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### Representations of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Rural Ways of Being in Picture Books for Children

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**Abstract:** This critical content analysis examines representations of rural life in a sample of 52 picture books by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and illustrators. While the United States and Canadian governments use quantitative measures to designate rurality, in this study rurality is conceptualized more broadly as an interaction between geographical, cultural, and social characteristics. Three sets of findings about the representation of rural people in Indigenous and non-Indigenous picture books are offered: the representation of human-to-human relationships, the relationships between people and the natural world, and the problems and challenges faced by rural people in the books. While there is increasing attention within children’s literature scholarship about the importance of culturally relevant picture books and representations of diversity, less is understood about representations of rurality in children’s literature and still less is known about textual representations that engage the intersection of rurality and minoritized groups such as Indigenous peoples.

**Keywords:** children’s literature, Indigenous, place critical content analysis, rural



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## Introduction

Children’s literature has an important place in literacy teaching and learning across grade levels. Teaching with children’s literature may take the form of teachers reading aloud culturally relevant texts to children (Christ & Cho, 2021; Osorio, 2020, using trade books in guided reading groups and literature discussion groups (Pittman & Honchell, 2014; Short & Pierce, 1990), reading texts “against the grain” (Temple, 1993, p. 92) through a critical lens that identifies assumptions about power relationships (Kesler et al., 2020; Norris, 2020; Vasquez, 2019), or engaging the critical connection of reading with pleasure (International Literacy Association et al., 2014; Shannon, 2016; Swaggerty, 2009). Research shows a range of literacy benefits when children’s literature is an integral part of literacy teaching, including vocabulary development (Baker et al., 2020; Angelos & McGriff, 2002), enhanced reading comprehension (Ceyhan & Yıldız, 2021; Cox & Guthrie, 2001), broader empathy for others (Newstreet et al., 2019; Tomé-Fernández et al., 2019), and positive reading identities (Allington & McGill Franzen, 2003; Niland, 2021).

Children’s literature connects students with people and places that share the same experiences, values, and perspectives as they, as well as those who introduce new ways of thinking and being in the world across time and space (Heydon et al., 2021; Sims-Bishop, 1990). In this way, children’s literature plays an important role in expanding students’ awareness of global society and their understanding

of their own social and cultural identities within broader society (Short, 2009). Indeed, children’s literature is a “means by which society transmits selective cultural understanding” (Noll, 2003, p. 183). The textual representations of social and cultural ways of being, therefore, must be authentic and multiple, if children’s literature is to meet its potential to support children’s development toward participating as open-minded, compassionate members of society. Furthermore, there is an ongoing need for systematic analysis of textual representations to highlight, question and make recommendations regarding the cultural representations in children’s literature.

The purpose of this study is to examine representations of rural life in picture books by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and illustrators whose books have been published in the United States and Canada. We chose books published in Canada and the United States because of our personal experiences in U.S. and Canadian Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural communities. This decision enabled us to adopt more of an insider perspective than would have been possible if we had attempted a broader analysis. The research team has wide ranging knowledge, research, and personal experience in the rural places within our respective home countries. Our decision to limiting our pool of books to our home countries of Canada and the United States reflects our understanding and respect of the heterogeneity of rural places across the globe. Essentially, we opted to write about what we know and thus traded breadth for depth. We opted to limit

the study to ruralities with which we are most familiar, while still recognizing the incredible heterogeneity of rural communities in Canada and the United States.

But what do we mean by rural? Conceptualizations of rurality typically consider density of population and distance-to-density (Reimer & Bollman, 2010). Statistics Canada (2018), for example, defines *rural* as “the area that remains after the delineation of population centres using current census population data” (n.p.). Within this definition are “small towns, villages, and other populated places with less than 1,000 population according to the current census [as well as] agricultural, undeveloped and non-developable lands, remote and wilderness areas.” In the United States, approximately one-fifth of students live in areas defined as rural by the U.S. Census Bureau and about 7.5 million public school students were enrolled in rural school districts during the 2016-17 school year (Showalter et al., 2019). In the United States, nearly one of every five students attends a rural school (Showalter et al., 2019) and about one in five rural residents is a person of color (United States Department of Agriculture, 2018).

In the United States, the historically rooted myth of pastoralism suggests that rural places and people are central to so-called “American” values. However, in practice and across rural locations, rural people and places are often negatively perceived. For example, pejorative terms with deep historical roots such as *white trash*, *hick*, and *redneck* are commonly used and rarely questioned (Theobald & Wood, 2010). In 1973, Williams authored *The Country and the City*, an analysis of English novels, now regarded as a seminal

analysis of representations of rural people because of Williams’ enduring argument that the textual representations both constitute and marginalize rural life. In Williams’ analysis, he suggests that the representations construct rural people as fundamentally deficient in contrast to urban dwellers (1973), but also that that the representations of rural life in the books are connected to both idyllic and deficient discourses that work in tandem to advance national interests particularly related to the rationalization of capitalist production in an urbanizing society (Johnson & Howley, 2000). The service of rural places to more urban ones continues today in a variety of forms in both the United States

and Canada. Rural sacrifice zones are one such example, where natural and human resources are sacrificed in order to support the extraction of resources and the transfer of waste (Klein, 2014).

In Canada, 10% of rural residents have an Indigenous identity, compared to 5% of Canadians living in rural and urban areas (Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2018). The marginalization of Indigenous peoples has a long history within

Canada and the United States. Over many years, the Canadian government has attempted to assimilate First Nations peoples. These efforts include: residential schools, where First Nations children were punished for using their languages; the White Paper, where the government of Canada proposed making Indigenous people Canadians; foster care policies that discriminate against First Nation families, with Indigenous children being removed from their families as an assimilative practice; and the Indian Act, which includes placing Indigenous people on reservations, defining who is and who is not Indigenous, and controlling the lives of Indigenous

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people in Canada. All of these assimilative practices have led to the loss of Indigenous languages and culture. And, although Canada's Indigenous people are resourceful and resilient, with few exceptions, Indigenous languages in Canada are in danger of extinction (Johnson, 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

While the United States and Canadian governments use quantitative measures to designate rurality, in this study, as explained further in the theoretical framework section below, rurality is conceptualized broadly as an interaction between geographical, cultural, and social characteristics (Cresswell, 2015; Gruenewald, 2008). Characteristics of rural communities defy efforts to homogenize or essentialize their nature. Rural communities in the United States or Canada may be organized economically around farming, fishing, resource-extraction/mining, tourism, or food processing. Socially and culturally, rural communities may be located in areas with a legacy of inequity such as the South or Central Appalachia in the United States or reservations in Canada or the United States, or may have robust populations of Native American, First Nations, or immigrants. However, rural communities do share common characteristics related to population density and proximity to urban centers. Many communities grapple with issues related to rurality such as isolation, access to resources, poverty, and teacher shortages (Showalter et al., 2019). Rurality is an often-stigmatized social difference more complex than the location of a school from an urban center (Azano et al., 2021).

Research suggests that curricula tend to reinforce dominant perspectives of "rural" and "Indigenous" in ways that undervalue and/or disregard the lives, knowledge and perspectives of rural and Indigenous community members (St. Denis, 2010, p. 35). In this

paper, we examine representations of rural non-Indigenous and Indigenous rural communities and the people who live there in picture books for children to gain a sense of whether this trend toward the marginalization of rurality extends to the picture books that may be read in classrooms. The following research questions drove our analysis:

1. How are rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's relationships represented in picture books?
2. How are relationships between rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and the natural world represented in picture books?
3. What kinds of problems and/or challenges are represented as characteristics of rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's lives?

We begin by describing our theoretical framework, framing rurality in terms of Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural places. We then review related research examining representations of rurality—of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives and lived experiences—in picture books. Our description of research methods begins with a statement of our positionality in relation to our identities, experiences and perspectives and details of the ways in which we used critical content analysis in the study.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings: Indigenous Land-Based Theory and Place Theory**

The picture books identified for inclusion in this study are set in rural places. Place as used here is not limited to the geographical space where the action unfolds (Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2003), but rather is

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading on the effects of these policies, see Battiste (2013) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).

constituted, maintained, and experienced in interaction between the natural landscape and the humans who reside there. Therefore, the characters in picture books cannot be understood independently either of each other or of the rural geography in which they are immersed.

Places are spaces made meaningful (Cresswell, 2015). They are infused with social meanings that have cultural histories (Gruenewald, 2008; Tuan, 2001). Therefore, we know and value places because they make us—emotionally, rationally, materially, and spiritually—just as we make them. Space, on the other hand, is a mappable physical and geographic location. Its size and location are determined through measurement according to criteria (Hubbard et al., 2011). The distinction between place and space is not straightforward because humans determine, among other things, criteria for inclusion and exclusion when defining particular types of spaces (Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2003). Place is not the valued, subjective opposite of space (Green, 2013). Like the settings of picture books, mappable space only appears to be neutral. The study described here works from the assumption that representation matters (Williams, 1973) and, further, that the rural places represented in the books are not local, neutral geographies of no consequence to child readers but rather that the places in the books are places that are culturally, socially, and politically relevant as well as connected to local, regional, national, and global contexts (Eppley, 2019).

For Indigenous peoples, land and locality take on great meaning and importance. Language comes from the land, culture comes from language, and identity comes from the culture (Stagg Peterson & Robinson, 2020). Indigenous peoples see place as a central tenet to their beliefs and identity. They move away from generalizability toward the local as a place for meaning making. This actively disrupts the normativity of settler colonialism and decolonizes

the space in which we work (Battiste, 2013; Downey, et al., 2019; Tuck 2013). By focusing on the local, the authors of the picture books we highlight here are working to decolonize the publishing space, moving away from the generalized to the specific. Further, by focusing on Indigenous and local rural authors we are creating a decolonized space (Tuck & Yang, 2012), claiming that space and offering value to these authors and their books.

We worked from a critical literacy approach (Callow, 2017; Janks, 2010, Vasquez, 2019) to analyze the selected picture books. Our goal was to draw from multiple viewpoints to disrupt commonly-held assumptions about rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of being that perpetuate inequities and oppression. We recognize that power inequities can be brought to consciousness when analysis “focuses on voice and who gets to speak, whose story is told, and in what ways” (Short, 2016, p. 5). Drawing on our own Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural experiences in the process of our analysis, we were keenly aware of biases and assumptions that were prominent in texts, as well as our own biases and assumptions, which we brought to each text and conversation. Textual analysis is not an objective activity because readers bring ideologies and values to the texts read (Bradford, 2017).

### **Representation of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Rural Perspectives and Lives in Picture Books**

Given the intentional attempt to eliminate Indigenous culture and language in Canada, it is not surprising that relatively few picture books depict contemporary Indigenous life. Indigenous people are represented historically when considered at all. More often than not, books published about Indigenous peoples are written and illustrated, as well as formatted and marketed, from a non-Indigenous perspective (Bradford, 2007). In many cases, non-

Indigenous authors are “oblivious to the historical and symbolic processes that have privileged whiteness as a normative mode of being” (Bradford, 2007, p. 226). This oblivion, however unintentional, results in the unconscious reproduction of stereotypes and misconceptions, particularly in representations of contemporary lives of Indigenous children and their families. All texts are written from a particular perspective, convey particular understandings, and use narrative strategies to position readers toward particular meanings (Short, 2016). Fiction, says Agbaw, “captures an author’s version of what really is, what used to be, and what ought to be” (2008, p. 4). Indigenous authors and illustrators write for Indigenous children from their Indigenous perspectives, imagining readers who bring Indigenous perspectives and experiences within a colonialist society to their reading (Bradford, 2017). Indigenous texts are an essential component in developing Indigenous children’s identity (Stagg Peterson & Robinson, 2020; Montero et al., 2013) as they help the children see themselves in texts and see themselves as readers.

**“Indigenous authors and illustrators write for Indigenous children from their Indigenous perspectives, imagining readers who bring Indigenous perspectives and experiences within a colonialist society to their reading.”**

Two studies by Canadian authors (Korteweg et al., 2010; Stagg Peterson & Robinson, 2020) reporting on Indigenous representation in picture books are particularly relevant here. The first study, situated within the field of environmental education, used reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978) to examine a selection of 20 Indigenous Canadian picture books. The team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers provided alternative perspectives on environmental education in their personal reflections and literature discussions about the books. Themes included human relationships

with the land, “deep circular connections of self-community-land-Creator” (Korteweg et al., 2010, p. 340) and stories embedded in the language, both reflecting Indigenous worldviews and knowledges. In the second study (Stagg Peterson & Robinson, 2020) an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper used an Indigenous knowledges perspective (Battiste, 2013) to read a selection of ten picture books published in Canada between 2015 and 2019 by mainstream and Indigenous publishing companies. Themes included a recognition of the intergenerational impact of residential schools and teachings from the land.

In one epistemological examination of 88 books for teaching science, half written by Indigenous authors and the other half written by non-Indigenous authors, Dehghani and colleagues (2013) found differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors. The words used by Indigenous authors were more likely to provide a depth of information about the natural world, including using more specific labels (e.g., *trout* rather than fish), were more likely to establish context for the narrative, and were more likely to include intergenerational relationships than books written by non-Indigenous writers.

Previous research examining representation of rurality in picture books is scant. Two studies using qualitative content analysis to examine textual representations of rural life are immediately relevant (Eppley, 2010; Eppley, 2017). The 2010 study of 24 books found that rural people were represented in picture books as self-reliant, connected to each other, and satisfied and happy. This study also noted a recurring theme captured as “rural as other” wherein

the problems, conflicts, and ways of being shown in the picture books suggested a perception of rural life and rural people as expendable and as “other” to urban people (Eppley, 2010). Another study of a small set of 25 books examined conceptualizations of rural girlhoods within picture books, asking specifically how girls interacted with each other in rural communities and the relationship between gender and work (Eppley, 2017). This study found that rural girls were most often shown at home and only infrequently shown in their communities and that work was more-or-less gender neutral for children, but very gender normative for adults (Eppley, 2017). Neither study included Indigenous books. This scholarship points to two especially relevant recurring themes. The first theme is that the small sample sizes in both studies suggests a need for more comprehensive studies and more rural picture books on the market. Second, is the critical need for analysis of rural Indigenous picture books. This study addresses both gaps. We found few critical content analyses of representations of rural ways of being, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Our rural childhood experiences and those of today’s children living in rural Canadian and U.S. communities and as members of Indigenous communities have not been the focus of such analysis.

### Study Design

#### Positionality of Researchers

The research team consisted of three members. Eppley is a former elementary teacher from rural Northern Appalachia, who currently prepares teachers of reading and studies textual representations of rurality. Stagg Peterson is a former elementary teacher in rural Alberta, who currently conducts research in northern rural and Indigenous communities with teachers on young children’s

language and literacy learning. Wood, of Métis<sup>2</sup> and settler ancestry, previously taught young children for eight years in the Peel District School Board, one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse school districts in Canada. Wood now conducts research with northern Indigenous communities. Collectively we recognize that our political stances, our various placed, gendered, and cultural identities and experiences profoundly impacted not only our interpretations of the books, but every aspect of the study in ways that were both constraining and enabling. We all have insider positionalities via our experience living in three distinct rural communities and, in Wood’s case, as Métis. Our multiple cultural perspectives and identities through which we read the books increased our collective potential for reading with and against the representation of rurality, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in the texts. Yet we are equally aware that our individual identities likely narrowed our meaning making in some regards, particularly the ways in which we related to the representations in the texts as different or similar to our own lived experiences with rurality.

#### Text Selection

As a team, we set the inclusion criteria and curated the pool of books via collaborative decision making about the inclusion or exclusion of particular books based on the agreed upon criteria. As explained in greater detail below, we selected picture books that depicted contemporary rural life that were published in Canada or the United States.

Picture books, whether written for audiences of older or younger children, often are marked by the following two characteristics:

- the work the pictures and print do collectively in suggesting meaning and

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<sup>2</sup> Métis are North American indigenous peoples who were born out of early contact between European settlers and Indigenous

people, who created their own unique culture, language and identity.

- the relative scarcity of printed text relative to images on the page.

The pictures *suggest*, rather than determine meaning in ways that often retell, complement, or extend the meaning of the printed text. Pictures can also tell a story contradictory to the printed text, such as is the case in *This is Not My Hat* (Klassen, 2012). The intentional interaction of print and image is the defining characteristic of the genre. In this study, a picture book was defined as a book, “in which the story depends on the interaction between written text and image and where both have been created with a conscious aesthetic intention” (Arizpe & Styles, 2003, p. 22).

As a team, we discussed criteria for inclusion: picture books that depict contemporary rural life and are rurally salient. This was often not straightforward. Homes often provided key clues about the extent to which a setting was rural. Communities, either sparsely populated farmland (e.g., Crum, 2009; e.g., Popp, 2002), small rural “towns” (e.g., Martin, 1984) or a First Nations reserve (e.g., Bouchard, 2010; Kusugak, 1993) most often signaled a rural setting. Books that depicted characters traveling to rural parks, beaches, lakes, or other recreational areas for vacation or leisure were excluded because of a representation of rurality as a place for urban and suburban people to visit, but not to live full-time (e.g., Chin, 2017).

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We chose books that represented contemporary life which we determined, approximately, as post-1970. A key reason for this decision was that the parents and grandparents in children’s lives were likely to be adults from about 1970 onward. We were interested in books showing contemporary rural life because of the potential of these books to counteract the commonly held idea that rural places are either invisible, old-fashioned, irrelevant, or deviant in a variety of ways. Markers of contemporary life, or time-neutral settings (e.g., Cowley, 2019; e.g., Kooser, 2012) required collaborative discussion among the

research team. Clothing and vehicles were the most frequently used indicators of what we considered contemporary life. The earliest publication was *Island Winter* (Martin, 1984).

Our selection process involved consulting children’s librarians and publishers of Indigenous literature, as well as previous research. Books with animals as stand-ins for human characters were excluded, as were board

books for very young children, concept books, learn to read books, series books, moveable books, informational picture books. We included only narrative picture books. In addition to book lists from previous studies (Eppley, 2010; Eppley, 2017), and professional publications such as *The Library School Journal*, the team sought the expertise of a children’s librarian<sup>3</sup>. The librarian used the following descriptors when searching the library’s database: country life, country life 20th century, farm life, rural families, Indigenous peoples, Inuit, and First Nations.

<sup>3</sup> We relied heavily on the assistance of the Toronto Public Library, a library with one of the most extensive children’s literature collections in Canada, to identify texts for our sample. The children’s librarians at the Toronto Public library are highly

respected for their knowledge of children’s literature. In particular, we relied on the assistance of one, Joanne Schwartz, to help us identify books for the study.



This resulted in 93 potential books, many of which were concept books and books for very young readers, but few that included Indigenous peoples and few that were ultimately included in the final sample. We then turned to three Indigenous-operated publishers of English language Indigenous children's literature in Canada: Theytus, Inhabit Media and Kegedonce. We sought their recommendations for additional titles to include in our pool of Indigenous books. We also sourced the personal library of Indigenous children's books owned by Jeffrey author three and found an additional six books that met our criteria. In total, our text set included 43 non-Indigenous books and nine Indigenous books.

The inclusion of picture books depicting contemporary Indigenous rural life in this study was challenging. There are significant historical and cultural reasons for the exclusion of Indigenous voices from picture books which limits the number of books published. However, many books written by Indigenous authors aim to relate important historical, not contemporary, realities that have been excluded from the historical record, such as residential schools or the Trail of Tears or the sharing of traditional stories and knowledge. Too much has been lost that needs to be reclaimed. As compared to the number of historical books, Indigenous authored picture books portray the everyday life of modern, rural Indigenous people much less frequently. Likewise, authors publish in a for-profit publishing system and work with editors who need to sell as many books as possible, which can result in generic representations with wider appeal. Of the Indigenous authored books that are set in contemporary times, many place Indigenous people in nature or inside a home or school, making it impossible to identify the location as rural. This place-blinding of Indigenous people is a disconnect given that around 60 percent of Indigenous people in Canada live on reserve or in rural communities (OECD, 2020). Further, being in

relation is central to the culture (human to human and non-human kin) for Indigenous people and this focus is emphasized by many authors and illustrators to the exclusion of human-made items that would create markers for us to identify a location as rural.

### Critical Content Analysis

Critical content analysis (Short, 2016; Utt & Short, 2018), the approach used in our analysis, offers a way of bringing to greater consciousness elements of representation within children's literature. The methodology is particularly suitable to picture books because it lends itself well to making explicit connections between the identified inferences in text to the contexts in which the books are read (Short, 2016). Critical content analysis is the use of "a critical lens to [support] an analysis of a text or group of texts in an effort to explore the possible underlying messages within those texts, particularly as related to issues of power" (Short, 2016, p. 6). Further, critical content analysis methodology "offers a way of reading power, explores the web of sociopolitical relations, and deconstructs taken-for-granted assumptions about language, meaning, reading, and literature" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xv). Threaded through critical content analysis methodology are constructs of subjectivity, ideology, and status that open up opportunities for uncovering social inequities. Critical content analysis differs from traditional content analysis (e.g., Schreier, 2014) in its compatibility with critical theory and its corresponding emphasis on the ways in which power is implicated in text. Power is implicated at the core of our study, and is apparent in particular in the disparity in the number of rural Indigenous authored books and the number of rural non-Indigenous books in the sample. In the same way that we consider this disparity as an outcome of historical, social, and cultural circumstances, critical content analysis challenges the idea of our study as a neutral

endeavor. Because the sample is not ideologically neutral, our study cannot be neutral. It thus requires the use of a critical frame, explicitly stated and fully employed in all aspects of a study, from design to implications (Short, 2016; Utt & Short, 2018).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

A graduate student assisted the team with the completion of the initial coding using an inductive approach without pre-established categories (Maxwell, 2013). Please see Figure 1. Methods at a Glance for an overview. Codes were organized in a shared spreadsheet that enabled the team to access, manipulate, and edit codes and themes from the beginning to the end of the process. The entire team of three researchers and one graduate student read a minimum of ten texts of the whole sample in common, making written memos to assist with analysis and code development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Our process was recursive and involved going back and forth between the images and print on each two-page spread of the picture books and the three research questions. We then grouped the descriptive units into emergent categories within the framework created by the research questions (Krippendorff, 2004). After re-reading the books with the initial codes in mind, changes were again discussed. Themes became more refined as a result of our repeated readings and discussions using a constant comparative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consensus around codes and salient themes was achieved by repeated team discussions of disparities and points of confusion. An example of our coding can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Sample Codes*

	<b>Book with Indigenous Characters</b>	<b>Indigenous Representations</b>	<b>Book with Non-Indigenous Characters</b>	<b>Non-Indigenous Representations</b>
<b>Relationships With Others</b>	<i>When We Were Alone</i> (Robertson & 2016)	Nokom is healed by nature and nurtures nature. Nokom shares her life experience with her granddaughter.	<i>Bag in the Wind</i> (Kooser, 2010)	The rural child is resourceful. They pick up aluminum cans alongside the road to recycle for money. One adult helps another by suggesting they use bags of leaves as insulation.
<b>Relationships Between Rural People and the Human-created and Natural Worlds</b>	<i>Dragonfly Kites</i> (Highway, 2002)	Children keep an Arctic tern and loon as pets. Name and feed a wild squirrel and rabbit.	<i>Sonya's Chickens</i> (Wahl, 2015)	Sonya nurtures baby chicks inside and continues to care for them when they live outside, eats their eggs, and is deeply affected by the loss of one to a wild animal.
<b>Problems and/or Challenges Faced by Rural People</b>	<i>The Water Walker</i> (Robertson, 2017)	Nokomis worries about water pollution. She demonstrates for 7 years to protest nibi (water) pollution and waste.	<i>Flood</i> (Villa, 2013)	A flood destroys a child's home.

The three themes reported here describe rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's relationships with others, relationships between rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and the natural world, and the problems and/or challenges of rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's lives.

**Discussion of Representations of Rurality in Picture Books**

The three research questions about the relationships in the books, the relationships between the human-created and natural worlds, and the problems and challenges of rural life framed our reading of the books and our critical analysis of their content.

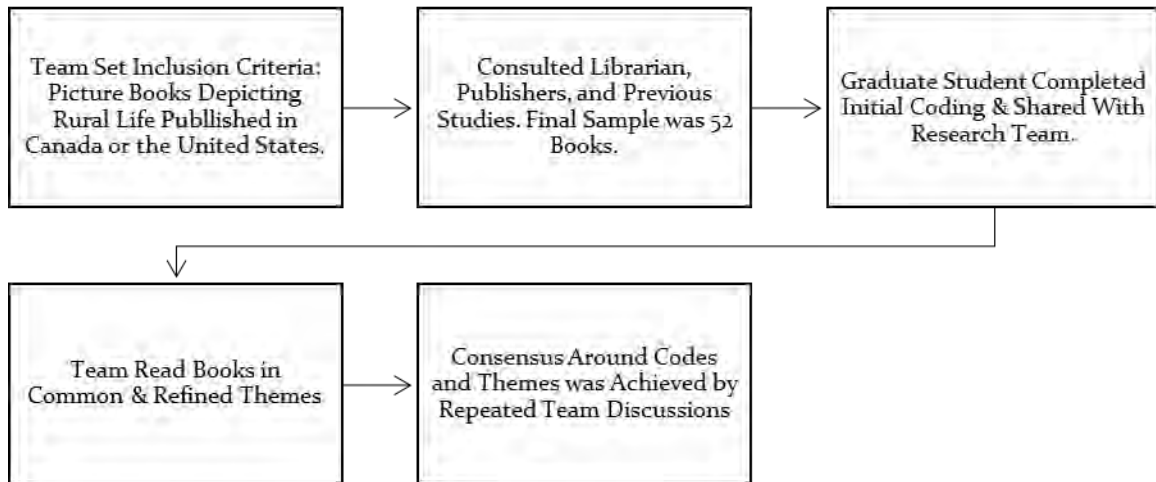


Figure 1. Methods at a Glance

## Gendered Interactions

In books about farming, the contributions of all family members to the work of the farm were at the center of the family relationships. Families did activities together, such as feeding farm animals in *Sonya's Chickens* (Wahl, 2015), cutting raspberry canes in *Sleep Tight Farm* (Doyle, 2016), picking apples in *Market Day* (Cordsen, 2008), riding a tractor in *On Uncle John's Farm* (Fitz-Gibbon, 2005), and cutting and stacking wood in *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005). Labor tended not to be divided by gender, with mothers and fathers, and girl and boy characters involved in the same work. For example, in *Here Comes Darrell*, the boy and girl siblings work together to unload and stack the firewood that Darrell delivered. A woman owns and operates a farm in *Grandma Irma's Farm* (Nienhaus, 2021).

The trend toward families engaged in the same work regardless of gender is somewhat of a departure from previous research that found that *adults* were often shown doing gender-normative work, whereas *children* more commonly, but not always, worked together on the same tasks (Eppley, 2017). Our lived experience growing up as rural children on farms

(Authors Stagg Peterson and Wood) and in families of mechanics and truck drivers (Eppley) led us to consider whether the type of work was connected to more or less complex representations of gender roles. Books set on farms such as *Sleep Tight Farm* (Doyle, 2016), *Market Day* (Cordsen, 2008), *On Uncle John's Farm* (Fitz-Gibbon, 2005), and *It's Milking Time* (Alsdurf, 2019) were more likely to challenge traditional gender roles. In books set off the farm, adults more often worked according to gender normative roles, like Darrell plowing snow while his wife baked pies in *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005) and the father completing home repair and the mother comforting the family in *Flood* (Villa, 2013).

In the same way, the Indigenous books show the children as moving between various roles in the community with the exception of *The Water Walker* (Robertson, 2017) where water protection is seen as the explicit role of women. Similarly, the adults in the stories seem to take on specific gendered roles, men hunt and drive the sleds and women take on nurturing and cooking roles. In these cases, it seems to be a reflection of the gender norms found within Indigenous communities. It is the experience of one of the authors that men and women have rigid roles within Indigenous culture; for example, men are fire

keepers at ceremony and women are water keepers. These roles are different than that of western culture. In Indigenous culture, the survival of the culture and community is seen as a joint responsibility of men and women and the separation of roles is one that happens during spiritual or traditional activities. This does cause a tension between current reality and traditional roles, but when a people are trying to save their culture, this tension is not a priority. The representation of the water protectors as women is a reflection of a traditional belief in Indigenous culture. It may also be why in most instances gender roles are not examined by Indigenous authors. Children are expected to find their role in the community. Each child has a gift for the community, and are actively encouraged to take on different roles, trying a wide variety of activities to find that gift.

### Relationships With Family and Community

Parent-child and grandparent-grandchild relationships were most prominently featured in the selection of non-Indigenous books. Grandparents and grandchildren were pictured together engaging in leisure-oriented activities such as stringing popcorn as in *Grandpa and Bo* (Henkes, 1986), going rafting in *The Raft* (LaMarche, 2000), and looking for owls at night in *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987). Leisure activities were also part of parent-child relationships, although less common than family work activities. Families skated on a pond in *When the Moon Comes* (Harbridge, 2017), ate meals and sat together in the yard in *Farm Year* (Popp, 2002), or relaxed in the living room in the evening in *Flood* (Villa, 2013).

In Indigenous culture, Elders are revered and children often have strong relationships with grandparents. Grandparents are an important part of Indigenous families and extended families are the heart of Indigenous culture. In Indigenous picture books, children are often shown in relation to grandparents, as this is a reflection of Indigenous

culture. Several of the books show children as helping their grandparents while they learn from them (Robertson, 2017; Nicholson, 2008). It is through helping grandparents and Elders that children learn Indigenous culture and tradition. Children are also seen as in relation to ancestors who protect and guide them, such as in *Muskrat will be Swimming* (Savageau, 2006), *The Secret of Your Name* (Bouchard, 2010), *This Land is My Land* (Littlechild, 1993), and *A Man Called Raven* (Van Camp, 1997). Decision making in Indigenous culture is done in light of seven generations—in light of the seven generations that came before us and the seven generations that will come after us. In this sense, grandparents, Elders, and ancestors are the key to the present and are necessary for leading our lives in a good way. Given the importance of grandparents it seems obvious that they would be represented in children's picture books. In all of the Indigenous picture books, the children are seen in relation to family members—except in the books that discuss Residential Schooling. In these stories, the children are separated from family, as they were historically. The last residential schools closed in 1996 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a).

The importance of relationships among rural community members was a prominent theme in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous books we examined. As was the case with family members, community members helped each other with physical work, such as cutting down a tree in a neighbor's yard in *Shaker Lane* (Provinsen, 1987), getting boats ready for the fishing season, repairing a house that has been damaged in a storm in *Thunder Storm* (Geisert, 2013), and cleaning up at the end of a market day. An especially relevant example of community interdependence is the rural Vermont community of *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005). Darrell assists his neighbors with snow removal and delivers firewood to a family who cannot afford to pay him. In the end, Darrell is surprised to find that while

he was working to help others, his neighbors organized to fix his barn roof before winter. All of the Indigenous books that we reviewed had a strong sense of community. The only exception are the books that dealt with Residential Schools, where the children were often portrayed alone or were separated from family and community. The sense of community among Indigenous people is a part of the culture and one of the things that makes Indigenous people so resilient.

The setting for the family and community members' interactions was primarily outdoors. In addition to farming activities, children were pictured climbing trees with their parents in *Down the Road* (Schertle, 2000), playing on swing sets with a neighbor in *Town by the Sea* (Schwartz, 2017), shoveling snow, or playing outside in the grass while parents look on in *A Little House in a Big Place* (Acheson, 2019), going on hikes nearby in *Hiking Day* (Rockwell, 2020), and doing yard work with siblings. Adults were frequently pictured doing domestic work such as cooking and hanging up the laundry. In *Building Our House* (Bean, 2013), a family works together as their house is being built in a field. They unload bags from a truck, and mix cement alongside other family and community members. In the Indigenous books, people are mostly seen on the land and living in relation to the land. This is even more true for the majority of Indigenous children's books. We excluded a large number of Indigenous children's picture books from analysis because they only represented Indigenous people as living in nature, making it impossible to identify the setting as rural as opposed to camping, taking place in a wooded urban area, alongside a lake or river in an urban area, etc.

**“The sense of community among Indigenous people is a part of the culture and one of the things that makes Indigenous people so resilient.”**

In Indigenous culture, humans are in relation to each other and the rest of creation: land, sky, water and non-human kin. The way in which these relationships are explored is very different for Indigenous authors. Water and ice are seen as characters in the story, with their own personalities and roles. People are not using the land, water, or animals but are in relation to them. Neither are Indigenous children shown as being afraid of the land, as is the case in the non-Indigenous book *Lenny and Lucy* (Stead, 2014). The land or ice is a place in which you play, like in *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails* (Kusugak, 1993), or work, like in *The Table Where Rich People Sit* (Baylor, 1994). People living in relation to the land is something that permeates the rural Indigenous books. Sometimes a non-human kin is a main

character, like the water in *The Water Walker* (Robertson, 2017) or Raven in *A Man Called Raven* (Van Camp, 1997). Other times, non-human kin are just a part of the story, like the land and the water in *Shin-chi's Canoe* (Campbell, 2008). Nature in these stories is more than a backdrop but becomes part of

the story and is a character herself. This is often true in Indigenous culture, and even Indigenous people who live in cities try to connect to the land and the water. It is who Indigenous people are.

### **Relationships With the Natural World**

Within the selection of non-Indigenous picture books, relationships with the natural world involved contrasting themes: 1) passive sensory delight in the flora and fauna along with an enjoyment of recreational activity within the natural world and 2) engagement in primary industry, with a view of the environment as a provider for families' livelihoods. Both messages are apparent in *Town by the Sea* (Schwartz, 2017). Nature is enjoyed and respected for

its beauty and, at the same time, it is the economic livelihood for families. The mining scenes are depicted with an almost entirely black page, whereas above-ground scenery is beautiful, bright, and inviting. In one two-page spread, the father is shown crouched in the mine, tiny amidst the darkness on the page. In the second contrasting spread, the child is shown swinging with only the bright wide sky in the background. The book offers a complex relationship between the rural community and the natural world, resisting any didactic tendencies about what nature should mean to the reader.

### ***Passive Sensory Delight***

Sensory appreciation of the natural world was reflected in illustrations of children with open mouths examining a spider web, as in *Tiny Perfect Things* (Clark, 2018) and peering at frogs in a pond (Savageau, 2006), as well as depictions of a family watching a moose in their yard in *From There to Here* (Croza, 2014). Outdoor recreational activities included backcountry skiing down a snow-covered hill in *Island Winter* (Martin, 1984), skating and playing hockey on a frozen pond and rafting on a river in *The Raft* (LaMarche, 2000). We first viewed the many images of rural children lying on the grass looking up at the sky, such as in *Home Grown House* (Wong, 2009), of a father and son sitting in a boat while recreationally fishing, of a boy sitting on a dock looking at the sea, and of family members sitting on their front porch in terms of the “laid back/idle” stereotype associated with rural life. After conducting our analysis of the Indigenous books through an Indigenous lens, our perspective of these images changed. We modified our theme to one of a sense of peacefulness with the natural world.

### ***Farming as Primary Industry in the Non-Indigenous Books***

Farming was the primary industry pictured in most of the non-Indigenous books. Characters fed and cared for livestock and they planted and harvested various crops. Other primary industries represented in the selected books were fishing, such as in *The Fishing Summer* (Jam, 1997) and coal mining in *Town by the Sea* (Schwartz, 2017). The authors’ and illustrators’ frequent construction of rural spaces as agricultural does not appropriately reflect the diversity of rural communities across the United States and Canada and further marginalizes the majority of rural children in the United States and Canada who do not live on family farms. Rural communities are diverse. They are found in the rolling hills of farmlands and prairies as frequently depicted in the sample, but rural communities are also located in mountain valleys, mountainous locations unsuitable for farming, and in deserts. Further, rural communities may have thriving economies, though this is not suggested in any of the books in our sample. More often the books do not provide any clues about the economic well-being of the community. *Muskrat Will Be Swimming* (Savageau, 1996) and *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005) are two that offer direct clues that the characters are experiencing economic uncertainty and decline.

The over-representation of farming books is expected, particularly among the non-Indigenous books. In the late 1700s, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy and westward expansion, devastating to Native peoples, repositioned most white rural former colonists as integral to the growth and character of the new nation (Azano et al., 2021). Farmers were seen as foundational to the national character, morally superior, hardworking, adventurous, and self-sufficient, all qualities of an ideal United States citizen (Azano et al., 2021). The values associated with farming are highly valued in U.S. and Canadian society, and farming is closely associated with rural ways of life and a so-called ideal childhood. It is

unsurprising that farms are overrepresented in the sample to the exclusion of fishing communities, logging, food production, and other industries common to rural communities.

### ***The Land in Indigenous Books***

In rural Indigenous books, the land is not something to be exploited or enjoyed, it is something that we are in relation with. The Indigenous books approached our relationship with the land and nature differently from the rural non-Indigenous books. In most Indigenous cultures, the land and nature are seen as non-human kin and even though they are appreciated for their beauty and bounty they are so much more, and as such have their own category. This can be seen in the respect the water is given in *The Water Walker* (Robertson, 2017), or how ice is portrayed in *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails* (Kusugak, 1993), and how the land envelops the characters in *Niwechihaw: I Help* (Nicholson, 2008). The land and nature are central parts of the characters' work, play and learning.

### **Problems and Challenges**

The problems or challenges faced by non-Indigenous rural characters in the books primarily came from the environment. Tornadoes and flooding damage homes and farm buildings in *Thunderstorm* (Geisert, 2013) and *Flood* (Villa, 2013), a fox kills chickens in *Sonya's Chickens* (Wahl, 2015), birds damage a garden in *And Then It's Spring* (Fogliano, 2012), and cows escape in *Farm Year* (Popp, 2002). Despite the many challenges presented, the relationship between the environment and rural family and community members is complex. In spite of environmental challenges as a common theme, characters also demonstrated their

aesthetic appreciation of their surroundings. For example, in *It's Milking Time*, a child and her father pause to admire the field from the barn window at the end of the day. The text states, "I lean against the dusty windowsill and see sunlight setting on a field of corn" (Alsdurf, 2019, n.p.). More often, however, the environment is to be respected for the challenges and dangers that it can create for individual rural families and entire communities. This was a stark difference between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous books, as the Indigenous books did not explore this theme.

A second source of problems or challenges to rural characters is modernization. This was apparent in just two of the non-Indigenous books, but it seems worth noting. Progress is assumed along with the unquestioned expendability of rural spaces. *Shaker Lane* (Provinsen, 1990) and

*Window* (Baker, 1991) document the urbanization of previously rural places. As development progresses across time, more and more houses are built, and trees and wildlife become scarce in the transition to suburban neighborhoods. These two books

present this as a tension, highlighting the stark differences between the rural and suburban spaces, yet there is also a sense of an inevitability of these changes. There is an inexorable evolution from rural to suburban. In this respect, readers are left with questions about whether there truly is a resolution to the problem of unrelenting urbanization experienced by the rural characters. The book concludes with the end of their previously rural lives. The problem is not resolved for the rural characters, and there appears to be little they can do to resist. These two books engage the invisibility and expendability of rural places (Reynolds, 2017) and the function of rural places as sacrifice zones (Klein, 2014), existing in the service of more urban places. There is a silence around the use of rural spaces that results in the

**“In rural Indigenous books, the land is not something to be exploited or enjoyed, it is something that we are in relation with.”**

oppression and exploitation of the people who live there.

In rural Indigenous stories, the problems were different; whether they dealt with problems related to settler colonialism, like residential schools in *Shi-shi-etko* (Campbell, 2005) or the loss of culture in *The Secret of Your Name* (Bouchard, 2010), or personal challenges, like those found in *A Man Called Raven* (Van Camp, 1997), or environmental problems, like those found in *The Water Walker* (Robertson, 2017). The Indigenous books we included dealt with problems that were problems of relation and being able to live in a good way. In many ways, these books represent the oppression by their larger neighbors experienced by Indigenous peoples, such as being forced off their land and onto reservations, and actively having been the victims of cultural genocide (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). But all the books analyzed represented Indigenous people as resilient and as fighting these problems, and in many cases overcoming them.

### Implications

We offered three sets of findings about the representation of rural people in Indigenous and non-Indigenous picture books: the representation of human-to-human relationships, the relationships between the people and the natural world, and the problems and challenges faced by rural people in the books. These questions directed our reading of the books and directed our thinking, more broadly, about Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural representation. We see textual representation, particularly because the books are used in school settings (Apple, 2014), as connected to spatial and social justice. Social inequities that are present in society will be present in texts, in both politically explicit and latent ways (Vasquez, 2012). Tools for thinking critically, including critical content analysis and critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2008), are useful for

pushing back on textual representations so that rural children see themselves reflected in the texts, but they are also useful tools to work toward more just outcomes for rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

Representations of social and cultural ways of being must provide authentic reflections of various ways of being, including rural Indigenous and rural non-Indigenous. Young readers should engage with multiple representations in order to live as open-minded, compassionate members of society (Leland et al., 2018). Our inclusion of Indigenous books seeks to recognize the stories told by the Indigenous authors and to acknowledge how colonization is implicated in the comparatively limited availability of these stories on the picture book market. Please see Table 2 below for sources of Indigenous books.

The metaphor of literature as a mirror reflecting children's lived experiences that creates a sense of worth and belonging, or as a window or sliding glass door as an entry way into the experiences of others (Sims-Bishop, 1990), is useful as a critical lens (Janks, 2010). For rural children in general, but particularly for Indigenous children, children's literature and picture books far more often provide windows than mirrors where place-related cultural identities are reflected. Children need to see themselves in the books that they read (Sims-Bishop, 1990) to facilitate self-identification as readers and to recognize books and reading as relevant to their everyday lives (Stagg Peterson, 2005). Much of what children encounter in schools is a reflection of the dominant culture that may not match well to rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous children's cultural identities and lived experiences. For children to grow as readers they need to identify as readers (Smith, 1988) and to identify as readers they need to identify with the books they are reading. Reading windowed representations of others, they have fewer



Table 2

*Sources for Indigenous Children's Literature from Indigenous Sources*

Type of Source		
<b>Canadian Non-Profit</b>	Poitras, C. (2021). <i>From sea to sea to sea: Celebrating Indigenous Picture Books</i> . International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY).	<a href="https://www.ibby-canada.org/indigenous-picture-book-collection/">https://www.ibby-canada.org/indigenous-picture-book-collection/</a>
	Dupuis, J.K., & Leatherdale, M.B. (2018). <i>From sea to sea: Celebrating Indigenous picture books</i> . International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY).	<a href="https://www.ibby-canada.org/indigenous-picture-book-collection/">https://www.ibby-canada.org/indigenous-picture-book-collection/</a>
	<i>Goodminds.com: First Nations, Métis, Inuit books.</i>	<a href="https://www.goodminds.com/home">https://www.goodminds.com/home</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	HighWater Press (Portage & Main Press)	<a href="https://www.portageandmainpress.com/HighWater-Press">https://www.portageandmainpress.com/HighWater-Press</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	Inhabit Media	<a href="https://inhabitmedia.com/about/">https://inhabitmedia.com/about/</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	Kegedonce Press	<a href="https://kegedonce.com/about-kegedonce.html">https://kegedonce.com/about-kegedonce.html</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	Theytus Books	<a href="http://www.theytus.com/">http://www.theytus.com/</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	Chickasaw Press	<a href="https://chickasawpress.com/books.aspx">https://chickasawpress.com/books.aspx</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	Pemmican Publications	<a href="http://pemmican.websites.ca/Home.page">http://pemmican.websites.ca/Home.page</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	Oyate	<a href="http://www.oyate.org/">http://www.oyate.org/</a>
<b>American Indian and/or Indigenous Press</b>	Salina Bookshelf	<a href="https://salinabookshelf.com/product-category/childrens-books/">https://salinabookshelf.com/product-category/childrens-books/</a>

opportunities to see mirrored places and cultural identities, develop a sense of belonging and connection, and cultivate shared experiences. Further, the mirror should reflect what Indigenous children recognize about themselves, versus a mirror of what a non-Indigenous author sees. Indigenous children deserve more Indigenous-authored books.

While there is increasing attention within children's literature scholarship about the importance of culturally relevant picture books (Clark & Fleming, 2019) and representation of diversity (e.g., Azano et al., 2017; Crawley, 2017; Crisp, 2018; Husband, 2019; Lo, 2019; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018), less is understood

about representations of rurality in children's literature (e.g., Eppley, 2010; Eppley, 2017; Keys et al., 2017; Pini et al., 2017) and still less is known about textual representations that engage the intersection of rurality and minoritized groups such as Indigenous peoples.

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