Weiser, M. Elizabeth, Brian M. Fehler, and Angela M. Hernandez, eds. *Engaging Audience: Writing in an Age of New Literacies.* **Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2009.**

Reviewed by Charles Etheridge

Three major changes relevant to the study of audience have occurred since the 1980s: the triumph of social constructionist theory, the emergence of "New Literacy" studies, and the digital revolution brought upon by social networking media and other Web 2.0 software applications. *Engaging Audience: Writing in an Age of New Literacies*, edited by M. Elizabeth Weiser, Brian M. Fehler, and Angela M. Hernandez, attempts the daunting task of "readdressing" audience in light of these changes. The editors have undertaken an ambitious project, and successes of their book greatly outnumber shortcomings.

This collection takes as its starting point Lisa Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford's essay "Audience addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," (hereafter referred to as AA/AI) which originally appeared in *College Composition and Communication* in 1984. The book is divided into three sections, which Weiser, Fehler, and Hernandez refer to as "Streams"–the "Audience Stream," which is dedicated exclusively to the work of Ede and Lunsford, the "Theory Stream," which is dedicated to theoretical explorations of audience, and the "Praxis Stream," dedicated to issues of theoretically informed pedagogy.

The editors argue that "no one could be more central to the past twenty-five years of audience theory" than Ede and Lunsford (ix), and the book reprints the 1984 essay in its entirety, along with Ede and Lunsford's 1996 "revisionist" piece "Representing Audience: 'Successful' Discourse and Disciplinary Critique." Additionally, Ede and Lunsford contribute a new essay, written for this collection, entitled "Among the Audience: On Audience in an Age of New Literacies." Taken as a triptych, these three pieces

arranged in succession make the book worth the price of purchase. The original essay, AA/AI was, at the time, a theoretically informed and pedagogically useful foray into the need for, and the challenges of, helping composition students understand the uneasy relationship between author and audience–the need to "balance the creativity of the writer" with the "creativity of the reader" (22).

Ede and Lunsford's 1996 "revisionist perspective" identifies some shortcomings of their original work, noting the limits of the binary thinking that the idea of "Audience Addressed" *or* "Audience Invoked" can lead to. They also usefully acknowledge the ideology of the first piece, an ideology which unquestioningly accepted the values of school and of academe. The final piece of the first section, "Representing Audience: 'Successful' Discourse and Disciplinary Critique," usefully explores how the idea of audience is complicated by the idea of Web 2.0 software, in which the line between author and audience is increasingly blurred. Citing forums such as Facebook and news outlets that invite reader comment, Ede and Lunsford note that the idea of audience becomes both more real (author and reader are communicating directly with one another) and more nebulous (if both author and reader are participating in a continuous stream of text about a topic, issue, or concern, is it even useful to maintain that one is the "author" and one is the "audience"?).

As useful as the first section of *Engaging Audience* is, because the book purports to offer some historical perspective on the idea of audience, it does seem appropriate to point out some inconstancies in the design of the book. Ede and Lunsford's work appeared in a May 1984 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, which was largely dedicated to the issue of audience. In addition to AA/AI, there is another piece by Lisa Ede, which offers a summary of research on audience conducted to that point, including discussions of the Aristotelian tradition, the important research done on audience in the discipline of speech communication, empirical research, and theoretical treatments. *Engaging Audience* at least mentions the Ede essay, but

ignores another "classic" on audience, one that appeared in the same issue of *3Cs*–Barry M. Kroll's, "Writing for Readers: Three Perspectives on Audience" (and which begins on the page following AA/AI).

Lest my criticism of the lack of attention paid to Kroll's work seems idiosyncratic or overly picky, I would note that Kroll's essay avoids two of the criticisms often made of Ede and Lunsford's work: binary thinking and a theoretically naïve view of reading. Kroll's work is truly descriptive in that he divides the way the field of composition has looked at audiences into three "Perspectives," the rhetorical, the informational, and the social. He then critiques each perspective from the perspective of rhetorical theory, pedagogical soundness, and the theory of reading on which the perspective is based. Unlike many authors in the mid-80s, Kroll resists critiquing the work of others to create "straw men" to advance the author's own pet theory; rather, he genuinely acknowledges the benefits and drawbacks to each theory. Although Ede and Lunsford's work has been republished more often than Kroll's and has definitely been more influential, a book that purports to look at the idea of audience from a historical perspective might have been enhanced had it at least acknowledged a voice from twenty five years ago that provided what has turned out to be a thoroughly twenty-first century critique of 1980s pedagogical and theoretical practices.

The second portion of *Engaging Audience*, entitled "Theory Streams," is both the shortest and the weakest section of the book. Much of what is said about questions of authorship raised by the application of poststructuralist theory to composition is well-written but not new, contributing little beyond what was said in the abovementioned May 1984 issue of *3Cs*. David Beard's "Communicating with the Audience" is worth singling out for praise; he takes methods of audience analysis drawn from contemporary theoretical studies in mass media and listening theory, and demonstrates how the application of these theories is useful both for authors and for those who examine how readers respond to text.

Most problematic about the "Theory Stream" section of *Engaging Audiences* is what is *not* there. The book's subtitle is "Writing in an Age of New Literacies," which suggests that there might be some discussion of the New Literacy studies that have blossomed in composition since the early 90s. So much of what New Literacy is about–the range of literacies, the different types of literacies, the ideology of literacy, what we even mean by the term "literacy"–is theoretically ripe for a discussion of audience, and I found myself wishing that Weiser, Fehler, and Gonzalez had included a few meaningful theoretical discussions of New Literacy as it relates to audience. This comment may, perhaps, be unfair– the editors likely had to work with the submissions they received and shouldn't be faulted for issues beyond their control. However, it would have been more accurate to avoid the name of a recognizable subfield in composition studies (New Literacy) if they were not going to treat that subject in their book.

The third section of the book, the "Praxis Stream," yields some real gold. This is by far the longest and richest section in the book, and the demands of space prevent me from recounting the main arguments from each good piece and singling them out for praise. Rather than give each selection a cursory treatment, I will deal with three in some depth, chosen because each demonstrates the way in which a new perspective on audience has enhanced some aspect of composition instruction (in this case, technical writing, service learning, and authorship in the Web 2.0).

The first, David Dayton's "New Media's Personas and Scenarios," points out one of the real paradoxes inherent in technical communication. Despite mounting theoretical and practical evidence that it is impossible for an author to truly "know" an audience, many instructors in the field of technical and professional communication continue to maintain that an author *can* know an audience. Dayton breaks through this deadlock by exploring how both authors and readers take on various personas depending upon the communication situation. He advocates bringing together the use of personas and scenarios to teach professional communication. Taken together, these strategies help

students de-center to both analyze "real" audiences more effectively and to "create" audiences as well.

As her title suggests, Phyllis Mentzell Ryder's "The Stranger Question of Audience: Service Learning and Public Rhetoric" examines the ways in which the question of "audience" was complicated by the "social turn" in the classroom–when service learning components entered the American composition classroom. Unlike the nebulous reading "publics" that develop in classrooms and in online social forms, community organizations represent a very real and knowable public. Ryder acknowledges that "Public work is fundamentally rhetorical work" (209), and she provides a detailed and helpful analysis of public situations in which students might meaningfully participate as authors. She then returns to the question of the New Media, noting how public expressions offer both opportunities for further fragmentation and for the creation of a genuine community. She then concludes that, because of their rhetorical complexity and the multiple constituencies they involve, service learning courses provide a "rich," "powerful," and "intellectual" forum in which students can learn to engage audiences (226).

Erin Karper's "Theorizing Audience in Web-Based Self-Presentation" effectively explores the way Web 2.0 has stretched definitions of what is meant by the term "audience." Younger people are "digital natives," presenting themselves on the web in multiple ways. Karper notes that people often engage in self-presentation on the Web in ways that can create problems later on, and goes on to note that many of the problems occur not because the authors are "naïve" but rather because they work from "faulty data about how the web works" (267). One of the challenges an author faces is a quest for a "digital mastery" that is never quite achieved.

Karper then goes on to explore the ways in which the participatory nature of the web promotes self-representation, rendering moot the question of whether or not an audience is "inappropriate" because the more useful question is: "who is the intended audience?" Authors often assume that utterances on the

web will only be viewed by the intended audience and not by others, and these authors often rely on pseudonymity, not realizing that the content of their web utterances will identify the author to others (such as employers) not intended as readers. Next, Karper explores authors' reliance and (often) mistaken belief in trust filters and other technologies intended to limit the audience of a particular web-based self-representation. He notes that statements made only for a specific audience rarely stay within the intended audiences, sometimes because of the actions of other readers and sometimes due to technical limitations of the software used (or a lack of understanding on the part of the user). The essay concludes with a discussion of "wikiality," or "reality defined by consensus" (277)–indicating that we live in age in which meaning *is* constructed socially. Karper's work effectively demonstrates the effects of the New Media on our understanding of audience, and then posits ways in which these media can be of pedagogical use.

Engaging Audiences is well worth reading. It gives us an historical sense about the role of audience in composition studies. It outlines many exciting pedagogical strategies about the enduring relevance that the concept of audience has to a new generation of scholars. There are some limits to the book, and a few flaws, but it is well worth a composition scholar/teacher's time. Weiser, Kehler, and Gonzalez are to be congratulated for assembling it.