

Jordan Parker

## Viewing Rural as a Social Construct: An Author Interview and Book Review of *Teaching English in Rural Communities*

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*With nearly a quarter of all Americans living in rural areas, educating rurally is essential. Critical Rural English Pedagogy aims to center place-based learning as beneficial to all students and educators.*

### Introduction

My mother's family has been a part of Montana's rural history since the homesteading days. She was raised in Great Falls until she met my father in the early 90s. "One of those Air Force Jetters," she'd call him. She left Great Falls with him after they were married, and we only returned for the year my father was deployed and the vibrant fairs and rodeos each summer.

I have lived all over the United States and in Europe, from Colorado Springs to Boston to Frankfurt to Orlando. As far as I was concerned, Montana was as rural a place as I could live in the continental U.S. Yet, it was not until attending the University of Montana that I began to understand the differences between these rural and urban settings. And it was not until reading *Teaching English in Rural Communities: Toward a Critical Rural English Pedagogy* that I began to contemplate education through the lens of rurality.

The stories told in *Teaching English in Rural Communities* by Drs. Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen (2021) relate tales of isolation and criticality, community and

celebration, and traditions and changes. Each of these relates to the idea of rurality, and it is the complexities of this idea that drive the research of Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen. Their research questions are centered around the following:

1. What is it like to be an English teacher in a rural and remote community?
2. What are the unique challenges and opportunities for learning and teaching English in these contexts?
3. How can English teachers best be prepared and/or supported to work in these rural and remote schools?

The conversation around teaching English education in rural communities has not been central to the conversations about English Language Arts education. In fact, as many English teachers in rural communities have witnessed, this lack of conversation has led to a lack of educational resources and positive representation of and for rural students.

For these reasons, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen push forward the concept of rurality as worthy of amplification and inclusion in the field of education. Their book is dedicated to helping advocate for and provide resources to the teachers essential to these rural communities.

Thanks to the new technologies of the past few years, I was able to sit down (virtually) and

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discuss *Teaching English in Rural Communities* with the authors. The following sections of this article include an introduction to both authors and their definition of Critical Rural English Pedagogy, a brief synopsis of each book chapter, highlights from the interview, and concluding thoughts on the book with aims to stretch this pedagogy further into educational realms.

Quotes included in each section are from the virtual interview and offer further insight into the authors' thoughts about instruction for Critical Rural English Pedagogy.

### Who are the Authors?

When Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen worked together at Montana State University, they each came from different backgrounds to tackle the complexities of rural education.

Petrone grew up as an urbanite. Not only was he raised in urban and suburban settings, but his teacher training was entirely urban-focused. Even his first faculty position at the University of Nebraska, a school in a state typically associated with rurality, felt urban-centric. It wasn't until his move to Montana State University in Bozeman that Petrone really began to recognize the significance of rurality in education. Robert Petrone is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Missouri.

Wynhoff Olsen began her teaching career in rural Minnesota, working as a high school teacher in the "outstate" district, the name for the more rural areas of the state outside of the big cities and suburbs. This idea of "outstate" or "instate" initially offended Wynhoff Olsen because their schools were all in the same state. She began to notice the limitations of professional development in these rural schools. This observation began her journey of critically looking at how rural education is constructed and implemented in the United States. Allison Wynhoff Olsen is currently an Associate Professor at Montana State University.

### Defining Ruralities and Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP)

The concept of "rurality" is certainly not new. In fact, the US government has held definitions of urban, and therefore rural, since the late 19th century. Currently, the US Census Bureau defines areas with populations exceeding 50,000 as urban and those greater than 2,500 as urban clusters; therefore areas with populations of less than 2,500 are considered rural (United States Census Bureau, 2022).

However, these definitions are limiting as these ideas of rurality and urbanity are socially constructed. These terms are also subjective. A citizen of Atlanta, Georgia, for example, might consider Missoula, Montana, to be rural, as Atlanta is over five times as populated. Yet another citizen from Anaconda, Montana, might say they are "going to the city" when traveling to Missoula to visit the nearest mall. Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen take the definition of rurality and expand upon its subjectivity. During the interview, Wynhoff Olsen described how she conceptualizes *ruralities*:

*We are well aware that rural contexts are completely distinct from one another. As we've been talking about today, rural Nebraska is not rural New York, it is not rural Montana. Rural Montana is not one monolithic thing either. So we encourage really pushing and asking people...to play with the plural form of the word, let's call it "ruralities," and see what the reactions are. Let's talk about why we are pluralizing something that is typically thought about as a singular notion.*

In advocating for the plural of this term, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen have opened up the conversation about contemporary ruralities, not as one simple definition but as a complex construct for defining personal narratives. In this way, rural English education can be a channel for creating a mirror for rural students and a window or sliding glass door for their urban peers (Bishop, 1990). Providing a space for different perspectives

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of rurality creates a foundation for developing critical pedagogy.

The authors define and develop Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP) as a response to the misrepresentation, or more often entire lack, of rural identity in mainstream media and curriculum. CREP is a framework that centers rurality amid critical literacy practices. As Petrone defined it, “It’s bringing the idea of rurality into the curriculum...as a social construct, as a discourse, as something that gets created by texts, by the media, by people’s understandings and, and their preconceptions...of places like rural communities.” CREP works not only to critique the current understandings and definitions of rurality but also to serve as a foundation for the celebration of being from a rural place.

### Overview of Book

#### Chapter 1

The book opens with a review of the current literature and research on rural pedagogy. *Teaching English in Rural Communities* aims to address the “lack of attention to rurality” and join the conversations about the complexities of English language instruction and ruralities. This chapter begins to analyze the perceptions of rurality that dominate the public and educational spheres, an analysis that is continuous throughout the book. Typically, the dominant discourse is degrading to rurality, promoting negative and limiting stereotypes. The chapter wraps up with a way to help counter these stereotypical perspectives: Critical Rural English Pedagogy.

#### Chapter 2

This chapter marks the beginning of the second part of the book, or as Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen state, the “heart” of the book. This section is dedicated to the practices of four English teachers in different rural communities around Montana. Chapter 2 focuses on Alli Behrens from rural Arizona, teaching in Whitehall, Montana.

Behrens’ chapter opens with a “Where I’m From” poem she wrote, which is later explained to

be an established part of her CREP curriculum. Her unit focuses on the messages from the media on rurality and the power of the criticality of CREP. At the heart of Behrens’ curriculum lies the skills students need to navigate the negative stereotypes of rural communities as portrayed in the media.

As Petrone shared during our conversation, “I think our book is trying to provide a counter-story or counter-narrative to a dominant understanding of rurality to complicate this dominant and often deficit and diminished view of rural contexts, communities, people.”

#### Chapter 3

Not only is it considered best practice to teach about Native American history and culture, but it is part of the Montana Constitution to do so. In chapter 3 of *Teaching English in Rural Communities*, Melissa Horner shares a curriculum that “indigenizes” CREP. In this unit, Horner critiques the “settler colonial notions of rurality as white places and spaces.” Horner’s lessons center Native American voices through literacy and activism. To address the potential resistance to this Indigenized curriculum, Horner suggests using a culturally responsive approach that values and incorporates diverse perspectives. She emphasizes the importance of building relationships with students, their families, and other community members to gain their trust and support. Horner also suggests engaging with local Native American communities and seeking their input and collaboration in designing and implementing the curriculum.

#### Chapter 4

The third and final chapter of Part II provides a look into the classrooms of two additional English teachers in rural communities. Liz Reiersen of Miles City, Montana, aims to show the duality of living in a rural community through celebration and critique. In her unit on poetry, Reiersen encourages her students to examine the dichotomy of rural living. This dichotomy can cause dissonance to emerge in students, and

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Reierson's unit on poetry alleviated some of the tension her students felt.

Catherine Dorian of Fort Benton, Montana, developed curricula focused on the ways in which small rural communities shape the citizens' reputations, specifically regarding sexuality and slut shaming. This unit was driven by the interests of the students and helped the students build connections between their daily lives and the broader sociopolitical contexts of their community.

This chapter closes with more ideas for teachers on how to move toward CREP by addressing issues that have been identified as more taboo in rural communities, including, for instance, LGBTQIA+ marginalization, race and racism, drug addiction, poverty and hunger, and ambition for higher education.

### Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens the final part of the book with a look at the intersection of race/ism and rurality. As Petrone pointed out during the interview, "there's a narrative of rural communities that are oftentimes coded as white." Not only does this coding further marginalize communities of color in rural contexts, but, in a place like Montana, it further pushes the narrative that Native Americans are a part of the past and not a part of modern rural communities. This chapter examines the histories and current cultures of Native Americans living rurally, as well as Black and Latin American rural communities. In particular, this chapter showcases the various ways in which these communities are thriving.

### Chapter 6

To wrap up the book, the final chapter dives down deep into the scope of CREP as it can be applied outside of the classroom. This chapter includes more strategies for integrating CREP in the classroom but also includes a discussion on implementing CREP in their lives outside of school. Because of how intertwined schools and communities are in rural places, it is isolating to

try to separate the two and often suffocating to have no separation at all. This chapter illuminates the self-care and professional development strategies and practices that help support teacher participation in CREP in their rural communities.

### Further Interview Highlights

The opportunity to interview the authors of the book provided further insight to their reasoning behind creating and advocating for CREP pedagogy. By including the following interview highlights, I hope to share further relevant ideas about CREP and rurality. The interview excerpts have been edited for reader clarity.

**JORDAN:** If you could summarize your book for our MEJ readers, what might that summary look like?

**ROBERT:** For me, there are a couple of key ideas. One is that your context matters, and this is regardless of rural. This is in any context. Context matters and it shapes what is and is not available for structuring learning and access. Specific to rural contexts, I think one of the central arguments of the book is that it's important to bring the idea of rural and rurality as a social construct into the curriculum.

**ALLISON:** There are aspects of the rural community to celebrate; there are aspects of that community to critique. What we learned through Liz [in Chapter 4] is that students might feel like they don't get to critique because they are in this rural space. They shouldn't be saying anything negative. That's what everybody else is doing about them. It doesn't mean this place is bad. It could mean those things, but it also could simply mean, *this is a critique, and I think this is what we need to pay attention to*. I think people deserve to be represented or heard differently. It's like, you know what? Actually, this bothers me. I just realize we're silencing this whole group of people or this idea.

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**JORDAN:** I loved Melissa's chapter [Chapter 3]. I think it was probably the most eye-opening for me, especially considering the emphasis on Indian Education for All (IEFA) Standards here in Montana. How does the concept of CREP play into IEFA?

**ROBERT:** In a state like Montana, rural isn't all white. You have reservations and you have Native communities. If you look at the voting for presidential elections in Montana, it offers a very different understanding of rural communities and how they vote than what mainstream media portrays. Also, Melissa's chapter opens up questions of how notions of land interplay with ruralities, pushing us to ask how land and people intersect. Different groups of people have different understandings of land.

For instance, in her chapter, Melissa shows how colonial society often understands land as property whereas many Indigenous communities understand much more different ways of being in relationship with land. I think CREP allows a way to think about and analyze these ideas.

**JORDAN:** My next question for you both comes from this idea that rural is so relative. So, why should traditional urban teachers care about critical rural English pedagogy? Why does it affect someone in Missoula? Why would it affect someone in New York City?

**ROBERT:** It's really an exciting question. A pie-in-the-sky answer is that so much of what I think we're trying to do in education is build a better world and learn to better understand each other. I imagine what opportunities there might be for this interplay between rural and urban/suburban students to help break down some of those divides.

There are often commonalities or ways that people can collaborate and coalesce together to work toward a greater aim. I'm thinking of possibilities for rural and urban points of

convergence around issues of justice and equity that might become possible by virtue of, let's say, urban students and teachers working with a rural lens and vice versa. It could work at the level of individual assumptions or prejudices, and it could work toward larger social, cultural, and political alliances.

**ALLISON:** CREP is a powerful way to think about what ways there are that we can explore other people and their relationships, their gifts, their talents, their constraints. How do we do that kind of thinking with place? When any teacher is able to get students to move beyond what is known, when we can get them to move and push forward, it allows us to complicate place and people as well as time and experience in really powerful ways that I think are exciting. I think this lens can help us be better people in general.

**JORDAN:** In Florence, MT, I was in a third-grade class and one of my eight-year-olds was working on his farm with machinery that was worth more than my annual salary. He could hear a tractor noise and he could tell you exactly the make and model of it. I was so impressed and surprised. This knowledge was such a valuable piece of his education. How do I take CREP and make it relevant for my students and for me as a teacher—as an early childhood or an elementary educator? Or for someone who's not even in literacy or ELA, who is teaching history or science, how do we take this one step further for them?

**ROBERT:** It's taking a stance of curiosity and inquiry and really paying attention to your surprises. Are you surprised that kids know the make and model of this piece of machinery? If you are, why is that? It's illuminating your own assumptions. As part of the ethnographic process, as much as you're trying to understand what's around you, you're actually understanding what's within you—your own filters, blocks, assumptions, and unconscious biases.

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I don't think we talk about it in this way in the book, and I think it's just kind of coming to me as we're in this conversation, but there's a participatory element to it as well. You come into the community, you get to know the people, the place, and then you invite that in. You're in a relationship with the people in the place and that is helping the work that you're doing in the classroom, just as your work in the classroom is helping the community

**ALLISON:** You're making me think of Cat Dorian's section [Chapter 4]. In her chapter, she is talking about using *Perma Red* [by Debra Magpie Earling] in her classroom. This was in her school. She did not seek it out. It was like, here's your book room, here are your books approved by the school board, and she was working with her seniors and talking with them about what they were experiencing and how they were experiencing their lives in place at that moment. That's a conversation that can happen in any discipline. For elementary teachers, it's when you're thinking about doing class meetings. You're checking in. What are people talking about? What Cat noticed was her students talking about their reputations and how they felt as the oldest students in the school. Did they feel comfortable with the reputations that they held? How were others given reputations?

I think part of how we as teachers across grades and disciplines bring in any pedagogy is by how we ask the questions that allow our students to share who they are in that moment. How do we use our own disciplinary knowledge to tap into that? I'm thinking of your eight-year-old student who knows about tractors and is doing this work. How can we tap into that?

**JORDAN:** It sounds to me like CREP, at its very center, is this idea that education should be student-centered. It should be this focus on what conversations your students are having, building these relationships, not just with your students,

but also with their community. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but am I getting that right? Do you have any final thoughts to share?

**ROBERT:** I hear what you're saying, and I appreciate your analysis of it. I want to push a little bit on that. I would actually argue that the book is place-centered, that it's student-in-place-centered. You can't understand a student-centered approach without understanding how that student exists within a context. Then you can move across different contexts to understand how place is shaping that student's experiences and how that student can inform place, too. The notion of place and context is really important. I think what we're trying to show in the book is that how place is understood shapes the internal experience of a person's life and their ability to engage in place across different places.

**ALLISON:** This is not a book just to say rural is awesome. Urban, rural, suburban—wherever you are, every place has issues. To speak to some of what we learned from these high school English teachers in rural spaces, there are some particular challenges that do seem specific to rural places. One main takeaway that I want readers to know is that teachers are brilliant. Rural teachers have not been given a platform and visibility in our big field and even sometimes in our smaller areas. But what we found was a group of teachers who were exceptional at their jobs, and they were creating curricula in ways that blew our minds. Part of what we wanted to do and why we wanted to write this book with these teachers was to help them talk about how they're doing this brilliant curricular work, to help give them a platform, and to start making these rural teacher voices more of a cacophony rather than a one-off. We're hoping to start a trend.

**ROBERT:** As a teacher myself, as a pre-service teacher, as a teacher educator, I love having examples of curriculum not necessarily to replicate but to inspire possibilities. That's one

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thing that I want teachers who read this book to walk away with: to be inspired to build curriculum. Because I think—increasingly—we're in an age where teachers are not allowed to build curriculum, not relied upon to build curriculum, or not believed that they can build curriculum. For me, as a teacher, that's one of the most stimulating creative aspects to teaching.

To add to that, how does rurality factor into the development of curriculum? That is for all teachers in rural and urban contexts. I would encourage rural teachers to think about how the concept of urban factors into their development of curriculum. Could you imagine a critical media literacy unit on how media shapes our ideas of rural coinciding with how media shapes our ideas of urban? Let's put those into conversation with each other.

### **Final Thoughts and Moving Forward**

Critical Rural English Pedagogy might seem limiting by the name; anyone teaching in urban settings may not initially see the value in understanding CREP and the concept of ruralities. According to Petrone, the “pie-in-the-sky answer” is that education is a vehicle for building a better world in which we better understand each other:

*I just think about what it might look like to have rural students...better understand and step into urban perspectives and rural perspectives. What might it mean to have urban/suburban students really think in critical and nuanced ways about rural communities? What kind of impact might that have in terms of relationships and in terms of coalition possibilities?*

Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen are not the only educators to see the value of changing the discourse around ruralities. Dr. Chea Parton developed a website—Literacy In Place (LIP)—dedicated to reviewing rural Young Adult Literature (Parton, 2022). Along with the units developed in *Teaching English in Rural*

*Communities*, there are plenty of opportunities to better acknowledge, represent, and educate on ruralities.

For educators of early childhood or elementary, or educators in other disciplines outside of ELA, CREP can be applied to the curriculum in the same way that it can be applied to urban settings: through relationship building. When we allow our students to show up in their entirety, when we pay attention to their interests and their backgrounds, we can develop CREP through a student- and place-centered curriculum. *Teaching English in Rural Communities* provides a foundation for strategies in critiquing, celebrating, and fully representing rurality within a place-based curriculum.

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