who have come before.

As meanings emerge in interaction, responsive to personal, institutional, and social histories, worldmaking involves weaving together different resources, reordering, remixing, and intertextually linking them in new ways sensitive to the rhetorical situation. Such a focus does not overemphasize the product (i.e., the text); rather, it emphasizes writing as a generative experience, one that can generate new ways of thinking, collaborating, learning, and participating in communities, regardless of what is produced. Such a focus on the experience of writing can offer an important rhetorical emphasis, with young people considering the implications of different choices of language, mode, and genre based on audience, purpose, and context. If all making is essentially remaking, then we might productively understand the possibilities of remaking the world in a different image—one that is more inclusive, just, and equitable, for example.

Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) have called this practice of counter-narrating perspectives and experiences silenced or ignored in mainstream texts and media re-storying. Young people can re-story the world through producing cultural artifacts that remake it and offer alternative interpretive frames, disrupting normative frameworks as youth narrate their experiences from their positions. Raquel and Sapphire collaboratively built a world where the institutional category of “learning disabled” is upended, re-storying their identities by positioning themselves not just as competent young composers, but as ethical actors with knowledge and a sense of purpose. In this way, we can understand writing as a transformative practice in challenging cultural forms of disabling, particularly for young people from marginalized backgrounds and communities whose words (and worlds) are rarely centered.

**Integrating Worldmaking Approaches in Classroom Writing Practice**

We have proposed understanding writing as a practice of worldmaking to emphasize the generative and transformative potentials of writing and to
encourage educators to frame writing in such expansive ways in their classrooms and curricula. This expanded understanding of writing as worldmaking practice—as the iterative, embodied experience of writing in and across multiple forms, audiences, and contexts in order to build shared worlds—positions young people and their knowledge and experiences at the center of writing activity. Such framing shifts the focus from individuals and their capabilities to the re-mediation and reformulation of the space itself to become more accommodating to different learning needs and histories. Such a focus also highlights the ways youth already act in rhetorically aware ways and heightens that awareness by opening it to critical inquiry.

A worldmaking focus complements current workshop and process-oriented approaches to writing instruction, but it also extends classroom writing practice in new directions: emphasizing writing as a worthy experience in and of itself; centering youth interests, passions, and perspectives; engaging in critical inquiry into the social, political, cultural, and historical realities of youths’ everyday lives; orienting writing to action, impact, and sociopolitical transformation; positioning young people as makers and knowers already connected to the world; and deepening the rhetorical flexibility youth already practice. We suggest three ways educators might reframe their spaces, pedagogies, and practices around a worldmaking approach to writing.

1. **Emphasize the world dimensions**
   - *Invite global connections into the classroom.*
     By bringing in students’ experiences with the world, educators can expand resources available for worldmaking: partnering with families, community members, artists, and other experts; inviting into the curriculum students’ passions and experiences (e.g., gaming, arts, animal rescue, etc.); displaying quotes, student writing, and other found writing on the walls; or finding opportunities for young people to connect with others locally and globally, whether through digital exchanges, physical internships, or community research projects.
   - **Promote ethical practices of composing.**
     A key part of being in relation to others is not just seeing oneself as part of a broader human community, but practicing that commitment by engaging in ethical writing practices: participating genuinely in a writing community; using one’s voice to advance the pursuit of justice; listening to others thoughtfully; working toward mutual respect; offering constructive and supportive feedback; giving credit to others’ ideas; or being generous in one’s interpretations.

2. **Embrace the process of making—iteratively, collaboratively, critically**
   - **Include opportunities for collaborative and multimodal making practices.**
     Practices of collaborative and multimodal writing are important in creating classrooms that are culturally responsive and inclusive to students with disabilities. Students are often asked to write independently, and while sometimes invited to share, the focus is on individual production of text. By offering multimodal and collaborative projects, teachers can create inclusive pathways into the curriculum and into the classroom community. Part of this work involves creating space for writing to emerge from ongoing activity: offering open times for writing; rhetorically alert “translating” writing across modes; or inviting students to choose personally meaningful writing topics.
   - **Highlight the material dimensions of composing.**
     A worldmaking focus acknowledges the powerful role of producing artifacts to share and circulate. Educators can foreground the designed
aspects of writing by bringing in materials (e.g., asking students to create a poem using found materials or craft supplies) or by using digital tools to create rhetorically sensitive work (e.g., coding six-word memoirs using tools like Webmaker or Thimble).

3. Create a space conducive to developing writing as a worldmaking practice
   
   • Let students write and develop their knowledge and confidence as writers. The practice of writing develops and emerges over time and with regular habits, so teachers can build a nurturing space with many opportunities to write across different forms and purposes. This might include regular daily writing in writer’s notebooks or sketchbooks, with occasions to write for pleasure or the experience, without worry about grades or correctness. There are many ways to build in a writing focus to communicate that writing as a practice—and by extension, students as writers—are valued in the space: engaging in conversations about language; examining communicative choices in different contexts; or writing in unexpected times and places.

   • Design a supportive space. Educators can create both pedagogical and physical space for developing a consistent writing practice. Pedagogically, this can include culturally relevant materials and resources, like time. Physically, this might include designing the room to invite writing: including visible inspirational texts about writing, creating a Writer’s Corner for the storage of writer’s notebooks and supplies, or making a dedicated writing space with comfortable furniture and resources accessible to different learners.

   • Emphasize the transformative potentials of writing. Students can intervene in issues of import to them through their writing: fighting injustices by creating campaigns, writing opinion pieces, or offering testimonies and stories. These forms of re-storying are critical elements in a worldmaking framework, as young people participate in creating new worlds where their perspectives are central. We see these kinds of efforts to create powerful artifacts that re-story mainstream narratives, which often exclude or marginalize groups of people, as important forms of agency for young people to practice.

   We close by giving Raquel the final word (see Fig. 1). In this excerpt about poetry, she evokes the power of worldbuilding for young people: “Poetry is the gentle wind blowing all of the complicated and suffocating weight of the world off your shoulders and onto a piece of paper.”

References


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Figure 1. Raquel’s description of poetry

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Language Arts, Volume 95, Number 4, March 2018
Amy Stornaiuolo and Erin Hope Whitney | WRITING AS WORLDMAKING


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*Language Arts,* Volume 95, Number 4, March 2018
Rachel and Sapphire used poetry as an inspiration to make sense of the world around them. Here are some lesson plans from ReadWriteThink.org that can inspire other writers:

Connecting Art, Music, Dance, and Poetry

- In this unit, students conduct research, work with online graphic organizers, and create a museum exhibit that highlights the work of selected artists, musicians, and poets. The goal of this unit is to help students understand the historical context of a specific time period and what kind of impact it had on groups in the United States. Critical thinking, creativity, and interdisciplinary connections are emphasized.

http://bit.ly/2fpg0vz

The Magnetism of Language: Parts of Speech, Poetry, and Word Play

- This lesson extends students’ knowledge of parts of speech and encourages them to look critically at how language functions. Students begin with a review of the parts of speech. Using Lewis Carroll’s poem “Jabberwocky,” students look closely at the nonsensical words to identify their parts of speech and meaning. After experimenting with the Word Mover mobile application, they create their own magnetic poetry kits, which they use to both revise and reinterpret Carroll’s poem and write their own original poems.

http://bit.ly/2wXkNxs

Entering History: Nikki Giovanni and Martin Luther King Jr.

- Students read Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech in conjunction with Nikki Giovanni’s poem “The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.” in order to better understand the speech and the impact it had both on observers like Giovanni during the Civil Rights Movement and on Americans today. After researching and writing quiz questions about the vocabulary and content of King’s speech, students practice it orally before performing it readers’ theater-style in front of an audience. Students synthesize their learning by writing reflections exploring various questions about King’s dream in today’s society, Nikki Giovanni’s response, and ways to promote social change.

http://bit.ly/2hXo0nC

Call for Nominations: Donald H. Graves Writing Award

The Donald H. Graves Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Writing annually recognizes teachers in grades K–6 who, through the teaching of writing, demonstrate an understanding of student improvement in writing. The NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee selects an award recipient from the portfolios and essays submitted during the year. Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at http://www2.ncte.org/donald-graves-writing-award/ and must be submitted by June 15, 2018. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the Elementary Get-Together during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas.