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Amplifying Rural Voices: Defining, Reading, and Writing Rural Stories

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It wasn't until I was in my doctoral program working with rural out-migrant English teachers (folks who left their rural communities to settle and teach in sub/urban ones), that I thought to ask about rural young adult literature (YAL) in teachers' classrooms. That I never thought to ask is both shocking and disappointing to me. After all, I *was* a rural student and teacher. My students and I were *living* rural stories, so why did I never think to try to find them and include them in my reading life and/or instruction?

Like the teachers in my study, I attended university in a sub/urban area and was never asked to consider the importance or possibility of teaching rural stories, and I likely subconsciously ingested and believed the narrative that rural stories weren't as important as urban ones. It wasn't until after my own out-migration where I landed in an urban-focused program that I started asking these questions. Feeling like a fish out of water and misunderstood because rural cultural practices don't always transfer well in sub/urban spaces, I started to think a little differently about representation.

Working with the out-migrant teachers taking part in my research, hearing their place-connected stories and approaches to reading instruction, I finally thought to ask if they had any rural YAL in their classroom libraries (see Parton, 2020, 2021 for more details on that study). Because they didn't have any rural YAL and had

trouble naming any contemporary rural titles, I asked myself:

- What was the last rural YA book you read?
- What contemporary rural fiction did you read while you were in middle/high school?
- What rural YAL do you include in your instruction?

For me, I had read quite a few rural YAL titles because I intentionally went looking for them, but I hadn't read any that I could recall in middle/high school, and even though I taught methods courses that always featured YAL, I had never included rural titles on my syllabi. This reflection and discovery culminated in my mission to create a website that would help teachers find, learn about, and teach rural YAL.

Introducing Literacy In Place

Literacy In Place (LIP) is a website dedicated to collecting and reviewing rural YAL titles as well as supporting teachers in making it part of their instruction. It is founded on three core beliefs:

1. Rural stories are worth reading and studying.
2. Rural stories are worth telling.
3. Rural communities and cultures are worth sustaining.

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I want to acknowledge here that, in my advocacy for sustaining rural cultures, I'm not looking at them through rose colored glasses. As with all cultures, there are some aspects of rural cultures that need to be reckoned with. I think about this in

a similar way to Paris & Alim's (2014) discussion of misogyny in Hip Hop and the need to address it while recognizing that those imperfections or problems don't render the culture unworthy of sustaining.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

Just finished @norawritesbooks's #RuralVoices. It was excellent. It does exactly what it set out to do and "defies the idea of a rural monolith, over and over, with every story".

In this  I give a brief shout-out to each piece in the collection. 1/

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

Replying to @readingrural and @norawritesbooks
2/ The (Unhealthy) Breakfast Club by @monica_roe is set in #SouthCarolina in the #corridorofshame and highlights #class, #race, the term #trailertrash, #disabilityinclusion, and is a #shortstory of #realisticfiction.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

3/ The Hole of Dark Kill Hollow by Rob Costello takes place in the #Catskills tackles issues of #loss and #grief, #LGBTQ identity and acceptance and is a #shortstory of #speculativefiction.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

4/ A Border Kid Comes of Age by @DavidOBowles takes place in the #Borderlands of #Texas and tackles issues of #Latinx and #LGBTQ identity and #family in #poetry.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

5/ Fish and Fences by Veeda Bybee takes place in #Idaho and is representative of #immigrant and #refugee and #AsianAmerican experiences. It also explores #loss and #grief and what it means to be #kind.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

6/ Close Enough by @norawritesbooks is #realisticfiction and a #shortstory set in #WestVirginia that includes #LGBTQ experiences and explores issues of #belonging. It also powerfully demonstrates that #ruralpeople can and do become #ruralauthors that tell #ruralstories.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

7/ Whiskey and Champagne by SA Cosby takes place in #Virginia and highlights #Black rural experiences and issues of #integrity and #class. It's a #shortstory and #realisticfiction.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

8/ What Home Is by @ashleyhopeperiz is an #autobiographical #poem that captures the complexity and conflicting feelings a person can have about home. It's set in #Texas and tackles a lot including issues of #race and #surviving sexual assault.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

9/ Island Rodeo Queen by @YamileSMendez is a #shortstory of #realisticfiction set in #Utah. It highlights #Latinx and #PuertoRican experiences, challenges of #belonging, and #rodeo.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

10/ Grandpa by Randy DuBURKE is a #graphicnovel style #shortstory set in #Georgia about #Black rural experiences that features issues of #loss and #grief and #identity.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

11/ Best in Show by @TirzahPrice is a #shortstory of #realisticfiction set in #Michigan during the #4H fair. It features an #LGBTQ love story and an adorable pig named Herbert.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

12/ Praise the Lord and Pass the Little Debbies: A (Mostly) True Story by @thunderchikin is a #shortstory that takes place in #Georgia and #Tennessee. It features a #multiracial character and tackles issues of #loss and #grief; #class and #religion.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

13/ The Cabin by @Nasugraq is a #shortstory that takes place in #Alaska and has some #speculative elements. It features an #indigenous Alaskan girl trapping in the #wilderness alone. Relying on her wits and cultural knowledge she proves herself a more than capable trapper.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

14/ Black Nail Polish by @shaecarys is a #shortstory that takes place in #Indiana (yay Hoosiers!). Its main character navigates challenges associated with #illness and #disability as well as the way it impacts and shapes her #identity and #friendships.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

15/ Secret Menu by @veedabybee seems to take place in #Idaho like her other piece in this collection. It is a short #graphicnovel style piece that features #AsianAmerican food culture and celebrates #culturalexchange through food.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

16/ Pull Up a Seat Around the Stove by @JosephBruchac is an #essay that includes some of his #poetry. It recounts his childhood growing up in rural #NewYork and his #indigenous #Abenaki heritage and ultimately considers how his rural experiences have shaped who he is.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

17/ Home Waits by Estelle Laure is a #shortstory that takes place across Taos #NewMexico and a boarding school in #Massachusetts. It features #ghosts and issues of #class and #mentalhealth.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

18/ The author statements at the end of the book are one of the most important parts of this book. As a kid, I always associated publishing with big cities and never imagined a hayseed like me could be an author, so they provide important representation. Don't skip them.

Dr. Chea Parton @readingrural · Jul 10

19/ I know these tweets don't come close to capturing everything, all the intersections of place & identity & important issues & emotions & wonder, that these stories hold, but I'm hoping they show y'all how important this collection is and what it can offer rural students.

Figure 1: Rural Voices Twitter Feed

Amplifying Rural Voices

Founded on these three tenets, Literacy In Place provides:

- a running list of contemporary rural titles that are reflective of the diversity that exists across and within rural communities;
- video book talks that include summaries, analyses, reactions, and teaching ideas for rural YAL titles;
- print Goodreads reviews of rural YAL;
- teaching resources for teacher educators wanting to include rural perspectives in their teacher education classes;
- interviews with rural YAL authors; and
- the (Non)Rural Voices blog where folks can contribute their stories to continue to nuance what it means to be rural.

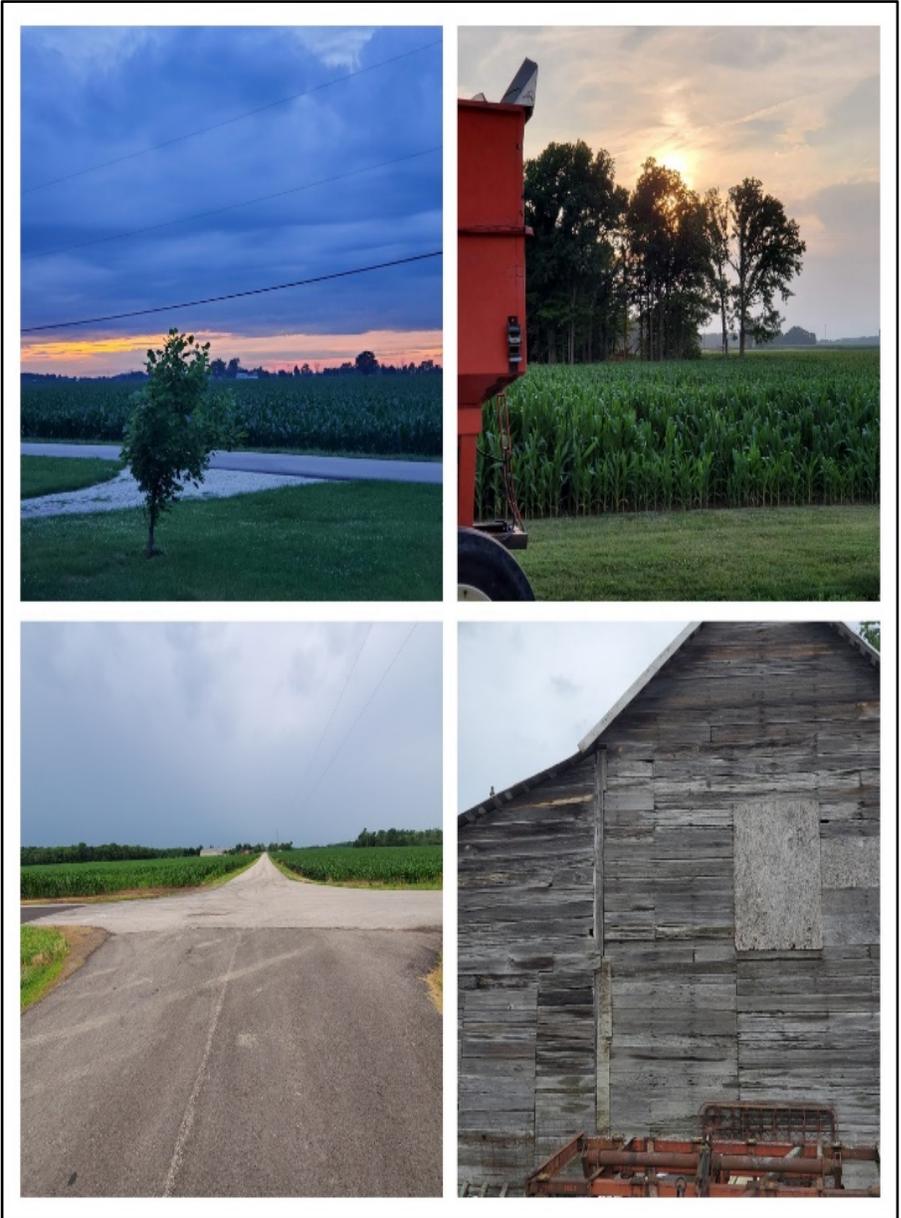


Figure 2: Pictures of my farm

It is my hope that teachers and teacher educators (across rural, urban, and suburban places) use this site to inform and support their inclusion of rural stories and perspectives in their instruction. The rest of this piece will detail one possible way I envision that secondary ELA teachers could use LIP to do just that.

Sample Unit: Defining, Reading, and Writing Rural Stories

The following unit outline is one way I

envision secondary ELA teachers could use LIP and its resources to teach rural YAL from a critical rural pedagogical perspective (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021). At the core of the unit is Nora Shalaway Carpenter's (2020) anthology *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America*. I suggest using this text for a myriad reasons, but the main ones are (1) it's a phenomenal collection that offers students an opportunity to engage with multiple and various types of rural experiences; (2) it does so without

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the need to purchase multiple books which is useful for departments already taxed budget-wise; and (3) it allows students to interact with multiple genres. (See Figure 1 for more information)

At the heart of Carpenter's project is the desire to challenge and disrupt deficit notions of rurality while expanding folks' understanding of the multiplicity and diversity of rural experiences. It seeks to dismantle deficit dominant narratives of rurality while redefining it through the experiences depicted in the collection's stories, poems, graphic short stories, and essay. Disrupting stereotypes of rural people/places while crafting a more inclusive definition of rurality is the heart of this unit.

Defining Rurality

In order to redefine rurality, we first need a working definition of it. This is no easy feat—even scholars who do rural research have trouble defining what “rural” means and is (Petroni & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021). Despite the difficulty of deciding on a hard-and-fast definition, students undoubtedly walk into our classrooms with their own definitions based on their own experiences. For example, my experience of rurality growing up working in the corn fields of the Midwest (see Figure 2) is probably a far different experience of rurality than exists for students in rural and remote parts of Montana. So then, what does it mean to be rural?

For this opening activity, ask students to define “rural” in their reader's notebooks (See Bomer, 2011 for more information on book clubs and reader's notebooks). It might be helpful to ask them to consider:

1. What does it mean to be rural?
2. What does rural look like?
3. What does it look like to insiders vs. outsiders?

Allow students to use words, pictures, memes. After they have collected ideas, have them write a dictionary-like definition and ask them to share with one another in small groups, combining their definitions into one the group can all agree upon.

Once the small groups have agreed on their definitions, have them write them on the board or share them in a physical or digital space to which everyone has access and viewing capability. Facilitate a whole class discussion in which the class works together to decide on a working definition of *rural*—what it is, looks like, sounds like, tastes like, etc.—whatever makes the most sense for your students and the standards you're looking to meet. Once the class has decided on a working definition of rural, have students copy that definition in their reader's notebooks so they can reference it throughout the rest of the unit.

Reading Rural Stories

After deciding on the class definition of rural, introduce *Rural Voices*. I suggest reading Carpenter's (2020) opening to the text aloud to students. In her opening letter to readers, Carpenter outlines the goals she and the other featured authors had for the collection. Explain that as students read each piece of the collection, they are going to consider how the author of each piece defines and depicts “rural,” completing a running comparison of each depiction with their own understandings and definitions of rural. It might be helpful to create a chart (See Figure 2) for students to keep track of their thinking as they read. Break students into small reading discussion groups so they can discuss their ideas with one another as they read.

Because each reader will approach the text with a specific set of experiences and understandings of rural (even with the collective class definition) it might also be helpful to allow students to jigsaw occasionally to discuss their thinking. Make sure students also read the authors' statements at the end of the book. They offer

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incredibly important insight into authors' own rural identities and experiences as well as the importance of writing about and making rural identities visible.

Writing Rural Stories

Growing up, and honestly until recently, I had always associated published authors with big cities. I had never considered that a rural someone like me could write something (other than academic work) that would be published, let alone that people would be interested in reading stories about rural experiences. Importantly, Carpenter's (2020) anthology proves that rural people can become published authors and that their published pieces can and do reflect rural experiences.

In the spirit of this, once students have read each of the pieces in *Rural Voices* and have taken notice of how each of the authors constructs rural experiences in their pieces, students will then choose one piece in the collection as a mentor text to use as inspiration for writing their own rural story. If they are looking for something a little bit different than what's in the book, pieces posted to the (Non)Rural Voices blog on LIP could also serve as mentor texts for their work.

Using their same reading groups as writing groups, students will write and workshop (see Bomer, 2011 for more information on conducting writing workshop) their rural stories. It would be wonderful if they were doing so in the pursuit of an authentic audience. For example, I welcome student work for the (Non)Rural Voices blog and there are other outlets such as The Daily Yonder, Rural Assembly, and Teen Ink that students could research and choose as outlets for their work. At the very least, students could publish their work to the rest of the class through a class magazine. After writers have finished their rural stories, they could revisit their reading notes to discuss in small groups and as a whole class how their own pieces

compare/contrast with the depictions of rurality in *Rural Voices* (Carpenter, 2020).

Re-Defining Rurality

Through their engagement with the stories in *Rural Voices*, the (Non)Rural Voices blog on Literacy In Place, and their own stories, students have essentially been working to nuance what "rural" is, means, and looks like. At the end of the unit, invite the whole class to revisit and reconsider the definition they devised at the beginning of the unit. Students can examine it in their same small groups, thinking with one another about how their considerations and perspectives surrounding how to define "rural" have evolved.

As a last activity in this unit, meet together as a whole class to discuss how their thinking of "rural" has grown, expanded, and evolved after reading and writing rural stories. What have students learned about being rural and what it means and looks like to be rural that they are taking with them? How do they think the notion of rurality has impacted the way they understand themselves, other rural people, and the way rural people are often represented in popular culture? This unit and the way students answer these questions can form further units and study of rural texts and the representation of rural people, places, and cultures in them.

As Carpenter (2020) illustrates in her opening to the collection, "There's not just one type of rural" (n.p.) and there is a need to disrupt "the idea of a rural monolith" to "change the conversation" and to "offer new narratives and ways of viewing the incredible people who make up rural America, the people who are so often misunderstood, made fun of, and maligned, who are overlooked or even outright ignored" (n.p.). Our students can and should be a big part of that work. So, please reach out to me if you plan to teach this unit and would like an authentic place for students to publish via the (Non)Rural Voices blog.

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Instructions: As you read each piece in the *Rural Voices* collection, take note of how the authors depict what rural looks, sounds, tastes, feels, smells like. You may not be able to fill out each box for all of the pieces, but those you do fill out, be sure to include a quotation from the text as evidence.

Then, for each piece, record a general idea of what “rural” is according to the depictions in that piece in the last column.

<i>Rural Voices Piece</i>	What does rural <u>look</u> like?	Sound like?	Taste Like?	Feel like?	Smell like?	What is “rural”?
The Unhealthy Breakfast Club by Monica Roe						
The Hole of Dark Kill Hollow by Rob Costello						
A Border Kid Comes of Age by David Bowles						
Fish and Fences by Veeda Bybee						
Close Enough by Nora Shalaway Carpenter						
Whiskey and Champagne by SA Cosby						
What Home Is by Ashley Hope Pérez						
Island Rodeo Queen by Yamile Saied Méndez						
Grandpa by Randy DuBurke						
Best in Show by Tirzah Price						
Praise the Lord and Pass the Little Debbies by David Macinnis Gill						
The Cabin by Nasugraq Rainey Hopson						
Black Nail Polish by Shae Carys						
Secret Menu by Veeda Bybee						
Pull Up a Seat Around the Stove by Joseph Bruchac						
Home Waits by Estelle Laure						

Figure 3: Example Reading Chart

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