

On the Road: Examining Self-Representation and Discourses of Homelessness in Young Adult Texts

**Analyzing discourses of
homelessness in literature
and other cultural texts—
by and about young
adults—reveals cultural
assumptions about this
important social issue.**

Theresa Rogers | Elizabeth Marshall

According to a 2007 report published by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the number of estimated homeless youths (age 18 and under) in the U.S. ranges anywhere from 52,000 to over one million (Fernandes, 2007). In Canada, on any given day it is estimated that there are 150,000 homeless youths on the streets (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). However, youths are chronically undercounted in surveys of homelessness in part because they tend to avoid shelter systems, making it difficult to pinpoint concrete statistics (Fernandes, 2007).

In addition, definitions of what it means to be homeless vary across institutions, communities and countries; but in general, they refer to people who are temporarily or more permanently without shelter. Prior to the 1980s in North America, “the homeless” were commonly referred to as vagabonds, hobos, and itinerants.

As terminologies change, so do the representations of homelessness in various kinds of mass-produced cultural texts, such as novels, memoirs, and film, in ways that uphold certain kinds of truths about what it means to live without a permanent home. These textual and visual representations are important to analyze as the discourses about homelessness within them are tied to material effects that influence the everyday lives of street youths.

In this article, we focus on representations of homelessness in two kinds of texts: memoirs written for and consumed by a young adult audience and multimodal zines created by homeless youths in Western Canada. We are particularly interested in the discourses of homelessness within these texts.

Our analysis includes popular contemporary coming-of-age memoirs about the homelessness of youths, including Jeannette Walls’s *The Glass Castle* (2006) and Nic Sheff’s (2009) *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines*, and related reviews and author interviews as well as multimodal zines (described below) created by contemporary street youths (Rogers & Winters, 2010).

We present these analyses because, in teaching our young adult literature courses, we find reading across texts and genres (“tagging”) to be a useful strategy that encourages rich discussions of competing discourses within young



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adult literature, classic literary works, cultural texts produced by youths, and contemporary popular media. These discussions offer new and multiple perspectives on various social issues that are found in contemporary young adult literature. For ease of terminology, we have come to call this approach “discourse tagging.” We outline how this strategy can be also be used in a young adult literature classroom in the “Take Action!” section.

Representations of the Self

We approach discourses of homelessness through representations of the self within memoir and zines. To analyze these self-representational projects, we draw on post structural theories (Gilmore 1994, 2001; Smith & Watson, 2001) for analysis. That is, we view representations of the self within these diverse texts as highly constructed artifacts that draw on conventions of fiction and incorporate other cultural materials (Marshall, 2006; Marshall & Rogers, 2005).

As Leigh Gilmore (1994) argued, “[t]exts perform a complex kind of cultural work—never more so than when they seek to represent the ‘self’” (pp. 22–23). From this perspective, we analyze the ways in which youths and adults whom have lived on the streets as teens draw on, critique, and reproduce discourses about homelessness in diverse cultural texts, including mass-marketed memoirs and DIY zines produced by youths living on the streets.

We intentionally mix cultural texts and read across distinct genres. As Claudia Nelson (2003) argued in her book *Little Strangers*, it is “[i]n this mixture of texts, we may discover how various kinds of writings for various kinds of audiences collide and collaborate to form patterns that may not be seen when we look at a genre in isolation.” As she suggested, this kind of analysis can “illuminate the extent to which imaginary, popular and ‘real’ representations” overlap, clarify, or challenge one another (p. 6).

Thus, the texts produced by street youths bump up against a variety of other texts about homelessness, including but not limited to “classics” as *Oliver Twist*;

popular films like *The Soloist*; mainstream news media; and popular memoirs, such as *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls and *Tweak* by Nic Sheff.

Our approach to discourse analysis is influenced mainly by Foucault’s (1972) and Bakhtin’s (1986) work and is related to, but distinct from, critical discourse analyses (e.g., Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Lee, 1996) commonly used in educational research. The use of the term discourse in this paper comes out of literary/cultural studies rather than a linguistic or sociolinguistic tradition (Mills, 1997).

Drawing on Foucault’s work, we are concerned with a more theoretical perspective on discourse as a general domain of the production and circulation of structuring statements (Mills, 1997). A structuring statement, in its simplest form, can be as common as an aphorism that is often assumed to be self-evident and true, such as “boys will be boys.” However, upon closer analysis, we can see that such a statement is full of cultural assumptions, including that boys’ behaviors can and should be accepted and absolved.

This approach to discourse theory provides the analytic leverage to locate and understand how discourses of homelessness across colliding cultural texts produce certain, albeit contradictory, ways of thinking and speaking about what it means to be homeless in a particular moment and location. Specifically, it allows for a focus on the discursive framework that organizes homelessness and how certain “truths” get taken up and authorized in two popular memoirs widely read by adolescents.

Additional theoretical perspectives from Bakhtin (1986) allow us to look how street youths construct double-voicings (reiterations) of these discourses of homelessness in a zine, as well as producing counterdiscourses (contradictory representations) through textual and visual play and parody.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the authors of the texts we analyze all engage with a dominant “neoliberal” discourse of homelessness (for a helpful definition of neoliberalism, see gravewisdom.tumblr.com/post/4680563684/what-is-neoliberalism-a-brief-definition-for-activists) in which individuals rather than systemic social inequalities are responsible for their life on the streets. Sometimes this discourse of homelessness, in which fault lies with the individual, is supported, and at other times it is resisted.

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We use the term “homeless” broadly. The protagonists of the memoirs as well as the street youths are transient; they are on and off the street, sometimes sheltered and sometimes on the move. In particular, we tag how this neoliberal discourse—“Homelessness is individual choice or failing”—gets reproduced and/or contested in these texts.

This normative discourse reproduces the constrained ways in which homelessness gets taken up in other spaces, such as in newspapers, policy documents, and, at times, young adult literature. In their zine texts, street youths make use of public space and media to counter this normalizing discourse by suggesting that “yuppies” are the problem and critique the system itself as enabling.

We by no means want to romanticize the texts produced by youths and realize that we have established a kind of binary between mainstream memoir and grass roots cultural productions by youths. However, this strategy allows us a way to begin to tease out the complicated ways in which “homelessness” is used in relationship to the construction of street youths in a variety of cultural texts.

The Glass Castle

Jeannette Walls’s *The Glass Castle* was a 2006 American Library Association Alex Award winner—an honor given to books written for adults that might appeal to young adults aged 12 to 18. Published in 2005, the *The Glass Castle* remains on the *New York Times* bestseller paperback nonfiction list at #15 at the time of this writing, and has been on the list for 300 weeks.

The book’s title comes from Jeannette Walls’s father’s dream to build a glass castle and ties her girlhood to a fantastical landscape—a forest from which she will escape. “All we had to do was find gold, Dad said, and we were on the verge of that. Once he finished the Prospector and we struck it rich, he’d start work on our Glass Castle” (p. 25). Her father’s constant pursuit of gold or other get rich quick schemes provides the backdrop for Walls’s coming-of-age memoir in which homelessness, or the threat of it, provides a backdrop.

Walls’s family is always “doing the skedaddle”—moving from one location to another. In one scene Walls asks her sister Lori, “How many places have we lived?”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘lived,’” she said. “If you spend one night in some town, did you live there? What about two nights? Or a whole week?” I thought. “If you unpack your things,” I said.

We counted eleven places we had lived, then we lost track. We couldn’t remember the names of some of the towns or what the houses we had lived in looked like. Mostly, I remembered the inside of cars. (p. 29)

Walls tells how her father, who drives the family all over the U.S., has “a bit of drinking situation” and is usually loaded. This results in harrowing travels in which Walls falls out of the back of a moving car and in which the three children are locked with their infant sister in the back of U-Haul for hours only to have the doors swing open on the highway. The family ends up in Welch, West Virginia, in a “house” that lacks plumbing and electricity.

After high school, Walls and her siblings move to New York. Her parents follow their children to the “Big Apple,” where they live on the streets. When Walls tells her mother “You can’t just live like this,” her mother responds, “Why not?...being homeless is an adventure” (p. 255).

Throughout the memoir, Walls writes about her family “living as nomads” as the result of her father’s personal failing as an alcoholic and her mother’s “free spirit.” Homelessness is a life that her parents choose. At times, Walls’s memoir opens up the idea of homelessness as resistance to “the system” only to close down these larger structural critiques through a return to discourses of individual choice.

Of her parents’ newfound community of squatters and their fight against New York city’s housing agency she says, “they’d stumbled on an entire community of people like themselves, people who lived unruly lives battling authority and who liked it that way” (p. 267). This point is underscored when, at the end of the memoir, a stunned Walls learns that her mother owns property worth one million dollars.

The young girl that Walls constructs in her memoir draws on ideologies of the (western child) as simultaneously naive and resilient. Transience, and the lack of a place to call home, provides a catalyst to find personal strength and to make different choices. The girl elicits sympathy for her tough childhood and admiration for her pluck as she rescues herself time and again.



Jeannette Walls is one of a long line of impoverished children who by inner strength and hard work make it to adulthood; she is an easily recognizable American character, who “pulls herself up by her bootstraps.” Homelessness affects Walls on an individual level as it allows her to develop personal resilience that ends in success: “You West Virginia girls are one tough breed” (p. 246). Even as a young teen, Jeannette knows that she will leave her family and not make the same decisions that her parents did, thus rendering homelessness as a personal choice that she has the agency to overcome.

Reviews of the book and interviews with Jeanette Walls reinscribe a neoliberal discourse of individual choice that focuses on Walls’s ability to overcome her family history of homelessness and forgive her parents their decisions. “My father was an alcoholic, but he was also charismatic,” Walls responds in an interview in the New York City blog the *Gothamist*.

Interviewers and reviewers seem to want Walls to ascribe blame to parents rather than question the possible systemic causes of homelessness. Nor do they make any mention of the residual privileges of her parents’ initial middle class background that enabled Walls to eventually house herself in New York’s Upper East Side neighborhood.

***Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines* by Nic Sheff**

Similarly popular among young adults and published under a young reader’s imprint, Nic Sheff’s memoir of drug addiction and homelessness spent many weeks on the *New York Times* list of bestselling children’s books. *Tweak* recounts two years during which Sheff was living on and off the street, part of longer trajectory of drug use that spanned from his early adolescence through to his 20s.

Sheff was raised in wealthy family but began using drugs at an early age, not long after his parents’ divorce. His memoir narrates his side of a story that was told in his father’s memoir, *Beautiful Boy* (Sheff, 2007). Here we focus in particular on the way Sheff writes about homelessness as the result of his addiction to methamphetamines and other drugs.

In several places, Sheff writes in present tense and builds in remembered dialogue. In one scene, he

moves from his current dilemma—whether to “trick” or beg—and he recalls another time he had to beg for money by feigning a work accident:

I made around fifteen bucks in about half an hour, then this Russian woman with very platinum hair stopped me.

‘What you say doesn’t make sense’, she said. ‘If you got hurt at work, why didn’t they help you?’

That was the end of that scheme. (p. 99)

Sheff reinscribes the homeless person as suspect and unworthy of trust or help. In a later scene, Sheff recounts an interaction with another homeless man to whom he tries to explain that there are places to sleep in the woods in Presidio and describes how to get there. But the next day he sees the man in same “goddamn spot” trying to sleep on the cement. Sheff betrays a lack of understanding of how people without homes find alternate spaces of belonging and safety and reinscribes his own discourse of individual preference and comfort.

In these scenes, Sheff maintains a discourse of “homelessness as individual failure”—a situation that is remedied by individual support; and, indeed, the activities recommended for young readers in the back of the book include many self-help strategies, such as volunteering at a soup kitchen. In the next section, we tag the ways in which street entrenched youths take up and counter this discourse of homelessness as individual choice or failing.

The Street Youth Project

The zine texts we analyze here are drawn from a larger study of youth literacy practices (Rogers & Winters, 2010). We spent over a year working with street-entrenched youths, ages 16 to 24, who produce a zine called *Another Slice* that, in their words, provides an outlet to share “art, thoughts and feelings with their peers as well as others” (from the inside cover).

The zine project took place at a youth-services center that provides a safe space and various resources for homeless or street-entrenched youths in a large city in Canada. When we began working at this site, the youths were creating a handmade and photocopied do-it-yourself (DIY) paper zine; more recently they shifted to posting the zine online (see www.anotherslice.ca).

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1 1 Zines have a long and complex history in North
2 2 America. Fan magazines started in the 1930s are often
3 3 seen as prototypes.

4 4 Since then zines have been appropriated by
5 5 a variety of “affinity groups” (Gee, 2004) such as
6 6 1960s political activists, punk rock musicians in the
7 7 1970s, 1990s feminist and girl power groups. More
8 8 recently there has been a proliferation of countless
9 9 groups posting online zines (Knobel & Lankshear,
10 10 2002; Rottmund, 2009). Zines provide a space for
11 11 these affinity groups to voluntarily come together
12 12 to share information and participate in appropriating
13 13 and transforming cultural materials to tell their own
14 14 stories and build their own communities (Jenkins,
15 15 2006).

16 16 Street zines have a unique history and trajectory.
17 17 The first street newspaper in North America may
18 18 have been “Hobo News” from the 1910s and 20s in
19 19 New York City, and there are now an estimated 50 to
20 20 70 street or homeless newspapers and zines (Dodge,
21 21 1999).

22 22 Street newspapers and zines often include
23 23 poverty-related political issues and free expression
24 24 with the intent of providing a platform for homeless
25 25 people to regain independence and maintain
26 26 self-respect. They include investigative journalism
27 27 for social action; information for the homeless;
28 28 poetry and other literary writing; and letters, photos,
29 29 and essays. They often invoke traditional media
30 30 discourses on the homeless and use sarcasm, and the
31 31 intended audiences are local (Dodge, 1999; Torck,
32 32 2001).

33 33 Zines have been taken seriously among researchers
34 34 of popular youth culture (Knobel & Lankshear,
35 35 2002) and media studies (Black & Steinkuehler,
36 36 2009; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994) and
37 37 to a lesser extent in literacy studies (Guzzetti &
38 38 Gamboa, 2004). From all these perspectives, it has
39 39 been argued that zines provide a rich perspective
40 40 on the cultural production of youths in alternative
41 41 communities.

42 42 *Another Slice* has its roots in both street newspapers
43 43 and zine formats. It began in the late 1990s with the
44 44 stated purpose of providing youths with “a venue
45 45 for self-expression and freedom of thought” and
46 46 dedication “to all young people coping with survival
47 47 on the streets” (from the inside page).

It is published several times a year, more recently every month, sometimes in themed issues (Halloween, tattoos, issue for social workers, etc.). *Another Slice* now includes a range of genres and forms—poetry, art, photography, announcements, sayings, essays, interviews, etc. (alone or combined)—to express interests; to present issues such as drug use, homelessness, power, and identity; and to share information about services and surviving on the street.

This page (see the Figure) from a paper issue of the zine provides interesting counterdiscourses on homelessness. Here a familiar credit card advertisement is appropriated to make a statement about homelessness. The slogan in the Figure reads: “Slice of Pizza—\$1/ Pack of Smokes—\$ 7/ Bag of Weed—\$ 25/ Your own place to live away from the streets/FUCKING PRICELESS.” The youth visually represented in the ad is sitting on a street with trademark Doc Martens-style boots, popular among street youths. In contrast to the memoirs, the appropriation and parody of the credit card ad genre here pointedly contrasts the gulf between those who live on the margins of society and the assumed audience of the original advertisement.

Though the creator of this ad laments her “lack of originality” and use of a “marketing ploy” the message is clear. And in case the meaning was not fully grasped by less sophisticated readers, a more explicit version is appended—that everyone wants a home.

The youth who created this page uses parody and other sophisticated textual and visual strategies and

Figure A page from the zine by street youth, “Another Slice”





tools of cultural critique to create a counterdiscourse about street youths. Rather than taking up a neoliberal discourse of homelessness that emphasizes personal failings, she reaches toward a structural critique about social equity and access, such as the lack of affordable housing for youths on the streets.

Another zine piece, one that also presupposes an awareness of the lenses through which street youths are being viewed, is a longer poem by this same youth, entitled “Yuppy Muck”:

Yuppy Muck
 Tripping time to waste away
 Broken souls rot to decay
 Cityscapes the goal [sic]* of me
 Fringed with lies and vanity
 You bastards walk with noses high
 Lamb skin coats, no wonder why
 A travesty mole on your city face
 “Souls of the Street are such a disgrace”
 We are proof this city’s fucked
 Chill for a while, now we’re stuck
 Watch the needles shoot the drug
 Another problem swept under the rug
 Know this in heart you sorry fuck
 My feet are trapped in your city muck
 You don’t care, think your [sic] so wise
 You who cause your cities [sic] demise
 *goat

Although the youth has chosen here to use one of the most traditional print genres—a ballad-like poem with four-line stanzas (quatrains) with a consistent meter (8 beats per line with occasional 9 or 10 beats as a kind of refrain, stress on first syllables) and rhymed couplets—the statement is confrontational. The author exploits the contrasting stereotypical discourses defining “yuppies” as successful and “homeless” as failures for her own purpose. Yuppies are “time-wasting,” have “broken souls,” and are narcissistic liars “fringed with lies and vanity,” an interesting counterpoint to the view that the homeless are untrustworthy and at risk as reified in the Sheff memoir.

In the poem, street people are seen by yuppies as drug addicts (shooting up) and are ruining the city—they are, in short, a “disgrace.” At the same time, the poem is held together by the idea that these views of street people are simply a way to scapegoat the homeless for a host of societal ills—that blame is in

fact misplaced in the discourses about “problems” that the city faces.

More recently, *Another Slice* produced a series of short videos on youth homelessness that are posted on iTunes University. In episode 1, a young woman named Carter dressed up as a professor and responded to a series of “man on the street” questions. (To view the film go to iTunesU at the University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education, Another Slice University). One young man asks how it feels to be on the street. Carter replies, “Living on the street felt safer than living at home—I felt like I would have more people to do things for me if something would happen.”

Here Carter counters the assumption that streets are always unsafe and marks her family life as a risky space. When asked about enablers that keep her on the street, Carter replied, “of course there are enablers. You can’t get a job so you don’t have a place, can’t get a place because you don’t have a job, can’t get a job because I don’t have a place,” clearly providing a counterdiscourse related to individual blame while clearly illustrating systemic causes of homelessness.

Discourses of Homelessness Across Texts and Genres

Tagging discourses about homelessness in this way allows us to see how, through multimodal productions, street youths consciously produce discourses that run counter to the way they are often represented in the media and in popular cultural texts such as *The Glass Castle* and *Tweak*. Looking back at the earlier examples, it is clear that by appropriating traditional discourses, combining cultural genres and forms, and using satire, the street youths were talking back to or disrupting common discourses about street youths that disempower them, and thereby repositioning themselves in relation to their audiences.

Rather than reify discourses of personal choice and responsibility that are consistent with neoliberal discourses, the street youths make tactical use of public space and media to provide counterdiscursive claims about the role of societal inequities.

These counterdiscourses (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977) resist and challenge the legitimacy of the

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original discourses, and “presuppose a horizon of competing, contrary utterances against which it asserts its own energies” (Terdiman, 1985, p 36). In addition, these representations are complicated and overlap with discourses of homelessness as a choice that allows individuals freedom from everyday constraints as in Walls’s *The Glass Castle*, and homelessness as personal risk or failure as in Sheff’s *Tweak*.

For instance, among the youths we interviewed, homelessness itself was seen less as a fixed identity marker than as a temporary situation and affiliation (Rogers & Winters, 2010). As one youth explained to us: “It’s nice when you can remind yourself that you’re only living your life like this temporarily as a cautionary tale for your future self.” Though many found it to be dangerous and difficult to live on the streets, they often

expressed positive aspects of street life and culture—such as freedom, nonconformity, and a sense of community.

While the counterdiscourses of youths represent the voices of those who have become homeless or street entrenched as a result of a complex set of inequities in the system, Wall and Sheff’s texts represent the voices of those who can draw on more privileged aspects of their backgrounds to “pull themselves up” as they each ultimately do in their memoirs.

Memoirs such as those by Sheff and Walls are popular because they are “edgy”; yet, when juxtaposed with and read against other cultural texts, such as street zines, what becomes visible are the ways they actually represent and reproduce the hope that youths will overcome adversity if they just try hard enough.

Table Teaching Resources on Homelessness

Category	Resources
Zines/Autobiographical Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Book of Zines: Readings from the Fringe</i> zinebook.com • Hubbard, J. <i>Lives turned upside down: Homeless children in their own words and photographs</i>. New York: Aladdin. • ZineWiki zinewiki.com
Picture Books/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bunting, E. (1991). <i>Fly away home</i>. New York: Houghton. • Disalvo-Ryan, D. (1997). <i>Uncle Willie and the soup kitchen</i>. New York: HarperCollins. • Gunning, M. (2004) <i>A shelter in our car</i>. San Francisco: Children’s Book. • Sendak, M. (1993). <i>We are all in the dumps with Jack and Guy</i>. New York: HarperCollins.
Young Adult Literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Booth, C. (2007). <i>Tyrell</i>. New York: Push. • Burgess, M. (2010). <i>Smack</i>. New York: Square Fish. • Maruca, B. and Rugg, J. (2005). <i>Street angel</i>. San Jose: SLG. • O’Connor, B. (2009). <i>How to steal a dog</i>. New York: Square Fish. • Rapp, A. (2010). <i>Punkzilla</i>. New York: Candlewick.
Classics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dickens, C. (1861). <i>Great expectations</i>. Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and brothers. • Guthrie, W. (1943). <i>Bound for Glory</i>. Boston: E.P. Dutton. • Orwell, George (1933). <i>Down and Out in Paris and London</i>. London: V. Gollancz. • Twain, M. (1884). <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>. London: Chatto and Windus.
Films	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh: www.clpgh.org/research/socialservices/homeless/films.html

Discourse Tagging in the Young Adult Literature Classroom

As we stated earlier, we have found discourse tagging to be a useful strategy in our classes on young adult literature that serve prospective teachers. The following questions encourage students to analyze the ways in which homelessness is represented across texts and genres including films, newspapers, and other cultural or popular media texts, as well as contemporary children's and young adult literature. (For a list of possible classic and contemporary literary works and popular media focusing on homelessness, see the Table. See Virginia Department of Education [2009] for additional young adult titles.)

Take Action!

1. Provide students with a definition of the term neoliberalism and the discourse (structuring statement) to be tagged: Homelessness is an individual choice or failing. You might begin by posing the question "Why are people homeless?" Ask students to discuss this question.
2. Pair texts and genres that are unlike one another or that represent different viewpoints. In this example, we assign *Tweak* or *Glass Castle*, as well as the youth-produced zines at www.anotherslice.ca. You can substitute other self-representational texts as long as they are different from one another in terms of their use of the discourse of individual choice/failing and are distinct genres.
3. Have students "tag" places in the text where discourses that represent homelessness as an individual choice or personal failing, as well as moments where that discourse is resisted or countered (e.g., that name social inequities or lack of systemic support structures).
4. Have students continue to trace these discourses out into the world by tagging the discourses/counterdiscourses in other everyday texts that are easily accessible (commercials, newspaper articles, etc.)
5. Have students discuss the implications of discourses in terms of sustaining various kinds of social discrimination and inequity.

- Do the discourses (structuring statements) in this text represent homelessness as a fixed identity of a family, youth, or adult, or is it seen as a more temporary state?
- Do the discourses in this text focus on homelessness as an individual choice or failing? Or is homelessness represented as the result of, or in combination with, more systemic social inequalities?

These questions can be applied to other self-representational texts, such as older memoirs written in the early to mid-20th century (e.g., Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*), or even to contemporary media accounts of homelessness. For example, how do newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Wall Street Journal* each represent homelessness?

Reading for particular kinds of discourses across texts and genres allows teachers and teacher educators to make explicit the broader, sometimes competing, discourses that frame the representation of social issues such as homelessness in young adult literature. For instance, educators might also tag discourses of gender, racial, sexual, or religious discrimination. What we strive for through this strategy is to encourage readers to trace their reading out into the world and to name and ultimately resist normative discourses through which social inequities are sustained.

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Rogers is a professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada; e-mail theresa.rogers@ubc.ca.

Marshall is an associate professor of Education at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada; e-mail beth_marshall@sfu.ca.

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