# How Does Contemporary YA Literature Represent Rural People and Places?

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*This article presents a critical content analysis of representations of rural people and places in contemporary, middle grades and young adult novels. Interrogating representations is vital for implementing critical rural place pedagogies. Findings indicate this award-winning text set included diverse representations of racial, religious, and sexual identities. Characters often felt a sense of place-based belonging and identity but also experienced tensions of feeling stuck. Rural places were frequently depicted as places of despair and pervasive poverty, with a lack of middle or upper-middle income representations. Implications for teacher education are presented with suggestions for critical place pedagogies and developing counternarratives that convey the diversity of rural people and places.*

Representation matters. As evidenced by the We Need Diverse Books (2023) movement and the Cooperative Children's Book Center's annual racial diversity statistics in publishing (CCBC, 2023), diverse representations in U.S. children's and young adult books are still lacking. Decades of scholarship has demonstrated that children need to see themselves depicted in texts to support healthy identity development and imagine an array of possibilities for their futures (e.g., Graff, 2010; Sims Bishop, 1990; Short et al., 2018). Seeing people and places reflective of their identities enables adolescents to answer developmental questions of *Who am I?* and *Where am I going* (Spring, 2018)? Likewise, rural youth need accurate, authentic, nuanced, and intersectional representations of rurality and rural identities in literature.

In American education, research and public narratives often focus on urban students (Tieken, 2014). However, one-fourth of American public schools are rural, serving approximately 9 million children (Showalter et al., 2017). When rural people and places are given attention, stereotypical images often persist of small town "deprivation and decline" and "backwoods, backwater, and backward" country folk or of outdated, romanticized, and quaint farm-towns

(Tieken, 2014, p. 7). Rural families face similar socio-economic challenges as their urban counterparts with poverty, transience, employment, access to quality education, and substance abuse, for example (Showalter et al., 2017), but contemporary rural scholars actively resist deficit discourses (Azano et al., 2022). However, overly idyllic depictions of a rural imaginary, rooted in the English countryside and Anglo-Saxon hegemony, are equally as problematic and can reinforce a sense of problem-free places (Azano et al., 2022; Panelli et al., 2009).

Furthermore, rural America is often perceived as White and homogenous, perpetuated by exclusionary and oppressive practices limiting "*whose* experiences are considered legitimate... erasing narratives of diversity" from rural discourses (Panelli et al., 2009, p. 355). The complex histories of diverse rural people are often glossed-over or erased in media and texts, including the historic and contemporary narratives of Indigenous people and the seizures of their land, the economic exploitation of indentured and enslaved people from Europe and Africa, respectively, and globalization's impact on rural communities (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2017; Azano et al., 2021). According to the 2020 U.S. Census (Johnson & Lichter, 2022), rural spaces are 76% White and 24% multi-racial, but these statistics may mask other social, historical, cultural, geographic, and economic diversities (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2017; Azano et al., 2021).

For example, rural cultural diversity can include cultural-religious groups such as the Amish, Mennonites, and Quakers, and racial/ethnic groups such as Romani, African Americans, Latin Americans, African and Middle Eastern refugees or immigrants, and Indigenous people (Eckert & Alsup, 2015). Diverse gender identities, sexualities, and abilities, among other identities, and increasingly multicultural populations are part of the fabric of many rural communities (Johnson et al., 2018). In-migration of Latin American populations account for "most of the growth in non-metro areas over the 2000s" (Carr et al., 2012, p. 40). Increasing immigrant populations also mean increases in emergent bi/multilingual students in rural schools. Essentially, "rurality cannot be idealized as homogenous or fixed along any single, cultural framing of space, society, or economy" (Panelli et al., 2009, p. 358).

Because cultural considerations in education often center around urban definitions, contexts, and demographics, culturally responsive curricular materials and pedagogies are typically based on urban understandings (Eckert & Alsup, 2015). Yet place and identity are interconnected, and rural places embody unique identities not captured by urban representations (Azano et al., 2021; Massey, 1994).

Over the years, researchers have increasingly focused on diverse children's and young adult (YA) literature representing people of color (e.g., Brooks et al., 2010; Williams, 2012), gender and sexual identity (e.g., Crawley, 2018; Jenkins, 1998; Young, 2019), and global populations (e.g., Lewis, 1987; Short, 2016). However, the scholarship on diverse representations of rurality in children's and YA literature is relatively sparse (e.g., Eppley, 2010; Keys et al., 2017; Pini et al., 2017; Soderberg et al., 2018). Eppley (2010) analyzed 24 picturebooks and found six recurring images that depicted rural people as self-reliant, connected, satisfied, diverse, expendable, and othered. Analyzing two YA dystopian novels, Lyngstad (2019) found that utopian images were often idealized as rural pastoral spaces. Soderberg et al. (2018) analyzed rural YA classics from their youth and found motifs of romantic and frightful forest images, stereotypical images of gossipy village people, and characters clinging to their rural identities after moving to a city. Keys et al. (2017) analyzed three rural YA novels' lesbian representation and identified themes of isolation and belonging for queer, rural youth. Recently, Eppley et al. (2024) examined four, contemporary, Canadian novels for representations of Indigenous culture and land. Little additional scholarship addresses Moeller and Becnel's (2015) call for research contemporary YA representations of "the lives and concerns of rural youth" (n.p.).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

As a teacher educator who works with many preservice and inservice teachers in rural schools and who taught in rural public schools, I saw a need to examine this central question: *How are rural people and places depicted in contemporary, award-winning, middle grades and young adult literature?* In addition, I wondered: *What are the attitudes, perceptions, and characteristics of rural people and places that are represented? What identities and ideologies are depicted?*

### *BOOK SELECTION*

To answer the research questions, I conducted a critical content analysis of 15 middle grades and young adult novels (identified hereafter as YA for brevity) published in the U.S. between 2015 and 2018 and set in contemporary (within the last 20 years), rural America. Definitions of *rural* vary greatly and are hard to articulate with specificity that does not overgeneralize (Coladarci, 2007; Longhurst, 2022). U.S. Census Bureau statistics, problematically, define rural places as any area that is "not urban" (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). Rural communities are often defined as having a population

less than 50,000, a density less than 1,000 people per square mile, agricultural land use attributes, and/or being far from urban centers (Ratcliffe et al., 2016, p.3). However, "it is important to define rural not only demographically and geographically, but culturally as well. The word *rural* functions for many as a marker of identity, regardless of demographic criteria or current location" (Donehower et al., 2012, p. 7). Therefore, I classified books as rural if they had *rural salience*, an integral rural setting (see Table 1), and a *felt sense* of rurality, supported through rich description of setting, people, place, geography, culture, and/or community (Coladarci, 2007; Longhurst, 2022).

TABLE 1

*Criteria for Book Selection*

| CRITERIA | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| RURAL SALIENCE AND SETTING | • A rural setting integral to the story<br>• Place characterized as culturally rural, as identified by the characters or narrative<br>• Story described a "small town" setting, a remote or isolated location, rural cultures, or rural attributes<br>• And/or setting was a real town with a population of less than 50,000 and not a city suburb |
| A FELT SENSE OF RURALITY | • Rurality was conveyed through rich description of setting, people, place, geography, culture, and/or community (Coladarci, 2007; Longhurst, 2022). |
| AWARD WINNING LITERATURE | • As identified by national or regional book awards for middle grades and young adult literature (grades 6-12)<br>• As identified on the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database<br>• Must be the first book if part of a series |
| CONTEMPORARY, REALISTIC REPRESENTATIONS | • Books published between 2015 and 2018<br>• Stories with contemporary settings<br>• Realistic fiction, with magical realism permitted |

To identify books, I scoured relevant book award/recommendation sites such as Okra Picks, the Southern Book Prize, American Library Association awards, the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belprè Award, the Notable Books for a Global Society, American Indian Youth Literature Award, and searched the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database for books tagged as *rural, southern, country,* and/or *small town* (or like terms). Award winning literature provided texts already evaluated by professionals as meeting accepted criteria for quality YA literature such as enduring themes and relevance to the target audience, high quality writing in the respective genre, creative use

of language and literary devices, and authenticity and accuracy (Short et al., 2018). I read online book reviews, book jackets, and summaries to identify prospective books with diverse geographical and/or cultural representations of rurality. I obtained 42 novels written for middle grades or young adult readers (grades 6-12) that seemed to initially meet the criteria in Table 1. I narrowed the list by focusing on 2015-2018 books that were not brand-new and, therefore, more likely to be accessible for teachers and already exist in school and local libraries. Fifteen books met all the criteria (see Table 2), although I'm sure readers will know of others I missed. (One important contextual note: I began this research in late 2019 to early 2020. The Covid-19 Pandemic impacted this work in substantial ways and delayed publication of findings.)

In Table 2, I used author's notes and author websites to determine demographics and rural connections. Often, this information is not explicitly stated, creating major limitations including assumptions about race based on visual appearance. I have noted authors as White-presenting in the absence of any specific race/ethnicity identification.

TABLE 2

*Book and Author Representations*

| TITLE | AUTHOR AND RACE/ETHNICITY | AUTHOR'S RURAL POSITIONALITY | RURAL SETTING | PROMINENT IDENTITY REPRESENTATIONS | SAMPLES OF NATIONAL AWARDS / RECOGNITIONS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | MIDDLE GRADES NOVELS | | |
| ***As Brave as You*** | Jason Reynolds<br>African American | Visited grandparents' rural SC farm in summers<br>Grew up in DC suburb: Oxon Hill, MD | North Hill[b], VA | African American<br>Visually diverse/ blindness<br>Agoraphobia<br>Christian religion | 2016 Kirkus Award Prize; 2017 Schneider Family Book Award Winner; 2017 Coretta Scott King Book Award, Honor |
| ***Bayou Magic*** | Jewell Parker Rhodes<br>African American | No evidence<br>Grew up in Pittsburgh, PA<br>Lives in Seattle, WA | Bon Temps[b] bayou, LA | Multi-racial/ethnic Cajun<br>African America<br>Spirituality | 2015 Cybil's Awards Finalist; 2015 Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature Best Books |
| ***The Benefits of Being an Octopus*** | Ann Braden<br>White-presenting | Lives in Brattleboro, VT | Small town, VT | White American<br>Queer identities | 2018 Cybils Awards Nominee; 2019 Best Children's Books of the Year |

| TITLE | AUTHOR AND RACE/ETHNICITY | AUTHOR'S RURAL POSITIONALITY | RURAL SETTING | PROMINENT IDENTITY REPRESENTATIONS | SAMPLES OF NATIONAL AWARDS / RECOGNITIONS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***The End of the Wild*** | Nicole Helget<br>White-presenting | Grew up on a farm in southern MN<br>Lives in St. Peter, MN | The woods of Colter[b], MI | White, Finnish American<br>Military veteran<br>Somali-Muslim American | 2018 NCTE Charlotte Huck Honor Book; 2018 Outstanding Science Trade Book for Students |
| ***The Ethan I was Before*** | Ali Standish<br>White-presenting | Grew up in small town in NC<br>Lives in Raleigh, NC | Seaside town of Palm Knot[b] GA | White American | 2017 Okra Picks List; 2018 Southern Book Prize, Longlist; 2018 Best Children's Books of the Year |
| ***They Call me Guero*** | David Bowles<br>Mexican American | Grew up in Rio Grande Valley, TX | Rio Grande Valley, TX | Mexican American<br>Military veteran | 2019 Pura Belprè Award, Honor; 2019 Whippoorwill Book Award; 2019 Americas Award |
| | | | YOUNG ADULT NOVELS | | |
| ***Apple in the Middle*** | Dawn Quigley<br>Native American, Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe | Grew up in Mankato, MN<br>Lives in Twin Cities metro, MN | Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation, North Dakota | Biracial White and Native American<br>Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe<br>Christian religion & Native spirituality | 2019 Choices list; 2020 American Indian Youth Literature Award |
| ***Between Two Skies*** | Joanne O'Sullivan<br>White-presenting | No evidence<br>Lives in Asheville, NC | Bayou Perdu[b], Plaquemines Parish, LA | Multi-racial/ethnic Cajun identities<br>Vietnamese American<br>Rural out-migrants<br>Catholic religion | 2018 Southern Book Prize Finalist; 2018 Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts |
| ***Bone Gap*** | Laura Ruby<br>White-presenting | No evidence<br>Lives in Chicago, IL | Bone Gap, IL<br>Rural Poland | (Dis)abilities – Prosopagnosia<br>White American | 2016 Printz Award; 2015 National Book Award Finalist; 2015 Cybils Awards Finalist |
| ***Dress Codes for Small Towns*** | Courtney Stevens<br>White-presenting | Grew up in Bandana, KY<br>Lives in central KY | Otters Holt[b], KY | Queer identities<br>White American<br>Christian religion | 2018 Best Children's Books of the Year; 2018 YALSA Best Fiction for YA |
| ***Dumplin'*** | Julie Murphy<br>White-presenting | No evidence<br>Grew up in Dallas-Fort Worth, TX<br>Lives in north TX | Clover City[b], TX | Queer identities<br>White American | 2015 Cybils Awards Finalist; 2016 Indies Choice Book Award, honor; 2016 PEN Center USA Literary Award, finalist |

| TITLE | AUTHOR AND RACE/ETHNICITY | AUTHOR'S RURAL POSITIONALITY | RURAL SETTING | PROMINENT IDENTITY REPRESENTATIONS | SAMPLES OF NATIONAL AWARDS / RECOGNITIONS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***The Gone Away Place*** | Christopher Barzak<br>White-presenting | Grew up in rural Trumbull County, OH<br>Lives in OH | Newfoundland[b], OH | White American<br>Christian religion<br>Japanese American<br>Shinto religion<br>Queer identities | 2019 Whippoorwill Book Award; 2019 Locus Award Finalist |
| ***I'll Meet You There*** | Heather Demetrios<br>White-presenting | No evidence<br>From Los Angeles, CA<br>Lives in NYC | Creek View[b], CA | White American<br>Military veteran<br>(Dis)abilities | 2016 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults; 2016 Best Children's Books of the Year |
| ***The Serpent King*** | Jeff Zentner<br>White-presenting | No evidence<br>Lives in Nashville, TN | Forrestville[b], TN | White American<br>Queer identities<br>Christian - Pentecostal religion | American Library Association Morris Award for best debut YA; Walden Book Award for YA Fiction |
| ***Sing, Unburied, Sing*** | Jesmyn Ward<br>African American | Grew up in DeLisle, Mississippi<br>Lives in New Orleans, LA | Gulf Coast/ Sunflower County, MS | White and African American biracial family<br>African American Spirituality | 2017 National Book Awards Winner; 2018 Southern Book Prize Finalist |

[a] based on visual appearance, if not explicitly stated
[b] fictitious rural place
[c] typically categorized at adult literature, but can be accessible as YA with the 13-year-old main character

## *CRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS*

I employed qualitative, critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2017; Schreier, 2012) with lenses of critical literacies and critical place pedagogies to examine representations of rural people and places in these books. Critical content analysis involves applying various critical theories to examine how social, cultural, and historical issues of power, privilege, inequity, ideology, voice, and marginalization are addressed in texts (Short, 2017).

Readers bring their histories, socio-cultural backgrounds, identities, stereotypes, and ideologies to the texts they encounter, creating biased perspectives (Crotty, 1998). These lived experiences interact with a text to create a reader's transactional understanding (Rosenblatt, 1978). Critical theory calls readers to interrogate their perceived realities and become social change agents when they discover issues of oppression, inequity, or marginalization (Crotty, 1998). Through critical

readings, readers can achieve *conscientization*, becoming conscious of the status quo by engaging in reflection and action for equity, also known as praxis (Freire, 2000). Therefore, critical content analysis researchers can disrupt the commonplace by interrogating dominant ideologies and discourses and creating avenues for social justice (Short, 2017).

Critical literacies are lenses through which people can analyze texts, examining what counts as text, whose voices are represented, how those voices are portrayed, and how power is represented and enacted through discursive practices (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2013; Mills, 2016). These interrogations dislodge hegemonic views within texts so readers may better understand them as well as reach a critical awareness about themselves and the world. Because "places and texts are socially and materially constructed," they can "be made differently" (Comber, 2016, p. 3). Critical literacies pedagogues consider ways to produce or collect counternarratives, write more inclusive texts, use literacies to present marginalized perspectives, and employ literacies to improve social equity.

Critical place pedagogies serve as a complementary theoretical construct for this study (Donehower et al., 2007). I considered how places are formed through practices of "negotiation and contestation," and reciprocally, how people's geographical identities are "continually moulded" through this "practising of place" (Massey, 2005, p. 154). Rural critical place pedagogies involve readers (and writers) examining the following:

- "constructions and representations of rural people and life" (Donehower et al., 2007, p. 9);
- "the extent to which characterizations of the rural match (or not) observations of demographic, social, and economic conditions" (Edmondson, 2003, p. 114); and
- evaluating relationships with people in "socio-ecological places" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7).

Through a lens of critical place pedagogies, readers consider local and global power dynamics of place and the intersections among them, and how place and people reciprocally shape one another.

In critical content analysis, researchers use theory to think about and analyze the data (Short, 2017). I selected tenets of critical literacies and critical place pedagogies to develop the following analytic questions:

- What stories are told/not told about rural settings and people?
- Whose voices are heard, silenced, marginalized, or stereotyped?
- "How are people presented in relation to each other and in relation to the place" (Comber, 2016, p. 19)?

- How are identities, activities, and relationships being given significance in these texts (Gee, 2005)?
- What is "the extent to which characterizations of the rural match (or not) observations of demographic, social, and economic conditions" (Edmondson, 2003, p. 114)?

Using these critical analysis questions, I read each novel at least twice, once for immersion as a reader to get a sense of the whole and once for deep analysis, returning to the texts frequently to ground my interpretations in the context of the whole and engage in iterative coding. I open-coded within texts themselves for any data unit (word, phrase, depiction, or idea) that might be relevant to the analytic questions. Then, I entered coded passages into NVivo to develop the categories and subcategories of the coding frames (Schreier, 2012), identify patterns across texts, identify the relationships between categories, and develop thematic assertions that described the literary representations of rural people and places (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I developed four thematic assertions, with related subthemes, and identified representative data excerpts to illustrate each. Then, I found scholarly literature to help interpret and contextualize the findings within critical literacies and critical place pedagogies.

This critical content analysis illuminated what representations were present and missing in this collection of 15 novels. My analysis gave me a stronger sense of how to guide youth and teachers in noticing and naming what is happening in rural literature and rural representations, which I synthesize in the implications section of this article.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I define themes as statements that tell a story about the patterned findings from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Category labels or topical phrases are insufficient as themes because they do not convey the relationships, relative meanings, or "so what" about the topic. While the four thematic statements below may seem long, they convey the nuance and complexity necessary to describe the depictions of rural people and places in these 15 contemporary YA novels:

- Characters in these rural novels often feel a strong sense of belonging to their community and connectedness with its people. Characters' identity development is influenced by and sustained through the community's culture and traditions, their intradependence, connections to the land, and the ways in which people negotiate difference.
- Rural towns are also portrayed as places where characters are stuck and want to leave for a better life. The novels portray a rural-urban hierarchy in which rural places are on the bottom and "making it out" is a marker of success; staying is a sign of failure. Occasional

counternarratives of rural places are provided in which the place positively shapes a character's identity.

- Rural places are overrepresented as spaces of poverty and dilapidation, with only a few instances of middle-income, stable families. Representations of poverty include characters who lack sufficient food and housing, who are unemployed, and whose parents are abusive or suffer from alcoholism or mental health challenges.
- The novels include a wide range of diversity in race, culture, gender identity and sexuality, and religion or spirituality through representations that showcase rural diversity. The intersectionalities of youths' diverse identities with rurality, a rare occurrence, are addressed well in several novels.

Below, I elaborate on each of these themes and their subthemes, provide data examples, and interweave discussion of the data with scholarly literature and relevant statistics. This integrated approach to the findings and discussion sections is important for incorporating theory into the analysis and for explicitly examining how the rural characterizations match up to demographic, social, and economic information (Edmondson, 2003).

## *THEME 1 – RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE PLACES OF BELONGING AND IDENTITY*

In this text set, many characters live with a sense of belonging and identity tied to their rural place. Because of their relationship with the place, people want to stay in their community, work to save hometown traditions, and engage in environmental activism and sustainability. In addition, several novels portray deep, sometimes spiritual, connections to the land and animals.

### *Identity, Belonging, and Community*

Identity development and a sense of belonging are fostered through festivals and community events as well as social, interpersonal networks throughout the rural communities represented. Characters with minoritized or marginalized identities draw upon these various networks and community traditions to gain acceptance and belonging.

**"Revitalizing the Commons"** (McInerney et al., 2011, p.6). Place-based pedagogies scholars emphasize the importance of communities sustaining *the commons*: shared natural resources, cultural traditions, or common public spaces or institutions (Bowers, 2006; Theobald, 1997). Across the text set, the characters enact an intergenerational value for sustaining or revitalizing the commons through traditions, events, and festivals that construct both individual and community identity.

There are both minor events or traditions and major, plot-driving events that influence character and community identity. For example, sharing gumbo in *Bayou Magic* and *Between Two*

*Skies*, attending the fair in *Bone Gap,* and fellowshipping at a pow-wow in *Apple in the Middle* are examples of small moments that bring people together. In other novels, events that sustain the commons are central to the plot. In *Dumplin',* the beauty pageant is the town's – and story's – main event: "the one thing that puts our little town on the map is that we're home of the oldest beauty pageant in Texas" (Murphy, 2015, p. 3). Dumplin' strives to show that she, a confident and curvaceous woman, belongs in the town's hallmark beauty pageant. Similarly, in *Dress Codes for Small Towns*, Billie thinks the annual Corn Dolly Award for an influential townswoman is beyond reach because she doesn't conform to mainstream beauty norms and is bisexual. Despite these feelings, she and her friends work to save the annual Harvest Festival and award. Billie's surprising Corn Dolly nomination is a crucial moment in developing her identity and community belonging. While critical place theorists argue that themes of community traditions cultivating identity and belonging may overly romanticize rural places (McInerney et al., 2011), the authors avoided romanticization by addressing contemporary, socio-cultural complexities and foregrounding voices and identities that challenge the status quo.

**Intradependence.** In addition to communities being characterized and shaped by their traditions, they are also depicted as networks of closely connected people and family (biological and chosen) with a strong sense of belonging and acceptance of one another, reflecting intradependence in how members of the community act collectively rather than individually (Theobald, 2007).

The description of the townspeople as one unified character or entity is a recurring motif in four texts: *Bayou Magic, Apple in the Middle, The Gone Away Place*, and *Bone Gap*. In *Bone Gap*, Ruby (2015) creates the "people of Bone Gap" as a character themselves, moving and acting in unison with one another as a collective or biologic network: "All of Bone Gap would help you" (Ruby, 2015, p. 146). From an intradependence lens, Bone Gap represents collectivism with several characters collaboratively making community decisions.

Representations of connection and intradependence are also found in *Apple in the Middle,* when Apple notices that the Indigenous people of Turtle Mountain are called cousins, aunts, and uncles, regardless of blood relation. Likewise, *The Gone Away Place* illustrates highly collective thinking after a tragic tornado. For weeks after the tornado, townspeople see ghosts of those killed. The town psychologist explains, "It is the community as a whole that is being haunted, and that is not entirely unexpected, if you studied other communities around the world that have suffered great

losses" (Barzak, 2018, p. 151). Intradependence and connectivity are echoed throughout the texts, depicting the characters' sense of community belonging.

**Minoritized and Marginalized Identities and Negotiating Difference.** One potential pitfall of focusing on intradependence and community connectivity is overlooking the ways in which "politics of race, gender, and class strongly influence the degree of attachment that individuals and groups feel towards a particular place and community" (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 9). Critical readers must ask: Who is not part of the collective? Although many of these books depict place-based belonging, some characters struggle with not fitting in because of minoritized or marginalized identities. People don't necessarily or automatically feel a sense of belonging to where they live (Comber, 2016; Massey, 2005). In fact, the term *community* "may mask significant diversity, and indeed conflict, within an area" (Comber, 2016, p. 38). Communities are not static places (Comber, 2016) and need to be examined as complex, dynamic spaces understood by and "constituted through interactions" (Massey, 2005, p.9).

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Leonie's White in-laws reject her and her children because she is African American, a point of contention she never overcomes. In addition to racial dissonance, sexual identity also causes feelings of isolation in some of the books. For example, in *Dress Codes for Small Towns,* Billie comes out as bisexual and says you "need a machete and some body armor if you want to walk the openly gay road in Otters Holt" (Stevens, 2017, p. 115). Feelings of outsiderness or marginalization based on race or sexual identity may be amplified in rural communities because of the intimate nature of rural relationships and connectivity, the visibility of difference, and/or the hegemony of the mainstream culture. Being a minority and/or marginalized in rural towns may create distance between individuals, rather than connection, and feelings of isolation from the community ecology.

Howley and Howley (2010) propose a definition of community as "a group of people in a place who engage in the project of constructing the common good in a way that reflects but also redefines important local meanings" (p. 36). They posit that the goal of a community is "remaining together despite difference" and determining how much difference a community will permit or tolerate (Buber, 1949 as cited in Howley & Howley, 2010, p. 36). This negotiation was evident when characters were determined to be different, by themselves and/or by others, and various community members determined how and if those people would be accepted.

### *Connections to the Land*

Characters demonstrate close ties to the land and animals in ways that are self-sustaining and/or protect nature, reinforcing motivations to sustain the commons (McInerney et al., 2011). These ties are evident in characters' respect for nature, connection with the land and animals, and in-depth knowledge of plants and herbology (explored in theme four). The animals and land are part of the commons that individuals and communities need for sustainability, and their intradependence encourages members to treat these resources with care (Theobald, 1997).

In the novels, the land plays an important role, providing for families as they tend gardens, raise livestock, and hunt. Grandmere, in *Bayou Magic*, sums it up well: "Everybody, young and old, lives off the water and land" (Parker Rhodes, 2015, p. 120). There is a pattern of heavy reliance on what the land can provide: characters cultivate sustenance gardens (*Bayou Magic*; *As Brave As You*) and keep bees (*Bone Gap*), shrimp and fish in the ocean (*Bayou Magic; Between Two Skies*), learn to slaughter livestock for meat (*Sing, Unburied, Sing*), and stockpile fresh and canned produce and forage in the forest (*The End of the Wild*). Some characters rely on the land and animals due to lack of convenient access to grocery stores or poverty, but connections to the land are also part of the cultural knowledge and ways of being.

Representations of rural people as idyllically living off the land can reinforce quaint stereotypes and mask the struggles in sustaining themselves and their families. Many characters in these books who live off the land are grandparent figures teaching "the old ways," which may reinforce an antiquated characterization that is irrelevant for contemporary rural families or younger generations. Such representations of rurality reinforce "the assumption that living off the land is still as pervasive and viable in rural areas as it has always been and that community is sustained through individuals' relationships with the land instead of with each other" (Donehower et al., 2007, p. 124). Although there are several depictions of people living off the land, they are balanced with descriptions of the activities and relationships that define communities.

As a whole, these novels emphasize the human connection and intradependence of rural people as well as their complex relationships with land and animals. Enacting critical place literacies, readers need to go beyond simply recognizing these connections to examine how local environmental issues connect to global concerns and confront systemic injustices and exploitation by challenging hegemonies (McInerney et al., 2011).

## *THEME 2 – RURAL PEOPLE FEEL STUCK AND RURAL PLACES ARE A DOWNGRADE*

Contrasting theme one's representations of belonging, rural places are also frequently portrayed as subpar places that people want to leave but feel "stuck." People who leave the community are glorified for "getting out." Conflicting emotions and motivations arise within these novels about staying versus leaving, echoing the scholarly literature on rural experiences: "rural youths' relationships to the countryside are characterized by conflicting feelings of belonging, longing, ambivalence, and abhorrence" (Leyshon, 2011, p. 304).

### *Stuckness*

Rural towns are portrayed as places characters are stuck, hate being, want to leave, or try to escape for a better life. Authors (through their characters) both implicitly and explicitly state that making it out of a small town is a marker of success and staying is failure. They portray a dichotomous, hierarchical relationship between rural and urban places that glorifies cities as places of culture, abundance, food, and fashion—a place one goes when they "make it out." "Making it out" rhetoric inherently devalues the lives of those who stay in small towns and implies that those who do are living lesser lives, which is a prominent belief among rural youth (Howley & Howley, 2010).

The refrain of stuckness suggests that people living in rural places have no productive possibilities for their future. In *Dumplin'*, the main character Willowdean explains:

> Clover City is the type of place you leave. It's love that either sucks you in or pushes you away. There are only a few who really make it out and stay out, while the rest of us drink, procreate, and go to church, and that seems to be enough to keep us afloat. (Murphy, 2015, p. 24)

Rural life is depicted as monotonous, unadventurous, and pleasureless. Likewise, in *The Serpent King*, the characters compare staying in Forrestville to dying. Lydia tells Dill his musical talents are wasted if he stays: "This is what I get for trying to keep from having to watch your life wither and die on the vine in this stupid little town" (Zentner, 2016, p. 88). Lydia continues a negative place rhetoric throughout the novel: "Opportunity and possibility don't knock at your door in Forrestville" (p. 89); "It sucks here. People are dumb and racist and homophobic" (p. 115). Although many rural places have significant social and economic challenges, stereotypes of small towns as dying and devoid of opportunities reinforce dominant, oppressive rural narratives and discount the many cultural experiences, livelihoods, and types of fulfillment that exist, suggesting that happiness resides only in cities.

### *Being Downgraded*

When a character leaves the city to move to a rural place, it's considered a downgrade. In *Dress Codes for Small Towns* (Stevens, 2017), Davey moves from Nashville with his mom to live in Otter's Holt, and Billie comments, "His mom didn't move him from Nashville to Otters Holt; she moved him from love to absence" (p. 51). Billie thinks Davey has lost his city friendships and relationships, the joys of city life, and his ability to express his gender-fluid identity, in exchange for this small town absence.

Another significant urban-to-rural downgrade depiction occurs in *Ethan I was Before* when Ethan's mother moves their middle-class family from Boston to her hometown of Palm Knot. Their friends are surprised: "You must have had an awful good reason to come back to this hole" (p. 23). This perception of downward mobility may be reified in rural school systems that "educate students for deployment in other places" through both overt and tacit discourses that emphasize an urban-rural hierarchy (Corbett, 2014, p. 13). Deficit thinking is repeated by characters who see themselves as stuck in unfruitful places, even though they may actually be (and are sometimes portrayed as) fulfilling their personal goals.

Discussed in theme three, most characters in this text set live in poverty, which may contribute to feelings of stuckness. Over-representation of rural people as low status and in constant despair is an act of "dehumanization" (Freire, 2000). Freire (2000) encourages educators to raise people's critical consciousness through a problem-posing curriculum that employs critical literacies. From this stance, educators and students "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world," and "they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2000, p. 83). In too many actual rural classrooms, students are implicitly (or explicitly) taught that leaving provides higher status than staying (Donehower, 2007), and this novel set largely reifies that message. However, a problem-posing curriculum would call readers to unveil these oppressive narratives and the systems that benefit from it, become critical of this "fragmented view of reality deposited" on them, and re-create the narrative more fully and humanely (Freire, 2000, p. 73).

### *Countering Narratives of Despair and Stuckness*

Across the novels, there are some positive countervoices of rural people negotiating their intersecting trajectories of place and identity (Massey, 2005). As noted, Lydia, in *The Serpent King*, feels Forrestville is a place of despair. She implies that her parents betrayed her by raising her there, depriving her of opportunities for greatness, but her father offers a countervoice: "Do you really think living here hasn't had a big hand in who you've turned out to be" (Zentner, 2016, p. 116)? This countervoice, although seldom heard in Zenter's novel, reminds readers that talents can flourish in small towns, just as Lydia has developed her identity and social recognition in Forrestville. However, readers may miss a counternarrative if voices representing stuckness and deficit perspectives maintain dominance throughout a novel.

*I'll Meet You There* also provides counternarratives. The main character, Skylar, develops her skills as a collage artist by drawing upon her rural experiences, and eventually, her collage becomes "a love letter to Creek View" (Demetrios, 2015, p. 363). Although Skylar ultimately leaves, she demonstrates that talents can flourish in rural communities and are not necessarily wasted or stifled there. In addition, this book offers a voice of resistance from Skylar's best friend, Dylan, who chooses to stay and argues against Skylar's constant negativity:

> You know what it feels like, being friends with you guys? Do you have any idea how it sounds when you talk about how crappy this town is and how you'd rather die than end up saddled with a baby, living in a trailer park, broke as hell. Every time you say that, you're describing my life. A life I'm actually okay with–I'm sure as hell a lot happier than either of you. (Demetrios, 2015, p. 235)

Dylan represents a young person negotiating her rural identity, developing a family, and having a fulfilling life in a small town.

In a different counternarrative, Evangeline, in *Between Two Skies,* wants to stay in her hometown, but her father wants something different for her:

> Everything seems focused on getting out of here, and going forward means getting away. And yet I feel this tug to stay, help Daddy on the boat. Shrimping is no way to make a living, he says. I can help more if I get an education and make money doing something else. What is the something else? The idea of sitting in an office all day feels like dying to me. I'll never do that. (O'Sullivan, 2016, p. 20)

Evangeline wants to take up her family's business, partly out of desire and partly out of a sense of belonging, but her parents believe an education will provide economic stability.

Despite these occasional counternarratives, characterizations of small-town life as downgraded and degraded prevail. I found a pattern of derogatory and dehumanizing depictions of rural places as least desirable in the geographic hierarchy, with urban cities at the top. Freire (2000) asserts that inquiry and action (including the construction of counternarratives) are essential for people to rehumanize themselves and their spaces, because "apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human" (p. 72).

## *THEME 3 – RURAL MEANS PLACES AND PEOPLE OF POVERTY*

Poverty, unemployment, hunger, and unhoused status are prevalent characterizations in these YA novels, and images of rural blight—dilapidation and despair—are commonly used to characterize rural places, disproportionately to U.S. rural population statistics.

### *Poverty, Hunger, and Unhoused Status*

Few characters are portrayed with middle-income or sufficient, working-class jobs. Although socio-economic status (SES) can be determined by several attributes, including income, occupation, education, and family size (APA, 2020), parental/guardian occupation was one of the only indications of income level in the novels. Only four main characters out of the 15 novels have middle-income families (i.e., parents who are a preacher, dentist, editor and computer coder, and small construction business owner). Four families are characterized with lower-middle income jobs (e.g., shrimper, utilities employee, emergency medical technician). In the remaining seven novels (47% of the set), the main characters' parents have very low-income, poverty-level jobs (e.g., bartender, cook, waitress, cashier, housekeeper, or produce picker), are unemployed and foraging for food, or are retired and living in poverty-like conditions.

Characters in several novels are chronically hungry, including Skylar in *I'll Meet You There*, Finn in *Bone Gap*, Zoey and her family in *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*, and Jojo and his sister in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*, a package of ground beef and a stolen can of Easy Cheese are rare treats for Zoey and her siblings. In *The End of the Wild*, the family staves off hunger by foraging in the woods. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Leonie uses money to buy drugs instead of feeding her children, and Jojo starves: "my throat a closing hand, my stomach a burning fist" (Ward, 2017, p. 84). Hunger occurs in approximately 16% of rural populations (USDA, 2018), but six of 15 novels (approximately 40% of the set) have chronically hungry characters.

In addition to widespread poverty and hunger, two novels depict unhoused youth and a third, *The Benefits of Being an Octopus,* shows a family at risk of losing their house. In *The Serpent King*, Travis is beaten and kicked out of his house for defending his mother against his abusive father, and he is forced to live in his truck. In *I'll Meet You There*, the main character, Skylar, leaves her alcoholic mother's trailer, briefly doesn't know where she will live, and ends up staying rent-free in the hotel where she works. In *The Benefits of Being an Octopus,* two moms barely avoid losing housing by teaming up to rent a one-bedroom apartment, with their five children, to escape their abusive male partners. While these representations disrupt the stereotype that being unhoused only occurs in cities, it heaps on images of excessive poverty (and violence) in rural areas without countervoices demonstrating otherwise.

Furthermore, circumstances of poverty are often juxtaposed with the idea that hardship builds character. In *End of the Wild,* Fern's stepdad tells the social worker, "The kids will struggle with me–that is true. But it is a good and honest kind of struggling that we do, one that makes us work together and pull out the best qualities in each of us" (Helget, 2017, pp. 193-194). Fern also notes that Alkomso's Somali American family "doesn't have much money, either, but they always seem to be able to outsmart being poor" (Helget, 2017, p. 115). This depiction trivializes poverty as something that clever, honest, hard-working people can overcome and be better for it. The idea of "outsmarting" poverty can be interpreted as a kind of victim blaming or way of justifying poverty as a plight of the uneducated and dim-witted.

Frequent representations of poverty may seem logical in rural-based literature because a higher percentage of the rural population lives in poverty than urban, but the pre-pandemic rural poverty rate was 16.4% (USDA, 2018), much lower than represented in this text set. In addition, the service sector is the largest employment venue in rural communities, including education and health care, which are typically middle-income industries (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019).

### *Dilapidated Houses and Businesses*

Because the families in these novels typically have low-income jobs, images of poor living conditions and community blight prevail. Main characters live in homes with little or no electricity, limited technology, lack of indoor plumbing, and houses in disrepair. For example, *Ethan I was Before* begins with a two-chapter-long description of the southern town of Palm Knot as "drooping and faded and flat," with "rough and lumpy" roads, houses in "varied states of dilapidation," and front porches that "all sag like giant hammocks" (Standish, 2017, pp. 7, 9). Images of crumbling buildings

and inadequate facilities are prevalent. Two brothers in *Bone Gap* live in "a peeling white house, a matching garage, and red barn permanently slanted to the left" (Ruby, 2015, p. 12). In *The Serpent King,* Dill's house is "white and rundown with a weathered tin roof and wood stacked on the front porch" (Zentner, 2016, p. 9). In *Dumplin',* Willowdean's "front door's been jammed for years" (Murphy, 2015, p. 12). In *I'll Meet You There*, Skylar's town has "a trailer park, a few run-down houses, a couple of businesses that barely made enough to keep their doors open, and the Paradise Motel" (Demetrios, 2015, p. 6). In *Bayou Magic*, grandmother's cabin has no telephone, "no microwave," and "only a stinky outhouse" (Parker Rhodes, 2013, pp. 2, 3).

On one hand, these images act as the antithesis to the rural, romantic idealism, depicting the opposite extreme of decaying, dying communities. Indeed, recent research indicates that rural economic blight and physical building decay is a concern: Skobba et al. (2020) surveyed 210 rural municipal workers in one southeastern state and found that over half of the respondents felt their communities had "quite a bit" to an "extreme amount" of dilapidated housing. Vacant housing and low property values were also a significant concern. However, when such blighted living conditions are overrepresented, one stereotype (idyllic farmland) is traded for another (shanty town).

Socio-economic status for rural communities is a complex intersection of multiple factors including income, perceptions of physical and mental labor, deficit thinking, political affiliation, and migration patterns (Jamieson, 2000; Theobald & Wood, 2010; Yodanis, 2002). In these communities, "the whole class structure may be represented within the boundaries of a coherent place, and people have a tangible sense of the stratification system" (Duncan, 1996, p. 105). Class stratification and poverty may be more visible in rural settings, as each person's situation frequently intersects with and influences others' lives.

However, applying critical place pedagogies, readers need to ask a deeper, more political question of power: how might rural people's feelings of stuckness, people's perceptions of rural as lesser, and situations of poverty be manufactured or produced by existing practices and policies? Massey (2005) argues that "the huge concentration of world city industries (and especially finance) is one element in the constellation of forces *producing* that poverty and exclusion" (p. 157). She also notes that "a decision has to be made: between reducing poverty and promoting City" (Massey, 2005, p. 157). Employing this critical place lens forces readers to consider how these social and economic situations are constructed by particular people, systems, and governments to serve particular interests.

## *THEME 4 – DIVERSE PEOPLE COMPRISE RURAL PLACES*

The dominant, U.S. media narrative of rural America as homogeneous, White, Christian, farming families misrepresents the diversity of race, culture, gender and sexual identities, religious beliefs, and other identities that exist among rural people (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019; Donehower et al., 2007). These books depict rural people of diverse races and cultures, include marginalized and intersectional identities, and address a range of religions, spirituality, and worldviews. The high diversity in these novels may be, in part, because the books were recently published, award winning or recommended books, and/or by award winning authors.

### *Diverse Representations of Race and Culture*

Regarding race and ethnicity, the set includes primary or secondary characters who are White/European American, Black/African American, Mexican American, Native American, Indian American, Somali American, and Japanese American. Five books have main characters and families of color:

- *As Brave as You; Sing, Unburied, Sing; Bayou Magic* – African American
- *They Call Me Guero* – Mexican American
- *Apple in the Middle* – Native American

The remaining books have White main characters. In addition, eleven books have secondary characters of color. Across the set, people of color represent 33% of main characters, which is higher than the 20% of people of color living in rural America (USDA, 2018). This overrepresentation can be considered a corrective trend that begins to rectify decades of omission and erasure.

Beyond simple percentages of representation, it is also important to consider *how* people of color and their intersectional identities are depicted in rural places and spaces. Intersectionality is the idea that identities are "interactive and mutually constructive" (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018, p. 431), and no identity is experienced or understood apart from one's other identity categories (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). Therefore, nuanced representations of multiple, intersecting identities provide readers with realistic models of adolescence. For example, the main character in *They Call Me Guero* develops positive, intersectional cultural identities with the support of family and friends. Guero's dad says,

> You're a border kid, a foot on either bank.
> Your ancestors crossed this river a thousand times.
> No wall, no matter how tall, can stop your heritage
> from flowing forever, like the Rio Grande itself. (Bowles, 2018, p. 9)

Guero's biculturality is described as a positive attribute. Guero also negotiates intra-cultural tensions based on skin tones. "Guero" is his nickname, meaning light-skinned. Although he identifies as Mexican American, he is often mistaken as White and bullies derogatorily call him "gringo." His dad explains the opportunities Guero will have because of his complexion: "M'ijo, pale folks catch all the breaks here and in Mexico, too. Not your fault. Not fair. Just the way it's been for years. Doors will open for you that won't for me." Regardless, Guero maintains pride in his heritage, asserting that his Mexican identity extends beyond skin color to include his cultural ways of being. Although Latin American people inhabit rural towns across the country, they have little YA literature representation, so this book makes an important contribution to rural-focused texts (Herrera, 2016).

Similarly, Apple in *Apple in the Middle* must negotiate her bicultural identity in both her suburban home and the Native American reservation community she visits. She faces racism from both sides, for being too dark when a White boy calls her a "prairie n***er" and for being too White when a tribal member tells her, "You're one of them white Indians. Apple–white on the inside and red on the outside" (Quigley, 2018, p. 155). Despite this intracultural othering, Apple develops her bicultural identity and claims her Indian-ness: "I may not be Indian the way you are, or anyone else for that matter. But I am Indian" (Quigley, 2018, p. 216). Negotiating intersecting racial/cultural identities is a common topic in contemporary YA literature, but layering these identities with rural ones seldom occurs (Paneli et al., 2009). Books with bi/multicultural representations of rural people help to dispel myths of homogeneity in rural America.

### *LGBTQ Identities in Rural Communities*

The Movement Advancement Project estimates that 15 to 20 percent of LGBTQ Americans live in rural places (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Research shows that LGBTQ "sexual identity development and expression" are influenced by "geographic location and community size," yet these aspects remain understudied (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018, p. 429). In this set of rural YA, the intersection of LGBTQ and rural identities, in some cases also interwoven with religious identities, is represented with the most depth through the main character in *Dress Codes for Small Towns* (shortened as "Dress Codes" hereafter) and in secondary characters in *The Serpent King*, *The Gone Away Place*, *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*, and *Dumplin'*.

*Dress Codes'* main character, Billie, considers herself a tomboy but doesn't like being mistaken as a man by the town tailor. Throughout the story, Billie explores her gender expression

and sexuality. A secondary character, Davey, who wears heavy eye makeup and struggles with his dad's acceptance, is presented as ambiguously queer. Billie's parents wonder about Davey's sexuality but ask in a way that conveys prejudice:

> [Billie's mom:] Dad is "not asking you to betray your friend's confidence. He's asking if Hattie [Davey's mom] has any reason to be concerned."
>
> [Billie's dad:] "No...I'm asking if Davey... is sexually fluid." (Stevens, 2018, p.172)

Although Billie's dad, who is also the town's preacher, says he is reading and learning about LGBTQ identities, he and Billie's mom still think Davey's sexuality is a "reason to be concerned." In the end, Billie's dad grows into a supportive parent of a queer child, thereby indicating acceptance by their Christian church as well. When Billie dances with her girlfriend in front of the church and community, her father cuts in and says, "I'm proud of you, Billie... following your gut, your heart– when you know it's not popular" (Stevens, 2018, p. 328). *Dress Codes* depicts rural youth exploring their gender and sexuality within a religious context, parents actively working to learn about LGBTQ identities, and supportive community members. Without discrediting the trauma and marginalization that many LGBTQ people have experienced from religious communities, this book offers a counternarrative to the stereotype that religious people are unaccepting of queer people or that these identities are mutually exclusive.

Massey (2005) says that a space is an open system of "connections yet to be made" and an openness of "loose ends and missing links" (pp. 11, 12). In *Dress Codes*, Billy constructs her identity throughout the story, and she makes new links, new connections, with queer allies and town members. Finding these new or "missing links" between herself and other queer community members helps her build confidence and gain acceptance. This subtle message that a rural place may have "connections yet to be made" for youth who feel different or minoritized provides hope for young people struggling to find their own sense of community.

Across the five books with queer characters, there are genuine, authentic representations of queer people that could positively support readers' identity development and normalize LGBTQ identities (e.g., Connor in *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*; the drag queens and Dumplin's friend Hannah in *Dumplin'*). There are also characters who represent the challenges of coming out as gay/queer (Drew in *The Gone Away Place*, and Davey in *Dress Codes*) and parents who both support (Billie's dad in *Dress Codes*) and ostracize LGBTQ youth (e.g., Becca's parents in *The Gone Away Place*). Books such as these serve as mirrors reflecting queer rural youth whose identities

are intersectional and as sliding glass doors for those who are questioning or exploring their identities to vicariously inhabit a world where it is okay to be queer (Sims Bishop, 2015/1990). They also serve as dispersing prisms (Krishnaswami, 2019) that refract and showcase the many kinds of rural people.

### *Diversity in Religion, Spirituality, and Worldview*

In this text set, I found diverse representations of religion, spirituality, and worldview. Five of the 15 books emphasize traditional or local knowledge of nature, herbology, spirituality, witchcraft, and/or Indigenous spiritual beliefs (i.e., Japanese Shintoism, African spirituality, Native beliefs). Christian identity is significant in five texts, with few of the other major, formal religions (e.g., Judaism, Hinduism, Islam) represented even tangentially. Five novels have little or no mention of religion. The Pew Research Center (2019) reported that 65% of U.S. adults identify as Christian, 26% of the population identifies as religiously unaffiliated, and 8% identify with non-Christian religions. If this text set reflected the nation's religious diversity, about two-thirds of the books would reflect Christian religions and one-third of the books would center on non-Christian worldviews; this set has the opposite. This inconsistency may disrupt hegemonic Christian narratives or stereotypes of rural places as solely Christian (again, providing a corrective trend) but also indicates an underrepresentation of the actual Christian population.

**Representing the Christian Majority.** Christianity is still prominent across the United States, and rural Americans identify as slightly more religious than other regions (Lyons, 2003). Christianity is largely represented as a positive influence in the lives of the novels' characters, except for *The Serpent King* that depicts religious extremism and manipulation and *The Gone Away Place* that depicts fundamentalism's intolerance of others. *Dress Codes* shows the ability for religious institutions and leaders to change and be inclusive. As *Brave as You, Dress Codes,* and *Apple in the Middle* depict church as a cultural staple: "down here, we go to church" (Reynolds, 2016, p. 119). Churches and religious institutions often function as one of the main social centers in rural communities (with the public school being a second), so church as a cultural staple accurately represents many rural communities (Lyons, 2003).

**Herbology and Spirituality as Worldviews.** Knowledge of plants, herbal remedies, and cultural herbology are woven into *Sing, Unburied, Sing; The End of the Wild; Bayou Magic; The Gone Away Place*; and *Apple in the Middle*. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Leonie remembers how her mother used her spiritual and herbal beliefs to heal the family with "homemade ointments," "special teas," and "saints and spirits" (Ward, 2017, p. 42). With their inherited abilities, Leonie and her son

Jojo both see spirits from the past. Similarly, both herbal medicine and folk spirituality are included in *Bayou Magic,* which has mostly African American characters.

There is a long history of African and African American women practicing herbal medicine and spiritual healing. In her analysis of historical and contemporary African American herbal medicine, Hamby (2004) noted, "African-American folk medicine was a multifaceted practice intertwined with religion and spirituality. Traditional medicine reflected a complex belief system that evolved from Africa into slavery and beyond" (p. 5). Therefore, the representations of herbal, cultural, and spiritual knowledge in the rural, southern, African American families in *Bayou Magic* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are historically and culturally accurate, while representing diverse knowledge systems.

In *The Gone Away Place,* Rose dies from tornadoes that hit her town. Using traditional Japanese Shintoism practices, her parents connect with Rose's spirit and protect it until she moves on to the afterlife:

> I was lucky that my dad knew things–things his parents had taught him about how to protect a person who's died, when their spirit is vulnerable to the predators that roam the spirit world... (Barzak, 2018, p. 158)

While Ellie, the main character, leads the other tornado victims to the afterlife by having them tell their story to her, Rose chooses to have her family guide her to the afterlife using traditional Shinto rituals (conveying religious pluralism as a whole text). This is a rare YA representation of a rural, Japanese American family incorporating Indigenous beliefs into their lives, and it is one of only two depictions of an Asian American family in this text set (the other is a Vietnamese American secondary character in *Between Two Skies*). Although the author is not a cultural insider, Barzak's writing is lent credibility with his two-year residence in Japan.

These representations of different funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) are vital in countering hegemony over what kinds of knowledge are valued. In addition to cultural influences on knowledge production, there are socio-political and spatial influences on "what is defined as legitimate knowledge" that Massey (2005) calls the "social geography of knowledge production" (p. 75). Within rural spaces, knowledge of herbology, nature, and foraging may be valued funds and forms of knowledge, but outside of those spaces, they are often dismissed or viewed as the old ways, folklore, or lesser. Such local knowledge and resources are also pushed aside in favor of global production. It is advantageous for agri-business and those invested in globalized trade to devalue and

discredit local forms of knowledge and stifle the production and distribution of rural knowledges (Massey, 2005). Therefore, these novels act as socio-political statements on the value of rural geographical knowledges.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CRITICAL PLACE PEDAGOGIES

Critical place pedagogies require learners to be actively involved in the process of place-making and in the production of knowledge. McInerney et al. (2011) assert, "A critical pedagogy of place not only interrupts the insular and prejudicial views of people but more importantly involves students in a political process of understanding and shaping communities" (pp. 11-12). Educators must be prepared to engage in critical inquiries and emancipatory pedagogies that guide students in examining "what needs to be conserved and protected" as well as "what needs to be transformed" in rural spaces (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 12). Rural is often the forgotten "R" in culturally relevant pedagogies (Azano, 2014), and educators can address this gap by developing more culturally relevant and proactive teacher preparation and K-12 curricula that include rural contexts (Garcia et al., 2015).

For many educators, teaching with multicultural literature is a means for "decentraliz(ing) the power of mainstream culture(s)" and a key objective (Cai, 2002, p. 272). Including rural representations when teaching multicultural literature clearly aligns with the pedagogical goals of using multicultural literature to examine issues of power, oppression, and inequity (Cai, 2002). Educators can engage pre/inservice teachers or K-12 students in examining literature (and other texts) through a critical place lens, analyzing the ways in which rural places are constructed, how rural identities are portrayed and how they might be narrated differently, and the local and global power structures that produce policies and practices in rural and urban places.

This study answered questions about how rural people and places are depicted in contemporary YA literature, including both positive representations of diverse identities and problematic narratives of being stuck in a small town and living in places of pervasive poverty and dilapidation. What do teacher educators and K-12 teachers do with this information? They can...

- Intentionally select texts with authentic, multifaceted representations of rurality and counternarratives to rural stereotypes.
- Analyze rurally salient texts with the critical place literature analysis questions in Table 3.
- Engage students in creating and sharing counternarratives of rurality.

Involving youth in composing counternarratives, based on their own stories or contexts, can help them value rural communities, promote sustainability, explore their intersectional identities, and transform their realities in productive ways (Anderson & Saunders, 2015; Comber, 2016).

TABLE 3

*Critical Place Literature Analysis Questions*

| | |
|---|---|
| CHARACTER & IDENTITY | How is a character's identity shaped by their rural place or community? |
| | How do the characters shape the rural place or community? |
| | How do diverse identities intersect in one character? In one community? |
| | In what ways do the main character's identities compare and contrast with your own identities? |
| PLACE / SETTING | How are rural places (landscapes, towns, houses, businesses, schools, etc.) represented? |
| | How do the representations of rural places compare and contrast with your own community? |
| | What do the characters say about the rural places in the story? What values are conveyed in their statements? |
| BELONGING | Who belongs in the community and who doesn't? Who is included or excluded? Why? |
| | Are there gatekeepers of acceptance and belonging in the rural community depicted? If so, what are the systems of power that are being enacted by the gatekeepers? |
| | In what ways are rural people—as a group and as individuals—marginalized, dehumanized, or humanized? |
| | What kinds of relationships are valued, nurtured, and made significant?<br>What relationships are not valued, not represented, or diminished in significance? |
| PERSPECTIVES | What are the beliefs and worldviews represented? How are these similar or different from those in your family, friends, and community? |
| | Whose perspective is silent, missing, or overrepresented in the novel? |
| POWER DYNAMICS | Who holds the power in the story? How do they maintain or lose their power? |
| | What social or economic systems work to maintain a person's or group's power? How does rurality play into these power dynamics? |
| | What are the economic powers or forces at work in the town? Who benefits and who is harmed? How does rurality play into these economic issues? |

A teacher or reader might choose to start with just one category of questions (e.g., character and identity, or place/setting), and as time permits, use the additional questions for deeper analysis. Teachers wanting to model the analysis with a whole class reading and guided practice can choose an excerpt from a book to collaboratively analyze: some poems in *They Call Me Guero* (e.g., Borderkid, Borderlands, Bottle Rocket Battle, Mischief, Christmas Concrete, etc.) or a chapter from *The Gone Away Place* (e.g., The Last Will and Testament of Becca Hendrix, Ch. 10, or Rose Sano—A Family Spirit, Ch. 14). With these pedagogies, it is important to foreground issues of

representation toward the goals of inclusion, equity, and sustainability. Critical place pedagogies have the power to shift rhetorics of rurality from deficiency, deprivation, and decline to statements of possibility and potential.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Rural sustainability, right-sizing, and/or renewal are complex processes that rely on many social, economic, and educational entities working in concert. Teaching with authentic, diverse rural literature, alone, will not move the needle on the wellbeing of rural people and communities. However, education is one powerful, contributing force in the process of cultivating positive rural identities and rural sustainability. This study highlights how particular texts depict rural youth and their worlds and considers how those texts can influence youth perceptions. Carefully selected, representative young adult literature can show youth different perspectives and possibilities and provide countervoices to deficit narratives of rural flight and blight.

Ultimately, I hope this work is used by teacher educators and teachers to facilitate critical discussions about rurality with young people. Having taught and lived in rural communities most of my adult life, this statement struck me as profound: "rural schools are the principal institutions in which young people learn authoritatively to leave rural places" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 46). To change waves of rural out-migration and counter urban favoritism, teacher preparation and K-12 educators can teach with critical place pedagogies that examine issues of rural representation and power inequities, so—together—we can restory the future.

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