

Taking Out the Trash:

Complicating Rural Working-Class Narratives in Young Adult Literature

Perhaps one of the most well-known texts that centers on life in a rural, southern town is Harper Lee's (1960/2006) classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This text is a mainstay in classrooms around the United States. Readers are captivated by Scout's tales of growing up with Jem, Dill, and Boo Radley in Maycomb, Alabama, and her life as the daughter of the honorable and iconic Atticus Finch. One character who receives little attention but whose actions drive one of the major plot points is Mayella Ewell. She is the eldest daughter of Robert E. Lee Ewell. If Atticus Finch is one of the most iconic characters in literature, Bob Ewell may be one of the most hated—emblematic of the racist, misogynistic attitudes that plagued the South during this time period. This family is referred to as “the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations” (p. 40). The Ewells flaunt their lack of formal education and live in such disarray that “the plot of ground around the cabin look[s] like the playhouse of an insane child” (p. 228).

Even today, Mayella is still representative of white people from poor, rural communities and the ways in which they are perceived by some members of society. A girl like Mayella would be assumed to have little or no education and may be seen as classless and rude, “a withered branch of the American family tree . . . a fungus growth, they could weaken the entire stock of southern society” (Isenberg, 2016, p. 180). Indeed, Mayella and her family would today represent the “white trash” or “redneck” stereotype of rural, working-class whites. This becomes problematic when the Ewells are the only narrative of rural, white,

working-class characters that students are exposed to in literature. Tragically, they have become an archetype for the rural, white working class.

Oftentimes, authors use rural whites in poverty as the villains or comic relief (Isenberg, 2016). As a result of such representations, students in our classrooms may view the plight of the poor as self-inflicted and deserved, thus distinguishing this group of marginalized people as deficit and open to derision (Coleman, 2012). Even when negative images do not come to mind, and “even though the white poor are many, living in suburbs and rural areas, they remain invisible” (hooks, 2000, p. 4) or “easily forgotten” (Hicks, 2005, p. 213). In order to have other, more varied representations of rural whites in poverty, we argue that teachers and librarians will have to look beyond the Ewells and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We do not advocate that teachers remove *To Kill a Mockingbird* from curricula, but we do advocate that they provide students with counter-narratives of working-class, rural, white characters.

In recent literature, *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance, 2016) has proven itself pertinent, particularly to those of the Appalachian working class, inciting controversy and stirring emotions in readers. J. D. Vance details his early life growing up in Breathitt County, Kentucky, and his later move to Middletown, Ohio. Vance concedes that at 31 years of age, it is somewhat “absurd” (p. 1) that he has already written a memoir; however, the book's 65-week span on the *New York Times* bestseller list suggests that his story strikes a chord with readers, perhaps particularly with white, rural,

working-class America. As white scholars who either came from rural working-class environments ourselves, or are teaching white students who come from rural working-class environments, our interest in this

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topic is both personal and academic. hooks (2000) argues, “We live in a society where the poor have no public voice. No wonder it has taken so long for many citizens to recognize class—to become class conscious” (p. 5). Vance has tried to give voice to a particular group of poor Americans. His account of “hillbilly culture . . . blended a robust sense of honor, devotion to family, and bizarre sexism into a sometimes explosive mix” (p. 41), offering readers an

understanding of a group of people who are hesitant to open up to those they deem to be outsiders. He highlights what it was like to be a student in rural Appalachia.

Class has reemerged as a point of discussion in America’s classrooms and is a valuable topic to address given that our students identify with these groups and/or will be taking classes with others who identify with these groups. According to the school report card for Breathitt County, Kentucky, during the 2016–2017 school year, 78.5% of students were on free or reduced lunch. County-wide, 3.4% of students planned to attend college, 1.8% planned to attend either vocational school or work while attending college part time, and 10.0% planned to work full time after graduation; however, the overwhelming majority of students’ post-graduation plans—84.8%—were “unknown” (Kentucky Department of Education, 2017). The communities that Vance and hooks discuss are still very much a part of the national student population, and they face their own set of unique challenges and pressures. Vance’s text, in particular, provides a contemporary context in which students might discuss the complex issues that the rural, white, working class face.

In this article, we use three central texts for young adult readers—*The Serpent King* (2016) by Jeff Zentner, *Ramona Blue* (2017) by Julie Murphy, and *The Smell of Other People’s Houses* (2016) by Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock—to highlight key themes of white, rural, working-class, adolescent experiences. We chose these texts in particular because they feature white working-class protagonists. We knew that the authors of these three texts describe explicitly the ways in which class affects the protagonists’ lives without class being the sole focus of the narratives. Specifically, we felt that these three narratives were representative of working-class teens without implying that class was the defining descriptor of the characters’ lives.

We wanted to analyze texts that might also complicate the seemingly single-story representation of working-class struggles as belonging to people of color, so we intentionally chose narratives that focused on white families. The books we found featuring working-class whites were often set in rural towns. As such, we hoped our work could not only highlight white, rural, working-class characters as an often overlooked and ostracized group, but could also delineate a marker of other potentially available white, working-class YA counter-narratives in the field. Finally, as relatively recent publications, these three texts have not, to date, had much academic attention, so we hoped to use this article to spotlight their content and potential within future classrooms and scholarship.

Our methodological approach involved a recursive cycle in which each researcher read and coded the three texts to consider portrayals of counter-narratives of rural working-class whiteness in each of the texts. The initial codes that suggested the presence of counter-narrative elements in some but not all of the texts were: strong family bonds, the role and power of religion, sexuality, children as financial providers, teen pregnancy, the need to escape one’s hometown, white privilege, and substance abuse. For the purposes of this article, we chose to focus on the themes of strong family bonds, the need to escape one’s hometown, children as financial providers, and white privilege. The other initial codes (the role and power of religion, sexuality, and teen pregnancy) were not consistent across all three texts, so we eliminated them. We did, however, choose to focus on the theme

of white privilege and how it is (or is not) addressed within the three texts, even though it was not a theme that was present in all three of the texts. We felt that it was ethically important for us to consider the presence or absence of this theme because of our intentional choice to focus on white, rural, working-class characters. Last, we eliminated the theme of substance abuse because we determined after the coding process that it did not qualify as a counter-narrative element since it is consistently portrayed in texts about rural communities already.

Class, Space, and Race in the US Context

Writing in 2000, bell hooks argued that “[a] changing class reality that destabilizes and in some cases will irrevocably alter individual lives is the political shift that threatens. . . . Class is the pressing issue, but it is not talked about” (p. 5). Heeding hooks’s warning, we push for a move forward to develop even more class-conscious individuals and institutions. Unfortunately, many Americans make broad assumptions about where people in the greatest economic need are geographically located. Scholars discuss the public’s perspectives about the low socioeconomic levels of urban environments due to the physical proximity of people and the heightened visibility of poverty within cities (Deavers & Hoppe, 1992; Milbourne, 2004).

In addition, the prevalent media representations of inner-city economic strife lead people to create correlative associations between lower-class families and city living; this, in turn, leads to a glossing over of rural spaces in studies concerned with poverty and the working class (Deavers & Hoppe, 1992; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; hooks, 2000; Milbourne, 2004; Moore, 2001). These assumptions, however, belie the realities surrounding socioeconomic conditions within rural environments. In 2016, the percentage of families living below the US poverty rate in metropolitan areas (12%) was slightly lower than nonmetropolitan areas (16%) (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017). Further complicating broad assumptions about poverty are statistics that show that the South has the highest percentages of poverty by state, with some nonmetropolitan areas reaching percentages in the low to mid 20s (Bishaw & Benson, 2017; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017). Eight of the ten states with the highest poverty numbers in 2016 exist within the United States’

Southern Delta and Appalachian areas, the settings of Vance’s memoir as well as two of our three focal texts (Hansen, 2017).

Amidst these intersections of class and space, race and space are messily intertwined. Race by itself is a fraught concept, particularly the racial category of “white.” Scholars illuminate the fallacy of concrete biological notions of race, but they also acknowledge the very real implications of race as a social construct (Mahiri, 2017; Smith 2003). Within the United States, the concept of whiteness was constructed as an ever-moving target of legal categorization that defined who could be free, own land, and vote (Mahiri, 2017; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Smith, 2003). In fact, the term “Caucasian” itself is a space-based term originating from the pseudo-scientific racist practices of Johann Blumenbach in 1775 who argued the Caucus region between Europe and Asia contained the most beautiful people (Mukhopadhyay, 2008).

A number of US legal cases have attempted to define whiteness, including the landmark 1920s naturalization cases of Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind, where Ozawa and Thind attempted to be defined as white and Caucasian, respectively, based on racial definitions like Blumenbach’s (Smith, 2003). Ozawa, of Japanese descent, was denied citizenship rights because his physical appearance of whiteness through fair skin was not supported by a Caucasian region ancestry; Thind, however, was denied the same rights despite his Caucus region ancestry because the court argued he did not appear to fit “the common man’s” understanding of whiteness. In other words, he did not look “white” as the white men of the court understood whiteness to be (Smith, 2003). Through these confusing legal re-defining practices, whiteness as a privileged identity could continue to be policed to limit rights to a select group of people already in power. The mercurial shifts in definitions of whiteness have drawn upon aspects like skin color, other physical features, countries of origin, and religious back-

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grounds. These definitions are not formal and contain an ever-growing list of signifiers that unclearly qualify what whiteness is and is not.

Yet while whiteness is illusory in its definition, it is still clearly discernable through the privileges that exist in society, especially regarding housing and education. Cities are natural sites of racial and ethnic diversity due to their histories as immigration hubs.

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Further, a conflation of non-whiteness with urban environments emerged due to historical, inequitable privileges of whiteness in non-urban areas (Smith, 2003). Jim Crow laws led to the Great Migration of black families toward Northern and Midwestern cities and also to racist exclusionary housing practices, such as redlining,

that came to define post-WWII suburbia and its origin with Levittown (Smith, 2003). As such, inequitable legal and housing practices reshaped the actual racial demographic geography of the United States as well as assumptions of class, space, and race.

Although the denotations of the terms “urban” and “rural” are specifically connected to population density and physical proximity to city centers, often within popular discourse (and especially within educational discourse), “urban” and “rural” take on more connotative racial and cultural meanings. For instance, in Dyan Watson’s (2011) interviews of teachers participating in an urban education program, she found that teacher participants’ understandings and use of the term “urban” “was constructed as a code word for *race*, specifically black and Latina/o and often for *poor*” (p. 50, emphasis in original). The conflation of blackness with poverty and its overrepresentation in the media are what hooks argues has erased the fact that “[w]hile black folks disproportionate to our numbers are among the poor, the vast majority of the poor continue to be white. The hidden face of poverty in the United States is the untold stories of millions of poor white people” (2000, p. 117).

Even as race, class, and space are interconnected within *assumptions* of urban contexts, the three categories intersect in some *realities* with respect to white-

ness, poverty levels, and rural contexts. As the US Census Bureau statistics for 2016 show, “non-Hispanic whites living in rural areas had higher poverty rates than those living in urban areas” (Bishaw & Posey, 2016). Nancy Isenberg (2016) takes her exploration of these intersections even further as she explores the ways in which limitations surrounding land ownership reinforced class stratification in the early US colonies and added to the creation of a stigmatized lower class of “white trash” (p. xv). These settlers found refuge on the least tenable lands, such as the swamps of the Carolina Low Country and the rocky and wild Appalachian mountain range, ultimately linking the white poor with specific rural geographic locations.

While class, race, and geography interconnected for these white, rural, working-class, early Americans, stigma muddied the waters of identity and agency as some people believed “[c]lass was congenital” and the result of bad “bloodlines that made poor whites a notorious race” (Isenberg, 2016, p. 137). From these American origins, the white, rural poor became conflated with the “white trash” stereotype and its corresponding characteristics of lazy, loud, and lascivious individuals who live in unfavorable homes. These tropes have lingered into 21st-century media representations, from Cletus, the slack-jawed local in *The Simpsons* (Groening & Brooks, 1989–2017) to individuals in the reality show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (Lexton, Rogan, & Reddy, 2012–2014). While race, gender, religion, and sexuality continue to be integrated into discussions of critical literacy and engagement in social and educational discourse, class is still often an easy target for derision. J. Mark Coleman (2012) describes this dilemma with students in his own classroom as they often see poverty as a result of an individual’s “bad decisions or personal deficits” (par. 9). This view is deeply ingrained in the American mythos of meritocracy that Edin and Shaefer (2015) argue stands counter to welfare programs and reinforces a blaming-the-victim view of class inequity.

If we hope as a country to truly reckon with class, we must do so in a way that understands its intersections and context. As authors, we want to make it clear that we are by no means arguing that the plight of the rural, white working class is more important than the circumstances of other minoritized groups or people in other geographic settings. However, having taught and lived in rural areas and worked with

students belonging to the white working class, we take to heart hooks's call for a transformative interracial approach to class equity "rooted in a politics of resistance that is fundamentally antiracist, one that recognizes that the experiences of underprivileged white folks are as important as those of people of color" (2000, p. 118). As such, we argue that an intersectional, anti-oppressive approach to class equity requires an analysis of multiple counter-narratives that serve to complicate single stories of race and class; however, instead of stopping there, we also argue that this analysis cannot ignore the importance of reckoning with white privilege, which is present regardless of class inequity.

Textual Analysis

The three examples of recent young adult publications we explore herein each feature white, rural, working-class adolescents. In *The Serpent King* (2016) by Jeff Zentner, friends Dill, Travis, and Lydia are growing up in small-town Tennessee. The teens within this text find their lives heavily influenced by their families. While Lydia grows up in a pleasant, upper-middle-class home with supportive parents, Dill and Travis both have troubled relationships with their fathers and find themselves working tirelessly to help their families make ends meet. Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock's *The Smell of Other People's Houses* (2016) is a multi-voiced narrative with four narrators: Ruth, Dora, Alyce, and Hank. The characters explore their positionality to their working-class families and their rural Alaskan home in varying ways—from a protective fondness to a defensive escape. Last, *Ramona Blue* (2017) by Julie Murphy centers on Ramona, a rising high school senior in Eulogy, Mississippi, as her understanding of her identity, sexuality, and future becomes more fluid—all while she balances two jobs and helps her pregnant sister prepare for a new baby.

These three texts each convey the complexities of rural working-class life in a far more nuanced manner than we can explore within the space provided here. For the purposes of this article, however, we focus our analysis on the ways in which the three focal texts exhibit the specific themes of the need to escape one's hometown, strong family bonds, and children as financial providers. Furthermore, conceptions of race beyond whiteness are explored in both *The Smell of*

Other People's Houses and *Ramona Blue* in interesting and important ways, particularly the ways in which the texts challenge readers to be conscious of white privilege. We conclude by providing pedagogical implications for the study of class, race, and place with adolescents in the form of text choices and writing assignments.

The Great Escape

Popular culture includes the story of a small-town young person dreaming of a big future in the big city. Sometimes this entails a career in show business, sometimes a serendipitously acquired job, sometimes a college acceptance, and sometimes it is just "getting out of town." But youth from rural working-class communities face a unique set of challenges if they decide they want to leave home. Vance (2016) discusses what this process looked like for him growing up in Ohio: "[I]t was all around us, like the air we breathed: No one in our families had gone to college; older friends and siblings were content to stay in Middletown, regardless of their career prospects; we knew no one at a prestigious out-of-state school; and everyone knew at least one young adult who was underemployed or didn't have a job at all" (p. 56).

Perhaps even more significant are the stigmas attached to those who do leave for better opportunities. Vance writes, "Hillbillies have a phrase—"too big for your britches"—to describe those who think they're better than the stock they came from. . . . The sense that they had abandoned their families was acute, and it was expected that, whatever their responsibilities, they would return home regularly" (p. 30). The characters in both *The Serpent King* and *Ramona Blue* are all too aware of the stigmas Vance describes. In addition to stigmas, the characters face fears of starting something new; hooks (2000) details this explaining, "While it was definitely easier for folks from poor white backgrounds to assimilate visually, we all experienced estrangement from our class origin as well as the fear of losing touch with the worlds we

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had most intimately known” (p. 119). Despite their readiness for a fresh start, the characters experience dual fears of both the unknown and of losing touch with their roots.

Youth from rural, working-class backgrounds who attend four-year universities are often first-generation

college students (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012).

Contending with accusations and personal worries of getting “too big for [their] britches” on top of the anxiety that accompanies a major life transition like going to college can be completely overwhelming and defeating for rural youth. In *The Serpent King*, Lydia has always felt misplaced in Forrestville and longs for a life in New York City. She is the only child of an upper-middle-class family. Both of her parents are college-educated and employed; her father is the Forrestville dentist.

Lydia had long made her dreams known to her

best friends Travis and Dill. However, the start of senior year has each of the friends feeling her impending departure more acutely. Dill gives Lydia an especially difficult time about getting out. When she brings up college, Dill is either “silent and taciturn about it” (p. 30) or the two get into an argument about whether or not Lydia is leaving Dill and Travis behind. Lydia is undeterred by Dill’s guilt trips and the rest of the senior class’s implications that she sees herself as “too good” for Forrestville. She pushes Dill to consider his own college prospects, often times pushing too hard, and she fails to see the challenges he faces. While Lydia has loving and supportive parents, Dill is the son of an incarcerated pastor and an overworked mother who is trying to convince him to drop out of high school, work more hours, and help pay for the family’s debts. When Dill raises the topic of college with his mother, she immediately shuts down

the idea, reminding him of the futility of comparing himself to Lydia. His mother’s warning exemplifies Vance’s earlier statements as she tells Dill, “Someday you’ll learn you’re no better than your own name” (p. 46).

The titular Ramona of *Ramona Blue* navigates similar concerns. For Ramona, neither her parents nor her sister attended college, and she had no plans to be the first to break this tradition. Much like Dill and Travis in *The Serpent King*, Ramona envisions her future in Eulogy, Mississippi, caring for her father, sister, and niece while her friends leave Eulogy (and her) behind for college. Like Dill, Ramona does not have enough money for college and also feels a tremendous sense of guilt around abandoning family members who depend on her. While music serves as both a creative outlet and a career prospect for Dill, swimming becomes an outlet for Ramona and eventually serves as a vehicle for scholarships. Ramona’s friend Ruth encourages her to think about a future beyond Eulogy and tells her, “There’s no reason you should be stuck here forever. I know you’re over this place. It’s so obvious” (p. 245)—a conversation nearly identical to one Dill and Lydia have in *The Serpent King*. Ramona, like Dill, is frustrated with her friend, “‘No reason? Are you serious?’ I ask, trying not to raise my voice. ‘I have plenty of reasons. I have no money, no car, a knocked-up sister, mediocre grades. . . . I can keep going,’ I tell her” (p. 245).

In addition to navigating the direct effects of poverty, Ramona and Dill, like many teens across the United States, experience what Dehaan and Deal (2001) describe as the “indirect” effects of poverty, which are “mediated through the parental relationship. Experiencing poverty is often associated with decreased marital satisfaction, harsher parenting practices, and depressed mood” (p. 53). For many youths, these effects alone can be a driving force behind the desire to escape, but with this decision come associated feelings of survivor’s guilt, even if the intentions of leaving are to increase future earning potential, as is true for Dill, or to benefit the entire family. In *The Smell of Other People’s Houses*, Alyce is tempted to leave in order to fulfill her lifelong dreams of becoming a dancer, but she expresses guilt over leaving her father behind to fend for himself without her, something that we will address further in a later section. Ruth’s temptation to escape is found in the arms of a

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rich boy who smells of “cedar and Tide” (Hitchcock, 2016 p. 12). The way Ruth describes her own home’s smell as “the faint scent of mold in secondhand furniture” stands in contrast to the idealized, escapist description of her boyfriend’s house, where “everything was fresh, like it was just flown in from Outside, and there were no rules” (p. 12), making clear that part of his appeal is the chance he might offer to help her escape from the trailer park where she lives with her grandmother. As for Hank and Dora, their desire for escape is more directly connected to the indirect effects of poverty that Dehaan and Deal describe, as both search for ways to escape their abusive home lives—Dora by clinging to her friend’s home as a temporary safe haven, Hank and his brothers by running away; even Hank’s little brother Sam dreams of escape through (possible) attempted suicide.

The Family Ties That Bind

As teens come of age, there is often a rejection of or moving away from family, a realization or forgiveness of the family’s wrongdoings, or the cultivation of parental relationships that become more like friendships. Each of the three focal texts feature families that reflect the destabilization of the heteronormative nuclear family—that is, a family with married, heterosexual parents and multiple children. Instead, adults are drawn in more complex, humanizing ways that do not define the mothers and fathers as good or evil (i.e., flat) characters. This follows a trend in young adult literature today in which parents are more layered and well-rounded and the relationships between the teen protagonists and their parents are more complex than we have seen in the past (Rebellino & Stamper, 2018).

While parents in young adult literature are often absent or only semi-present in teens’ lives, within our three focal texts, non-nuclear and intergenerational family structures provide strong familial support. Friends, neighbors, and grandparents provide family ties that help to foster the strong sense of community often cultivated in rural areas. As family is broadly defined in texts about rural working-class communities, pride operates in complex ways and becomes a tie that binds people together. Vance (2016) illustrates this through memories of his grandmother, recalling, “She loathed anything that smacked of a lack of complete devotion to family” (p. 41). For instance, “even though you never start a fight, it’s maybe okay

to start one if a man insults your family. This last rule was unspoken but clear” (p. 66). Despite the aforementioned feelings of wanting to escape, characters are often paradoxically fiercely defensive of their non-nuclear families, which helps establish the notion that in rural working-class communities, family is foundational to an individual’s identity.

While the concept of family is complicated in its move away from the nuclear or traditional concept, the family unit in rural working-class literature

is by no means “broken.” Rather, the families in the three focal texts highlight how the bonds of family in rural communities are not always bound by blood, yet are strong roots in each of the characters’ lives. In *The Serpent King*, Dill, Travis, and Lydia serve as family for each other, emotionally championing and lifting each other, such as when Lydia encourages Dill to go

to college or when the trio fiercely defends its members from the mockery of peers. The teens also provide one another financial support in unconventional ways, as seen when Lydia’s father drives Dill to see his father in prison, hires him in the family dentistry practice, and buys excessive firewood from Travis. Dill even takes Travis in when he has nowhere else to live. Similarly, in *The Smell of Other People’s Houses*, Dumpling and Bunny’s family takes Dora in, and the nuns provide shelter and emotional support for Ruth and her grandmother in their times of need. In *Ramona Blue*, Freddie’s grandmother Agnes and his late grandfather raise Freddie when his parents are unable to care for him. Agnes even plays a maternal role for Ramona and Hattie, hosting Hattie’s baby shower and helping Ramona get involved with swimming. Further, Freddie, Ruth, and Saul all provide emotional support and understanding for Ramona, particularly as she comes to better understand her sexuality. In these ways, the focal texts serve to show the complexity of the family unit in lower socioeconomic areas and how, through nontraditional arrangements, community is fostered.

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In addition to the multifaceted family unit, the texts all mirror a characteristic often apparent in rural lower-class communities: supporting or defending family members for better or for worse. Individuals frequently demonstrate particularly strong loyalty to their families, even under conditions in which the readers may have expected the characters to turn

away. In *The Serpent King*, Dill honors his parents by visiting his father in jail and being honest with his mother about his plans for college because it is the right thing to do. Despite the absence of his father's physical presence and the emotional rift between him and his parents, he does not waver in his loyalty (though his mother's notions of loyalty may differ). In *Ramona Blue*, Ramona and her sister Hattie vow to always support each other, and Ramona even considers putting her own life

on hold in order to financially support Hattie and her child. Ramona proclaims to herself, "I am reminded of my priorities. Before I belong to anyone, I belong to Hattie. I belong to my sister. I belong to our life in this little town" (p. 297). Even though this vow is mostly one-sided, Ramona feels a sense of responsibility for pregnant Hattie and stands in when both their mother and Hattie's boyfriend are absent. In *The Smell of Other People's Houses*, Ruth honors her grandmother by naming her newborn baby after her, even after their years of misunderstanding and lack of communication. Loyalty to one's family is a guiding theme through these chosen texts and throughout many rural working-class communities.

Bills to Pay, Mouths to Feed

The protagonists in each of our focal texts see their jobs as contributing to the survival of their family. Given the foundational role of the family to rural working-class identity and the characteristic fierce family loyalty, this role as family provider takes on an even greater responsibility. Altogether, the stakes

are higher surrounding the characters' employment. If a job interferes with a character's ability to perform at school or achieve another personal goal, such as athleticism (swimming for Ramona) or artistic success (music for Dill and dancing for Alyce), the working-class characters face stress on the more fundamental level of *need*—namely, the physiological and emotional human needs for food, warmth, rest, and security. In these focal texts, the parents' inability to earn enough money to provide the basic needs of their families creates in the teen characters an onus to contribute to the livelihood of the family as a whole. In this way, the responsibility to the family's livelihood takes precedence over the character's individual success, and devotion to the family unit clashes with individual identity development.

In *Ramona Blue*, Ramona frequently comments about how tired she is from working her multiple jobs delivering newspapers on her bicycle in the early morning and bussing tables at a local restaurant at night. Ramona comments, "[G]rowing up, most kids wonder what they will do for a living. But for me, there was never any worry over what the job would be, just how soon I could start" (p. 9). Her understanding of her future is one that consists of as many jobs and shifts as possible, but all of it serves to benefit her family. While her father encourages her to be young and blow her paychecks on "something foolish" (p. 44), Ramona instead describes the number of times she drained her savings to save Hattie. While Hattie is the one to get pregnant, not Ramona, Hattie's pregnancy immediately leads Ramona to begin planning for the family's survival—hers, Hattie's, her niece's, and her dad's—even as Ramona fears the added layers of stress. This self-sacrifice in the name of family success also occurs for Alyce in *The Smell of Other People's Houses* when she makes the initial choice to help her father on his fishing boat instead of going to her much-anticipated dance audition.

Both Dill and Travis in *The Serpent King* face more troubled relationships with their role as family provider, a role that is forced upon them as opposed to willingly taken up, as it is with Ramona and Alyce. Even though Dill's mother holds multiple jobs as a maid and gas station attendant, her salary is still not enough to allow the family to survive and to pay off the debt Dill's father accrued before being arrested. Even though Dill did not contribute to the debt, his

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mother reminds him regularly of his family duty. Both Dill and Travis comment that they are the only people who their mothers have for support. In Travis's case, his father beats him and his mother. Travis expresses feeling trapped in the abusive home when Dill urges him to call the police on his father: "Travis gave a quick, bitter laugh then drew his breath in. 'No. The lumberyard would shut down. I'd lose my job. My family would lose its income. My mom couldn't get by on the little sewing jobs she does'" (p. 231). As a result, both Dill and Travis endure physical and emotional abuse while working long hours and still attending high school in order to help their families survive. Altogether, the teens' exhaustive working lives in our focal texts represent the struggles of the American working poor who, despite holding multiple jobs and working overtime, for one reason or another still fall short of financial security (Edin & Shaefer, 2015).

This alternative family financial structure, where the teen plays a crucial role in providing for the family, ultimately affects the power dynamics between the adults and children. As much as Ramona and Alyce care for their fathers, for example, both describe the men in ways that suggest the daughters have to take on a protective role instead of the other way around. Dill's and Travis's relationships with their fathers, as well as Dora's relationships with her own irresponsible and alcoholic parents, reflect what Vance (2016) sees in his older 15-year-old sister while growing up: she was the "one true adult in the house . . . I depended on her so completely that I didn't see Lindsay for what she was: a young girl, not yet old enough to drive a car, learning to fend for herself and her little brother at the same time" (p. 83).

White Privilege within Poverty

Thus far, we have addressed how our three focal texts highlight complex themes and serve as counter-narratives to the single-stories of white, rural, working-class families. These narratives work in much the same way as Vance's (2016) memoir, and unsurprisingly the themes explored in the fiction above appear in *Hillbilly Elegy*, as well. However, we feel the need as white educators working toward anti-oppressive pedagogy to highlight the fact that race is rather unproblematized within Vance's memoir. Vance does not acknowledge the privilege of his whiteness and how it served him and his family within his work. He

interrogates the stereotypes of class and space, but takes his whiteness as a given and invisible norm. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) comment, "Once again the significance of race and the advantages of being White are being denied. Further, this discourse assumes that Whites and people of color have the same reality, the same experiences in the same context, and that the same doors are open" (p.123). As in *Hillbilly Elegy*, race as a factor is overlooked in *The Serpent King*. Dill and Travis have plenty of hardships, but facing racial prejudice is not one of them. Our other two focal texts, however, include characters and conversations that challenge readers to become aware of the narrators' white privilege even as they face socioeconomic struggles. Murphy's and Hitchcock's incorporation of various points of view provide an intersectional approach to class which stands in contrast to Zentner's all-white narrative.

In *Ramona Blue*, Ramona and her friends decide to have a fun night out and sneak through a fence for a pool party in someone else's backyard. Ramona hides the details of the pool's ownership from Freddie, leading him to believe that the pool belongs to a friend. Unfortunately, the owner arrives and threatens to call the police and tells the teens that he has a gun, so they make a run for it. At first, the scene has the potential for a problematically colorblind experience as the white teens giggle down the road. Freddie, however, becomes quiet. When Ramona asks what is wrong, Freddie addresses the white privilege involved in the act and her failure to see how the experience could have put his life in danger:

Maybe sneaking onto private property is just some kind of stupid antic for you, but from where I stand, that's how black kids get shot. . . . You can't pretend to be color-blind or some shit when it's convenient for you, okay? I'm black. This is the skin I wear every damn day. You're my best friend. You can't tell me that you don't see that my black life is not the same as your white life. . . . Maybe you haven't

This contemporary example provides readers opportunities to consider important cross-racial aspects of privilege and racism that might be misunderstood to be relics of the past, as in discussions of more historical texts like *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

thought about things like this before, because you don't have to. I get that. But when I tell you I'm uncomfortable, I need you to listen, okay? (p. 160).

This contemporary example provides readers opportunities to consider important cross-racial aspects of privilege and racism that might be misunderstood to be relics of the past, as in discussions of more historical texts like *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In *The Smell of Other People's Houses*, all of the narrators can be identified as coming from a working-class background, but three of the four narrators are white. As Dora, an Eskimo girl serving as the one narrator of color, explains, "Being poor may be enough to make us all look like a bunch of mismatched, unfashionable orphans, but it isn't enough to make us all friends" (pp. 25–26). While none of the characters in the text have problem-free lives, the three white narrators' white privilege can be contrasted with Dora's experiences of racism. Dora faces the same class-based struggles as the other narrators, but she also faces racism from her classmates. Ruth's boyfriend mutters, "Does anyone else smell muktuk?" as Dora walks into the classroom, which Dora comments is "such an old racist joke I can't even give him points for trying" (p. 27). The teasing continues when the white girls in her school make fun of Dora's snow boots, which she

purchases because the "rich white girls wear [them]" (p. 32). They subsequently tease her about trying to look like them. Alyce, Ruth, and Hank all face many of the same issues as Dora, including abusive parents and making personal sacrifices for the good of their family, but only Dora has to face this racism as well. By choosing multi-voiced narration for her novel, Hitchcock structurally organizes her text in a way that provides readers with a comparison of how class, space, and race intertwine.

Classroom Connections: Considering the Intersections of Class, Race, and Space with Adolescents

Examining the lives of and the issues impacting rural working-class people in our country has practical implications for teaching, learning, and advocacy. Providing access to texts in school libraries and making intentional text choices in classrooms can serve to address issues of class, race, and space with adolescents. Literature that illustrates the economic, social, religious, and political aspects of working-class life for whites in rural areas is important for all students to read—both rural whites and non. Young adult and children's literature set in rural areas has largely existed as texts about farming (e.g., *Charlotte's Web* [White, 1952/2006] and *A Day No Pigs Would Die* [Peck, 1972/1994]). While there is certainly validity in sharing these stories, these farming texts capture different issues related to living in poverty in rural areas than do texts specifically about the working-class whites living in small towns or rural communities where farming is not predominant. Furthermore, a reliance on farmhouse narratives of rurality feeds central assumptions of an idyllic, rural, working-class life (Milbourne, 2004). A list of fiction and nonfiction texts for middle readers and young adults about rural working-class people and families that can supplement classroom libraries is provided in Figure 1.

Students need to see themselves and others in a multitude of texts that portray the complexities of social issues and families that constitute rural working-class life. We need texts that help to complicate single stories so that they do not exist as the single narrative that students have about any one group of people (Ehst & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2014). It is important to remind audiences that white, working-class people can exist in texts as more than comedic relief and

Middle Grade (MG) and Young Adult (YA) Fiction

- Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The outsiders*. New York, NY: Penguin. (YA)
- Patron, S. (2006). *The higher power of lucky*. New York, NY: Atheneum. (MG)
- Rowell, R. (2013). *Eleanor and Park*. New York, NY: St. Martins. (YA)
- Vanderpool, C. (2010). *Moon over manifest*. New York, NY: Yearling. (MG)
- Voight, C. (1982). *Dacey's song*. New York, NY: Atheneum. (MG)
- Weeks, S. (2006). *Jumping the scratch*. New York, NY: Laura Geringer Books. (MG)
- Whaley, J. C. (2011). *Where things come back*. New York, NY: Atheneum. (YA)
- Woodson, J. (2012). *Beneath a meth moon*. New York, NY: Penguin. (YA)

Nonfiction

- Bartoletti, S. C. (1996). *Growing up in coal country*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Edin, K. J., & Shaefer, H. L. (2015). *\$.00 a day: Living on almost nothing in America*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Walls, J. (2005). *The glass castle*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Figure 1. Further reading

that they are not defined by archetypal stereotypes of illiteracy and laziness. To help fight single stories and bridge the gap between schools and the communities of which they are a part, teachers should find ways to incorporate texts that highlight cultural and class-based issues into their classrooms (Hayes, 2017).

In addition to the texts read and provided in schools, another pedagogical implication for teaching adolescents the ways in which class, race, and space intersect might entail the inclusion of text-based writing prompts and projects that ask students to consider the role of class and race in their own lives and communities. The teaching of texts about rural, working-class families also needs to change to reflect the types of students in our classrooms and the experiences and ideologies of the authors of the texts. As Appleman (2015) suggests, “[W]e cannot simply change the texts that are taught; we must change how they are taught” (p. 182). Teachers can ensure that students consider texts and the issues presented in them differently by incorporating class writing and discussions that explicitly ask students to critically question how people are represented in the texts. Questions might include:

- How does the text contradict generally accepted truths?
- How does the text maintain the status quo by reinforcing existing hierarchies?
- Is there economic diversity in the text?
- Is there racial diversity within the socioeconomic groups represented?
- How do characters from different socioeconomic classes interact with each other?
- Which socioeconomic class and racial group does the work claim to represent?
- Whose values are being reinforced or justified in the text?
- What are the privileged identities within the text? How are these addressed or represented?
- Are there characters who experience both privilege and oppression (i.e., experiencing racial privilege and socioeconomic oppression)?

Writing and discussions can also be centered around inquiry units where students consider the economic issues that impact the lives of people in their community. Based upon our own experiences teaching and learning alongside students in rural, working-class communities, some of these inquiry topics might include: coal mining, factory jobs and their shift

overseas, the heroin epidemic and other substance-abuse-related issues, and the evolution of religion in public spaces. Drawing on both fiction and nonfiction, students can read about issues that matter to them and their peers, conduct research, and present their findings or take a position in the public sphere for the purpose of social action or advocacy.

To date, well-meaning teachers have used texts like *To Kill a Mockingbird* to teach critical literacy and empathy without realizing that they might be perpetuating a single story about white, rural, working-class Americans. Indeed, Lee’s novel has had a lot of success with rural students, allowing them to see themselves and their values represented in the canonical landscape where they are otherwise largely invisible. However, we question whether students are so attached to this single narrative—as flawed and dated as it is—because it is the only mirror they have. Instead of relying on a single mirror, we are asking teachers to diversify the reflections of the rural working class that their students see.

Referencing the harmful narratives perpetuated about people on welfare, despite a lack of substantial evidence, Edin and Shaefer (2015) write, “Sometimes evidence, however, doesn’t stand a chance against a compelling narrative” (p. 14). Throughout this article, we have provided readers with powerful and compelling counter-narratives to these stereotypes. By using young adult literature like the texts featured here and encouraging students to develop critical class consciousness through reading and writing, we hope that today’s teachers will not be complicit in passing the buck on economic inequity in the United States.

Karly Marie Grice recently earned her PhD at The Ohio State University and is currently an assistant professor of English at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois. Her research and teaching interests include multicultural children’s and adolescent literature, comics and multimodal texts, and teaching for social justice. She previously taught high school English in Anderson, South Carolina.

Caitlin E. Murphy is currently a PhD candidate in the Literature for Children and Young Adults program at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include reciprocal disclosure between teachers and students and the role that literature plays in eliciting those exchanges, youth incarceration, and humanizing pedagogies in the English classroom. She earned her MEd from Wake Forest University. Before working on her doctorate, Caitlin taught

high school English for eight years, five of which were in rural Kentucky.

Eileen M. Shanahan recently earned her PhD at The Ohio State University and is currently an assistant professor of Literacy at Eastern Kentucky University. Her research and teaching interests include understanding how discourse shapes teacher learning, teaching English language arts from a social justice perspective, and argumentative writing instruction. She previously taught eighth-grade language arts in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she also served as a middle school curriculum coordinator.

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