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Promising Practice

Literacy In Place: Creating Community by Reading and Writing Rural Stories

Chea Parton

Rural people are everywhere – including in spaces of higher education I had grown to assume they aren't. My assumption was likely born from my experience completing my PhD in an urban-focused program, but I imagine this may be true for a fair share of emerging scholars wanting to do rural work. Because of my work on rural out-migrant teachers' personal and professional identity development (Parton, 2020) and the challenges they face including rural young adult literature (YAL) in their English language arts classrooms (Parton, 2021), I have been learning that a surprising number of English Education scholars I know have rural backgrounds. Recently, I presented at a conference in which the panel chair – who I've known for some time – introduced our panel by saying he was a fitting chair because he grew up in a rural place. I had no idea. I've also been working with an editor of a journal on a piece about the layers of rural place and social class. After quite a bit back and forth and nearing a final draft, the editor told me that he is excited about my work because he grew up working-class rural. Again, I had no idea and I assumed, like I'm sure many folks assume of me, that he grew up middle class and sub/urban.

My knowledge of rural authors writing rural (YAL) stories was also sorely underdeveloped until my dissertation journey. Just like sharing my work has led me to discover more scholars with rural backgrounds, I have also been discovering so many more rural authors than I (and my teacher participants) knew existed. While conducting interviews with teachers during my dissertation, I realized that rural books, especially rural YAL, were largely ignored and absent from my participants' and my own learning and teaching experiences. I taught in a rural school. We read canonical historical fiction that took place in rural places, but I can't think of a single contemporary rural story on any of my syllabi. Nor did I ask students to write about their own experiences as rural people. And why not? Probably for a lot of reasons, but chief among them was that, like so many rural people, I was educated to leave

(Corbett, 2007) and I assumed that they were all middle-class and sub/urban.

Working with the teachers in my study and these reflections on my own learning and teaching inspired me to do something to support teachers in locating, learning about, and teaching rural YAL. It also has me thinking about how we build rural community through our stories – how we come to find one another in academic spaces. I created Literacy In Place (LIP) to both support the reading and writing of rural stories in an effort to help us create rural community across the various (non)rural and academic spaces we occupy, and I'm hoping you'll join me in both endeavors. The rest of this piece will outline the major components of the site and serve as an invitation for you to contribute to the growth of our community in this online space.

What is Literacy In Place?

Literacy In Place is a website that is founded on three main principles:

1. Rural stories are worth reading and worthy of study.
2. Rural stories are worth telling.
3. Rural cultures are worth sustaining.

Surrounding these tenets, LIP seeks to make it easier for teachers to discover contemporary rural YAL and support them in bringing it into their classrooms (See Table 1 for more detail). It also seeks to support rural students, teachers, and teacher educators in telling their place-connected stories through the (Non)Rural Voices Blog, which gets its name from my desire to honor the fact that so many of us who have out-migrated still feel close to our rural roots and identify as rural even if we aren't currently living in a rural place, making us nonrural and rural simultaneously. This is part of the story of rural people, and I wanted the blog to be friendly to those stories, too. Both the reading and writing of rural stories are instrumental in growing and maintaining rural communities and sustaining rural cultures.



Literacy In Place: On the Website
<https://literacyinplace.com>

Rural Book List: An ever-evolving [list of books](#) featuring rural people, places, and experiences including:
Reading Rural YAL: The link to the [Reading Rural YAL YouTube channel](#) with book talks of rural YAL
Rural Book Reviews: The link to the [Reading Rural Goodreads account](#) for print reviews of rural YAL.
Classroom Teachers: A selection of rural-focused readings, resources, and teaching ideas for classroom teachers
Teacher Educators: A [suggested reading list](#) of texts for teacher educators to include in teacher preparation programs to invite preservice teachers to think about how place has and will continue to shape who they are becoming as teachers as well as [sample activities and lesson ideas](#).
(Non)Rural Voices blog: A space for students of all levels, teachers, and teacher educators across numerous and multiple rural and out-migrant identities to write their stories to challenge the negative stereotypes and assumptions about rural people
Reading Rural YAL Podcast: Conversations with YAL authors and rural education scholars and practitioners

Reading & Studying Rural Stories

A hefty portion of Literacy In Place is dedicated to cataloging and providing information on contemporary rural YAL. Like the out-migrant teachers in my study, I couldn't have named a contemporary rural book if my life depended on it. Because the publishing industry doesn't market books according to their rurality and there is no rural fiction genre, finding them can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. As a classroom teacher, time for lunch is hard enough to come by, so finding time to go looking for rural YAL is unlikely. That's where LIP comes in. Having a central location where teachers know they can go to find a list of books, as well as reviews and teaching ideas for those books, can support them in bringing those stories into their classrooms. Through the Goodreads reviews and Reading Rural YAL book talks on LIP, teachers have an opportunity to hear a rural person talk about the story, allowing them to know what the story is about as well as whether or not disrupts or maintains the dominant notion that rural people are backwoods and backwater (Tieken, 2014), unintelligent, and averse to difference and change.

Using LIP in Reading Instruction

There are myriad ways LIP can be used to support rural ELA teachers' reading instruction. Probably more than a few I haven't even considered, but I'll discuss the ones I *have* thought about here. Using the book list, teachers and librarians could select rural YAL books for their classroom and school libraries, recommending rural YAL to readers in their classrooms and schools. Teachers could use

these books in a combination of whole-class, book club, and independent reading work in multiple and various combinations to help students explore and examine their (and others') ruralities. These texts could be used as part of the standard curriculum as well as with Critical Rural English Pedagogy (Petroni & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021), pedagogy designed specifically to invite students think critically about what it means to be rural, who qualifies as rural, and what power dynamics exist between rural and sub/urban places.

Building on the book list, the reviews and book talks on the site are designed to provide teachers with summaries of the texts, how place works in them, my responses to them as a rural-identifying reader, and give some ideas of approaches to use when teaching them. These resources are designed and created to help teachers with their text selection efforts as well as strategies for teaching. Reviews and book talks could also be used as mentor texts for types of projects students could create in conjunction with their reading. For example, students could write Goodreads reviews of the rural YAL that they read and/or make videos that provide summaries, mini analyses, their reactions, and/or recommendations for other students and teachers when it comes to reading and teaching their book.

Using LIP in Writing Instruction

In order for students to have rural YAL to read, folks have to write it, which means that it's important for students to see and believe that rural people can and have become published authors. To increase the visibility of rural authors, I have been conducting

Author Talks as part of the Reading Rural YAL series. Showing all or portions of those videos could go a long way for inspiring rural students to tell their place-connected stories. To this end, using some of the rural YAL listed on the site as mentor texts, students could begin working to capture and paint their own rural places through writing. Students could also use some of the pieces I have posted to the blog to work through my own identity and rural story as mentor texts for theirs. Students' writing could take the form of a variety of genres: short story, graphic short stories/comics, personal essays, memoir, flash (non)fiction, photo essays, poetry, and cover a multitude of topics important and relevant to students' rural cultures, experience, and lives.

As students work to describe and share their unique, individual, and nuanced rural experiences, they could seek authentic avenues of publication to do so. There are avenues such as LIP's (Non)Rural Voices Blog, Teen Ink, The Daily Yonder, Rural Assembly, the local paper, and other news media outlets to which students could submit their work. Other projects could focus on students' rural school and/or community as their audience. Photovoice (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004) projects allow students to highlight great things about the community as well as aspects that could use some change. They invite community stakeholders to view students' exhibitions and listen to them in order to

work toward needed change. "Humans of _____" (e.g., Humans of New York) and oral history projects (e.g., Foxfire) are also useful for helping students engage with their rurality, their culture, and their community in powerful ways. All of these projects hold incredible potential for helping students grow as writers and as members of their rural communities.

Join Me in Building Rural Community

Literacy In Place is still in its infancy; the site just launched in June of 2021. I envision and hope that it will continue to grow through collaborations with and feedback from teacher educators as well as teachers and students in rural classrooms. There is still much to work to be done to disrupt negative assumptions of rural people and places, and I hope that rural teachers, teacher educators, and authors are willing to partner with me in it. If you or your students are interested in collaborating, have suggestions for the books list, or have other questions or ideas please don't hesitate to contact me at readingrural@gmail.com or through the site's contact form. To stay up to date on the happenings of the site, you can also subscribe to the Reading Rural YAL YouTube channel/podcast and follow me on Twitter @readingrural. It is my hope that you will join me in building a more visible community of rural scholars, readers, and writers.

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