

Literary Landscapes:

Using Young Adult Literature to Foster a Sense of Place and Self

When Billy Jo in Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* returns to her drought-stricken farm in Oklahoma after an aborted attempt to escape, she confesses that she knows ". . . now that all the time I was trying to get/out of the dust,/the fact is,/what I am,/ I am because of the dust./And what I am is good enough./ Even for me" (222). She realizes that, even though the monstrous "dust" threatens to devour her, it has also influenced how she views herself and the world. "Place" has shaped who she is—how she sees, acts, believes, thinks, and speaks.

Not all recently published young adult novels are set in such a well-defined, specific geographical region as Hesse's historical novel. Yet, an examination of six representative recent young adult novels will show how the lives of the protagonists, like Billy Jo, are shaped by their literary landscapes—physical, social, and cultural—even though it is becoming increasingly difficult to define these "landscapes." Sociologists have pointed out that in the postmodern world teenagers sometimes feel "disconnected" from their gelatinous places which seem to be increasingly becoming more ". . . chaotic, unpredictable, and unstructured" (McDonald, 2). Furthermore, two young adult literature specialists have observed that urban teens often navigate through fluid spaces which are ". . . disorienting, disrupting a fixed sense of place" (Bean and Moni, 640), and this spills over into their interior worlds as well. Instead of clear anchors in family, community, and institutions like schools to forge a coherent identity, these fluid spaces engender feelings of disconnection and alienation. Many contemporary teens spend time in "non-places" . . .

supermarkets, railway stations, and malls" (Bean and Moni, 641).

Postmodern teens often construct an identity based on the ". . . consumption of goods that form or alter identity, e.g., cars, clothes, CDs, cell phones, gang affiliations, graffiti writing, eating disorders, ethnic and cultural affiliation, sports, and street life" (Bean and Moni, 641). Sometimes they struggle to escape or reject their locale. At other times, they use ". . . action and experience to forge identities in this shifting, unstable landscape" (Bean and Moni, 641). Hence, many young adult protagonists find it difficult to connect with their "region/place."

Even though it is more difficult to pinpoint "place" in contemporary young adult novels, it is still important for teen readers to examine how "place" helps shape a protagonist's identity, albeit sometimes the connection is subtle and multifaceted. We recommend using the following reading prompts as a framework for analyzing the relationship between "place" and identity.

- a. Distinctive physical/geographical features of space/place.
- b. Distinctive characteristics of the cultural/ideological (traditions, habits, values, beliefs) landscape.
- c. Ways in which social and interpersonal relationships help shape the protagonist's identity.
- d. Ways in which cultural and/or sub-cultural linguistic patterns (dialects, slang, neologisms) help shape the protagonist's identity.
- e. Ways in which the protagonist's identity is shaped by place and/or by her/his struggle to reject or escape place.

f. Means the protagonist uses to search for and discover her/his own place and identity.

Using these prompts as a guide, we will explore how six young adult authors construct literary worlds in which “place/literary landscape” informs a character’s identity.

In Paul Fleischman’s *Breakout*, seventeen-year-old Del is desperately searching for a “place” and an “identity.” To underscore this on-going quest, the story alternates between two different narratives—one in which Del records what happens and runs through her mind as she waits in an all-day traffic jam on the Santa Monica Freeway and the second (taking place eight years later) in which Del (now named Elena Franco, a playwright and performer) performs her own one-woman show based upon being caught in a traffic jam on a Los Angeles freeway. By juxtaposing these two narratives, Fleischman artistically delineates how Del’s life-long search for “place” is integrally linked to her sense of who she is.

Through Del’s interior monologue, we learn that she has lived in foster homes in the Los Angeles area through high school, but she has never felt connected to any of their worlds. She has survived through various forms of what she calls “shape shifting” (33), e.g., striving for invisibility, immersing herself in Italian films, impersonating others, and losing herself in classic novels. As the novel opens, she is still attempting to escape. She discloses that she is on the freeway in her ’83 Datsun, trying to run away from LA to a “. . . life without a file, just like other people!” (12). She fakes her own death; leaves her old self behind—boombox, CDs, new Doc Martens, and lava lamp; disguises herself as a college student, camping in the Southwest, so police won’t recognize her as a minor; and leaves town, hoping to exchange her “interim” identity for a permanent one (17).

Being caught in a traffic jam provides Del the opportunity to reflect on who she is, where she came from, and where she wants to go.

She perceives LA as a place of contrasts and mixed messages:

Los Angeles! City of tanned shoulders! Smog-spewing, pay-per-viewing, sitcom maker of the world! Mall builder! Pierced-tongue purveyor of tacos! Surfboard toter, deal closer, looter, shooter, barbecuer, black-jacketed valet parker of a million BMW’s! City of thronged roads! Drive-through city! City whose dwellers see the sun through sunroofs, its

rays pouring through like a revelation and tanning the youthful, muscled, tattooed, sunscreensed shoulders of Los Angeles. (15)

It is inhabited by people who simultaneously fascinate and repel:

. . . dreadlocks, pierced eyebrows, pierced lips, pancake makeup, a wristwatch in the shape of Dali’s melted clock, berets, birthmarks, bald heads, bloodshot eyes, a combined eighteen yards of tattoos of barbed wire, scabs, scars of worrisome origin, toupees apparently bought at garage sales, age spots, pornographic earrings, fingernails chewed to the quick, lazy eyes incorrectly addressed for the past five minutes, capillaries in the nose, constellations of moles, Milky Ways of dandruff . . . (93)

As she observes people on the freeway, she gives us glimpses into their lives: a mother and her self-absorbed fifteen-year-old son, playing a game on his cell phone while listening to a CD through headphones; an illegal alien driving a ‘51 Volvo; a college student working on a piece on “road rage”; and two drain cleaners trying to hook up with a woman who turns out to be gay.

She also notes how drivers use their cars to insulate themselves from the world around them. They customize their cars to satisfy individual tastes and then guard them with security systems. Their identities seem to be wrapped up in the kind of car they drive. In this culture of shifting mores and individualistic values, “place” and “identity” have become self-constructed and solipsistic.

The longer Del interacts with the stranded drivers, however, the more she realizes how opportune this traffic jam is. It is a leveler—they are all equal. Eventually, the motorists put aside their distinctions of class, race, appearance, politics, and model of car, start talking to each other, and share their own stories and talents. And the more Del loses her self in the lives of others, the more she understands her own life and place in the world.

Del experiences her own “breakout.” It dawns on her that “. . . L.A. is a vast, ludicrous, lethal, infuriating collection of Other People” and that is . . . “all

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we've got" (135). She understands that without connection we cannot survive, and that Other People help define who we are. Furthermore, we have to accept "Otherness. Things we have no control over, didn't ask for, don't deserve . . . 'It is what is'" (135).

Through Elena, readers learn that Del has broken away, not only from the traffic jam, but also from her past. Through the arts of playwrighting and performing, she has created her own "place" and found her "identity."

Fifteen-year-old Tyrell, the African-American narrator in Coe Booth's *Tyrell*, is a victim of his place—the New York Bronx. When his father is sent to jail for a third time, his mother scams the welfare system and is placed on probation for fraud; Tyrell, his seven-year-old brother, and his mother become homeless victims of the over-subscribed Shelter System. As the story begins, Tyrell, a high school dropout, rides a rickety bus with his mom

and little brother to a cheap hotel in Hunts Point. From the bus window he sees ". . . two drunk Mexicans. . . screaming at each other," a man with a shovel ". . . swinging it 'round, trying to get them to move from his store. People is walking up an down the street like nothing is going on. Like it's just another night in the Bronx" (17). This bus trip is Tyrell's nadir, but in the Bronx, life goes on; no one takes note of anyone else's pain. Tyrell later admits that "I don't need nobody to tell me how fucked up this city is" (215). Living in this city has messed up his life, too. Tyrell and his friends feel trapped like pin balls in a shabby, broken pinball machine.

Tyrell's cell phone connects him with family and friends. His girlfriend provides him with a prepaid card, saying "I wanna make sure I can always talk to my man . . ." (16). He values that phone connection so deeply that he accepts her charity, though he speaks often of guys needing to be tough. He says, "guys gotta act stronger and tougher when females is watching them" (93).

Because he has nothing, he is willing to break rules. His only means of making money is ". . . at the

train station swiping people in with [his] MetroCards, charging them half what the city want" (60). Everyone tries to beat the system—his friends sell drugs, a girl his age in the hotel sells her body for sex, his father's friends sell beer and prostitutes to minors.

And yet, in spite of his indifferent, unruly landscape, Tyrell tries to be responsible and caring. Because his mother is immature and dysfunctional, he assumes full responsibility for his younger brother, Troy. It is the only way the two brothers can stay together and out of foster care. Tyrell's constant attempts to make money are always motivated by making sure Troy has food. His mother demands that he sell drugs to make money for her, but he refuses, unwilling to end up in jail like his dad.

Tyrell looks up to his dad as a role model until his dad is thrown in jail. ". . . he ain't done nothin' to make sure we was gonna be 'ight while he was gone. And, now, 'cause of him, I gotta be the man" (224). Tyrell loses his childhood in a set of conditions beyond his control. He wonders what will happen when his father is released. "I'm s'posed to go back to being a kid again? 'Cause I don't think I could go back, you know what I mean?" (224).

Unlike other protagonists in young adult novels set in a specific region, Tyrell is not searching for his roots. There is very little family history beyond a cranky grandmother who appears briefly early in his life. Instead, Tyrell's environment forces him to make adult decisions in order to survive. He weighs freedom against responsibility, indifference against caring, giving up against forging ahead.

When the New York City Administration for Children's Services takes custody of Troy, abandoned all night in the seedy hotel while his mother goes out partying, Tyrell finally realizes he cannot be the sole provider for a seven-year-old. He sees this as his chance to make his own way. He writes, "I need [freedom] too. I need time where I don't gotta worry 'bout nobody but myself. I mean, it ain't my job to be no father at fifteen" (308-9). The young, homeless girl he meets at the dreaded Bennett Hotel escapes with him, each trudging off with a plastic bag of belongings. Together, they plan to enroll Tyrell in her alternative high school. He has not escaped the Bronx or even homelessness, but, unlike his dad, he is "gonna be 'ight" no matter what happens.

In Patrick Jones' *Nailed*, sixteen-year-old Brett

Fifteen-year-old Tyrell, the African-American narrator in Coe Booth's *Tyrell*, is a victim of his place—the New York Bronx.

Hendricks spurns the conventions of Flint, Michigan—a politically conservative, blue-collar city. Brett’s dad manages the local car wash, while his mom works as the cashier at the local Wal-Mart. Brett’s dad is into NASCAR, cars, and poker—he spends more time worshipping his vintage, red, “holy” Camaro Beretta than he spends with his son.

Brett, on the other hand, is an artist who cares about books, music, and the theater. Because Brett does not fit the image of the typical Flint male, Brett and his dad clash. Brett’s dad wants him to learn a trade; he calls him a “freak boy” because he wears his hair in a tinted pony tail, dresses unconventionally, and loves to sing and act.

Neither does Brett fit in at Southwestern High School, run by a “Jockarchy” who think the “world revolves around them and [who] harass those who are different” (181). In this environment hostile to non-athletic males who love the world of theater and music, Brett is frequently the victim of bullying.

Flint is not an accepting place for Brett. Even though his Mom is sympathetic and tries to understand him, he feels lonely and disconnected. He isn’t sure who he is, but he does know who he doesn’t want to be—a “pathetic poser” (58), caught in a dead-end, back-breaking job. He does not want his ideas and opinions “stamped out like another GM assembly line part” (58). He longs to break away from high school, Flint, and his Dad; like the Joads in *Grapes of Wrath*, he is looking for a “promised land, far away from Flint” (101).

But, meanwhile, Brett is trapped in Flint, fighting to survive and to establish his identity. Performing as the lead singer in a local band, the Radio-Free Flint, helps bolster his self-efficacy. Dressing in Goth-like theater costume castoffs and Goodwill thrift store apparel helps him stand out as a non-conformist. Romancing Kylee, a sexy, talented dancer, who admires his acting ability, helps build his self-esteem. Later, however, when she twice cheats on him, he feels betrayed, devastated and empty. Running for student body president gives him a platform to speak out against hypocrisy, harassment, and apathy.

After Brett capitulates to his dad’s demand to change the oil in his Mom’s car, Brett and his dad start talking again and begin to understand each other. Brett’s dad begins to respect him and offers advice which helps build his confidence; he tells Brett that

Life is not “. . . about getting what you want, it’s about getting what you need and doing what you should” (167). Brett finally feels validated as a son and human being when his dad sells his cherished Camaro to help pay Brett’s legal fees.

Brett’s new girlfriend, Becca, teaches him that he can be “different without feeling odd” (203). And after he allows himself to be beaten to a pulp by the school bully just to prove to his fellow classmates that he is “not gutless” (198), he returns to look at the graffiti, “Brett Lives,” he had earlier painted on the Grand Trunk Railroad concrete. Standing there, he thinks “. . . about Becca, senior year, Rodeo-Free Flint’s new lineup, and my father and I know those words are the fuel I’ll use to make my own way on this human highway” (216). Brett’s experiences in Flint have given him the resiliency to fight back, to chart his own path, to be the “real thing.”

In e. E. Charlton-Trujillo’s novel, *Feels Like Home*, young adult readers meet narrator Mickey Owens, a high school senior living in the small South Texas town of Three Rivers. The multi-layered regional setting in this story permeates her every action; her complex view of herself and her past, present, and future; and her relationships with family and friends.

As the story begins, the reader learns that Mickey’s father has been killed in a pickup truck accident while inebriated. Mickey’s mother had deserted the family when Mickey and her big brother Danny were youngsters, and Danny became Mickey’s hero and best friend. But after Danny graduates from high school as a football star, he takes off in shame because the townspeople blame him for setting the fire which burns down the football stadium and kills his best friend. Mickey spends her adolescent years hating Danny for leaving. Upon Danny’s return, he hopes to make things better for Mickey, but she cannot forgive him for abandoning her.

She also recognizes a split in the town’s citizens—white wealthy rednecks, Mexicans, and white trash. She knows that despite her intelligence and Danny’s football prowess, they are considered white trash. She

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plans to escape the Three Rivers community after graduation to attend college.

The distinctive physical and geographical features of the literary landscape in this novel serve as a framework for extended metaphor and foreshadowing of change in characters. One particularly strong image of place involves “. . . a little scraggle of road” called “the Stick” by locals. When Mickey and Danny were growing up, the Stick was a place of refuge: “Mom’s moods and Dad’s drinking, it all faded the second our

shoes stepped out on that narrow dirt road snaking between two cornfields. . . out there we belonged. . . There was no limit to the transformations of the vast openness” (44). After Danny returns, they revisit the Stick, but, this time, they aren’t sharing dreams. Rather, the place denotes a remoteness between Mickey and Danny—as wide as Texas.

Later, the Stick again becomes a place to talk. Mickey and her friend Ricky

ditch school, go to the Stick to share thoughts, and watch a storm bubble angry clouds. Ricky drives Mickey back to town as the “wind roar[s] and the neighbor’s wind chimes smashing together [is] the only sound aside from cracking leaves that pierce the smothering air” (138). When they get to Mickey’s house, Danny bursts out the door, grabs Mickey, and sends Ricky packing. The prairie storm mirrors Mickey and Danny’s unraveled relationship.

The siblings have also been shaped by a shared reading experience. They have always been captivated by *The Outsiders*, identifying with the characters’ struggles and their search to belong. After Danny leaves near the end of the novel, Mickey sashes out to the Stick, crawls onto the hood of her truck, and once again opens *The Outsiders*. She writes: “I started reading aloud, hoping my voice carried up over the fields, past the stadium, along the highway, and soared right across the Texas state line. I hoped that maybe Danny could hear” (213). In the wide expanse of fields and sky and in the narrow confines of a small Texas town, Mickey learns about loyalty, growing up,

forgiveness, honesty, and letting go while hanging on. Powerful lessons learned from a powerful landscape.

In Alan L. Sitomer’s *Hip-Hop High School*, smart and ambitious Theresa Anderson (Tee-Ay) lives in an inner city filled with race riots, drugs, and random shootings—a community in which blacks are set to fail before they even get started. Most of the “peeps” in her ’hood dream of becoming rappers, hi-hoppers, or ballers but end up with low paying jobs, in jail, or as drug-addicts. She feels her neighborhood is undergoing “poorification”—the middle class is being replaced by a “. . . straight-out low class” (214-215). All that is left in her community are a “. . . bunch of liquor stores and doughnut shops that sell Chinese food” (57).

The one positive force in Tee-Ay’s environment is hip-hop music. Tee-Ay idolizes the beat-boxers and hip-hoppers who “flow rhymes by the fence” (1) of her school—“music, rhythm, and rhymes make it all good no matter what ’hood you came from” (40). The “wild, electric sizzle” (21) of hip-hop lingo races through her veins and gives her a sense of self-identity and serenity—“. . . if you talk too proper, you might get jumped by a crew of four or five . . . because people will think you’re trying to act white” (5). Her favorite expression—“Wuzzup wit’ dat?”—makes her sound cool (5). Hip-hop “understands” her and keeps her company “. . . like a slo-mo flow of dope, dope show” (134).

Not only does hip-hop help Tee-Ay fit in, it also teaches her about the benefits of “elevating your mind” (120). Since sixth grade she has dreamed of graduating high school with a respectable GPA so she can attend a good university—USC—in spite of all the “haters” who constantly try to bring her down. Thus she works hard to overcome all of the obstacles in her way—low self-esteem; a drug culture; a school with “. . . helicopters, race riots, and wannabe gangstas” (230); an overly-protective mother who does not trust her; and daily black-on-black violence. Tee-Ay realizes that to survive at her high school she has to stand up for herself and find her “. . . own groove in life” (208).

Tee-Ay enrolls in Honors classes; stops smoking pot; resists the temptation of sex; works at the movie theater to make her own money; befriends Devon, the brightest boy in her class; works hard in the library accessing SAT websites and prepping for the SAT test; reads the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* which con-

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vinces her she can do something with her life too; and, when her soul mate, Devon, is shot in a drive-by shooting, she finishes writing his application essay for college and submits it for him. While writing the essay about how “. . . an event, an encounter, or a specific life experience has helped shape your character and influence your perspective on life” (279), she realizes that Devon has been able to transform his bad experiences in the ‘hood into positive ones—he used his misfortunes as a “. . . motivational tool to work even harder so that he could become a success in life” (322).

Like Devon, Tee-Ay also chooses to turn the negative influences in her environment into positive ones. The consequences of these choices are not easy; she often feels betrayed, confused, and guilty. She admits: “Maybe I’m broken on the inside” (49). Yet, her persistence pays off. Her guidance counselor helps her get into USC in spite of her mediocre SAT scores, and her mother gives her a new car for graduating from Hip-Hop High.

In John H. Ritter’s *Under the Baseball Moon*, the setting of “over-the-moon and star-tossed” Ocean Beach in San Diego, CA, is woven into every part of the story, narrated by fifteen-year-old trumpet playing, skateboarder Andy Ramos. In Part I, Andy introduces Ocean Beach as a “. . . magical, organical beachtown filled with soul, filled with the spirit of long-lost freedoms, and known simply as ‘OB’” (1). Part II opens with a lyrical description of place: “Peaches, oranges, nectarines. Llama rides, cake and pies, and everything in between. . . Listen to the ocean pound and the foghorn bay. You can sell your soul at these crossroads, *mijo*, or you can walk away” (127).

Andy grows up surrounded by music making—jazz, rock, bebop, and hip-hop or “old school music,” as he calls it. His musical roots. And now he is beginning to create sounds beyond his roots, street sounds he imitates on his trumpet as he skateboards under Sunset Cliffs Boulevard Bridge near Robb Field and the softball diamonds. He calls his music “Cultural Fusion” because it is just like his neighborhood.

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He is a spray-paint artist, or tagger, with music, spraying people and trash-can cats, Newport coffee shops and tattoo parlors, and the broomstrokes of Freeman sweeping the sidewalk. Andy hopes this will be his “break out summer,” when he will become a respected and recognized musician beyond the boundaries of San Diego.

When he reunites with a childhood friend, Glory Martinez, who has just returned to town with her mother, Andy begins imitating her softball pitching moves. Before long, the two discover that Andy’s music carries Glory’s pitching to new heights, and Glory’s presence

inspires Andy’s music in a magical way as well. Their dreams of becoming a famous softball pitcher and a renown musician fuse. But, in a scene filled with allegorical implications, Andy meets a stranger on the pier in the dark of night and later fears he might have sold his soul to the devil for the promise of musical success. He believes he could lose both Glory and future musical glory because of one weak moment.

Ocean Beach tradition is rich with magic—a fortune teller, a Holy Jokester, and a root doctor wander in and out of the story. In the introduction to Part III, readers are told that “this rivermouth town has been a crossroads town since the river was a stream . . . a vortex of things hoped for, a conjunction of things unseen. . . . Never underestimate, *mijo*, the powers of this place” (209). As Andy grows into his dream, he looks for “*verdad* that” or the truth. Though he starts out hoping to escape the small-town musician’s life his parents are happily living, by the end of his breakout summer, he is still in Ocean Beach, while Glory has received a softball scholarship to attend Cal Berkeley. He is still there three years later, thinking he has “dropped off the music industry’s radar screen” (280). But, then the phone rings, and his band “FuChar Skool” is about to take off, fueled by the power of OB.

By using the six prompts detailed earlier as a frame of reference, we have tried to demonstrate the role “place/literary landscape” plays in shaping a young protagonist’s character and identity. We hope

these brief analyses will serve as models for readers who wish to examine place and identity in young adult novels. Also, as teens engage with young adult novels, we hope they will see and/or reexamine connections or disconnections between their own “place” and their own emerging identity.

Dr. Gerrit W. Bleeker is Professor of English and Associate Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Emporia State University, where he specializes in English education and American literature. He coauthors a column about children’s and young adult literature with Barbara S. Bleeker for the Topeka Capital Journal.

Barbara S. Bleeker teaches in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Emporia State University, where she is a specialist in children’s literature.

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