

Reading the Rural Queerly: Interrogating Metronormativity in Young Adult Literature

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In this article, we describe an interpretive framework for teachers and teacher educators to use when engaging with two areas of English language arts curriculum and research—ruralness and queerness—as they work alongside readers of young adult literature. Too often rural communities and queerness are characterized as opposed if not incompatible. This binary—i.e., urban-as-queer-affirming and rural-as-queerphobic—has become so common that queer theorists have developed the term metronormativity to name and interrogate this ideology (Halberstam, 2005; Gray, 2009; Herring, 2010). Having lived and taught in rural and small town communities, we are concerned that metronormativity can, at times, go unrecognized if not uninterrogated in educational research. By offering a framework for teaching and analyzing literature in classrooms and teacher education classrooms, we encourage readers of queer young adult literature to ask questions about how and why ideas about spaces and sexualities become naturalized ideologies that are accepted as truth. Such questions matter not only for queer youth in rural contexts. Instead, they offer productive ways to think about literature and its relationships to life for readers in urban, suburban, and other contexts regardless of their sexual identities.

In this article, we describe an interpretive framework for teachers and teacher educators to use when engaging with two areas of English language arts (ELA) curriculum and research - ruralness and queerness¹ - as they work alongside readers of young adult literature (YAL). We do so, in part, because all too often rural communities and queerness are characterized as opposed if not incompatible: to be queer and live a queer life, there is too often an assumed need to leave rural and

¹ In this article we use the term *queer* broadly to reference gay, lesbian, bi, pan, queer, questioning, and ace sexualities. Although attention to gender and trans identities is important, in this article we primarily engage with queer theories rather than trans theories and discuss young adult literature representing queer rather than trans youth. Thus, our use of the term *queer* is an effort to be precise about the focus and limitations of our analysis, and we encourage other scholars to continue exploring rurality and LGBTQIA+ identities by focusing specifically on gender and transness.

small-town communities for gay urban city centers. This binary—i.e., urban-as-queer-affirming and rural-as-queerphobic—has become so common that queer theorists have developed the term *metronormativity* to name and interrogate this ideology (Gray, 2009; Halberstam, 2005; Herring, 2010). Having lived and taught in rural and small-town communities, we are concerned that metronormativity can, at times, go unrecognized if not uninterrogated in educational research. We hope that by engaging the concept here, there can be more nuance, complexity, and care brought to discussions of rurality and queerness.

On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that there are challenges, even dangers, in rural communities for queer people (Movement Advancement Project, 2023b), especially queer youth, both in and beyond schools (Kosciw et al., 2022; Movement Advancement Project, 2023a). Indeed, our writing of this introduction during the spring of 2023 is against a backdrop of intensive state-level anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation in the U.S., with a significant portion (although undoubtedly not all) of this legislation occurring in states with electoral power bases in rural communities (Reed, 2023). These challenges should neither be denied nor erased.

On the other hand, no community is a monolith, and rural communities should not be singularly reduced. Such reduction results in simplistic, flattening, and deficit-oriented narratives of the heterogeneity of the rural, and these narratives hinder rather than help educational efforts for queer liberation. More nuance, complexity, care, and compassion are needed. In ELA education, some scholars are already engaged in efforts to develop more nuanced understandings of rural communities (e.g., Johnson, 2017; Schey et al., 2023; Shelton, 2022). Our goal in this article is to add to this scholarship by focusing on the possibilities of queer young adult literature. By identifying and questioning when metronormativity operates in YAL, and with what consequences, readers might construct more nuanced understandings about place and sexuality, especially so that queer youth in rural places might imagine futures and enact the present such that they do not need to escape home simply to be queer (cf. Schey, 2021).

By offering a framework for teaching and analyzing literature in ELA and teacher education classrooms, we encourage readers of queer YAL to ask questions about how and why ideas about spaces and sexualities become naturalized ideologies that are accepted as truth. Such questions matter not only for queer youth in rural contexts, although they undoubtedly do. They offer productive ways to think about literature and its relationships to life for readers in urban, suburban, and other contexts regardless of their sexual identities.

In the remainder of this article, we begin by turning to queer theory, specifically focusing on queer theorizations of rurality and metronormativity, ideas that we extend to develop an interpretive framework for teaching and analyzing queer YAL. We then describe how we selected the three YAL novels that serve as focal examples in this article, and we offer brief overviews of each text: Callender's *King and the Dragonflies*, Duyvis' *The Art of Saving the World*, and Little Badger's *Elatsoe*. Next, we operationalize our framework by providing examples of what it can look like to read the rural queerly in each of our three focal texts. We take the approach of enacting our framework through a series of questions that teachers and readers might apply to other texts. Thus, our focal texts are presented as examples of more general interpretive approaches that we encourage readers to take up and adapt for their own purposes and needs. Finally, we close by reflecting on possibilities for extending these ideas and offering suggestions of other potential queer YAL texts and questions that might be used to interrogate metronormativity.

READING THE RURAL QUEERLY

Reading queer YAL is not only about the inclusion of representations of queer lives and lifeworlds, but also about the ways classroom readers interpret and make sense of these literary representations. Taking up the latter, scholars have advocated for drawing from queer and trans theories in order to read in ways that not only disrupt heteronormativity, cishnormativity, and their intersections with other oppressions such as racism but also open up possibilities for understanding and affirming sexual and gender diversity (e.g., Blackburn et al., 2018; Helton, 2020; Jiménez, 2021; Matos & Wargo, 2019; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Schey, 2017). In short, such scholars advocate for reading queerly. Contributing to this line of scholarship, we extend these perspectives by offering an additional dimension to the critical approaches (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019) educators can employ when reading queerly. Specifically, we advocate for reading the rural United States in queer(er) ways and suggest doing so by engaging discursive formations of geography and region through queer rural studies (Gray, 2009; Halberstam, 2005; Herring, 2010; Manalansan et al., 2014).

QUEERLY THEORIZING RURALITY

Queer theorists underscore the importance of identifying and subverting norms, binaries, and other naturalized practices, or in Eng et al.'s (2005) words, "to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity" (p. 1), to which we would add normativities more broadly. Applying such a lens to queer YAL, scholars have productively

interrogated norms of coming out narratives (Matos, 2019), happiness (Chrisman & Blackburn, 2019), racialization (Wargo, 2017), and time (Abate, 2020). Extending Coleman's (2018) work on regionality, in this article we consider normativities of geographic scale, specifically the discursive formation of the rural/urban binary. We are interested in how rurality and urbanity come to have consequences in queer YAL, how the urban becomes a naturalized part of queer life (in other words, part of homonormativity), and how classroom readers might question the spatial normativities as they are represented in texts.

Extending queer theory to questions of geography, Halberstam (2005) usefully introduces the term *metronormativity* to describe the rural/urban binary yet “not [as] a ‘real’ binary; it is rather a locational rubric that supports and sustains the conventional depiction of queer life as urban” (p. 190). Halberstam further elaborates that metronormativity narratively

maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative ... the metronormative story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town’ is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy (pp. 36-37).

Herring (2010) develops Halberstam's neologism further, articulating six analytic axes of metronormativity as entailing the “cartographic and performative, psychic and social, imaginary and all-too-materialized” (p. 15). Herring's axes include: narratological, racial, socioeconomic, temporal, epistemological, and aesthetic. Herring advocates for interrogating these six axes of metronormativity as part of queerly theorizing urban/rural binaries, offering the notion of critical rusticity as an alternative, which he describes as “an intersectional opportunity to geographically, corporeally, and aesthetically inhabit non-normative sexuality that offers new possibilities for the sexually marginalized outside the metropolis as well as inside it” (p. 68). The lens of critical rusticity suggests that readers and teachers must not make a priori or essentialist assumptions about rural and urban areas, including who occupies or belongs in these places. Instead, we advocate for analyzing the narrative tropes and social constructions that build contemporary discourses of the rural and urban. We then look to challenge the inaccuracy and injustice of hierarchies by highlighting contradictions and nuances stemming from our analysis.

A note on defining the term *rural*; there is no consensus among scholars about a clear definition of what or where rural is. As Parton (2021) notes in her popular academic rural-themed educational blog:

The rural US is a collective but far from a monolith. Though it might make some things easier to nail it down to one thing, even the [US Census Bureau definition](#) makes this impossible. The temptation would be to define rural by the numbers – population size, land size, proximity to an urban center. But as with most things, it's not that simple.

Thus, rurality has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, being as much about cultural practices as numerical metrics. Given our focus on books recognized through the Whippoorwill Book Award (see, Whippoorwill, n.d.) and grounding in critical cultural theories, for the purposes of this article, we take a qualitative approach. Within this approach, we draw from the Whippoorwill Awards committee's interpretation of what novels constitute rural novels; ultimately, we are more interested in what types of movements toward liberatory and humanizing social change become possible through asking different questions about queer rural novels rather than adjudicating what constitutes "true" and "false" rurality in YAL.

CRITIQUING METRONORMATIVITY THROUGH CRITICAL RUSTICITY

Drawing on queer theorists' critiques of metronormativity, we extend them to consider what a spatial lens attending to metronormativity and critical rusticity might offer for classroom readers engaging with queer YAL. If reading queerly is less about literary representations of queer people and more about the interpretive and epistemological frames that readers use to make sense of a given representation, then queer reading can extend from sexuality to space, such as how representations of the rural and urban are both constituted by and constitute norms of sexuality among other identities.

Although there are many threads that might be taken up in raising questions about queer(ed) space in young adult literature (and we encourage other scholars to take up these questions), in this article we deploy three axes from Herring: the epistemological, racial, and aesthetic axes of critiquing metronormativity. We chose these three because, given our analysis, they resonated strongly with the texts we chose, thus opening up generative opportunities for exploring this lens. However, we encourage other scholars and educators to continue using all six axes in their interrogation of rural and queer YA lit. We briefly define the three axes here before taking them up in greater detail in the findings, where we use each to pose questions about our three focal young adult novels.

First, the epistemological axis plays out in the rural/urban binary by suggesting that urban communities are "more in-in-the-know, in-the-loop, and up-to-the minute" (Herring, 2010, p. 16). In contrast to the progressive, cutting-edge intelligence of urban communities, rural communities are

normatively positioned as ignorant if not unintelligent, unknowing, behind, and backward. In this way, knowledge practices are mapped onto place in the construction of metronormativity. Second, a racial axis becomes significant in understanding rurality and urbanity, albeit in contradictory ways. In one sense, the urban becomes discursively positioned as more racially diverse and inclusive when contrasted with the homogeneous whiteness of rural communities. In another sense, metronormativity characterizes the urban as promoting whiteness as normative, which both Muñoz (2009) and Riggs (1989) point out. However, neither of these discursive constructions of race and the urban/rural hold up, and these contradictions around race and space reveal how discursive formations of the rural and urban are ideological rather than naturalized facts about these contexts. Said another way, we suggest that cultural understandings of what is rural and what is urban are social constructions. The fact that they are not “naturally” occurring phenomena is apparent when we highlight the contradictions in the findings. In particular, upon closer inspection of the intersection of rurality and queerness, dominant constructions of these categories fall apart. Third, the narratological axis intertwines space and story in understanding sexuality and gender. As first emphasized by Halberstam (2005) and underscored by Herring (2010), “Metronormativity often appears as a travel narrative that demands a predetermined flight to the city [from the rural]” (Herring, 2010, p. 15). Herring further points out that this migration narrative coincides with “the form of a bildungsroman” (p. 15), creating a tripart configuration that maps coming-to-the-city onto coming-of-age onto coming-out (see also, Thein & Kedley, 2015).

Although Herring names these axes as separate for definitional purposes, he emphasizes their interconnections, for instance, that becoming more knowledgeable and sophisticated (i.e., the epistemological) is intertwined with moving to the city (i.e., the narratological). With these perspectives in mind from queer theorizations of space and rurality, we next describe our focal novels and approach to analysis before then outlining some possibilities for leveraging these theories to read the rural queerly in teaching and reading queer YAL.

RURAL PLACES AND QUEER THEMES: SELECTING AND ANALYZING THE LITERATURE

We chose three contemporary young adult novels for this study, all categorized as rural and featuring queer characters. The novels were selected from a list of winning titles of the annual Whippoorwill

Award which honors young adult texts that “represent the reality of rural places without overly romanticizing or denigrating a place” (Whippoorwill, n.d.). These book winners have been determined to “contribute to the body of diverse YA literature by providing representations of diverse people and places” (Whippoorwill, n.d.). The award has had three cycles of winners, beginning with books published in 2019 and continuing through the present. Past winners have included books with a variety of genres that push the bounds of what is considered “rural” literature in United States contexts, including rural science fiction and fantasy novels, or narrative settings in the Caribbean and other international spaces. The winning texts in the Whippoorwill Award are deemed by judges to show that the “qualities that mark rural ways of life as different from urban are more complex and extend beyond geography, population, and socioeconomic variation” (Whippoorwill, n.d.). The young adult novels selected for this article come from the 2020-2021 publishing cycle and were announced in 2022, the most recent iteration when we began our analysis and completed our initial drafting of this article. All three of our focal books feature queer-identified characters in a rural setting. We chose these three texts from the more extensive list of Whippoorwill Award winners because we knew they specifically had elements of race, knowledge, place, and sexuality in them, and we hoped they would illuminate how race, knowledge, place, and sexuality function in rural themed books in alignment with our analysis. Given the prominence of white gay characters in YAL, we attempted to select texts that included diverse racial (Black, indigenous, white) and sexual (questioning, asexual, queer) identities. Thus, we intend them to be illustrative examples for the type of interpretations classroom readers might have rather than positioning these novels as representative of a sample or definitive in any way; in other words, we selected them for their analytic inductive potential rather than their enumerative inductive potential (cf. Mitchell, 1984).

King and the Dragonflies (2020) is a novel by Kacen Callendar that won the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature in 2020. In this book, titular character King’s older teenage brother Khalid dies, and the twelve-year old King believes his brother returns to visit him as a dragonfly. While King mourns Khalid, King’s friend Sandy goes missing. However, it is soon revealed that Sandy is suspected to be gay and may be hiding from his abusive father. King struggles with wanting to help his friend, but also worries about being perceived as gay himself, even as he questions his own sexuality. This book is set in rural Louisiana, and in addition to sexuality, includes themes of race, class, family, friendship, and education. This book was considered middle grades

book by the publisher, and the Whippoorwill Committee included it in their selection for young adult books, so its utility spans across a larger group of youth than the other texts.

The Art of Saving the World (2020) is a fantasy novel by Corinne Duyvis. Duyvis is a co-founder of the “Disability in Kidlit” blog (Disability, n.d.) and author of several science fiction and fantasy YAL novels. In this text, main character Hazel lives in a rural area of Pennsylvania called West Asherton. For Hazel’s entire life, she has been unable to travel further than a small circumference surrounding the family farm. If she does stray from this area, a “rift” in the Earth to which she is magically connected becomes unsettled and disrupts the world with extreme natural and supernatural disasters. Because the government knows of Hazel’s connection to the Earth’s rift, federal agents surveil her and don’t allow her to leave the farm. Suddenly, on Hazel’s sixteenth birthday, other identical people also named Hazel appear on the farm; they are from other dimensions, and although they look exactly like Hazel, they have different personality traits and identities. Chaos begins as the rift starts reacting to the presence of multiple Hazels. This is a fantasy book with dragons and unicorns in a rural (and sometimes urban) setting, and some characters are represented as queer.

Elatsoe (2020) by Darcie Little Badger, is a realistic fantasy book about the title character Elatsoe (Ellie), who is a member of the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas, and who can raise spirits who have died. This includes her life-long companion, Kirby, her pet dog, who travels alongside Ellie as a spirit, and assists in adventures as necessary. Ellie is confronted with a murder mystery—the death of her cousin, in which the cousin (as a spirit) comes to Elatsoe and asks her to investigate Dr. Allerton, who is a white man and leader of the town of Willowbee. Ellie soon discovers that the town’s “official” history was a centuries-long manipulation of the narrative by settlers who were not native to the area, but who now control everything from the town museum to the local newspaper. The narrative indicates that Ellie is asexual and describes how she develops emotional closeness to, and even intimacy with, her friend Jay.

We read and analyzed these three young adult novels – *King and the Dragonflies*, *The Art of Saving the World*, and *Elatsoe* – keeping in mind how books with queer identities in rural contexts could be used in classrooms in order to queer understandings of gender, sexuality, and place. Drawing on Herring’s (2010) theory of queer anti-urbanism, we individually coded each text using all six analytical axes of metronormativity, noting instances and ideas from the novels that confirmed, challenged, and complicated metronormativity. After discussing our initial insights, we developed a

descriptive matrix (Miles et al., 2014). This matrix included the six axes from Herring's (2010) text, and as we read each book, we coded for place, knowledge, race, and sexuality. Thus, we each documented selections of the book that spoke to place, epistemology, race, or sexuality, and assigned and collected them in a spreadsheet organized by Herring's (2010) axes (i.e., we created a descriptive matrix). We also drew on Critical Content Analysis (CCA) (Johnson et al., 2017) in our analysis of texts. CCA is a qualitative method of research that is used to analyze texts while situating them within the society that they are representations of and contribute to. CCA is useful in examining power and privilege in children's or YA literature. We met biweekly as we read and documented to discuss these codes, how our readings were influencing our understanding of both queerness and critical rusticity, and how those frameworks were affecting our readings.

We limited this work to the three indicated axes (the epistemological, racial, and narratological) based on our academic and educational interests and their relevance to the novels. This approach helped us identify how metronormativity drove plots and how ideologies of place were constructed through sexuality in relation to knowledge, race, and narrative. From the onset and through our coding and analysis of these novels, our goal has been to model an exploration of rural texts with characters who have diverse sexual identities and experiences. Two texts are fantasy, and the third is realistic fiction, which gave us a multidimensional insight into how ruralness and queerness were represented across texts. Reflecting our desire to consider a range of texts through multiple lenses and given our interest in a general sense of place in these novels, we present more general analyses of plot lines and characters rather than focusing on close readings of a few brief passages. This approach facilitates the illustration of queer theories of rurality as a framework for reading YAL, which is at the center of our article. We turn to these findings next.

INTERROGATING METRONORMATIVITY IN RURAL YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

In this section, we use three axes of metronormativity—epistemological, racial, and narratological normativities—to model how classroom teachers and teacher educators might extend concepts from queer theorizations of space and place to the teaching and reading of queer young adult literature with students. In discussing each axis, we offer a series of questions that distill key insights about metronormativity and serve as a springboard for readers mobilizing a critical rusticity interpretive framework. We then apply these questions to each of the three novels, illustrating how the texts at

times challenge, at other times reify, and at still other times complicate metronormativity. The existence of conflicting ideologies about place and sexuality in each novel underscores the importance of reading the rural queerly and critically rather than simply celebrating some literary representations of rural queerness and demonizing others as problematic.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL NORMATIVITIES

A Framework for Reading

Beginning with the epistemological axis of metronormativity, we look at textual representations of where knowledge resides, who possesses knowledge, and how that knowledge has been acquired historically. Furthermore, we ask where the knowledge gaps are in the textual narratives, particularly the knowledge gaps in the characters that drive plots forward. Representations of both know-how and gaps in know-how can instruct classroom readers about the formation of rural and queer identities and the relationship of these identities to different place.

Metronormative ideologies suggest that the closer one exists to an urban space, the more knowledge one is expected to possess, and the higher they are on the hierarchy of contemporary or cosmopolitan understandings (Herring, 2010, p. 16). Rural people, especially rural people with little exposure to urban and suburban places, are expected to not only know less but also to have had fewer chances to fully explore their sexuality and gender. Thus, they can be assumed to be repressed or closeted by virtue of their geography (Herring, 2010). This narrative—of equating urban with a more complete understanding of the world and oneself—is built and reified in the media and literature when it offers deficit characterizations of rural areas and implies that the people who live in rural areas are backwoods hicks with backwards ideas. Messages to youth suggest, both indirectly and directly, that a better life, including a job, education, and entertainment options are only available outside of the rural place, and to attain those things, youth must relocate to an urban or suburban place (Parton & Kuehl, 2023). For queer-identified youth, the message that the rural is a place that is incompatible with their queerness is even more prominent. Rural queer YAL and frameworks for reading these texts can disrupt these metronormative epistemological tropes and give readers an alternative to the idea that the rural is singularly a place of ignorance to escape or flee but not a place with knowledge in which to learn and thrive.

All readers—whether in rural contexts or not, and queer-identified or not—are served by literature that represents geographical diversity that isn't negative, harmful, and one-directional (i.e., oriented toward the city) but rather nuanced, complex, and compassionate. This is especially relative

to opportunities for queer people; rural places are not simply void of happiness, joy, and opportunity for queer youth, and urban places are not free of struggle. A critical exploration of epistemological representations in these books can support readers—teachers and students—in critically identifying and disrupting problematic representations of rural places.

We offer a set of questions for classroom readers to consider as they examine knowledge and place in young adult literature:

- Which characters know what in the novel? In other words, who is “in-the-know,” “in-the-loop,” or “up-to-the-minute” and who isn’t? What does knowing or not knowing suggest about these characters?
- Are characters from rural or urban communities represented as knowing more or less than characters from other communities? What does this suggest about these places and the people from these places? What do the characters in rural and urban communities know about their own spaces?
- How does this novel describe characters having knowledge, accessing knowledge, manipulating knowledge, and so forth? How do characters convince others of their knowledge or discredit the knowledge of others? What role do institutions—such as schools and governments—influence which characters seem believable and credible or not?
- What differences in knowledge among characters exist in relation to identities such as different ages and sexualities?
- Based on a novel’s representations with respect to these questions, what norms and ideologies does the text construct with respect to knowledge, queer identities, and rural and urban communities?

Turning to the Texts

Rather than treating these questions as exhaustive, we understand these questions to be open invitations for engaging young readers with epistemology and metronormativity in sustained and nuanced ways. Our discussion of Callender’s, Duyvis’, and Little Badger’s novels thus serve as illustrative examples to spark readers’ pedagogical imaginations rather than definitive, all-encompassing analyses. We turn to each of these novels next.

The setting of *King and the Dragonflies* is largely in a bayou in rural Louisiana where the titular King character lives with his family and attends secondary school with his friends. The novel subverts many of the epistemological tropes of metronormativity by representing rural characters as being in the know. Moreover, the novel queers adult-youth knowledge hierarchies by repeatedly positioning young characters as having important knowledge that others, including adults, do not. Indeed, King’s older brother, who passes away just before the start of the novel, seems to voice this

theme when he reminds his younger brother that King would be okay “as long as you got that truth in you” (p. 12). Further developing themes of knowledge in the novel, King is privy to a number of pieces of information that most characters in the book are not: most importantly, where his friend Sandy is hiding. Sandy has run away to escape his abusive father, who is also the local sheriff. King’s geographic knowledge of the bayou and the local landscape allow him to assist Sandy.

Epistemology matters not only in recognizing the knowledge assets of rural youth but also in relation to these youths’ sexuality. It is through his friendship with Sandy that King begins to question, explore, and understand his own sexuality. This questioning unfolds across the novel, especially as King reflects on his own truth and understanding of who he is as he mourns his brother’s death, considers whether he should tell where Sandy hides, and comes to name his sexuality. These tensions around who can know what about sexuality are especially a sticking point with King’s father, such as when the family travels to New Orleans to visit King’s city-dwelling Aunt Idris. Aunt Idris corrects his parents when they seem to suggest a contradiction between being gay and being Black (p. 57)—an embodied truth that King already seemed to know, which challenges beliefs that might position Black queer rural youth as unknowing.

Knowledge about the “rift” in the Earth—which has the potential to react violently and cause chaos around main character Hazel’s world—is held tightly by the government in *The Art of Saving the World*, a narrative dynamic that highlights how institutions can influence and even control knowledge, particularly when institutions delimit what can be known about rural communities such as Hazel’s home of West Asherton. The government—in the form of what Hazel calls the MGA and its agents—tampers with multiple dimensions and brings together multiple different versions of Hazel (for example, there is at least one Hazel who is queer and an additional Hazel with endometritis). The government then attempts to control what happens to the rift and the people connected to it. Significantly, the MGA’s efforts to contain the rift almost always have an epistemological dimension: although claiming to act to save people and the country, the MGA promotes ignorance in the general population and with the Hazels especially as they conceal information, reveal half-truths, and actively engage in deceptions and lies. These knowledge practices suggest how institutions, such as governments, actively create harm through the manipulation and distortion of knowledge. The problematic nature of the MGA’s actions is brought into further relief when contrasted with the Hazels, who have more accurate information than the MGA due to the Hazels’ experiences in

multiple dimensions and their connections with supernatural knowledge sources such as a dragon guide named Neven.

Although presenting some compelling critiques of knowledge hierarchies with respect to institutions and age, *The Art of Saving the World* reifies some other aspects of the epistemological axis of metronormativity. For instance, Hazel “Prime” (named as such because she is the original and first Hazel in the dimension of the story) has lived an incredibly isolated life, mostly within a few miles of her family’s farm because traveling too far away from the rift destabilizes it. As a result, Hazel/Prime’s lack of knowledge is repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel. For instance, early in the book she is uncertain how to buy items at a gas station, or later she is in awe at the comfort and know-how of other Hazels in Philadelphia. Indeed, her lack of knowledge and experience, which lead to her struggle with “failing” to save the world from the rift, becomes a central plot mechanism: ignorance which stems from her rural life in isolation. Notably, even as *King and the Dragonflies* and *The Art of Saving the World* have very different storyworlds—one realistic, one fantastic—both novels nonetheless result in explorations of similar epistemological normativities with respect to interrogating ruralness and not knowing.

Like *The Art of Saving the World*, a major plot thread of *Elatsoe* is the ability of authorities and institutions (the government and MGA in *The Art*, and the town leaders of Willowbee in *Elatsoe*) to manipulate knowledge for their benefit. Like Hazel’s access to special knowledge through the supernatural (such as Neven the dragon), Elatsoe (Ellie) gains unique knowledge through her ability to communicate with the dead, have visions about the past, and develop connections to nature and animals. All these epistemological abilities stem from her Lipan Apache elders and her relationship with her ancestral land. Using her connections with her ancestors and Native community, Ellie exposes the ways Willowbee town leaders manipulate knowledge to gain money, prestige, and power. Conversely, Willowbee’s institutional knowledge is constructed through the local schools, museums, and town leaders, who fabricate a history that serves their best interests and conceals the truth of their horrific exploitation of people and their town’s transplantation onto Lipan Apache land. Thus, a settler colonial history and knowledge has obscured Native knowledge, and lives are lost because of it, including the murder of Ellie’s cousin.

Thus, the novel subverts metronormative characterizations of knowledge and further complicates them by describing epistemological dynamics with respect to settler colonialism and indigeneity. Specifically, rather than rural communities being ignorant (as metronormativity suggests)

or Native communities being backward (as settler colonialism suggests), Ellie and her community are in-the-know throughout the novel, using their knowledge to untangle the mystery of Willowbee and Dr. Allerton. Ellie's journey offers a commentary on how the historical record—especially relative to Native and indigenous communities—has been constructed at the expense of nondominant communities and how metronormative knowledge can be queered with indigenous understandings and truths. In our discussions of both *King* and *Elatsoe*, race has been an aspect of epistemological normativities, and we next turn to focus more fully on racial normativities.

RACIAL NORMATIVITIES

A Framework for Reading

As Herring (2010) describes, the racial logics of the rural-urban relationship are complicated, even contradictory, in that the urban can at times emphasize a normative ideal of whiteness, yet at other times the urban be characterized as more racially diverse and inclusive than the rural. Yet rather than being constraining, the multiplicity of racial logics opens up several pathways for readers of rural queer YAL to inquire into the interconnections among race, place, and sexuality. We offer the following questions for classroom readers to use for this purpose:

- Which characters are shown to be and feel at home in rural communities? Or in urban communities? Who is associated with the rural or urban? What are all these characters' racial, sexual, and gender identities, and what does the sense of "homeness" suggest about race and racism?
- What spaces of racial homogeneity and heterogeneity exist in the novel?
- What do interracial and intraracial relationships look like among characters in rural and urban communities? Are these the same or different? In what ways?
- Based on a novel's representations with respect to these questions, what norms and ideologies does the text construct with respect to race, queerness, and rural and urban communities?

Again, leveraging these questions as beginnings rather than exhaustive, we next turn to applying them to Callender's, Duyvis', and Little Badger's novels.

Turning to the Texts

Callender's *King and the Dragonflies* focuses on Kingston "King" James and his parents, a Black family living in a small town in Louisiana, who are grieving the recent death of King's older brother. The novel resists any simple characterization of rural Louisiana with respect to race and queerness. Indeed, youth and adults, Black and white, straight, queer and questioning, all explore the tensions

of experiencing relative privilege and marginalization depending on their location within matrices of ageism, white supremacy, misogyny, and homophobia. For instance, King had been close friends with Sandy Sanders—who is white, gay, cis, and a boy—until ending their friendship after King’s older brother Khalid overhears Sandy tell King that he’s gay and discourages King from being friends. As Khalid told King, “You don’t want anyone thinking you’re gay, too, do you?” (p. 27). Later though, King and Sandy renew their friendship, yet not without a conversation in which they discuss King’s experiences of the Sanders family’s racism and Sandy’s experiences of King’s homophobia. Such conversations occur within and across racial groups, sexual identities, and ages, all of which add up to a representation of the Louisiana town as a racially heterogeneous community, yet not one of racial harmony. Instead, the plot traces how anti-Blackness and homophobia shape the lives of cis gay and questioning boys of different races in the small town.

Indeed, white supremacy, along with other forms of privilege such as community status and government connections, buffer Sandy’s father, the area sheriff, from suspicion of and accountability for physically abusing his sons, including Sandy. This abuse compels Sandy to initially run away and hide in the bayou near the town and eventually to attempt to run away to New York City via New Orleans. Although such a moment suggests that the novel positions the urban as an alternative space more accepting than the rural, the plot undermines such a conclusion. Ultimately, King talks with his parents, stops Sandy from running away, and holds the sheriff accountable for his abuse. In the end, King and Sandy return to their rural home to build lives in their small town as out and queer. Without simply resolving the presence of racism and homophobia in the town, the novel does provide opportunities for challenging these oppressions in ways that make the rural livable for both King and Sandy, a move challenging metronormativity.

In *Elatsoe*, Little Badger weaves together race, queerness, and place through an exploration of Ellie’s relationship with her Lipan Apache elders and her ancestral land. Indeed, the novel’s fantasy-tinged mystery plot centers around questions of who belongs, who gets to decide, and whose presence is harmful and helpful. Set primarily in a rural segment of Lipan ancestral lands, Ellie investigates the strange occurrences in and around Willowbee to solve the mystery of her cousin’s murder. Rather than positioning the rural as homogeneously white, the novel interrogates the effects of settler colonialism in this rural community, challenging the idea that the predominantly white inhabitants of Willowbee belong on the Lipan land. The challenge to Willowbee’s legitimate belonging is especially due to the ways that the leaders in the community, led by Dr. Allerton, seem

to exploit, and even murder, people for their own benefit. In some moments, Ellie protects her friends and family through removing invitations to Native land for white vampires, and ultimately the plot's conflict is resolved when she exposes Allerton's exploitation of her murdered cousin and countless others who were victimized. Thus, the novel weaves together complex questions of who gets to belong in rural ancestral lands not only with respect to Native and settler identities but also the ethics and effects of Native and settler engagements with people of various identities and communities.

Duyvis' *The Art of Saving the World* offers the least engagement with questions of race alongside rural and queer identities. Tellingly, the novel is largely silent about race, yet this subtlety does not undermine the importance of nonetheless asking questions about race and racism. A central location in the novel's setting is Hazel/Primes's family farm in West Asherton, Pennsylvania. Although the reader's understanding of the rural community is limited due to Hazel/Primes's life which is lived within a few miles of her family farm, the community is characterized as homogeneously white, even if only through its implicit, unmarked identity. Racial heterogeneity comes from beyond the rural, such as through the characters' time spent in a more racially diverse Philadelphia or through the MGA agents, some of whom are characters of color and all of whom come from beyond the rural community of West Asherton. In setting up the implicit binary contrast between a homogeneously white rural community and urban communities of rural diversity (communities characterized as ahead of the lagging rural), this novel ends up reifying racial logics of metronormativity as described by Herring.

NARRATOLOGICAL NORMATIVITIES

A Framework for Reading

Combining insights from Halberstam (2005), Herring (2010), and Thein and Kedley (2015), an attention to the narratological axis of metronormativity highlights the tripart convergence of space, age, and sexuality as coming-to-the-city is part of a coming-of-age cycle that entails coming-out as queer. These interrelations not only raise many compelling ways for classroom readers to approach rural queer YAL but also to do so through emphasizing a literary element quite common in English language arts classrooms, namely, plot. We offer the following questions for readers to use to consider the interconnections among narrative, place, and sexuality:

- Which characters want to leave a rural community, and which want to stay? What about in an urban community? What are these characters' reasons for wanting to stay or go? What do characters describe as desirable and undesirable about rural and urban communities?
- Which characters can stay or go? In other words, which characters have the agency to make decisions about staying or going and in turn have the resources (for example, money, social support networks, knowledge) to act on their desires to stay or go?
- How do characters change (or not change) when they travel from one context to another (e.g., from the rural-to-urban or urban-to-rural)?
- In which contexts (e.g., rural, urban, particular locations in a rural or urban setting) are characters out as queer? In which contexts do characters describe that they feel safe (enough) to be out or affirmed when they are out? In which contexts are there communities of queer people?
- Based on a novel's representations with respect to these questions, what norms and ideologies does the text construct with respect to narrative, travel, coming-of-age, queer identities, and rural and urban communities?

We next offer examples of how such questions might be applied to our three focal novels.

Turning to the Texts

Duyvis' *The Art of Saving the World*, perhaps most strongly of our three novels, presents a metronormative story. Hazel/Prime (recall that Prime is the first of the interdimensional versions of Hazel) lives a relatively sheltered and isolated life in West Asherton. Due to the need for her to remain close to the portal on her family farm lest it start to act up and endanger others, especially the residents of West Asherton, Hazel/Prime has lived most of her teenaged life within a few miles of her house, traveling to school and a few nearby locations such as a diner. Near the beginning of the novel, she describes her feelings of desire for Marybeth, another girl in her class. Fully admitting these feelings to herself, much less acknowledging her queer desire to other people, seems like an impossibility. As the narrative unfolds, Hazel/Prime meets Hazels from other dimensions who have traveled more, especially to the nearby city of Philadelphia, and who have experiences which have enabled them to learn more and become more confident, with one Hazel/Red even being out and dating girls. When Hazel/Prime sees these characters, travels across Pennsylvania, and spends time in the city of Philadelphia, she gradually gains more confidence and admits her desires to herself and the other Hazels. Thus, it is in leaving West Asherton and coming-of-age through her fight to

save the world that she gains confidence and comes out. Through a narratological lens, readers come to understand how the bildungsroman coincides with both an exodus from the rural and a coming out, a configuration which reproduces a metronormative narrative.

Callender's *King and the Dragonflies* complicates this metronormative narrative. At times, it directly engages it, most notably in the novel's closing arc. Sandy Sanders becomes convinced that for him to live a life in which he is out as gay, safe, and happy (especially because his abusive father is the area's sheriff and in Sandy's perspective, will not be held legally accountable for his abuse), Sandy needs to leave his small Louisiana town and run away to a city such as New York City. He asks, and even pressures, King to come with him, and they plan to meet at the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans during King's family's trip to the city for Mardi Gras. At this point in the plot, it is metronormativity that contributes to Sandy's plan being intelligible both to King and readers, and for a time, it seems that King might join Sandy. Ultimately though, King decides to tell his parents, which results in Sandy being found before he runs away to New York, his father being arrested for abuse, and his brother Mikey becoming his caretaker. Thus, in the end *King and the Dragonflies* subverts metronormative narratives in that through King's and other characters' actions, their small Louisiana hometown becomes a place where King and Sandy can both stay and live queer lives. To be sure, not everything is perfect. For instance, King's own father is still in a process of learning how to affirm King's queerness, and Sandy and Mikey still have the challenge of healing from the trauma of their abuse. Yet, these characters do so by staying rather than leaving their rural home.

If Callender's novel subverts the narratological axis of metronormativity through direct engagement, then Little Badger's *Elatsoe* offers an alternative approach, even if both ultimately offer stories of queer (gay and ace, respectively) characters staying and wanting to stay in their rural and small-town communities. While the urban (both in the imagined escape location of New York City and the visited place of New Orleans) serves as a significant element shaping the plot in *King*, in *Elatsoe* the urban is largely irrelevant and inconsequential via its absence. Rather than traveling between rural and urban contexts, Ellie's investigation of her cousin's murder features her movement among rural places. At most, the urban is briefly mentioned through some back story explaining how some university students come to help Ellie, but never does she come to desire escape to or through the urban university. Instead, it is one place among many in the narrative. Ellie's ties to the rural space of the Lipan Apache land subverts metronormative narratives of leaving in that the story is much more concerned with who is and should be allowed to make this (rural) land home, a question

most dramatically exemplified through the opportunistic and exploitative presence of the small town of Willowbee and its white settlers. By ultimately showing the evil and corruption of Willowbee, the narrative does not suggest Ellie's need to migrate from the rural to the urban, but rather it suggests the need for Ellie to reject Willowbee, due to its harmful and violent acts, and instead to claim Native land and a Native community as rightful in the place Willowbee currently occupies. This reversal of metronormative narratological norms importantly not only values the rural but does so through indigenous epistemologies of place.

INTERROGATING METRONORMATIVITY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE IN ELA CLASSROOMS

Through offering analyses of Callender's *King and the Dragonflies*, Duyvis' *The Art of Saving the World*, and Little Badger's *Elatsoe*, we have explored questions of knowledge, race, narrative, place, and sexuality in queer rural YAL. Rather than suggesting that these analyses are definitive or that these questions are the only ones worth asking about these and other rural queer YAL, our intent and our approach illustrates how classroom readers might explore questions about rurality and queerness in texts, thus fostering nuance rather than merely reproducing simplistic understandings of place and sexuality. Indeed, through our own process of studying these novels in relation to queer theorizations of metronormativity and critical rusticity, we came to understand these novels in new and different ways. We argue that it is through fostering more complex understandings of place and sexuality that ELA educators can challenge oppressive ideologies about the rural and the queer and work toward queer liberation, especially a vision of justice that is intersectional. We suggest that Herring's (2010) axes of metronormativity are a useful framework for future research relative to queer YA literature, and also for teachers and readers of YA literature to use in classrooms and with youth. Future areas of research may extend the current research by looking to collaborate directly with rural and urban youth to better understand their interpretations of place, race, and sexuality in literature. Alternatively, working closely with teachers in more practical oriented work to help them develop a questioning and critical stance about place is imperative in urban, suburban, and rural spaces to challenge hierarchies relative to place and space.

In our article, we have foregrounded three axes of metronormativity that we found to be particularly generative for interpreting our three focal novels. One of our experiences during our analysis for this article was that some axes of metronormativity were more illuminating for some

novels rather than others. This experience sparks us to close by extending Herring's (2010) work in cultural studies to offer a more robust set of questions for queer YAL—our findings dealt with three axes of metronormativity, and in the Appendix we offer questions for the additional three axes of the socioeconomic, temporal, and aesthetic. Our hope is that teachers, teacher educators, and readers might use the questions about all six axes to explore rural queer YAL specifically but more broadly to ask question of place and sexuality in the teaching, learning, and reading of literary texts. These questions explore the ideologies present in the texts themselves but also those that readers bring to the texts. We encourage teachers, teacher educators, and readers to apply these questions to multiple genres of literature set in rural and small-town communities. In other words, in addition to novels, genres such as graphic novels and poetry can be vehicles to examine how rural stories are told, who gets to tell them, and who gets to belong in these narratives.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONS FOR READING THE RURAL QUEERLY

FOR TEACHERS, TEACHER EDUCATORS, AND READERS:

Questions from the Socioeconomic, Temporal, and Aesthetic Axes to Consider When Teaching and Reading Rural Queer Young Adult Literature (adapted from Herring, 2010)

<p>QUESTIONS ABOUT SOCIOECONOMIC NORMS</p>	<p>AS READERS OF THIS BOOK:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What assumptions do we have about class, class, and interclass relations in rural, urban, and suburban places? What places do we assume to have greater or less differences in class? What places do we assume to be richer or poorer? To contribute to or challenge economic inequalities?
	<p>IN THIS BOOK:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which characters gets to be and feel at home in rural communities? In urban communities? Who is associated with the rural or urban? What are all these characters’ class, sexual, and gender identities, and what does the sense of “homeness” suggest about class and economic exploitation? • What spaces of wealth and poverty exist in the novel? • Who has access to leisure, and who has to work? What are the effects on characters of having access to leisure or not? • What do interclass and intraclass relationships look like among characters in rural and urban communities? Are these the same or different? In what ways? • Based on a novel’s representations with respect to these questions, what norms and ideologies does the text construct with respect to class, queerness, and rural and urban communities?
<p>QUESTIONS ABOUT TEMPORAL NORMS</p>	<p>AS READERS OF THIS BOOK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What assumptions do we make about time and rural, urban, and suburban places? Which places do we assume are cutting-edge, progressive, or forward looking? Which places do we assume are backward or culturally backwater?
	<p>IN THIS BOOK:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which characters are dynamic, change, learn, and grow? Which characters are static, unable to learn, and unable to grow? • Which characters are cutting-edge, progressive, and forward looking? Which are backward or culturally backwater? • Which characters are out-of-sync? And which align with the expected rhythms of a place? • Across these questions, which characters come from what places? What does this suggest about these places?

	<p>Based on a novel’s representations with respect to these questions, what norms and ideologies does the text construct with respect to time, queerness, and rural and urban communities?</p>
<p>QUESTIONS ABOUT AESTHETIC NORMS</p>	<p>AS READERS OF THIS BOOK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What assumptions do we make about aesthetics and rural, urban, and suburban places? Which places do we assume are fashionable or desirable? Which do we assume to be unfashionable or undesirable? <hr/> <p>IN THIS BOOK:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which characters are stylish and fashionable, and which characters are not? Which characters are beautiful, and which characters are not? Which characters set trends and influence other characters? Which characters follow others? • Which characters are desired by other characters? Which characters attracts friends, romantic attention, and renown? Which characters struggle to gain acceptance? • How do different characters have confidence in their style, have stylish clothes and items, or put out a feeling of stylishness? • Across these questions, which characters come from what places? What does this suggest about these places? • Based on a novel’s representations with respect to these questions, what norms and ideologies does the text construct with respect to aesthetics, queerness, and rural and urban communities?