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# Space and Place and the “American” Legacy: Female Protagonists and the Discovery of Self in Two Novels for Young Adults

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## **Space and Place and the “American” Legacy:**

### **Female Protagonists and the Discovery of Self in Two Novels for Young Adults**

The American<sup>1</sup> Wild West: Big, blue skies; towering mountains; independent, free-spirited residents; and open vistas that draw the eye for miles. New York City: Skyscrapers that block the sky, busy streets lined with workers and big shots and dreamers; a kinetic, frenetic energy that fuels the soul. Each of these American places holds not only particular perceptions given the influence of history, story, and media, each is also framed as offering escape to those in need of change; one can get lost and found in the natural world or in a sea of humanity. These associations and this shared assumption of discovery remind us of the importance of setting, of place, in our conceptions and perceptions of the world around us. Where we are located can influence our way of doing and being in the world: Do we ride a bike or ride the subway to work or school? Do we live in a cabin or a high-rise apartment? How we locate ourselves can also impact the ways in which we measure our self-worth and find connection or feel disconnection with others around us. The emotional and mental space we inhabit is intimately bound to the physical place in which we reside.

Examinations of the intersection between space, place, and identity in story have the potential to reveal the complexities inherent in locating one’s self. This is an especially important process for young adult readers who are moving toward greater independence and autonomy as they work to define their own place in the world. Engaging students in conversation around identities in the context of literature can support their success in understanding how the world

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<sup>1</sup> The use of “American” throughout this paper is intentional. The Americas extend well beyond the borders of the United States, and use of the term to refer only to the United States is centric and limiting. This paper highlights the conceptions and perceptions of “America” as an abstract concept more than a place defined by geography.

and their place in it is socially constructed and thus able to be revised. As cultural artifacts, young adult (YA) texts both originate from and influence the social, cultural, and ideological understandings of adolescence/ts, and, in the process, develop, propagate, and/or critique ideas of adolescence/ts (Lewis, Petrone, & Sarigiandes, 2016). When we invite students to question these ideas of who and what they are *supposed* to be, we encourage them to consider how this literature is never neutral. It is always imbued with ideologies that “interpellate readers in particular ways,” positioning them as “certain types of subjects with certain worldviews, beliefs, values, and ethics” (Connors & Rish, 2015, p. 23).

As part of a larger sabbatical project centered on new YA literature published first or simultaneously in a country outside the United States, I came across three titles (out of 35 novels read) that were set in the US. Of the three titles identified, two employed thematic consideration of the mother-daughter relationship in the development of character and seemed to use a particular setting, or place, to house this development. *Crow Mountain* (Inglis, 2016) (named to the 2017 Long List Book Awards of the United Kingdom Literacy Association, received the 2016 Romantic YA Novel of the Year Award from the Romantic Novelist’s Association, nominated for the 2017 CILIP Carnegie Medal, and named to the shortlist for the 2016 Young Quills Award sponsored by the Historical Association) features two London teens who travel to Montana in different times; Emily ventures West in 1867 to meet the man she is expected to marry, and Hope accompanies her mother on a research trip to a Montana ranch in contemporary times. In parallel narratives told in two voices across alternating chapters, the young women describe their individual but similar experiences when placed in a survival situation growing from an unexpected accident in the wilderness. Although Inglis self-identifies as an informal historian of history in Europe and the United States, she is decidedly British, calling London her

home (<http://lucynglis.com/about/>). In *A Hundred Hours of Night* (Woltz, 2016) (winner of the 2016 Nienke van Hichtum Prize), Emilia runs away from her home in the Netherlands in hopes of building a new identity in New York City following a sex scandal involving her father and lack of attention from her artist mother. She meets three other young people who provide support and friendship when Hurricane Sandy black outs the city. Over the course of her experience in the darkness, she comes to better understand her parents and her own needs and wants. The author was in New York City when and soon after Hurricane Sandy struck but was raised and lives currently in the Netherlands.

Upon encountering these novels, I was intrigued by the decision of non-US authors to choose settings in the US and outside their own homelands as places for their female characters to inhabit, particularly given the ways in which these spaces provided distance to reconfigure the protagonists' views of themselves as young people growing up under the regular and watchful eye of the adults, especially the mothers, in their lives. Drawing upon theories centered on conceptions of space and place (Massey, 1991; Tuan, 1977) to explore how a new physical place provides space for independence development among female teen protagonists in the two novels and the implications for such development given the authors' identities as non-US authors writing about the US, this analysis helps us think about the experiences of the novels' female protagonists as they venture into new and different places and how they identify with these places in the process of casting a redefinition of themselves. This study offers an additional layering of complication to existing work in the field given the national identities of the authors whose work is under consideration, inviting us to wonder about representations of place across borders and geographies. And in the context of education, this work invites opportunities to think

carefully about how we might support students in their development of accurate understandings of their own places and the larger global community in which they reside.

### **Theories of Space, Place, and Identity**

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) first explored and articulated how ideas of space and place depend upon one other for definition, arguing that if “we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause” (p. 6). Tim Cresswell elaborates on this claim, noting that “When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way..., it becomes place” (2004, p. 10). This place, then, can take the form of home, for Tuan, a fundamental concept to people around the globe. He argues that the valuing of home was central to the ancient Greeks and Romans, the New Zealand Maori warrior who asked to revisit the border of his territory before dying, the Native Americans who worshipped the earth as a maternal figure, and migratory families that moved away only to follow the pull of home back again (p. 155-160). Home, then, becomes “an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness.... Home is where you can be yourself” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 24).

Tuan’s vision of home was reexamined, however, by Doreen Massey who forwards a new vision of place, one that is “open and hybrid—a product of inter connecting flows—of routes rather than roots,” one that “calls into question the whole history of place as a center of meaning connected to a rooted and ‘authentic’ sense of identity forever challenged by mobility” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 13). Massey’s thinking responds to concerns of lack of local color and diversity resulting from global expansion and capitalism, the fear that everywhere is the same. Unlike Tuan, Massey argues that place is more open, not static, that places are “processes” (1991, p. 29) and do not have singular identities. The specificity of place, a sense of uniqueness, does exist, but it does not result from a “long, internalized history” (1991, p. 28). It is instead the

result of a “distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations” (1991, p. 28). The same home, then, isn’t the same for everyone who lives there. This tension between space and place as more or less stable takes on resonance in consideration of the two titles explored here, both of which feature characters who travel to a new location and find a missing element of their identities.

Scholars have taken up the idea of place as central to characters’ identity development in the context of literary study. In his 2010 piece, Estok forwards the setting in Sinclair Ross’ (1990) historical novel, *As for Me and My House*, as the driving force in the narrative. He argues that the setting of the novel takes control, such that the characters become “little more than a dim backdrop” to the forces of the natural world in which the story is housed (p. 79). For Estok, the role of setting is inextricably bound to the role of the environment. The novel “subtly but persistently forces the reader to consider the ethical commensurability between humankind and nature,” reminding readers that nature does not have to hold our best interests dear; we are pawns in a world that reaches beyond our jurisdiction.

Booth (2011), in an analysis of human dwelling places in contemporary Egyptian literature, challenges Tuan’s vision of space and place while advancing this same enlargement of setting as much more than a simple backdrop for the narratives. He argues that the novels he explores suggest the “interrelation of crowdedness, daily instability and psychological anxiety.” The social spaces in these titles “engender alienation” rather than foster “a sense of collective identity, an ideal imagined nation-ness” (p. 380). Although Tuan defines places as “centers of value where needs are satisfied” (1977, p. 4), Booth positions these spaces as no places in the way they deny “stable shelter to subjects of the nation” (p. 380). Across these analyses, personal

identities are suppressed in response to the power of the places in which people reside, and opportunities for individual decision-making and choice are limited.

Other scholars have examined space and place within the context of literature for younger readers, specifically. Lockney (2013) draws upon place-based identity theories to describe how personal identity in Meg Rosoff's (2004) *How I Live Now* is not only "bound up with a place, or places" but can contribute distinctly to the very identity of that place (p. 312). In line with the work of Massey (1991), above, Lockney proposes that Rosoff challenges traditional conceptions of place as fixed or stable in that the central characters "play an active role in constructing a renewed sense of place in especially challenging circumstances" (p. 312-313), thus capturing the realities of mobility in constructions of personal identity. In their analysis of the children's novel *Gaffer Samson's Luck* (Walsh, 1984), Hodges, Nikolajeva, & Taylor (2010) highlight how Massey's consideration of social relations is bound to the influence of power and positioning in the determination of personal identity. They identify a complex network of identities and allegiances that foreground place (rather than age or gender) as a defining element of identity in the novel. Being a member of the village or the estate determines the peer groups and the mobility of the characters, thus suggesting a lack of autonomy or ownership over who one is or might be. Spring (2016) explored the "connections between lived and textual encounters with place" among three adolescent readers of YA fiction to examine how these young people explain place and place-identity in their lives and in literature. Her work offers evidence for the argument that fiction can serve dual purposes: To "bring us closer to our experiences of the world" and to provide readers "an alternative world, for methods of escape or adventure" (p. 357). We are not bound to one place alone.

### **Geography and Identity Construction in the Novels**

Each of the three female protagonists under consideration here becomes attached to a particular geographical location. With this attachment comes a perception of belonging. At the end of each novel, each protagonist returns to this location or chooses to remain there; it becomes a rooted place, a home. Tuan would argue that this suggests the valuing of a particular location in the creation of home. However, across both novels, it is the new, unfamiliar location that provides the impetus for identity development by offering room for reflection in a space away from home. Unlike Tuan's vision of the place-space relationship and the idea that a particular space, when settled and made special, assumes resonance as a place of home, the places in these novels afford space for personal growth among the characters, thus offering an inverse relationship: The geographical homes of the protagonists fail to provide the sense of connection afforded by the new, unfamiliar places. It is only when the young women travel to a new location that they find a missing element of their identities. We witness a reconstruction of geographical home growing not from birth or family or tradition or historical attachment but experiences that open space for reflection and increased understanding of the self and one's place. Unlike the findings forwarded by Estok (2010) and Booth (2011), personal identities in these novels are supported rather than suppressed in response to the power of the places in which the characters reside, and opportunities for individual decision-making and choice abound.

In *Crow Mountain*, we follow the development of two teens across two time periods, one historical and one contemporary, and both experience the unanticipated discovery of what was missing from their lives in their homelands, finding themselves literally and metaphorically in rural Montana. Emily leaves her posh London home in 1867 with the intention of traveling West to meet the man she is matched to marry, a railroad tycoon who promises continued financial security. From the outset of her development narrative, it is clear that the expectations for

women that Emily is beholden to are those passed down from her mother; she shall conduct herself according to strict rules of appropriateness for her time and station. Despite the fact that Emily is covered in red welts on her hip bones and the ribs of her back, for example, “Mama had taken a notion that a steel-strengthened corset was the way to proper posture” (p. 36). Such posture is necessary for Emily to transition “straight into the smartest of San Francisco society” (p. 36). Emily is also expected to heed the advice shared in a pamphlet provided by her mother as necessary reading during the journey. The document speaks “only of duty and tolerance.” As Emily explains, “*My tolerance, that is. Tolerance toward what was expressed as my marital duties and my husband’s natural physical needs*” (p. 38). Although Emily has “no knowledge of what form this ‘tolerance’ was to take, or what ‘physical’ part [she] might play in it” and remains completely naïve about sexual intercourse, she assumes her mother has her best interests in mind.

However, when her carriage crashes in Montana and she is the sole survivor of the accident, Emily resides in a new place, one in which Mama’s rules no longer apply. She is rescued by Nate, a horse tamer and rancher who was raised as a member of the Apsáalooke tribe (federally recognized today as The Crow Tribe of Montana) and who brings her back to his cabin for care and recovery. In these close quarters, society life and its accompanying expectations hold no sway; Emily must learn a new set of rules. After Nate prepares a bath for her, Emily is nervous about removing her clothing; her “concepts of modesty were being abraded rapidly” (p. 76). This shift is compounded when Nate comes to the tub and helps wash her hair. Emily worries, “Mama had told me many times that I should never let anyone see me naked” (p. 76), but Nate’s kindness makes her call into question what she has learned. For the first time in her life, she is charged with making her own decisions—from selecting what to wear (p. 79) to deciding whether to flee or stay at the cabin alone with Nate (p. 115). With time, Mama’s

influence begins to fade. By way of example, although “Mama would have taken a fit if she had seen what [Emily] did next” (p. 170), Emily crawls into the bedroll with Nate, accepting that sharing “a bed with a man whilst engaged to another” (p. 102) is the way of life in this place.

Emily’s development narrative shifts as she transforms into someone different—someone unacceptable under the terms of her former life. The reality that she “had been living alone with a horse trader” renders her “worthless” in the eyes of her Mama’s society (p. 137). However, at the same time Emily’s worth wanes under these expectations, her self-worth soars as a result of her life in this new place. In a pivotal scene in which Emily bravely battles against a buffalo hunter, protecting Nate from harm in the process, she achieves “warrior” status (p. 218). As part of Apsáalooke tradition, she is honored with the blood of the buffalo, joins the circle of warriors at the evening celebration, and is awarded a coup-feather for her first battle. She describes herself, “I ate like a savage, with my hands and my teeth, face bloody, watching them whoop and holler and dance to the pounding of the drums” (p. 219). This reference serves to reinforce Emily’s perception of herself as no longer “civilized.” By the end of her experience with Nate on the mountain, Emily has proudly become “a wild thing, as interested in the plants and animals of our home as I once had been in Milton and Dryden” (p. 299). She calls this once unfamiliar place home; Montana gives her what all of the seemingly valuable sensibilities of London could not: “Who she is was forged on this mountain” (p. 352).

It is important to note the problematic representation of the Apsáalooke people in this scene given the complicated—and persistently negative—portrayal of Native Americans in literature. Although depictions of the Apsáalooke people and their lives in the novel are rendered more carefully in some ways (the women are strong, complex, and varied; the characters inhabit both historical and contemporary times; and across both times, the characters resist and challenge

their oppressors), this scene reveals assumptions about privilege, place, and identity that reinforce stereotypical representation.<sup>2</sup> The equal and naïve conflation of Emily's experience and that of the Apsáalooke people (she is invited to participate in this celebration as one of their own but holds none of the historical and cultural knowledge necessary to understand fully her role) suggests an over-simplicity on behalf of the author that ignores the complexities of identity. As Chang (2011) argues, "Space can be reconstructed by means of memory, history, culture, or imagination; in other words, home can be reconstructed. Furthermore, home is closely related to identity, which can therefore be reconstructed, too" (p. 144-145). The presentation of Emily's significant reconstruction of her identity in this particular space ignores in this moment the complex influence of memory, history, culture, and imagination and instead falls prey to inaccurate and stereotypical imagery in the description of her limited experiences (ex. the "whooping" and "hollering" that accompany the dance, the blood smeared on her face, her behaving as a "savage" and becoming "wild"). Emily's new sense of self is tied up with historically-repeated and erroneous understandings of the wild Native as a reflection of the savage subconscious of the White soul; Emily unleashes an "uncultivated" element of herself that her own society has expected her to repress in order to remain "civilized." Although readers might embrace Emily's shift in identity for the way it reveals and affirms her strength, this representation of her "wild" self as somehow feral and untamed diminishes the potential complexity of her transformation while reaffirming a distorted view of Native Americans.

One might argue that Emily's shift in character has less to do with personal agency and more to do with her passive acceptance of the constructions of identity projected upon her in this

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Eastman, 2008; Reese, 1999; and Slapin, Seale & Gonzales, 1996 for helpful guidance on how to evaluate texts for anti-Native American bias.

particular place. She is not just *allowed* to behave in certain ways; she is *expected* to do so in this locale, one defined by its own cultural norms. However, I argue the persistence of Emily's new identity across communities suggests its authenticity. Following Nate's murder and her father's discovery of where she has been living, Emily is forced "back to a life of *must*, of *should*" (p. 337). Her father brings her to San Francisco where she marries the railroad tycoon after all. And yet, her new home is just a residence; parts of her Montana past remain a part of her. She loses her "wild" existence, but it remains central to her identity. Although she is forced to wear clothes deemed appropriate for a married lady, she refuses to wear shoes in an act of defiance. She maintains a glasshouse garden filled with mountain plants and open to the public so others may experience the West she came to love. She buys farmland and space for a buffalo preserve in Montana for her son's inheritance, a child we learn is Nate's own. And in the end, the pull of the place proves impossible to resist, as Emily comes back and chooses her final resting spot near an ancient tree and next to Nate. Again, however, we must consider how Emily's ease of movement across places and spaces ignores the privilege that she holds as result of her mobility. As Chang (2011) argues in her post-colonial analysis of Louise Erdrich's middle grade novel *The Game of Silence* (2005), immigrants, refugees, and displaced persons in the post-colonial era "need to find a place of their own in the world and the new identity or self that can survive there.... Choosing to relocate is not the same thing as being dispossessed" (p. 133). Unlike the Apsáalooke people in the novel who are forcibly displaced by colonial arrival and conquest, Emily comes to Montana, this new place as the result of an accident, and she has the freedom to navigate across multiple places as she determines the home of her choosing.

The developmental narrative of Hope, the contemporary teen in *Crow Mountain*, runs parallel to that of Emily. Like Emily, Hope is bound to the expectations for women passed down

from her mother, and like Emily, these expectations are grounded in a vision of womanhood appropriate to the time. Emily's mother defines herself as a feminist and guides her daughter accordingly. As Emily explains, "Meredith's idea of equality and feminism was that all women were on first-name terms" (p. 13). Meredith's character borders on stereotype in her vision of men as the enemy looking to take advantage of women; she advises her daughter, "You must use your personal agency as a woman to stop that happening" (p. 15). However, Meredith employs her vision of feminism to protect her daughter, homeschooling her, for example, to keep her from doing "what other girls [her] age are doing"—"hanging around in a park, drinking," "taking drugs," and "messaging boys naked pictures of themselves" (p. 15). As readers, we see her mask the vulnerability resulting from her husband's decision to leave her for his pregnant girlfriend when Hope was six weeks old with a defensive stance.

Hope unwillingly abides by her mother's expectations, not always agreeing but fearing what might happen if she challenges her outspoken caregiver. Her mother regularly speaks for her, defining her in the process. When Meredith and Hope meet Cal and Caleb, a teen and his father who own the ranch where they are staying in Montana while Meredith gathers data to study the subalpine microclimate, Meredith insists that "Hope's rather shy" (p. 20) and that "Hope is a picky eater" (p. 65) before she can speak for herself. In a particularly telling scene, Cal, the teen, asks Hope about her career plans. Although Hope "wants to be a writer. More than anything," her mother "answered for her," explaining, "Hope is homeschooled, and we're still discussing what she will study at university. A vocational or science degree is best. It's very difficult for arts graduates to find work in the UK at the moment" (p. 22). Cal probes again, directing his question at Hope. Hope takes a breath to speak, but the words stick in her throat; her mother then responds that she will likely study Chemistry. Hope is silenced by her mother

but also lacks the conviction to challenge her. Hope keeps her email exchanges with her father a secret and defines herself as “always good” (p. 88).

In parallel with Emily’s experience, when Cal’s truck crashes in the forest and Hope and Cal take cover at a cabin while awaiting rescue (the same cabin formerly inhabited by Emily and Nate), Hope finds herself in a place that offers space to figure out who she is. She, too, is changed by her experience on the mountain. She and Cal work together to find food and water, keep warm and dry, and ultimately build a relationship. Her independence and conviction to live on her own terms are bolstered by reading Emily’s diary (which she found at the ranch a few days prior). She admires Emily’s ability to become stronger in the face of new expectations rather than fall apart beneath them. Hope assumes personal agency and musters the courage to push back against her mother’s expectations and create her own definition of the young woman she aspires to be. While staying in the cabin, for example, Hope learns that Cal was falsely accused of raping a young woman in the community. When rescuers finally arrive and Hope’s mother assumes the worst, having heard the story about Cal, Hope stands up in his defense. Her mother insists that they need to leave and avoid any further contact with Cal. Hope objects: “You’re trying to control me. I don’t *want* to go home.... I want to stay.... I’m choosing this. *Me*” (p. 340). Although her efforts to remain in Montana are thwarted by her mother, upon her return to the UK, Hope chooses to attend public school and spend time with her dad against her mother’s will. And like Emily, Hope returns to the mountain and to Cal where they agree to be married and live off the grid in the cabin.

Emily and Hope are connected to this place by their similar experiences and through the journal that allows Hope to follow Emily’s lead in forging her own path. Hope explains that there is “less head noise” in this place (p. 117) and more silence to contemplate her role in it.

She reads Emily's words: "I had thought to spin out my life in West Coast drawing rooms and the society pages, yet here I was, a player on a different stage in the theater of a new America. I looked back toward the mountains and for the first time in my life felt a profound sense of belonging" (p. 239). Hope learns of the reality she shares with Emily despite existing in different moments. Emily writes, "For the first time in my life, I lived only in the moment I occupied. I was no longer in a perpetual state of preparation for a day that would not come. I did not need to change or control my person in order to please anyone but myself" (p. 177). She recognizes the power she, like Emily, has over her own life. As Emily writes, "I'd never chosen anything for myself before.... Not food, not clothes, not when I did things, or what I did. Or even who I married. Not anything" (p. 278). In this place, both Emily and Hope choose for themselves. And because the place is depicted as "totally unspoiled" (p. 64) and having "hardly changed" (p. 225) across the differing lives of these two protagonists, its potential remains.

In its conception and depiction of Montana, Crow *Mountain* offers an origin story not bound by history and simultaneously advocates for the stability of place. Although Emily's and Hope's new geographical home does not result from long-standing connections to family or heritage or history, it is positioned as unchanging—and ideally so. A sense of future optimism is established when Hope puts down roots in this place and makes strides to live the romantic adventure Emily was denied with the death of her husband. It is here in this story that heritage is born. Neither Emily nor Hope construct a new sense of place, as Massey would argue; they do, however, construct new selves in a particular place that may, in turn, result in a lingering sense of place bound by a particular family history. Lockney (2013) argues that personal identity can "contribute to the identity of a place." In these novels, however, the place gives rise to changes in

personal identity. Because this place is presented as static, it allows both girls, across time, to benefit from its powers, suggesting that this place, in this context, has a single identity.

This presentation of place as unchanging and static and singular across time is complicated, however, in the way it ignores the historical realities that underpinned Westward expansion and manifest destiny. As colonists moved West to fulfill what they perceived as their rightful takeover of the land, they hid behind their convictions regarding the morality and value of expansionism to displace those in their way. When place in the novel is described as “totally unspoiled” (p. 64) and having “hardly changed” (p. 225), it ignores the experiences of displaced peoples for whom life was (and continues to be) significantly altered as a result of colonial arrival and conquest. From a post-colonial view (Pratt, 1992; Saïd, 1979), it also suggests that the single identity of this place is not only determined by the oppressors but that the experiences and stories of the oppressed are not a valuable or even essential part of the narrative; they can be dismissed—and that the colonists have the power to do the dismissing. Post-colonial theorist Pratt (1992) advances the term *anti-conquest narrative*, referring to stories in which a European narrates his or her adventures and the accompanying ways in which (and degrees to which) he or she rejects, denies, or ignores responsibility as an agent, directly or indirectly, of colonization or colonialism. It could be argued that Emily’s view of this place as unchanging, in particular, ignores the consequences of colonialism and that her seemingly seamless engagement with the Apsáalooke people makes her somehow less culpable.

In *A Hundred Hours of Night*, we meet and follow the development of Emilia de Wit, a fifteen-year-old who runs away from the Netherlands to New York City to escape her troubled reality. Via a widely disseminated Internet story, her father has been publicly accused (and is guilty) of having a relationship with a female student in Emilia’s grade. Her mother’s reaction is

to have no reaction as all, a behavior that has defined her maternal role as far back as Emilia can remember. At the outset of her development narrative, Emilia claims that has she no story of her own, as it has been co-opted by her parents:

My dad wears corduroy pants and likes stargazing more than anything else. And, oh yeah, I almost forgot—last Tuesday he destroyed my world. My mother is Nora Quinn. She was born in Ireland, and now and then she speaks to me in English. I mean: She speaks to me now and then. Always in English.... I'm their daughter. That was my story. But now I have nothing at all. (p. 2)

She chooses New York City as the setting for her new start, a place that embodies freedom, as evidenced by the *Declaration of Independence*, which she describes as “one of the best things ever written” (p. 10), and the Statue of Liberty, a beacon that beckons travelers like her.

Emilia is in love with the city, a place she knows only through her history class at school, television, and film but one she believes will offer her space to generate a new story for herself. When telling the airline ticket clerk of her destination, she explains, “I feel something new and exciting running through my veins as I say the name of the city: I'm going to *New York*. My friends all have posters on their bedroom walls of boys they've never seen in real life. But above my bed, I have the New York City skyline. Okay, I've never been there, but I'm in love with it all the same” (p. 5). Upon her first view of New York City, seen through a bus window, she says “America is the ultimate story” (p. 21). As she imagines life in this new location, she draws upon what she thinks she knows about this place and its inhabitants: the “lonely, hung-up control freaks like [her],” the women who keep a diary and constantly clean their apartments “wearing an oversized sweater that once belonged to their ex or their dead father” and who “have only a cat to talk to” and “eat takeout every night” (p. 23). This place feels like it should be familiar: “If

there's anywhere in the world I should feel home," she claims, "it's here, in this glittering city" (p. 23).

The arrival of Hurricane Sandy guarantees that Emilia will have time to immerse herself in the city and begin to figure out who she wants to be; the wild state of the natural world stops the daily routine in this urban space. Emilia finds temporary housing in an apartment inhabited by a teen, Seth, and his younger sister, Abby (their mother is away from home due to work-related travel), and her parents are unable to travel to the city given airport closings. The physical distance that now exists between Emilia and her guardians allows her to feel independent and autonomous, free to create a new vision of herself outside the reaches of the adults who she feels have marred her identity. After calling home on the telephone and letting her parents know that she is okay following the hurricane, she tells herself in an imaginary conversation, "There's an entire ocean between us. There's nothing you can do if you don't like me wandering around this city. I have my friends and my passport and a toothbrush. I'm free" (p. 135).

As Emilia's development narrative continues, however, she learns that such independence can come with challenges; the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina offers a new, more complicated, vision of New York City and of herself. She encounters the reality of not having access to running water and flushing toilets, electricity, and the Internet. Following the storm, the city is "so unrecognizable that it's disturbing. The center of the world should not be *closed*. At the center of the world you shouldn't have to be scared of the moment when it gets dark" (p. 144). It is in this dark, quiet place, however, that Emilia is able to better understand her mom and the dysfunctional relationship she has with her daughter and her husband. As a result of her shared experience with the strangers around her in the city, she begins to consider the meaning of connection. While standing amidst several others without power and access to showers and

normalcy, she reflects, “It’s getting dark, but I don’t want to leave. It’s crazy. I understand these people better than my own parents. We’ve been a family over there in the Netherlands for fifteen years now, but how many times have I ever felt that we were going through the same thing?” (p. 147). These reflections continue during the outage and eventually open a space for her to think more empathetically about her parents’ relationship. As she walks the dark streets with Seth, she remembers her father’s explanation for his affair, his expressions of loneliness and feelings of being tied to a life that failed to bring him joy. She considers, “I can imagine loneliness very well, but not being *tied down forever*. I’ve known for years that I’m going to move out as soon as I’ve done my final school examinations. I don’t have to live in the same house as them for the rest of my life. I try to imagine how I would feel if I knew that this would never stop” (p. 190).

Emilia begins to see the truth about herself and the underlying reasons for her desire for escape. Yes, her father messed up and yes, her mother is inaccessible, but Emilia’s discomfort with the family relationship stems from more than her fear of being an adult given her parents’ seeming failure. She is frustrated that her parents do not understand her, but the reality is that she does not understand herself. As she wanders the halls of the Frick Art Museum in anticipation of being reunited with her mother following the storm, she sees herself as she is: “I am Emilia. A scared little girl. A sexy cat. I sleep next to Jim, next to Abby, I am the daughter of a sleazy school principal, I am a girl who stands on the sidewalk, swearing at the top of her voice, and exploding with the light of a billion suns—I don’t know who I am anymore” (p. 204).

When she meets and talks honestly with her mother for the first time in a long time, Emilia articulates a desire to remain in the city. She asserts herself and the value of her story and the importance of figuring it out: “I want to be in New York. I want to live” (p. 234). Although her mother supports her decision and her father says he will think about it, what matters more is

Emilia's understanding of her own courage independent of her parents. On a solo walk later that evening, she sees the Statue of Liberty and is reminded of the immigrants who came before, who risked their lives in the name of freedom. "I don't know if I could ever be that brave," she admits. "But I do know something has changed. A month ago, whenever I was in doubt, then I thought: Okay, I just won't do it. And now I think: Yeah, let's do this Let's give it a try" (p. 236).

In *A Hundred Hours of Night*, Emilia is attached to NYC (or her assumptions about it) before she ever experiences it; once she comes to know the city, it is not the same place she envisioned, but it is now where she wants to build her home. When considered through an application of Massey's theories, a reconstruction of the geographical home supports the conception of place as less stable or static than that advocated by Tuan. The presentation of New York City in *A Hundred Hours of Night* is grounded in a definition of place influenced by the many stories of those who inhabit it and the reality that these stories differ depending upon the experiences of the teller. There is no singular construction of this place projecting itself on her; her choice to remain in this place is unique to her. Emilia comes to understand that liberty takes on a different form for her than it did the immigrants who came before the arrival of the Internet and travel guides. As she views the Statue of Liberty, she shares in the appreciation of freedom as an abstract concept experienced by immigrants across time and place but witnesses how the lived reality of this freedom is markedly different for her given her place in history.

### **Implications**

Both of the titles examined here defy several elements of literature for young people identified by scholars as commonly evidenced in such titles. Nikolajeva, in her analysis of the children's novel *Gaffer Samson's Luck* noted above (Hodges, Nikolajeva, & Taylor, 2010), for

example, argues that “the dilemma of children’s literature lies in two contradictory objectives: to keep the child protagonist safe and secure in the felicitous space and to encourage identity development. This is frequently achieved through the master plot of children’s literature: home—away—home. Such cyclical movement in space allows fictional children to test their possible identities without the actual need to develop them” (p. 196). In these novels, however, the protagonists disrupt this cycle in that they choose not to go home; they actively reject the place into which they are born and construct instead an alternate home driven by their own convictions and desires. This disruption parallels the argument offered by Trites (2012) in her close reading of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. She argues that Asher’s (2007) novel strays from the “life is a journey” pattern of growth reflected in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, examining how the narrative violates the expected script of the adolescent protagonist by presenting a character who, given her decision to take her own life, does not arrive successfully at her “metaphorical destination” (p. 77). She chooses death rather than growth. Across both novels examined here, it could be argued that the protagonists, in their disruption of expectation, similarly challenge the script of adolescence by forging a path that leads from home to away and, ultimately, to a destination that begins rather than completes the journey. Although they do not choose a literal death, their real and metaphorical establishment of a new home suggests a rejection and rebirth of identity. Some have argued that literature for younger readers, as written by adult authors is grounded in “unequal, asymmetrical power positions.... Adult values, beliefs and rules are almost without exception presented as the norm. Norm-breaking is allowed for a limited time and on certain conditions, but adult normativity is always confirmed” (Hodges, Nikolajeva, & Taylor, 2010, p. 199). These titles, however, challenge this convention in that the young people win in

the battle for their own sense of normalcy relative to place; they decide what counts as home despite pressure from the adults in their lives to abide by grown-up rules.

I argue that these challenges to convention are influenced directly by particular assumptions about America as a place as perceived through the outsider lens of the authors who constructed these stories. Across both titles, the presentation of *The Wild West* and *The Big City* as particular focal places affirms the myth of America as a wondrous place in which anything is possible, in which one can lose and find oneself. These protagonists are given space in which to buck convention, to create their own American dream, in ways that sustain the narrative of hope and possibility and rule-bending that has accompanied the real and mythic history of the United States as the land of the free and the home of the brave. This romanticized view is positive in the fact that perpetuation of the myth offers hope; the American dream is alive and well in the construction of these tales. However, this view is simultaneously inaccurate given the reality that the myth is much less simple. Given the forces of fortune and the history of institutions in a nation that is not always equitable in its bestowing of favor, not every American dream comes to fruition, not every traveler to this place finds what he or she seeks. The authors of these two novels hold outsider perspectives by virtue of their identities as non-US authors, and the affirmation of *The Wild West* and the *The Big Apple* evidenced in their stories reflects perhaps limited lived experience in these places and a global society that offers virtual, but not necessarily lived, access to information about most anywhere at the click of the mouse. In the case of *Crow Mountain*, these perspectives also intimate the lasting effects of post-colonialism in the representation of Native Americans. Unconscious or not, these views when unchecked can reverberate across time and generations.

This recognition serves not to discount or discredit these authors, as their stories are engaging, thought-provoking, and worth sharing with adolescent readers. However, it does serve to remind us as educators that critical readings of texts are essential in the development of young people who can effectively engage as members not only of a democratic nation but a global society whose national borders are much less fluid in the exchange of information. Today's adolescents are exposed to a rich but complicated "multiplicity" resulting from globalization and new electronic media that shift and redefine conceptions of the self and other (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2001, p. 1). If teachers and students do not possess adequate knowledge and understanding of cultures different than their own, they likely will be unable to recognize stereotypes or biases in both life and the literature they read (Chaudhri & Schau, 2016; Zitzer-Comfort, 2008). Careful and critical study of space, place, and identity within story might help readers challenge mainstream depictions of people and places (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015).

Like the protagonists in these two novels, young adult readers can find not only temporary escape in fiction but a real understanding that identity is not bound to a singular place. Sophie, one of the teen participants in Spring's (2016) study first described her identity as bound to the place in which she grew up; her definition of self "was construed not as a choice, but as intrinsic.... She spoke about Port Mary not reverently, but with acceptance: this is where she was born, so this place is (and will always be) home" (p. 361). And yet, through reading and conversation about place, space, and identity construction in literature, Sophie described an increasing desire to experience something new and different. As Spring says, "Through reading, Sophie questions her own positioning in the world; she is able to test out what these worlds are like, these worlds that are not like hers" (p. 362). Relative to the novels discussed here, educators might use *Crow Mountain* to invite students into conversation about place, space, and identities,

particularly in terms of gender norms across time, representations of Native Americans, and issues of self-reliance and what constitutes “home” (please see Appendix A). Similarly, educators might consider how *A Hundred Hours of Night* can allow students to explore assumptions of particular geographies and the limitations to really knowing a place or culture (please see Appendix B).

By engaging with and participating in these questions and activities, young adult readers might consider the complex interplay between space, place, and identity. They might come to share Massey’s (1991) conclusion that home is open, hybrid, and interconnecting or find resonance in Tuan’s (1977) claims that home is static and stable, a place of pause. More importantly, they might think deeply and carefully about the ways in which identities are constructed in any space and place, how being rooted may or may not equate to being trapped, how the resources resulting from privilege influence the ways in which one might or can navigate space, and how who we are is inextricably linked to the place from which we come—and that this is true for others, as well. Ideally, this process might serve to help young people challenge misconceptions and romanticized views and build more complex understandings of communities and cultures that lie beyond the national borders in which they reside.

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## **APPENDIX A: Ideas for Teaching *Crow Mountain***

### Discussion Questions

- 1) The novel begins with the Apsáalooke proverb, “You already possess everything necessary to become great.” How do these opening lines reinforce and/or contradict the themes of external and internal geography contained in the novel?
- 2) Now that you have read this novel, how much do you think you know about the Apsáalooke people, both historically and contemporarily? To what extent do you trust the author in the conveyance of this culture and its people? Why?
- 3) Think about the organizational structure of the novel and the alternating narration of Emily and Hope. Why might the author have decided to begin with Hope’s perspective? To start Emily’s chapters with quotations from the pamphlet on appropriate behavior for young women? What are the benefits and complications of setting the novel across two different time periods?
- 4) Consider the mother-daughter relationships described in the novel. How are they similar? How are they different? Do the time and place in which the characters live matter? Are

the men in the novel equally bound by setting? How is your relationship with your parents or guardians influenced by the gender norms and expectations of today?

#### Activities

- 1) Work in small groups to explore various Montana travel web sites (you might begin with <http://www.visitmt.com/> and <http://www.mt.gov/visitors/default.mcpX>). On a sheet of butcher paper, generate a list of common elements and language used to describe the state. What is the identity of place being forwarded? What does this place seem to promise? Who is included in the portrait of this place? How are they represented? Who is not? What does this absence suggest? Compare your poster with those created by your classmates. As a full class, discuss whether your collective findings align with how Montana is depicted in the novel.
- 2) Engage in a think-pair-share to consider the relationship between independence and identity. Does being away from your parents or guardians allow you to (or require that you) think more readily about who you are and who you want to be? How might the persistent influence of parents and guardians unintentionally hinder children from growing up?
- 3) Gather information on post-colonial literary theory (this might be a useful place to start: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/10/>). As a class, revisit scenes from the novel through this same lens. How does this new understanding of power and privilege influence your reading? Working in small groups, apply this same literary lens to a poem written by a post-colonial poet [Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia), Lorna Goodison (Jamaica), Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), W.B. Yeats (Ireland), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), and

Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal)]. What does the application of this lens help you consider, understand, or wonder about the piece?

- 4) Select a place that has particular meaning to you. Independently generate an artistic response to this place, capturing its importance through words, images, photographs, music, etc. As part of your creative process, consider whether this place feels permanent or always in a process of change (or somewhere in between or some altogether different). If willing, share your creation with the class.

## **APPENDIX 2: Ideas for Teaching *A Hundred Hours of Night***

### Discussion Questions

- 1) The novel opens with an excerpt from the US *Declaration of Independence* (“We hold these truths to be self-evident...”). To what extent do these words relate to the themes of freedom and liberty in the novel?
- 2) How careful are we/should we be in determining truth from information we gather through social media? How does a lack of in-person interaction invite dishonesty online? How does a lack of in-person interactions provide greater room for honesty online? Would you trust a person based solely upon his or her web presence?
- 3) How do your impressions of New York City compare with those of Emilia? How might her views be shaped by her non-American identity? Do you share a similar fascination with a city outside of the United States?

### Activities

- 1) Research Humans of New York (<http://www.humansofnewyork.com/>) to learn more about the aims of this project and the stories it contains. Talk as a class about how the project fits or doesn't fit Emilia's assumptions about the city.
- 2) Independently generate a brief but colorful description of a place you have never been but would really like to visit. Explore the following questions in a small group: What is it about this place that intrigues or fascinates you? How do you think your assumptions about this place developed? If you knew the reality would be significantly different from your imagined impressions, would you still want to visit this place?
- 3) Play a game of "would you rather" using the following questions as your guide: When faced with a challenge, would you rather ignore reality and let the issue work itself out or tackle it head on even if others' feelings get hurt in the process? Would you rather experience incredible, but dangerous, adventures or live a life without the possibility of physical harm? Would you rather meet and fall in love with a stranger or have a relationship with someone you already know?
- 4) Consider the fact that this novel has been translated into English from the original Dutch by a British translator who now lives in the Netherlands. Read and discuss the article in the Summer 2017 issue of the academic journal *The ALAN Review* that features a conversation between several translators of young adult fiction, including Laura Watkinson. How do these translators describe the process of conveying a potentially unfamiliar culture to readers? Locate a poem written in a language you do not speak, and attempt to translate it into one you do. How much of the new piece reflects your cultural norms and values? How important is accuracy in the translation process? What might be lost and found in the process of translation?

