Once there was a girl named Shaquita.

She was forced to live with her Auntie and cousin because...

...her mother and father went to Hawaii and never came back.

Over the weeks, Shaquita became a maid. She washed dishes, cleaned clothes, and wore the same clothes every day. (p. 1–4)

This excerpt from Shaquita, was written by Tameka (all names for these students are pseudonyms), a seventh-grade African American student, during a children’s book workshop for middle school youth of color. Earlier on in this after-school workshop, Tameka told me that she wanted to write a “ghetto” Cinderella story (“ghetto” had a positive connotation for her, indicating an urban, mostly African American cultural style). She told me that she intended to share the story with a local preschool that her siblings and cousins attended. In considering the interests of her young audience members, she wanted to create a text that would be entertaining and that they could relate to, something she claimed was lacking in the books she read in school as a young child.

Although we often think of children’s books in terms of reading, the stories that Tameka and her peers wrote demonstrate that children’s books can also offer a powerful catalyst for writing. Published children’s books offer models of various genres that draw upon a range of literary devices, organizations, and representational resources that can be analyzed and used as inspiration for young writers. Children’s books also allow young writers to craft their texts for a real audience beyond their classmates and teacher. Such authentic writing situations are an important part of effective writing instruction (Atwell, 1998). As Tameka wrote her story, she often read and analyzed other Cinderella tales (e.g. Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella, San Souci, 1998; Chinye: A West African Folk Tale, Onyefulu, 1994). She also frequently talked about what her young audience members would like in the story.

In addition to providing compelling precedents and real audiences, writing children’s books offers young authors opportunities for improvisation. By
middle school, students have a wealth of experience reading children’s books at school and, in some cases, at home. The familiarity of this type of text offers students the opportunity for creativity; indeed, some genre scholars have argued that, while skilled writers often test the boundaries of genres, at least some experience with a genre is needed for innovation to take place successfully (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Such improvisational spaces offer the potential to build on students’ cultural and linguistic resources. In so doing, children’s book writing can be used to create connections between students’ in- and out-of-school lives. As a growing body of work suggests, literacy educators can draw powerfully on students’ out-of-school and unofficial literacy practices (Alvermann, Xu, & Carpenter, 2003; Bausch, 2003; Mahar, 2003; Riojas-Cortez, Flores, Smith, & Clark, 2003).

To understand how Tameka and her peers drew upon popular and cultural representations in their stories, I use the concept of “recontextualization.” In her story, Tameka made a number of recontextualizing moves, recasting the traditional Cinderella storyline in terms of her contemporary cultural values. Recontextualization involves pulling in and changing elements of one text into another (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Linell, 1998). For example, Shaquita attended a prom rather than a ball; she rode off in a “white limo with the works” rather than a pumpkin; and she fell in love with a D.J. rather than a prince, who incidentally proposed to her over the phone. In crafting a traditional tale in modern terms, Tameka assembled a range of popular media and cultural representations. In a sense, recontextualization is an unremarkable phenomenon as all texts draw from prior texts to some extent (Bakhtin, 1981). Although common, recontextualization, especially involving students’ cultural and popular resources, is not often valued, recognized, or made explicit in academic contexts. However, as Shaquita illustrates, such textual moves can place students’ social memberships into dialogue.

In crafting her story, Tameka used popular and African American representational forms to situate herself and her young audience in the “borderland” space between school-based, popular, and African American cultures. Unlike many current school-based literacy practices, where little interplay exists between students’ lives in and beyond school, borderlands exist where hybrid ways of being, knowing, and using language are valued (Anzaldúa, 1999; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997). The curriculum for the workshop explicitly sought to create borderlands where students’ literacy practices from beyond school were recruited as resources rather than dismissed as deficits. For example, in the workshop, students were introduced to a variety of model children’s books where dialect, languages other than English, and cultural representations played important roles. Students took up these resources as they wrote their own books. By recontextualizing such representations, Tameka and her peers engaged in building borderlands between their in- and out-of-school lives.

To understand the textual moves made by Tameka and her peers, I closely examined the representational resources—including settings, characters, language, and popular culture—that these young authors drew upon in writing children’s books. I also investigated how these choices situated authors and their young audiences at the intersections of social worlds. Such an analysis is important to me as both a teacher and researcher because it recognizes the diversity of resources available to young writers.

**The Children’s Book Workshop**

The children’s book workshop took place in the Metropolis PEOPLE Program, an after-school academic enrichment program for middle school youth of color. The program is part of an attempt by the University of Metropolis to attract and prepare students from underrepresented groups to attend the university. 100 students are admitted annually, with priority for students who would be first generation college attendees or who qualify for free or reduced price lunches. In middle school, students participate in summer and after-school workshops focusing on literacy, technology, science, and math. In high school, they continue with summer workshops and electronic correspondence courses. If students are admitted to the university after participating in the program, they receive full tuition scholarships for their undergraduate education.

The children’s book workshop was among 12 workshops offered in spring 2001. It was among the most popular workshops, drawing 12 regular participants. All of the students were girls; nine African American,
In addition to reading and critiquing published children's books, students were expected to write and illustrate their own books individually or in pairs.
students used their out-of-school experiences to negotiate the conventions of children’s books. Finally, I verified and elaborated these analyses with other ethnographic evidence.

**Recontextualization in Children’s Books**

As a number of scholars point out (Heath, 1988; Wolf & Heath, 1992), children’s interactions with books, both in and beyond school, are complex processes. Children’s literature serves multiple purposes that include instructing students about language and life, providing entertainment and comfort, instilling moral values, and reflecting a range of lives and values. Students took up these broader purposes of children’s literature in the books they produced. Within the seven children’s books produced in the workshop, several contained explicit moral messages; all of the stories dealt with common problems that young people face and offered solutions for such problems; and all of the students claimed that they wanted their books to be entertaining and relevant for their young audience. Published examples of various types of children’s books were shared and discussed throughout the workshop, and I modeled writing my own nonfiction book. Despite this attention to the range of genres available, all of the students chose to write fictional stories. As the students explained, these were the kinds of books that they liked as children, so they would be “more fun for kids”; they also pointed out that they had more ideas for writing this kind of book. In crafting their stories, the students incorporated typical features of what Hasan (1996) calls the “nursery tale” genre, including placements, initiating events, sequent events, final events, finales, and morals. Likewise, the students primarily followed common storylines including love lost, outcast becoming popular, and rags-to-riches.

In creating their books, students recontextualized popular culture, language practices, and images, which brought sometimes disparate discourses into conversation. Across the seven children’s books produced in the workshop, I located four distinct types of recontextualization: setting, characters, language, and popular culture. At least one of these types of recontextualization occurred in each of the children’s books, whereas four of the books contained all four types of recontextualization.

**Recontextualization of Setting**

Five of the students’ stories recontextualized setting. Although a few of the students positioned their stories in settings typical of published children’s stories (e.g., school), most of the students located their stories in contemporary places and situations, reflecting their cultural and popular affiliations. An example of this occurred in Kimberly and Maxine’s book entitled *Dassandra Story*, which was about a poor, unfashionable girl who became popular after the school nurse gave her a makeover.

Early in the story, Dassandra’s brother tries to help her understand why she is so unpopular, and points out that she wore the same clothes the day before. On the next page, there is an image of Dassandra having three thoughts, “No money,” “No water,” and “dirty clothes,” each illustrated and captioned in a cartoon bubble. Below the image are the words, “Well, I don’t have anything else to wear.” Dassandra said, “Mom missed the water bill this month” (*Dassandra Story*, p. 4). Through this statement and illustration (see Figure 1), Kimberly and Maxine located the story in a financially struggling household, which, according to self-reports, Kimberly had experienced earlier in her lifetime and Maxine had become familiar with through a number of friends in similar circumstances. The story then moves to Dassandra’s school where, after being teased by other students, Dassandra confides in the school nurse who states, “To tell you the truth they should accept you the way you are. But if you really want to do something about it I’ll give you a full makeover at my shop, Goode Cosmetology” (*Dassandra Story*, p. 9). The story is resolved at Nurse Goode’s beauty shop where she gives Dassandra a makeover and new clothes. As Majors (2002) points out, salons play a central role in the lives of many African Americans, as it did in the lives of Kimberly and Maxine. Thus, the two girls were able to draw on this setting as a resource that played a pivotal role in the outcome of their story. Indeed, after visiting Nurse Goode’s salon, Dassandra “became popular and she lived happily and popular forever” (*Dassandra Story*, p. 11). By incorporating the settings of a poor household and a salon into their story—both of which are rare in children’s literature—Kimberly and Maxine recontextualized these settings into school contexts.
and created a borderland space for themselves and their young readers.

**Recontextualization of Characters**

A second type of recontextualization in children’s books occurred through the names, appearances, and roles of characters. This included instances where characters were assigned culturally specific names, were represented as members of a particular racial/ethnic group, or played contemporary roles. I include this as a type of recontextualization because the inclusion of people of color continues to be rare in published children’s books. Although awareness of multicultural children’s literature is growing, Horning, Kruse, and Schliesman (2002) maintain that over the past decade, the number of books about people of color remained under ten percent of books published, of which under five percent were written by people of color. As poignantly illustrated by Tameka’s description of the lack of books she could identify with in her own

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### Modern Versions of Traditional Folk and Fairy Tales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Briggs, Raymond</td>
<td>Jim and the Beanstalk. (Paperstar, 1997)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cole, Babette</td>
<td>Prince Cinders. (Putnam, 1997)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emberley, Michael</td>
<td>Ruby. (Little Brown, 1990)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emberley, Rebecca</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ernst, Lisa Campbell</td>
<td>Goldilocks Returns. (Aladdin, 2003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosales, Melodye</td>
<td>Leola and the Honeybears: An African-American Retelling of Goldilocks and The Three Bears. (Scholastic, 1999)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scieszka, Jon</td>
<td>The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs! Illus. L. Smith. (Viking, 1989)</td>
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—Marilyn Carpenter

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childhood, the students’ inclusion of culturally specific names and representations were significant acts of recontextualization.

Three of the stories contained characters with African American names, including Ashlay in Ashlay ’n’ Zork, Dassandra and Marcus in Dassandra Story, and Shaquita in Shaquita. Also, one of the stories, The Blue Fish, included a character with the Hmong name Mie. The use of culturally specific names did not necessarily coincide with the representations of characters; for example, Dassandra was only illustrated as obviously African American in a few images, and Mie was a fish!

In addition to names, students used illustrations to include particular cultural or ethnic groups. Two of the stories contained a majority of representations of African American characters (Ashlay ’n’ Zork and Be Careful What You Wish For) and three contained some representations of main characters that were obviously African American or biracial as confirmed by the authors (Dassandra Story, Samantha, and Shaquita). Only one of the stories, The Blue Fish, was illustrated with explicitly European American characters that were drawn in Animé style with stereotypical European American features. Interestingly, the storyline of The Blue Fish contains the only group of main characters that are portrayed negatively as greedy and selfish.

Recontextualization was also accomplished through characters’ roles. An example of this occurred in Shaquita through the inclusion of a D.J. and his sidekick. Sam the D.J. is Shaquita’s modern-day prince, and his sidekick Mike steps in to keep the music going while Shaquita and Sam have their first dance. These roles draw from the values of popular culture, in which D.J.s make for desirable partners and sidekicks are needed to keep the music playing.

**Recontextualization of Language**

In all of the stories, language—including the use of words/sayings, pronunciation, grammar, and modes of discourse—served as a central way to accomplish recontextualization. Words such as “cool,” “bud,” and “gonna,” as well as popular sayings like “bust out [of jail],” “checkin’ her out,” and “be there,” peppered the stories. Students primarily used these words and sayings to develop characters, both through characters’ direct speech and in descriptions of characters. As one student told me when I asked why she used the contraction “gonna” instead of “going to,” “It makes the characters seem real, like they’re really talking. It would sound stupid if she said, ‘I’m going to be late.’” These sentiments were echoed in other students’ explanations, as well.

Three of the stories contained characters who used pronunciations, grammatical moves, and modes of discourse of African American Vernacular English. For the most part, these were confined to the direct speech of characters. For example, Saundra and Tressa incorporated grammatical aspects of this dialect in Be Careful What You Wish For, a Halloween horror story for older children about a girl who wishes her abusive father would die—a wish that results in dreadful consequences. The main character, Marie, cries, “There nothin I can do my mama’s dead” after her mother is killed. As documented by Smitherman (1977), the omitted be is used to refer to conditions that are fixed in time and events that are unrepeatable, as in this example. Also, the spelling of “nothin” reflects the pronunciation of –in rather than –ing (Rickford, 1999).

Elsewhere in the story, a ghost offers Marie assistance, stating, “You see this here? It is a wishing pumpkin,” and then explains the consequences of misusing the pumpkin’s powers. The use of “this here” is a common grammatical move in many English dialects, including African American Vernacular English, and is used to point to a nearby object in contrast to something more distant (Petrova, 1998; Rickford, 1999).

In addition to grammar, several students incorporated African American modes of discourse in their stories, including “signification” and “tonal semantics.” In Dassandra Story, Dassandra’s unpopularity due to unfashionable dress is introduced via signification. As Smitherman (1977) points out, signification “refers to the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles—that is, signifies on—the listener” (p. 118). This discursive form is sometimes used just for fun, but is also a socially acceptable way of critiquing someone. Early in the story, Dassandra’s brother states, “Dassandra, you put things together that most people wouldn’t. Elton John dresses better than you do” (p. 3). When she becomes upset with him, he leaves, saying, “Whatever, you non-matching—” (p. 5). At school, Dassandra’s peers make the same
critique when one shouts, “You wore that ‘Good-Will’ looking shirt yesterday” (p. 6). These three instances of signifying serve to set up the central problem of the story that is later resolved by a full makeover.

Another African American mode of discourse, tonal semantics—including rhyme, alliteration, and repetition—highlighted key points in the stories. While these are common poetic moves found in children’s books, in African American Vernacular English the repetition of sounds and structures is used for emphasis and effect. As Smitherman (1977) points out, they are integral to understanding the meaning of spoken utterances. The presence of tonal semantics has been documented in written texts, as well (Redd & Massey, 1997; Smitherman, 1994). The students who drew upon this resource used rhyme, alliteration, and repetition to highlight important points and characters in their stories. For example, the moral of the story Be Careful What You Wish For, “So if you wish for something terrible about someone it may come true but the worst thing for you . . .” contained a rhyme between “true” and “you” that emphasized the lesson and signaled the end of the story.

In Shaquita, Tameka used a heightened presence of alliteration, rhyme, and repetition around Shaquita’s interaction with the angel. As she told me, “Even though the story’s about Shaquita, it’s the angel who makes stuff happen.” The centrality of the angel was carried through in the style of the text. Tameka wrote:

“So you’re a . . .” “No time to talk,” said the angel, cutting her off. “We need to get you in some clothes and fast.”

“First, you need a dress. How about a white silk Armani with cross-front high heels.” Shaquita heard chimes and suddenly her rags were replaced with Armani and instead of bare feet she had high heels.

“How about a fancy hair-do, a bouffant would be nice for a dance.” Swish, swish and it was there.

“Wow, this is...” “Chit-chat when you get back, you need a car,” cutting her off once more. “Ooo, can I get a white limo with the works and a personal driver?” “Of course,” said the angel, “Why not?” With a swish, swish, she was in her limo and around the corner. (p. 13–16)

Shaquita’s face-to-face interaction with the angel begins with an interruption from the angel, which is repeated again on the last page of their interaction. Both pages start with Shaquita talking, the angel interrupting, and the repetition of the phrase “cutting her off.” In each of the interruptions, the sounds [k] and [t] are repeated—“No time to talk,” said the angel, cutting her off, and “Chit-chat when you get back, you need a car; cutting her off once more.”

Another pattern in this part of the story included the pattern of needing/receiving, which structured the bulk of their interaction. On page 14, Shaquita needed a dress and received an Armani; on page 15, she needed a hairdo and received a bouffant; on page 16, she needed a car and received a limo. This pattern was echoed at the end of page 14, as well, when, “her rags were replaced with Armani and instead of bare feet she had high heels.” Also, on the final two pages, the alliteration of “swish swish” preceded the change.

Their interaction comes to a dramatic crescendo on the final page, beginning with the rhyme, “chit-chat when you get back.” Also, the [w] sound is repeated multiple times: “Wow, this is...,” “Chit-chat when you get back, you need a car,” cutting her

Recontextualization of Popular Culture

In addition to setting, characters, and language, students made popular culture references through fashion and music. Many of the characters’ taste in clothing and hair reflected that of the students in the group. The majority of the stories contained characters who wore their hair in popular contemporary hairstyles. Also, a number of the characters wore clothing styles that were popular at the time among many American youth. For example, in Dassandra Story, the popular students wore styles such as flare-legged pants, midriff shirts, platform shoes, and mini-skirts (see Figure 2). Indeed, in two of the stories, Shaquita and Dassandra Story, access to specific brands...
of clothing as part of a more comprehensive makeover lead to the resolution of the story. For example, Shaquita wore a “white silk Armani” to the prom, which made her desirable to the D.J. Also, Dassandra became popular only when she got a makeover including an American Eagle wardrobe. Clothing and hairstyles, whether specifically addressed in the story line or included in illustrations, provided important representational resources for students in creating their books.

Musical references were another way in which students incorporated popular culture in their books. For example, in one of the books, a poster of NSYNC, a popular boy band, is hanging on the wall in one of the illustrations. In Shaquita, music plays a more central role to the storyline when, “The d.j. happened to play Shaquita’s favorite song, ‘A Song for Mama,’” which is by another popular group, Boyz II Men. Like the use of contemporary clothing and hairstyles, popular musical references located the students, their books, and their young readers in a context that valued these references as meaningful.

**Implications for Teaching**

Through the use of settings, characters, language, and popular culture, the students engaged in borderland building on two fronts—both in the workshop and in their audiences’ early childhood classrooms. Tameka drew on each of these types of recontextualization in Shaquita to situate herself and her young readers in a borderland between school, popular, and African American cultures. Tameka accomplished this by setting her story in a contemporary context including a prom, by representing and naming her characters as African American, by using tonal semantics to highlight the importance of the angel, and by incorporating popular fashion and music. Through these moves, she recontextualized representations from popular and African American cultures into the institutional, academic, and arguably White spaces of the university and the early childhood classroom.

My experience teaching and researching this workshop enabled me to consider how teachers might incorporate reading, analyzing, and writing children’s books into their classrooms. Although the context of this study is very different from the conditions faced by most teachers—in terms of class size, student enrollment based on interest, and student demographics—it provides a specific example of what such instruction might look like and what it might lead to in students’ writing.

Using children’s literature as a catalyst for students’ writing suggests several practices for teachers to consider in their literacy classrooms. First, published children’s books can be used as a way to unpack the craft of writing. Because of the familiarity of children’s book genres, this type of reading and writing offers a unique context for exploring how writers draw on a variety of resources to engage their young audiences. By analyzing how authors of children’s books use literary devices such as metaphor and rhyme, dialect resources such as call and response, as well as representations of diverse people and places, students were able to apply these devices to their own writing. As Tameka’s “ghetto” version of Cinderella demonstrates, young people can mobilize common story lines and re-accent them with their own experiences and cultural resources. Having access to published books that engage in such work, as well as developing an awareness of how and why such moves are important, were central factors leading to these students’ successful attempts at this type of writing.

Second, children’s book writing can be used to teach students how to meaningfully and intentionally bring their out-of-school lives into conversation with in-school literacy practices. The students in this workshop recontextualized a number of representational resources in their writing that extended far beyond the typical scope of academic settings. Whereas these resources are often ignored or devalued in school (Finders, 1997; Gomez, Stone, & Hobbels, 2004), they do not need to be. Students’ representational resources from beyond school can be viewed as “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1994) to be cultivated and refined. Indeed, as the work of Tameka and her peers illustrates, such resources can provide avenues of access to school-based literacies.

Whereas resources such as dialect and popular culture can be powerful, students need instruction on how and where such moves are effective. For instance, while acceptable within the context of a children’s book, a reference to NSYNC likely would not be appropriate in a science lab report. I am not arguing for an all-out celebration of students’ out-of-school lives; rather, I am calling for a careful examination of what such resources might offer to literacy teaching and learning. Previous work has illuminated the complexity of dialects such as African American Vernacular English and
how the discourse practices from this dialect are valuable in some academic situations (Lee, 1993; Smitherman, 1994) Likewise, a growing body of work has examined the role of popular culture in students’ literacy development (Alvermann et al., 2003; Dyson, 1997). Much of the work in these areas has examined how young people spontaneously incorporate these resources into their writing despite teachers’ intentions. However, ultimately, we need to move young writers toward becoming deliberate and reflective users of such representational tools. This children’s book workshop offers one example of how these resources might be intentionally cultivated in literacy classrooms.

Finally, writing children’s books can be used to foster critical literacies, to challenge the way the world is represented in both reading and writing. Tameka’s claim that her life was not reflected in the books she read as a young child demonstrates that the opportunity to pull together school, cultural, and popular resources into a text was a significant critical act, calling into question the absence of people like her in the children’s book publishing industry. As illustrated by the stories written by Tameka and her peers, such opportunities can become powerful forums for youth to place their in- and out-of-school lives into a dynamic and critical dialogue.

Nonetheless, these students’ critical readings of the world were often in tension with the pragmatic realities of their lives. All of the students in the workshop made some critical observations during our discussions of published children’s books and engaged in critical action by including representations of culturally diverse settings, characters, and language. However, many of the books still evoked a number of problematic stereotypes. Both Shaquita and Dassandra Story dramatically illustrate this in that the female main characters did not solve their own problems; rather, their problems were solved by an angel and a nurse who gave them access to name brand products. This was a common topic of conversation as the students drafted their books, so the young women in this workshop were aware that these problematic aspects existed but still chose to include them in their texts. The authors of Dassandra Story even addressed a critical viewpoint in their text, through Nurse Goode’s comment that, “To tell you the truth they should accept you the way you are.” In both of these texts, the pragmatics of popularity won out over critical consciousness. As teachers, we need to help students work through these tensions; one place to do this is in writing. For example, if I were to teach this workshop again, I would have students write multiple versions of their books, including a critical tale. What would happen if Shaquita decided that the prom wasn’t “all that” or if Dassandra and her brother decided that mismatched clothes should become the new fashion? Such counter-stories need to be dealt with alongside the solutions that Tameka, Kimberly, and Maxine used.

The lessons that can be learned from this workshop and these students extend well beyond writing children’s books. Unpacking the craft of writing, drawing on students’ out-of-school lives, and engaging students in critical reading and writing are important goals for literacy educators across genres. Indeed, literacy educators must make these issues central to their teaching, especially as our students reflect increasingly diverse backgrounds. Through careful study of our teaching practices and students’ writing, we can begin to shape a more equitable and ethical approach to teaching literacy.

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