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Authorial Ideology and Intention in Presentations of Place in YA Immigration Narratives

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Abstract

Authors are not absent from the pages they craft; they have an intended audience, and they hold and communicate particular values as they generate narratives for this audience. When authors hold identities that place them outside of the community about which they write, authorial ideology and intention carry additional weight that, in the context of immigration narratives, influences assumptions of place brought to bear in telling stories of leaving and finding “home.”

This content analysis draws upon paratexts and materials included on an author’s website to explore constructions of place in an award-winning, young adult (YA) immigration narrative, including how authorship informs the presentation of place and the protagonist who inhabits it.

The paper works to extend existing understandings by examining not only what happens to *characters* as they navigate place in YA literature, but what *authors* bring to these titles in the act of constructing these characters.

Keywords: International; literature; theory

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The home-journey-home pattern in literature for young people is well established (Nikolajeva, 2004; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003; Reimer, 2008). The central setting is the space (dwelling, town, city, community) in which the protagonist lives, usually with members of her, his, or their family. As the story progresses, the protagonist is pulled away to experience something new before returning to this space having learned something of value about the self, others, and/or the world. The home-journey-home pattern in fictional narratives of immigration takes a different form in that the reason for leaving home centers not on a choice to seek adventure or new experiences but a demand resulting from war, chaos, and strife and that the protagonist, subsequently unable to return home, navigates a new home. In describing fictional stories of immigration, Warnqvist (2018) claims that

war forces the protagonist's family to flee, and a motion takes place from the tension and chaos that characterize the situation in the home country to the peace that the new country offers. The basic structure can thus still be described as home-away-(new) home, but with a different cause for the displacement. (p. 62)

While peace is not always found in the new country—and the new home does not always feel like home—the different causes of displacement help define narratives of immigration uniquely.

As it true for all narratives, authorial ideologies influence how a protagonist's journey is presented to readers (Connors & Rish, 2015; Nodelman, 2008; Trites, 2000). In narratives of immigration, inherently defined by changes in geography, these influences take on a particular resonance given the assumptions of place brought to bear in telling stories of leaving and finding one's "home" given the complicated social and emotional realities of such a process both historically and contemporarily. With these complications in mind, this analysis seeks to explore

answers to two questions: What role does place play in an award-winning, young adult (YA) immigration narrative? How might authorship by a cultural outsider, or one whose cultural identity differs from that of the protagonist, inform the presentation of place and the protagonist who inhabits it?

Place in Immigration Narratives for Young Readers

Some scholars who have examined the relationship between place and immigration in literature for young people center their work on content analyses that reveal common features of fictional immigration narratives. For instance, Ward and Warren (2019) explored 36 picture books and nine chapter books published between 2013-2018 written for elementary school readers and featuring a refugee as main character. They identified two recurring themes associated with the narrative pattern: “making a journey,” in which titles attended to the characters’ movements between places, and “making a new life,” in which titles centered on the everyday experiences of the characters’ as they negotiate a new environment (pp. 408-409). The latter titles “are often structured around following the main character through changes over time, which leads to adjustment and even a sense of safety, healing, and happiness” (p. 409). Similarly, Warnqvist (2018) drew upon theories of home and homelessness to examine how experiences of flight are portrayed across 22 picture books published in Sweden between 2014 and 2018. “The norm of these refugee stories,” as evidenced in the study’s findings, “is to idealize the recipient country—often to be understood as Sweden—as the best imaginable home” (Warnqvist, 2018, p. 69).

Several examinations of the relationship between place and immigration in literature for children and young adults center on positioning and whether the protagonists are depicted agentically. Karam et al. (2019) examined how Sudanese and South Sudanese children resettled

as refugees are represented in three contemporary middle grade novels. Findings suggest that the books, to varying degrees, challenge stereotypical representations by “highlighting the characters’ sense of agency and resiliency in negotiating the complexities of belonging, learning, positioning, and remembering” but fail to present a “comprehensive picture of the refugee experience” (p. 36). Liang et al. (2009) analyzed a collection of novels published between 1990 and 2006 with a focus on resettlement to the United States. Findings suggest that the refugee characters are positioned agentively during their journey across countries of temporary resettlement and within the permanent resettlement context. However, in their home countries, characters are positioned reactively, which the authors argue helps readers develop a sense of sympathy and understanding of the hardships that children resettled as refugees endure.

Other scholars focus on whether fictional narratives of immigration can challenge real world bias. Sung et al. (2017) analyzed the representations of female characters’ immigration experiences to the US as depicted in four, award-winning middle grade novels published between 2000-2006. The authors found that, although the novels offer readers knowledge of immigrants’ familial and historical backgrounds, they fail to challenge stereotypes often attributed to members of these communities and thus reaffirm postcolonial positionings. Salas (2018) explored how undocumented Latinx immigrant youth were portrayed in three YA novels published near the end of the Trump presidential campaign and into his first term (2016-2017). The author explored how language and power intersect and are used to give or deny characters voice and how the texts might serve as counter narratives against ill-informed and racist rhetoric (Salas, 2018).

This scholarship works together to paint an increasingly rich picture of place in literature for young people—as something connected intimately with characters’ identities and experiences

and as something that can be defined/created/limited by others and subsequently tied to oppression and marginalization. This paper attempts to extend these understandings by moving beyond an examination of what happens to *characters* as they navigate place in YA literature to exploring what *authors* bring to these titles in the act of constructing these characters and why this is important to see and name, especially when authors' identities place them outside the communities about which they write. The content analysis centers on one author and one text, examining both the paratextual features of the novel as well as interviews and other writings by the author to explore how the author's ideological assumptions about a cultural community to which she does not belong shape how she imagines the world of the protagonist.

Considerations of Ideology and Authorship

This work is grounded in the theoretical assumption that authors are not absent from the pages they craft, have an intended audience in mind, and hold and communicate particular values as they generate narratives for this audience (Connors & Rish, 2015; Nodelman, 2008; Trites, 2000). YA literature, in particular, socializes adolescent readers to accept adult ideologies (Trites, 2000). Fiction for young people reflects stories that adults believe young people not only want, but need, to hear; this literature, then, contains ingrained adult assumptions, knowledge, and experiences designed to enculturate readers into certain normative ways of thinking (Nodelman, 2008). 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 et al. 2010, p. 199)

As cultural artifacts, YA texts position “readers as certain types of subjects with certain worldviews, beliefs, values, and ethics” (Connors & Rish, 2015, p. 23). Award-winning titles carry an additional level of influence; because they are named as worthy of recognition, they posit authority around the story being told.

Scholars have drawn upon this theoretical orientation to uncover and examine the presence of ideologies in the stories that authors craft for young readers. Glenn and Caasi (2022), for example, engaged in a critical comparative content analysis that employed theories of poststructuralist feminism to examine two versions of a nonfiction fitness text for young adults, one written for females and one for males, but both written by men. The analysis reveals a persistent naming of gendered assumptions forwarded by the authors about the appropriateness of particular sports to particular athletes, purposes of fitness, understandings of the ideal athlete, and emotional capacity of young adult readers. Taken together, these assumptions reflect a particular authorial positioning of athletes and expectations around performance, one that lurks beneath the texts themselves, suggesting to readers that how bodies are shaped and how bodies perform are normative and distinctly gendered, a finding that holds particular resonance when we consider the authoritative nature of informational texts.

Similarly, Caasi and Glenn (in press) utilized critical content analysis and theories of ideology to explore how two Black women athletes, Simone Biles and Serena Williams, are positioned by adult authors and illustrators in biographies written for a range of young people. Findings reveal how the authors, in their presentation of contradictory narratives, forward ideologically grounded stereotypes of these athletes. The authors position Biles and Williams, for example, as simultaneously exceptional in their athletic abilities (born with talent and genetically gifted at their sport) and exceptionally dedicated (putting in hours of work into their craft as

athletes), forwarding a false narrative of hard work and effort. They also pit narratives of exceptionality against those of humanization in ways that reinforce assumptions around girls and women having to be “normal” to be accepted or liked. Finally, they forward versions these athletes as emotionally fragile. They are physically strong but mentally weak, emotionally volatile in ways that challenge their success, and in need of saving from the emotional states that hinder their ability to succeed.

Other scholars have examined how authors experience real or perceived pressures to communicate particular ideologies. Kerby, Baguley, and MacDonald (2019) examined children’s picture books published over the past two decades that center the Australian experience during World War I to argue that authors have worked to balance several thematic imperatives: painting the Australian soldier as victim of trauma, providing a moral lesson around war that is both historically accurate and sensitive to contemporary values, and using story as a source of nation building and pride. The researchers conclude that the picture book authors and illustrators of their text set responded to this challenge by offering an ideologically conservative version of events, one that is “acceptable to mainstream sensibilities yet make[s] a suspect contribution to historical understandings of the period” (p. 107).

Other scholars have noted how authors respond to ideological pressures in ways that can be seen as progressive and subversive. Wang (2020) provides a feminist critique of two contemporary Chinese children’s fantasy novels to argue that the novels, on the one hand, conform to ideological assumptions around the patriarchal family structure by constructing a “binary opposition between the fantastic-female-child and the rational-male-adult, with the latter dominating the female and the child by repressing their propensity for imagination and fantasy” (p. 433). On the other hand, however, the novels have a “subversive edge in the way that the

binary opposition between male and female is transgressed” and points to “the formation of a new kind of intersubjective relationship that is based on understanding and tolerance rather than refusal and dominance” (p. 433). Similarly, Toliver (2021) focused on three Afrofuturist texts written by Black female authors that feature Black adolescent female protagonists to explore how each author highlights with intention “the celebratory aspects of Black existence and imagination and critiques oppressive ideologies that have historically attempted to thwart Black celebration and creativity” (p. 132). Her work demonstrates how Afrofuturist authors “use the carnivalesque concept of grotesque realism to critique dominant bodies that elevate anti-Blackness in society” (p. 132).

Across these studies, what authors believe, whether or not they understand, name, or own these beliefs, matters in the creation of the stories they forward.

Text Selection and Analytical Processes

This paper centers constructions of place and their intersection with authorial ideology, building upon findings from a project aimed to understand how the global phenomenon of immigration was represented in YA books published outside of the US. The study (Durand et al., 2021) analyzed immigration-themed books included on the United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY) Outstanding International Books (OIB) lists published between 2006 (origin year of the award) and 2019. Analysis focused on paratextual features and how they 1) suggest that authors gain perceived authority to tell immigration narratives through their sociocultural proximity to real events and people who experience migration and 2) can reveal ideological problems with authors’ didactic purposes for writing immigration stories and with depictions of migration in terms of escape and rescue. This paper focuses on one book, *The Fox Girl and the White Gazelle* (Williamson, 2018). This title differs from others in the sample given

the authorial ideologies it reflects. The author, a white woman who is not an immigrant and who is a cultural outsider to the immigrant community about which she writes, creates a story that has the potential to educate and challenge readers to provide nuance to the ideological problems noticed in the study referenced above.

Two levels of analysis were employed to explore the research questions for this paper. I began by (re)reading the novel and generating codes in response to guiding questions aligned with research question one: Where is home for the protagonist? How is this home described? What places does the protagonist encounter on the journey? How are these places described? In what place does the protagonist exist at the conclusion of the novel? How is this place described? Sample codes that emerged in this process included disruption of place due to external forces, hopeful visions of a new place, difficult realities of a new place, emotional longing for home, moments of transition, outsider status, moments of connection, and cultural identity. I then turned to sources of information that might reveal the ideological assumptions of the author (research question two). I reviewed Williamson's online content, blog posts, and interviews, all included on her website (and thus presumably approved by her) to gather evidence of her intentions for writing and beliefs around immigration. I then looked across the textual codes and web-based evidence to consider how these data sets talk to one another and potentially reveal how the author's assumptions shape the construction of her narrative. The resulting assumptions, evidenced in the web-based materials and influential in the presentation of the protagonist's experience as an immigrant, organize the findings below and center on the author's positioning of immigrants and immigration, stance of humility and critique, aims in writing, and lived commitments to equity.

Findings

In Williamson's novel, the protagonist, Reema, and her family flee civil war in Aleppo, Syria and find their way to Glasgow, Scotland (pp. 128-130). As Reema reflects upon her home prior to the war, she fondly remembers the beauty of Aleppo and its fruit trees (p. 12). She reminisces about school and drinking lemonade with Baba at the café (p. 43), holds happy memories of playing with friends (p. 83), and longs for the bustling markets (pp. 44-45). But she remembers, too, the darkness and fear brought on by war. Reema describes Scotland as a sad place, where she drowns in green and feels the rain as tears on her cheeks (p. 15). The family's new apartment is cramped, with inadequate room for Baba's chair (p. 26), and Reema's teachers speak too quickly for her to understand (p. 111). She worries that everyone in Scotland looks at her and her family with "pity and suspicion" (p. 11). She feels unwanted, like she does not belong and will always be moving from place to place, missing a home and not being able to find one (p. 13). But she also sees Scotland as a place where she might be herself. Reema's family feels pressure to culturally conform, but it is important to Reema to maintain her faith and cultural and religious practices (pp. 28-29). Although she understands that some western people stereotype Muslim women because of the hijab (pp. 14, 87, 88, 125), she holds to home in her choice to wear it anyway.

The authorial description of Reema's experiences across these two spaces offers a nuanced look at the complexity of the transition. It positions Syria as a home connected to beauty, family, and friends, while still naming the danger and loss brought on by war. It positions Scotland as a complex place, one that offers Reema space to grow into her cultural identity and one that often feels unwelcome. This positioning minimizes the glamourization of either place, offering instead a layered portrayal of the experience of its protagonist. I argue that this

positioning is grounded in the author's ideologies evidenced at the intersection of the novel and author's web-based materials.

Positioning of Immigrants and Immigration

Victoria Williamson is a white woman who is not an immigrant and who is a cultural outsider to the community about which she writes. However, she positions immigrants and their experiences with care, noting the challenges faced while honoring the people and their humanity. She reminds readers that all individuals hold their own stories, writing,

Often when we think of refugees, we imagine traumatised victims of war who are in need of our pity and charity, and we often don't look beyond the sensational newspaper headlines to the individual stories each unique person brings with them. (Williamson, 20 June 2018)

She calls out actions that name immigrants as lesser, critiquing for example the presumed generosity of socioeconomically stable Westerners who donate books to young people in Africa:

Africa has a chronic shortage of textbooks and story books in schools, however over the years I've seen this shortage constantly used as a justification for people from economically developed countries dumping their torn, dirty, or newish-but-completely-inappropriate books on book charities for Africa. (Williamson, 14 Sept. 2019)

She reflects upon her experiences as a volunteer who spent years packing books for donation, wondering how some adults "thought that books which were too ripped and soiled for their own children should be good enough for someone else's child just because they lived in a poorer country" (Williamson, 14 Sept. 2019).

This same valuing of people extends to *The Fox Girl and the White Gazelle*, particularly in Williamson's development of Reema's character. An interview reveals her commitment to avoiding generalization in the telling of Reema's story:

[the]most important thing to understand about Reema's story is that it's hers and hers alone. Every refugee's experience is different, and although there might be common threads running through their stories—for example adjusting to a different language and culture, leaving family and friends behind--there is no single 'refugee experience.'

(Eagleton, 11 June 2019)

She highlights her decision to include Reema's perspective as a necessary step in challenging her own and others' assumptions, noting,

[G]iven my own cultural background and the fact that I am neither Muslim nor Syrian, it would have been easier for me to have told the story only from Caylin's [a white girl character] point of view. However, I felt that it was vital to give Reema an equal voice in this book. If the story had been written purely from Caylin's point of view, Reema would have been instantly 'othered'—seen only as a 'foreign' friend who advanced Caylin's storyline without playing the lead role in her own. (Eagleton, 11 June 2019)

Humility and Critique

Williamson's stance also suggests the presence of her own humility and willingness to learn. She describes how the young people with whom she worked taught her that access to relevant stories matters for all readers. She reveals that her students found little connection with characters "who went to 'proms' and ate ice cream and had sleepovers and set off fireworks on Bonfire Night" (Eagleton, 11 June 2019). When she shared titles by West African writers, like Chinua Achebe, Mabel Segun and Kola Onadipe, however, these same students read

enthusiastically. Williamson learned that “*who* the stories were written about—who got to narrate and whose life experiences were reflected—was just as important as *what* the stories were about” (Williamson, 1 Aug. 2018).

This learning helped her understand how important it was for her to “write inclusive stories where all children can see reflections of themselves in heroic roles” (Eagleton 11 June 2019). It helped her recognize—and consider as an author—her own biases and the limits of her experiences, as evidenced by her claim,

Growing up, most of the main characters who went off on exciting adventures in the books I read were white British and American boys. That early template of who the usual ‘hero’ of a story could be influenced my own early writing greatly. It wasn’t until years later that I noticed that all of the lead characters I’d written in my first attempts at stories and novels were middle class white boys too. Even my animal stories featured ninety percent male characters, with a few minor female characters thrown in to make up the numbers. (Eagleton, 11 June 2019).

This intentional stance toward inclusion is reflected in the work that Williamson completed in her efforts to tell Reema’s story, specifically. She states that the novel features “the voices of some of the many children [she has] met” (Williamson, n.d., Power of story; Williamson, n.d., Author, dreamer, storyteller) and that the initial idea of the book came from teaching in a school where a large proportion of the children were seeking asylum (Eagleton, 11 June 2019). As a religious and cultural outsider, she engaged in multiple efforts to be factually and emotionally accurate in telling Reema’s story: reading about Islam and refugees, the *Koran*, and first-hand interview accounts of children who described their experiences to journalists, teachers, social workers and support workers; seeing the experiences of refugees; and having a

Muslim man serve as a sensitivity reader around the presentation of Islam in the novel (McDonald, 1 July 2018; Eagleton, 11 June 2019). She names the complexity of writing about a community to which she does not belong and demands that other writers consider the same, arguing, “As authors, we have a duty to represent a range of different characters and voices in our books, and not always default to writing characters just like us whose life experiences mirror our own” (Williamson, 21 May 2018).

Aims in Writing

In writing the novel, Williamson sought a positive response to the humanitarian crisis she witnessed following the start of the Syrian war. As a teacher who had witnessed the increase in the number of refugee and asylum-seeking children in Glasgow schools over the years, she hoped to describe with care the issues the children faced: “the challenges of absorbing a new culture and language, making friends and putting down roots far from home when their futures were uncertain, and their difficulties in dealing with the memory of traumatic events” (Williamson, n.d).

Unlike titles for young people that position the country of arrival as idyllic and idealized, however, Williamson’s novel portrays Reema’s experiences with complexity. Williamson’s primary aim was disruption, as evidenced by her claim,

This problem of seeing people who have a different religion or cultural background as the ‘other’ is a major problem not just in children’s fiction, but in real life, especially when it comes to the Muslim faith. I definitely wanted to dispel some of the myths that certain popular media outlets peddle about Islam and its followers. This isn’t just a problem for people coming to this country, but for British children who have grown up here. (Eagleton, 11 June 2019)

By giving Reema her own voice, Williamson aims to show readers not only how her Muslim faith was part of her everyday life, but “entirely compatible with her new home in Scotland, despite the prejudices of a minority of her neighbours” (Eagleton, 11 June 2019).

Lived Commitments to Equity

Williamson strives to live her commitments, engaging in advocacy efforts that suggest a deeply rooted stance toward justice. She asks the teachers and students she meets to think critically about books by considering these questions: “Who is telling the story? Is it written from the point of view of a resident of that country or a displaced person seeking a refuge? Is it sympathetic or hostile? Is the story being told with empathy, or is it exploitative, full of click-bait headlines and inflammatory phrases to draw readers in, regardless of the dehumanising effect this has on the people being described?” (Williamson, 21 May 2018). Through her school visits and creation of curricular materials that can be used to teach the novel (Williamson, n.d., Learning resources), Williamson reminds teachers that “we need to ensure that students have access to a wide range of sources in our classes that describe historical and current affairs events from all points of view, not just the mainstream or ‘accepted’ version” (Williamson, 21 May 2018) and that reading “helps us to listen to a character’s point of view without allowing us the chance to interrupt, or insert our own voice and opinions over the top of theirs, as we so often do in real life” (Williamson, 7 June 2019). To support young refugees in telling their own stories, she has submitted a proposal with a social work lecturer to support creative writing classes for young refugees, opening space for them to share their experiences (Eagleton, 11 June 2019), and she donates 20% of royalties earned from purchase of her novel to the Scottish Refugee Council (Williamson, 2018).

Discussion and Implications

Place holds resonance in this award-winning, YA immigration narrative, and Williamson's authorship informs the presentation of that place and the presentation of the protagonist who inhabits it. Because the descriptions of place and person contained in this story are informed by particular authorial ideologies and intentions, they also serve to challenge narratives of immigration that offer "overly simplified depictions of successful adjustment to a new place of resettlement [that] run the risk of distorting the daily realities of the very people whom they aim to represent" (Adichie, 2009). By crafting a story grounded in personal (and publicly shared) commitments to honest and nuanced positioning of people and their communities, humility and a willingness to learn and critique, and efforts toward equity and advocacy, Williamson's novel, "[r]ather than exoticizing refugees as other or focusing solely on apparent differences between surface-level customs or even deeper cultural traditions" (Ward & Warren, 2019, p. 410), strives to offer "multidimensional ways of describing the dynamic nature of the refugee experience (Paris & Alim, 2014), as well as its unique common humanness (Hope, 2017).

This is not to suggest that Williamson can or should speak for young people who experience immigration or that she is able to capture fully the stories such young people have shared with her in classrooms and other spaces. As a field, we are struggling to reconcile the distinction between writing beyond one's community and engaging in cultural appropriation, as evidenced by recent examples of authors coming under attack when they seem to get it wrong (Please see Benedictus, 2019; Waldman, 2019; and Rosenfield, 2019 for summary and analysis of recent events.). However, this is not to say that we should cease advocating for stories written by cultural insiders, particularly immigrants whose voices continue to be largely absent from the

field. As a case in point, of the 14 immigration-related titles to appear on the USBBY Outstanding International Books lists since their inception, only one author is an immigrant, and only one title is illustrated by a cultural insider. The remaining writers are cultural outsiders, predominantly white women, whose books are being advanced as quality titles by virtue of their award status. Such a reality demands not only a critical reading of these titles, but consideration of whether and how outsider authors can write stories that affirm the experiences of immigrants and avoid doing harm, something that Williamson seems to achieve given the alignment between her ideological stance and the novel she has produced.

Growing from the findings presented here, then, I encourage us to consider how an author's positionality cannot be separated from the text the author creates. I invite us to bring questions and criticality to any story, considering the importance of the author's identities and possible aims for writing as essential parts of our reading experience. I also provide an example of an author who seems to be getting it right. Although Williamson tells a story that is not her own, she evidences both a stance and process that strive to do no harm and instead honors the people and places about which she writes. She makes visible how this might look for authors—and demands their accountability in telling the valuable stories of others.

Conclusion

Certainly, “bearing witness to others’ stories leaves room for authors to reframe them through their own worldviews” (Durand et al., 2021). How we see the world is grounded in where we live in that world; we hold assumptions about our own ways of being and doing that shape how we make sense of other ways of being and doing (Glenn, 2017). As theories of authorial ideology suggest, any author writing any text brings to bear personal values and beliefs growing from lived experiences influenced and limited by the myriad identities they hold and do

not hold. However, by publicly communicating ideologies that hold and embrace complexity and care—and using them to craft her novel—Williamson pushes on authorial characterization of “displaced children/characters as needing saving,” with authors and their stories playing the role of savior “by raising awareness about children who are immigrants and their related plight” (Durand et al., 2021, p. 670).

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