There are various reasons why some students in our modern schools cannot relate to characters that grow up in linear fashion to become cohesive representatives of their communities. As in many well-known folktales and fantasies, there is often a period in this novel where the young adolescent steps outside his or her comfort zone and attempts to impose private meanings and ideologies over the unknown world in order to make sense of it. This aspect of the text speaks to the angst-ridden, disorienting years of meaning-making that a teenager—"I got no problems, no babies' dads disappeared on me going along in our separate kinds of walks: Jeremy dancing his Hacky sack dance, Jilly shimmying her shimmy of normalcy must be found, and preparations must begin for life in a middle class society (Kushigian, 2003)."

The young character achieves cultivation and education through linear stages of development, moving from error to truth and from confusion to enlightenment. Although writers focus on the character's unique private life and thoughts during this growth process, these thoughts are ultimately representative of an age, culture, and place (Tennyson, 1968, p. 196).

As time has a generative and productive purpose in the coming-of-age text. The growth of the main character is related to the growth of his or her culture; "the son will continue the father, the grandson, the son—and on a higher level of cultural development" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 204). The Bildungsroman is meant to promote a sense of self in the reader to a greater degree than any other text, and the protagonist, such as Fenwick in Capote's *The Grass Harp* (1951) or Spaulding in Badbury's *Dandelion Wine,* is encouraged to see himself or herself belonging to something larger (Kushigian, 2003). The Bildungsroman is meant to promote a sense of self in the reader to a greater degree than any other text, and the protagonist, such as Fenwick in Capote's *The Grass Harp* (1951) or Spaulding in Badbury's *Dandelion Wine,* is encouraged to see himself or herself belonging to something larger (Kushigian, 2003). Coming-of-age novels such as Huck Finn (Twain, 1884/2001) and Little Women (Alcott, 1989/2004) disseminate values that are both national and normative, where what is national constitutes what is considered normative growth within that nation's parameters. These values are personified in the discourse and action of memorable young characters.

The grand narrative behind this depiction of adolescent growth supports the humanistic conception of identity as an entity with a core or essence, which develops in layers throughout stages of life, progressing toward a fixed place. In 1968, Erikson spoke for an ideology deeply ingrained in the academy when he noted that identity formation is "a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" (p. 21). Although the adolescent experiences angst while grappling with this external frame of reference in the community, humanists assure us that there is a homogenous core in his or her communal culture—something to grow toward, to negotiate, and to, ultimately, define the self by.
Our late-capitalist society has outgrown the industrial paradigm that loomed large throughout the nationalist phase and viewed school as an institution that could, alongside parental and community assistance, prepare students to obtain lifetime employment or settle into a home in a stable community. Ideally, in the bildungsroman, characters are apprentices who inherit stability. Parents and benefactors augment, or supplement, formal education with informal training and guidance towards specific, fixed trades, careers, and proper positions in society. The bildungsroman begins as a hopeful subgroup, catered to middle class audiences with—as Charles Dickens aptly noted—great expectations.

More often than not, the notion of inheriting stability is a charm that may betray our youth or may be too remote for today’s students to entertain. Many students, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, are all too aware of the unstable, changing jobs market, with its high unemployment and welfare rates. It may be difficult for some students to seek additional or supplementary guidance from parents who are still shifting jobs and identities themselves. Case studies of inner city youth highlight these conditions and seem to suggest that they no longer live “as a journey towards the future, but as a condition” (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 640). The grand narrative that views education as a means of allowing the adolescent to promptly reach a fixed, stable place does not provide a road map that many of our teens will buy into.

Mass immigration and globalization has also altered our student bodies and has called into question the relevance of the notion of a community core that our curriculum materials support and to which our students are expected to relate (Luke, 1998). A large percentage of our urban youth belong to immigrant families and may still have strong affiliations with other countries and places. To this end, national space cannot be figured as a fluid extension of family and communal space; each of these spaces may be affiliated with completely different, shifting signs and meanings. Instead, we might view national community, home, neighborhood, and virtual (Internet) spaces as “exist[ing] in both hierarchical and dialogical relationships with each other,” competing to inform the identity of urban teens (Mojle, 2004, p. 20). Coming-of-age texts featuring young characters who grow up in cohesive communities do not speak to the multiple spaces of youths’ lives and their negotiation of different, provisional communities.

Identity and Difference

The general response to this change in the student body addresses the need to place multicultural fiction alongside traditional favorites like the bildungsroman. If a reading of the text enacts a process of self-creation, new voices and choices of self-creation must be added to the canon, so that every reader can develop “heightened sensitivity to others, and a more fully articulated set of values and principles” that are representative of different races, genders, and classes (Collins & Blox, 2003, p. 380).

The subculture of the adolescent and the construction of adolescent growth-into-community is a theme high school students might be interested in exploring as researchers, positioning themselves as objects of their own critical inquiry. However, a conception of culture that often informs multicultural education tends to view attributes of social groups and communities as closed entities, which can be represented by exemplary pieces of literature that frame cultural essences (“Yon, 1999”). For example, educators might attempt to address atonement any condition of feeling “other” that remains unexpressed—by using multicultural anthologies, which come replete with introductions that frame and represent different cultures. The middle class, humanist discourse the school employs to talk about a novel or short story from an ethnic-minority author might overlook the heteroglossia of that text, specifically, the diverse discourses within the text that challenge the establishment of characters as cohesive ideologies of their culture (Bakmin, 1991, p. 263c). The notion that differences reside between and not within different cultural, ethnic, and social communities accompanies this resistance to heteroglossia. Such education runs the risk of promoting what Fish calls boutique multiculturalism—a superficial, if genuine and well-intended, appreciation of another culture or ethnicity that is all too easily compartmentalized (1997, p. 378).

This boutique multiculturalism might be seen as a resonance of the nationalist legacy that still permeates the language arts classroom in North America. For years, the hope was that literature in the school might familiarize diverse populations with a community or national core (Collins & Blox, 2003); currently, even though a plurality of cultures might be recognized, there seems to be a continued orientation toward community that “assumes relationships between ‘personal identity’ and ‘cultural identity’ as unproblematic” (“Yon, 1999, p. 624c”). When this relationship is problematic in education, we have for too long construed the resolution as simply a matter of locating and unveiling the unique, different cultural core of a marginalized individual. To this end, educational practice employs alternative ways of endorsing the same grand narrative of identity development we have become familiar with through the years.

Trying to escape this quagreary proves to be a difficult feat for English educators. It is difficult to read for difference without framing atonement when we read within a humanist institution founded on a collective, communal goal. If we push education to a place that resists an orientation toward community and confronts an entirely different conception of citizenship, our tension isclinging to the value of literature as a social cohesive and reading as something that unites us makes it difficult to promote solidarity. As a starting point, however, we have to discard the grand narrative that fails to note how increasingly complex the link between identity and place is becoming. We need to acknowledge new affiliations made between different socially situated identities and appreciate the conception of identity as fragmentary, local, and contingent on a person’s involvement and interaction with his or her world. As Giroux (2000) noted,

Identity can no longer be written through the lens of cultural uniformity or enforced through the discourse of assimilation—rather students bring to the classroom not some unified grand narrative but multiple narratives representing diverse immigration and language and cultural experiences. (p. 380)

When reading coming-of-age novels, the focus on individuals, and in of themselves, might be redirected to a focus on how individuals are produced in an effort to sort through this production (Leadner, 2002). Identity is not just a matter of being; it is continuously, endlessly, and elusively a matter of becoming (Yon, 1999, p. 625c).

New Narratives: A Selection of Contemporary Young Adult Novels

This conception of identity—as-process has multiple, overwhelming implications for literacy practice. Spatial and discourse theorists have come up with numerous ways in which students can interact with others, reposition themselves, and engage with multiple written and non-written texts in order to continually deconstruct and rewrite their identities. Most of these implications go beyond the scope of this article, but the bildungsroman is a particularly useful resource because it is explicitly and primarily concerned with becoming. It is a novel of apprenticeship, of learning, and of self-development.

We might find many classic coming-of-age novels for young adults to be valuable for much more than, and in spite of, the hegemony and cultural capital they advocate. The subculture of the adolescent and the construction of adolescent growth-into-community is a theme high school students might be interested in exploring as researchers, positioning themselves as objects of their own critical inquiry. Teachers might juxtapose a traditional bildungsroman with a contemporary rewriting of the novel to help students explore what was and what is expected of them as they become young adults, so that they might resist or deal with such expectations with a discerning eye.

If teachers were to do a lesson on the theme of identity development, it might be interesting to pair Alcott’s (1868/2004) classic, Little Women, with a contemporary bildungsroman for young adults. Little Women chronicles the experiences of four sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—as they grow up, each with unique desires and aspirations. Critics have disagreed about whether the novel seeks a new vision of women’s subjectivity or argues for the continued confinement of women to the domestic realm (Parille, 2001, p. 34). Feminist readings of little women focus on sympathy for Jo’s impatience with ladylike decorum and her career aspirations (Seeley, 2005); and yet Amy’s troubles as an artist, and the way in which Beth’s death aids in the strengthening of the sisters’ bonds and their sense of familial loyalty might be read as a nod to the endurance of provincial life—and family and communal sphere that binds the identity one grows into.

There is a longing in Alcott’s (1868/2004) young female characters to present themselves in particular ways, to find and become the best part of themselves. Jo has become a much-loved character in coming-of-age texts, but she, too, along with the other sisters, sets specific goals to help herself better: “You laugh at me when I say I want to be a lady, but... I want to be above the little meanness and follies and faults that spoil so many women” (Alcott, 1868/2004, p. 279). This desire to find the best version of the self sets the girls on different and conflicting paths; at times it sends them out into the world, and this leads to excitement, but this excitement is then countered with questions of where a person’s responsibility should lie and where one might best seek a place for fulfillment.

A passage worthy of students’ attention involves a philosophical debate Jo attends in the city. This debate fascinates her and stirs in her the aspiration to do big things in the world. Professor Bhaer quickly reminds her of religious and familial bonds, and the idea that one’s natural character is most important—“a better possession than money, rank, intellect, or beauty” (p. 320). Here, character begins and ends with an identity that is grounded in community.

Regardless of where the March sisters seek fulfillment, Hollander (1981) noted that a “satisfying continuity” informs all the lives of girls who seek to find themselves (p. 28). The characters are possessed with traits that allow for some form of stasis in their personality, even amidst tribulations and change. For Hollander, Alcott creates a world where a deep “natural piety” indeed effortlessly binds the child to the woman she becomes. The novel shows that as a young girl grows up, she may rely with comfort on being the same person, whatever mysterious and difficult changes must be undergone in order to become an older and wiser one (p. 28).

There is something quite beautiful and compelling in the loyalty and love we find in Alcott’s (1868/2004) text, but it may be interesting to pair this text, or sections of it, with more contemporary novels, such as those in Wolff’s (1993) Make Lemonade trilogie, where loyalties are more fractured and difficult and where love lies in unusual places, with untraditional characters. This series focuses on the coming-of-age experiences of Verna LaVaugh. Unlike Jo’s comfort in the stability of character, True Believer’s (Wolff, 2002) Lavaugh muses that

When a little kid draws a picture
It is all a big face
This reflection is understandable when the reader considers all that fourteen-year-old LaVaughn has been privy to by the end of Make Lemonade (1993): her father’s accidental death during a gang shooting from a bullet that wasn’t meant for him, the violent physical and sexual abuse of a young woman she babysits for, and urban poverty that structures all of her surroundings. The complexity of LaVaughn’s life results in occasional feelings of displacement from her younger self. LaVaughn’s attitude is life-affirming: like the March sisters, she is vivacious and inspired, and she also wants to better herself. And yet, for LaVaughn, this betterment involves self-sustainability. She desires a college education that will allow her to move on from her makeshift, poor, and troubled community.

It is significant that the place of LaVaughn’s upbringing remains unamed; she lives in public housing, but this could be any project in North America. The projects are, of course, owned by others. They are not marked by national and communal history and character; they do not carry with them a spirit or essence to which the growing adolescent can hinge his or her identity. In Make Lemonade trilogy, the communal sphere is unstable and shifting, and what little sense of community LaVaughn grows into is found almost by default, when she answers a babysitting ad posted at school. In order to make money for college, she hesitantly takes the job and finds herself caught up in the life of Jolly, teenage mother of two children from different fathers. Jolly lives in squall and disorder as she continues to struggle against the experiences and the dangerous web of connections made during her life on the streets.

Make Lemonade (Wulf, 1993) is filled with self-reflexivity, and as LaVaughn reflects on her growth, she brings salient memories of her life to the reader’s attention. Often, these memories are fragmented: she sees parts of her dead father’s face; she confronts sudden smells on unameded street corners that remind her of him; she sees flashes of the mismatched socks and short pants belonging to Jeremy, the young boy she babysits and grows fond of; she indulges in visions of herself, Jolly, and Jeremy and the baby on the city street one afternoon, all disheveled, all lost in their own world, and yet in some ways happy together “like a family from a continent of I don’t know what” (p. 91).

When Jolly loses her factory job, LaVaughn has to decide if she should continue giving her time to the family for free or if she should remove herself from the situation. She reflects on the words she hears in the esteem class she takes at school:

One good thing you do in a day for somebody else
don’t cost you.
But then they go on about how you have to find the good thing
that ain’t the wrong good thing. (Wulf, 1993 p. 120)

In some ways, this is too far too for Little Women (Alcott, 1868/2004). Here, the process of making a self still happens at the intersection of the personal and the communal; the process of self-creation happens in relation to others and with others. But in Make Lemonade (Wulf, 1993), LaVaughn alone seems to be the harbinger of care; her single mother can’t really support her college dreams or unLaVaughn’s own needs, and Jolly’s children are way too young to really “know” LaVaughn. She must break through barriers to self-discovery on her own, while she sorts out the people who matter to her and how they fit with what she wants to do. She ponderes what is worth carrying with her as she tries to move beyond the world she was born into and mourns, in her own way, what she has to leave behind. LaVaughn’s inner resolve, her determination to live a better life, allows her to handle such weighty tasks without being pulled under by them.

Other bildungsroman features characters who struggle with the issues of modernity and community are briefly explicated in Table 1. The contemporary coming-of-age novels for young adults listed there all resist, to varying degrees, the grand narrative that delineates what a coming-of-age character looks like. Many of these texts feature ethnic minority characters living in major urban centers, and this provides a particularly poignant challenge to the concept of self-formation. Within the nationalist paradigm, immigrant characters are expected to have their lives’ stories told in entirely new forms in order to be accommodated into their new schools and communities. Coming-of-age novels, such as Autobiography of My Dead Brother (Myers, 2005) and Breath, Eyes, Memory (Danticat, 1994/1998), feature characters who grapple with this process and who do not want to be compromised by or circulated to any place. Such texts destabilize the trajectory of growth-into-core community. The characters in these novels lament and embrace this destabilizing process, just as students in our Contemporary Coming-of-Age Novels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the Novel</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Date Published</th>
<th>Brief Overview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Room on Lorelei Street</td>
<td>Pearson, D.B.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Shadows and sunlight shine on the brownstone of the house in which Zoe was raised, and the reader is transported to the streets of the Bronx. Zoe, a 17-year-old protagonist, is determined to live a better life and to remain connected to the people and places around her. She faces the challenges of balancing her desire for happiness and self-sustainability with her need to sort through her confused feelings of love and anger toward her mother. This book asks if teens can create a community and a life for themselves that is entirely unique, while still reflecting the complexities and difficulties of dealing with adolescent vulnerabilities and issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theories of Relativity</td>
<td>Haworth-Attard, J.C.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Dylan, a 16-year-old street youth, is apathetic to the challenges life has thrown at him—mainly, his family and troubled upbringing. The novel is told from Dylan’s first-person perspective and is filled with his philosophical musings on what it’s like to be a real part of one’s own. Dylan struggles with people who want to help him find his way off the street, but who refuse to invest in more than a superficial understanding of his life’s realities and what he needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alice, I Think</td>
<td>Judy, J.</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Alice is a girl who keeps nowhere near. After her brief stint in public school demonstrated that she was a bit too creative and different to fit in with people, she was home-schooled. Her goals for her life to help her, her love of belonging beyond her eccentric family sphere. She finds herself attending public school and negotiating her desire to fit in with her desire for a more alternative way of living.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breath, Eyes, Memory</td>
<td>Danticat, E.L.</td>
<td>1994/1998</td>
<td>Sophie is a Haitian girl growing up in New York. She vacillates between tradition and modernity, between old ideologies and new ones, and finds that her identity falls nowhere near. She is deeply affected by the problems, the loneliness, and the lack of community she encounters in the modern city. She learns that she can never really go back—that her longing for home, for tradition, and for an identity that is tied to place, is a regressive, reductive act.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theories of Relativity</td>
<td>Myer, D.B.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Dimples is a 16-year-old who doesn’t want to belong. He is a young man who doesn’t care about where he comes from. He struggles with people who want to help him find his way off the street, but who refuse to invest in more than a superficial understanding of his life’s realities and what he needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories of Relativity</td>
<td>Myer, D.B.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Theories of Relativity is a coming-of-age novel that explores the theme of identity and the search for belonging. The novel follows the life of a young man named Dimples, who is struggling to find his way in the world. Dimples is a young man who doesn’t care about where he comes from. He struggles with people who want to help him find his way off the street, but who refuse to invest in more than a superficial understanding of his life’s realities and what he needs.</td>
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Nothing but the Truth and a Few White Lies (Chen Headly, 2006). Patti Ho is a bicultural American teenager with a strict, conventional Taiwanese mother and an absent Caucasian father, whose own identity lies somewhere in the “murky in-between.” Patti claims she does not have a nuclear family, with two perfect parents, but a broken family that periodically goes nuclear on each other” (p. 328). Though her racial background is unique and her issues with her mother are culturally specific, the author does a brilliant job of universalizing her struggles.

These novels portray what Wilkinsky (1991) calls “the constant reworking of the world by the silenced and dispossessed,” who want to find voices that are not necessarily commensurate or representative of their dominant or marginalized cultures (p. 66). Authors trace the growth of these characters as they grapple with different discourses, establish relationships with different people, move between different spaces, and answer to a constant need to blend, rework, and reinvent the self. In most of the young adult texts I have just listed, it is not formal education, or a move to a progressive, modern community that allows for and provides access to personal fulfillment and a strong sense of identity. Instead, the protagonists must look to their own strengths, talents, and interests as they attempt to figure out what they want to be in life. For Dimple of Born Confused (Hidier, 2002), photography helps clarify this vision; for Tyrell (Booth, 2006), mixing records helps bring happiness and possible financial security; for Jesus in Autobiography of My Dead Brother (Myers, 2005), art provides hope. Such texts are not about finding a geographical place of belonging but, rather, a way to belong in diverse and fragmented societies.

Conclusion

The texts I have discussed and listed are not meant to serve as representatives of distinct cultures, nor are they a panacea to which all students struggling to find their story can turn for a remedy. However, all of the texts feature characters who struggle to separate their personal history(ies) from their representational history: a feat that delineates growth as a difficult, nonlinear, and lonely process—but a feat that points to dignity and resilience. Here, we see that dominant discourses, such as schooled discourse, might silence various private identities of all students, but we also see that characters—and adolescent students—can struggle to resist this.

If these texts are used as a component of literary practice, combined with instructional methods that facilitate critical inquiry, students in our classrooms might each find that they can relate, in their own way, to characters who are trying to find their voices amidst all of the written and non-written texts in our world that are competing to construct them. Even if a sense of solidarity between student and character is only fleeting, or partial, or understood on a preconscious level, it sets up a nice place of interchange, where “normal growth” can depart from itself to question itself and where variations of memories and histories can persist as students read the texts, think of their own experiences, and perhaps even write their own experiences in an attempt to work and rework their notions of what it means to grow and to belong.

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References


A coming-of-age story is a genre of literature that focuses on the growth of a protagonist from youth to adulthood ("coming of age"). Coming-of-age stories tend to emphasize dialogue or internal monologue over action, and are often set in the past or have adults looking back into the past. The subjects of coming-of-age stories are typically teenagers. The Bildungsroman is a specific subgenre of coming-of-age story. The Telemachy in Homer's Odyssey (8th century B.C.)


