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"A Family from a Continent of I Don't Know What":

Ways of Belonging in Coming-of-Age Novels for Young Adults

> We must have looked like some kind of family
> going along in our separate kinds of walks:
> Jeremy dancing his Hacky sack dance,
> Jilly shimmying her shimmy of
> "I got no problems, no babies' dads disappeared on me
> and I ain't been fired from my job"
> Jilly bouncing on my arm and humming
> and leaning out from my hip like a flag waving itself.
> A family from the continent of I don't know what
> —*Wolff,* Make Lemonade*, p. 91*

T he students in our classrooms learn to comprehend, make meaning of, and express information and ideas when they become literate, but they also develop a very particular social self in relation to their interaction with texts (e.g., Collins & Blot, 2003; de Castell, 1997; Yageleski, 2000). Whether they are aware of this or not, students are met with the work of resisting and challenging particular constructions of texts, thinking through meanings signified by the words and formulas of texts, and finding somewhere in what they read "a place for one's own story" (Willinsky, 1991, p. 60). But *one's own story* is of course always relational; it constructs and is constructed by both written and unwritten texts. It is determined, in part, by what Jean Francois Lyotard calls *grand narratives*: stories that explain and further circulate certain belief systems and practices that are entrenched in dominant cultures (Willinsky, 1991).

If we believe that the students in our high schools are in the throes of identity development, then we might ask ourselves what the *grand narrative* of that development might look like. When students are trying to find and make a place for their own story, what ideas about identity development are they working with and coming up against? The answer to this question is complicated, but it lies deeply embedded in traditional school philosophy and in some classic texts that still have a powerful presence in high school classrooms. The *bildungsroman,* in particular, might be said to embody grand narrative. This genre—which includes texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960)*, Little Women* (Alcott, 1868/2004)*, Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908/1989)*, Homecoming* (Voigt, 1981)*,* and *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967)—focuses specifically on self-formation and is narrated from the perspective of the character who is coming-of-age, or who reminisces about doing so.

In exploring the grand narrative of self-formation that underwrites the traditional *bildungsroman*, we find a strong link between identity and community.

In this article, I want to express my concern with this connection. The background knowledge many students bring to their reading today may reside in a paradigm that is incommensurate with the one that underlies the grand narrative of adolescent growth. While I acknowledge a continuous need for the classics, I am interested in the ways in which more contemporary young adult coming-of-age novels, such as *Theories of Relativity* (Haworth-Attard, 2005) and *A Room on Lorelei Street* (Pearson, 2005) might be useful for adolescents who struggle to understand traditional relationships between identity and place.

The Purpose of Literacy Practice during the Nationalist Regime

For many teachers, education is, at least in part, about fortifying students' characters—establishing their social selves (de Castell, 1996). Before new technologies competed with the written text, the book was the definitive resource for self-preservation and self-formation, and the high school English curriculum valued texts that would shape the character of the students, the community, and the nation (de Castell, 1996). English teachers who embrace this tradition might still provide their classes with a survey of canonical texts in order to trace the character or the spiritual and ideological essence of places and times in history. Whether a character's growth takes place in an urban setting, such as the Williamsburg tenement in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Smith, 1943/2005), or a pastoral setting, as with *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908/1989), canonical coming-of-age novels have been, and continue to be, lessons in how identity and character are very much affiliated with time and place.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, or what is known as the early nationalist phase in Western society, the production and consumption of literature enacted a "capacious, symbolic form of nation and belonging" (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 78). Filled with national lore, the literature of America, the nascent land of opportunity, encouraged self-improvement above all else. By reading texts, Americans began to faithfully "construe themselves as and through a 'fictive people' who share an origin" (p. 78). We might say that most educators of this nationalist phase, which stretches to the middle of the twentieth century, linked Western literature to notions of belonging,

considered reading to be a process of self-making, and valued education as a way to prepare young people to *belong* to the nation in various ways, through stable employability, citizenship, and domesticity (Collins & Blot, 2003).

The Classic *Bildungsroman*

The *bildungsroman* is deeply rooted in culture; its primary focus is on "the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience" (Hardin, 1991, pp. xxii–xxiii). The young character achieves cultivation and education through linear stages of development, moving from error to truth and from confusion to enlightenment. Although writers focus on the character's unique private life and thoughts during this growth process, these thoughts are ultimately representative of an age, culture, and place (Tennyson, 1968, p. 136).

As in many well-known folktales and fantasies, there is often a period in this novel where the young adolescent steps outside his or her comfort zone and attempts to impose private meanings and ideologies over the unknown world in order to make sense of it. This aspect of the text speaks to the angst-ridden, disorienting years of meaning-making that a teenager grapples with. However, the main character often learns that the world must be *domesticated,* normalcy must be found, and preparations must begin for life in a middle class society (Barney, 1999, p. 69)). The denouement of the *bildungsroman* ensures that the private identity and ideologies of the main character are commensurate with those of the public sphere. According to Bakhtin, the action and discourse of characters in novels always represent a definite ideological position (Davidson, 1993); in the traditional coming-of-age novel, the ideological position is ultimately posited as unified and representative (Kester, 1995).

Time has a generative and productive purpose in the coming-of-age text. The growth of the main character is related to the growth of his or her culture; "the son will continue the father, the grandson, the son—and on a higher level of cultural development" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 204). The *bildungsroman* is meant to promote a sense of self in the reader to a greater degree than any other text, and the protagonist, such as Fenwick in Capote's *The Grass Harp* (1951), or

Spaulding in Badbury's (1957) *Dandelion Wine,* is encouraged to see himself or herself belonging to something larger (Kushigian, 2003). Coming-of-age novels such as *Huck Finn* (Twain, 1884/2001) and *Little Women* (Alcott, 1989/2004) disseminate values that are both national and normative, where what is national constitutes what is considered normative growth within that nation's parameters. These values are personified in the discourse and action of memorable young characters.

The grand narrative behind this depiction of adolescent growth supports the humanist conception of identity as an entity with a core or essence, which develops in layers throughout stages of life, progressing toward a fixed place. In 1968, Erikson spoke for an ideology deeply ingrained in the academy when he noted that identity formation is "a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" (p. 22). Although the adolescent experiences angst while grappling with this external frame of reference in the community, humanists assure us that there *is* a homogenous core in his or her communal culture—something to grow toward, to negotiate, and to, ultimately, define the self by.

The Classic *Bildungsroman* and Today's Teen

There are various reasons why some students in our modern schools cannot relate to characters that grow up in linear fashion to become cohesive representatives of their communities. Our late-capitalist society has outgrown the industrial paradigm that loomed large throughout the nationalist phase and viewed school as an institution that could, alongside parental and community assistance, prepare students to obtain lifetime employment or settle into a home in a stable community. Ideally, in the *bildungsroman*, characters are apprentices who inherit stability. Parents and benefactors augment, or supplement, formal education with informal training and guidance towards specific, fixed trades, careers, and proper positions in society. The *bildungsroman* begins as a hopeful subgenre, catered to middle class audiences with—as Charles Dickens aptly noted—great expectations.

More often than not, the notion of inheriting stability is a chimera that may betray our youth or may be too remote for today's students to entertain. Many

students, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, are all too aware of the unstable, changing job market, with its high unemployment and welfare rates. It may be difficult for some students to seek additional or supplementary guidance from parents who are still shifting jobs and identities themselves. Case studies of inner city youth highlight these conditions and seem to suggest that they no longer live life "as a journey towards the future, but as a condition" (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 640). The grand narrative that views education as a means of allowing the adolescent to promptly reach a fixed, stable place does not provide a road map that many of our teens will buy into.

Mass immigration and globalization has also changed our student bodies and has called into question the relevance of the notion of a community core that our curriculum materials support and to which our students are expected to relate (Luke, 1998). A large percentage of our urban youth belong to immigrant families and may still have strong affiliations with other countries and places. To this end, national space cannot be figured as a fluid extension of family and communal space; each of these spaces may be affiliated with completely different, shifting signs and meanings. Instead, we might view national, community, home, neighborhood, and virtual (Internet) spaces as "exist[ing] in both hierarchical and dialogical relations with each other," competing to inform the identity of urban teens (Moje, 2004, p. 20). Coming-of-age texts featuring young characters who grow up in cohesive communities do not speak to the multiple spaces of youths' lives and their negotiation of different, provisional communities.

Identity and Difference

The general response to this change in the student body addresses the need to place multicultural fiction alongside traditional favorites like the *bildungsroman*. If a reading of the text enacts a process of self-creation, new voices and choices of self-creation must be added to the canon, so that every reader can develop "heightened sensitivity to others, and a more fully articulated set of values and principles" that are representative of different races, genders, and classes (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 380).

However, a conception of culture that often informs multicultural education tends to view attributes

of social groups and communities as closed entities, which can be represented by exemplary pieces of literature that frame cultural essences (Yon, 1999). For example, educators might attempt to address alterity—any condition of feeling "other" that remains unexpressed—by using multicultural anthologies, which come replete with introductions that frame and represent different cultures. The middle class, humanist discourse the school employs to talk about a novel or short story from an ethnic-minority author might overlook the heterglossia of that text, specifically, the diverse discourses within the text that challenge the establishment of characters as cohesive ideologues of their culture (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263). The notion that differences reside *between* and not *within* different cultural, ethnic, and social communities accompanies this resistance to heteroglossia. Such education runs the risk of promoting what Fish calls *boutique multiculturalism*—a superficial, if genuine and well-intended, appreciation of another culture or ethnicity that is all too easily compartmentalized (1997, p. 378).

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This boutique multiculturalism might be seen as a resonance of the nationalist legacy that still permeates the language arts classroom in North America. For years, the hope was that literature in the school might familiarize diverse populations with a community or national core (Collins & Blot, 2003); currently, even though a plurality of cultures might be recognized, there seems to be a continued orientation toward community that "assumes relationships between 'personal identity' and 'cultural identity' as unproblematic" (Yon, 1999, p. 624). When this relationship is problematic in education, we have for too long construed the resolution as simply a matter of locating and unveiling the unique, different cultural core of a marginalized individual. To this end, educational practice employs alternative ways of endorsing the same grand narrative of identity development we have become familiar with through the years.

Trying to escape this quandary proves to be a difficult feat for English educators. It is difficult to read for difference without framing alterity when we read within a humanist institution founded on a collective, communal goal. If we push education to a place that resists an orientation toward community and confronts an entirely different conception of citizenship, our tendency to cling to the value of literature as a social cohesive and reading as something that unites us makes it difficult to promote solidarity. As a starting point, however, we have to discard the grand narrative that fails to note how increasingly complex the link between identity and place is becoming. We need to acknowledge new affiliations made between different socially situated identities and appreciate the conception of identity as fragmentary, local, and contingent on a person's involvement and interaction with his or her world. As Giroux (2000) noted,

> Identity can no longer be written through the lens of cultural uniformity or enforced through the discourse of assimilation—rather students bring to the classroom not some unified grand narrative but multiple narratives representing diverse immigration and language and cultural experiences. (p. 190)

When reading coming-of-age novels, the focus on individuals, in and of themselves, might be redirected to a focus on how individuals are *produced* in an effort to sort through this production (Leander, 2002). Identity is not just a matter of being; it is continuously, endlessly, and elusively a matter of becoming (Yon, 1999, p. 625)

New Narratives: A Selection of Contemporary Young Adult Novels

This conception of identity-as-process has multiple, overwhelming implications for literacy practice. Spatial and discourse theorists have come up with numerous ways in which students can interact with others, reposition themselves, and engage with multiple written and nonwritten texts in order to continually deconstruct and rewrite their identities. Most of these implications reach far beyond the scope of this article, but the *bildungsroman* is a particularly useful resource because it is explicitly and primarily concerned with *becoming.* It is a novel of apprenticeship, of learning, and of self-development.

We might find many classic coming-of-age novels for young adults to be valuable for much more than, and in spite of, the hegemony and cultural capital they advocate. The subculture of the adolescent and the construction of adolescent growth-into-community is a theme high school students might be interested in exploring as researchers, positioning themselves as objects of their own critical inquiry. Teachers might juxtapose a traditional *bildungsroman* with a contemporary rewriting of the novel to help students explore what was and what is expected of them as they become young adults, so that they might resist or deal with such expectations with a discerning eye.

If teachers were to do a lesson on the theme of identity development, it might be interesting to pair Alcott's (1868/2004) classic, *Little Women*, with a contemporary *bildungsroman* for young adults. *Little Women* chronicles the experiences of four sisters— Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—as they grow up, each with unique desires and aspirations. Critics have disagreed about whether the novel seeks a new vision of women's subjectivity or argues for the continued confinement of women to the domestic realm (Parille, 2001, p. 34). Feminist readings of little women focus on sympathy for Jo's impatience with ladylike decorum and her career aspirations (Seelye, 2005), and yet Amy's troubles as an artist, and the way in which Beth's death aids in the strengthening of the sisters' bonds and their sense of familial loyalty might be read as a nod to the endurance of provincial life—and family and communal sphere that binds the identity one grows into.

There is a longing in Alcott's (1868/2004) young female characters to present themselves in particular ways, to find and become the best part of themselves. Jo has become a much-loved character for her tomboyish, defiant ways, but she, too, along with the other sisters, sets out specific goals to help better herself: "You laugh at me when I say I want to be a lady, but . . . I want to be above the little meanness and follies and faults that spoil so many women"(Alcott, 1868/2004, p. 279). This desire to find the best version of the self sets the girls on different and conflicting paths; at times it sends them out into the world, and this leads to excitement, but this excitement is then countered with questions of where a person's responsibility should lie and where one might best seek a place for fulfillment.

A passage worthy of students' attention involves a philosophical debate Jo attends in the city. This debate fascinates her and stirs in her the aspiration to do big things in the world. Professor Bhaer quickly reminds her of religious and familial bonds, and the idea that one's natural character is most important— "a better possession than money, rank, intellect, or beauty" (p. 320). Here, character begins and ends with an identity that is grounded in community.

Regardless of where the March sisters seek fulfillment, Hollander (1981) noted that a "satisfying continuity" informs all the lives of girls who seek to find themselves (p. 28). The characters are possessed with traits that allow for some form of stasis in their personality, even amidst tribulations and change. For Hollander,

> Alcott creates a world where a deep "natural piety" indeed effortlessly binds the child to the woman she becomes. The novel shows that as a young girl grows up, she may rely with comfort on being the same person, whatever mysterious and difficult changes must be undergone in order to become an older and wiser one (p. 28).

There is something quite beautiful and compelling in the loyalty and love we find in Alcott's (1868/2004) text, but it may be interesting to pair this text, or sections of it, with more contemporary novels, such as those in Wolff's (1993) Make Lemonade trilogy, where loyalties are more fractured and difficult and where love lies in unusual places, with untraditional characters. This series focuses on the coming-of-age experiences of Verna LaVaughn. Unlike Jo's comfort in the stability of character, *True Believer*'s (Wolff, 2002) Lavaughn muses that

> When a little kid draws a picture
> it is all a big face
> and some arms stuck on.
> That is their life.
> Well, then: you get older,
> and you are a whole mess of things:
> new thoughts, sorry feelings,
> big plans, enormous doubts
> going along hoping and getting disappointed
> over and over again
> No wonder I don't recognize
> my little crayon picture.
> It appears to be me.
> And it is.
> And it is not. (p. 3)

This reflection is understandable when the reader con-

siders all that fourteen-year-old LaVaughn has been privy to by the end of *Make Lemonade* (1993): her father's accidental death during a gang shooting from a bullet that wasn't meant for him, the violent physical and sexual abuse of a young woman she babysits for, and urban poverty that structures all of her surroundings. The complexity of LaVaughn's life results in occasional feelings of displacement from her younger self. LaVaughn's attitude is life-affirming; like the March sisters, she is vivacious and inspired, and she also wants to better herself. And yet, for LaVaughn, this betterment involves self-sustainability. She desires a college education that will allow her to move on from her makeshift, poor, and troubled community.

It is significant that the place of LaVaughn's upbringing remains unnamed; she lives in public housing, but this could be any project in North America. The projects are, of course, owned by others. They are not marked by national and communal history and character; they do not carry with them a *spirit* or *essence* to which the growing adolescent can hinge his or her identity. In the Make Lemonade trilogy, the communal sphere is unstable and shifting, and what little sense of community LaVaughn grows into is found almost by default, when she answers a babysitting ad posted at school. In order to make money for college, she hesitantly takes the job and finds herself caught up in the life of

Jolly, teenage mother of two children from different fathers. Jolly lives in squalor and disorder as she continues to struggle against the experiences and the dangerous web of connections made during her life on the streets.

Make Lemonade (Wolff, 1993) is filled with self-reflexivity, and as LaVaughn reflects on her growth, she brings salient memories of her life to the reader's attention. Often, these memories are fragmented: she sees parts of her dead father's face; she confronts sudden smells on unnamed street corners that remind her of him; she sees flashes of the mismatched socks and short pants belonging to Jeremy, the young boy she babysits and grows fond of; she indulges in visions of herself, Jolly, and Jeremy and the baby on the city street one afternoon, all disheveled, all lost in their own world, and yet in some ways happy together "like a family from a continent of I don't know what"(p. 91).

When Jolly loses her factory job, LaVaughn has to decide if she should continue giving her time to the family for free or if she should remove herself from the situation. She reflects on the words she hears in the esteem class she takes at school:

> One good thing you do in a day for somebody else don't cost you.
> But then they go on about how you have to find the good thing
> that ain't the wrong good thing. (Wolff, 1993 p. 120)

In some ways, this is not too far from *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868/2004). Here, the process of making a self still happens at the intersection of the personal and the communal; the process of self-creation happens in relation to others and with others. But in *Make Lemonade* (Wolff, 1993), LaVaughn alone seems to be the harbinger of care; her single mother can't really support her college dreams or understand her attachment to Jolly, Jolly isn't paying her and is too troubled to register LaVaughn's own needs, and Jolly's children are too young to really 'know' LaVaughn. She must break through barriers to self-discovery on her own, while she sorts out the people who matter to her and how they fit with what she wants to do. She ponders what is worth carrying with her as she tries to move beyond the world she was born into and mourns, in her own way, what she has to leave behind. LaVaughn's inner resolve, her determination to live a better life, allows her to handle such weighty tasks without being pulled under by them.

Other *bildungsromans* featuring characters who struggle with the issues of modernity and community are briefly explicated in Table 1. The contemporary coming-of-age novels for young adults listed there all resist, to varying degrees, the grand narrative that delineates what a coming-of-age character looks like. Many of these texts feature ethnic minority characters living in major urban centers, and this provides a particularly poignant challenge to the concept of self-formation. Within the nationalist paradigm, immigrant characters are expected to heave their lives into entirely new forms in order to be accommodated into their new schools and communities. Coming-of-age novels, such as *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (Myers, 2005) and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Danticat, 1994/1998), feature characters who grapple with this process and who do not want to be compromised by

Table 1. Contemporary Coming-of-Age Novels

A Room on Lorelei Street **(Pearson, 2005).** Pearson's novel features Zoe, a 17-year-old protagonist whose father has passed away, whose mother is an alcoholic, and whose grandmother is too demanding, if caring. These circumstances lead Zoe to rent her own small space and attain a job to support herself. There, she finds an unexpected friend in her elderly landlord. Throughout the novel, she struggles with her desire for happiness and self-sustainability and her need to sort through her confused feelings of love and anger toward her mother. This book asks if teens can create a community and a life for themselves that is uniquely theirs, while still reflecting the complexities and difficulties of dealing with adolescent vulnerabilities and issues.

Theories of Relativity **(Haworth-Attard**, **2005).** Dylan, a 16-year-old street youth, is apathetic to the challenges life has thrown at him—mainly, his family and troubled upbringing. The novel is told from Dylan's wry, bright perspective and is filled with his philosophical musings on what it's like to lack a real place of one's own. Dylan struggles with people who want to help him find his way off the street, but who refuse to invest in more than a superficial understanding of his life's realities and what he needs.

Alice, I Think **(Juby, 2000).** Alice is a girl who fits nowhere neatly. After her brief stint in public school demonstrated that she was a bit too creative and different to fit in with her peers, she was home-schooled by her new-age parents. Nine years later, her counselor creates some goals for her to help her find a place of belonging beyond her eccentric family sphere. She finds herself attending public school and negotiating her desire to fit in with her desire for a more alternative way of living.

Breath, Eyes, Memory **(Danticat, (1994/1998).** Sophie is a Haitian girl growing up in New York. She vacillates between tradition and modernity, between old ideologies and new ones, and finds that her identity falls nowhere neatly. She is deeply affected by the problems, the loneliness, and the lack of community she encounters in the modern city. She learns that she can never really go back—that her longing for home, for tradition, and for an identity that is tied to place, is a regressive, reductive act.

Born Confused **(Hider, 2002).** *Born Confused* tells the coming-of-age story of Dimple, an Indian American girl growing up in New Jersey. Dimple's best friend, a "blond-haired blue-eyed Marilyn for the skinny generation" calls her "Indian girl," but Dimple reveals to the reader that this description doesn't ring "entirely true to me in terms of how I felt inside, but the thing is, I never really considered myself as American, either" (p. 12). Dimple negotiates different belief systems as she interacts with the people around her and grows close to specific members of her family and her love interest. Her development is a recursive process that turns back on itself, is hindered, and then reworked as she faces the challenges of growing up in a plural, urban, fast-paced society. At the end of the novel, she takes pride in her unique identity—an identity by no means fixed or tightly packaged.

Tyrell **(Booth, 2006)**. Tyrell is a 15-year-old whose coming-of-age experiences, like those in *A Room on Lorelei Street* and *Theories of Relativity,* do not take place in one stable community. Tyrell tells us that the Bronxwood houses, in the Bronx, "used to be my whole world" (p. 1), but we find him in a shelter and then in a roach-infested motel with his mother and brother after they are evicted from their apartment. Tyrell has talents as a DJ and schemes and daydreams about DJing in the Bronx in order to make enough money to help his family. In the meantime, he struggles with teenage issues of sexual frustration, confusion, loneliness, and angst. Tyrell's pursuit of happiness—his own attempt to progress in life—is a challenging one, and he struggles with the moral choices around staying clean and honest while also trying to maintain a sense of belonging with his friends and family in the Bronx.

The House on Mango Street **(Cisneros**, **1984).** Esperanza lives in a rented house in a poor Latino section of Chicago. She describes herself as the "girl who didn't want to belong" (p. 106). "I have inherited my grandmother's name," she tells us, "but I don't want to inherit her place" (p. 11). She does not want to be slotted into a Latino stereotype or to end up like the rest of her family, who fulfill the low expectations others have of them. Esperanza tells us that she has to go far away from her home and neighborhood with her books and paper in order to come back "for the ones who cannot get out" (p. 110). She distances herself from her cultural core in order to find her own place in the world.

Autobiography of My Dead Brother **(Myers, 2005).** This novel focuses on the lives of three young African American men in the aftermath of a friend's death, the victim of a drive-by shooting. Narrated by Jesse, an aspiring artist with an uncertain future, the text also focuses heavily on CJ, who wants to play more jazz than his family will allow, and Rise, who seems to be headed down the wrong path at full speed. The strength of this novel lies in the way that Myer presents these characters and their families as fallible, yet still paints them with a tender, humanizing brush. Like *Tyrell*, the main character grapples with moral choices and has to negotiate his desire to make good decisions that will improve his lot with his desire to remain connected to the people and places around him.

Nothing but the Truth and a Few White Lies **(Chen Headly, 2006).** Patti Ho is a biracial American teenager with a strict, conventional Taiwanese mother and an absent Caucasian father, whose own identity lies somewhere in the "murky in-between." Patti claims she does "not have a nuclear family, with two perfect parents, but a broken family that periodically goes nuclear on each other" (p. 328). Though her racial background is unique and her issues with her mother are culturally specific, the author does a brilliant job of universalizing her struggles.

or circumscribed to any place. Such texts destabilize the trajectory of growth-into-core community/culture. The characters in these novels lament *and* embrace this destabilizing process, just as students in our classrooms might.

These novels portray what Willinsky (1991) calls "the constant reworking of the world by the silenced and dispossessed," who want to find voices that are not necessarily commensurate or representative of their dominant *or* marginalized cultures (p. 66). Authors trace the growth of these characters as they grapple with different discourses, establish relationships with different people, move between different spaces, and answer to a constant need to blend, rework, and reinvent the self. In most of the young adult texts I have just listed, it is not formal education, or a move to a progressive, modern community that allows for and provides access to personal fulfillment and a strong sense of identity. Instead, the protagonists must look to their own strengths, talents, and interests as they attempt to figure out what they want to be in life. For Dimple of *Born Confused* (Hidier, 2002), photography helps clarify this vision; for *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006), mixing records helps bring happiness and possible financial security; for Jessi in *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (Myers, 2005), art provides hope. Such texts are not about finding a geographical *place of belonging* but, rather, a *way to belong* in diverse and fragmented societies.

Conclusion

The texts I have discussed and listed are not meant to serve as representatives of distinct cultures, nor are they a panacea to which all students struggling to find their story can turn for a remedy. However, all of the texts feature characters who struggle to separate their personal history(ies) from their representational history: a feat that delineates growth as a difficult, nonlinear, and lonely process—but a feat that points to dignity and resilience. Here, we see that dominant discourses, such as schooled discourse, might silence various private identities of *all students*, but we also see that characters—and adolescent students—can struggle to resist this.

If these texts are used as a *component* of literary practice, combined with instructional methods that facilitate critical inquiry, students in our classrooms might each find that they can relate, in their own way, to characters who are trying to find their voices amidst all of the written and nonwritten texts in our world that are competing to construct them. Even if a sense of solidarity between student and character is only fleeting, or partial, or understood on a preconscious level, it sets up a nice place of interchange, where "normal growth" can depart from itself to question itself and where variations of memories and histories can persist as students read the texts, think of their own experiences, and perhaps even write their own experiences in an attempt to work and rework their notions of what it means to grow and to belong.

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