

“The River Remembers Where It Belongs:” Geographies of Youth Displacement and Mobility in Three Novels in Verse

Who am I, and where do I belong? As Erin Spring notes in her study of adolescents’ engagement with text and spatiality, “young adult fiction is fraught with implications for identity, of which place often takes center stage” (Spring, 2016, p. 432). Yet despite the ubiquity of social, cultural, and geographic movements across spaces and landscapes in contemporary fiction for young adults, literary scholars have only just begun to pay closer attention to the interconnectedness of place, space, and identity (Spring, 2016). Building on the theoretical frameworks of feminist cultural geography (Massey, 1994; Rose, 1993) and relational mobilities (Urry, 2007), this paper analyzes these complex interrelationships in connection with the experiences of marginalization and exclusion three young protagonists encounter as they move through and occupy multilayered fictional worlds. Jacqueline Woodson’s *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Thanhha Lai’s *Inside Out and Back Again*, and Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust* feature preteen and adolescent characters struggling to belong amid various forms of upheaval and displacement—thereby dispelling romanticized, nostalgic portraits of “home” with representations of mutable, overlapping spheres of deep fulfillment and dangerous instability. Moreover, while the presence of water (or, in the case of Hesse’s novel, the lack thereof) often functions in all three works as a physical barrier or impediment to mobility—binding young characters to their familial lineages—tides of water and dust also underscore the malleability of space and identity, shepherding the potential for more fluid subjectivities moving forward. Thus, by analyzing such depictions of space and mobility through a geographic lens, I aim to highlight the ways in which young protagonists come to terms with, respond to, or challenge the perceived confines of their everyday spaces and identities—including the subtle ways in which they actively shape and redefine them (Bavidge, 2006).

References

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