

An Empowered Rurality?!):
The Subversive Power of Peer Sponsorship in *The Serpent King*

Amy Azano argues that literary scholarship has neglected to consider the rural context. Kim Donehower also suggests rurality remains on social and scholarly margins due to prevailing negative stereotypes that position rural people outside the purview of modern social concern. Similarly, Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed posit that rural is Other due to a broad sociopolitical assumption that urbanization is a natural and inevitable process—thus, rural folks are stubborn, vain rabble rousers, folks who should understand their way of life is dying. In the face of this cultural and political marginalization, I wonder how literature for young people might offer rural readers positive alternatives for themselves and their communities. In short, I ask: how might young adult literature set in rural places reveal young rural people’s potential for agency and transformative change?

This presentation will closely examine the depiction of peer-to-peer sponsorship as a transformative model for empowering young rural people. Using Jeff Zenter’s *The Serpent King* (2016), and borrowing from Deborah Brandt’s notion of literacy sponsorship, as well as Maria Kefalas and Patrick Carr’s sociological study of rural education, I argue that Zenter offers a promising subversion of dominant, deterministic discourses imbuing rural places and schools. However, in doing so, I also critique the neoliberal, economic assumptions behind this educational ideology. Furthermore, I question the ways rurality remains, in this novel, as in others, a place for empowered young people to leave. Ultimately, I call for authors and scholars to imagine ruralities that are instead places to live.

Keywords:

Rural, agency, youth, neoliberalism, sponsorship